Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania

The Local Stakes of the Sahelian Crisis

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The Sahel Research Group, of the University of Florida's Center for African Studies, is a collaborative effort to understand the political, social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the countries which comprise the West African Sahel. It focuses primarily on the six Francophone countries of the region—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—but also on in developments in neighboring countries, to the north and south, whose dynamics frequently intersect with those of the Sahel. The Sahel Research Group brings together faculty and graduate students from various disciplines at the University of Florida, in collaboration with colleagues from the region.

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Abstract:

The crisis of Islamic insurgency in the Sahel emerged out of an unprecedented spread of the global jihadist ideology in the region, the spillover of the Algerian and Libyan crises, and the people's growing dissatisfaction vis-à-vis their governments. Mauritania was the first Sahelian country to suffer from the crisis of Islamic insurgency; and it was also, unexpectedly, the first Sahelian country to have reached what should be called the post-Islamic insurgency period. After six years (2005-2011) of struggle, Mauritania had, in fact, succeeded in expelling the threat of jihadism out of its territory. This success must be credited to the states' effective response to the crisis, particularly the combination of military political and ideological responses. The outbreak of the Malian crisis has had a positive impact on Mauritania's stability as it allowed the withdrawal of many Mauritanian jihadists from the national scene to focus instead on jihad in Mali and elsewhere in the region. The Malian crisis has further intensified the political and ethno-racial debates while badly hurting the local economy. Finally, the Sahelo-Saharan crisis of Islamic insurgency is a regional crisis that needs a regional solution. Mauritania remains vulnerable as the insurgency continues to spread throughout the region.

About the Author:

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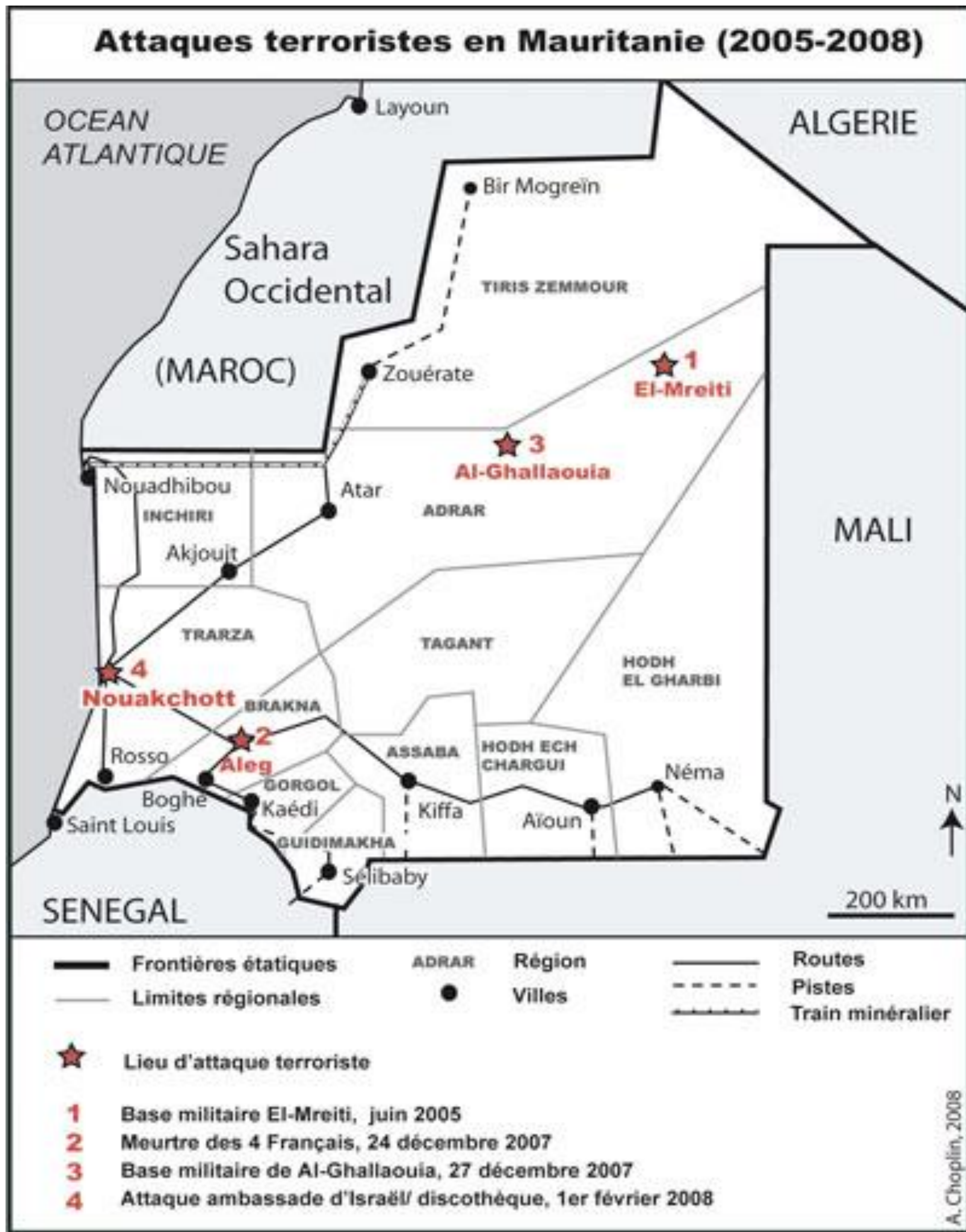

Source: Armelle Choplin, « La Mauritanie à l'épreuve de l'islamisme et des menaces terroristes », *EchoGéo, Sur le Vif*, 29 April 2008.

On the frontlines

The Sahel region is going through an important transformation. A region that was once known for its peace and stability has suddenly turned into a sanctuary of violence, kidnapping, suicide bombing, and the spread of radical Islamic ideologies. This sudden change has puzzled scholars, and challenges the existing paradigms for understanding the political and religious dynamics of the region. It requires researchers to re-think the Sahel, and to re-examine the local and global dynamics at play in an effort to make sense of these new phenomena. There are basic questions that still need answers: Where did this crisis come from? What changes happened in the Sahel that could explain the sudden spread of jihadism in a way that was unexpected only a few years ago? What impact does this crisis have on the region's medium and long-term stability? This paper tries to provide an understanding of the crisis of Islamic insurgency in the Sahel by examining the case of Mauritania.

Mauritania, Mali and Niger are the three Sahelian countries that are on the frontlines of what we might call the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic insurgency. These countries have each experienced military assaults, suicide attacks, kidnappings, and killing of Westerners perpetrated by jihadists inside their territories. Yet all three have had different trajectories. While the Malian state collapsed in 2012 in the face of the crisis and Niger struggles to maintain a precarious stability, Mauritania seems the first to have reached a post-Islamic insurgency period. In fact, after six years of intense counterterrorism activity between 2005 and 2011, Mauritania appears to have successfully expelled the jihadist threat from its territory. Unlike Niger and Mali, no terrorist attacks have occurred on Mauritanian soil since December 2011. This is all the more notable given that, prior to the onset of the Malian crisis, a number of factors suggested extreme vulnerability to jihadist activism, and seemed to set Mauritania apart from its Sahelian neighbors as the easiest prey for the jihadist enterprise. First, although no significant jihadist attacks happened in Mauritania before 2005, Mauritanians were no strangers to the jihadist enterprise; a number of radical Mauritanians have had a long history of involvement in jihadi militancy in the region, as well as in the core of Al-Qaeda, where at least five Mauritanians counted among Ben

Laden's inner circle.[1] Second, Mauritania was the first Sahelian country to be targeted by terrorist attacks as a direct result of the spillover into the Sahel of the Algerian Islamic insurgency, and that even before the creation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Third, Mauritania was the first Sahelian country to develop local endogenous cells of jihadists, particularly in the suburbs of Nouakchott. Between 2005 and 2011 no fewer than fourteen deadly attacks committed by AQIM and its affiliates plunged Mauritania into an unprecedented situation of insecurity. Finally, the outbreak of the Mauritanian Islamic insurgency coincided with a period of high domestic political volatility marked by two military coups and two military transitions to new elected regimes.

Surprisingly, despite the political instability that punctuated this period of crisis, successive Mauritanian governments reacted promptly and decisively against the threat posed by jihadist movements via a combination of military, political, and religious strategies. As a result of this strong reaction, Mauritanian jihadists gradually withdrew from their increasingly unsuccessful national front in order to join more promising ones in Libya and Mali.

While the outbreak of these other conflicts seems to have had a positive impact on Mauritania's immediate security, it poses numerous challenges to the country's long-term stability. The regional conflicts have, in fact, exacerbated the long-standing debates over racism and slavery, as well as heightened the political tensions between the ruling majority and the opposition, increasing the specter of sociopolitical instability. Mauritanians, in addition, still constitute the majority of the membership within the jihadist groups operating elsewhere in the region, and many occupy important leading positions in these movements. The potential return of these well-trained jihadists may pose a considerable threat to Mauritania's medium and long-term security. Finally, the downturn of the tourism industry and the influx of refugees have negatively affected the local economy, and could well contribute to a further deterioration of the living conditions of ordinary Mauritanians.

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[1] The five Mauritanian members of Al Qaeda directory are Mahfouz Ould Waled, Ahmad Ould Noman, Ahmad Ould Abdel Aziz, Mohamed Ould Salahi, Ould Sidi Mohamed. See, Zekeria O.A. Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie*, Karthala, Paris, 2013, pp.1146-149.

