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The importance of ethnic and religious structures in the region of Sahel: Socio-political and security dimensions. The case study of Mauritania

Preface

The region of Sahel exists in the western imagination predominantly in the context of security threats. In a volatile sociopolitical landscape of West Africa with its multiplicity of non-state actors, the primordial ethnic and religious structures are one of the very few constants points of reference.

The understanding of security challenges in the region is becoming more nuanced. There is a necessity of addressing multiple aspects of the radicalization phenomenon – socio-political and security dimensions are overlapping and interconnected.

This article aims to underline the importance of ethnic and religious structures for both animating and understanding political and security dynamic in the region based on the example of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The first part of the article aims to identify sociopolitical factors influencing the security situation in the country and beyond, in sometimes surprising ways, with main emphases on the importance of ethnic and religious structures and the role of political Islam.

The second part of the article provides an exemplification of multiple, not always coordinated, security initiatives in the region that Mauritania is aspiring successfully to play lining role in, partly thanks to its complex understanding of security resulting from its unique social structure.

Since gaining its independence Mauritania's political equilibrium has been based on regionalism and tribalism. The regime has exploited the inter-tribal rivalry to marginalize political opponents. Although in 2009 formal transfer to civilian rule has been made and subsequent reform introduced, in theory, democratic institutions, they are still subordinated to the military¹ and clientelist system supports of the ruling party². Social stratification actually reinforces the authoritarian structures³. The ethnic dynamic of Mauritania has also influenced the local operational environment of the movement of global jihad⁴.

Socio-political dimension

Political background

Mauritania, an important player in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, has so far been much less affected by the general insecurity in the Sahel than its neighbours. The last major terrorist attack in Mauritania dates back to 2011⁵ and the aspiring regional leader in democratization and stability faces several inter-related development challenges, the biggest being the creation of a new social identity built on citizenship and not a hierarchy of tribal affiliation. Economic and political marginalization of in fact the majority of the population is reinforced by primordial ethnic animosities and social stratification so significant that all possible social and economic roles that an individual can fulfil are determined by origin⁶. So as explained further, social exclusion is, in fact, one of the serious threats to internal stability and indirectly (by facilitating radicalization) to regional counterterrorism efforts. On September the 19th 2017 the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Mauritania, Isselkou Ould Ahmed Izid Bih⁷ addressed the United Nations General Assembly⁸, pointing out that after heavy fighting in 2010 and 2011 Mauritania has faced the threat of terrorism successfully, has reformed its legal frameworks in accordance with international agreements regarding terrorism, set out a roadmap of the fight against terrorism, including a social

¹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/27/who-shot-a-a>. (Access to all electronic sources used in the article, unless stated otherwise, on 22.01.2018).

² *Ibidem*.

³ See more in B. N'Diaye (2006). Mauritania, August 2005: justice and democracy, or just another coup?, *African Affairs*, Vol. 105, No. 420, pp. 421–441.

⁴ See more in C. Jourde (2012). Mauritania: Crash of Authoritarianism and Ethnicity, In: *Political Islam in West Africa*. Edited by W.F.S. Miles, p. 101–127. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

⁵ S. Rao, Conflict analysis of Mauritania. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2014; http://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/gsdrc_conflanal_mauritania.pdf and <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/11/mauritania-s-precious-stability-and-islamist-undercurrent-pub-62730>.

⁶ See more on the biggest developmental and security challenges for Mauritanian society in: S. Rao, *op. cit.*; http://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/gsdrc_conflanal_mauritania.pdf and <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/11/mauritania-s-precious-stability-and-islamist-undercurrent-pub-62730>.

⁷ See biography of FM: <http://fr.ami.mr/Membre-Gouvernement-55>.

⁸ Isselkou Ould Ahmed Izid Bih's address to the United Nations General Assembly, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57586#.Wm4cNqjiaUk>.

assistance program, and introduced further democratization reforms, particularly with regard to women's rights. The Minister declared that Mauritania, in collaboration with IOM, has eradicated illegal migration from its territory; he emphasized the importance of Mauritania's commitment to the Paris Agreement on climate change⁹.

Mauritania has undergone a 30-year period of military rule and continuum of subsequent coups d'état¹⁰, with regime change happening endogenously among the dominant ethnic-tribal alliance. President Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya was president between 1984 and 2005 before being deposed in a military coup¹¹. His regime was followed by President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi who was president of Mauritania between 2007 and 2008, before being deposed in another coup (On 11 March 2007, for the first time in the country's history, Mauritians could choose between several candidates in presidential elections with no incumbent or official candidate of the regime)¹². Colonel Abdel Aziz came to power in a coup in 2008 and won a second term in 2014¹³. Mauritania may have entered a new phase of stability under Aziz¹⁴. He has promised not to amend the Constitution in order to run for a third term. The process of national dialogue started with the first meetings held in October 2016. On the 5th of August 2017 the national referendum was held; the turnout was 53.73 per cent, with over 80 per cent of votes in support¹⁵ of both abolition of the Senate and amendments to the design of the national flag (two red horizontal stripes, symbolizing blood spilt during the war with France for independence in 1960, were added)¹⁶. The turnout and the level of support for the ruling camp have been much lower in regions with predominantly Haratin district population (Mauritians of African origin, see part 1.2 The complexity and importance of ethnic structure), as for example in the capital's Sebkha district, where the majority of inhabitants voted 'no'¹⁷. Noticeably the same legislative project was defeated in the Senate in March¹⁸, despite fierce criticism from a boycott movement that called mass protests during campaigning. Part of the political establishment is supporting further prolongation of Aziz rule. The President himself said (in mid-August 2017) that "in two years, or even 10 years, other amendments could arise to adapt our constitution to reality"¹⁹.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ See more on the contemporary history of Mauritania in: A.G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, and Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Pub. Group, 2008.

¹¹ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/11/mauritania-s-precarious-stability-and-islamist-undercurrent-pub-62730> and <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/27/who-shot-a-a>.

¹² A.G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Pub. Group, 2008. p. XLVI and p. 41–43.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 339–341. (See biography of the current Mauritanian president).

¹⁴ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/27/who-shot-a-a>.

¹⁵ Referendum win shows Mauritanian president's power; <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/ES223645/Referendum-win-shows-Mauritanian-presidents-power>. (Access granted through a free NATO HQ subscription, during an Internship).

¹⁶ Mauritania: New flag, same old president, <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-08-08-mauritania-new-flag-same-old-president>.

¹⁷ Mauritania opposition crackdown aims at 2019 election; <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB225221/Mauritania-opposition-crackdown-aims-at-2019-election>.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Mauritania votes to abolish Senate by referendum, <http://www.france24.com/en/20170807-mauritania-votes-abolish-senate-referendum-abdel-aziz-possible-third-term>.

In 2019, for the first time in Mauritania's history, there is a chance for a democratic and peaceful transfer of power from one elected president to another, but opposition is raising doubts regarding the President's willingness to step down after the second term in office²⁰. There are not many other candidates with real chances of winning the popular vote, which is to a large extent a consequence of the complexity of Mauritania ethnic structure. Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid, the leader of the anti-slavery movement (IRA), will, presumably, mainly be backed by minority black population and could have difficulty attracting a wider electorate. Jemil Ould Mansour, the leader of the Tawassl party, as a moderate Islamist, also enjoys only sectoral appeal, the ambiguous relationship with the ruling elite being the other factor limiting his chances. Mohamed Ould Ghadda, being an Arab, might be able to attract a broader spectrum of voters, but he was recently arrested and imprisoned²¹, presumably as a preemptive measure.

