

## Geopolitics Beyond Recognition: Somaliland, Israel, and the Changing Meaning of Statehood

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**Abstract.** The evolving relationship between Somaliland and Israel raises urgent questions about how diplomacy beyond formal recognition is reshaping the politics of sovereignty and legitimacy in Africa, particularly in a region governed by strong territorial norms. This study aims to examine the political implications of emerging ties between a non-recognized polity and an established state, and to analyze how recognition operates as a strategic and political instrument rather than a purely legal act. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research relies on official statements, diplomatic communiqués, policy documents, and responses from regional organizations, which are analyzed using thematic analysis and qualitative discourse analysis to trace competing narratives of legitimacy and strategic framing. The findings show that three distinct legitimacy logics structure the interaction: performance-based legitimacy articulated by Somaliland through references to governance, stability, and elections; strategic-security legitimacy advanced by Israel through concerns over maritime security, counterterrorism, and regional influence; and normative-legal legitimacy emphasized by Somalia and regional organizations through the defense of territorial integrity and inherited borders. The study concludes that diplomacy without formal recognition is becoming an increasingly viable modality of geopolitical engagement in the Horn of Africa. The novelty of this research lies in conceptualizing recognition as a layered and contested process that links *de facto* statehood to regional security logics and norm entrepreneurship. The article contributes to scholarship on unrecognized states and African sovereignty norms while offering policy-relevant insights for regional organizations and external partners engaged in the evolving politics of statehood in the Horn of Africa.

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**Keywords:** *Somaliland; Israel; Diplomacy Without Recognition; Unrecognized States; Horn of Africa Geopolitics.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent fragmentation of several states reshaped global debates on sovereignty, recognition, and political legitimacy. Scholarship on contemporary geopolitics has highlighted how shifting security architectures, economic interdependence, and renewed great power competition have unsettled long-standing assumptions about territorial order and state authority (Carpenter, 2025; Chiramonte et al., 2025; Gardini, 2021; Lee, 2020; Mehring, 2024). Within this broader context, the Horn of Africa has emerged as a critical theatre where local governance struggles intersect with maritime corridors, energy routes, and external military presence (Ayal et al., 2025; Hailu et al., 2025; Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2020). Few cases encapsulate these tensions more clearly than the Republic of Somaliland, whose quest for recognition exposes the complex entanglement of internal state-building and external legitimacy in a changing international order (Bradbury, 2013; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014).

Emerging from the collapse of the Somali Democratic Republic in 1991, Somaliland declared independence after years of civil war, state repression, and institutional breakdown. In the absence of a functioning central authority in Mogadishu, political elites and clan leaders in the northwest embarked on an internally driven project of reconstruction that combined customary authority with formal political institutions (Bradbury, 2013; Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009). Over the following decades, Somaliland developed many of the institutional features commonly associated with sovereign states, including a constitution approved by referendum, competitive multiparty elections, a functioning parliament, an independent currency, security forces, and relatively stable governance structures (Bradbury, 2013; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014). While southern Somalia continued to experience protracted insecurity and externally supported stabilization efforts, Somaliland cultivated a reputation for hybrid governance and comparatively effective local administration (Besteman & Cassanelli, 2017; Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009; Menkhaus, 2020).

Despite these achievements, Somaliland remains internationally unrecognized and is officially regarded as part of the Federal Republic of Somalia. Its diplomatic isolation reflects deeply entrenched norms prioritizing territorial integrity and the preservation of inherited colonial borders, especially within Africa (Jones, 2025; Suleiman, 2025). The African Union (AU) and its predecessor have consistently defended these principles, viewing unilateral secession as a destabilizing precedent in a continent historically vulnerable to fragmentation (African Union Commission, 2025; Besteman & Cassanelli, 2017). From this perspective, the core research problem is the persistent disjuncture between Somaliland's performance as a *de facto* state and the international community's reluctance to confer *de jure* recognition, a disjuncture that raises fundamental questions about the meaning of sovereignty and legitimacy in contemporary African politics (Caspersen, 2012; Krasner, 1999; Yarom, 2026).

Various normative and policy responses have been proposed to manage similar tensions between self-determination and territorial integrity. International legal scholarship and diplomatic practice have explored frameworks such as autonomy arrangements, federalism, power-sharing, and conditional recognition as mechanisms to balance claims of distinct polities with the imperative of regional stability (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009; Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Kim & Shin, 2021). At the same time, critical work on sovereignty has underscored that recognition is not a neutral legal act but a political decision embedded in asymmetric power relations and strategic calculations (Gardini, 2021; Krasner, 1999; Mandaville, 2023). In Africa and the broader Middle East, these debates are further complicated by external interventions, energy geopolitics, and

maritime security concerns that link local statehood conflicts to wider regional and global rivalries (Carpenter, 2025; Chalaris, 2021; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Sultana & Cohen, 2025).

More targeted solutions have emerged in the literature on de facto states, which examines entities that exercise internal sovereignty without enjoying widespread external recognition. Scholars have documented how such polities use elections, institution-building, and development performance to construct claims to legitimacy both domestically and externally (Caspersen, 2012; Lefebvre, 2021; Pinfeld, 2023). Research on “engagement without recognition” shows that de facto states, their patrons, and neighboring countries often cultivate informal diplomatic, economic, and security ties outside formal channels to manage conflicts and reap strategic benefits (Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Shtern & Rokem, 2023; Wu & Yarrow, 2022). Comparative work on contested territories and secessionist conflicts in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean further illustrates how these arrangements allow actors to navigate between legal non-recognition and pragmatic cooperation (Abbasov & Souleimanov, 2022; Fernandes & de Matos, 2024; Meibodi & Feizollahi, 2024; Pegolo, 2021).

Governments in several countries of Africa also have contended with threats that had come from groups wanting self-rule and ending their long association with the central political authority. Some of these agitations for self-rule have shown greater poignancy than others. In Ethiopia, the threat from its coastal colony to break away lasted thirty years and culminated in a costly war which ended in 1991, with Eritrea emerging as a breakaway state. Ethiopia officially agreed to Eritrea’s independence in 1993 and made Eritrea the first successful breakaway nation in post-independent Africa. Eritrea breaking away from Ethiopia was attributable primarily to political rather than economic or cultural differences (Zhizhi & Achiákù, 2020)

However, the application of these specific solutions remains uneven and context dependent. Much of the existing research has focused on Eurasian and post-Soviet cases, with comparatively less attention to African de facto states whose fortunes are shaped by AU norms and external maritime interests (Caspersen, 2012; Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Lefebvre, 2021). Studies of informal diplomacy and counter-secession strategies highlight the importance of patron–client relationships and great power involvement, yet rarely consider how a single recognition decision by a non-regional actor can reconfigure existing norm constellations (Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2026). In the Horn of Africa, scholarship has examined port politics, sea access, and regional security dynamics around Berbera and the Red Sea corridor, but has not systematically linked these issues to the politics of recognition affecting Somaliland (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025). Likewise, work on Israel’s evolving geostrategic posture and its engagement in Africa and the Middle East has rarely been connected

to de facto state diplomacy on the African continent (Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024; Mitchell, 2024; Ram & Yacobi, 2023).

Overall, the literature indicates that while significant advances have been made in understanding de facto states, recognition politics, and regional security in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, these strands of scholarship remain largely fragmented. Research on Somaliland has illuminated its internal governance and diplomatic outreach, yet often treats external actors in aggregate rather than examining specific bilateral relationships (Bradbury, 2013; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014). Studies of Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean geopolitics emphasize maritime chokepoints, port infrastructures, and external military bases without foregrounding how recognition struggles shape the agency of local polities (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Mou et al., 2021). In parallel, analyses of Israel's foreign policy underline changing regional alignments, security partnerships, and energy strategies, but seldom explore their implications for African sovereignty norms and de facto entities (Cohen, 2020; Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024; Mason, 2024; Mitchell, 2024). This fragmentation leaves a gap for research that examines how a concrete act of recognition at the intersection of these domains reconfigures political dynamics across multiple scales.

This study addresses that gap by situating Israel's recognition of Somaliland within the intersection of de facto state diplomacy, African sovereignty norms, and evolving Horn of Africa–Middle East security logics. It builds on realist perspectives that emphasize strategic interests, power projection, and security externalities in state behavior (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979), while also incorporating constructivist insights into the role of norms, identities, and recognition in constituting international actors (Wendt, 1999; Wendt, 1999 is already present; keep as is) and postcolonial critiques that highlight enduring hierarchies and colonial legacies in the global ordering of statehood (Hastie, 2023; Thompson, 2020). The central hypothesis is that Israel's recognition of Somaliland is not simply a legal endorsement of statehood but a strategic and symbolic act that simultaneously contests and reproduces regional norms of territorial integrity. The scope of the study covers the period from Somaliland's declaration of independence in 1991 to the diplomatic developments of 2025, focusing on the political and normative implications of this recognition across national, regional, and international arenas.