This paper examines these different aspects of the stakes of the Sahelian Islamic insurgency in Mauritania. After surveying the particular challenges faced by Mauritanian governments, it emphasizes the conditions under which the crisis emerged, its impact on Mauritania, and the factors of both resilience and of vulnerability at play.

Mauritania's Challenging Governance Context

A political sociology marked by ethno-racial tensions and slavery. Among the Sahelian countries, Mauritania is distinguished by its political sociology. The Sahel region, geographically located at the crossroads between sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, brings together populations of black Africans with white communities of Arab and Berber origins. The estimated 3.5 million Mauritanians are divided into three major ethnic groups: (1) White Moors or beydane, who are of mixed Arab and Berber origins, represent 30% of the population; (2) black non-Arabized ethnic groups, who also represent about 30% of the population; and (3) the haratine, or Black Moors of mixed origin, who represent the remaining 40% of the population. Mauritanians are 100% Muslim, mostly practicing Sunni Islam, although there is a strong *Sufi* presence, particularly of the Tidjaniyya order. In most Sahelian countries, ethno-racial politics tend to favor black Africans who are very often accused of marginalizing the white minorities (as is the case in Niger and Mali). In Mauritania, to the contrary, white Moors control much of the political and economic resources to the detriment of non-Arabized blacks and of the *haratine*. This comes as a result of a historically rooted power arrangement that has far-reaching consequences on the country's sociopolitical and economic setting.

The most important cleavages in Mauritania are racial and linguistic. Significant tensions revolve around the official identity and language of the Mauritanian state: Whether Mauritania is an Arab or a "black African" country, and whether the official language should be Arabic or French.[2] Major debates in the political, economic, and social domains are often

[2]The identity of the Mauritanian state is disputed between two extremist tendencies: On the one hand, the Mauritanian Ba'athists and Nasserites claim that Mauritania is an Arab country and deny nationality to the Afro-Mauritanians. This was the idea that underlined the outbreak of violence in 1989. Their argument is based on the historical claim by Morocco that Mauritania was part of its territory, a claim that delayed the acceptance of Mauritania into the United Nations until 1961. On the other side, extremists among the Afro-Mauritanians claim Mauritania as a country of black Africans, basing their argument on the identity of the first indigenous populations

framed through the prism of race and language. These racial and linguistic cleavages are historically rooted, and they are constantly exacerbated by questions related to slavery and the *arabization* of the educational system.

Prior to the third century C.E., black Africans of the ancient Ghana and Tekrur empires populated what is today the Mauritanian territory.[3] Starting in the third century, Berber populations from North Africa began moving south into the region, fleeing the increasing desiccation of the Sahara. They were followed by two waves of Arab immigrants: the Almoravids, in the 11th century, and the Beni Hassane, who migrated from Yemen from the 13th through the 15th centuries.[4] In a long historical process, Berbers and Arabs assimilated into a dominant "white" group, to which were attached enslaved people from Mauritania's indigenous black populations. The Arabs and Berbers, and their enslaved black populations, constituted what came to be called the Moors. Both Black and White Moors are unified by the practice of Islam and the use of the Hassaniyya language—an Arabic dialect with significant Berber influence. The black non-Arabized Mauritanians are composed of Haalpulaar, Soninke, Wolof, and Bambara communities of sub-Saharan African origins. These cleavages, inherited from the early social history of the region, have punctuated the contemporary history of Mauritania. Afro-Mauritanians have been subject to discrimination and ethnic violence, very often organized or sponsored by the modern-day Mauritanian state. The peak of the recent violence occurred in 1989-1991[5], when the

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of Mauritania, and the claim that whites migrated into the region later. The politicization of these competing narratives fed the events of 1989 as well as repetitive coup attempts (Interview with sociologist, Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, July 2013, Nouakchott). It is important to mention that identity is a sensitive issue in Mauritania and people's views about it are generally influenced by their ethnic and racial background. In this paper I draw extensively from my interview with sociologist Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, first because he comes from a mixed family of *beydane* and Afro-Mauritanian (which is a rare phenomenon), and second because he presents an eloquent statement of the kind of critical analysis of Mauritanian society that transcends the ethno-racial cleavages.

[3] Diallo Garba, "Mauritania – The Other Apartheid?" *Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Current African Issues 16, p.1-57,* 1993. Available at: http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:273488/FULLTEXT01.pdf. Last visited on 12 July 2014.

[4] Noel Foster, *Mauritania: the Struggle for Democracy*, Lynne Rienner publishers /First Forum Press, 2011, Boulder, CO and London, UK. p.11.

[5] The violence originated from a conflict between Senegal and Mauritania over grazing rights on their shared border on the Senegal River. But the conflict quickly became ethnically based, opposing Moors and the black populations of Wolof, Soninke, and Bambara. In Mauritania, it started in April 1989 with a massive deportation of Afro-Mauritanians to Senegal (around 70,000 in total) and the occupation of their lands. Then, during the night of 27-28 November 1990, 28 Afro-Mauritanians were massacred in Inal during celebrations of Independence Day. In March 1991, 504 Negro Mauritanians were extra-judicially executed, accused by the Ba'athists of Ould Taya's regime of organizing a coup (Interview with sociologist, Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, July 2013, Nouakchott).

regime of President Ould Taya massacred more than 500 black military officers, deported around 70,000 civilians to Senegal and Mali, and then distributed their lands to Moors, particularly those called the moussafirine.[6] Mauritanian society today remains deeply divided by issues related to racism, tribalism, the *arabization* of the educational system as well as that of slavery.

By most accounts, slavery was a common practice in Mauritania until 1980. It is a practice that is deeply embedded in Moorish society, although it concerns the Afro-Mauritanian societies as well. The Mauritanian state has issued three laws that gradually abolished slavery—in 1959, 1981, and 2007—without fully eradicating the phenomenon. Indeed, there are claims that the prevalence of slavery still persists in Mauritania more than anywhere else in the world.[7] Policies of *arabization* are another key source of tension between Mauritanian ethnic groups. During the colonial period, education in French favored the Afro-Mauritanians, giving them a certain competitive advantage in administrative and military recruitment, often to the detriment of the Arabized Moorish population. Tensions emerged as a result, and the white Moorish leaders who took control over the country after independence initiated a program of *arabizing* the administration and the educational system. They did this partly in order to re-assert the Arabic identity of Mauritania, but also to create opportunities for those who studied in traditional Arabic and

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[6] Mauritanians use the word "*moussafirine*" (literally "travellers" in Arabic) to refer to Moors—both white and black— who were expatriated from Senegal to Mauritania during the event of 1989. The so-called *moussafirine* are in their majority *haratines* who fled slavery in Mauritania during the colonial period and were freed by the colonial authority in Senegal. Initially, the colonial authority authorized the practice of slavery as long as it remained confined within the Mauritanian territory. The slaves become free as soon as they crossed the border into Senegal. Both *haratine* and *beydane* communities lived peacefully in Senegal until the outbreak of the 1989 crisis, when the Senegalese government expelled them to Mauritania in reaction to the deportation of the Afro-Mauritanians to Senegal. The Mauritanian state settled many of these *moussafirine* in the land that has belonged to the Afro-Mauritanians. This problem of land appropriation still constitutes one of the major sources of tensions in the river valley. While the Mauritanian government has more recently accepted the return of the expelled Afro-Mauritanians, no measures have been taken to restore their lands. To the contrary, the expropriation of land still continues through the local authority appointed by the central government. The authorities are usually white *beydane* and they use their power to redistribute land in a nepotistic and clientelistic way. The events of 1989 have left three major problems unsolved: (1) the expropriation of the land of Afro-Mauritanians which was redistributed to the *moussafirine* and other wealthy *beydanes* from other *wilayas* (provinces); (2) the problem of citizenship in the sense that many of the repatriated do not have legal documents that prove their Mauritanian nationality; (3) the lack of economic opportunities for the repatriated (Interview with sociologist, Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, July 2013, Nouakchott).

[7] The last Global Slavery Index classifies Mauritania as the country with the highest prevalence of slavery in the world, with an estimated 140,000 to 160,000 slaves out of a population of less than 3.5 Million people. See "Mauritania" on the official website of the Global Slavery Index 2013. Available at: http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/mauritania/. Last visited on 12 August 2014.

Koranic schools called mahadaras, primarily young Moors. This *arabization* program, however, has in many ways proven counterproductive. It has disorganized the educational system, produced skills that are not needed in the job market, and increased unemployment and frustration among many young Moors. The resulting ethno-linguistic agitation in Mauritania strongly resonates on the country's political and economic situation.

Political instability and economic poverty. The first president installed by the departing French colonialists when Mauritania gained its independence in November 1960 was Mokhtar Ould Daddah. As "father of the nation," Ould Daddah's regime initially focused on unifying the different communities in an effort to create a Mauritanian nation. From a pluralist democratic system in its early days, however, the regime quickly lapsed into a single-party state, before finally ending as a dictatorship. In 1966 Ould Daddah initiated the program of *arabizing* the educational system, creating a strong reaction from Afro-Mauritanians. Under his rule, Mauritania allied with Morocco in its effort to annex the Western Saharan territory. The resulting conflict with the Western Saharan separatist movement, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario), as well as a massive drought in 1973, paved the way for a military overthrow of Ould Daddah in July 1978. The coup was a critical juncture in the history of contemporary Mauritania, marking a milestone for military involvement in domestic politics. In its first statement, the junta announced that the military had become "the custodians of national political legitimacy of last resort."[8] This would remain the case throughout the contemporary history of Mauritania. From 1978 to the present, Mauritania has been effectively ruled by the military or by retired military men, with the exception of the seventeen months of civilian rule between April 2007 and August 2008.

