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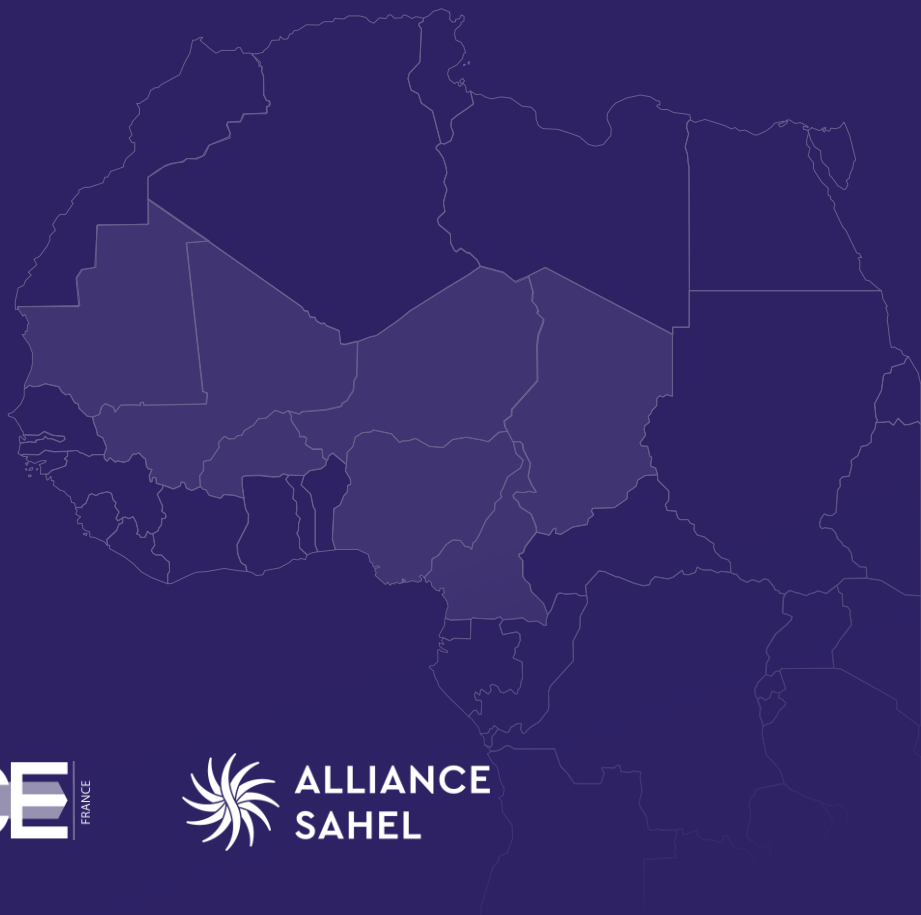


The impact of the Malian security crisis on Mauritania

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The ongoing crisis in the Sahel region, marked by the expansion of armed groups, weak state institutions, political instability, and poverty, is leading to massive population movements both within and across national borders. Mauritania and Mali are two neighbouring countries that have been affected by terrorist violence at different times, but since 2012, the continuing deterioration in the security situation in Mali has had a knock-on effect in Mauritania: the latter is receiving an ever-increasing number of Malian refugees, who are now settling there on a long-term basis. With the arrival of more than 50,000 new Malian refugees in 2023, mostly women and children, there are very significant political, economic, and social consequences for Mauritania and the Hodh Ech Chargui region.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mauritania has been, after Algeria, one of the countries most affected by the terrorist threat (from the Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat, Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, GSPC), and the presence of *katibas* in the country was reported as early as 2005, including in the capital city, Nouakchott.¹ Mauritania responded to the attacks with a threefold strategy. The first part of its strategy consisted in strengthening the presence of the state on the principle that, in order to discourage people from joining armed groups, it is essential to provide aid to the population and guarantee basic social services. The second part involved strengthening security arrangements with the aim of neutralising the jihadist threat: the creation of nomadic *méhariste* (camel cavalry) units responsible for surveillance and intelligence, which travel to remote areas, the militarisation of the border with Mali, and the surveillance of roads by air and by the installation of fixed security posts. The third part of the strategy was a theological response, involving the establishment of a political-theological dialogue between theologians and prisoners.² Although the model used by Mauritania has led to the dismantling of several terrorist cells – the country has not seen any terrorist attacks since 2011 – declassified American documents have revealed that the country has paid money to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to prevent tourists from being kidnapped. Mauritania has always denied these accusations, instead emphasising the success of its anti-terrorism laws and the administrative and economic measures being used to strengthen the presence of the state.

As for Mali, the fall of the Libyan regime in 2011, which encouraged the return of fighters of Malian and Nigerien origin, has been cited as a major factor in the destabilisation of countries along the whole Sahel strip. However, there are also structural factors contributing to the speed and intensity of the contagion at the regional level: notably the weakness of the state in the various countries and the gradual establishment of armed groups, which have extended their influence from northern Mali to the Liptako-Gourma region (spanning the border areas of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), and from there to the north of the coastal countries. Whereas Mauritania has chosen to rely on its own forces to fight terrorism, the fight against terrorism in Mali, until very recently, 'was delegated to the United States, Algeria, Mauritania', and France (Antil 2011, p. 63). Since 2011, international programmes³ and various international security and stabilisation operations (Operation SERVAL and FATIM in 2013, Barkhane, MINUSMA, and G5 Sahel)⁴ have supported the Malian state in its fight against terrorism, but this extensive support has not succeeded in

¹ Before 2011, Mauritania had suffered seventeen terrorist attacks, six of which were carried out in Nouakchott and claimed by the GSPC and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In 2007, four French citizens were murdered in Aleg, and a suicide bomber attacked the French Embassy in August 2009.

