

Religious Factors in North African Integration

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Abstract

The long-standing stagnation of North African integration is due to a complex and diverse set of reasons, including structural factors such as political divisions, economic disparities, and external intervention, as well as deeper socio-cultural variables such as religion. As a crucial region of Islamic civilization, North Africa's population, with over 90% sharing an Islamic identity, provides a potential value foundation and cultural resource for regional integration. However, when religion is politicized or conflicts with the interests of core countries, its spillover effects can weaken the regional institutionalization process. This paper aims to explore the role of religion, particularly Islam, in the North African integration process. Within a constructivist and identity politics framework, it uses comparative qualitative methods and typical cases as empirical evidence to analyze its internal logic, thus providing a new perspective for understanding the role of religious factors in contemporary regional cooperation.

Keywords

North Africa, Islam, Integration, Maghreb Union.

1. Introduction

The integration process in North Africa has progressed more slowly than cooperation mechanisms in other regions, due to factors including historical heritage, differences in political systems, territorial disputes, and the continued involvement of external powers. Religion, particularly Islam, as one of the most influential socio-cultural forces in North Africa, deserves in-depth examination of its role in regional integration. On the one hand, Islam provides a relatively unified set of values and cultural identity, enabling it to enhance mutual trust across national borders and reduce cultural friction in institutional integration; shared religious festivals, laws, and social norms lay a soft foundation for cooperation. On the other hand, differences in doctrinal interpretation, sectarian divisions, and the politicization of religion often exacerbate differences between countries; extremism and cross-border security threats further compound religious issues and security risks, weakening the stability of regional cooperation. Therefore, the multifaceted nature of religious identity can both serve as a bond driving regional integration and be transformed into a bargaining chip in power competition and the process of securitization. Against the backdrop of global multi-polarization and the restructuring of regional order, the deepening of North African integration largely depends on how countries strike a balance between religious and cultural identity and their practical political interests. This paper takes North African countries as its research subject, aiming to analyze the dual role and inherent logic of religion in the integration process, and to assess its potential impact under the current geopolitical landscape.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, academic attention has increasingly focused on the role of cultural and identity factors in regional integration. As early as the mid-20th century, Deutsch proposed the concept of a "security community," emphasizing that transnational social communication and shared

identity can reduce the likelihood of conflict and form integration bonds that transcend national boundaries.[1] Constructivist international relations theory inherited and expanded this idea; Adler and Barnett pointed out that shared values and identity are core conditions for regional cooperation and institutionalization.[2] Based on this, North African studies have gradually incorporated religious identity into their discussion framework, arguing that Islamic faith and its derived socio-cultural resources have a significant impact on regional integration.

Under the "cohesion hypothesis," religion is often seen as a bond that promotes cooperation. On the one hand, Islam, as the common faith of North African countries, can provide value consensus and social capital for regional cooperation. The preamble to the Marrakesh Treaty, which established the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989, emphasized that the legitimacy of regional integration stems from the "common history, religion, and language" among member states. The 2019 African Development Bank's annual assessment report on regionalism in North Africa reiterated that "shared destiny and identity" should be the foundation for regional cooperation.[3] This official discourse reflects the normative and legitimacy function of religious identity, reducing uncertainty between states and providing a framework for institutional design and cooperation.[4] Some scholars further point out that religious belief, by shaping a sense of community, makes it easier for member states to seek compromise in security and political affairs.[5]

However, some literature emphasizes the "divisive assumption" of religion. On the one hand, religious resources are often strategically used by national elites, thereby exacerbating regional divisions.[6] Amoretti points out that religious discourse in North African political practice is not only a tool for legitimacy but also an arena for power competition. The religious divisions following the Libyan civil war are particularly typical. [7]Wehrey and Boukhars analyzed the expansion of Madhuri al-Salafi within the security sector, showing that the politicization and militarization of religious movements strengthened the hostility of local factions and generated cross-border spillover effects. On the other hand, extremist organizations use religious symbols for transnational mobilization, creating distrust between regions. An analysis in *World Politics Review* points out that the expansion of the Islamic Maghreb Branch (AQIM) and its allies into West African economic centers and coastal regions, along with activities such as terrorist attacks in the Sahel and Maghreb, has led to security threats replacing regional cooperation agendas.[8]

As research deepens, academia has gradually moved beyond the binary opposition of "religion facilitating or hindering integration," with some scholars analyzing the dynamic influence of religious factors in the process. Cimini and Tomé-Alonso, in their comparative study of Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco, point out that Islamists and political parties respond selectively to external (regional and international) influences, incorporating external conditions into their own strategies through mechanisms such as "adaptation-learning-competition-cooperation," resulting in diverse political trajectories. [9]Anne Wolf's historical research on Ennahda also illustrates how political parties, upon entering government and governance practices, "de-ideologize and adjust their strategies," shaping national and transnational political relations through interactions with more fundamentalist or Salafist groups within society. [10]These studies emphasize that religious identity is not a static factor, but rather is shaped by domestic political structures, transnational religious networks, and international pressure.

