

Somaliland and Israel—Considerations Regarding Recognition and Cooperation

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In the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region—areas whose security and strategic importance for Israel have grown significantly over the past two years—lies Somaliland, an independent and pro-Western state that has yet to be recognized by the international community. Its primary objective is to secure recognition and to build alliances with states that can support it vis-à-vis its rival, the Somali government in Mogadishu. In recent years, Somaliland has cultivated close ties with the United Arab Emirates and Taiwan. Its leadership has now placed considerable hope in the Trump administration, and in this context, it has intensified its efforts to achieve recognition, including from Israel. This article examines Israel–Somaliland relations from Israel’s perspective and outlines the considerations for both supporting and delaying Israeli recognition.

Somaliland—More Than Thirty Years of Independence and Stability

Somaliland covers the northwestern part of what the international community still recognizes as Somalia. It was independent for a brief five-day period in 1960 before joining a union with Somalia, and it later reasserted its independence in 1991 as it emerged from the brutal Somali civil war that began in the late 1980s.

Over the past century, Somaliland has developed a distinct identity. It was ruled by the British (unlike Somalia, which was under Italian control); its people have long-standing ties with South Yemen across the Gulf of Aden; and most of its population belongs to the Isaaq clan, in contrast to Somalia’s other major clan families. The Isaaq suffered discrimination, violence, and—according to its members—even genocide at the hands of the clans that ruled Somalia, especially during the 1980s.

Since declaring its de facto independence, Somaliland has contrasted sharply with Somalia in almost every respect: its security environment is calm, its internal politics are stable, and it has no significant jihadist presence. Although there are border disputes in outlying areas where other clans reside, these conflicts remain localized and contained. Since the 2000s, Somaliland has maintained a stable, effectively functioning multi-party democratic system with regular elections. The most recent vote, held in 2024, featured orderly and peaceful transfers of power. All major political forces are pro-Western and wary of Islamist movements,

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as well as of China and Russia. Although they differ on how to achieve it, they all share the overarching goal of securing international recognition.

Somalia's instability is largely concentrated in the south, which has helped bolster Somaliland's stability. It is far from the main conflict zones—whether fighting among rival clans or clashes between the government and the powerful al-Shabaab organization. Somaliland also borders relatively stable and friendly neighbors: Ethiopia, Puntland (a de facto autonomous state within Somalia's federation), and Djibouti, and it maintains peaceful relations with all three. In 2024, Somaliland signed a strategic memorandum of understanding with Ethiopia that would grant landlocked Ethiopia access to the strategic port of Berbera, along with an implicit promise of future recognition of Somaliland's independence (the agreement was later effectively frozen, although not formally canceled, due to Turkish–Somali pressure). Relations with Djibouti have also advanced, and in October 2025, Somaliland signed the “Nairobi Agreement” with Puntland to enhance security and commercial cooperation.

In recent years, Somaliland has also expanded its ties with other pro-Western states. Its two most strategic partners are Taiwan and the United Arab Emirates. Taiwan—a global chip-manufacturing powerhouse—has invested in Somaliland's rare metals and minerals sector, while the UAE has invested heavily in developing the port of Berbera. For the UAE, Somaliland offers a strategic foothold in the Horn of Africa, complementing its other regional strongholds, such as Socotra Island in Yemen, Puntland, and Darfur.

Somaliland also has reasons to be cautiously optimistic about its relationship with the United States. American delegations—including representatives from the Pentagon—have visited the country, which positions itself as a potential strategic base for the United States in the region. President Trump has stated that US recognition of Somaliland is under consideration, and Congress is planning to urge the State Department to re-examine bilateral ties with the goal of enhancing them. As an interim step, lawmakers have proposed that the State Department start distinguishing between Somalia and Somaliland in its travel advisories. Senior Republicans, including Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, have repeatedly voiced support for recognizing Somaliland's independence. Nevertheless, Washington is still weighing several strong arguments against recognition, and progress has been slowed by delays in key appointments and in formulating a broader US policy toward Africa and the Red Sea.

Against this backdrop, Somaliland is waging a media and lobbying campaign to advance its bid for international recognition. In May 2025, Somaliland's presidency appealed to UN member states to recognize it as an independent state, and in October 2025, local media reported that more than 20 states, including Israel, were moving toward recognition. Somaliland has also become increasingly willing to adopt additional symbols of sovereignty. In November 2025, it declared full control over its airspace—separating it from Somalia's nominal sovereignty—and required all aircraft to obtain direct authorization from Somaliland's authorities to fly through its airspace. It also announced that it would no longer recognize visas issued by the government in Mogadishu.

