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Conflict analysis of Mauritania

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About this report

This report provides a short synthesis of some of the most recent, high quality literature on the topic of conflict in Mauritania. It aims to orient policymakers to the key debates and emerging issues. It was prepared (in November 2013) for the UK Government's Department for International Development,

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1. Overview

Mauritania is a large, mostly desert territory, populated by 3.2 million inhabitants and with a history of military rule and regime change through coup d'états. It has a history of inter-ethnic conflict and politicisation of identity with a notable border dispute in 1989 between Mauritania and Senegal resulting in violence and the deportation of non-Arabic speaking (i.e. black) Mauritanians. The current President is Abdel Aziz, a former military colonel, who largely (but not unwaveringly) enjoys support from the powerful military and the legislature.

Mauritanian security threats are complex and intertwined. Key drivers of conflict are Islamist terrorist movements and the risk of radicalisation; the often divided and belligerent Mauritanian military; domestic protests similar to the Arab Spring protests; trafficking and kidnapping; and wider social, economic and political tensions. Specifically, these conflict drivers are:

- **Growing radicalisation of Mauritanian youth:** Islamist terrorist groups, especially Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), may increasingly recruit disaffected Mauritanians even though mainstream Mauritanian Islam rejects such ideologies. AQIM have recently increased attacks and criminal activities in Mauritania and neighbouring countries.

- **Divided and belligerent military:** Democratic practices are not yet ingrained in Mauritania. The military retain political and economic control but are themselves often divided and prone to foment instability. The military seem largely supportive of the current regime but an upcoming troop deployment may anger certain members.

- **Arab Spring and protest movements:** Though perhaps not as radical as the Arab Spring movements in Tunisia or Egypt, there have been, so far peaceful, protests across Mauritania demanding government reforms. There are doubts over the protest movements' sustainability given internal divisions and co-optation by the regime.

- **Trafficking (i.e. arms, drugs, cigarettes) and kidnapping:** Mauritania and surrounding countries have become routes for arms trafficking, drugs trafficking (especially from South America to Europe) and cigarette smuggling. Such activity, as well as the growth of kidnapping for ransom, have provided funds for Islamist terrorists, and is hard to counter given the lack of alternative economic opportunities in the region.

- **Weakness of economy and state institutions:** Mauritania's economy lacks diversification and is not able to generate sufficient tax revenue from its widely dispersed population and politically connected industries. The judiciary is politicised, understaffed and underfinanced, and the state is unable to provide basic services for everyone.

- **Weak and factious political system:** The political system is clientelistic, with influential informal networks rather than set interest groups, and is dominated by the ruling party and their associates.

- **Sociopolitical tensions:** Mauritania continues to be divided along ethno-racial lines with heightened sensitivities from 'Arabicisation' policies and following the expulsion of black Mauritanian citizens in the 1989 Mauritania-Senegal border dispute.

There do not seem to have been significant international responses that deal specifically with Mauritanian conflict. There are, however, notable actions taken by the Mauritanian government:

- **Anti-Islamism drive:** The military has improved its fighting capacity, anti-terrorism legislation has been passed, and there are measures to delegitimise Islamist ideologies.

- **Anti-corruption drive:** There is a new code of ethics for public servants and there have been a number of criminal corruption investigations and prosecutions, though notably not against regime allies.

- **Ethnic reconciliation and democratisation:** Mauritania now allows voluntary repatriation of those (primarily black) Mauritanians exiled in the 1989 border dispute. There have been social cohesion government programmes and constitutional amendments which affirm state multi-ethnicity, affirm the criminalisation of slavery and prohibit coups.

- **Stabilising Mali:** Mauritania will deploy troops to the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali to safeguard Mauritania-Mali borders.

There are a number of practical recommendations from the literature:

- Avoid pigeon-holing (e.g. state vs. non-state actors) and oversimplified thinking (e.g. the state must be either autocratic or Islamist).
- Include previously marginalised communities within state institutions and political processes.
- Support legitimate, democracy-leaning political regimes.
- Control use and proliferation of firearms.
- Incrementally weaken criminal networks.
- Form a common position on ransom payments with other countries.
- Support livelihoods and economic opportunities.

2. Conflict dynamics

2.1 Recent history

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is a territory, of mostly uninhabited desert, with a population of 3.2 million citizens. It is one of the poorest countries in the world with government agencies that are underfinanced, lack adequate capacity, and that are consequently unable to monitor the entire territory (Jourde, 2011).

In an overview of the recent political history of Mauritania, BTI (2012) comments that the country has undergone a 30-year period of military rule and successive coups d'état. President Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya was president between 1984 and 2005 before being deposed in a military coup. 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 by a military group. Colonel Abdel Aziz was a key figure in that coup and went on to be the current President of Mauritania, winning the 2009 Presidential election and sworn into office on 5 August 2009.

Figure 1. Map of Mauritania

Source: Boukhars, 2012, p. 5

Prior to Ould Taya's presidency which began in 1985, Mauritania experienced a period of economic stagnation which lasted from 1975 to 1984 (BTI, 2012). During this period there was a collapse of iron prices, long periods of drought, and the aftermath of Mauritania's involvement in the Western Saharan War. This period led to the expansion of the public sector and a resulting increase in public debt. In 1985, Mauritania organised its first restructuring program with the IMF and the World Bank which was followed by other economic restructuring programs.

