

The Israel–Somaliland Agreement:

Implications for Somalia’s Sovereignty, Regional Security, and International Politics

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Key Messages

- ▶ Israel’s recognition of Somaliland marks a significant diplomatic shift. It is the first formal recognition of Somaliland by a UN member state and represents the most serious external challenge to Somalia’s territorial integrity since 1991.
- ▶ This issue is both legal and political. While recognition does not automatically violate the UN Charter, it sits uneasily with the established principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and Africa’s long-standing commitment to inherited borders.
- ▶ The territorial realities complicate Somaliland’s claims. Ongoing contestation in Sool and Sanaag and the formation of the Northeastern State reveal that effective and uncontested control remains disputed.
- ▶ Security risks are real but indirect. Even without a confirmed Israeli military base, the perception of new alignments near Bab al-Mandeb could attract extremist attention and increase regional tension.
- ▶ The economic stakes are high. The Red Sea corridor carries a substantial share of global energy and trade flow. Instability near Somaliland’s coastline could have consequences beyond that of Somalia.
- ▶ Regional rivalries may deepen as a result. This move intersects with existing Gulf tensions and broader competition involving Iran, the Houthis, and Red Sea security dynamics.
- ▶ The international response has largely been supportive of Somalia. Most states and multilateral organisations have reaffirmed Somalia’s territorial integrity, and no other country has followed Israel’s recognition of Somaliland’s independence.
- ▶ Internal cohesion shapes the outcomes. A unified federal position strengthens Somalia’s diplomatic standing, whereas internal fragmentation risks weakening its leverage.
- ▶ Dialogue is essential. External recognition does not resolve the underlying political questions between Mogadishu and Hargeisa; sustainable outcomes require Somali-led engagement.

Background

The collapse of the military government led by Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991 triggered state breakdown and civil war across Somalia. In the north, the Somali National Movement (SNM) consolidated control over most of the former British Somaliland Protectorate. Following a series of reconciliation conferences involving SNM leaders, clan elders, and community representatives, the SNM Central Committee declared on 18 May 1991 the restoration of the Republic of Somaliland within the borders of the former British Protectorate (Interpeace, 2008).

Over the following decades, Somaliland reduced inter-clan conflict, established hybrid governance combining traditional elders (Guurti) with modern institutions, and held multiple elections. A 2001 referendum reportedly showed overwhelming support for independence. Despite maintaining relative internal stability and functioning institutions, Somaliland has not received international recognition and continues to be regarded under international law as part of the Federal Republic of Somalia (Michael Walls and Steve Kibble, 2011).

Somaliland grounds its territorial claim in the borders of the former British Protectorate, which briefly gained independence on 26 June 1960 before uniting with Italian-administered Somalia on 1 July 1960. However, its claim over the Sool and Sanaag regions has long been contested. In August 2023, SSC-Khatumo forces took control of Las Anod and surrounding areas, and in October 2023 the Federal Government recognised SSC-Khatumo as an interim administration (Horseed Media, 2023). In July 2025, a Grand Constitutional Conference declared the formation of the Northeastern State as Somalia's sixth Federal Member State, with federal recognition granted on 31 July 2025 (CHS Doha, 2025). These developments have altered the territorial realities underlying Somaliland's independence claim.

In recent years, Somaliland has intensified its diplomatic and lobbying efforts to secure international recognition.

In early 2025, international media reported that the United States and Israel had approached several East African actors, including Somaliland, as possible destinations for resettling Palestinians displaced from Gaza under proposals linked to the U.S. President Donald Trump's post-war plan (AP, 2025). Reports also suggest that the United Arab Emirates, which normalized relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords, may have played a facilitating role. The UAE maintains strong economic ties with Somaliland, including a \$442 million investment in the development and operation of the Berbera port (Bloomberg, 2026).

