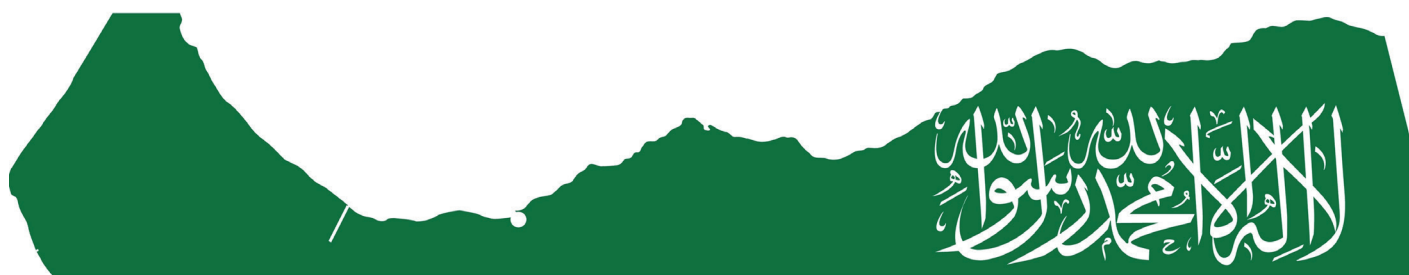


SOMALILAND AND THE RED SEA CORRIDOR THE CASE FOR UK RECOGNITION

By ANDREW FOX



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Cover image: Map showing borders of Somaliland highlighted with the national flag by creativeverse at Shutterstock (www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/somaliland-vector-flag-map-2762891115).



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About The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free, working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.



About the Centre for New Middle East

The Centre for New Middle East is a one-stop shop designed to provide opinion-leaders and policy-makers with the fresh thinking, analytical research and policy solutions required to make geopolitical progress in one of the world’s most complicated and fluid regions.

Established following the fallout from the Arab Spring, the Centre is dedicated to monitoring political, ideological, and military and security developments across the Middle East and providing informed assessments of their wide-ranging implications to key decision makers.

Executive Summary

In addition to academic research, this paper is based on fieldwork in Somaliland in May 2026, including interviews and meetings with government ministers and advisors, regional elected officials, the Army Chief of Staff, and Berbera Port officials.

The United Kingdom should recognise Somaliland as an independent state, a recommendation that would have been easier to avoid a few years ago, when London could still treat Somaliland as a useful but unresolved anomaly. Such a position is harder to sustain now. Israel’s recognition of Somaliland in December 2025 ended the fiction that the status quo is frozen. The question for the UK is no longer whether recognition will ever become a live policy issue. It is a question of whether Britain will shape that debate or allow others to define it for narrower regional purposes.¹

This paper makes the case for recognition on five grounds.

1. Somaliland sits on the Gulf of Aden approaches to the Bab el-Mandeb and is adjacent to a trade route whose disruption by Houthi and Iranian action has had immediate and lasting effects on British shipping and supply chains.
2. Somaliland has sustained effective self-government for more than three decades and compares favourably with many recognised states in terms of institutional continuity, electoral competition, and local political ownership.
3. Its legal and historical claim is exceptional rather than generic: it aligns with the boundaries of the former British Somaliland protectorate and has long been treated by African and international analysts as a distinctive case.
4. Continued non-recognition imposes real costs on security cooperation, trade, finance, and diplomatic clarity.
5. A British policy centred almost entirely on Mogadishu has reached diminishing returns and leaves London strategically passive in a region where Turkey, the UAE, China, and others are already acting with greater purpose.²

Recognition must not mean improvisation, opportunism, or indifference to risk. Britain should not copy the Israeli model, which has been widely read through the lens of Middle Eastern rivalries and has intensified Somaliland’s exposure to regional backlash. Instead, the UK should pursue a managed recognition strategy anchored in four principles:

- recognition within the borders of the former British protectorate;
- support for talks on disputed eastern areas and minority protections;

¹ “Israel becomes first country to formally recognise Somaliland as independent state”, *Reuters*, 26 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-recognises-somaliland-somalias-breakaway-region-independent-state-2025-12-26/; “UK refuses to recognise breakaway Somaliland as independent”, *Reuters*, 29 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/uk-refuses-recognise-breakaway-somaliland-independent-2025-12-29/; Hani Ibrahim, “Selective Diplomacy: Israel’s Somaliland Move and its Regional Implications”, Royal United Services Institute, 3 February 2026, www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/selective-diplomacy-israels-somaliland-move-and-its-regional-implications.

² “Freight through Suez Canal down 45% since Houthi attacks – UNCTAD”, *Reuters*, 26 January 2024, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/freight-through-suez-canal-down-45-since-houthi-attacks-unctad-2024-01-26/; “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/; Sarah G. Phillips, “When Less Was More: External Assistance and the Political Settlement in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.3 (2016): 629-645, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12601>; Michael Walls, “The Emergence of a Somali State: Building Peace from Civil War in Somaliland”, *African Affairs* 108, no.432 (2009): 371-389, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adp019>; “International Crisis Group, Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership”, *Africa Report* No.110 (23 May 2006), www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/somaliland-time-for-african-union-leadership.pdf; Michael Jones, *Mired in Mogadishu: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Somalia* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2023), <https://static.rusi.org/OP-mired-in-mogadishu-web-final.pdf>.

- continued diplomatic engagement with Somalia on practical questions such as trade, airspace, and movement;
- a package of maritime, diplomatic, and economic cooperation that turns recognition into a stabilising framework rather than a symbolic gesture.³

The immediate policy steps are clear. The UK should announce recognition of Somaliland as a sovereign state; establish full diplomatic representation in the capital, Hargeisa; begin negotiations on maritime and port security and customs cooperation; encourage British International Investment and UK Export Finance to scope commercially viable projects linked to Berbera and the corridor to Ethiopia; and work with African and Gulf partners to ensure that recognition is paired with de-escalation, not regional confrontation. Recognition would align British policy with political reality and create a more credible basis for advancing UK interests in the Red Sea corridor.⁴

³ Hani Ibrahim, “Selective Diplomacy: Israel’s Somaliland Move and its Regional Implications”, Royal United Services Institute, 3 February 2026, www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/selective-diplomacy-israels-somaliland-move-and-its-regional-implications; “International Crisis Group, Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership”, *Africa Report* No.110 (23 May 2006), www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/somaliland-time-for-african-union-leadership.pdf; “AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union, 2005, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf; James Ker-Lindsay, “Engagement without Recognition: the Limits of Diplomatic Interaction with Contested States”, *International Affairs* 91, no.2 (2015): 267-285, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12234>.

⁴ “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/; Finn Stepputat and Tobias Hagmann, “Politics of Circulation: The Makings of the Berbera Corridor in Somali East Africa”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no.5 (2019): 794-813, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775819847485>; Sankalp Gurjar, “The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean”, *International Studies* 60, no.3 (2023): 313-327, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817231202305>; Michael Jones, *Mired in Mogadishu: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Somalia* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2023), <https://static.rusi.org/OP-mired-in-mogadishu-web-final.pdf>.

