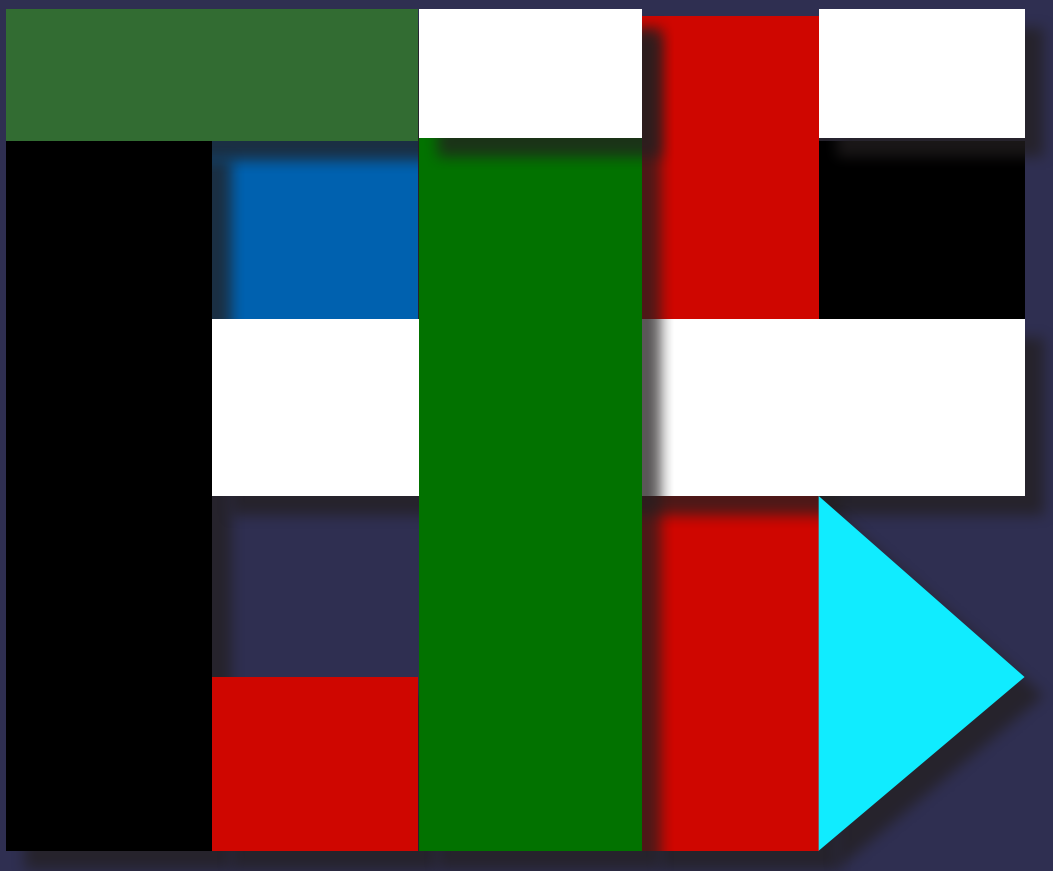
New Flags in the Red Sea Region

Understanding acceleration of separatist projects in Somalia, Yemen and Sudan

Jędrzej Czerep, Julia Sochacka, Michał Wojnarowicz



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Key takeaways

- The separatist projects in the Red Sea region became and will continue to be some of the focal points for the reshaping of the political and security architecture of the broader region
- From mid-2025 to early 2026, major breakaway movements in Somalia, Yemen and Sudan progressed significantly. These advances resulted from both activities of the local parties involved as well as from assistance by major foreign actors, most notably the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel.
- Formal or informal uplifting of the statuses of the breakaway quasi-states in the region threatens further erosion of international law in a particularly sensitive area: rejecting unilateral changes of borders. While in the cases of Sudan's RSF-backed Tasis parallel government, Somaliland, and the Southern Transitional Council in Yemen, the initial push towards their maximalist goals has passed, they—and their backers—will continue to seek conditions for a comeback.
- Turbulence caused by those developments continues to affect the region. As a result of the failed secession of South Yemen, the Houthi groups have been able to exploit the security gap to progress with their September 2026 offensive on the Bab al-Mandeb shores, threatening maritime security and global trade. Somalia's path towards a negotiated settlement with its breakaway regions seems to have closed. The war in Sudan continues to represent one of the world's largest humanitarian crises and—due to overlapping alliances—is at risk of merging with a looming war in Ethiopia and creating a major regional conflict.
- The three analysed separatist cases, while interlinked, exhibit significant differences in terms of historical trajectories, local legitimacy, institution-building, and agendas. Of the three cases, the Sudanese RSF-backed Tasis government's claim is the weakest, leaving no space for its political future.
- While the Saudi-Emirati rivalry, which is often focused on their attitude towards non-state actors and separatist movements, remains overshadowed by other tensions in the region, such as the US-Israeli war against Iran, Houthi escalation, or Israel's wars with its neighbours, it consumes much of their energy and resources.

It has the potential to become one of the major elements of the new power play in the region, and it has already contributed to the signing of the Mecca Agreement by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan.

- The EU should be more active in upholding the territorial integrity of Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, as separatism not only hampers international order and strengthens clientelist networks in the region, but also destabilises and sows seeds of new conflicts in the future. An effective approach would require the EU to show more assertiveness and a stronger political resolve in its relations with the UAE and Israel.

Introduction

Between mid-2025 and early 2026, three separatist projects in the wider Red Sea region reached a decisive point. In July 2025, a government backed by the Rapid Support Forces militia and their political allies was established in Nyala, Western Sudan. It began to set up an alternative administration for its proto-state centred on Darfur, a move which was widely criticised for effectively partitioning Sudan. Then, in December 2025, Israel formally recognised Somaliland as an independent state with Hargeisa as its capital. This brought Somaliland's quest for statehood back into the spotlight, effectively closing the door on Mogadishu's hopes for a negotiated reintegration. This development also signalled that the status quo of keeping the borders intact was unravelling. In the same month, Yemen's separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) captured almost all of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen's territory. By January 2026, the STC leadership had published a proto-constitution for the 'State of South Arabia' and initiated a two-year process towards an independence referendum.[1]

The proliferation of new flags in the region further complicated an already difficult situation in Africa and the Middle East. Khalifa Haftar's eastern Libya and Yemen's Houthi heartland both function as de facto separate entities. New, volatile conflicts are emerging in Ethiopia and Somalia, where numerous ethnic or clan-based entities are becoming increasingly independent of central authority. Meanwhile, the M23 rebel group is engaged in state-building in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The principle of the inviolability of internationally recognised borders, already strained by Russia's drive to annex Ukrainian territories, is therefore under ever-increasing pressure, with potentially profound consequences for the international order.

Although the three cases examined in this study have different origins, trajectories and regional contexts, they are interconnected. Some of the same actors—specifically, the United Arab Emirates and Israel—have been involved, exploiting the territories of one proto-state to achieve their objectives in another. For instance, the UAE has supplied

[1] While separatist projects continue to develop in Sudan and Somaliland well into 2026, the STC's military and political advance proved short-lived and was soon reversed.

the RSF in Sudan with military equipment via eastern Libya and Somalia's Puntland. Additionally, the STC's president al-Zubaidi was evacuated from Yemen via Somaliland amid a Saudi-backed counteroffensive. Access to strategic geographic locations for the implementation of Emirati and Israeli regional agendas is clearly at stake, as is their rejection of the regional status quo in favour of redrawing the rules. Saudi Arabia's opposing view on these matters pushes it to actively counter the emergence of the three proto-states. This has included spectacularly dismantling the nascent Southern Yemeni project in early 2026, as well as attempting to persuade Sudan's neighbours to stop allowing UAE transports *en route* to Darfur.

While regional actors' policies towards the separatist proto-states in the Red Sea are often high-stakes and involve substantial resources, they tend to shroud their involvement in secrecy and denial. This can lead to severe misunderstandings of the internal dynamics driving the local state-building authorities, whose policy orientations often shift between national and separatist agendas, as well as the motivations of their foreign backers. For example, the popular media narrative that the UAE incites separatism to fracture existing states is contradicted by Abu Dhabi's support for Ethiopia's central authorities against Tigray.

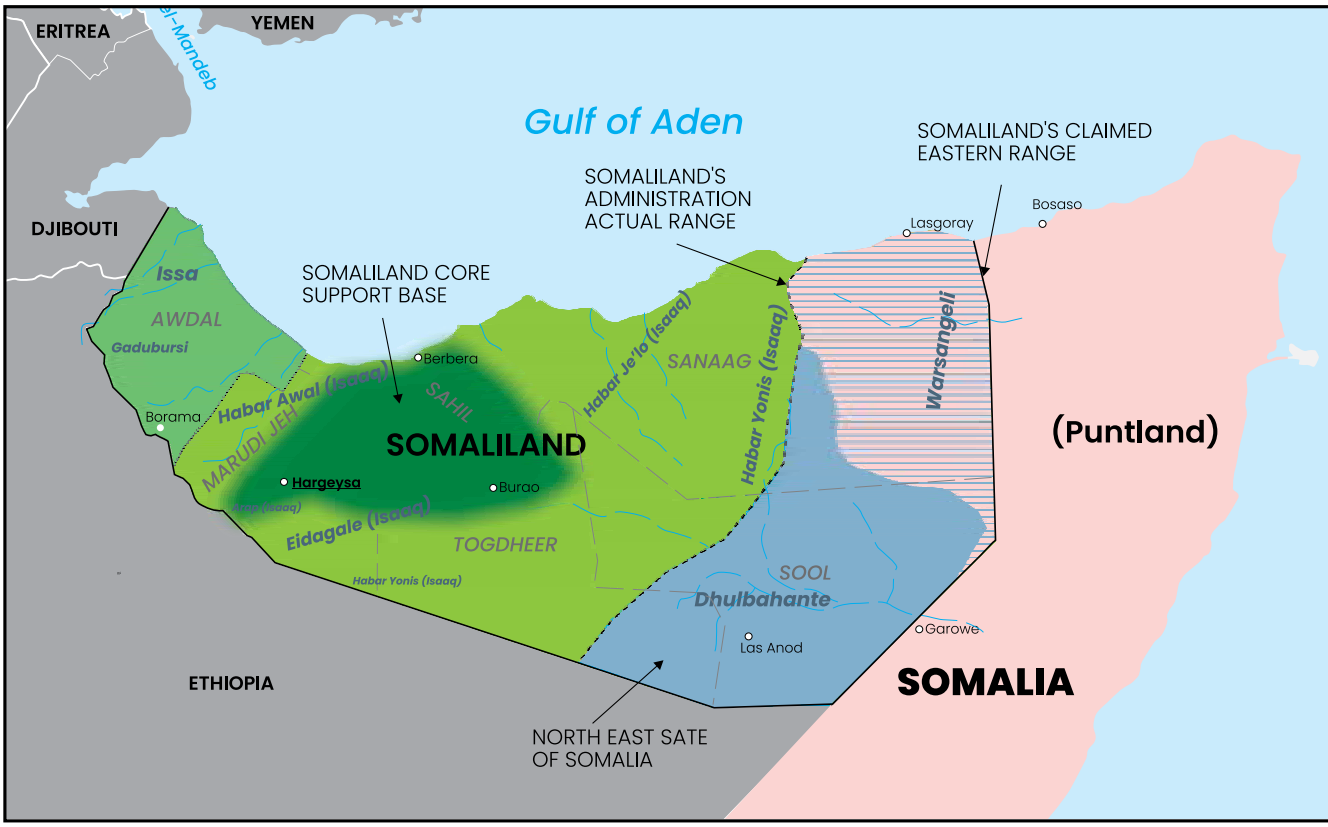
This study provides tools to decipher the recent rise in separatism in the Red Sea region by:

- examining the evolving local factors and shifting fortunes of separatist movements in southern Yemen, western Sudan, and Somaliland.
- assessing the legitimacy of these projects by considering the military, political and economic realities on the ground, as well as the legal arguments of the local and regional actors involved.
- evaluating their likelihood of success in establishing themselves as de facto states within a changing internal and regional context.
- assessing the likelihood of permanent re-drawing of regional borders by gaining foreign recognition in the short- and medium-term perspective.
- assessing the "ownership" or other roles that regional actors play in the separatist projects in the region;
- proposing policy recommendations for the EU in relation to new separatist movements and their backers.



Separatist entities uplifted in 2025 and other de facto authorities in the region

1. Somaliland



Somaliland's claimed borders, effective control and core support base (September 2026)

Somaliland's modern history is that of a de facto state structure which has survived for 35 years as an unrecognised but functioning polity. It is relatively stable, conducting regular elections at the central and local levels since 1997, with power peacefully transferred. However, the success story narrative that Somaliland is known for must be re-examined in light of recent setbacks. Selective development and consolidation of clan-based loyalties that equated the pro-independence current with the interests of the dominating Isaaq clan resulted in a progressive alienation of the minorities on its peripheries. This tension led to an uprising in the city of Las Anod. Somaliland's institutions have been pushed out of large parts of its claimed territory while the Somali state re-entered it.

Somaliland:



Seeks secession from: Somalia

Historical claim: separate colonial entity, brief independence in 1960

Territorial control: approx. 120, 000 km^2 effectively controlled in 2025 and into 2026

Territorial control dynamics: receded in 2023

Core support base: Hargeisa—Berbera—Burao triangle

Stable population: yes

De facto self-rule: 1991—collapse of Somalia's institutions,
declaration of independence
2001—independence approved in constitutional referendum

Recognition: by Israel (2025)

Key backers: UAE, Israel, Ethiopia

Stable institutions: yes

Administration separated from armed movement: yes

Consolidation of institutions

The former British Somaliland found itself on a collision course with Somalia that led to its secession in the 1980s. The Somali National Movement (SNM) opposed the regime of the then Somali dictator Siad Barre, who responded by discriminating against and targeting members of the Isaaq clan, who dominated the North-West of the country, where the SNM operated. This culminated in the bombardment and near-complete destruction of Hargeisa, the region's biggest city, after which the prospect of a shared future within a single state seemed impossible. The subsequent collapse of the Somali state sealed the fate of the union, while the bottom-up, cross-clan structures developed in Somaliland allowed it to avoid the chaos that consumed much of the rest of what existed on the map as Somalia.

Somaliland declared independence in 1991, after which the former liberation movement, the SNM, began to fracture in a similar way to the fragmentation of Somalia proper. This internal conflict culminated in fighting over control of Berbera port in 1992 between two clan-based factions of the original SNM. The faction led by Abdirahman Ahmed Ali Tuur, who served as Somaliland's first president, suffered heavy losses. Following this experience, the SNM agreed to withdraw from its dominant position in the state, paving the way for controllable civilian rule—something exceptional by African standards. A hybrid regime had developed by 1993, following the Borama Conference, which brought together clan elders to lay the foundations for the region's self-governance system. Formal institutions such as the presidency and the House of Representatives were combined with the vast mediating powers of the chiefs, who formed the House of Elders (Guurti), with customary law (*xeer*) key in maintaining justice at the local level. Livestock exports through the Berbera port secured revenue for the state budget. The state formation period of the 1990s was marked by the exceptionally high level of involvement of local private businesses, particularly wealthy livestock traders. In the absence of foreign financial assistance, they were able to finance the demobilisation process and the creation of nascent institutions, including a central government, as well as fund consultative conferences.[2] Some scholars, such as Mark Bradbury, refer to it as a "co-dependency," while others, such as Alex de Waal, call it a "profit-sharing agreement."[3] Regardless of the label, these activities largely neutralised local conflicts and eventually paved the way for the development of a constitution, which was approved in a 2001 referendum. This introduced a unique three-party system, whereby associations could seek authorisation every 10 years to become one of the

[2] N. Eubank, *Peace-Building without External Assistance: Lessons from Somaliland*, Center for Global Development, Working Paper No. 198, January 2010, pp. 9–10, www.cgdev.org.

[3] *Ibidem*.

three legally operating political parties permitted to compete for power and coexist within institutions.

This socio-political construct has allowed Somaliland's identity and ethos to solidify, with today's generation of young adults having lived their entire lives as Somalilanders. Somaliland's success in developing functioning institutions and providing a peace dividend is undisputed, especially when compared with the protracted weaknesses and failures of most other states in the region.

However, this did not prevent major failures. The adoption of a multiparty system and political competition, which initially seemed positive, also meant a departure from the consensual and accommodative grassroots model that had developed in the 1990s. This fuelled processes that led to a progressive fracturing of the social fabric. With development and decision-making concentrated in a centrally located triangle between the main, Isaaq-clan-dominated cities Berbera, Hargeisa and Burao at the expense of other parts of the country, questions were raised about the legitimacy of Somaliland's authorities. Throughout the post-2001 period, the Isaaqs have substantially increased their representation in the administration. Consequently, rather than improving its representation of citizens across the spectrum, the nascent Somaliland state began to "shrink"[4] into an Isaaq project. In the largely non-Isaaq peripheries, the presence of Somaliland's institutions has always been weak and the response heavy-handed. While the Isaaq largely supported Somaliland's administration and its ambitions to win international recognition, the Dulbahante and Warsangeli minorities inhabiting the east of the country, and those in the Awdal province in the west (the Gadubursi and the Issa), kept their reservations.[5]

If the three-party system was intended to diffuse clan differences, the lack of ideological differences between the parties solidified voting patterns along patrilineal lines. In practice, throughout the 2000s, the multi-party system transitioned silently into one of "intra-Isaaq competition."[6] For example, the political crisis of 2017 reflected competition between the Isaaq clans of Habar Je'lo and Habar Awal, represented by the Kulmiye party of the then president, Muse Bihi, and the Habar Yonis clan, represented by the Waddani party.[7] By 2024, all of the major groups seeking authorisation as legal political parties for the 2024–2034 period were Isaaq-dominated.[8]

4 S.J. Hansen, M. Bradbury, "Somaliland: A new democracy in the Horn of Africa?," *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 34, No. 113, 2007, p. 470.

5 M.V. Hoene, J. Norman, "The Paradox of Progress: Foreign Investments, Kinship, State-building, and conflict in Somaliland," *African Affairs*, Vol. 125, No. 498, 2026, p. 12.

6 *Ibidem*.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 11.

8 *Ibidem*.

Somaliland's presidency also proved susceptible to manipulation. The Guurti's prerogative to extend presidential terms, initially presented as an exception for special circumstances, became the norm. Leaders' terms have been controversially extended under various pretexts, allowing Dahir Riyale Kahin to extend his rule to 2008–2010,[9] Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo to extend his rule to 2015–2017, and Muse Bihi to extend his rule to 2022–2024.[10]

The Las Anod crisis

Alongside the Isaaqisation of the state, the social contract based on recognition of Hargeisa's authority began to unravel. A tendency to adopt an anti-Somaliland approach emerged particularly strongly among the Dulbahante, a group associated with the wider Darood clan family, centred on the city of Las Anod. Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, they largely remained aloof from Somaliland's affairs. Many Dulbahante did not register for the 2001 constitutional referendum and widely boycotted subsequent elections. While Somaliland's administration—mainly municipal authorities in Las Anod itself—only established a real presence there after 2007, clan-based "counter-administrations" challenged its authority at different subsequent periods. Although the 2017 Somaliland president, Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo, signed an agreement in Ayanbo with grassroots administration leader Ali Khalif Galaydh, promising a power-sharing scheme and more representation for the Dulbahante, his successor, Muse Bihi, pursued a policy of forced subjugation.[11] Frustrations over this volatility contributed to the street unrest that erupted in late 2022 and was exceptionally brutally quelled by Somaliland's Rapid Reaction Unit special police force. This was followed by Bihi's baseless allegations that protesters bearing the Somali flag were colluding with al-Shabaab terrorists, and the city's subsequent shelling by a Somaliland army garrison located atop nearby hills. This caused substantial casualties and destruction, and the majority of the city's inhabitants fled.[12]

This set a new dynamic in motion. A full-scale Dulbahante uprising, reinforced by their clan-kin arriving from other regions, erupted in early 2023. After months of fighting and the targeting of civilian infrastructure (including the water supply system to Las Anod) by Somaliland's troops, an estimated 8,000–10,000 Somaliland security personnel and their institutions were expelled from Dulbahante-inhabited lands.[13]

[9] "Somaliland," *Freedom House*, 2013, https://freedomhouse.org.

