



# DIALOGUES

SECURITAIRES  
DANS L'ESPACE  
SAHELO - SAHARIEN

## SECURITY CHALLENGES AND ISSUES IN THE SAHELO-SAHARAN REGION

THE MAURITANIA PERSPECTIVE

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## FOREWORD

The recent Malian and Libyan crises have exacerbated the multidimensional insecurity (at personal, economic, political, social, environmental, healthcare, etc. levels) that affects the populations living the Sahelo-Saharan region, and have showcased not only the weakness of the States but also the necessity for regional cooperation, especially between the Maghreb and West Africa. Together, they may face up to similar challenges.

The project called "Dialogues about Security in the Sahelo-Saharan Region" stems from this observation. It was initiated by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Office in Mali, in partnership with its counterparts in Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia, in order to underscore the strong interdependences that exist between North and West Africa regarding security matters, and to promote national and sub-regional dialogues about the security challenges and issues that prevail within the States and across borders.

It aims at assessing the overall situation in the region, in light of the concept of human security. This is why country-based studies were conducted in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Chad and Tunisia. Each country-based study went through a validation process led by a committee of human security specialists from the country in question. Also, each country-based study was discussed by experts during a workshop that was organized for the purpose of not only identifying shared issues, but also agreeing on the top political actions that must be carried out in the Sahelo-Maghrebian region.

These country-based studies represent the first phase of an on-going multiyear project. They are also the intellectual basis on which some upcoming activities will be based, such as a regional conference that will focus on the priority issues that the experts have defined during their respective workshops.

The outcomes of the project will be used by all the key players involved in the various aspects of human security across the region. They will also be important sources of information and guidelines for the policy-makers and the members of the civil society, as well as for national and foreign researchers and university staff members.

Bamako, July 2016

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## INTRODUCTION

Once a trade corridor between Sub-Saharan Africa and the region extending from Morocco to the Nile River, Central Sahara has turned into a concentrate of all kinds of dangers, a place where a fermenting multidimensional conflict has become a threat to all the surrounding countries. New forms of insecurity that are now thriving in the area horrify the inhabitants of this vast desert. In addition to the precarious living conditions, fear is causing a mass exodus, sometimes to much less hospitable places.

Weak States characterized by a lack of resources are unable to find a common ground regarding the right way to manage their diversity. They are in such a disarray that they contribute, through bad governance, to making their internal conflicts worse. The weakness of these post-colonial States is equally reflected in the porosity of their borders and in the rapid expansion of gray areas within their territorial limits. This situation tells of the emergence of some key players who are beyond their control.

Although a very serious and visible threat in itself, such a perspective seems insufficiently taken into account by the geopolitical strategies of the countries in question. Instead, hidden agendas about the exclusive use of resources and the monopoly of influence prevent the regional and international authorities from seeing beyond their immediate and narrow interests. Yet the Sahelo-Saharan region is, in reality, far beyond the ability of any of the individual ambitions that are competing awkwardly with each other and trying to control it. It is falling into the hands of dark forces that are spreading an ideology the populations may adopt in the end, for a lack of better alternatives.

An analysis of the Malian crisis leads one to conclude that such a crisis is the outcome of signs that pertained to a decaying State having reached the term of its historic efficiency, as well as an indication of the fate that awaits all the African States that would lack imagination when it comes to governing their national territories. For, the security issues that led to the Malian "multi-crisis" are similar to those that are also shaking openly or covertly all of the formerly colonized African countries. However, some countries in the Sahelo-Sahara region do not seem to learn from the "fable of the bull". The similarity of the national contexts, of the challenges, threats and key players present does show how much it is necessary for these States to have a strategy based on pulling together their resources in a sustainable fashion.

To think otherwise and to consider that the Malian crisis is an isolated case means to delay this process of pulling resources together, and to accelerate the process of precipitating these States into a situation of chaos. It also means to forget that Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mauritania, Niger, Morocco and Senegal are subjected to the same risks as in the case of Mali, but in different forms and about different periods. Thus, it is not enough to have a strategy built on the security, peace and development triptych at the level of each country, because this individualistic approach will hardly help put an end to the dangers of jihadism, internal rebellions, coups d'état or to the proliferation of all kinds of trafficking.

With regard to Mauritania, our analysis of these issues has focused on the internal and external security challenges and issues that the country is facing, and on the response of the Mauritanian public authorities. In this regard, it was difficult to conduct interviews, and it was even more difficult to have access to the rare first hand documents that exist.

It should be noted that in the context of this study, a security challenge should be understood as an ordeal that the country is already going through, or its related signs that are visible on the horizon. A security issue should be understood as the price to pay so the country may address a given challenge. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to mention the challenges and issues of all kinds that are threatening the stability of Mauritania, including the ones that have a natural, historical or cultural characteristic, and that contribute to increasing security risks.

## I. THE ISSUE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Few people can assess correctly the sociological, cultural and political implications of drought as an essential component of the environmental issue. They fathom only the visible and immediate economic and social aspects that require urgent solutions, such as food assistance.

### 1.1 The impacts of the environment

The climate and the terrain are two natural phenomena that constitute a major challenge for Mauritania. Mountains and sand dunes cover 70% of its territory. The climate pejouration has had destructive effects on the economy and society. People in the North migrate to the South and concentrate on lands in the humid zones. Consequently, they multiply the number of conflicts to an extent that is beyond the capacity of the State to manage.

Now, pastoralist communities of the southern and eastern regions spend more time in Mali and Senegal, and by crossing over the borders of different countries most of the time, they weaken their tie to their motherland. The State is confronted to the difficulties of managing rationally its natural resources. In a context of precariousness, it should carry out agricultural development projects at a faster pace, but it lacks the necessary means to do so.

So far, the best solution for the populations of the northern region of the country has been to come down to the Senegal River valley, but farmland is less and less available in this area. Even the capital-city of the country is threatened. A potential flood could emanate from a breach in the protective coastline. This city of over one million inhabitants was built on the edge of a depression located below sea level. Technicians understood well the risks associated with this geographical location, so they developed a Master Plan in which the lower sections of the site were "non aedificandi".

However, the public authorities divided these sections into plots in order to settle more people. Thus, they committed a mistake that could have immense consequences. People damaged the protective coastline as they kept collecting and using the sand to continue to build the city. There is an imminent danger now. Some studies show that the average rate of erosion affecting the coastal sand dunes was 0.83 m per year between 1954 and 1980.

### 1.2 Response to climate change

To address the environmental issue and protect the country from food insecurity, the Government leaders have adopted a strategy based on (i) a legislative process that aims at adjusting the legal and institutional frameworks pertaining to the management of natural resources (ii) a favorable process that promotes the development of irrigated farming in the Senegal River valley and (iii) a sensitization process that aims at making the populations aware of the need to protect natural resources<sup>2</sup>.

This strategy generated some positive results, but the risk of food shortage remains. The country still needs food aid from foreign donors and the capacity of the State is limited with regard to the fluctuating needs of the population. The pace of implementing irrigation projects remains slow due to a lack of resources, and in spite of the assistance provided by the European Union (EU), the United Nations Organization for Food and Agriculture (FAO), the World Bank, the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (FADES). Other friendly partners assist Mauritania with a much-appreciated emergency food aid, especially the World Food Program (WFP), the United States of America, Japan and more.

### 1.3 Mauritania in the Sahel Region

Desertification and food insecurity are a threat to Mauritania. Thus, the country has joined the Inter-States Committee against Drought in the Sahel (CILSS) as well as the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River Valley (OMVS), which proved highly beneficial to its Member States.

