

## Berbera Port: the nexus of Emirati-Israeli interests in the Red Sea



The UAE's absence from the Gulf Cooperation Council statement — and before that, from the statement issued by a number of Arab and Islamic countries condemning Somaliland's move to open diplomatic representation in occupied Jerusalem — sparked widespread debate in Gulf and Arab circles, raising questions about Abu Dhabi's motives for avoiding condemnation of a step that was met with broad rejection from most Arab and Islamic capitals.

This absence was not seen as a passing protocol detail. Rather, it brought back into focus the tangled relations between Abu Dhabi and Somaliland on one hand, and between this internationally unrecognized entity and the Israeli occupation state on the other, especially amid what is seen as growing Israeli support for Somaliland and Tel Aviv's efforts to expand its presence in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.

At the heart of this entanglement stands Berbera Port, which is no longer merely a commercial facility on the Gulf of Aden coast, but has become a pivot point in a broad regional and international competition. From this perspective, Somaliland's move in Jerusalem, and the Emirati silence surrounding it, take on dimensions that go beyond the immediate diplomatic position, raising broader questions about the nature of Emirati-Israeli rapprochement in this sensitive region, the positions of regional states toward it, and the geopolitical repercussions it may carry that could reshape the map of the region.

## Somaliland: an opportunity to advance Abu Dhabi's project

The Emirati position on Somaliland's latest move cannot be read in isolation from a broader course Abu Dhabi has adopted over recent years, one based on expanding its military, political and economic presence in strategic flashpoints, from the Horn of Africa to Yemen, Libya and the Red Sea, through a network of ports, bases and security partnerships stretching from Eritrea and Somaliland to Sudan and vital shipping lanes.

Abu Dhabi views Somaliland as a strategic opportunity to maximize its influence in the Horn of Africa, given its sensitive geopolitical location along shipping routes between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, and the leverage that provides over the security of international trade, energy flows and maritime corridors. From this angle, Somaliland does not appear to be merely a marginal entity in the region's equations, but rather a foothold within a network of interests that the UAE — along with Israel — seeks to entrench in one of the world's most sensitive regions.

The Emirati presence in this separatist entity is not limited to the economic or diplomatic dimension. It falls within a broader vision of reengineering regional balances and expanding the scope of Emirati-Israeli influence in the Horn of Africa through soft entry points such as unrecognized entities or disputed territories, where the authority of the central state recedes and local spaces become more vulnerable to political, security and economic penetration.

This presence therefore reopens debate over the nature of the Emirati role in a number of controversial regional files, particularly those touching Arab and regional national security, alongside growing engagement in arrangements of cooperation and coordination with Israel. That makes the Emirati silence over Somaliland's move in Jerusalem not merely a diplomatic abstention from condemnation, but a political indicator that raises deeper questions about Abu Dhabi's direction in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, and the extent of its overlap with the Israeli project in the region.

## Berbera Port: the UAE's foremost objective

Somaliland has imposed itself on the regional and international map as an economic and strategic hub of great importance, combining a sensitive geographic location, maritime influence and promising investment opportunities. It sits at a vital junction between Djibouti to the north and Ethiopia to the south, on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden, placing it close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the most important maritime passages leading to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, and overlooking one of the busiest and most sensitive global trade routes.

At the heart of this strategic geography stands Berbera Port as Somaliland's economic lifeline and one of the most important ports on the Gulf of Aden, in addition to being a highly significant import outlet for Ethiopia. Berbera, therefore, cannot be treated merely as a conventional commercial port, but as a strategic foothold on the edge of the Gulf of Aden and Bab el-Mandeb, and a link between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, all the way to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean.

This is why Abu Dhabi places the port at the top of its priorities in its approach to Somaliland, especially after the blow the UAE suffered in Somalia and Djibouti, where agreements signed with both countries to manage ports there were canceled. Beyond the port's proximity to Bab el-Mandeb, Yemen and the Red Sea — which increases its value in the equations of trade and regional influence — it represents a strategic opportunity to strengthen the UAE's presence in the Horn of Africa, placing it in direct proximity to interlocking files in Yemen, the Red Sea, Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia, while also allowing room to compete with other regional ports, foremost among them Djibouti.

In this way, the port becomes an Emirati instrument of influence that goes beyond the economic dimension, turning into a platform for monitoring and exerting influence over one of the world's most important maritime corridors.

