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An analysis of ideational foundations of Morocco's integration into ECOWAS

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This article examines the impact of ideational elements on state efforts to achieve regional integration, with a specific focus on Morocco's pursuit of membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This study investigates how shared cultural heritage, historical narratives, and common views on principles such as free trade and security partnerships foster a sense of collective identity among states, thereby promoting deeper cooperation and integration within regions. However, conflicting ideologies can create obstacles to meaningful integration by breeding distrust and friction among participating states. This study argues that constructivism provides valuable insights into regional integration processes by emphasizing the importance of shared norms, identities, and social interactions among states. The analysis reveals that Morocco's aspiration to align with the interests of other African states in ECOWAS and promote economic integration serves as the ideological basis for its pursuit of ECOWAS membership, viewing it as a symbol of African resurgence and a means to strengthen its regional position. Although Morocco's history, laws, society, and politics align with ECOWAS norms, the absence of provisions for new members in the ECOWAS Treaty presents a hurdle for Moroccan accession. Nevertheless, this article suggests that the ECOWAS Authority of the Heads of State and Government could potentially address this issue by establishing a supplementary protocol to admit Morocco, underscoring the significance of ideological factors in shaping regional integration processes and institutions.

KEYWORDS

regional integration, ideational factors, ECOWAS membership, constructivism, shared norms, Morocco

1 Introduction

This article examines the impact of ideational elements on state efforts to achieve regional integration, with a specific focus on Morocco's pursuit of membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This study investigates how shared cultural heritage, historical narratives, and common views on principles such as free trade and security partnerships foster a sense of collective identity among states, thereby promoting deeper cooperation and integration within regions. However, conflicting ideologies can create obstacles to meaningful integration by breeding distrust and friction among participating states.

Thus, this study argues that constructivism, which emphasizes social constructs, identities, and norms shaping international behavior, provides valuable insights into regional integration processes by emphasizing the importance of shared norms, identities, and social interactions among states. Ideational factors shape regional integration by

influencing collective interests and interactions. Hettne (2003, p. 183) shows that shared identities, values, and cultural commonalities foster integration. Even where political ideologies and economic theories motivate integration as in the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the European Union (EU; Mitrany, 1966; Kloran, 1962), the underlying foundations often go back to historical legacies, cultural and social affinities.

The analysis reveals that Morocco's aspiration to align with the interests of other African states in ECOWAS and promote economic integration serves as the ideological basis for its pursuit of ECOWAS membership, viewing it as a symbol of African resurgence and a means to strengthen its regional position. Although Morocco's history, laws, society, and politics align with ECOWAS norms, the absence of provisions for new members in the ECOWAS Treaty presents a hurdle for Moroccan accession. Nevertheless, this article suggests that the ECOWAS Authority of the Heads of State and Government could potentially address this issue by establishing a supplementary protocol to admit Morocco, underscoring the significance of ideological factors in shaping regional integration processes and institutions.

Since 2010, Morocco has strategically redirected its diplomatic efforts toward sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the West African region, which is characterized by deep-rooted historical, social, and economic connections spanning numerous centuries. As a key component of this diplomatic shift, the Kingdom reinstated its membership in the African Union and actively pursued the negotiation and implementation of various mutually beneficial economic agreements with the sub-Saharan African nations. Notably, in 2017, Morocco submitted a formal application for full membership in the ECOWAS (Messari, 2020).

ECOWAS is central to this study because it is a key regional organization in West Africa, integral to regional integration. The focus on ECOWAS enables an analysis of Morocco's strategic interest in joining and its potential impact on both the organization and regional dynamics. ECOWAS is unique in regional integration due to its shared social, cultural, and economic characteristics among member states. Commonalities in language, culture, tradition, history, and commerce enhance regional cohesion and facilitate effective integration efforts. No countries outside West Africa are integrated with ECOWAS, although there have been significant association agreements with countries such as Chad and Cameroon (Galeazzi et al., 2017). Morocco's bid for full membership is particularly novel, especially given that other non-West African countries are also pursuing membership—Tunisia is applying to join, and Mauritania, a former member, is seeking reentry (Abderrahim and Byiers, 2018). This context underscores the evolving dynamics of regional integration and provides a unique opportunity to examine the implications of expanding ECOWAS's membership beyond its traditional geographic boundaries.

The main motivation behind Morocco's bid to become a transregional member of this esteemed regional organization includes a confluence of factors. These comprise rich historical ties binding Morocco to the West African region, underpinned by shared legacies and enduring cultural affinities. Furthermore, Morocco's application reflects a commitment to fostering the spirit of South-South cooperation, aimed at bolstering interregional collaboration and solidarity among nations of the Global South.

Moreover, Morocco's decision to seek membership in ECOWAS is based on the recognition of an intrinsic interdependence between the Kingdom's future trajectory and that of the West African region, signaling a strategic alignment of interests and aspirations.