Politicisation of identities increased during the economic stagnation and Ould Taya's presidency. In particular there was increased politicisation between the Arabic-speaking (i.e. Arab) groups – the Bidhan and the Haratin – and the non-Arabic speaking (i.e. black) ethnic communities – the Haalpulaar, the Wolof, the Sooninke and the Bamana (BTI, 2012). This dynamic has structured the Mauritanian political landscape. There has been political conflict over linguistic policies, education

policies, land tenure policies and ethnic quotas. There was major violence between 1989 and 1991, when military personnel deported about 80,000 Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana people to Senegal. During that time hundreds were killed and thousands were dismissed from the military and public service.

President Ould Taya, formerly a military colonel, agreed to adopt a new democratic constitution and multiparty elections since entering power in 1985 (BTI, 2012). However, the constitution guaranteed the president far-reaching powers and Ould Taya's party, the Democratic and Social Republican Party (Parti Démocratique, Républicain et Social, PRDS) dominated the legislative assembly. Ould Taya's presidency saw increased social polarisation and dissatisfaction over domestic policies involving unequal distribution and foreign policies supportive of ties with the United States and Israel.

After two or three unsuccessful coups, Ould Taya was ousted in 2005 and there followed relatively fair municipal, legislative, and presidential elections (BTI, 2012). Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi won the 2007 presidential election, with support of key officers including Colonel Abdel Aziz who was an importantfigure in the coup against Ould Taya. President Abdellahi was ousted after 17 months in power in August 2008 by mostly the same officers who had staged the 2005 coup.

Abdel Aziz was declared interim head and went on to win the presidential election in 2009 in the first round with 53 per cent of the vote, eliminating the need for a second round. His party, Union for the Republic (Union pour la République UPR) controls a majority of seats in the National Assembly, having won 14 of 17 seats in a senate election in November 2009. The remaining three seats are held by other pro-Ould Abdel Aziz candidates.

2.2 Current conflict dynamics

Jourde (2011) argues that security threats in Mauritania and the Sahel region are "characterized by layers of intertwined and crosscutting interests at the local, national, and regional levels" (2011: 1). Conflict dynamics and drivers are thus complex and inter-related.

Cultural factors and Mauritania's expansive geography make it an easy target and safe haven for traffickers and armed groups, including transnational Islamist terrorist movements[1] (Jourde, 2011). The current key conflict drivers include the **presence of Islamist terrorist groups**, especially Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the **potential for growing radicalisation** of Mauritanians. The **military still remain a key conflict driver** and remain divided and belligerent. There are also a number of different types of **socioeconomic tensions**. The most notable is that of the Haratin ethnic group, who continue to be viewed as second-class citizens, living on the margins of the country's social, economic and political spheres (BTI, 2012). There are also **political protests** which some observers (e.g. Lum, 2011) argue have been inspired by the Arab spring movement. Underlying this has been **transnational crime**, in particular trafficking of arms, drugs and cigarettes, as well as kidnap for ransom. These have helped fund and develop criminal networks and Islamist terrorist groups.

[1] For further information on border insecurity see: Browne, E. (2013). *Border insecurity in North Africa*. GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 945. Birmingham,UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. http://www.gsdrc.org/go/display&type=Helpdesk&id=945

3. Drivers of conflict

This section highlights the key conflict drivers[2], actual and potential, which have been identified in the literature. It is important to note that many of the conflict drivers are inter-dependent (e.g. Islamist groups are funded by trafficking which takes place because of the weak economy) though they have been explained in separate sub-sections in this report.

3.1 Growing radicalisation of Mauritanian youth

Other than the domestic military, the main threat to political stability in Mauritania is currently from the radicalisation of Mauritanian youth and potential recruitment by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Currently, AQIM militants are thought to have the capacity to wage a guerrilla campaign against Malian and foreign (including Mauritanian) troops in Mali[3], as well as a terrorist campaign targeting Mali's neighbours which include Mauritania (EIU, 2013). At the same time, **AQIM is increasingly tapping into the anger of young Mauritanians** frustrated by poor job prospects, injustice, and corruption, to radicalise them, even though Mauritania did previously seem resistant to such movements (Boukhars, 2012). Most of the recruits into the extremist networks have been white Arabic-speaking Moors, young males living around the capital, Nouakchott. A report by Menas Associates (2012) notes that though the Islamist group the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa is not active in Mauritania it threatens to increase the level of Islamist militancy in Mauritania and is believed to be led by a Mauritanian.

On the other hand, Thurston (2012) argues that Mauritanian Islamism does not currently pose a threat and the mainstream of the movement appears committed to democracy. He notes that **Mauritanian Islamist leaders have explicitly rejected using violence** to take over the state and publicly condemn AQIM.

Islamism and Salafi ideas

Boukhars (2012) argues that the penetration of imported Salafi[4] ideas into Mauritanian society has impacted Mauritanians' culture of tolerance and particularistic Islamic identity. There have been increasing public displays of piety and rising social pressures for conformity to ritual purity and rigid religious commandments.

The Arabisation of education led to **importing Egyptian and Near East teachers** who influenced the introduction, reform, and interpretation of Islamic laws, and provided ideology for the upsurge in the Arabist/Islamist trend in Mauritania. **Financial donations from the Persian Gulf**, particularly from Saudi Arabia, have funded mosques, Islamic study centres, and mahadras (religious schools). **Mauritanians returning from living in the Gulf** have also contributed to the spread of Salafi ideas.

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[2] Mauritania has extensive iron ore deposits which account for almost half of its exports, and oil has been discovered in 2001 (Nashashibi, 2012). However, natural resources have not been cited as a conflict driver in reports and news articles on Mauritania (e.g. Boukhars, 2012; Moctar, 2013).