The complexity and importance of ethnic structure

The Arab-Berber, or Moorish, Bidhan (the 'Bidhan', meaning 'white' or 'light-skinned', thus they are referred to as "White Moors", also spelled Maure)²² constitute less than one-third of the country's population, but dominate economically and politically²³. The Haratin or the "Black Moors"²⁴, descendants of black Africans enslaved and Arabized by the Bidhan, are the most numerous group. The relationship between the Haratin and the Bidhan is ambiguous, as the Haratin have lost all connection to their tribal, non-Arab ancestry. The only identity they recall is that of being subordinate to the Arabs²⁵. The Haratin share the same language, Arab-Muslim culture and social organization with their (former) masters. (This started to change in the late 1970s with the emergence of a Haratin political movement called *El Hor*, meaning Freeman²⁶. This was the first manifestation of the Haratin as an autonomous political and social force). The third group, also affected by slavery, are the West African or Black Mauritanian members of Tukolor, Sarakolé, Fulani (Fulbe), Wolof, and Bambara – transnational West Africa ethnic groups that in Mauritania kept their distinctive African identity²⁷. The Bidhan are themselves subdivided into about 150 different tribes that are linked by complex social interdependences: solidarities, alliances and rivalries²⁸. The

²⁰ Why Mauritania's crucial referendum may only be the first of many, <http://africanarguments.org/2017/08/01/why-mauritania-constitutional-referendum-may-only-be-the-first-of-many>.

²¹ Mauritania opposition crackdown aims at 2019 election; <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB225221/Mauritania-opposition-crackdown-aims-at-2019-election>. (Access granted through a free NATO HQ subscription, during an Internship).

²² A.G Pazzanita, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

²³ C. Jourde, Ethnicity, Democratization, and Political Dramas: Insights into Ethnic Politics in Mauritania, *African Issues*, Vol. 29, Issue 1–2, 2001, p. 26–30.

²⁴ <http://www.mar.umd.edu/assessment.asp?groupId=43502>.

²⁵ A. McDougall, Living the Legacy of Slavery. Between Discourse and Reality, <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/15068#ftn26>.

²⁶ A.G Pazzanita, *op. cit.*

²⁷ D.L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Updated Edition, University of California Press, p. 48.

²⁸ See more on the complexity of the Mauritanian ethnic structure in Anthony G Pazzanita, *op. cit.*, p. 331–354.

Bidhan elite itself consists of the warriors (Hassani) and the marabouts – religious leaders and mystics²⁹. Both groups derive their tradition and origin to a greater extent from the Arabs than from the Berbers. The vassals-Zenaga³⁰ (Berbers conquered by Arabs and therefore Arabized) are the subordinate group among White Moors³¹. These dependences are reminiscent of precolonial polities widespread in the time of African emirates³² and were reinforced by French rule in XIX century³³. Feudal structures have remained a dominant form of the socio-economic organization of society. Mauritania's post-independence socio-political landscape has been dominated by the power imbalance between ethnic groups in the country and repeated attempts by marginalized majority to assert its non-Arab identity and claim for a more equitable share of political and economic participation³⁴.

Abolishing slavery in 1981, Mauritania was the last country in the world to do so³⁵. Non-governmental organisation have been trying for years to ignite a mass movement similar to the anti-apartheid one and to persuade the United States, the main political, and what is perhaps more important, financial backer of Nouakchott, to put pressure on subsequent Mauritanian governments³⁶. This has led to surprising divisions in the expected interest groups; with the religious right assuming unexpected prominence. The role of the international organisations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, only indirectly and partially addressing public demands to combat slavery, yet, simultaneously, having political and economic tools to put successful pressure on Mauritanian administration, remains ambiguous³⁷. For a human rights activist strong western support for state authoritarian administration allows sustainment for those practises, which equals implicate encouragement for discriminatory policies³⁸. Slavery was explicitly outlawed, but not yet penalized,

²⁹ See more on Haratins people in West Africa in B. Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Cambridge University Press. Online publication date: October 2009.

³⁰ A.G. Pazzanita, *op. cit.*, p. 321–324, 352.

³¹ D.L. Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 3–54.

³² S.O.M. Mohamedou (2012). Riq Fi Mauritania: al-abad shara'iy ūw syasiy [Slavery in Mauritania: Its religious and political dimensions]. Rabat, Morocco: Top Press, p. 30–31 and El Hamel C. (2002). "Race," slavery and Islam in Maghribi Mediterranean thought: The question of the Haratin in Morocco. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 7, 29–52 .

³³ T. Tamari, The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1991), pp. 221–250, Cambridge University Press.

³⁴ See more in: B. N'Diaye, *op. cit.*, pp. 421–441.

³⁵ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/08/freedom-fighter>.

³⁶ The Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania (IRA-Mauritania): <http://www.freedom-now.org/about/mission>.

³⁷ A. Bullard, From Colonization to Globalization. The Vicissitudes of Slavery in Mauritania, *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 2005/3–4, 179, p. 752.

³⁸ Resolution on the State of Human Rights in Mauritania, 7 August 2000, signed by: Association mauritanienne des droits de l'homme (AMDH); SOS-esclaves; GREDDes-Mauritanie; CRADPOCIT (Collectif des anciens détenus politiques civils torturés); Collectif des veuves; Collectif des rescapés militaires; Collectif des familles séparées par la déportation; Comité de solidarité avec les victims de la répression en Mauritanie; CAP (Collectif Aide et Partage); Collectif des fonctionnaires et travailleurs victimes des événements de 1989; Collectif des femmes des anciens détenus politiques; Ligue africaine des droits de l'homme (section de Mauritanie). A document provided by SOS-esclaves, Nouakchott, Mauritania.

in 1981. As of 1998, the world slavery has stopped being used in the official legislation to describe the problem of extreme servitude in the country, which constitutes a major obstacle to addressing the essence of the problem. The existence of parallel legal systems is a fundamental factor making it difficult to address slavery and other social problems in the country. The Mauritanian constitution based on the model of the French Fifth Republic coexists with the traditional judicial system derived from Islamic sharia. A de facto founding document of contemporary antislavery movement – the petition of March 1996 explicitly states that “the modern law of Mauritians is intentionally ambiguous and destined primarily for an international audience”³⁹. According to different estimates, up to 20 per cent of Mauritania’s 3.4 million population is still bound into hereditary servitude often ongoing even among the Mauritanian diaspora abroad⁴⁰ and therefore remains de facto enslaved⁴¹. Dependency is constantly being reinforced and reintroduced into the social fabric under the protection of an ill understood religious or family obligation⁴².

The practice is still persistent, although throughout the recent years the government had introduced, with moderate success, a limited scope of legal and political measures aiming to promote social cohesion, such as constitutional amendments which affirm state multi-ethnicity, affirm the criminalization of slavery and prohibit coups. First and foremost, slaves’ ownership was finally criminalized in 2008. To a large extent as a result of these programmes and policies Mauritania is no longer the country with the highest percentage of enslavement individuals in the world, although it remains among 10 most affected states⁴³, and for slave owners to be held criminally liable remains extremely rare⁴⁴.

The socio-psychological burden of hundreds of years of enslavement remains taboo. The SOS-esclaves report from 2002–2003 offers a systematic study of the population from five regions in the south-east of the country, with over a million inhabitants. What is symptomatic, according to the report “victims do not denounce the principle of their domination, but only the specific damages or injuries they suffered”⁴⁵. Public awareness of the problem is still insufficient; there have been numerous examples of hostile treatment of human rights campaigners (including foreigners) by officials⁴⁶.

³⁹ Petition on Slavery in Mauritania, 22 March 1996, signed by 118 Mauritians including lawyers, doctors, Senators Youssouph Ba and Koita Tidjane, and Ambassador Diawara Gagny. The document provided by SOS-esclaves, Nouakchott, Mauritania.

⁴⁰ A. Bullard, *From Colonization...*, *op. cit.*, p. 752.

⁴¹ J.D. Sutter (2011, December). Slavery’s last stronghold. CNN News Report. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slaverys.last.stronghold>.

⁴² See more in G. Lydon, Slavery, exchange and Islamic law: A glimpse from the archives of Mali and Mauritania. *African Economic History*, 33, 2005, p. 115–146.

⁴³ Walk Free Foundation. (2014). Global slavery index report. Retrieved from http://d3mj66ag90b5fy.cloudfront.net/wpcontent/uploads/2014/11/Global_Slavery_Index_2014_final_lowres.pdf. Global slavery index report 2017: <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/index>.

