

# Implications of Israel's recognition of Somaliland



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## OPINION

The announcement on December 26, 2025, that Israel had officially recognized Somaliland and would establish full diplomatic relations with it represents a move whose timing is more striking than its substance.

Although not entirely unexpected, this development reflects a profound shift in Israeli geopolitical calculations since October 2023 — shaped by the Gaza war and subsequent Ansarullah (Houthi) attacks on Israeli vessels in the Red Sea. These developments compelled Israeli policymakers to reassess their regional strategy, recognizing that reliance on a single base in Eritrea exposed Israel to political instability and limited its operational scope against disparate Houthi threats.

Since 2024, Israeli intelligence — particularly Mossad — has quietly deepened its engagement with Somaliland. This included establishing confidential ties with senior political figures there, facilitating in-person meetings between intelligence chiefs, and diplomatically laying the groundwork for eventual recognition while preserving a veil of public ambiguity. It is unsurprising that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly acknowledged the roles of Mossad Director David Barnea and Israeli intelligence in “paving the way” for this recognition after years of covert effort. Officially, Israel justified the recognition as a means to promote stability in the Red Sea and cooperate in counter-terrorism efforts against the Houthis. The more pressing question now concerns the broader implications for the region — particularly the Horn of Africa and the wider Middle East.

### A strategic asset

Somaliland has, amid accelerating regional realignments, emerged as a strategic asset of significant value — its importance spanning maritime, regional, economic, and geostrategic dimensions. On the maritime front, Somaliland controls more than 460 miles of coastline along the Gulf of Aden, positioning it at the southern gateway of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait — a chokepoint through which nearly one-third of the world's maritime trade passes annually, including vital energy shipments from the Middle East to Europe and Asia. Disruptions — such as the Houthi attacks since late 2023 — trigger spikes in insurance premiums, divert shipping away from the Suez Canal, and inflict multibillion-dollar losses on global supply chains. In this context, Somaliland's control of its coastline becomes pivotal to any strategy aimed at securing stability in the Red Sea.

Economically, Somaliland offers landlocked Ethiopia an alternative maritime outlet through the Port of Berbera — developed by DP World to handle approximately 500,000 containers annually. Linked by proposed rail lines into Ethiopia's interior, this route could significantly reduce Addis Ababa's heavy reliance on Djibouti for international trade. Ethiopia has since signed a 50-year agreement with Somaliland, securing rights for military bases and conditional official recognition of Somaliland — positioning Berbera as integral to Ethiopia's long-term vision of independent maritime access and naval development.

Regionally, Somaliland stands out for its relative stability, democratic elections, and institutional functioning over the past three decades — features that attract investment from Persian Gulf states, Israel, and informally, the United States. These actors view Somaliland as a more dependable partner than the fragmented federal government of Somalia. Strategically, Somaliland offers a logistical and intelligence hub that complements the emerging regional architecture following the Gaza war — one that seeks to counter Iranian influence and Houthi operations in the Red Sea. In return, Somaliland could benefit from Israeli technology in agriculture, water management, and port security. Furthermore, Somaliland possesses long-



The illustration shows Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (c) and Somaliland's President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi over a map of Somalia and the so-called Republic of Somaliland.

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sought US interests: reserves of critical minerals essential for defense industries and green technologies, and the potential for military facilities that offer a US presence independent of Djibouti, which hosts China's first overseas military base. The intensifying strategic competition with Beijing lends additional urgency to Washington's interest in diversifying its regional access. Accordingly, Israel's recognition marks a departure from the long-standing African Union principle of non-recognition of secessionist entities, grounded in the idea that secessionist claims should not be legitimized regardless of political cost. Somaliland's geography, internal stability, and alignment with anti-Iranian interests have elevated its value in regional strategic calculations.

### From de facto to diplomatic reality

Israel was among the more than 30 entities that initially acknowledged Somaliland in June 1960, upon its first declaration of independence before it federated with Italian Somaliland later that month. After Somaliland unilaterally renewed its declaration of independence in 1991, Hargeisa's authorities pursued international legitimacy by promoting two core narratives: that Somaliland represents a stable oasis with competitive elections over decades, and that it has successfully confronted religious extremist groups such as al-Shabab, even as it contends with flare-ups in Las Anod and Burma in the Oodale region. Despite some foreign representative offices in Hargeisa — such as Kenya's and Ethiopia's — the journey toward international recognition remains challenging.



Tens of thousands of Somalis gathered across the country on December 30, 2025, to protest Israel's recognition of the breakaway region of Somaliland, a move condemned by more than 20 countries as an attack on the East African nation's sovereignty.

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Two developments have been especially consequential. First was Ethiopia's January 1, 2024, memorandum of understanding, granting it access to 20 kilometers of Gulf of Aden coastline near Berbera in exchange for a formal pledge to recognize Somaliland. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed described access to the Red Sea as an existential right for Ethiopia — the world's largest landlocked country — making Somaliland's legitimacy central to Ethiopia's long-term strategic autonomy and reducing its near-total trade dependence on Djibouti. Under this agreement, Ethiopia not only gained commercial port access but crucial rights to lease a military base near Berbera that would enable Addis Ababa's pursuit of blue-water naval capabilities — core to its vision of regional influence.