Somaliland's location along the Gulf of Aden, near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the sea route connecting the Red Sea to the Suez Canal, significantly enhances its geopolitical importance. This corridor carries a substantial share of global container traffic and energy shipments (World Bank, 2025). Its strategic position has attracted sustained interest from regional and international actors.

In January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding under which Ethiopia would gain access to the Red Sea through Berbera in exchange for potentially recognising Somaliland as an independent state (BBC, 2024). Although the agreement was not formalised, it intensified regional tensions.

On 26 December 2025, Israel formally recognised Somaliland as an independent state under the framework of the Abraham Accords (BBC, 2025). Somalia's Federal Government strongly condemned the decision, describing it as a violation of its sovereignty and warning against any foreign military presence on its territory (AlJazeera, 2025). This recognition marked the first time a UN member state formally acknowledged Somaliland's independence, transforming a long-standing political dispute into a major international diplomatic and security concern.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief analyses the political, legal, security, and diplomatic implications of Israel’s recognition of Somaliland for Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa. This study examines how this decision may affect Somalia’s sovereignty, regional stability, and international relations. This brief aims to inform policymakers, regional actors, and international partners about the associated risks and support evidence-based responses that uphold Somalia’s unity, constitutional order, and long-term stability.

Methodology

This policy brief is based on qualitative desk-based research that draws on document reviews, policy analysis, and media monitoring. It mainly uses reliable secondary sources to examine the political, legal, and security implications of Israel’s recognition of Somaliland for Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa. Key legal and policy documents, including Somalia’s Provisional Constitution, the United Nations Charter, the African Union Constitutive Act, and relevant regional agreements, were reviewed to assess how this move aligns with national, regional, and international norms. The study also analysed reports and statements from major regional and international organisations and monitored reputable international, regional, and Somali media to track developments, verify events, and capture different perspectives. The academic and policy literature was reviewed to provide background and context. All information was analysed thematically and organised around sovereignty, regional security, and international relations, ensuring that the brief is based on credible, verified evidence and supports clear, practical policy recommendations.

Key Findings

Implications for Somalia’s Sovereignty

Somaliland’s claim for secession dates back to 1991 but remains internationally unrecognised. A recent effort in this direction emerged with the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland in 2024 (BBC, 2024). However, this agreement was never formalised. Instead, Somalia and Ethiopia, with mediation by Turkey, later reached an understanding to cooperate on commercial arrangements and bilateral agreements that would ensure Ethiopia’s “reliable, safe, and sustainable access” to the sea under the sovereign authority of the Federal Republic of Somalia (AlJazeera, 2024).

According to Somalia’s Provisional Constitution (2012), any foreign recognition of Somaliland as an independent state raises serious constitutional issues. The Constitution clearly establishes Somalia as a single sovereign republic and states that its unity and territorial integrity are inviolable and that the territory of the Federal Republic of Somalia is indivisible (Articles 1 and 7) (Somali Provisional Constitution, 2012). It also defines Somalia’s borders as those inherited at independence in 1960, including Somaliland (Article 7(4)). As the supreme law of the land, the Constitution provides no legal basis for unilateral secession by any region or for external actors to redefine Somalia’s territorial status (Article 4). In addition, the conduct of foreign affairs is reserved for the Federal Government, meaning that regional administrations have no legal mandate to seek international recognition or exercise sovereign diplomatic authority (Article 54). The Constitution further affirms that the Somali people form one indivisible political community, a principle that would be directly undermined by the external recognition of Somaliland as a separate state (Article 8).

Under the United Nations Charter, member states are committed to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of other states (United Nations, 1945). Article 2(4) is primarily framed around the prohibition of the use or threat of force; thus, recognition of a breakaway territory is not, in itself, a straightforward violation of that provision. However, Israel's recognition of Somaliland sits uneasily with the Charter's broader logic of non-interference and the UN system's long-standing practice of treating Somalia's internationally recognised borders as intact. Somalia remains a recognised UN member state, and Somaliland continues to be treated internationally as part of its territory. In this context, unilateral recognition can be understood as politically and diplomatically undermining Somalia's territorial integrity, even if it does not amount to a direct breach of Article 2 (4) in the strict legal sense.