While existing research has revealed the duality of religious identity, several shortcomings remain: First, most literature tends to describe the "cohesive" or "divisive" role of religion in a one-dimensional way, lacking a mechanistic analysis of how it transforms under different conditions. Second, existing research largely focuses on individual cases or movements, lacking a systematic exploration of the interaction between religious identity and regional institutionalization. For example, the specific religious elements in the Maghreb Union's

institutional building, interest coordination, and security cooperation have not been thoroughly explored.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the dynamic role of religious factors in the North African integration process using qualitative research methods, combining policy texts, the practice of regional cooperation mechanisms, and typical national cases. This paper will demonstrate that religion can both reduce cooperation costs as a shared identity and become a source of division due to religious authority competition, religious politicization, and transnational security threats. Through this analysis, this paper strives to supplement the understanding of the "context-dependent" mechanism of religion in regional cooperation based on existing literature, thereby providing a new explanatory path for examining the complexities of North African integration.

3. The Evolution of the Religious Landscape in North Africa

As a crossroads of civilizations connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa, North Africa developed a multi-religious landscape during its long history from the pre-Christian era to the 7th century AD. Before the introduction of Islam, North Africa exhibited significant religious diversity. The Carthaginian religious tradition persisted along the coast, Christianity spread widely in cities and frontiers during the Romanization period, and Jewish communities and the indigenous Berber (Amazigh) religious customs continued. Roman-era North Africa even fostered a unique Christian tradition, demonstrating the profound influence of Christianity on regions such as Achilles and Numidia.[11] The Arab-Islamic conquests beginning in the 7th century altered this landscape. With the introduction of Arabic and Islam into North Africa, a dual process of Islamization and (partial) Arabization gradually occurred. By the 11th century, the Berber communities had largely accepted Islam, but a long-term process of "Arabization-Indigenization" emerged at the linguistic and cultural levels. Islam became the dominant religion, but local social structures, tribal customs, and regional differences left a lasting impact on religious practices.[12]

At the levels of jurisprudence and religious studies, North Africa has long held the Maliki School as its orthodox legal tradition, which has profoundly influenced social life, customs, and judicial practice. Simultaneously, Sufism, as a socially integrated and communal religious expression, enjoys a broad popular base and a cross-border Tariqa network, providing an institutional foundation for North Africa's inherent religious continuity and cross-border social connections. [13]These historical structures laid the crucial "cultural-institutional" premise for later religious-political relations.

The colonial and national independence movements of the 19th and 20th centuries also profoundly transformed the relationship between religion and politics. Secularized modern state institutions, religious governance reforms during the colonial era, and the construction of national identity after independence meant that religion was both incorporated into the discourse of state legitimacy and, to varying degrees, restricted or utilized under different regimes. In the latter half of the 20th century, especially against the backdrop of the Cold War and decolonization, religion became both an important social glue in civil society and increasingly intertwined with modern political movements.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, Islam in North Africa has exhibited significant internal pluralism. On the one hand, there is "everyday Islam" centered on the traditional Malik-Sufi tradition; on the other hand, the rise of Political Islam since the mid-20th century, and the emergence of Salafist fundamentalism and radical jihadism (Salafi/Salafi-Jihadist) after the Cold War and the subsequent Arab Spring, have become new political and security variables. Academic and policy analyses both point out that the activities of the latter (especially transnational extremist organizations such as AQIM and ISIS) in the Sahel-Maghreb region have brought about

significant cross-border security spillovers, altering the agenda of security interaction and cooperation among states. [14]Therefore, religion in contemporary North Africa encompasses both institutionalized, governable religious diplomacy and educational networks (such as state-level imam training and the export of moderate discourse) and transnational risks of potential politicization or militarization; these two aspects coexist and interact.