From July 1978 to January 1980, a series of crises within the junta led to the shift of power from Ould Mohamed Saleck to Ould Bouceif, and then to Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Ahmed Louly, and finally to Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah, who became President in January

[8] Boubacar N'Diaye, "La Mauritanie" in Bryden Alan et al, eds. *Challenge of Security Sector Governance in West Africa,* Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2008, p176 (Author's translation). Available at: http://www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Gouvernance-du-secteur-de-la-securite-en-Afrique-de-l-Ouest-francophone-bilan-et-perspectives. Last visited on 2 August 2014.

1980. Ould Haidallah's regime engaged Mauritania in new reforms, including the drafting of a new constitution, the re-abolition of slavery, and the initiation of a very cautious political opening. In December 1984, however, a coup from inside the junta led by the Army Chief of Staff, Colonel Maaouya Ould Taya, deposed Ould Haidallah. The new regime engaged Mauritania in many innovative policies, including the adoption of new laws on land tenure and, most importantly, the engagement on a path toward a "gradual democratization." While Ould Taya's regime initially promised a political opening, it was to be by far the most repressive regime in the history of Mauritania, marked by the prosecution of members of the political opposition and journalists, and for the perpetration of ethnic violence and human rights abuses, particularly against Afro-Mauritanians. The regime's repression persisted throughout the 1990s, resulting in repeated coup attempts in the early 2000s.

The last coup attempt in 2003 and an attack on the Lemgheity military base by the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat or Group Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat (GSPC) in June 2005 sealed the fate of Ould Taya's regime. On August 3rd 2005 a coup, coauthored by Colonel Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, the head of the presidential guard and Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, director of state security, ousted Ould Taya. The junta adopted a new liberal constitution and organized legislative and presidential elections. Following the 2nd round of the presidential elections, Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi won 52% of the votes and was inaugurated President for a six-year term. Both the transition and the organization of the elections received significant praise from international observers.

But this democratic experience was to be short-lived. Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was a high official in both Ould Daddah and Ould Taya's administrations, where he occupied successively the positions of Minister of Planning, National Economy, Energy, and Fishing. He left Mauritania in 1989 to work for the Kuwait Fund in Niger until 2003. He then re-engaged in politics in 2006 as an independent presidential candidate with no political party nor even a real political base. He won the election thanks to the support of the military and an eclectic parliamentary coalition of independents and the former ruling majority from Ould Taya's era. Tensions emerged within the coalition soon after the formation of the new government. On August 6th 2008, Ould Abdallah issued a decree deposing the Chief of

Presidential Security, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and the Chief of Army Staff, General Mohamed Ould Ghazwani. The same day, the military took over the presidential palace, surrounded key government offices and announced the dissolution of the government. Mauritania's seventeen-month experience of "true" democracy had ended with another coup. Under significant international pressure, presidential elections were again held in July 2009 with Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, the head of the junta, as a candidate, eventually being elected with 52% of the vote.

The fight against AQIM and its local cells in Mauritania dominated the early days of Ould Abdel Aziz's presidency. While he succeeded in dismantling jihadist urban networks and undertook military strikes against AQIM bases in Mali, his presidency has been faced with constant challenges. His claim of efforts at liberalizing politics and fighting against corruption have been tarnished by revelations of scandals involving the president himself, including charges of involvement in transnational networks of illegal trafficking.[9] Furthermore, his regime still suffers from a deficit of legitimacy given the circumstances of his arrival in office. The so-called "radical" opposition protests regularly, calling for the removal of "an illegitimate regime." On October 13th 2012, Mauritanians feared the specter of a new coup after President Ould Abdel Aziz was "accidentally" shot by a checkpoint guard, requiring him to be hospitalized for several weeks in France. He was reelected for a second term in June 2014, in an election that was boycotted by the main opposition parties. This boycott perpetuates the deficit of legitimacy that has characterized his regime from its beginning.

Although its economy is among the more successful in the Sahelian region, Mauritania remains a poor country. With an HDI score of 0.467, Mauritania ranks at the 155th position on a list of 187 countries. This is one point below Senegal (154th), and respectively 25, 27, 28 and 31 points above Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger.[10] The Mauritanian economy suffers, in addition, from a problem of unequal distribution. Ethno-racial background

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[9] Ali Attar, "Mauritanie: fin de parcours pour Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz ?", Afrik.com, 16 February 2013. Available at: http://www.afrik.com/mauritanie-fin-de-parcours-pour-mohamed-ould-abdel-aziz. Last visited on 14 August, 2014.

[10] See the *United Nation Development Program,* Human Development Report 2013, The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World. Available at: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/14/hdr2013_en_complete.pdf. Last visited on 10 July 2014

generally determines who gets what. The *beydane* community controls the majority of the country's wealth, while structural barriers related to their racial and linguistic affiliation hinder the economic performance of the black minorities (Haalpulaar, Soninke, Bambara and Wolof). The *haratine* occupy the bottom of the economic spectrum, their economic misfortunes attributed to the "after-effects of slavery."[11] This situation must be seen as being at the root of recent protests, labeled the "revolt of the *haratine,*" to demand the effective end of all slavery and the alleviation of its devastating impact on the *haratine* community.[12] Biram Dah Abeid, a *haratine* and anti-slavery activist, received almost 9% of the vote in the 2014 presidential elections, which has been interpreted as an indication of an eventual reconfiguration of Mauritania's sociopolitical and economic landscape.

A tolerant but increasingly politicized Islam. The population of Mauritania is effectively 100% Muslim. The constitution establishes the country as an Islamic Republic and decrees Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. To the extent that other religions such as Christianity exist, they are practiced only by expatriates. The vast majority of Mauritanians practices Sunni Islam, and follows the Maliki School of jurisprudence.

Historically, the practice of Islam in Mauritania was dominated by Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the Qadiriyya and the Tidjaniyya. Starting in the 1970s, however, returning Mauritanian students from the Middle East, the flow of Saudi funding, and expatriate teachers who were recruited to help with the *arabization* program, resulted in the gradual introduction of Wahhabi ideas. This period also marked the birth of political Islam in Mauritania, although it is a phenomenon that has been marked by three distinct major tendencies.[13] First, a group of Islamists inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the Arab world created organizations with ambitions of coming to power through participation in democratic elections. Although not legally recognized and in fact repressed for decades, Islamists were finally accepted as legitimate political actors when their

[11] Bertelsmann Stiftung, "BTI 2012—Mauritania Country Report," *Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung*, 2012. Available at: www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/Inhalte/reports/2012/pdf/BTI%202012%20Mauritania.pdf. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[12] Interview with sociologist, Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, July 2013, Nouakchott.
[13] For more details, see, *International Crise Group,* « L'islamisme en Afrique du Nord IV: Contestation islamiste en Mauritanie: Menace ou bouc émissaire? » Rapport Moyen-Orient/Afrique du Nord de Crisis Group, N°41, 11 May 2005.

political party, Tawassoul, was recognized in 2007 during the period of democratic rule. Second, the Da'awa movement is composed of local preachers and itinerant Pakistani and Indian clerics who are affiliated with the international Tabligh movement. This movement focuses on calling people to an ascetic life and teaches the practice of Islam. It is a peaceful movement that is apolitical on its face, yet its activities have far-reaching political influence. Third, the Salafist movement, a reaction to what it deems as "heretical innovations" in Islamic practices and which advocates for a puritanical approach to religion, has found adherents in Mauritania. Salafists advocate for the implementation of sharia in what they believe is its original sense, as practiced by the Prophet Mohamed and the first three generations of Muslims (salaf as-salih). It is important to underline that, contrary to widespread interpretations of this movement, Salafism is not in itself synonymous with extremism, jihadism, or terrorism. Mainstream Salafist clerics in Mauritania and elsewhere are against the interpretations of jihad and the activism proposed by such groups as Al-Qaeda. Only a minority of Salafists believes in what is called Salafiyyal Jihadiyya ("Salafist Jihadism"), the ideology that claims that jihad is obligatory or even permissible in the current context of Muslim societies. International media focus on the activism of these Salafi minority positions, thus making them more visible than the others and, overshadowing the more mainstream tendencies. Although I do not mean to suggest a clear-cut categorization of Islamic political currents (there is overlap among these three tendencies), my point is to underline that the violent movements discussed in this paper represent only a small minority of the broader Islamic political movements in Mauritania.

Mauritania's experience with the Islamic Insurgency

Mauritania was the first Sahelian country to be victimized by the current Islamic insurgency. Between 2005 and 2011, at least 14 deadly attacks were officially committed by AQIM and its affiliates on Mauritanian soil (See table below). Furthermore, Mauritanians hold important leading positions within the jihadists groups operating elsewhere in the Sahel, and are suspected to outnumber any other Sahelian nationality within the membership of the jihadist groups.[14] Who are the Mauritanian jihadists, and why are young

[14] While Algerians monopolize the military command of the *katibas* (the battalions), Mauritanians tend to control the spiritual and clerical leadership, thanks to their legendary reputation as great *Murabitune* Islamic scholars. See,

Mauritanians tempted to enroll in jihadi groups more than other Sahelian nationalities? These are important questions in the framework of an assessment of Mauritania's current situation.