² Mauritians made up a large proportion of the fighters belonging to AQIM.

³ See, for example, the US Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative.

⁴ The G5 Sahel, created in February 2014 and comprising Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso, aims to help safeguard security and development in its member countries. The G5 Sahel Joint Force, an anti-terrorist force, was officially launched in July 2017. On 15 May 2022 Mali announced that the Joint Force was withdrawing from Malian territory, followed by similar announcements by Burkina Faso and Niger in December 2023.

restoring stability in Mali, nor has it prevented the terrorist threat⁵ from spreading to central Mali and to the wider region (in Liptako-Gourma). The continuing deterioration in the security situation in Mali is leading to massive population displacements towards neighbouring countries, most notably Mauritania, with economic, social, and humanitarian consequences.

The aim of this note is to highlight: (i) the issues for Mauritania linked to the deterioration in the security situation in northern Mali; and (ii) the local governance issues – access to services, social cohesion, and tensions over existing resources – linked to the arrival of new Malian refugees in Mauritania, and to Mauritania's response.

II. THE DETERIORATING SITUATION IN MALI: BETWEEN SECURITY RECONFIGURATION AND ECONOMIC SUFFOCATION

In August 2023, following months of tension, war resumed in northern Mali between armed groups belonging to the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement (Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development, CSP-PSP) and the Malian army, just as MINUSMA was beginning its withdrawal from northern Mali.⁶ Northern Mali had already seen a large number of internally displaced people as a result of threats and attacks by JNIM and ELGS, and the resumption of fighting in northern Mali led to the displacement of people towards Algeria and Mauritania. According to figures for October 2023, there are 391,961 internally displaced persons in Mali and 104,324 refugees in Mauritania.⁷

A. The end of the (non-)implementation of the Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali resulting from the Algiers process (2015)

Although little progress was made in implementing the Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (or Algiers Accords, 2015) under the two terms of office of Ibrahim Keïta (2013-2020), the military authorities in power in Bamako since 2020⁸ have a more determined vision of its implementation (or rather its non-implementation), together with a more centralised and unitary territorial approach. In 2019, the inclusive national dialogue recommended an 'intelligent rereading' of the peace agreement with the aim of rebuilding the nation-state (Bourgeot 2021). Yet, on 14 November 2023, the military regime succeeded in retaking Kidal by force, which constituted a highly symbolic political act for the military regime, marking the return of the state to this town from which it had been absent since 2012. Such use of force is not enough, however, to 'repair relations between the state and communities' (Baldaro and Sangaré 2023). The transitional government called on groups 'not involved in terrorism', as well as Mali's partners, to commit to a 'direct inter-Malian dialogue for peace and reconciliation', which was intended to replace the Accord. This idea was immediately rejected by Tuareg groups, who described it as a 'sham' and saw it as 'a way of declaring the Accord definitively null and void'.⁹ By stating that the fight against armed

⁵ Mainly Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS).

⁶ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1485134/politique/dans-le-nord-du-mali-linquietante-reprise-de-la-guerre/>

⁷ <https://r4sahel.info/en/situations/sahelcrisis/location/8776>, as of 31 October 2023.

⁸ President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was overthrown by a military coup on 19-20 August 2020. Virginie Baudais and Gregory Chauzal, 'Mali's transition: High expectations and little time', SIPRI Blog, September 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2020/malis-transition-high-expectations-and-little-time>

⁹ According to the President of the Transition, the 'direct inter-Malian dialogue for peace and reconciliation' should make it possible to 'eliminate the roots of community and inter-community conflicts' and 'promote national ownership of the peace

terrorist groups, including rebel groups, should continue 'until the country is completely pacified', the government not only broke with the northern groups but also with Algeria, the leading international mediator, which organised a meeting with representatives of the signatory groups in December 2023 and then received Imam Mahmoud Dicko, an opponent of the military junta.¹⁰

At the beginning of 2024, the issue of the Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali continued to pit the international community against the transitional Malian government: the members of the UN Security Council 'recalled the central nature of the 2015 Accord [...] and urged all signatory parties to resume dialogue and commit to implementing the Accord in order to guarantee peace and stability in Mali'.¹¹ Meanwhile, the strategic committee of the Mouvement du 5 juin – Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques (5 June Movement – Rally of Patriotic Forces, M5-RFP) proposed 'abandoning the Accord altogether' in favour of an inter-Malian dialogue.¹² On 25 January 2024, the Malian government issued two press releases,¹³ the first denouncing the 'proliferation of unfriendly acts and instances of hostility' on the part of the Algerian Republic, and the second announcing the end of the Accord for Peace and Reconciliation 'with immediate effect'.¹⁴ A few days later, on 26 January 2024, the Malian government announced the creation of a steering committee for the Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation.¹⁵