Scholars have primarily approached this topic from the economic, institutional, power, and legal perspectives. Notably, Odeyemi (2020), Bakare (2019), Salawu (2019), and Kolawole (2018) examined Morocco's affiliation with ECOWAS, contending that ECOWAS constitutes an exclusive regional initiative involving solely West African states. However, these scholars overlooked the fact that the notion of regionalism extends beyond geographical constraints. It is a process shaped by multifaceted factors such as social, cultural, historical, economic, and political dynamics that respond to temporal domestic and international exigencies. For instance, the African Development Bank boasts 27 non-African members originating from Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas (African Development Bank, 2016), which have not impeded the bank's efficacy or diverted it from its mission of promoting development in Africa; instead, they significantly contribute to the bank's financial resources.

Consequently, analyzing Morocco's ECOWAS membership through realist, institutionalist, and economic paradigms fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges involved. This shortcoming arises from the neglect of social, cultural, historical, and identity-related factors in regionalist analyses, with an excessive focus on economic interdependence. This study seeks to address the existing gap in the literature by examining the ideational motivations underpinning Morocco's bid for full membership in ECOWAS. Specifically, it aims to investigate how historical connections, cultural affinities, and the principles of South-South cooperation influence Morocco's strategic initiative, extending beyond conventional economic and institutionalist frameworks. By employing a constructivist approach, this research will offer a more in-depth analysis of the regional integration dynamics at play and elucidate the broader implications for both Morocco and the ECOWAS community.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 The notion of region

The notion of "region" within academic discussion has elicited a diverse range of interpretations, reflecting its multifaceted character. Researchers like Huang et al. (2024) propose a limited understanding of regions, characterizing them as clearly defined spatial entities reminiscent of established geographical regions, such as Europe, the Balkans, and North and West Africa. On the other hand, Ghica (2013), Muntschick (2012), Fawcett (2004), and Grugel and Hout (1999) advocate for a more fluid conception, viewing regions as relative constructs contingent upon sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors.

Grugel and Hout (1999, p. 8) assert that regions do not remain static but rather undergo ongoing transformation driven by political contestations and intentional interventions from states and societal actors. Ghica (2013, p. 739) concurs, emphasizes the role of social actors in constructing regions, wherein diverse geographical entities are imbued with a collective identity. Building

on this idea, Hettne (2003, p. 183) conceives of regions as socially constituted phenomena arising from interactions and mutual understanding among social actors.

This underscores the belief that regions are socially constructed entities crafted to suit the specific objectives and interests of the communities that bring them into being. Moreover, it accentuates the dynamic nature of regions that can expand or contract in response to interactions and intersubjective dynamics among actors within their purview.

2.2 A constructivist perspective on regional integration

Regional integration has grown as an offshoot of international relations and witnessed significant growth, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War (Fawcett, 2004). Mainly dominated by functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, the field boasts of different analytical models and frameworks, including constructivism and the new regionalism approach (NRA) as Soderbaum and Grant (2016) have observed. In this section, a constructivist framework is developed to analyze regional integration in the ECOWAS to explain the ideational foundations of the Moroccan membership application.

The social theory of international politics posits that international economic, political, and social reality is socially constructed and that this accounts for all changes in the international system. Change occurs because of interactions and shared values that provide grounds for understanding between actors (Wendt, 1998, 1996, 1995). In a regional system, interactions and shared values allow states to develop ideas, norms, and identities that distinguish themselves from others. These worldviews constructed by states develop in stages and change from time to time due to developments that are internal and/or external to the regional system, as Ghica (2013) observed. These developed norms, ideas, and identities explain the interests and goals of states in any regional system and provide the prism within which a group of states interacts with its external environment. Various integration projects have often responded to different issues from national governments, the public in member states, civil social or other interests, including the private sector, and transnational issues such as migration and terrorism.

The need for enlargement to admit new members, the need to approve the exit of members, or the need to create a new or broaden existing policy domain allows the states in the regional systems to review and shift their goals to satisfy the demands of the time. Regional integration is a continuous process that responds to issues as they appear (Hettne and Soderbaum, 2000). The expansion of the scope of regional organizations can be attributed to the integration process, which evolves over time to encompass different policy domains.

In 1975, ECOWAS was established as a regional union by 15 West African countries to coordinate the sub-region's economic development (Suleiman et al., 2024). However, in 1977, Cape Verde was admitted as the 16th member (Aminu and Raja, 2021). The organization's scope also expanded to include political, peace, and security affairs. Consequently, the ECOWAS Monitoring

Group (ECOMOG), a multilateral military force, was established in 1990 to monitor ceasefires in two member states and was subsequently deployed in Liberia before extending its operations to Sierra Leone (Aminu and Raja, 2021). Morocco's application for membership in the ECOWAS is grounded in its long-standing historical, economic, and social ties with the region. This rationale was articulated by Rachid Abdi, Vice President of the Moroccan Parliament, during his presentation at the 51st Ordinary Summit of ECOWAS held in Monrovia in 2017 (Channels Television, 2018). These links have been sustained through postcolonial boundaries, which were defined by the indelible prints left by centuries of trade, culture, and religion across the Trans-Saharan region. Morocco has been at the forefront of reviving these links, particularly in areas of religious dialogue and trade partnerships. The country has demonstrated its commitment to develop its potential in collaboration with other countries in the region.