The African Union is guided by the principle that the borders of African states at the time of independence should be respected and preserved. Article 4(b) of the AU Constitutive Act states that the Union operates on the basis of "respect of borders existing on achievement of independence," reflecting the commitment of African states to uphold colonial-era boundaries to promote peace and prevent conflict (African Union, 2000). Under this principle, Somaliland is considered part of the internationally recognised territory of Somalia, which inherited its borders at the time of independence in 1960. Therefore, recognising Somaliland as a separate state without Somalia's consent would violate the African Union's long-standing position that colonial borders should only be changed through peaceful and mutually agreed processes.

Proponents of Somaliland's recognition argue that it satisfies the Montevideo criteria of statehood: a defined territory, permanent population, effective government, and capacity to conduct foreign relations. Somaliland has demonstrated sustained internal governance for over three decades (Jambir, 2026).

However, the decisive issue remains effective and uncontested territorial control of the region. Since August 2023, Somaliland has lost control of much of Sool and parts of eastern Sanaag as well. In July 2025, the Federal Government formally recognised the Northeastern State as a new Federal Member State. These developments complicate Somaliland's claim to exercise full and stable authority over its territory.

Recognition theory further complicates this picture. Under the declaratory view, statehood depends on objective criteria; under the constitutive view, recognition by other states is central to acquiring an international legal personality. Somaliland shows many features of functional governance, yet the absence of broad recognition, especially from African states, continues to limit its external standing.

Although Somaliland presents itself as a *sui generis* case, citing its brief independence on 26 June 1960 before union on 1 July 1960, the AU interprets this principle through the lens of the 1964 Cairo Declaration, which fixed the borders of newly independent states as they existed at the moment of their original membership in the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Because Somaliland was already part of the Somali Republic when the OAU was formed, the AU views its withdrawal as a violation of the sanctity of post-colonial borders.

Guided by the *uti possidetis juris* and a preference for preserving existing member states, the AU treats unilateral separation as a potential trigger for wider fragmentation. In this sense, AU Chairperson Mahmoud Ali Youssouf recently reaffirmed that any attempt to alter the territorial configuration of a member state without its consent is "null and void" and risks setting a dangerous precedent for peace and stability (Anadolu, 2025). In practice, AU resistance is not only about protecting inherited borders; it is about avoiding precedents that could encourage other secessionist projects, preventing conflict spillover, and refusing to validate statehood claims where the asserted territory is actively contested, as the Sool and Sanaag disputes now make more salient.

Beyond the legal dimension, Israel's recognition has political implications within Somalia. Tensions are already high between Puntland and Jubaland and the Federal Government in Mogadishu, particularly over proposed constitutional amendments, the management of national resources, foreign relations, and the organisation of future national elections. Following a meeting in Garowe, Puntland and Jubaland issued a joint statement expressing their loss of confidence in the Federal Government (Goobjoog, 2025). However, neither state has publicly responded to Israel's recognition of Somaliland.

Their silence contrasts with the positions taken by other Federal Member States, including Galmudug, Southwest, Hirshabelle, and the newly established Northeastern State, which openly condemned Israel's actions and reaffirmed that Somaliland remains part of the Federal Republic of Somalia (Dawan Africa, 2026). While silence does not necessarily imply endorsement, the absence of a clear public position may be interpreted as reflecting the existing political divisions within the federal system. In the context of strained center–state relations, such a divergence risks complicating the presentation of a unified national stance on questions of sovereignty.

The regional diplomatic dimension intersects with Somalia's internal dynamics. While the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) collectively condemned Israel's recognition of Somaliland, the United Arab Emirates did not issue a separate national statement (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2026). This is notable given the UAE's normalisation with Israel under the Abraham Accords in 2020 and its substantial economic interests in Somaliland, including its investment in the Berbera port (AlJazeera, 2020). The absence of an independent UAE position may reflect the UAE's careful effort to balance its strategic ties with Israel and its interests in the Horn of Africa.