B. Security reconfiguration in northern Mali: civilians fleeing violence

On the grounds that MINUSMA's mandate was inadequate to meet the country's security challenges, Mali called for it to be withdrawn 'without delay' at the Security Council meeting on 16 June 2023.¹⁶ The withdrawal came against a backdrop of tensions between the Malian government and international partners, attacks by the armed groups EIGS and JNIM, and renewed fighting between the Malian army and the Coordination des Mouvements de Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements, CMA). The city of Timbuktu has been under a jihadist embargo since 8 August 2023, and goods can no longer enter the city, with JNIM fighters stopping lorries from Algeria and Mauritania in particular. The September 2023 report of the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) noted that the number of displaced people in the Gao region had fallen by 42%, but new displacements were subsequently reported between October and December 2023 due to attacks by jihadist groups.¹⁷ In contrast, the situation in the Kidal region has deteriorated sharply, with a 116% increase in the number

process'. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/01/03/mali-les-separatistes-touareg-rejettent-l-annonce-d-un-dialogue-inter-malien-pour-la-paix_6208835_3212.html

¹⁰ In a press release published on 13 December, the Algerian authorities reaffirmed that the Accord remained the 'ideal framework for resolving the crisis in Mali' and urged 'all Malian parties to renew their commitment to this collective work of peace and reconciliation'. The meeting in Algiers, hosted by the Algerian Prime Minister, was attended by Alghabass Ag Intalla (Secretary General of the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), and current President of the CSP-PSP), Fahad Ag Almahmoud and Hanoun Ould Ali (representatives of the Plateforme, an armed group that is a signatory to the 2015 Accord), and Mohamed Elmaouloud Ramadane (spokesman for the CSP-PSP). The meeting was heavily criticised by the Malian government, which denounced it as a meeting with movements 'that have chosen the terrorist camp'. The ambassadors of both countries were recalled. See: <https://twitter.com/MaliMaeci/status/1737572206735982599>

¹¹ Press statement by the Security Council on the closure of MINUSMA. <https://press.un.org/fr/2024/sc15557.doc.htm>

¹² 'Mali: Le M5-RFP demande l'abandon pur et simple de l'Accord de paix d'Alger', West Africa Democracy Radio, 6 January 2024.

¹³ Press release no. 064 and 065 from the transitional government.

¹⁴ 'Au Mali, ouverture d'une enquête judiciaire contre des chefs d'Al-Qaïda et des séparatistes touaregs', <https://www.jeu-neafrique.com/1509265/politique/au-mali-ouverture-dune-enquete-judiciaire-contre-des-chefs-dal-qaïda-et-des-separatistes-touaregs/>

¹⁵ Decree no. 2024-0053/PT-RM of 26 January 2024.

¹⁶ The decision was endorsed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2690 of 30 June 2023, which ended MINUSMA's mandate. The withdrawal was completed on 31 December 2023.

¹⁷ OCHA, 'Note d'informations humanitaires sur la région de Gao – Rapport de situation de décembre 2023'. Insecurity and military operations are hampering the work of humanitarian organisations, the monitoring of protection incidents, and access to internally displaced persons in the Gao, Kidal, and Menaka regions.

of displaced people, rising from 14,964 in December 2022 to 32,394 in September 2023. More than 6,000 people have been displaced in the various communes of Kidal, and 'according to local sources, the towns of Kidal, Aghelhoc, Anéfis, and Tessalit have been emptied of around 70% of their populations'.¹⁸ Families have moved to Algeria or to neighbouring towns, but also to the commune of Kidal, either staying with family members or on improvised sites. The people of the Kidal region are moving primarily to Algeria, with which the region shares a long border, while those from the Timbuktu, Léré, and Goundam regions are moving to Mauritania.

The military operations carried out by the Malian army in the regions of northern Mali, the fighting between jihadist groups, and the presence of the Wagner Group are increasing the risk of human rights violations, attacks against civilians, and restrictions on movement, as reported by Human Rights Watch.¹⁹ In December 2023, the Kal Akal association, a civil society organisation based in Kidal, condemned summary executions, thefts, forced disappearances, the destruction of infrastructure, and the targeting of Tuareg, Arab, and Fula communities by the Malian armed forces and elements of the Wagner Group, particularly through drone strikes and bombings.²⁰ Accounts from refugees speak of violence perpetrated against the population by armed groups,²¹ but also by the Malian armed forces and members of the Wagner Group. The majority of the Tuareg and Arab populations have fled to Mauritania since this route is reputed to be safer than those leading to Algeria or Niger. The choice of Algeria, for some, can be explained by the geographical proximity between Kidal and Algeria and the family ties that exist between communities on either side of the border, but it nonetheless seems that more people have opted for Mauritania. Furthermore, recent tensions between Mali and Algeria have led to fears of refolement, while community ties mean that Mauritania is the preferred direction of retreat, particularly along the Léré-Goundam-Niafunké-Timbuktu axis (UNHCR interview, Nouakchott, 11 January 2024).