Accordingly, the study pursues three main objectives. First, it assesses Somaliland's motivations for engaging Israel in the context of prolonged diplomatic isolation and intensifying competition over Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean governance. Second, it analyzes Israel's strategic interests in recognizing Somaliland, including security, maritime, and geopolitical considerations within its broader African and Middle Eastern policies (Eiran, 2022; Harbord,

2024; Mitchell, 2024; Ram & Yacobi, 2023). Third, it evaluates the wider political and normative implications of this recognition for Somalia's sovereignty claims, AU norms on territorial integrity, and the evolving practices of diplomacy without recognition. The guiding research questions are: Why is Somaliland pursuing engagement with Israel at this stage of its diplomatic trajectory; what strategic and political interests underpin Israel's decision to recognize Somaliland; and what are the broader implications of this development for sovereignty, regional stability, and international recognition norms. While the analysis is constrained by the evolving nature of Somaliland–Israel relations and the limited transparency of diplomatic negotiations, it seeks to provide a theoretically informed and empirically grounded account of how recognition operates as a contested instrument of geopolitics in the Horn of Africa.

## LITERATUR REVIEW

This section establishes the analytical foundation for understanding Somaliland–Israel relations by clarifying key concepts and outlining the main theoretical lenses used in the study. It focuses on the notions of diplomacy without recognition, *de facto* states, and informal diplomacy, and then examines how Realism, Constructivism, and Postcolonial theory illuminate the motivations, dynamics, and implications of interactions between Somaliland and Israel. In so doing, it connects debates on sovereignty, recognition, and geopolitical realignments that have intensified in recent decades in regions such as the Horn of Africa and the Middle East (Carpenter, 2025; Chiamonte et al., 2025; Coetzer et al., 2023; Gardini, 2021; Lee, 2020; Mehring, 2024).

### Concepts and Definitions

#### 1. Diplomacy without Recognition

Diplomacy is conventionally understood as formal relations among sovereign states based on mutual recognition and institutionalized interaction (Bull, 1977). Diplomacy without recognition, by contrast, refers to diplomatic engagement in the absence of formal legal recognition of statehood, whereby actors pursue political, economic, or security cooperation while deliberately withholding *de jure* acknowledgment of sovereignty (Ker-Lindsay, 2012; United Nations Security Council, 2025; Yarom, 2026). This practice reflects a pragmatic adaptation within an international system where strategic interests and security imperatives frequently take precedence over strict adherence to legal categories or normative consistency (Carpenter, 2025; Gardini, 2021; Mandaville, 2023; Markiewicz, 2025).

In the context of unrecognized or partially recognized entities such as Somaliland, states and non-state actors may cultivate informal ties to advance convergent interests without revising official recognition policies. These interactions can encompass trade agreements, port and

infrastructure arrangements, representative or liaison offices, security cooperation, and issue-specific partnerships on matters such as counterterrorism, migration management, or energy transit (Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Kim & Shin, 2021; Mou et al., 2021; Wu & Yarrow, 2022). The resulting patterns of “engagement without recognition” blur the traditional Westphalian assumption that recognition is a prerequisite for diplomacy, and instead highlight a more flexible and instrumental understanding of diplomatic practice (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009; Brown & Hermann, 2020; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2026).

For Somaliland, diplomacy without recognition with actors such as Israel offers opportunities for economic cooperation, security partnerships, and enhanced international visibility that would otherwise remain constrained by its lack of *de jure* status. For Israel and other external powers, engagement with Somaliland may serve wider strategic goals in the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean theatres, including maritime security, supply-chain resilience, and the management of regional rivalries (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025; Harbord, 2024; Mitchell, 2024). These practices exemplify how diplomacy without recognition operates at the intersection of legal ambiguity and geopolitical calculation.

## 2. De Facto States

A *de facto* state describes a political entity that exercises effective control over a territory and population, develops institutions that perform core functions of governance, and exhibits a sustained claim to sovereign status, yet lacks widespread international recognition (Caspersen, 2012; Herb, 2014; Osman, 2026). Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991 and has since maintained relative stability, established governing institutions, and organized competitive elections, while continuing to seek international recognition as a separate state. Despite its empirical attributes of statehood, it remains unrecognized by the United Nations and most sovereign states, and is formally regarded as part of the Federal Republic of Somalia.

*De facto* states challenge conventional legal definitions of statehood grounded in the Montevideo Convention (1933), which emphasizes a permanent population, defined territory, government, and capacity to enter into relations with other states. In many cases, such entities fulfill the first three criteria but are prevented from fully exercising the fourth criterion by political and diplomatic constraints, including counter-secession policies and regional norms of territorial integrity (Caspersen, 2012; Lefebvre, 2021; Pegolo, 2021). Comparative research on contested polities, including cases in the South Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean, underscores that *de facto* states often rely on external patrons, functional cooperation, and performance-based legitimacy to sustain their claims (Abbasov & Souleimanov, 2022; Fernandes & de Matos, 2024; Meibodi & Feizollahi, 2024; Pinfold, 2023; Vukosav & Radoš, 2022).

Understanding Somaliland as a de facto state situates its quest for recognition within a broader universe of entities that navigate between internal sovereignty and external exclusion. This framing clarifies why alternative diplomatic pathways, including informal relations with Israel and other partners, become strategic choices for advancing security, economic development, and normative visibility in the absence of formal recognition (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025). It also highlights how de facto states engage in norm entrepreneurship by emphasizing good governance, stability, and constructive international roles to challenge prevailing hierarchies of legitimacy (Caspersen, 2012; Lefebvre, 2021; Ram & Yacobi, 2023).

### **3. Informal Diplomacy**

Informal diplomacy encompasses a spectrum of interactions that fall short of fully institutionalized treaty relationships or formal recognition. It includes back-channel negotiations, parliamentary and party-to-party contacts, economic partnerships, cultural and academic exchanges, city diplomacy, and quasi-official representation offices (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2013; Riordan, 2007). Informal diplomacy enables political actors to pursue shared interests while minimizing the legal, political, or symbolic costs associated with formalizing ties, particularly in conflict-affected or normatively contested environments (Browne & Bradley, 2021; Chachashvili-Bolotin, 2023; Markiewicz, 2025).

In the Somaliland–Israel case, informal diplomacy may involve unofficial delegations, development initiatives, private-sector engagement, and security cooperation that precede or accompany any move toward formal recognition. Such practices resonate with broader trends in global politics in which cities, private firms, religious organizations, and transnational advocacy networks participate in shaping foreign policy outcomes alongside states (Hartal, 2022; Mandaville, 2023; Squire & Dodds, 2020). Informal diplomatic practices have been documented in relation to security governance, energy projects, and humanitarian assistance in contested settings in the Middle East and North Africa, where legal constraints coexist with intense strategic interaction (Chalaris, 2021; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Slesinger, 2022; Sultana & Cohen, 2025).

For de facto states, informal diplomacy can partially compensate for the absence of formal embassies and multilateral representation, providing channels for aid, investment, and security cooperation that enhance their functional integration into regional and global orders (Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Shtern & Rokem, 2023; Wu & Yarrow, 2022). Together, the concepts of diplomacy without recognition, de facto statehood, and informal diplomacy provide a conceptual vocabulary for analyzing Somaliland’s external engagements with Israel and other actors,

foregrounding the tension between legal recognition and political practice in contemporary world politics.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

To analyze the motivations and implications of Somaliland–Israel relations, this study draws on three major international relations traditions: Realism, Constructivism, and Postcolonial theory. Each offers distinct insights into why such interactions occur, how they are embedded in broader structures of power and meaning, and what they signify for evolving norms of sovereignty and recognition.

### **1. Realism**

Realism posits that international politics is characterized by anarchy, understood as the absence of a central authority, and that states primarily act to maximize security, power, and survival (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). From a realist perspective, foreign policy is driven by material interests and relative power capabilities; alliances and collaborations are therefore formed on the basis of strategic calculation rather than normative alignment. Recent analyses of geopolitical competition in regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Western Indian Ocean highlight how energy corridors, maritime choke points, and military basing rights shape state behavior in ways consistent with realist expectations (Chalaris, 2021; Hailu et al., 2025; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2020; Kim & Shin, 2021; Mitchell, 2024).