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<sup>2</sup>German bilateral Cooperation has played an eminently positive role in getting Mauritians to change their predatory attitude significantly, after they had understood the need to manage their natural resources rationally.

In addition, it is possible for Mauritania to cooperate further with Mali and Senegal and to reduce greatly its food deficit by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by these two countries in terms of livestock transhumance.

Cooperation within the OMVS and, generally speaking, between Mali, Mauritania and Senegal, has demonstrated that the river basin and the pastoral zones they share can be a good basis for elaborating a framework that harmonizes the strategic interests of the three countries. Foreign partners did not hesitate to lend their assistance regarding the implementation of the OMVS projects, and to bet on the success of an organization that is now considered as an exemplary tool for regional integration.

Despite these positive aspects, cereal production in Mauritania remains substantially low. This represents an additional risk of instability due to the growing number and widespread nature of conflicts over land and water resources.

## **1.4 Conclusion/Recommendations**

To meet the environmental challenge that affects the country, Mauritania should focus on:

- Releasing productive energies in the rural areas by revising the legal framework that pertains to land ownership and by securing the rights of landless peasants;
- Elaborating a multifaceted policy of promoting the villages of former slaves and of settling the rural populations on their ancestral lands, while providing them with access to basic social services. This policy should be based on preserving open/surfacing water resources in rural areas;
- Strengthening security conditions in the border areas and improving the joint border management system by creating a sub-regional observatory of cross-border transhumance;
- Accelerating the pace of implementing irrigation projects in order to meet the needs of the local communities and to stop the progression of the desert;
- Involving the communities in the protection of natural resources and in the preservation of timber, which is wasted on a large scale since the forests have been declared a property of the State.

## II. THE ISSUE OF THE JACOBIN LEGACY

The issue of the Jacobin legacy is a congenital handicap that affects directly the shaping of the Constitution, and the functioning and evolution of the French-speaking State in Africa. It is a phenomenon that corrodes the State system and destroys it eventually.

### 2.1 The dilemma of the postcolonial State

The Mauritanian State is still under construction. Its foundations are hibernating identities that command all aspects of social life still. They existed long before the colonial period, almost independently from each other. They refer to tribes, emirates, remains of tiny principalities or of former kingdoms. Thus, one may understand the plea to take into account the fragility of the State in such a context and in a world where, paradoxically, globalization exacerbates identity-based conflicts. However, one should not use this argument to justify the excessive centralism that Arab and African regimes do not hesitate to adopt as their governing style, in the name of public safety.

One must accept the fact that centralism does not allow all citizens to see their own image mirrored in the State apparatus. The Mauritanian Government leaders do not fathom this necessity and do not consider it during the consolidation phases of the State, except when it comes to watering down tyranny. However, the placebos they use are administered badly, and the difficulty of managing them efficiently turns into another challenge. Moreover, the mode of governance becomes highly personalized. It does not ensure a fair distribution of chances and opportunities within the State.

### 2.2 Cloned Democracy and excessive centralism

It is impossible to believe that liberal democracy, the product of century-old ideas and struggles, and the fruit of large-scale sacrifices, may just fall from the sky on behalf of societies where enslaving other persons is still a virtue. This opinion does not mean contempt for the people of Africa. It assesses the natural limitations of any exercise in democracy. Here, the issue seems all the more tragic because this country can exist neither as a democracy nor without democracy. This is why it adopted a cloned model of democracy which fits a society that colonization has first kept frozen in its evolution, then has dug up to give the illusion that it is building a modern State.

In Mauritania, people vote to adopt a Constitution and to elect local community leaders, a Parliament and political parties. However, the decentralization process has been stalled almost since its inception, the Constitution is not really working, and the majority of Parliamentarians are singing glory to an omnipotent executive branch. The proclaimed liberties/rights do not help prevent the most flagrant abuses of authority and power. Civilian and military regimes are unable to complete successfully the State model under construction. Its gestation may be interrupted at any given time to provide the pre-colonial entities with a chance to take their revenge on modernity. The army then seizes such an opportunity to invoke a breach in History, to seize power and take the country into a more dramatic direction.

### 2.3 Limited actions from the State and its partners

The State is not able to put an end to centralism, due to the will and the reflexes of State employees who are opposed to any form of decentralization. On one hand, this leads the rebel movements that fall prey to the illusion of separatism to think, wrongly, that this mode of governance is insufficient with regard to achieving their goal. On the other hand, the strategy of the partners is based on the notion that decentralization is a way to stabilize the State, to soothe the identity conflicts and to provide local authorities with a framework that encourages their participation in national affairs.

The European Union, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Germany, France, Spain, Japan the World Bank, the African Development Bank contribute greatly to the success of such a strategy. Despite their efforts, the train of decentralization remains still because the State fears that it might suffer from the negative effects of its own dismemberment. Such fear caused partly the failure of the peace process in some countries of the region.

### 2.4 Conclusion/recommendations

Three recommendations could obviate the harmful effects of excessive centralism on the Mauritanian State:



Initiate a national debate around the key issue of rebuilding the State on the basis of a unifying contract. Obviously, it is more dangerous to keep together sociocultural entities that want to separate;

- Remove the main obstacle to a real decentralization, which is the fear of the State to disintegrate. This requires more effort in raising awareness among the ruling elite, so they understand the link between decentralization, stability, and development. They need to understand that excessive centralism may lead local identities to express themselves awkwardly, to be tempted by separatism, and to want to partition the State;

- Transfer real power and resources to the local communities, especially the regional authorities.

## III. THE ISSUE OF THE MILITARY REGIME

### 3.1 The original sin of the military regime

The military regime started in Mauritania in 1978. The country was suffering from drought and war in the Sahara. The first regime was right when it intervened to prevent the dismantling of the State. The traditional, tribal, religious and regional authorities were questioning its legitimacy.

However, if the military regime did fill a void, it also triggered dynamics that exacerbated the threat level, because one coup d'état led to another coup d'état, and this weakened the army because a part of the military elite was eliminated in the process. It was History repeating itself, with one new tribe going up the ladder to settle accounts with others, one new class of businesspersons emerging from nowhere, and one more leader worshipped as an idol temporarily. To remove such a kaleidoscopic context is a new imperative. It consists in putting in place a new system for the prevention of coups. Currently, State officials no longer have time to think about bigger threats to the country or no longer consult with collaborators whom they fear greatly.

The army has replaced conventional security institutions and no longer focuses on its original mission. The regime acts on its behalf and becomes the source of all the security challenges. It prevents the country from operating over the long term, due to its own instability. Resources are no longer allocated to development but are concentrated in areas that match the need for the power centers to protect themselves. The inability to think about sustainable approaches to managing diversity manifests itself as soon as the slightest problem arises. However, it should be clear that the latter case is inherent to all pluralistic societies, and coexistence between different communities is an opportunity, not an obstacle.

### 3.2 Mauritania and the military regime

One should not attribute to the Mauritanian military regime all the slippages and wounds that hurt the country. Treating such harms represents a major challenge in itself. The groups of officers who exercised power have always been "monitored" by civilians who got themselves entangled in various ideological battles and rivalries. This amplified the risk of instability. The military tried many times to return to civilian rule. Between 1979 and 2005, they made several attempts to engage the country on the path of democracy. However, such attempts were doomed each time, due to the actions of some civilian groups. All attempts to transition to a civilian regime failed due to the complicity, in part, of civilian groups who were trying to use the military regime as a Trojan horse.