2.3 Methodology

To analyze Morocco's bid for ECOWAS membership, a triangulation approach was employed, combining both documentary analysis and in-depth interviews. The documentary analysis encompassed a review of various sources, including official records, policy documents, legal texts, video materials, and relevant academic literature. Key documents reviewed included the ECOWAS (Revised) Treaty of 1993, ECOWAS Vision 2050, the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), the ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment, the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, the 2011 Moroccan Constitution, and the video recording of Morocco's address at the ECOWAS 51st Ordinary Summit. This extensive review was aimed at delineating the historical, economic, and social factors influencing Morocco's application for ECOWAS membership.

In addition to the documentary analysis, the study involved conducting a total of 10 in-depth interviews to thoroughly investigate the subject. While four of these interviews were directly quoted in the article, the remaining interviews, though not cited verbatim, played a crucial role in shaping contextual reflections and broadening the understanding of the topic. This methodological choice ensured that the analysis benefited from a diverse range of insights, contributing to a well-rounded exploration of the subject matter.

Thematic analysis was utilized to examine the interview data, identifying common themes and areas of consensus or disagreement regarding Morocco's potential membership in ECOWAS. This analysis specifically focused on the implications for regional stability, trade, infrastructure, and security. Furthermore, informal discussions with ECOWAS officials were conducted to enhance the contextual understanding and offer additional perspectives on the organization's stance regarding Morocco's application.

The integration of these methodological components was designed to provide a thorough and detailed analysis of Morocco's engagement with ECOWAS. Adhering to ethical research practices, the study ensured the integrity of the data

by obtaining written consent from all participants quoted. This combined methodological approach aimed to offer a comprehensive understanding of Morocco's bid for ECOWAS membership and its broader implications for regional integration.

3 Results and discussions

3.1 Analysis of the ideational foundations for Morocco's membership in ECOWAS

This section examines the regionalization processes in precolonial Africa, with a particular focus on the Trans-Saharan Africa region. Additionally, it investigates Pan Africanism and South-South Cooperation as ideational factors that explain Moroccan membership applications. This analysis provides insights into the advantages that the addition of Morocco would bring to the ECOWAS, guiding policy reflections toward admitting the Kingdom into the regional body.

3.1.1 Regionalization in the Trans-Saharan Africa context

The Trans-Saharan African region has evolved and persisted because of the intricate interplay of social, religious, economic, and political dynamics between societies situated in the southern and northern perimeters of the Sahara Desert. These multifaceted factors, driven by humanity's innate desire for communal coexistence, have fundamentally shaped the trans-Saharan Africa region, portraying it as a construct rooted in human proclivity toward collaboration, conflict resolution, and sociocultural influence.

The regions north and west of Africa have long-standing ties spanning the socio-political, economic, and diplomatic realms. Throughout history, these societies have traded across space with each other, significantly impacting the cultures, languages, and identities of the inhabitants of both regions (Ross, 2011). Trans-regional commerce introduced horses and camels to West Africa and transported goods such as gold, silver, slaves, hides, and skins to North Africa. Moroccan leather, renowned for its quality, originated from West African Hausa city-states, such as Sokoto.

The ties between these regions, shaped by economic exchanges like Trans-Saharan trade, were pivotal. Arab-Berber merchants brought Islam to West African kingdoms, influencing politics and society. The cities of Timbuktu, Gao, Katsina, Kano, and Borno emerged as centers of learning. Scholars such as Ibn Battuta and Al Maghili disseminated Islamic knowledge, which facilitated cultural exchanges throughout West Africa. An interview with a historical sociologist revealed the significant and lasting impact of North African culture on West African societies. As she stated:

If you take North Africa, generally, and look back at trans-Saharan trade, you will see how it helped shape West African identity. For example, in Kano City, neighborhoods are assigned to North African traders and migrants. By tracing the formations of these neighborhoods exclusively, one can understand even the locations or cities from which the people living in them came in North Africa. Alkantara, Alfindiki, and others have primarily

been occupied by North Africans who emigrated from present-day Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria (Said, 2022).

Arab culture and Islamic civilization significantly impacted societies in Central Sudan, influencing aspects such as trade, intermarriage, and social customs. This influence is reflected in culinary traditions, architecture, and clothing. During the nineteenth century, Emir Ibrahim Dabo of Kano encouraged Arab settlers to establish leather manufacturing in the region, leading to the establishment of settlements such as Alkantara, Alfindiki, and Dandali (Adamu, 2014, p. 127–132; Naniya, 2000, p. 8, 9). These dynamics play a crucial role in the processes of identity formation and transformation, with implications that extend across the Trans-Saharan region.

