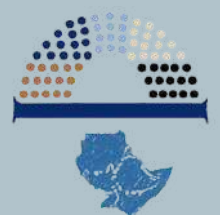


The Somaliland Issue: Which Path Will Ethiopia Choose?



The recognition of Somaliland acts as a "Pandora's Box," offering Ethiopia a strategic maritime gateway while risking regional conflict and violating Somalia's sovereignty. Amidst a diplomatic "encirclement" by Egypt, Eritrea, and Somalia, compounded by growing Egyptian influence in Djibouti, Ethiopia faces a critical choice: maintain its maritime vulnerability or recognize Somaliland to permanently reshape regional power dynamics.



Its Blessings and Its Curses

In the past week, the news surrounding Somaliland recognition has generated significant discourses and extensive commentaries. Undoubtedly Israel has effectively opened the Pandora's Box of the Horn of Africa. The issue of Somaliland's recognition in this region is akin to the Greek myth; once opened, it introduces irreversible transformations and unforeseen consequences. According to the myth, the curiosity that compelled Pandora to open the box eventually released misery and chaos into the world. Similarly, the matter of Somaliland's recognition has the potential to unravel political tensions that have remained suppressed for years.

On one hand, granting recognition may bring hope; the final gift in Pandora's Box. This could manifest as securing a reliable maritime gateway, establishing a unified front against extremism led by radical Islam, and sparking a new economic era by addressing the long-standing question of self-determination. On the other hand, just as the miseries released from the box are remembered, this action could violate Somalia's sovereignty, ignite a regional war, exacerbate border disputes and accelerate the intervention of external powers like Egypt and Turkey, plunging the region into an inescapable political quagmire. Setting these

questions aside for a moment, which path is optimal for Ethiopia? Since she cannot remain in perpetual silence, would it be better to withhold recognition or follow the Israeli? Let us attempt to examine this by synthesizing the available data.

The Diplomatic Crossroads: Israel and UAE

First, let us examine Ethiopia standing at a diplomatic intersection between two of her primary contemporary allies: Israel and Dubai. Following reports of Israel becoming the first nation to grant statehood recognition to Somaliland, the government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed finds itself at an extremely challenging diplomatic crossroads. Although Ethiopia maintains strong trade ties with Somaliland, utilizes the Port of Berbera and operates regular flights to Hargeisa, it has thus far refrained from granting official recognition. However, the bold step taken by Israel, is creating diplomatic and political pressure on Ethiopia to re-examine its long-standing position.

The complexity is further intensified by the fact that Ethiopia's close partner, the United Arab Emirates, does not support Israel's decision. Ethiopia must balance its historical friendship with Israel against its comprehensive cooperation, need not to mention military aid, with the Emirates. Moreover, having hosted



Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in Addis Ababa just days prior, analysts suggest that if the federal government does not exercise extreme caution, Abu Dhabi might drag its feet from Addis Ababa. Regional political analysts suggest that Ethiopia's current diplomatic strategy may be to maintain a posture of silence. This was recently reinforced by Ethiopia's Ambassador to Somalia, who informed that Ethiopia is 'closely monitoring' the situation but had no prior knowledge of Israel's decision.¹ By stating that this is a 'matter to be seen in the future' and noting that Ethiopia is not alone in its silence, the Ambassador signaled that Addis Ababa is intentionally deferring a formal stance to avoid immediate regional escalation.

Analysts argue that if Ethiopia officially supports Israel's move, it will enter into conflict with Somalia, various Arab nations. Conversely, if it opposes the move, it risks jeopardizing its hope for a crucial maritime outlet and its historical friendship with Israel. Therefore, to maintain the balance between these two opposing interests, it appears Ethiopia is refraining from official statements and patiently monitoring the situation as a safe alternative. The fundamental question now is: - Can the support of the UAE, combined with Israel's

security guarantee, mitigate Ethiopia's fears? If Israel can provide Addis Ababa with reliable security intelligence, counter-insurgency support and security cooperation, Ethiopia might accept the UAE's credit guarantees and move toward Somaliland recognition. Without this security support, however, the likelihood of Ethiopia refraining from recognition increases.