⁴⁴ A. Bullard, *From Colonization...*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

⁴⁵ 2002–2003 Annual Report, Nouakchott (a pdf file available at www.sosesclaves.org).

⁴⁶ There are many cases of arrest and persecution against human rights campaigners, see: Mauritania: UN experts concerned about situation of jailed human rights activists: <http://www.ohchr.org/FR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20699> and The Initiative for the Resurgence of the

Culturally sanctioned discrimination has been deepened by the modern strategy of Arabization (started under Moctar Ould Daddah, the first president of independent Mauritania), aimed to ally Mauritania with the pan-Arab movement of the 1960s. The new wave of discriminatory policies was confronted by small but persistent resistance culminating in the publication of Manifesto of the 19th in 1966, by a small group of Black African activists. From 1967 Arabic became the official language of the state education system aiming to reverse postcolonial dominance of Black and tribal Mauritians in the state administration⁴⁷, as those groups more eagerly participated in the colonial educational system and as a consequence, dominated the state bureaucracy at the time of independence⁴⁸. Rapid Arabization required Arabic speaking teachers that were recruited ad hoc from Koranic schools, thus having difficulties in teaching modern subjects. As a consequence young people, produced by the Arabized education system were lacking modern qualifications required to find employment in the economy transitioning from feudalism into capitalism. Thus, they easily became a support base for many Islamist groups⁴⁹.

Under Ould Taya domestic discriminatory policies became more and more interlinked with regional policy and directed towards securing Mauritania a position within the Arab nations family. The complexity of Mauritania patterns of dependency does not match the simple racial or religious divisions, the social structure and its problems are peculiarly Sahelian⁵⁰, not African, Arab or Islamic, which makes them much more nuanced and therefore difficult to eradicate. Anti-slavery activists working in Sudan habitually and usually play successfully on the scheme of Christians enslaved by Muslims. The Haratin in Mauritania, however, are Muslim as well⁵¹.

The 1993 meeting of the International Islamic Organization issued an official condemnation of Israel's deportation of 443 Palestinians. On, ignored the 1989 deportation of some 70,000 Muslims from Mauritania. The Mauritians, of course, were Black African⁵²

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that by 1991 about 53,000 Mauritians were living in Senegal and at least 13,000 in Mali (UNHCR, 1991). The objective was the further Arabization of Mauritania⁵³.

Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania (IRA-Mauritania): <http://www.freedom-now.org/campaign/ira-mauritania/>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/mauritania/report-mauritania/>.

⁴⁷ A. Bullard, *From Colonization...*, *op. cit.*, p. 755.

⁴⁸ S. Rao, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ A. Bayat (2010). *Life of Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. p. 173.

⁵⁰ See more on Haratin people in West Africa in B. Barry, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ Scholars suggests that the encounter between Arabic Nomadic groups in Mali and Mauritania, and Africans have produced entirely new racial categories and identities in the Sahel region. Colour terminology and religious knowledge were used as powerful tools to create cultural and racial differences between Bidan-Whites and Sudan-Blacks. With whiteness being used as a synonym for Arab Islamic knowledge and privilege and Blackness with slavery. See more in B.S. Hall, The question of race in the pre-colonial southern Sahara, *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3–4 (September–December 2005) p. 339–367.

⁵² A. Bullard, *Mauritanian Activists' Struggle Against Slavery*, *Middle East Report* 32 (2), 2002, p. 15.

⁵³ S. Rao, *op. cit.*

Migration issues continue to be used as a tool in Mauritanian domestic and foreign policy. In 1989, Taya's regime took advantage of the border dispute with Senegal to further marginalize black Mauritanians⁵⁴. Many of them suffered ethnic cleansing and large-scale deportations to Senegal and Mali between 1989 and 1992. The international response has been minimalized by important regional political developments⁵⁵. Nowadays we can observe the reverse of the situation of the 90s – Mauritanian Mbera camp is home to nearly 52,000 registered refugees (according to July 2017 data from the United Nations Refugee Agency⁵⁶). The majority arrived at the peak of the crisis in Mali in 2012, the influx continued for the last 5 years, and the rivalry with the local population for limited resources increased. While the Mauritians were officially deregistered from UNHCR's refugee list in 2015 and 2016, between 40 and 60 per cent still live in the camp. In June 2016, Mauritania, Mali and UNHCR concluded a Tripartite Agreement for the voluntary repatriation of Malian refugees (of course when conditions will allow for their return). In the meantime, it reconfirms the commitment of Mauritania and Mali to protect refugees⁵⁷.

International aspirations as a manifestation of a complex identity

Bilateral and multilateral relations of Mauritania are the manifestation of its Arab aspirations and willingness to maintain strong ties with the West. Mauritania is not a member of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and left the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2000⁵⁸. This reflects the Arab identity of the ruling elite and their sentiments towards the European legacy of Moorish medieval Caliphates of Cordoba and Grenada; the economic aspect of that decision remains questionable. There is an ongoing conversation in the country concerning ECOWAS that is gaining momentum⁵⁹ as a consequence both of G5 Sahel membership and of the recent collaboration between President Aziz and ECOWAS in relation to the political situation in the Gambia⁶⁰. Mauritania, a member of the Arab League, severed ties with Qatar during the 2017 diplomatic crisis⁶¹.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ A. Bullard, *From Colonization...*, *op. cit.*, p. 759.

⁵⁶ <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/60782>.

⁵⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/report/mauritania/mauritania-unhcr-operational-update-13-october-2017-enar>.

⁵⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/578966.stm>.

⁵⁹ Mauritania signs partnership agreement with ECOWAS: <http://www.africanews.com/2017/05/08/mauritania-signs-partnership-agreement-with-ecowas/>. After Morocco, Mauritania Wants to Join ECOWAS: <http://sahelstandard.com/index.php/2017/05/11/after-morocco-mauritania-wants-to-join-ecowas/>.

⁶⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gambia-politics-mauritania/mauritanian-president-arrives-in-gambia-to-talk-to-jammeh-idUSKBN1522QO>.

⁶¹ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170607-mauritania-breaks-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar/>.

The EU is the single largest donor to Mauritania⁶². The Cotonou Agreement, with the European Development Fund (EDF)⁶³ as the main financial tool of cooperation, includes certain obligations regarding human rights, governance and the rule of law. Mauritania is a signatory to the Economic Partnership concerning development cooperation; the relationship is defined by the National Indicative Programme 2014–2020⁶⁴, which, among other priorities, points to the crucial role of the agricultural sector in Mauritania. The Western Mediterranean Forum, a French proposed concept, commonly referred to as 5+5 Dialogue, was officially launched in Rome in 1990 as an informal sub-regional forum to foster relations between European countries and the newly born Arab Maghreb Union and to achieve stability and peace in the Mediterranean⁶⁵. (The group was initially called “4+5”. It became “5+5” when Malta joined the initiative in the second conference, held in Alger in 1991). The initiative joins 10 countries around the West Mediterranean sea countries, Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya on the southern rim and Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Malta on the northern rim. With regard to security, as a key partner in the fight against terrorism and a member of the G5 Sahel, Mauritania has become a privileged diplomatic interlocutor for the EU on security and development issues in the Sahel⁶⁶. The close Chinese-Mauritanian relationship has survived one military coup in 2005 and 2008⁶⁷. During the elections held in between the two coups, both of the main presidential candidates praised Mauritania’s ties with China as its economic offer including the so-called Chinese aid has practically no political preconditions, contrary to western developmental help and FDI. Modest oil reserves were discovered at Mauritania’s Chinguetti oil field at the turn of the new millennium⁶⁸. China quickly saw the potential and currently operates three exploration projects in the country. In 2006, China and Mauritania signed a \$2 million cooperation deal comprising the health, economic and sociocultural domains⁶⁹. The Nouakchott Port project, financed through a \$295 million preferential loan provided by the Chinese government⁷⁰ is of a strategic importance and is part of a wider pattern systematic Chinese expansion into Africa. Canadian Kinross Gold Corp (the world’s fifth biggest gold producer by output) plans an expansion of two gold mines at Tasiast in Mauritania⁷¹. The rela-

⁶² [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578036/EXPO_IDA\(2017\)578036_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578036/EXPO_IDA(2017)578036_EN.pdf).

