



International recognition, religion, and the status of Western Sahara

Nikola Mirilovic¹ · David S. Siroky²

© Springer Nature Limited 2020

Abstract

How do countries decide whether or not to recognize an aspiring state? We examine such decisions in the context of contested recognition, which we define as a claim to statehood that is recognized by a large number of countries, but remains unrecognized by many others. We suggest that religion—both at the domestic level via religious regulation and discrimination against minority religions and at the international level via transnational religious ties—shapes recognition decisions. In cases where the two parties to a recognition dispute share the same dominant religious tradition (as in Western Sahara), transnational religious ties are expected to lead to external support for the side that emphasizes its religious identity and that has access to more resources. Moreover, we show that countries with higher levels of religious regulation are less likely to extend recognition. We assess these two conjectures for why some countries—but not others—have recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic as an independent state using data on the recognition decisions of all 192 United Nations member states.

Keywords Sovereignty · International recognition · Religion · North Africa

✉ Nikola Mirilovic
nikola.mirilovic@ucf.edu

David S. Siroky
david.siroky@asu.edu

¹ School of Politics, Security, and International Affairs, University of Central Florida, 4297 Andromeda Loop N., Howard Phillips Hall, Rm. 302, Orlando, FL 32816, USA

² Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology, Jilská 1, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic



Introduction

International recognition is key to claims of sovereignty (Krasner 1999). Even though such recognition is a constitutive element of being a state, the empirical question of why countries decide to extend or to withhold recognition has seldom been studied systematically.¹ While many aspiring states become universally recognized (e.g., South Sudan, East Timor), or remain universally unrecognized (e.g., Somaliland, Bangsamoro Republik), there is an important subset of cases (e.g., Palestine, Kosovo) in which recognition is actively contested; among the international “club of established states”, there is both a large number of states that have extended recognition to the aspiring state, but also many that have withheld recognition.²

Most empirical research on international recognition (e.g., Coggins 2011, 2014) has tended to focus on the recognition decisions of great powers. This research has generated many insights, which can be built upon by studying the recognition decisions of all states—large and small. This extension matters for several reasons. First, aspiring states need support from many countries—not just the major powers—in order to join key international institutions. For example, the procedure for joining the United Nations involves securing the approval of two-thirds of the General Assembly.³ Second, recognition facilitates the building of economic and other ties between potential partners, since trade with (and investment in) an entity that lacks international recognition often carries much greater risks than these same activities with countries that are internationally recognized. Englebert and Hummel (2005) argue that internationally recognized sovereignty and the associated material returns are particularly valuable in Africa. Moreover, the absence of recognition is highly conducive to conflict. Florea (2014) argues that the emergence and presence of “de facto states” is associated with a higher overall likelihood of civil war onset. For these reasons, aspiring states dedicate considerable time and resources to increase the number of countries that recognize them (e.g., Rich 2009). At the same time, states that would lose territory to the aspiring state often work hard to minimize the number of recognitions (Ker-Lindsay 2012).

While we focus on cases of partial recognition, important works in the literature have examined unrecognized states and argued that we should think of sovereignty in terms of degrees rather than absolutes. Pegg (1998) and Kolsto (2006) emphasize the conceptual distinction between failed and quasi states. According to Kolsto (2006), states in name only (recognized but unable to effectively govern) should be referred to as “failed states”, whereas unrecognized states should be referred to as “quasi states”, which are generally characterized by weak economies and are dependent on an external patron. Pegg (1998, p. 251) points out that de facto states

¹ Coggins (2011) is an exception that we discuss in more detail below.

² There is another subset of states with minimal recognition, often by one or a few states (e.g., Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Northern Cyprus), which provide a set of cases that are amenable to qualitative analysis but not statistical methods.

³ General Assembly of the United Nations, Rules of Procedure, XIV. Admission of New Members to the United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/ga/about/ropga/adms.shtml>. Last accessed: June 5, 2019.



can survive for a long time and have a significant impact “on global political economy and, especially, on the number of fatalities and refugees produced.” Caspersen (2012) argues that what partly explains the existence of unrecognized states is that the international system emphasizes the principle of territorial integrity. She points out that unrecognized states are shaped by four central factors: military victory, precarious existence, external dependence, and continuing attempts to legitimize the entity, both internally and externally (Caspersen 2012 p. 32). Berg and Kuusk (2010) advance an empirical approach to the study of sovereignty and operationalize it as a relative concept according to which there are degrees of international recognition.

McCauley and Posner (2015) point out that social scientists have emphasized the arbitrary nature of African borders and used those borders as a source of natural experiments in their research designs. Meanwhile, debates about the role of vulnerability and ethnic ties in explaining external involvement in secessionist conflict to a significant extent originated with work on Africa (e.g., Herbst 1989; Saideman 1997). In addition to its policy significance, the question of where borders and border changes come from, in Africa and elsewhere, has important implications for social science theory building (Carter and Goemans 2011; Siroky and Hale 2017).

In this study, we examine why some countries, but not others, recognize aspiring states. We first develop the theoretical argument and key alternative explanations. When states have religious ties to both sides of a recognition dispute, we argue that they are more likely to support the established state than the aspiring state in recognition disputes. Moreover, we suggest that countries which extensively regulate religion domestically are less likely to recognize aspiring states. We develop these arguments and then assess them using evidence from the Western Sahara (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) recognition dispute). We justify the case selection, explain why it is an important case for this international relations question, and provide a brief background on the case. After discussing the results, implications, and limitations of the statistical analysis, we summarize the findings and discuss directions for future research.

Situating the argument in the literature

Whether or not an aspiring state will succeed in becoming a full member of the international system, much of the literature informs us, is primarily a function of the facts on the ground (see Anonymous 2002,⁴ and Coggins 2011, for descriptions and criticisms of this argument). The key question, according to this perspective, is whether the aspiring state or the state that would lose territory to the aspiring state prevails militarily. If the representatives of the aspiring state control the territory that they claim, then they will obtain recognition; but if that territory is controlled by the “parent” state, the aspiring state will remain largely unrecognized.