In response to the instability that the military regime represents, Mauritians have adopted a strategy that has produced some positive results. However, they need to pause and organize a large debate about a shared vision, regarding the nature of the threats that affect their country. This seems like an exercise for the distant perspective, since the conditions for undertaking such a debate do not yet exist. The coups take place with external support only when it is believed that the country faces a real danger, while the Juntas who seize power consider they may endure the adverse effects of releasing power to civilians.

The first military regimes were motivated by revolutionary ideologies of the post-war era. However, the recent coups seem to reflect some other considerations. The foreign partners who convinced the leaders behind the last coup d'état to negotiate a return to the constitutional order<sup>2</sup> no longer seem motivated to use all their influence so the protagonists of the Mauritanian political scene come to the negotiating table. Finally, the Mauritanian political elite seems more and more incapable of formulating a shared vision of a model society that is likely to get the support of the populations and of the foreign partners.

### 3.3 Scary similarities

Mauritania is in a situation similar to that of Mali. Thus, it may suffer from the same type of major crisis, if appropriate solutions are not implemented in order to remove the country from stormy areas:

- (i) The two countries have inherited the same Jacobin tradition as the basis of their public institutions. They have been unable to carry out their decentralization process although this is better suited to the Sahel environment. This inability on the part of the State prevents the separatist movements to believe that reforms pertaining to decentralization can provide the appropriate framework for expressing the specific identities of the regions.
- (ii) They both include an area where the populations may feel excluded. Southern Mauritania is inhabited by ethnic groups with darker skin tones mainly, and the region is neglected since the State stopped investing directly in the agricultural sector. Eastern Mauritania borders the Northern part of Mali. It is also overlooked when it comes to implementing public investment policies.
- (iii) They both suffered from the actions of a military regime that has divided badly the national wealth between the various ethnic groups, regions and social strata.
- (iv) In both countries, Governments failed to root out corruption, mismanagement, nepotism and collusion between politics and money.

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<sup>2</sup> The African Union, the United Nations, the European Union, the major powers taken individually put pressure on General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz so that he organizes free elections in Mauritania. These negotiations have resulted in an agreement in Dakar that has not been fulfilled.

### 3.4 Conclusion/Recommendations

The military regime may lead Mauritania to troubled shores. This pluralistic country is impacted by wide-open schisms, but its political elite lacks the caliber and the capability to surpass the simple dream of exercising power to get to requirements associated with its use. Thus, it would be good to undertake the following initiatives:

- Ask the partners of this country to convince the State authorities and the opposition leaders that unless they work closely together they would be incapable of governing effectively;
- Adopt a governing method that would allow the army to return to its barracks, while it continues to contribute, in one way or another, to shaping the direction of the country;
- Strengthen the civil society so it plays its role in educating citizens and in opposing arbitrary decisions.

## IV. THE ISSUE OF WAHHABISM

'Transversal divide' means the growing separation of the Mauritanian Muslim community into two blocs with conflicting views of Islam: Wahhabism and Sufism. Both sides are represented by powerful religious brotherhoods.

### 4.1 The long walk to a disguised denominational State

Most Mauritians are Muslims. However, the way the legal systems of the country have reflected this fact has been evolving since Independence. The Constitutions of March 22, 1959 and of May 20, 1961 noted that the religion of the Mauritanian people is Islam and stated: "the Republic guarantees freedom of conscience to every citizen and the right to practice their religion within the limits imposed by morality and public order." Thus, criminal law could not yet punish cases of apostasy, because every Mauritanian enjoyed freedom of conscience and could choose any other religion. However, the Constitution of July 20, 1991 stipulates in Article 5: "Islam is the religion of the People and of the State." This radical revolution consecrates a denominational State although it was not proclaimed explicitly.

Several factors explain this change in the nature of the State after 30 years of evolution: - In the late 1970s, Marxist and Baathist organizations with a lay characteristic appeared within the school and student communities. This got the political authorities and the obscurantist conservative circles worried. These parties entered into an agreement that was materialized by the creation of a super ministerial department charged with Islamic Orientation;

- The 'Arabization' of education and of several sectors of the Public Administration opened the upper echelons of the State to elements of Arab-Islamic culture. They tied their fate to the culmination of a process of 'Islamization' of the political system. The military regime itself promoted the full application of Sharia through a broad proselytizing campaign and the Government undertook a reform in this regard in 1980. The Head of State promoted a religious fervor that led to a rise of Wahhabism, the ultimate source of violent Islamism;

- The 'Arabization' of education generated some problems of coexistence between the Arab ethnic group and other Mauritians with darker skin tones, while inter-ethnic relations had never reached a conflict level<sup>3</sup> before. The various Governments considered that Islamizing the State would help strengthen national unity and would produce school curricula that everyone would accept.

### 4.2. The State in a religious deadlock

The re-Islamization of the State was not limited to an accelerated and botched 'Arabization' process that created only fanatics, to the application of Sharia by anyone who could read Arabic and would pretend to be a magistrate, or to a religious doctrine being sponsored excessively by the State. In fact, it got religion-based schooling to continue to expand without any overseeing by the State authorities.

Now, the State is at a crossroads, and it must choose between secularism and religion urgently. Either it stops a process of re-Islamization that has already produced visible effects likely to generate violence, or it obeys the injunctions of a backward society that naively believes that an imaginary Golden Age represents its salvation, and turns its back to democracy, modernity and development priorities.

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<sup>3</sup> See the events of 1989-1991, discussed in a subsequent chapter.

The congenital defects of the State and its natural penchant for excessive centralism lay bare the depravity of a military regime that is obsessed with its own security and that is unable to undertake long-term endeavors. The denominational character that the State has adopted surreptitiously, due to political myopia, has created challenges and issues that Mauritania will find difficult to address, including the risk of reminding people of an old forgotten war that did occur in this unstable Sahelo-Saharan region.

### 4.3. The forgotten war

From 1644 to 1674, the war of "Char Bebbá" opposed the Beni Hassan tribes of Arab origins to the Sanhaja tribes of Berber origins. According to many historians, this was also a conflict between a legalistic vision of Islam and a more tolerant understanding, and even libertine vision of this religion. Supporters of the second trend were more in tune with the temperament of Moorish society. Ultimately, Sunni Islam prevailed because it corresponded better to the demands of a geographical area and of a nomadic lifestyle that cannot bear too many restrictions.

At the end of the conflict, a tacit *modus vivendi* was established. It was based on tolerance as the key principle amid elastic interpretations of the limits of Sharia. This was a precarious balance because no State authorities were vested with the power to sanction across the Mauritanian region, except the Almamy who performed their official duties well in the Fouta area, starting from 1776. Consequently, the country experienced a period of terror and intertribal warfare that created a climate of collective psychosis and a subsequent spreading of the Qaderiya and Tijaniyya religious brotherhoods.

These brotherhoods grew quickly. They recruited thousands of followers among all tribes and became some types of "spiritual Emirates" that transcended tribal, regional and social divides. The predominantly Sunni religious elite responded timidly, and then found a compromise with Sufism. Elsewhere, Sufism and Sunnism had clashed badly.