Regional Security Implications

Israel's recognition of Somaliland comes at a time when the Horn of Africa is already under considerable strain. The region faces overlapping conflicts and political crises that remain unresolved.

Sudan remains engulfed in fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. In Somalia, al-Shabaab continues to pose the most serious militant threat, while Islamic State Somalia remains active, particularly in Puntland. Ethiopia is confronting armed rebellions from the Fano militia and the Oromo Liberation Army. In South Sudan, renewed clashes between government forces and the SPLM-IO have further destabilised an already fragile state (ACLED, 2025). In such an environment, even limited shifts in military alignment can have wider consequences.

The most immediate concern centres on reports of a possible Israeli military presence in Somaliland. Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud stated in an interview with Al Jazeera that Somaliland had accepted Israel's conditions, including resettling Palestinians, allowing a military base on the Gulf of Aden coast, and joining the Abraham Accords (AlJazeera, 2025). If Although no formal basing agreement has been publicly confirmed, Israeli outlets such as Haaretz and Natsiv Net have reported discussions on the matter, with Somaliland officials describing it as “on the table.” Even without a signed agreement, the seriousness of these discussions signals a potential shift in the regional security dynamics.

If a base were established in Berbera, it could expose Somaliland and potentially other parts of Somalia to new security risks. Al-Shabaab has issued warnings against any Israeli military presence (Middle East 24, 2025). Given the heightened tensions linked to the Gaza war, such a development could become both a symbolic and operational target for extremist mobilisation. This risks extending instability to Somaliland, a region that has maintained relative internal stability for decades.

Israel's interest in Somaliland is closely linked to the developments in the Red Sea. Since the outbreak of the Gaza War, the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) has launched missile and drone attacks targeting vessels linked to Israel and, at times, Israeli territory (Washington Institute, 2026).

From Israel's standpoint, a position near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait would enhance surveillance and reduce logistical constraints in responding to threats from Yemen (IISS, 2026). Simultaneously, such a move would likely increase the risk of retaliation. Somaliland lies within reach of Houthi missile and drone systems, and Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi has warned that any Israeli presence would be treated as a military target (AlJazeera, 2025). Escalation in this context would place pressure on Somaliland's limited security institutions and add strain to the region.

The risks are not only military in nature. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and Suez Canal. An estimated 10–12 percent of the global seaborne oil trade, along with a significant share of container traffic and liquefied natural gas shipments, passes through this corridor. Recent Houthi attacks have forced shipping companies to reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transit times, fuel costs, and insurance premiums (Washington Institute, 2024). Traffic through the Suez Canal declined during periods of insecurity, resulting in measurable economic losses. In this context, heightened military rivalry along the Somaliland coast could amplify the perception of risk and further disrupt trade flows and global energy markets.

This recognition also intersects with broader regional rivalries. Iran views the expansion of Israeli activity near the Red Sea as a direct strategic concern. Tehran criticized the visit of Israel's Foreign Minister, Gideon Sa'ar, to Somaliland, describing it as a violation of Somalia's sovereignty (Tehran Times, 2026). Given the long-running shadow conflict between Israel and Iran, which escalated in 2025 through direct strikes and retaliatory missile exchanges (TRT World Research Center, 2025), any Israeli security presence near Bab el-Mandeb could be interpreted as part of efforts to counter Iran-aligned forces in Yemen. This raises the possibility that the Red Sea corridor could become an arena for indirect confrontation.

Other regional actors have also adjusted their postures. Following Israel's recognition, Turkey reinforced its security engagement with Somalia under the 2024 Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework. While Turkey has long trained Somali forces at Camp TURKSOM, it has recently increased its naval activity and air support in coordination with Mogadishu. This shift signals a firmer commitment to support the federal government and safeguard Somalia's maritime rights.

