

State Recognition as a Maritime Security Strategy: Israel's Recognition of Somaliland in the Red Sea Crisis

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis pengakuan Israel terhadap Somaliland dalam konteks ketidakamanan maritim di Laut Merah pada periode 2023–2026. Penelitian ini berangkat dari pertanyaan mengenai bagaimana pengakuan negara dapat berfungsi sebagai instrumen strategi keamanan maritim. Tujuan penelitian adalah mengidentifikasi kepentingan strategis yang ingin diamankan Israel, menilai nilai geopolitik Somaliland, serta menganalisis implikasi pengakuan tersebut terhadap dinamika keamanan kawasan. Penelitian menggunakan kerangka Neorealisme dan Regional Security Complex Theory untuk menjelaskan hubungan antara tekanan struktural dan dinamika keamanan regional. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi kasus kualitatif melalui analisis dokumen laporan institusional, dokumen kebijakan, dan literatur akademik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengakuan Israel terhadap Somaliland berfungsi sebagai strategi untuk mengurangi kerentanan maritim di sekitar chokepoint Bab el-Mandeb melalui potensi akses ke infrastruktur strategis seperti Pelabuhan Berbera, namun langkah tersebut juga memicu sekuritisasi regional terkait isu integritas teritorial dan memengaruhi konfigurasi keamanan kawasan Laut Merah.

Kata kunci: *pengakuan negara; keamanan maritim; geopolitik Laut Merah; keamanan kawasan*

ABSTRACT

This study examines Israel's recognition of Somaliland in the context of maritime insecurity in the Red Sea during 2023–2026. The research addresses how and why state recognition can function as a strategic instrument for maritime security. The study aims to identify the strategic interests Israel seeks to secure, assess Somaliland's geopolitical value, and analyze the regional security implications of the recognition. The analysis applies Neorealism and Regional Security Complex Theory to explain the interaction between structural pressures and regional security dynamics. The research employs a qualitative case study design based on document analysis of institutional reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature. The findings indicate that Israel's recognition of Somaliland serves as a strategic response to maritime vulnerabilities around the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint by expanding potential access to strategic infrastructure such as Berbera Port. However, this move also triggers regional securitization related to territorial integrity and alters the security configuration of the Red Sea region.

Keywords: state recognition; maritime security; Red Sea geopolitics; regional security



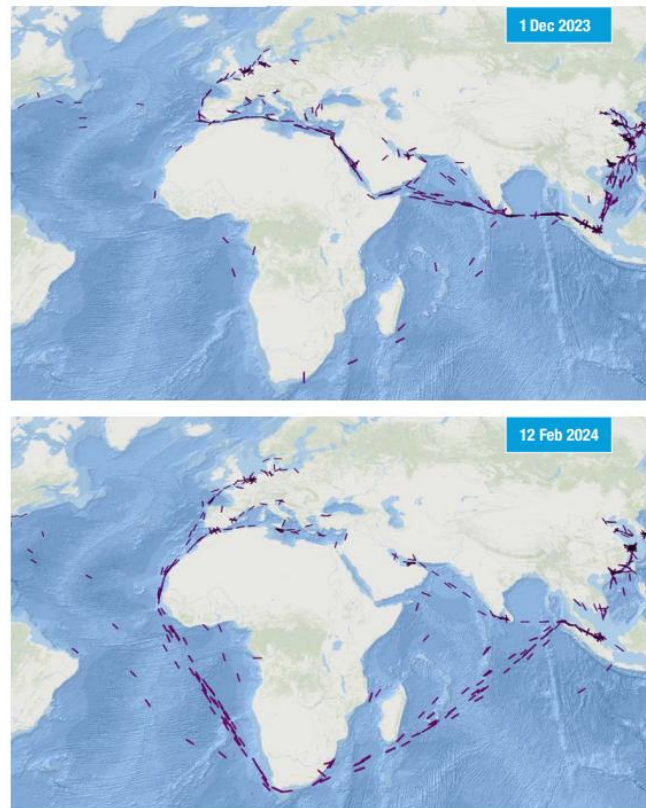
INTRODUCTION

The Red Sea serves as a vital maritime route connecting Europe and Asia via the Suez Canal (Sainz, 2025). However, disruptions in the Red Sea and the Suez Canal caused by the Houthis in November 2023 persist, jeopardizing the free movement of goods and interconnected global supply chains (Sainz, 2025). The Houthis are a political and religious armed group that represents Yemen's Shiite Muslim minority (BBC, 2025). They identify themselves as part of an Iranian-led "axis of resistance" against Israel, the U.S., and the West, alongside armed groups such as Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement (BBC, 2025). On November 19, 2023, the Houthis hijacked a merchant ship in the Red Sea and have since launched dozens of missile and drone attacks on commercial vessels (BBC, 2025). Initially, the Houthis stated they were targeting ships linked to Israel, or those traveling to or from the country. However, many of the ships had no connection to Israel. As a result, many major shipping companies have decided to avoid the Red Sea and are taking much longer routes via southern Africa (BBC, 2025).