[10] "Somaliland opposition rejects move to extend president's term by two years," *Somali Guardian*, 2 October 2022, www.somaliguardian.com.

[11] M.V. Hoene, J. Norman, *op. cit.*, pp. 85–90.

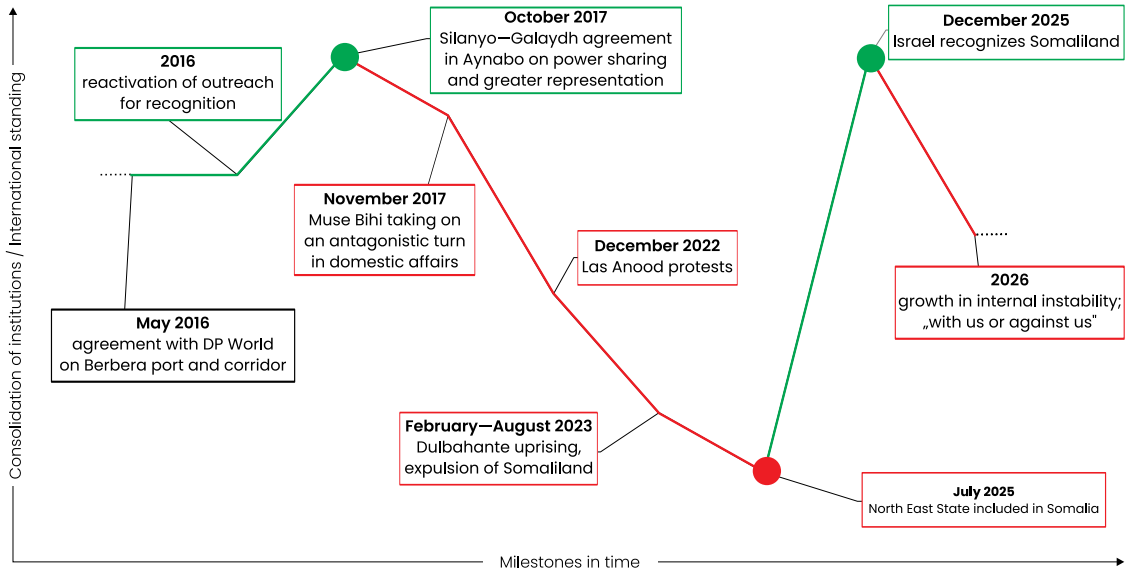
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 91.

[13] *Ibidem*, pp. 70, 90.

Weakened by internal divisions along sub-clan/party lines, Somaliland lost control of up to a third of its claimed territory and a substantial proportion of its population. This breakaway population first self-governed and later formed the North-East State (NES), which fell under the control of the Somali government in Mogadishu. In mid-January 2026, shortly after Israel's recognition of Somaliland, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud organised a widely publicised visit to Las Anod for the swearing-in of the new state's authorities. This was intended to demonstrate the invalidity of Somaliland's territorial claims and that Somalia was regaining control. The ceremony was attended by diplomats from countries opposed to the policies of Israel and the UAE, including Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. The flags of Egypt, Oman, China and Djibouti were also raised. The celebrations were accompanied by the deployment of Somali troops to the NES,[14] an act linked to rumours of Israeli plans to send mercenaries to Somaliland to help recapture Las Anod.

The crisis in Las Anod severely damaged Hargeisa's reputation and shattered the illusion of a peaceful, consensual democracy. By launching an uncompromising crackdown that left no space for a negotiated settlement, Somaliland revealed that its adherence to international standards is selective at best. Domestically, this consolidated the definitive loss of legitimacy among the Dulbahante, Warsangeli and portions of other non-Isaaq minorities, significantly eroding the popular base for the Somaliland statehood project.

Somaliland's statehood trajectory 2016–2026



[14] J. Czerep, "Israel's Recognition of Somaliland Heightens Tensions in the Horn of Africa," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 12 (2644), 19 February 2026, www.pism.pl.

Towards and after Israeli recognition

In the 1990s, the international climate was entirely unsupportive of Somaliland's quest for recognition. In the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, the international community had zero appetite for further unilateral changes to borders. This pushed Somaliland into a long period of de facto independence, and several actors maintained close ties with the statelet during this time.

Throughout Somaliland's modern history, Ethiopia and Djibouti have maintained local liaison offices, with the Ethiopian representative holding ambassadorial rank. Somaliland established diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 2009. Since authorising direct funding to Somalia's regions in 2010, the US has been able to partner with Somaliland as if it were a state, allowing the World Bank to finance projects through the Republic of Somaliland's budget.[15] While France was the first to support Somaliland's nascent army in the 1990s by providing uniforms, substantial donor funding only began to flow from the mid-2010s.[16] Development, infrastructure and security projects have been funded by European states (the EU, Norway and the UK), the US and the UAE, with Ethiopia and Kenya following suit.

In the UK, the Somaliland mission, established in 1993, serves as its official representation and a strong lobbying centre promoting independence. At a parliamentary level, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Somaliland, which was established in 2016, regularly proposes motions in favour of Somaliland's recognition. In recent years, Somaliland's authorities have cultivated ties with Sir Gavin Williamson, the former defence secretary and current head of the Parliamentary Group, who was dismissed from Theresa May's government for leaking intelligence. The Somaliland Chamber of Commerce paid for his visits to Hargeisa and Berbera, awarded him Somaliland honorary citizenship, and organised a special day in his honour in January 2022.[17][18] Lobbying in Britain was also intended to counter reports of atrocities by Somaliland forces in Las Anod, which, due to the historical connection, had reached a broader audience in the UK than elsewhere.

In 2016, Somaliland entered into a partnership with DP World—an Emirati parastatal port infrastructure giant based in Dubai—and the Ethiopian government to develop and operate the port of Berbera and a transport route from Ethiopia to the port via the Somaliland capital, Hargeisa. This made the UAE a strategic partner of the Somaliland

[15] G. Pinauldt, "Somaliland: the long road to recognition," IRIS, 27 April 2026, www.iris-france.org.

[16] *Ibidem*.

[17] H. Yorke, "Sir Gavin Williamson reborn as Somaliland independence hero," *The Times*, 22 May 2022, www.thetimes.com.

[18] In May 2026, he was also appointed as the head of the Hargeisa-based Somaliland Recognition and Independence Institute.

government and its main regional supporter. The UAE also sought to establish a military presence in Berbera. This period coincided with a renewal of Somaliland's efforts to win international recognition.

Ethiopia has repeatedly signalled an intention to formally recognise Somaliland, particularly when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's initial plans to foster economic and political integration in the Horn stalled. The country came closest to doing so on 1 January 2024, when Abiy and Somaliland's then president, Muse Bihi—who had just suffered defeat in Las Anod and was losing popularity—signed a memorandum of understanding on leasing part of Somaliland's territory. The full details were not disclosed, but it is understood that the Ethiopian authorities expressed a willingness to recognise Somaliland's independence in exchange for a 50-year lease on a section of coast in Somaliland's Awdal province for the construction of a future naval base, a commercial port and a 90 km railway line. Somaliland was also to be given shares in Ethiopian Airlines.[19] Two weeks after the MoU was signed, Somaliland's diplomatic mission in Addis Ababa was quickly renamed to an embassy[20] and the foundation stone for a new official embassy building was laid later that year, although the Ethiopian authorities snubbed the ceremony.[21] Ultimately, however, the deal was not implemented, as the African Union strongly opposed the prospect of one of its members recognising a change to the borders of Somalia. In December 2024, Ethiopia and Somalia agreed in the Ankara Declaration that any arrangements regarding the Somali coast must involve Mogadishu. In pursuit of sea access, Abiy refocused attention towards Eritrea. In 2024, amid speculation of possible recognition, Somaliland opened official representation in Nairobi, Kenya, which reflected a concurrent deterioration in Nairobi's relations with Mogadishu.

In the years leading up to the decision of to recognise Somaliland's statehood, Israel had strengthened relations with its authorities in Hargeisa, in close coordination with the UAE, seeking to gain a stronger position vis-à-vis Iran and the Houthis. The war in the Gaza Strip provided additional motivation. Israeli diplomats explored the possibility of relocating part of the Palestinian population to third countries, and Somaliland was considered in this regard,[22] although its authorities denied any negotiations or consent to the forced transfer of Palestinians.

[19] J. Czerep, "Ethiopia Seeking to Regain Access to the Sea," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 9 (2317), 24 January 2024, www.pism.pl.

[20] Abdirashid Ibrahim, post on X, 15 January 2024, https://x.com/cabdirashed/status/1746943327008653392.

[21] "Ethiopia silent as Somaliland lays foundation for embassy in Addis Ababa," *Hiraan Online*, 18 October 2024, www.hiiraan.com.

[22] "Somaliland denies it agreed to accept Gaza refugees or host Israeli military bases," *The Times of Israel*, 7 July 2026, www.timesofisrael.com.

Proponents of recognition have also made themselves heard in Washington, where Somaliland has long enjoyed the support of a group of officials and think tankers from Republican circles. The group's most recognisable figures—J. Peter Pham of the Atlantic Council, former U.S. Special Envoy for the Sahel Region, and Tibor Nagy, former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa—co-authored a section on the benefits of recognising Somaliland in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025,[23] which many believed contained a blueprint for Trump's second-term policies.

In October 2025 in Dubai, the then DP World Group Chairman and CEO, Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem (one of the informal architects of the Abraham Accords), sat alongside Somaliland's President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi "Irro" during a panel at The Africa Debate.[24] Bin Sulayem publicly appealed for Somaliland's recognition, which he said could bring more 'trade and investment'[25] and confirmed he had sent letters to the authorities in Israel, France, the UK, the US and other states regarding this matter.[26] The timing, shortly before the formal act by Israel, suggested a concerted effort to prepare the ground for Somaliland's introduction to the global community of states.

Eventually, after a decade of diplomatic engagement and outreach by Hargeisa, Israel—considering the unique advantages such a move offered in the security area—formally recognised Somaliland. On 26 December 2025, a joint statement on this matter was released by Prime Minister Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar, and Somaliland's President "Irro." Netanyahu, in a separate statement, linked the declaration to the "spirit of the Abraham Accords" and recognised the special contribution of the Mossad to this development.[27] This clearly pointed to the security dimension of the relationship. Legal criteria of control over territory and population, as required in the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, were also widely used by Israel to justify its move,[28] but appeared outdated in the context of establishing the NES on part of Somaliland's claimed territory. It was obvious that for Israel, recognising Somaliland primarily served the purpose of establishing a greater presence in the region to keep an eye on its enemies, the Houthis in Yemen and Iran. Somaliland's terrain offers a convenient location for military and intelligence operations on the Gulf of Aden, Bab

[23] B. Fox, "US could recognise Somaliland in next diplomatic challenge to EU," *EUObserver*, 6 January 2026, https://euobserver.com.

[24] Bin Sulayem's career ended next February, where his cosy relationship with Jeffrey Epstein came to the light.

[25] M. Serie, "Momentum grows for new country of Somaliland," *Semafor*, 8 October 2025, www.semafor.com.

[26] *Ibidem*.

[27] *Israel recognizes the Republic of Somaliland as an independent and sovereign state*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Israel, 26 December 2025, www.gov.il.

[28] See for example: G. Goldstein, D.J. Arbess, "A Two-State Solution for Somalia," *Wall Street Journal*, 7 January 2026, www.wsj.com.

el-Mandeb and in Yemen. Defence Minister Israel Katz admitted that "under the radar" cooperation on "classified" operations had been ongoing for years. As early as 2022, it was reported that Israelis were inspecting the runways of old Somaliland airports for potential use.[29] Following recognition, Israel reportedly deployed around 50 soldiers of Ethiopian origin to the region.[30] CNN also reported that Israel used covert military sites in Somaliland during the 2026 war with Iran.[31]

Unsurprisingly, statements rejecting Israel's move were issued by the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and multiple individual states.[32] Somalia's federal government convened an emergency UN Security Council meeting, presenting the recognition as part of a plot to force Palestinians to relocate. All but one of the 15 members strongly condemned the act, with the US expressing some understanding of Israel's position.

Nevertheless, Somaliland hoped for other states to follow suit. Positive signs of favour for recognising Somaliland were evident in President "Irro's" travel to Davos for the World Economic Forum in January 2026, where he held a side event on business prospects at Berbera Port. He also shook hands with Donald Trump's son Eric, although the latter later denied that they had spoken.[33] Following Israel's move, some prominent American authors argued for the US to follow. Hudson Institute's Joshua Meservey argued in "The Washington Post" that Somalia was a failed state, Somaliland was more functional than many states, and that eventual recognition by the US would include assistance fighting American enemies in the region.[34] American Enterprise Institute's Michael Rubin compared "divorce" between Somaliland and Somalia to other terminated, poorly implemented unions (such as one of Senegal and Gambia) and pointed to Somaliland's terror-proof nature, which contrasted with conflict-prone pan-Somali nationalism.[35]

[29] M. Gabore, "Somalia Plans to Foment Conflict in Awdal Region After Israeli Recognition of Somaliland," *Drop Site*, 29 January 2026, www.dropsitenews.com.

[30] R. Soylu, "Israel deployed troops to Somaliland after recognition, source says," *Middle East Eye*, 22 June 2026, www.middleeasteye.net.

[31] T. Shalev. T. Lister, "Exclusive: Israel sent troops to Azerbaijan during Iran war as part of secret network across region, sources say," CNN, 6 June 2026, https://edition.cnn.com.

[32] *Israel's Recognition of Somaliland Triggers Sharp Divides, as Security Council Speakers Warn Move Threatens Stability in Horn of Africa*, UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, United Nations, 29 December 2025, https://press.un.org.

[33] D. Gauthier-Villars, "At Davos dinner with Eric Trump and others, African president pitches business deals," Reuters, 23 January 2026, www.reuters.com.

[34] J. Meservey, "Israel recognized this small enclave as a country. America should, too," *The Washington Post*, 12 January 2026, www.washingtonpost.com.

[35] M. Rubin, *Recognizing Somaliland Won't Cause War; It Will Prevent One*, American Enterprise Institute, 8 January 2026, www.aei.org.

For Hargeisa, apart from benefits derived from recognition, the change also brought new challenges. Both local and regional actors had been put under increasing pressure to pick sides, which limited their flexibility on the ground. This has accelerated tensions between Hargeisa and minority clans, who, due to rising clannism, increasingly view the issue of recognition as part of the Isaaq agenda. For example, the tension fuelled a rise in militancy among the Issa clan in Somaliland's Awdal region, a movement that appeared to have the support of the Mogadishu authorities. In January 2026, a group of Issa parliamentarians from Mogadishu announced the foundation of Guban[36]—a new federal state in Awdal—on TV, a move that required the consent of the federal authorities. Recognition also sowed discord between Somaliland and Djibouti, with the latter's authorities signalling contemplating intervention in Awdal.[37] It also reduced Israel's manoeuvring space considerably, as its options for dealing with Somalia proper became much more limited. In previous years, the country had been mentioned as a potential candidate for joining the Abraham Accords.[38] Its authorities had reportedly considered blocking the recognition of Somaliland by Israel and potentially the US, specifically by declaring the normalisation of relations with the latter.[39]

Recognition by Israel was followed by celebrations in Hargeisa where crowds seemed grateful for finally seeing rewards from their recognition-seeking efforts. In June 2026, Somaliland's president, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi "Irro," made a historic visit to Israel. This included the opening of an embassy in Jerusalem (rather than Tel Aviv), meetings with President Isaac Herzog, and the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as a visit to the grave of Theodor Herzl, the founding father of modern Zionism.[40] In the Muslim world, showing support for Israel and Zionism, especially after the Gaza war of 2023, remains a delicate matter. Unsurprisingly, shortly after Israel's recognition, Somaliland's leading Islamic scholars expressed their dissatisfaction with this relationship,[41] and the conduct of the trip was criticised by some in the domestic opposition. For the Muslim states in the region, the likelihood of recognising Somaliland has decreased, as joining an Israel-led initiative bears a high reputational risk.

Despite intensified efforts to broaden the coalition of countries formally recognising Somaliland, neither American nor British authorities had moved any closer to

36 M. Gabore, *op. cit.*

37 *Ibidem*.

38 A. Oseran, "Israel in talks with four states on expansion of Abraham Accords—report," i24 News, 7 March 2023, www.i24news.tv.

39 "Somalia pitched Abraham Accords bid to block Somaliland recognition, records show," *Somali Guardian*, 8 January 2026, www.somaliguardian.com.

40 "Somaliland opens Jerusalem embassy after Israel's recognition of its independence," BBC, 16 June 2026, www.bbc.com.

41 Jubba TV, 2 January 2026, www.facebook.com/reel/4263249480619015.

recognising Somaliland by mid-2026, although a future shift cannot be ruled out. Although Republican Representative Scott Perry introduced a bill to recognise Somaliland in the US House of Representatives in June 2025, President Trump did not support it, even after Israel's recognition. The US State Department's June 2026 report on prospects for cooperation with Somaliland, commissioned by Congress four months earlier, also maintained the legalistic 'one Somalia' approach.[42]

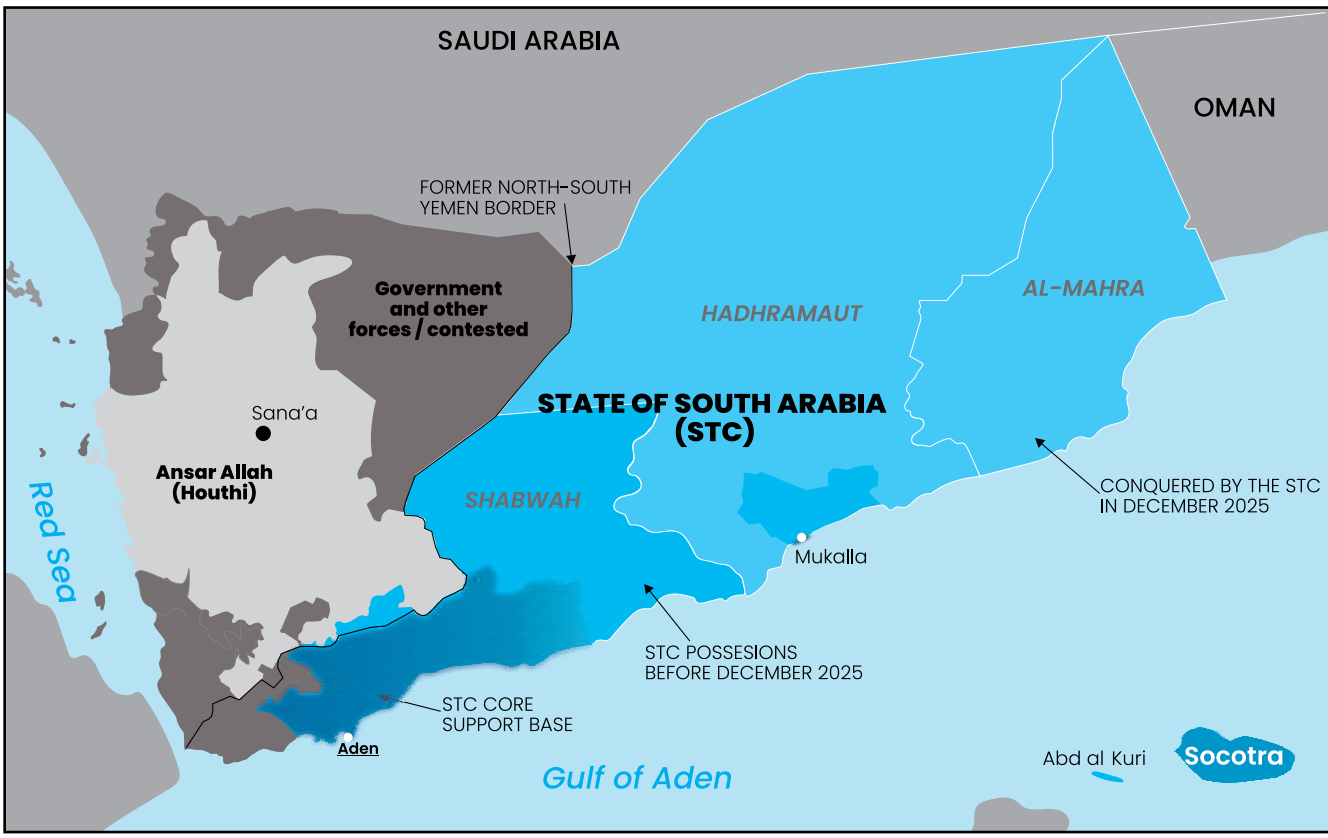
Somaliland leader Irro kept hoping to build momentum for eventual recognition by the US, and in early September 2026 he embarked—via the UAE—on a lengthy tour through Washington DC and New York. On this occasion, he advertised Somaliland as a trusted partner against the Houthis and China. The visit's highlights included a declaration that Somaliland, if requested, could contribute 2 thousand troops for the International Stabilization Force that was expected to be deployed in Gaza under Trump's Board of Peace.[43] Despite interactions with newly appointed assistant secretary of state for African affairs Frank Garcia, multiple Congressmen, prestigious speaking engagements, and holding a street rally in front of the UN Headquarters, the visit had little chance of bringing about an immediate, fundamental shift in the American approach. A key reason for this was the difficulty of naming concrete advantages for the US from any formal recognition, as the Americans already enjoyed access to the military facilities in Djibouti or Puntland overlooking the Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. Economic cooperation could have been expanded within the framework of the Somaliland Economic Access and Opportunity Act, a bill tabled in early 2026 and aimed at securing Somaliland's access to the American financial system. The timing of the visit was equally unfortunate, overshadowed by projections that the Republicans risked losing control of Congress in the approaching midterms. If this forecast comes true, it will limit the overall influence of even the most dedicated pro-Somaliland lawmakers. In the UK, despite accelerated calls from Reform UK leader Nigel Farage and Williamson, both of whom attended a pro-independence rally in London on 14 January 2026, the government's position, as expressed in the UN Security Council on 29 December last year,[44] remained unchanged.

