

Number: 13

January 2026

ISRAEL'S RECOGNITION OF SOMALILAND

What is Somaliland?

When Israel recognised Somaliland, it not only acknowledged a *de facto state* but made a geopolitical move in violation of International Law at the mouth of one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. On 26 December 2025, Israel became the first country to recognise Somalia's breakaway region, Somaliland.¹ Somaliland unilaterally declared independence from Somalia in 1991 (with capital Hargeisa), and since then, it has maintained informal ties with many governments and international bodies without any official recognition of the region. Somaliland has its own political system, government institutions, currency, and police force. Relying on its working political system and functional stability, Somaliland has participated in regional forums like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to engage in diplomacy and economic discussions. To bypass formal statehood, Somaliland has been running its business with other international actors through missions (South Africa, Norway, Sweden) and representative offices (UK, US, Ethiopia, Taiwan, UAE, Kenya, etc.), private investments (Coca Cola), port concessions (UAE for Berbera port) and infrastructure deals (Ethiopia). Somaliland's missions to other countries are not diplomatic but liaison offices that handle trade, cultural ties, and relations between Somaliland and the host country. Most notable partners of Somaliland are Taiwan, Ethiopia, the UAE and now Israel. Previously, Ethiopia tried to strike a port deal with Somaliland in 2024 in exchange for recognition;² several city councils in the UK passed motions to recognise Somaliland's right to self-determination; some US officials also advocated for recognition, but the US officially has one Somalia policy. Due to the absence of formal recognition, Somaliland was not eligible for traditional aid; resultantly, it built internal institutions, established tax-based relationships and a stable environment. This signals reliability to international partners and ability to forge bilateral relations with international actors, circumventing formal recognition. Hence, Somaliland possesses all

the essentials of statehood, a permanent population, defined territory, an organised government and ability to enter into relations with other states, as recognised in International Law.

Somaliland's Self-declared Independence

Somaliland has been a British colony named the State of Somaliland till 1960, while Somalia was an Italian colony. Italian Somaliland (present-day Somalia) remained a UN Trust Territory under Italian administration from 1950 to 1960. The original State of Somaliland gained independence from British rule on June 26, 1960³ and existed as a sovereign state for 5 days before it voluntarily united with the Trust Territory of Somaliland to form the Somali Republic. During this brief period in 1960, Somaliland received international recognition from approximately 35 countries which included Israel, US (de facto recognition), UK, China, USSR, France, Libya, Ghana, Egypt and Ethiopia.⁴ Somaliland re-declared its independence in 1991 as the successor to the 1960 state, becoming the current Republic of Somaliland.

Somaliland wanted self-governance for itself due to harsh policies against its main clan, Isaac, under the dictatorship of Siad Barre. A civil war ensued, and following the overthrow of Barre, Somaliland declared independence from Somalia. Somaliland has a population of six million people and is relatively more peaceful and stable than Somalia, which faces internal challenges from Islamist militant groups, namely Al-Qaeda's affiliate, Al-Shabaab.⁵ Despite Somaliland's ethnic differences with Somalia, Somalia considers it an integral part of its territory. Due to Somali protests against any overtures to recognise the breakaway region, no country had officially recognised Somaliland. Somali leaders have repeatedly reiterated that any attempt to recognise Somaliland is an attack on its sovereignty and an interference in its internal matters. Somali President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, declared Israel's recognition of Somaliland an "existential threat" to the country's unity.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this Policy Brief are of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect policy of the IPRI.



Source: BBC

Israel's Recognition of Somaliland- Objectives and Implications

Israel sees recognition of Somaliland as an opportunity to expand and extend the country's partnerships. Israel has assured its new ally of cooperation in intelligence sharing,⁶ agriculture, health, technology, and economy. However, the strategic reasons for Israel's recognition are:

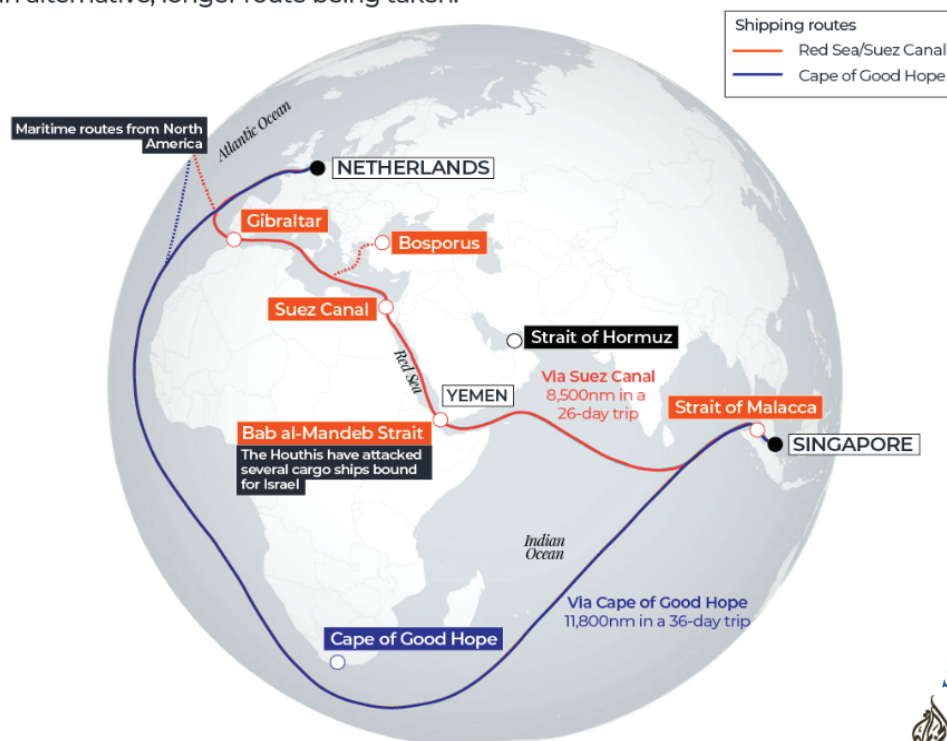
- Greater access to the Red Sea, which has been a source of support and weapon supply to fighters in Gaza.
- Somaliland's Berbera port as a launchpad to counter Iran-backed Houthis' attacks on Israeli shipments. Ultimately, countering Iranian influence in the region.
- Protecting and monitoring American sea routes.
- Making a circle of allies around the so-called axis of terrorism.⁷