Introduction

Somaliland has long been treated as a diplomatic problem to be managed rather than a political reality to be acknowledged. That approach reflected understandable caution. The African Union has been reluctant to set precedents for secession; external powers have preferred the simplicity of Somalia’s formal territorial integrity; and international partners have hoped that creative engagement without recognition might preserve stability while leaving the ultimate status question unresolved. However, Somaliland has now remained in that limbo for thirty-five years. Over that period, it has built institutions, held elections, negotiated internal settlements, and exercised durable authority across most of the territory claimed by the former British Somaliland protectorate.⁵

The status quo has also become less stable. The Red Sea has become a more contested security theatre; Berbera has gained greater strategic value; Ethiopia’s search for sea access has altered regional calculations; Taiwan and China have made Somaliland part of a wider contest over diplomatic space; and Israel’s recognition in December 2025 has ensured that the recognition question can no longer be treated as hypothetical. Britain’s official position, restated days later, was to reject recognition and reaffirm Somalia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. This paper argues that London should change course.⁶

The argument is not that Somaliland is flawless or that recognition is risk-free. Somaliland’s democracy has suffered delays and manipulation; its control over eastern regions is contested; and clumsy handling of recognition could worsen regional rivalries or deepen domestic fault lines. However, Somaliland has crossed the threshold at which continued non-recognition is no longer prudent. It is a political choice to withhold formal acknowledgement from an entity that meets the practical tests of statehood more convincingly than many states that already enjoy full diplomatic standing with the UK, such as Palestine. Britain, as the former colonial power and as a state with deep interests in the Horn of Africa, is unusually well placed to make that judgment in a disciplined and useful way.⁷

⁵ Chatham House, *Somaliland’s Place in the World* (December 2011), www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/1211confsummary.pdf; Sarah G. Phillips, “When Less Was More: External Assistance and the Political Settlement in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.3 (2016): 629-645, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12601>; Michael Walls, “The Emergence of a Somali State: Building Peace from Civil War in Somaliland”, *African Affairs* 108, no.432 (2009): 371-389, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adp019>.

⁶ “Ethiopia signs pact to use Somaliland’s Red Sea port”, *Reuters*, 1 January 2024, www.reuters.com/world/africa/landlocked-ethiopia-signs-pact-use-somalilands-red-sea-port-2024-01-01/; “Outflanked by China in Africa, Taiwan eyes unrecognised Somaliland”, *Reuters*, 1 July 2020, www.reuters.com/article/world/outflanked-by-china-in-africa-taiwan-eyes-unrecognised-somaliland-idUSKBN24251T/; “Taiwan says Somalia bans entry to its citizens amid Somaliland dispute”, *Reuters*, 30 April 2025, www.reuters.com/world/africa/taiwan-says-somalia-bans-entry-its-citizens-amid-somaliland-dispute-2025-04-30/; “Israel becomes first country to formally recognise Somaliland as independent state”, *Reuters*, 26 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-recognises-somaliland-somalias-breakway-region-independent-state-2025-12-26/; “UK refuses to recognise breakaway Somaliland as independent”, *Reuters*, 29 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/uk-refuses-recognise-breakaway-somaliland-independent-2025-12-29/.

⁷ Hamdi I. Abdulahi, “Elections and Electoral Processes in Somaliland: A Fading Democracy”, *Journal of African Elections* 21, no.2 (2022): 76-99, <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2022/v21i2a4>; “Somaliland agrees to ceasefire after five days of fighting in disputed territory”, *Reuters*, 11 February 2023, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somaliland-agrees-ceasefire-after-five-days-fighting-disputed-territory-2023-02-10/; Janis Grzybowski, “To Be or Not to Be: The Ontological Predicament of State Creation in International Law”, *European Journal of International Law* 28, no.2 (2017): 409-432, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chx031>; Laura Hammond, “Diaspora Returnees to Somaliland”, in *Africa’s Return Migrants: The New Developers?* (London: Zed Books, 2015), www.ceris.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Diaspora-returnees-to-Somaliland-LauraHammond-2015.pdf.

1. The Strategic Importance of the Red Sea Corridor

The Red Sea corridor concentrates a very large share of Eurasian trade into a narrow, disruption-prone route. The Suez-Red Sea system handles roughly one-eighth of global trade, and the Houthi attacks that intensified in late 2023 showed how quickly insecurity at the southern entrance to the Red Sea can cascade into higher freight costs, longer transit times, and pressure on British supply chains. The corridor’s significance is therefore measured by shipping delays, insurance costs, rerouted vessels, and political leverage over a chokepoint linking Europe to the Indian Ocean.⁸

By February 2026, Maersk was again rerouting some sailings around the Cape of Good Hope due to fresh constraints in the Red Sea. The persistence of this risk should underpin policy. Rather than a short, self-contained crisis, it suggests that the UK and its allies are facing a structural problem in which regional instability, proxy warfare, and maritime coercion can repeatedly disrupt one of the world’s most important trade arteries.⁹

The corridor is best understood as a political-military system rather than merely a sea lane. China has established a permanent military foothold in Djibouti. Turkey has entrenched itself in Somalia’s security sector and, in 2024, signed an agreement to support Somalia’s maritime security, gaining control over both Somalia’s airport and seaport. The lesson is simple: influence in the Red Sea is accumulated on land as much as at sea. Ports, bases, training missions, and political relationships on the African littoral shape the balance of power just as directly as naval deployments offshore.¹⁰



Road map of the de facto state of Somaliland by Rainer Lesniewski at Shutterstock (www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/vector-road-map-de-facto-state-2435591427).

⁸ “Freight through Suez Canal down 45% since Houthi attacks – UNCTAD”, *Reuters*, 26 January 2024, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/freight-through-suez-canal-down-45-since-houthi-attacks-unctad-2024-01-26/; Emilio Rodriguez-Diaz, J. I. Alcaide, and R. Garcia-Llave, “Challenges and Security Risks in the Red Sea: Impact of Houthi Attacks on Maritime Traffic”, *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering* 12, no.11 (2024): 1900, https://doi.org/10.3390/jmse12111900.

⁹ “Maersk reroutes some sailings around Africa due to ‘unforeseen constraints’ in Red Sea”, *Reuters*, 27 February 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/maersk-reroutes-some-sailings-around-africa-due-unforeseen-constraints-in-red-2026-02-27/.

¹⁰ “China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti”, *Reuters*, 1 August 2017, www.reuters.com/article/world/china-formally-opens-first-overseas-military-base-in-djibouti-idUSKBN1AH3E1/; “Turkey to provide maritime security support to Somalia – official”, *Reuters*, 22 February 2024, www.reuters.com/world/turkey-provide-maritime-security-support-somalia-official-2024-02-22/.

Berbera sits within that wider strategic competition. Emirati investment and security cooperation have made Somaliland part of the UAE’s broader Red Sea and Horn strategy, while Ethiopia’s 2024 memorandum with Somaliland shows that Addis Ababa also views Berbera as strategically significant, not merely commercial. At the same time, Somaliland sits at the juncture of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, with direct access to some of the world’s busiest shipping lanes. Berbera’s importance therefore stems from a convergence of geography, infrastructure, and politics.¹¹

Corridors like this must be understood as political projects through which movement, taxation, coercion, and state-making are organised. Berbera’s development is more than a port upgrade. It represents a restructuring of authority and economic power that binds Somaliland, Ethiopia, and the Gulf more tightly together. A policy that recognises only Somalia’s formal map while ignoring these material arrangements fundamentally misreads how power is actually produced on the ground.¹²

For Britain, the implication is clear. A serious Red Sea strategy requires more than freedom-of-navigation rhetoric and episodic naval responses: it requires reliable partners and viable nodes along the African littoral. Somaliland is one of the few places where strategic location, a functioning administration, and an expanding logistics asset coincide. Recognition would acknowledge this and enable Britain to act on it more coherently.¹³

¹¹ “UAE to train Somaliland forces under military base deal – Somaliland president”, *Reuters*, 15 March 2018, www.reuters.com/article/world/uae-to-train-somaliland-forces-under-military-base-deal-somaliland-president-idUSKCN1GR2ZH/; “Ethiopia signs pact to use Somaliland’s Red Sea port”, *Reuters*, 1 January 2024, www.reuters.com/world/africa/landlocked-ethiopia-signs-pact-use-somalilands-red-sea-port-2024-01-01/; “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/.