Informal diplomatic engagement between Somaliland and Israel can be interpreted as a function of these power dynamics and strategic interests. Somaliland's position along key maritime routes linking the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Aden renders it relevant for external powers seeking to secure trade, energy flows, and military logistics (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Mou et al., 2021). For Israel, engagement with Somaliland may offer strategic advantages in monitoring regional threats, countering rival influences, and diversifying security partnerships in a context of complex regional alignments and ongoing conflicts (Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024; Mason, 2024; Mitchell, 2024).

Realism also suggests that Somaliland pursues *de facto* diplomatic ties to bolster its own security and leverage its geopolitical position to gain external support. Even in the absence of formal recognition, entities with effective control over territory can act as quasi-states that seek alliances, security guarantees, and economic partnerships to enhance their resilience in an anarchic environment (Caspersen, 2012; Pinfeld, 2023). Empirical work on regional security complexes and proxy competition in the Middle East underscores how actors balance ideological commitments with pragmatic accommodations when faced with shifting threat perceptions and

power distributions (Abbasov & Souleimanov, 2022; Deheshyar & Aminabadi, 2022; Mehring, 2024; Saraswat, 2024; Shumilin, 2021; Sultana & Cohen, 2025). In this light, Somaliland–Israel engagement appears as an instance of strategic alignment driven by convergent security interests rather than purely normative considerations.

## 2. Constructivism

Constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas, identities, norms, and social practices in shaping international relations, arguing that state interests and preferences are not given exogenously but are constituted through interaction and shared understandings (Wendt, 1999). According to constructivists, material capabilities matter, but their meaning and political effects depend on the normative and interpretive frameworks through which actors perceive one another.

With respect to Somaliland and Israel, constructivism draws attention to how historical experiences, identity narratives, and discourses of legitimacy influence patterns of engagement. Somaliland's self-presentation as a stable, democratic, and responsible actor in a conflict-affected region is central to its bid for recognition and partnership, while Israel's narrative as a technologically advanced security provider and development partner shapes its outreach to African and Middle Eastern states (Ben-Porat et al., 2022; Cohen, 2020; Eiran, 2022; Ram & Yacobi, 2023). Constructivist work on narratives, mapping, and everyday practices in contested spaces demonstrates how symbolic representations of territory, borders, and sovereignty help to produce and reproduce geopolitical orders (Leuenberger & Schnell, 2020; Thompson, 2020; Yaar-Waisel, 2020).

In this perspective, informal diplomacy between Somaliland and Israel is not merely instrumental but also a site where identities and norms are negotiated. Discourse surrounding Somaliland's statehood and Israel's regional role shapes the perceived legitimacy of their cooperation, including appeals to shared experiences of marginalization, security threats, or developmental aspirations (Atallah, 2023; Hastie, 2023; Nashef, 2021; Osuri, 2020). Constructivists also highlight the importance of international norms such as self-determination, territorial integrity, and recognition, and how actors selectively invoke, reinterpret, or contest these norms to justify their policies (Bermejo-García, 2021; Clancy & Falk, 2021; Gardini, 2021; Mandaville, 2023). Somaliland–Israel ties can thus be read as an example of how non-recognized entities and middle powers participate in the ongoing reconstruction of diplomatic norms, including the normalization of engagement without recognition.

## 3. Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens that foregrounds how colonial histories, racial hierarchies, and imperial legacies continue to structure contemporary international relations (Said, 1978). It interrogates the ways in which global norms about statehood, borders, and legitimacy have been produced within unequal power relations that privilege certain actors and marginalize others. In doing so, postcolonial scholarship draws attention to the persistence of colonial-era boundaries, differential recognition practices, and uneven geographies of violence and development (al-TaHER & Younes, 2024; Devadoss, 2024; Hastie, 2023; Thompson, 2020).

Applied to Somaliland's international engagements, a postcolonial lens emphasizes how its quest for recognition reflects broader patterns of exclusion in the international system. Somaliland's position at the periphery of global governance can be understood as part of enduring colonial cartographies that locked African polities into inherited borders, while granting metropolitan and regional powers disproportionate influence over which claims to statehood are deemed legitimate (Jones, 2025; Thompson, 2020). Postcolonial work on Palestine and other contested territories illustrates how everyday practices, urban spaces, and infrastructures become sites where geopolitical domination and resistance are enacted, providing useful analogies for understanding the lived consequences of non-recognition (AbreeK-Zubiedat, 2023; Golan, 2024; Hammond, 2020; Iwaisi, 2023; Rijke, 2021; Thawaba, 2023).

Postcolonial theory also interrogates the asymmetrical power relations that shape interactions between Western-aligned states, regional powers, and African polities. Informal relations between Somaliland and Israel may thus be interpreted not only as strategic cooperation but also as negotiations within a system where resources, representation, and discursive authority are unevenly distributed (Chenoy, 2023; Hajat et al., 2024; Mandaville, 2023; Shumilin, 2021). This perspective underscores the need to examine how global security and economic agendas intersect with local struggles for recognition, and how marginalized actors exercise agency by appropriating, subverting, or reworking dominant diplomatic norms (Atallah, 2023; Osuri, 2020; Ram & Yacobi, 2023).

### **Fusion: Theory Meets Practice**

Each of these theoretical frameworks contributes a distinct analytical perspective. Realism highlights material interests, strategic alignments, and security dilemmas; Constructivism foregrounds identities, norms, and discursive practices; and Postcolonial theory draws attention to historical injustices, structural inequalities, and the colonial origins of contemporary geopolitical orders.

Combined, these approaches help explain why Somaliland and Israel might pursue informal diplomatic engagement in the absence of broad formal recognition. Their relationship reflects

strategic interests in maritime security, geopolitical positioning, and economic cooperation in an increasingly crowded Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean space (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Mitchell, 2024; Mou et al., 2021). At the same time, it is shaped by identity narratives and evolving norms surrounding de facto statehood, recognition, and South–South partnerships (Ben-Porat et al., 2022; Gardini, 2021; Mandaville, 2023; Wu & Yarrow, 2022). These dynamics unfold within a broader context marked by colonial legacies, racialized sovereignty, and contested borders that continue to influence which claims to statehood are validated or denied (Hastie, 2023; Jones, 2025; Osuri, 2020; Thompson, 2020).

Taken together, the concepts and theories discussed in this chapter provide a robust framework for analyzing Somaliland’s external engagements, particularly its evolving relationship with Israel. They move the analysis beyond simplistic accounts of unilateral decision-making, toward a more nuanced understanding of how structure, agency, history, and identity intersect in the practice of diplomacy without formal recognition. This fusion of perspectives informs the subsequent empirical analysis, which traces how recognition operates as a layered and contested instrument of geopolitics in the Horn of Africa.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive research design to examine the political and geopolitical implications of emerging ties between Somaliland and Israel. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for research questions concerned with meanings, norms, sovereignty claims, and diplomatic practices rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recognition politics and statehood are understood as socially constructed and embedded in historical and institutional contexts, which necessitates interpretive analysis grounded in political discourse and institutional behavior. The methodological choices therefore align with the theoretical framework drawing on realist, constructivist, and postcolonial perspectives on international order and geopolitics (Bull, 1977; Gardini, 2021; Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999).

### **Research Design and Approach**

The research adopts a qualitative case study approach, treating the Somaliland–Israel relationship as a single, analytically significant case. Case study methodology is appropriate when examining contemporary political developments within complex real-world settings where contextual variables are inseparable from the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim is not statistical representativeness but analytical illumination of how recognition, sovereignty, and strategic interest intersect in a specific instance of diplomacy without

recognition. Somaliland represents a long-standing de facto state with sustained internal governance capacity (Bradbury, 2013; Caspersen, 2012; Lefebvre, 2021; Walls, 2014), while Israel's recognition in 2025 constitutes a departure from prevailing diplomatic caution toward unrecognized entities and reflects broader shifts in regional security logics (Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024; Mitchell, 2024).

The case-study design is consistent with recent qualitative research on regional security, de facto states, and contested sovereignties, which often relies on intensive single- or small-n designs to unpack complex causal mechanisms and discursive formations (Abbasov & Souleimanov, 2022; Fernandes & de Matos, 2024; Pegolo, 2021; Pinfold, 2023; Sultana & Cohen, 2025). It also reflects methodological practice in contemporary geopolitics scholarship that foregrounds in-depth contextual analysis over broad cross-national comparison when exploring sensitive conflicts and evolving diplomatic alignments (Carpenter, 2025; Chiaramonte et al., 2025; Coetzer et al., 2023; Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2020; Lee, 2020; Mehring, 2024).