⁴ The Anonymous (2002) article was published anonymously because the author was a serving official of an international organization, in order not to compromise the neutrality of that organization (Anonymous 2002, p. 247).



Many empirical cases are problematic for the “facts on the ground” perspective. In Somalia, for example, the breakaway region of Somaliland is *de facto* autonomous and is not controlled by the central government in Mogadishu. Moreover, Somaliland is widely regarded as more politically stable and better governed than the rest of Somalia. Somaliland has been pursuing independence and international recognition, but has not been recognized by any sovereign state. By contrast, the Palestinian Authority does *not* have full control over much of the territory it claims for a future Palestinian state, yet it is recognized by more than 100 countries. As these cases suggest, “facts on the ground” may be important, but they are insufficient to account for international recognition.

Coggins (2011) carried out the first systematic study of international recognition decisions by great powers and hypothesized that great powers tend to rapidly converge on whether or not to recognize an aspiring state’s claim to sovereignty. The recognition decisions of great powers do not always converge, however. For example, the USA, the United Kingdom, and France recognize Kosovo, but China and Russia still do not after more than 10 years, and the opposite is the case regarding Palestine. Great powers have not recognized Western Sahara, consistent with Coggins (2011), but many other countries have extended recognition to the Sahrawis, which is consistent with our emphasis on the relevance of the decisions of *all* countries, not just the great powers, to become a member of the club of nations. While we readily acknowledge that great powers often influence the recognition decisions of some countries, recognition decisions do not automatically follow the lead of great powers.

In addition to great power preferences, liberal scholars have emphasized the role of regime type in international relations. Ozpek (2014) applies this perspective to the international recognition of “*de facto* states,” but finds that democracies are *not* more likely to recognize a “*de facto*” state when it is more democratic than the “parent state.”

Some more constructivist scholars have argued that international recognition decisions are shaped by prevailing global norms. Von Hippel (1995), for instance, suggests that the norm of non-intervention, dating back to the Treaty of Westphalia, has contributed to the duration of many *de facto* states. Fazal and Griffiths (2014) show that shifts in international norms affect patterns of secessionism globally. Furthermore, economic development could influence recognition decisions, particularly in cases perceived to involve decolonialization issues, for developing countries may be more likely than developed countries to emphasize the importance of the issue and the international norm of decolonialization.

Finally, the international recognition decisions of countries located in close geographic proximity to the secessionist dispute may differ from those that are geographically distant. For example, Rich (2009) finds that distance from Beijing increases the likelihood that a country will recognize Taiwan.

In terms of larger international relations theoretical debates, some international recognition theories are generally consistent with realist ideas (e.g., great power influence), while others are closer to liberal perspectives (e.g., importance of democracy and/or of international norms). Constructivist arguments provide insight into international recognition. The importance of international recognition in and of



itself (and, to some extent, independently of the facts on the ground) may be consistent with the constructivist claim that the international system is “what states make of it” (Wendt 1992). Becoming a state involves being recognized as such by other members of the club. Moreover, our argument emphasizes the importance of shared identity ties, which shapes recognition patterns and decisions, consistent with the constructivist interpretation of international structures and identity (Wendt 1992).

The argument

Although many factors have been proposed to explain variation in international recognition, including military, economic, and political factors, few scholars have taken the role of religion seriously. In recent decades, scholars have brought religion back into the study of comparative politics and international relations (Grzymala Busse 2012; Warner and Walker 2011). There are good reasons to think that religion is more important in politics than many scholars have thus far acknowledged in the literature.⁵ Of particular interest for this study, we build on the work of scholars who have examined the sources of governmental regulation of religion and its role in contemporary politics (Grim and Finke 2006, 2011). Whereas some countries are relatively open to religious proselytization by members of “non-traditional” religions, other countries regulate religion more tightly, including official and social restrictions on minority or “non-traditional” religious traditions. Contrary to claims about secularization trends, Fox (2008) argues that religion continues to influence politics, and that governmental regulation of religion is common in many countries.

Religious regulation also impacts international relations. For example, Henne (2012) finds that regulation of religion influences interstate disputes. We argue that cross-national variation in how regulation of religion is institutionalized in domestic politics shapes international recognition decisions of those countries with regard to aspiring states. Countries that regulate religion extensively do so partly in response to perceived threats to the dominant religious tradition, a challenge posed by distinct cultural minority groups at home. There is evidence that supports this claim. Sarkissian (2015) argues that governments may target groups they perceive as a threat to national unity with religious repression. Fox (2011, p. 8) states that religious discrimination against minority religions can “occur in the context of conflict between majority and minority groups over issues such as separatism or political participation.” Fox (2004, p. 26) also shows that “[e]thnoreligious conflicts are more likely to involve issues of self-determination,” that ethnoreligious minorities face more discrimination than other minorities, that minorities who express religious grievances are more likely to be discriminated against, and that separatist conflicts tend to be more violent when religious grievances are present (Fox 2004).

This sense of vulnerability to actual or anticipated challenges from minority religious groups in countries that extensively regulate religion has crucial implications for their international recognition decisions, since it may lead states to seek to keep

⁵ E.g., see Berkhout and Ruedin (2017) on religion and politics of immigration.



a tight lid on the “Pandora’s box” of any proposed minority accommodation (Bus-tikova 2020). One reason for this behavior is that countries that extensively regulate religion may view the advent of new states as setting a precedent that could undermine stability at home by encouraging domestic religious minority groups to seek greater autonomy. As a result, we should expect countries that heavily regulate religion to be much more reluctant to extend recognition to aspiring states, all else equal. Whereas arms transfers and other forms of support to insurgents are often clandestine, recognition decisions are public and therefore highly visible. Financial support for insurgents can be discontinued, but international recognition is harder to revoke. For these reasons, states are likely to seriously consider the precedent they are setting and the message they are sending to domestic minority groups with their recognition decisions.