Refugees report that populations are being attacked by the Malian army and Wagner along the Kidal-Mopti-Léré-Fassala axis, committing extortion, rape, and other acts of violence. Some people report that, at the end of December 2023, Wagner soldiers pursued refugees within 5km of the Mauritanian border and 'committed massacres under the eyes of the Mauritanian army opposite' (interview in Bassiknou, 25 January 2024). Mauritanian citizens have also been the victims of attacks:

On several occasions, Mauritanian livestock farmers have been the target of military attacks in the border zone between Mauritania and Mali. In 2022, at Hassi El Ataye, soldiers from the Malian army and elements of Wagner killed twenty-five Mauritanian livestock farmers. Last week, seven Mauritanian livestock farmers and two Malian Fulani herders were killed by Malian soldiers in cold blood in the south not far from Nara. Not to mention the capture of a group of Mauritanian livestock farmers near Adel Bagou by the Wagner Group, during which two Mauritanians were murdered. Mauritanians in Hodh Ech Chargui are often attacked in the border area with Mali. (interview with a mayor, Hodh Ech Chargui, January 2024)

The protection of the border had already led to tensions between Mauritania and Mali in early 2022, when several Mauritanians were reported missing while the Malian army, together with elements from the Wagner Group, was conducting operations, including on Mauritanian territory. In March 2022, the Mauritanian Prime Minister called on the United Nations to 'put an end to these recurring criminal acts', referring to massacres committed on Mauritanian territory. On 12 March 2022, the Malian authorities retaliated, banning the movement of civilians in the border area with Mauritania. More recently, because of the deter-

¹⁸ OCHA, 'Mali: Note d'informations humanitaires sur la Région de Kidal – Rapport de situation #1 – 08 novembre 2023'.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: Islamist Armed Groups, Army Target Civilians', 1 November 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/01/mali-islamist-armed-groups-army-target-civilians>

²⁰ <https://amadalamazigh.press.ma/fr/des-centaines-de-civils-tues-dans-le-nord-du-mali-selon-lassociation-kal-akal/>

²¹ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1482736/politique/a-bord-du-tombouctou-ceux-qui-etaient-coincees-a-linterieur-y-sont-restes/>

orating security situation, Mauritania launched an emergency appeal advising its nationals in Mali to return to Mauritania, as their safety could not be guaranteed outside the national territory. This led to the return of approximately 8,000 people.²²

C. Local economies suffocated by insecurity

The border between Mauritania and Mali stretches for more than 2,000 km, and the populations living in the border regions are suffering greatly from the slowdown in cross-border trade. The consequences of insecurity include the establishment of new transhumance corridors in the Hodh Ech Chargui region, rising food prices, and the increased cost of keeping animals. The violence in Mali has had economic repercussions for the Malian population, with fishing times and areas restricted by armed groups and with farmers no longer able to cultivate remote fields because of the presence of armed groups or because fields have been burnt or grazing areas have become inaccessible for herders and their cattle. People often move to Mauritania with their livestock, putting enormous pressure on host communities, the environment, and the region's already limited resources.²³ The transhumance cycle has also been disrupted, as the movement of Mauritanian livestock is affected by the insecurity in Mali. The Mauritanian authorities regularly alert livestock farmers to the risks (murders and theft of livestock) that they run by crossing the border but restricting movements poses other risks, whether in terms of food security or other dangers (over-grazing, epidemics, etc.), in one of the poorest regions of the country. The environmental risk is significant in an area that is susceptible to droughts and floods and given the use of firewood or charcoal as household fuel.

III. LOCAL GOVERNANCE ISSUES: HUMANITARIAN AID AND INCLUSION POLICY

[...] there are Berbers, Arabs, and Fulani are everywhere, from the borders to Néma [...], in the streets, on the roads [...], I've never seen anything like it. (interview with a community leader from Hodh Ech Chargui, Nouakchott, 16 January 2024)

Since 2012, Mauritania has been a receiving country for Malian refugees fleeing the violence of armed groups in central and northern Mali.²⁴ In March 2012, there were 10,864 Malian refugees in the Mbera camp in Mauritania, and the number of refugees had already risen by 20% by December 2012 (see graph below).²⁵ 2022 and 2023 saw a massive influx of Malian refugees.

Between January and December 2023, the number of refugees in Hodh Ech Chargui rose from 98,000 to 153,000, while the number in the Mbera camp rose from 90,000 to 104,000, and the number of those outside the camp rose from 8,000 to 49,000.²⁶

The settlement of people outside the Mbera camp reflects the fact that the camp itself is overwhelmed. These refugees are largely made up of people from central Mali, arriving from the south. They settle in or

²² Pro-Nexus interview, Nouakchott, 17 January 2024.

²³ The continued movement of refugees – particularly those who have livestock – does not call into question their refugee status.

²⁴ According to UNHCR, the majority of these refugees come from Léré (Niafunké Cercle), Timbuktu, and Tilensi (Gao Cercle). The town of Léré has been attacked several times: as early as 1991 there was a mass exodus of people to Mauritania following an incident in which the Malian army carried out a massacre in Léré.

²⁵ Refugees in the Mbera camp were able to vote in Mauritania's 2013 presidential and legislative elections.

²⁶ United Nations Mauritania, Emergency response for refugees from Mali, January 2024.

