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The Primacy of Security over the Blue Economy in Israel's Strategy Toward the Horn of Africa

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Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay[1]

Introduction

Definitions of the Horn of Africa vary across regional studies, reflecting different geographical and analytical perspectives.[2] A narrow geopolitical approach limits the region to Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. A broader, security-oriented geostrategic perspective, by contrast, distinguishes among three concentric circles. The first, or core, comprises the four countries mentioned above, while the second, or strategic hinterland, includes Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda. This broader configuration is sometimes referred to as the Greater Horn of Africa. The third circle extends to the broader geostrategic arena surrounding the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab, encompassing Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, as well as other countries with security interests in these waterways, including Israel, the UAE, Türkiye, Qatar, Iran, the US, China and India. A further approach defines the region institutionally, using the membership of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an East African regional organization, as its frame of reference. Under this definition, the Horn of Africa comprises eight countries: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and South Sudan.

The foregoing discussion highlights the region's strategic importance, which stems from its location along major maritime chokepoints and global trade routes connecting the Strait of Hormuz in the Arabian Gulf, the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal, as well as routes extending southward through the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean toward the Cape of Good Hope.

The Horn of Africa is also strategically significant in the context of the "blue economy," which refers to the sustainable use of marine and coastal resources to promote economic growth while preserving marine ecosystems. This concept encompasses ports and maritime transport, fisheries and mineral resources, energy, tourism and pollution control.[3]

First: Drivers of Israel's Strategic Engagement in the Horn of Africa

Israel's strategy toward the Horn of Africa rests on two main pillars: security and the blue economy. This study argues that security takes precedence, with blue-economy initiatives serving broader strategic objectives. Although the two dimensions are complementary and mutually reinforcing, security considerations prevail when competing priorities require a choice.

A historical review of the period before the Iranian Revolution suggests that, particularly after the October War of 1973, Israel grew increasingly concerned about developments in the Horn of Africa. Its primary objective was to prevent the emergence of an Arab power bloc in the region that could further isolate Israel and place it in a difficult geostrategic position. At the same time, Israel sought to support US efforts to weaken Soviet influence in the region.

Diplomatic relations between Israel and Ethiopia, the largest country in the Horn of Africa, were severed in 1973 and restored only in 1989. Nevertheless, Ethiopia remained central to Israel's regional strategy. During the diplomatic rupture, informal ties persisted, including Israeli training for Ethiopian elite units and support for exiled Somali opposition groups opposed to President Siad Barre's government. Beyond Ethiopia's regional significance, Israel sought to capitalize on the centuries-old antagonism between Ethiopia and the Arab world to gain influence over at least one country bordering the Red Sea, particularly before Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1993.[4] However, a US Policy Review Committee document prepared before the Iranian Revolution[5] indicates that the US assessment at the time was as follows:

> In our view, interdiction of the Red Sea maritime route does not, of course, require control of the entire littoral. Nor, in the absence of an Israeli base in the southern portion of the Red Sea, does a position of some influence in Ethiopia materially enhance Israeli capability to counter a blockade. Furthermore, Israeli oil reserves are sufficient to withstand the effects of a blockade for six months, beyond which a blockade is unlikely to continue.
>
> Nonetheless, the prospect of further hostile influence in the Red Sea area, whether Arab or Soviet, increases the potential threat of a blockade of a route on which Israel depends heavily not only for its Iranian oil supplies but for its important trade and communications with Asia and Africa. Anything which threatens to increase Israeli isolation is of genuine concern to them, and in the context of our relations with Israel and our objectives in the Middle East, to us as well.

According to the US document, Israel and the US recognized that the "growing Soviet, Cuban and Libyan ties with the EPMG [Ethiopian Provisional Military Government] make the Israelis increasingly uncomfortable with the situation in Ethiopia and might force them to alter their estimate of [the Ethiopian ruler then] Lt. Col. Mengistu [Haile-Mariam] as being a nationalist rather than a dedicated Marxist. They will nonetheless probably still be desirous of keeping a minimal tie with Ethiopia on the theory that an enemy of the Arabs can be an Israeli friend, and will probably continue to urge the U.S. to maintain its ties and assistance to the Mengistu regime in the hope that a U.S. presence will attenuate Soviet influence. They will also urge the exercise of U.S. influence to lessen the possibility of elements hostile to Israel predominating in Djibouti,"[6] which provides Ethiopia with access to the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Since 1979, Israel's strategy toward the Horn of Africa has been driven by several security considerations:

1. Israel's southern maritime outlet, the port of Eilat, is closely connected to the coastlines of the Horn of Africa and neighboring Arab states, including Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Accordingly, Israel has sought to establish ties with countries in the region that have access to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, or the Indian Ocean. Although the Abraham Accords with Gulf states have expanded Israel's strategic focus to include the Strait of Hormuz, its early engagement with Ethiopia, a key country in the Horn of Africa, reflected a longstanding effort to establish a foothold from which it could extend its influence along the region's maritime corridors. This engagement was driven partly by the presence of Ethiopia's Jewish minority, known as the Falashas, and by Ethiopia's interest in obtaining Israeli assistance to counter Arab support for Eritrea and Somalia during earlier periods of conflict with both countries.[7] Moreover, historical US documents suggest that Israel sought to establish relations with any African country bordering the Red Sea or Bab al-Mandab, or situated along the maritime corridor linking the Arabian Sea to the Indian Ocean. Consequently, strengthening strategic ties with Ethiopia has remained a key Israeli objective. As discussed in a previous study, Israel and Ethiopia have cooperated extensively on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a project with significant implications for Egypt's water security and environmental interests.[8]

2. The Iranian Dimension of the Conflict over the Horn of Africa: Israel's interest in the Horn of Africa predates the Iranian Revolution. Since the 1960s, Israel has sought to secure its trade routes with Asia through the Red Sea, as reflected in its relations with Ethiopia and Kenya. In particular, Kenya's Port of Mombasa on the Indian Ocean played an important role in Israeli trade with East Africa and Asia. Many shipping companies favored Mombasa because of its road and railway connections to Uganda to the west. However, the 1979 Iranian Revolution brought the Red Sea into the wider Israeli-Iranian rivalry, particularly from the 1990s onward. According to a study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS),[9] this rivalry extended into the Horn of Africa through routes reportedly used to transport Iranian weapons to the Palestinian resistance via countries in the region, particularly Sudan and Eritrea, both of which have Red Sea ports, including Assab and Massawa. Israel also believes that Iran supported rebels in Ethiopia's Tigray region, particularly in 2021–2022. Israel may seek to use this development to strengthen its ties with Ethiopia. "Building on the Abraham Accords, the US has sought to reinforce Israel's integration into the regional security architecture. In 2020, Washington persuaded Sudan to normalize relations with Israel in part by relying on the financial leverage of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Khartoum. Following the election of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in Somalia in May 2022, the US has been exploring options to expand the Abraham Accords with the support of the UAE, which enjoys a good relationship with the new Somali president. Mohamud allegedly had contact with Israeli officials during his

trip to the UAE in June 2022. In November 2021, the US led the first quadrilateral naval drill in the Red Sea with Bahrain, Israel and the UAE. A few months later, Israel took part in another major US-led naval exercise in the Red Sea which included Saudi Arabia and Oman. And in March 2022, the US held a secret meeting between top military officials from Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Sharm el-Sheikh to discuss coordination against Iran's growing missile and UAV capabilities. Although Saudi Arabia has not normalized relations with Israel, the US has encouraged a back-channel security dialogue between them. Washington has also facilitated negotiations between Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia to transfer control of Tiran Island and Sanafir Island from Egypt to Saudi Arabia. These islands are located at the entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba and play a key role in Israel's access to the Red Sea. Washington has largely relied on its maritime convening power to facilitate defense cooperation in the region. Egypt joined the US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in early 2021, and in November of that year, Israeli naval sources suggested that Israel could be next. This, as well as the inclusion of Israel in US Central Command's area of responsibility in September 2021, will probably facilitate greater Israeli security cooperation with countries in the region. That same month, Jordan began hosting US Navy Task Force 59 at its Red Sea naval base in Aqaba, which will has encouraged cooperation on the use of uninhabited systems and artificial intelligence for maritime operations in the area. And in April 2022, the Combined Maritime Forces established a new international maritime task force focused on the Red Sea, Combined Task Force 153, which focuses on capacity building to combat illegal trafficking.[10]

The Houthis' blockade of the Port of Eilat, which began in October 2023, reduced port activity by 85%. In response, port director Gideon Golber appealed for government support before the Knesset's Economic Affairs Committee in July 2024.[11] These developments further heightened Israel's strategic interest in the Horn of Africa as a route to the Cape of Good Hope.

