Radicalization and Citizenship

What 800 Sahelians have to say

Mauritania National Report

Perception study on the drivers of insecurity and violent extremism in the border regions of the Sahel

AN 'EPIC, UNUSUAL AND STRATEGIC STUDY'

This research project on perceptions of insecurity and violent extremism drivers in the cross-border regions of the Sahel has offered a unique opportunity to embark on a major and innovative study at the regional level regarding global issues such as armed violence, radicalization, jihadism and security. The project was undertaken without preconceptions and its multinational scope, through the study of frontier regions of countries in the Sahel, together with the decision to listen to the views and ideas of the region's own people and take account of their perceptions and representations, has contributed to the broad, generous and ambitious orientation of an exercise. In general, very little is known about how the populations most affected by armed violence, extremism and insecurity perceive and react to it. In fact, a dominant paradigm exists regarding these questions, which are generally seen from 'top-down' perspective by national and international institutions. These institutions opt for political, security, police and military responses to violent radicalism based on religion.

While perceptions and representations do not necessarily precisely reflect reality, they contribute towards conveying an idea of its depth, intensity, and texture: its sound, its tonality and its contrasts. Most often what is 'perceived' is a distortion, an exaggerated vision of what is, in fact, 'lived'. However, the characteristic distance between what is lived and what is perceived may also take an inverted form, with the latter offering an attenuated and filtered reconstruction of reality. The respondents express themselves, for the most part, in a sober manner in describing the misfortunes and the mortal dangers they have suffered. The responses of the 800 Sahelians who have been interviewed during this study reveal a practical rationality in the face of the challenges of radicalization, violence and insecurity, which is evinced by vulnerable individual actors whose circumstances are precarious and painful.

In addition to the difficulty and danger involved, readers of this report should be aware of the experimental nature of this enquiry, which was undertaken simultaneously in eight Sahelian countries. This wide area of research, studied in depth over a short period of time, has opened up ideas for action and reflection which have hitherto been disregarded or insufficiently considered. Thus, it has given access to fruitful lines of research and identified latent solidarity networks. It is agreed that this exploratory work should be furthered.

Over a period of between five and eight days, 59 researchers made round trips totalling some 24,000 kilometres, covering the frontier zones linking Senegal to Mauritania and Mali, the zones linking Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and those of the countries bordering on Lake Chad, namely Chad, Nigeria and Cameroon. A questionnaire was used to collect responses from 698 individuals in all, spread throughout these eight countries of the Sahel including, in descending order, 147 respondents in Mali (21 per cent of the regional sample); 120 in Nigeria (17 per cent); 100 in Niger (14 per cent); 88 in Mauritania (12 per cent); 74 in Senegal (10 per cent); 71 in Chad (10 per cent); 60 in Burkina Faso (8 per cent); and 38 in Cameroon (5 per cent). Supplementary in-depth interviews were carried out with more than 50 people during additional consultations.

Through these two stages of the inquiry process, the teams identified a pool of 80 key contacts who were subsequently invited to come to Abuja, Bamako, Dakar, N'Djamena, Niamey, Nouakchott, Ouagadougou and Yaoundé to compare and exchange their perceptions of the reasons for insecurity and violent extremism in their respective frontier zones. Interviews were also set up, to the extent this was possible, with those who sympathised with armed groups or with reformed group members. Lastly, national and international consultants were approached to produce case studies and conceptual analyses which were complementary.

The organisation of the research itself represented a substantial challenge. Problems arose from the recruitment of teams to administer the questionnaire (these were composed of teams of researchers and university personnel made up entirely of nationals from the countries concerned) as well as from the simultaneous initiation of research on the ground in all eight countries. Other issues were associated with the necessity to follow a protocol in relation to security; communication covering the entire group of researchers dispersed throughout the cross-border conflict zones; and the organisation of the transfer of the contact group of key respondents to the various capitals. Plans needed to be constantly revised to react to circumstances and various constraints. These included administrative considerations (permits and co-ordination with the authorities); political concerns (the post-election situation in Nigeria and the transition in Burkina Faso); security scares (Boko Haram attacks in the region of Lake Chad); financial difficulties (failed transfers, budget overruns); technical problems (electricity and internet failures); and even climatic and cultural obstructions (the rainy season and the onset of the month of Ramadan).

The decision to work with university researchers and interviewers of local nationality rather than with external consultants was a risk, but one which has paid off. The goal was to construct a team which had the most appropriate profile for a method of enquiry which was adapted to local realities; was able to suggest the best places to go: was able to select the most able interviewers; and, finally, was able to bring insight to the analysis of the results. The common methodology across the survey was the outcome of interactions with the eight national teams and thus emerged from a collective effort. The quality of the data and the analysis which has come out of the responses of the 800 Sahelian respondents is opening up a range of options for mitigating their vulnerability to violent extremism and enhancing the resilience of the populations concerned. The study has deliberately ignored the conventional taxonomy of the armed groups and the interpretation of religious motivation which is typical of political science approaches in order to concentrate on a conceptual framework which stays closer to the perceptions of the inhabitants of the cross-border regions themselves.

In the majority of the areas covered, however, the populations received the researchers favourably and opened up to them without any major problems throughout the entire critical phase: the research on the ground. In Mali, the locals were particularly appreciative of the courage of the researchers who had come to see them where they lived and had posed direct questions, going straight to the essential issues. In Nigeria, the teams were all the more favourably received because their respondents were conscious that no-one representing the authorities had ever seen fit to concern themselves with what the population had been suffering for years, since the beginning of the Boko Haram insurrection. It should be noted that, in certain sensitive cross-border areas, unusually, none of the teams were escorted by security forces or police during their work on the ground, despite the fact that the study had laid down no procedure on this issue. However, the teams were, themselves, supposed to announce their arrival and make contact with the public authorities and with the military command in the districts they proposed to visit. Both of these elements formed an important part of the approach since, in the view of those involved in the study it had an impact on the way the neutrality of the study was perceived by local inhabitants. Thankfully, no researcher was worried, even though they were at times in close proximity of security threats.

Amidst the observations, the results and the suggested avenues for reflection, there are facts which might seem, at first sight, to be embarrassing, since it is evident that the perceptions of the individuals interviewed prioritise some striking truths which demand to be considered. However, within what the responders have to say and their ideas for change there is, above all, a demand for the reinforcement of the state, and a desire for normality and security indissociable from a

citizenship which is in the course of formation. The stories of the respondents, though sometimes tragic, also have the merit of not permitting the future to be previewed in a too deeply apocalyptic a manner. Those involved in this study have refused to analyse the situation using fear as an explanatory principle (the heuristic of fear), although by the end of this research it had become clear that radicalization is a durable phenomenon to which people will have to adapt and respond. At the very moment when the international community finds itself entrenched in a second "war against terror" in the Middle East, the questions dealt with here are not merely of local concern.

Burkina Faso - 6 interviewers
1'500 km – 5 days

60 interviews
Villages around 6 towns
Languages: Fulfulde

Cameroon - 6 interviewers
1'500 km – 8 days

38 interviews
Villages around 6 towns
Languages: Mandara, Fulfulde, Chad
Arabic, Kotoko, Kanuri, Gamargu,
Podoko, Matal, Mafa &Kapsiki

Mali - 8 interviewers
8'000 km – 12 days

147 interviews
Villages around 15 towns
Languages: Fulfulde,
Tamasheq, Hassaniya Arabic

Mauritania - 6 interviewers
2'500 km – 7 days

88 interviews
Villages around 16 towns
Languages: Pulaar,
Hassaniya Arabic, Wolof
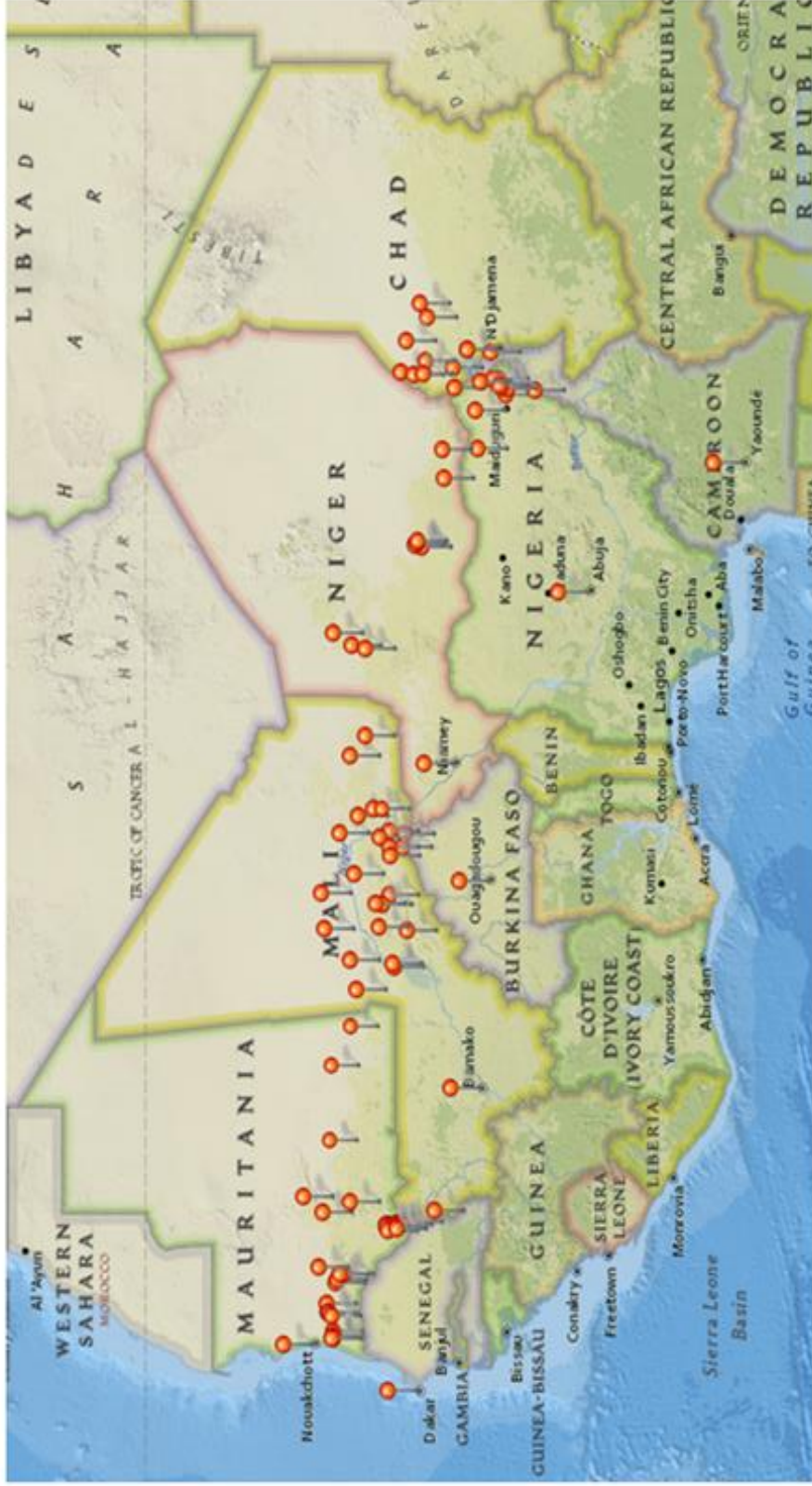
Niger - 9 interviewers
4'000 km – 6 days
100 interviews

Villages around 12 towns

Languages: Hausa,
Tamasheq, Fulfulde

Nigeria - 9 interviewers
1'600 km – 7 days

120 interviews
Villages around 8 towns
Languages: English,
Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo

Senegal – 6 interviewers
2'800 km – 6 days

74 interviews
20 villages
Languages: Wolof,
French

Chad - 9 interviewers
2'000 km – 6 days

71 interviews
Villages around towns
Languages: Chad Arabic,
Kanembu, Buduma

8 capital cities
8 focus groups

80 community
leaders

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Study areas

Mauritania is a land steeped in paradox where sedentary and nomadic peoples of Arab-Berber and black African culture cohabit; their fates are tied tightly together in an entwined legacy of antagonism and conflict, common interest, alliances, and inter-ethnic complementarity. The border areas covered by this study are the *wilayas[1]* of Hodh El Gharbi, Hodh Ech Chargui (in the extreme south-east), Assaba (in the east) – all three of which neighbour Mali – and the Brakna *wilaya* (in the centre-south) which borders part of the Senegal River. These regions were also chosen as study areas in this research for historical and security reasons. The people of the first three *wilayas* are essentially Hassaniya-speaking, of Arab-Berber heritage. Here, in terms of numbers, are found the country's great tribal confederations, but also places where minorities (Soninké, Peul, Haalpulaar and Bambara) have been established for centuries. This is different from some of the Brakna areas visited (Bagne, Niabina) where Haalpulaar communities make up the majority of the population. The town of Aleg and its surroundings are traditionally places of cohabitation between Moors and Halaiba Fulani. Nouakchott is, like all urban centres, a mixing place, although it retains fairly distinct community separation.