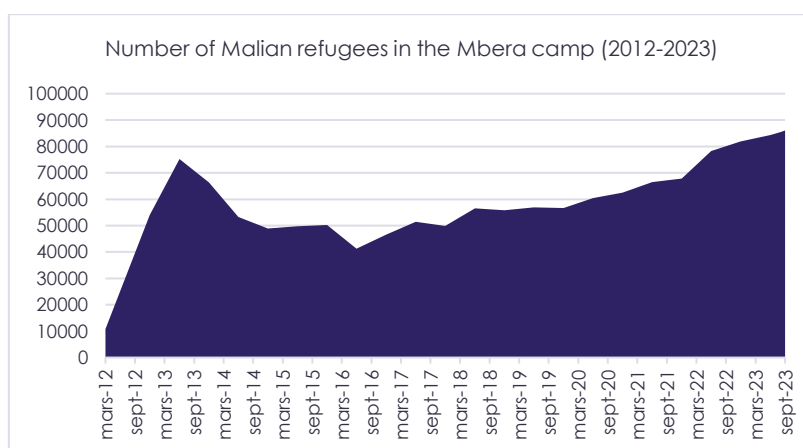
near towns and live in very difficult conditions. In most cases, they have lost all their possessions, and have been traumatised by the bloody attacks they have suffered. These are extremely vulnerable populations.

A. Mbera, Mauritania's second largest city

On 31 October 2023, Mauritania was hosting 112,021 refugees, 98.5% of whom were Malians (108,095). Of these refugees, 51% were women and 54% were children (aged 0-17).²⁷ Malian refugees arrive in Mauritania via the border region of Hodh Ech Chargui, which hosts more than '110,000 Malian refugees out of a host population estimated at around 500,000'.²⁸ In this region, 86,586 were registered in the Mbera camp, 1,313 were registered outside the camp, and 10,553 were awaiting registration. 1,268 were registered in the town of Néma (the region's capital), and 5,732 were registered near Néma.²⁹ Most of the refugees arriving via the south of Mauritania are Fulani, and most of those arriving via the south-east are Tuareg and Arab, with a few Fulani.

Arab and Tuareg refugees from Mali mostly settle in the Mbera camp, in the Bassiknou district.³⁰ The Fulani population represents only a minority of those in the Mbera camp, but occupies a few of its neighbourhoods, while most of this population settles outside the camp, particularly towards the town of Amourj. Those hosted in the Mbera camp benefit from the services provided there, but as the camp has reached saturation point, new refugees are settled outside the camp without the benefit of such services. An 'extension' of the camp has been created at Twaguitine, 40km from Mbera. The continuous influx is putting further pressure on available services and resources, as the camp has reached its highest occupancy since its creation in 2012.³¹

[...] waves of Malians made up of women, children, and men continue to stream into Mauritania by car, donkey, cart, and sometimes on foot. There are so many of them that they sometimes lodge, sleep, and eat in the streets of Fassala, Bassiknou, Néma, Adel Bagrou, Amourj, and Djiguenei. You can sometimes see dozens of families coming from Mali, especially in the border towns of Fassala and Adel Bagrou. In these Mauritanian towns, Malian migrants are very numerous and tend to outnumber Mauritaniens. (interview with a mayor, Hodh Ech Chargui, January 2024)



²⁷ UNHCR, 'Mauritania Operation. Camp and Urban area. Refugees and Asylum Seekers (as of 31 October 2023)'.

²⁸ Delegation of the European Union to Mauritania, 'Mauritania: l'UE mobilise des fonds additionnels pour répondre à l'afflux des réfugiés maliens', 14 December 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/436684_en?s=109

²⁹ UNHCR, 'Mauritania Map – Situation of Refugees and Asylum-seekers (as of 31 October 2023)'.

³⁰ Bassiknou is both an administrative district and a town in the region of Hodh Ech Chargui, situated 12,000km from Nouakchott.

³¹ Islamic Republic of Mauritania, Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development, 'Lettre de politique de développement sur les réfugiés et communautés d'accueil', July 2023, p. 10.

Source: *Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)*, IOM, 2012-2023

According to information gathered on the ground, all these refugees are fleeing insecurity, intensified fighting, and the involvement of the Wagner Group alongside the Malian army. Mauritanian actors observe that it is essential to take care of the refugees outside the camp by providing them with basic services (health, education, etc.), but also to support the host communities, which are also affected by these massive arrivals.

B. The Mauritanian government's inclusive policy

In addition to the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951 relating to the Status of Refugees (ratified in 1983), the Protocol of 31 January 1967 relating to the Status of Refugees, and the Organisation of African Unity Refugee Convention of 10 September 1969, the legal and institutional framework is based on the following texts:

- Decree 2021-436/MIDEC creating the Commission responsible for coordinating development projects targeting refugees.
- Decree 2022-063 of 5 May 2022, repealing and replacing decree 2005-022 of 3 March 2005, as amended, setting the terms and conditions for the application of international conventions relating to refugees in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.
- Decree 2022-166/MAEPSP creating the administrative unit responsible for coordinating and monitoring development programmes in Hodh Ech Chargui.
- UNHCR-Mali-Mauritania Tripartite Agreement, signed in February 2022.³²
- UNHCR-Ministry of the Interior and Decentralisation Memorandum of Understanding (2022) delegating refugee status determination in urban areas to UNHCR.