It is important to note that the way we conceptualize vulnerability to religious minorities here is related to, but distinct from, the presence of an active ethnic secessionist movement, which we consider separately below. While ethnic and religious secessionist claims can and sometimes do overlap, they are analytically distinct phenomena.⁶ For example, Fox (2004) distinguishes between ethnic and ethnoreligious conflict, and finds that ethnoreligious conflict accounts for less than half (about 39%) of the cases of ethnic conflict. Second, religious regulation is not only a response to active and mobilized secessionist claims, but also to ones that the state or the dominant religious groups perceived as potentially threatening in the future, despite the absence of current mobilization. This leads to our first of two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 Countries that extensively regulate religion are less likely to recognize aspiring states than countries that regulate religion less.

In addition to the influence of religion at home, we propose that religion may also influence recognition decisions via transnational religious ties. Fox et al. (2009) argue that states tend to intervene in ethnic conflicts on the side of their co-religionists. They further argue that this tendency is particularly pronounced for Islamic states, which today mostly intervene on behalf of Muslim minorities. Transnational religious ties may influence foreign policy decisions for at least three reasons. First, religion may shape policymakers’ worldviews (Fox and Sandler 2004) leading them to view co-religionists abroad sympathetically. Second, Horowitz (2001) argues that ethnic ties matter to an important extent for psychological (more than economic) reasons, and a similar characterization could apply with equal force to shared religious ties. Third, Saideman (1997) argues that ethnic ties matter transnationally because the public sympathizes with co-ethnics abroad while elites, for domestic political reasons, seek to adopt foreign policy positions popular with the public. We conjecture that a similar dynamic may pertain to transnational religious ties.

Although states may be more likely to intervene on behalf of their co-religionists engaged in conflict with a state or a group where the majority belongs to a different

⁶ The correlation in our data between these two predictors is less than 0.30.



religious tradition, there is also a need to evaluate these expectations in conflicts involving two groups belonging to the *same* religious tradition. One might expect transnational religious ties to have “no effect”, for example, on the likelihood that a majority Muslim country would disproportionately support one or the other side in a dispute between a Muslim state and Muslim secessionist group.⁷ However, we do not share this expectation because we argue that the effect of transnational religious ties is influenced by whether or not the leaders of the aspiring and the established state choose to emphasize their religious identity. This insight builds on the work of Isani and Silverman (2016) who argue that the foreign policy views are influenced by how religion and politics are contextually framed. In particular, they claim that the views of Americans toward actors within the Syrian civil war are influenced by whether or not those actors engage in Islamic rhetoric, are labeled as “Islamist”, and seek to adopt Shari’a law (with the latter effect being the strongest).

More generally, foreign policy views may be influenced not only by the religious affiliations of foreign actors, but by whether or not those foreign actors emphasize those religious identities or are perceived to do so. Crucial is that the state has more means at its disposal to utilize transnational religious ties to project influence abroad. In cases where the established state and the aspiring state share the same predominant religious tradition, the recognition decisions of other states that also share the same predominant religious tradition will be driven by two factors: (1) whether or not the parties in the recognition dispute emphasize their religious identity and actively seek to rely on religious mechanisms in support of their position and (2) the relative extent of resources the two parties can use to exercise influence abroad. Furthermore, we argue that most states—including majority Muslim states—are oriented toward the status quo of existing borders (Maoz 1989).

Transnational religious affinities are not a constant or deterministic causal force. Actors choose whether or not to mobilize such ties, and the extent to which they succeed may partly be a function of their capabilities and access to resources. Arguments emphasizing transnational religious affinities share some similarity with claims that transnational ethnic ties are important in explaining civil war outcomes (Saideman 1997). We expect that religious affinities play a key role in explaining recognition decisions. As argued above, pursuing international recognition ultimately requires building a large coalition involving most of world’s countries. By contrast, an insurgent group may be able to survive with the support of one country (perhaps a country where the co-ethnics of the insurgents are the dominant group) that is willing to provide it shelter.

Religion tends to be a much broader category than ethnicity, and therefore coalitions built on transnational religious ties are potentially considerably larger than those built on transnational ethnic ties. Saideman (2001, p. 27) points out that

⁷ Saideman (1997, p. 728) hypothesizes that “[s]tates will be neutral or ambivalent toward those conflicts where decision makers’ supporters have ties to both sides” with regard to ethnic ties in international relations. One could extend this to religion, and suggest that countries with shared religious ties to both the incumbent state and the aspiring state would remain neutral, which would most likely result in non-recognition, the default position.



leaders of secessionist movements may prefer to emphasize broader identities, such as religious ones, rather than narrower ones, such as language or kinship, in order to maximize international support. The state that would lose territory to an aspiring state would face similar incentives in seeking to maximize international support against recognition. This leads to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 Countries that share a religion with both the parent and the aspiring state are less likely to recognize the aspiring state than countries without such religious ties.

Before describing the data and methods to operationalize and assess these hypotheses, we first provide some brief background on the recognition dispute over the status of Western Sahara that is relevant to understanding the context in which other countries are making their recognition decisions.

Western Sahara

There are several key reasons to focus on Western Sahara. The first and arguably most crucial from our perspective is that this is a case of contested recognition where there is no clear religious affiliation cleavage between the two key parties (both being predominantly Muslim). This stands in contrast with other prominent contested recognition cases, where there is a salient religious cleavage (e.g., Israeli-Palestinian and Kosovo conflicts). Studying cases where other countries have ties to both sides of a recognition dispute matters for theory building. This can be done when studying Western Sahara, but not when studying some other contested recognition cases.

Religion is also a crucial distinction in the case of Western Sahara because of the different approaches that Rabat and Polisario have taken to religion and politics. Majority Muslim countries, for example, should be more likely to support a Muslim state than a Muslim aspiring state or secessionist group. Needless to say, the state has more means at its disposal to use transnational religious ties to project influence abroad. Wainscott (2014) argues that Morocco has sought the role of the regional religious leader (e.g., by providing religious training for Malian imams in Morocco), partly in order to build support abroad for its position on Western Sahara. In 2015, Morocco inaugurated the Mohammad VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines and Morchidates, which offers religious training to students from abroad, including many from other African countries (Morocco World News 2015).