This way, the Islamic culture in Mauritania enriches itself through its intertwining of various influences. To a Sunni background, it added a Shi'a core, which was introduced by groups coming from Egypt and the Maghreb, and it mixed these elements with predominant Sufi practices. This culture is based on a triptych that mirrors well the meeting of the Man from the desert with the animist culture of the Afro-Berber. Hence, the assertion that the Mauritanian is a Sunni when it comes to his behavior and its relationships with others, a Shi'a when it comes to his traditions, and a Sufi when it comes to his way of contemplating the world.

This triptych is three centuries old, and is the basis of Islam in Mauritania. It transpires through the fact that all the religious brotherhoods count members from all the ethnic groups in Mauritania. This represents a solid obstacle to the spreading of violent Islamism, and explains the raging behavior of the Sunni terrorist movements towards the mausoleums of the historic leaders of the brotherhoods, after these movements occupied Northern Mali<sup>4</sup> and Libya. The speed and the force with which Malians, Mauritians, Senegalese and nationals of many other African countries have reacted against such acts of desecration denote their deep attachment to the brotherhoods in question.

However, this foundation of the existing relationships between West African countries and peoples has been eroding rapidly, in recent decades. This is due to Wahhabism, an avowed enemy of Sufism and Shi'ism. The Wahhabi obedience is all the more dangerous because the religious brotherhoods, one of the main bulwarks against terrorism, are facing great difficulties now. They have lost almost simultaneously a generation of illustrious spiritual leaders, and their current young Sheikhs are often inexperienced. These new religious leaders have less and less resources to devote to their brotherhoods, unless they accept Wahhabi charitable donations.

However, such an assistance "does not result from a selfless philanthropy, corresponds to a hidden but very well prepared agenda: the 'Wahhabization' of African Islam<sup>5</sup>. This is why, from Mauritania to Chad, and from Niger to Mali, Wahhabism is making a spectacular breakthrough. But not all the States are prepared to let this legalistic Islam grow<sup>6</sup>."

### 4.4. Mauritania and the Wahhabi threat

Mauritanian leaders lacked alertness and good judgement when they let Wahhabism spread its human and institutional infrastructure. The struggle between esotericism and positivism ended badly with the victory of the first one. It took two centuries for the second one to rearm and to rise to the surface again, in the shadow of the State and of leaders who were mostly against the brotherhoods. To receive donations, Mauritania started to court countries in the Gulf region that are the

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<sup>4</sup> This was the case in Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

<sup>5</sup> LABEVIERE Richard, "Terrorisme: Au Sénégal, le Wahhabisme gagne du terrain", magazine Afrique-Asie, posted by the [www.dakaractu.com](http://www.dakaractu.com), February 21, 2014. Available on: [http://www.dakaractu.com/Terrorisme-Au-Senegal-leWahhabisme-gagne-du-terrain\\_a60612.html](http://www.dakaractu.com/Terrorisme-Au-Senegal-leWahhabisme-gagne-du-terrain_a60612.html) [accessed January 05, 2016].

<sup>6</sup> SPIEGEL Justine, TILOUINE Joan, MADJIASRA Nako, CARAYOL Rémi, SEDIK Abba, "Islam ou Islamisme: Salafisme conquérant au Sahel" [Online], Jeune Afrique, posted online 24 December 2013. Available on: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/135159/politique/le-sahel-face-au-salafisme-conqu-rant/> [accessed 16 January 2016].

exclusive exporters of Wahhabism. Some characters who receive money from the most secret circles within presidential palaces used the Wahhabi network to influence the highest authorities of the State.

Starting from 1994, the State leaders saw the Wahhabi movement as such and began to fight it. They discovered that it was an octopus with three tentacles: the first one makes reference to democracy and accepts to participate in it; the second one pretends to loathe politics and violence and to limit itself to proselytizing (daoua) only; and the third one ignores democracy and morality, and is dedicated exclusively to its brand of jihad. Since then, the Mauritanian authorities have been completely at a loss. Consequently, Mauritians are left with a widening gap between two religious doctrines that are fighting each other silently.

The old Islamic thinking was based on a compromise between the Maliki Achari form of Sunnism, the dormant form of Shi'ism, and the form of Sufism that is directly opposed to petrodollars-sponsored Wahhabism, which sees the brotherhoods and their leaders as remnants of the Gentiles era (djahiliya). Is a merciless war not likely to explode at any given time between these two camps then?

Therefore, the challenge is to stop at the right time the rise of Wahhabism, which is threatening all the countries of the Sahelo-Saharan region, especially Mauritania, Mali and Senegal. However, one cannot rely on the States, or on the civil society organizations. They are unable to act against the Wahhabi octopus, because they know that "he who pays commands." Even Morocco, a millennial State now led by a courageous and intelligent king, eventually entered into an alliance with the movement that is spearheading Wahhabism in the world.

#### **4.5. Conclusion/Recommendations**

The long-term struggle against obscurantism, which is the quintessence of the political, economic and social vision promoted by Wahhabi Islamists, should not be based on coercive methods, but on democratizing the society:

- In order to fight against Wahhabism, find a way to take advantage of the liberal nature of the nomads. They are strongly attached to moving around freely and to spiritual freedom;
- Trust that Sufism may conquer large social domains and contain various waves of a devastating and obsolete Wahhabism;
- Restructure the State apparatus by taking into account the cultural diversity of the country, by proclaiming its attachment to democracy, and by adopting again the same principles that were proclaimed in the Constitution of 1961, which guaranteed freedom of conscience and freedom of religion to every citizen;
- Promote a democratic culture by abandoning repression, by getting women used to enjoying equal rights as it is the case with men, and by freeing the Haratines and other dominated groups from the grip of their former masters or so-called 'protectors';
- Exercise a constant overseeing of religious schools and delete from their curricula any call to violence.

## **V. THE ISSUE OF THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY**

### **5.1. The historical background of slavery in Mauritania**

In Mauritania, as elsewhere, slavery exists in the form of relics of all types as well as in the form of contemporary practices. The remnants of the phenomenon exist among all the Mauritanian ethnic groups. Caravan merchants brought slaves they had purchased at the markets of "Bilad Sudan". As Alain Mabanckou stated, many dark-skin Africans had created networks for the trading of slaves and did bear some responsibility in the enslavement of their own<sup>7</sup>. In Mauritania, the decadence of the system of enslavement began in the early 19th century, when the slave masters began to free the men in some oasis.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Mauritanian society evolved into a feudal system because of the combined effects of colonization, series of droughts and chronic food shortages. The "pacification" of the country encouraged the settling of the servile labor surplus that was no longer necessary for pastoral activities. Mobility was no longer an indispensable aspect of their survival strategy. Instead, the tribes needed to secure their respective territories at a time when the colonizing forces were trying to integrate them into larger colonies. This led to the birth and multiplication of the adwabas or villages of former slaves, who were no longer subjected to the system of enslavement.

Much later, the system of enslavement collapsed because successive cycles of droughts caused the dismantling of the pastoral mode of production. By the mid-1960s, animal breeding was the main sector that still required the use of slave labor, but the pejoration of the climate resulted in the death of most of the Mauritanian livestock. The vagaries of the climate changed the nature of the production systems, and brought slavery to an end. Historically, its justification had been the claim that raising livestock is a labor-intensive activity. Thus, desertification, the depletion of land and the deterioration of

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<sup>7</sup> HART Adrien [Online], "Les Africains ont une responsabilité dans la traite des Noirs", [www.slate.fr](http://www.slate.fr), March 16, 2012. Available on: <http://www.slateafrique.com/84079/traite-mabanckou-tabou-africain-esclave> [accessed April 25, 2016].

existing dams freed up thousands of Haratines or former slaves, who then rushed to the cities or to the valley of the Senegal River to earn a living.

