Breaking Diplomatic Norms

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1. Introduction

For over three decades, the Republic of Somaliland has maintained effective statehood, meeting the Montevideo Convention's criteria in several ways, including having a stable population, a defined territory, and a functioning government. Though several states, including Israel, recognized its brief independence in 1960, the international community remained reluctant to acknowledge its 1991 restoration of sovereignty. This reluctance comes from a broader hesitation to the principle of territorial integrity concerning the Somali Republic.

This seemingly stable position began to shift on December 26, 2025, when Israel became the first UN member state to formally recognize Somaliland's independence. The move does not only have domestic effects in Somalia, but it represents a significant departure from decades of international consensus and signals a potential rethinking of how the global community approaches questions of self-determination versus territorial integrity in the Horn of Africa and beyond.

2. Somaliland's Statehood and the Question of Recognition

Somaliland's claim to independence draws inspiration from a distinct colonial history and a brief period of recognized sovereignty. Initially established as a British Protectorate in 1884, it developed separately from Italian-administered Somalia for over seven decades. Upon its independence on 26 June 1960, thirty-five nations (including all five permanent members of the UN Security Council) recognized Somaliland as a sovereign state. However, five days later, it voluntarily merged with the former Italian Somalia to form the Somali Republic, though the legal validity of this union remains contestable, as the Act of Union was never properly ratified by the northern legislature. After surviving decades of political marginalization and a genocidal campaign under the Siad Barre regime, Somaliland restored its independence on 18 May 1991.

Since then, Somaliland has maintained the attributes of statehood outlined in the 1933 Montevideo Convention, as well as governs stable borders based on colonial-era treaties, operates a bicameral parliament, issues its own currency, and governs based on a constitution approved by popular referendum. Under the declaratory theory of statehood, these empirical realities should constitute legal statehood regardless of any external recognition. Yet Somaliland has remained locked out of formal international structures, unable to access multilateral financial institutions or bilateral development aid.

The international community's reluctance to recognize Somaliland stems primarily from a rigid attachment to the territorial integrity principle sacred in the African Union's founding documents. African leaders have long feared that acknowledging Somaliland would trigger a "Pandora's box", a lethal cascade of secessionist claims across the continent, undermining the sanctity of colonial-era borders, and gravely endangering the multiethnic population. This concern has prevailed despite Somaliland's unique historical circumstances and proven governance capacity, leaving it in an extensive legal limbo that privileges abstract principles over on-the-ground realities.

Israel's relationship with Somaliland predates the recent diplomatic breakthrough. Israel was among the states that welcomed Somaliland's original independence in 1960, and informal ties continued even during the decades of non-recognition. While most of the international community

deferred to the African Union's position, Israel maintained de facto engagement with Somaliland, viewing it rather as a stabilizing force in a region plagued by extremism. These historical connections provided the foundation for Israel's decision in December to become the first UN member state to recognize Somaliland's restored independence.

3. Regional and Global Implications in the Horn of Africa

The Federal Republic of Somalia, already weakened by al-Shabab's everstanding menace, now faces an existential threat. Somaliland is not the only breakaway territory of Somalia, with Puntland hoping for a similar fate. Finding external diplomatic support is now a necessity for Mogadishu, which is cultivating relationships with Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Egypt to preserve its sovereignty and integrity.

The African Union, alongside other international entities such as the European Union, Arab League, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, immediately harshly condemned Israel's action, reaffirmed the sovereignty of Mogadishu over Somaliland, and the respect for the intangibility of the borders. Furthermore, China too is an increasing supporter of Somalia's integrity and sovereignty due to Somaliland's relations with Taiwan. All these international organisations and actors fear that Somaliland's recognition could spark and encourage other secessionist movements and dynamics, increasing the instability of an already volatile international landscape.