From an economic perspective, this crisis reveals a clear mechanism. Attacks on merchant ships heighten perceptions of risk, prompting shipping companies to reroute their vessels, thereby increasing travel time and logistics costs. The Suez Canal, which contributed approximately \$9.4 billion—equivalent to 2.3 percent of Egypt's GDP in 2023—has seen a revenue decline of about 40 percent due to the Red Sea crisis, and if conditions continue to deteriorate, the impact could potentially spread to neighboring countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan through regional economic spillover effects (UNCTAD, 2024).

From a supply chain perspective, this disruption has caused many shipping companies to reroute via the Cape of Good Hope. Rerouting from the Suez Canal to the Cape of Good Hope significantly increases voyage distances; for example, the Ras Tanura–Rotterdam route has increased from 10,358 km to 17,975 km—about 42 percent longer—while the Singapore–Rotterdam route is now approximately 29 percent longer (UNCTAD, 2024). The logistical impact is also reflected in the increase in the India–Europe round-trip duration from 56 days with 8 ships to 63 days requiring an additional ship, as well as a potential 10 percent rise in global demand in TEU-miles if all Asia–Europe routes are rerouted (UNCTAD, 2024). Evidence from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis also shows a sharp increase in shipping costs in the Suez region from late 2023 to early 2024, confirming that "geopolitical risks" affect ship prices and availability (Dunn & Leibovici, 2024).

Figure 1 - Diversion of container shipping routes from the Suez Canal toward the Cape of Good Hope



Source: (UNCTAD, 2024)

In addition to manufactured goods and containers, this route is also crucial for the energy sector. Data shows that the flow of crude oil and petroleum products through Bab el-Mandeb in the Red Sea fell by more than 50 percent in the first eight months of 2024 (EIA, 2024). This demonstrates that the energy market is highly sensitive to threats at chokepoints. Strategically, this chokepoint has become a focal point of security competition because it connects the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the shipping network to the Indian Ocean (EIA, 2024).

Amid escalating security uncertainties in the Red Sea since 2023, Israel’s recognition of Somaliland on December 26, 2025, came at a strategic juncture (Bhansali, 2026). This recognition is noted as the first formal recognition by a UN member state of an entity that declared independence in 1991 (Reuters, 2025). The report frames this move not merely as a bilateral decision, but as a response within a regional context facing layered geopolitical, maritime, and security pressures during the 2023–2026 period (Bhansali, 2026). Conceptually, the recognition creates a “juridical disruption” that challenges Somalia’s sovereignty claims, yet has not yet directly altered the configuration of regional alliances (Bhansali, 2026).

In terms of port infrastructure and political economy, attention is focused on the Port of Berbera in Somaliland. This port is seen as an asset that can be directly linked to maritime security interests. DP World reports on the development of Berbera and its target expansion capacity of millions of TEUs per year, indicating efforts to make Berbera a regional trade hub in the Horn of Africa (Kherallah, 2021). An impact assessment by British International Investment estimates that the expansion of this port will provide additional economic benefits and contribute to Somaliland's GDP by 2024 (Hedley et al., 2025). This data is crucial to confirm that Berbera is not merely "potential" but an infrastructure that is already generating a measurable economic impact. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover the true motives behind Israel's recognition of Somaliland as a strategic geopolitical move in response to a crisis, rather than merely a matter of bilateral diplomacy.

The context of Somaliland's status itself underscores why the recognition of a single country can have far-reaching effects. Somaliland is an entity capable of establishing a system of government and relative stability, yet it continues to face obstacles to recognition. Hoehne (2022) emphasizes that success as a de facto state does not automatically lead to recognition, making strategies for external legitimacy a political arena in their own right. Within this framework, Israel's recognition can be interpreted as a significant shift in Somaliland's path to legitimacy as well as a catalyst for reactions, as it touches on border norms and security interests in the chokepoint environment (Hoehne, 2022).