By contrast, Polisario has not emphasized religion. According to Zunes (1987, p. 38), the movement “espouses a kind of indigenous socialism.” Zunes (1987, p. 34) characterizes Polisario as pragmatic and relatively non-ideological. According to Polisario commander Brahim Bedileh (Bhatia 2001, p. 298): “All of these years, we have always avoided the temptation to fall (or to be closer) to closed



systems, whether in terms of communism or Islam. Our main ideology is to make our country free, and to achieve our self-determination.” Meanwhile, Morocco has sought to portray the Polisario as “both communist and Islamic extremist” (de Orellana 2015, p. 488).

Majority Muslim states may also seek to avoid political fragmentation in the Muslim world. For these reasons, majority Muslim states may tend to side with other majority Muslim states, especially when their challengers are non-Muslims, but also when the challengers are primarily Muslims. An example of such a preference for the status quo is the extensive support that Saudi Arabia has offered to Morocco (Zoubir 1990, p. 228). The Saudis also viewed Morocco as a counterweight to the spread of radical ideas from Algeria and Libya (von Hippel 1995, pp. 78–79). Another possibility is that affinity between conservative monarchies could account for the ties between Riyadh and Rabat. Polisario lacks the resources that Morocco as an established state has to promote its interests abroad.

Moreover, given the importance of “facts of the ground” arguments for recognition and secession in general, the case of Western Sahara is curious, since most of SADR’s claimed territory is controlled by Morocco (Zoubir 1990, p. 226), yet a fairly large number of states still recognize SADR’s claim to sovereignty. Furthermore, it is an important case from the viewpoint of regime type arguments. According to Freedom House data (2014), Morocco is “partly free,” whereas SADR is “not free,” which implies that democracies should be reluctant to recognize the Sahrawis and Polisario. However, the Freedom House score for Western Sahara incorporates criticism of Moroccan authorities in Western Sahara as well as criticism of Polisario’s governance in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria.⁸ Nonetheless, since neither party to the dispute is remarkably democratic, one might argue that democracies will withhold recognition from SADR not because it is less democratic, but rather because neither the incumbent state (Morocco) nor the aspiring state (SADR) is democratic. It is also a relevant case to assess whether cases of decolonization elicit more sympathy from developing countries, since many perceive the Western Sahara dispute as a decolonialization issue.

The current dispute over Western Sahara dates back to 1975, when Spain began to decolonize its possessions in the region (Zunes and Mundy 2010). Morocco and Mauritania both claimed Western Sahara. Meanwhile, Polisario, an organization representing the inhabitants of the area—known as the Sahrawis (a group of mixed Arab-Berber descent)—pursued an independent state, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The Sahrawis defeated the Mauritanian forces, and Mauritania withdrew and retracted its claim to the area. However, Moroccan forces eventually established control over most of Western Sahara, leading many Sahrawis and some of the Polisario leadership to seek refuge in neighboring Algeria (Mundy 2006, San Martin 2004). Nearly half of the indigenous population of Western Sahara has resided in Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria since 1976 (Mundy 2007, p. 275).

Rabat argues that the Moroccan kingdom has a historical claim to the area that predates European colonization and views the dispute over Western Sahara’s status

⁸ Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/western-sahara#.Vbu0xvnlw4I>.



as a matter of attempted secession (Zoubir 1990, p. 226). Many Moroccans view the Sahrawis as a sub-set of the Moroccan nation and not as a distinct nation entitled to its own country (Mundy 2007, p. 278). Historically and currently, Rabat has diplomatic and military support from the United States and from France (Pazzanita 1994), as well as from most countries in the Middle East (Zunes and Mundy 2010). The United States declared Morocco a major non-NATO ally in 2004 (Zunes and Mundy 2010).

By contrast, Polisario views the dispute as a matter of decolonization and resistance to foreign occupation (Zoubir 1990, p. 239; Zunes and Mundy 2010).⁹ Polisario has received strongest support from Algeria, where many Polisario fighters and supporters have sought refuge. The dispute over Western Sahara has been a source of significant tension in Morocco's relationship with Algeria (Zoubir 1990). Tension in the relations between Rabat and Algiers over Western Sahara stymied efforts to revive the Arab Maghrib Union (UMA) (Zunes and Mundy 2010). African regional integration efforts have also been hindered. In response to the decision by the African Union to admit SADR as a member, Morocco left the African Union (Pazzanita 1994; von Hippel 1995). SADR has also maintained strong ties with the post-apartheid leadership of South Africa and numerous other African countries. Like many other cases of contested recognition, Polisario has sought to increase the number of external recognitions of SADR (Pazzanita 1994, p. 271), whereas Morocco has sought to restrict them. Overall, more than eighty countries have recognized SADR (Zunes and Mundy 2010).¹⁰

Data

The unit of analysis in this study is the country-level recognition decision. The outcome of interest is distributed binomially, and takes a value of one for formal recognition and a value of zero otherwise. UN Membership defines the universe of cases, which generates 192 country-level observations, one for each country's decision. This setup allows us to focus on the crucial dyadic characteristics and ties between each individual country and the parties to the same conflict. To test our two key hypotheses and to assess the most promising alternative explanations, we collected data on the recognition decision of each state,¹¹ along with its level of religious regulation, transnational religious affinity, domestic vulnerability to ethnic separatism, and several other important factors highlighted in the literature and discussed in the previous sections.

⁹ Zunes and Mundy (2010) argue that there is broad international consensus that the status of Western Sahara is a matter of decolonialization.

¹⁰ Some recognitions were later retracted, but we are not focused on retractions in this article, which we believe would require a separate and full analysis beyond the scope of this study.

¹¹ The source of recognition data is: https://www.worldstatesmen.org/Western_Sahara.html [Last Accessed: November 21 2015]. A list of recognitions that occurred prior to 1994 is available in Pazzanita and Hodges (1994, pp. 378–379). We view this decision as zero-sum, so recognition of the aspiring state implies not supporting the parent state and vice versa.