## **5.2. Discrimination as a result of slavery**

Almost all the persons who are still deprived of their freedom are enslaved women at the mercy of the ruling families in rural societies. However, if slavery has become almost insignificant compared to what it was 50 years ago, its discriminatory consequences continue to exist. They are causing a horizontal divide that may lead to a conflict it would be difficult to resolve.

Experience has already shown that when slavery disappears, it leaves a type of smoke that continues to suffocate the descendants of the victims. Certain behaviors persist as reflexes resulting from a complex of inferiority that had affected generations of former slaves, while the descendants of the ancient masters develop a complex of superiority with regard to the first group. The barrier between these two spheres appear during marriage attempts that would defy “upward mobility” within this social order.

However, many other side effects are more frustrating in many respects. For the dominant culture maintains slavery as a norm in every area. The Law said that all citizens are equal, but many judges believe that slavery cannot be abolished by the State. To them, most of the Haratines are still slaves, until the former masters declare explicitly that they have been freed. This explains the conduct of judges who close their eyes on criminal cases involving slavery. Manual labor is seen as a prerogative of the former slaves, and this explains why, in the cities, the Haratines are most likely to drive carts, or to work as maids, bricklayers, carpenters, day laborers, etc. In the countryside, social classification mirrors the medieval type of feudalism, and the production system is based on agro-pastoral activities.

The social divide is more evident when it comes to land tenure in the rural areas where many forms of slavery-like operations do exist. The Haratines or former slaves suffer from the fragility of their ownership rights, and must make subtle payments to so-called ‘protectors’, although they are theoretically free. Thus, they face more oppression/exploitation when they get the status of former slaves, but they live under the illusion of enjoying their freedom because they may claim their right to use land as any other member of the tribe. However, the quality/fertility level of the piece of land they get to use is very much correlated to the level of docility they show towards the tribal chief.

In the rural areas, the cruel system of sharecropping persists and conceals a form of enslavement. Even in irrigated areas, where the State has invested in large farming projects, the Haratines peasants continue to pay a high ransom to the traditional landowners.

## **5.3. Dealing with the legacy of slavery**

Although it was and still is the expression of the will of a society where feudal relations predominate, the Mauritanian State has, since its Independence, been aware of the serious nature of the social divide it inherited as a legacy of slavery. The aforementioned Constitutions have proclaimed equal rights for all citizens, and their adhering to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition, in order to meet the requirements of its own domestic and foreign policies, the State has taken some measures against slavery. We will analyze their outcomes further down.

Mauritania has ratified all the international conventions that prohibit trafficking in human beings, abolish forced labor, criminalize slavery, and guarantee to former slaves the same rights that other members of the tribes enjoy, including land ownership. These measures were followed by the creation of an agency charged with the mission of fighting against discrimination as a legacy of slavery, and with the implementation of development programs in areas where many former slaves live, in order to improve their access to basic social services.

## **5.4. Conclusion/Recommendations**

To address its horizontal divide, Mauritania must come up with a good multifaceted strategy based on a vision shared by all the Mauritians and by the development partners. This endeavor requires several steps, at different levels:

- At the legal and institutional levels, the national laws must be followed rigorously, and the Tadamoun Agency must be authorized to manage the land it develops and to redistribute plots to former slaves. This Agency should be turned into a National Delegation charged with the mission of developing all the adwabas;
- In terms of securing land rights, the current Land Ordinance must be enforced rigorously, so each peasant becomes the owner of his/her own plot and sharecropping is eradicated;
- At the cultural level, an agency must be created and charged with promoting not only the folklore of the adwabas but also democratic ideals;
- In terms of capacity-building, the judges and other staff members of the Justice system must be trained in Human Rights and procedural laws, and civil society organizations must get enough support to double their efforts in fighting against slavery, particularly SOS slaves;
- In terms of awareness, it is necessary to let people know about the laws that abolish slavery and that criminalize the enslavement of other persons in the adwabas.

## VI. THE ISSUE OF HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE BETWEEN ETHNIC GROUPS

Maintaining a harmonious coexistence between ethnic groups is a major concern in Mauritania today. This challenge results from the mishandling of the 1989 crisis, which generated a serious liability at the humanitarian level and caused a social divide that persists to this day. How was such a divide created, how big is it, and what risk does it represent for the stability of the country?

### 6.1. From the pre-colonial period to Independence

During the pre-colonial period, no major squeaking existed in the relationships between members of the ethnic groups that populated the territory we now call Mauritania. Sometimes, a Moorish tribe could enter into a conflict with a Fulani, Wolof or Soninke tribe, but such a conflict would be less bloody than the internal wars opposing two or more Moorish tribes. The interactions between the Fulani kingdom of Fouta Toro (Mid-valley region of the Senegal river) and the Moorish Emirate of Brakna were less conflictual than the interactions between the latter and the neighboring Emirate of Trarza<sup>8</sup>, while the Trarza Moors maintained the best of relationships with the communities that had settled the left bank of the river.

The intermingling of populations was such that, by the time the colonial forces entered the region, the local communities lived in a state of symbiosis that favored intertribal marriages, trade and membership in the religious brotherhoods. During the colonial period, the elections that were held in relation to the Constitution of 1946 had no racial connotation. The first député<sup>9</sup> (representative) and the first senator<sup>10</sup> of Mauritania were both from light skin ethnic groups, but they got elected due to the votes of dark skin Mauritians mostly.

Mauritians had no difficulty with living together and laying the foundation of their new State at the time of Independence. In 1960, the year of Independence, the country counted zero kilometer of paved road. There were only a few schools, small medical centers and administrative buildings in the 28 largest villages then listed as territorial subdivisions. Nevertheless, this lack of urban infrastructure did not prevent Mauritians from coexisting harmoniously, and many moved back and forth between their country and Morocco, Senegal or Mali. After the country gained its Independence, inter-ethnic relationships suffered only small disruptions that were closely linked to the place given to Arabic<sup>11</sup> in the school curricula.

### 6.2. The divide of the 1990s

The 'Arabization' of the education system did not occur in the flexible and slow manner it should have. In addition, there was the emotional charge attached to the 1983 land reform. Such a reform was based on sound principles, but the State authorities did not follow them. Thus, the dark skin Mauritanian nationalists quickly estimated that this reform was an instrument tailored to the plundering of their ancestral lands. In 1984, these groups constituted a front that quickly clashed with the public authorities. The Government condemned some members of this group to death and threw others in prison. The conflict between the regime and the dark skin nationalists quickly turned into a witch-hunt campaign. Tens of thousands of so-called 'Blacks' were dispossessed of their livestock and forced into exile. Others were deported to Senegal and were able to return home only in 2008. However, the biggest wound resulted from the assassination of many soldiers in circumstances that still need to be elucidated. This wound caused the death of the harmonious interethnic coexistence, which had not always been managed appropriately by the national State after Independence.

From April 2007 to August 2008, when a civilian regime came briefly to power, the majority of the Mauritians who were deported to Senegal came back and settled in their villages of origin. They received some assistance from the State, and an agency was created in order to facilitate their reintegration. It developed new plots, drilled wells, fixed old houses and provided emergency food assistance. However, there was only limited progress made with handling the issue of "humanitarian liability". The widows of the officers and soldiers who were assassinated received vacant plots in the urban centers, but two important issues were not addressed at all.