International recognition has therefore been the paramount goal of Somaliland's successive governments—a goal that has remained unchanged despite democratic transfers of power. Recognition would formalize Somaliland's status and, it hopes, protect it from a future scenario in which a strengthened Somalia—alone or with its allies—might seek to re-impose

its authority over the territory with international legitimacy. In addition to recognition, Somaliland aims to secure reliable and powerful allies.

For now, the danger posed by the government in Mogadishu remains largely hypothetical. Somaliland faces more immediate security concerns, including the Houthis; the spread of global jihad (currently active in neighboring Puntland); separatist pressures along its periphery; and subversive activity linked to China and Turkey—threats for which there is tangible evidence on the ground.

The Importance of Somaliland for the West and Israel

Somaliland's significance lies in its geostrategic location and in its willingness—as a stable, moderate, and reliable state in a volatile region—to work closely with Western countries. Its location at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden—opposite southern Yemen—linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean gives it a unique geostrategic importance. This strategic value was why the British Empire took control of the territory at the end of the 19th century, and why the United States secured access to a military base there during the Reagan administration in the 1980s, at the height of the Cold War.

Today, Somaliland's coastline and territory lie roughly 300 to 500 kilometers from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, including the port of Hodeidah. Since the Gulf states, the United States, and Israel have all fought the Houthis in recent years without achieving a decisive outcome, Somaliland's location—and the possibility of operating from its territory—could be a game changer.

Somaliland could serve as a forward base for a range of missions: intelligence collection and monitoring of the Houthis and their military buildup; logistical support for Yemen's internationally recognized government in its war against the Houthis; and direct operations, from offensive actions to intercepting Houthi attacks at sea or by UAVs. A useful parallel is Israel's close alliance with Azerbaijan, which has significantly strengthened Israel's strategic and operational ability to counter the Iranian threat. Similarly, Somaliland could become a key pillar of Israel's efforts to address the Houthi threat.

Alongside Somaliland's strategic location, it is equally important that its government seeks wide-ranging cooperation with pro-Western states. This reflects both political willingness and practical capability. Although Eritrea lies even closer than Somaliland to areas from which operations against the Houthis could be launched, its regime is anti-Western and maintains friendly ties with Iran. Djibouti, despite its strategic location, maintains de facto neutrality in regional conflicts, while Ethiopia lacks access to the sea and has ambivalent relations with the United States.

Somaliland, therefore, offers a unique combination of geostrategic location and a clear readiness to pursue extensive cooperation with Western-aligned states. Its growing ties with the United Arab Emirates—driven in part by Abu Dhabi's interest in the war against the Houthis—underscore this. Somaliland has also signaled that it is prepared to develop broad security relations with the United States, including the possibility of hosting an American base, and it might be open to cooperation with Israel.

In relation to Israel, Somaliland's government has maintained a positive stance, even during the past two years of the war in Gaza, and it is plausible that unofficial contacts already exist among senior figures in both parties. In recent months, Somaliland has signaled its willingness to cooperate with pro-Israel initiatives, including the expansion of the Abraham Accords. Public discourse in Somaliland tends to be generally pro-Israeli, although critical voices also exist, particularly in light of the war and reports from Gaza, as well as the presence of non-violent Salafi movements in the country.

Considerations for and Against Recognizing Somaliland

For Somaliland, the most coveted prize is US recognition, which it expects would prompt many other US partners to follow suit. It therefore devotes the bulk of its diplomatic efforts to the White House and Congress. Somaliland presents itself as firmly opposed to China and willing to take significant steps to advance American interests in the strategic Red Sea-Indian Ocean region. In its engagement with the United States, Somaliland also highlights its democratic system, political freedoms, and opposition to radical Islamist ideologies. In conversations with US officials and in its public messaging, Somaliland has made clear its eagerness to join the Abraham Accords. Moreover, Somaliland's desire for US recognition is so strong that its government did not publicly reject reports circulating several months ago that Washington was considering a proposal to resettle Gazans in Somaliland, even though the idea was extremely unpopular among Somaliland's own population.

Nonetheless, despite Somaliland's goodwill toward Washington and its strategic location, the United States remains hesitant to grant it formal recognition—for several significant reasons.