3. The Strait of Hormuz crisis has increased the strategic importance of some previously less prominent Kenyan ports, particularly Lamu and Mombasa, the latter of which was discussed earlier. As shipping routes to Gulf ports such as Jebel Ali were disrupted, some vessels were forced to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, boosting activity at ports along the Indian Ocean coast of the Horn of Africa. In March 2026, the number of vessels calling at the Port of Mombasa increased by 50%, while cargo handled at the Port of Lamu during 2024–2025 rose more than tenfold. These developments suggest that the narrow geographical definition of the Horn of Africa discussed in the introduction is no longer adequate. Instead, a broader geostrategic perspective is more appropriate, and Israel has sought to capitalize on this shift. A study by Israel's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) indicates that Kenyan ports, particularly Mombasa and Lamu, have become part of Israel's strategic planning. Moreover, bilateral ties had already taken root well before the current Strait of Hormuz crisis, particularly during 2007–2017, a formative period in the renewal of relations. These ties subsequently expanded at an accelerated pace.[12] Since 2022, bilateral cooperation has also extended into the defense sphere, encompassing "counterterrorism," training, cybersecurity, defense industries, and

defense research and development.[13] Furthermore, the Israeli security and surveillance company Magal Security Systems played a key role in developing and upgrading the security infrastructure at the Port of Mombasa, well before the current crisis of Hormuz.[14] Relations advanced further in 2024, when Kenya's Ministry of Defense stated that cooperation with Israel covered shipbuilding, the blue economy, and the security areas mentioned above.[15]

4. The Somaliland Issue: Since 1991, Somaliland's secessionist bid has reflected Israel's efforts to extend its geostrategic influence in the Horn of Africa to encompass Ethiopia, Kenya, Eritrea, and Djibouti, while maintaining ties with Sudan and Egypt. These efforts aim to strengthen Israel's strategic position in the Red Sea and around Bab al-Mandab, while preparing it to respond to potential shifts in maritime transport routes that could diminish the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz. Israel's recognition of Somaliland in December 2025 further illustrates this strategy. According to the cited sources, Israel became the first and only country to recognize Somaliland as a state. Netanyahu said the declaration "is in the spirit of the Abraham Accords," which Israel had concluded with Gulf states and Sudan.[16] Somaliland's strategic importance to Israel is further underscored by its substantial territory of approximately 137 thousand square kilometers, population of about 5.5 million, and port of Berbera, which overlooks the Gulf of Aden. These features are particularly significant in the following respects:[17]

a. Israel's recognition of Somaliland is closely linked to its security interests in the Red Sea, particularly after Ansar Allah in northern Yemen effectively paralyzed operations at the port of Eilat during Operation al-Aqsa Flood, as noted earlier.

b. As relations between Eritrea and Israel deteriorated, Israel moved quickly to establish ties with Somaliland to offset this setback. Somaliland's government, meanwhile, viewed closer relations with Israel as a gateway to security, economic, technological and diplomatic cooperation. This was reflected in a statement by Somaliland's defense minister in June 2026 that Israel was training Somaliland's police and military forces.

5. Eritrea: Following Eritrea's independence in 1993, Ethiopia became landlocked, losing its access to the Red Sea, particularly through the port of Assab. The loss of direct access to the Red Sea remains a major source of tension between the two countries. Israel's relations with Eritrea have also been shaped by historical tensions stemming from its support for Ethiopia during Eritrea's independence struggle. Nevertheless, bilateral relations improved after 1993, particularly following Israel's reported provision of medical care to Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki.[18] Subsequently, Eritrea reportedly allowed Israel to establish monitoring stations on its territory to track what Israel claims are arms shipments from Iran and other sources to Palestinian resistance groups. However, Israel's

reported attack on an Iranian vessel in Eritrean territorial waters in 2021 contributed to tensions between the two countries.[19] The current state of Israel-Eritrea relations can be summarized as follows:

a. Although diplomatic relations between Israel and Eritrea have continued at a reduced level, Israel's policy toward Eritrea remains primarily driven by "security" considerations. Israel closed its embassy in Asmara in July 2022, 29 years after diplomatic relations were established, while Eritrea has retained its diplomatic mission in Israel. Closer Israeli-Ethiopian ties appear to have fueled Eritrean suspicions, potentially explaining Israel's swift recognition of Somaliland as a means of compensating for Eritrea's diminished role in its regional strategy while continuing to strengthen ties with Ethiopia.[20]

b. Another source of tension is the presence of approximately 19 thousand Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel, a community divided between supporters and opponents of the Eritrean government. Clashes between the two groups, as well as confrontations with Israeli police in September 2023, left approximately 100 people injured. Police reportedly used live ammunition on some occasions. From the Eritrean government's perspective, these incidents have reinforced the perception of Israel as a hub for the Eritrean opposition, further straining bilateral relations.[21]

6. Djibouti:[22] Perhaps Djibouti's most distinctive feature compared with other countries in the Horn of Africa is its hosting of numerous foreign military bases, including American, Chinese, French and Japanese facilities. Djibouti maintains no diplomatic relations with Israel and has opposed Israel's recognition of Somaliland. In 2026, Ethiopia relies on Djibouti and Somaliland to access the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, respectively. Notably, until Djibouti gained independence in 1977, Israel used its port through the Israeli shipping company ZIM, which reportedly accounted for 30% of port activity.