¹² Finn Stepputat and Tobias Hagmann, “Politics of Circulation: The Makings of the Berbera Corridor in Somali East Africa”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no.5 (2019): 794-813, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775819847485; Ahmed M. Musa, “The Berbera Corridor Development & Somaliland’s Political Economy”, in *Land, Investment and Politics: Reconfiguring Eastern Africa’s Pastoral Drylands*, ed. Jeremy Lind, Doris Okenwa, and Ian Scoones (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 110-121, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787449077.009; Sankalp Gurjar, “The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean”, *International Studies* 60, no.3 (2023): 313-327, https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817231202305.

¹³ “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/; Sankalp Gurjar, “The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean”, *International Studies* 60, no.3 (2023): 313-327, https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817231202305.

2. Somaliland’s Political Development Since 1991

Somaliland’s post-1991 trajectory was a negotiated political settlement built through a series of inter-clan conferences in which local actors bargained over ceasefires, representation, taxation, and the architecture of government. Somaliland’s institutions emerged from an internally driven peace process, with limited external financing and strong local ownership. That origin is a major reason why this proved more durable than the externally brokered arrangements repeatedly attempted in southern Somalia.¹⁴

The key institutional innovation was hybrid rather than doctrinaire. Traditional clan elders, especially through the Guurti (House of Elders), were woven into a constitutional order that also embraced elected offices, formal ministries, and a written charter. This represents a negotiated accommodation between social legitimacy and state form. That hybrid character has often been untidy, but it helped Somaliland secure sufficient consent to prevent a return to large-scale internal war.¹⁵

This success should not be romanticised. Somaliland’s stability has rested partly on selective bargains between political elites and commercially powerful actors, especially around Berbera. The system privileged some groups over others, and relative order was often purchased through elite coalition-building rather than neutral institution-building. Even so, the critical fact for the recognition debate is that Somaliland did build and is sustaining its own governing order.¹⁶

That order produced an electoral record unusual in the Horn of Africa. Somaliland held competitive presidential contests, a constitutional referendum, and parliamentary elections in which incumbents could lose ground. Whilst the system has grown more vulnerable to legal manipulation and institutional drift, the 2021 parliamentary election, in which the opposition won a majority, also showed that electoral politics in Somaliland have remained substantively competitive rather than merely ceremonial.¹⁷

The fragilities are nonetheless real. In 2022, delays to the presidential election triggered deadly protests; the electoral body postponed the vote; lawmakers then extended President Muse Bihi Abdi’s term; and fighting in and around Las Anod in 2023 exposed the depth of territorial contestation in the east. These episodes demonstrated that Somaliland’s institutions do not command uniform legitimacy across all the areas it claims and that elite manipulation can still push the system into crisis.¹⁸

¹⁴ Sarah G. Phillips, “When Less Was More: External Assistance and the Political Settlement in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.3 (2016): 629-645, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12601>; Michael Walls, “The Emergence of a Somali State: Building Peace from Civil War in Somaliland”, *African Affairs* 108, no.432 (2009): 371-389, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adp019>; Timothy A. Ridout, “Building Peace and the State in Somaliland: The Factors of Success”, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 3, no.2 (2012): 153-171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2012.741040>.
¹⁵ Michael Walls, “The Emergence of a Somali State: Building Peace from Civil War in Somaliland”, *African Affairs* 108, no.432 (2009): 371-389, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adp019>; Michael Walls and Steve Kibble, “Beyond Polarity: Negotiating a Hybrid State in Somaliland”, *Africa Spectrum* 45, no.1 (2010): 31-56, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/000203971004500102>.
¹⁶ Sarah G. Phillips, “When Less Was More: External Assistance and the Political Settlement in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.3 (2016): 629-645, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12601>; Oliver McPherson-Smith, “Better Off Alone: Somaliland, Institutional Legacy, and Prosperity”, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 12, no.2 (2021): 203-224, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2021.1915649>.
¹⁷ Hamdi I. Abdulahi, “Elections and Electoral Processes in Somaliland: A Fading Democracy”, *Journal of African Elections* 21, no.2 (2022): 76-99, <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2022/v21i2a4>; “Somaliland opposition win majority in first parliamentary vote since 2005”, *Reuters*, 6 June 2021, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somaliland-opposition-win-majority-first-parliamentary-vote-since-2005-2021-06-06/.
¹⁸ Hamdi I. Abdulahi, “Elections and Electoral Processes in Somaliland: A Fading Democracy”, *Journal of African Elections* 21, no.2 (2022): 76-99, <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2022/v21i2a4k>; “At least five people killed, 100 hurt in Somaliland protests”, *Reuters*, 12 August 2022, www.reuters.com/world/africa/least-five-people-killed-100-hurt-somaliland-protests-2022-08-12/; “Somaliland postpones presidential election until next year”, *Reuters*, 25 September 2022, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somaliland-says-planned-presidential-poll-not-viable-postpones-next-year-2022-09-24/; “Somaliland lawmakers vote to extend president’s term by two years”, *Reuters*, 1 October 2022, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somaliland-lawmakers-vote-extend-presidents-term-by-two-years-2022-10-01/; “Somaliland agrees to ceasefire after five days of fighting in disputed territory”, *Reuters*, 11 February 2023, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somaliland-agrees-ceasefire-after-five-days-fighting-disputed-territory-2023-02-10/.

However, the 2024 presidential election also showed that Somaliland retains corrective capacity. More than 1,000,000 voters were expected to turn out at over 2,000 polling stations. International observers were deployed, and the opposition candidate Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, known as Cirro, defeated the incumbent and took office. This demonstrates that Somaliland continues to display the core attribute that matters most for recognition: it governs itself through institutions that are real, locally rooted, and capable of surviving political turnover.¹⁹

¹⁹ “Voting underway for presidential election in Somalia’s breakaway region of Somaliland”, *Associated Press*, 13 November 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/16890f7c42336ca07bb1e644f8106192>; “Somaliland opposition leader Cirro wins in presidential election, beating incumbent”, *Reuters*, 19 November 2024, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somaliland-opposition-leader-cirro-wins-presidential-election-beating-incumbent-2024-11-19/.