A chronology of the attacks. Rumors of the threat of Islamist attacks in Mauritania have circulated since the 1980s, and these were used by Ould Taya's regime to justify crackdowns against emerging and politically threatening Islamist movements. Mauritania experienced no Islamist violence, however, until June 8th 2005 when the Algerian GSPC attacked the Lemgheity military garrison—situated at about 1000 km northeast of Nouakchott on the border with Algerian border—and killed at least 15 military personnel. Mauritania thus became the first Sahelian country to suffer the spillover of the Algerian jihadi movement, and that even before the regional expansion of the movement under the name of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[15] At the time, the attacks were widely viewed as being masterminded by the regime to justify another crackdown against the opposition, particularly the moderate Islamists.[16] Whatever the truth, the attacks created a precedent that plunged Mauritania into a cycle of violence for many years to come.

Djallil Lounnas, « Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique et la crise malienne Sécurité globale, » *Centre d'Etudes et des Recherches Globales, Sécurité Globale*, July 2012. Available at: http://www.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/Al-Qaida.pdf. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

[15] The Organization Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is believed to have been declared in early 2007, a transformation of the GSPC.

[16] *International Crise Group,* « L'islamisme en Afrique du Nord IV: Contestation islamiste en Mauritanie: Menace ou bouc émissaire? » Rapport Moyen-Orient/Afrique du Nord de Crisis Group, N°41, 11 May 2005.

Table: Chronology of Jihadists' attacks in Mauritania				
	Date	**Place**	**Target**	**Casualties**
1	5 June 2005	Lemgheity	Attack against small military garrison of Lemgheity	Officially, fifteen military killed, seventeen injured and two lost, versus 9 jihadists killed
2	24 December 2007	Aleg	Attacks against a convey of French tourists	Four French tourists were killed
3	27 December 2007	Ghallawiya	Attack against a military patrol	Three military were killed
4	1 February 2008	Nouakchott	Attack against the Israeli Embassy and the night club "VIP"	One French citizen and two Franco-Mauritanian injured
5	15 June 2008	Nouakchott	Exchange of fire between police officers and jihadists	One police officer and two jihadists killed
6	14 September 2008	Tourine	Attack against a military patrol	Fifteen military killed
7	23 June 2009	Nouakchott	Attack against Christopher Legget, an American evangelist	One person (Christopher Legget) killed
8	9 August 2009	Nouakchott	Suicide-bombing against the French Embassy	Three officers: two French and one Mauritanian injured
9	29 November 2009	Nouakchott - Nouadhibou	Kidnapping of 3 Spanish working for an NGO	Hostage were liberated versus ransom and the liberation of Omar Saharaoui
10	19 December 2009	Kobeni	Kidnapping of two Italians coming from Burkina Faso	Hostage were released, officially, through diplomatic negotiations
11	24 August 2010	Nema	Suicide-bombing against the military garrison of Nema	Officially, three soldiers injured
12	17 September 2010	On the Border with Mali	Mauritanian military offensive against AQIM's positions on the Malian border	Fifteen jihadists and six soldiers killed
13	24 June 2011	Wagadou forest	Offensive of the Mauritanian army against AQIM in the Wagadou forest	Officially, fifteen jihadists and two military killed
14	5 July 2011	Bassiknou	Military attack by the jihadist against the military garrison of Bassiknou	A military source reported, fifteen jihadists killed, and nine captured

Source: Compiled by author.

This sequence of attacks, however, stopped in 2012. Since then, and as of mid-2014, there have been no significant jihadist attacks on Mauritanian territory. Although this can in part be credited to the government's strategic response to the crisis, it also seems likely that the opening of the Libyan and Malian fronts played a key role in withdrawing the Mauritanian jihadists from the national scene. In fact, concordant information shows a strong presence of Mauritanian jihadists among the jihadist groups operating elsewhere in the region.

Who are the Mauritanian jihadists and what explains their engagement in violence? Over the years the Mauritanian government has arrested some 70 persons accused of being directly or indirectly involved in terrorist attacks. The analysis of this small sample of Mauritanian jihadists shows that violent extremism is a phenomenon that concerns all the major ethnic groups in Mauritania, although at varying levels. White Moors have a large preeminence among the group, accounting for three out every four persons arrested (75%). They are followed by the *haratines*, representing around 17%, and the Afro-Mauritanians, representing only 9%. Most importantly, almost all of the jihadists arrested had an Arabic education, including the Afro-Mauritanian and the *haratines*.[17] The sample also shows that jihad is overwhelmingly a youth phenomenon, with nine out of ten among the arrested jihadists under the age of thirty. It is also a phenomenon that affects mostly medium income or poor families.[18]

The profile and trajectory of one jihadist, a certain Sidi Ould Sidina, provides insights into the rationale behind such youthful engagement with jihadists. In an insightful New York Times article entitled "The Saharan Conundrum," Nicholas Schmidle retraces the trajectory of Ould Sidina, one of the jihadists responsible for many attacks in Nouakchott, including the murder of four French tourists. Ould Sidina was a white Moor who grew up in Toujanine, a poor neighborhood of Nouakchott. He earned the reputation of being a "scrappy kid" and a "petty tyrant." He was involved in all kinds of illicit activities, including robbing, selling drugs, and drinking. In his late teenage years he enrolled in a *mahadara* outside Nouakchott where he adopted the radical ideology of takfir, "which some

[17] Zekeria O.A. Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie*, Karthala, Paris, 2013, p160.
[18] Zekeria O.A. Salem, Ibid, p161.

extremists use to justify violence against nonbelievers."[19] In 2006, Ould Sidna enrolled in the Algerian GSPC network of jihadists, and received training in camps in northern Mali. His hope was to be deployed in Iraq, but at the time when he was enrolled, the GSPC was planning to create local cells in Mauritania. After his training, he was sent back to Mauritania where he joined other jihadists and commenced his jihadi adventure. In an interview with Alakhbar newspaper, Ould Sidna explained his motives:

> "I am a young Mauritanian. I have a message. I seek to transmit it. I call for the application of God's law. I am a soldier of the al-Qaida organization. I fight to establish sharia ... I am a young Mauritanian who loves his community ... On the other hand, I am against the impious dictatorial generals (*tawaghit*) who control this country and refuse to apply God's law. I will fight them until they return to the law, if not until I die on this road ... General Ould Abdelaziz forced out Ould Cheikh Abdellahi because he had arms, Saleh Ould Hanenna is now a political leader because he took up arms to fight injustice. They all became leaders. Why is that when we do precisely the same thing, we become criminals? Did they not say, when Saleh Ould Hanenna carried out his putsch, that he was a criminal, and see him today as a great political leader? You will see that many of those who accuse today wish us the best and publish new fatwas on new legal bases in our favor."[20]

Although jihadists in Mauritania have different profiles and trajectories, they all seem to emerge and operate in the same sociopolitical and economic context, providing important insights about the conditions that push individuals to engage in violence.

What explains the propensity for Mauritanians to be involved in Sahelian jihadism? The factors behind the outbreak of the crisis of Islamic insurgency in the Sahel and the massive youth enrollment into jihad continue to puzzle a number of scholars: where did this wave of radical jihadi movements come from? Are these movements simply the local representatives of global jihadism, or are they contentious grassroots movements that are primarily motivated by domestic issues, but use jihadist ideology as a source of legitimacy? In other words, to what extent is jihadism in the Sahel best explained by the global jihadist ideology or by local domestic realities? A number of analyses, particularly in the media, privilege the global ideological explanation over the domestic realities. Yet, in Mauritania,

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[19] Nicholas Schmidle, "The Saharan Conundrum," *The New York Times Magazine,* 13 February 2009. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

[20] Quoted in Zekeria O.A. Salem, "The Paradox of Islamic Radicalization in Mauritania," In George Joffe, eds. *Islamist Radicalization in North Africa: Politics Process*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012, p. 195.

as my analysis demonstrates, it is rather the union between the global and the local that produced the crisis of Islamic insurgency. While it is true that the global jihadist ideology spreads through the media, particularly the internet, and through transnational networks of jihadists, it must nonetheless be emphasized that the ideology spreads especially easily in Mauritania because it found fertile ground there among a large number of deprived and alienated youth who tend to blame their particular misfortunes on bad state governance.

First, the recent phenomenon of proliferation of jihadist groups in many Muslim societies across the world is viewed as the result of the transposition of a global jihadist ideology into local contexts. Al Qaeda, which embodies the global jihadist ideology, is deemed to spread its network everywhere in the Muslim world through more or less disenfranchised groups of jihadists. According to this view, a global Al Qaeda conspiracy prevails over local realities, and this explains the widespread outbreaks of Islamic insurgency. Many analysts go as far as to divide Islam into two categories: a good, local, peaceful Islam, and a bad, imported, violent Islam. In her analysis of the Islamic insurgency in Mauritania, Choplin insists on distinguishing between "Mauritanian Islam" from "foreign terrorism."[21] It might be emphasized that the jihadist ideology is deemed to originate from the global phenomenon of "Islamic revivalism" that started roughly around the 1970s in many Muslim societies around the world. But Islamic revivalism has taken different trajectories, some peaceful and others violent. Jihadism as a radical ideology advocates for the use of violence as a means for political struggle. It is generally—not exclusively—associated with Salafism, more precisely, Jihadist Salafism.