In general, as Israeli recognition creates a new political map in the Horn of Africa, the Ethiopian government has entered a diplomatic game characterized by extreme caution. How long can this silence continue? Or will there be a time when the government announces its own decision to protect Ethiopia's interests? This remains a point of focus for international diplomats and analysts. In the current context, the ingenuity with which Ethiopia mitigates risks without losing its interests will determine the direction of regional politics for the coming year.

The Relationship Between Abu Dhabi and Somaliland

Regarding the friendship between Abu Dhabi and Somaliland, how far does it extend? The UAE does not formally recognize Somaliland as a sovereign state. As of this analysis goes to publication, only Israel among UN member states has granted full diplomatic recognition. The UAE continues its formal position of supporting Somalia's sovereignty and territorial

¹ What does the Ethiopian ambassador say about Somaliland, TPLF, Egypt? (Ambaasaaddarri Itoophiyaa waa'ee Somaalilaand, TPLF, Masrii maal jedhu?) <https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/articles/c8j37d38rpwq>



integrity. The UAE's stance is a balanced journey between strategic economic interest and diplomatic caution.

Even though the country has not officially recognized Somaliland, in practice, it treats it as a sovereign entity, establishing significant military and economic relations. Specifically, the massive investment in the Port of Berbera through DP World and the agreement to build a military facility demonstrate that the UAE views Somaliland as a primary security partner in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. While the UAE refrains from recognition to avoid diplomatic conflict with the Arab League and Somalia, Israel's recent step has created a new opportunity for the UAE to move it's behind the scenes support into the open and act as a financial guarantor to consolidate Somaliland's recognition by coordinating countries like Ethiopia and Kenya. This movement is seen as part of the UAE's effort to expand the principles of the Abraham Accords into East Africa. This balanced approach clearly reflects the nature of UAE foreign policy. Continuing deep cooperation with Somaliland provides geopolitical benefits, such as confronting Houthi insurgents in Yemen and protecting trade routes, while simultaneously respecting the principles of the African Union and the Arab League by withholding formal recognition.

Ethiopia's Foreign Policy Interests and Strategic Scenarios

In evaluating Ethiopia's decision to grant or withhold recognition through the lens of its own foreign policy, several factors must be considered. Currently, Ethiopia's foreign policy calculations are driven by increasing security threats in its periphery. Addis Ababa's concern over the strengthening security cooperation between Egypt, Somalia and Eritrea has grown. Ethiopia views this trilateral relationship as a strategy designed to block its efforts to gain a sea outlet and to surround the country strategically. These fears are compounded by the long-standing Nile River dispute with Egypt and the recent rapprochement between Mogadishu and Cairo. Somalia has requested military support from Egypt to protect its maritime territory, which is clearly interpreted as a strategy to block Ethiopia from gaining a Red Sea outlet via Somaliland.

It should be recalled that Ethiopia previously intended to grant recognition to Somaliland as part of its port access agreement. While that agreement was hindered by Turkish mediated talks with Somalia, Ethiopia's demand for a maritime outlet remains unaddressed. Tensions with Eritrea and the collective movement of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia regarding Red Sea security are interpreted as an attempt to stifle Ethiopia's access to the sea. Consequently, Ethiopia may



rejoin the path of recognizing Somaliland to challenge this real or imagined encirclement.

In response to these pressures, Ethiopia is likely weighing three primary strategic scenarios: -

The Bold Gambit: - Formally recognizing Somaliland following the Israeli precedent. This would offer the blessing of a sovereign naval base and permanent port access, but carries the curse of potential kinetic conflict with Somalia and diplomatic sanctions from the African Union.

Strategic Hedging: - Deepening functional and economic integration with Somaliland without granting formal de jure statehood. This offers the blessing of economic gain without immediate war but carries the curse of continued vulnerability to the encirclement strategy of its rivals.

Status Quo: - Relying on Turkish mediation and maintaining the existing delicate balance. This carries the blessing of avoiding a breach with the Arab world but the curse of leaving Ethiopia's economic survival under the veto of its historical competitors.