On one hand, most of the communities that resettled the bank of the river did not recover their ancestral lands, which are still exploited by other groups with the support of the public authorities. On the other hand, the relatives of the assassinated victims have neither been compensated nor invited to negotiate with the State. So far, the Government and its partners have no strategy in place regarding such a heavy liability. They are afraid, because any investigation in this direction must start with establishing what really happened and who are the persons behind the crimes that were committed. However, these two questions are difficult to answer because some of the people involved are still serving in the armed forces.

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<sup>8</sup> OULD SAAD Mohamed, "L'Emirat du Trarza et ses relations avec les royaumes soudanais de la vallée du fleuve Sénégal au cours des XVIIIème et XIXème siècles" [undated], Department of History/FLSH, University of Nouakchott.

<sup>9</sup> Hormah Ould Babana.

<sup>10</sup> Eddy Ould Zeine.

<sup>11</sup> QUEFFELEC Ambrose, OULD ZEIN Bah, "La longue marche de l'Arabisation en Mauritanie", [no date]. Available on: <http://www.unice.fr/ILF-CNRS/ofcaf/15/queffelec.html> [accessed December 27, 2015].

### 6.3. Conclusion/Recommendations

To count on time and hope that the Mauritanian people will forget crimes committed against innocent and defenseless persons and communities seems like having contempt for History. To weep or to just pray at the graves of the victims and think that this is enough with regard to healing such deep wounds is a clear sign of naiveté. To rely on the strength of the ties that religion, family blood and fate have created and consider that they will erase the souvenir of violent crimes is like going blind. Therefore, it is essential to deal with the challenge of impunity and take the following measures:

Set up an independent and courageous investigative commission to find out exactly what happened with regard to the events in question and who are the real culprits;

Identify and compensate the surviving family members of the murder victims;

Give to the communities of former deportees their land back and develop more areas in relation to their current needs.

## VII. Mauritania and the Issue of Terrorism

Mauritania is one of the most threatened countries in the Sahel region by terrorism and its related epiphenomena. The latter are usually referred to as “crime-based economy” and we devote the subsequent chapter to this topic. A survey showed how serious this threat is in the current regional context.

### 7.1. The changing terrorist threat

Geographically, Mauritania is located at the center of the Sahel region, which is characterized by what Mehdi Taje has called “the logic of chaos in which anomic spaces emerge and are likely to cause a long term destabilization of the Sahelian ocean, and of the Maghreb and West Africa indirectly”<sup>12</sup>. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Mauritania feared terrorist activities that had started in neighboring Algeria and extended into Niger and Mali. Its natural resources are located mostly in the northern part. It is difficult to control this area, and the touristic activities that the country can promote are meharees in its Saharan zone.

Thus, the Government closed its eyes on the movements of Algerian terrorist groups within the Mali-Algeria-Mauritania border strip and the area of Lehfeira. This is North of the Mauritanian town of Bir Moghrein, one of the biggest markets for the trading of arms, cigarettes and drugs in the Maghreb region. However, in June 2005, some jihadists attacked a military unit in Lemghaity, near the northeastern border of the country, and broke this tacit deal. People asked themselves what could motivate such an attack on a country that had tolerated jihadists. The answer to this question came in the form of the coup d'état of August 3 of the same year. The country then discovered how vulnerable and weak it is, and how much it represented a reservoir for the recruitment of terrorists. Some of its own nationals attacked repeatedly the State. This showed that Mauritania, the “land of the million poets”, could also produce as many extremists.

Later, the fundamentalists who were arrested revealed that they had ties with terrorist nebulas operating in the Sahel, but they no longer wanted to use Mauritania to conduct spectacular actions. They targeted the neighboring countries instead. They would rather use Mauritania as a dormitory or a corridor for the trafficking of narcotics, a potential training center or a kind of commercial hub where they may open hundreds of stores to distribute food and medicine. They did not need to proselytize since the State was doing this already. It did not realize that different Islamist trends were working together and were converging towards the same ideal: to create an Islamic State.

### 7.2. The Mauritanian strategy against terrorism

So far, the Mauritanian strategy against terrorism, as it is explained in official documents<sup>13</sup>, seems to be effective. It is centered around several points, namely: (i) to create a legal framework that facilitates the fight against terrorist acts, and to strengthen specialized legal services in order to prevent and to combat terrorism and transnational crime; (ii) to strengthen military capabilities in terms of material and human resources, and of intelligence; (iii) to carry out pre-emptive strikes against the enemy in the eastern border areas; (iv) to organize a dialogue with terrorist groups via the prisoners who were jailed in Mauritania, and (v) to oversee the mahadras and other religion-based educational institutions.

The Mauritanian response to the terrorist threat is also carried out through the G5 Sahel, which includes Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, in addition to Mauritania. This regional body is a response to several concerns: (i) the need to focus anti-terrorism efforts and strategies on the most vulnerable countries, and to deal with the challenges of poverty and institutional fragility at the same time; (ii) the need to build stronger alliances and to coordinate anti-terrorism efforts and strategies, so countries do not fight inefficiently on their own; (iii) the need to replace improvised strategies with a well-structured long-term response to terrorism, combined with sound development, governance, education and security measures.

The G5 Sahel is meant to control better the wide-open Sahelian space where multiple risk factors are growing. Studies show that the Sahel needs a multidimensional mission in order to be saved from all these scourges. It is about combining the

<sup>12</sup> Mehdi Taje: “Les défis sécuritaires au Sahel : une analyse géopolitique”, La Tribune Libre, no. 19, 30 Novembre 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et de la Coopération, La Mauritanie face au défi terroriste: De la Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre le Terrorisme et la Criminalité Transnationale, Avril 2012, 31 pages.



aforementioned requirements with appropriate measures in the following areas: (i) good governance involving the participation of public and private key players when it comes to fighting terrorism; (ii) infrastructure development in order to enhance mobility and to increase exchanges between G5 Sahel countries; (iii) resilience aiming at income-generating activities in order to improve the living standards of the populations, especially women and the youth, and (iv) security and defense based on regional cooperation mechanisms.

The G5 Sahel faces several obstacles. They include a drastic limitation of the resources of the Member States, various interferences from both regional and international bodies, and a weak institutional anchoring.

### **7.3. The counter-terrorism strategy of the partners of Mauritania**

Mauritania and its partners have signed a number of conventions that provide a solid legal and institutional framework regarding their cooperation efforts and anti-terrorism policies. The instruments of cooperation between Mauritania and other States include the 1998 Arab Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism; the 1999 Convention of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on the Prevention and the Fight against Terrorism, which was supplemented by a Protocol in 2004; and the 1999 Convention of the Organization of the Islamic Conference on combating International Terrorism. The partners of Mauritania have also adopted a number of multilateral strategies such as:

\* The European counter-terrorism strategy: It aims at strengthening political stability, security, social cohesion and the system of governance of the Sahel countries; improving access to economic opportunities and basic social services; weakening terrorist groups and criminal networks; strengthening security levels in risky areas; and helping continental and regional organizations with fighting terrorism effectively. This strategy focuses on development efforts, but one could make three key observations with regard to Mauritania:

- The European Union countries tend to focus on their individual priorities rather than focus on the shared objective of fighting terrorism;

- Aid is not always directed towards drying up the sources of conflicts. For ten years, no funding was made available so the Government implements a suitable land governance that could have positive impacts on agricultural development and social cohesion, and that could wipe out the legacy of slavery in order to strengthen national unity and stability;

- Funding does not reach the remote areas that border countries affected by terrorism.