To examine the first hypothesis, we considered three measures of religious regulation. The first measure, created by Grim and Finke (2006, 2011), is from the Association of Religious Data Archives (ARDA). The variable is composed of two parts. The formal regulation of religion (GRI) varies on a scale from 0 to 10, and measures the extent to which the government allows freedom of religion, foreign and other missionaries are allowed to operate, and proselytizing and conversion are allowed or restricted. The second part of the measure is the social regulation of religion (SRI), which also varies on a scale from 0 to 10, and measures social attitudes toward “non-traditional” faiths, and whether the citizens are willing to tolerate proselytizing by members of those faiths in their country. We use the additive index of religious regulation for each country as the main indicator to examine Hypothesis 1. The two indices are highly correlated, and thus jointly form a single explanatory “factor”, which is more efficient to estimate than two correlated variables.

We also examine alternative measures of religious regulation to further explore the robustness of the hypothesized relationship. The Grim and Finke (2006, 2011) variable is relatively broad and it allows for social aspects of restrictions on minority religions to be taken into account. However, this variable incorporates a variety of forms of religious regulation, including regulations that specifically target minority faiths and those that may apply to all religions including the majority religion (Fox 2011, p. 11).

For this reason, we also examine indicators from the Religion and State (RAS) dataset. The RAS data include an additive index that specifically measures religious discrimination against minority religions.¹² This variable may allow us to assess more precisely our causal logic, which links religious regulation with a sense of perceived vulnerability to minority religious groups. Taking the analysis a step further, we also include a component of the just mentioned RAS additive index: the requirement for minority religions (as opposed to all religions) to register with the state authorities. Sarkissian (2015) includes registration requirements among policies that may intend to repress religion. Including measures of registration requirements specifically targeting minority religions should provide further confidence in any claim that perceived vulnerability to minority religions plays a role in international recognition decisions. To capture transnational religious ties, we collected data on the percentage of a country’s population that is Muslim.¹³

To account for domestic vulnerability to ethnic secession (which may affect recognition decisions independently of religious regulation), we created an indicator variable that equals one if a country had an active domestic secessionist movement at any time since 1980, according to Griffith’s database (2015, 2016) on secessionist movements, which includes all secessionist groups and not only those involving “at risk” minorities (Griffiths 2016).

To account for differences and clusters of democracies, we also include an indicator of democracy that focuses on whether its executive and legislature are chosen in

¹² We agree with Fox (2011, p. 6) that “the indexes provide a more accurate and nuanced analysis of religious phenomena” than single variables.

¹³ The source of the percent Muslim variable is the ARDA data.



Table 1 Western Sahara recognition models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Religious regulation	− 0.16*** (0.04)			− 0.17*** (0.04)
Percent muslim	− 0.02** (0.01)	− 0.02** (0.01)	− 0.03*** (0.01)	− 0.02* (0.01)
Ethnic separatism	− 0.93 (0.52)	− 1.56*** (0.54)	− 1.62*** (0.54)	− 0.88 (0.51)
GDP pc × 1000	− 0.18*** (0.05)	− 0.19*** (0.06)	− 0.20*** (0.06)	− 0.00*** (0.00)
US FDI/GDP	0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	
Ethnic diversity	0.98 (0.93)	1.01 (1.03)	0.93 (1.04)	
Democracy	− 0.59 (0.46)	− 0.59 (0.49)	− 0.46 (0.47)	− 0.51 (0.45)
Distance from rabat	− 0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.02 (0.07)	− 0.00 (0.00)
RAS-composite ^a		− 0.04** (0.02)		
RAS-composite ^b			− 0.40** (0.18)	
AIC	178.58	161.67	161.28	178.97
Log Likelihood	− 80.29	− 71.83	− 71.64	− 82.48
Deviance	160.58	143.67	143.28	164.97
Num. obs	192	172	172	192

^aComposite measure of religious discrimination against minority religions

^bRequirement for minority religions (as opposed to all religions) to register

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

elections contested by more than one party, and on whether alternation between parties in power occurs (i.e., when the ruling party loses an election, a peaceful transfer of power occurs).¹⁴ We also considered the raw Polity 4 score, and a cutoff of 6 and above as well as 7 and above for democracy.¹⁵

For controls, we code for the ethnic diversity of the recognizing country using its ethnic fractionalization index.¹⁶ We argue above that domestic politics and religion issues affect recognition decisions and that the crucial factor is how those politics are institutionalized. An alternative expectation would be that ethnic diversity

¹⁴ Cheibub et al. (2010). We use the average democracy score from 2000–2010 in the final models. Using the 1990s or 1980s did not change the main results.

¹⁵ Marshall et al. (2014).

¹⁶ The source for this variable is Alesina et al. (2003).



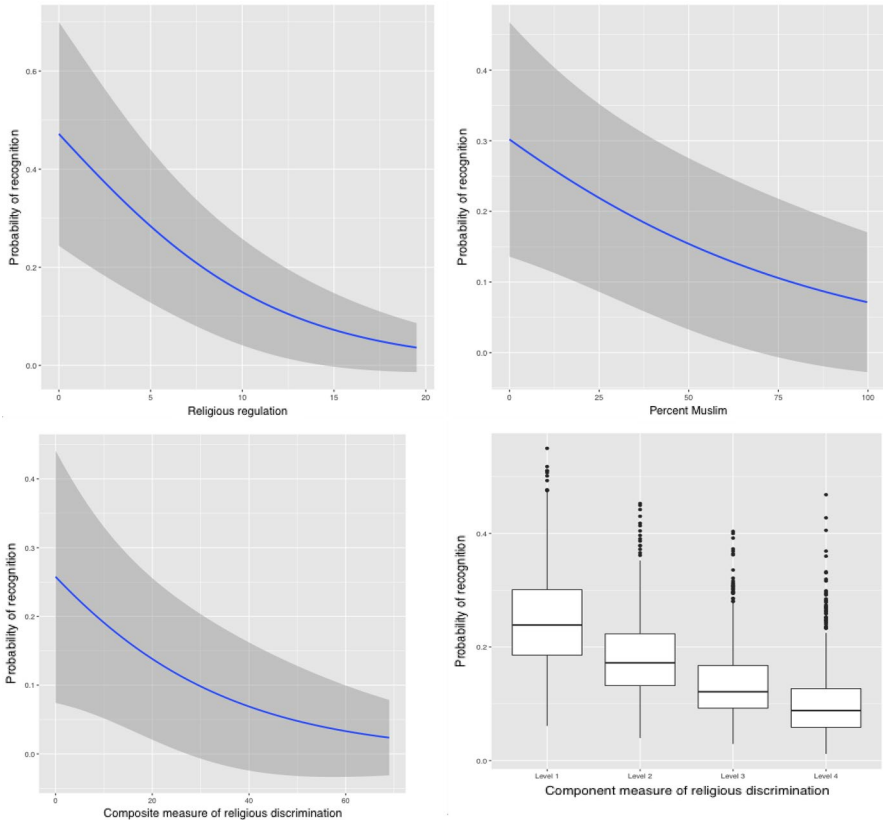


Fig. 1 Marginal plots of hypothesized relationships in Western Sahara recognition models