Second, the increasing use of the internet by international jihadist networks to spread jihadist ideology constitutes another indicator of the influence of global jihadism over local contexts. There are many jihadist websites that target young Maghrebi—including Mauritanians—with propaganda aiming to convert them to jihad. In addition to religious discourses and savory promises of a better financial, social, and spiritual life, some of the websites show videos of jihadists having a normal and successful life, and even getting

[21] Armelle Choplin, « La Mauritanie à l'épreuve de l'islamisme et des menaces terroristes », *EchoGéo, Sur le Vif*, 29 April 2008. Available at : http://echogeo.revues.org/4363. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

married - "something about which unemployed, marginalized youths can only dream."[22] The fact that these websites and videos are in Arabic renders them easily accessible to young Moors. Furthermore, the jihadist discourse about the Western conspiracy and a generalized war against Islam and Muslims on the part of the West are reinforced by TV images showing continuous attacks against and humiliation of Muslims in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq. These conflicts in Muslim countries contribute a great deal to justifying violence against Westerners and their collaborators in Mauritania.[23]

Finally, the transposition of the global jihad to the local Mauritanian context is also achieved through the symbolic role played by Mauritanian figures of global jihad. Mauritanians have a long history of involvement in jihadist activities at both the international and regional level. At the international level, Mauritanians have been involved in the highest echelons of global jihad. At least five had been important members of Osama Ben Laden's inner circle, including Mahfouz Ould Waled, Ahmad Ould Noman, Ahmad Ould Abdel Aziz, Mohamed Ould Salahi, and Ould Sidi Mohamed.[24] Regionally, Mauritanians have been involved in jihad in Algeria since the early 1990s. Around twenty young Mauritanians are known to have died in different jihadist operations organized in Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Tunisia since the early 2000s.[25] These networks assured the connection between local jihadists and the global web of jihad. The secretive nature of jihadist organizations makes it almost impossible for an outsider to join without being recruited by an existing member. Thus, networks for recruitment are a crucial factor for enrollment into jihadist organizations.

Yet while the spread of the global jihadist ideology is a fact in Mauritania, it should not overshadow the importance of indigenous factors related to the country's domestic political and socioeconomic issues. Mauritania faces a growing phenomenon of radicalization, affecting mostly young people (16 to 24 years).[26] Domestically, the

[22] Mawassi Lahcen, "Maghreb terrorists make sales pitch to youth" *Maghrebia*, 13 June 2014. Available at: http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/reportage/2014/06/13/reportage-01. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[23] This argument was repeated several times during various interviews in Nouakchott in July 2013.
[24] Zekeria O.A. Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie*, Karthala, Paris, 2013, pp.1146-149.
[25] Zekeria O.A. Salem, Ibid. p160.
[26] A.Boukhars Ibid. p. 12.

ideological component of young peoples' radicalization includes attending extremist *mahadaras*, exposure to radical media, or interacting with extremist imams and preachers at local mosques. But when asked about the drivers of radicalization and youth enrollment in jihad, informed observers and academics in Nouakchott also emphasize local factors, namely the feeling of dissatisfaction and injustice prevalent among youths.[27] This feeling is nourished by the popular perception of a contrast between the country's wealth in terms of natural resources, the small size of its population, and the high levels of poverty. The charges made by these youth against the state echo common themes of corruption, nepotism, clientelism, tribalism, ethnicism, and the state's failure to provide adequate social services.

The lack of regime legitimacy resulting from the history of political instability and military rule that we have surveyed above has led Mauritanian rulers to rely increasingly on ethnic and tribal alliances. The military oligarchy has led to increased corruption and patronage, to the benefit of a small number of *beydane* families who maintain tight control over the most productive sectors of the economy, including fisheries, iron, petrol, and gold.[28] Combined with governmental inability to effectively carry out many basic social welfare duties, these factors produce intense resentment. Mauritanians in general are particularly dissatisfied with educational policy. Successive governments have failed to develop an educational system that transcends ethnic divisions and responds to the political and economic needs of the country.[29] The current dual educational system—Arabic and French—has only exacerbated social fragmentation, and increased the desperation of youths to find decent jobs.[30] The *mahadaras* constitute an historic alternative to formal school, but they also face the challenge of preparing youth for employment, and the radicalization of their graduates. All these problems contribute to destitution,

[27] This theme was repeated many times during interviews in Nouakchott in July 2013.
[28] Noel Foster, Mauritania: the Struggle for Democracy, Lynne Rienner publishers /First Forum Press, 2011, Boulder, CO and London, UK.
[29] Focus groups discussions and interviews in Nouakchott, July 2013.
[30] One of the critiques against the educational system in Mauritania is its level of disorganization. In addition to the bilingual programs in Arabic and French, there is also a purely religious system followed by students in the *mahadaras*. They obtain the "Bac O," which is considered equal to the baccalaureate in literature or science. The Bac O graduates are considered qualified for all kinds of professions that other graduates can access. A Bac O graduate could be a magistrate, military or police officer, or an agent in different bureaucratic positions. They are also very present in the media, meaning that radio and television media have become more and more religious.

hopelessness, and a sense of injustice among young Mauritanians. Mauritanians heavily emphasize these sentiments as being among the most important factors driving young Mauritanians toward radicalization and violent extremism.[31] Their "pervasive marginality" and anger against the state are instrumentalized by violent extremist groups in internet forums and in mosques, who then propose the extremist agenda as a viable alternative. They thus become "easy prey" to the jihadi recruiters who feed them attractive propaganda.[32]

Countering the Threat: The Reaction of the Mauritanian Government

The Mauritanian government reacted to the jihadist threat with a combination of military, political, and religious strategies. The military reaction consisted, first, in reinforcing the armed forces' operational capabilities in quantity and in quality.[33] In terms of quantity, a massive recruiting scheme transformed the Mauritanian armed forces into one of the largest military forces in the Sahelian region. The national army of Mauritania is estimated at around 21,000 soldiers, of which 5,000 are paramilitary. This is significantly larger than Senegal, Mali, and Niger, which count respectively 15,620, 15,150, and around 12,000.[34] Beyond sheer numbers, President Ould Abdel Aziz declared in 2011 that his government had increased the logistic capacities of the Mauritanian army by 300 to 400 times since he came to power in 2008. The Defense and Security budget, which in terms of proportion to the GDP is also the highest in the region,[35] increased by approximately $10 million in 2013.[36] In addition to efforts to upgrade the Mauritanian military, the government also increased its military cooperation with foreign countries. Both France and the United

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[31] Focus group discussions and interviews by the author in Nouakchott, July 2013.

[32] Anouar Boukhars, "The Drivers of Insecurity in Mauritania," The Carnegie Papers, Middle East, April 2012. Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/mauritania_insecurity.pdf. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

[33] Jeune Afrique, « Mauritanie, Le President Abdel Aziz refuse le dikta du terrorisme », 8 June, 2011. Available at : http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/DEPAFP20110806150924/actualite-afriquemauritanie-le-president-ould-abdelaziz-refuse-le-diktat-du-terrorisme.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

[34] The differences between armed forces in Mauritania and neighboring countries is even starker when the numbers are compared proportionally to the population. In fact, there are six members of the military for every 1000 Mauritanians, whereas in Senegal and Mali this proportion is roughly 1 per 1,000, and in Niger the proportion is even less than one per 1,000 (0.7 ‰).

[35] B N'Diaye, Ibid, p. 156.

[36] Alakhbar, « Mauritanie-Budget 2013: Augmentation pour le gouvernement et la Défense/Sécurité, » 12 December 2012. Available at : http://fr.alakhbar.info/5518-0-Mauritanie-Budget-2013-Augmentation-pour-le-gouvernement-et-la-DefenseSecurite-.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

States have provided significant support—sometimes with their military on the ground—to the Mauritanian army. With all these resources, the Mauritanian army succeeded in expelling the jihadist threat and has even undertaken preventive attacks against AQIM bases in Mali, particularly in the Wagadou forest. It appears clear in the chronology of the attacks that there is a certain shift in the balance of power from the jihadists, who dominated the early period of the conflict, to the Mauritanian army. Starting in 2010, the army evolved from a primarily defensive strategy to a much more offensive one. Furthermore, in collaboration with Spain and the European Union, in January 2013 the government launched an ambitious project called Project Sahel Occidental which seeks to secure borders within the Sahel, aiming at preventing the infiltration of clandestine immigrants and the jihadists into the territory of Mauritania.[37]

In addition to the military solution, the government also engaged in a number of policies aiming to undermine the political and ideological legitimacy of jihadist groups. In the political arena, in 2007 the government legalized the moderate Islamist movement, which officially became the National Party for Reform and Development or Tawassoul. Leaders of this party explicitly condemn AQIM and its radical ideology, and declare their commitment to democracy. Their support for the government and its counterinsurgency policy helped counteract the jihadist discourse that depicts the government as *taaghout* (infidel and authoritarian) and the counterinsurgency as a war against Islam.[38] This is particularly significant given that the jihadists used the ideology of takfir to argue that the ruling elites have become infidels since they implement secular laws in what is supposed to be an Islamic Republic, and they collaborate with the West in its war against Islam. The insurgency is, therefore, framed as a jihad of "believers against unbelievers." But despite theological differences, very few in Mauritania would qualify the Islamists of Tawassoul as unbelievers given that they also advocate for the implementation of sharia and are against Western influence. Having them on the side of the government in this controversy gives the government a certain political and religious legitimacy while shifting the debate from a

[37] Bakari Guèye "Arrestation de terroristes du Mali en Mauritanie," Magharebia, 19 March 13. Available at: http://magharebia.com/fr/articles/awi/features/2013/03/19/feature-03. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[38] Alex Thurston, "Mauritania's Islamists," The Carnegie Papers, Middle East, March 2013 Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/mauritania_islamists.pdf. Last visited on 11 July 2014.

politico-ideological arena—secular versus religious—to a theological debate between Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood tendency on the one hand, and jihadists who claim Salafist traditions on the other.