Somalia's geography heightens the significance of these developments. With one of Africa's longest coastlines bordering a vital global shipping route, the country is at the intersection of security, energy, and commerce. In such a setting, military tension can quickly translate into economic disruption, drawing Somalia deeper into wider regional competition.

International and Diplomatic Implications

Somalia received broad diplomatic support following Israel's recognition of Somaliland. Most members of the United Nations Security Council criticised the decision during an emergency meeting, with the United States being the only member that did not openly condemn it, although it stated that its position on Somaliland had not changed (AlJazeera, 2025). The European Union reaffirmed its commitment to Somalia's unity and territorial integrity in line with the Somali Constitution and the Charters of the African Union and the United Nations (European Union, 2025). The African Union reiterated its long-standing principle of respecting borders inherited at independence, first affirmed by the Organization of African Unity in 1964 (African Union, 2025). Similarly, the IGAD emphasised that Somalia remains a sovereign member state whose unity and territorial integrity are recognised under international law (IGAD, 2025).

Support extended beyond multilateral institutions. The Arab League denounced Israel's decision as a violation of international law and Somalia's sovereignty (Anadolu, 2025). The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation strongly rejected the recognition during its 22nd Extraordinary Session in Jeddah, describing it as a breach of Somalia's sovereignty and internationally recognised borders (OIC, 2026). The Gulf Cooperation Council condemned the move, although the UAE did not issue a separate national statement (GCC, 2025).

To date, no other country has followed Israel's recognition. This suggests that despite geopolitical tensions, the prevailing international position continues to support Somalia's territorial integrity. Simultaneously, the episode highlights growing concerns regarding the selective application of international norms. In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, the U.S. President Donald Trump suggested that strategic judgment and national interest often guide foreign policy decisions more than abstract legal commitments (New York Times, 2026). While this statement was not directed at Somalia, it illustrates a wider reality: when major powers treat recognition or sovereignty as instruments of strategy rather than as legal questions, fragile states become particularly vulnerable. For countries like Somalia, where territorial integrity remains closely tied to state-building and post-conflict recovery, selective or politically motivated recognition risks weakening the already fragile norms that protect smaller states from external interference.

This recognition has also raised concerns about Africa's long-standing approach to borders and statehood, which has prioritised stability through respect for inherited colonial boundaries.

Some commentators have described the emerging patterns of external support for breakaway authorities as part of a broader fragmentation dynamic affecting fragile states (AlJazeera, 2026). While such characterisations remain contested, they reflect anxieties about renewed secessionist politics in conflict-affected regions.

Within the Gulf, this issue intersects with the existing tensions between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, particularly regarding the separatist movements in southern Yemen. Saudi Arabia has grown cautious about territorial fragmentation in neighbouring regions, viewing it as directly linked to border security and the stability of the Red Sea. After Israel's recognition of Somaliland, friction between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi resurfaced, especially amid Saudi accusations that the UAE supported southern Yemeni actors, including the movement led by Aidarous al-Zubaidi (AP, 2025).

The divergence became more visible when Somalia's Federal Government cancelled agreements with the UAE, accusing it of undermining national unity and sovereignty (AlJazeera, 2026). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has sought to reassert itself as a leading regional actor while adopting a more cautious posture toward rapid normalisation with Israel and policies that may enable separatist actors. In contrast, the UAE has pursued an assertive regional strategy built on economic partnerships, port investments, and flexible diplomatic alignments. These differences reflect a broader realignment in Gulf politics, where stability, influence, and maritime control increasingly intersect with questions of sovereignty and fragmentation (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2026).

