Somalia's failure to normalise relations with Israel early led to a preventable dilemma

In today's shifting geopolitical landscape, timing is everything. Decisions delayed can become opportunities lost. Somalia now finds itself facing a diplomatic dilemma that, arguably, could have been avoided.

For decades, Somalia maintained a firm position of non-engagement with Israel, rooted in historical alignment with Arab States and strong support for the Palestinian cause. This stance reflected both political solidarity and domestic public sentiment. However, global and regional dynamics have evolved significantly, while Somalia's policy has remained largely unchanged.

Over the past few years, several Arab and Muslim-majority countries have taken bold steps to normalise relations with Israel. Nations such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan chose to establish diplomatic ties, driven by strategic interests in security, technology, trade, and international partnerships. These moves signalled a shift from ideological rigidity toward pragmatic engagement.

Somalia, however, did not follow this path. As a former Somali diplomat, I observed these developments closely. Through my work, I attended diplomatic engagements where Israeli representatives were present. These interactions provided insight into the potential benefits of normalisation.

Based on these experiences, I came to believe that gradual engagement and eventual normalisation with Israel could serve Somalia's long-term strategic interests. In a cautious and indirect manner, I shared this perspective within professional circles. However, such views were not welcomed. I was warned that continuing to advocate for normalisation could result in serious professional consequences, including the loss of my position.

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The message was clear: this was a sensitive and restricted subject. I was also cautioned about potential risks to my personal and family safety, which I did not fully understand at the time. As a result, I stepped back from engaging on the issue. This reflects a broader challenge: limited space for open discussion on key foreign policy decisions.

Meanwhile, the region continued to evolve. Somaliland—a self-declared independent region seeking international recognition since 1991—has demonstrated a more flexible approach.

By exploring normalisation with Israel, Somaliland appears to be leveraging geopolitical shifts to advance its own interests. This contrast is significant. While Somalia maintained a fixed policy, Somaliland has attempted to turn the same issue into an opportunity. What could have been a proactive strategy for Somalia has now become a reactive challenge.

At the same time, delayed foreign policy decisions have had broader consequences. Prolonged inaction has not only limited Somalia's diplomatic options but has also contributed to internal vulnerabilities.

Somalia continues to face serious security threats from extremist groups such as al-Shabaab and Isis-affiliated elements. In this context, strategic hesitation can deepen existing challenges and indirectly affect national unity.

In November 2023, Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre made remarks in which he referred to Israelis and Jews using the phrase "children of pigs and monkeys," while expressing support for Hamas. This raises serious concerns about the use of antisemitic rhetoric in political discourse.

This issue is not only about Israel. It is about strategy, timing, and adaptability. Somalia continues to face complex challenges, including insecurity, economic constraints, and rebuilding State institutions. Foreign policy must balance principle with pragmatism.

Expanding relations with a wider range of international partners could open opportunities in security cooperation, agriculture, water management, and technology. At the same time, any shift must be handled carefully. Public sentiment in Somalia remains strongly supportive of Palestine, and any move toward normalisation requires responsible leadership.

Ultimately, Somalia's situation highlights a key lesson: delayed decisions in diplomacy can narrow future options and carry consequences for national unity and stability. What once could have been a strategic choice is now a complex dilemma.

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