affects recognition decisions directly, e.g., by being associated with concerns about secession. We include the ethnic diversity indicator in the analysis to account for that possibility.

We also include foreign direct investment (FDI) from the US as percentage of the GDP of each country in our sample as an indicator of economic ties to the US.¹⁷ As we discuss above, Washington DC has tended to back Morocco. Lake (2009) argues for the importance of hierarchical relationships in international relations, with powerful countries like the US able to influence other countries. Countries that have economic ties to great powers may be more likely to adopt those great powers' foreign policy preferences, including regarding recognition. For economic development, we used the logged gross domestic product (GDP) per capita,¹⁸ and finally we also include a control for distance from Rabat.¹⁹

¹⁷ Bureau of Economic Analysis, Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data, (<https://www.bea.gov/iTable/index.cfm>), accessed on Jan 3 2014.

¹⁸ Gleditsch (2002).

¹⁹ Weidmann et al. (2010).



Discussion

Table 1 presents the numerical results with three different specifications, and Fig. 1 displays the marginal effects of the two key hypothesized relationships to illustrate their substantive impact on the predicted probability of international recognition.

The results of our statistical analysis provide strong support for the paper's two primary hypotheses about the effects of religious regulation and transnational religious ties on international recognition. We find that states engaged in extensive regulation of religion were significantly less likely to recognize Western Sahara (H_1). Majority Muslim countries also were significantly less likely to recognize Western Sahara (H_2). The case of Western Sahara indicates that religion plays a large role both domestically and transnationally in shaping the decision to extend or withhold recognition. The transnational religious ties and regulation of religion indicators are statistically significant in all models.

Figure 1 illustrates the marginal effects of the two hypothesized religion variables. Religious regulation had the largest substantive impact (H_1). For instance, a state that scores at the 10th percentile on the regulation of religion index had a 45% chance of recognizing Western Sahara, whereas a state that scores at the 90th percentile on the regulation of religion index had only 5% chance of recognizing Western Sahara (a ninefold increase in the predicted probability), all else equal. This represents a ninefold decrease in the probability of recognition. By comparison, a fully Muslim country has a predicted probability of 0.10 of recognizing Western Sahara, all else equal, whereas a country with no Muslims at all has a predicted probability of 0.30 of recognizing Western Sahara—this represents a threefold difference, also a significant substantive effect (H_2).

For robustness, we also estimated models that replaced ARDA's religious regulation measure with two variables from the Religion and State Dataset (Fox 2015), which are also both significant and negatively signed (Models 2 and 3). These are also displayed in Fig. 1. The marginal effects here are large (a fivefold and fourfold effect size when shifting from low to high values on the predictors within the range of empirical data)—a country scoring low on the composite RAS index (Model 2) has a 25% chance of recognizing Western Sahara, whereas a country with a high score has only a 5% chance—representing a fivefold decrease in the probability of recognition. Similarly, a country with a low score on the RAS component (Model 3) has a 24% of recognizing Western Sahara, whereas a country with a high score has only a 7% chance, indicating more than a threefold decrease in the probability of recognition. All three models point to the significant role of religious regulation in shaping recognition decisions, among both great powers and minor players in the international system.

In addition, we find some support for several other explanations. Countries with active or recent experiences of ethnic separatism were generally less likely to extend recognition to Western Sahara, which supports the theory of domestic vulnerability. Richer countries were also much less likely to recognize Western Sahara than developing countries, which could indicate that developing countries may place a particular emphasis on the dispute as a matter of decolonialization. By contrast, regime



type, ethnic diversity, US FDI and distance from Rabat do not have a significant impact on recognition decisions, and also do not change any of the results when removed.²⁰ Finally, we examined how well the main model was able to classify the correct outcome (recognition or non-recognition). The sensitivity of the model (correctly predicting recognitions) and the specificity of the model (correctly predicting non-recognition), as well as the overall classification rate, were all just above 80%, which represents a respectable classification accuracy.²¹

In sum, the analysis provides strong evidence for the role played by religion in shaping recognition decisions at both the domestic and transnational levels. At the same time, it provides some new evidence for other theories and claims in the existing scholarly literature. But how much of this reflects differences between Western Sahara and other cases of contested recognition?

Religious regulation may in general discourage states from recognizing an aspiring state's claim to statehood—this affect would then be consistent across different recognition disputes. Transnational religious ties may operate differently in different contexts, such as when both parties in a recognition dispute belong to the same religious tradition (Western Sahara, Taiwan), or when there is a clear religious cleavage involved (Kosovo and Palestinian conflicts; on these cases see Mirilovic and Siroky 2015, 2017). There are other differences between recognition disputes (i.e., geographic location, relevant past United Nations resolutions, etc.) that could affect recognition decisions. For these reasons, of the evidence on the Western Sahara recognition dispute should in the future be integrated with studies of other cases and the larger literature on international recognition.