Previous research has shown that security crises in the Red Sea disrupt shipping traffic and efficiency. Rodriguez-Diaz & Alcaide (2024) explain that regional instability correlates with changes in maritime traffic patterns in the Red Sea and Suez Canal corridors over the short term. These findings are reinforced by a study that assesses the crisis as a factor that undermines port resilience and increases operational uncertainty at supply chain nodes, such that the security impact of chokepoints operates through mechanisms of congestion and logistical volatility in the global network (Liu et al., 2026).

At the same time, the Red Sea is positioned as an interconnected security space. Mohammed (2024) explained that security threats in the Red Sea region are shaped by interactions and shared interests among regional states and forums, meaning that no single country determines threat assessments. Blakkisrud et al. (2025) also explained that recognition by other states not only provides symbolic legitimacy but can also alter patterns of relations and the level of engagement of external actors. Meanwhile, Darwich & Bakonyi (2025) explained that the construction and development of ports not only enhance economic and

logistical functions but also strengthen the political image and sovereignty claims of an entity in the eyes of international actors.

Although several studies indicate that crises in chokepoint regions, such as the Bab el-Mandeb, prompt states to adjust their strategies and regional relations, they have not comprehensively addressed Israel's recognition of Somaliland within a single, integrated analytical framework. Maritime studies generally focus on the impact on shipping flows and trade costs, while the literature on recognition highlights its implications for the status of de facto states in general; thus, the relationship between Israel's recognition and maritime security strategies has not been systematically explained. Building on this gap, this study analyzes Israel's recognition of Somaliland as a strategic move to reduce the vulnerability of maritime routes, with implications for security dynamics in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

Based on the above phenomena, the research question formulated is: What strategic interests does Israel seek to secure in the Red Sea? The initial argument of this study is that Israel's recognition of Somaliland is a strategic move oriented toward maritime security and its geopolitical position in the Red Sea. From a neorealist perspective, states are actors that prioritize security within an international system lacking a central authority; thus, the Red Sea crisis drives states dependent on maritime routes to seek strategic cooperation to mitigate risks and safeguard their interests. Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory, the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa are understood as a single interconnected security region; thus, Israel's recognition of Somaliland is not only related to Israel's national interests but also has the potential to influence the security responses and calculations of other states in the region.

In this framework, Somaliland is seen as a country that offers advantages in geopolitics, infrastructure, and diplomacy. Recognition has a multiplier effect because it not only builds bilateral relations but also triggers institutional responses that can reshape the region's political landscape and potentially make it more competitive and security-sensitive. This study aims to explain the motives and implications of Israel's recognition of Somaliland both empirically and theoretically by identifying Israel's maritime security interests in the Red Sea arena, explaining Somaliland's strategic value from a maritime geopolitical perspective, analyzing the dynamics of regional reactions and their consequences for the regional security configuration, and assessing how this recognition could potentially affect the balance of power and regional security structures.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

This study employs the Structural-Regional Security (SRS) Framework, which integrates the theory of Neorealism developed by Waltz (1979) and the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Buzan & Wæver (2003) As two analytical instruments that operate sequentially to address the research questions, neorealism explains why Israel acts—namely, due to the structural conditions of anarchy and the failure of collective security mechanisms, which drive the emergence of unilateral actions as a strategic necessity. RSCT further explains how these actions propagate within the Red Sea and Horn of Africa security complex and elicit diverse responses among regional actors (Saripudin & Juned, 2025). The integration of these two theories forms a coherent causal chain: structural pressures generate strategic actions, and these actions produce security externalities that influence the overall security dynamics of the region (Gebru et al., 2023).

Waltz's structural neorealism (1979) is based on the premise that the international system operates under conditions of anarchy, that is, the absence of a supranational authority capable of guaranteeing the security of every state. In such a situation, states cannot fully rely on collective security mechanisms and must act based on the principle of self-help, whether through the development of internal capabilities or through external balancing, to ensure their survival (Meibauer, 2023). Waltz (1979) asserts that structural pressures are the primary determinants of state behavior, not leaders' preferences or domestic ideologies. When structural pressures increase, states tend to respond with relatively similar patterns regardless of internal political differences (Au-yeung, 2025). Within this framework, external balancing through strategic partnerships or the expansion of geographical access becomes a rational choice when collective security mechanisms prove inadequate (Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2024).