State and citizenship, religion and identity

Religion (that is, Islam) is fundamental to identity in Mauritania, where proximity to the judicial-theological standard has spread a popularized version of Islamic knowledge. Political Islamist groups and violent extremists put this knowledge to their own uses in many ways. Citizenship is not always accepted because it is hampered by pyramidal social structures (tribes, factions) that are more pertinent and efficient. Trust in the state goes up and down. Historically, there is a relationship between society and latent, 'managed' violence, that is not perceived as such by the masses who describe themselves as pacifist and conciliatory.

Inter-communal and cross-border dynamics

Inter-ethnic conflicts – sometimes latent, sometimes open – are crystallized within the Arabic language. While Islam plays a role of inter-communal unification, the different rituals involved in the practice of religion are also a cause for the demarcation of ethnic identity. While a large majority of former slaves live in a post-slavery situation marked by precariousness, descendants of slaves are increasingly demanding recognition. The border is perceived as both a place of rupture and extension in terms of security and commerce. While residents in 'peri-border' areas (Kiffa, Barkéol, Kankossa, etc.) say they feel they mostly enjoy the benefits of a dual geographical location, those living closest to the border (Bassiknou, Adel Bagrou, Bousteyla) report more disadvantages. The crisis in Mali, in particular, has weakened tenure of the border area which was already disturbed shortly before independence. For respondents in Bassiknou and the eastern Hodh region, 'terrorist deviations' with religious references originate in Mali.

Radicalization: clues and process

The entire range of political and violent messages/actions with a religious basis are found in Mauritania. According to this study, three organisations enjoy the highest visibility: the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, and Tablighi Jemaat Dawa (a proselytizing movement). The process of radicalization is not linear in Mauritania. Rather, it swings continually between a hardening and weakening in relation to 'organised' religious observance. One enters and exits the circle of radicalization with a flexibility that blurs the actual influence of the phenomenon and the way it turns into actual violence. The mastering of religious texts, honoured as part of culture and/or identity in

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[1] Administrative division.

Mauritania, can have two different significant effects. In some cases, it helps protect against excess (by neutralizing individuals so soaked in dogmatic knowledge that they could not be baited by the extremist message). In other cases, it is used by the holders of this same knowledge and helps to propel them into the circles of decision-making and design of the violent extremists.

The role of women

In Mauritania, there is great variation in the status of women, depending on whether they belong to the Moor or black Mauritanian community. Although women are devalued in all communities, the lingering matriarchy within the Moorish community gives women more visibility and active participation in decision-making. The Moors see women as the guarantors of social values. Traditionally, they are entrusted with giving children their first Quranic instruction, teaching up to the basics of the Sunna and Hadith. Women are very present and fill a valued role in social aspects of the new religious practices. They serve as transmitters within their own circles, but also as reactors within civil society. They bring force to claims and are mobilized during protests (organizing meetings demanding the release of Salafist prisoners or going door-to-door to raise awareness).

Avenues for reflection

Two strategic lines of reflection and institutional action have been identified:

- o Anticipate the potential for a drift into violence;
- o Build a space for observation and debate about developments in religious life.

Based on the perceptions collected from respondents and observations made in the field, supported by analysis and discussions with various relevant actors, five avenues for further reflection have emerged:

- o Put education at the centre of responsible citizenship;
- o Plan and establish support actions within the mahadras;
- o Recreate and restore trust in the state;
- o Rethink administrative, economic and cultural decentralization for greater effectiveness;
- o Invest in communication.

INTRODUCTION

From Nouakchott, six interviewers travelled almost 2,500km in a round trip conducting 88 interviews (and some group interviews which gathered 44 participants in total), in the villages around 20 towns, as well as in the city of Nouakchott. The survey identified 10 resource persons on the borders of Mali and Senegal, who were then invited to Nouakchott to meet and exchange their perceptions about insecurity and violent extremism in their respective areas. The analysis of the results presented in this report has been substantiated by information gathered in Nouakchott and from contributions by national experts on the subject.

Mauritania is a land steeped in paradox where sedentary and nomadic peoples of Arab-Berber and black African culture cohabit; their fates are tied tightly together in an entwined legacy of antagonism and conflict, common interest, alliances, and inter-ethnic complementarity. The Mauritanian population (3.4 million, according to the last census, with 48.9% men and 51.1% women) consists of Arab-Berber communities (Moors or *bidhân*[2]) and black African communities (Soninké, Haalpulaar, Wolof) with distinct socio-cultural identities. They share two-fifths of the territory, the rest being almost totally occupied by desert between the Sahel and Sahara. The Bidhane are said to be the majority group in the country. They represent 70-80% of the population, according to official sources. This imprecision is due to the fact that community-based statistics are almost a taboo subject in Mauritania: information regarding the demographic weight of ethnic groups appears to be a state secret and remain inaccessible outside official government circles. The last decade has seen a peak in ethnic tensions (with the single-system educational reform of 1999 and the campaign to issue biometric civil identity cards in 2012) between the Bidhane and the peoples of the valley region of Mauritania.

The border areas covered by this study are the *wilayas*[3] of Hodh El Gharbi, Hodh Ech Chargui (in the extreme south-east), Assaba (in the east) – all three of which neighbour Mali – and the Brakna *wilaya* (in the centre-south) which borders part of the Senegal River.

The people of the first three *wilayas* are essentially Hassaniya-speaking, of Arab-Berber heritage. Here, in terms of numbers, are found the country's great tribal confederations, but also places where minorities (Soninké, Peul, Haalpulaar and Bambara) have been established for centuries. This is different from some of the Brakna areas visited (Bagne, Niabina) where Haalpulaar communities make up the majority of the population. The town of Aleg and its surroundings are traditionally places of cohabitation between Moors and Halaiba Fulani. Nouakchott is, like all urban centres, a mixing place, although it retains fairly distinct community separations: black Mauritanians settle in neighbourhoods close to the coast while the Moors settle in the dunes.

The wilayas of Hodh El Gharbi and Hodh Ech Chargui (in the extreme south-east)

The different histories of the two Hodh should be emphasised. At one time integrated into the colonial territory of Sudan, they were attached to Mauritania in 1944. Security was the main reason for this administrative decision. The colonial authorities considered the Moorish tribes' transhumance routes in the Sudan as destabilizing factors to their global geopolitical policy of control

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[2] Bidhane: a self-appellation designating the Sahara-Sahel people of mixed Berber, Arab and black African heritage, living in the area between southern Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, part of the desert of southern Algeria and northern Mali. The word comes from the Arabic *el-ebyadh* (white), plural, *Elbydh*. The name was adopted to differentiate them from the darker-skinned people of Sudan who cohabit the same area. The Bidhane speak the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic. The Bidhane were called "Moors" by the French colonial administration, a name still used today.

[3] Administrative division.

and oversight. On the other hand, the expansion of the *hamalliste*[4] movement and its growing spiritual influence on local people aroused their fear. It is a densely populated rural area with extreme poverty. Besides, pastoralism (the main economic activity) shares space with sedentarism (which was initiated at the beginning of the 1940s, in the middle of the colonial period).

The two Hodhs are territories in transition. They host armed/violent elements whose presence may not be visible but can be felt as soon as one moves away from the urban centres. Approaching the border area (Gogui Zemal) or the region of Hodh Ech Chargui (Néma), one enters a security area which looks tranquil and hosts Malian refugee camps (M'berra, Bassiknou, Vassala). The violent and armed groups do not (usually) show aggression: they prefer to establish controlled and 'smooth' circulation so as not to disturb the authorities and, thereby, to ensure the substantial trafficking of people and equipment. Part of this area is almost deserted, making it a fertile ground for moving contraband of all kinds (fuel, cigarettes, food). On top of smuggling activities, insecurity is at its greatest between Néma and Bassiknou. Vehicle theft by groups is recurrent and cases of attacks on isolated individuals are often reported.

The wilayas of Assaba (east) and Brakna (south-central)

In 2008, two French tourists were killed in Aleg, the capital of Brakna (250km from Nouakchott). Nevertheless, Aleg remains the most secure area of the regions which were visited during the study. It was chosen as a survey site because of this violent episode and the frequent passing through of groups – all of whom are, at least in their speech, radicalized – which maintain a tight grip on the city and its surroundings. Kiffa, the capital of Assaba, is also an important transit area, although it is more commercially active (with large weekly markets, livestock trade, regional trade of consumer goods, etc.). Kiffa is also a place where diverse, local, seasonal migration paths intersect (Néma-Aïoun-Nouakchott). Foreigners also pass through: ethnic groups from Assaba with large communities in the central African countries, and even foreigners coming from as far away as Angola and South Africa. Three-quarters of the region's economy is based on this commercial immigration.

Nouakchott

The choice of the capital for the survey is justified by the fact that Mauritania, essentially, is Nouakchott. This is due to the frequency and volume of the rural exodus which has made the city the primary destination since the 1970s. In fact, except for two or three indigenous tribes, almost all of the people living in Nouakchott come from the interior of the country. In the capital, one meets rural people whose links with their home cultures remain almost untouched beneath the surface of their urban lives. Many of our respondents from the interior describe their lives as a back and forth journey between the border areas and the capital; Nouakchott remains the epicentre of Mauritania's intense evolution. Finally, it should be noted that the only effective mixing between communities[5] is in upper middle-class neighbourhoods (where the exchange is more economic than cultural) or in the newest housing developments like Dar Naim and Riyadh.

The analysis of this unprecedented collection of perceptions from the population in the frontier zones of the Sahel who are most vulnerable to, and most concerned with, security is structured around four considerations which are indicative of the complexity of the subject of the study. In this report, the perceptions are first placed in the context of the state and citizenship, religion and

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[4] Islamic movement divided into brotherhoods, initiated by Sheikh Hamallah and opposed to colonial intrusion.

[5] During the last decade, the historic district of Nouakchott, Ksar, which is usually presented as a place of community friendliness, emptied of its black Mauritanian people who settled in new neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city. Following the same process of community isolation, neighbourhoods in the 5th and 6th districts of the capital emptied of people of Moorish origin who moved into the inner city or to the north-eastern edge of the capital.

identity (Section I), before being examined in relation to inter-communal relations and cross-border issues (Section II). These two initial stages contribute to the understanding of the process of radicalisation and its measurement (Section III), before the report puts into perspective the part played by women (Section IV). The report concludes with avenues for further reflection. While this report is based on the results and observations in the eight national reports within the international study, it is not to be regarded as a substitute for them.