\* The Maghreb strategy: It could have been the ideal framework for cooperation between Mauritania and the whole of the Maghreb, as well as between the Maghreb and the countries of the Sahel, regarding security issues. However, some obstacles still prevent the countries of this region to come up with a shared vision, especially when it comes to security issues. We will limit ourselves to the words Mehdi Taje wrote in his aforementioned article: "[the initiatives and differing positions of one country compared to the others (Maghreb countries) tarnish the image of a Maghreb that shows division and is far from fulfilling its joint strategic obligations]".

\* ECOWAS is the regional organization that is closest to Mauritania, which was a Member State until 2000. Thus, some types of permanent coordination mechanisms persist, particularly when it comes to fighting against terrorism. The organization has created a regional framework for conflict prevention and a second one for the promotion of good governance, peace and security. In 2013, ECOWAS has adopted a strategy against terrorism because it considered that this scourge threatens peace, security and stability; that terrorist activities are a major threat to the entire region of West Africa; and that no Member State is completely safe from the negative impacts of terrorism.

Its Member States must adopt a legislative framework that facilitates the implementation of this regional strategy, and that strengthens both their cooperation efforts and the capabilities of their defense and security forces, so member States may prevent and fight terrorism effectively.

\* The United Nations has adopted a strategy to fight against terrorism as well as a plan of action to eliminate conditions that are conducive to the spreading of terrorism. This strategy aims not only at consolidating the capacity of the States to prevent and fight terrorism, but also at strengthening the role of the United Nations in ensuring respect for human rights and rule of law.

The UN strategy is more comprehensive than the strategies of other regional organizations, including the European Union, which is greatly affected by terrorism. The approach of the United Nations focuses on providing legal and institutional support to Member States and on ensuring a legal grounding to their counter-terrorism efforts.

### **7.4. Conclusion/Recommendations**

The terrorist threat to Mauritania is much more serious than it seems. Mauritania is a large territory, and in order to access its various corners one needs almost exclusively means that are hard to get. It is a country where some people are in collusion with terrorist groups and where desperate young people would be ready to satisfy his hatred against a political system that has allocated State funds for decades to some people at the expense of others. This bad practice has generated inequalities and frustrations among various segments of the populations. Thus, the country needs to:

Initiate an inclusive national dialogue that will allow all the key players and development partners to identify the circumstantial and structural threats to the country, and to come up with the best ways to deal with such threats cohesively;

Promote a democratic culture that will serve as a bulwark against terrorism. The deepening of the democratic process shall pull the country out of its semblance of democracy, and stop traditional obscurantist forces from maintaining the so-called "inferior social groups" and women in bondage;

Put an emphasis on the development of the border regions that are far from the capital-city, and support local communities and their organizations in implementing initiatives that offer better prospects to women and young people than joining terrorist groups.

## VII. MAURITANIA AND THE ISSUE OF CRIME-BASED ECONOMY

Crime-based economy means the trafficking of weapons, cigarettes, narcotics and human beings. It should be noted that this chapter is a summary of information gathered via various informal sources. Thus, such a summary should be updated continuously in order to reflect accurately the evolution of the aforementioned types of illicit activities across the sub-region, and to grasp their linkages with terrorism and even some regimes in West Africa and in the Maghreb.

### 8.1. Drug trafficking

Mauritania lies at the heart of an expanding triangular trade network pertaining to illicit drugs<sup>14</sup>. It is not a market for illicit drug consumption due to the prevailing poverty and the commitment of its people to religion. However, drug trafficking started in the early 1980s in the port of Nouadhibou, when this facility was very much used by Russian, South Korean, Japanese and European sailors. The network that provided cocaine to these sailors originated in the Canary Islands. A while later, another network started in Nouakchott. It was organized by businesspersons who were closely tied to the military junta then in power, according to some sources.

In 1989, because of the conflict with Senegal, the State authorities encouraged Mauritanian traders who were expelled from Senegal to settle in Guinea Bissau. It did not take long for some of them to discover the 'properties' of the illicit drugs they shipped to Mauritania through Senegal. This network began to smuggle drugs by using the Mauritanian airline company that had just opened a flight between Nouakchott and Bissau. The cocaine was then transported to Libya, Europe and the Gulf region via Morocco and especially Algeria.

Some top State leaders quickly started to profit indirectly from this operation, in addition to the small traders who had settled in Bissau and few border security agents who did so initially<sup>15</sup>. Their foreign accomplices behind the illicit trafficking of narcotics and cigarettes were very influential individuals, and rumors said that the terrorist movements intended to turn Mauritania into a transit corridor with regard to trafficking illicit drugs.

### 8.2. Illicit arms trade

Mauritania is an ideal location when it comes to the proliferation of small arms. Inter-tribal wars and conflicts opposing Emirates lasted until the beginning of the 20th century. The Sahara Wars of 1975 and of 1979 also created an urgent need for Mauritanians all over the country, but especially in the northern and eastern parts, to have weapons in order to defend themselves against attacks from the Polisario Front.

For all these reasons, many Mauritanian families keep, as in self-defense reflex, small arms they have purchased through unofficial channels. From 1990, members of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA)<sup>16</sup>, rebels from North Mali and dissidents of the Polisario Front met in Lehfeira<sup>17</sup> for the purpose of trafficking arms anonymously. This area was a no-man's-land. Mauritania did not want to exercise any formal control, and saw it as a marketplace where items donated to the Saharawi people by international charities could be sold discreetly.

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<sup>14</sup> LUNTUMBUE, Michel, *Criminalité transfrontalière en Afrique de l'Ouest: Cadre et limites des stratégies régionales de lutte*. The GRIP analytical note, October 9, 2012, Brussels. Available on: [http://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES\\_ANALYSE/2012/na\\_2012-10-09\\_fr\\_m-untumbue.pdf](http://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES_ANALYSE/2012/na_2012-10-09_fr_m-untumbue.pdf) [accessed January 13, 2016]

<sup>15</sup> In 1996, some police officers were freed before going to court and were reinstated in their positions, because an extensive investigation could have compromised high-profile public and private barons. Because these police officers got very alarmed, other powerful individuals stepped in and took control of the trafficking networks.

<sup>16</sup> First group of Islamists that was created in Algeria, after the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was prevented from participating in the 1992 elections.

<sup>17</sup> Located in Mauritania, between Tindouf and Bir Moghreïn (formerly called Fort Trinquet).

Some people said that the Polisario Front got deeply involved in these trading activities. In December 2010, three of its leaders were arrested by the Mauritanian authorities<sup>18</sup>, but they were set free at the request of Algerian and Sahrawi authorities.

### **8.3. Threats resulting from crime-based economy**

The impacts of the crime-based economy on the security of the States and of the populations are the same everywhere. In the case of Mauritania, they could be extremely serious. The institutional foundations of the country are fragile, and growing inequalities may lead to lasting conflicts because competing groups with ties to the political power are organizing the different types of trafficking. These illicit activities generate enormous resources that widen the gaps between tribes, regions, social classes and ethnic groups. Thus, they contribute to increasing the threat level. Since the beginning of the military regime, the sinecure associated with the central power made existing inequalities worse and created some new ones.

One should keep in mind that the growing imbalances caused by the accumulation of ill-gotten capital could lead people to question the legitimacy of the State itself. The timing and the format of such a questioning will depend on how quickly the political power will connect with drug traffickers, or other criminals. This threat is much more serious in a country where imagination plays a big role in the structuring of cultural norms, and nothing escapes the watchful eyes of the nomads that Mauritanian people still are.