The development of trans-Saharan Africa was shaped by trade, linguistic exchanges, Islamic influence, and security alliances among precolonial societies. These interactions are essential for understanding Morocco's membership bid. Over the course of centuries, Sahara-bordering societies have engaged in diplomatic, economic, and social exchanges, which resemble modern trans-regionalism. However, colonialism disrupted the cooperative patterns established by precolonial societies.

Morocco's historical influence in West Africa stems from centuries of trade, religious exchange, and educational initiatives. The Dourous Hassania, hosted by Moroccan King since 1963, exemplifies this influence by drawing numerous West African religious leaders and scholars, strengthening regional ties (Tber, 2023). Moroccan scholarships and Imam training programs also highlight these educational and religious connections, facilitating mutual understanding. These historical links underpin Morocco's membership bid, demonstrating a foundation of shared values and collaboration.

Moreover, Morocco's commercial relationship with West Africa, marked by enduring trade networks, continues to thrive, as seen in the high demand for Moroccan textiles in Nigeria. This economic engagement is crucial for understanding Morocco's bid for membership, which aims to formalize and enhance these ties. Culturally, the shared influence of Gnawa and Koranic music and historical intermarriage illustrates deep-seated cultural connections, further supporting Morocco's bid by emphasizing regional cohesion and cooperation.

Morocco's commitment to pan-African ideals is exemplified by its pivotal role in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. Morocco hosted the Casablanca Group in the 1960's, which advocated the immediate political integration of Africa (Kloman, 1962), showcasing Morocco's progressive stance within the Pan-African movement. Across successive reigns, Morocco consistently perceived the nation's fate as intricately linked to that of Africa. Although Morocco temporarily withdrew from OAU in 1984 under King Hassan, bilateral relations with individual African states remained robust. Under King Muhammad VI's dynamic diplomacy, Morocco returned to the AU and pursued membership in ECOWAS to reaffirm Morocco's African identity.

Morocco's diplomatic efforts in Africa involved various public and cultural initiatives that demonstrated its socioeconomic progress. Morocco supports African youth through scholarship programs aimed at training future leaders. Additionally, Morocco engages in soft power projects, including humanitarian aid, healthcare, and social investment across Africa. Morocco has

taken significant steps to address the issue of radicalization and terrorism through the implementation of initiatives such as the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams and Islamic preachers from various African countries. The country's focus on promoting trade, investment, and partnerships in Africa has helped foster continental cohesion and address challenges, such as unemployment and poverty. The Moroccan government's emphasis on unity and collaboration among African nations is in line with the vision of cohesive Africa that promotes shared prosperity and sustainable development.

The problems and difficulties facing sister African countries in the Sahel region will not be solved by security and military measures alone, but rather by an approach based on cooperation and shared development (King Mohammed VI, 2023).

Morocco has been actively promoting African unity for optimizing resources, with a particular focus on integrating West Africa, the Sahel, and the Atlantic coast with the Mediterranean. Under the leadership of King Mohammed VI, several initiatives have been implemented, including the construction of a gas pipeline between Nigeria and Morocco for energy collaboration, the development of an Atlantic African corridor for regional connectivity, and the facilitation of access to the Atlantic for Sahelian states through southern Morocco. Other initiatives included Morocco's pursuit of membership in the ECOWAS economic community and efforts to foster a more balanced trade relationship with sub-Saharan African partners. These interconnected initiatives have significant economic and socio-economic ramifications, which align with the "practical and effective responses" alluded to by King Mohammed VI in his 48th Green March Anniversary Address. These efforts served as a testament to Morocco's steadfast dedication to promote regional cohesion and prosperity.

3.2 ECOWAS (Revised) Treaty 1993 and Moroccan membership

Article II of Chapter II of the ECOWAS (Revised) Treaty 1993 defines the member states of ECOWAS as "the states that ratify this treaty" (ECOWAS, 1993, p. 5). The Treaty does not specify any geographical requirements, implying that any state that ratifies or accedes to the treaty can become a member of the organization. Second, Article I of Chapter II of the Treaty states that the purpose and objective of the ECOWAS is to further "economic integration and the realization of the objectives of the African Economic Community" (ECOWAS, 1993, p. 1). In this regard, ECOWAS is open to all initiatives and arrangements, including membership enlargement, which promotes continental integration and helps achieve the African Economic Community (AEC), which is the ultimate goal of all regional economic communities (RECs).