Strategic Risk Assessment

Israel’s recognition of Somaliland introduces a complex layering of threats extending from domestic constitutional challenges to international maritime security. To prioritize the necessary policy responses, these threats must be evaluated based on their potential to disrupt the Somali state and the probability of their occurrence in the current geopolitical climate. The following matrix synthesizes the key findings of this brief into a prioritized framework for decision makers:

Risk Category	Specific Threat	Impact	Likelihood	Strategic Consequence
Sovereignty	Federal Fragmentation: Internal divisions between the FGS and FMS (Puntland/ Jubaland) are exploited by external actors.	Critical	High	Weakens the legal mandate of the Federal Government and undermines national unity.
Security	Extremist Escalation: Al-Shabaab or ISIS-Somalia targeting new alignments or any potential Israeli military footprint.	Major	High	Extends the theater of conflict into previously stable northern regions.
Geopolitics	Red Sea Proxy War: Retaliatory drone/missile strikes by Houthi forces against Somaliland territory assets	Major	Medium	Transforms the Somali coast into a primary front for Middle Eastern power struggles.
Economic	Maritime Disruption: Increased insurance premiums and rerouting of trade around the Cape of Good Hope due to instability.	Major	Medium	Significant loss of revenue and disruption of global energy and container traffic.
Diplomacy	Erosion of Norms: Other states treating recognition as a strategic instrument rather than a legal question.	Major	Low	Currently low likelihood as no other country has followed Israel’s lead.

Conclusion

Israel's recognition of Somaliland has transformed a long-standing internal political dispute into a regional diplomatic and security issue. What was once a long-standing political disagreement is now a live diplomatic and security issue with regional implications. For Somalia, the matter is not only about legal doctrine; it is about preserving a fragile federal system and maintaining a sense of national coherence at a time when political trust is already under strain.

These risks are not limited to politics. The Horn of Africa is unstable, and the Red Sea corridor is increasingly contested. Any perception that Somaliland could host new military alignments or become part of wider Middle Eastern rivalries raises understandable concerns. In such a sensitive maritime environment, even symbolic decisions can have security and economic consequences.

Simultaneously, this episode reflects a broader reality in international politics: recognition is no longer always guided strictly by multilateral consensus. Strategic interests often shape the outcomes. For countries like Somalia, which are still consolidating institutions after conflict, this creates uncertainty about how secure existing norms are.

Ultimately, recognition alone will not determine Somaliland's future, nor will it settle Somalia's internal political questions. The direction taken from here will depend on dialogue, restraint, and political judgment, both inside Somalia and among the regional powers now drawn more directly into the issue.

Policy Considerations

This development does not call for reactive measures but for careful political judgment.

▶ First, Somalia must remain diplomatically steady. The strong support expressed by the UN, African Union, IGAD, Arab League, and the OIC shows that most states

continue to recognise Somalia's territorial integrity. Sustained engagement with these partners is important. Recognition decisions rarely unfold in isolation; quiet coalition building may be more effective than confrontation.

- ▶ Second, internal cohesion is as important as external diplomacy. The differing responses of the Federal Member States reveal the underlying tensions in the federal system. At this moment, structured consultations between Mogadishu and the Federal Member States are essential. A unified national position strengthens Somalia's international credibility.
- ▶ Third, clarity in foreign policy is increasingly necessary to avoid misunderstandings. Somalia's location along the Red Sea corridor means that it will continue to attract competing interests. A clearly articulated doctrine on neutrality, security partnerships, and foreign military presence would reduce ambiguity and help prevent external actors from exploiting the country's internal divisions.
- ▶ Fourth, security risks should be addressed pragmatically. Whether or not an Israeli military presence materialises, the mere perception of new alignments could attract unwanted attention from extremist groups and regional rivals. Therefore, strengthening coordination between federal and state security institutions is a precaution, not an escalation.
- ▶ Fifth, Somalia may benefit from maintaining a careful distance from the wider Middle Eastern rivalries. The Red Sea is already crowded with competing interests. Avoiding entanglement while safeguarding national interests requires balance rather than alignment.
- ▶ Finally, dialogue with the Somaliland authorities should not be abandoned. Recognition by an external actor does not resolve the underlying political questions between Hargeisa and Mogadishu. These questions ultimately require Somali-led dialogue, patience, and political maturity.

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