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Executive Summary

- This policy paper analyzes the potential Israeli interests behind the recognition of Somaliland, factors that purportedly led Somaliland to support this initiative, and examines implications for Somaliland, Somalia, and beyond.
- Israel's decision to recognize Somaliland is primarily driven by its strategic interests in the Red Sea, including containing the Houthis threat, countering Türkiye's expanding influence in Somalia, and mitigating its growing diplomatic isolation.
- For Somaliland, the move reflects diminishing prospects for international recognition, internal polarization following the 2023 defeat in Las Anod, and concern over the improving international standing of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS).
- While the recognition offers symbolic validation for Somaliland's leadership, it carries several risks: it might disrupt Somaliland internally, intensify tensions with Somalia, and exacerbate insecurity across the Horn of Africa by inviting proxy competition and militant retaliation.
- For Somalia, the development undermines sovereignty, distracts from efforts to establish security, and deepens political polarization ahead of the 2026 political transition.
- The Federal Government should prioritize domestic unity and inclusive engagement. At the same time, it should pursue pragmatic dialogue with Somaliland's leaders while carefully balancing external diplomatic efforts with urgent internal priorities, including security and the political transition.

Introduction

The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, on 26 December 2025, announced that his government had formally recognized Somaliland, becoming the first United Nations Member State to do so since Somaliland first began pursuing international recognition 34 years ago. Shortly after the announcement, the federal government convened a cabinet meeting to discuss the matter and issued a press release in which it decried the move and reaffirmed its absolute commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia.

In a similar vein, the federal president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, launched a swift diplomatic offensive by making telephone calls to world leaders to rally their support and affirm their solidarity with Somalia. Subsequently, a chorus of countries (UN, 2025) and regional organizations (Al Jazeera, 2025) issued categorical condemnations of Israel's violation of Somali sovereignty and underlined their full and unqualified recognition of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia.

This is not the first time an external state has infringed upon the sovereignty of Somalia; however, this constitutes the gravest such violation in recent history. In January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in which, allegedly, the latter offered to lease a 20-kilometer stretch of coastal land for 50 years in exchange for potentially taking steps towards recognizing Somaliland (Somali Public Agenda, 2024). This agreement placed Somalia and Ethiopia at loggerheads, resulting in heightened diplomatic tensions between the two states for nearly a year, until Türkiye-mediated talks culminated in the Ankara Declaration on 11 December 2024 (FGS Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Though the two states reaffirmed each other's sovereignty, Ethiopia did not publicly renounce the MoU, leaving open the possibility that Ethiopia may resurrect the MoU any time in the future it deems opportune.

Against this backdrop, this policy paper considers the potential Israeli interests behind the recognition, factors that purportedly led to Somaliland supporting the move, and examines its potential implications for Somaliland, Somalia, and beyond. Finally, it concludes with several policy recommendations.

Why Israeli recognition of Somaliland?

The reasons and motivations that led Israel to offer formal recognition to Somaliland remain opaque and open to speculation. By contrast, international recognition has for many years been the single most important political priority for Somaliland's leadership. What remains far more puzzling, however, is how the current leaders of the region dared to align themselves with Israel and seek recognition from it, even though most Muslims, including Somalis, and their political leaders, harbor a long-standing and virulent enmity toward the Israeli state, which is increasingly viewed by many people around the world as a pariah, apartheid, and genocidal state implicated in the decimation of the Palestinian people.

Several reasons could explain why Israel undertook this move. First, Israel is arguably eager to carve out a sphere of influence in the strategic Red Sea, which is attracting the increased attention of global powers. Israel's interest in the region intensified after Israeli and other commercial ships came under repeated attacks from the Houthis in Yemen, as well as several missile strikes on key Israeli infrastructure, including its main airport. These attacks, at times, disrupted flights and forced many Israelis to seek shelter from the barrage of Houthi missiles. It is important to note that the Houthis, who are the most resilient members of the Iran-backed, so-called "Axis of Resistance," started these attacks in response to Israeli atrocities in Gaza.

Thus, to at least contain or stem the threat posed by the Houthis, Israel could find no better option than Somaliland, as most other Red Sea countries would not accept allowing Israel to come close to or gain access to the Red Sea, viewing such access as a threat to their security. Israel allegedly plans to establish a base in the strategic port of Berbera, which would provide it with easy access to the Red Sea and enable it to conduct operations against the Houthis more efficiently(Freeman, 2026). Furthermore, a presence in the Somaliland region would facilitate intelligence and surveillance operations at close proximity.