[3] For further information on conflict in the Mali and the Sahel see: Rao, S. (2013). *Conflict and Stabilisation in Mali and the Sahel Region*. GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 876. Birmingham, UK: Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, University of Birmingham.
http://www.gsdrc.org/go/display&type=Helpdesk&id=876

[4] "Salafi movement: A militant group of extremist Sunnis who believe themselves the only correct interpreters of the Koran and consider moderate Muslims to be infidels; seek to convert all Muslims and to insure that its own fundamentalist version of Islam will dominate the world." Source: The Free Dictionary
http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Salafi+movement

Mahadras and mosques can become important social networks that bind together potentially already alienated students. Charismatic preachers can further reinforce group solidarity and norms but also play a role in ideological formation. The **majority of mahadras, however, do not propagate violent ideologies**, and instead cater to a sizeable population outside of an arguably failing education system.

There is **a lack of access to education** and the underperformance of the educational system and the level of education a person attains appears to be linked to the risk that an individual will turn to violent extremism (Boukhars, 2012). The Mauritanians who have been arrested for terrorism offenses are young (i.e. aged between 16 and 24), poor, speak only Arabic, and possess little education.

There are strong and growing **feelings of unfairness and injustice** (Boukhars, 2012). These feelings are generated by anger about the treatment of Muslims in Palestine and in conflict theatres, and outrage at the corruption of the Mauritanian political elite. There is a cycle of social fragmentation, social exclusion, and human insecurity. Most extremists have been young males, living on the periphery of Nouakchott, where there are high levels of social fragmentation (e.g. high divorce rates, high delinquency rates) who after failing at school, were drawn into extremism through radical preaching.

Though most of the recruits into the extremist networks have been white Moors, there is growing concern that other **groups who have been discriminated against are vulnerable to radicalisation**. The only two Mauritanian suicide bombers, as of 2012, have been Haratins – a group often discriminated against. It has been reported that AQIM leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar wants to attract black Africans because poor economic and social conditions have made them ripe for recruitment and there is a perception that they would agree more readily than Arabs to becoming suicide bombers. The Islamist rhetoric espoused by groups such as AQIM emphasises a more anti-traditionalist, egalitarian ideology as opposed to the Islam of the Qadiriya and the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhoods that are associated with a rigid caste system. AQIM seems to have failed, so far, to attract any recruits among the Halpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof.

AQIM in Mauritania

As early as 2005, President Ould Taya warned of the presence of dormant terrorist cells in the country, but few Mauritanians took him seriously, as he was known to instrumentalise threats to counter opponents and improve his standing (Boukhars, 2012). Since that time there have been a number of attacks. In June 2005, there was a deadly attack by AQIM against the Lemgheity barracks in the north-eastern part of the country which killed 15 Mauritanian soldiers and wounded 39 others.

Evidence has emerged that since late 2005 that **a few dozen Mauritanians have become important players in AQIM** or have gone through military and ideological training in the militant camps of northern Mali and Algeria (Boukhars, 2012). There were also a number of attacks in Nouakchott in 2008 which demonstrated links between Mauritanian youths and AQIM. That said, the number of youths recruited into AQIM remains comparatively very small and Mauritanian attacks remain relatively unsophisticated. Boukhars (2012) concludes that **AQIM's capabilities are extremely limited in Mauritania** and its affiliated networks are disorganised and weak.

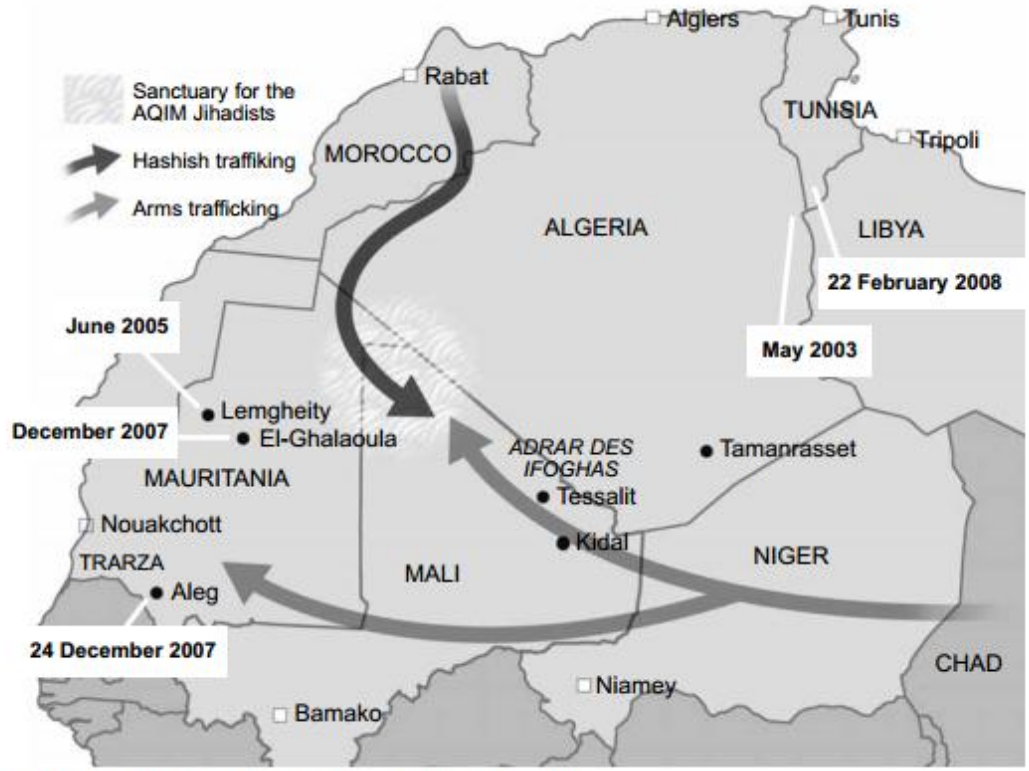
Boukhars (2012) argues that the growth of the nascent militant movement has been disrupted by the Mauritanian **government's aggressive pursuit and imprisonment** of suspected violent

extremists, as well as the tribalist and a pluralistic Mauritanian society that generally practices an open and moderate form of Islam.