Despite the absence of diplomatic relations, Djibouti's president Ismail Omar Guelleh stated in 2020 that the dispute with Israel was "because they're denying Palestinians their inalienable rights." He added that "We neither have a problem with the Jews as a people nor the Israelis as a nation. Some of them even come to Djibouti on business with their passport, and Djibouti's citizens have been able to travel to Israel for 25 years now," but "the conditions aren't ripe" for normalization." [23] Nevertheless, Djibouti has taken positions that align with those of some Abraham Accords countries, notably severing diplomatic relations with Iran in 2016. It has also aligned with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in rejecting Somaliland's claim to independence. This ambiguity in Djibouti's position may encourage Israel to continue pursuing normalization with the country.

Second: Indicators of the Predominance of Security Considerations

The following table outlines the main areas of engagement and cooperation between Israel and the countries of the Horn of Africa:[24]

Table 1: The Primacy of Israeli Security Considerations over the Blue Economy in the Horn of Africa

Country	Primary focus	Other areas of engagement	Israeli exports ($)
Somaliland	Security cooperation and military training	Diplomatic relations	N/A
Ethiopia	Blue economy	Health, water, and limited security cooperation	Less than 2 million
Eritrea	Regional security	Relations largely inactive	11 thousand
Djibouti	Regional security, particularly around Bab al-Mandab	Relations largely absent	2.18 million
Somalia	Security-driven competition over Somaliland	Relations largely absent	2 million
Sudan	Normalization and Red Sea security	Relations stalled by the civil war	N/A
Kenya	Securing alternative ports in case of a Red Sea closure	Some cooperation on the blue economy	46.1 million (2024); 49.94 million (2025)

The table above shows that Israeli exports to the Horn of Africa account for just 0.03% of Israel's total global exports.[25] Moreover, most blue economy projects remain under development or involve Israel in partnership with other actors. These include the Port of Berbera, a desalination project in Somaliland, and research on aquaculture and marine technology. Israel's presence in these fields, however, remains extremely limited.[26] Thus, the blue economy remains marginal to Israel's regional engagement, whereas its security cooperation with Horn of Africa countries focuses on the following areas:[27]

1. Arms sales and military and security training.
2. Infrastructure protection, cybersecurity and "counterterrorism."
3. Intelligence sharing, particularly on maritime transport.
4. Countering Iran's activities in the Horn of Africa and across Africa more broadly.
5. Intelligence cooperation to monitor Palestinian organizations operating in Africa, particularly in the Horn of Africa.
6. Expanding normalization with African countries, including those in the Horn of Africa, to secure support for Israel in international organizations, particularly the United Nations (UN).

Third: Prospects for Israel's Future Approach to the Horn of Africa

Based on the preceding indicators, the following trends may characterize Israel's approach to the Horn of Africa over the next five years:[28]

1. Strengthening ties with Somaliland as much as possible and working to consolidate its independence. It may also seek to expand its current diplomatic relationship into a "security framework" encompassing intelligence cooperation, maritime surveillance, radar systems, countermeasures against arms smuggling, port security and drone technology, while further expanding port infrastructure.

2. Establishing a coordination body comprising Israel, Somaliland, Ethiopia and the UAE, with a focus on developing the port of Berbera in Somaliland. However, this initiative would face several challenges, including tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), as well as instability and inter-state tensions involving Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan. Moreover, strained Ethiopia-Eritrea relations, particularly over the volatile Tigray region along their shared border, would pose a further obstacle, making coordination within this proposed bloc more difficult.

3. Israel would seek to establish a strategic foothold in Eritrea, which has a coastline of approximately 1,200 kilometers along the Red Sea. If this effort fails, it could turn to Berbera port in Somaliland as an alternative. Should that option also prove unviable, Israel would seek to strengthen ties with Kenya, particularly through the ports of Mombasa and Lamu, to secure alternative access to the Indian Ocean if Red Sea shipping is disrupted.