The AU does not oppose the idea of African states acquiring or retaining membership in the RECs. Instead, the AU has proposed several options to address the issue of the overlapping membership of African states in multiple RECs. The AU has developed four scenarios to address this issue: the status quo scenario, Accelerated Convergence Scenario, the Abuja Treaty Scenario Option 1, and

option 2, which aims to bypass any difficulties that may arise from multiple memberships of RECs. The status-quo scenario suggests that states should continue to maintain their current arrangements of holding memberships in more than one REC. The Abuja Treaty Option 1 proposes that states should delineate their RECs membership based on geographical location, which would render transregional RECs such as COMESA and CEN-SAD ineffective, and halt inter-REC harmonization processes such as the tripartite framework between SADC, EAC, and COMESA, which is supported by the Accelerated Convergence scenario in line with the global practices of regionalism. The Abuja Treaty Scenario Option 2 allows states to maintain multiple RECs memberships if they do not hinder intra-REC harmonization (African Union, 2009, p. i-iii).

Articles 34 and 35 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties 1969 provide a solution that could address any potential legal gap that Morocco's admission to the ECOWAS might create. Article 34 asserts that "A treaty does not create either obligations or rights for a third State without its consent" (United Nations, 1969, p. 13). Consequently, Morocco's membership must be approved by the highest decision-making organ of the ECOWAS, and the ECOWAS Treaty would then legally bind to Morocco. Article 35 further states that "An obligation arises for a third State from a provision of a treaty if the parties to the treaty intend the provision to be the means of establishing the obligation and the third State expressly accepts that obligation in writing" (United Nations, 1969, p. 14). As such, Morocco's application for membership demonstrates her commitment to the ECOWAS Revised Treaty 1993 in accordance with Article 35's general provisions.

The ECOWAS adopted supplementary acts in 2006 to facilitate the amendment of the treaty. The Authority of the Heads of State and Government, consisting of 15 members, must approve any supplementary acts with a majority of nine votes. As a result, the accession of new members is primarily a political matter rather than a legal one and is subject to the assessment and understanding of its merits by member states.

Several legal instruments could potentially hinder Morocco's accession to the ECOWAS. These include the Protocol on the Community Court 2005, Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of 2001, Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment, Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention of 1999 among other initiatives. However, upon closer examination, these protocols enable Morocco's accession rather than impede it.

3.2.1 Protocol on the Community Court 2005

The member states of the ECOWAS recognize the authority of the ECOWAS Court to address matters referred to by member states, citizens, and legal entities (ECOWAS, 2016). For example, one interviewee raised the issue of whether Morocco would accept any decisions of the ECOWAS Court as binding in the event of its ascension to ECOWAS (Rabiu, 2022). The challenges associated with the expansion of ECOWAS are evident, particularly in light of the concerns that exist within the organization. However, policymakers in Morocco recognize the obligations that come with ECOWAS membership and, by signing its statutes, Morocco will be legally bound to adhere to all regulations applicable to member states.

Spandler and Soderbaum (2023) resolved the political convergence issue of regionalism by linking it to notions of national sovereignty, which can be categorized as instrumental, principled, and status-oriented. They demonstrated how state elites' choice of narrative influences regional integration (Spandler and Soderbaum, 2023, p. 10–11). Consequently, Morocco's accession to ECOWAS should be understood politically, as it aligns with the prevailing notion of national sovereignty in the region along with its economic and developmental significance.

3.2.2 The ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of 2001

Since 2001, the ECOWAS has taken steps to promote democratic principles and good governance in the region through constitutional convergence. This initiative led to the adoption of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which seeks to prevent unconstitutional changes in government and foster stability (ECOWAS, 2001, p. 5–7). Article 1 of the Protocol provides guidelines for constitutional convergence among member states, including the democratic separation of powers, secularism in state affairs, and respect for human rights. To assess Morocco's potential accession to ECOWAS, certain subsections of Article 1 are particularly noteworthy as they may conflict with Morocco's internal political structure.

Subsection (a) of Article 1 is as follows:

Separation of powers: The Executive, Legislative and Judiciary. Empowerment and strengthening of parliaments and guaranteeing parliamentary immunity. Independence on the Judiciary: Judges shall be independent in the discharge of their duties. (ECOWAS, 2001, p. 5)

Critics may lack a comprehensive understanding of Morocco's governance framework, which includes a constitution and a robust parliamentary democratic space, as guaranteed by the 2011 Constitution and its mandate for the independence of parliament, whose members are elected through periodic elections (Moroccan Constitution, 2011, p. 18). Additionally, the Moroccan Constitution grants the parliament the authority to deliberate on matters requiring legislation (Moroccan Constitution, 2011, p. 21–23). The Moroccan Constitution, as an internal feature of Moroccan society, reflects the strong bond between the Moroccan people and their historical legacy. The adherence to these principles highlights the significance of this connection.