3. Security Institutions and Maritime Capabilities

Somaliland’s security order is best described as hybrid and uneven. It combines formal state institutions with negotiated clan authority, local mediation, and ad hoc arrangements for order. This approach has worked best in the centre-west of the territory, where the political settlement is deepest. It has worked less well in peripheral areas, where allegiance is contested or where Hargeisa has preferred indirect management to deep bureaucratic penetration.²⁰



Hargeisa, capital city of Somaliland

The coercive core of this order emerged gradually. The early state sought to demobilise militias, build integrated national forces, and establish a police presence that could extend beyond the capital. Resolving major political conflicts was essential to this process. The development of the Somaliland Police Force shows that professionalisation has advanced, but also that reform has been uneven, shaped by local hierarchies, limited resources, and inconsistent standards for recruitment and training.²¹

²⁰ Alice Hills, “Off-road Policing: Communications Technology and Government Authority in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.5 (2016): 1061-1078, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12701>; Dominik Balthasar and Janis Grzybowski, “Between State and Non-state: Somaliland’s Emerging Security Order”, in *Small Arms Survey 2012: Moving Targets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 146-173, www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2012-Chapter-05-EN.pdf.
²¹ Dominik Balthasar and Janis Grzybowski, “Between State and Non-state: Somaliland’s Emerging Security Order”, in *Small Arms Survey 2012: Moving Targets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 146-173, www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2012-Chapter-05-EN.pdf; Axelle Djama, “Establishing and Structuring a State Law and Order Profession: The Somaliland Police Force from 1993 to Today”, *Politique Africaine* 170, no.2 (2023): 17-40, <https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.170.0017>.

External security support has demonstrated these asymmetries. Counterinsurgency operations in the Somali territories show that externally backed specialist units, such as the Rapid Response Unit, could be better equipped and more operationally capable than ordinary forces, yet remain weakly embedded within transparent legal and political oversight. In other words, Somaliland has developed useful pockets of coercive capability, but it has not fully solved the accountability problem that often accompanies externally assisted security-building.²²

The maritime picture is similarly mixed. Somaliland’s coastline is strategically positioned, but its coastguard has long been under-resourced, with limited boats, fuel, communications, and case-building capacity. Somaliland’s relative success against maritime predation owes less to a robust coastguard than to stronger onshore order, social stigma against piracy, and the political desire to distinguish Somaliland from the lawlessness associated with southern Somalia.²³

Recognition would not turn Somaliland into a fully professional maritime security actor overnight. It would, however, remove some of the ambiguity that currently constrains deeper security cooperation. The UK could support military training, coastal surveillance, port security, legal training, customs enforcement, and counter-smuggling more transparently if it were dealing with a recognised government rather than an entity treated in law as part of another state. That is especially relevant given ongoing insecurity in the east, which shows that Somaliland’s territorial claim must be consolidated politically as well as militarily.²⁴

²² Louise Wiuiff Moe, “Counter-insurgency in the Somali Territories: The ‘Grey Zone’ Between Peace and Pacification”, *International Affairs* 94, no.2 (2018): 319-341, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix250>.
²³ Alice Hills, “Off-road Policing: Communications Technology and Government Authority in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.5 (2016): 1061-1078, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12701>; Justin V. Hastings and Sarah G. Phillips, “Order beyond the State: Explaining Somaliland’s Avoidance of Maritime Piracy”, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56, no.1 (2018): 5-30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X17000519>.
²⁴ “Somaliland agrees to ceasefire after five days of fighting in disputed territory”, *Reuters*, 11 February 2023, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somaliland-agrees-ceasefire-after-five-days-fighting-disputed-territory-2023-02-10/; Louise Wiuiff Moe, “Counter-insurgency in the Somali Territories: The ‘Grey Zone’ Between Peace and Pacification”, *International Affairs* 94, no.2 (2018): 319-341, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix250>; Alice Hills, “Off-road Policing: Communications Technology and Government Authority in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.5 (2016): 1061-1078, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12701>.

4. Berbera and the Strategic Geography of the Horn of Africa

Berbera is not merely a port. It is a corridor, a state-making project, and a geopolitical asset through which 85% of Somaliland’s GDP flows. The Berbera corridor is an arrangement in which circulation and political order are produced together. Port development in Somaliland links local elite competition, Ethiopian trade strategy, and Gulf geopolitical ambitions. Berbera’s significance lies precisely in this fusion of commercial and strategic value.²⁵



Berbera port

The current phase of development began with the DP World concession. In 2018, DP World, a multinational logistics company, launched the first phase of Berbera’s expansion as a major project, and Ethiopia acquired a stake in the venture, reflecting the corridor’s importance for Addis Ababa. The infrastructure package surrounding the port, including road, free trade zone, and airport improvements, is best understood as an attempt to build an alternative logistics ecosystem on the Gulf of Aden rather than a stand-alone commercial terminal.²⁶

²⁵ Finn Stepputat and Tobias Hagmann, “Politics of Circulation: The Makings of the Berbera Corridor in Somali East Africa”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no.5 (2019): 794-813, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775819847485>; Sankalp Gurjar, “The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean”, *International Studies* 60, no.3 (2023): 313-327, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817231202305>; Ahmed M. Musa, “The Berbera Corridor Development & Somaliland’s Political Economy”, in *Land, Investment and Politics: Reconfiguring Eastern Africa’s Pastoral Drylands*, ed. Jeremy Lind, Doris Okenwa, and Ian Scoones (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 110-121, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787449077.009>.
²⁶ “DP World launches expansion of port in Somaliland”, *Reuters*, 11 October 2018, www.reuters.com/article/markets/dp-world-launches-expansion-of-port-in-somaliland-idUSL8N1WR6DY/; “Ethiopia acquires stake to join DP World, Somaliland port venture”, *Reuters*, 1 March 2018, www.reuters.com/article/world/africa/corrected-ethiopia-acquires-stake-to-join-dp-world-somaliland-port-venture-idUSL8N1QJ4OQ/; Ahmed M. Musa, “The Berbera Corridor Development & Somaliland’s Political Economy”, in *Land, Investment and Politics: Reconfiguring Eastern Africa’s Pastoral Drylands*, ed. Jeremy Lind, Doris Okenwa, and Ian Scoones (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 110-121, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787449077.009>.

Ethiopia’s interest explains much of Berbera’s strategic logic. Since losing access to the sea via Eritrea, Ethiopia has relied heavily on Djibouti. The 2024 memorandum with Somaliland, though controversial and politically explosive, confirmed that Addis Ababa still views Berbera as a potential hedge against overreliance on a single outlet. A port that can serve Ethiopia, attract Emirati capital, and sit astride the Red Sea-Indian Ocean junction inevitably becomes more than a local development story.²⁷

That does not mean Berbera is politically neutral within Somaliland. The port deal has redistributed land values, rents, and expectations, often intensifying competition among local networks. Development creates opportunity, but it also generates new struggles over who benefits. Recognition would make it easier to channel external investment through clearer legal frameworks, state-to-state agreements, and more predictable regulatory structures than the current limbo allows.²⁸

The diplomatic fallout of early 2026 emphasises the point. Mogadishu’s decision to annul agreements with the UAE, including those relating to Berbera, underscored the instability created when an unrecognised territory hosts infrastructure of regional importance. DP World’s insistence that operations in Berbera were unaffected revealed the other side of the same reality: Somaliland is treated by commercial and security actors as an operational political authority, whether or not formal diplomacy recognises it. Recognition would bring legal and diplomatic practice closer together.²⁹

For British policy, Berbera is relevant because it could form part of a broader resilience strategy for the Red Sea. It is not a substitute for Djibouti, nor should it be imagined as a ready-made military hub. However, it is an increasingly significant node, with sufficient administrative coherence and external investment to matter. Recognition would give the UK a firmer basis on which to build commercial, customs, and maritime partnerships around that asset.³⁰