⁶³ Partnership Agreement between the members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States of the one part, and the European Community and its Member States, of the other part, signed in Cotonou on 23 June 2000; <https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/node/62775>.

⁶⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/countries/mauritania_en.

⁶⁵ <http://www.mede.a.be/en/themes/euro-mediterranean-cooperation/dialogue-55-western-mediterranean>.

⁶⁶ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578036/EXPO_IDA\(2017\)578036_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578036/EXPO_IDA(2017)578036_EN.pdf).

⁶⁷ See more in F. Farhaoui, *Mauritania and Newly Emerging Economies in Africa Turkey and China, 2008*.

⁶⁸ <https://www.offshore-technology.com/projects/chinguetti>.

⁶⁹ <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2012/0301/China-buying-out-Africa-Top-5-destinations-of-Chinese-money/Mauritania>.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ <https://ca.reuters.com/article/businessNews/idCAKCN1BT1BE-OCABS>.

tions between Mauritania and Morocco have deteriorated even further, as of September 2017, after Rabat agreed to host a number of Mauritanian opposition activists, whom Nouakchott accuses of seeking to harm public security in the country and has issued a formal international arrest warrant for some of them, especially businessman Mohamed Ould Bouamatou⁷². The United States was the first country to recognize Mauritania's independence in 1960⁷³. It supported Mauritania's transition to democracy following the 2005 coup d'état, providing election-related assistance for voter education and provided elections support for the 2007 elections. Assistance other than humanitarian assistance to Mauritania was suspended after the 2008 coup⁷⁴. Following the certification of the 2009 election by foreign observers the restrictions were lifted⁷⁵. Mauritania is a member of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a successor of the Pan-Sahel Initiative (created September 11, 2001)⁷⁶; it receives security assistance to support its counterterrorism efforts. Mauritania was the third "Arab" country to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999, (in response to U.S. Pressure)⁷⁷; the issue continued to galvanize Mauritania's public opinion, ultimately resulting in recalling Mauritania's ambassador from Israel in 2009⁷⁸. The other factor possibly jeopardizing Mauritania's cooperation with The West, including NATO countries, is the influence of Iran. Since the 80s, mainly through educational and cultural activity, charitable work and developmental assistance, Iran has been widening its ideological, and thus political, influence in impoverished parts of Muslim Asia and Africa. In recent years Saudi-Iranian rivalry has been especially visible in West Africa⁷⁹, including Mauritania; Iran is offering free religious education combined with social assistance sometimes, but not always, connected with conversion to Shia Islam⁸⁰.

Security dimension

The significance of ethnicity and religion for the stabilization efforts

The almost unbreakable cycle of servitude makes Mauritanian society more permissive to violence. Haratins or "Black Moors", as Arabized, yet discriminated against, may be especially prone to foreign radial propaganda (as local activists of Islamism

⁷² <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170913-mauritania-disappointed-as-morocco-hosts-opposition/>.

⁷³ S.E. Eizenstat, US Foreign Policy towards the Maghreb: The Need for a New Beginning, http://www.iemed.org/anuari/2010/aarticles/Eizenstat_foreign_policy_en.pdf.

⁷⁴ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/27/who-shot-a-a/>.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ S.E. Eizenstat, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸ R. Ojeda-García, Islamist Groups in Mauritania: Evolution and Analysis. In: F. Izquierdo Brichs, J. Etherington, L. Feliu (ed.) *Political Islam in a Time of Revolt. Islam and Nationalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-52833-5_11.

⁷⁹ G.M. Feierstein, The Fight for Africa: The New Focus of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF2_Feierstein_AfricaSaudiIran_web_4.pdf.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

have been predominantly representatives of “White Moors” or Bidan); and some of them have joined the ranks of the transnational terrorist movements in Africa, which exploit local ethnic animosities for their own aims (mainly Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s al-Mourabitoun). In fact two suicide attacks organized by AQIM in Nouakchott in 2010 were actually carried out by the Haratin⁸¹. From the geopolitical point of view it is difficult to put emphasis on human rights regarding the most active ally in the counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, and one of the most stable counters in the region.

A coherent counterterrorism cooperation between the Mauritanian government and the West began under the leadership of Ould Taya, nota bene the proponent of intensified and often brutal Arabization. In accordance with his policies, when the defenders of tribal African identity organized as the *Forces de liberation africaines de Mauritanie* (FLAM), they were denounced by the government as racist extremists⁸², and as a consequence Haratin were removed from any significant positions.

Under President Aziz Mauritanian counterterrorism international cooperation became institutionalized and Mauritania emerged as a Sahelian champion in that matter⁸³. The success in the fight against terrorism coincided with raising awareness of the impact of socio-political exclusion and radicalization on both achieving and maintaining security in the country⁸⁴. The regime has started to address the non-military security threats, ranging from ethnicity religion and climate change (see FM speech mentioned above). For example, widespread recultivation of irrigation systems⁸⁵ has begun to halt the outflow of the rural population, traditionally dependent on farming, to radical jihadists groups. There is increasing political will for the wider social inclusion of previously marginalized groups, it occurs still within restrictions typical for the authoritarian regimes, but the result of rapprochement towards Haratin, although still questionable on the human rights level, in the aspects of security improvement is undeniable.

The ethnic and religious structure and dependences are the primary but not only non-military factors impacting the security situation in the Sahel, particularly in Mauritania. Based on the examples given above we can enumerate subsidiary factors (of a mutually influencing and reinforcing character), such as continuum of authoritarian regimes, demographic structure, internal migrations, urbanisation and climate change (in case of Mauritania severe droughts).

The real symbol of a synergy of military and non-military security in Mauritania is the persona of Mohamed Ould Sheikh Mohamed Ahmed, the Army Chief of Staff. Known as Ould Ghazouani, the centre figure to the coup of 2008 and one of the closest figures in the inner circle of President Abdel Aziz, he constitutes a great

⁸¹ R. Ojeda-García, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

⁸² A. Bullard, From Colonization to Globalization. The Vicissitudes of Slavery in Mauritania, *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 2005/3–4, 179, p. 755.

⁸³ S.E. Eizenstat, US Foreign Policy towards the Maghreb: The Need for a New Beginning, http://www.iemed.org/anuari/2010/aarticles/Eizenstat_foreign_policy_en.pdf.

⁸⁴ https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/news_152791.htm?selectedLocale=en.

⁸⁵ M. García-Bolaños, C. Borgia, N. Poblador, M. Dia, Ould Mohamed Vadel Seyid, L. Mateos (2011). Performance assessment of small irrigation schemes along the Mauritanian banks of the Senegal River. *Agricultural Water Management*. 98. 1141–1152. 10.1016/j.agwat.2011.02.008.

personification of the profound importance of ethnic and religious nuances in both the socio-political landscape of Sahel and its security situation. El Ghazouani is originally from the wilaya (prefecture) of Assaba, in the south, a descendant of the most prestigious and privileged class in society. He was born as the son of a marabout – spiritual leader of the Berber Ideiboussat, a tribe of great significance, and thanks to Sufi-mysticism ties and trade proveniences they acquired a great – but discreet – influence in the country. Ould Ghazouani has therefore unique knowledge of the Mauritanian tribal landscape, animosities and interdependences. El Ghazouani was serving as the de facto president interim, after Abdel Aziz was reportedly accidentally shot by the soldier in October 2012 and was undergoing his convalescence in France. It was at the Military Academy in Meknès (Morocco) that the two men met in 1980 and appreciated each other. They share a very cordial personal relationship. He was an extremely active advocate of Aziz abroad, particularly in France: before 2009, he gained support for the new regime by developing effective counter-terrorism intelligence cooperation with the West. Over the years he has developed a wide range of influences and patronages: as mentioned, Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Ghazouani, an influential member of the Islamist obedience party Tawassoul, his first cousin; Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mohamed Lemine, secretary-general of the Union for the Republic, the presidential party, is also his cousin. He is married to Marieme Mint Mohamed Vadhel Ould Dah, an adviser at the Mauritanian embassy in Washington. The Ould Ghazouani extraordinary career is profound proof of the importance of addressing religion and ethnicity for the success of stabilisation efforts.