STATE AND CITIZENSHIP, RELIGION AND IDENTITY

Points to remember:

- Religion (that is, Islam) is fundamental to identity in Mauritania, where proximity to the judicial-theological standard has spread a popularized version of Islamic knowledge. Political Islamist groups and violent extremists put this knowledge to their own uses in many ways.
- Citizenship is not always accepted because it is hampered by pyramidal social structures (tribes, factions) that are more pertinent and efficient. Trust in the state goes up and down.
- Historically, there is a relationship between society and latent, 'managed' violence, that is not perceived as such by the masses who describe themselves as pacifist and conciliatory.

1. Mauritanian society and its inner identity

"The state is really the tribe of those in power". (Comment by a respondent, M'Bagne, Brakna)

1.1 Horizontality and hierarchy

As in all other regions of the country, the people living in the border regions practice Sunni Islam of the Maliki rite. This permeates all ideas, values and social practices. It also gives the entire society an ideological and legal-religious homogeneity which is enhanced by common membership of the religious brotherhoods. Thus, differences between traditions and customary law which are specific to each community may appear to be minor.

As a result of this, as well as for various other reasons, the communities who live together have a number of features in common. The main ones are:

- o *Pyramidal social organisations:* based on specialization and a hierarchy of different social orders which determine the status, role and level of participation for men and women in various aspects of social life.

- o *Patriarchal societies:* the communities of the Mauritanian nation are governed through patriarchal and patrilineal order (based on paternal authority, i.e., the male relatives and the primary authority of the father); and by the rule of patrilocal

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SOCIAL HIERARCHY

The horizontal multiplicity of ethnic groups in these regions is juxtaposed with a hierarchy that structures all communities into social strata. At the top are the traditional holders of political and military power (warriors) and spiritual and intellectual power (marabouts), while at the bottom of the scale are categories of dependents, artisans, slaves and the descendants of slaves. One can summarily classify these social orders into four broad categories:

- o Nobles: people of the sword or pen (warriors and marabouts among the Moors; "*gueer*" among the Wolof; "*hooro*" among the Soninkés; "*rimbe*" among the Haalpulaar);

- o Free men/women: the "*diounkorounko*" (intermediate group between nobles and slaves, among the Soninkés) are the archetype of this category; in other ethnic groups, they are mainly artisans such as griots and smiths in the Moor community, and in the black African communities, woodworkers (*lawbé*), weavers and shoemakers;

- o Dependents: the *Haratines* and dependent *Z'naga*, under the domination of more powerful groups (tribes, clans);

- o Servants: the *maccube* among the Haalpulaar; the *jaam*, among the Wolof; the *kommo* among the Soninké; the *abeid*, among the Moors.

The result is a relatively rigid social structure, a complex tangle of relationships, behaviour and custom, and very limited social mobility (endogamy is the rule; exogamy, the exception).

marriage (a type of union in which the wife comes to live in the husband's father's family after marriage).

o *Slave societies (until a very recent past):* ethnic groups living in Mauritania have a long history of slavery and, even today, there is a troubled and complicated relationship with servitude.

However, the relative stability of these social features is beginning to look fragile. As it is the case in many developing countries, Mauritania's socio-economic structures are going through more or less profound changes. These changes, whose beginnings can be traced to mid-1970s, are observable in all communities in the country. Various elements combined together gave rise to the emergence of new players: the expansion of the market economy, urbanization, the 'progress' of ideas of equality and democracy, the modernization of teaching and new technologies. These elements have set in motion – at first, in a confused way, and then increasingly assertively – the redefinition of society and forms of identity.

1.2 Modernity and reorganisation

Paradoxically, at the same time that lifestyles (food, clothing, manners) are undergoing a relative standardization, the dynamics of conflicting identity have been strengthened. These dynamics make it clear that perceptions of identity and group solidarity (ethnic and tribal) come before any sense of national belonging and the desire to build a common destiny.

Significant progress has been made in many areas: real improvement in material conditions (roads, housing, telecommunications, etc.), improved health coverage, increased school enrollment, and the development of infrastructure. However, despite the many development projects implemented and the progress made, important gaps, shortcomings and weaknesses remain. Poverty, in particular, remains endemic: 42% of the total population lives below the poverty line (according to data from the 2008 Survey of Household Living Conditions, *l'Enquête sur les conditions de vie des ménages*).

The development of the state apparatus and the emergence of new growth centres have had a particular impact on amplifying the phenomenon of rural exodus, and significantly contributed to a very rapid urbanization. Although nomads still were the majority 50 years ago, they went from 33% of the population in 1977 to less than 5% in 2000. With 95% of its population living in urban centres, Mauritania is now among the countries with the highest rate of urbanization in the world.

The result of this upheaval is not only the disruption of patterns and routes of agro-pastoral life which were once dominant. It is also the many changes which affect society as a whole, as well as each constituent community: more individualistic behaviours; the deepening of social differences (increasing impoverishment of large sections of the population, perpetuation of privileged segments); the extension of precariousness to new layers of society; the loosening of community solidarity; the development of socially and legally marginalized urban subcultures.

2. Mauritania… an Islamic state

> *"Islam is the cement of the nation, it is what remains when everything goes".*
> (Comment by the Vice President of a political party in Nouakchott)

From the outset, it must be explained that the term "Islamic state" – so inflammatory in news reports from the Middle East in recent months – is no more nor less than national identity in the subconscious of the average Mauritanian. Mauritania is, after Pakistan and before Iran, one of the pioneering countries to display religious identity in its official name. The introduction of this section

mentioned the historical link – even 'cement' – which Islam represents in this country, and which functions as a common supra-authority between the virtual patchwork of ethnic groups making up Mauritanian society. In Mauritania, religion is not only a faith; it has also served as a means of unification since independence in 1960. In the first official speeches – void of any extremism or essentializing – Islam is called the cement of the nation. In terms of the perceptions that interest this study, combining the state and Islam is quite acceptable to the psyche and experience of Mauritanians. However, as will be demonstrated later, this is acceptable in the context of a specific form of Shar'ia doctrinal rule.

Religion, then, was a unifying element in building the state. But a little historical digression is necessary at this stage. Between 1980 and 1984, the military regime of Ould Haidallah tried to establish *Shar'ia*, or Islamic law. When those interviewed in the study were asked about this episode of the country's legal-political life, it was clear that the measures met with relative acceptance. Some respondents called it a time when banditry and general insecurity significantly declined, reminding us that *"in any case, religion cannot do evil, it is men who do evil."* (Comment by a 64-year man in Niabina, Brakna). During the group interview in Nouakchott, participants stressed the differentiation to be made between text (Quranic and Sunnah) and deeds. According to them, the text is "*viable*" and, in principle, applicable; the seeds of deviation are in the modalities of implementation.

Perceptions of the state

The doctrinal text can be a solution, if the ideal application method is found. However, the state is not perceived as a structure or concept which is viable in the long term, for it is insufficiently part of 'consensual' democratic legitimacy. This pushes society towards religion, which is alone *"able to ensure life in this world and hereafter"* (Comment by a 29-year woman in a group interview in Nouakchott). Overall, this view is more common among a rather young segment of the population.

In the questionnaires and through the other means of collecting perceptions, the respondents widely cited coups d'état as factors of both violence and insecurity. They consider the country's institutional mechanisms as inadequate and unsustainable, and fear the risk of political destabilization any time.

> *"We cannot believe in a state that puts all its energy into channelling, maintaining, and containing the army. Security measures are primarily designed to protect power, not the people (…) The state itself is afraid of its own army, its own generals".* (Comment by a 32-year-old teacher from Aleg)

> *"The state is already too busy with ethnic divisions to offer a truly preventive or repressive plan against insecurity. To make such a plan, it needs foreign aid, and this, we will never tolerate".* (Comment by a tribal chief)

This flaw in the trust between the state and its people ran through the comments collected during the study, even from those who belong to the same political party as the President. Citizenship in Mauritania is a concept under construction in which the 'average' Mauritanian is still struggling to find their place. In this context, the struggle between public power and tribal dominance is permanent. In Mauritania, identity is forged primarily through religion, tribe, brotherhood, and community. It is clear there is an inner configuration of self-definition wherein national identity comes last, even if a slow evolution is taking place. For example, the emergence of strong national feeling can be observed at sporting or cultural events.

3. Modular religiosity

"Shar'ia is the law of God… entrusted to Man. We go as far as the maqasid (goal, purpose) of the law allows, and the faqih (Islamic jurist) is the one who knows how to stretch the purpose". (Comment by a supporter of the jihadist cause, Nouakchott)

What determines the basic personality of a Mauritanian 'conscience' – of any community – is religious identity. Among the Moors, this relationship to belief is part of every important phase and event, as it is in the conduct of everyday life. Going back to the origins of Moorish society, the omnipresence of religion is coupled with flexibility in the traditional interpretation of dogma which puts the Quuran at the service of communal life, as much as much as possible. Moorish marabout scholars have developed competence in this over-investment in interpretation. Such over-investment leaves the door open to all sorts of circumventions of canonical injunctions or, conversely, to a tightening of the rule when it is in line with their interests or those of their social groups. This art of casuistry (one might call it dogmatic 'contortionism') is the first casualty in the radicalization process linked to new religious practices promoted by such radical Islamic groups as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Legal-theological justifications and arguments are learned and internalized by the young and women, even when they are not fully implemented. From there, these arguments enter popular culture up the levels from housewives to scholars of the statutory order of *zwâyä*[6] to spiritual teachers, lawyers and guides of daily religious practice. In Mauritania, judicial-religious rule is a general preoccupation. Everyone consults it for the smallest affair, even those who do not strictly follow orthodoxy. Knowing your *shra'* ("Act") is an act of faith, value and identity – all at the same time. It is not enough to practice the spirit and body of canonical rule; one must also know how the rule is made and by whom, for the channel itself is a message. But knowledge of the original religious law does not necessarily mean that it is followed and incorporated into all levels of traditional life and social normative systems. Rather, there is a syncretic mastery of dogma at the service of custom, which can sometimes be at odds with the *shra'*

> **THE BOOK OF PEACE AND WAR**
>
> *"In fact, you need look no further: if you look closely, violence has always been present in our relationship to religion. The Almoravids came with a book in one hand and a sword in the other. This is our reference to ourselves, the Moors. But, throughout our history, we have always been able to manage this violence, never abused it. The desert requires mistrust, at all times, and violence when necessary. I am against religious violence, my whole family was educated in tolerance and appeasement, but I cannot deny that, in Mauritania, our society was based on a highly visible background of religious violence. In all ethnic groups, black or Arab-Berber, there has been war between marabouts and the Hassani swordsmen. Everywhere. The men of the sword won, everywhere, but the others continued to hold and possess knowledge, for knowledge never perishes. And we have all returned to the Book, in spite of ourselves. We are Muslims. We need texts and marabouts. So, in short, when we want to make war, we open the Book and when we want to make peace, we also open the Book. In reality, it is Islam that suffers; it is not Islam that dictates. Religion as interpreted by our scholars has always served a thousand causes at once. At the end of the 17th century, the final battle between warriors and marabouts was religious violence (if one takes the warriors' side) and holy war (if one takes the side of the marabouts). In between, Islam is not to blame. It was about two historical groups fighting for their own interests. This is still happening today. Except that, in times of peace, violence is managed and everyone goes back to being passive and unarmed..."*
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> Comment by the chief of a large tribal federation in Bassikounou and in the eastern Hodh

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[6] The Zewaya, or the nobility of the Book, are one of two social classes at the top of the hierachical pyramid. They hold and produce religious, spiritual and intellectual knowledge in Moor culture.

in spite of it having been internalized. For example, the Moors' traditional refusal of polygamy gives rise to a series of conditions in the marriage act, for *Shar'ia* gives every Muslim the right to four wives (except in countries where the Personal Status Code has ruled to the contrary).