The cases discussed in the above paragraph also illustrate the relevance of the recognition issue. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the highest profile conflicts in the contemporary world, and an important source of tension in the Middle East. The status of Taiwan is a potential source of conflict in East Asia and between the world's two most powerful countries, the US and China. The status of Kosovo is a potential security challenge for Europe. Each recognition dispute is important; and detailed studies of each present building blocks in our effort to understand sovereignty and how it is contested in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

International recognition is a crucial component of sovereignty, but the question of how countries choose whether or not to extend it to aspiring states has not been widely subjected to systematic examination. In cases of contested sovereignty, religion can significantly shape international recognition decisions. Specifically, this study demonstrates that countries which extensively regulate religion

²⁰ We also compared Models 1 and Model 4 using separation plots, and did not observe any large differences in models with and without these controls.

²¹ The classification accuracy without the controls is slightly worse, and the accuracy without the two religion variables is significantly worse.



are significantly less likely to extend recognition to aspiring states. Furthermore, we show that transnational religious ties affect recognition decisions, even in disputes where both parties belong to the same religious tradition. Actors that choose to emphasize their religious identity are better positioned to benefit from transnational religious ties than actors that do not choose to emphasize their religious identity. This effect is magnified in the actors that emphasize their religious identity also enjoy an advantage in terms of access to resources.

The study of international recognition should strive in parallel to be comparative and to investigate theories on significant cases. This will enable us to advance and expand our understanding of which factors matter in general and which are conditional on the particulars of a recognition dispute. Future research should seek general patterns while carefully accounting for contextual differences between the cases. In this way, we see the most promise for contributing to a larger research agenda.

We do not argue that religion and politics is the sole determinant of recognition decisions. Other factors, such as great power politics, ought to be taken into account. At the same time, our results indicate that placing religion and politics in a central role provides key insights to understanding recognition decisions that are not afforded by other perspectives and theories.

More broadly, our results indicate that identity and domestic politics matter in international relations. We argue that religion can be an important component of shared identity ties that influence international relations. However, the analysis provided here indicates that shared religious identities do not automatically translate into international support. Rather, the politics of how such ties are mobilized, and the capabilities and resources of actors who seek to utilize them play a key role. This indicates that insights from different international relations perspectives, those emphasizing power politics and those emphasizing identity, can be productively combined. Consistent with insights from constructivist perspectives on international relations, and with the work of scholars who have emphasized the interaction of politics and religion, we suggest that identity should neither be ignored nor assumed to have an automatic and unmediated effect on international relations.

Recognition decisions are partly driven by the domestic politics of the recognizing state. Recognizing states consider the impact of recognition decisions and of the advent of new states on their domestic politics and concerns. Identity variables have an impact that is not limited to domestic politics, but is transnational as well. This illustrates the need to combine the study of international and domestic politics, rather than study the two separately. Questions of contested recognition, secession, and de facto states are increasingly prominent in the contemporary world. Developing a stronger grasp of those developments will further our understanding of how sovereignty is being contested and recognized today in world politics.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.



References

- Alesina, Alberto, Arnaud Devleeschauwer, William Easterly, Sergio Kurlat, and Romain Wacziarg. 2003. Fractionalization. *Journal of Economic Growth* 8 (2): 155–194.
- Anonymous, 2002. Government recognition in Somalia and regional political stability in the Horn of Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 40 (2): 247–272.
- Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA). <https://www.thearda.com/>. Accessed 19 Nov 2015.
- Berg, Eiki, and Ene Kuusk. 2010. What makes sovereignty a relative concept? Empirical approaches to international society. *Political Geography*. 29: 40–49.
- Berkhout, Joost, and Didier Ruedin. 2017. Why religion? Immigrant groups as objects of political claims on immigration and civic integration in Western Europe, 1995–2009. *Acta Politica* 52 (2): 156–178.
- Bhatia, Michael. 2001. Interview with Brahim Bedileh, commander, 2nd military region (tifariti), POLISARIO front. *Review of African Political Economy*.
- Bustikova, Lenka. 2020. *Extreme reactions: Radical right mobilization in eastern Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Carter, David, and Hein Goemans. 2011. The Making of territorial order: New borders and the emergence of interstate conflict. *International Organization* 65 (2): 275–309.
- Caspersen, Nina. 2012. *Unrecognized States*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Cheibub, Jose Antonio, Jennifer Gandhi, and James R. Vreeland. 2010. Democracy and dictatorship revisited. *Public Choice* 143: 67–101.
- Coggins, Bridget. 2011. Friends in high places: International politics and the emergence of states from secessionism. *International Organization* 65 (3): 433–467.
- Coggins, Bridget. 2014. *Power politics and state formation in the twentieth century: The dynamics of recognition*. Cambridge University Press.
- De Orellana, Pablo. 2015. Struggles over identity in diplomacy: ‘Commie terrorists’ contra ‘imperialists’ in Western Sahara. *International Relations* 29 (4): 477–499.
- Englebert, Pierre, and Rebecca Hummel. 2005. Let’s stick together: Understanding Africa’s secessionist deficit. *African Affairs*. 104 (416): 399–427.
- Fazal, Tanisha M., and Ryan D. Griffiths. 2014. Membership has its privileges: The changing benefits of statehood. *International Studies Review* 16: 79–106.
- Florea, Adrian. 2014. De facto states in international politics (1945–2011): A new data set. *International Interactions* 40 (5): 788–811.
- Fox, Jonathan. 2004. *Religion, civilization, and civil war*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Fox, Jonathan. 2011. Building composite measures of religion and state. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 7: 1–39.
- Fox, Jonathan. 2015. *Political secularism, religion, and the state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fox, Jonathan. 2008. *A world survey of religion and the state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fox, Jonathan, and Schmuël Sandler. 2004. *Bringing religion into international relations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fox, Jonathan, Patrick James, and Yitan Li. 2009. Religious affinities and international intervention in ethnic conflicts in the middle east and beyond. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 42 (1): 161–186.
- Freedom House. 2014. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/western-sahara#.Vbu0xvnlw4I>.
- Gleditsch, Kristian S. 2002. Expanded trade and GDP data. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46: 712–724.
- Griffiths, Ryan D. 2015. Between dissolution and blood: How administrative lines and categories shape secessionist outcomes. *International Organization* 69 (3): 731–751.
- Griffiths, Ryan D. 2016. *Age of secession: The international and domestic determinants of state birth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grim, Brian J., and Roger Finke. 2006. International religion indexes: Government regulation, government favoritism, and social regulation of religion. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 2: 1–40.
- Grim, Brian J., and Roger Finke. 2011. *The price of freedom denied: Religious persecution and conflict in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grzymala Busse, Anna. 2012. Why comparative politics should take religion (more) seriously. *Annual Review of Political Science* 15: 421–442.