Another issue regarding Morocco's potential membership in the ECOWAS could stem from its status as an Islamic state, as mandated by its Constitution. This stipulation is derived from subsection (f) of Protocol 1, which requires member states to uphold "secularism and neutrality of the State in all matters concerning religion; ensuring freedom for every individual to practice, within the boundaries of existing laws, their chosen religion throughout the national territory" (ECOWAS, 2001, p. 6). The 2011 Constitution guarantees freedom of practice to other denominations within the Kingdom (Moroccan Constitution 2011, p. 13). Morocco's tangible demonstration of religious tolerance, evident through its inclusive practices and coexistence of diverse faiths, serves as a testament to the nation's commitment to fostering harmony and understanding among its people (US Department of State, 2022).

TABLE 1 Applicable Visa Regimes between Morocco and ECOWAS States.

	List of states	Applicable visa regime
1	Benin	Visa stamp required before departure
2	Burkina Faso	Visa exemption in force
3	Cape Verde	Visa required
4	Gambia	Visa required
5	Ghana	Visa required
6	Guinea	Travel Authorization Request (AEVM)
7	Guinea Bissau	Visa required
8	Ivory Coast	Visa exemption in force
9	Liberia	Visa required
10	Mali	Travel Authorization Request (AEVM)
11	Niger	Visa exemption in force
12	Nigeria	Visa required
13	Senegal	Visa exemption in force
14	Sierra Leone	Visa required
15	Togo	Visa exemption in force

Source: Author computation (based on information from: <https://www.consulat.ma/en/list-countries-whose-citizens-are-exempted-entry-visa-morocco>).

3.2.3 ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment

The ECOWAS Protocol was established in 1979, and has undergone significant changes over the years, including five major transformations in 1985, 1986, 1989, and 1990. This Protocol allows member states to eliminate barriers to movement, residence, and the establishment of citizens of ECOWAS. The Protocol mandates a three-phase process to achieve this goal, including the right of entry and the abolition of visas, the right of residence, and the right of establishment (ECOWAS, 1990). The free movement of persons and goods within the subregion has been a crucial accomplishment of the ECOWAS since its inception (Suleiman et al., 2024). Any state seeking to join the community must adhere to the standards set forth in this protocol.

Table 1 demonstrates that Morocco has made considerable progress in facilitating free movement with ECOWAS states, even prior to its application for membership in the sub-regional organization. Morocco initiated the elimination of visa barriers with West African countries on a bilateral basis from at least 1964 when it abolished all visa requirements with the Republic of Senegal. Subsequently, additional ECOWAS countries were added to the list, with various visa exemption regimes established with Guinea-Bissau in 2015, Ghana in 2017, Mali, Guinea Conakry, and Togo in 2018, and Burkina Faso in 2020 (Abourabi, 2022).

Morocco's proactive stance in advocating for free movement, residence, and establishment within Africa not only bolsters its own accession but also fosters regional integration and cooperation. By championing these principles, Morocco not only enhances its diplomatic standing, but also contributes to the continent's socioeconomic development and stability, paving the way for a more interconnected and prosperous African community. This

commitment reflects Morocco's dedication to fostering inclusive growth and collaboration across the continent.

3.2.4 The ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention

The ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, formalized through the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security, operates on the principle of regional solidarity and collective action (ECOWAS, 1999). In a region plagued by persistent conflicts, terrorism, and political instability, ECOWAS's approach emphasizes the necessity for member states to collaborate closely to address these threats collectively. The framework embodies a commitment to preventive diplomacy, early warning systems, and the integration of human security considerations—such as socio-economic development and protection of individual rights—as crucial elements for averting and resolving conflicts (ECOWAS, 1999). This holistic approach reflects the organization's recognition of the complex and interconnected nature of security challenges in West Africa and the Sahel.

Morocco's counterterrorism strategy, particularly its innovative deradicalization programs, aligns with similar values of stability and security (US Department of State, 2023). Situated in a region also grappling with the ramifications of extremism and instability, Morocco has developed a comprehensive approach that includes rehabilitation and reintegration of former extremists (Jamal, 2018). This strategy underscores a commitment to human rights and the belief in individual reform, incorporating educational and psychological support as key components. Morocco's focus on educational interventions and counter-narratives is indicative of its proactive stance against radicalization, paralleling the preventive measures emphasized by the ECOWAS framework.

The ideational factors underlying the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention of 1999 and Morocco's counterterrorism expertise, including its deradicalization efforts, reveal a convergence of shared values, despite their different operational focuses and methodologies. Both frameworks emphasize the critical importance of stability and security, particularly in the context of the severe and multifaceted insecurity confronting West Africa and the Sahel. This shared emphasis not only highlights their common goals but also underscores a potential area of synergy between Morocco's aspirations for full membership in ECOWAS and the organization's ideals of peace and stability.