One cannot discuss the violent turn and radicalization of the religious phenomenon in this region of the world without understanding the nature of their link with the message of Islam; with the production of legal-spiritual standards; and with the different uses of these standards which have shaped the ancient and recent history of this country. This proximity to and knowledge of the dogmatic source is a peculiarity of religion in Mauritania which has an impact on the perceptions – expressed or latent – of the new Islamic forms and practices observed at the global level. Almost all the people interviewed during the study (perceptions were collected according to a qualitative research approach) have had some religious education but, above all, they showed a quite amazing epistemological predisposition towards the legitimacy, validity and immutability of Shar'ia law, even without agreeing on its applicability. Of the 20 people interviewed in Moorish areas, 10 could recite the Quran by heart and 18 knew the work of Lakhdari, Ebnou Acher, Sheikh Khalil (authors of treaties governing every detail of the life of the Maliki Muslim). Yet, this predisposition does not induce a stronger leaning than otherwise to the armed jihadi cause or to extremist violence. The section on the radicalization process below explains the places and times where and when the effects of the internalization of religious knowledge thought of as a globalizing culture can be felt.

Textual rigidity, however, is balanced by the nearly universal spreading of religious orders. The most important of them in number and variety are the Tijaniya, Hammaliste (or, Niassène), and the el-Jaylaniya Quadiriya. These Sufi paths have considerable influence on daily religious life in Mauritania, as in other regions of the western part of Sahara. They are in a constant dialectical process with the preachers of orthodoxy. Their contribution – in terms of mediation, social assistance and community diversity – is highly appreciated by the population who, overall, values the *Echyakh* (as they are known locally).

Finally, in Mauritania, the traditional teaching system at the higher level (textual exegesis) concerns almost all rural young people (15-23 years). However, at age 20, those leaving the *mahadras* (a sort of 'university of the desert') only aim for one thing: to continue their studies integrating into the state's educational system. This bipolarity of the education system, with its more or less informal bridges, is one of the major problems people under 30 have to enter the job market.

INTER-COMMUNAL AND CROSS-BORDER DYNAMICS

Points to remember:

- Inter-ethnic conflicts – sometimes latent, sometimes open – are crystallized within the Arabic language. While Islam plays a role of inter-communal unification, the different rituals involved in the practice of religion are also a cause for the demarcation of ethnic identity.
- While a large majority of former slaves live in a post-slavery situation marked by precariousness, descendants of slaves are increasingly demanding recognition. The border is perceived as both a place of rupture and extension in terms of security and commerce. While residents in 'peri-border' areas (Kiffa, Barkéol, Kankossa, etc.) say they feel they mostly enjoy the benefits of a dual geographical location, those living closest to the border (Bassiknou, Adel Bagrou, Bousteyla) report more disadvantages.
- The crisis in Mali, in particular, has weakened tenure of the border area, which was already disturbed shortly before independence. For respondents in Bassiknou and the eastern Hodh region, 'terrorist deviations' with religious references originate in Mali.

1. Ethnic and religious divides

> *"We are all Muslims, yes; we share the same Sufi paths. But there are many mosques where only black Mauritanians pray and others where only the Bydhan* [Moors] *pray, especially in large cities which are normally mixed places... In our rural areas, the Moors are in their dunes and the Haalpulaar peasants* [those who speak the Fula language] *are on farmland: they do not meet. Increasingly, enmities are growing because the state gets involved and not always in the right way. Our lands are redistributed under land reforms and valuations that are, in fact, facilitating land acquisition by rich Moorish businessmen".* (Comment by a farmer and father, 59, Brakna)

Throughout the country's history, both ancient and recent, inter-communal interaction has ranged from complementarity (the barter of 'sedentary' products against those produced by 'pastorals', peaceful coexistence in some areas, Quranic education) to rivalry (quarrels over water points, land, and political representation for settlers). The coexistence of communities which are different in language, culture, sociology and history inevitably raises issues of communication and competition for political and cultural pre-eminence and economic resources. This rivalry is intensified by a context of imbalance between the ecosystem and the basic needs of humans and livestock. Obviously, when this diversity is accompanied by racial differences, the risk of conflict increases. But it must be remembered that, in the past, these societies cultivated a degree of harmony between each other and shared certain socio-cultural traits such as social stratification and important shared values (mutual aid, modesty, avoiding other communities, and certain customs).

The slow settlement of nomadic Moors, which begun in the '50s and '60s, took on a brutal form and intensified significantly in the decade between 1970-80. This was the result of climate change which dramatically reduced the space for survival and exacerbated competition over environmental resources. If this situation had no direct impact on cohabitation between the ethnic communities, its longer term influence now seems difficult to contest (the land reform of 1983, the buying up and

expropriation of agricultural land – whose first victims were the Arab communities of Trarza, traditional land owners in the Chemama region).

Over half a century after the country's independence, Mauritanians continue to live in an unacknowledged communitarian mode. Apart from some aspects of religious life (brotherhood communities), there are no common public spaces for the different ethnic groups, and no genuine cultural and social bridges between them. The coexistence of different groups is – with a few exceptions such as mixed marriage or the ethnic mix of wealthy neighbourhoods – frozen in ignorance and mutual distrust of one another. In periods of calm, Mauritanians live back to back, closed off, in their own respective communities. In moments of crisis, they come face to face, pitted against each other.

Bad governance, patronage and the predatory behavior of some spheres of power – which have marked the country in recent decades – have exacerbated competition at all levels for resources and top positions in the state. Obviously, this competition has a communal aspect in addition to its tribal, regional and caste aspects.

Economically, a few elements can be noted: the unbridled liberalism which led to selling off state companies for the benefit of particular private regional groups; the undue favours granted (to business owners for tribal or clan reasons – particularly in relation to fishing and agriculture – as well as to those who founded a proliferation of banks with ethnic foundations); the virtual disappearance of black African business owners from the economy; and the lack of any significant *Haratine* (former slave) wealth. These are all signs of deep disparities based on socio-ethnic identity, both in terms of access to economic decision-makers in the state and the resources in the private sector.

Moreover, the idea of predominance of a link between Arabism and Islam – supported and promoted by pan-Arab nationalists (from the '60s to the '90s) – drew the boundaries of identity in a narrow way. This has confined each community within a tracking system where religious unity must accommodate Arabic and international ties to Arabism. The black Mauritanian communities (Haalpulaar, Soninké and Wolof) have always shown some reluctance in relation to the spread of Arabic in education. This has sometimes resulted in cycles of violence: language disputes around the educational reforms of 1966; the conflict with Senegal against the background of ethnic conflict in 1989; the establishment of civil-status documents in 2013 which were seen as segregationist measures by black Mauritanians; and the ongoing land disputes in the Valley, the Chemama, the Gorgol, etc.

Post-servile status: the opportunity for dialogue

An increasingly strident claim challenging Moorish culture in its entirety is added to this antagonism between Moors and black Mauritanians. Mauritania is regularly singled out, in global forums and by part of the international community, for complacency or complicity regarding forms of social organisation in which slavery-like practices persist – in various ways and varying intensities. Although slavery affects all communities, the Moorish phenomenon is most visible in terms of numbers and dependence. This persistence of statutory and economic inequality is even more paradoxical in that the Mauritanian government has ratified all international conventions on human rights and freedoms. Internally, there are also a range of anti-slavery texts, including three abolition laws from the last century, and two measures adopted during the last decade – one by Parliament (2007) and the other at the ministerial level (2011).

According to a report on slavery in the world by the NGO Walk Free[7], Mauritania's population is still 4% slave. In addition, a large majority of former slaves live in a situation of immediate post-slavery marked by precariousness and illiteracy. Management of the consequences of post-slavery is carried out at various levels and timescales, whether they are public initiatives or interactions between the social groups concerned. Thus, while the laws in the formal framework are clear, implementation is far from satisfactory according to the parties concerned (i.e. the *Haratines* themselves) and their advocates.

The official government line, strengthened by the existence of these laws, remains confined to the legal framework. The Government has not attempted to move beyond the treatment of "the effects of slavery". Most importantly, it has not shown real political will to propose, in addition to laws, multi-sectoral support which is better able to initiate emancipation for the descendants of slaves. This official position, however, is challenged by a section of civil society which supports this cause and denounces proven cases of servitude against the background of the international struggle for equal rights. One of these activists, Biram Dah Abeid, head of an organisation representing *Haratine* rights, is currently in custody. He was imprisoned for two breaches of public order and social peace.

Between these two positions, regulatory and normative, a new expression has been added to public record. This expression is unique to the subordination/emancipation model of former masters and slaves. Since the early 2000s, there has emerged a new form of relationship which "invents" new hooks and inter-ethnic understanding on the margins of ancestral practices of dependence. If the original asymmetry has not been erased, these new attitudes open spaces for diversity that are not without effect on the social representation of the weight and role of the *Haratines* in Mauritania today. The denial of the authorities and the polemic tone of the NGOs are not taking into account this new form of relationship which is converting the social norm into a supra-norm which could be called citizenship. Preventing a breakup of the state caused by the *Haratine* issue necessarily requires awareness of the value of transitional justice that draws on these new forms of relationship. Note that radicalization is one of the options chosen by former slaves to unlock their status. The Islamist message symbolically erases these inequalities by substituting for them a role that is open to every recruit of slave origin: "Go teach the fundamentals of religion to your people".

As for the other communities, the religious brotherhoods – mostly Tijaniya Tariqa (in its two forms, Niassène or Hamalliste) – remain one of the main areas where narrow representations of affiliation dissolve, as do certain professions where individuals are organised in guilds (the SNIM mining company, the unions, some left-wing parties, etc.).

2. Borders: social change, trafficking and insecurity

These comments by a Soninké farmer and a Moorish Chorfa from Néma deliver two visions of developments in northern Mali and their implications:

> *"Here in Bassiknou, we have long lived with the benefits of having Mali next door. We get medical treatment there, we sell and buy there, we learn farming methods... But, for some time now, with the war on the other side, even if some of our businesses have flourished, we are living every day in fear of losing our earnings and our lives if we leave our dwellings. All this is the fault of the Moors. It is their sons who join with the others and make us suffer. It is true that some of those who join them come from*

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[7] According to this organisation's *Global Slavery Index*, 155,600 Mauritanians live in conditions of a slave relationship (http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/download/).

our community, but they do not have much effect on their group or family, for example. Now, there is no more security here, everyone is on the alert, Bambara, Moor, Fulani…" (Comment by a Soninké farmer, 58, on the southeast edge of Néma)

"In this area of the country, there has always been movement, a going back and forth between Mali and our villages and camps. The Bambara and Soninké who come around here work the land, they do not contribute to much here except with the products of their fields. They go to Mali mainly to see family or the doctor. Sometimes, they also exchange their grain for cloth, food, etc. But we, the Bidhane, are the ones who bring money into the country. We are traders, our presence always brings back money when we go to Mali. We have been traders for generations and we also teach the Quran. When we make seasonal migrations over there, a Moor, and especially a Chorfa, is a popular person because they can do everything. Some people ask us for talismans, traditional medicines. It is true that our youth are vulnerable for they are targeted by jihadists, but the young black Mauritanians are still bandits: because they have no knowledge to transmit, they are assigned to such tasks as monitoring, patrolling. They are the ones who sow terror. But people here are conciliatory. We know our interests; we share more of them with the "others" [i.e., the Mberra NGOs, Salafists, traffickers, etc.] *than with the regular authorities".* (Comment by an elderly Moor of the Chorfa of Néma)

The arrival of a frontier: a history of change

As mentioned in the introduction, the Hodh have only been part of Mauritania since 1944. As a result, before the war in northern Mali, the populations living on both sides of the border had already experienced a significant change with this redrawing of the border which had repercussions on social boundaries. In Mauritania, there are also internal borders, such as borders associated with social status (former masters/former slaves) and communities (Moor/black African). While showing a porous nature in certain contexts, these internal borders are rather tight. Drawing a dividing line between two spaces is often the will of a supranational authority. But the history of this geographical limitation, the interaction that it causes, the new mobility it generates, the denial or appropriation it raises, concern only the people living on either side of this line, whether it is imposed or natural. For example, for the Bidhane groups on the Mauritanian side, the dividing line changed their position in space and their relationship with spatiality. Dividing the space in two parts automatically created a 'here' and 'there' for people accustomed to great mobility without hindrance. Through this historical episode, former slaves have experienced, if not a change in status, at least an improvement in living conditions and opportunities for empowerment. One of the main consequences of this shift in the geographical border has been a relaxation in the dominating/dominated relationship characterizing relations between the *Bidhane/Haratine*, for example with the massive settlement of slaves. The limitation of mobility seems to have changed the nature of migration, which now obeys imperatives which have nothing to do with the search for water points and pasture. On both sides of the dividing line, people have attached themselves to new identities; security monitoring has increased; and a new 'foreignness' has gradually crept into the interstices of identity, whether fictive or real, which once functioned in terms of tribal and ethnic boundaries.