Second, the Israeli move could be interpreted as an attempt to counter its regional rival, Türkiye, which over the past decade has firmly established itself in Somalia. Türkiye hosts its largest overseas military base and embassy in Mogadishu and has secured several major bilateral agreements with Somalia. It has also concluded two significant agreements with the FGS on maritime and defense cooperation, and on oil and gas exploration, in February and March 2024, respectively.

Third, beyond strategic considerations, the move is also likely driven by domestic political optics. The Israeli Prime Minister appears intent on using this recognition to break his government's near international isolation, which resulted from the devastating war in Gaza, by portraying it as the inclusion of a new "Muslim state" into the Abraham Accords. Additionally, as his popularity has sharply declined and elections approach in Israel, he has undertaken this move in an effort to salvage his image and

secure an electoral victory (Ghebrezghiabher, 2025). It also diverts attention from the ongoing tragedies in Gaza.

For the Somaliland perspective, a range of factors likely pushed its leaders to seek and/or accept recognition from Israel. The bloody conflict between Somaliland forces and SSC-Khatumo militias—now the Northeast State—left Somaliland weakened and exposed on multiple fronts. It lost territories previously claimed as part of the former British Somaliland Protectorate. In addition, it suffered losses in personnel and materiel, with over 300 soldiers, including commanders, falling into the custody of SSC-Khatumo militias, where they remain detained. The defeat in Las Anod culminated in the formation of an interim administration in October 2024, which the federal government later elevated to federal member state status as the Northeast State in July 2025, combining key parts of the Sool and Sanaag regions—areas that Somaliland had partially controlled, long claimed, and promoted as integral to its project.

Following the Las Anod debacle, Somaliland experienced heightened internal polarization. The events galvanized largely marginalized peripheral clans, particularly the Gadabuursi (also known as Samaroon), who harbor grievances over representation and resource-sharing; key segments of them are reportedly inclined toward unity with the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). Although their mobilization was quickly contained, tensions continue to simmer and await a trigger.

Polarization further intensified before and after Somaliland's elections. The November 2024 elections brought Abdirahman Irro to power, succeeding Muse Bihi Abdi, who was widely regarded as a secessionist hardliner and militarist. Internally, Mr. Irro was perceived as less committed to the Somaliland separatist project and as leaning toward advancing negotiations with Mogadishu as a path to settlement.

At the same time as Somaliland's position weakened, the FGS was improving its international standing and gradually reclaiming its de facto sovereignty. The FGS dealt a significant blow to Somaliland's aspirations when Mogadishu diplomatically thwarted Somaliland's attempt to secure recognition from Ethiopia in exchange for access to the sea through an MoU signed with Addis Ababa in early 2024.

The combined effect of these circumstances diminished public hope and confidence in recognition and generated widespread fatigue, despite long-standing political rhetoric assuring the public that recognition was forthcoming and urging patience. These dynamics hastened Somaliland's leaders to impulsively seek recognition at any cost in order to hold their local constituency together, revive confidence in the separatist project, and counter perceptions that the current Somaliland president favors unity over secession.

Exploring the implications

Implications for Somaliland

The Israeli move will not be a passing event but will undoubtedly have far-reaching implications for Somaliland, which is currently basking in jubilation (The Economist, 2025). These implications may stem from two sources: internal and external.

We begin by discussing risks which come from within Somaliland, including potential effects on public support and the risk of intensifying already sensitive political debates.

Firstly, the Somalia-wide respected religious figures in the region of Somaliland could mobilize themselves and oppose the act. There is already some evidence of this: Somaliland authorities arrested a [prominent religious figure](#) on 27 December 2025, who spoke out against Israeli recognition. The authorities in Hargeisa also arrested [another religious figure](#) on 2 January 2026, after calling out the Abraham Accords, and warned that if the Somaliland president signed them, it would be against “Islamic principles”.