²⁷ “Ethiopia signs pact to use Somaliland’s Red Sea port”, *Reuters*, 1 January 2024, www.reuters.com/world/africa/landlocked-ethiopia-signs-pact-use-somalilands-red-sea-port-2024-01-01/; Finn Stepputat and Tobias Hagmann, “Politics of Circulation: The Makings of the Berbera Corridor in Somali East Africa”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no.5 (2019): 794-813, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775819847485>; “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/.
²⁸ Ahmed M. Musa, “The Berbera Corridor Development & Somaliland’s Political Economy”, in *Land, Investment and Politics: Reconfiguring Eastern Africa’s Pastoral Drylands*, ed. Jeremy Lind, Doris Okenwa, and Ian Scoones (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 110-121, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787449077.009>; “Multi-million dollar deal for Somaliland’s historic port sparks land rush”, *Reuters*, 4 April 2017, www.reuters.com/article/world/multi-million-dollar-deal-for-somalilands-historic-port-sparks-land-rush-idUSKBN17624A/.
²⁹ “Somalia ends port deals and security cooperation with UAE”, *Reuters*, 12 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalia-annuls-all-agreements-with-uae-including-port-deals-2026-01-12/; “Dubai’s DP World says operations at Somaliland’s Berbera port unaffected by UAE-Somalia dispute”, *Reuters*, 13 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/dubais-dp-world-says-operations-somalilands-berbera-port-unaffected-by-uae-2026-01-13/.
³⁰ “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/; Sankalp Gurjar, “The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean”, *International Studies* 60, no.3 (2023): 313-327, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817231202305>.

5. The Legal and Normative Case for Recognition

The strongest objection to recognising Somaliland is that international law privileges territorial integrity and is wary of secession outside decolonisation. That objection is often overstated, as if non-recognition settled the question of statehood. It does not. Effectiveness, recognition, and legality do not mechanically determine statehood, and non-recognition does not, by itself, resolve the ontological problem. Somaliland is an unrecognised entity with the objective characteristics of a state that has been unable to actualise that statehood.³¹

Somaliland’s case goes beyond a generic claim to redraw African borders. It is rooted in the boundaries of the former British Somaliland protectorate, which gained independence in June 1960 and later joined the former Italian Somalia. The African Union’s 2005 fact-finding mission emphasised that Somaliland’s claim was historically unique and should not be treated as opening a continental Pandora’s box, stating that, “Somaliland’s search for recognition is historically unique and self-justified in African political history.” That judgment addresses the standard African objection on precedent: Somaliland can be recognised as an exceptional case without endorsing a general right of partition.³²

It is also worth focusing the legal argument on failed states. Where a parent state has been unable, for a prolonged period, to provide security, a functioning political system, and basic services, and where a breakaway entity has been able to provide them, international law should allow a path to justified secession. Somaliland exemplifies that paradigm. Somalia’s internationally recognised state has, for decades, been unable to exercise authority over Somaliland, while Somaliland itself has built and maintained its own institutions in Mogadishu’s place.³³

Some argue that engagement without recognition resolves most practical problems and avoids the political cost of formal recognition. That argument is only partly right. States have considerable latitude to engage with contested entities without recognising them, but that latitude has limits. Innovative diplomatic and financial mechanisms can create the impression of progress, yet they do not regularise status. Somaliland can be visited, indirectly funded, traded with, and quietly cooperated with, but it still cannot fully access the legal, diplomatic, and economic instruments that recognised statehood unlocks.³⁴

The AU mission made the material consequences explicit when it warned that a lack of recognition tied the hands of Somaliland’s authorities and people, preventing them from effectively and sustainably engaging with the outside world. That judgment remains accurate. Non-recognition complicates direct budgetary support, sovereign agreements, passport usability, air-service arrangements, access to international finance, and long-term investment risk. In the 1990s and early 2000s, isolation may inadvertently have supported a more

³¹ Janis Grzybowski, “To Be or Not to Be: The Ontological Predicament of State Creation in International Law”, *European Journal of International Law* 28, no.2 (2017): 409-432, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chx031>; Chatham House, *Somaliland’s Place in the World*, December 2011, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/1211confsummary.pdf.
³² “AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union, 2005, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf; International Crisis Group, “Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership”, *Africa Report* No.110, 23 May 2006, www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/somaliland-time-for-african-union-leadership.pdf.
³³ Aaron C. Kreuter, “Self-Determination, Sovereignty, and the Failure of States: Somaliland and the Case for Justified Secession”, *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 19, no.2 (2010): 363-397, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1938732>; Sarah G. Phillips, “When Less Was More: External Assistance and the Political Settlement in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.3 (2016): 629-645, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12601>; Michael Walls, “The Emergence of a Somali State: Building Peace from Civil War in Somaliland”, *African Affairs* 108, no.432 (2009): 371-389, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adp019>.
³⁴ James Ker-Lindsay, “Engagement without Recognition: the Limits of Diplomatic Interaction with Contested States”, *International Affairs* 91, no.2 (2015): 267-285, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12234>; Chatham House, *Somaliland’s Place in the World*, December 2011, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/1211confsummary.pdf.



Somaliland Army artillery units parade on Liberation Day, 2026

accountable politics by forcing Somaliland to rely heavily on domestic revenue and diaspora resources. Today, that legacy of self-reliance is real, but the continued denial of status has become more constraining than productive.³⁵

The normative case for recognition does not therefore rest on the claim that Somaliland has suffered enough or behaved better than Somalia and thus deserves a prize. It rests on a narrower proposition: after three and a half decades of effective separate government, continued refusal to recognise Somaliland is no longer a neutral defence of order. It is a choice to deny legal form to an existing political reality. Britain should stop treating that denial as prudence and recognise it for what it is: a policy decision that can be revised.³⁶

³⁵ “AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union, 2005, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf; Nicholas Eubank, *Peace-Building without External Assistance: Lessons from Somaliland*, CGD Working Paper 198 (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2010), www.cgdev.org/publication/peace-building-without-external-assistance-lessons-somaliland-working-paper-198; Laura Hammond, “Diaspora Returnees to Somaliland”, in *Africa’s Return Migrants: The New Developers?* (London: Zed Books, 2015), www.ceris.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Diaspora-returnees-to-Somaliland-LauraHammond-2015.pdf.
³⁶ Janis Grzybowski, “To Be or Not to Be: The Ontological Predicament of State Creation in International Law”, *European Journal of International Law* 28, no.2 (2017): 409-432, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chx031>; Aaron C. Kreuter, “Self-Determination, Sovereignty, and the Failure of States: Somaliland and the Case for Justified Secession”, *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 19, no.2 (2010): 363-397, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1938732>; Chatham House, *Somaliland’s Place in the World*, December 2011, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/1211confsummary.pdf.

6. The Security Situation in Somalia

Somalia’s security environment remains characterised by fragmented sovereignty rather than conventional state control. Al-Shabaab has survived successive military campaigns because it operates as both an insurgency and a governing authority in areas where the federal state is absent or distrusted. Its strength is coercive as well as fiscal, judicial, and administrative: it levies taxes, resolves disputes, punishes non-compliance, and exploits clan grievances where Mogadishu and federal member states are perceived as predatory or externally dependent. The result is a security landscape in which control is negotiated village by village and road by road, rather than held securely by the federal government.³⁷

That weakness has direct implications for Somaliland. Mogadishu lacks the coercive capacity to protect Somaliland, police the approaches to the Gulf of Aden, or credibly guarantee security along the Red Sea corridor. Foreign support can undermine the normal taxation-protection bargain between citizen and state, while enabling Al-Shabaab to present itself as a harsher yet more reliable alternative in some localities. The UK should therefore assess Somalia based on actual authority, not on formal jurisdiction. On that test, the federal state remains too weak, internally divided, and externally dependent to serve as the sole anchor of British policy in the Somali territories.³⁸

³⁷ Janis Grzybowski, “To Be or Not to Be: The Ontological Predicament of State Creation in International Law”, *European Journal of International Law* 28, no.2 (2017): 409-432, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chx031>; Aaron C. Kreuter, “Self-Determination, Sovereignty, and the Failure of States: Somaliland and the Case for Justified Secession”, *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 19, no.2 (2010): 363-397, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1938732>; Chatham House, *Somaliland’s Place in the World*, December 2011, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/1211confsummary.pdf.