The political Islam as a stabilization factor in the Mauritanian security realm

As one of the two Islamic republics in Africa (the other one being The Gambia), Mauritania has a particularly ambiguous relationship between the ruling elite and movement of political Islam, or Islamism. Islamism, in its contemporary, party-shaped form, is present in Mauritania since 1970, its rising influence a coincidence, as throughout the MENA region with rapid urbanization, in case of Mauritania, reinforced by droughts of 1973–1990. The rural population deprived of traditional tribal support networks turns to religion instead⁸⁶.

Islamist political movement in the country has an ambiguous relationship with the Haratin. On the one hand, some Mauritanian public figures have been for years exploiting the nuanced stance of Islam on the issue of slavery to justify local practices of servitude for their own or systemic gains. On the other hand, social exclusion and marginalization in public sphere have made the Haratin eager supporters of mostly opposition Islamist movements⁸⁷. It is reflected in the fact that the Bidan tribes are predominantly followers of Maliki-Sunni jurisprudence, while the majority

⁸⁶ C. Jourde, *Mauritania...*, *op. cit.*, p. 109 and Z.O.A. Salem, *The Paradoxes of Islamic Radicalisation in Mauritania*. In: *Islamist Radicalisation in North Africa: Politics and Process*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012 p. 186.

⁸⁷ C. Jourde, *Mauritania...*, *op. cit.*, p. 101–109 and Z.O.A. Salem, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

of the black Mauritanian communities belong to Sufi tarikats⁸⁸, or brotherhoods of the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya⁸⁹.

Islamic parties in Mauritania have been showing great adaptation ability shifting from operating underground to regime supporters to opposition⁹⁰. In the 1990s, political liberalization allowed Islamists to participate in elections as independents⁹¹, and since its legalization in 2007, Tewassoul (ideologically but not so politically associated with Muslim Brotherhood), has become the strongest Islamist party in Mauritania and a significant minority voice in the country's politics and has established ties with Islamists elsewhere in the Arab world⁹². These moderate Islamists had accepted the parliamentary democracy and explicitly rejected the usage of violence in political struggle⁹³. Their official presence in the political scene in the country, in fact, has contributed to democratization by widening the political participation of the masses. During the period of greatest uncertainty in 2008, mainstream Islamists did not, notably, demand the imposition of an Islamic state, but only the restoration of civilian democratic rule⁹⁴. Tewassoul maintains the official and unofficial dialogue with the ruling elite⁹⁵ (Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Ghazouani, an influential member of the Islamist obedience party Tawassoul, is the first cousin of General Mohamed Sheikh Mohamed Ahmed Sheikh El Ghazouani⁹⁶). The outlook of political Islam in Mauritania definitely does not meet the popular presumption on that movement.

Mauritanian participation in counterterrorism efforts

The first terrorist attack in the country in the name of global jihad was carried out in 2005 (15 Mauritanian soldiers were killed and 39 others wounded)⁹⁷ by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, an Algerian jihadist splinter group that renamed itself Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007⁹⁸. (Since that time there have been a number of attacks in Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania and dozens of kidnappings of Westerners). AQIM has attacked symbols of Western influence in Mauritania⁹⁹, opening fire on the Israeli embassy in 2008 and carrying out a suicide

⁸⁸ C. Jourde, *Mauritania...*, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ Z.O.A. Salem, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁹⁰ R. Ojeda-García, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ A. Thurson, *Mauritania's Islamists* at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs.

⁹² R. Ojeda-García, *op. cit.*

⁹³ „Déclaration de politique générale”. Parti de Rassemblement National pour la Démocratie et le Développement. Tawassoul.

⁹⁴ R. Ojeda-García, *op. cit.*

⁹⁵ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/11/mauritania-s-precarious-stability-and-islamist-undercurrent-pub-62730>.

⁹⁶ <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/139295/politique/mauritanie-mohamed-ould-ghazouani-l-homme-de-l-ombre/>.

⁹⁷ S. Rao, *op. cit.*

⁹⁸ D. Cristiani, R. Fabiani, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Implications for Algeria's Regional and International Relations*, *IAI Working Papers* 2011, no 07; <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.461.4283&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

⁹⁹ http://carnegieendowment.org/files/mauritania_islamists.pdf.

bombing near the French embassy in 2009¹⁰⁰. (There were also a number of different attacks in Nouakchott in 2008). In early 2011, Mauritanian soldiers intercepted an AQIM convoy carrying explosives to Nouakchott, presumably as part of an assassination plot against Abdel Aziz, or the French embassy¹⁰¹. To help stabilize the neighbouring Mali, the Mauritanian government has provided around 1,800 troops to the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), established by Security Council resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013¹⁰². Mauritania is taking part (with France and other G5 Sahel counters) in Operation Barkhane, an ongoing anti-insurgent operation in Africa's Sahel region, which commenced on 1 August 2014¹⁰³. With regard to security and development, the G5 Sahel¹⁰⁴ is of particular interest. This new regional body was created in 2015 by the leaders of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso. Mauritania hosts the headquarters of the group and President Aziz is its first chair. In June 2017 the UN Security Council endorsed the formation the G5 Sahel joint force, comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger¹⁰⁵, to combat terrorism and transnational organized crime in the restive region¹⁰⁶.

The G5 Sahel (G5S¹⁰⁷) institutional framework was created as a platform for regional cooperation in development policies and security matters. It was created in February 2014 by the leaders of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso under the motto that "There is no lasting development without security nor enduring security without effective development". The G5S is permanently seated in Mauritania and President Aziz has been its first chair. The aims of the organization are to foster economic development in the Sahel through an effective cooperation

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/world/africa/09mauritania.html>.

¹⁰¹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/27/who-shot-a-a/>.

¹⁰² <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en>.

¹⁰³ The New Geopolitics of Peace Operations II: African Outlooks on Conflict Management, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/NGPII_Sahel-Saharan-Africa-%28Bamako%29.pdf.

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.g5sahel.org/>.

¹⁰⁵ Each member country has set up a National Coordinating Committee which is under the supervision of the national Ministers in charge of Development. The chairman of each National Coordination Committee is the national focal point of the G5 Sahel. The Permanent Secretariat of the G5 Sahel is the body responsible for implementing the decisions of the Council of Ministers. It is headed by a Permanent Secretary General, who is currently Najim El Hadj Mohamed from Niger. Placed under the authority of the Council of Ministers, the Secretariat is a very light, flexible and effective non-budgetary structure with no more than a score of people in total.

¹⁰⁶ Security Council Welcomes Deployment of Joint Force to Combat Terrorism Threat, Transnational Crime in the Sahel, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2359 (2017): <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12881.doc.htm>, <https://onu.delegfrance.org/G5-Sahel-Joint-Force-10433#The-G5-Sahel-Joint-Force-an-African-initiative-supported-by-the-United-nbsp>.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.g5sahel.org/index.php/qui-sommes-nous/le-g5-sahel>.

The organs of the G5S are:

- The Conference of Heads of State;
- The Council of Ministers;
- The Permanent Secretariat (based in Nouakchott)
- The Defense and Security Committee
- National Coordinating Committees for G5 Sahel Actions.

on security, economic resilience, infrastructure development, and management of water resources¹⁰⁸.