- Henne, Peter S. 2012. The two swords: Religion–state connections and interstate disputes. *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (6): 753–768.
- Herbst, Jeffrey. 1989. The creation and maintenance of national boundaries in Africa. *International Organization* 43 (4): 673–692.
- Horowitz, Donald. 2001. *Ethnic groups in conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Isani, Mujtaba, and Daniel Silverman. 2016. Foreign policy attitudes toward Islamic actors: An experimental approach. *Political Research Quarterly* 69 (3): 571–582.
- Ker-Lindsay, James. 2012. *The foreign policy of counter secession: Preventing the recognition of contested states*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kolsto, Pal. 2006. The sustainability and future of unrecognized quasi-states. *Journal of Peace Research* 43 (6): 723–740.
- Krasner, Stephen D. 1999. *Sovereignty: Organized hypocrisy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lake, David. 2009. *Hierarchy in international relations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Maoz, Zeev. 1989. Joining the club of nations: Political development and international conflict, 1816–1976. *International Studies Quarterly* 33 (2): 199–231.
- Marshall, Monty, Ted Gurr and Keith Jagers. 2014. *Polity IV project: Dataset users manual v2013*.
- McCauley, John F., and Daniel N. Posner. 2015. African borders as sources of natural experiments: Promise and pitfalls. *Political Science Research and Methods* 3 (2): 409–418.
- Mirilovic, Nikola, and David Siroky. 2015. Two states in the holy land? International recognition and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Politics and Religion* 8 (2): 263–285.
- Mirilovic, Nikola, and David Siroky. 2017. International recognition and religion: A quantitative analysis of Kosovo's contested status. *International Interactions* 43 (4): 668–687.
- Morocco World News. 2015. King Mohammed VI inaugurates institute for the training of imams, female preachers. <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2015/03/155048/king-mohammed-vi-inaugurates-institute-for-the-training-of-imams-female-preachers/>. Accessed 19 Nov 2015.
- Mundy, Jacob. 2006. How the US and Morocco Seized the Spanish Sahara. *Le Monde Diplomatique*.
- Mundy, Jacob. 2007. Performing the nation, pre-figuring the state: The Western Saharan refugees, thirty years later. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45 (2): 275–297.
- Özpek, Burak Bilgehan. 2014. The role of democracy in the recognition of de facto states: An empirical assessment. *Global Governance* 20: 585–599.
- Pazzanita, Anthony G. 1994. Morocco versus Polisario: A political interpretation. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 32 (2): 265–278.
- Pazzanita, Anthony G., and Tony Hodges. 1994. *Historical dictionary of Western Sahara*. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press.
- Pegg, Scott. 1998. *International society and the de facto state*. Brookfield: Ashgate.
- Rich, Timothy S. 2009. Status for sale: Taiwan and the competition for diplomatic recognition. *Issues and Studies* 45 (4): 159–188.
- Saideman, Stephen M. 1997. Explaining the international relations of secessionist conflicts: Vulnerability versus ethnic ties. *International Organization* 51 (4): 721–753.
- Saideman, Stephen M. 2001. *The ties that divide: Ethnic politics, foreign policy, and international conflict*. NY: Columbia University Press.
- San Martin, Pablo. 2004. Briefing: Western sahara: Road to perdition? *African Affairs*. 103 (413): 651–660.
- Sarkissian, Ani. 2015. *The varieties of religious repression: Why governments restrict religion*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Siroky, David S., Christopher W. Hale. 2017. Inside irredentism: A global empirical analysis. *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (1): 117–128.
- von Hippel, Karin. 1995. The non-interventionary norm prevails: An analysis of the Western Sahara. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 33 (1): 67–81.
- Waincott, Ann. 2014. Morocco steps up leadership in religious and security affairs in W. Africa. *Islamic Commentary*. <https://islamiccommentary.org/2014/03/morocco-steps-up-leadership-in-religious-and-security-affairs-in-w-africa/>. Accessed 18 Nov 2015
- Warner, Carolyn, and Steve G. Walker. 2011. Thinking about the role of religion in foreign policy: A framework for analysis. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7 (1): 113–135.
- Weidmann, Nils B., Doreen Kuse, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. 2010. The geography of the international system: The CShapes dataset. *International Interactions* 36: 86–106.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1992. Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization* 46 (2): 391–425.



- Zoubir, Yahia H. 1990. The western sahara conflict: Regional and international dimensions. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 28 (2): 225–243.
- Zunes, Stephen. 1987. Nationalism and non-alignment: The non-ideology of the polisario. *Africa Today* 34 (3): 33–46.
- Zunes, Stephen, and Jacob Mundy. 2010. *Western Sahara: War, nationalism and conflict irresolution*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Nikola Mirilovic is an Associate Professor at the School of Politics, Security, and International Affairs at the University of Central Florida. His work has been published in *Comparative Politics*, *International Political Science Review* *Foreign Policy Analysis*, and elsewhere. Mirilovic's research interests include migration and diaspora politics, and the role of ideology and religion in international relations.

David S. Siroky is Associate Professor of Political Science in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University where he is a core faculty member of the Center for Social Dynamics and Complexity and a faculty affiliate of the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict, the Center for Jewish Studies, the Melikian Center for Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies, and the Center on the Future of War. He is currently a Fulbright Scholar at the Czech Academy of Science, Institute of Sociology. His research focuses on nationalism, particularly its separatist and irredentist strains, and on violent conflict. It is motivated by an interest in understanding the roots of social and political conflict and in uncovering successful strategies to subdue it in divided societies and volatile regions. His publications appear in some of the leading journals and have been supported by grants from, among others, the US National Science Foundation, the US Department of State, the Fulbright Foundation, Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, and the Open Science Foundation.

