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Israel’s Recognition of Somaliland: Strategic Logic and Regional Implications

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Rather than an isolated diplomatic gesture, Israel’s decision to formally recognise the Republic of Somaliland constitutes a deliberate strategic intervention in the Horn of Africa. By extending recognition to a de facto sovereign entity that is not officially recognised, Israel has challenged long-standing international norms governing statehood, territorial integrity, and recognition. This move prioritises strategic geography, security utility, and governance capacity over legal formalism, setting a precedent that could have significant regional and systemic consequences. That strategic intent was further emphasised less than two weeks later when Israel’s foreign minister officially visited Hargeisa, signalling a swift shift from diplomatic recognition to practical political engagement.

However, this precedent is political and operational rather than juridical in nature. It does not rewrite international law on recognition; instead, it signals a selective and contestable shift towards prioritising functional sovereignty and strategic alignment in geopolitically sensitive and contested regions. While the immediate diplomatic costs are substantial, particularly concerning Somalia, the African Union and key regional powers, the recognition reflects a calculated long-term strategy: that functional sovereignty and geopolitical alignment will increasingly outweigh legal orthodoxy in regions of global strategic importance where sovereignty is contested.

On 26 December 2025, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Israel’s recognition of Somaliland, representing the first formal acknowledgement of Somaliland’s statehood by a UN member state. The timing, just a few days before the 35th anniversary of Somaliland’s 1991

declaration of independence, was both symbolically significant and strategically motivated. Somaliland is not a typical secessionist entity. It existed briefly as an independent state in 1960, before voluntarily uniting with the former Italian Somalia. Following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, Somaliland reasserted its sovereignty and has since developed robust governance institutions, security forces, a functioning electoral system, and effective territorial control. Nevertheless, international recognition has remained elusive due to the prevailing norm of preserving post-colonial borders in Africa. Israel's decision breaks with this consensus. It signals a willingness to reassess recognition policy based on empirical governance outcomes rather than inherited legal frameworks, particularly where strategic interests are implicated.

Israel's decision is primarily driven by hard security logic. Somaliland's location on the Gulf of Aden, close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, puts it at the heart of one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. Specifically, for Israel, the strategic value is twofold. Firstly, Somaliland offers a strategic location from which to monitor the maritime domain in an increasingly asymmetric security environment, including the threat posed by Iranian-backed Houthi forces operating from Yemen. Secondly, Somaliland provides Israel with strategic depth beyond its immediate neighbourhood, extending its security perimeter into the Red Sea basin. Unlike Somalia, where the federal government struggles to project authority beyond Mogadishu, Somaliland offers predictability, internal stability, and a cooperative local partner. From a security-planning perspective, this reliability outweighs the diplomatic costs associated with recognising a contested state.

The recognition also reflects Israel's broader effort to counter hostile or competitive regional actors, which is an integral part of its foreign policy. Despite scaling back its presence in recent years, Iran continues to have a significant footprint in the Red Sea through proxy forces, posing a direct threat to Israeli maritime and economic interests. Somaliland's proximity to Yemen provides a strategic advantage for monitoring and potentially constraining Iranian-aligned activities. Equally significant is the Turkish presence. Türkiye has established its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu and has become deeply embedded within regional security and political architecture. From Israel's perspective, the Horn of Africa, and specifically Somalia, has effectively become a zone of Turkish strategic influence. By contrast, Somaliland

represents a politically stable, non-aligned alternative, which could dilute Ankara's influence in the region. Thus, recognition serves as a means of geopolitical balancing, strengthening a cooperative actor while complicating competitors' strategic environment. Beyond its bilateral implications, Israel's move could catalyse new alignments among actors such as Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and potentially India. Ethiopia's reliance on access to the port of Berbera underscores Somaliland's economic and strategic importance, even though Addis Ababa is publicly cautious. Despite the usual denials, Somaliland could serve as a gateway for India to Central and East Africa, as well as a means to contain Chinese influence. Somaliland's stability increases its appeal as a logistics hub within an emerging Indo-Middle Eastern-African corridor. Such alignments would not require universal recognition to be effective. Incremental engagement, such as security cooperation, investment, and port access, could gradually normalise Somaliland's de facto status.