4. Gradually and discreetly strengthening ties with Djibouti, where relations with Israel appear relatively open, as suggested by the president's remarks cited above. Israel could also leverage Gulf influence to encourage closer Djiboutian engagement, particularly to secure maritime access and strengthen its position near the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

5. Given Sudan's ongoing civil war, Israel is likely to defer a definitive strategy until the conflict's outcome becomes clearer. Sudan's participation in the Abraham Accords could facilitate closer ties, particularly given its extensive Red Sea coastline. Moreover, since both warring parties reportedly maintain overt or covert ties with Israel, Israel may seek to strengthen relations with Sudan regardless of which side ultimately prevails.[29]

6. From another perspective, Israel's recognition of Somaliland has strained its relations with Somalia, Djibouti and Egypt. To mitigate these repercussions, Israel may seek to consolidate a countervailing bloc comprising the UAE, Somaliland, and Ethiopia.

This strategy would involve developing a regional security architecture and expanding intelligence and technological cooperation, with Somaliland serving as the "central hub and Ethiopia and Kenya providing support." Moreover, Israel could invoke the perceived threats posed by Yemen's Ansar Allah movement and Iran to justify its expanding regional presence.

Conclusion

Given current regional dynamics, Somaliland appears to offer Israel its main foothold for establishing a sustained presence in the Horn of Africa. Its approximately 850 kilometers of coastline along the Gulf of Aden could enable Israel to gain strategic depth vis-à-vis Yemen and Iran.[30] This presence could take the form of an intelligence platform near the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Gulf of Aden, potentially complemented by a military base at the port of Berbera and the use of the city's airport. Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has reportedly raised this possibility.[31]

Israel may also seek to capitalize on the rivalry between India and China in the Horn of Africa. China maintains a military presence in Djibouti and promotes its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which extends into the region. India, meanwhile, has developed extensive ties with Israel since the Indian National Congress (INC) lost power and is advancing the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Since both the Chinese and Indian initiatives intersect with the Red Sea network, their implications for regional competition warrant closer examination. Two Indian principles are particularly relevant to understanding this strategic overlap:[32]

1. Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). Introduced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, SAGAR promotes cooperation among Indian Ocean littoral states in maritime security and the blue economy.
2. Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR). Introduced in 2025, MAHASAGAR broadens the scope of SAGAR from the Indian Ocean to a wider global framework, with particular emphasis on the Global South.

This suggests that India could become a key partner in expanding Israel's regional presence, with India focusing on infrastructure development while Israel concentrates on strengthening security and intelligence capabilities. However, such cooperation would face major challenges, mainly:[33]

1. Africa's structural weaknesses: The Horn of Africa is likely to be affected by the continent's broader challenges. Poverty and population growth have contributed to widespread food insecurity, with 20% of Africa's population experiencing malnutrition. Moreover, nine military coups occurred in seven African countries between 2020 and 2023, while Africa's debt-to-GDP ratio doubled from 30% to 60% over the past decade. These conditions could make Israeli-Indian cooperation costly, given the substantial burdens both countries would have to shoulder.
2. The principle of preserving inherited colonial borders: The African Union upholds the principle that inherited colonial borders should remain unchanged to prevent widespread and protracted conflicts. Israel's recognition of Somaliland could therefore heighten African concerns about the spread of separatist movements and, in turn, make African countries more wary of India if it is perceived as supporting Israel's position.

3. Turkey's presence in Somalia could bring it into competition with Israel and India in Somaliland, potentially heightening tensions, particularly given Turkey's support for Somalia's rejection of Somaliland's independence.

4. Competition between Israeli and Indian technologies and their Chinese and Turkish counterparts highlights the latter's potential advantages in cost and competitiveness. Consequently, China and Turkey could gain ground in African markets, forcing Israel either to lower its prices or to absorb the price difference to remain competitive.

5. Somaliland remains diplomatically isolated. Apart from Israel, no country has formally recognized its independence. The US position, however, is more nuanced: while Washington rejects recognition, it maintains ties with Somaliland's administration, including security cooperation. According to a US State Department report, "the United States maintains a positive, constructive relationship with Somaliland" within the framework of recognition of Somalia's sovereignty. President Donald Trump has likewise stated that the US would not follow Israel's lead in recognizing Somaliland, although "everything is under study." Moreover, Washington defended Israel's right to recognize Somaliland at the UN Security Council.[34]

Accordingly, Israel's efforts to expand its security presence in the Horn of Africa will depend on two key developments:

1. Developments in the Strait of Hormuz: If Iran succeeds in entrenching the principle of "innocent passage" through the strait, while Yemen's Ansar Allah movement consolidates its gains in the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa will become increasingly important to Israel, prompting deeper Israeli involvement in regional security arrangements.

2. Broader International Recognition of Somaliland: If international recognition of Somaliland expands, it could provide Israel with a more favorable environment for establishing a significant security foothold in the region, particularly given the fragility of the regional order in the Horn of Africa, as discussed throughout this study.

Endnotes

[1] An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.

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