[42] J. Pecquet, "'Bureaucratic' US State Department report disappoints Somaliland advocates," *The Africa Report*, 2 June 2026, www.theafricareport.com.

[43] H. Keinon, "Somaliland willing to send up to 2,000 troops to Gaza force, president says," *The Jerusalem Post*, 10 September 2026, www.jpost.com.

[44] J. Czerep, *Israel's Recognition…*, *op. cit*.

2. South Yemen



STC's December 2025 control /claimed future 'South Arabia' state and core support base

South Yemen is unique in its volatility. Historically, the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula was divided along religious, tribal and political lines. This resulted in a deep-rooted division between North Yemen, which was known as the Yemen Arab Republic in the 20th century, and South Yemen, which was known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) until 1990.

Before the establishment of an independent state in 1967, South Yemen was under British occupation. Aden was seized in 1839 to secure maritime routes to India and counter Ottoman influence, and it was designated a Crown colony less than a century later, in 1937. Surrounding areas were governed indirectly through agreements with local tribal rulers in the Federation of South Arabia and the Protectorate of South Arabia. These constituent states retained relative autonomy. The struggle for independence from Britain began in 1963 and culminated in the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1967, the only Marxist regime in the Arab world.[45]

Despite having a functioning government, international recognition, and a distinct identity from North Yemen, the project for southern independence lasted only 23 years. PDRY weakened during the 1980s due to internal conflicts and declining support from the Soviet Union. This created an opportunity for negotiations with North Yemen, particularly with the increasingly appealing prospect of combining northern oil production with southern refining and export infrastructure. Formal unification was achieved in 1990, largely driven by political and economic crises in both states.[46] However, tensions between the formerly separate North and South persisted and resurfaced periodically, first in 1994, leading to a brief civil war. In the following years, nostalgia for independence was the dominant emotion among Southern society, linked to an exaggerated narrative of the PDRY's achievements.[47]

[45] A.I. Ahram, "Separatism, the Arab uprisings and the legacies of lost territorial autonomy," *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2020, p. 125.

[46] H. Lackner, "The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen: Unique Socialist Experiment in The Arab World at a Time of World Revolutionary Fervour," *Interventions*, Vol. 19, No. 5, 2017, p. 682.

[47] A.-L. Amira Augustin, *South Yemen's Independence Struggle: Generations of Resistance*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2021, pp. 57–58.

STC's South Yemen ('State of South Arabia'):



Seeks secession from: Yemen

Historical claim: legacy of pre-1990 People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)

Territorial control: approx. 290, 000 km^2 claimed and controlled in December 2025*

Territorial control dynamics: all territory lost in January 2026

Core support base: former Aden protectorate

Stable population: yes (except approx. 125,000 displaced in Hadhramaut province)

De facto self-rule: Dec. 2025—Jan. 2026—establishment of state institutions; declaration of roadmap to statehood (not implemented)

Recognitions: none

Key backers: UAE

Stable institutions: no

Separation from armed movement: no

Towards South Yemen's revival

In the early and mid-2000s, dissatisfaction in South Yemen steadily intensified amid perceptions that the northern-dominated government was exploitative. Amid widespread accusations of corruption, misappropriation of oil revenues and illegal land expropriation, President Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule became increasingly unpopular. This discontent was reflected in the 2006 protests of Southern military and security officers who had been purged after the 1994 civil war.[48]

By 2007, these grievances had contributed to the emergence of the Southern Movement, also known as al-Hirak, an umbrella network advocating renewed southern autonomy

[48] N. Brehony, "From Chaos to Chaos: South Yemen 50 years after the British departure," *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 2017, p. 438.

or independence.[49] While many within the movement supported full secession, others preferred a federal arrangement.[50] Following the turmoil of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, the southern regions faced their own internal tensions, particularly regarding the influence of al-Islah, Yemen's local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The movement was viewed with suspicion in the south, while al-Islah reportedly regarded the south as being insufficiently religious.[51] While the northern provinces have historically been more conservative, the south, with its Marxist ideological heritage, was considered more progressive, particularly regarding education and women's rights. Consequently, unification was perceived as a threat to the Southern way of life.

The erosion of central control enabled forces of the Southern Movement to seize key installations across the south. When the Houthis, a pro-Iranian force that had been expanding control within the former North Yemen's borders, captured Sana'a in 2014 and advanced southwards, some of the Southern Movement aligned themselves with Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi's internationally recognised government, which was supported by Saudi Arabia. Despite this alliance, power remained fragmented on the ground. Aden and other strategic areas, including ports, airports, and energy infrastructure, were effectively controlled by Southern forces under the leadership of Aidarous al-Zubaidi, a former officer in the PDRY's military who, shortly after Yemen's 1990 unification, engaged in pro-South militancy. At this point, Southern activists began transitioning from advocacy to governance, albeit in a fragmented security landscape of the region. The consolidation of territory and structures was additionally threatened by the Houthis, who by that time had already emerged as the dominant force in the north.

In February 2015, Hadi escaped the Houthis' house arrest in Sana'a and fled to Aden, where he declared the city the temporary capital to reconstitute his authority. On 26 March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition launched Operation Decisive Storm, which was aimed at countering the Houthi movement and restoring Hadi's government. The frontlines that emerged following the internationalisation of the conflict closely resembled the former border between North and South Yemen. As the Houthis consolidated their control in the north, further strengthened by the capture of Sanaa, the southern governorates had fragmented leadership since the official Yemeni government under President Hadi could not extend sovereign control over that territory. This weak leadership and power vacuum allowed extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-Yemen

[49] "Mapping the Yemen conflict," European Council on Foreign Affairs, p. 2, https://ecfr.eu.

[50] S. Dahlgren, "The Snake with a Thousand Heads: The Southern Cause in Yemen," *Middle East Report*, No. 256, 2010, pp. 28–33, www.researchgate.net.

[51] L. Issaev, A. Khokhlova, A. Korotayev, "The Arab Spring in Yemen," in: J.A. Goldstone, L. Grinin, A. Korotayev (eds.), *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century: The New Waves of Revolutions, and the Causes and Effects of Disruptive Political Change*, Cham: Springer, 2022, p. 699.

Province to flourish, effectively partitioning non-Houthi Yemen into competing political entities. Although they could cooperate militarily against the Houthis, these entities were unable to reach a consensus on internal governance.

In 2017, tensions between Hadi and the southern forces escalated, prompting Zubaidi to openly advocate southern independence. On 4 May, he announced his intention to establish an independent southern state in a speech delivered in Freedom Square, Aden, which became known as the Aden Historical Declaration. A week later, the Southern Transitional Council was formed. Flags of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen were visible at the event,[52] suggesting that the newly established state was continuing the legacy of South Yemen. In January 2018, the STC captured Aden, establishing it as the main governance centre of the new Southern state.

Rise and fall of the STC

Although the initial intention of the Southern Transitional Council seemed to be to secede from Yemen (understood as the entity led by the government of President Hadi, as opposed to the unrecognised Houthi 'state' in the north), two years after the Aden Historical Declaration, the group's policy changed. On 5 November 2019, the STC signed the Riyadh Agreement with the Saudi-backed Hadi government, allowing the STC to hold government positions in exchange for remaining within the unified state and relinquishing territorial control. However, the peace agreement was short-lived and largely unimplemented. As early as April 2020, the STC once again declared self-governance, although this time the council lacked the support of local authorities, with several governorates – including Hadhramaut, Al-Mahra and Socotra – openly rejecting the transfer of power. In order to prevent the further disintegration of the anti-Houthi coalition, a government of national unity was formed in December 2020, with the STC once again becoming part of it. Following Hadi's departure in 2022, the internationally recognised government reorganised as the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), with al-Zubaidi (who continued as head of STC) named its vice-chairman.

This double status allowed him to use international engagements to promote the Southern cause in a semi-open way. One of the most consequential visits took place in 2023, when a delegation travelled to the United Kingdom. There, Aidarous al-Zubaidi met with political stakeholders and participated in a speaking engagement at Chatham House. He also travelled to the US, where he attended the UN General Assembly. There, he met with the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken.

[52] اليمن: إعلان عدن "التاريخي" وآراء المتظاهرين, BBC Arabic, 4 May 2017, www.bbc.com.

Underlying issues between unionists and separatists persisted and resurfaced periodically. In August 2022, clashes between Southern and government troops in Ataq triggered a wider STC offensive that lasted until November. This resulted in the STC strengthening its position while weakening the PLC government, as well as local terrorist groups, although these were on the sidelines. However, it did not cause the STC to definitively break off from the PLC until 2025.

STC's push to strengthen its position to eventually seek independence ran both internationally and domestically. To further engage with foreign diplomats and representatives, the STC established its Washington mission in May 2025. The following month, the Yafa American Community Centre, an association of Yemeni Americans from the southern district of Yafa, organised South Yemen Advocacy Day attended by Republican Senator Ted Cruz and Democratic Senator Jacky Rosen. In the US, the STC also worked with lobbying companies, like Independent Diplomat (ID), who had among their clients Western Saharan, Malian and Somali separatist and independence movements. In the run-up to the political and military offensive in Yemen, STC also contracted Hyperfocal Communications, a subsidiary of the lobbying firm Straife, which has previously provided services for the Dubai-based energy company BGN International and has also been connected to Libya's Khalifa Haftar.[53]

In September 2025, al-Zubaidi reiterated the call for a two-state solution in Yemen. Soon after, the STC accelerated its military progress. In December, in less than a week, its fighters seized Hadhramaut (bordering Saudi Arabia) and the eastern Al-Mahra (bordering Oman), claiming control over most of the PLC's territory. Some areas were surrendered without a fight, as the Yemeni government forces were eager to retreat. On top of these field developments, the STC's leader announced the establishment of the State of South Arabia with Aden as its capital, followed by the publication of the Constitutional Declaration. It outlined its future system of governance, which involved both Islamic and democratic elements.[54] In a TV address on 2 January 2026, Zubaidi announced the beginning of a two-year transitional period that would lead to its full independence, following a UN-supervised referendum. He also called for the international community to sponsor dialogue with the Yemeni government, threatening an immediate declaration of independence if there was no response or if subjected to "military aggression."[55]

These declarations were made at a time when the most recent advances had already prompted a military reaction. Two weeks after the capture of Hadhramaut, Saudi Arabia demanded that the STC withdraw from its newly acquired positions. The Council refused,

53 "Straife advises oil trader BGN International," *Africa Intelligence*, 9 March 2023, www.africaintelligence.com.

54 Constitution Declaration of the South Arabia State, 3 January 2026, https://en.stcaden.com.

55 H. Salon, "Southern Yemen separatists push for secession," *Le Monde*, 3 January 2026, www.lemonde.fr.

and the Saudis subsequently carried out several airstrikes on their positions, as well as on two ships sailing from Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates, which were allegedly carrying weapons and vehicles for the STC. Ultimately, the STC withdrew from some of its positions and was pushed out of others by Saudi-supported Yemeni government forces. On 7 January 2026, Aden was captured by government forces, and peace talks were scheduled to take place in Riyadh in the following days. Following the negotiations, the STC announced its dissolution in a recording on 9 January. However, some STC officials later questioned its validity. Members of the former Council took part in the Southern Dialogue meeting, sponsored by Saudi Arabia, which started on 18 January. Following a month of consultations, the PLC formed a new government headed by the former foreign minister, Shaya al-Zindani, a representative of the South but not affiliated with the STC. The dissolution of the STC and the emergence of a new PLC government in early 2026 resulted in a situation where, despite its official dissolution, the STC remained a functioning political entity and retained support in its strongholds, particularly in Aden. The PLC's cabinet reform in February 2026 marked a seizure of control by the Saudi-backed Yemeni presidency. Despite the formation of a seemingly balanced government led by a prominent southern politician, the STC has been marginalised to prevent it from exerting control over southern politics. Once again, the Southern cause has been reframed from a struggle for independence to a struggle for autonomy.

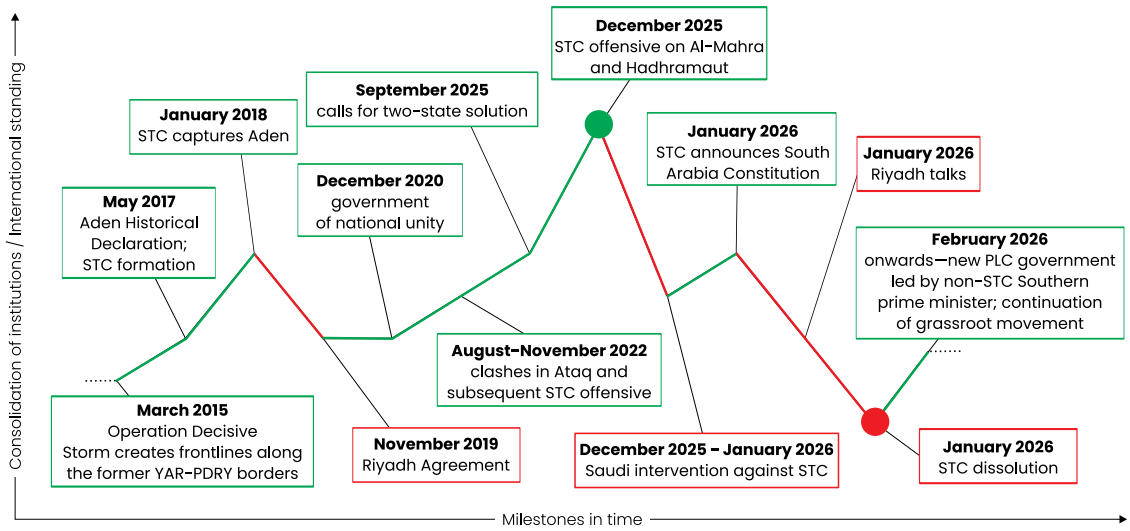
The volatility of the declared goals over the past ten years was a result of constantly changing political calculations. This demonstrated that, ultimately, secession was just one of many potential outcomes and could be replaced, to a certain extent, by broad autonomy. The reasons for this could be traced back to the long-standing Southern perception of being unable to access decision-making at the highest level, as well as the struggle for resources and financial support in the South. Therefore, political concessions would be acceptable if these needs were met. This approach resulted in inconsistency in the STC's actions: on the one hand, the group used military force to advance territorial control, while on the other, it signalled a readiness for political dialogue and was consistently included in the political decision-making.

Similar discrepancies can also be seen at the grassroots level. The Southern cause remains a unifying force for much of the population within the borders of the former PDRY (claimed as the nascent "South Arabia"), particularly in Aden. This is also correlated with hostility towards accepting Saudi patronage. The official dissolution of the STC prompted large-scale demonstrations against the central, Saudi-backed government, reflecting decades of distrust of the northern leadership and reiterating a preference for secession. Such demonstrations happen regularly, predominantly in Aden and other major cities. The group is also actively working towards remaining an important political force, periodically mobilising its supporters for various occasions. On 4 May 2026, a mass rally was held to commemorate the 9th anniversary of the Aden

Historic Declaration and the establishment of the STC.[56] Another rally is scheduled for 1 September 2026 in commemoration of the establishment of the Southern Army and in protest of an alleged attempt to capture STC's office in Mukalla.[57]

There are still communities, such as those in Hadhramaut, whose idea of self-governance is limited to autonomy within a unified state. The political landscape of the South is becoming increasingly fragmented, with new factions emerging with new agendas.[58] This fragmentation is also observable in the non-governmental sector. For instance, women's civil society organisations appear to be pursuing divergent objectives: in December 2024, the STC-backed Southern Women's Union submitted a petition to the Governor of Aden, alleging that gatherings organised by the Yemeni Women's Union's Aden bureau "endanger the Southern cause." This resulted in the interruption of a side event organised by the YWU around the 7th Women's Summit.[59] This division is significant since the Southern cause itself includes a feminist agenda that fosters women's advocacy and calls for broader emancipation, and the Southern movement, embodied by the STC, sees itself as a progressive force relative to other Yemeni factions.

South Yemen's statehood trajectory 2015–2026



[56] "Yemen: Mass Rally in Aden Renews Mandate for STC on Anniversary of Aden Declaration," *YemenOnline*, 4 May 2026, https://yemenonline.info/special-reports/12479.

[57] "STC Prepares to Mark Southern Army Anniversary," South24 Center, 27 August 2026, https://south24.net.

[58] G. Cafiero, "Why Yemen's Southern Transitional Council is unlikely to fade away," Amwaj Media, 22 January 2026, https://amwaj.media.

[59] B. Al-Lahbi, R. Mugahed, L. Uhlenhaut, "A Year in Patriarchy: Key Setbacks in Yemeni Women's Rights in 2024," Sana'a Center, 4 February 2025, https://sanaacenter.org.

External limitations and ideological rifts

The three major forces opposing the STC are actively working against partition. Saudi Arabia and the PLC are allied, with the former sponsoring the latter. The third faction is the Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah. They are still formally at war with all the other Yemeni stakeholders and are therefore naturally opposed to the STC and the wider Southern separatist movement. Although their military expansion has mostly been limited to several northern provinces (including the capital, Sana'a), their official objective remains control over the whole of Yemen. However, the rift between the Houthis and the STC runs deeper than the political differences that arose after the Saleh presidency was deposed. There are also significant ideological differences: the Ansar Allah promote and impose an Islamist social order, whereas the STC, while remaining conservative in line with broader Yemeni societal tendencies, is rooted in the ideology of the more secular PDRY. Consequently, the conflict between the Houthis and the Southerners transcends military engagement, extending into the realms of political and religious beliefs. Although the Saudi intervention in December 2025 and January 2026 caused chaos in the anti-Houthi camp, this was short-lived and did not allow Ansar Allah to launch an offensive. This is most likely because they lacked the military power or political support to effectively curb Southern activism.