Moreover, the people concerned know the patterns of seasonal migration; but this migration takes place in an area without administrative delineations. The attachment of the Hodh to Mauritania has integrated new areas for people to travel to and from. The recent and relative difficulty to reach them has led to the need to organise stays in a concentrated way. Movement now occurs on a cyclical rhythm: one no longer goes to the other side just to sell a cow or buy a few bags of millet. One pools objectives and schedules their achievement.

Subsequently, it became necessary to perform at home certain activities which were once done by the seasonal migrants in the Malian area. Skills and expertise were introduced into everyday practices. Agriculture, dyeing, grain storage, etc. would, henceforth, be done locally. The border changed local habits; it created a new otherness and new cycles. This historical overview helps to more effectively understand the underlying changes which have resulted from the crisis in northern Mali. Similar changes are now happening except that, this time, insecurity and the new information technologies have been added into the mix.

The Malian crisis: the new face of change at the border

A Moorish teacher, aged 52, living in Bassiknou, testifies about these developments:

BORDERS MODIFIED BY DE GAULLE IN 1944

In the 1930s, the colonial administration had concerns about the movements of nomadic Moors in the north of the colony of French Sudan, including multiple attacks by followers of the hamalliste brotherhood against colonial interests. Both Hodhs, with a predominantly Moor population, were sources of security concern. Their attachment to Mauritania on 5th July 1944 came in response to this need for security.

"*This is not the first time that we have lived through change here. Already our grandparents told us that, with the border, everything changed. The slave listened less to his master because he could flee, the camp leaders saw their authority reduced because the camp was split in two... What is happening today is a bit like that, because now, for example, in Bassiknou, the hierarchy of money is changing. There are rich people who have been robbed, lost everything, livestock, material goods, all looted by jihadists from Mali (sometimes enlisted jihadists are our cousins, but often they are foreigners, Malians, Algerians...). So, when money changes hands, power also changes hands, and then the former slaves go to Mali because they want to make their slave past disappear, although over there, too, there are bella* [slaves]. *But*
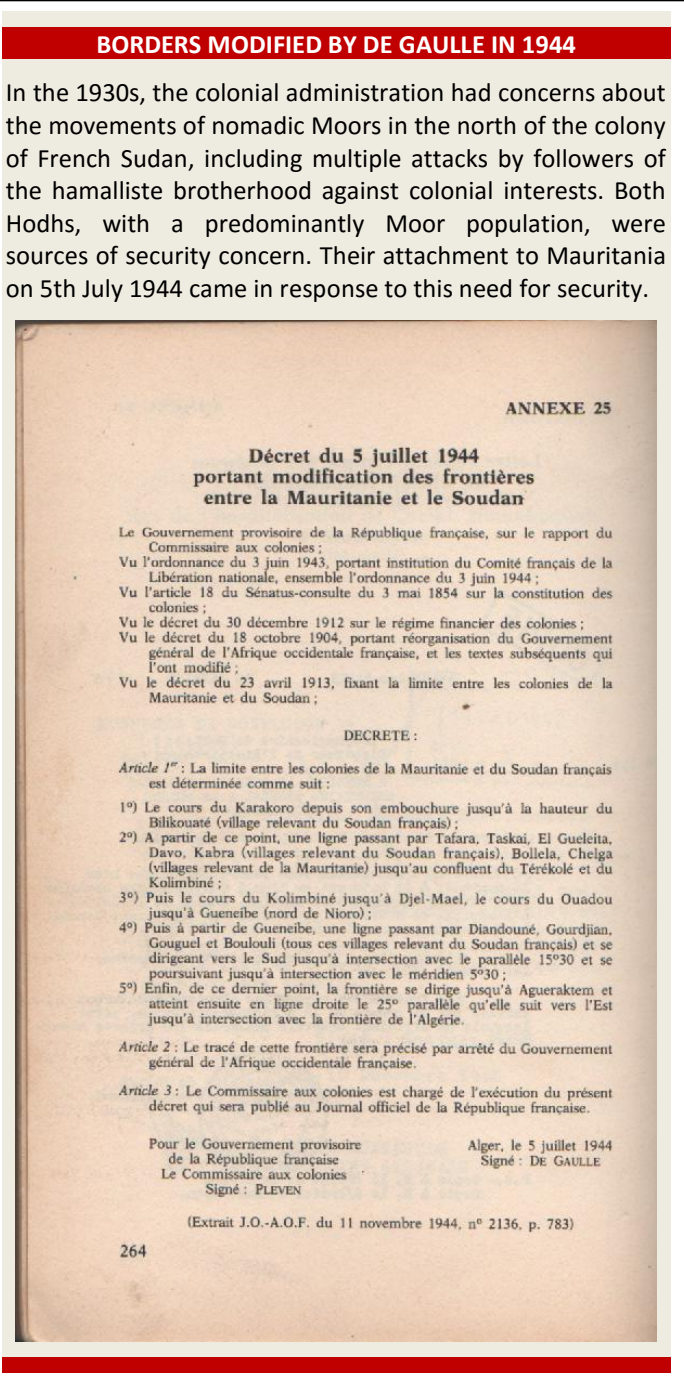
> *these slaves are more educated and speak Arabic. There is a high level of insecurity that blends into everyday normality. Here, we pay attention all the time; we have this habit. Fuel is sold by foreigners, but the authorities turn a blind eye. It is better for everyone, so it works like that. And also, even those who had only a utilitarian use of Bambara have started to learn it so as to make NGOs believe that they are Malians. That, too, is a change; before it was the Tuaregs who passed themselves off as Moors to live in peace and now it is the Moors or their former slaves who cheat to impersonate refugees. We no longer know who is who, for it changes every day; people arrive, people leave. In Néma, people pretend not to know what is happening here, right on the border. We are a bit left to ourselves. The law is a mix of state law and the law of the foreign terrorists (Malians and others)."*

According to the respondents involved in the study, the events of the war in northern Mali have created a new spatial (refugee camps, displaced villages) and economic configuration in which new social and identity constructs will be grafted. The stories collected indicate a perception of space that is like a pendulum: steadfastly oriented along a north-south axis. The area and the geographic spread are not seen in terms of length and width. They are rather seen according to a cyclical up and down movement of seasonal migrations, in a slow creeping towards the regions of Mali for various reasons. Insecurity hinders these movements, for it requires finding additional solutions that, in turn, form new relational facets: resupplying through the traffickers for the mother of a family, or hosting foreigners for money, etc.

> *"Moving to Mali was also to sell our labour,"* says one respondent, a housewife, *"it was undertaken to offer our services as farmworkers to the owners of the Malian fields. Before, when our young people went over there, we were pleased. Now we are quite worried..."*

According to these stakeholders, mobility was a 'natural' act in the continuity of their space. It was neither thought of nor experienced in terms of migration, not even in the sense of temporary migration. Just as after the 'correction of the borders' in the 1940s, the Malian crisis has brought new upheaval and changes in traffic, relationships and activities. According to the respondents, one of the main current constraints is the insecurity of travel. For them, neither Malian sovereignty nor Mauritanian territory has any real meaning. Their 'country' is the area through which they migrate, back and forth. Almost all the experiences collected around the three elements of community/border/security express a deep change taking place beyond the visible turmoil caused by radicalization, whether it is armed or not.

RADICALIZATION: CLUES AND PROCESS

Points to remember:

- The entire range of political and violent messages/actions with a religious basis are found in Mauritania. According to this study, three organisations enjoy the highest visibility: the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, and Tablighi Jemaat Dawa (a proselytizing movement).
- The process of radicalization is not linear in Mauritania. Rather, it swings continually between a hardening and weakening in relation to 'organised' religious observance. One enters and exits the circle of radicalization with a flexibility that blurs the actual influence of the phenomenon and the way it turns into actual violence.
- The mastering of religious texts, honoured as part of culture and/or identity in Mauritania, can have two different significant effects. In some cases, it helps protect against excess (by neutralizing individuals so soaked in dogmatic knowledge that they could not be baited by the extremist message). In other cases, it is used by the holders of this same knowledge and helps to propel them into the circles of decision-making and conceptual design of the violent extremists.

1. Radicalization and violence: words in action and the action of words

> *"To each his talk and God for all! We* [the radical movements] *do not speak the same language, what the Ikhwan* [Muslim Brotherhood] *call 'mousslimin'* [Muslims] *can be for us 'moufssidin fil ard'* [corruptors on earth]*, so we have an obligation to destroy or at least neutralize them". (*Comment by a Salafist man, 47, Barkéol, Kiffa region)

In relation to the issue of insecurity, the word *emn* (security) – which was used by the researchers during the survey – remains associated almost exclusively with crime (theft, rape, attacks motivated by greed) in the perception of the respondents. However, this association between 'security' and crime is not the same for the people encountered in Bassiknou, and in the Hodh Ech Chargui in general, where religious tensions were described as the source of insecurity. Indeed, among the respondents in these regions, religion is mentioned among the causal factors of insecurity. Yet, they specify that they mean the religion promoted by the armed groups from northern Mali.

It is important to present an overview and background of the words (in everyday language) used by respondents to denote religious practice or thought (whether as part of an organised movement, individual behaviour or a traditional collective, and relating to how the message is received and the interaction it involves). The point is to see what real or imagined meanings have become grafted onto phrases covering the scope of the relationship to belief, dogma and new religious practices. It is also important to understand the influence of this talk on the global perceptions of religion in everyday life.

The box below shows some of the Arabic expressions which are used locally. Their interpretation in this study, and in this context, does not always coincide with international meanings. They are listed in an order which steps in their relationship to Islam. What is conveyed here is more a reflection of perceptions than an accurate reflection, through words, of the organisations mentioned (whose historiography is not the objective of this study).

STEPS IN THE RELATIONSHIP TO ISLAM

Moutadayina
A person who is literally "religious", that is, someone who visibly practices their faith with fervour, and who is valued socially, without necessarily being affiliated to any organised religious group. This term was in social use even before the emergence of radical groups. This person may be any age.

Moultazim (diniyenn)
Description of a person who is literally (religiously) "committed", that is to say who is in the process of reformulating his relationship to faith. They may not be radicalized, but their life is modelled on the precepts of Islam (e.g. they close their store at the hours of prayer or they use Islamic finance for loans). Most often, people who describe themselves as *moultazim* are between 20-45 and consider themselves modern and educated. They did not accept, at least to the researchers involved in the study, that they were aligned to any organisation, so their approach is individual.

Likhwan, Islahiyin (dou'att)
According to the groups encountered during this study, this is anyone who has a relationship with the local representatives of the Egyptian-inspired movement *Ikhwan el mousslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood). This affiliation may concern religious observance alone, but more often it includes political leanings or participation in charity works and associated movements. This term invokes the idea of organisation and religious renewal/reform. The garments they wear are distinctive: women are veiled in the Saudi manner; men wear white turbans and, for some, the *djellaba*.