AQIM in the north-west Africa region

Sidibé (2012) documents the attacks by AQIM between 2003 and 2012 across north-west Africa (see Figure 2 below). As of 2012, the movement is made up of up to 800 fighters scattered across the Sahel. They are particularly mobile, and capable of rapidly moving from one country to the next to evade security services but Sidibé (2012) notes that **an area in the north-east of Mauritania** (as well as north Mali and south-west Algeria) **remains a particular haven for AQIM**.

Figure 2. Map of major attacks by AQIM 2003-2012



June 2005: 15 soldiers killed in an attack against their barracks

December 2007: 4 soldiers killed in ambush

24 December 2007: 4 French tourists are killed

22 February 2008: kidnapping of 2 Austrian tourists in southern Tunisia, then moved to Northern Mali

May 2003: kidnapping of 32 tourists from Switzerland, Germany and Holland in the Algerian Sahara.

Source: Sidibé (2012)

AQIM primarily profits from the kidnappings of Western nationals and it is reported that **90 per cent of AQIM resources come from ransoms** paid in return for the release of hostages (Sidibé, 2012). They are also involved in trafficking of arms, drugs and cigarettes (see section 3.4). Goita (2011) argues that AQIM is seeking to bridge the divisions that have historically separated Sahelian

communities from Salafist terrorist groups. In addition to **strengthening ties with regional criminal networks**, AQIM are simultaneously **looking to deepen connections with local communities**.

3.2 Divided and belligerent military

Democratic institutions are subordinated to the military (BTI, 2012). President Abdellahi strengthened democratic institutions compared to Ould Taya, though it was ultimately a coup that ousted Abdellahi after only 17 months in office. Since the coup and subsequent election, the level of state violence has remained relatively low and that the rights of expression and assembly have not been seriously violated. The **quality of democratic practices ultimately depends on the will of the military strongman of the moment** and the seat of power is very precarious as the shift of power from one head of state to the next is the result of power struggles among military factions (BTI, 2012).

There is **ongoing political infighting and factional rivalries** among senior military officers. Boukhars (2012) notes that the 17-month tenure of President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi was undermined by political factions supporting the former regime and senior military officers (as well as powerful political and tribal supporters of the former regime) who were suspected of instigating conflict between the executive and the legislature to undermine the authority of the civilian leadership.

Boukhars (2012) argues that the **military have fomented disorder and political paralysis**, so as to give them the right to intervene with coups, as has happened in 2005 and 2008. Following these coups there have been factional struggles within the military which have led to modest changes in personnel in top command positions.

To help stabilise neighbouring Mali, the Mauritanian government has promised to provide around 1,800 troops to the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). There is speculation that this move is not welcomed by all of the Mauritanian military, and such **deployment could alienate and aggravate parts of the military** (EIU, 2013a). Though the current President Abdel Aziz is believed to command the overall respect of the army, there always remains the possibility of a military coup, especially if there is increased political instability or the army become involved in a protracted and expensive Mali campaign (EIU, 2013a).

3.3 Arab Spring and protest movements

Mauritania's Arab Spring has been described as 'overlooked' by global media and the international community (Al-Jazeera, 2012; Nashashibi, 2012). On 25 February 2011, there were large **protests across the country with protestors demanding government reforms**. Lum (2011) argues that these protests have been inspired by the success of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and highlights the seven core demands distributed in a list by protest organisers:

- The withdrawal of the military from politics.
- A firmer separation of powers.
- The establishment of a national agency to combat slavery.
- Constitutional reforms affecting the electoral system.
- The reform of the process by which officials publicly declare their assets.
- The reform of local administration and the empowerment of elected mayors.
- Media law reforms.

Protestors claim that President Abdel Aziz has either created or ignored Mauritania's many social, economic, and political problems including widespread poverty, a drought crisis, unchecked slavery, and government corruption (Al-Jazeera, 2012). There have also been further protests such as that on 20 January 2012 where protesters gathered in Place 1 Mai, a public square in the capital Nouakchott.

On 17 January 2011, Yacoub Ould Dahoud, **a Mauritanian businessman in his 40s, self-immolated in front of the Presidential Palace of Nouakchott**, in protest at government corruption (Al-Jazeera, 2012). In 2012, on the one-year anniversary of Dahoud's death, crowds gathered in Nouakchott to commemorate him and as another opportunity to rally against the government.

Other protests relate to **slavery**, which though illegal in Mauritania, still takes place with activists claiming the government rarely holds slave owners accountable and instead persecutes abolitionists (Al-Jazeera, 2012). Mauritania has the highest prevalence worldwide of slavery per head of population, with some 151,000 people, **almost 4 per cent of its population, thought to be slaves** (Walk Free Foundation, 2013). Al-Jazeera (2012) cites the case of four activists from slavery abolitionist group the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Anti-Slavery Movement in Mauritania (IRA-M) detained by authorities for demanding the freedom of three children they claim are currently working as slaves. Moctar (2013) notes that in 2013, support has been offered by the Islamist party Tawassoul to the anti-slavery campaign of IRA-M, and argues that this gesture is of particular significance as religious pretexts are often used to justify slavery in Mauritania.