The external forces driving—or curbing—southern separatism are centred in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Even before the 2015 war, the UAE had significant economic interests in Yemen. From 2008 to 2012, DP World operated the Port of Aden, but this deal was cancelled by the early Hadi government, which claimed that the promised port development had never fully materialised.[60] Unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE established a network of local proxies and security structures, suggesting that Abu Dhabi was laying the groundwork for sustained post-war influence.[61] From the outset of the civil war, the UAE provided direct military and economic support to the southern forces,[62] establishing a network of military bases and infrastructure on the islands of Socotra and Perim, among other locations. In Yemen's mainland, the UAE forces were present alongside various local forces, first and foremost the Giants Brigades, which have operated under the UAE's financial and logistical tutelage on Yemen's western coast.[63] Apart from engaging with separatist movements, the UAE's direct or indirect presence on certain territories also secured Emirati interests against threats caused by Iran and the Houthis. Paradoxically,

[60] W. Valentine, *Yemen moves to cancel DP World Aden port deal*, Baird Maritime, 26 June 2012. www.bairdmaritime.com.

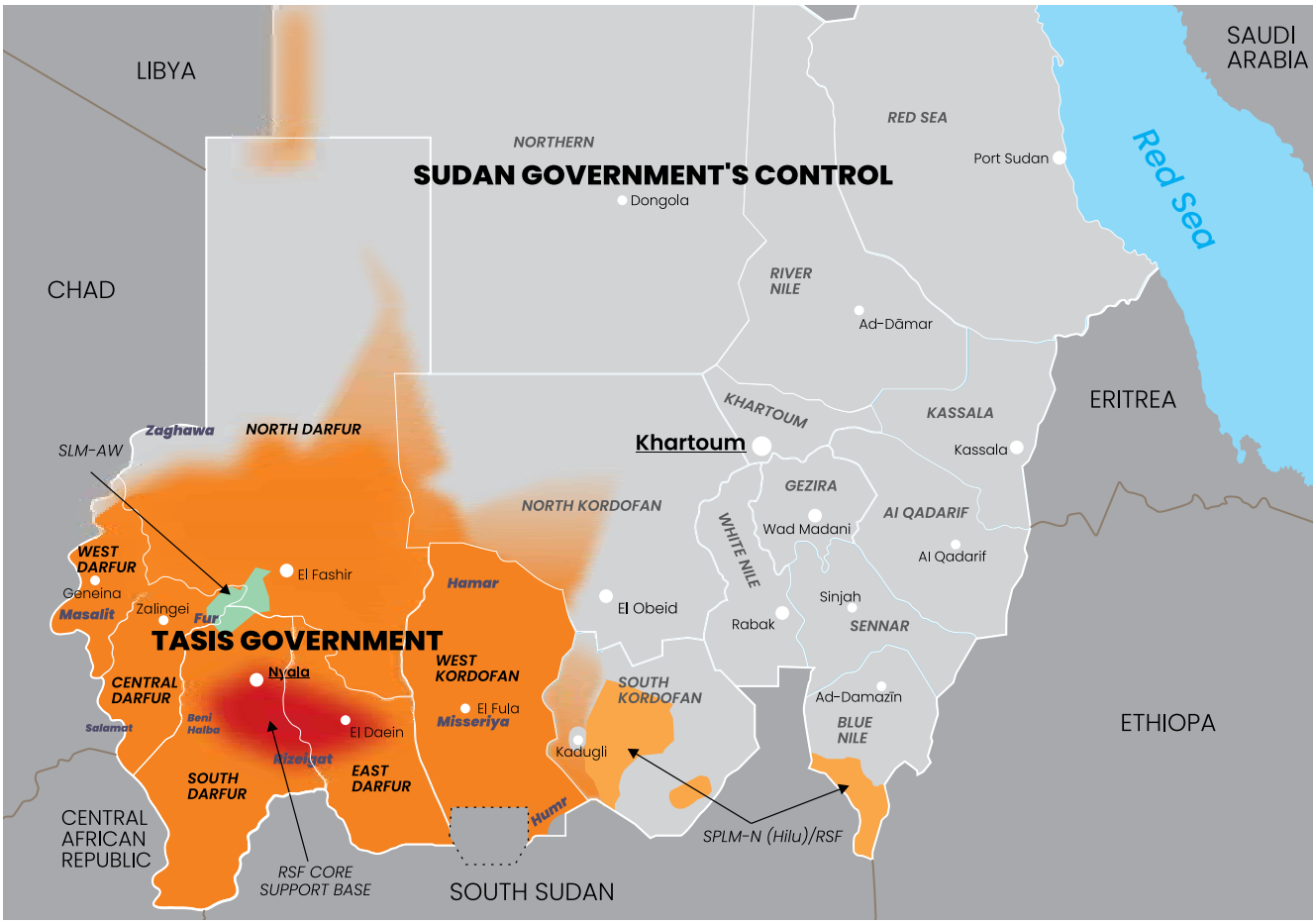
[61] B. Poornima, "Shared Goals, Diverging Paths: Saudi-Emirati Alliance in Yemen Conflict (2015–2023)," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2024, p. 47.

[62] A.I. Ahram, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

[63] Other UAE proxies on the ground included the Security Belt Forces and the Hadrami/Shabwani Elite Forces.

the UAE's approach to advancing its own security considerations was an important factor contributing to the STC's failure. The UAE preferred to establish a small, weak and dependent state within Yemen's borders; however, once it became clear that this objective would not be realised by January 2026, the UAE chose to avoid a prolonged conflict by backing down.

3. Western Sudan under RSF



RSF control in Sudan, Tasis administrative range and its core support base (September 2026)

Attempts to establish a quasi-state in western Sudan, in territories controlled by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), one of the world's biggest non-state armed groups that evolved from the Arab militias from the Darfur region that fought Sudan's government in the 2023 civil war, are shrouded in conflicting narratives, shifting allegiances and evolving ambitions. However, what is certain is that in the fourth year of the Sudanese civil war, Sudan is being steered towards a Libya-like partition by RSF's continued effort to build a quasi-state on areas under its control. This state-formation exercise is based on the RSF's military strength, its tribal policies and loyalties, the co-option of some influential allies from outside the group, and the essential involvement of a foreign actor: the UAE. This ongoing state-formation project has come at the cost of the displacement of approximately eight million people—inhabitants of the region concerned who did not subscribe to the RSF's vision—and extreme violence bearing the hallmarks of genocide in Geneina and Al Fasher. Nevertheless, the foundation of a proto-state claiming a vast territory is an undeniable reality.

The history of resentment towards Khartoum, the capital of modern-day Sudan, is a long one. The Darfur Sultanate, the homeland of the Fur tribe, existed as a separate state in what is now Western Sudan from the 17th century until 1916, when it was forcibly absorbed into the much younger British Sudan. Following Sudan's independence in 1956, political power and resources were concentrated in the centre of the state, the Nile Valley. Therefore, most of the rebellions in the country's history have taken place on the periphery, where economic, political, and cultural grievances persisted. This led to the separation of South Sudan as an independent state in 2011, and to continued rebellions in South Kordofan's Nuba Mountains. In Western Sudan, the early anti-state movements mostly called for fair inclusion rather than separation and were associated with Darfurian non-Arab groups such as the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa. These movements were not among the RSF's predecessors. The RSF played the role of the state's enforcers against these groups.

In the lead-up to the conflict that broke out in April 2023, the RSF co-governed Sudan as part of the shaky transitional civilian-military government (2019–2021), and then alongside the army (the Sudanese Armed Forces, SAF) as part of the junta that overthrew the government. During this period, the RSF presented itself as the most powerful actor in Sudan and its parallel army. Its leader, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo—better known as "Hemeti"—is a member of the Mahariya sub-group of the Rizeigat Arab tribe from the Sudanese-Chadian borderland. He harboured ambitions of becoming the ruler of Sudan, if not a regional hegemon. To this end, he expanded his political, military and economic power base. This was achieved on a national level—in the post-Bashir era, the RSF was recruiting across Sudan, profiting from gold exports and operating as a regional mercenary provider—as well as locally, through investments in tribal networks. In Western Sudan, for example, "Hemeti" sponsored inter-tribal agreements

and put many local leaders on his payroll. He also worked to consolidate transnational networks reaching Chad, the Central African Republic, Niger and other states where nomadic Arab minorities could be found. He appealed to their shared genealogies, and many believed they could find a new homeland in Darfur at the expense of indigenous African groups. The consolidation of a local power base was a means of building leverage before an anticipated power struggle against the state, which RSF supporters called 'the 1956 Republic' and hoped to erase. "Hemeti's" home region was to provide a decisive source of recruits for the war and benefit from victory.

Tasis/RSF government:



Seeks secession from: Sudan*

Historical claim: not articulated**

Territorial control: approx. 500, 000 km^2 controlled by its administration in 2025 and into 2026

Territorial control dynamics: receding with progression of Sudan Armed Forces control

Core support base: Arab tribes in parts of East and South Darfur states

Stable population: no (approx. 8 million displaced)

De facto self-rule: 2023—expulsion of Sudan's institutions

2025—formation of parallel government and administration

Recognitions: none

Key backers: UAE, Kenya

Stable institutions: no

Separation from armed movement: no

** Officially seeks governance over all of Sudan*

*** in internal discourse, arguments are partially related to Darfur's pre-1916 independence*

In the first year of the war, the RSF appeared capable of achieving its maximalist goals. Apart from dominating its home region, where it pushed the SAF out, targeted and dispossessed non-Arab populations (notably the Masalit), and also captured and largely depopulated the core of the state—the Khartoum agglomeration and the central agricultural areas of Gezira and Sennar. Further progress towards the Red Sea region and the North was intended to complete the takeover. Meanwhile, "Hemeti," who seemed on track to control all of Sudan, worked on building an image of a national leader that would be acceptable for the international community.

Between March and October 2024, the RSF established ersatz civil administrations in the areas under its control.[64] Unable to hold the heartland of Sudan in Khartoum,[65] where SAF began regaining control as locals considered the RSF invaders, the group had to recalibrate its ambitions. "Hemeti" announced in October 2024 the activation of a "Plan B."[66] Rather than overthrowing and replacing the Sudanese state, the RSF now aimed to establish itself within its core territories in Western Sudan as if it were a state. Subsequently, RSF's power and structures gradually consolidated and further developed in the five administrative units that make up the Darfur region and the neighbouring West Kordofan state.

From political-military alliance to quasi-state institutions

The launch and development of the RSF's civil administration in Darfur and parts of Kordofan was followed by an acceleration in efforts to co-opt[67] some political and military leaders of the western region, as well as local tribal officials, into a broader format than the RSF proper. Among this circle of newly won allies were the current customary Sultan of Darfur, Ahmed Ali Dinar[68] (great-grandson of the last Sultan of an independent Darfur), and former members of the Sovereignty Council (Sudan's transitional presidency before the war), including Muhammad Hassan Al-Ta'ayshi, Al-Hadi Idris, and Al-Tahir Hajer (the latter two of whom also commanded armed factions[69]). Other allies included officials

[64] *Tasis Government: Reading into the political context and structural challenges*, Insights Sudan Data Program, 11 August 2025, https://insights-sd.org.

[65] After 2025, the last areas East of the Nile remaining under the influence of the RSF were some pockets on the borderlands with Ethiopia and South Sudan traditionally held by SPLM-N. Later, the RSF increased their presence there thanks to the use of bases and supply lines from Ethiopia.

[66] *Hemeti accuses Egypt of air bombing his forces, announces moblization of million fighters*, 10 October 2024, Al Taghyeer, www.altaghyeer.info.

[67] Talks with the individual leaders and factions that eventually made up an alternative government began before the war and continued throughout its course.

[68] The Dinar family considered his rule illegitimate, and the shura council of the Fur pledged allegiance to the army in March 2025.

[69] Both factions later observed splinter groups and defections by fighters who didn't agree with RSF alignment.

from the Taggadum coalition, led by former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, such as the former Minister of Justice, Nasreddin Abdel-Bari. Most of these consultations took place in Kenya. It became clear that the goal of the exercise extended beyond an ad hoc alliance. The goal was the formation of a durable structure aspiring to govern. Its delegates and supporters discussed the possibility of launching their own passports, currency and other attributes of sovereignty.

In December 2024, the Nairobi-based group proclaimed that they would form a civilian-led government, independent of the RSF, to administer the areas under their control.[70] This set a path towards a de facto partition of Sudan. Abderrahman Dagalo, the RSF's military leader on the ground and brother of Hemeti, stated that consultations were "in full swing" to form the government as soon as possible.[71]

Another major conference, widely promoted and held in the Kenyan government-owned Kenyatta International Convention Centre in Nairobi, led to the signing of a Foundation (Tasis) Charter on 22 February 2025. This charter provided for the restoration of constitutional and civilian rule in all of Sudan, as well as the establishment of a new national army.[72] Support rallies were held by Arab populations in Nyala (South Darfur) and Geneina (West Darfur), and the customary leaders of the Misseriya and Rizeigat tribes (the RSF's core constituencies) publicly endorsed the charter. The list of signatories included some heavyweight Sudanese political figures who had not previously been seen as potential RSF allies, most notably Abdulaziz al-Hilu, a rebel and political leader from the Nuba Mountains (SPLM-N), and some figures from the east of the country. Their presence supported the argument that the document reflected a call for a national reform ("new Sudan") and not a parallel government.[73] However, its signatories made it clear that the latter would be announced from within Sudan at a later stage. On 3 March, the same group signed a transitional constitutional charter for a post-war Sudan in Nairobi, pronouncing Sudan a secular, democratic and decentralised state.[74]

Despite the "national" rhetoric surrounding these developments, it was clear that what was taking shape accounted for a separatist project. RSF's dependence on its ethnic/

[70] K. Abdelaziz, N. Eltahir, "Sudan's RSF fighters say they plan to work with a new government, raising partition fears," Reuters, 20 December 2026, www.reuters.com.

[71] "Plans for parallel government continue despite rifts in Sudan's Tagadum," *Sudan Tribune*, 7 January 2026, https://sudantribune.com.

[72] "Sudan's RSF, allies sign charter for parallel government," *Sudan Tribune*, 23 February 2026, https://sudantribune.com.

[73] Term coined by iconic leaders of the South Sudan's movement, John Garang, which meant an inclusive and a secular state embracing—instead of fighting down—its diversity.

[74] "Sudan RSF-aligned groups sign transitional charter in Nairobi, back secular state," *Sudan Tribune*, 3 March 2025, https://sudantribune.com.

tribal base in Western Sudan, and front realities following RSF's loss of Khartoum, steered it towards consolidation of a geographically limited quasi-state as a substitute for its failed ambitions of controlling the entire state. That was also how the international community read declarations by the Nairobi-based group. They were immediately condemned by the UN Security Council members,[75] the African Union, the EU, and key Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Qatar, and Egypt, as they were seen as an attempt to divide Sudan's territory. Within the Nairobi group, two factions clashed: one prioritised seeking international recognition, while the other believed this was an unrealistic goal and that they should focus on winning domestic legitimacy.[76]

In anticipation of the announcement of a parallel government, the existing RSF "civil administration" of South Darfur, headed by Professor Youssef Idris, began renovating state institution buildings in Nyala.[77] On 1 July, the Tasis coalition announced the formation of its leadership body,[78] and on 26 July 2025, it announced the formation of a parallel Government of Peace and Unity based in Nyala. Al-Ta'ayshi was named Prime Minister, and "Hemeti" was placed at the helm of the new 15-member Presidential Council, with al-Hilu as his deputy. The coalition was dominated by military (rebel) leaders and RSF's tribal affiliates. Apart from the regular "members," the Presidential Council included eight nominal "governors" of different regions of Sudan, the most important of whom was the Darfur governor, Al-Hadi Idris. Others were given quasi-ministerial portfolios, with Suleiman Sandal, a prominent former Zaghawa rebel, holding the Ministry of the Interior. The swearing-in ceremony was presided over by the "chief justice" (although this function did not exist at the time) and was attended by tribal leaders.[79] Al-Ta'ayshi's first decree after being sworn in as the Tasis government's Prime Minister was the appointment of Goni Mustafa Abu Bakr Sharif as its "Permanent Representative to the UN"[80]—a move clearly aimed at promoting ambitions of statehood. Further ministerial positions (including justice and finance), as well as undersecretary and general director roles (including police, taxes and the news agency), were filled in May 2026.[81]

[75] UN Security Council press statement, 6 March 2025, https://x.com/UKUN_NewYork/status/1897757501547839549.

[76] "With new Constitution signed, RSF and allies plot parallel state," *Africa Intelligence*, 13 March 2025, www.africaintelligence.com.

[77] "Renovation of state institutions begins in Nyala in preparation for the parallel govt," *Darfur24*, 12 May 2026, https://darfur24.com.

[78] "Widespread welcome for the announcement of the Leadership Body of Tasees," *Assayha*, 3 July 2025, https://assayha.net.

[79] H. Alnaser, M. Idris, M. Alagra, O. al-Faroug "Members of parallel govt sworn in, Hemedti appears in Nyala," *Mada Masr*, 5 September 2025, www.madamasr.com.

[80] "TASIS Govt Appoints Ambassador to the United Nations," *Darfur24*, 2 September 2025, https://darfur24.com.

[81] Decision by PM Mohemmed al-Ta'ayshi, 4 May 2026, https://x.com/HAbonoba/status/2051608527655891056.

In a further move towards state building, on 22 April Ta'ayshi signed a decision to establish a "federal executive body," which media outlets affiliated with the Tasis heralded as the completion of the creation of new state structures[82] with defined competencies, powers and composition of the executive apparatus. This followed the appointment by "Hemeti" of the Judiciary Council, the Chief Justice, and the Council of Regions.[83] In May 2026, the Tasis government officially began establishing a state-like security and intelligence apparatus under the Security and Defence Council.[84]

The Tasis government attempted to mirror some of Khartoum's characteristic sovereign prerogatives. After experiencing cash shortages and being excluded from the introduction of new banknotes by the Khartoum-based central bank in 2024, it moved to standardise the currency. To this end, in early 2026 it introduced the semi-electronic El Mustaqbal Bank financial exchange, which offered a digital money transfer app called Future Money Service.[85] This app was soon to become a tool for paying salaries.[86] It then began introducing physical 500- and 1,000-pound banknotes[87] signed by Hussein Yahia Jangol, a former Central Bank Governor who, in May 2026, was given a parallel position by the Tasis government (which also established its own "Transitional Monetary Council").[88] At the time of writing, it was unclear whether the banknotes originated from old stocks or were newly printed, and if so, by whom and where.

Similarly, the Tasis government introduced its own secondary school certificate exams. Throughout the war, army-affiliated authorities had continued to organise these highly symbolic exams, popularly known as "Sudan exams," but they were halted in areas dominated by the RSF.[89] Many students from Western Sudan travelled to army-held areas to take the exams. The RSF occasionally attacked or threatened examination centres. However, in February 2026, Ta'ayshi declared that his government was ready to organise the exams independently, in coordination with its Technical Supervisory

82 "التعايشي يؤسس الدولة بقرار تنفيذي حاسم," *Tasis News*, 22 April 2026, https://tasisnews.com.

83 Suleiman Sandal, post on X, 24 April 2026, https://x.com/SuleimanSandal/status/2047547537414861151?s=20.

84 "RSF-Led Founding Government Forms Security and Defense Council," *Darfur24*, 31 May 2026, https://darfur24.com.

85 It rivalled the Bankak app frequently used by the Sudanese diaspora to wire money into Sudan.

86 K. Abdelaziz, N. Eltahir, "New Sudanese notes circulate in RSF areas, deepening de facto split, Reuters, 25 June 2026, www.reuters.com.

87 "New Banknotes Enter RSF-Controlled Areas Amid Cash Shortages in Darfur," *Darfur24*, 2 June 2026, https://darfur24.com.