In November 2009 the government sponsored a theological debate between a panel of well-known ulama (clerics) in Mauritania, led by the charismatic Islamist and influential member of Tawassoul Mohamed El Hassen Ould Dedew and several other jihadists detained in the prison. Part of the discussion was broadcast on national media. The initiative aimed not only to attempt to prove the jihadists wrong on theological grounds, but also, and more importantly, to educate young people who might be tempted by jihadist discourse. The debate lasted for two weeks, and was officially considered "successful." According to the Ould Dedew Commission, which represented the official and mainstream Mauritanian Islam, the majority of the jihadists proved to be "open" to moderate theological arguments, with only three who refused to be convinced.[39]

This combination of military, political, and religious strategies in fighting the jihadists has yielded some concrete results. The fact that Mauritania has witnessed no jihadist attacks for the last three years should at least partly be credited to the efficacy of these strategies. Yet Mauritania's more recent peacefulness is likely also due to the withdrawal of many of its jihadists from the national scene to focus instead of jihadi fronts elsewhere in the region, notably in Mali. The outbreak of the Malian insurgency is thus directly linked to the security situation in Mauritania.

The Malian Crisis through Mauritanian Lenses

In January 2012, a coalition of Tuareg separatists from the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the mujahedeen of Ansar Dine (a branch of AQIM) launched a rebellion from northern Mali. The former wanted to establish a separatist, secular state which they called the Republic of Azawad, while the latter sought to create an Islamic state in northern Mali. Strengthened by sophisticated arms and well-trained combatants spilling out of Libya, the insurgents quickly defeated the Malian army,

[39] Zekeria O.A. Salem, "The Paradox of Islamic Radicalization in Mauritania," In George Joffe, eds. *Islamist Radicalization in North Africa: Politics Process*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012, p200.

triggered a collapse of the Malian government, and occupied two-thirds of the Malian territory. The collaboration between the two forces quickly turned confrontational, however, leading to the defeat of the MNLA separatists and the extension of the jihadists' control over all of the Azawad territory. The jihadists' control of northern Mali lasted for nine months, during which they imposed their radical interpretation of sharia upon the local population. While the international community floundered in trying to coordinate a response, the mujahedeen advanced towards the Malian capital, Bamako, in early 2013. This move precipitated an UN-approved French intervention called Opération Serval backed by the African-led International Support Mission for Mali (AFISMA). By mid-February, most of the Islamist-held territory had been liberated and reoccupied by the Malian army. The exception was the far northeastern region of Kidal, which (with French protection) stayed under the control of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, MNLA.

Mali and Mauritania share 2,237 kilometers of border. Across this border populations are linked by familial, cultural, economic, and religious relationships that pre-date the colonial territorial divide. Any problem that affects one side of the border poses a direct threat to the other. As the crisis enfolded in Mali, then, the political, social, and economic landscapes in Mauritania were transformed according to the vicissitudes of the conflict.

The impact of the Malian crisis on political debate in Mauritania. The political debate over the Malian crisis in Mauritania reflected a mixture of cynical satisfaction as well as charged arguments between different actors. The Malian crisis occurred at a time when the government in Nouakchott was declaring victory in its domestic fight against the jihadists. But it also coincided with a tense political climate as the main opposition parties united to contest President Ould Abdel Aziz's legitimacy and to demand his departure from power.

The Mauritanian government framed its initial reaction to the conflict in Mali around the notion of "prudence," following a policy of "chacun pour soi" ("every man for himself"). This approach focused on protecting Mauritania's own backyard from renewed terrorism, while remaining uninvolved in Mali's domestic issues, justifying this stance by pointing to the complexity of the Malian crisis. When asked whether Mauritania would intervene,

President Ould Abdel Aziz stated, "We will not intervene militarily in Mali …the Malian problem is very complex; Mauritania does not have a solution to it."[40] The word "complexity" is used here diplomatically. In fact, from the Mauritanian perspective, the Malian crisis was primarily a crisis of leadership—something that only Mali could solve. President Ould Abdel Aziz was very critical of the deposed Malian President, whom he accused of laxity in addressing the threat of jihadi movements implanted in Mali. Indeed, the Mauritanian government went as far as to accuse the former Malian authority of complicity with the terrorists. According to Ould Abdel Aziz, "any solution to the Malian problem has to pass through establishing a strong and representative government."[41]

Besides the "complexity of the Malian crisis," there are several other domestic and international factors that help explain the cautious stance of the Mauritanian government. First, the Malian crisis occurred during a very tense political climate between the government and the opposition, as Ould Abdel Aziz, who came to power through a military coup and later sought to legitimate his regime through democratic elections, faced strong critiques at home. The Coalition of the Democratic Opposition (COD) denied the legitimacy of the regime, and sponsored regular demonstrations on the streets to demand the rahil of the raïs.[42] This tense political climate required caution from the government, which sought to avoid opening a new front or giving the opposition further ammunition with which to attack the regime.[43] This was particularly significant given strong popular sentiment against intervention, justified by tribal linkages between the rebels in northern Mali and some Mauritanian tribes. The military involvement of Mauritania would thus appear as a war against "cousins, friends and parents of Mauritanians." [44] Additionally, there is a popular sentiment among Mauritanians that the conflict in Mali was another machination

[40] *Le Monde & AFP*, « La Mauritanie n'interviendra pas au Mali contre les groupes islamistes, » 6 August 2012. Available at : http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2012/08/06/la-mauritanie-n-interviendra-pas-au-mali-contre-les-groupes-islamistes_1742839_3212.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[41] Assanatou Baldé, « La Mauritanie se Repositionne dans le jeu Malien, » *Afrik.com*, 19 April 2013 http://www.afrik.com/la-mauritanie-se-repositionne-dans-le-jeu-malien. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[42] The slogan of the "*rahil* of the r*aïs*" was used prominently during the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. It means the departure of the President.
[43] *Institut Thomas More* « La Mauritanie face à la crise au Nord-Mali | Changement de stratégie ? » 24 October 2012. Available at : http://www.institut-thomas-more.org/fr/actualite/la-mauritanie-face-a-la-crise-au-nord-mali-changement-de-strategie-.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[44] *Institut Thomas More*, Ibid.

of Westerners to promote their imperialistic interests – and thus that African countries involved in the intervention force are in effect fighting a proxy war on behalf of Western interests.[45]

Internationally, after the March 2012 military putsch in Bamako, ECOWAS had become the principle actor in charge of the Malian intervention. The organization decided, hurriedly, to deploy a force of 3,000 troops from its member countries. Since Mauritania had not been member of ECOWAS since 2000, however, it bore no responsibility to participate in this intervention. Finally, the failure of the initiative known as the Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region (CEMOC), according to which the so-called "countries of the field" (Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Algeria) would join forces to fight the jihadi movements that threaten them all, has left each country exclusively responsible for its own security. During its struggle with the jihadi movements between 2007 and 2011, Mauritania fought with no significant support from its neighbors. As a result, the Mauritanian government saw no moral obligation to support Mali in its ordeal.

Diplomatic pressures from France eventually softened the chacun pour soi attitude of Mauritanian authorities. After a meeting with President Ould Abdel Aziz in Abu Dhabi in late January 2013, President Francois Hollande announced that "Mauritania could intervene if it receives an official request from Mali."[46] This pronouncement sounded like a volte-face by the regime from its initial position of non-intervention. A week later the Malian interim president, Dioncounda Traore, traveled to Nouakchott to make the "official request." Meanwhile discussions about the deployment of UN forces in Mali had advanced significantly, and during the visit of Nigerien President Issoufou Mahamadou, Ould Abdel Aziz announced an imminent deployment of 1,800 Mauritanian military in Mali to participate in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).[47] A year later, however, Mauritanian forces are still not deployed in Mali, as

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[45] *Institut Thomas More,* Ibid.

[46] *Elhourriya,* « Réticences maliennes face à la présence militaire de la Mauritanie, » 22 April 2013. Available at : http://www.elhourriya.net/fr/analyses/9189-mauritanie.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014; Mohamed Sneiba « *Mauritanie: Ni guerre ni paix* » 28 January 2013. Available at: http://sneibamohamed.over-blog.com/article-mauritanie-ni-guerre-ni-paix-114803803.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

[47] *Elhourriya*, Ibid.

negotiations have stalled due to disagreements over the areas where such forces should be deployed.[48]

Within the political parties, the debate over the French intervention and the deployment of Mauritanian forces to Mali further heated an already tense relationship between the opposition and the ruling coalition. The Coordination of the Democratic Opposition, or *Coordination de l'Opposition Democratique* (COD) issued a statement condemning the French intervention in Mali and warning the Mauritanian government against any involvement of Mauritanian forces in the conflict. Ahmed Ould Daddah, a leader of the Mauritanian opposition, publicly rejected the French intervention in Mali, cautioning that Mauritanian participation in the war would have dangerous consequences for the country. He added that Mali and Mauritania have historical and religious ties, as well as common interests, which "the government has frittered away."[49] His party, the Rally of Democratic Forces or *Regroupement des Forces Démocratiques* (RFD) "sought active measures from all political players to prevent the involvement of the [Mauritanian] army in the war."[50] The leader of the moderate Islamist party Tawassoul, Jemil Ould Mansour, described the Malian crisis not through the prism of religious fundamentalism, but as the consequence of the mistreatment of the northern population by the French-manipulated Malian government. He expressed the position of the party through his Three No Statement: "no to the French intervention in Mali, no to religious extremism, and a thousand-times no to Mauritanian military involvement in Mali."[51] Despite its strong opposition to intervention, the Tawassoul party has an ambivalent position regarding the crisis in Mali. The party "deplored" —not condemned—the situation in Mali, but strongly condemned the French intervention. This attitude contrasts with their response to the domestic Mauritanian

[48] Mauritania requires that its forces be deployed along its border with Mali while the Malian government, suspecting a certain acquaintance between Mauritanian forces and the Tuareg and Arab armed groups in the north, proposes the deployment of the Mauritanian forces on the Nigerien and Burkinabe borders. See *The North Africa Post,* "Mauritania sets MINUSMA participation", 15 August 2014. Available at: http://northafricapost.com/4169-mauritania-sets-minusma-participation.html. Last visited on 11 August 2014.

