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Issue Brief

Israel's Recognition of Somaliland: Implications for Alliances in the Red Sea Basin

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S*ummary*

Israel's recognition of Somaliland can be interpreted as a strategic recalibration aimed at offsetting diplomatic isolation on the international stage over its actions in Gaza. For India, it remains prudent to monitor the realignment of regional alliances and power equations in the Horn of Africa.

On 26 December 2025, Israel became the first country to recognise Somaliland, a breakaway region in the Horn of Africa (HoA) that declared its independence from Somalia in 1991 but has since failed to gain international recognition.¹ Somaliland meets most of the requirements of a democratic sovereign state. It holds free and fair elections, has its own currency, its own security force, issues its own passport, and asserts that its independence claim is consistent with a longstanding norm of the African Union (AU) and its predecessor—the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)—that colonial-era borders should be maintained. Somalilanders also claim that they are predominantly of the Isaaq clan and therefore ethnically distinct from other Somalis.² Despite these elements of international law of recognition working in its favour, the breakaway region of Somaliland has not been internationally recognised until Israel recently decided in its favour.

Following the announcement, Somalia vehemently condemned Israel’s move as an attack on its sovereignty and a violation of its territorial integrity.³ Its leaders underscored that it would not permit the establishment of any foreign military bases or arrangements that could potentially draw Somalia into proxy conflicts. Somaliland’s leadership, on the other hand, welcomed the move, describing it as a “historic and principled” decision by Israel.⁴ However, several regional actors, including Egypt, Jordan, Türkiye, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Nigeria, the African Union (AU), China, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the European Union (EU) and many other Middle Eastern and African nations condemned the move.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) convened an emergency meeting on 29 December 2025, during which many members warned against “unilateral recognition”. It asserted that sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity are foundational obligations under the UN Charter and the “bedrock of Africa’s stability and international peace and security”.⁵ This development has now opened a new chapter in Middle East–Africa alliances and has significant implications for peace, security and stability in the HoA.

¹ Benjamin Netanyahu, “[I announced today the official recognition of the Republic of Somaliland as an independent and sovereign state...](#)”, X, 26 December 2025.

² Somalis are one ethnic group united by language, culture and religion, but are socially divided by a complex patrilineal clan system into five main families—Dir, Isaaq, Darood, Hawiye and Rahanweyn. Somaliland is predominantly inhabited by the Isaaq clan.

³ Merve Berker, “[Somalia Rejects Israel’s Recognition of Somaliland as State, Calls Move Violation of Sovereignty](#)”, *Anadolu Ajansi*, 26 December 2025.

⁴ “[UN / Israel Somalia](#)”, United Nations, *UNifeed*, 29 December 2025.

⁵ “[Israel’s Recognition of Somaliland Triggers Sharp Divides, as Security Council Speakers Warn Move Threatens Stability in Horn of Africa](#)”, UN SC/16270, UN Security Council Meeting, 29 December 2025.

Furthermore, Israel’s recognition of Somaliland has occurred at a time when reports indicate that Yemen’s Ansar Allah, commonly known as Houthis, have increased coordination and are sharing lethal drone technologies with the al-Shabaab in Somalia. This transactional and opportunistic alliance facilitates al-Shabaab’s access to sophisticated arms, while the Ansar Allah gets access to smuggling routes and financing opportunities.⁶

Why did Israel recognise Somaliland?

Somalia’s President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud alleged that Somaliland had accepted three conditions in exchange for recognition by Israel—the establishment of a military base on the Gulf of Aden coast, the resettlement of Palestinians, and Somaliland joining the Abraham Accords to normalise ties with Israel.⁷ However, Somaliland’s Foreign Minister, Mohamed Bihi Yonis, dismissed these claims as “false allegations” and stressed that Israel’s recognition was based on Somaliland’s longstanding case for statehood, and it intends to uphold diplomatic transparency.⁸ Only the final condition for Somaliland’s accession to the Abraham Accords has been publicly acknowledged by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Somaliland is located in the HoA, sitting along the southern edge of the Gulf of Aden, directly across the water from Yemen. It borders Ethiopia to the south and west, Djibouti to the north-west and Somalia to the east. It has a coastline of 850 km along the strategic Gulf of Aden, making it a crucial maritime corridor near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which 12–15 per cent of global trade and nearly one-third of the world’s maritime cargo passes. It is frequently described as an “oasis of stability” in a volatile region and serves as a buffer against extremist groups like al-Shabaab, which plague neighbouring Somalia. Somaliland’s stability and its proximity to Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen make it a prime location for conducting surveillance and counter-strike operations and have consequently attracted the interest of major powers, including the United States.

As is well known, the Houthis have disrupted critical maritime traffic in the Red Sea, Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden, and have imposed a blockade on Israeli-linked shipping in response to Israel’s military campaign in Gaza. Subsequently, the Israeli port of Eilat experienced a significant loss of revenue. The Houthi blockade has also led to a 50 per cent reduction in Suez Canal traffic, severely affecting Egypt’s

⁶ Karen Allen, “[Houthis in Somalia: Friends with Technological Benefits?](#)”, Institute for Security Studies, 10 June 2025.