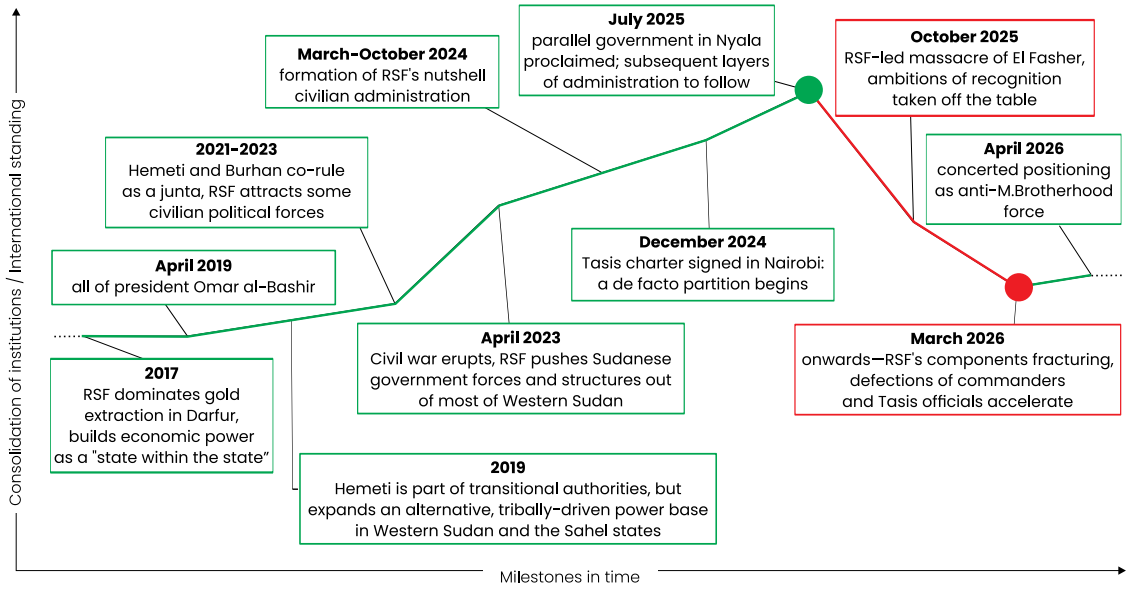
88 S. Baldo, *Future Bank: Sudan's Monetary Partition*, The Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker, May 2026, p. 1, https://sudantransparency.org.

89 "Two Certificates, One Country: The Battle Over Sudan's Education in Darfur and Kordofan," *Atar*, 13 April 2026, https://atarnetwork.com.

Committee for Examinations.[90] Rather than holding them in April to coordinate with those in Khartoum, they were scheduled for June 2026. The Tasis government claimed that around 10,000 students took the exams,[91] which was over 50 times fewer than in government-held areas. There has been division among Tasis insiders regarding this exercise: some view it as a symbolic achievement and proof of growing capabilities, while others see it as a resource-consuming "political performance aimed at projecting statehood."[92] Either way, it was followed by the appointment of a minister for higher education.

In another attempt to gain de facto recognition, the Tasis government required all national and foreign aid organisations to register and be accredited to continue operating in coordination with the National Authority for Humanitarian Access in April 2026, and urged UN agencies to reopen.[93] This placed relief organisations in a precarious position, forcing them to balance maintaining open channels with the Tasis government against the risk of strengthening the group's standing on the path towards recognition/partition.

RSF/Tasis statehood trajectory 2017–2026



[90] "Tasis announces completion of preparations for the 2026 Sudanese Certificate Examinations," *Assayha*, 16 February 2026, https://assayha.net.

[91] Ayin Network, post on X, 10 June 2026, https://x.com/AyinSudan/status/2064655236547895324.

[92] "RSF-led government holds first secondary school exams, *Mada Masr*, 12 June 2026, www.madamasr.com.

[93] "Important decision regarding Organizations' efforts in areas controlled by the Peace Govt," *Assayha*, 2 April 2026, https://assayha.net.

Government for some, extreme violence for others

The formation and establishment of parallel authorities and a de facto state in Western Sudan came at the expense of the region's indigenous population. Although ethnic violence was never official policy, the RSF colluded with and depended on groups driven by racism and inter-communal hatred. The results were catastrophic. By 2023, around 15,000 Masalit people had been massacred in Geneina (West Darfur), with virtually the entire remaining Masalit population fleeing to Chad. Next in line was the Zaghawa tribe. Initially neutral, its leaders, Gibril Ibrahim (head of the Justice and Equality Movement, JEM) and Minni Minawi (leader of the Sudan Liberation Movement), had aligned with the army in November 2023 once they understood the existential nature of the threat they faced.[94] The long-lasting siege of El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, was intended to break the resistance against the RSF's sweeping power and punish the Zaghawa. After a deadly 1.5-year siege, El Fasher witnessed massacres in October 2025, in which, according to data from Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab, 60,000 people may have been systematically killed.[95] These events bore the hallmarks of genocide, in stark contrast to the inclusive language found in Tasis' proclamations.

Assessing the population controlled by the Tasis is extremely challenging, as its quasi-government has turned millions of residents into internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. By mid-2026 the five regions of Darfur held the country's biggest concentration of internally displaced people: 5.6 million, or 64% of Sudan's total.[96] A large proportion stayed in the remote Jebel Marra massif in Central Darfur, which remained beyond the reach of the RSF and is governed by a neutral party. 1.1 million have fled the region into Chad, Libya or the Central African Republic.[97] Frontline Kordofan region held additional 1 million IDPs and at least 350 thousand natives of Darfur and Kordofan have been displaced in other parts of Sudan. The major towns "governed" by the Tasis are largely deserted, with El Fasher being the starkest case. Months after its brutal conquest, the 1.3 million civilians who left this metropolis remained displaced.[98] While government-controlled areas have witnessed massive voluntary returns (some 3.6 million people returned to Khartoum and the central agricultural provinces from early 2025 into mid-

[94] "Darfur armed movements renounce neutrality in Sudan war," Radio Dabanga, 17 November 2023, www.dabangasudan.org.

[95] M. Townsend, UK prioritised ties with UAE over averting mass atrocities in Sudan, MPs to be told, *The Guardian*, 23 June 2026, www.theguardian.com.

[96] *DTM Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot Update 6*, *IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix*, 15 June 2026, p. 3, https://dtm.iom.int.

[97] *Ibidem*, p. 30.

[98] *Ibidem*, p. 1.

2026), very few—roughly one-tenth of this figure—have returned to their homes within the Tasis-held quasi-state.[99] This is attributable to the clear understanding that they are not safe, as RSF/Tasis rule on the ground reflected a pattern of ethnic cleansing.[100] In early 2025, satellite images showed that around 10 per cent of non-Arab villages in West Darfur had been destroyed. The participation of some local and national figures from non-Arab constituencies in the Tasis government is usually the result of co-option rather than a genuine embrace by the community.

Thus, the RSF/Tasis-led breakaway state can only claim to represent a fraction of West Sudan's constituencies, and it remains hostile towards the millions of original inhabitants of the land it occupies. Furthermore, it actively backs the resettlement of ethnic kin from other African countries, primarily Chad, Niger, and the Central African Republic, facilitating their arrival at the expense of the local population. This reflects the vague notion of a homeland ruled by and for nomads, a notion that motivates many foreign volunteers and settlers but which contradicts the modern concept of state citizenship. Therefore, it is impossible to view the Western Sudan's de facto separatist project as derived from local consensus. If such a consensus exists, it is extremely selective, confined to communities near the RSF leadership's social base. The quasi-state's foundation is therefore inextricably linked to the violent exclusion of millions of the original inhabitants of Western Sudan, enforced through marginalisation, displacement and genocide.

Reality or a bubble?

Despite nominally operating from Nyala in South Darfur, the Tasis government struggled to secure a presence on the ground. Its leader, "Hemeti," has not been permanently resident in Darfur but, for most of the time, has typically moved between the UAE and Kenya. The "government's" swearing-in ceremony on 31 August 2025 was pre-recorded in Kenya. While some officials managed to travel to Nyala to assume their duties upon its broadcast, others, such as Khartoum University professor Mohammed Yousif, were unable to do so.[101] On 26 September, several Tasis officials, including "Hemeti" and Idris, held a modest open-air "government meeting" at an undisclosed lakeside location to demonstrate their presence in the country and their proximity to the people. This did little to dispel doubts about the government's ability to operate from its nominal capital. A similar case occurred in May 2026 when journalists concluded from an examination of pictures from a

99 *Ibidem*, p. 13–29.

100 *Sudan: Destroyed Structures in West Darfur in 2023*, Office of Global Criminal Justice, 16 January 2025, https://2021-2025.state.gov.

101 "تفاصيل جديدة حول اليمين الدستوري لـ"حكومة تأسيس"", *Darfur24*, 3 September 2025, https://darfur24.com.

Tasis Leadership Council meeting that it had been held in a rented venue in Nairobi rather than in Nyala, despite the removal of Kenyan brand labels from bottled water.[102] Thus, occasional sightings of government officials in Nyala, such as the carefully staged tour by "Hemeti" and al-Hilu after the swearing-in ceremony, primarily served as PR stunts to assure the population of their presence.[103]

Tensions persisted between the civilian and military components of the RSF/Tasis. Shortly before the founding charter was signed in Nairobi, Al-Hadi Idris argued that forming a quasi-state would enable the group to acquire military aircraft, since these are only "sold to governments."[104] However, the group soon stopped making similar remarks, as they contradicted the officially adopted narrative. Abderrahman Dagalo, the de facto military leader and personnel manager on the ground, never took up a formal position within the Tasis government. This was likely a move to ensure his authority remained unchallenged and superior to any civilian role. This disparity was evident in incidents such as the July 2025 announcement by the civil authority of South Darfur of "mandatory conscription" for sections of the youth, Sufi groups and students. Those who resisted risked imprisonment.[105] In other parts of Darfur, doctors were forced to either pay bribes or join the paramilitaries in what resembled organised, top-down extortion.[106] A similar example of the government acting as a front for military operations came in "Hemeti's" speech to troops in July 2025. He urged Darfurian citizens to await the expansion of RSF control, promising that humanitarian aid would follow thanks to the parallel government's supposed ability to liaise with international relief organisations. However, he added that these same citizens would soon no longer require aid.[107] According to this logic, once the military objective has been achieved, the "government" will become irrelevant.

The territorial scope of the quasi-state, as well as the extent of Tasis' administrative coverage, is not clearly defined. For example, when Abderrahman Daglo ceded power over some Misseriya tribal lands in Western Kordofan province to South Sudanese (Nuer) mercenaries, South Sudanese warlord William Yak Yak—whose fiefdom defied national borders and ranged from South Sudan's Bahr el-Ghazal

[102] "Exposé: Questions Mount over Nyala meeting as details point to staging outside Sudan, in Nairobi," *Kenya Today*, 3 May 2026, https://kenya-today.com.

[103] Members of parallel govt sworn in, Hemedti appears in Nyala," *op. cit*.

[104] "RSF-backed parallel government plans to acquire warplanes," *Sudan Tribune*, 16 February 2025, https://sudantribune.com.

[105] Mohamed Mustafa, post on X, 27 May 2025, https://x.com/Moh_Gamea/status/1927387761914306961.

[106] "Rapid Support Forces resort to forced recruitment campaigns," *Ayin Network*, 26 June 2025, https://3ayin.com/en/rsfrecruitment/.

[107] "Sudanese rebel leader rallies troops in rare public appearance, *Sudan War Monitor*, 25 July 2025, https://sudanwarmonitor.com.

region into areas nominally under Tasis control—became de facto "governor" of this grey zone.[108] Northern parts of Western Kordofan, traditional strongholds of the Hamar tribe, have been rumoured to be set to be absorbed into East Darfur—the RSF's core region—in an attempt to centralise control in the hands of trusted loyalists.

Trust among its core constituencies is also an issue. Violence, racism and ethnic favouritism have remained constant sources of internal tension within the group. While the RSF militia and its state-building efforts initially received significant support from Western Sudan's Arab tribes, notably the Rizeigat, Misseriya, Ta'isha, Beni Halba and Hawazma, it soon became clear that power and a privileged status were being monopolised by the small Mahariya clan of the Rizeigat tribe, from which "Hemeti" and the core of the RSF's leadership hail. Internal competition repeatedly led to violent confrontations, with sections of the Misseriya, Mahamid (a rival Rizeigat clan), Salamat and others staging rebellions against marginalisation or persecution. By early 2026, this trend had produced a sustained cycle of defections involving notable RSF field commanders and Tasis government officials. Relations were equally tense with the non-Arab factions that had allied with the RSF for protection or out of opportunism. Sustained battlefield losses for the RSF would likely lead to further fracturing and a narrowing of the social base of the Tasis government, eventually reducing it to a localised insurgency centred in East and South Darfur that cannot credibly challenge the state.

The secularism declared in the Tasis founding documents[109] became a source of division as the bulk of the RSF cadres originated from entities affiliated with al-Bashir's Islamist National Congress Party. Therefore, despite the Tasis' official anti-Islamist rhetoric, which was intended to win it sympathy from the international community, many—probably a majority—of its members disagree with its officially declared programme.

From its very inception, the economic viability of the Tasis government has been constrained. Following the Nairobi conference, how the proto-state should be financed remained unclear, with only vague proposals to establish a committee to raise private sector funds or to attract non-Islamic and international investors.[110] In May 2026, "Hemeti" alluded to the fact that his group was preparing to export livestock, crops and gum arabic, most likely by organising secure commercial transit routes

[108] "المرتزق الجنوبي وليام ياك ياك حاكماً بأمر عبدالرحيم دقلو، والمسيرية ينحنوا له," *Shahied Ayaan Platform*, 24 April 2026, https://shahiedayaan.com.

[109] References to secularism were added to secure an alliance with the Nuba Mountains SPLM-North faction led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu, reflecting a non-negotiable part of his political programme.

[110] "With new Constitution signed, RSF and allies plot parallel state," *op. cit.*

through Chad and Libya. Meanwhile, it became evident that the Tasis authority's connection to the RSF made it largely dependent on an expansive war economy, in which the looting of resources in newly conquered territories provided for RSF fighters and their families. It is no coincidence that social peace in the region deteriorated when the frontlines stalled in the first half of 2026, triggering intensified infighting over positions and spoils.[111] Discussions on resuming state-like tax collection only began in May 2026.[112] In June 2026, the Tasis authority announced that it had begun refining oil on its territory. However, the lack of pipelines connecting the oil fields to the primitive refining facilities, coupled with the reliance on trucks for oil transportation,[113] raised serious questions about the economic viability of this endeavour.

There have always been stark differences between the government's proclamations and the reality on the ground. Following the siege of El Fasher, some Tasis officials complained that their government was unable to limit violence against civilians due to a lack of "qualified personnel and administrative experience."[114] When the head of the South Darfur civil administration visited the Kalma IDP camp, an air of desperation hung over his efforts to assure its displaced residents that "there is no enmity between us [the Tasis government] and you," and that the authorities in Nyala represented the marginalised.[115]

In May 2026, Ahmed Bakr, the former finance minister for East Darfur state, who had recently escaped and joined the Khartoum government, assessed that the Tasis government "had no actual existence on the ground" and merely represented "a powerless media façade incapable of managing the areas under the militia's control or providing any basic services to citizens."[116] This followed reports that the daughter of the Tasis Minister of Education had snuck out of Darfur to take an exam in government-held Ad Damir (in River Nile State),[117] reflecting the perception that Tasis was no substitute for a real government.

[111] Mat Nashed, post on X, 1 June 2026, https://x.com/matnashed/status/2061368980283981972?s=20.

[112] "Sudan TASIS government begins reactivating tax revenues," *The Sudan Times*, 29 May 2026, https://thesudantimes.com.

[113] "RSF Begins Oil Refining in South Darfur Using Crude from East Darfur, Sources Say," *Darfur24*, 26 June 2026, https://darfur24.com.

[114] H. Alnaser, M. Idris, M. Alagra, O. al-Faroug, *op. cit.*

[115] *In a notable development, a delegation from the Founding Government visits the "Kalma"camp*, Radio Dabanga, 5 March 2026, https://x.com/RadioDabanga/status/2029692936502255951?s=20.

[116] وزير منشق يكشف: انهيار داخل المليشيا وانفلات أمني خطير في الضعين, Shahied Ayaan Platform, 26 May 2026, https://x.com/AyaanShahied/status/2059334576124703191?s=20.

[117] تسلل ابنة مسؤول بالمليشيا لأداء امتحانات الشهادة بالدامر دون مضايقات, Shahied Ayaan Platform, 27 April 2026, https://x.com/AyaanShahied/status/2048739506082210112.

Sudan's parallel government's foreign engagements and assistance

Lobbying for Sudan's RSF/Tasis has not been directed at winning formal recognition for the breakaway quasi-state with Nyala as its capital. Instead, it has focused on disassociating the group from its crimes and promoting its political project as pro-democracy, anti-Islamist, and broadly popular. It has served to mask the UAE's involvement with the RSF. Portraying the RSF/Tasis as indispensable to Sudan's equilibrium and as a responsible partner has served to normalise their hold on power, both in the present and in the event of any future peace arrangement. This effectively leads to their entrenchment as a parallel government.

RSF's own attempts to engage with the international community date back many years before the war. Around 2016-17, the group promoted itself as a potential EU partner in controlling irregular migration.[118] Back in 2019, "Hemeti" signed a contract with the Canadian lobbying firm Dickens and Madson, headed by former Israeli spy Ari Ben-Menashe, to work on his image and arrange meetings with global leaders.[119] Those efforts continued after the eruption of war in 2023 and accelerated once the Tasis authority began taking shape. By early 2025, the RSF-affiliated Qimam movement (involved in RSF's nascent civilian administration, later a signatory of the Tasis Charter) had established at least six offices across Europe—in London, Brussels, Paris, Oslo, Amsterdam and Geneva—to liaise with authorities and EU and UN institutions.[120] In order to win the support of European policymakers, "Hemeti" recycled the migration-control narrative which resurfaced in the Tasis administration's earliest Nairobi document.[121] There have also been attempts to list RSF-linked individuals as speakers on Sudan-related events at the European Parliament[122] or UN Human Rights Council in Geneva,[123] although in both cases that was prevented by protests by the Sudanese diaspora.

Indirectly, foreign engagements by politicians from subsequent civilian coalitions led by former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok have also benefited the RSF and Tasis. Hamdok's group, which had wide access to Western audiences, positioned itself as the civilian

[118] S. Baldo, *Border Control from Hell: How the EU's migration partnership legitimizes Sudan's "militia state"*, The Enough Project, April 2017, pp. 9–12, https://enoughproject.org.

[119] M. Nashed, "The soft-power campaign of Sudan's RSF leader 'Hemedti'," Al Jazeera, 20 April 2023, www.aljazeera.com.

[120] "RSF's political wing sets up home across Europe," *Africa Intelligence*, 13 January 2025, www.africaintelligence.com.

[121] Mohanad Elbalal, post on X, 26 February 2025, https://x.com/MohanadElbalal/status/1894818993699004427.

[122] M. Griera, "MEP invited genocide-linked militiamen to talk peace in European Parliament, *Politico*, 25 September 2025, www.politico.eu.

[123] Gaffar Mohammud Saeneen, post on X, 19 June 2023, https://x.com/saeneen/status/1670812837587959809.

representative of Sudan and, in effect, its future government-in-waiting. Hamdok's associates routinely avoided criticising the RSF and the UAE, and consistently promoted solutions that would entrench the RSF as a ruling force. For example, they proposed a 10-year process before the militia would be unified with the national army.[124] This aligned with Hemeti's earlier demands to maintain the RSF's status as a 'state within a state' indefinitely. Following the formation of the Tasis government, several top figures from this circle (then known as the Taggadum coalition), including Hamdok's former Justice Minister, Nasredeen Abdulbari, openly joined with the RSF. The remaining group rebranded as Sumoud and continued to declare neutrality, although leading members, such as Bakri Al Jak, became favourites of the quasi-official Tasis news agency Assayha. Hamdok himself resided in the UAE and has served as chairman of the board of CADI since February 2023, an Emirati investment management firm that identifies business opportunities in Africa.[125] For those reasons, the Sudanese largely rejected Hamdok's group, seeing it as colluding with the RSF. Still, they remained influential opinion-shapers on the international stage.