The evolution of the religious landscape has direct implications for contemporary North African politics and integration. First, historically formed religious-legal traditions (such as the Malik school) and transnational religious networks provide a possible institutional foundation for regional cultural identity and cross-border social capital, theoretically reducing cultural friction in integration and serving as a resource for "soft integration." Second, the pluralism and competition within Islam, from moderate Sufi traditions to radical Salafism, and the possibility of religion being instrumentalized by state or non-state actors, can exacerbate divisions and trigger securitization discourses during periods of political instability or conflict of national interests, thus hindering the institutionalized integration process. The Arab Spring and its consequences (such as the collapse of Libya and the political restructuring in Tunisia) clearly demonstrate that when religion is politically mobilized or securitized, its spillover effects rapidly cross national borders, causing security priorities to crowd out the integration agenda. In conclusion, religious influence in North Africa has deep historical roots and presents a complex and fragmented landscape in the contemporary era. Understanding this historical and structural context is a prerequisite for analyzing how religion influences North African integration through mechanisms such as legitimization, political mobilization, and security spillovers.

4. Religion as a "Soft Foundation" and Institutionalization Approach

Looking back at the development of North Africa, religion has always been a core force shaping its civilization, especially Islam, which has profoundly rewritten North Africa's historical trajectory and spiritual core. As the dominant religion in North African society, Islam is not only deeply rooted in individual faith and daily life, but also serves as a resource for regional connections through multiple channels such as language, institutions, and networks. From a multi-dimensional perspective, Islam's community identity at the cultural and social levels, its bridging function as a cross-border religious network, its institutionalization potential as a regional religious platform, and its convergence in the economic and legal fields can provide a practical and positive force for North African integration. This chapter discusses these four paths separately, aiming to systematically present how religion provides a "soft foundation" and institutionalization possibilities for regional integration.

(1) Community Identity at the Cultural and Social Level.

Most North African countries use Arabic as their public discourse, and Quranic language (i.e., Classical Arabic) occupies a central position in religious education and worship. The sharing of language and religious texts makes religious discourse, etiquette norms, and ethical judgments highly comprehensible and predictable among different countries. This cultural and linguistic homogeneity reduces the communication costs of transnational exchanges, making it easier for policymakers, religious scholars, and ordinary citizens to form a common framework of reference on certain public issues. In other words, a shared religious domain provides a foundational condition for the generation of trust and cultural mutual recognition within the region.

Religious festivals such as Ramadan and Eid al-Adha not only reflect individual religious practices but also constitute important nodes for transnational people-to-people interactions. Through exchanges of festivals and rituals, people establish transnational social connections through mutual visits, religious charity, and joint religious discourses. Such people-to-people

interactions catalyzed by religious festivals can maintain a certain level of social trust during periods of tension in official political relations, providing a "buffer zone" at the grassroots level and thus creating a more favorable social atmosphere for subsequent institutional dialogue.

The fundamental principles of Islam in family, business, and social ethics, such as the prohibition of interest, honest contracts, and charitable obligations, are institutionalized to varying degrees in North African countries. This ethical compatibility allows social welfare and public welfare undertakings to be realized through "Islamic finance," "charitable foundations (waqf, religious donations)," and "charitable obligations (zakat) management." [15] On issues such as public welfare and social welfare mechanisms, there exists a certain shared value foundation. Policymakers, when designing transnational cooperation projects, such as social security cooperation and cross-border labor regulations, can reduce cultural resistance and enhance policy acceptability based on these shared ethical principles.

(2) The Role of Cross-Border Religious Networks

Sufi orders (such as Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya) have historically established extensive regional networks in North Africa. Through *zāwiya* (religious schools or monasteries), long-standing apprenticeship systems, and pilgrimage gatherings, Sufi orders have formed social ties that transcend national borders. Sufi orders undertake educational, relief, and mediation functions at the community level. During periods of colonial rule or weak state power, cross-border Sufi networks can compensate for deficiencies in official diplomacy and governance, playing a role in "people-to-people diplomacy." [16] For example, the movement of scholars and joint celebrations between orders help maintain mutual trust at the grassroots level, providing social support for official cooperation. Religious academic institutions and scholars in North Africa (including universities, seminaries, and legal masters) frequently engage in cross-border exchanges, forming a shared context for regional knowledge production and discussions of Islamic law. Central academic institutions such as Al-Azhar in Cairo wield significant influence over the entire discourse on Sunni religious law, and their academic judgments and interpretations serve as models within the North African religious sphere. [17] Through the transnational dissemination of academic conferences, publications, and religious rulings, networks of religious scholars play a crucial role in fostering a shared understanding of norms and reducing interpretive discrepancies. This transnational academic interaction not only consolidates the uniformity of religious law but also provides a shared foundation for religious culture and social cooperation in North Africa.