⁷ Faisal Ali, “[Somaliland Denies Agreeing to Host Israeli Bases, Resettle Palestinians](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 1 January 2026.

⁸ Solomon Ekanem, “[Somaliland Rejects Allegation of Israeli Security Deal Tied to Recognition](#)”, *Business Insider Africa*, 2 January 2026.

already struggling economy. The Suez Canal accounts for approximately 12–15 per cent of global trade and around 30 per cent of international container traffic, with more than US\$ 1 trillion in goods annually transiting through it.

Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, the Houthis, along with Hezbollah and other groups associated with the Iran-led ‘axis of resistance’, have launched hundreds of missiles and drones against Israel in solidarity with Hamas, which carried out attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023. Despite multiple aerial strikes, including attacks, that have killed senior Houthis and destroyed critical infrastructure in Yemen, including ports, oil refineries, storage facilities, airports and power plants, the Houthis’ activities in the Red Sea have not been contained. Israeli strategists believe that the proximity of Somaliland to Yemen could enable real-time monitoring and intelligence gathering of Houthi operations in the Red Sea, as well as the interception of drones and missiles before they reach mainland Israel. Such proximity would also provide Tel Aviv with greater strategic depth in the Bab el-Mandeb region *vis-à-vis* Iran and its allies.

Furthermore, an Israeli presence in Somaliland would allow Israel to monitor Türkiye's growing military presence in Somalia and the Red Sea, from a long-term security perspective. Türkiye has, in recent months, bolstered defence cooperation and the military presence in Somalia by providing advanced military hardware, such as drones and helicopters, and by strengthening naval capabilities to combat al-Shabaab and secure maritime resources, centred on the significant TURKSOM training base in Mogadishu, under a comprehensive defence pact signed in 2024. An Israeli presence in Somaliland would also benefit its closest ally in the Gulf region—the United Arab Emirates, which is a member of the Abraham Accords, has a military base in Somaliland, and Dubai’s DP World company manages the Port of Berbera. This also facilitates Ethiopia’s access to the Red Sea and provides an alternative trade route in East Africa.

The Case for Somaliland’s Recognition

In the 21st century, four member states have been admitted to the UN, the primary ‘committee of nations’, with South Sudan (2011) being the newest member. Napoleon once stated that the French Republic did not need to be recognised in the same way that the sun’s rising did not need to be recognised. In our time, state recognition is of two types: *de facto* and *de jure*. *De facto* recognition acknowledges a state or government based on its actual control and existence, even if it is not legally recognised. *De jure* recognition is a formal legal acknowledgement by other states that confirms the complete legitimacy, rights and diplomatic relations under international law.

Somaliland was a British Protectorate for 73 years and, after gaining independence in 1991, has functioned as a Sovereign State. In many ways, Somaliland is not an aspiration; it is a reality and enjoys de facto recognition and abides by international law.⁹ The voluntary union of Somaliland and Somalia in 1960 proved unsuccessful for several reasons, prompting Somaliland to declare independence at the Grand Conference in Burao in 1991. That was neither the first time nor the last time African states entered a union that later dissolved.

In 1958, Egypt and Syria created a political union—the United Arab Republic (AR)—which was subsequently dissolved in 1961. In June 1960, French Senegal and Sudan united as Mali and separated in August 1960. In 1980, Senegal and Gambia formed Sengambia, which later split in 1989. In 2011, South Sudan seceded from Sudan following a 2005 peace agreement. Many countries have gained recognition as sovereign states and joined the UN as full members.

Under international law, Somaliland has a strong case for UN membership. An AU fact-finding mission to Somaliland in 2005 asserted that Somaliland’s search for recognition was “historically unique and self-justified in African political history”.¹⁰ The findings of the report were echoed in 2006 by the International Crisis Group, which suggested that “Somaliland should be given AU observer interim status analogous to the interim status it has granted 31 non-African states or the status of the Palestinian Authority at the UN”.¹¹

These observations indicate that Somaliland has a historical, political, legal and humanitarian case and right to be recognised by the UN committee of nations. However, Somaliland remains unrecognised, although it invokes the AU’s principle of *Uti possidetis juris* (Latin for ‘as you possess by law’) under which newly independent states retain colonial borders, to argue for recognition of its pre-union borders as its sovereign entity. The AU, though, has tended to discourage recognition of new states, fearing destabilisation from other secessionist movements.

Regional and International Responses

Israel’s recognition of Somaliland has indeed ignited a regional firestorm with a growing number of nations rejecting the move. At stake are control of maritime gateways and strategic corridors flanking the Red Sea, as well as the possibility of redrawing alliances and upending regional security dynamics. The HoA is

⁹ “[Somaliland an International Case](#)”, *Govsomaliland.org*, August 2020.