However, Neorealism, which focuses on the system and state levels, does not fully account for the relational and regional consequences of such actions. To address this dimension, the study employs Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) (Buzan and Wæver, 2003), which posits that security dynamics tend to cluster geographically, leading states within a region to develop interdependent security perceptions. Threats and responses cannot be understood in isolation from their regional context. Key variables shaping security behavior within a complex include geographical proximity, power distribution, and historical patterns of friendship and enmity. In this study, the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa are understood as a single interconnected regional security complex, where Gebru et al., (2023) demonstrate that

interactions between the Middle East and this region create increasingly tight security linkages due to competition among external actors.

The concept of securitization within the RSCT serves as an analytical tool to understand regional responses to a state's strategic actions within the same complex. Securitization is the process by which an issue is framed as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). This process is not determined unilaterally by a single actor but is shaped by the interaction between actors who frame the threat and audiences who accept or reject that framing. The RSCT predicts that strategic actions affecting patterns of friendship and enmity within a regional complex will trigger a reorganization of interstate security relations, including the formation of new axes reflecting shifts in the distribution of perceived threats.

The SRS framework then operationalizes these two theories into three empirical indicators to structure the analysis of research findings. First, the intensity of structural threats is measured through data on maritime insecurity in the Red Sea as an indicator of systemic pressure underpinning the logic of self-help. Second, the value of strategic assets is measured by the geographical proximity of Berbera Port to Bab el-Mandeb and its logistical capacity, as a material justification for balancing strategies. Third, the dynamics of regional securitization are analyzed through official statements and institutional resolutions following recognition, as indicators of shifting amity-enmity patterns within the regional security complex. These three indicators operate sequentially. The first indicator explains the structural conditions driving Israel's actions; the second explains the material rationale for Somaliland's choice as a strategic partner; and the third explains its regional consequences within the RSCT framework.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, single-case design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research questions are explanatory, aiming to explain how and why Israel's recognition of Somaliland functions as a strategic instrument of maritime security, rather than measuring the frequency or statistical distribution of a phenomenon (Lamont, 2015). The case study design was chosen because this case is a phenomenon unprecedented in the international system and possesses high theoretical value for in-depth analysis (Yin, 2018). Case studies in international relations have proven to contribute to a cumulative understanding of world politics through process-based reasoning and causal mechanisms, particularly when researchers seek to link structural pressures to foreign policy decisions (Bennett and Checkel, 2015).

Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis spanning January 2023 to March 2026, covering three categories of sources. First, official documents and institutional data, including official statements from the governments of Israel and Somaliland, communiqués from the African Union Peace and Security Council, resolutions of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, reports from the Bank of Israel on the crisis's impact on trade, as well as quantitative data from the EIA, IMF, UNCTAD, and the World Bank. Second, the academic literature, including reputable journal articles published between 2018 and 2026, is relevant to Red Sea maritime security, the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa, the strategic value of Berbera Port, and the dynamics of state recognition. Third, policy reports and institutional analyses, including publications from British International Investment, Lloyd's List, and regional think tanks that analyze recognition of Israel within the context of Red Sea security. Data inclusion criteria require direct relevance to the research variables, verifiable sources, and publication within a timeframe covering the crisis period under study.

Data analysis was conducted using the process tracing method, combined with thematic analysis grounded in the SRS framework. Process tracing was used to trace causal chains as predicted by Neorealism and RSCT, employing a systematic causal mechanism analysis procedure (Bennett and Checkel, 2015). The first stage analyzes structural pressures and self-help logic using data on Israel's maritime vulnerabilities and the failure of multilateral collective security mechanisms as empirical evidence of the operation of anarchy. The second stage analyzes recognition as an instrument for balancing and strategic positioning by systematically comparing the available balancing options for Israel, along with their strengths, limitations, and actual choices for each. The third stage analyzes the geopolitical value of Berbera Port through data on infrastructure capacity, DP World investments, the Berbera Corridor, and its geographical proximity to Bab el-Mandeb as material justifications for the balancing strategy. The fourth stage analyzes the dynamics of securitization and regional responses through official statements and institutional resolutions of the African Union and the OIC as indicators of shifts in amity-enmity patterns within the security complex of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

The validity of the research is ensured through two dimensions consistently applied throughout the analysis. Construct validity is strengthened through source triangulation, in which each analytical claim is supported by independent sources (Denzin, 1978). The logical consistency among empirical indicators ensures internal validity, the theoretical mechanisms of Neorealism and RSCT, and the conclusions drawn at each stage of the analysis. Procedural reliability is ensured through the transparency of data selection criteria and the documentation

of a chain of evidence that readers can trace, enabling the study's conclusions to be evaluated using systematic, replicable procedures (Yin, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to analyze Israel's recognition of Somaliland within its maritime security strategy in the context of the Red Sea crisis during the 2023–2026 period. The primary focus of this study is how such recognition serves as an instrument to reduce Israel's vulnerability to disruptions in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, and how this step influences the security configuration of the Horn of Africa. The discussion covers an analysis of Israel's maritime vulnerabilities, the geopolitical value of Berbera Port, and the responses of regional organizations to territorial integrity issues.