The military aspects of the G5S are coordinated by the respective countries' Chief of Staff. In June 2017 the UN Security Council endorsed the formation the G5 Sahel joint force (Force conjointe du G5 Sahel - FC-G5S), comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, to combat terrorism and transnational organized crime in the restive region. By unanimously adopting UNSC resolution 2359 (on 21 June 2017)¹⁰⁹, the UNSC welcomed the joint force's strategic concept of operations, urged the joint force to fill up to 5,000 military and police personnel by March 2018¹¹⁰ (G5 nations have expressed their ambition to increase force strength to 10,000, similar to the force strength of the MNJTF), as well as to support the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)¹¹¹. The enhancement of cooperation between MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel States through the relevant intelligence and liaison officers is perceived crucial for the effectiveness of the counterterrorism efforts in the region¹¹². The relationship between the G5 Force and the UN forces still needs to be clarified. A joint G5S anti-terrorist force started to develop the first operational components in mid-October 2017 under the command of General Didier Dacko, the former chief of staff of the Malian Armed Forces¹¹³, and is planned to be fully operational by March 2018. France's public backing accelerated the G5 leaders' planning, and on July 2, 2017, during the G5 summit in Bamako, President Macron set out a package of assistance for the new force¹¹⁴.

It is estimated that the annual costs will be close to \$500m.¹¹⁵ The United Nations Security Council said responsibility for funding lies with the G5, though it has encouraged support from the international community. The five African countries have collectively pledged \$57m between them, while the European Union offered to match that amount¹¹⁶. A high-level G5 Sahel donor meeting was held in New York on 18 September 2017¹¹⁷ prior to the General Assembly's annual general debate in order to

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.g5sahel.org/index.php/qui-sommes-nous/le-g5-sahel>.

¹⁰⁹ Security Council Welcomes Deployment of Joint Force to Combat Terrorism Threat, Transnational Crime in the Sahel, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2359 (2017). <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12881.doc.htm>.

¹¹⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/g5-sahel-force-leaders-arrive-summit-paris171213063153149.html>.

¹¹¹ Security Council Welcomes Deployment of Joint Force to Combat Terrorism Threat...

¹¹² *Ibidem*.

¹¹³ <http://sahelien.com/en/g5-sahel-ibk-on-the-front-in-mopti/>.

¹¹⁴ Package includes: start-up support worth more than 8 million euros this year; 70 military vehicles; and technical and logistical assistance. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/west-african-france-leaders-launch-sahel-force-170702140016920.html>.

¹¹⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/g5-sahel-counterterrorism-force-explained-171102071159524.html>.

¹¹⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/g5-sahel-counterterrorism-force-explained-171102071159524.html>.

¹¹⁷ <http://afrique.le360.ma/mauritanie-mali-autres-pays/politique/2017/09/18/15118-g5-sahel-un-si-decisif-lundi-18-septembre-new-york-15118>.

mitigate the international community for sufficient funding of counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel¹¹⁸. The meeting convened the presidents of the five Sahel countries, the French President Emmanuel Macron, the African Union President Alpha Condé, and the President of the AU Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat, the EU's High Representative Federica Mogherini, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the US Homeland Security advisor. Later during the UN general debate, several leaders called on the United Nations to provide sufficient resources to the regional G5 Sahel joint force. In October the US pledged an additional \$60m¹¹⁹. On 13 December 2017 President Macron hosted G5 Sahel Summit in Paris. During the meeting, Saudi Arabia confirmed its pledge for 100 million euros contribution to the G5 Sahel budget and the UAE announced donating 30 million euros and decided to sponsor the G5 Sahel Military School based in Mauritania¹²⁰. The contribution is a major boost to the cash-strapped force and brings pledged commitments to more than half of the roughly \$500 million the G5 Sahel says it needs for its first year of operations.

In practical military operational terms, the newly created force cooperates with France (the troops of Barkhane, an ongoing anti-insurgent operation in Africa's Sahel region, which started on 1 August 2014 and G5 are conducting joint operations with the armies of the Sahel countries and the UN force in tackling jihadist groups)¹²¹ and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali through the MINUSMA command centre in Mopti (Mali)¹²². The G5 force, a new Sahelian counterterrorism unit, can constitute a useful barometer of the Sahelian countries' ability to strengthen their own security arrangements and the wider readiness of the international community to make a serious commitment of resources to the stabilization of the region, which in consequence may reduce trans-Saharan migration towards Europe. The creation of the G5 force can also be perceived in the context of France's efforts to alleviate the burden of supporting the region's counterterrorism struggle¹²³.

¹¹⁸ At UN Assembly, sub-Saharan leaders call for increased UN aid to regional anti-terror force. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57717#.Wm-OjajiaUn>.

¹¹⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/g5-sahel-counterterrorism-force-explained-171102071159524.html>.

¹²⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/g5-sahel-force-leaders-arrive-summit-paris-171213063153149.html>.

¹²¹ <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/ES227483/Macron-will-keep-an-eye-on-G5-Sahel-force>. (Access granted through a free NATO HQ subscription, during an Internship).

¹²² The main areas of operation are:

- Mali/Burkina border region and the border between south-east Mali and Niger;
 - the cross-border region between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger knew as Liptako Gourma;
 - Niger-Chad border;
 - countering groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM), Jamaat al-Nasr al-Islam, Ansar al-Dine, as well as Katiba Masine (an affiliate of Ansar al-Dine);
- <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/g5-sahel-counterterrorism-force-explained-171102071159524.html>.

¹²³ <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/ES227483/Macron-will-keep-an-eye-on-G5-Sahel-force>. (Access granted through the NATO HQ subscription).

The security situation in the region of Sahel

The security situation in the Sahel remains volatile and complex. The inability of the Sahelian states (with the emphasis on Mali¹²⁴) to monopolize the use of violence within the borders and effectively control the threats imposed by extremist armed groups remains a serious concern for the international community and for the Mauritanian government, which perceives its efforts to stabilize Mali in categories of both vital state interest and leverage in relations with the West, including NATO¹²⁵. Nouakchott enjoys special partnership status with the Alliance within the framework of Mediterranean Dialogue¹²⁶, which allows it to receive assistance in various defence and security areas, with regard to Mauritania particularly in counter-terrorism and defence institution building¹²⁷.

Until 2015 the governments in the Sahel dealt with religious extremist violence predominantly as a national military issue, though often given less priority than other armed threats, e.g. separatism, to the state¹²⁸. The need for cooperation on security and improved border control amplified from 2014¹²⁹ as the extremist threat grew increasingly transnational and Libya descended further into chaos. Terrorism expanded across the national borders from Nigeria into Chad, Niger, and Cameroon in 2014/15¹³⁰, and from Mali to Niger and Burkina Faso in 2016. Large under-governed spaces along Niger's northern border allowed for relatively unrestricted movement to and from Libya¹³¹. The conflict in Nigeria and Mali, aggravated by weak state authority and state collapse in Libya, sustains a climate of instability across the Sahel region¹³². Vast and porous border areas provide safe havens for armed criminal groups and create permissive conditions for drug and people trafficking¹³³. Several terrorist groups, many of which are allied to the

¹²⁴ Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, (S/2017/811); <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/report-secretary-general-situation-mali-s2017811>.

¹²⁵ NATO and MD partners meet in Mauritania for the Fifth Mediterranean Dialogue Policy Advisory Group (MD PAG), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_147563.htm?selectedLocale=en.

¹²⁶ NATO Mediterranean Dialogue, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_52927.htm.

¹²⁷ It is worth to notice that MD framework, emphasizing to way engagement principle, allows transatlantic community to learn from unique Sahelian experience of counter-terrorism deradicalization, etc. See NATO's Mediterranean Initiative Policy Issues and Dilemmas, National Security Research Division, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.640.4664&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

¹²⁸ Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa: A Development Approach. United Nations Development Programme Regional and Multi-Country Project Document; <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Local%20Governance/UNDP-RBA-Preventing-Extremism-2015.pdf>.

¹²⁹ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_110614.htm?selectedLocale=en.

¹³⁰ Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. Country Reports on Terrorism. Chapter 2. Country Reports: Africa Overview; <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239404.htm>.

¹³¹ R. Andersson Europe's failed 'fight' against irregular migration: ethnographic notes on a counterproductive industry, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2016, 42:7, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1139446>

¹³² https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/14-07-22-Impact-of-Conflict-MaliNigeria_FINAL.pdf.

