

Israel's recognition of breakaway Somaliland fuels the fires of regional conflict

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In a highly provocative move on December 26, Israel announced that it would formally recognize Somaliland as a sovereign state. The territory unilaterally declared independence from Somalia in 1991. As the first country to do so, Israel's move, driven by its strategic aim of controlling access to the Red Sea, the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean, has triggered alarm across the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Somaliland, in north-western Somalia, lies east of Djibouti which hosts military bases for the United States, China, France and several other countries. Home to around five million people living in extreme poverty, with high unemployment and insecurity, Somaliland's main asset is the port of Berbera. Situated on the Gulf of Aden near the Bab el Mandeb strait, the gateway to the Red Sea, and opposite Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, Berbera occupies a position of enormous strategic value.

The Horn is one of the world's most unstable regions, shaped by long-standing, interlinked conflicts and positioned along a maritime corridor through which 15 percent of global maritime trade and 30 percent of global containerised traffic pass—on the way to the Suez Canal, Europe and North America. This has made it the focus of competing interests by the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, Israel and China, with each backing rival states and factions within them to secure influence.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, together with his Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar and Somaliland President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, have signed a joint declaration establishing full diplomatic relations, including the opening of embassies. This follows a year of discussions in which the establishment of an Israeli military base and the resettlement of forcibly displaced Palestinians from Gaza were reportedly raised, although Somaliland's foreign minister denied the reports at the time.

Netanyahu justified the move as consistent with “the spirit of the Abraham Accords”, which have provided for the deepening of military and intelligence ties between the Gulf petro-monarchs and Israel. In so doing, he revealed Somaliland's motivation: securing US recognition that could unlock trade, loans and investment in the impoverished country, forced by decades of diplomatic isolation to function as an autarkic economy.

Netanyahu promised immediate cooperation in agriculture, health, technology and the economy. He added, “Of course I'll communicate to President Trump your willingness and desire to join the Abraham Accords”. The US defended Israel against Somali moves for an emergency meeting of the Security Council at the UN but noted its own position on Somaliland (non-recognition) had not changed.

Somalia responded by denouncing Israel's actions as a “deliberate attack” on its sovereignty. The African Union likewise rejected Israel's move, saying it risked “setting a dangerous precedent with far-reaching implications for peace and stability across the continent”. More than 20 states, mostly in the Middle East and Africa, made similar statements.

Israel's alignment with the UAE

Israel's Institute for National Security Studies openly articulated the strategic logic behind the move. It argued that “Somaliland's territory could serve as a forward base for multiple missions: intelligence monitoring of the Houthis and their armament efforts; logistical support for Yemen's legitimate government in its war against them; and a platform for direct operations against the Houthis.”

Since the start of the war in Gaza, Israel has struck Houthi targets, military and civilian, while Houthi forces have targeted Israeli-linked shipping in the Red Sea in support of the Palestinians.

Israel has already established a military-intelligence base on the Socotra archipelago in the Gulf of Aden opposite Yemen, in collaboration with the UAE. Their close collaboration has fuelled the widespread belief that the UAE played a key role in brokering Israel's recognition of Somaliland.

Abu Dhabi is investing heavily in developing Berbera as an alternative to Djibouti. Last June, it signed a \$3 billion deal to build a railway linking Berbera to Aysha in Ethiopia, running parallel to the existing highway, as part of its broader plans for an infrastructure network that could extend to Kenya.

The UAE refused to sign the joint Arab-Islamic statement condemning Israel's recognition of Somaliland. This prompted Somalia to cancel its agreements with the UAE covering key port operations, security cooperation and defence.

The Israel-Turkey conflict

Israel's recognition of Somaliland places it on a collision course with Turkey which has backed Mogadishu against Hargeisa for more than a decade. It has turned Somalia into a de facto Turkish protectorate and a key gateway for Turkey's expanding political, military and economic presence in Africa.

Since President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 2011 visit to Mogadishu, Ankara has invested heavily in the country, particularly in oil and gas, but also building schools, hospitals and infrastructure, offering scholarships for Somalis to study in Turkey and establishing its largest embassy.

Turkey opened its biggest overseas military base in Mogadishu in 2017 and has begun construction of a space port that it intends to use for testing of long-range ballistic missiles. In December 2024, the two countries signed the Ankara Declaration, a defence and economic cooperation agreement, that positioned Turkey as a mediator in the Ethiopia-Somalia dispute.

With Ankara positioning itself as the principal guarantor of Somalia's unity and sovereignty, Israel's recognition of Somaliland is a direct threat.

The clash reflects a broader geopolitical rivalry. Turkey offers rhetorical support for Hamas in Gaza and insists on maintaining a unified Syrian state under the regime of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, while Israel prefers a fragmented, decentralised Syria that can no longer act as a regional counterweight. Both states pursue their aims through proxy forces, military bases and aerial strikes, each seeking to reshape the regional order in line with its own interests.

In the eastern Mediterranean, the antagonism is even sharper. Israel, Greece and Cyprus remain committed to the EastMed Pipeline, designed to transport gas to Europe while bypassing Turkey entirely. Ankara views this as part of a broader attempt to “encircle” Turkey economically. Israeli arms sales to Cyprus are another antagonising factor.