Israel's Maritime Vulnerability in the Chokepoint Crisis

Israel's reliance on maritime trade with Asia increases the country's exposure to disruptions in the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb, as these routes constitute the shortest path between Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean. Etkes & Feldman (2024) notes that Israel's maritime imports from Southeast Asia and Oceania were valued at approximately 20 billion U.S. dollars in 2023, accounting for about a quarter of total civilian imports. The same study explains that the shipping distance from China to Israel increases from approximately 13,600 kilometers via the Suez Canal to about 29,100 kilometers via the Cape of Good Hope route, meaning that a change in route places time and cost pressures on the supply chain (Etkes & Feldman, 2024). These findings indicate that Israel's vulnerability to chokepoint crises is not only related to the threat of attacks but also to the elasticity of logistics costs that arises when shipping distances increase sharply.

This vulnerability is also evident in the port dimension, as activity at the Port of Eilat declined sharply after Houthi attacks destabilized the southern route. The Bank of Israel noted that maritime traffic at the Port of Eilat came to a near-complete standstill after the attacks began, even though the weight of goods unloaded at that port accounted for only about 0.7 percent of the total weight of goods unloaded at Israeli ports in 2022 and 2023 (Etkes & Feldman, 2024). The same study explains that vehicle imports have a higher dependency on Eilat, as approximately 48 percent of vehicles imported in 2022 were unloaded at Eilat, meaning disruptions at this port create specific sectoral pressures (Etkes & Feldman, 2024). The EIA also notes the existence of the Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline as infrastructure connecting

ports in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, meaning the stability of ports at the Red Sea end remains relevant to Israel's energy and logistics calculations (EIA, 2024).

The capacity of the global shipping market can mitigate some of the direct economic impacts. Still, this capacity does not eliminate the country's need to reduce security uncertainties along shipping routes. The Bank of Israel indicates that the value of Israel's imports from Asia-Oceania declined at a rate similar to the decline in imports from other regions after October 2023, so the study did not find an unusual decline that could be explained solely by rerouting (Etkes & Feldman, 2024). An International Monetary Fund report assessed that attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea occurred in a corridor accounting for approximately 11 percent of global trade, and the report noted that global transportation costs increased due to rerouting from the Suez Canal to the Cape of Good Hope, although these costs remain far below the 2021–2022 peak (International Monetary Fund, 2024). These findings indicate that Israel faces both security risks and logistical disruptions simultaneously, necessitating policies that mitigate risks in chokepoint regions without relying solely on market mechanisms.

Recognition as an Instrument for Expanding Access and Reducing Vulnerability

Somaliland's strategic value in maritime security calculations lies in the location of Berbera Port in the Gulf of Aden, close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and shipping routes leading to the Suez Canal. A report by British International Investment explains that the expansion of the container terminal in Berbera increased throughput capacity from 150,000 TEU to 500,000 TEU after the first phase was completed in 2021, while subsequent phases are planned to raise capacity to 2 million TEU through pier extensions and the addition of cargo handling equipment (Hedley et al., 2025). The same report also states that the development concession is managed through a long-term partnership with DP World and the Somaliland government, giving the port a more stable investment foundation and governance structure compared to many ports in conflict-ridden contexts (Hedley et al., 2025).

The development of Berbera also reflects the intersection of trade logistics and the regional security agenda, as this corridor is seen as an option to diversify access that was previously concentrated in Djibouti. The BII report notes that Ethiopia channels approximately 90 to 95 percent of its trade through Djibouti, so diversifying routes via Berbera has the potential to reduce this dependence and strengthen the resilience of regional routes (Hedley et al., 2025). The BII report describes the Berbera Corridor as a 937-kilometer connectivity route from Berbera to Addis Ababa and highlights DP World's investment commitment of 442

million U.S. dollars for port infrastructure upgrades, positioning the corridor as a cross-border logistics hub of both economic and political significance (Hedley et al., 2025).