Nashashibi (2012) argues that **demonstrations have thus far been peaceful** and centred around reforms but there may be violence if protesters feel they are being indefinitely ignored or oppressed and this is a particularly dangerous development because of Mauritania's ethnic fault lines.

Lum (2011) notes that it is uncertain whether the protest movement will make future gains as the **youth movement faces internal divisions** that risk exposing it to co-optation by the regime. He notes that the ruling UPR party announced plans to form a youth section. The protest movement is also limited by being mainly drawn from the urban middle class with reduced participation from members of the lower classes who are essential for a truly mass demonstration in the capital. Nonetheless, he concludes that the most important result of the Arab Spring in Mauritania may be an **increasingly bold and defiant posture among student organisers** and other youth demonstrators on campus and throughout the country, and this will affect the future tone and direction of politics.

Moctar (2013) argues that in 2013 there has **been an increase in solidarity and cooperation** between campaign groups, such as a joint protest held by the February 25 Movement and black African rights groups; Tawassoul's support to the anti-slavery campaign of IRA-M; and IRA-M expressing solidarity with the 7,000 dockworkers who went on strike in April in Nouakchott.

3.4 Trafficking (i.e. arms, drugs, cigarettes) and kidnapping

Mauritania is situated in the Sahel and Sahara regions, which are increasingly blighted by transnational criminal networks, and especially trafficking. Sidibé (2012) argues that the Sahel has, in fact, become the sanctuary of choice for criminal networks and terrorist groups in search for bases from which they can secure financing and plan attacks. **Complicity exists between the traffickers and certain populations**, which may include some local state officials and civil servants (Sidibé, 2012). Other transnational actors involved in drugs trafficking include Sahraouis of the Polisario Front, Mauritanian 'businessmen', elements of AQIM, Algerians, Moroccans, Lebanese businessmen in the Canary Islands and on mainland Spain, Galicians and other international networks.

Arms trafficking networks encompass the Sahel and include the Mano River countries – Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Sidibé (2012) traces the development of arms trafficking to the multiple recent conflicts in West Africa and in countries such as Chad, the Sudan, and Somalia. The supply chain is diversified with northern routes bordering Algeria and Niger and other routes through Mauritania.

The **cocaine trade** from South America to Europe via West Africa expanded rapidly after 2005, though it contracted somewhat in 2008, and Mauritania briefly emerged as a major transit country around 2007 (Lacher, 2012). That year there were two large seizures of 630kg of cocaine in Nouadhibou airport in May and 830kg of cocaine in Nouakchott that August. However, there is little evidence for sustained major flows on any single route and since 2008 Mauritanian annual seizures of cocaine have declined significantly. Sidibé (2012) comments that AQIM profits from cocaine trafficking in West Africa in particular, though this is second to the profits made from kidnapping for ransom.

Mauritanian intelligence services reported high levels of **cannabis trafficking** and estimate that around one-third of Moroccan cannabis production transits the Sahel states, partly to circumvent the Algerian-Moroccan border (Lacher, 2012). Cannabis resin arrives in Mauritania overland via Algeria or Western Sahara, or by boat, and then enters Mali either through the north, or along the Nouakchott-Nema road through the Timbuktu Region. Recent seizures include two tonnes of cannabis resin off Nouadhibou in January 2012, and 3.6 tonnes in Timbedra in May 2012.

Lacher (2012) argues that **cigarette smuggling**, in particular, has greatly contributed to the emergence of the **practices and networks that have allowed the growth of drug trafficking**. The smuggling of cigarettes to North African markets grew significantly in the early 1980s. In particular cigarettes were imported through Mauritania which supplied a large portion of the Algerian and Moroccan market. Currently cigarette smuggling contributes to the emergence of smaller gangs of smugglers charged with transporting the merchandise from Mauritania, Mali, and Niger into Algeria. Lacher (2012) highlights that Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who became one of the leading figures in AQIM's Sahelian operations, is widely reputed to have long run a cigarette smuggling racket across the Sahara.

The rise of **kidnapping for ransom** in the region is linked to, and is a main driver of, AQIM's growing presence in the Sahel (Lacher, 2012). In December 2007 four French tourists were killed by AQIM members in southern Mauritania. From early 2008, a series of kidnappings across the region began and by April 2012, 42 foreign nationals had been targeted. Of those, 24 were released, 5 were killed while being taken hostage or in captivity, and 13 were still being held hostage as of the end of August 2012. The locations of these abductions were not just Mauritania but also Algeria, Tunisia, Niger, and Mali. Lacher (2012) notes that repeated hostage takings have caused tourism in the Sahel and Sahara to collapse, thereby further limiting opportunities for employment and profit outside of criminal activity.

3.5 Weakness of economy and state institutions

The Mauritanian economy and state institutions are notably weak. The **economy lacks diversification** (BTI, 2012) and is based mainly on small-scale agriculture, nomadic herding, mining in Zouerat and fishing off Nouadhibou (Boukhars, 2012). The recent high prices for oil and minerals has been good for the producers of iron ore, gold, copper, uranium and oil but has led to the skyrocketing of food prices, with the poor hardest hit (BTI, 2012).

The economy is **not able to generate sufficient tax revenue** to support basic state functions (Boukhars, 2012). It is also difficult to collect tax from the highly dispersed nomads, it is politically dangerous to impose taxes on agriculture (controlled by those with strong connections to state officials), and the government lacks legitimacy among the population and the influential traditional elites.