Selefi, Oussouli
The popular perception of the *selefi* or the *oussouli* ("fundamentalist") is a notch above a 'brother' (*men likhwan*). With the use of this term begins a large spectrum of terms relating to radicalization. At the very end of this spectrum, extremism is observed in various forms: in speech, alone; in attitudes (clothing, relational); or in the taking up of arms. For the average Mauritanian, the *Selefiyiin* are orthodox people, given to labelling the ideas and practices of others as heresy, with, in the background, their willingness to apply Shar'ia to the letter.

Jihadiyiin
They are the soldiers. According to the people interviewed during the study, there are few jihadists in Mauritania. The vast majority of people consider that the conditions for *jihad* – as presented by the Prophet – are not found in the region. But the respondents in the study also said that a minority of jihadists does exist. They are often in constant migration in the sub-region and beyond.

El moutetariv
This term, which literally means "extremist", is really specific to the border areas (those involved in the study did not encounter it in Nouakchott, for example). The respondents use it to refer to those at the extreme limit of radicalization. Manifestation of extremism takes several forms. Often the people who are called *El moutetariv* have little Quranic knowledge and imperfect mastery of Shar'ia rules. It seems to be a catch-all term, wherein predominates the idea of the criminal, without social ties, with basic religious knowledge, someone who is usually already known to the police and security services (from testimony in Bassiknou).

Derived from comments by the people interviewed during the study

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Despite its effective presence in Mauritania among popular perceptions, the **Jama'at Da'wa at-Tabligh** does not appear in the box because its members are often treated as Salafists – although they represent a very different structure. Its members are not in the same network of socialization as, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is involved in a broad spectrum of action (in schools, universities, markets, trade unions, etc.). The Jama'at Da'wa focus on preaching and teaching religious precepts. But the interviews that the researchers involved in this study conducted with Salafists released from prison indicate that these stories and testimonies give Jama'at Da'wa a strong influence over very young people and disadvantaged social groups (such as former slaves). However, the overall perception does not dissociate them from other radicals.

It must be added that the emergence of vocabulary which is specific to religious expression – as presented in the box – is both cause and consequence of changes to the way religion is practiced in Mauritania. If it is the product of a real evolution of religious practice and overall belief, this vocabulary itself authorizes a new understanding of Islam by breaking it into several areas and levels, as an Imam at a mosque in Dar Naim (western district of Nouakchott) suggests:

> *"In our original, traditional environment, the relationship to religion was limited to two dimensions, connected by various bridges: that of the mahadra, responsible for explaining and setting rituals and practices, and that of the Sufi paths, concerning everything related to love, worship and the relationship with God."*
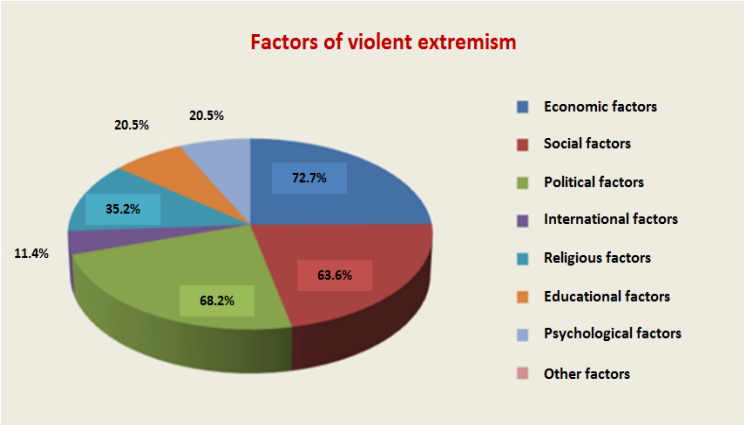
Finally, young people often move from one level to another: today's Muslim Brother could be tomorrow's Salafist. Young people may leave any form of movement, only to retain the religious fervour and clothing which will make their entourage continue regarding them as an extremist, although they have broken with that training. Some young people admitted that they have kept the external appearance of radicalized youth because it brought them respectability in the neighbourhood or in the village – an ambiguity that was rewarding. The trajectories of the young people encountered during the study are quite diverse and not linear. Further study is needed of the evolution of extremism.

2. Radicalization: sources and resources

> *"Returning to God is the only way that is left to us; the way of God is the only cause that still deserves to be fought for. There is no more Arab nationalism, pan-African solidarity. Liberalism has won everywhere. To change things, the only way left is action, not ideas".* (Comment by a 23-year-old Moor student, Salafist, at the Islamic Institute of Aïoun)

In Mauritania, change linked to religious phenomena affects all layers of the population and seems to stem from several cyclical and structural factors. At first glance, it could be said that these changes are part of a general push towards a new order, itself divided between the open call for modernity and a latent conservatism. But this is not the opinion of the respondents as 72.7% said the primary sources of radicalization were associated with economic insecurity when offered a multiple choice question during the survey (as illustrated in the pie chart).

According to the respondents, a disadvantaged childhood leads inevitably to a general vulnerability to crime *"of which radicalization, armed or not, is only one of the faces"* (comment by a respondent from Néma). In the popular view, trajectories of radicalization are due to the issue of economic redistribution and social support (parental divorce, exclusion, family crisis) or to the presence of such political factors as adherence to the opposition and criticism of the government. These factors put such young people in a situation of exclusion which pushes them to engage with the first organisation they encounter, always with the aim to gain access to public life and bring about change through ideas. Religious fervour and the momentum towards religious conformity have little to do with

Factors of violent extremism

- ■ Economic factors
- ■ Social factors
- ■ Political factors
- ■ International factors
- ■ Religious factors
- ■ Educational factors
- ■ Psychological factors
- ■ Other factors

72.7%
63.6%
68.2%
11.4%
35.2%
20.5%
20.5%

young people turning to radicalization.

Through analysis of the data from this survey, there emerges – alongside the causes mentioned by the respondents – a greater complexity in the interrelationship between, on the one hand, changes in religious practice and understanding and, on the other, changes of a more collective nature (e.g. the redefinition of identity underway in the country, modernization and new social demands, all of which do not, however, supersede or neutralize traditional structures at odds with the modern state).

In addition, models of social and economic success associated with radicalization are growing at a fast pace. For example, the new leaders of opinion are increasingly among the ranks of the local Muslim Brotherhood. In seeking to understand radicalization within Mauritanian society, those involved in the study realised that, ultimately, resources which radicalization brings with it are the prime factors motivating young people. And these resources are multifaceted, as demonstrated below in the four interviews with young people involved in what they present as a humanitarian association. Well known in Nouakchott, this association is managed by the *Islahiyin* (moderate reformers, mainly members of the Tawassul political party of the Muslim Brotherhood which now leads the opposition in Mauritania and which has a majority of female affiliates).

To address the points related to this study, only young men were invited to speak. The respondents, who were aged between 23-38 years, had no difficulty in engaging on issues related to religion. They showed a certain degree of skill in explaining the why and how of their actions:

> *"The first thing that brings me here is the role they give to me. Here, I feel that I can contribute and that I have a real, positive impact while helping others. I am learning to get organised. The first thing the Muslim Brotherhood reformers (Islahiyin) gave me is organisation. This is valuable. The failing public school system did not teach me that."*(comment by Speaker 1)

> *"The brothers strengthened my faith. I recite the Quran by heart. I come from Aïoun, Gogi Zemal. It is very poor there. To be with them in politics, as in our youth activities, is to be sure to get help if you are in need, in a simple way, because we also help others. Here we have one identity, that of a Muslim."* (comment by Speaker 2)

> *"I am a Salafi, I come here (in this association) because I help celebrate the end of Ramadan. I am not for violence, I do not know violence, but I think that in today's world, one must be in an Islamist organisation with an Islamist orientation (tewejouh islami). The outside world is organised, the states of this region are weak, they cannot or do not want to bring about true development, that is, a form of life organisation that would help us move forward. But here, with the Brothers, there are resources to take, be it for this world here below or for the afterlife."* (comment by Speaker 3)

> *"I come from Kiffa. I am of the Tejekanet tribe where we grow up with religious knowledge. I only came to the Likhwan (Muslim Brothers) for the values they convey, because my religious knowledge must be used for something, for preaching, or to give my energy to a charitable cause. My role model is Mohamed El Hassen Ould Dedew, the great scholar (alem). I am not in need, my family and our tribe are rich, but it is for the faith and our role as Muslims, to do something for my community. The difference between my father and me is that he votes for the ruling party out of opportunism, while I vote for the Tawassul party out of conviction. Is it not better? Is this not democracy?"* (comment by Speaker 4)

The intergenerational angle

As implied in the last speaker's words, generational conflict (which is increasingly sensitive) can be observed in the new religious practices. Radicalization is also the battle between the old and the new. In membership in political or armed Islamist movements, young people seem to find something solid to hold on to in the modern world (as paradoxical as that may seem for a Western observer). The extremist message is perceived by young people as the only way to dissolve ancestral inequality (traditional social hierarchies) and deconstruct former frameworks – like the framework of the tribe, which is seen as fuel for the state and maintained by the state as an electoral catalyst. In the border areas of the two Hodhs, the great fiefs of the religious chiefdoms and the Sufi paths (especially

> **THE DREAM OF A YOUNG MAN IN NÉMA**
>
> *"I was born in Néma and grew up here. I am 21. Before the war in northern Mali, Mauritania, for me, stretched to the first Malian villages, like Kayes, Nioro… The war in Mali shrunk 'my' territory. We were already poor here; we are even poorer now. I did not get my high school diploma (Baccalaureate). I wanted to go to the Islamic Institute in Aïoun, but I could not. To go to Nouakchott, you have to know someone who is already there or work very hard. If you go to Bassiknou, Vassala, M'berra, there you are sure to better you situation, by entering into contact with the world of the refugees and the NGOs, where you can do lots of things with them (trade, errands, distribution, etc.). But that, too, is a network… I am hoping to get in, but my dream is to go teach the Quran in northern Mali. If you manage to get recruited by the fighters and go there for a short time, you come back with enough money. They need to teach people to read Arabic, to find someone who can explain the tenets, and they don't find them easily. I can do this, I won't go to fight or do harm, but to be with people where money is circulating."*

the Qadiriya brotherhood as advocated by Cheikh Sidi el Moctar el Kenty, or *Hamallisme*), older people complain that they are no longer followed by the young who see in their practices "*bid'ah*" (reprehensible innovations), acts foreign to the original path of the prophet of Islam.

> *"When I make ziyarat* [holy visits]*, three of my four sons refuse to accompany me. They say they do not recognise themselves in the Tariqa* [fraternities]*, and that many things need to change in our way of worshiping God. They refuse Sufism and prohibit certain things we have been doing here since the dawn of time, for example they have started creating separate spaces for men and women, although we know very well what is haram* [forbidden]*; we know that there is no harm in mixed assemblies if everyone shows respect through his clothing, his attitude, his words... But, now, everything is haram with the young Muslim Brothers, they no longer listen to music, they disobey the elders... everything is collapsing, we do not know whether we should look forward to their renewed interest in pious works or worry about it"*. (Comment by a family head in Kiffa)

The young people encountered in this study seemed to be on multiple and different paths. No single way leads to radicalization or a violent attitude supported by religious extremism, neither in the border area nor in Nouakchott. The majority of young Islamic militants encountered during the study – who were living both in poverty and affluence (around 20 in Nouakchott and a little more near Aleg, M'Bagne, Kiffa and Bassiknou) – openly claim to be affiliated with denominations, organisations, movements and associations calling for the radicalization of religious practice. Those involved in the study have not always been able to establish, in the qualitative processing of the study data, a direct link between the new religious practices and economic status/poverty. However, all these young people share the same search for new values (democracy, 'eastern modernity', new identities, a break with the traditional order, renewed trust in the state, citizenship, etc.). Every poor, young Mauritanian, whose education has been incomplete, is potentially the target of an extremist group, violent or not.