The synergy between Morocco's counterterrorism efforts and the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention becomes particularly evident in the context of West Africa and the Sahel's current security environment. Both regions are caught in a whirlwind of insecurity, characterized by terrorism, armed conflict, and political instability. Morocco's aspiration for full membership in ECOWAS is informed by a recognition of the interconnectedness of regional security dynamics and a desire to contribute to collective peace and stability. Morocco's addition to ECOWAS can enhance the organization's capacity to address the region's complex security challenges through shared strategies and collaborative efforts.

3.2.5 Membership categories—full, associate, observer

International organizations are established by states and other entities to achieve shared objectives. The conditions for membership, including suspension and termination, are outlined in their founding agreements and do not adhere to universally accepted principles (Droesse, 2020).

The membership of supranational entities is typically connected to national sovereignties, with organizations classified as having open, restricted, or closed membership policies (Droesse, 2020, p. 79). Regional organizations usually restrict membership to their specific region, whereas organizations based on shared identity or economic goals, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs), have broader membership criteria. Closed organizations such as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) focus on shared ideals rather than regional boundaries. The expansion of the ECOWAS aligns with its founding objectives by emphasizing common historical ties and African solidarity in accordance with the Revised 1993 Treaty and associated protocols.

The ECOWAS Authority provisionally accepted Morocco's application for observer status and deferred the amendment of the ECOWAS Treaty. This amendment would establish criteria for membership types, such as full, associate, or observer status for prospective states. While the ECOWAS Parliament debates Morocco's full membership, the ECOWAS Commission synthesizes opinions and technical reports to advise the Heads of State and Government. Discussions on non-security matters, including potential humanitarian crises, can be protracted because of diverse member-state perspectives. Diplomatic decisions involve reconciling conflicting interests and considering long-term implications. According to an ECOWAS Commission official, the process is lengthened by member states' unique concerns and the need for consensus. According to the official, "Morocco has already achieved Observer Status in the ECOWAS, pending when the Authority will finally complete its consultation and make an amendment of the ECOWAS Treaty to include a clause on the accession of third states'. Another official emphasizes that member states possess unique characteristics that must be effectively synthesized before any decision is made. The Commission works to navigate these complexities and provides effective advice to the highest decision-making body.

The ECOWAS Parliament is divided on this issue, with most members favoring Morocco's accession. While the Speaker of the ECOWAS Parliament argues that Morocco's inclusion would be advantageous for ECOWAS, the Deputy Speaker remains undecided. The opinions of civil society are similarly diverse, with some supporting this idea, while others are hesitant about it (Channels Television, 2018). This suggests that the delay in Morocco's admission to the regional group is a result of careful consideration aimed at incorporating various stakeholder perspectives and achieving lasting, sustainable outcomes.

Moreover, a diplomat attributes the delay in Moroccan membership to the normal timeframes associated with decision making in multilateral settings. He argues that such delays are typical and occur when making decisions within these types of organizations.

Delays in such processes are not uncommon when regional organizations contemplate expansion. A parallel can be drawn between Turkey's aspirations for EU membership and East Timor's inclusion in ASEAN. Turkey continues to face challenges on its path, while East Timor swiftly attained ASEAN membership. These dynamics are intricately linked to member states' perceptions of identity and the prevailing criteria for admitting new members (Wali, 2022).

The perception exists that Moroccan membership could act as a deterrent to the proliferation of terrorism in an area. Additionally, the Kingdom will provide valuable knowledge for combatting terrorism to the ECOWAS. As per a specialist in international affairs and security, the admission of Morocco to ECOWAS will aid in "curtailing the spread of terrorism, of which Morocco has demonstrated mettle on" (Waziri, 2022). Nevertheless, Morocco's unrestricted membership within the ECOWAS will not materialize without the unanimous agreement of all 15 member states, although most of them are favorable toward it.

3.2.5.1 Morocco's ECOWAS membership: insights from Turkey's EU and Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession?

Turkey's bid for European Union (EU) membership is deeply rooted in its historical connections with Europe, which trace back to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and its ongoing engagement with European institutions (Muftuler-Bac, 2023). Turkey first applied for full membership in the European Economic Community (EEC), the precursor to the EU, in 1987. Prior to this, it had become an associate member of the EEC in 1963 and signed a Customs Union agreement with the EU in 1995. Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate for full EU membership at the Helsinki Summit in December 1999, and formal accession negotiations commenced on October 3, 2005. However, by May 2016, progress was notably slow, with only 16 of the 35 negotiation chapters opened and one closed. Attempts to expedite the process included the 2016 refugee deal aimed at accelerating talks and facilitating visa-free travel for Turkish citizens (Yurttas, 2023).

Despite these efforts, the accession negotiations have faced significant obstacles since 2016, largely due to criticisms from the EU regarding Turkey's human rights record and deficiencies in rule of law (Dudley, 2020). The situation deteriorated further in 2019 when the European Parliament committee voted to suspend the accession talks, eliciting strong reactions from the Turkish government (Michalopoulos, 2021; Kaeding and Schenuit, 2021). Consequently, negotiations have stalled, with no new chapters being opened or plans for modernizing the EU-Turkey Customs Union. In 2023, the opposition alliance in Turkey, known as the Table of Six, released a memorandum expressing their intent to resume EU accession talks should they win the elections, underscoring Turkey's continued aspiration to join the EU despite current standstills (Esen, 2022).