First, on principle, US policy on Somalia has been consistent in recent decades in supporting the "One Somalia" policy, the position that Somalia should remain a single, unified state rather than be divided into separate sovereign entities. Washington has sought to strengthen the government in Mogadishu, particularly in light of its two-decade war against al-Shabaab. From the US perspective, Somalia is an ally—albeit a weak and failing one—and the United States periodically provides military assistance, including in strikes against global jihadist operatives.

In contrast, recognizing Somaliland would be viewed in Mogadishu as an American betrayal and could trigger blowback inside fragile Somalia—for example, by encouraging the formal secession of Puntland and Jubaland, both of which are still symbolically committed to Mogadishu's authority, or by strengthening al-Shabaab. This concern aligns with a broader international reluctance to recognize unilateral border changes or secessionist states, out of fear of opening a Pandora's box and destabilizing borders elsewhere, especially in the Middle East and Africa.

Although this is a significant consideration for Washington, which is generally inclined to maintain the status quo, it is possible that the Trump administration could break with the long-standing practice of upholding "One Somalia" and resisting recognition of secessionist states. However, another factor likely plays an even more important role for the United States at present: the stance of most Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt, as well as Turkey, all of which support preserving Somalia's unity. With the exception of the UAE, Arab League states both officially and in practice support Somalia's territorial integrity and vehemently oppose recognition of Somaliland. For Turkey, Somalia is a central ally in the Red

Sea region, approaching the status of a client state. These powerful states—whose views carry weight in Washington—have made clear their strong opposition to recognizing Somaliland.

While their influence in Washington is far more limited, African Union member states also tend to oppose the formal recognition of secessionist entities, fearing a domino effect across the continent.

Compared with the United States, Israel faces additional considerations. While opposition from Qatar and Turkey to recognizing Somaliland is not particularly significant for Israel—and could arguably have the opposite effect—Egypt’s position, and possibly China’s, could prove more consequential. At the same time, Israel’s close relationship with the UAE strengthens the case for supporting Somaliland. However, Israel has traditionally been reluctant to recognize secessionist states, partly out of concern that doing so could set precedents that might backfire in the context of a Palestinian state. This concern is less relevant today, given the de facto and near-universal international recognition extended to the Palestinian “state” in recent years.

A more serious factor for Israel—one that warrants caution and serious reflection before extending formal recognition to Somaliland—is a pragmatic one. Recognizing Somaliland without parallel US recognition could trigger negative repercussions for both Israel and Somaliland. While an Israel–Somaliland agreement might appear to strengthen Israel’s regional standing, it could also provoke a significant backlash in parts of the Muslim world. This could place Somaliland at the center of regional criticism and could push it to scale back or avoid expanding its public cooperation with Israel. Paradoxically, Israeli recognition could even complicate efforts to broaden the Abraham Accords to additional Muslim states.

Below the Threshold of Recognition—At Least for Now

Israel requires allies in the Red Sea region for many strategic reasons, among them the possibility of a future campaign against the Houthis. Somaliland is an ideal candidate for such cooperation, as it could offer Israel potential access to an operational arena close to the conflict zone. Beyond security cooperation, ties with Somaliland also carry economic and reputational value for Israel’s national security, given the minerals located in Somaliland and Israel’s interest in cultivating relationships with Muslim populations in the region. Israel should, therefore, work to expand its cooperation with Somaliland, ideally in coordination with the UAE and the United States.

Nevertheless, Israel has compelling reasons to refrain from becoming the first state to recognize Somaliland. Foremost among these is the concern that early recognition could actually hinder the cultivation of close relations, given the possible regional reactions and dynamics. As long as the United States (or at least the UAE) does not recognize Somaliland as an independent state, Israel should not act alone on this front.

The recommendation, therefore, is to advance relations with Somaliland below the threshold of recognition. While Israel and its partners in Washington can assist Somaliland in efforts to persuade the Trump administration to recognize it, the United States should be the first to make any public move. In parallel, prior to formal recognition, Israel and Somaliland can deepen their security and economic partnerships, establish interest offices (as many other

states already do with Somaliland), and even take symbolic steps such as recognizing Somaliland passports.

Such steps would avoid the risks of formal recognition while still enabling both sides to advance their essential interests. An Israeli security and economic presence in Somaliland does not necessarily require formal recognition, and conversely, Somaliland may at present prefer close, quiet ties with Israel over high-profile, precedent-setting declarations. Somaliland stands to gain substantially from such cooperation, particularly given the security challenges it faces in the Red Sea region and the Horn of Africa. For Israel, Somaliland may prove to be a game changer in the struggle against the Houthis.

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