Israel's recognition is not the first attempt at international legitimation in exchange for strategic goals. In January 2024, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed signed a Memorandum of Understanding with President Muse Bihi Abdi of Somaliland. Through this, Ethiopia, the most populous landlocked country in the world, aimed to establish sea access and naval projection in exchange for official recognition. The agreement included not only a sea outlet through 20km of coastline for 50 years, but also the option to lease a military base in the port area of Berbera, right in the Gulf of Aden. Despite the strategic appeal, the agreement didn't last. In December 2024, Türkiye hosted in Ankara a round of negotiations between Somalia and Ethiopia to reaffirm Somalia's integrity and grant Addis Ababa sea access under Somalia's sovereignty and authority. However, the new Israeli move could give new momentum to the strategic recognition exchange, given the longstanding tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and regional maritime influence.

Israel's recognition has very little to do with the hope of the secessionist republic's population. This move is part of a broader Israeli plan to weaken central authorities and support the UAE-led axis of secessionist armed groups, in an attempt of expanding Trump's Abraham Accords to new entities and broken countries. Moreover, Somaliland constitutes a clear entry point for establishing itself in the Horn of Africa, gaining access to the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Despite the stated intention to focus on

establishing extensive cooperation in agriculture, health, technology, and the economy, a military presence in Somaliland would enable Tel Aviv to gain better and deeper monitoring and countercapabilities against Ansar Allah-led Yemen and Tehran's activities in the Gulf of Aden. Although there was no mention of that in the official statements, Tel Aviv and US President Donald Trump evaluated Somaliland as a possible location for their plan of eradication and relocation of Gaza's Palestinians.

4. International Law and Recognition Theory Revisited

Not only did it create wide disputes in the international community, but Israel's recognition of Somaliland in 2025 also crystallized a longstanding tension between competing theories of statehood in international law. The declaratory theory holds that Somaliland has functioned as a state for decades by virtue of meeting the Montevideo Convention's four main criteria: a permanent population, defined territory, functioning government, and capacity for foreign relations. Article 3 of the 1933 Convention explicitly states that political existence is independent of recognition by other states. The constitutive theory, however, maintains that statehood only materializes through formal acknowledgment by the existing community of states, portraying Somaliland's empirical capacities as legally irrelevant without external validation.

Israel's decision represents a unilateral political act that provides Somaliland the international legal personality required to exercise formal rights and obligations in the global arena. As described earlier, for three decades, the international community adhered to the principle of Somalia's territorial integrity, leaving Somaliland diplomatically isolated despite its functional governance. Israel's recognition disrupts this consensus and lends credence to the argument that Somaliland's situation reflects the dissolution of a voluntary union rather than unlawful secession. Somaliland's case also aligns with remedial secession theory, which holds that a territory may legitimately claim independence when the parent state systematically excludes it from meaningful political participation or governance .

The immediate consequence is Somaliland's potential transition from de facto to de jure statehood, which could end decades of its international isolation and open access to multilateral financial institutions and development partnerships. Beyond the bilateral relationship, Israel's move reveals the inherently political nature of state recognition: a process often driven less by legal principles than by the strategic calculations of major powers. Whether other states follow Israel's lead remains uncertain for us, but the precedent challenges the notion that recognition of states operates according to some objective criteria, revealing the current shift in global politics, according to which geopolitical interests shape the international system's membership rules.

5. Conclusion

Although Somaliland meets the Montevideo Convention's criteria, the international community has never recognized its independence and has always protected the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia. Israel's connection with the breakaway state is historically well-established within African diplomacy and provided a solid foundation for the recent recognition.

The main international organisations, regional and global actors, condemned Israel's action, which was not an isolated move on behalf of Somaliland's hopes for the future, but rather part of a broader plot. Tel Aviv might aim to establish a deeper military presence in the Horn of Africa following the example of the 2004 Memorandum of Understanding between Somaliland and Ethiopia. This aspiration would serve to counter the threat from hostile forces active in the area, such as Ansar Allah in Yemen and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Despite that, due to its erratic behavior in the Middle East, the War in Gaza, and the genocide accusations, Israel's diplomatic authority is currently heavily damaged. The December 26th decision did not spark a wave of recognition for Somaliland but backfired, increasing international support for Mogadishu's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

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