Yet, other well-known religious figures across Somalia have not yet come out openly on the topic; they may possibly be waiting for the charged emotions of the public to calm down. Their religious messaging reaches a wider audience in Somalia and beyond. Publicly expressing their opposition to Israel’s recognition could provoke backlash against the administration. The Somaliland administration would likely try to silence dissenting voices. However, if the religious figures—whose religious messaging reaches a wider audience in Somalia and beyond—remain silent to avoid irritating the administration, they could risk losing their legitimacy among Somalis at home and abroad and could be viewed as colluding with Somaliland on this matter.

Secondly, this move could add a new layer of division in Somaliland in an already polarized context. Some political moderates and opponents of the secession project, particularly those holding strong anti-Israel views, may interpret the move as establishing relations with a state they regard as hostile to Muslim interests. Already, some cautiously raised questions, while some expressed their opposition to the recognition from Israel, including religious figures whom the authorities detained. This group could be easily exploited by other groups seeking to mount resistance against the administration in response to its decision.

Thirdly, the move may dent potential hope for political dialogue between the Northeast state and Somaliland. Somaliland already views the establishment of a federal member state aligned with the federal government as an effort to undermine its secessionist project and challenge the relative security and stability it has maintained. Northeast state may interpret the development as an act of defiance against its formation and an

imminent threat to its existence. Heightened tensions could disrupt the movement of people and goods between the two regions and may further complicate Somaliland's efforts to negotiate the release of prisoners of war held by the Northeast state.

At the same time, Israel's recognition of Somaliland is likely to generate a range of external political and security repercussions from those outside of Somaliland. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

Firstly, Djibouti was among the first batch of countries to denounce the Israeli recognition of Somaliland. Moreover, on 31 December 2025, it closed Somaliland's liaison office in Djibouti. The country may see Israeli basing in Somaliland as a threat to its security and set up Somaliland as a competitor for its major source of revenue generation: the lease of bases to foreign powers. Djibouti may engage clans like Isse and Gadabuursi, who have grievances against the Somaliland administration, to oppose the recognition. Previously, the Somaliland administration accused Djibouti of supporting the anti-Somaliland movement in the Awdal region, though this was denied by the Djibouti government (Somai Dispatch, 2024). This puts Somaliland under pressure to seriously address local grudges being held by Gudabuursi and Isse clans.

Secondly, since we expect that Israel is at least partly driven by its interest in neutralizing or containing the threat of Houthis in Yemen, it is worth considering that the Houthis may respond directly to any Israeli presence in Somaliland. The Houthis have already warned that Israeli presence in Somaliland will be treated as a military target (Anadolu Agency, 2025). The Houthis could even unleash pre-emptive strikes against key infrastructure in Somaliland that they believe could accommodate Israel. Indeed, the Houthis have already attacked targets in Israel, and commercial ships in Red Sea perceived to be used by Israel and sunk some of them, supposedly in solidarity with the people in Gaza (The Arab Weekly, 2025).

Thirdly, Somalia may take punitive measures against Somaliland, which is already struggling with the introduction and enforcement of the E-visa to passengers coming into Somalia, including Somaliland. The FGS may weaponize its sovereignty over the control of the airspace, putting further burden on civilians in Somaliland. Likewise, the FGS may double down on enforcing the Electronic Cargo Tracking Number (ECTN) it introduced in September 2025, which every commercial ship bound to Somali ports – including Somaliland's Berbera port – is required to attain before arrival, regardless of the respective administrations of these ports. Nevertheless, this could push the Somaliland leaders to be more extreme and earn them further local legitimacy.

Fourth, the FGS may provide increased material support to the Northeast state and accelerate enlistment of new recruits from Sool and Sanaag into various FGS security apparatuses. Additionally, it could establish military bases in the Northeast state, further undermining the case for separation in the eyes of those considering recognizing Somaliland. A related scenario is that the new development could add further fuel to the already tense situation in areas where communities from the Dhulbahante and Isaq clans co-exist.

Fifth, the new development could limit movement between Mogadishu and Hargeisa, as both administrations may introduce measures to restrict mobility under the guise of safeguarding security. Both administrations could inspect and interrogate people traveling to and from either city, making travel for workshops, conferences, family visits, or humanitarian purposes inconvenient. Consequently, potential travelers may choose not to travel to either place to avoid harassment by immigration officials at both airports. This situation could significantly damage entrepreneurs from both regions, primarily domestic travel companies.