Within the governments that assisted the establishment of the Tasis parallel government, the UAE and Kenya played critical roles. Each had been driven by a different rationale for engagement. For the UAE, assisting Tasis represented the continuation of a long-standing strategic military and political investment in the RSF (which had served as an important supplier of manpower for the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen a decade earlier) and formed an element of the broader process of establishing itself as an emerging regional security power. For Kenya's leadership, facing economic crisis at home, the calculations seemed to have been driven by hopes of profiting from the regional war economy. This assertion is supported by Emirati import data, which since the beginning of the war in Sudan has reflected a significant increase in gold exports from Kenya to the UAE. While Kenya previously exported an average of 3.4 tonnes of gold to the UAE, this figure increased to 28 tonnes in 2023 and 56.1 tonnes in 2025.[126] These increases can only be explained by Kenyan involvement in a covert scheme to transport gold from RSF-held areas to Dubai, a city that has historically been at the centre of "Hemeti's" relationship with the UAE leadership and is a regional prime gold-laundering hub. Developing more formal economic ties with the UAE may partly explain Kenya's unusual willingness to contribute to enabling the partition of Sudan. For example, while preparations were underway for the Nairobi gathering, the UAE and Kenya entered into a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement,[127] and during the signing of the Tasis charter, Kenya finalised arrangements with the UAE to receive a $1.5 billion loan.[128]

[124] Patrick Heinish, post on X, 19 March 2024, https://x.com/patrickheinisc1/status/1770037710461255852.

[125] Dr. Abdalla Hamdok, CADI website, 10 February 2023, www.tcadi.com.

[126] *From Nairobi to Dubai: How Kenya Became a Transit Corridor for Financing Genocide in Sudan*, Fikra For Studies and Development, May 2026, p. 4.

[127] "UAE and Kenya sign Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement to enhance trade," *Finance Middle East*, 15 January 2025, www.financemiddleeast.com.

[128] D. Herbling, *Kenya Said to Receive $1.5 Billion UAE Loan Next Week*, Bloomberg, 21 February 2025, www.bloomberg.com.

Despite official denials, Kenya effectively permitted its territory to be used as the launchpad for the separatist project. Not only have Kenyan authorities hosted RSF leaders, including "Hemeti," but they have also provided Kenyan passports to almost 30 key figures.[129] This scheme dates back to mid-2024, when the Kenyan authorities issued a passport to Algoney Daglo, Hemeti's brother and a key procurement operative on behalf of the RSF militia.[130] This practice continued during the period when the RSF and its allies rebranded themselves as the Tasis government.

The UAE supported the organisation of the Nairobi conference that produced the Tasis charter, strengthening the perception that Tasis had grassroots legitimacy. For that purpose, it has been reported to be facilitating the travel to Kenya of Darfurian tribal officials via Chad and Uganda. During the formation of the parallel government in Nyala, the UAE was also reported to have materially supported the establishment of its physical infrastructure, including by flying in office materials and furniture.[131]

Throughout the war, the UAE has primarily served as an initiator, organiser and sponsor of supplies for the RSF.[132] This was achieved by establishing a vast regional network of

[129] Exposure in early 2026 provoked extensive media outcry: "The Standard" newspaper illustrated its front page with Algoney's picture and the title "RSF Passport Shame".

[130] "RSF passport shame," *The Standard*, 26 February 2026.

[131] Makkawi Elmalik, post on X, 13 July 2025, https://x.com/Mo_elmalik/status/1944321560640127454.

[132] In its January 2024 report (S/2024/65, pp. 14-15, https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/65) the United Nations Panel of Experts on the Sudan assessed as "credible" reports on "heavy rotation of cargo planes coming from Abu Dhabi International Airport to Am Djarass airport in eastern Chad" where ammunition shipments were unloaded before being loaded onto trucks heading to Sudan. On 7 January 2025, the US Treasury Department announced sanctions (https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2772) against RSF leader "Hemeti" and seven companies associated with the paramilitary group, all based in the UAE, involved in providing financial support to the militia, including selling gold mined in Sudan, arms supplies, and logistics. On 15 January 2025, future US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, during his Senate confirmation hearing (www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/nominations-01-15-2025), stated that the UAE "are openly supporting an entity that is carrying out a genocide". The 9 July 2026 European Parliament resolution (2026/2799(RSP)) on the situation in Sudan's El Obeid named the UAE as a party "financing, [providing] arms supply and other support of the RSF" and called for sanctioning the Emirati entities responsible. The 23 June 2026 testimony (https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/167667/default/) of Nathaniel Raymond, executive director of Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab before the UK House of Commons International Development Committee, detailing UAE supplies provided to the RSF force besieging El Fasher remains a principal reference for the British parliamentary inquiries into Sudan's war. The UAE's supply networks have also been thoroughly investigated by, among others, Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2024/07/new-weapons-fuelling-the-sudan-conflict/; www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/sudan-advanced-chinese-weaponry-provided-by-uae-identified-in-breach-of-arms-embargo-new-investigation/); Le Monde (www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2026/03/22/the-uae-is-reorganizing-its-arms-supply-network-for-sudanese-paramilitaries_6751682_124.html?srsltid=AfmBOor6cFqJLuKjtXJ3ODs9u85qB2AZnSNbRixHosRrmcJ5PrDp5iQq), Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org/news/2026/07/23/frances-troubling-silence-on-the-uae-role-in-sudan), or Reuters (www.reuters.com/investigations/us-contractor-mystery-boeings-operating-sudan-paramilitary-supply-routes-2026-07-15/). The UN Panel of Experts' draft 2026 report (www.reuters.com/investigations/us-contractor-mystery-boeings-operating-sudan-paramilitary-supply-routes-2026-07-15/) detailed logistics supplies into Sudan's Nyala, particularly mercenaries hired by UAE-based firm, Global Security Services Group (GSSG).

air and land supply routes to provide the RSF with military supplies, including arms and ammunition, armoured vehicles, drones, anti-aircraft systems, jamming devices, and mercenaries. Operating this support network, which has continued throughout the conflict, even in the face of the 2026 Gulf crisis, represents one of the biggest efforts to support a foreign insurgent group in recent history. The UAE has also hosted the RSF leadership, its political allies and affiliated companies, as well as provided them with media and political cover. This approach continued when the Tasis group embarked on its state-building drive. The smooth adjustment of the UAE's earlier pro-RSF policy into one that also involves support for the new "government" is well exemplified by "Hemeti's" travels. When his RSF appeared to be winning the war in late 2023, the UAE provided him with a plane for his tour of Africa.[133] This enabled him to meet the presidents and prime ministers of Uganda, Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and South Africa, as well as attend a summit of the regional IGAD organisation in January 2024. That tour served to present "Hemeti" as the incoming, acceptable leader who would impose himself as the new ruler in Khartoum. In February 2026, a similar exercise saw an Emirati Royal Jet plane move between the UAE, Nairobi and Entebbe (Uganda),[134] again serving "Hemeti" in his new capacity as the leader of an alternative, quasi-civilian Western Sudanese authority.

The UAE have used its diplomatic channels and lobbyists to influence European or American legislation on Sudan. In the US, lobbying firms hired by the UAE's embassy[135] to promote its preferred Sudan narrative reportedly accelerated their activities following a letter in December 2023 by Democratic Representative Sara Jacobs and nine others, calling for the UAE to stop supporting the RSF.[136] Lobbyists have mobilised intensively to counter all subsequent attempts to pass legislation that would condition American arms sales to the UAE on ending its backing of the RSF. In Europe, similar efforts were recorded when the European Council worked on its November 2025 post-El Fasher statement.[137] According to Euronews, references mentioning the UAE's involvement were withdrawn from the draft following lobbying by Lana Nusseibeh, the UAE's Assistant Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, who was present in Strasbourg.[138] Only in July 2026 did the EU Parliament manage, for the first time (in the face of internal opposition), to

133 "Hemedti Makes Diplomatic Tour of East Africa While RSF Fighters Gain Ground," *ADF*, 30 January 2024, https://adf-magazine.com.

134 Basha باشا, post on X, 22 February 2026, https://x.com/BashaReport/status/2025509621536891141.

135 At the outset of the war, the UAE embassy in Washington hired at least two lobbying firms to work on Sudan-related issues: American Defense International (ADI) and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld.

136 "Investigation: The UAE lobby in the US," *Sudan In The News*, 16 January 2025, www.sudaninthenews.com.

137 "Sudan: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union," European Council, 20 November 2025, www.consilium.europa.eu.

138 V. Genovese, "European Parliament condemns war in Sudan without mentioning UAE," *Euronews*, 28 November 2025, www.euronews.com.

adopt a resolution that named the UAE as a party "fuelling the war" by financing and arming the RSF.[139] The UAE has also used direct pressure on governments whenever the issue of the RSF or UAE-RSF relations is raised. For example, after the April 2024 UN Security Council meeting, during which Sudanese representatives accused the UAE of supporting the RSF, the Emiratis paused all ministerial meetings with the UK,[140] blaming British representatives for letting these criticisms be voiced during the session.[141] This diplomatic pressure likely explains reported claims that the UK actively lobbied African diplomats not to criticise the UAE for its links to the RSF during the siege of El Fasher.[142]

In attempts to present itself as a constructive force in Sudan, the UAE is building up its image as a humanitarian actor. On an outreach mission to Chad in November 2024 led by Assistant Minister Lana Nusseibeh (also known for lobbying in Europe), the Sudanese refugees she visited refused Emirati aid and stated they would not be used in a whitewashing exercise.[143] They blamed the UAE for their expulsion from Sudan and demanded it cease support for the RSF. In February 2025, while the Nairobi group was trying to establish an independent authority for Western Sudan, the UAE organised an aid-pledging conference at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa's Addis Ababa headquarters, on the sidelines of the African Union Summit. Opened by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, the conference was attended by the UAE and its regional allies who support the RSF. The UAE pledged $200 million, Ethiopia pledged $15 million, and Kenya pledged $1 million in what was described as humanitarian support for Sudan.[144] However, participants in the Nairobi conference later clarified that the money was to be distributed by their newly formed parallel government only.[145]

Sky News Arabia was one of the most prominent media outlets for pro-RSF/Tasis propaganda. The station was established as a joint venture between the UK's Sky News and the UAE's International Media Investments (IMI), controlled by the UAE's Vice President, Mansour bin Zayed. For a long time, this station benefited from using the recognisable Sky News logo and borrowed the British station's credibility to back up its

[139] European Parliament resolution of 9 July 2026 on the threat of war crimes, the escalating violations of international humanitarian law and the human rights situation in El-Obeid, Sudan (2026/2799(RSP)), www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2026-0267_EN.html.

[140] E. Swinford, "UAE cancels meetings with Britain in row over Sudan," *The Times*, 28 April 2024, www.thetimes.com.

[141] The UK is responsible for the Sudan file in the UN bodies as an informal "penholder."

[142] M. Townsend, "UK 'tried to suppress criticism' of alleged UAE role in arming Sudan's RSF militia," *The Guardian*, 24 March 2024, www.theguardian.com.

[143] "Sudanese refugees in Chad reject UAE aid, demand end to RSF support," *Sudan Tribune*, 17 September 2024, https://sudantribune.com.

[144] "Emirati-backed Sudan humanitarian conference draws criticism from Sudanese government," *Sudan Tribune*, 13 February 2015, https://sudantribune.com.

[145] "RSF-backed parallel government plans to acquire warplanes," *op. cit.*

pro-RSF narratives. This only came to an end following a scandal related to its flawed "reporting" from El Fasher. Shortly after the massacre in the city, when it was inaccessible to outsiders, the Sky News Arabia team was permitted to film a "documentary" on the ground. In the video, presenter Tasabih Mubarak, the wife of prominent Tasis politician Ibrahim al-Mirhgani, appeared alongside and praised the infamous RSF female officer Shiraz Khalid, notorious for inciting sexual violence and who was posing as a civilian.[146] Reacting to widespread outrage, the UK-based parent Sky News, known for objective reporting on Sudan, severed ties with the Emirati-controlled station.[147]

Efforts to manipulate social media to shape public sentiment involved amplifying pro-RSF content using hijacked or newly created accounts,[148] sometimes using stolen Somali models' profile pictures.[149] Evidence indicates that Hemeti's younger brother, Algoney Daglo—based in Dubai while under US sanctions—was at the centre of this effort.[150] The UAE was also listed as the main location for managing the RSF's active Facebook account at the time.[151] When, in November 2025, X (formerly Twitter) released functionality which allowed users to check the location of a given account, it quickly became apparent that many of those linked to the RSF/Tasis were posting from the UAE.[152] Throughout 2025, the influential Visegrad24 platform, which connects Polish and South African right-wing groups with pro-Israeli and pro-UAE circles,[153] featured stories about Sudan that adopted a strongly pro-RSF line, echoing the messaging of Emirati media outlets.[154]

Even as the chances of political or military success for the RSF and Tasis narrowed, the UAE, and to some degree Kenya, continued its costly and politically risky support for Western Sudan's quasi-state-in-the-making. This can partially be explained by the UAE's reluctance to accept the failure of a project in which it had heavily invested, especially after its forced withdrawal from Yemen. Another factor lies in the very

146 "SKY News Arabia newscaster travels to El-Fashir and hugs RSF war-criminal," *Maltese Herald*, 10 November 2025, https://themalteseherald.com.

147 M. Sweney, "Sky ends controversial news joint venture in United Arab Emirates," *The Guardian*, 31 May 2026, www.theguardian.com.

148 T. Knight, post on X, 15 September 2023, https://x.com/awildknight/status/1702648016056832198.

149 M. Ngegi, "سرقة صور نساء صوماليات واستغلالها للترويج لدعاية سياسية," BBC Arabic, 21 October 2025, www.bbc.com.

150 "Hemeti's brothers wage his social media war, Africa intelligence, *Africa Intelligence*, 21 April 2023, www.africaintelligence.com.

151 Daniel van Oudenaren, post on X, 1 May 2023, https://x.com/daniel_van0/status/1653073801549168650.

152 R. Uddin, "Social media accounts linked to Sudan's RSF are based in the UAE," *Middle East Eye*, 24 November 2025, www.middleeasteye.net.

153 "Unmasking Visegrád24: Tracing the People, Money, and Political Connections," *VSquare*, 2 October 2025, https://vsquare.org.

154 J. Gillon, "Abu Dhabi weaves its digital web in Africa," *Africa Intelligence*, 28 January 2026, www.africaintelligence.com.

limited willingness of the international community to exert pressure on the UAE due to its economic power and the little interest the Sudan war generates. For those reasons, the UAE's well-documented support to one of the world's most deadly militias goes largely unchecked. In the case of Kenya, the authorities continued to officially deny any support for the division of Sudan, although, as with the issuance of passports, press investigations provided evidence to the contrary. Therefore, the Kenyan authorities were subjected to a level of fierce domestic scrutiny that the UAE never had to confront.

4. Understanding the drivers of accelerating separatist movements in the Red Sea region

Bottom-up drivers and dilemmas

Eritrea and South Sudan are two young states that have succeeded in establishing themselves in the broader Red Sea region, and that could serve as reference points for the three separatist movements under discussion. Although in both cases the struggle for independence was difficult, they eventually seceded once the respective governments of Ethiopia and Sudan had given their consent, which assured the international community of the legality of the process. In Somaliland's case, the breakdown of central authority in Mogadishu also resulted in a situation of de facto non-opposition from the nominal capital to the regional developments. However, once the central authority was slowly re-established, the situation changed. Somaliland's leadership has also long benefited from its geographic isolation from Somalia, as the two regions are separated by the semi-autonomous region of Puntland.[155] Neither of these conditions applied to Western Sudan or South Yemen, even though the central governments of both Sudan and Yemen were also weakened by civil wars and confined to only a fraction of their national territories. This offered the secessionists a window of opportunity that they were willing to exploit.

However, this did not mean that establishing new breakaway states was always their firm, thoroughly thought-through goal. Both the STC and the RSF/Tasis proved flexible enough to maintain both national-level goals and secessionist/autonomist options. Despite their efforts at quasi-state building on the ground, it was the circumstances of the wars they fought, combined with their perception of the regional setting, that

[155] This is now changing with the establishment of the Northeast State around Las Anod.

steered their agendas towards one or the other. A similar pattern can be seen with the Rwanda-backed M23 in eastern DRC, which balanced a national agenda of regime change with occasional signalling of a secessionist option if certain demands were not met.[156] Over time, as has been noted in Sudan, the probability of opting for a secessionist "Plan B" grows in parallel with the development of state-like institutions on the ground.[157]

The social support base for the de facto state institutions and their pro-recognition agenda is never universal, even though interested parties prefer to portray it as such. In Somaliland, for example, support is strongest among the dominant Isaaq clan and in the heart of the territory, which is concentrated between Hargeisa, Berbera and Burao. The progressive Isaaqisation of positions within the system and the limitation of economic benefits have translated into a regression of state presence and acceptance on its peripheries. The RSF/Tasis authority underwent a similar process when, as power became increasingly concentrated in the hands of the Mayariya clan, its original solid support base among the Arab constituencies of Western Sudan began to shrink. Signs of major structural weaknesses, as well as internal dissent and infighting, point to the possibility of a collapse or further fracturing of the RSF/Tasis parallel authorities. This could potentially lead to a repetition of the January 2026 scenario seen in South Yemen, especially if material support from the UAE were to cease. In Yemen, even though the STC's top echelons remain fully committed to the secessionist cause, other governance groups, primarily the PLC, have been assembling competing public and non-governmental structures. The public structures involve the alleged incorporation of Southern Yemeni activists into the Saudi-backed government.

At first glance, Somaliland's experience overcoming the 1992 internal crisis and its initial attempts at consensus-building may offer valuable lessons for Tasis, which faces similar challenges. However, closer examination of Tasis' shortcomings reveals why this model is inadequate and beyond the reach of its architects. For Tasis to move forward in the style of Somaliland post-1992, the dominant force (the RSF) would need to step down to allow nascent civilian politics to prevail, and a real reconciliation would need to be fostered with recently victimised sections of Western Sudan's populations. There is neither the appetite nor a viable pathway to achieve any of these goals. Rather, Sudan's separatists seem to be hoping to repeat the Libyan scenario of de facto partition, with parallel administrations and armies, mimicking the state. As in Libya, this future would allow the current authorities to run a semi-private fiefdom while enjoying support from key foreign backers.

[156] C. Ndushabandi, "DRC WAR: M23 Rebels Threatens Kivu Secession, *Chimp Reports*, 19 November 2023, https://chimpreports.com.

[157] Y. Ford, L. Karr, "M23's State-Building Project," *Critical Threats*, 9 September 2025, pp. 5–7, www.criticalthreats.org.

Conversely, South Yemen's 20-year history as a fully independent and internationally recognised state enabled the development of its own political elites, some of which, almost by default, transformed into separatist groups after unification. However, three decades later, the new South Yemen proto-state was the most ephemeral of all, as it overreached itself and provoked a decisive military reaction before it could build proper administration. Unlike Western Sudan, and much like Somaliland, the Southern Yemen separatist movement enjoys widespread social support, making it hard to dismiss as artificial. Even if local elites are unable to deliver a stable polity now, the foundations for another attempt remain in place.

In comparison, Western Sudan wildly differs from South Yemen and Somaliland. Unlike those areas, it cannot rely on deeply rooted separatist sentiments which are supported by coherent historical narratives and serious legal arguments. The emergence of Tasis seems to be more of a means to secure gains in the civil war than a potential political solution that would re-establish nationwide control by Khartoum.

While all separatist projects exclude some communities, the sheer scale and intensity enforced by RSF-led Tasis is incomparable in this regard. It has resorted to large-scale ethnic targeting, sometimes reaching genocidal levels, as well as racially motivated population replacement and settlement projects, making it unthinkable that it could gain solid legitimacy across the diverse communities under its control. This differs from the experiences of Somaliland, which largely enjoyed peace dividends from the 1990s, and South Yemen, where the legacy of the pre-1990 state's progressive policies acted as a pull factor.

Foreign backers: between grand strategy and opportunism

The convergence between the UAE's policies and the rise of separatist movements in the region is undeniable. For at least a decade, it has offered military and political support to Southern separatists in Yemen, sponsored a breakaway administration led by Gen. Khalifa Haftar in Libya, established a presence in Somaliland and Puntland, and, most controversially, fostered Sudan's RSF/Tasis. This collection of quasi-states and movements aspiring to statehood under the UAE's tutelage is sometimes referred to as the 'axis of secessionists.'[158] Analysts and journalists frequently characterise the fuelling of separatism in the region as a defining feature of the UAE's—and at times Israel's—broader approach to the region, widely interpreted as a "divide and rule"

[158] See for example: A. Krieg, "How Abu Dhabi built an axis of secessionists across the region," *Middle East Eye*, 28 March 2025, www.middleeasteye.net.

strategy.[159] Yet, while numerous regional examples seem to support this view, several notable exceptions point in the opposite direction.