### **Case Selection and Temporal Scope**

The temporal scope of the study spans from Somaliland's declaration of independence in 1991 to Israel's formal recognition in 2025. This longitudinal design allows tracing historical antecedents, shifts in diplomatic positioning, and evolving regional reactions over more than three decades. Beginning in 1991 situates the analysis within Somaliland's state-building trajectory and its efforts to institutionalize governance and electoral processes (Bradbury, 2013; Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014). The endpoint in 2025 captures a critical turning point in external diplomatic engagement, marked by heightened debates on territorial integrity, maritime security, and regional alliances (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025; Jones, 2025).

The selection of this period reflects the need to link internal developments in Somaliland with evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Scholarship on Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean geopolitics, maritime chokepoints, and external military presence indicates that the decades since the end of the Cold War have seen a progressive densification of strategic interests in the region (Chalaris, 2021; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Mou et al., 2021; Sultana & Cohen, 2025). By focusing on 1991–2025, the study captures both structural continuities and key moments of change in the interplay between de facto statehood, recognition politics, and regional security configurations (Cohen, 2020; Eiran, 2022; Ram & Yacobi, 2023).

## Data Sources and Sampling Strategy

The study relies exclusively on secondary data. Secondary-source analysis is appropriate in contexts where primary data collection is constrained by political sensitivity, limited access, or diplomatic confidentiality, particularly in conflict-affected and normatively contested settings (Browne & Bradley, 2021; Markiewicz, 2025; Slesinger, 2022). Research on international diplomacy, sovereignty disputes, and regional security often depends on documentary evidence, official statements, and policy discourse as primary empirical material (Carpenter, 2025; Clancy & Falk, 2021; Mandaville, 2023; Shahbaz et al., 2024).

Sources were selected using purposive sampling guided by three criteria: relevance, credibility, and triangulation potential. Relevance required direct engagement with Somaliland's statehood and diplomacy, Israel's foreign policy, recognition politics, African Union norms, or Horn of Africa and Middle East geopolitics (Abbasov & Souleimanov, 2022; Ali et al., 2025; Caspersen, 2012; Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Lefebvre, 2021; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2026). Credibility prioritized peer-reviewed academic publications, scholarly books, official government documents, international organization statements, and established media or policy outlets (Ben-Porat et al., 2022; Gardini, 2021; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Mandaville, 2023; Mitchell, 2024). Triangulation potential ensured that empirical claims could be cross-verified across multiple source types.

The dataset includes peer-reviewed scholarship on de facto states and recognition (Caspersen, 2012; Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Lefebvre, 2021; Pinfeld, 2023), works on Somaliland's political development and port politics (Ali et al., 2025; Bradbury, 2013; Gurjar, 2023; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014), analyses of sovereignty and organized hypocrisy (Krasner, 1999; Jones, 2025), and theoretical accounts of international order and geopolitics (Bull, 1977; Cohen, 2020; Gardini, 2021; Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999). It also incorporates official statements from Somaliland authorities, the Government of Israel, the Somali Federal Government, and the African Union, alongside reputable media and policy analyses documenting political reactions and strategic framing (African Union Commission, 2025; Chenoy, 2023; El-Shewy et al., 2025; Hesová, 2025; Thussu & Chatterjee, 2026; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2026).

## Data Collection Procedures

Data collection followed four structured stages. First, a systematic literature mapping exercise was conducted to identify key theoretical debates and conceptual categories relevant to sovereignty, recognition, informal diplomacy, and regional security in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East (Carpenter, 2025; Coetzer et al., 2023; Mandaville, 2023; Shumilin, 2021). This

mapping included database searches, citation tracking, and review of specialist journals and edited volumes.

Second, official governmental and institutional statements were compiled and archived chronologically to capture shifts in rhetoric and justification. These included communiqués and press releases issued by Somaliland, Israel, the Somali Federal Government, the African Union, the United Nations Security Council, and other regional organizations (African Union Commission, 2025; Clancy & Falk, 2021; United Nations Security Council, 2025).

Third, media and policy analyses were gathered to document immediate reactions, expert commentary, and broader strategic interpretations of Israel's recognition of Somaliland. Sources included think-tank reports, policy briefs, and analyses from regional and international outlets focusing on security, energy, and maritime politics (Anouti & Fleming, 2025; Chenoy, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Mitchell, 2024; Sultana & Cohen, 2025).

Fourth, all materials were categorized into thematic clusters, including Somaliland's diplomatic motivations, Israel's strategic interests, Somalia's sovereignty claims, African Union responses, and regional geopolitical implications. This structured organization ensured transparency and analytical coherence prior to coding and facilitated systematic comparison across actor positions and time periods (Browne & Bradley, 2021; Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024).

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Two complementary analytical techniques were employed: thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis. Thematic analysis followed the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), encompassing familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of candidate themes, review of thematic coherence, refinement of theme definitions, and integration into a structured narrative. This approach is widely used in qualitative political research to identify patterned meanings across diverse textual sources (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Coetzer et al., 2023; Griffiths & Repo, 2020).

Coding combined deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework and existing literature, including categories such as sovereignty, recognition, territorial integrity, strategic interest, informal diplomacy, and de facto statehood (Caspersen, 2012; Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Krasner, 1999; Wendt, 1999). Inductive coding allowed additional themes to emerge from the data, including geopolitical signaling, normative defense, pragmatic engagement, and maritime security logics (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025; Mou et al., 2021). This dual strategy balanced theoretical grounding with empirical openness and is consistent with contemporary interpretive work on contested territories and regional conflicts (Abreek-Zubiedat, 2023; Brenner, 2024; Rijke, 2021; Thawaba, 2023).

Qualitative content analysis was applied particularly to official statements and formal declarations. Following Krippendorff's (2018) methodological principles, the analysis examined language use, frequency of key concepts, legal references, and framing strategies. Special attention was devoted to how actors invoked international law, regional stability, security cooperation, and historical precedent in justifying their positions (Bermejo-García, 2021; Clancy & Falk, 2021; Gardini, 2021). Comparative analysis across actors Somaliland, Israel, Somalia, and the African Union enabled identification of convergences and divergences in narrative construction and strategic communication (Boms & Ulusoy, 2021; Eiran, 2022; Ram & Yacobi, 2023; Shtern & Rokem, 2023). This systematic evaluation strengthened interpretive rigor and mitigated reliance on anecdotal inference.

### **Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Limitations**

Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research requires strategies tailored to interpretive inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Four measures were employed to enhance trustworthiness. First, data triangulation was used to cross-check findings across academic literature, official documents, and media or policy sources (Browne & Bradley, 2021; Carpenter, 2025; Mandaville, 2023). Second, theoretical triangulation was applied by interpreting findings through multiple international relations frameworks rather than a single explanatory model, integrating realist, constructivist, and postcolonial insights (Hastie, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2001; Thompson, 2020; Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999). Third, procedural transparency was maintained through explicit documentation of sampling decisions, coding categories, and analytical stages, following best practices in qualitative and interpretive research on security and foreign policy (Markiewicz, 2025; Squire & Dodds, 2020; Slesinger, 2022). Fourth, reflexivity was incorporated by acknowledging the politically sensitive nature of recognition politics and remaining attentive to potential interpretive bias in reading contested texts (Atallah, 2023; Devadoss, 2024; Osuri, 2020).

Ethical considerations were addressed despite the absence of human subjects. All materials analyzed are publicly available documents, and no confidential or classified sources were used. Care was taken to represent political positions accurately and to contextualize claims within broader debates rather than selectively quoting statements. The study does not advocate particular policy outcomes but seeks analytical clarity regarding motivations, interests, and normative implications, in line with critical approaches to geopolitics and international law (Chenoy, 2023; Clancy & Falk, 2021; El-Shewy et al., 2025).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, reliance on secondary sources limits access to confidential diplomatic negotiations and informal channels of communication that may

have shaped the Somaliland–Israel relationship behind the scenes. Second, the rapidly evolving nature of the relationship means that interpretations reflect a specific historical moment between 1991 and 2025; subsequent developments may confirm, nuance, or challenge some of the conclusions. Third, media and policy framing may introduce narrative bias; however, triangulation across diverse source types and critical reading practices mitigate this risk. Finally, as a single-case study, findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable. The goal is to contribute to theory-building and conceptual refinement regarding diplomacy without recognition and de facto statehood, rather than to provide broad empirical generalizations (Caspersen, 2012; Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Pinfeld, 2023).