According to several national documents, Malian refugees are 'generously' welcomed by Mauritania. Refugee status gives them access to identity cards, the labour market, banking services, etc. Between July and November 2022, Mauritania launched a campaign to regularise the status of foreigners without residence permits, and 136,000 people were registered. A campaign to register refugees living in Hodh Ech Chargui also resulted in the registration of more than 7,000 people.

However, in a context of gradual disengagement by humanitarian actors, the Mauritanian government recognises the need to take ownership of the management and protection of the growing number of refugees. The government's response is based on three aspects: protection, empowerment, and strengthening the resilience of both refugees and host communities. Many of the people we spoke to stressed the importance of supporting the host community, in particular through development projects, but also by distributing cash, food, and livestock feed and improving access to healthcare.

Several ministerial departments are involved in the refugee issue:

- The Ministry of the Interior and Decentralisation is responsible for security and inclusion through the National Consultative Commission on Refugees and the Commission for the Coordination of Development Projects Targeting Refugees in Mauritania.
- The Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development coordinates public development policies concerning refugees.
- The Ministries of Health, Education, the Environment, and Water and Sanitation.
- The Ministry for Social Action, Children, and the Family.

³² A tripartite memorandum of understanding between Mali, Mauritania, and UNHCR on voluntary repatriation, signed in 2016.

- The National Advisory Commission on Refugees and Persons in Need of Protection, attached to the Ministry of the Interior.
- The coordination committee for development projects targeting refugees.
- The General Delegation for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion (Taazour).
- The Hodh Ech Chargui development unit oversees development projects for both refugees and host communities.³³

Decree 2005-022 grants refugees access to education (through the INAYA system), social protection (through the TEKAVOUL programme), and employment, all under the same conditions as nationals.³⁴ At the 2019 Global Forum on Refugees, the Mauritanian government made a number of commitments, including providing refugees with access to the national health system, a legal framework, identity documents, and the labour market.³⁵ In this context, UNHCR, the Mauritanian government, and the international community, including the Sahel Alliance, intend to ensure greater socio-economic inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in the national system.³⁶ For international actors, working with national agencies makes it possible to target both host communities and refugees, which is essential given the large number of refugees, and this policy aims to find a lasting solution to the difficulties caused by the displacement of populations.³⁷

Various projects do exist to support refugees, such as the Al Baraka economic programme, the promotion of credit agencies (PROCAPEC), and the ProNexus project,³⁸ which is run jointly by UNHCR and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Development Cooperation, GIZ), which aims for the economic inclusion of refugees, asylum seekers, vulnerable groups, and host communities outside the Mbera camp, in partnership with the national employment agency (Techghil).³⁹ The Mbera camp and four communes in Bassiknou are involved in projects related to access to water: the installation of solar-powered infrastructure, the construction of water troughs for cattle, and capacity-building for managers of traditional water points, in order to reduce the risks associated with access to water and to strengthen social cohesion by including refugees in management committees. Other community NGOs, such as SOS Désert, SOS Nomades, and Femmes Ressources, work on projects relating to social cohesion, reforestation, market gardening, and sanitation.

Health is overseen by the Mauritanian government, including four facilities in the Mbera camp.⁴⁰ Since 2020, the Ministry of Health has been running a medical clinic in the Mbera camp, and is also seeking to increase the capacity of the Bassiknou health centre to meet the needs of both the host population and refugees.⁴¹ These centres are part of the national public health system, and support for both categories of population is essential in order to facilitate social cohesion. However, refugees have strongly expressed

³³ The creation of this unit was part of Mauritania's 'multidimensional strategy' to combat terrorism, since, according to its agents, one of the pillars of that strategy is 'the population, which must be engaged and involved in a climate of development. There is also a religious aspect that is very important in this matter; moderate discourse and awareness-raising are important in this strategy.' Interview at the HEC development unit, 17 January 2023.

³⁴ The National Agency for the Registry of Populations and Secure Documents is responsible for issuing national identity numbers and identity cards.

³⁵ UNHCR/WFP, Supporting inclusion of Refugees in the National Social Safety Net, Mauritania.

³⁶ UNHCR Mauritania, Factsheet, Development in Forced Displacement Settings, Mauritania, June 2023.

³⁷ This strategy was developed by UNHCR and the Mauritanian government (2023-2026) on protection and solutions to the forced displacement of people living in Mauritania, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees.

³⁸ This project was launched three years ago (in early 2021) and focuses on six areas of intervention: improving access to basic services, such as health, education, and sanitation; improving young people to access means of subsistence; social protection; coordinating stakeholders, including TFPs and government structures; strengthening the humanitarian-development-peace nexus aimed at empowering refugees; and collecting lessons learned by UNHCR and GIZ.

³⁹ Techghil, as part of the ProNexus project, opened an office in Bassiknou in March 2022, with the aim of providing training and employment opportunities for refugees and host populations.

⁴⁰ Stratégie Nationale de Protection Sociale (National Social Protection Strategy, SNPS II).