¹⁰ “[AU-Fact Finding Mission to Somaliland \(30 April to 4 May 2005\)](#)”, African Union, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

¹¹ “[Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership](#)”, International Crisis Group, Africa Report No. 110, 23 May 2006.

undoubtedly a vital zone, not only for Israeli security planners but also a site of intense geopolitical competition among superpowers and emerging middle powers, including Türkiye, India, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In terms of economic and military capacity, Ethiopia and Kenya are the foremost powers in the HoA, followed by Uganda and Tanzania, both of which have significant growth rates.

The US defended Israel’s recognition of Somaliland, saying it “has the same right to conduct diplomatic relations as any other Sovereign State”.¹² At the same time, the US will likely continue cooperation with Somali forces in their effort to counter the activities of violent extremist organisations in the region, especially ISIS-Somalia and al-Shabaab. China, which has, over the years, made significant investments in the HoA, categorically opposed Israel’s formal recognition of Somaliland and categorised Israel’s move as “foreign interference”.¹³

Ethiopia, Egypt, Türkiye, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are the countries whose responses to Israeli recognition are particularly noteworthy. Ethiopia, despite signing an MoU with Somaliland in 2024 to secure access to the Red Sea, has not adopted an official position on the matter. Instead, Addis Ababa has adopted a calm, deliberate stance by closely monitoring the situation. For Egypt, Israel’s recognition of Somaliland is viewed as a direct threat to its conflict over water (the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, GERD) with neighbouring Ethiopia.

On the other hand, Türkiye’s opposition to Israel’s move is existential in geopolitical terms. Türkiye has been positioning itself as Somalia’s most committed external partner. Mogadishu is not merely a recipient of Turkish assistance, but is a cornerstone of Ankara’s broader ambition to project influence across the Red Sea basin. Israel’s recognition of Somaliland, therefore, undermines the authority of the Somali Federal Government and consequently weakens Ankara’s claim and desire to be the principal external guarantor of Somali unity and security.¹⁴

India’s Stand

For New Delhi, it is prudent to closely monitor developments in the Red Sea basin. Significant amounts of Indian imports and exports pass through the Gulf of Aden annually. It is a region where the Indian Navy’s proactive presence through extensive maritime operations like Operation Sankalp in the aftermath of Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in late 2023 has made a difference. Such developments are

¹² [“Israel’s Recognition of Somaliland Triggers Sharp Divides, as Security Council Speakers Warn Move Threatens Stability in Horn of Africa”](#), no. 5.

¹³ [“China denounces Israel’s recognition of Somaliland”](#), *Friends of Socialist China*, 2 January 2026.

¹⁴ Scott N. Romaniuk, [“Israel, Somaliland, Türkiye: Recognition Battleground in the Horn of Africa”](#), *Geopolitical Monitor*, 2 January 2026.

occurring in conjunction with India’s growing regional and global ambitions to embed itself as the preferred security partner in the western Indian Ocean. Naturally, then, Israel’s recognition of Somaliland is a significant realignment of regional alliances and power equations, deserving keen attention from India. However, India currently maintains a policy of supporting Somalia’s territorial integrity and has not officially recognised Somaliland.

India is aware of the China challenge in the region. While Somaliland and the Port of Berbera do offer Indian companies access to the HoA’s largest market—Ethiopia—and further inwards into continental Africa, India is unlikely to go against the principles of the UN Charter and entertain any talks of ‘recognition’. Some analysts arguing in favour of India’s recognition of Somaliland say that India “must not defer the African coast arbitrarily to Chinese interests”.¹⁵ Such an argument fails to recognise the growing African agency that increasingly informs Africa–India maritime security engagement and Africa’s cooperation with other international development partners. India’s maritime engagement in the Red Sea basin must certainly be proactive, but growing Indian maritime activities in the region must not be mistaken for influence.

Conclusion

At a time when Israel is under unprecedented international scrutiny over its war in Gaza, amid reports that more than 70,000 Gazans have been killed, its efforts to expand its presence in Africa, through the Abraham Accords, can be interpreted as a strategic recalibration aimed at offsetting diplomatic isolation elsewhere. Israel’s relatively favourable relations with several African states provide the foundation for such engagement, lending the strategy a degree of short-term viability. Yet this expansion carries significant structural risks. It threatens to unsettle existing regional power balances, potentially drawing resistance from influential African actors and, more critically, from China, whose economic and strategic stakes in the continent make it unlikely to acquiesce to any substantial reconfiguration of influence.

Additionally, unverified media reports, denied by Somaliland’s leadership, regarding potential plans to relocate Palestinians from Gaza to Somaliland further complicate the strategic calculus. Such proposals, if pursued, could exacerbate tensions between the United States and its Arab partners, undermining Washington’s broader regional coalition-building efforts and exposing the limits of alignment-based diplomacy amid heightened geopolitical contestation.

¹⁵ Michael Rubin, [“Israel Recognizes Somaliland: Why India Should Follow Suit”](#), American Enterprise Institute, 29 December 2025.

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