Overall, the integration of qualitative case-study design, purposive sampling, structured data collection, thematic and content analysis, and triangulation strategies provides a coherent methodological framework. This approach enables systematic examination of how recognition, sovereignty, and strategic interest intersect in the evolving diplomatic relationship between Somaliland and Israel, while maintaining alignment between theoretical assumptions and empirical analysis.

## RESULT

This section presents the descriptive findings derived from thematic and qualitative content analysis of academic literature, official statements, and policy documents concerning Somaliland–Israel relations. The results are organized into four components: (1) empirical findings on the evolution of Somaliland’s statehood project and Israel’s engagement; (2) overarching thematic patterns; (3) actor-specific discursive framings; and (4) cross-cutting geopolitical and normative tensions. Analytical interpretation is deliberately limited in this section; extended theoretical engagement is reserved for the Discussion.

### Empirical Results Derived from Thematic and Content Analysis

#### 1. Somaliland’s Quest for Statehood

Somaliland’s contemporary claim to statehood is rooted in its distinct colonial and postcolonial trajectory. The territory was administered as the British Somaliland Protectorate until it briefly attained internationally recognized independence on 26 June 1960, and shortly thereafter entered into union with the former Italian-administered territory to form the Somali Republic on 1 July 1960 (Lefebvre, 2021; Thompson, 2020). The subsequent decades were marked by authoritarian rule under Siad Barre, centralization of power in Mogadishu, and violent repression, particularly targeting communities in the north such as the Isaaq, which contributed to growing demands for political autonomy and redress (Bradbury, 2013; Lefebvre, 2021; Menkhaus, 2020).

Following the collapse of the Somali Democratic Republic and the outbreak of civil war, political leaders and clan elders in the northwest unilaterally declared the restoration of Somaliland's independence in 1991. Since that time, Hargeisa has maintained a distinct institutional order that includes a constitution ratified by referendum, competitive multiparty elections, a bicameral legislature, separate security forces, its own currency, and a functioning civil service (African Security Analysis, 2025; Bradbury, 2013; Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014). Relative to southern and central Somalia, which have experienced recurrent insurgency, al-Shabaab violence, and external stabilization interventions, Somaliland has been repeatedly described as comparatively stable and administratively effective (African Security Analysis, 2025; Besteman & Cassanelli, 2017; Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025; The Week, 2025).

For more than three decades, Somaliland's authorities have sought to translate this empirical record into de jure recognition. Diplomatic efforts have included structured talks with the Federal Government of Somalia, as well as dialogue hosted in London, Ankara, Djibouti, and other venues, alongside engagement with regional organizations and individual states (Bradbury, 2013; Menkhaus, 2020; Somaliland Chronicle, 2026). African Union fact-finding initiatives acknowledged the territory's distinct historical trajectory and functional governance, but reiterated continental norms that prioritize territorial integrity and inherited colonial borders, cautioning against precedents that might embolden secessionist projects elsewhere in Africa (African Union Commission, 2025; Jones, 2025; Somaliland Chronicle, 2026; Suleiman, 2025).

Despite the absence of formal recognition, the divergence between Somaliland's internal consolidation and Somalia's protracted insecurity has remained a recurrent theme. The region's ability to hold successive elections, manage largely peaceful political transitions, and control major urban centers stands in contrast with continued insecurity and humanitarian crises in other parts of Somalia (African Security Analysis, 2025; Menkhaus, 2020; The Week, 2025). At the same time, exclusion from international financial institutions and multilateral forums has constrained Somaliland's access to development finance, investment, and treaty-making opportunities, reinforcing its search for alternative diplomatic partnerships and entry points into regional and global governance (Ali et al., 2025; Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025).

## **2. Early Contacts and Informal Engagements with Israel**

Empirical evidence indicates that interactions between Somaliland and Israel predate the 2025 recognition decision. Israel was among the states that acknowledged Somaliland's brief independence in 1960, although this recognition was superseded when the Somali Republic was

formed (Lefebvre, 2021). Archival references and secondary accounts suggest that in the mid-1990s President Ibrahim Egal communicated with Israeli leadership, including Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, expressing openness to formal ties framed around shared concerns about Islamist militancy and regional security (Lefebvre, 2021). Subsequent leaders, including President Dahir Riyale Kahin, intermittently signalled interest in closer engagement, linking such overtures to Somaliland's search for development partners beyond its immediate neighbourhood (Lefebvre, 2021; Somaliland Chronicle, 2026).

These early contacts, however, remained tentative and largely informal. Somaliland's political and economic ties to Gulf and wider Arab markets, especially in livestock exports and remittances, incentivized caution in any move perceived as politically sensitive in the Arab and Muslim worlds (African Security Analysis, 2025; Somaliland Chronicle, 2026). Secondary reporting indicates that successive administrations in Hargeisa weighed the potential benefits of ties with Israel against the risk of retaliation or diplomatic downgrades by key Arab trading partners and by organisations such as the Arab League (Lefebvre, 2021; Osuri, 2020; Zohny, 2023). As a result, engagement remained low-profile, consisting of exploratory dialogue, unofficial visits, and limited-sector cooperation rather than publicized formal commitments (Browne & Bradley, 2021; Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Wu & Yarrow, 2022).

### **3. Israel's Strategic Calculations in Africa and the Horn**

Israel's broader engagement with Africa has been cyclical, shaped by shifting geopolitical alignments, energy routes, and security concerns. In the early decades after independence, Israel established relations with a number of African states, followed by a period of diplomatic retrenchment in the 1970s in response to pressures associated with the Arab–Israeli conflict and anti-apartheid mobilization (Cohen, 2020; Eiran, 2022). Recent scholarship documents a renewed effort to expand Israel's diplomatic, economic, and security footprint on the continent, tied to interests in technology export, counterterrorism, and access to strategic maritime and energy corridors (Ben-Porat et al., 2022; Harbord, 2024; Mitchell, 2024; Wu & Yarrow, 2022).

The Horn of Africa and adjacent Red Sea–Gulf of Aden corridor have emerged as particularly salient for Israeli strategic thinking. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a critical chokepoint for global shipping and energy flows, while neighbouring theatres in Yemen, Sudan, and the Western Indian Ocean have become sites of intensified competition among regional and extra-regional powers (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Mou et al., 2021; Sultana & Cohen, 2025). Analyses of Israel's changing geostrategic posture note growing attention to maritime security architectures, early-warning capacities, and logistical nodes that can support naval and intelligence operations (Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024; Slesinger,

2022). In this context, Somaliland's long coastline, relative internal stability, and proximity to sea lanes are repeatedly identified as potential assets for security cooperation and projection of influence into the Red Sea basin (African Security Analysis, 2025; Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025; Israel–Somalia relations, 2026).

The Abraham Accords, initiated in 2020 and subsequently expanded, form another part of the empirical backdrop to Israel's engagement with Somaliland. These normalization agreements with several Arab states have been interpreted as recalibrating regional alignments and opening diplomatic, economic, and security channels that were previously constrained (Bakare, 2024; Bani Issa, 2025; Çinkara & Coşkun, 2023; Hemmatifar & Dastenaiei, 2024; Hussain et al., 2024; Sperling & Trumpfheller, 2025). Policy analyses suggest that the Accords facilitated broader regional experimentation with new partnerships, including in Africa and the Western Indian Ocean, where shared concerns about Iran, non-state armed groups, and maritime security have encouraged converging interests (Abbasov & Souleimanov, 2022; Anouti & Fleming, 2025; Chenoy, 2023; Sultana & Cohen, 2025). Within this evolving landscape, Somaliland is empirically situated as one of several sites where Israel seeks to link security cooperation, technology transfer, and diplomatic outreach.

#### **4. From Informal Dialogue to Formal Recognition**

The empirical record indicates that these overlapping dynamics converged in a diplomatic breakthrough on 26 December 2025, when Israel became the first United Nations member state to formally recognize Somaliland as an independent state (Al Jazeera, 2025; Lefebvre, 2021; Somaliland Chronicle, 2026). A joint declaration signed by representatives of the governments in Tel Aviv and Hargeisa established full diplomatic relations and announced intentions to open embassies, appoint ambassadors, and develop cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure, technology, and security (African Security Analysis, 2025; Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025; The Week, 2025).

Somaliland's official communications presented the recognition as the culmination of a protracted quest for international legitimacy and as a potential gateway to wider diplomatic inclusion and investment (Somaliland Chronicle, 2026; The Week, 2025). In contrast, the Federal Government of Somalia condemned the move as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, insisting that Somaliland remains a constituent region of the Federal Republic of Somalia (African Union Commission, 2025; Somalia Federal Government, as cited in Reuters, 2025; Suleiman, 2025). Statements by the African Union and other regional organisations reiterated longstanding norms of respect for inherited colonial borders and warned that external

recognition of secessionist entities could have destabilizing effects across the continent (African Union Commission, 2025; Jones, 2025; Thompson, 2020).