(3) Regional Religious Platforms and Cooperation Agendas

Transnational religious or cultural international organizations (such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, OIC) and the political-cultural Arab League play a platform role in promoting dialogue, cultural exchange, and cooperation projects among member states. While these organizations have limited effectiveness on politicized issues, they possess strong coordination capabilities in soft areas such as education, cultural heritage protection, and religious affairs exchange. Through these platforms, North African countries can establish common agendas on religious affairs, mutual recognition of education, and cultural activities, gradually transforming grassroots cultural connections into institutionalized cooperation frameworks.

Regional conferences, mutual visits by religious affairs officials, and transnational cooperation in Islamic law research can incorporate religious agendas into the scope of official diplomacy. Institutionalized religious dialogue reduces the space for "moral misunderstandings and misjudgments," paving the way for transnational legal cooperation, immigration management, and mutual recognition of religious education. Institutional guarantees are provided. Once such institutionalized practices become established norms, they will enhance the predictability and sustainability of policy coordination in the long term.

(4) Economic and Legal Convergence Islamic finance

Based on its shared religious principles (such as the prohibition of interest, risk-sharing, and asset-backed contracts), naturally possesses the potential for transnational expansion. If North African countries achieve a certain degree of convergence in regulatory standards, accounting principles, and contractual systems, Islamic financial instruments (such as Islamic bonds and Islamic investment contracts) can become important channels for cross-border infrastructure financing and regional investment cooperation. [18] Institutionalized Islamic finance can not only attract religious capital from within and outside the region but also provide transnational projects with financing pathways that comply with religious norms, thereby reducing political and social resistance.

The Halal industry is developing rapidly globally, covering food, pharmaceuticals, tourism, and other fields, providing new opportunities for regional economic cooperation. North African countries have complementary agricultural, food processing, and tourism resources, such as Morocco's olive oil, Egypt's fruits and grains, and Tunisia and Egypt's religious tourism routes. By establishing unified halal certification standards, optimizing cross-border supply chains, and jointly promoting brands, North African countries can transform these resource advantages into transnational market connections. For example, Moroccan olive oil is exported to the Middle East market through Gulf Standardization Organization (GSO) certification, and Egypt and Tunisia are cooperating to develop "Islamic cultural heritage tourism routes" to attract Muslim tourists worldwide. This religiously based industrial cooperation not only enhances the recognition and consumer trust in regional trade but also forms an institutionalized cooperation mechanism, providing substantial support for North African economic integration. Through cross-border collaboration in the halal industry, informal business connections are gradually becoming institutionalized, while simultaneously strengthening North African countries' participation in the global Islamic economic system, creating a sustainable path for regional economic and social integration.

In areas closely related to religion, such as family law and inheritance law, while differences exist among North African countries, their shared Islamic legal traditions provide a workable starting point for legal convergence. For example, Morocco's Moudawana (Family Code), Egypt's family and inheritance laws, and Tunisia's relatively secular yet still partially Islamic legal principles all reflect a common legal cultural foundation. Through comparative legal studies, judicial exchanges, and gradual mutual recognition measures, such as coordination of cross-border marriage registration, alignment of inheritance practices, and pilot programs for social security systems, North African countries can explore pathways for legal coordination while protecting cultural diversity.[19] This not only provides a legal basis for the mutual recognition of marriage laws and the movement of people, but also creates possibilities for cross-border social security cooperation and lays an institutional foundation for the legal support of regional integration.

In summary, Islam, through shared cultural contexts, the bridging function of cross-border religious networks, the institutional potential of regional platforms, and convergence in the economic and legal fields, constitutes an important positive driving force for North African integration. These mechanisms can reduce the cultural and social costs of transnational cooperation and provide realistic pathways for institutional alignment. It is important to emphasize that the promoting role of religion is not spontaneous and automatic, but can only be effectively activated under the combined conditions of political will, institutional arrangements, and the external environment.