³⁸ Ken Menkhaus, “Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping”, *International Security* 31, no.3 (2007): 74-106, <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/governance-without-government-in-somalia-spoilers-state-building-and-the-politics-of-coping/>; Roland Marchal, “A Tentative Assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, no.3 (2009): 381-404, <https://library.au.int/tentative-assessment-somali-harakat-al-shabaab-5>; Aisha Ahmad, Tanya Bandula-Irwin, and Mohamed Ibrahim, “Who Governs? State versus Jihadist Political Order in Somalia”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 16, no.1 (2022): 68-91, <https://library.au.int/who-governs-state-versus-jihadist-political-order-somalia>.

7. Chinese and Turkish Regional Competition

Somaliland is increasingly exposed to a regional contest in which infrastructure, diplomatic recognition, and military access are intertwined. China’s position is clearest in Djibouti, where commercial corridors, port investment, and a permanent PLA support facility sit alongside Western military installations. The Djibouti model illustrates how Beijing links logistics, debt-financed infrastructure, commercial port influence, and military reach within a single strategic geography. For a Taiwan-aligned Somaliland, Chinese pressure is therefore a practical constraint on passports, investment, mining partnerships, port politics, and the wider contest over who shapes the Red Sea littoral. One Somaliland government official stated, “China is our enemy.”³⁹ This makes it almost unique in Africa, where China has been buying up support. Somaliland could be a bulwark against this if the UK recognises it.

Turkey’s project is distinct yet significant. Ankara has built influence in Somalia through humanitarian diplomacy, infrastructure, business contracts, training, and security cooperation centred on Mogadishu. Turkey’s engagement with Somalia is a hybrid of moral language and strategic interest, with Turkish policy seeking visibility, access, and a long-term role in state-building rather than aid alone. This gives Ankara influence on the Indian Ocean side of Somalia but less direct leverage over the Gulf of Aden and the Berbera corridor.⁴⁰

The strategic point for Britain is that Somaliland is already part of this competition, even though it remains outside formal diplomatic protection. China benefits from Somaliland’s isolation, which gives Beijing greater freedom to pressure a Taiwanese partner through Mogadishu and Djibouti. Turkey benefits from the opposite geometry: a Somalia-centred framework that privileges Mogadishu as the gatekeeper for external security and economic engagement. Recognition would give London a clearer basis to protect its own interests and to prevent Somaliland’s future from being shaped solely by states with narrower agendas that conflict with the British national interest.⁴¹

³⁹ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China’s Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China’s Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no.125 (2020): 731-747, www.researchgate.net/publication/338126436_China's_Military_Base_in_Djibouti_A_Microcosm_of_China's_Growing_Competition_with_the_United_States_and_New_Bipolarity; David Styan, “China’s Maritime Silk Road and Small States: Lessons from the Case of Djibouti”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no.122 (2020): 191-206, <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/28399/3/28399.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Pinar Akpınar, “Turkey’s Peacebuilding in Somalia: The Limits of Humanitarian Diplomacy”, *Turkish Studies* 14, no.4 (2013): 735-757, www.researchgate.net/publication/259910581_Turkey's_Peacebuilding_in_Somalia_The_Limits_of_Humanitarian_Diplomacy; Theodore Baird, “The Geopolitics of Turkey’s ‘Humanitarian Diplomacy’ in Somalia: A Critique”, *Review of African Political Economy* 43, no.149 (2016): 470-477, www.jstor.org/stable/26159860; Chuck Thiessen and Alpaslan Özerdem, “Turkey in Somalia: Challenging North/Western Interventionism?”, *Third World Quarterly* 40, no.11 (2019): 1976-1995, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2019.1619074.

⁴¹ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China’s Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China’s Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no.125 (2020): 731-747, www.researchgate.net/publication/338126436_China's_Military_Base_in_Djibouti_A_Microcosm_of_China's_Growing_Competition_with_the_United_States_and_New_Bipolarity; David Styan, “China’s Maritime Silk Road and Small States: Lessons from the Case of Djibouti”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no.122 (2020): 191-206, <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/28399/3/28399.pdf>; Chuck Thiessen and Alpaslan Özerdem, “Turkey in Somalia: Challenging North/Western Interventionism?”, *Third World Quarterly* 40, no.11 (2019): 1976-1995, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2019.1619074.

8. Somalia’s State Failure and the Limits of British Investment

Somalia remains a failed state in the practical sense most relevant to British policy: the recognised government does not hold a monopoly of force, does not enforce uniform administration across its territory, and relies heavily on external finance, troops, and diplomatic shelter. Collapse has produced multiple political orders within Somalia, some more effective than the recognised centre. That finding strengthens the case for Somaliland. It shows that formal recognition of Mogadishu and UK financial and diplomatic support for Somalia have not translated into effective Somali authority or British influence, while non-recognition has denied Somaliland the diplomatic instruments normally attached to effective government.⁴²

The record of external state-building in Somalia is correspondingly poor. Decades of institution-building failed to revive a functional central government; regional and international security policy helped construct Somalia as a failed state while seeking to rebuild it through external templates; and Mogadishu remains a violent political marketplace in which insecurity itself can be a source of profit. Nearly £60 million of British investment routed through that architecture since 2021 has yielded only modest strategic returns. It has neither displaced Al-Shabaab, nor created a durable national security apparatus, nor delivered meaningful authority or influence over Somaliland.⁴³

For the UK, the conclusion must be that further investment through Mogadishu should not be conflated with a strategy for the Red Sea corridor. Continued support for Somalia may still be necessary for humanitarian, counterterrorism, and stabilisation reasons, but it should not be allowed to block a separate recognition policy for Somaliland. A Somalia-first approach has consumed British money and diplomatic energy while leaving Britain dependent on a state that cannot deliver the security, commercial access, or political coherence London now needs in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea corridor.⁴⁴

⁴² Tobias Hagmann and Markus V. Hoehne, “Failures of the State Failure Debate: Evidence from the Somali Territories”, *Journal of International Development* 21, no.1 (2009): 42-57, www.researchgate.net/publication/23992690_Failures_of_the_State_Failure_Debate_Evidence_from_the_Somali_Territories; Ken Menkhaus, “State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a ‘Functional Failed State’ in Somalia”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656, November 2014, 154-172, www.jstor.org/stable/24541768.
⁴³ Ken Menkhaus, “State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a ‘Functional Failed State’ in Somalia”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656 (November 2014): 154-172, www.jstor.org/stable/24541768; Jonathan Fisher, “AMISOM and the Regional Construction of a Failed State in Somalia”, *African Affairs* 118, no.471 (April 2019): 285-306, www.researchgate.net/publication/345626701_AMISOM_and_the_regional_construction_of_a_failed_state_in_Somalia; Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, “Profiting from the Failed State of Somalia: The Violent Political Marketplace and Insecurity in Contemporary Mogadishu”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 38, no.3 (2020): 437-458, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02589001.2020.1774522.
⁴⁴ Aisha Ahmad, Tanya Bandula-Irwin, and Mohamed Ibrahim, “Who Governs? State versus Jihadist Political Order in Somalia”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 16, no.1 (2022): 68-91, <https://library.au.int/who-governs-state-versus-jihadist-political-order-somalia>; Ken Menkhaus, “State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a ‘Functional Failed State’ in Somalia”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656 (November 2014): 154-172, www.jstor.org/stable/24541768; Tobias Hagmann and Markus V. Hoehne, “Failures of the State Failure Debate: Evidence from the Somali Territories”, *Journal of International Development* 21, no.1 (2009): 42-57, www.researchgate.net/publication/23992690_Failures_of_the_State_Failure_Debate_Evidence_from_the_Somali_Territories.