Similarly, Timor-Leste's pursuit of ASEAN membership has been influenced by its historical and cultural ties with Southeast Asia (Hooi, 2020). The journey began in 2002 when Timor-Leste, following its secession from Indonesia, was recognized as an ASEAN observer (Seixas et al., 2019). It joined the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2005 and acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2007. By 2011, Timor-Leste officially applied for full ASEAN membership. This application was followed by a

comprehensive fact-finding mission in 2019, which assessed Timor-Leste's readiness to join the ASEAN Community, encompassing the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (Seixas et al., 2019, p. 151). During this period, Timor-Leste sent a significant delegation to the ASEAN Secretariat to engage with various ASEAN bodies and familiarize itself with the regional framework and processes.

In 2022, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) conducted a detailed screening of Timor-Leste, meeting with key government ministries and business entities to evaluate the country's alignment with ASEAN Economic Agreements (ASEAN Economic Community, 2022). That same year, Timor-Leste was admitted "in principle" and granted observer status at all high-level ASEAN meetings (Serey, 2022). Following a thorough review, the ASEAN Coordinating Council formulated a comprehensive Roadmap for Timor-Leste's full membership, along with its annexes, reflecting the culmination of extensive fact-finding missions conducted in 2023 (Lertnaikiat, 2024).

This structured approach, involving stages of observer status, fact-finding missions, and detailed evaluations, mirrors the procedural requirements that Morocco must also navigate in its pursuit of full membership in ECOWAS. In a meeting with Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Naser Bourita, the President of ECOWAS Parliament, Mr. Sidie Mohamed Tunis, stated that "We are looking at strategies, opportunities and possibly constraints. But for now, my colleagues and I are very positive about this" (Tunis, 2022). Thus, Morocco has already cleared the initial and most important hurdle by securing "in-principle" membership status with ECOWAS. This suggests that ECOWAS recognizes a convergence of interests with Morocco, which arises from a shared understanding of intersubjectivities. Since 2018, the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government has instructed the ECOWAS Commission to conduct a feasibility study, which remains ongoing (Kasraoui, 2018; BBC News, 2017). The findings of this report will be crucial in determining Morocco's path to full membership, highlighting the procedural rigor like that faced by other aspirants.

4 Conclusion

In summary, this article investigated Morocco's ambition to join the ECOWAS using a constructivist theory lens, considering historical, social, economic, political, and legal aspects. Our examination has unveiled the intricate nature of Morocco's bid for membership and its potential ramifications for regional organizations. Despite the advantages of Morocco's inclusion, obstacles stemming from legal uncertainties within the 1993 ECOWAS Treaty and Nigeria's dominance remain.

The core of our analysis is ECOWAS as an organization exclusively for West African nations, potentially neglecting historical, religious, and cultural ties between West and North Africa. Although resistance to expanding membership beyond conventional boundaries may persist, incorporating Morocco offers appealing benefits grounded in a shared African identity and potential for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Morocco's pursuit of ECOWAS membership is deeply rooted in its African identity, as expressed in its constitutional framework and emphasized by King Mohammed VI. Aligned with the broader framework of South-South solidarity (Suleiman and Slighoua, 2024), Morocco aims to transcend colonial legacies and foster a shared sense of identity with ECOWAS states through initiatives such as the joint Fertilizer Development and Production project and the Nigeria-Morocco Pipeline.

The process of determining Morocco's membership status in the ECOWAS presents two distinct possibilities: full membership and observer status. Each option has its own set of opportunities and challenges that reflect the complex interplay between practical considerations and identity-based factors. Eventually, regardless of the choice made by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, Morocco and the ECOWAS would benefit substantially. In addition to the immediate consequences for Morocco and the ECOWAS, this study emphasizes the lasting significance of continental identity and historical connections in determining regional cooperation.

Despite these favorable conclusions, several limitations are acknowledged in this research. Although the study included interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders and examined a comprehensive set of materials—such as historical documents, legal texts, and reports, the interpretive nature of qualitative research may have introduced certain subjectivities. The findings are shaped by the researchers' perspective and the inherent interpretative nature of qualitative data. Recognizing these limitations is important for providing a complete and accurate understanding of Morocco's potential ECOWAS membership. This study emphasizes the necessity for additional investigations that incorporate the perspectives of West African and Moroccan citizens to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the integration process and its impact on grassroots involvement and engagement. By continuing to engage in dialogue and cooperation, ECOWAS can navigate these complexities and emerge as strengthened, reflecting the evolving nature of state interactions worldwide.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MRS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MS: Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AH: Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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