However, a young, Arabic-speaking, Mauritanian Moor living in the urban centre with average wealth can just as easily lean towards the structures linked to new religious practices. For this person, the desire is qualitative: they are interested in redefining their environment and their religious ideals. Recruiters see in this person a most attractive recruit: they can quickly create new cells (in their university, their family circle, or among colleagues), which a recruit with less social influence cannot produce. Both types of young Mauritanians are useful to the radicalization process, with variations in their modes of action and their assignments.

3. Traditional religious knowledge: obstacle or facilitator?

> *"The Islahiyin* [reformers] *bring us nothing new; they only cut us off from our young people. Long before them, the Zewayas had the knowledge and understanding of sacred texts. Teaching Islam is our life: what could a young reformist teach me?"* (Comment by an Imam in a mosque in Toujounine, in the eastern district of Nouakchott)

A collection of perceptions on radicalism and violence linked to religion cannot be done in Mauritania without considering the field of knowledge traditionally produced around religious life for centuries. Across the country, in all communities, be it on the border or in the central areas, traditional teaching is a strong presence in the daily lives of groups and individuals. The goal of this study is not to present the nature of this teaching, but to highlight how it can be converted, in terms of values and tools, by those who hold this knowledge into extreme radicalization.

The activity of radical movements first revolves around preaching sessions and religious sermons in meeting places (mosques, associations, households). Those involved can always be divided into two camps: a minority of leaders, teaching "the lesson" (*eddarss*), and a majority of listeners, receiving religious knowledge in an easy and immediately usable manner. In Mauritania, the paradox is that the receivers of the message often have as much religious scholarship as their masters. As part of this study, the opinions from the heads of urban *mahadras* were collected. Here is what one master of the Quran confided:

> *"Learning the Quran is a mandatory part of our identity as Zewaya and Muslims. But often, the young people who are freshly out of the mahadras break free from this Zewaya identity and from the peaceful use we make of it. They set themselves up as masters of extremist cells around the world thanks to our ancestral knowledge. People listen to them because they are not ignorant, they have the knowledge... With these people, we teachers of the mahadras are generally in rupture. We do not want to deal with them. Not only because of the authorities, but because these young people become enemies of the traditional world. But one cannot say either that the extremists recruit much among those leaving the educated circles, because these young people often want to get into the workforce early and refuse to engage."*

**QUESTIONS FOR THE MOTHERS OF "FORMER SALAFISTS"
(OFFICIAL TERM)**

To complete the survey, those involved asked questions about what it meant to be "violent" to 26 women (mothers) who were met in Nouakchott as part of a case study on those "exiting" from a radicalized experience (whether armed or virulent only in speech) which was carried out on the sidelines of this study. Those involved in the study met the mothers of these former detainees condemned for "terrorist crimes", who are designated as "former Salafists" by the heads of prison administrations.

The main questions asked were:
o   For you, what does it mean to be a terrorist (*irhabi*)?
o   Do you consider your son to be *irhabi*? If not, how would you define the action of your son in his organisation?
o   Is your son's experience valued by the family?

The answers can be synthesized around one idea: while families, especially mothers, often frown on violent radicalization, being a former salafist does not make someone an outlaw and even less an outcast. On the contrary, through some amazing process, the offending acts are dissociated from the individual. People understand that a person can go very far in his communion with God and faith and put the two supreme values (God and faith) above men who, in this view, could be eliminated if they ever stray too far from the path...

It was apparent from the answers to the three questions, that the experience of violent, armed extremism is not considered to be criminal. It is devalued only if it is accompanied by embezzlement, theft or any other breach of honour. Taking up a weapon in God's name was not once mentioned as a fault by these mothers, but as 'deviance', 'spiritual search', a 'chain-reaction', etc. For the mothers, their sons are not terrorists. Instead, they are ambiguously presented as part of the 'people of jihad' (*men ehl al jihad*).

In this study, the methods and ways of acquiring religious instruction were presented by the heads of mahadras and some parents of students as designed to be compartmentalized, proposing as many answers as questions. Therefore, no room is left for any questioning linked to new religious practices for someone coming out of these 'universities of the desert'. A young man who has perfected his traditional teaching was, for the respondents, someone who had nothing to learn from extremists; on the contrary, it is the cells – and especially foreign ones – who have everything to learn from him. That said, some young people encountered during the study brought up the rigid nature of some of the educational texts – texts that are never criticized, although they are not from the Quran or the Hadith but rather from human jurisprudence which, in their view, responded to the needs of a bygone era.

It appears that young people do not spare traditional teaching from their general re-evaluation of socio-political institutions and religious norms. This is coupled with an urgent need to put religion back on its original track.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Points to remember:

- In Mauritania, there is great variation in the status of women, depending on whether they belong to the Moor or black Mauritanian community. Although women are devalued in all communities, the lingering matriarchy within the Moori community gives women more visibility and active participation in decision-making.
- The Moors see women as the guarantors of social values. Traditionally, they are entrusted with giving children their first Quranic instruction, teaching up to the basics of the Sunna and Hadith.
- Women are very present and fill a valued role in social aspects of the new religious practices. They serve as transmitters within their own circles, but also as reactors within civil society. They bring force to claims and are mobilized during protests (organizing meetings demanding the release of Salafist prisoners or going door-to-door to raise awareness).

"The Muslim Brothers give us our true worth, the one we were given by the Prophet. Moor society values women only to subject them, while Islam, followed to the letter, devoid of these customs, retains woman's dignity in every respect. Yes, we are calling for a break with the social order to return to God". (Comment by a young Muslim sister, a 23 year old student, Tevragh Zeina residential area)

1. Gender in Mauritania

Women constitute the majority of the Mauritanian population: 51.1%, as opposed to 48.9% for men. From the early 1990s to the present, matters relating to the status, roles, rights and promotion of women in society and in the state have gained increasing importance. This period has been characterized by definite progress in many areas through the creation of structures and institutions, as well as the establishment of institutional mechanisms, to guide and manage public policies on gender and human rights. National laws are rooted in Islamic law and in a 'custom-based' interpretation of societal facts, whereas national policies reference universal authority founded on the will to build a world of freedom and equality according to international conventions.

The participation of women in public life has improved significantly since the adoption, in 2006, of a law establishing a quota (20%) for female participation on the lists of candidates for elected office (Municipal Councilors, MPs and Senators). Their accession to elected office or administrative responsibilities, although it has progressed over the years, first originated from a system based on token representation rather than from their actual role in office. Despite their political dynamism, the participation of Mauritanian women in political life has long been confined to voter activism. Following the 2006 and 2007 elections, women held 19% of the seats in both houses of parliament and 30% of Municipal Councilor positions. In the same period, and for the first time since the country's independence, women were promoted to positions of authority or representation (*Wali*, ambassadors) which were previously exclusively male responsibilities. Mauritania's first woman Magistrate only appeared in 2012.

Community life in Mauritania is characterized by the strong involvement of women. Thousands of female co-operatives contribute to the socio-economic sector, and NGOs and community organisations are mostly directed or led by women.

The level of women's economic activities is still somewhat unclear (they are underestimated or not accounted for in official figures), but various indicators seem to show an increase in their contribution to national wealth. Women are particularly active in the primary sector (31.4%) and in the informal sector.

But such progress is still only a small step. It is not sufficient to fill the widening deficits, lacks and imbalances between women and men in many areas of social life.

THE WEAKER SEX

In the social representations of women which come from the traditional, conservative environment, the female figure has symbolic predominance. The presence of women is valued, including in the meetings of men. The idea that Mauritanian women, in general, and Moorish women, in particular, have a margin of freedom, movement and initiative that is quite different from their sisters in similar cultures is widespread. Among traditional Moors, the woman is idealized: she embodies the honour of the group, standing like a 'queen', disdainful of household chores. According to this representation of the woman, the term 'weaker sex' makes sense... What is remarkable is the investment in 'weakness'. Both society and the masculine elements of the group treat women according to this 'weakness.' As for women, this moral and physical characteristic legitimizes a special handling of their status. The inter-gender relationship is not based on a clearly stated male superiority, but rather on an instrumentalisation of feminine attributes, something most people accept. The Saharan space also has a critical effect on this; the scarcity of income, like the nomadic lifestyle and the mobility within this space, means that everyone has a vital role to play for the survival of the group. In these conditions, it is hardly possible to separate out the female members. Women have their role: they must make sure that hierarchical representations and order are valued. Thus, they can gain respect from the community. The subtlety of the perception of women in Mauritania is that it puts the 'noble' female status above all, in the symbolic, but which otherwise retains from patriarchy restrictions which women themselves enforce and which, finally, assign them to a manageable space where their only right to movement is within it. Similarly, religion and sacred knowledge are open, but not completely accessible. Biographies of religious scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries mention no female scholars, although they did exist.

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2. Gender and radicalization

The women interviewed in this study are rural or semi-rural women. The vast majority of them live in poor material conditions, if they do not live in extreme poverty. However, some women from the wealthy neighbourhoods of Nouakchott, where luxury preaching is spreading against a background of modernism and higher education, were also invited to express themselves. In traditional society, women already have a close relationship with basic religious knowledge: they are responsible for teaching Quranic basics in early childhood, as well as the basics of the Sunna and the Hadith. This is mostly the case in zewaya circles. Some epistles dealing with religious ritual are sometimes reserved for teaching to women, in particular, everything concerning the life of the Prophet and his companions and writings about purification.

2.1 Women, borders and insecurity

In the border areas of the country, women play many roles in the daily lives of radical groups or simple smugglers. Yet, they do not see their help as a crime or participation in any process leading to violence. Instead, they consider their collaboration as part of ancestral hospitality and mediation for which they feel socially mandated. As long as there is no visible violence or aggression, they remain available or neutral, and ready to co-operate depending on whether they feel their direct interests

are threatened or not. Radical extremists often use women for a number of operations and activities, such as:

- o *Facilitation,* with the integration of individuals who are "committed" in Mali, but staying on the Mauritanian side of the border: this implies receiving convoys in their homes for one or two days, as well as providing information about the situation in the village or town. As most of these women living on the border are bilingual, they often serve as interpreters. On the Mauritanian side, and especially among the Moors, men use a second language only when necessary; they seldom mention the number of dialects they speak. The use of local dialects is more spontaneous in women and cultural mixing is easier. This quickly reassures Malian elements, whether in camps, on market day, or simply when looking for accommodation.

- o *Mediation* through women, mainly mothers who are respected by all: for example, they can intercede with the administrative authorities, and sometimes even with leaders of extremist networks. They can request someone's freedom; the granting of documents; or the right for a man to ask a woman to marry him when the applicant is not from the region and is dismissed as a "Malian fighter", etc.

- o *Commerce*, as many traders on the border deal directly with female owners of wholesale businesses or women who work as suppliers of goods to the capital. Usually this trade is in dyed textiles, food (potatoes, yams, shea) and, sometimes, smuggled goods (cigarettes, alcohol, drugs).

- o *Recruitment:* this role is less common as the risky nature of the area does not encourage women to join the cause of extremists in northern Mali. But the promise of a better life for those who manage to get to the big cities (Bamako) sometimes leads women (especially the young) to cross the border. Often, they are quick to return; but some who are unable to return end up integrating into foreign communities. (The comments collected mention alleged abductions and disappearances of young women).

It must be remembered that women in the border areas are rural women whose living conditions are insecure or very insecure. The effects of a massive rural exodus of men, with increased responsibility and constraints on women, add up to this insecurity. Even when they have the opportunity to bring money into the family, these long separations (some of which end in abandon) often have dire consequences on family life, in general, and the stability of the couple, in particular. Women must take on additional responsibilities and tasks usually attributed to men. They find themselves powerless to stop the deterioration in the health and education of their children; they are also more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections like HIV/AIDS.

