

Somaliland: Mixed motives

by GWYNNE DYER

Last week Israel was the first country in the world to establish diplomatic relations with Somaliland. Not Somalia, a wreck of a country on the East African coast that has been mired in civil war for the past thirty-five years, but Somaliland, a different country just north of there that has been peaceful, relatively prosperous and even democratic for all those years.

This is causing a diplomatic outcry because many countries suspect that the deal has a secret clause. They think Somaliland's president, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, may have promised to let Israel offload Gaza's two million Palestinians onto his country in return for recognising Somaliland as an independent state.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's motivation is clear. He still wants to expel the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip if possible, although his own cabinet will not let him defy President Trump's order to accept a ceasefire. But he knows how volatile Trump is: just one big Hamas strike could turn him around and let Netanyahu restart the war.

Netanyahu is slow-walking the talks on moving to the second phase of the ceasefire (ten weeks and counting), while the Israeli forces keep trying to provoke Hamas into doing something stupid (401 Palestinians killed and 1,108 injured since the ceasefire). But even if Israel got a green light from Trump to expel the Palestinians, where would it send them?

Every Arab state has said it will not be an accomplice in the ethnic cleansing of the Gaza Strip, but Somaliland would do as a destination. It's Muslim, it has room (6 million people in an area bigger than Bangladesh), it's not too far from home (just across the Red Sea from Yemen), and above all it's willing. But why would it let in up to two million Palestinians?

They would be excellent immigrants in smaller numbers (one of the best-educated populations in the Arab world), but normally no country would voluntarily bring in foreign immigrants who speak an entirely different language and are up to one-third of the entire existing population. However, Somaliland does not live in normal circumstances.

It's a classic case of 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure.' The British colony of Somaliland and the Italian colony of Somalia both got their independence in 1960, and the people of the smaller bit (Somaliland) voted to join the bigger bit in a unified 'Somalia'.

They forgot that all politics in Somalia is clan politics, and that the Isaaq, the main clan family in the northern, formerly British-ruled area, had no allies or influence in the formerly Italian-ruled south. The Isaaq came last in government and civil service jobs, in education and healthcare, in their share of the national budget.

Within a year the northerners had realised their mistake and voted heavily against the new constitution. It made no difference ? and when they protested, they were met with repression.

By the '80s the whole north was occupied territory and the repression had tipped over into genocide. It only ended when the dictator Mohammed Siad Barre was overthrown in 1991 and the former British colony reclaimed its independence and its name: Somaliland.

The rest of the once-united country then dissolved into almost perpetual civil war (which still continues), but Somaliland kicked free of the wreckage and has seen no further violence. It's a perfectly normal country in many ways ? an army, a currency, a school system and healthcare, regular elections ? but no other country recognises its government.

It is a victim of the basic rule of post-1945 international law: borders may not be changed by force. That's unfair to many parts of the world that are trapped in unhappy unions, or have managed to secede but don't get international recognition. However, if the rule puts an end to wars of conquest then it's a price most of the world thinks is worth paying.

The problem is that the rule is no longer being observed. Russia's attempted conquest of Ukraine is the most flagrant example, but the impending US attack on Venezuela would be an equally unjustifiable breach of the law. If those things are okay, then surely Somaliland can legally secede from Somalia without getting the latter's permission.

Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates will probably recognise Somaliland fairly promptly, because they have some interests in common with it. However, I suspect that Somaliland's president is stringing Netanyahu along: he already has the recognition, and in the end he probably won't help Israel ship the Palestinians out.