Israel's recognition of Somaliland involved extensive secret engagement focusing on strategic goals, high-level visits and Mossad activity, long-sought legitimacy by Somaliland and potential deals for military access and Palestinian resettlement. Israel is likely to deport Palestinians from Gaza to Somaliland; a move which is also going to get support from the US. Somaliland gives Israel greater access

ECONOMY

Alternative shipping route to avoid the Red Sea

Attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels in the Red Sea have disrupted maritime trade along major shipping routes via the Suez Canal and Bab al-Mandeb Strait, leading to an alternative, longer route being taken.



Source: Al-Jazeera



Source: Port Economics, Management and Policy, Reuters | January 12, 2024

@AJLabs ALJAZEERA

to Bab al Mandeb (routes 1/3rd of global trade), and the Gulf of Aden than it previously had. In response to Houthi attacks, Israel repeatedly struck targets in Yemen. The Houthis have already warned that Israeli presence in Somaliland would be a target for their forces. Some sources hint that Israel already has a presence in Somaliland; the recognition only formalises it.

Another aspect of this recognition is the potential settlement of Palestinians forced out of Gaza; however, Somaliland has negated the recognition to have anything to do with the Palestinian issue. Israel has been widely criticised by countries and organisations for its disregard for Somalia's territorial integrity. Egypt, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Yemen, Sudan, the AU, EU, and OIC have been among the actors criticising Israel's move. The US is the only country that defended Israel in the UNSC emergency meeting, stating that Israel is free to pursue diplomatic relations with any state it wishes. The US also underscored that the UN response contradicts the decision taken by UN member countries earlier in the year to recognise a Palestinian state.

Most of Somaliland's partners and sympathisers have shown no intention to follow Israel's suit. The US declared that its position on Somaliland has not changed. The UAE, despite operating a military port in Somaliland, has remained quiet on the issue. Türkiye brokered a written agreement between Ethiopia and Somalia (after the controversial MOU to seal the Ethiopia-Somaliland port deal), with Ethiopia committing to respect Somalia's territorial integrity. Hence, Ethiopia has refrained from issuing a statement regarding the recognition. Türkiye also expressed full solidarity with President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud of Somalia and condemned bifurcation of Somalian territory. Somaliland hoped that the US would also recognise it following hints given before Trump's second term. Somaliland has expressed its desire to join the Abraham Accords in the hopes of getting closer to the US, if not earn full recognition as an independent state. Despite silence from these countries, the fear remains that other countries might also choose to recognise Somaliland.

The AU is concerned that this recognition might lead other separatists in the region to demand recognition for territories under their control. Breakaway and semi-autonomous regions might evade the authority of central governments by establishing external alliances. The Islamist militant group, Al Shabaab, which operates in Somalia, has already issued statements to fight Israeli use of Somaliland, as the group sees Israelis as infidels. The group's anti-Israel rhetoric might strengthen its recruitment and funding, as many factions inside Somalia and Somaliland do not support Israel's recognition of Somaliland. AU will have to take concrete measures to arrest the ongoing trend of separatism in the African continent as there are approximately two dozen separatist movements underway. Israel's move may have been symbolic, but it has definitely been seismic.

Notes

- ¹ "Israel Recognises Somaliland," The Economist, December 30, 2025, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/12/30/israel-recognises-somaliland>.
- ² International Crisis Group, "The Stakes in the Ethiopia-Somaliland Deal," Crisis Group Africa Report, March 6, 2024, accessed January 02, 2026, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia-somaliland/stakes-ethiopia-somaliland-deal>.
- ³ Republic of Somaliland, "The State of Somaliland Became the First East African Country to Obtain Independence," Republic of Somaliland, accessed January 4, 2026, <https://www.republicofsomaliland.com/somaliland-first-east-african-country>.
- ⁴ Republic of Somaliland, "The State of Somaliland Became the First East African Country to Obtain Independence."
- ⁵ BBC News, "Why Israel's Recognition of Somaliland as an Independent State Is Controversial," BBC News, December 30, 2025, accessed January 3, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c14v4kmg275o>.
- ⁶ Benoit Faucon and Dov Lieber, "Israel Flexes New Diplomatic Muscle in Recognition of Somaliland," Wall Street Journal, January 5, 2026, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/israel-flexes-new-diplomatic-muscle-in-recognition-of-somaliland-f326231b>.
- ⁷ How Will Israel's Recognition of Somaliland Impact the Middle East? YouTube video, 05:44, posted by Al Jazeera English, December 28, 2025, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GN5tYuyvp34>.