The **judiciary is politicised** and hampered by customary mechanisms and an informal system dominated by influential groups (Boukhars, 2012). All administrative regions have courts, but most are **understaffed and underfinanced** as are other judicial and regulatory arms of the state (Boukhars, 2012; BTI, 2012). Boukhars (2012) argues that insufficient tax revenue is a contributory factor in this.

BTI (2012) notes that the **state's capacity to establish its authority and provide for basic social services varies significantly** across the entire territory, as well as for all social groups. Most government actions are concentrated in the capital and in the main cities. Regional governors and prefects of local districts are powerful actors outside the capital, without effective monitoring from the centre. In the provision of health and education services, NGOs and other non-state actors complement, and sometimes replace, efforts by the state.

Boukhars (2012) argues that the state's loss of legitimacy, through corruption and ineptitude, engenders negative consequences on stability and risks shifting citizens' allegiance to malevolent non-state actors such as drug traffickers and violent extremists.

3.6 Weak and factious political system

Pervasive corruption and weak governance in Mauritania are key sources of popular dissatisfaction, which lead to social tension and instability (Boukhars, 2012). For example, officials are often involved in scandals of illegal or abusive land attribution (BTI, 2012). Boukhars (2012) argues that there continues to be **a clientelistic system which is dominated by the ruling party**. Individuals and groups in parliament usually belong to this ruling party and enjoy the support of the military. This influence extends to the bureaucracy and the civil service, which endorsed the 2008 coup. Likewise those individuals, families, and clans with ties to **factions within the military dominate most key sectors** of the economy.

There are few interest groups in Mauritania but rather **informal networks or channels** through which societal interests are represented (BTI, 2012). Some are ideologically driven such as Arab nationalist (i.e. 'Nasserist' or 'Ba'athist') networks, as well as the moderate Islamists who claim affiliation with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. BTI (2012) argues that these networks are unofficial and informal but are very real and influential.

Mauritania is supporting the war against terrorism, in particular by providing troops to neighbouring Mali. There is likely to be considerable **opposition among domestic political parties** to this, and in particular to the involvement of Western intelligence and security services (EIU, 2013b).

3.7 Sociopolitical tensions

Boukhars (2012) argues that **Mauritania is divided along ethno-racial lines** and this has been a distinct cause of protracted tension and conflict in the country. In particular are issues relating to the Haratin ethnic group, estimated to be 40 per cent of the Mauritanian population and mainly thought to be the former slaves of the Moorish community. The Haratin are excluded politically and other minority groups, such as the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana have been marginalised (BTI,

2012). The non-Arabic speaking minorities, based primarily along both shores of the Senegal River Valley, feel underrepresented in the state apparatus (BTI, 2012) and there have been **confrontations between Arab and black Africans** (Boukhars, 2012).

Since the 1960s there has been a shift towards 'Arabicising' the education system and reducing the numbers of black Africans in the administration (Boukhars, 2012). This '**Arabicisation'** has led to unrest, as in 1966 when riots broke out in response to the government's decision to make Arabic compulsory in secondary schools. In the 1980s the regime introduced land reforms to deal with the problem of desertification, moving Arab herders closer toward the banks of the Senegal River and the black African farmers living there. This led to further tension as black Africans perceived the government's move as an attempt to advance the interests of one ethnic and linguistic group at their expense of the other.

In 1989 there was a **border dispute between Mauritania and Senegal** over herdsmen's grazing rights. This degenerated into mutual ethnicity-based repatriations, violent expulsions and killings as radical forces took advantage of domestic power struggles to mobilise ethnic interest groups and exacerbate ethnic and racial rivalries (Boukhars, 2012). Mauritanian government officials were involved, portraying the border dispute as part of the struggle to correct the demographic imbalances and limit the losses inflicted by French colonialism and creating fear of rising black African power (Boukhars, 2012). In total, between 40,000 and 60,000 black Africans – Mauritanian citizens from the Halpulaar, Wolof, Soninke, and Bamana ethnic groups – were **expelled** to Senegal and another 15,000 to 20,000 to Mali. Some 500 soldiers suspected of weak loyalties to the established order were removed. This event has been significant in shaping inter-ethnic dynamics.

More recently conflicts erupted in violence in March 2010 between black Africans and Arabic-speaking students after a statement made by the prime minister and the minister of culture referred to Arabic as a dominant language (Boukhars, 2012). In late 2011, riots broke out in protest against a controversial civil census which black Mauritanians, especially in the south, believed to be racist and discriminatory.

BTI (2012) comments that the level of civil rights violations in Mauritania has diminished significantly since the removal of President Ould Taya from power in 2005. However, civil rights are still not uniformly applied and are dependent on an individual's ethnic, racial, social and family background. A new anti-terrorism law, adopted in 2010, restricts further the rights of citizens deemed guilty, or suspected of, 'terrorist activities', which are themselves very broadly defined. Several organisations have drawn attention to the treatment of prisoners and a dozen of prisoners have died in 2010 due to bad health conditions.

4. International and local responses to conflict

Research for this report was unable to find any significant international response which has taken place in Mauritania to deal with conflict, though there are actions by international agencies to deal with humanitarian issues such as the effect of the 2012 drought, refugee issues or dealing with slavery. Consequently this section highlights the key issues undertaken by the Mauritanian government to address conflict drivers both within Mauritania and in neighbouring Mali.