9. Why Recognition Serves UK Interests

Recognising Somaliland would serve British interests because the current UK policy in Somalia has reached structural limits. Technical fixes and capacity-building have a limited shelf-life, while Somali actors remain divided over fundamental questions of governance and authority. A policy focused on state-building through Mogadishu can deliver only incremental gains and may still fail to resolve the core political fragmentation that undermines them. Rather than replacing British engagement with Somalia, recognition of Somaliland would diversify it and make it more realistic.⁴⁵

Recognition would also strengthen Britain’s position in the Red Sea. Formal relations with Somaliland would make it easier to negotiate maritime domain awareness, port security, customs cooperation, anti-smuggling measures, and intelligence sharing with a government located next to one of the world’s most sensitive maritime approaches. Britain already has interests in safe passage through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The question is whether it wants to pursue those interests through quiet ambiguity or through a clearer relationship with one of the few relatively stable authorities on the African shore.⁴⁶

There is also a competitive logic. China has opposed Somaliland’s ties with Taiwan and benefits from the diplomatic isolation that leaves Somaliland more vulnerable to external pressure. Turkey has become Somalia’s foremost external security partner. The UAE has integrated Berbera into its commercial and strategic network. Taiwan’s relationship with Somaliland since 2020 shows that external actors already treat Hargeisa as a consequential political unit when it suits their interests. The UK’s continued refusal to recognise Somaliland simply means the UK watches while others shape the strategic environment to their own ends.⁴⁷

Britain also has a distinctive historical and social stake. Somaliland was a British protectorate, and the UK hosts Europe’s largest population of Somalilanders, with long-established communities in Cardiff, Liverpool, London, Manchester, and elsewhere. Studies of diaspora returnees show how deeply these transnational links continue to shape Somaliland’s politics, investment, and public life. Recognition would therefore acknowledge an existing relationship of history, migration, and responsibility that British policy has long preferred to keep implicit.⁴⁸

Economically, recognition would help align political authority with commercial reality. Berbera already attracts international capital and is central to corridor planning with Ethiopia and the Gulf, but the legal ambiguity surrounding an unrecognised territory raises transaction costs and discourages the full range of state-backed financial, insurance, and development instruments

⁴⁵ Michael Jones, *Mired in Mogadishu: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Somalia* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2023), <https://static.rusi.org/OP-mired-in-mogadishu-web-final.pdf>.
⁴⁶ “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/; Alice Hills, “Off-road Policing: Communications Technology and Government Authority in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.5 (2016): 1061-1078, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12701>; “Freight through Suez Canal down 45% since Houthi attacks – UNCTAD”, *Reuters*, 26 January 2024, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/freight-through-suez-canal-down-45-since-houthi-attacks-unctad-2024-01-26/.
⁴⁷ “Outflanked by China in Africa, Taiwan eyes unrecognised Somaliland”, *Reuters*, 1 July 2020, www.reuters.com/article/world/outflanked-by-china-in-africa-taiwan-eyes-unrecognised-somaliland-idUSKBN24251T/; “‘Born free’: Somaliland says China can’t dictate to it over Taiwan”, *Reuters*, 11 February 2022, www.reuters.com/world/china/born-free-somaliland-says-china-cant-dictate-it-over-taiwan-2022-02-11/; “Taiwan says Somalia bans entry to its citizens amid Somaliland dispute”, *Reuters*, 30 April 2025, www.reuters.com/world/africa/taiwan-says-somalia-bans-entry-its-citizens-amid-somaliland-dispute-2025-04-30/; “Turkey to provide maritime security support to Somalia -official”, *Reuters*, 22 February 2024, www.reuters.com/world/turkey-provide-maritime-security-support-somalia-official-2024-02-22/; “China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti”, *Reuters*, 1 August 2017, www.reuters.com/article/world/china-formally-opens-first-overseas-military-base-in-djibouti-idUSKBN1AH3E1/.
⁴⁸ Laura Hammond, “Diaspora Returnees to Somaliland”, in *Africa’s Return Migrants: The New Developers?* (London: Zed Books, 2015), www.ceris.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Diaspora-returnees-to-Somaliland-LauraHammond-2015.pdf.

that British firms and public agencies might otherwise use. In that sense, recognition is a way of reducing uncertainty around a place that is already economically active but still formally suspended between market relevance and legal invisibility.⁴⁹

Finally, recognition would allow Britain to reclaim the initiative after Israel’s move. The risk of inaction is that the first recognition of Somaliland will remain associated with Middle Eastern conflict, Abraham Accords politics, and speculation about military bases, rather than with a disciplined argument about effective statehood, inherited borders, and regional stability. A British recognition decision, if carefully prepared, could reframe the issue on more principled terms and prevent Somaliland’s future from being defined chiefly by external actors with narrower agendas.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ “DP World launches expansion of port in Somaliland”, *Reuters*, 11 October 2018, www.reuters.com/article/markets/dp-world-launches-expansion-of-port-in-somaliland-idUSL8N1WR6DY/; “Ethiopia signs pact to use Somaliland’s Red Sea port”, *Reuters*, 1 January 2024, www.reuters.com/world/africa/landlocked-ethiopia-signs-pact-use-somalilands-red-sea-port-2024-01-01/; “AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union, 2005, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf; Chatham House, *Somaliland’s Place in the World* (December 2011), www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/1211confsummary.pdf.

⁵⁰ “Israel becomes first country to formally recognise Somaliland as independent state”, *Reuters*, 26 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-recognises-somaliland-somalias-breakaway-region-independent-state-2025-12-26/; Hani Ibrahim, “Selective Diplomacy: Israel’s Somaliland Move and its Regional Implications”, Royal United Services Institute, 3 February 2026, www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/selective-diplomacy-israels-somaliland-move-and-its-regional-implications; “UK refuses to recognise breakaway Somaliland as independent”, *Reuters*, 29 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/uk-refuses-recognise-breakaway-somaliland-independent-2025-12-29/.