The recognition decision also elicited commentary from regional and international observers who linked it to broader patterns of geopolitical competition, maritime security concerns, and normative contestation about the future of territorial integrity in Africa and the Middle East (Carpenter, 2025; Chiaramonte et al., 2025; El-Shewy et al., 2025; Hailu et al., 2025; Harbord, 2024; Jones, 2025). These reactions underscore that the Somaliland–Israel relationship has significance not only as a bilateral development but also as an empirical instance of the evolving relationship between de facto statehood, recognition politics, and regional security orders.

### Overview of Thematic Patterns

Thematic coding of the dataset generated five dominant descriptive patterns that recur across academic studies, official statements, and policy analyses. These patterns capture how actors frame the Somaliland–Israel relationship in terms of diplomacy, security, legality, and normative order.

Table 1. Major Empirical Themes Identified

Theme	Core Empirical Indicators	Main Referencing	Actors
Pragmatic diplomacy	References to cooperation without prior recognition; issue-specific partnerships	Somaliland, Israel	
Strategic realignment	Red Sea security, Horn of Africa access, counter-influence dynamics	Israel, policy analysts	
Territorial integrity defense	Emphasis on sovereignty, colonial borders, African Union principles	Somalia, African Union	
Recognition as political signal	Language emphasizing precedent, historic shift, geopolitical messaging	Israel, international media	Somaliland,
Normative tension	Competing references to self-determination and territorial integrity	All actors	

Source: Author’s compilation based on thematic and content analysis of official statements, academic literature, and policy reports, 1991–2025 (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Krippendorff, 2018).

These themes show that Somaliland and Israel principally frame their relationship as a pragmatic and strategic partnership, while Somalia and African regional organisations foreground legal continuity and potential precedents. Policy analysts and commentators position recognition as a political signal embedded in wider debates about the resilience or erosion of territorial integrity norms (Carpenter, 2025; Gardini, 2021; Jones, 2025; Markiewicz, 2025).

### Somaliland’s Diplomatic Framing

Analysis of Somaliland’s official communications and policy-facing documents reveals three recurrent descriptive patterns that structure its external narrative regarding engagement with Israel and the broader international community:

1. Statehood performance narrative. Somaliland authorities consistently highlight institutional stability, electoral continuity, and internal security as empirical justification for recognition. References to regular elections, constitutionalism, and hybrid governance arrangements are deployed to demonstrate that Somaliland meets or exceeds the practical governance standards of many recognized states (Bradbury, 2013; Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014).
2. Pragmatic partnership framing. Engagement with Israel is described in terms of concrete developmental and security benefits rather than ideological alignment. Official statements emphasize prospective cooperation in areas such as agriculture, water and energy infrastructure, maritime security, and technology transfer, often linking these sectors to broader agendas of economic diversification and regional connectivity (African Security Analysis, 2025; Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Mou et al., 2021).
3. Legitimacy-seeking language. Recognition is repeatedly described as “historic,” “long overdue,” and “a step toward international normalization,” underscoring Somaliland’s view that external endorsement validates an already existing reality of de facto statehood (Lefebvre, 2021; Somaliland Chronicle, 2026; The Week, 2025).

Table 2. Somaliland Narrative Emphases

Category	Frequency in Statements	Illustrative Focus
Governance and stability	High	Elections, constitution, security, hybrid institutions
Economic development	Moderate	Investment, technology transfer, port development
International legitimacy	High	Recognition, normalization, inclusion in institutions

Source: Author’s compilation based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) of official Somaliland government statements, policy documents, and secondary academic sources, 1991–2025.

### Israel’s Strategic Positioning

Empirical analysis of Israeli governmental statements, media briefings, and policy commentaries identifies three main descriptive elements in Israel’s framing of its engagement with Somaliland.

First, Israeli discourse is strongly security-centric. Official communications consistently reference maritime security in the Red Sea corridor, regional stability in the Horn of Africa, and

enhanced counterterrorism cooperation as core justifications for the relationship (Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025; Johnson, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Protecting shipping lanes near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and strengthening partnerships with states and entities located along key maritime routes are invoked as central considerations (African Security Analysis, 2025; Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025).

Second, recognition is embedded within a broader narrative of strategic diversification and outreach in Africa and the wider Global South. Policy documents and expert analyses situate ties with Somaliland alongside deepening relations with other African partners in sectors such as agricultural technology, renewable energy, infrastructure, and security cooperation (Ben-Porat et al., 2022; Cohen, 2020; Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024; Mitchell, 2024). In this framing, Somaliland is presented as part of a wider network of partnerships that enhance Israel’s regional and extra-regional connectivity, rather than as an isolated or exceptional case (Mason, 2024; Wu & Yarrow, 2022).

Third, explicit legal and normative argumentation regarding Somaliland’s fulfilment of statehood criteria appears less prominent in Israeli discourse. Unlike Somaliland’s emphasis on constitutionalism and electoral performance, Israeli statements rarely elaborate on Montevideo criteria or doctrines of remedial secession, and instead foreground strategic convergence, security cooperation, and economic opportunity (Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025; Johnson, 2025; Reuters, 2025). References to governance and democracy appear intermittently, often in connection with broader claims that Israel is partnering with “responsible” or “stable” actors in the region (Ben-Porat et al., 2022; Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024).

Table 3. Israel’s Statement Patterns

Strategic element	Observed emphasis level
Maritime security	High
Regional influence	Moderate to High
Democratic solidarity	Low to Moderate
Legal argumentation	Low

Source: Author’s compilation based on qualitative content analysis of official statements by the Government of Israel and associated policy commentaries, December 2025–January 2026 (Krippendorff, 2018).

### Somalia and African Union Responses

By contrast, statements issued by the Federal Government of Somalia and by African Union organs display a markedly different pattern focused on sovereignty, precedent, and normative continuity.

1. Sovereignty defense. Somali governmental communications consistently affirm the indivisibility of the Federal Republic of Somalia and describe Somaliland as an integral region

- of the state. Israeli recognition is framed as an infringement of Somalia’s territorial integrity and political independence (African Union Commission, 2025; Somalia Federal Government, as cited in Reuters, 2025; Suleiman, 2025).
2. Precedent anxiety. Both Somalia and the African Union warn that acceptance of Somaliland’s secession could encourage similar claims elsewhere in Africa, thereby threatening regional stability. References to other secessionist conflicts and contested territories are invoked to underline perceived risks of “balkanization” or renewed fragmentation (African Union Commission, 2025; Jones, 2025; Pegolo, 2021; Thompson, 2020).
  3. Normative continuity. African Union documents reiterate the organization’s foundational commitment to the sanctity of inherited colonial borders and to collective approaches to boundary and recognition disputes (African Union Commission, 2025; Besteman & Cassanelli, 2017). In this framing, Israel’s recognition is presented as misaligned with established continental practice and norms, even as some statements acknowledge Somaliland’s relative stability and institutional development only in passing (African Security Analysis, 2025; Jones, 2025).

Table 4. Somalia and African Union Framing Patterns

Core concept	Relative emphasis
Territorial integrity	Very high
International law	High
Regional stability	High
Somaliland governance record	Minimal

Source: Author’s compilation based on thematic and qualitative content analysis of official Somali Federal Government and African Union statements, policy documents, and secondary literature, 1991–2025 (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Krippendorff, 2018).

### Cross-Cutting Discursive Tensions

Comparative analysis of the narratives presented above reveals a structural pattern of cross-cutting tensions among three legitimacy logics that are empirically observable in the data:

1. Performance-based legitimacy. Somaliland’s discourse foregrounds institutional performance, democratic procedures, and stability as core bases for external recognition and partnership (Bradbury, 2013; Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014).
2. Strategic-security legitimacy. Israel’s framing emphasizes maritime security, counterterrorism, and regional positioning, presenting recognition as part of a wider set of security and economic alignments in Africa and the Middle East (African Security Analysis, 2025; Cohen, 2020; Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024; Mitchell, 2024).
3. Normative-legal legitimacy. Somalia and the African Union prioritise legal continuity, territorial integrity, and established regional norms, treating external recognition of

Somaliland as a challenge to the postcolonial order of African borders (African Union Commission, 2025; Jones, 2025; Thompson, 2020).