Israel's recognition of Somaliland expands the institutional space for access negotiations, as formal recognition typically opens broader diplomatic ties and treaty channels compared to unofficial contacts. Isak Yusuf & Ahmed (2026) notes that Benjamin Netanyahu announced formal recognition on December 26, 2025, and describes how the Somali federal government responded with a diplomatic campaign emphasizing sovereignty and territorial integrity. Isak Yusuf & Ahmed (2026) assess that Israel linked the recognition to an ad hoc policy regarding the Houthi threat and note that Somaliland's location provides geographical proximity to the Houthi-controlled coastal regions of Yemen.

The link between the recognition and maritime security strategy is also evident in the industry's need for route protection and the state's need to support freedom of navigation through monitoring and response capabilities. Lloyd's List reports that tanker owners' associations have circulated advisories urging vessels to avoid the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the report notes that many operators are discussing enhanced security measures, including the use of armed escorts and stricter war risk assessments (Lloyd's List, 2024). The UNCTAD report also notes that hundreds of container ships rerouted via the Cape of Good Hope in early 2024, so the need for security support at points near Bab el-Mandeb remains relevant even as some ships avoid the area (UNCTAD, 2024).

Response to Territorial Integrity and Regional Securitization

The regional organizations' response to Israel's recognition has framed the Somaliland issue as a security concern requiring collective action. A communiqué from the African Union Peace and Security Council stated that the council expressed deep concern, condemned Israel's unilateral recognition of the so-called "Republic of Somaliland," and called for its immediate revocation, as the action was deemed a threat to Somalia's sovereignty and stability (African Union, 2026). The communiqué also emphasizes the principle of the inviolability of inherited borders and states that no actor has the authority to alter the territorial configuration of African Union member states, thereby positioning the recognition claim as an act without legal effect (African Union, 2026).

A broader multilateral response reinforces securitization through legal affirmation, as international organization resolutions link recognition to threats to regional peace. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation resolution expresses a firm rejection of recognition, describing the act as a violation of sovereignty and internationally recognized borders, and

assessing it as a direct threat to peace in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, 2026). The resolution also states that recognition is an illegal act with no legal effect, thereby placing the issue within the logic of “non-recognition” regarding situations arising from illegal actions (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation 2026).

The intensification of these responses creates space for competition over influence and the risk of escalation beyond formal diplomatic channels, as regional actors blend domestic security agendas with regional stability agendas. (Isak Yusuf & Ahmed (2026) assesses that these developments could intensify proxy competition and trigger retaliation by armed groups. Isak Yusuf & Ahmed (2026) also highlights concerns that regional actors may exploit the recognition issue to pressure domestic parties through economic and security instruments. Czerep (2026) assesses that recognition heightens the risk of dangerous processes in the Horn of Africa, as recognition could exacerbate long-standing conflicts and drive the formation of rival alliances that pressure states to choose sides. A World Bank report on the Red Sea shipping crisis confirms that attacks and conflicts in the shipping corridor have increased the intensity of conflict incidents and reduced maritime trade volumes at several regional ports, meaning that post-recognition political escalation has the potential to add another layer of uncertainty to an already strained logistics network (International Monetary Fund, 2024).

Structural Pressures and the Logic of Self-Help

Neorealism asserts that the anarchy of the international system is the primary determinant of state behavior. In the absence of a supranational authority, states are driven to rely on self-help mechanisms, including external balancing, to ensure their survival (Waltz, 1979). The operational question in this section is: how does the structure of the international system of anarchy shape the decision to recognize Israel? This logic holds that structural pressures, rather than leaders' preferences or domestic ideologies, are the primary determinants of foreign policy choices (Meibauer, 2023).

In this case, Neorealism yields the explanatory claim that Israel's recognition of Somaliland constitutes external balancing through geographical positioning. The Houthi military campaign since November 2023, which Operation Prosperity Guardian has not fully neutralized, creates structural pressure on Israel as a state heavily dependent on the Red Sea corridor for trade, energy imports, and strategic communications (Isak Yusuf & Ahmed, 2026). It is the failure of these collective security mechanisms that, according to Waltz (1979), structurally drives states to resort to unilateral action. Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi (2021) Reinforce this argument by demonstrating that security interdependence around the Red Sea is

systemic, such that any shift in the balance of power at one point immediately triggers strategic adjustments at another.