4.1 Anti-Islamism drive

The Mauritanian government has undertaken several steps and initiatives to combat extremism (Boukhars, 2012). It is **improving its fighting capability and modernising its military** equipment

through the acquisition of high-performance aircraft and other material. New **antiterrorism legislation** has been established to balance security and the rule of law with legitimacy of counterterrorism laws. The government has also tried to **delegitimise the ideological justifications** for radicalism by hiring hundreds of new imams to preach in the country's mosques, as well as engaging extremist prisoners through structured dialogue with state-sponsored Islamist scholars and clerics. Boukhars (2012) notes that this programme was somewhat successful in rehabilitating violent extremists as well as deradicalising potential recruits. There has been only one case of recidivism out of the 40 to 50 people who have been released from prison, and dozens of former radicals have reformed.

4.2 Anti-corruption drive

President Abdel Aziz has made the fight against corruption a central theme of his presidency (BTI, 2012). The anti-corruption drive follows political protests in 2011, after which the Mauritanian government convened several emergency sessions of parliament in January to discuss revisions to the constitution and its electoral laws (Al-Jazeera, 2012).

A new **code of ethics for public servants** was introduced and the Investigations Unit of the Office of the Inspector General launched several **criminal investigations** of agencies suspected of waste, fraud, and misappropriation of state funds (Boukhars, 2012; BTI, 2012). As a result the chairs of the National Human Rights Commission and of the national anti-AIDS agency were arrested and charged with corrupt practices. A number of senior civil servants and officials were dismissed, including the governors of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, and the heads of the Central Commission of Public Contracts and the public microcredit agency, Procapec. This was met with a degree of public approval (Boukhars, 2012). It is however notable that both the current and previous general inspectors are members of the president's UPR party and this raises concerns regarding **investigatory bias** (BTI, 2012). In fact no public or para-public agencies that are chaired by military officers have been audited. Highly influential supporters of the president have also escaped scrutiny and prosecution by the inspector general (Boukhars, 2012; BTI, 2012).

There have also been attempts to modernise Mauritanian financial institutions. In 2009-2010, the Mauritanian Tax Agency (Direction générale des impôts, DGI) tried to implement more effective tax collection among banks, and in 2012 state agencies began to computerise administration systems to be more effective (BTI, 2012).

4.3 Ethnic reconciliation and democratisation

Recently there has been a growing emphasis on conflict prevention and ethnic reconciliation (Boukhars, 2012). In 2007, the government began to **allow voluntary repatriation** of the black African citizens who were expelled from the country in 1989, back to Mauritania from their exile in Senegal and Mali. Since the beginning of this process of voluntary repatriation, over 20,000 refugees have returned. The government has also recently established the **Programme for the Prevention of Conflicts and the Consolidation of Social Cohesion**, directed at both Haratin and returning black African refugees. In March 2012, parliament passed **a number of constitutional amendments** that affirmed the multi-ethnic character of the state, criminalised slavery (though this is already stated in a 2007 law), and which also prohibited military coups.

4.4 Stabilising Mali

Following the March 2012 coup in neighbouring Mali which resulted in a substantial increase in AQIM-held territory in northern Mali, the **Mauritanian government promised to provide around 1,800 troops** to the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (EIU, 2013a). MINUSMA is made up of 6,300, mostly African, troops and will aim to safeguard areas near Mauritania's shared border with Mali. It has, however, been speculated that Mauritania's increased involvement in MINUSMA could result in Mauritania being increasingly targeted for terrorist attacks by AQIM supporters (EIU, 2013a).

5. Practical recommendations

A number of recommendations arise from the literature both in relation to understanding the conflict drivers in Mauritania and dealing with them. These recommendations are primarily targeted at the international community but include recommendations for Mauritanian and neighbouring governments.

5.1 Avoid pigeon-holing and oversimplified thinking

Jourde (2011) criticises the conceptualisation of the situation into binary choices: military-enforced stability versus Islamist terrorist violence; the state versus non-state actors (i.e. insurgents and traffickers). He argues that policymakers and analysts must devote more time and resources to considering the complexity of the region. Understand the spectrum of rivalries among tribes specialising in illicit commerce, the tensions between castes, the impact of ethnicity on Islamist mobilisations, the personal competition between military officers, the political economy of Sahelian communities (such as the Tuareg), and the complex and at times contradictory structures of loyalty, including those to the state (as an employer), the tribe, and personal interest.

5.2 Include previously marginalised communities within state institutions and political processes

Jourde (2011) argues that sustainable development programmes and political outreach can build stronger loyalties. He cites the examples of the official recognition of Mauritania's moderate Tawassoul Islamist party by the government in 2007, and Mauritania's Programme for the Prevention of Conflicts and the Consolidation of Social Cohesion, which is directed at both Haratin and returning black African refugees. The international community can provide support to programmes such as this one whose resources are insufficient. He stresses that outreach should not be equated with wider militarisation which may well undermine, rather than build loyalty.

5.3 Support legitimate, democracy-leaning political regimes

The international community, including regional organisations such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States should provide support to democratic regimes and those that are implementing democratic changes, while pressuring and condemning those that carry out authoritarian policies. Jourde (2011) argues that legitimate governments are less subject, though not immune, to violent opposition and are better equipped to respond to societal demands. He cites the example of democratic Mali, which is much less subject to anti-government violence, except in

regions where the government underperforms, such as in northern Mali. On the other hand, he argues that autocratic Mauritania and Algeria have been more significantly targeted by protests and violence.

5.4 Control use and proliferation of firearms

Pézard and Glatz (2010) argue it is important to reduce the proliferation of small arms and their illegal use. The priorities they suggest are for Mauritania to: form a National Small Arms Commission; revise and update arms legislation; improve the security of the state's arms stocks to prevent thefts and disappearance of weapons and ammunition; and develop Mauritanian institutions to more effectively monitor armed violence. It is also important to tighten border security.