⁴¹ The ProNexus project provides training for staff and refugee representatives. UNHCR, 'Overview of protection and self-reliance activities in Mbera camp and Bassiknou', p. 4.

dissatisfaction with the quality of care provided: 'whatever our illness, we are always given paracetamol, there's no other equipment, no staff' (interview in Mbera, January 2024). Access to education is somewhat different, in that the education provided in the Mbera camp follows the Malian curriculum, under the supervision of the Mauritanian Ministry of Education.⁴² In principle, refugees have the same access to education as nationals, but the school enrolment rate for refugees is low (38% in 2022)⁴³ and many of the people we spoke to reported that many children do not go to school because their families are reluctant. Since these refugees are spending a long time in exile, the Mauritanian government would like to integrate refugee children into the national education system, which would mean replacing the French-speaking (Malian) curriculum with teaching in Arabic, in line with the Mauritanian education system. However, access to education is not guaranteed for the children of families who are not in the Mbera camp and who do not have a residence permit.

The biggest challenges concern nutrition, and therefore food insecurity, access to water, and also access to water and grazing areas for livestock. The issue of water (drinking water and water for livestock) risks undermining peaceful coexistence between the two communities. According to a UNHCR analysis carried out in 2023 on the socio-economic situation of refugees and host communities, 37% of host community households have access to drinking water, compared with 98% of refugee households, as a result of the aid provided by partners and the boreholes that have been drilled.⁴⁴ Finally, access to employment should also be granted to refugees under the same conditions as for nationals, but there are several challenges, such as the low level of education among refugees, the large number of young people without qualifications, and the lack of diversity in the Mauritanian economic sphere.

In July 2023, the Mauritanian government updated the development policy letter (June 2018) relating to the management of refugees and host communities. The Mauritanian strategy is based on three policy levers: the first is the transformation of local economic opportunities in a rapid, sustainable, and inclusive manner; the second is the improvement of social protection and access to basic services; and the third aims to strengthen governance related to refugees and host communities. The development policy letter is intended to be 'a response to the challenge of maintaining peaceful coexistence between host communities and displaced populations'. However, the government document identifies the policy's weak points, which include: limited empowerment – particularly economic empowerment – of the two communities and insufficient access to basic social services; a low level of school enrolment and inadequate training provision; and strong pressure on natural resources, linked to 'the still limited territorial planning and integration of the Mbera camp into its environment, despite its likely positive contribution to the development of the Bassiknou district'.⁴⁵ With the support of its partners, the Mauritanian government aims to ensure that the inclusion of refugees in the national system is brought about in a sustainable manner.⁴⁶

⁴² The local authorities provide technical support and pedagogical supervision, while UNHCR and UNICEF coordinate educational activities and actors within the education working group. The camp has twenty-two nursery schools, eight primary schools, and two secondary schools, which award the Malian baccalaureate. Most of the teaching staff are refugees. See UNHCR, 'Overview of protection and self-reliance activities in Mbera camp and Bassiknou', October 2023.

⁴³ Islamic Republic of Mauritania, Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development, 'Lettre de politique de développement sur les réfugiés et communautés d'accueil', July 2023, p. 13.

⁴⁴ *Idem, Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ *Idem, Ibidem*, pp. 4 and 5.

⁴⁶ The implementation of this policy will extend from 2024 to 2027 and will focus on: (1) transforming the local economy; (2) improving social protection and access to social services; and (3) security and protection for refugees. With regard to this third strategic lever, Mauritania has undertaken to adopt a draft law on the right of asylum.

C. Political consequences and positioning of the Mauritanian government in the management of refugee flows

UNHCR and GIZ have recorded 153,000 Malian refugees, but the actual number in Mauritania is estimated to be two to three times this figure, representing between 3% and 9% of the Mauritanian population.⁴⁷ Although there are official crossing points, the current problem is that there is a 'massive, disorganised influx [...] refugees are entering everywhere'. Refugees are present throughout Hodh Ech Chargui and, according to the region's development unit, 'the population of Fassala has multiplied by four, and that of Megve by three, while Mbera is now the second largest city in Mauritania after the capital Nouakchott'.⁴⁸ This is a major cause for concern because Mauritania has never experienced the arrival of refugees in such great numbers, not even in 2012-2013. The Mbera camp is overwhelmed. Japan provided US\$2 million in aid in 2023 via the World Food Programme, which enabled food aid to be provided to 65,000 Malian refugees between July and November.⁴⁹ UNHCR requested US\$32 million to be able to carry out its operations, but only US\$12 million was provided. The European Union has also provided an additional €500,000 in humanitarian funds to support Malian refugees through Action Contre la Faim.⁵⁰

D. Social consequences: maintaining peaceful cohabitation between refugees and host communities

According to Kadari Traoré and Adinla Saye, while it is 'often asserted that there are no problems between Mauritians and Malian refugees [...] testimony from interviews often leads to these initial assertions being contradicted'.⁵¹ This is also what emerged from our discussions with host populations, who say that they 'don't gain much' from this situation and that they pay the price because of the scarcity of pasture, environmental degradation, and increased competition on the labour market. The need to preserve peaceful cohabitation between the two communities is constantly reiterated, and this is all the more important as the conditions for voluntary return are not yet in place, owing to the continuing deterioration in the security situation in Mali. The protracted presence of refugees, who continue to arrive in ever greater numbers, calls for specific interventions, particularly in the Hodh Ech Chargui region. In 2021, UNHCR conducted a 'Survey on the Intention to Return of Malian Refugees', which concluded that the majority did not intend to return (79%), mainly because of the insecurity, criminal activities, and absence of the rule of law in their place of origin. 85% said they wanted to stay in Mauritania.⁵²