These three logics do not merely conflict at the level of policy preference. They rest on distinct understandings of what constitutes legitimate statehood and appropriate international conduct. Figure 1 presents a descriptive model of the interaction among these logics, locating Somaliland, Israel, and Somalia/African Union at different points in a triangular field of performance, security, and legal-normative claims.

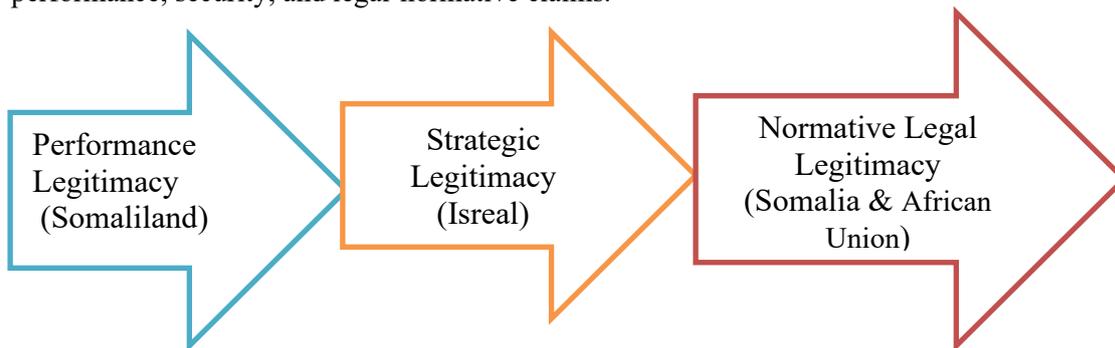


Figure 1. Competing Legitimacy Logics in Somaliland–Israel Recognition Dynamics (Descriptive Model)

Source: Author’s conceptual model based on thematic and content analysis of academic literature, official statements, and policy reports, 1991–2025 (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Krippendorff, 2018; Caspersen, 2012; Jones, 2025).

This descriptive model summarizes the empirical patterns identified by the analysis and provides the basis for the subsequent discussion of how recognition functions as a layered and contested instrument of geopolitics in the Horn of Africa.

## DISCUSSION

### Recognition Beyond Westphalian Orthodoxy

The Somaliland case challenges classical Westphalian assumptions that equate sovereignty with formal recognition and treat juridical status as the definitive marker of statehood (Krasner, 1999; Montevideo Convention, 1933). The empirical findings show that Somaliland has exercised significant diplomatic agency for more than three decades, despite the absence of de jure recognition, by building institutions, conducting elections, and engaging in targeted external relations (Bradbury, 2013; Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014). This pattern supports scholarship on de facto states which argues that effective control, governance performance, and external engagement can generate forms of functional sovereignty even in the absence of full international acceptance (Caspersen, 2012; Herb, 2014; Lefebvre, 2021; Pinfeld, 2023; Vukosav & Radoš, 2022).

Constructivist perspectives help explain why Somaliland's claims have gained traction with some external actors even as formal recognition remained elusive. Legitimacy emerges as a social construct grounded in shared understandings of what counts as responsible governance, rather than a simple binary of recognized versus unrecognized entities (Wendt, 1999; Ben-Porat et al., 2022; Gardini, 2021). The emphasis in Somaliland's discourse on stability, democratic procedures, and hybrid institutions resonates with broader normative trends that valorize good governance and security provision in fragile regions (Besteman & Cassanelli, 2017; Jones, 2025; Menkhaus, 2020). At the same time, work on territorial integrity and border regimes in Africa shows that colonial boundaries and postcolonial sovereignty norms remain remarkably resilient, even as they are increasingly contested in practice (Thompson, 2020; Jones, 2025; Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2020). The coexistence of robust internal statehood with external non-recognition in Somaliland therefore illustrates that recognition is neither fixed nor absolute but layered, negotiated, and contingent (Caspersen, 2012; Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Lefebvre, 2021; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2026).

### **Realist Strategic Logic in Israel's Recognition**

Israel's decision to recognize Somaliland can be read primarily through a realist lens that prioritizes security and strategic advantage over normative or legal consistency (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979; Cohen, 2020). The results show that Israeli discourse surrounding the recognition emphasizes Red Sea and Gulf of Aden maritime security, counterterrorism cooperation, and diversification of regional partnerships, while devoting comparatively limited attention to legal doctrines of self-determination or remedial secession (African Security Analysis, 2025; Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025; Johnson, 2025; Reuters, 2025). This pattern aligns with broader analyses of Israel's changing geostrategic posture, which highlight the importance of securing critical maritime chokepoints, energy routes, and forward positions in an increasingly crowded Western Indian Ocean and Eastern Mediterranean (Ali et al., 2025; Eiran, 2022; Gurjar, 2023; Hailu et al., 2025; Hokayem & Momtaz, 2024; Mitchell, 2024; Mou et al., 2021).

From this perspective, recognition functions as a geopolitical instrument rather than a purely legal endorsement of Somaliland's statehood. It creates opportunities for intelligence cooperation, infrastructure development, and logistical access in a region where rival powers and non-state armed groups are active (Abbasov & Souleimanov, 2022; Feldstein, 2023; Slesinger, 2022; Sultana & Cohen, 2025). The timing of the move, in the wake of the Abraham Accords and amid shifting alignments in the Middle East and Horn of Africa, suggests that Israel is seeking to embed itself more deeply in emerging regional security architectures that connect the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean basins (Bakare, 2024; Çinkara & Coşkun, 2023;

Hemmatifar et al., 2024; Mason, 2024; Sperling & Trumpfheller, 2025). In line with realist critiques of international norms, the case illustrates how powerful states selectively reinterpret principles such as territorial integrity when strategic benefits appear to outweigh reputational or diplomatic costs, particularly in postcolonial settings marked by governance gaps and contested sovereignties (Gardini, 2021; Herb, 2014; Lee, 2020; Shumilin, 2021).

### **African Union Norms, Territorial Integrity, and the Politics of Precedent**

The responses of Somalia and the African Union demonstrate the enduring strength of continental norms that privilege territorial integrity and inherited colonial borders (African Union Commission, 2025; Besteman & Cassanelli, 2017; Suleiman, 2025). Official statements frame Israel's recognition as a direct challenge to the postcolonial settlement and as a potential precedent that could embolden other secessionist projects across Africa (African Union Commission, 2025; Jones, 2025; Pegolo, 2021). This concern with precedent is consistent with long-standing regional anxieties about fragmentation and the political costs of redrawing borders in multi-ethnic states (Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Fernandes & de Matos, 2024; Gardini, 2021).

Yet the empirical evidence highlighted in the results indicates a growing tension between these normative commitments and the practical realities of governance. Somaliland has sustained relative stability, institutional continuity, and electoral processes over three decades, whereas internationally recognized Somalia has struggled with insurgency, external intervention, and recurrent institutional crises (Bradbury, 2013; Menkhous, 2020; Walls, 2014). This divergence echoes broader debates in political geography and international law about the "end of territorial integrity" as a taken-for-granted organizing principle and the rise of functional or performance-based understandings of statehood (Jones, 2025; Bermejo-García, 2021; Clancy & Falk, 2021). The African Union's position thus reveals a structural dilemma: how to reconcile a principled defence of existing borders with the need to account for empirically effective governance in de facto polities such as Somaliland (Caspersen, 2012; Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Lefebvre, 2021). The Somaliland–Israel case suggests that this dilemma is likely to become more acute where external actors are willing to depart from regional norms for strategic reasons (Carpenter, 2025; Hailu et al., 2025; Mandaville, 2023).

### **Diplomacy Without Recognition as a Structural Shift**

The three legitimacy logics identified in the results point to a broader structural transformation in international diplomacy in which engagement increasingly occurs outside traditional multilateral recognition frameworks. Scholarship on "engagement without recognition" and informal diplomacy shows that states and de facto entities increasingly rely on

quasi-official missions, technical cooperation, and issue-specific partnerships to bypass the constraints of formal status (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2013; Browne & Bradley, 2021; Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Riordan, 2007; Wu & Yarrow, 2022). Somaliland's trajectory, culminating in Israel's recognition, fits this pattern: over time it accumulated a dense web of informal economic, security, and political ties that partially compensated for exclusion from international organizations and prepared the ground for a formal breakthrough (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Somaliland Chronicle, 2026; The Week, 2025).