The second was the advocacy of US Senator Ted Cruz, who has led a coordinated effort emphasizing four strategic priorities: containing Chinese influence in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa; expanding US security partnerships; securing critical minerals for American defense supply chains; and strengthening ties among Israel, Persian Gulf states, and US Asian partners. In August 2025, Cruz wrote to President Donald Trump in his capacity as Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa, affirming that Somaliland is “a significant diplomatic and security partner” capable of advancing US strategic interests in the Horn of Africa. His efforts have elevated Somaliland from a peripheral issue to a subject of high-level strategic debate in Washington, even if immediate US recognition has not yet occurred.

### Tensions and repercussions

The timing of Israel's decision is critical. As noted by political thinker Hamid Rabi', the region may be approaching what he described as “the end of Arab time,” with collective security at its weakest under a paradigm of competing regional projects. Partition and reengineering of regional orders are underway in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and now Somalia. This suggests the emergence of new geostrategic architectures shaping alliances and balances. Israel's recognition of the “Republic” of Somaliland carries profound geostrategic repercussions for the Horn of Africa and the Bab el-Mandeb basin. It transforms an unrecognized entity into an official platform within a regional bloc anchored in the Abraham Accords and a broader strategy of

At the same time, the recognition undercuts Turkish and Qatari arrangements in Mogadishu and the Turkish training base in Somalia that have been in place since 2017. It represents a setback to Turkish influence in Somalia and a possible escalation in Turkish-Israeli contestation over influence in Mogadishu. Turkey might deepen its partnership with the Somali federal government or Qatar to balance against Israel's rising axis around the Red Sea.

In the Horn of Africa, the move amplifies tensions with Mogadishu's federal government, which still regards Somaliland as a secessionist region. The recognition could be leveraged in internal Somali political struggles between federal authorities and regional players aligned with Doha and Ankara versus those closer to Persian Gulf partners — potentially exacerbating Somalia's fragility and complicating its fight against al-Shabab.

For Ethiopia, which views the Port of Berbera as a means to diversify economically and reduce dependence on Djibouti, Israel's recognition may be seen as an opportunity to deepen logistic integration with the emerging Israeli axis. However, it could also entangle Addis Ababa more deeply in the regional contest over the Red Sea, competing with Egypt and Sudan over trade routes and supply lines.

Eritrea, long benefiting from the ambiguity of its status and the use of its ports as intelligence platforms and unpublicized bases for Israel, now faces direct competition. Somaliland's newfound leverage with Tel Aviv and possibly Washington strengthens its negotiating position and may diminish Eritrea's ability to exploit its geography as a strategic commodity.

Djibouti, host to US, Chinese, French, and Japanese military bases, may interpret the Israeli-Somaliland alignment as an attempt to bypass its centrality in maritime security. This could push Djibouti toward deeper cooperation with China or Turkey to reinforce its pivotal role in guarding the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint, potentially contributing to a multipolar maritime order on Africa's side of the waterway.

### Broader regional dynamics

Regionally, the recognition fits within a transformation of the Red Sea into an arena of interconnected strategic competition — a “crisis arc” stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Horn of Africa. Some Persian Gulf states, in line with the Abraham Accords and a Saudi inclination toward de-escalation with Iran, envision a “stability arc” from Aqaba to the Gulf of Aden through partnerships with friendly states. Yet this arrangement carries explicit risks. It could incentivize Iran and the Houthis to view ports like Berbera and Zeila as legitimate targets if Israeli military components develop there — potentially broadening the current Red Sea confrontation and creating new flashpoints along critical trade routes. Movements like al-Shabab and other armed actors in Somalia and Ethiopia might exploit anti-normalization narratives to recruit followers and justify attacks on Israeli or Persian Gulf interests in Somaliland, reviving patterns of proxy conflict.

In conclusion, Israel's recognition of Somaliland sets a legal and political precedent in Africa for engagement with stable secessionist entities. This could encourage similar recognition efforts elsewhere or drive states like Ethiopia and Nigeria to adopt stricter stances against secession to prevent internationalization of their own internal separatist movements. It also provides Somaliland with direct channels for investment, security partnerships, and armaments outside the framework of the Somali state — complicating future prospects for unity or federal reform.

Far from being a mere acknowledgment of a new state, Israel's decision marks a turning point in reshaping the balance of power in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea basin. It expands the influence of the Israel-US axis, challenges Turkish, Qatari, and Iranian presence, and, paradoxically, opens new vectors for instability and proxy conflict in one of the world's most strategic corridors.

The article first appeared on [Ahran Online](#).



Such positioning extends Israel's strategic depth from the Eastern Mediterranean into the Horn of Africa and redefines the Red Sea from a vulnerable supply line into an operational theatre from which responses to Iranian and Houthi threats could be more effectively mounted. This also redistributes maritime security responsibilities among Tel Aviv, Washington, and Persian Gulf capitals.