¹³³ S. Rao, *op. cit.*

transnational networks of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and branches of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh), operate in the region. Their reach from Mali is gradually expanding¹³⁴.

The Sahel region has gradually increased security cooperation initiatives. For Sahel's governments, the new security paradigm represents an opportunity to attract substantial external assistance for measures that strengthen the national security apparatus and reduce threats to the government. Besides strong western support, in 2017 Russia signed bilateral military cooperation agreements with Niger, Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso¹³⁵. Two newer security initiatives impacting Sahel's instability have emerged. First, the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a military counterterrorism (CT) operation was established early in 2015 in the Lake Chad basin between Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin¹³⁶. The MNJTF is a Chadian-driven, ad-hoc response to increasing Boko Haram (BH) attacks on the Chadian and Nigerien side of the Lake Chad basin. Second, G5 Sahel mentioned above.

The Sahel has become a focus area for security interventions aimed at reducing the region's volatility to instability and cross-border threats. The states in the Sahel have traditionally participated in multilateral forums that have security as a component of broader political-economic objectives. Most of these have, however, been broad, North or West African cooperation initiatives of which the Sahel was not the centre, nor did they include all the Sahel's states. The countries in the Sahel have limited experience on cooperating with their neighbours on Sahel-specific threats. North African initiatives remained mostly visionary and ineffective, driven by regional rivalry for influence by regional powerbrokers. By contrast, West African cooperation, particularly the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS), has been relatively effective but excludes Chad and Mauritania.

Efforts continue on the implementation of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement signed in 2015¹³⁷. First, mixed security patrol organised in Gao on 23 February 2017¹³⁸ is a positive but isolated step towards the implementation. Ongoing regional stabilisation attempts are complicated by the amount, complexity and sometimes contradictory nature of local driven reconciliation initiatives and agreements such as those concerning the areas of Bamako and Timbuktu. As a consequence of Bamako's "Definitive" Ceasefire Agreement of 20 September 2017¹³⁹, further agreements were

¹³⁴ N. Annan, *Violent Conflicts and Civil Strife in West Africa: Causes, Challenges and Prospects*. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*. 2014, 3(1).

¹³⁵ http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12139323@egNews.

¹³⁶ West Africa Report. *Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram*, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/WestAfricaReport17.pdf>.

¹³⁷ Joint Declaration on the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali from the Algiers Process, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/22244/Joint%20Declaration%20on%20the%20implementation%20of%20the%20Agreement%20on%20Peace%20and%20Reconciliation%20in%20Mali%20from%20the%20Algiers%20Process.

¹³⁸ Monthly Mixed Migration Summary, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/54736>; <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-03-08/joint-declaration-african-union-united-nations-economic>.

¹³⁹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/september-2017>.

signed at the beginning of October 2017 by Coordination of Azawad Movement and armed groups under the "Platform"¹⁴⁰.

Mali's government delayed regional elections from 17 December 2017 to April 2018 amid security concerns caused by the spreading reach of militants¹⁴¹. (It is not clear if the delay would affect the timing of presidential elections scheduled for July). Mali struggled to counter insurgents and sectarian infighting during 2017 despite international military interventions and a 2015 peace deal¹⁴², and much of the country's north remains beyond government control. Four United Nations peacekeepers and a Malian soldier were killed and 21 people wounded in two separate attacks in the centre of the arid West African country on 24 November. Opposition politicians expressed concern that the security situation is unlikely to improve by April¹⁴³.

The terrorist outlets in the region are currently mostly joined under the umbrella name of Jama'a Nasr al Islam was al Mouslimine or the INIM (the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims, a new entity created on March 2, 2017, as a result of a merger between branches of AQIM, AD, AM, LMF¹⁴⁴ in an attempt to capitalize on their shared resources and know-how). The newly established group immediately pledged alliance to al Zawahiri partly to internationalize their propaganda impact. The JNIM activists are aiming at international stabilisation efforts in the region, namely at MINUSMA, Operation Barkhane and MDSF¹⁴⁵. The JNIM continue to jeopardize at least short-term counterterrorism efforts of G5 Sahel¹⁴⁶. In Mali alone, there have been 232 terror-related incidents so far in 2017¹⁴⁷. Since the merge into INIM, tactics has already become more sophisticated, which allows for even further exploitation of existent ethnic animosities among the local population and inabilities of government forces. Attacks on UN and local security personnel, churches and even threats towards teacher civil servants and humanitarians continue to reoccur with regularity. According to intelligence assessment, ransom kidnapping remains a priority for the group, especially with regard to Westerners and military personnel (for both propaganda and financial reasons). The other group active in the region is the Islamic State of Grand Sahara; it poses a considerably smaller threat than INIM.

The G5 Sahel has fully established itself as a security factor in the region, with the Joint Force (GF- SJF) operating from Sevare in Mali since September 9, 2017, with a mandate in border security and counter-terrorism. (The full operational capacity

¹⁴⁰ West Africa Report. Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/WestAfricaReport17.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-election/malis-regional-elections-delayed-by-security-concerns-idUSKBN1DR185.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

¹⁴³ www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-election/malis-regional-elections-delayed-by-security-concerns-idUSKBN1DR185.

¹⁴⁴ Analysis: Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php>.

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-g5-sahel-joint-force-fighting-terror-building-regional-security>.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁷ <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en>.

is expected to be reached in spring 2018 under the condition of sufficient funding, which remains a source of concern)¹⁴⁸.

The U.N. Mauritanian peacekeeper has been killed and three of his countrymen wounded in the Central African Republic in an attack carried out by mostly Christian anti-Balaka forces at a U.N. police checkpoint on 5 December 2017. The attack took place at the entrance to a camp for IDP'S in the town of Bria after the peacekeepers intervened to free two hostages from anti-Balaka. The Mauritanian was the 14th peacekeeper¹⁴⁹ killed in the Central African Republic this year¹⁵⁰.

While the MNJTF extends into West Africa and is not exclusive to the Sahel, the creation of Sahel G5 represents the first forum exclusive to the Sahel to address concerns specific to its region. Sudan, though it shares many of the region's security threats, remains outside of the multinational security initiatives. However, Sudan cooperates with Chad on border security¹⁵¹. The armed actors in S G5's deployment area are highly mobile, well-armed, and have a good local knowledge and logistical networks motivated to protect their local sources of income. Terrorist groups in the region direct their attacks on national and international security forces and other symbols of central government. In Mali, MINUSMA sustains nearly daily attacks on its infrastructure and personnel, diverting resources from operations to force-protection¹⁵². The pursuit of security cooperation aligns multiple interests. The international community, regional institutions, and Western governments are keen to see African governments take more responsibility for security; they seek African solutions to African problems, aimed at building local capacity and decreasing the presence of foreign troops. Foreign troops take on support and training roles; this is both cheaper for contributing nations and less politically controversial on the domestic front.

The S G5 models its military operations on the MNJTF. Hailed as a success for reducing BH's ability to hold territory and disrupting its organization¹⁵³, the MNJTF's effectiveness was hampered by multiple challenges and has clear limitations in providing long-term results¹⁵⁴. BH has since splintered, spread and reorganised¹⁵⁵. Attacks continue in remote areas where state authority is low and security weak.

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-g5-sahel-joint-force-fighting-terror-building-regional-security>.

¹⁴⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/peacekeeper-deaths-failure-leadership-adapt-180123095854000.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Condemning Killing of Peacekeeper in the Central African Republic, Secretary-General Warns Attack Could Be War Crime, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sgsm18811.doc.htm>.

¹⁵¹ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/chad-committed-to-a-secure-border-with-sudan>.

¹⁵² <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/security-council-press-statement-terrorist-attack-against-un-multidimensional-integrated>; <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/mali/events/article/mali-terrorist-attack-on-a-minusma-convoy-26-10-17>; <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/mali/events/article/mali-attacks-against-minusma-and-the-malian-armed-forces-24-11-17>.

¹⁵³ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-joint-task-force-against-boko-haram-stay-the-course>.

¹⁵⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/west-african-france-leaders-launch-sahel-force-170702140016920.html>.