The timing of Netanyahu's recognition of Somaliland was deliberate. It came just days after a summit in Jerusalem to form a “strategic alliance” between Israel, Greece and Cyprus aimed at countering Israel's regional isolation. Netanyahu took aim at Turkey, saying “To those who fantasize they can restore their empires and their rule over our countries I say: forget it. It's not going to happen. Don't even think about it”.

While Erdoğan denounced Israel's recognition of Somaliland, he refrained from criticising the UAE, which has become a crucial economic lifeline for Turkey. It has established a \$10 billion investment fund in the country, part of a larger commitment to invest \$50 billion. Bilateral trade between the two nations now exceeds \$40 billion.

The other regional players

The other countries in the region with major interests in the Somaliland question are Ethiopia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

In January 2024, landlocked Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa's powerhouse and for a long period the region's anchor state on behalf of US imperialism, signed an agreement with Somaliland granting it access to Berbera as its main maritime outlet. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is seeking to diversify Ethiopia's reliance on Djibouti which handles 90 percent of its trade at a cost of \$1.5 billion.

The deal signalled Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland as an independent state and de facto line up with the UAE. It produced a furious response from Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea.

Egypt opposes Somaliland and Israel's recognition in large part as a result of its conflict with Ethiopia, centred on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) which threatens to reduce the flow of the Blue Nile, which supplies 80 percent of Egypt's water. Cairo has signed a military cooperation agreement with Mogadishu to train Somali forces and invest in military infrastructure.

Saudi Arabia's opposition to Israel's move is shaped by its intensifying rivalry with the UAE for control over Red Sea chokepoints, ports and logistics corridors.

Riyadh is expanding its own presence, including a 30-year concession for the Saudi-owned Red Sea Gateway Terminal to develop Djibouti's port of Tadjourah. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and its regional allies face growing challenges from UAE-backed proxies—the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan and Southern Transitional Council in Yemen—and Abu Dhabi's broader push to secure recognition for Somaliland.

The US and Chinese response

President Donald Trump publicly dismissed the idea of recognising

Somaliland, remarking, “Does anyone know what Somaliland is, really?” Yet this flippant remark contradicts his own administration's strategic planning. Project 2025, drafted by the Heritage Foundation, explicitly recommended recognising Somaliland as a means of countering China's growing influence in Djibouti and the wider region.

Divisions within the administration reflect competing imperialist priorities. Some officials fear that recognising Somaliland would jeopardise military cooperation with Somalia in the US air war in the region, carried out under the banner of combatting al-Shabaab and ISIL.

Trump's second administration has dramatically escalated aerial strikes in Somalia—more than the combined total under George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Joe Biden—killing over 7,000 people. These operations, largely ignored by the mainstream media, are on track to exceed the 219 strikes carried out during Trump's first term.

Nevertheless, on Wednesday, the Trump administration suspended all assistance to the Somali federal government, claiming that officials had destroyed a World Food Programme warehouse at Mogadishu port filled with food aid it funded. The action underscores Washington's readiness to use economic coercion, and follows Trump's vitriolic campaign against Somali immigrants to the US.

These moves come in the context of China's reaffirmation of support for Somalia, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi telling his Somali counterpart last week: “We will consistently support Somalia in safeguarding its national sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, and oppose Somaliland's collusion with the Taiwan authorities in seeking independence.”

Capitalist war and the Horn of Africa

Israel—and the UAE's—efforts to secure recognition for Somaliland highlight and enflame the enormous geopolitical tensions in the Horn of Africa, a region that is already contending with multiple crises amid drought and famine:

- The civil war in Sudan between rival military factions that has killed more than 150,000 people and displaced more than 12 million, creating the world's largest humanitarian crisis that threatens to spill over into neighbouring Ethiopia and South Sudan.
- Increasingly tense relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea that could escalate into war as Ethiopia pushes for Red Sea access.
- Political tensions in South Sudan that could reignite civil war.
- Across the Red Sea, the civil war in Yemen between Houthi rebels to the north and Saudi and UAE-backed forces that are backing rival factions in the south.

The combination of competing imperialist and regional interests over trade routes and resource, intersecting with the venal ambitions of the local ruling classes, has not only turned the region into a social nightmare for tens of millions, it has created a tinderbox for war with global consequences.

A major conflict—possibly between the two rival blocs of Ethiopia-Somaliland backed by the UAE and Israel, and Somalia-Egypt-Eritrea-Turkey backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar—would disrupt critical marine traffic and involve outside powers already deeply entangled in the region.

These dangers are fundamentally rooted in capitalism: the private ownership of the means of production, the division of the world into rival nation states and the relentless struggle for markets, profits and resources. Developments around Somaliland are further proof that this global system is in profound crisis, posing immense dangers to workers and oppressed people around the world.

They underscore the necessity of a socialist internationalist movement, unifying workers around the globe in the fight for a society based on democratically planned production for need, not competition for private gain and geopolitical power.



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