[49] Al-Mokhtar Ould Mohammad, "Mauritanian Consensus Against France Intervention in Mali," *Alakhbar –English,* 18 January 2013. Available at: http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/14695. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

[50] Al-Mokhtar, Ibid.

[51] See the official website of Tawassoul, لقاء موسع مع قادة الحزب لشرح الموقف من الحرب في مالي (translated from Arabic by the author). Available at: http://www.tewassoul.org/in.html-5498--1---0----0---0--0-0--1. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

Islamic insurgency, where the party openly condemned the jihadists, expressed clear support for the Mauritanian army, and even stayed silent regarding French military support to the Mauritanian army. Finally, two socialist-leaning opposition parties singled out France's ruling Socialist Party for criticism, accusing it of being under the influence of Zionism.[52]

This clear and unified position of the opposition parties contrasts with the ambivalent position of the ruling coalition—an ambivalence which comes as a result of the volte-face of the regime from its initial policy of non-intervention. At the onset, the ruling party appeared to oppose intervention in Mali. One of the leading members of the party and head of the regulatory Supreme Court, Sidi Ould Maham, rejected the French intervention and claimed that it would have been better for Paris "to gather all the Malian parties around the negotiating table," stating that "only dialogue can avert a war in Mali and the region."[53] This public position changed after President Ould Abdel Aziz's decision to send Mauritanian forces to the MINUSMA. Then, the party began issuing fuzzy statements, such as: "the party expressed its concern regarding the situation in the Sahel and particularly in northern Mali. It reiterates its call for the African Union and the ECOWAS to take action to support the efforts of the United Nations to establish security in Mali on the basis of Malian sovereignty."[54] This ambivalence led to accusations of flip-flopping by critics of the government, to which the presidential party, the Union for the Republic or *Union pour la République* (UPR), responded by declaring that "there is a big difference between participating in the war – which Mauritania still refuses to do – and participating in UN peacekeeping forces which the government approved."[55]

The position of religious leaders. Mainstream Islamic leaders in Mauritania, Salafists as well as those from Sufi brotherhoods and traditional Maliki leaders, all condemned the jihadi occupation of northern Mali. This position was consistent with their stance on Mauritania's

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[52] Al-Mokhtar, Ibid.
[53] Al-Mokhtar, Ibid
[54] *Alakhbar*, « Mauritanie – Politique: L'opposition accusée d'inciter à la révolte (UPR), » 4 July 2013 http://www.fr.alakhbar.info/6441-0-Mauritanie-Politique-Lopposition-accusee-dinciter-a-la-revolte-UPR.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[55] Cheikh Aïdara, « Guerre au Mali : La Mauritanie va envoyer 400 hommes, » *L'Authentic.info*, 13 March 2013, http://lauthentic.info/spip.php?article3572. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

own experience of jihadi movements, and echoed the fatwa of condemnation which the Mauritanian *ulama* had issued in that regard. Disagreement, however, emerged after the French intervention in Mali started. A group of thirty-nine religious leaders issued a fatwa opposing the French intervention, qualifying it as an "imperialistic campaign." They stated their rejection of any participation by Mauritania in a "war waged by infidels against Muslims."[56] A contrasting position among other religious leaders, however, legitimized the intervention on the grounds that this was not a war of infidels against Muslims but rather a war against "terrorism" that targeted Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

There is a historical as well as jurisprudential background to these contrasting positions. Historically, Mauritanian clerics have been divided between those who are take a conciliatory stance vis-à-vis the state and those who are more confrontational. The former tend to belong to the Sufi and traditional Maliki groups, whereas the later tend to belong to the Salafi tendency. The debate regarding military intervention in Mali appears as a continuation of a series of important politico-religious debates that have punctuated the history of Mauritania; these have included the debate regarding the legitimacy of colonial rule and that around the adoption of the constitution in the early 1980s. Jurisprudentially, the controversy around the legality of the military intervention against the jihadists is grounded in a theological dispute about the Islamic legal judgment regarding the status of a Muslim who kills other Muslims in the name of jihad. Those legal scholars who legitimize the intervention draw a parallel between today's jihadists and the Khawarij of the early days of Islam who, according to the tradition of the Caliph Ali, must be forced to renounce their ideology or be killed. The other position, however, sees them as simply disobedient Muslims whose judgment should be left to God. Insofar as they remain Muslims, they cannot be legally killed; hence the refusal of any military intervention.

The Malian crisis also revived the long-simmering sectarian dispute between Sufis and reformists. The Sufi milieu in Mauritania strongly condemned the jihadist, particularly after the destruction of the sacred tombs and manuscripts of the Djingareber mosque in

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[56] *Agence Nouakchott d'Information*, علماء موريتانيون يرفضون الحرب في مالي ويدعون لنصرة المسلمين هناك, 15 January 2013. Available at : http://www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=20497. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

Timbuktu. These were sacred places for the Kunta community, a segment of Moorish society that has strong tribal and spiritual ties among Mauritanian Sufi communities. Sufi Muslims value and venerate sacred tombs as part of their Islamic rituals, whereas Salafists consider that veneration as a form of idolatry. They claim that the jihadists invaded Northern Mali because they considered the populations' practice of Islam as idolatry, and they intervened to impose their "true Islam." This dispute shaped the stance of each group in Mauritania towards its ideological allies on the other side of the border; the Sufis strongly condemned the jihadists and supported the Malian government and the French intervention, whereas the Salafists tended to support the jihadi movements.

Socioeconomic impacts of the Malian crisis on Mauritania. In addition to its impact on the political and religious debate, the Malian crisis had significant socioeconomic impacts on Mauritania, notably in the revival of the ethno-racial tensions, the influx of refugees, and the downturn of the tourism industry.

The Malian crisis further exacerbated the ever-present racial debate within Mauritania. At the apex of the crises, debates intensified between the anti-slavery and anti-racism activists on the one hand, and the Ba'athists and Islamists on the other, the former accusing the white Moors of systematically aligning with the MNLA and with the Arab jihadists, whereas the later accused the Afro-Mauritanians of supporting their sub-Saharan counterparts in southern Mali.[57] In general terms, the sympathy of white Moors for the Tuareg of the Azawad in Mali is not a mystery. Both communities have, after all, common Arab and Berber origins and are linked by profound familial, economic, and cultural relationships. The recent crisis in Mali has been widely understood in accordance with the MNLA's

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[57] The accusations of racism against the Islamists in the Tawassoul party are based on the fact that the domination of *beydane* over the *haratine* and the Afro-Mauritanians, as well as the practice of slavery, and the *arabization* of education are all legitimized using the same religious interpretations that the Islamists advocate as the best political system for Mauritania. The Arab domination is often justified by a hadith of the Prophet that says that the Caliph of Muslims should be an Arab, and among the Arabs he should be from the Quraish—the Prophet's tribe—and among the Quraish he should come from the Bani Hashim family—the Prophet's family. The practice of slavery is also justified through the interpretation of Islamic scripts. One of the canonical books of the Maliki tradition, *Moukhtasar al-Khalil*, not only authorizes slavery, but it describes in detail laws regulating treatments reserved to slaves, including violent treatments. Finally, the *arabization* of education is justified on the grounds that Arabic is the language of the Qur'an and hence God's chosen language. The fact that Islamists are largely on the reactionary side of these debates earns them criticisms of racism. These observations are based on a series of interviews with politicians and commentators in Nouakchott, July 2013 (Interviews with anti-slavery activists Biram Dah Abeid and Oubeid Imjine, respectively, in Gainesville, FL, December 2013, and in Nouakchott, July 2013.

narrative which says that the crisis comes as the result of ethnic and racial discrimination by the black majority in the south against the white minority in the north.[58] This framing of the crisis thus evokes Mauritania's own demons about racism and discrimination. Two major events further radicalized the debate over Mali within Mauritania. First, in April 2012, the Mauritanian army expelled 200 Senegalese who were suspected of practicing Salafism,[59] justifying these deportations as a part of Mauritania's fight against AQIM.[60] This event conjured up memories of the massive deportation of Afro-Mauritanians to Senegal in 1989. Second, in September 2012, a convoy of Mauritanian preachers was attacked by the Malian army, killing 16 people, among them 12 Mauritanians. The Malian army insisted it was an accidental confusion of the group with AQIM fighters, but the accident happened in an already tense climate of violence against "light skinned" traders, including many Mauritanians, in the cities of Bamako and Segou following the defeat of the Malian army in the north. Some of the families of the victims in Mauritania called for revenge, but the Mauritanian government acted quickly to defuse the crisis.