The UAE's current selective approach is clearly visible in Ethiopia, where centrifugal pressures have grown stronger under Abiy's leadership. Since 2018, the central government has faced major rebellions in three of its ethnically based regions: Tigray (where an all-out war from 2020 to 2022 may have cost half a million lives), Oromia, and Amhara. In this case, however, the UAE firmly backed the central government, providing military equipment during the Tigray conflict, consolidating Abiy's power, and heavily subsidising his massive new palace as part of the $10 billion project on Yeka Hills overlooking Addis Ababa.[160] While the UAE promoted "parallel governments" in Sudan and Libya at the expense of the internationally recognised ones, their approach towards Somalia was more nuanced. While the UAE has been a crucial partner to Somaliland, as well as to other regions resisting Mogadishu's authority, such as Puntland and Jubaland, it has also supported the Somali central government. In Mogadishu, the UAE has spent years competing with Turkey for influence, investing heavily in this relationship, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was only after Israel's recognition that Somalia's central government suspended this cooperation. Somaliland's attitude towards the UAE has also shifted. While its former president, Bihi, was an unapologetic UAE supporter, the current president, "Irro," has tried to take a more balanced stance since December 2025.[161]

Israel's support for separatist movements and self-determination aspirations has also always been selective and dependent on current political circumstances. For example, while Israel was the only Middle Eastern state to support the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum in September 2017,[162] it also recognised the Moroccan annexation of Western Sahara in July 2023, at the expense of the local pro-independence movement.[163]

Israel has a long history of supporting regional separatism across the Middle East and further afield, a policy that the UAE appears to be following. Since the Israeli state's founding, cooperation with ethnic and religious minorities has been a key element

[159] S. Bashir Mohamed, "Divide and rule in the Horn of Africa: How the UAE fuels separatism to fracture Somalia," *Middle East Monitor*, 18 January 2026, www.middleeastmonitor.com.

[160] "The Ethiopian prime minister's new home," *The Continent*, 16 June 2024, https://continent.substack.com.

[161] A. Barawani, "Djibouti Warns Israeli Somaliland Base Threatens Regional Stability," *Facility for Talo and Leadership*, 1 March 2026, www.ftlsomalia.com.

[162] M. Wojnarowicz, "Israel and the Kurdish Question," *Bulletin PISM*, No. 88 (1530), 26 September 2017, www.pism.pl.

[163] "Israel recognises Western Sahara as part of Morocco," Al Jazeera, 17 July 2023, www.aljazeera.com. "Why Israel Should Support Algerian Secessionists," *Tikvah Ideas*, 18 December 2025, https://ideas.tikvah.org.

of its foreign and security policy and a component of the "periphery doctrine."[164] It prioritises security issues and utilises unofficial channels of cooperation, primarily those operated by intelligence agencies. In the Red Sea region, rivalry with Iran is a key driver in the proactive use of these tools to establish relationships with partners. Israel has consistently worked to strengthen its operational capabilities, including through establishing intelligence outposts in Eritrea, and has actively attempted to curtail Iranian influence. Iran has exploited regional instability stemming from civil wars in Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia. This dynamic has significantly worsened since 7 October 2023, with the Israel-Hamas war and the mobilisation of the "Axis of Resistance." Beyond more extensively violating the territorial integrity of neighbouring states, Israel has also intensified its outreach efforts to cultivate cooperation with regional minorities. This was particularly evident in appeals to ethnic minorities during the war with Iran and Hezbollah, as well as support for Druze separatist movements following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024. There were also calls to support Kabyle separatism[165]—in retaliation for Algeria's unfavourable policies—and the division of South Africa,[166] a move unmistakably tied to the latter bringing genocide charges before the International Court of Justice.

For both the UAE and, to a certain extent, Israel, backing separatist entities is less about true ideological support for breakaway movements than about securing convenient and under-the-radar footholds. As relative newcomers to the region, both the UAE and Israel look for strategic gaps and emerging windows of opportunity. This dynamic requires them to be unorthodox and creative in their choice of partners and not to shy away from options that others consider too risky. In this respect, alternative breakaway "governments" serve their interests just as effectively as regional pariahs or client states.

Israel and the UAE are also frequent (although not always) partners of choice, united by common perspectives on Arab-Israeli rapprochement (as per the Abraham Accords), the influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia, and opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood in the region. Both states see themselves as eager to shake up and redraw the traditional parameters of the Middle East's power politics. Selective engagement with separatists is welcomed whenever it helps to achieve these goals.

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[164] K. Zielińska, Israel's Periphery Doctrine: Prospects for Defining and Studying a Foreign Policy Practice, *Politické vedy*, No. 23, 2020, pp. 219–245.

[165] "Why Israel Should Support Algerian Secessionists", *Tikvah Ideas*, 18 December 2025, https://ideas.tikvah.org.

[166] G.A. Gochin, "Africa Must Fragment, South Africa First," *The Times of Israel*, 2 January 2026, https://blogs.timesofisrael.com.

In both cases, separatist entities in the region have been employed in broader policies of "encircling" regional adversaries with a ring of client states (or quasi-states), which allow for more effective application of pressure. Similar approaches accompanied their pursuit of wider access to the coasts around the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb.

In Sudan, the result was that the country found itself surrounded by UAE-friendly (or dependent) states and non-state entities—Eastern Libya, Chad, Central African Republic (CAR), South Sudan, Ethiopia—creating a supply route for the RSF. The UAE-sponsored Haftar's Eastern Libya served as a rear base for the RSF, offering training programmes for its fighters[167] and permitting supply deliveries via the Kufra airport and, occasionally, the Benghazi seaport. Haftar also delegated the local Subul al-Salam militia to serve as the RSF's partner in controlling Sudan's northwestern corridor, which borders Egypt, Libya and Chad. Despite strong societal links to Western Sudan's non-Arab communities, Chad allowed the UAE to run a logistical support network for the RSF, enabling targeting of those groups. For example, a military supply base built in Amdjarass in mid-2023[168] was masked as a field hospital for Sudanese refugees.[169] The Chadian leadership took this extremely risky and domestically unpopular stance in exchange for the UAE's budgetary and military support. The RSF have used the CAR as a recruitment ground, exploiting shared tribal affinities, particularly in areas close to Am Dafok, Sam Ouandja and Ndah.[170] The UAE secured the CAR government's cooperative stance toward the RSF by offering to fund Wagner and Africa Corps operations in the CAR.[171] South Sudan has remained open to RSF recruitment, fuel supplies, and use of its territory for offensives in Sudan's Blue Nile area. The RSF have also used South Sudan for medical treatment and to traffic looted goods. This support is driven by UAE financial pledges, such as a $12.9 billion loan-for-oil deal in 2024—the biggest in the country's history[172]—and the printing of South Sudanese pound banknotes.[173] Ethiopia, whose government receives strong backing from the UAE, backed away from its previously neutral position on the war in its neighbouring country and was directly supporting the RSF by late 2025. Apart from opening RSF bases and drone launch

167 "Inside the secret network fueling Sudan's war," *Lighthouse Reports*, 29 June 2026, www.lighthouse reports.com.

168 "Sudanese refugees in Chad reject UAE aid, demand end to RSF support," *op. cit*.

169 "*UAE to establish field hospital in Amdjarass, Chad to support Sudanese refugees*," UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 July 2024, www.mofa.gov.ae.

170 Final report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 7 of resolution 2693 (2023), S/2024/444, 5 June 2024, pp. 8–10.

171 "Touadera turns to Abu Dhabi to pay for Africa Corps," *Africa Intelligence*, 11 November 2025, www.africaintelligence.com.

172 "UAE company agreed to loan $13B to South Sudan in exchange for oil," *Al-Monitor*, 27 April 2024, www.al-monitor.com.

173 "South Sudan, UAE strike deal on money printing," Radio Tamazuj, 14 August 2025, www.radiotamazuj.org.

sites near Asosa in the Benishangul-Gumaz region,[174] the country has been accused of allowing civilian Ethiopian Airlines aircraft to be used to transport RSF fighters, including between N'Djamena in Chad, Addis Ababa, and Asosa.[175] This allowed RSF groups to enter Sudan's Blue Nile state and draw Sudanese forces away from the main frontlines in Western Sudan. As with Chad, this was a high-risk policy for Ethiopia, endangering areas adjacent to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and provoking the emergence of new anti-government rebel groups. It also brought Addis Ababa's main internal adversary, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, closer to an alliance with the Sudanese government.

A similar train of logic could explain the UAE's support for Yemen's STC. The Saudis saw STC's takeover of the Hadhramaut province, which borders Saudi Arabia, as crossing a red line—they felt increasingly encircled by the UAE and its STC proxies. They also felt that their vital interests were being threatened, as access to the Red Sea via the Bab al-Mandab strait would be controlled by the Emiratis from outside and the Houthis from inside. Consequently, access to the Western oil export route, the only Saudi alternative to the Strait of Hormuz, would depend on a pro-Iranian actor and a competing regional power.

While Israel's attacks on Houthi targets were triggered by security concerns in the context of the movement's involvement in the Iranian "Axis of Resistance," its political engagement with southern separatists in Yemen has largely been conducted in concert with the UAE. This alignment is evident in the STC's political positioning towards Israel: as early as 2021, STC leader Aidarus al-Zubaidi indicated openness to recognising Israel and establishing relations within the framework of the Abraham Accords,[176] even after 7 October.[177] The prospect of open cooperation with this partner, including recognising a potential separatist state and redividing Yemen, has increasingly entered mainstream Israeli public discourse.[178]

The almost simultaneous move to elevate the status of the STC's "South Arabia" and Somaliland also offered Israel the chance to corner the Houthis from both sides. A win for the STC would also diminish the anti-Israeli axis in the Gulf, which was strengthened

[174] B. Rukanga, "Sudan accuses Ethiopia and UAE of orchestrating drone attacks on airport," BBC, 6 May 2026, www.bbc.com.

[175] R. Tedd, "Ethiopian Airlines Now Suspected of Fueling Sudan's War," *Rich's Substack*, 4 March 2026, https://richtedd.substack.com.

[176] "Yemen slams STC remarks on Israel normalization," *AA*, 4 February 2021, www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemen-slams-stc-remarks-on-israel-normalization/2133775.

[177] M. Ali Hirsi, "Yemen's Al Zubaidi on Southern independence and what comes next," *The National News*, 24 September 2025, www.thenationalnews.com.

[178] J. Genn, "UAE-backed forces seize South Yemen oil belt, reshaping war and Gulf power balance—analysis," *The Jerusalem Post*, 10 December 2025, www.jpost.com.

by the Gaza war. The proximity of Israeli-backed forces to Saudi Arabia could ultimately prompt that country to rethink its diplomatic approach to Israel, which would gain the ability to project power directly onto Saudi borders.

It was the top-down clientelism and encirclement policy conducted by the UAE and, to a lesser extent, Israel, rather than bottom-up affinities, that forged new connections between these separatist entities. Therefore, it was unsurprising that, following his loss of territorial control over Aden, Yemen's STC president, Aidarus al-Zubaidi, evacuated via Somaliland before moving on to the UAE. Throughout 2025, the UAE-operated military base at Bossaso airport in Puntland served as a key supply hub for Sudan's RSF. These included not only vital equipment, but also mercenaries, including from Colombia. From this staging point, they were routinely flown to Eastern Libya before crossing into Sudan's Darfur region.[179] However, by mid-2026, most new transports from Eastern Libya passed through Chadian territory before entering the RSF/Tasis-controlled part of Sudan, rather than using the direct separatist-to-separatist connection, which had become too vulnerable to aerial attacks. Berbera in Somaliland became a transit point for UAE supplies to the RSF's new bases in Ethiopia. It has been reported that these transports were driven overland through Ethiopian territory to Asosa. Without the UAE's influence, most of the links between the separatist entities in the region would not exist, except for neighbourly West Sudan—East Libya ties.

The Emirati-Israeli engine

While Israel and the US have heralded the 2020 Abraham Accords as marking a new era of wider Arab-Israeli rapprochement, in practical terms, it has focused on scaling up and formalising the strategic partnership between the UAE and Israel. This brought together Emirati finances and Israeli technology to achieve mutually beneficial goals in the region. The relationship has largely remained unaffected by the fallout from the events in Gaza since 7 October 2023, and both parties have interpreted the re-election of Donald Trump as a sign that the momentum of the Abraham Accords could be renewed. Commercial ties between the UAE and Israel have grown significantly, as have military cooperation, arms sales and intelligence links, all valuable to separatist entities.[180] Sometimes, as in Somaliland or Yemen, Israeli-Emirati cooperation reflected their broader regional policy priorities; in other cases, like Sudan, it was probably more of a side-effect of their military partnership.

[179] The working relationship between Haftar and "Hemeti" predated the latter's proto-state-building effort. RSF became involved in the Libyan civil war around 2019, working as mercenaries for Haftar and apparently bankrolled by the UAE.

[180] These included conducting a joint naval drill in 2011 (with US and Bahraini participation), jointly running an intelligence-sharing platform known as the "Crystal Ball"; opening of an Emirati subsidiary of an Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit Systems; deploying the Barak missile system to Emirati military facilities.

Since the early 2020s, Israel has pursued a presence in the Emirati-occupied Socotra archipelago, an STC stronghold off the Somali coast. Reports indicate that Israeli personnel have been operating at the Emirati intelligence base on Abd al-Kuri Island in the archipelago since at least 2024.[181] Satellite images even revealed the words "I love UAE" written in piles of dirt by workers digging an airstrip.[182] This strategic location enabled both the UAE and Israel to track potential Houthi attacks against their vessels. If the STC's secession from Yemen had not been aborted, Israel would likely have been interested in expanding its presence, alongside the UAE, into South Yemen's mainland.

Israel's recognition of Somaliland was widely interpreted as a joint Emirati-Israeli political and military endeavour. Against this backdrop, the President of Djibouti, Ousman Guelleh, described the UAE as a "vanguard of Israel" in the region. He said that it was they who "initiated" the process of recognition, later "selling" it to Israel.[183] Therefore, it is unsurprising that, in the immediate aftermath of Israel's December 2025 declaration, the authorities in Mogadishu did not retaliate against Israel—with whom it has no diplomatic relations—and instead cut relations with the UAE, ordering its military assets out of Somalia.[184] In April 2026, the UAE welcomed "Irro" in Abu Dhabi.[185]

Israel's recognition of Somaliland raised anticipation that the country would establish a permanent military base on its territory, something that President "Irro" did not rule out when asked about it during his first visit to Jerusalem. In the months following the declaration, satellite images revealed the construction of a dozen underground structures in the vicinity of Berbera airport (a site which had hosted UAE forces in 2017–19), along with radar and air defence systems. This pattern largely reflected the earlier expansion of the UAE's Bossaso base in Somalia's Puntland, where the deployment of Israeli ELM-2084 radars, suitable for air and maritime surveillance, has been observed.[186] According to reports, Israeli teams have repeatedly visited the site in Berbera.[187] This makes it likely that the new facility will also be open to Israeli personnel. As with similar

[181] E. Ardemagni, "Yemen: Houthis' Militarized Islands are Stoplights in the Red Sea," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 24 November 2023, www.ispionline.it.

[182] J. Gambrell, "An airstrip is being built on a Yemeni island during the ongoing war, with 'I LOVE UAE' next to it," AP, 28 March 2024, https://apnews.com.

[183] F. Soudan, "Ismaïl Omar Guelleh: «Les Émirats sont l'avant-garde d'Israël dans notre région», *Jeune Afrique*, 27 February 2026, www.jeuneafrique.com.

[184] Reactions to this order served as a test of Mogadishu's influence over its other semi-autonomous regions, which also developed military cooperation with the UAE: Puntland, where it operated a base since 2022 and Jubaland (squeezed on Kenya's border), where it had a presence since 2023. Both refused to comply.

[185] "Exclusive: UAE lobbying four countries to recognise Somaliland," *Somalia Today*, 4 May 2026, https://somaliatoday.com.

[186] F. Bossi, "The Emirates Armed Forces deploy the Israeli ELM-2084 radar in Puntland," *FW MAg*, 22 April 2025, https://fw-mag.com.

[187] "Israel's quiet security ties with Somaliland, *Geeska*, 23 June 2026, www.geeska.com.

arrangements, this would allow Tel Aviv plausible deniability regarding any military presence while retaining the operational advantages of working below the radar.

While the goal of winning strategic footholds on the coast of the Gulf of Aden is obvious and the two states share a common perception of threats, Sudan presents a different approach. There, the UAE has thrown its full weight behind the RSF/Tasis, which is currently restricted to its landlocked stronghold. From an Israeli perspective, this limits, if not eliminates, the options for utilising the long Sudanese coastline overlooking Saudi Arabia. Strategically, it would be far more desirable for the Israelis to engage with the Sudanese government. Before the war, they had encouraged it to join the Abraham Accords in 2021—a move that remained largely on paper—and later explored proposals regarding the potential resettlement of Palestinians[188]. Nevertheless, the UAE's continued support for the RSF, despite the high reputational risk and questionable returns, has also brought Israel closer to that faction and its proto-state. Some surveillance equipment could have been delivered by Israel-linked operatives,[189] and in early 2026, movements of cargo planes connected to the supply of UAE arms to Libya were tracked between military bases in Abu Dhabi, Israel, Bahrain, and Ethiopia[190] (the latter served as a supply route for the RSF in Sudan at the time).

By 2025, the RSF had initiated a modest charm offensive aimed at Israel. The group's advisor and de facto top diplomat, Youssef Ezzat, gave an interview to Israel's KAN, in which he compared the RSF's experience of war against the Sudanese army with Israel's fight against Palestinian groups.[191] "Hemeti," as with other Somaliland officials before him, has reportedly been discreetly promoting the idea of receiving some Palestinians if they were to be expelled from the Gaza Strip.[192] Following the RSF massacre in El Fasher in October 2025, the converging Emirati and Israeli narratives on the war in Sudan became apparent. At this time, UAE media outlets, seeking to whitewash the genocide conducted by their proxies in El Fasher, intensified their efforts to equate Sudan's army with the Muslim Brotherhood. On 30 October, just days after the RSF's massacre in El Fasher, Israeli media officials repeated the UAE's talking points, promoted by the controversial British-Bahraini influencer Amjad Taha[193] and posted

188 J. Federman, M. Lee, S. Magdy, "AP Exclusive: US and Israel look to Africa for moving Palestinians uprooted from Gaza," *AP*, 14 March 2025, https://apnews.com.

189 W.N. Robinson, "Blood and business: The Israel-UAE nexus fuelling Sudan's war," *New Arab*, 13 November 2025, www.newarab.com.

190 S. Hooper, O. Rickett, Exclusive: UAE flights linked to Sudan war tracked from Israel to Ethiopia, *Middle East Eye*, 21 January 2026, www.middleeasteye.net.

191 W.N. Robinson, *op. cit.*

192 S. Salem, "Egypt bitter as Sudan's RSF commander Hemedti proposes to host Gaza refugees," *The New Arab*, 28 May 2025, www.newarab.com.

193 Amjad Taha أمجد طه, post on X, 30 October 2025, https://x.com/amjadt25/status/1983681017123893751.

them on the country's official Arabic-language X account.[194] Additionally, both the ex-PM Hamdok's group and top RSF leaders have been reported to be conducting low-key visits to Israel to meet its MFA and intelligence officials[195][196].

Despite spearheading efforts to militarily and politically strengthen separatists in Somaliland, Western Sudan and South Yemen, the UAE itself has refrained from formally recognising their aspirations of statehood. Most notably, and somewhat surprisingly in the case of Somaliland, the UAE chose to remain a discreet backer of the process[197] rather than leading by example. In Sudan, following the 2025 escalation when the Sudanese government cut relations with the UAE, the UAE declared that it did not recognise the "Port Sudan authority"[198] (by then, Port Sudan served as the temporary seat of the Sudanese government) but fell short of lending full recognition to the Tasis. Furthermore, when the STC declared statehood, the UAE—the primary backer of the separatist project over the past decade—held back from open recognition, even at the peak of the movement's success, made possible by Emirati support.