5. Restraining Factors of Religious Politicization and Identity Constraints

Although Islam has a significant shared cultural foundation in North Africa, religion is not a natural unifying force. Under the interaction of various conditions, religion is often politicized or intertwined with other identity politics, thus becoming a factor hindering regional cooperation. This chapter analyzes how religion transforms into a constraint on integration in real-world political scenarios, focusing on four interconnected mechanisms.

The politicization of religion refers to the process by which religious discourse and organizations are introduced into partisan competition, national governance, and public policy. When religious organizations or ideologies become resources for political party mobilization and legitimacy competition, they are often endowed with political functions that transcend religion itself. [20]The politicization of religion not only affects domestic governance but also constrains regional cooperation through two pathways: first, externalized security concerns-if a country views its religious rivals as "the other" or "threats," it may adopt a tougher border and diplomatic policy, reducing cross-border interactions; second, the spillover of legitimacy struggles-the transnational connections of religious parties or movements (such as the cross-border networks of some Islamic political organizations) may be seen as potential tools of interference by neighboring countries, prompting receiving countries to adopt defensive strategies and reducing the likelihood of regional institutionalization. The fluctuations in Tunisia's domestic and foreign policies during the Ennahda regime are an example of the outward extension of the politicization of religion. Furthermore, after the Muslim Brotherhood's downfall in 2013, Egypt's strong opposition to any cross-border Islamist networks directly impacted its deteriorating relations with Qatar and Turkey. [21]This illustrates that the religious-secular political dynamics within domestic countries directly influence the priorities and agenda-setting of their foreign cooperation.

Although North Africa is predominantly Sunni and has long been dominated by the Maliki school of thought, significant differences remain in religious practices, interpretation of Islamic law, and the institutionalization of religious authority. On the one hand, Maliki law has been localized in different countries, combining with customary law to form distinct legal cultures; on the other hand, Salafism, revivalism, and Sufism differ in their social influence and political attitudes. These internal differences are not always visible, but they can become substantial obstacles in legal cooperation, mutual recognition of education, or coordination of transnational religious affairs-for example, the mutual recognition of family law or religious education often fails to reach a consensus due to differing interpretations of the scope of application of Islamic law among countries.

The long-standing institutionalized differences in the Maliki traditions of North African countries regarding marriage, inheritance, family law, and religious education manifest as high transaction costs in regional integration. Marriage or inheritance judgments from one country are often difficult for neighboring courts to directly recognize due to differences in procedure or interpretation, hindering the legal recognition of cross-border families and the transfer of social security for labor groups. Similarly, the lack of comparability in judicial cooperation and commercial arbitration when dealing with the application of religious law creates legal uncertainty for cross-border investment and the movement of people. This results in relatively active North African integration at the economic level (such as energy and infrastructure cooperation), but slow progress in the areas of people movement, mutual legal recognition, and social welfare. In other words, the divergence between religious law and institutional interpretation may lead to a long-standing situation of "hard cooperation first, soft cooperation lagging behind" in North African regionalism.

The core demand of this movement is to fight for language and cultural rights, promoting the official status of Tamazight and its use in education and media. This directly challenges the

state-building narratives centered on Arab nationalism and Islam adopted by many North African countries after independence. When the demands for empowerment of national culture are interpreted by official ideologies or conservative forces as a challenge to the unity of the "Arab-Islamic community," significant political tensions arise. [22] This process not only reveals the inherent contradiction between national narrative and national identity, but also erodes the effectiveness of religious identity as a social cohesive force-it forces individuals to weigh multiple identities and may even lead to alienation from the dominant religious political narrative, thus injecting new variables into the region's political and social development.

The intertwining of ethnicity and religion leads to internal divisions-identity conflicts within the state weaken its consistency and trust capital in external negotiations-and a breakdown in regional identity-if certain groups in the Maghreb emphasize local or ethnic identities rather than pan-Arab or pan-Islamic identities, then integration discourses based on religion lose appeal among these groups, thus limiting the public opinion base for regional policies. The different development paths of the Yamazig movement in Morocco and Algeria also demonstrate that the issue of national identity has a profound impact on the integrity of cultural communities.

An analysis of four constraining paths-the politicization of religion, differences in Islamic law, the intertwining of ethnicity and religion, and the prioritization of national interests-concludes that the role of Islam in North African integration is profoundly conditional. Religion itself is not a singular integrative tool; its ability to play a driving role depends on: first, whether domestic politics depoliticizes religious discourse and establishes inclusive governance; second, whether the legal and educational spheres promote comparable institutional alignment; third, whether ethnic and linguistic identity issues are properly addressed to avoid weakening the discourse of the religious community; and finally, whether states can find space for mutual trust and complementarity in strategic and interest-based matters.