As expected, Somalia's reaction was sharply negative. Mogadishu framed the recognition as a violation of sovereignty and a threat to regional stability. There is a credible risk that Somalia may respond asymmetrically, for example, through diplomatic escalation, destabilising proxy forces in contested regions such as Sool and Sanaag, or aligning more closely with anti-Israeli actors. However, this scenario is undermined by Somalia's many internal problems, which limit its effectiveness. Another significant security risk concerns the potential reaction of radical Islamist movements operating in Somalia. Groups such as al-Shabaab and the local Islamic State branch active in Puntland may increasingly view Hargeisa as a legitimate target due to its proximity to Israel, thereby increasing the threat of terrorism in Somaliland and testing its internal security resilience. Although Somaliland has demonstrated greater institutional resilience and more effective internal security governance than the rest of Somalia, its counterterrorism capacity is limited by insufficient resources and intelligence capabilities, as well as unresolved inter-clan tensions. The African Union has also condemned the decision, citing fears of setting a precedent. The AU's commitment to colonial borders is not a matter of legal rigidity, but of political survival: many African states face latent secessionist pressures and view any erosion of territorial integrity norms as dangerous to their very existence. Key regional players, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have also voiced their opposition, viewing Israel's move as unilateral interference in a fragile region. Egypt views the recognition of

Somaliland through the lens of its dispute with Ethiopia over the Nile. There are fears that increased engagement by Israel and the UAE in the Horn of Africa could reinforce Addis Ababa's regional leverage by strengthening an informal axis. Saudi Arabia, while less directly affected, is wary of unilateral moves that bypass regional consensus and increase the UAE's assertive presence in the Red Sea. The growing rivalry between the two Gulf countries, in contexts such as Sudan and Yemen, risks spilling over in the Hargeisa-Mogadishu dispute, opening a new front. Together, these dynamics could exacerbate intra-Arab tensions and further complicate Egypt–Ethiopia relations, which are already fragile.

Washington's response to Israel's recognition of Somaliland reflects the inherent tension between operational requirements and long-standing normative commitments. Official US policy continues to prioritise Somalia's territorial integrity, mainly due to ongoing counterterrorism cooperation and the presence of US military personnel on the ground. However, Israel's move has intensified internal debate within US strategic circles over whether continued reliance on the weak Mogadishu government adequately serves US interests in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. Rather than viewing Somaliland's recognition as an all-or-nothing diplomatic decision, the United States would be better off adopting a nuanced, interest-driven approach that allows for flexibility. Such an approach would involve expanding structured, yet unofficial, engagement with Somaliland, including senior-level contacts, security consultations, and targeted development cooperation, without extending formal diplomatic recognition. This stance would enable Washington to acknowledge Somaliland's functional relevance while minimising the potential harm to its relationship with Mogadishu.

From a security perspective, Somaliland offers a little-explored opportunity to expand the United States' regional partnerships. Cooperation in areas such as maritime security, undersea infrastructures, counter-piracy, and Red Sea domain awareness, potentially coordinated with Israel and select Gulf partners, mainly the UAE, would allow the United States to assess Somaliland's reliability as a security partner. Rather than being an alternative to existing cooperation with Somalia, such engagement could be presented as supplementary to it. This approach would reduce U.S. exposure to the risks associated with state fragility and political instability in Mogadishu.

Diplomatically, Washington is well positioned to subtly reframe the debate within the African Union. Rather than directly challenging the principle of territorial integrity, Washington could encourage a more pragmatic discussion around governance-based criteria for engagement short of recognition. Crucially, the United States should preserve its strategic flexibility. Publicly reaffirming rigid opposition to the future recognition of Somaliland would unnecessarily limit U.S. leverage and reduce adaptability in an increasingly volatile regional environment.

Strategic ambiguity, combined with incremental engagement, would enable Washington to reap the benefits of Somaliland's stability and geographic location without being forced to make premature decisions that could undermine broader regional objectives. A cautious yet proactive US posture would enhance resilience in the Horn of Africa, protect American interests in the Red Sea corridor and prevent overdependence on a single fragile partner, while leaving open the possibility of adjusting policy should the situation continue to evolve.

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