Saudi reaction to the 2025 secessionist surge

The extensive regional build-up of UAE and Israeli assets elevated the stakes of the ongoing Saudi-Emirati competition and—through Yemen—reached the borders of Saudi Arabia, prompting the latter to react. The first and most spectacular element of this pushback was the Saudi intervention against the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen. This involved a direct attack on an Emirati ship supplying the separatists, resulting in a full withdrawal from Yemen by the UAE. The Saudis also sent troops over the border to support the PLC in regaining control over STC's possessions. When the militias previously supporting the STC changed loyalties and joined the offensive, it allowed the Saudi-backed forces to swiftly reach Aden and reverse both STC's territorial and political gains.

Once Yemen was under its control, the Kingdom moved on to reverse or at least limit the military, diplomatic and political gains achieved by the UAE and Israel through

[194] إسرائيل بالعربية, post on X, 30 October 2025, https://x.com/IsraelArabic/status/1983799560842465584?s=20.

[195] "Somoud officials linked to Hamdok travel to Israel," *Africa Intelligence*, 27 July 2026, www.africaintelligence.com.

[196] E. Husham, "RSF head Hemeti secretly cultivates ties with Israel," *Africa Intelligence*, 28 August 2026, www.africaintelligence.com.

[197] See, for example, media reports on alleged arrangements for Somaliland's recognition by Eswatini, Argentina, Zambia and the Dominican Republic: "Exclusive: UAE lobbying four countries to recognise Somaliland," *op. cit*.

[198] *UAE Does Not Recognize the Decision of Port Sudan Authority*, United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 May 2025, www.mofa.gov.ae.

their connections to other separatists. This entailed isolating Somaliland, as well as disrupting supply channels for the RSF/Tasis in Sudan, by reaching out to Emirati clients in Sudan's neighbourhood with long-term, alternative offers. Questions therefore arose as to the limits of this reaction. In open communication, Saudi officials gave assurances that, once the situation in Yemen had been resolved, the Saudi-Emirati feud would easily come to an end. However, subsequent events have proved otherwise.

This broader effort began with consultations held on 5 January 2026 between the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud; the Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi; and the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Badr Abdelatty. The Egyptians have long viewed the UAE's inroads into the Horn of Africa as benefiting their rival, Ethiopia. They have also become increasingly frustrated with Haftar, their nominal ally, over his role in fighting their other partner, the Sudanese government, right on their doorstep. Both countries therefore had good reason to join forces to prevent the effective division of Sudan and Somalia. On Somalia specifically, their ministers declared a "complete rejection" of unilateral actions by outside powers that threatened the country's sovereignty.[199] The day after the Cairo meeting, the Saudi public TV channel Al Ekhbariya warned that any state recognising Somaliland would be considered part of an anti-Arab and anti-Muslim camp alongside Israel.[200] This was followed by intense backdoor diplomacy to prevent others from following Israel's lead, while pushing the Somali government in Mogadishu to cancel security and port agreements with the UAE.[201] The public pretext was unauthorised use of Somali territory to facilitate the exfiltration of the STC leader from Aden. Another Cairo meeting, on 15 January, focused on the potential for a new military coalition in the region comprising Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Somalia,[202] and in early February, this was followed by the signing of a new military cooperation agreement with Somalia.[203]

Saudi Arabia played a role in consolidating Somalia's newly established Northeast State (NES), which is located in areas that Somaliland had previously claimed as its own territory. The Saudi ambassador was among the few foreign representatives to attend the 17 January inauguration ceremony of the state authorities in Las Anod.[204]

199 "Egypt, Saudi Arabia coordinate on regional crises ahead of first Supreme Council meeting," *Daily News Egypt*, 5 January 2026, www.dailynewsegypt.com.

200 هنا الرياض, post on X, 6 January 2026, https://x.com/AlriyadhHere/status/2008627425148567813.

201 "Saudi Arabia in talks with Egypt, Somalia on military coalition", *Bloomberg*, 16 January 2026, www.bloomberg.com.

202 *Ibidem.*

203 "Somalia, Saudi Arabia sign agreement on military cooperation," Al Jazeera, 10 February 2026, www.aljazeera.com.

204 N. Aden, Somali president attends inauguration of Northeast state leader in Las Anod, *TRT Afrika*, 17 January 2026, www.trtafrika.com.

There were also rumours that the Saudis were in talks with the NES about establishing a naval base on its territory (though at the time the NES's control of the Laasqoray port was far from established) to counterbalance the Emirati presence in Bossasso and Berbera, and that they were engaging with the pro-UAE Puntland authorities by offering them an alternative financial deal.

On the Sudanese front, January saw Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Somalia temporarily close their airspace to Emirati cargo planes supplying the RSF.[205] Egypt and Saudi Arabia have reportedly attempted to convince Libya's Haftar to distance himself from the UAE. As with Puntland,[206] they presented alternative proposals for military and financial support intended to outbid the UAE. According to reports, the Saudis seemed determined, with claims that Haftar's son Saddam—who oversees the RSF portfolio in Libya—was "literally summoned to Egypt."[207] Over the following weeks, the Saudis facilitated the implementation of an earlier arms supply deal that Haftar's Libya had signed with Pakistan, with at least five cargo planes reported as landing in Benghazi in March.[208] Outreach to Chad was conducted through the Saudi Fund for Development, whose executive director met with the Chadian prime minister in N'Djamena.[209] In mid-February, the Saudi foreign minister also attempted to persuade Ethiopia to stop allowing the UAE to use its territory to supply the RSF, with Abiy Ahmed reportedly rejecting the idea outright.[210] The Saudis have also increased their efforts inside Sudan. The beginning of 2026 saw a series of defections by senior RSF commanders and Tasis-affiliated political figures, shaking the cohesion of the proto-state. Saudi Arabia's authorities assisted the surrender of several prominent individuals to the government in Khartoum, including Major General Al-Nour Ahmed Adam "Al-Nour Guba" (formerly the third most senior figure in the RSF), alongside the notorious commander Ali Rizkallah "Savanna," by offering financial incentives to the defectors.[211] Saudi Vice Foreign Minister Waleed Elkhereiji has also reportedly been behind attempts to limit Emirati political influence by re-engaging elements of the opposition—including figures from the Tasis

[205] G. Kurtz, W. Lacher, S. Roll, "The Destabilising Role of the United Arab Emirates in African Conflicts," *SWP Comment*, No. 19, 19 May 2026, p. 4.

[206] Sultan Khalif, post on X, 8 January 2026, https://x.com/SultanKhalif9/status/2009296483049460070.

[207] "Egypt and Saudi Arabia pressure Libya's Haftar to stop UAE supplies to Sudan's RSF, *Middle East Eye*, 22 January 2026, www.middleeasteye.net.

[208] S. Matthews, "Pakistan delivers weapons to Libya's Haftar as part of Saudi-financed deal, sources say," *Middle East Eye*, 21 April 2026, www.middleeasteye.net.

[209] M. Moussa, "شاد – المملكة العربية #السعودية: رئيس الوزراء يستقبل المدير التنفيذي للصندوق السعودي للتنمية لبحث تعزيز الشراكة الثنائية," *ATPE*, 13 February 2026, https://atpe.td.

[210] "آبي أحمد لين فرحان انتم تدعمون الإرهاب... والأخير يتهم أبو ظبي بالعبث بأمن المملكة والمنطقة," *LebanGate*, 15 February 2026, https://lebangate.com.

[211] "Riyadh wires millions of dollars for two RSF defectors," *Africa Intelligence*, 2 July 2026, www.africaintelligence.com.

political coalition[212] and Hamdok's group, widely viewed as having a pro-UAE bias—and integrating them back into the fold of the Sudanese government.[213]

It is hard not to link the signing on August 7, 2026, of the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan to the efforts to curb the Emirati-Israeli inroads, often manifested in the separatist areas. It coincided with reports on the Pakistani arms supplies to Sudan and its defence pact with Somalia. In both cases, Pakistani military hardware, likely paid for by the Saudis, can be used by the central governments to gain an upper hand against the separatists[214]. There have also been reports that Turkey might suspend sales of drones to Chad and Ethiopia because of the country's role in supporting the RSF. Concurrently with working on the new regional military partnership, Saudi Arabia was reported to be blocking financial transfers to the UAE-based accounts[215].By September 2026, Saudi efforts to counter the emergence of breakaway states in the region had produced mixed results. Although the consolidation of power in the south of Yemen should have strengthened the fight against the Houthis, the Saudi-backed government's limited capabilities and the rift between separatists and unionists blocked any substantial progress in this area. Saudi Arabia largely succeeded in persuading the UAE to leave Yemen and in liquidating the STC's territorial fiefdom, thereby eliminating the STC as a viable political force. While it successfully fended off what it perceived as a direct threat to its borders, it could not change local pro-separatist sentiments. It helped to persuade other states against recognising Somaliland's statehood, but it was unable to do anything about further progression of bilateral relations with Israel; therefore, it did not halt "Irro's" momentum completely. In the case of Sudan, some important steps were taken towards dismantling the RSF/Tasis regional supply network. However, none of the UAE's key regional clients made the definitive U-turn the Saudis had hoped for[216]. The UAE proved itself adaptable in the face of a changing environment, modifying rather than abandoning its lifeline to the RSF/Tasis. While it is too early to predict the internal collapse of Western Sudan's quasi-state, growing tensions, contradictions, and defections have made the prospect of ending another UAE-related separatist project in the region less unlikely than before.

[212] "Riyadh quietly lobbies within Tasis ranks," *Africa Intelligence*, 6 July 2026, www.africaintelligence.com.

[213] "Riyadh secretly pieces together civilian government allied with Burhan," *Africa Intelligence*, 15 June 2026, www.africaintelligence.com.

[214] J. Sochacka, "The Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani Mecca Agreement," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 42/2026, 21 August 2026, www.pism.pl.

[215] A. England, N. Parasie, A. Al-Omran, "Saudi Arabia blocking payments to UAE accounts, business say," *Financial Times*, 8 July 2026, www.ft.com.

[216] This political setback can be attributed to Uganda, which previously played an important role in pro-RSF logistics. In early July 2026, on a government visit to Sudan, the Ugandan envoy rejected the parallel authority and recognised the Khartoum-based military-led government as Sudan's only legitimate authority.

Conclusions

In 2025, against the backdrop of crisis in the international order, a wave of separatist movements spread across the Red Sea area. It represents an ongoing strain test for the principle of inviolability of borders, already challenged by Russia's land-grab in Ukraine. The new separatist momentum that arose throughout 2025 resulted from a combination of internal dynamics within the states concerned and the involvement of regional actors, most notably the UAE and Israel.

The varied histories, trajectories and dynamics that govern the lifespan of each separatist project remind us that there is no single, universal model for breakaway state-building in the region. The STC's South Arabia proved popular but short-lived due to an unfavourable regional context. Western Sudan's Tasis-led quasi-state, born out of ethnic cleansing and massive displacement, is struggling to prove that its administration's future is more than a mirage. Somaliland, the oldest and most stable of these entities, received an unprecedented boost to its international ambitions from Israeli recognition at the moment when internal crises had brought it to its lowest point.

There is no universal principle of fuelling separatism embedded in the UAE's or Israeli policies. If there is a general guiding foreign policy principle that explains their unorthodox moves, it is their openness to revisionism and a willingness to challenge the status quo. Derived from their regional ambitions in an unstable and unpredictable environment, combined with high adaptability, a relaxed approach to international law and experience of avoiding consequences for their actions, they seek to avoid being viewed through the same lens as "ordinary" states. This situation makes those states eager to exploit separatist movements, turning them into one of their trademark foreign policy tools.

Partnering with separatist entities offers the UAE and Israel a unique set of advantages. Cultivating these ties helps establish politico-military logistics that are instrumental in exerting pressure on regional adversaries by surrounding them with proxies and client states. Linking up with separatist forces in Somalia and Yemen allowed the expansion of networks helpful in containing the Houthis while consolidating a foothold around the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb. By contrast, Sudan had no such strategic

payoff: while the UAE's bet on the RSF/Tasis temporarily increased its access to gold, it effectively blocked its path to the Sudanese section of the Red Sea, and provoked damaging international scrutiny. The move also exposed its regional client states to extra risks, such as the potential emergence of new rebellions and insurgencies.

There is no "separatist international" in the Red Sea area or the wider Middle East. Despite growing links between the separatist quasi-states stretching from Somaliland and Puntland to eastern Libya and the RSF-held Western Sudan, there is little to no exchange of state-building experiences between them. In most cases, without the UAE's influence, they would have very little interest in one another.

Although the UAE and Israel do coordinate and cooperate with separatist entities in the Red Sea area, this does not necessarily reflect common political goals. Both seek greater surveillance capacities against the Houthis and Iran in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, resulting in parallel strategies in Yemen and Somalia. In Sudan, however, their priorities diverge sharply—though this does not prevent ongoing technical and media cooperation regarding the conflict.

While the Saudi-Emirati feud remains overshadowed by other sources of tensions in the region, such as those around Iran or Israeli conflicts with neighbours, it consumes much of the main protagonists' energy and resources. Their rivalry, often centring around the separatist entities, has the potential to become one of the defining features of the Middle Eastern power game. Its latest chapter opened with the signing of the Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani Mecca Joint Defence Agreement in August 2026 which failed its first real stress test a month later by proving unable to immediately counter the Houthi advance on the Bab el-Mandeb shores.

The future does not look promising for the separatist projects concerned. Each of them has moved past the peak where successful implementation of its maximalist goals might have been possible. In the case of South Yemen, the reversal of fortunes was complete. Sudan's Tasis domestic support base is crumbling, and Saudi Arabia continues its attempts to dismantle its support networks in the region. Somaliland has, at the time of writing, been unable to win wider recognition, and Israel's decision has not established a new normal. Still, of the three, Somaliland's solid institutional foundations leave it best positioned to withstand existential challenges, even as its territorial footprint decreases and domestic tensions mount. The situation could deteriorate if Ethiopia's war with the Tigray province—and possibly also with Eritrea—reignites, as it could effectively collapse the boundary between Sudan's and Ethiopia's wars, merging two already interlinked theatres into a broader regional conflict. Under those circumstances, the UAE's bet on Ethiopia's government could introduce a volatile new dynamic, raising the stakes in the separatist regions, spanning from Somaliland and Puntland, through Sudan into Haftar's Eastern Libya.

Recommendations

- For the EU and the US, dealing with the reality on the ground, which often involves engaging with the de facto authority of separatist entities—whether ephemeral or stable—should not lead to diluting their commitments to the principles of states' territorial integrity and inviolability of borders;
- Potential formal recognition should always be guided by full compliance with international law as per the 1933 Montevideo Convention, including consent of the country's central authorities, none of which has been satisfied in Sudan, Yemen or Somalia;
- The issue of separatism in the broader Red Sea region should be considered a higher priority by states seeking to defend and strengthen multilateralism and international law, as it is directly connected to the evolution of the rules guiding regional security and involves influential global actors who exhibit selective adherence to international standards;
- The EU and the US should work closely to strengthen regional organisations, such as the African Union and IGAD, as the instrumentalisation of separatism and clientelism in the region undermines their agency and ability to fulfil their mandates;
- The international community should work specifically to prevent the re-emergence of 2025's regional separatist momentum, as this would pose a much greater challenge to the international order than an individual case. To prevent this, they must more actively engage the UAE and Israel to seek to limit their instrumentalisation of separatism.
- In the case of **Somaliland**, the EU and the US should continue engaging with the local authorities as a de facto authority on mutually beneficial issues (such as development, governance, security), while recognising the aspirations of those sections of society which do not identify with Somaliland authority, such as the NES;
- The EU and the US should support Somalia and Somaliland (as well as Puntland) in negotiating a consensual agreement on their future relations.

- In the case of **Sudan.** The US and the EU should designate the Rapid Support Force (RSF) a terrorist organisation to more effectively counter it and its foreign enablers. Any future peace settlement must bar the RSF/Tasis from continued governance of Western Sudan, as consolidating their control would permanently block the return of millions of refugees and perpetuate the world's biggest refugee crisis;
- The EU and the US should recognise that the UAE's continued support for the RSF is the single most important factor fuelling and prolonging Sudan's war. For this reason, US and EU arms supplies to the UAE should be conditioned on the country's full and verifiable withdrawal from providing the group with weapons.
- In the case of **Yemen**, the EU and the US should, with Saudi Arabia, promote a future settlement that recognises the Southern population's right to access to decision-making and preservation of identities connected to historic legacies, including that of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

The region's key stakeholders vs separatist projects

Country/factor	United Arab Emirates	Israel	Saudi Arabia	Turkey	Egypt	African Union	League of Arab States
Major involvement with:	Somaliland, Puntland, Yemen, western Sudan, eastern Libya, Kenya, Chad, Ethiopia	Somaliland, Yemen	Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Sudan's neighbouring states, coordination with the Mecca Agreement signatories, approach politically aligned with Algeria and Djibouti	Somalia, Sudan	Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea, eastern Libya	According to the mandate	According to the mandate
Supported groups	The Government of Somaliland, STC, RSF	The Government of Somaliland, STC, ambiguous stance towards Sudan (leaning towards supporting the interests of the UAE, and thus the RSF)	The Government of Somalia, the PLC, the Government of Sudan (Abdel Fattah al-Burhan)	The Government of Somalia, the PLC, the Government of Sudan (Abdel Fattah al-Burhan)	The Government of Somalia, the PLC, the Government of Sudan (Abdel Fattah al-Burhan)	The Government of Somalia, the PLC. In Sudan, the AU supports peace talks within the framework of the "Quintet" (AU, LPA, IGAD, EU, UN) and rejects the legitimacy of the RSF's "parallel government"	The Government of Somalia, the PLC. In Sudan, it supports peace talks within the framework of the "Quintet" (AU, LPA, IGAD, EU, UN) and rejects the legitimacy of the RSF's "parallel government"

Country/factor	United Arab Emirates	Israel	Saudi Arabia	Turkey	Egypt	African Union	League of Arab States
Key objectives	Maximising influence in the region and exploiting power vacuums; countering the development of democratic movements in the region; securing preferential (and ideally exclusive) access to key geographical locations; traces of hegemonic ambitions over Sudan	Maximising influence in the region and capitalising on power vacuums; bringing about a division within the Arab (and, more broadly, Muslim) bloc in line with the "periphery doctrine"; countering Iranian influence	Maintaining the position of a regional power; countering the development of democratic movements in the region; halting the expansion of the UAE-Israeli bloc; assuming a leading role in the region as the security architecture is changing	Increasing influence in the region; supporting governments associated with political Islam, countering Israeli expansion, and achieving regional leadership	Maintaining good relations with influential Gulf states (primarily the Gulf Cooperation Council, but also the UAE); maintaining the Somali government as a counterweight to Ethiopia; maintaining the government of Abdel Fattah al-Burhan to preserve influence in Sudan; supporting Haftar in Libya, whilst countering his cooperation with the RSF	Maintaining territorial integrity of Member States, stabilising the region, preventing the emergence of new separatist movements on the continent	Maintaining territorial integrity of Member States, and stabilising the region

Country/factor	United Arab Emirates	Israel	Saudi Arabia	Turkey	Egypt	African Union	League of Arab States
Approach towards the status quo	Revisionist approach, expansion of influence	Revisionist approach, expansion of influence	Conservative approach, with high priority given to countering revisionism, including the readiness to allocate significant resources and build a regional coalition	Conservative approach, particularly regarding territorial integrity; at the same time, openness to involvement in the internal affairs of other states	Conservative approach, with any revision of the status quo seen as a source of destabilisation and problems that translate, for example, into a deterioration of the economic situation in the region	Support for territorial integrity that is seen as a guarantor of stability	Support for territorial integrity that is seen as a guarantor of stability
Ideological foundations	Strong opposition to political Islam; combating fundamentalist groups (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood)	Strong opposition to political Islam, combating states supporting the Palestinian cause	Political Islam undergoing a transformation towards pan-Islamism	Political Islam undergoing a transformation towards pan-Islamism	Strong opposition to political Islam, nationalism, but also a pan-Arab and pan-African approach	Pan-Africanism	Pan-Arabism

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