During the group interview held in Nouakchott on 14-15 July 2015, one of the women from Bassiknou, a midwife, recounted the climate of fear permeating daily life:

> *"Every day, we hear stories of robbery and assault that make us live in fear. We do not recognise the fighters right away, the city is a place of passage where we see different kinds of people. And, then, when you're a woman you can only resign yourself and not blow on the coals. We soothe our men, our sons, asking them not to confront the newcomers and not to meddle in the affairs of the smugglers..."*

> *"I'm here in Nouakchott for medical treatment. I was evacuated from the Hospital of Néma because my leg is rotting. I was stabbed in the Mali area. I was there with my husband. People from MNLA came to our homes at night, they took everything. They wanted to harm me, one of them attacked me with a knife. He thought I was a*

Tuareg so I spoke in Hassaniya for him to hear my accent. Otherwise, he would have killed me because I had dishonoured him by being married to a slave descendant. Over there, everything is mixed up... we do not know who is who. It is language which sometimes saves, not faith..." (Comment by a seamstress, aged 22, from M'berra, encountered in the hospital in Nouakchott)

THE CONDITION OF RURAL WOMEN

Despite progress, disparities persist between rural and urban areas including, among others, the following:

- Analysis of rural poverty by gender of the head of household shows that it is highest among households headed by women (57.9% as opposed to 52.9% of those headed by men).

- The literacy rate is 65.2% in urban areas and 52% in rural areas. The enrollment rate in primary education is 82.3%, with 70.2% in rural areas and 101.4% in urban areas. Gross enrollment at the secondary level is relatively low: 29% nationally with 49.8% in urban areas and 12.1% in rural areas.

- In health, immunization coverage against BCG remains low in rural areas; the use of contraceptive methods remains uncommon (3.3% in rural areas, 13.8% in urban areas); the use of prenatal care remains lower in rural areas (66.1 as opposed to 88% in urban areas); undernourishment remains most severe in rural areas where 36.5% of children are moderately thin, 9.5% are severely thin and 30.9% of children suffer from growth retardation; assistance during childbirth is much lower in rural areas (39%) than urban areas (90%). Rural women's knowledge of HIV/AIDS is low (8.4%, as opposed to 17.3% in urban areas).

- The situation of women in rural areas remains precarious, marked by the prevalence of female genital mutilation, forced feeding, early marriage, polygamy, divorce, marital and sexual violence, a low level of awareness about their situation, low participation in decision-making, non-accessibility to social and legal protection, and ignorance of economic and social rights.

- The unemployment rate is around 47.8% in rural areas. Employment is precarious and dominated by the high incidence of collective work without explicit compensation, the lack of a real market for paid work, and the persistence of different forms of labour for others.

2.2 Women and religious life in urban areas

In Nouakchott, women are present at all levels of decision-making and action within the radical movements. They can be involved in charity work and religious classes. Besides, they often serve as preachers and move around giving sermons which are very popular in the homes of some well-off families as well as in the slums. Their sermons may not give any sign of radicalization; nevertheless, they are a new form of urban religious expression based on the models of the major cities of the Middle East. This feminine preaching can take the form of services given by experienced women preachers who preach according to standards from the Gulf monarchies on special occasions (Ramadan, periods of mourning, religious holidays). This style of preaching is known in Mauritania through broadcasting by Arab satellite television stations. In interviews, these women show satisfaction with the roles given to them. They learn by heart methods to deliver religious sermons, just as radicalized men do, and they actively work in recruitment (presented as a return to God and not as any form of organised action). In Nouakchott, those involved in the study met some of these young activists, aged 17-35, in markets, universities, private centres, and sometimes in meetings. Older women meet together, but they are less actively engaged in religious activities.

At the political level, two women sit in the National Assembly for the moderate reformist Islamist party. Both political women enjoy an excellent reputation, even with their political opponents. It seems that the commitment to orthodoxy has a value-added effect for women, which generates a

faddish attraction and collective commitments to orthodoxy that often dissolve as easily as they were made. But for women who remain in government, the path is clear to the highest levels of social and political distinction.

Changes in religious expression are also noticeable in other aspects of daily life, such as clothing styles and leisure activities. Traditional women's dress in Mauritania is a dress-veil made from a fairly lightweight fabric, loosely worn. Women who have chosen radicalization wear a black Saudi-style '*abaya*', with a scarf as a distinctive sign. The normal Mauritanian dress is considered not in accordance with religious precepts, whereas "*moultazim*" ("committed") clothing is seen as a marker of the wearer's affiliation to new religious practices. During holiday periods, women involved with radicalized movements double the frequency of their actions, in urban or rural areas. They actively participate in setting up the 'winter camps' which make up a very attractive activity for a large part of the youth (even for those who are not religious fundamentalists). In fact, these camps are spaces for distraction, expression and religious education. They are mainly provided by the Muslim Brotherhood for young people (who receive very few such offers on the part of state). The presence of women is meant to dissuade the authorities from interfering in these activities for young people.

> *"When we, women, hold a sit-in in front of the presidency for the release of detainees, we are most often heard. And when we are not, we stay a few more days chanting phrases in front of the authorities. Because in our culture it is shameful to leave weak women in the sun, sooner or later, discussion will be initiated. If it were men demonstrating, the police would come and disperse them very quickly... We, women, have our role in society, especially to demand change. Even if they do not give in to our demands, we are at least heard. It is important that women are involved in religious knowledge and in the return to religion purified of all customs and traditions, to implement transmission, to relay..."* (Comment by a Muslim sister and businesswoman, President of a neighbourhood committee)

In Mauritania, women who are engaged in organised movements of religious reform are not only a point of connection between parts of the radicalization process; they are stakeholders acting at the level where new concepts are fluid and mobile. They are also forces of resistance against any act to disintegrate these movements.

AVENUES FOR REFLECTION

Based on the perceptions collected from respondents and observations made in the field, supported by analysis and discussions with various relevant actors, five avenues for further reflection have emerged. But, first, two strategic lines of reflection and institutional action should be remembered.

Strategic line of reflection N°1: Anticipate the potential for a drift into violence

It is important to reflect on and bring forth a vision of anticipation able to take into account the potential for violent drift. This study shows that this potential is currently contained in the framework of discursive denial through a pacifist self-perception of both the self and interrelationships. This discursive denial also opens the way for the legitimization of violence that can be 'managed.' Such legitimization may be utilized in a variety of situations: against non-Muslims, in cases of damage to the foundations of religion, in cases of foreign interference, to defend the sanctity of the Prophet, etc.

Through the stories and information collected, the study was able to demonstrate the existence of a 'violence scenario' which is potentially ready to be activated. It remains hidden within the shared and conveyed values, and appears most often in the form of ambivalent attitudes. This scenario is a reality situated somewhere in the middle of the matrix of inter-group relations and new religious practices in this "land of Islamic peace", as the respondents often describe their country. Certainly, all communities within Mauritanian society express a deep aversion to aggressive judgments, posturing and behaviour. However in the recent history of the country, the murderous conflict with neighbouring Senegal is a reminder of the existence of the seeds of violence and the materialization of underground divisions. Long denied, these can be turned into a generalized, bloody confrontation with a minor dispute between farmers. If, in 1989, the trouble spots were mostly communal or political, rather than religious, the resulting conflict still revealed the unpredictability of a surge of violence. All the ingredients are still present, alongside new religious practices that are increasingly fragmented and at odds with traditional points of reference which, in some respects, served as a method of relieving societal tensions.

Strategic line of reflection N°2: Build a space for observation and debate about developments in religious life

Given the changes in Mauritanian religious life in the 21st century, it would be useful to create a space for monitoring and exchange in the form of an observatory and forum for debate. It could take charge of the evolution in religious 'ideas and behaviours' and the way in which they are organised and structured as part of political or cultural action. This space could play a vital role in informing and enriching all sectoral policies, especially those concerning young people, education and employment. It happens that the Mauritanian government is in the process of setting up the Supreme Youth Council. For now, this institution is already perceived as a refuge for young graduates from leading foreign universities, while it could be a tool for renovating society and highlighting the real problems of young people, including extreme radicalization. The Supreme Youth Council, if it could be depoliticized, could also spur on the indispensable educational reforms which the government is struggling to put in place. And it could be a place where different population groups meet for strengthening national unity, through programmes designed to challenge strict ethnic identity.

On the basis of enlightened strategic vision and an optimal institutional framework, five avenues for further reflection have been identified:

Avenue for reflection 1: Put education at the centre of responsible citizenship

Every result must begin with and pass through education. Civic education is currently almost nonexistent in Mauritania. It could be part of the school curriculum and religion could be presented as an integral part of Mauritanian citizenship. Care could be taken to establish consistent quality schools in the Adwabas (villages of former slaves) to ensure all young Mauritanians have equal opportunities in terms of training and employment. It should not be forgotten that the interviewees in this study listed economic insecurity and youth unemployment as the primary causes of radicalization and called for education providing qualifications and opportunities.

Avenue for reflection 2: Plan and establish support actions within the mahadras

Working within the traditional religious schools (the *mahadras*) and getting the leaders of these centres involved could be a way to prevent violence and extremism. The *mahadras* are not breeding grounds for religious radicalism, but the students which come out of them are prime targets for 'headhunters' and other extremist recruiters. Practical measures to avoid sensitivities relating to everything concerning the sphere of sacred knowledge could be put in place and take the form, for example, of conferences and courses (on topics such as religion, citizenship, the natural sciences, the social sciences, etc.) which could be entrusted to government officials, academics and opinion leaders. These would be invited to initiate reflection and foster exchanges which could take place more or less frequently.

Avenue for reflection 3: Recreate and restore trust in the state

The majority of radicalized young people say they are searching within the Islamist movements for new values of participation in a collective work of social and national belonging, with new ideals of popular commitment. Like education, good governance remains a key part of social peace. In the responses to the study questionnaire, the respondents cited the recurrence of coups, both in relation to violent episodes they had experienced and to their constant fear of new violence... In their accounts, they also mentioned the influence of the tribe in state affairs and the way the government uses the tribal forces. As part of a struggle against extremism, it would be necessary to establish a relationship of trust with young people who thirst for reform, social justice and change. What the state does not give them in institutional stability some young people seek in radical, even extremist, circles. They see in them places for visionaries, builders and entrepreneurs. Building trust in the state would require unifying, inclusive action which would place the emphasis on the share of young people in the population and on their dynamism.

Avenue for reflection 4: Rethink administrative, economic and cultural decentralization for greater effectiveness

Efficient decentralization with elected deliberative assemblies and local development plans would allow people to play a more active role in the management of radicalization. In a modernized political and institutional framework, the prefects, in partnership with local municipalities, could organise inter-generational exchange. They could also foster free expression between young and old about their fears and aspirations. The points in common which would come out of this process would be summarized in a 'charter of understanding'. A successful decentralization policy would encourage and develop actions of cross-cultural co-operation across borders, based on the history and

development of their communities and common heritage. Such decentralization would allow to review land use and regulate the rural exodus which represents the 'first step' for some young people towards jihadist recruitment in the border regions.

Avenue for reflection 5: Invest in communication

Communication can greatly contribute to preventing extremism and violence by spreading a culture of freedom, equality and peace based on the needs of everyday life and the practice of citizenship. Investing in communication and diversified media allows the establishment of a social pedagogy affecting all population groups and representatives of public authority (administration, the army, the courts, education). The embryonic nature of citizenship in Mauritania would be an adequate framework for new unifying definitions. Yet, its actual emergence could not be completed without a communication policy. Initiating a strategy and an 'anti-extremist' message based on the values of freedom and tolerance as well as the principle of consensus and the inclusion of all social actors (women, traditional chiefs) could rely on a range of vehicles (realistic short documentary films and even cartoons for children). Even when there is an acknowledged appeal to violence, it would be important to increase initiatives for dialogue, like the one initiated in January 2010 between the authorities, religious leaders (*faghih*) and Salafist prisoners.

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