Sixth, Somaliland may become a new theatre of competition among competing powers, greatly risking the relative stability and security it has long prided itself on maintaining. Countries that perceive a threat in the Israeli presence near the Red Sea may attempt to counter any increase in Israeli influence. At the same time, Israel and its allies could establish further alliances to cement and protect their interests in the area that may undermine the relative stability of Somaliland.

Implications for Somalia

The new development will have implications for Somalia, originating from two sources: internal and external. The potential internal implications resulting from the recognition declaration are numerous, but key issues are highlighted below.

Firstly, the move further undermines Somalia's already weak and vulnerable sovereignty. Somalia has been slowly reclaiming its de facto sovereignty, but this development serves as a setback for Somalia's territorial integrity. However, this is not the only threat to Somalia's de facto sovereignty but the presence of armed non-state actors, the autonomy of the federal member states, foreign troops, and reliance on foreign aid also make the sovereignty weak and vulnerable.

Secondly, the new development plays into the hands of armed non-state actors by creating recruitment opportunities. Al-Shabaab could seize this momentum to craft religion- and nationalism-laden messages to exploit both nationalists and people with fervent religious sentiments. This could pose a significant threat to the federal government, as Al-Shabaab could draw more recruits to overwhelm federal government forces and/or open additional fronts. While FGS launched an offensive against Al-Shabaab and made gains on the ground in 2022 and 2023, the January 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU distracted the FGS and gave an opening for the group to exploit. It succeeded in recapturing strategic locations it lost to the government; increased its revenue; and drew in more people who held anti-Ethiopian sentiment after the federal government turned its whole attention to the MoU (Webb, 2024). As a consequence of the MoU, FGS President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, in a press conference in Addis Ababa, stated that Al-Shabaab recruited thousands of people in 2024 following the signing of the MoU (Dawan Africa, 2025).

Thirdly, the move weakens the federal system as some federal member states may be emboldened to further pursue their alleged relations with foreign countries that are

believed to be involved in activities that do not serve the territorial integrity of Somalia.

Fourthly, it deflects the attention of the federal government from fighting Al-Shabaab, as the FGS will prioritize defending external sovereignty over local dynamics. It is likely that the federal government will devote resources, including diplomatic, time, and energy, to mobilizing the support of the international community against Israel. Concentrating the government's focus on addressing this new development will severely affect local security dynamics, as happened in 2024, when the federal government shifted its attention from the fight against Al-Shabaab—in which it had made significant gains—to the Somaliland–Ethiopia MoU, causing a reversal of those gains.

Fifthly, the new development could increase already increasing polarization over elections in 2026, as the federal government president may attempt to use the defense of the country's sovereignty as a distraction from upcoming elections. The opposition contends that a federal government with a mandate after May 2026 will be critical for addressing the Somaliland–Israel development. This places Somalia in a dilemma over whether to prioritize elections or diplomatic efforts against Israel's recognition of Somaliland.

The new development will also have external implications for Somalia. Firstly, the efforts of foreign powers committed to disintegrating the country or keeping it divided will increase, as Somalia becomes more exposed to foreign meddling and infiltration. The ravaging political fragmentation in the country is not in the interest of preserving sovereignty and territorial integrity. Secondly, Somalia could attract global jihadists as the areas in which they previously operated continue to shrink, further straining the already fragile security dynamics in the country.

Wider implications for the Horn of Africa and beyond

Israel's recognition could have several regional and international implications.

Firstly, the Horn of Africa, which is already marked by recurrent conflict and political volatility, may be affected by spillover effects stemming from the new dynamics associated with Israel's recognition of Somaliland. Any escalation arising from this development could exacerbate the region's existing humanitarian challenges, contribute to increased arms flows through proxy competition, and create additional openings for Islamist groups to expand recruitment and influence, thereby heightening security risks across the region.

Secondly, accommodating Israel in Somaliland may hurt the free movement of commercial ships in the Red Sea, if the Houthis ratchet up their attacks on ships transporting goods in the Red Sea, causing increased insurance premiums for ships and higher costs of goods as a result.

Thirdly, it could lead to the formation of competing alliances: one comprising most of the countries bordering the Red Sea—such as Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Eritrea,

and Egypt—which would view an Israeli presence in Somaliland as a threat to their national interests; and a counter-alliance—primarily including Israel and its allies in this matter—which could trigger confrontation in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, resulting in security threats to Somaliland, Somalia, and beyond.