What about the Israeli role?

Tel Aviv views Somaliland as a rare strategic opportunity to strengthen its presence on the edge of the Red Sea, especially after the escalation of Houthi threats since the Gaza war, and the disruptions that accompanied them in Israeli supply chains, along with mounting pressure on shipping through the Red Sea. These developments have pushed Israel to search for a foothold in this sensitive region, one that would allow it to protect its maritime and logistical interests and reduce its vulnerability to any threats coming from Bab el-Mandeb.

From this perspective, the Israeli entity sees Somaliland as an important gateway for expanding its maritime and shipping presence. Gaining influence or partnerships linked to Berbera Port would in practical terms mean moving closer to the coast opposite Yemen, and in direct proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, giving Tel Aviv greater capacity to monitor shipping traffic and build security arrangements with Somaliland and some of its allies, with the aim of securing supply lines and limiting the ability of the Houthis or others to disrupt Israeli interests in the Red Sea.

On another level, Israel sees Somaliland as a broader platform for strengthening its presence in the Horn of Africa, a region that in recent years has become an arena of intense international and regional competition because of its logistical

location and its importance to the security of maritime corridors and international trade. Israeli outreach to Somaliland, therefore, cannot be separated from an attempt to entrench new influence in a region where the interests of major and regional powers intersect.

Tel Aviv can also use this presence to serve its agendas toward influential regional actors such as Egypt, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, by repositioning itself in a highly sensitive geopolitical space and moving closer to the files of the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and the Horn of Africa.

In this sense, the Israeli role in Somaliland does not appear to be merely a limited diplomatic or economic move, but an attempt to change the rules of the game in the Horn of Africa and reshape its geopolitical map in a way that serves Israeli interests and gives it greater room for influence in one of the world's most sensitive regions.

#### The intersection of Emirati and Israeli interests

In light of the above, Emirati and Israeli interests intersect in Somaliland at an extremely sensitive strategic point. Abu Dhabi sees Berbera Port as a central link in its project to build a network of maritime influence stretching from the Gulf to the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, giving it a foothold in a logistical zone that can be leveraged in multiple regional files. The Israeli entity, meanwhile, views the port — and Somaliland more broadly — as a bridge for strengthening its presence near Bab el-Mandeb and the Red Sea, and for expanding its political and security influence in one of the region's most sensitive areas.

Against this convergence of interests, the Emirati and Israeli visions meet in supporting Somaliland, strengthening its position and backing it in its separatist path toward independence, far from Arab, Islamic and regional considerations tied to Somalia's unity or to the risks of opening the door to Israeli expansion along the Red Sea flank.

Such a course gives Tel Aviv an additional opportunity to deepen its influence near vital maritime corridors, while Abu Dhabi, through its economic and logistical presence, provides an enabling environment for this expansion, potentially creating political and security pressure on a number of Arab and regional states.

This direction cannot be separated from the profound shifts in Emirati foreign policy in recent years since the death of Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, as Abu Dhabi has come to adopt a highly pragmatic approach in which calculations of influence and interests take precedence over traditional nationalist and Arab considerations.

From here, the Emirati-Israeli rapprochement in Somaliland appears to be an extension of this approach: Abu Dhabi is moving outside the Arab consensus on a number of sensitive issues, prioritizing the strengthening of its regional and international presence even when that comes at the expense of broader Arab approaches. Israel, in turn, sees this Emirati openness as an ideal gateway for expanding its influence in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, turning Somaliland into a new testing ground for the overlap of interests between the two sides.

In sum, Berbera is no longer just a local port on the Gulf of Aden coast. It has become a strategic nexus where complex regional and international calculations intersect — Emirati, Israeli, Somali and Ethiopian. Regional states view this shift as a growing security and logistical threat, especially given the openings it creates for the repositioning of external powers in a highly sensitive area, and the pressure that may result on Somalia, Egypt, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia and other parties concerned with the security of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

Accordingly, any Israeli-Emirati-Somaliland rapprochement in Berbera cannot be read as a passing economic investment or a limited commercial partnership, but rather as part of a broader attempt to redraw the balance of power around the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, opening the door to new arrangements that could affect Arab and regional national security and forcing the countries of the region to deal with them before they become a *fait accompli* that is difficult to contain. So who will move first?