In addition, Mauritania has historically had a small but important tourism industry, particularly during the annual Rallye Paris-Dakar, an off-road race established in 1978. Until the mid-2000s, the race route originated in Paris and finished in Dakar, with an important segment passing through Mauritania. Security concerns posed by the Islamic insurgency in Mauritania in the second half of 2000s obliged the organizers to adjust the race, eventually moving it completely to South America. Largely as a consequence, tourism in Mauritania dropped by 70%. Combined with the frequent warnings by Western governments advising their citizens to refrain from traveling to Mauritania and other

[58] Jemal Oumar, « La Mauritanie tente de mesurer l'impact de la crise au Mali, » Magharebia, 2 January 2013. Available at: http://magharebia.com/fr/articles/awi/features/2013/01/02/feature-03. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[59] Sabine Sessou, « La Crise Malienne va-t-elle s'étendre au Niger et en Mauritanie ? » Forum Francophone des Affairs, 14 June 2013. Available at: http://www.ffacnc.qc.ca/index.php/dossiers/36-geopolitique/193-la-crise-malienne-va-t-elle-s-etendre-au-niger-et-en-mauritanie. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[60] Seneweb, « Lutte contre l'AQMI : La Mauritanie expulse 200 Sénégalais de son territoire, » 4 October 2012, http://www.seneweb.com/news/Diplomatie/lutte-contre-l-rsquo-aqmi-la-mauritanie-expulse-200-senegalais-de-son-territoire_n_63798.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

Sahelian countries due the threat of kidnapping, the result has been a significant loss of incomes for local economies.[61]

These economic challenges have been exacerbated by the estimated 150,000 to 200,000 Malian refugees in Mauritania. According to the UNHCR, by the end of August 2012 more than 100,000 Malians, mostly Tuareg, had already sought refuge in Mauritania. This immediate influx of refugees continued for several weeks at a rate of several hundred arrivals per day. Although humanitarian organizations have intervened by providing shelter and food, refugees almost always burden the resources of both the host government and local communities. For Mauritania, a relatively food insecure country, the rapid influx of refugees could have particularly deleterious effects for local food supplies.

Prospect for (in)stability in Mauritania: Regional solutions for regional problems

The Sahelo-Saharan Islamic insurgency is not a Malian problem. It is a regional, and indeed even a global, issue. Although Mali has been the sanctuary for the various jihadi movements, neither AQIM, nor MUJAO, nor Ansar Dine are exclusively Malian. Moreover, neither the composition of their membership, their objectives, nor their zones of intervention would identify any of these organizations by a clearly national identity. They are composed, in fact, of individuals from different countries and even different continents, all armed with the goal of establishing sharia everywhere in the world. [62] The Sahelo-Saharan Islamic insurgency has so far affected nine countries in the region, including Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. Yet, many reports have mentioned the presence of citizens of other countries, including Senegal, Sudan, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Pakistan, and Yemen. If anything, this points to the scope of the threat, and its potential for further expansion. Many sources have reported links between AQIM and its affiliates in the Sahelo-Saharan region with Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and AQAP in Yemen.[63] Furthermore, the alliance

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[61] *Xinhua*, « La Mauritanie affectée par la crise malienne (SYNTHESE), » 24 January 2013. Available at : http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/96852/8105195.html. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[62] See the statement to that effect by one jihadi, "Oumar Ould Hamaha : Message a la France et aux Etats Unis." *Youtube video available at:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjRZcJAb_Cc. Last visited on 10 July 2014.
[63] Jonathan Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 January 2013. Available at: http://www.cfr.org/north-africa/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-aqim/p12717. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

between the MNLA and AQIM in Mali, the reported presence of elements of the Polisario Front among the jihadi movements, and the alleged contacts between Boko Haram and the rebel movements in Darfur raise questions about the extent of the relationship between nationalist and separatist movements with this blossoming phenomenon of Islamic insurgency.

In brief, the crisis of Islamic insurgency is a regional problem that thus requires a regional solution. The countries mentioned above are not the only ones on the alert. As the September 2013 attacks on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi and previous attacks in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania demonstrate, no African country can deem itself immune to Islamic insurgency or terrorism.

In Mauritania, while effective military action, as well as the strategy of politically and ideologically isolating the radicals, has proven fruitful in curtailing domestic jihadists' momentum, these are only short term solutions that will need to be reinforced by long-term and regional solutions if the issue is to be definitively addressed. In the end, Mauritania's future security will depend heavily on the ways in which the crisis is dealt with at a regional level.

Yet, the Sahelian countries have proven so far unable to coordinate their efforts in order to combat the threat of jihadism. The discussions about the necessity to create a joint force to combat regional threat have been on the agenda since the mid-2000s, but the negotiations have stalled in part because of the lack of resources and most importantly because of the deficit of trust among the countries' leaderships. In 2005, an Algerian initiative, sponsored by the United States, brought together the military forces of many Sahelian countries for a military training in southern Algeria. The Algerians transformed this initiative, a few years later, into what is called the Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region or the Comite d'Etat-Major Operationel Conjoint (CEMOC). The objective of CEMOC is to centralize and improve coordination of intelligence and military operations of the countries that share a concern with the threat of AQIM, namely Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. [64]

[64] See, Mehdi Mekdour, « Al Qaïda au Maghreb Islamique : une menace multidimensionnelle, » *Groupe de Recherche et d'Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité*, August 2011. Available at :

This initiative has been, however, paralyzed by significant challenges, including rivalry and mistrust between its members. While Algeria assumes the leadership of the group quite naturally—given its military capabilities and its experience in fighting AQIM, other members—particularly Mauritania—have expressed reservation vis-à-vis what they consider as the "Algerian domination" of the group.[65] Other challenges relate to the lack of agreement on the right of the military of one member to pursuit jihadists inside the other members' territory. Furthermore, the CEMOC has been unable to undertake any significant action to help Mauritania and Mali in their fight against jihadist groups. The CEMOC is only one example that highlights the difficulty of the Sahelian countries to organize coordinated responses to the regional threat of insecurity. Other multilateral and bilateral initiatives sponsored by the European Union and by individual countries such as France have aimed at helping the Sahelian countries to organize a regional response to the crises. But these multiple initiatives have had limited success so far and, even more troubling, their lack of coordination runs the risk of further confusing the scene.[66]

Conclusion

The Mauritanian case clearly demonstrates that the outbreak of the crisis of Islamic insurgency in the Sahel must be understood as produced by a confluence of a global jihadist ideology with the local socioeconomic and political contexts. In fact, while the importation of global jihadism is a reality in the Sahel, the resulting Islamic insurgency occurs in a local context of bad governance, alienation and deprivation of the majority of youth, and the resulting phenomenon of growing radicalization. To mobilize an insurgency, global ideology has to be appropriated by local actors, justified in a local language, and expressed using local arguments. It is therefore the alliance between a global ideology and a deleterious local context that contributes to the emergence of an Islamic insurgency. However, it is the local context—and particularly the relative strength or weakness of the

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http://archive.grip.org/en/siteweb/images/NOTES_ANALYSE/2011/NA_2011-08-26-FR_M-MEKDOUR.pdf. Last visited on 10 July 2014.

[65] See, M. Mekdour, Ibid.

[66] See, Luis Simon, Alexander Mattelaer, Amelia Hadfield, « Une Stratégie Cohérente de l'EU pour le Sahel,» Parlement Européen, *Direction Générale des Politiques Externes de l'union*, May 2012. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2012/433778/EXPO-DEVE_ET%282012%29433778_FR.pdf. Last visited 17 August 2014.

state—that determines whether an insurgency succeeds or fails. This appears clear when looking comparatively at the frontline states of the current Islamic insurgency: Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. In Mali, the Islamic insurgency emerged out of an alliance between a transnational jihadi network (AQIM) with local charismatic nationalist Tuareg leaders who converted into jihad. It then grew stronger through the propagation of a mixed discourse of Tuareg nationalism and jihadism among an aggrieved population. And it finally defeated an army that was strikingly weak in its structure and capabilities. In Mauritania, the global jihadist ideology spread through the media, the internet, and by dint of linguistic proximity but also through networks of local jihadists.[67] Contrary to Mali, it met a state that was strong enough to successfully mobilize military, political, and religious forces to suppress the threat. In Niger, by contrast, although the local conditions are quite similar to those of Mali and Mauritania, the spread of global jihadism was very limited. Perhaps this is due to the absence of a local network of jihadists or any linguistic proximity, but also due to the state's ability to more or less effectively control its border.

I must note, however that while Mauritania has successfully managed to prevent any major terrorist attack in recent years, it is still far from immune. The above-mentioned crisis of governance, the radicalization of youth, and the existence of networks of jihadists are issues that remain unresolved. Furthermore, the defeat of the Islamist movements in northern Mali might have a positive outcome for Mauritania's security in the short term, given the fact that the Islamists have finally been dislodged from a sanctuary which allowed them to plan attacks inside Mauritania. In the long term, however, Mauritania's security will depend on the fate of the jihadists as they continue to disperse throughout the region, perhaps awaiting a new opportunity to regroup or crafting a new strategy of jihad. The opening of another front, say in Libya, would be advantageous for Mauritania's security by removing the country far from the frontlines. Paradoxically, however, greater success in routing the jihadists elsewhere could have negative repercussions in Mauritania, given the number of Mauritanians enrolled in the jihadi groups who may be tempted to return home and re-organize themselves in new local *katibas*. Either way, it is foolish to expect the

[67] Jihadist use very often the Arabic language to communicate. The fact that 70% of Mauritanians speak Hassaniyya (an Arabic dialect) as their native language facilitate their access to the jihadist propaganda.

complete surrender of the jihadists across the region just because they have lost control of their Azawad stronghold. It remains evident that the long-term security of Mauritania, as well as that of all the Sahelian frontline countries, depends on the overall stability of the entire region.