10. A Managed British Recognition Strategy

A British recognition policy should be phased, explicit, and tightly framed. It should begin with the proposition that Britain recognises Somaliland because it meets the practical test of statehood and because its case is historically exceptional, not because London seeks a new military proxy in the Red Sea or wishes to weaken Somalia for its own sake. Israel’s recognition has already shown how quickly Somaliland’s status can be drawn into wider regional rivalries when the political rationale is not carefully bounded.⁵¹

First, the UK should make clear that recognition applies to Somaliland within the borders of the former British protectorate and does not endorse coercive claims over disputed eastern areas. Recognition should be paired with support for dialogue, local mediation, and practical arrangements in areas where Hargeisa’s authority remains contested. That would make clear that Britain is acknowledging an existing state claim rather than underwriting territorial maximalism.⁵²

Second, recognition should be accompanied by full diplomatic normalisation. The UK should establish an embassy in Hargeisa, accredit an ambassador, and negotiate agreements on military cooperation, trade facilitation, customs modernisation, anti-corruption support, maritime policing, and port security. These measures would translate recognition into better governance and a more functional bilateral relationship.⁵³

Third, London should pair recognition with reassurance for Mogadishu. Recognising Somaliland would not require abandoning Somalia, downgrading relations with the federal government, or endorsing further fragmentation within Somalia.

On the contrary, Britain should propose structured talks on airspace, trade, movement, shared infrastructure, debt, and consular issues, precisely because recognition would dispel the illusion that the status question can be deferred indefinitely. Diplomacy works best when intent is made clear. Britain should therefore recognise openly and then negotiate pragmatically, rather than continue to engage ambiguously while pretending the underlying dispute is unchanged.⁵⁴

Fourth, the UK should lay the diplomatic groundwork with African and regional partners before announcing recognition. The African Union’s concerns about precedent are real, but its own fact-finding mission also recognised Somaliland’s exceptional history. Britain should therefore build a coalition around the narrowest and strongest case available: former colonial borders, prolonged effective self-government, and the unique collapse of the union with Somalia.

⁵¹ Hani Ibrahim, “Selective Diplomacy: Israel’s Somaliland Move and its Regional Implications”, Royal United Services Institute, 3 February 2026, www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/selective-diplomacy-israels-somaliland-move-and-its-regional-implications; “International Crisis Group, Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership”, *Africa Report* No.110 (23 May 2006), www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/somaliland-time-for-african-union-leadership.pdf.

⁵² “AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union, 2005, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf; “Somaliland agrees to ceasefire after five days of fighting in disputed territory”, *Reuters*, 11 February 2023, www.reuters.com/world/africa/somaliland-agrees-ceasefire-after-five-days-fighting-disputed-territory-2023-02-10/.

⁵³ Chatham House, *Somaliland’s Place in the World* (December 2011), www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/1211confsummary.pdf; Alice Hills, “Off-road Policing: Communications Technology and Government Authority in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.5 (2016): 1061-1078, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12701>; “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/.

⁵⁴ James Ker-Lindsay, “Engagement without Recognition: the Limits of Diplomatic Interaction with Contested States”, *International Affairs* 91, no.2 (2015): 267-285, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12234>; “UK refuses to recognise breakaway Somaliland as independent”, *Reuters*, 29 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/uk-refuses-recognise-breakaway-somaliland-independent-2025-12-29/.

Recognition would carry greater legitimacy if it were preceded by consultations with the AU, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, the UAE, and others whose interests intersect in the corridor.⁵⁵

Fifth, Britain should use recognition to unlock practical development and investment. Support for Berbera and corridor governance should focus on customs capacity, transparent revenue management, land governance, and the legal conditions for private investment. One lesson from Somaliland’s history is that domestic accountability grew in part because the polity relied on local revenue and bargaining. Recognition should preserve that strength while reducing the needless external constraints imposed by legal invisibility.⁵⁶

The right time for such a move is now. Somaliland has already crossed the threshold of effective statehood; first recognition has already occurred; and the Red Sea crisis has already elevated the territory’s significance. Waiting longer would merely prolong a mismatch between political reality and British policy, while other powers continue to shape Somaliland’s future without Britain’s full participation.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ “AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union, 2005, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf; “International Crisis Group, Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership”, *Africa Report* No.110 (23 May 2006), www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/somaliland-time-for-african-union-leadership.pdf; “Ethiopia signs pact to use Somaliland’s Red Sea port”, *Reuters*, 1 January 2024, www.reuters.com/world/africa/landlocked-ethiopia-signs-pact-use-somalilands-red-sea-port-2024-01-01/.

⁵⁶ Nicholas Eubank, *Peace-Building without External Assistance: Lessons from Somaliland*, CGD Working Paper 198 (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2010), www.cgdev.org/publication/peace-building-without-external-assistance-lessons-somaliland-working-paper-198; Ahmed M. Musa, “The Berbera Corridor Development & Somaliland’s Political Economy”, in *Land, Investment and Politics: Reconfiguring Eastern Africa’s Pastoral Drylands*, ed. Jeremy Lind, Doris Okenwa, and Ian Scoones (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 110-121, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787449077.009>; “Multi-million dollar deal for Somaliland’s historic port sparks land rush”, *Reuters*, 4 April 2017, www.reuters.com/article/world/multi-million-dollar-deal-for-somalilands-historic-port-sparks-land-rush-idUSKBN17624A/.

⁵⁷ “Israel becomes first country to formally recognise Somaliland as independent state”, *Reuters*, 26 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-recognises-somaliland-somalias-breakway-region-independent-state-2025-12-26/; “UK refuses to recognise breakaway Somaliland as independent”, *Reuters*, 29 December 2025, www.reuters.com/world/uk-refuses-recognise-breakaway-somaliland-independent-2025-12-29/; “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/.

Conclusion

The case for British recognition of Somaliland is now stronger than the case against it. Somaliland has governed itself for thirty-five years, maintained a distinct political order, and gained increasing strategic value in a region central to British maritime and security interests. Its claim is exceptional rather than generic, its institutions are imperfect but real, and the costs of non-recognition are no longer theoretical. Britain should recognise Somaliland because doing so would align its policy with the facts on the ground and create a firmer basis for cooperation in the Red Sea corridor.⁵⁸

Recognition would not resolve Somaliland’s internal tensions, settle every border dispute, or transform the Horn of Africa, but refusing recognition would do even less. It leaves Somaliland in legal limbo, undermines the transparency of external engagement, and cedes the initiative to actors whose motives are often narrower than Britain’s. A careful British recognition strategy would be a sober acknowledgement that statehood, once sustained for this long, in this exceptional situation, and at this level of effectiveness, should eventually be recognised as such.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Sarah G. Phillips, “When Less Was More: External Assistance and the Political Settlement in Somaliland”, *International Affairs* 92, no.3 (2016): 629-645, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12601>; Michael Walls, “The Emergence of a Somali State: Building Peace from Civil War in Somaliland”, *African Affairs* 108, no.432 (2009): 371-389, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adp019>; “Why is Somaliland strategically important?”, *Reuters*, 6 January 2026, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/why-is-somaliland-strategically-important-2026-01-06/; “AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union, 2005, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/au-fact-finding-mission-to-somaliland-30-april-to-4-may-2005.pdf.

⁵⁹ Janis Grzybowski, “To Be or Not to Be: The Ontological Predicament of State Creation in International Law”, *European Journal of International Law* 28, no.2 (2017): 409-432, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chx031>; James Ker-Lindsay, “Engagement without Recognition: the Limits of Diplomatic Interaction with Contested States”, *International Affairs* 91, no.2 (2015): 267-285, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12234>; Hani Ibrahim, “Selective Diplomacy: Israel’s Somaliland Move and its Regional Implications”, Royal United Services Institute, 3 February 2026, www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/selective-diplomacy-israels-somaliland-move-and-its-regional-implications.

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