Israel's unilateral recognition on December 26, 2025, was carried out without coordination with the UN or the African Union and accurately reflects Waltz's "self-help" logic: when systemic institutions fail to provide security, states establish bilateral arrangements to secure relative advantage. The recognition of Somaliland, which opens access to the coastal region of the Gulf of Aden and the infrastructure of Berbera Port, serves as a concrete balancing instrument to expand Israel's security perimeter toward the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint. Donelli & Cannon (2021) note that the intensity of Middle Eastern states' external engagement in the Horn of Africa is determined by domestic security burdens and national capacity—two variables that, in Israel's case, both point to the need to expand strategic reach. The persistence of the crisis described by Rodriguez-Diaz et al. (2024) confirms that this recognition is not a momentary reaction, but rather a calculated response to accumulated structural pressures that have not been resolved through multilateral channels.

Balancing and Strategic Positioning

Having established the structural conditions driving unilateral action, this section analyzes why Israel chose recognition as a balancing instrument among available options. The operational question is: how does Israel's recognition of Somaliland function as a balancing behavior against regional threats? Neorealism predicts that states in an anarchic system will pursue external balancing to counter threatening powers, yet the choice of specific balancing instruments is determined by calculations of relative utility (Waltz, 1979). Table 1 presents a systematic comparison of three strategic options available to Israel during the 2023–2026 crisis period.

Table 1. Systematic Comparison of Israel's Balancing Options in Responding to the Houthis' Maritime Threat (2023–2026)

Balancing Options	Advantages	Limitations	Israel's Choice
Military escalation against the Houthis	Elimination of the direct threat; a deterrent signal to Iranian proxies (Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2024)	Risk of regional escalation; international condemnation; does not result in exclusive geographical access (Meibauer, 2023)	Limited airstrikes on Houthi infrastructure without escalation to ground operations (Clough, 2024)
Increased coalition participation (Operation Prosperity Guardian)	Security burden-sharing among more than 20 member states; multilateral legitimacy under a U.S. framework (House of Commons Library, 2025)	Benefits are collective, not exclusive to Israel; the coalition fails to restore full navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait because Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not join (Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2024; Waltz, 1979)	Participation but insufficient; the coalition's failure drives Israel's need for an exclusive strategy it can control independently (Kamali et al., 2024)
Recognition of Somaliland	Exclusive bilateral access to the Port of Berbera, approximately 290 km from Bab el-Mandeb; first-mover advantage over the UAE and Ethiopia (Donelli & Cannon, 2021; Gurjar, 2023)	Risk of diplomatic isolation; rejection by the AU and OIC, which deem recognition an illegal act with no legal effect (Ker-Lindsay, 2012)	Signed by PM Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Sa'ar on December 26, 2025; meets the criteria for neorealist relative gains because the benefits are exclusive and non-replicable (Ali, 2025; Waltz, 1979)

Source: Author's compilation

Table 1 shows that recognition of Somaliland is the only option that fully meets the criteria for external balancing in the Neorealist sense because it provides exclusive access, a geographical positioning that cannot be replicated by a multilateral coalition, and a first-mover advantage that strengthens Israel's relative position before competitors consolidate similar relationships. Meibauer (2023) asserts that the Neorealist logic of balancing prioritizes long-term security gains. Within this framework, the other two options fail to meet these criteria because military escalation does not yield a durable strategic foothold, while coalition

participation yields collective rather than exclusive benefits; thus, neither sufficiently addresses Israel's need to reduce dependence on security mechanisms it cannot control independently.

The choice of recognition also reflects the concept of relative gains central to Neorealism. Waltz (1979) argues that states evaluate cooperation not only in terms of absolute gains but also in terms of relative advantages over competitors. By recognizing Somaliland before Ethiopia, the UAE, or the U.S., Israel established an exclusive first-mover position, granting preferential access to Berbera Port infrastructure. Donelli & Cannon (2021) assert that the timing of engagement is a critical variable in determining the exclusivity of bilateral access arrangements in the Horn of Africa, making Israel's recognition timing not merely a coincidence but a deliberate strategic calculation.

Berbera's geographical proximity to Bab el-Mandeb makes it a concrete balancing asset, extending Israel's security perimeter to the point most critical for neutralizing the Houthi threat (Gurjar, 2023). Saripudin & Juned (2025) confirm that the Red Sea crisis has reoriented regional security calculations toward areas adjacent to the chokepoint, making Somaliland's position in the Gulf of Aden an increasingly contested asset. Under the logic of Neorealism, a state that secures access to such a strategic point earlier than its competitors holds a structural advantage in the regional security configuration. By formalizing recognition, Israel locks in that access before the competitive dynamics between the Berbera and Mogadishu axes close off further diplomatic maneuvering space.