New types of violence are becoming prevalent. This represents a serious threat. The country is facing not only religious terrorism, but also an unprecedented crime level. The strange cases of murders and of "suicides" that are affecting all the social groups now can be explained only when one takes into account the types of retaliations that are specific to the networks of drug traffickers. If the Government does not make a significant effort to show that it is not acting in collusion with these networks, the Mauritanian society and the foreign partners will certainly establish a link between the rising crime level and illicit economic activities on one hand, and with public authorities on the other hand.

Then, obscurantist forces and terrorists could easily convince Mauritians that an Islamic State represents the best solution for them, instead of a democratic regime. It is the ultimate goal for the Mauritanian Islamist groups. On the surface, it seems they have renounced violence. However, they expect "the collapse of the political power without any foreign intervention" as they said, before they can make use of violence openly.

### **8.4. Mauritania and the issue of crime-based economy**

Mauritania has adopted the approach of the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime (UNODC) known as the 2010 Dakar Initiative. Its objectives are: to reduce the possibility for organized crime groups to use the country for drug trafficking; to reorganize the law enforcement agencies and the judiciary; to intensify the fight against organized crime and corruption; to prevent drug abuse and to reduce the related negative health/social consequences.

The expected outcomes of this program are: strengthening cross-border operational cooperation and information exchange; harmonizing the legal frameworks to be used in fighting against transnational organized crime; improving the capabilities of law enforcement agencies with regard to border control and forensics; updating the national legislation and strengthening of the operational capacity of the police with regard to fighting terrorism.

### **8.5. The strategies of the partners**

The partners of Mauritania have adopted strategies that involve various State authorities.

The African Union and ECOWAS have initiated a plan of action<sup>19</sup> for drug control and crime prevention, and have set up a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation. The plan aims at strengthening the capabilities of the regional organizations and of member States so they may achieve a number of objectives when it comes to fighting against organized crime and drug trafficking, to searching and preventing drug use, to providing the required treatment and to assisting the criminal justice system in its fight against money laundering. The UNODC program for West Africa also aims at strengthening international cooperation in such areas as criminal affairs, conflict prevention, corruption cases, witness protection, assistance to victims and to minors, access to justice, and alternatives to imprisonment.

The European strategy is based on a framework that defines the overall policy and the broad priorities of the Union with regard to fighting against drug traffickers. It is based on the fundamental legal principles and the founding values of the Union. Its specific objectives are: (i) contribute to reducing the demand for drugs, the addiction to drugs, the risks and the negative health and social consequences; (ii) disrupt the drug market; (iii) improve coordination at the European and international levels; (iv) facilitate dialogue and cooperation with other countries and international organizations regarding drug-related issues; (v) contribute to the large-scale sharing of data emanating from research, monitoring and evaluation.

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<sup>18</sup> They were Sultani Ould Ahmadou Ould Baddi, Farha Ould Hmoud Ould Maatallah and Mohamed Ould Laakik, who were caught in possession of a large quantity of illicit drugs.

<sup>19</sup> UNODC : Programme régional pour l'Afrique de l'Ouest 2010 - 2014

## 8.6. Conclusion/Recommendations

Mauritania lies at the center of a hurricane caused by drugs, arms and cigarettes traffickers, but the country lacks the means to deal with such a huge threat. Its neighboring countries in the Maghreb region have no institutional tool to help limit the flow of illegal drugs and of people who cross its territory. Mauritania cannot work closely with one of the two regional powers (Algeria and Morocco) without offending the other. The European countries, including France and Spain, cannot offer more support than what is already provided. In this context, it would be useful for Mauritania to:

Become again a Member State of the ECOWAS by signing all the required protocols;

Lead a campaign that aims at getting its partners within the Arab Maghreb Union to design a regional strategy regarding the fight against terrorism, drugs and cross-border crime;

- Negotiate bilateral defense agreements with European countries that are likely to accept such a partnership, like France, Spain and Germany;
- Organize a national debate on the risks associated with the crime-based economy in order to develop a coping strategy based on a shared vision of such risks.

## CONCLUSION

One could consider that the main challenges that Mauritania is currently facing are not serious or urgent enough. One could also think the opposite, given the political deadlock that the country has been experiencing for more than three decades, and the accumulation of blunders in the management of a State system that was ill-conceived from the start. Today, Mauritania is affected by dangerous trends that may propel it in the eye of the storm at any moment.

In addition to the existing inequalities between social classes, particularly between Haratines and so-called 'white' Moors, there are widening gaps between the regions of the country. The best potentials for economic development are concentrated in the northern and coastal regions, and in the valley of the Senegal River. The populations of the central and eastern regions are getting poorer and are rushing to other locations. If it is true that this latter reality is partly due to geological and climatic conditions, it can still be perceived as differentiating between the people themselves, given the fact that there is no coherent strategy in place regarding the allocation of State resources and public investment, which could mitigate the initial imbalance.

Another type of inequality is the general feeling that the Moors are treated better than the so-called 'black' Mauritians. Certainly, one may argue that there are a lot of poor people among the first group and a few rich families among the second group. One may also observe that the Moors have more experience in the field of trade, especially in brokerage and transport by caravans. They have distribution networks across all the West African countries and demonstrate great skills in saving money. The so-called 'black' Mauritians do not have such an experience.

However, if these arguments are partly accurate, they do not justify the inequality that exists between Mauritanian ethnic groups in terms of wealth distribution. One of the causes of this inequality is the uneven allocation of State resources, which resulted in widening the gap between Moors and so-called 'black' Mauritians, particularly during the years of structural adjustment program and of privatization. In addition, the school system was based, since 1973, on a policy whereby dark skin Halpularen, Soninke and Wolof students study in French while the others study in Arabic. Thus, this system led to separate development contexts for the Moorish and so-called 'black' communities. It has created a situation where children from the same country grow up with their backs turned to each other, and they ignore each other's living conditions.

Terrorist movements are hibernating in the country. They are using it as a training field where their propaganda may help them recruit hundreds of fighters at any given time. The crime-based economy is co-opting the upper echelons of the State authorities. It may change the existing social models. Wahhabism is conquering slyly the field of religious culture, although it was defeated three centuries ago under a different name.

Desertification is progressing quickly and is forcing people to move constantly to humid areas, which are already overpopulated. In the valley of the Senegal River, a region seen as the ultimate solution for resettling waves of landless peasants and former slaves, intercultural conflicts may explode any time and may lead the country into a type of violence that people has never seen before.

So, is it enough to wonder what miracle is keeping Mauritania standing and how long it may continue to defy all the existing challenges? Surely, due to their nomadic lifestyle, Mauritians have developed an ability to improvise that still allows them to survive the vagaries of their History and of the climate. But how much longer will they be able to improvise salutary solutions?

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## DIALOGUES

SECURITAIRES  
DANS L'ESPACE  
SAHELO - SAHARIEN

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A former high-ranking administrator and Minister in the Government, Isselmou ABDEL KADER now works as an independent consultant. He has specialized in leading dialogue between communities, conflict prevention and resolution, decentralization and local development.

### Summary

The country-based studies highlight the nature of the State and the key question of governance in the Sahelo-Saharan region. The types of relations that the State maintains with the populations become a crucial issue when one considers the identity/ethnic dimensions of the demands that minority groups often express at the risk of destabilizing the entire region. The issues of violent extremism and of crime organized across borders are also discussed.

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