However, analysts also point to reasons why Ethiopia might refrain from recognition. These include the Ankara agreement facilitated by Turkey, which suggested Ethiopia could reach a sea use agreement with Somalia under

international law. Furthermore, there are concerns regarding the stability of the Somali Region (Ogaden) within Ethiopia. Given the historical scars and previous wars, recognition could destabilize this region. Additionally, Somalia might coordinate with rivals to support insurgent groups or even grant recognition to 'Tigray statehood' aspirations in retaliation. Finally, cognizant of the fact that, Somaliland recognition without the legal permission of her erstwhile mother land opposed the very fundamental principle enshrined in the AU founding charter, there is the risk that such a decision would place Ethiopia's regional influence under the shadow of Israel, potentially leading to a push by Egypt and et alibi, to remove the AU headquarters from Addis Ababa.

The Israeli, Turkish and Somali Calculations

Why did Israel dare to recognize Somaliland? Regional analysts submit various explanations. Some posit this is part of an effort to relocate one million Palestinians from Gaza to the Horn of Africa. Others argue it aims to counter Houthi attacks from Yemen. Since Somaliland is situated directly across from Yemen, it allows Israel to establish military facilities, secure the Bab el-Mandeb strait and exert influence in East Africa; vital for cargo ships blocked from the Suez Canal. Another goal is to counter



Turkish influence. While Israel previously observed Turkey and the UAE build military camps in the region, the recent war with Iran has made a military presence in this corner of Africa a strategic imperative.

While Turkey officially condemns Israel's move, all eyes are on President Erdogan. It is expected that the President will meet his Somali counterpart to announce the results of energy exploration off the Somali coast. Since 2023, Turkey-Israel relations have deteriorated significantly, with Ankara imposing trade sanctions over Gaza. Tensions have further intensified following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, as Israel supports a decentralized Syria; a position Turkey views as empowering Kurdish groups near its border.

Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud recently addressed these developments, alleging that Somaliland agreed to three main conditions in exchange for Israeli recognition: first, the settlement of Palestinians in Somaliland; second, the establishment of an Israeli military base on the Gulf of Aden; and third, Somaliland's inclusion in the Abraham Accords. He warned that these conditions create a dangerous global situation. Somaliland has officially denied these claims, stating no such agreements were reached. The coming months will determine the veracity of these statements, however.

The Djibouti Factor

Finally, let us conclude by examining Djibouti's recent conduct, which may compel Ethiopia to break its perceived encirclement by recognizing Somaliland. Djibouti recently announced its firm rejection of Ethiopia's request for exclusive use of the Port of Tadjoura and the establishment of a naval base. President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh stated that the request for a corridor with special sovereign status was unacceptable, famously declaring, "Djibouti is not Crimea," and emphasizing that they would not accept foreign land claims.

While Ethiopia seeks to reduce its 95% trade dependence on Djibouti, President Guelleh noted that tension has eased through Turkish diplomacy. However, Djibouti is simultaneously deepening ties with Egypt. A recent visit by Egypt's Minister of Transport resulted in historic agreements on ports, logistics and renewable energy. Egypt has opened its first bank in Djibouti and secured roles in the Doraleh container terminal. This indicates Egypt's intent to be a decisive power at the southern Red Sea gateway.

What does this Egypt-Djibouti rapprochement mean for Ethiopia? It is a critical concern. The fact that the port handling the vast majority of Ethiopia's trade is falling under Egyptian investment and technological influence poses a



national security threat. This grants Egypt the potential to exert pressure on Ethiopia's trade routes. Cairo's media views this as a major success in their strategy to surround Ethiopia using Somalia, Eritrea, and now Djibouti. Specifically, projects like the solar power plant and terminal expansion at Doraleh transition Egypt's involvement from diplomacy to a hard economic presence, making Ethiopia's quest for an independent sea outlet increasingly difficult.





BRIDGE Research & Innovation



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Bridge Research and Innovation for Democratic Governance and Enhanced Peace (BRIDGE) is an independent, non-profit think tank based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Registered under the FDRE Civil Society Organization Proclamation No. 1113/2019, which specializes in parliamentary affairs, peace, and development in the IGAD region.



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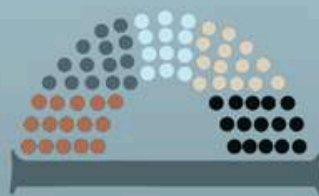
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