From a constructivist and postcolonial standpoint, these practices contribute to a more pluralistic and networked international order in which multiple layers of legitimacy and authority coexist and interact (Atallah, 2023; Hastie, 2023; Mandaville, 2023; Thompson, 2020). Cities, private firms, and transnational advocacy networks often play a central role in these informal arrangements, which can reshape geopolitical imaginaries and everyday experiences of borders and sovereignty (Hartal, 2022; Leuenberger & Schnell, 2020; Shtern & Rokem, 2023; Squire & Dodds, 2020). The Somaliland–Israel relationship illustrates how non-recognized entities can leverage such networks to exercise agency, attract investment, and influence regional security debates even while formal recognition remains partial and contested (Caspersen, 2012; Ram & Yacobi, 2023; Wu & Yarrow, 2022).

At the same time, the case underscores that diplomacy without recognition does not necessarily erode territorial integrity norms uniformly. Rather, it produces uneven and often ambiguous arrangements that can both challenge and reinforce existing hierarchies, depending on who benefits from new forms of engagement (Chenoy, 2023; Devadoss, 2024; El-Shewy et al., 2025; Markiewicz, 2025). Somaliland's partial inclusion through bilateral ties with Israel may strengthen its position vis-a-vis some external actors while leaving African regional institutions wary or resistant. This ambivalence reflects what some analysts describe as a transitional moment in global politics, in which geoeconomic, security, and normative logics intersect in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Chiaromonte et al., 2025; Coetzer et al., 2023; Shahbaz et al., 2024; Sultana & Cohen, 2025).

### **Human and Normative Implications**

Finally, the findings underscore that recognition politics has concrete human and societal implications that extend beyond abstract debates about sovereignty and law. For many Somalilanders, Israel's recognition has been interpreted as validation of decades of political resilience and self-governance, with potential benefits in terms of investment, mobility, and access to international forums (African Security Analysis, 2025; Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025; Somaliland Chronicle, 2026). Such developments can foster a stronger sense of collective dignity

and belonging after years of marginalization from formal diplomacy, echoing broader postcolonial discussions about the emotional and symbolic dimensions of international status (Atallah, 2023; Nashef, 2021; Osuri, 2020).

Conversely, in Somalia and parts of the wider region, the recognition has been perceived as a breach of sovereignty and as an external imposition on domestic political space, contributing to anger, protest, and fears of further fragmentation (Abdi, 2025; African Union Commission, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; Suleiman, 2025). Similar tensions have been documented in other contested settings where decisions about borders and recognition intersect with lived experiences of occupation, displacement, and everyday insecurity (Abreek-Zubiedat, 2023; Brenner, 2024; Griffiths & Repo, 2020; Hammond, 2020; Rijke, 2021; Thawaba, 2023). In the Horn of Africa, the Somaliland–Israel development also interacts with wider struggles over sea access, port politics, and economic inequality, which shape how different communities perceive the risks and opportunities associated with new diplomatic alignments (Ali et al., 2025; Hailu et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Patterson & Kuthy, 2024).

These human implications reinforce the argument that recognition should be analysed not only as a legal or strategic act but also as a practice that redistributes opportunities, vulnerabilities, and symbolic capital among populations (Caspersen, 2012; Gardini, 2021; Mandaville, 2023). As the case of Somaliland and Israel demonstrates, decisions taken by external actors can recalibrate domestic expectations, shape political narratives, and influence long-term trajectories of conflict and cooperation. A nuanced understanding of these processes is therefore essential for crafting responsible policy responses that minimise harm and support inclusive, peaceful outcomes in contested and partially recognized territories.

## **Recommendations**

Building on the empirical results and the foregoing discussion, several policy-oriented recommendations can be proposed for the main actors involved in the Somaliland–Israel relationship and for regional and international stakeholders.

First, for Somaliland, the analysis suggests the importance of consolidating gains from recognition by continuing to invest in internal governance, institutional capacity, and inclusive political processes. Strengthening public administration, electoral integrity, and rule-of-law institutions will reinforce performance-based legitimacy and reduce the risk that external partners view Somaliland primarily through a narrow security lens (Bradbury, 2013; Haggmann & Hoehne, 2009; Menkhaus, 2020; Walls, 2014). Deepening economic diversification, including through port development, regional trade, and infrastructure connectivity, can enhance resilience to

external shocks and demonstrate that recognition contributes to tangible developmental outcomes for citizens (Ali et al., 2025; Gurjar, 2023; Mou et al., 2021; Patterson & Kuthy, 2024).

Second, for Israel, engagement with Somaliland should be approached as part of a broader, carefully calibrated regional strategy. The findings indicate that recognition offers potential advantages in terms of maritime security, intelligence cooperation, and access to strategic ports, but also carries diplomatic risks in relation to Somalia, the African Union, and other African and Arab partners (African Union Commission, 2025; Eiran, 2022; Harbord, 2024; Jones, 2025; Mitchell, 2024). Israeli policymakers may therefore benefit from adopting a gradual, multi-track approach that combines security collaboration with visible contributions to civilian sectors such as health, agriculture, and education, in line with emerging practices of development-oriented diplomacy (Ram & Yacobi, 2023; Sperling & Trumpfheller, 2025; Wu & Yarrow, 2022). Transparent communication with regional organisations and neighbouring states could mitigate perceptions that the move is intended solely as a unilateral power projection.

Third, for Somalia, the Somaliland–Israel development underscores the need for sustained diplomatic engagement that combines defence of territorial integrity with pragmatic dialogue. While contesting unilateral recognitions that are perceived as infringing sovereignty, Somali authorities could explore confidence-building measures and structured negotiations with Somaliland that address security, economic, and constitutional questions in a sequenced manner (African Union Commission, 2025; Ker-Lindsay, 2012; Pegolo, 2021; Suleiman, 2025). Comparative experiences from other secessionist and autonomy disputes suggest that inclusive frameworks and third-party facilitation can help de-escalate tensions and create space for creative institutional arrangements, even where full agreement on status remains elusive (Caspersen, 2012; Fernandes & de Matos, 2024; Pinfold, 2023).

Finally, for the African Union and international actors, the case highlights the limits of rigid formal recognition frameworks in contexts where de facto governance and regional security concerns are deeply intertwined. Regional and global institutions may wish to consider mechanisms that allow for differentiated, conditional, or functional engagement with de facto entities, without necessarily prejudging final status, while maintaining strong commitments to conflict prevention and human rights (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009; Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Mandaville, 2023; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2026). Such mechanisms could include observer arrangements, issue-specific technical cooperation, or structured dialogue platforms, designed to integrate empirically effective polities into regional governance circuits in ways that reduce incentives for unilateral moves and external instrumentalisation (Carpenter, 2025; Coetzer et al., 2023; Gardini, 2021; Jones, 2025). In this regard, the Somaliland–Israel

relationship should be treated as an opportunity to rethink how the international community engages with contested statehood in Africa, balancing respect for existing borders with recognition of functional governance and the lived realities of affected populations.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the emerging diplomatic and political ties between Somaliland and Israel, revealing how non-recognized states can engage meaningfully in international relations despite formal exclusion. The empirical analysis demonstrated that Somaliland leverages performance-based legitimacy, emphasizing stable governance, democratic institutions, and security provision to project credibility, while Israel pursues strategic legitimacy, framing recognition as a tool to secure Red Sea access, counterterrorism cooperation, and regional influence. Somalia and the African Union, in contrast, foreground normative-legal legitimacy, emphasizing territorial integrity and the preservation of postcolonial borders. Together, these patterns illustrate the coexistence of competing legitimacy logics and the ways in which recognition, diplomacy, and power intersect in contested political spaces.

Theoretically, the findings reinforce the insights of Realism, showing that strategic interests can drive recognition even when normative or legal constraints exist; Constructivism, demonstrating that legitimacy is socially constructed and performative; and Postcolonial Theory, highlighting the influence of historical asymmetries and inherited territorial structures in shaping contemporary diplomatic decisions (Bradbury, 2013; Wendt, 1999; Herb, 2014). The study contributes to scholarship on de facto states and informal diplomacy by evidencing that engagement outside formal recognition can produce tangible political, security, and economic outcomes, challenging traditional Westphalian assumptions about the link between statehood and legitimacy (Kersten & Vollaard, 2019; Krasner, 1999).

Practically, these findings have implications for policymakers in the Horn of Africa, the African Union, and global actors: engagement with non-recognized entities can no longer be dismissed as purely symbolic, and strategic partnerships may advance stability, development, and security even in contested contexts. Future research could examine longitudinal impacts of such recognition on regional geopolitics, comparative cases of other de facto states, and the interaction between informal diplomacy and formal multilateral institutions. Overall, the Somaliland–Israel case provides a vital lens for understanding the evolving dynamics of recognition, sovereignty, and diplomacy in an increasingly complex international system.

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