5.5 Incrementally weaken criminal networks

Lacher (2012) argues that external actors should help incrementally weaken the criminal networks in the Sahel by developing a coherent international approach to help strengthen regional cooperation. With local people having few alternative income sources, taking strong steps to break up criminal networks, rather than an incremental approach, could do more harm than good. Pézard and Glatz (2010) note that traditional societies are often economically dependent on small-scale trafficking and it is vital not to intervene in these societies in an aggressive fashion.

5.6 Form a common position on ransom payments with other countries

The African Union has called for prohibition of ransom payments to terrorist groups; Algeria refuses to pay such ransoms; and Mali has no national consensus (Sidibé 2012). Lacher (2012) suggests a common global approach to limiting ransom payments.

5.7 Support livelihoods and economic opportunities

Goita (2011) argues that governments must protect livelihoods and create economic opportunities so as to maintain the divisions that historically have separated indigenous Sahelian communities from Salafist terrorist groups.

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Appendix: Principal groups and actors

Presidents

Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz

Abdel Aziz is the current President of Mauritania, winning the 2009 presidential election and sworn into office on 5 August 2009. As General Abdel Aziz, he led a coup d'état ousting President Abdallahi in August 2008. Following the coup Abdel Aziz led the High Council of State and acted as head of state during political transition to a new election. He resigned from that post in April 2009 to stand as a candidate in the 2009 presidential election. Abdel Aziz was also a leading figure in the August 2005 coup that deposed President Ould Taya.

Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi

Abdallahi was President of Mauritania between 19 April 2007 and 6 August 2008. He ran as an independent but at the time received support from the ruling Military Council for Justice and Democracy (CMJD). Abdallahi was deposed in a bloodless coup d'état by a military group led by Abdel Aziz.

Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya

Ould Taya was president between 12 December 1984 and 3 August 2005 before being deposed in a coup d'état led by the Military Council for Justice and Democracy (CMJD).

Political parties and military groups

Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR)

The UPR is a political party in Mauritania formed by Abdel Aziz after he officially resigned as leader of the military junta that ran Mauritania, so as to run for President of Mauritania. After winning the Presidential election in 2009, Abdel Aziz resigned as Chairman of the party on 2 August 2009 as the President of Mauritania cannot be a member of any party. The UPR control 38 of the 53 Senate seats, giving it a majority in the National Assembly. The UPR is part of the ruling Coalition of the Majority bloc.

Coordination of the Democratic Opposition (Co ordination de l'opposition démocratique, COD)

COD is the main opposition bloc made up of 13 political parties, including the Rally of Democratic Forces, the Union of the Forces of Progress, Tewassoul Party, the People's Progressive Alliance, El Wiam, the Mauritanian Party of Union and Change, and the Popular Rally of Mauritanian People. The

COD has failed to generate substantial political capital from general dissatisfaction with living standards, although tensions may rise again should 2013's upcoming National Assembly elections be seen as neither free nor fair (EIU, 2013a).

High Council of State (Haut Conseil d'État)

The Council was a military junta that acted as the interim government following the coup d'état which ousted the President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi on 6 August 2008. The Council was led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz between the coup d'état and 15 April 2009 where he resigned so as to stand as a Presidential candidate. Ba Mamadou Mbaré became the first black leader of Mauritania, leading the Council between the time that Abdel Aziz stepped down as Council head and the time Abdel Aziz was sworn into office as the President of Mauritania.

Military Council for Justice and Democracy (Le Conseil Militaire pour la Justice et la Démocratie, CMJD)

The CMJD was a military junta which acted as the interim government following the coup d'état which ousted the President Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya on 3 August 2005. They continued to serve this role until the presidential election where President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was sworn in on 19 April 19 2007. Several members of CMJD later became members of the High Council of State when it came to power in the 2008 coup d'état led by Abdel Aziz.

Democratic and Social Republican Party (Parti Démocratique, Républicain et Social, PRDS)

The PRDS were the political party of President Ould Taya and dominated the legislative assembly while Ould Taya was president. In the first 10 years of Ould Taya's presidency the opposition held one seat and in the last two years the opposition held four. Many PRDS members went on to join the current government UPR party.

Islamist groups

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

In September 2006, four Islamist groups from the Sahel region, the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat – GSPC), the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (Groupe Islamique Combattant au Maroc – GICM), the Libyan Islamic Combatant Group (Groupe Islamique Combattant Libyen – GICL) and the Tunisian Islamic Combatant Group (Groupe Islamique Combattant en Tunisie – GICT), as well as other small Islamist groups from countries including Mauritania, Mali and Niger, built an alliance with Al-Qaeda and renamed themselves as AQIM.

As of 2012, the movement was made up of up to 800 fighters scattered across the Sahel (Sidibé 2012). It is divided into several sub-groups which are particularly mobile, and capable of rapidly moving from one country to the next to evade security services. AQIM mainly recruits from amongst the Tuaregs, Arabs, and Moors but also from sub-Saharan Africa. AQIM and its founding groups have

previously supplied fighters to combat areas such as Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan between 2004 and 2006. They currently train Jihadists from neighbouring countries, Europe and elsewhere.

Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest, MUJAO)

MUJAO is an AQIM offshoot responsible for the kidnap of three European aid workers from the Polisario Front camps near Tindouf, Algeria inOctober 2011 and involved in the kidnapping of seven Algerians from the consulate in Gao, Mali in April 2012. They are not known to operate in Mauritania but threaten to increase the level of Islamist militancy in Mauritania. It is believed to be led by a Mauritanian.