¹⁵⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/news-and-events/eu-statement-multi-national-joint-task-force-against-boko-haram_en.

Nigeria remained reluctant to let external forces operate on the Nigerian territory, especially Chadian. True joint operations under a centralised chain of command never materialised and respective national armies operate largely on their own. Poor communication and soldier skills, lack of intelligence capabilities and constant underfunding have hampered effectiveness. The MNJTF has been widely accused of using excessive force against local populations and of failing to provide protection for civilians¹⁵⁶. Compensating for security forces' limited reach, the armies in the Lake Chad basin have encouraged vigilante groups to sharpen campaigns against BH insurgents, paving the way for the proliferation of arms and non-state armed groups¹⁵⁷. Initiatives in the S G5 framework already face operational challenges similar to those of the MNJTF. The region's security and defence forces overall have poor capabilities; they are poorly trained and equipped, stretched over large areas, and unable to provide security beyond localized areas. The S G5 recognizes the need for external support in nearly all aspects of the operation, from funding, training, logistics, equipment, communications technology, intelligence, and tactical support, to camp protection and even sanitation.

The Sahel states have common structural weaknesses that promote conflict, limited government legitimacy, poor democratic credentials, and a preference to deal with security threats with repressive military action. Their current cross-border threats are largely rooted in decades of neglect, underdevelopment, and ethnic marginalization. In remote areas, the Sahel's governments have relied on engaging local, ethnic-based militias for protecting government interests. Decades of this practice have sharpened community fault lines and fostered anti-government sentiments. Extremist groups capitalise on these grievances to gain a local foothold and embed in the population. In many areas, extremist actors have established themselves as, or have local agreements with, legitimate alternatives to the government. Marginalized ethnicities and their self-defence groups are today over-represented among the cadre of extremist groups. There is a significant risk that the S G5 JF may be perceived as an extension of traditional marginalization strategies and become a driver of radicalization and inter-community violence¹⁵⁸. Because the force is mandated to target trafficking activities, S G5 JF operations could potentially disrupt local economies that are essential for local livelihoods. Disrupting the few income sources will not only make the S G5 JF unpopular in the local population, but could also direct more people to join terrorist groups¹⁵⁹. On a more political level, all of the S G5 countries are prone to limit personal freedoms and strengthen authoritarian practices on the pretext of security¹⁶⁰. All S G5 has already declared a state of emergency in their un-

¹⁵⁶ The Extension of Child Protection Activities in North East Nigeria. Combating grave abuse and violations against children in newly accessible LGA's, http://humanitarianintelligence.net/onewe_bmedia/noham.lambert_Molly_Lambert__STAKEHOLDERANAL_MLambert.pdf; S. Eke, Undertaking Population-centric Counterinsurgency in the Age of Salafi-driven Insurgencies: A Study of the Boko Haram Conflict, University of Victoria, 2017, https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/bitstream/handle/1828/8862/Eke_Surulola_MA_2017.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/west-african-france-leaders-launch-sahel-force-170702140016920.html>.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

stable border regions, providing wider powers to their security forces. The long-term rulers of Chad (in power since 1990) and Mauritania (since 2008) provide leadership, a degree of predictability and broad external relations to the initiative. The strong reliance on individual personalities rather than institutions is an organisational weakness and risk to its longevity. While the presidents of Chad and Niger were re-elected for new five-year terms in 2016, presidential elections are scheduled in Mali on July 18 and in Mauritania in 2019. The region's high volatility may also bring about abrupt changes in national security priorities; an internal destabilisation in any one member country, such as a coup, political upheaval, economic crisis or a return to full scale conflict in Mali, could bring about re-deployment and reassignment of security forces for more pressing national purposes. Chad, the strongest military force of the S G5, has repeatedly warned that it has reached its utter limit in terms of capabilities and has several times threatened to withdraw its forces from abroad to deal with more direct threats to stability at home. A potential destabilization outside of the S G5, i.e. Algeria or Sudan, would jeopardise individual states' regional commitments¹⁶¹.

Conclusion

The understanding of security challenges in the region is becoming more nuanced. There is a necessity of addressing multiple aspects of the radicalization phenomenon – socio-political and security dimensions are overlapping and interconnected. An outlook of political Islam in Mauritania definitely does not meet popular presumption on that movement, being, in fact, in its endogenous branch, a stabilizing force in that country. Success in achieving relative security in Mauritania lies in recognising and addressing the ethnic and religious status (as including or excluding from society) as the independent variable in the quest for security. The real symbol of a synergy of military and non-military security in Mauritania is the persona of a profound importance for the Mauritania stabilisation and counterterrorism efforts – Mohamed Ould Sheikh Mohamed Ahmed, the Army Chief of Staff. There is increasing political will for the wider social inclusion of the previously marginalized groups; it occurs still within restrictions typical for the authoritarian regimes, but the result of re-approachment towards Haratin, although still questionable on the human rights level, in the aspects of security improvement is undeniable.

Znaczenie struktur etniczno-religijnych w regionie Sahelu, w wymiarze społeczno-politycznym oraz bezpieczeństwa. Przykład Mauretanii *Streszczenie*

Celem artykułu jest podkreślenie znaczenia czynnika etniczno-religijnego zarówno dla przebiegu, jak i zrozumienia dynamiki politycznej i bezpieczeństwa w regionie Sahelu. Zagadnienie zaprezentowano na przykładzie Islamskiej Republiki Mauretańskiej.

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem.*

The importance of ethnic and religious structures in the region of Sahel...

W pierwszej części artykułu zidentyfikowano – czasem nieoczywiste – czynniki społeczno-polityczne wpływające na bezpieczeństwo Mauretanii i całego regionu, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem znaczenia struktur etnicznych i religijnych oraz roli „politycznego islamu”. W drugiej części przedstawiono i zanalizowano liczne, nie zawsze skoordynowane inicjatywy bezpieczeństwa w regionie, wskazujące, iż Mauretania z powodzeniem aspiruje do roli regionalnego lidera w aspekcie bezpieczeństwa. Źródłem sukcesu owych dążeń jest kompleksowe zrozumienie zagadnienia bezpieczeństwa – wynikające w przypadku Mauretanii z doświadczenia własnej wyjątkowej struktury społecznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Mauretania, kompleks bezpieczeństwa w regionie Sahelu, struktura etniczno-religijna, trybalizm, stratyfikacja społeczna

The importance of ethnic and religious structures in the region of Sahel: Socio-political and security dimensions. The case study of Mauritania

Abstract

This article aims to underline the importance of ethnic and religious structures for both animating and understanding political and security dynamic in the region, based on the example of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The first part of the article aims to identify sociopolitical factors influencing the security situation in the country and beyond, in sometimes surprising ways, with the main emphases on the importance of ethnic and religious structures and the role of political Islam. The second part of the article provides an exemplification of the multiple, not always coordinated, security initiatives in the region, that Mauritania is aspiring successfully to play lining role in, partly thanks to its complex understanding of security resulting from its unique social structure.

Key words: Mauritania, Sahelian security complex, ethno-religious structure, tribalism, social stratification

Значение этническо-религиозных структур в регионе Сахель в аспекте безопасности и социально-политических отношений. Пример Мавритании

Резюме

В статье обращено внимание на значение этническо-религиозного фактора для понимания политической динамики и вопросов безопасности в регионе Сахель. Проблема рассмотрена на примере Исламской Республики Мавритания. В первой части статьи указаны социально-политические факторы, влияющие на безопасность Мавритании и всего региона, а также обращено внимание на значение этнических и религиозных структур и роль «политического ислама». Во второй части статьи приведены многочисленные примеры, не всегда скоординированных, инициатив в области безопасности в регионе, указывающие, что Мавритания успешно стремится к роли регионального лидера в аспекте безопасности. Успех этих действий возможен при условии комплексного подхода к вопросам безопасности – с учетом опыта уникальной социальной структуры Мавритании.

Ключевые слова: Мавритания, комплекс безопасности в регионе Сахель, этническая и религиозная структура, трибализм, социальная стратификация