Territorial Integrity and Regional Responses

The RSCT framework views security as a relationship among mutually influencing actors, and close geographical proximity typically reinforces how actors perceive threats in the region. The RSCT definition asserts that the security complex comprises states whose security perceptions and issues are interconnected, making it illogical to address them in isolation. On this basis, Israel's recognition of Somaliland can be understood as a trigger that activates the already strong interconnection of threats around the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint.

RSCT emphasizes that the structure of the complex is influenced by the distribution of power and by historical relations of amity and enmity, which shape the level of threat interconnection. In this context, the Red Sea and Horn of Africa region exhibits layered interconnections, as the conflict in Yemen, Somalia's stability, and cross-actor influence competition converge within the same maritime space. This characteristic provides a basis for viewing the region as an environment prone to tension, such that policy changes affecting territorial status quickly become a shared security concern.

At this stage, Buzan & Wæver (2003) explain that, in the political sphere, existential threats are often linked to the principles of sovereignty, legitimacy, and authority; thus, issues of recognition and territorial integrity can be framed as threats to a state's very survival. When a regional organization asserts the inviolability of borders and rejects unilateral territorial changes, it is elevating the issue of recognition to the level of a threat to the foundational principles of the regional political order. This explanation leads the discussion to the mechanism of securitization—the process by which ordinary political issues are transformed into security issues that require a special response.

Buzan & Wæver (2003) also emphasize that securitization operates through discursive practices that frame issues as existential threats, thereby creating space for more assertive actions and broader coordination. In this context, the collective response of regional organizations can be understood as an effort to uphold regional political norms and structures, as the erosion of border norms risks setting a precedent that disrupts cross-border stability. The emphasis on legality and the delegitimization of recognition also expands the issue beyond the bilateral sphere into the regional order, meaning the perception of threat is no longer confined to Somalia but extends to interconnected regional security concerns.

The intensifying interconnectedness of threats is also evident in the expanding impact of the issue across sectors, particularly the economic and energy sectors. Buzan & Wæver (2003) emphasize that security sectors can be interconnected because actors often integrate various sectors into policy practices and securitization processes. The World Bank explains that the Red Sea shipping crisis impacts shipping costs and port networks, thereby transforming security uncertainty into measurable economic pressure. The EIA also notes changes in energy flows through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait during the crisis period, meaning that security disruptions at this chokepoint have direct implications for energy commodity dynamics. This cross-sectoral interconnectedness reinforces the argument that post-recognition political escalation can add a layer of uncertainty to logistics networks already under strain.

The concept of external actor penetration within the RSCT helps explain why the regional response is not merely normative but also structural. The same book emphasizes that security complex theory links a state's internal conditions, interstate relations within the region, and regional relations with broader external powers. Israel's recognition can be understood as a form of external penetration that adds a layer of competition to a region already serving as an arena for influence rivalry. This penetration tends to reinforce existing patterns of enmity when the issue at hand is sovereignty, as regional actors perceive that external actions can alter the distribution of influence and drive realignment. This explanation helps demonstrate that

responses regarding territorial integrity and regional securitization are not spontaneous reactions but part of a security complex mechanism operating through interconnected threats. Overall, this discussion shows that Israel's recognition of Somaliland should not be interpreted as a neutral bilateral act but rather as an effort to maintain the regional order while managing the risk of escalation within a chokepoint environment already facing logistical and economic pressures.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes Israel's strategic interests in the Red Sea, Somaliland's geopolitical value, and the implications of recognition for regional security dynamics through the Structural-Regional Security (SRS) Framework. The findings demonstrate that Israel's recognition of Somaliland on December 26, 2025, functions as an instrument of external balancing under systemic anarchy, providing exclusive access to Berbera Port and expanding Israel's security perimeter toward the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint. RSCT complements this by showing how recognition triggers securitization by the African Union and OIC, reinforcing existing enmity patterns and altering regional security dynamics. Theoretically, this expands the concept of balancing beyond military instruments and alliances, demonstrating that state recognition can serve as a legitimate balancing tool. In practice, Red Sea stability depends not only on managing the Houthis' threat but also on competition for access to chokepoint infrastructure, as unilateral territorial actions risk amplifying regional uncertainty. Given temporal limitations ending March 2026, future research should examine post-recognition logistical cooperation, evolving strategic calculations of regional actors such as the UAE and Ethiopia, and whether AU-OIC securitization establishes norms that hinder similar recognitions or consolidate opposition, thereby weakening Somalia's territorial integrity position.

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