Fourthly, this may set a precedent for movements with separatist sentiment that are fighting in countries in the Horn of Africa and wider Africa, that demand independence for their regions from their parent countries.

Finally, the recent military actions by Russia in Ukraine and by Israel in Iran, Qatar, and Syria have posed a serious challenge to the current international order. Israel's recognition of the Somaliland administration, where Taiwan also maintains a representative office, could accelerate China's measures to seize Taiwan before Israel and its Western allies consider recognizing Taiwan as an independent entity. This situation could eventually lead to a major escalation among the world's great powers.

Policy Considerations

To deal with the development, which is escalating at a fast pace, this policy paper suggests the following recommendations for primarily federal government of Somalia to consider.

Enhance domestic unity: To counter threats to national sovereignty, the federal government is urgently required to show compromise toward its local adversaries on matters of the constitution, elections, and other issues that some actors use as a pretext to avoid the responsibility of collectively defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country.

Avoid antagonizing the Somaliland people: While pursuing diplomatic efforts to reject Israel's move, the federal government should avoid any measures that could further alienate the people in Somaliland and lend legitimacy to the cause of secessionist hardliners. Some argue that the FGS's introduction of the e-visa further fed the separatist agenda after people from Somaliland traveling from around the world to Hargeisa suffered significantly due to the e-visa requirement.

Seek the support of close allies: The federal government should strive to establish close relations with countries that have the ear of the great powers. This could help draw the attention of great power leaders to the seriousness of the matter and ensure that it is not taken lightly. Having warm relations with the allies of the great powers is an advantage in a world that is growing increasingly anarchic, where respect for international norms is becoming irrelevant.

Engage Somaliland leaders on the risks involved: Moderate and pragmatic intellectuals, religious figures, and business leaders should persuade Somaliland leaders that the risks outweigh the assumed benefits. The move could promote alternative pathways, such as negotiations with Mogadishu to reach a settlement on the Somalia–Somaliland issue. The fate of Somaliland is tied to what negotiations between the two sides ultimately produce.

Leverage national expertise: The federal government should leverage the expertise and knowledge of its most capable citizens on a range of issues, including engaging international media to convey the government's message to a global audience. It should also take advantage of Somali diplomats with rare diplomatic skills to achieve success in efforts to defend national sovereignty.

Balance efforts to secure external sovereignty with domestic priorities: In 2024, following the announcement of the Somaliland–Ethiopia MoU, the federal government shifted its focus away from other key internal matters. This shift caused a significant setback to the government's domestic affairs. The federal government should carefully balance its efforts to secure external sovereignty with those aimed at addressing key internal matters. These include developing a consensual roadmap for the 2026 political

transition, enhancing security by continuing the fight against Al-Shabaab, and addressing social issues, such as responding swiftly to the ongoing drought.

Capitalizing on the momentum to advance negotiations with Mogadishu: Since Somaliland currently attracted global attention, it should capitalize on the momentum and interest in advancing negotiations with Mogadishu. Somaliland leaders should discuss their future status with Mogadishu and pressure foreign countries to support such negotiations.

International community re-engagement of state-building in Somalia: The international community should revisit their engagement in Somalia state-building and re-examine their current role. They should support a holistic dialogue on a system of governance that works for Somalia. The status quo would no longer work in Somalia. The international community should change their engagement approach and support Somalis craft governance structures that can advance unity and improve governance. That can come out of dialogue and negotiations among key institutions and actors in Somalia, including the federal government, Somaliland, federal member states, other key political stakeholders and civil society.

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Better Governance for Brighter Somalia

Somali Public Agenda (SPA) is a non-profit public policy and administration think-and-action tank based in Mogadishu, with the mission to advance responsive, evidence-based, and inclusive governance and public services in Somalia through research and analysis (through SPA Research), dialogue (through SPA Forums & SPA Podcasts), co-design of evidence-based policies and services (through SPA Policy Lab), and capacity development (through SPA Learning Lab).

SPA has established a unique reputation as a credible, neutral, and influential think-and-action tank across Somalia; has networks spanning the political landscape, including government institutions, opposition actors, and civic stakeholders; and has a strong track record of influencing policy at the highest level, as evidenced by our Success Stories and Testimonials pages on our website.

Our team is regularly called upon to provide analysis and commentary in the media, as well as to Somali government officials and the international community.

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