6. A Specific Case-The Practice of the Maghreb Union

Since its inception in 1989, the Arab Maghreb Union has aimed to promote political, economic, and social cooperation among its five member states. However, for a long time, many cooperative agendas have remained dormant or inefficiently functioning. Mainstream explanations often point to structural bottlenecks in the political-economic-security framework, such as a lack of trust among states, low economic complementarity, border disputes, and external intervention. These explanations form the core framework for analyzing the functionality of the Maghreb Union. Against this macro-context, religion, as a highly prevalent socio-cultural factor in the region, is both a potential resource for cooperation and often instrumentalized in power struggles or security crises, thus exerting a complex influence on the institutionalization path of the Maghreb Union. For the five member states of the Maghreb Union (MAU), the degree of institutional embedding of religion and the structure of national religious authority vary significantly. Examples include the monarchical religious role in Morocco, the state-militarized religious governance tradition in Algeria, and Tunisia's attempts at secularization. These differences provide a starting point for studying how religion can intervene in the integration process.

To transform religion into an institutionalized driving force for integration, it must be achieved through concrete institutional products or rules. A prominent example in North Africa is Islamic finance, which offers a practical path from religious norms to operational rules. Reports from institutions such as the African Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund indicate that if North Africa can achieve a certain level of consensus on Islamic bond issuance, Islamic banking supervision, and contractual recognition, transnational infrastructure financing and regional project cooperation will be feasible, for example, through common halal

financial instruments to finance cross-border energy or transportation projects. [23] However, in reality, this mechanism is limited by differences in national financial regulations, inconsistencies in tax systems and contractual laws, and varying public perceptions of Islamic financial products. Therefore, the success of this institutional path depends more on political will and regulatory dialogue than simply on religious commonality. In other words, religion provides the possibility for institutionalization, but whether it is transformed into an integration tool depends on the interaction between national policy coordination capabilities and external economic regulatory pressures. Official diplomacy among Maghreb member states is often constrained by political differences. In such cases, religious networks (such as religious charities, Sufi orders, and the academic influence of religious institutions like Al-Azhar) play a substitute role in elite mobility and transnational knowledge exchange. If religious academic institutions can develop a common agenda on transnational issues, such as mutual recognition of religious education, cross-border charity, and religious consular cooperation, they can become precursors and buffers for institutionalized dialogue. However, the strength of the role of religious networks varies greatly among different countries. On the one hand, some Sufi networks can provide mediation resources across borders; on the other hand, competition for religious authority between countries like Morocco and Algeria often weakens the effectiveness of these networks, making them difficult to replace formal mechanisms on key policy agendas. Within the Maghreb Union, the influence of religion is highly conditional. When there is a willingness for institutional alignment, regulatory discourse, and political stability among countries, religious identity and institutionalization (such as Islamic finance) can become tools for promoting cooperation. However, in situations where religion is politicized, there are significant differences in religious authority structures, or security threats are frequent, religion often becomes more divisive and was instrumentalized by external forces or domestic elites, thereby exacerbating the weakening of the Maghreb Union's functions. The policy implications for the Maghreb Union are that to unleash the positive potential of religion, it is necessary to promote institutional alignment in technical, especially financial and legal frameworks, establish transnational trust mechanisms supplemented by religious dialogue, and incorporate non-state religious networks into standardized dialogue.

7. Conclusion

Religion is both a resource and a source of risk for North African integration-the key lies in institutional design and political wisdom. By consciously transforming religious cultural resources into institutionalized and manageable tools for cooperation, North African countries, while respecting diversity, may be able to transform the "soft power" of religion into a lasting driving force for regional common prosperity in the future. Given the current changes in the global and regional landscape, a pragmatic and gradual policy mix will be the most feasible path. As a crucial region of Islamic civilization, North Africa's population, with most people sharing an Islamic identity, provides a potential value foundation and cultural resource for regional integration. However, when religion is politicized or conflicts with the interests of core countries, its spillover effects can weaken the regional institutionalization process. This paper aims to explore the role of religion, particularly Islam, in the North African integration process. Within a constructivist and identity politics framework, it uses comparative qualitative methods and typical cases as empirical evidence to analyze its internal logic, thus providing a new perspective for understanding the role of religious factors in contemporary regional cooperation.

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