On 1 January 2024, the mayor of the commune of Almekve sent an appeal to the President of Mauritania, stressing that living conditions there were tragically poor and that the massive arrival of Malian populations had led to the virtual paralysis of public services. In light of the border situation, the mayor called for urgent development action:

With this appeal, by which I have bypassed the normal channels, I wanted to inform Your Excellency of the conditions in which the citizens of our electoral district are living following the recent deterioration of the situation in Mali, which has led to the displacement of thousands of its citizens and has driven the inhabitants of this municipality from water points and pastures. The overpopulation has led to a lack of basic services and difficulties in providing services in

⁴⁷ Mauritania's population is estimated to be 4,615,000 million, as of 2021.

⁴⁸ Interview at the HEC development unit, Nouakchott, 17 January 2023.

⁴⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/mauritania/japans-humanitarian-assistance-supports-more-65000-refugees-mauritania-mbera-camp>

⁵⁰ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/436684_en?s=109

⁵¹ Kadari Traoré and Adinla Saye, 'Cartographie des potentielles sources de conflits existant entre les réfugiés maliens et la population hôte dans la Moughataa de Bassikounou, Mauritanie', UNHCR/Save the Children/International Alert, January 2020, p. 11. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/87203>

⁵² UNHCR, 'Enquête sur les intentions de retour au Mali', February 2021. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/85266>

public state facilities such as schools and health centres, causing distress in people's living conditions and difficulties in their means of subsistence. It goes without saying that the administrative and security authorities here in Bassiknou – who are aware of these cases and are monitoring the problems they are causing and the disasters they are wreaking – are predicting a catastrophe in the deteriorating conditions of the inhabitants, so that the present reality does not turn into a tragedy.⁵³

There is a risk of major demographic upheaval: Mauritania has mainly received Arab and Tuareg populations, but more and more Fulani people are arriving in Mauritania from central Mali, via the Koulikoro region. These new arrivals are mostly not settling in Mbera, but in the localities of the Hodh Ech Chargui region. The arrival of Fulani populations is raising fears of problems of social cohesion, which makes this a very sensitive issue. The people we spoke to describe the Fulani population as extremely poor, and this poverty (giving rise to groups of women and children begging) contrasts with the Tuareg and Arab populations, who 'drive Land Cruisers'. The scarcity of resources, pressure on social services and resources, and competition from Malian labour were seen as threats to social peace.⁵⁴

We know that this peace is fragile because the host population is being marginalised owing to a lack of adequate development initiatives. [...] We need to put in place more development initiatives for the host populations, who are beginning to show their distress, and some are leaving their land [...]. Refugees [...] are everywhere, in the streets, in the souks, they do all sorts of jobs and our fellow citizens can no longer find work. (interview with a mayor, 26 January 2024)

The most obvious risk is that of a breakdown in social cohesion, in a region with a population of 539,467⁵⁵ and which hosts around 100,000 Malian refugees, representing up to 20% of the region's population. The arrival of refugees is putting a strain on all basic services (health, education, water, food security) in a poor region that is also susceptible to droughts. The refugees are in a vulnerable situation and are exacerbating the situation of the host populations. In addition, the use of (meagre) local resources by refugee families and humanitarian aid is often a source of tension, with host populations feeling short-changed and demanding to be taken into account in aid programmes.

The situation at Mbera is a very serious issue for the Mauritanian government, as the camp's population is now very large compared to the population of Hodh Ech Chargui, and the camp has reached saturation point. The government is reportedly planning to transform the camp into a city,⁵⁶ which would enable the camp to be integrated into the 'national governance system in order to promote the harmonious and positive integration of the camp into the *wilaya* [administrative region] of Hodh Ech Chargui and to support the potential represented by the refugee population in terms of local development'.⁵⁷ Population movements are a concern for the Mauritanian authorities, and granting a regularised, permanent administrative status to the population would make it easier to govern the area.

⁵³ Translation from Arabic, <https://www.elmourageb.com/node/21140>

⁵⁴ According to the people we spoke to, trade in Bassiknou is dominated by Tuaregs and Arabs from Mali – a situation which creates tensions between the Malian refugees and the host population.

⁵⁵ 'Cadre harmonisé d'analyse et d'identification des zones à risque et des populations en insécurité alimentaire au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest', 11 November 2023.

⁵⁶ 'Camp de Mbera: l'ambitieux projet du président Ghazouani', Africa Intelligence, 19 December 2023.

⁵⁷ Islamic Republic of Mauritania, Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development, 'Lettre de politique de développement sur les réfugiés et communautés d'accueil', July 2023, p. 5.

IV. CONCLUSION

The term 'Malian crisis' has become inadequate as a way of describing this increasingly complex situation, since it has become a long-term situation with both medium- and long-term consequences for Mauritania. Given the current situation in Mali and the prolongation of the (military) transitional regime, it is unlikely that the flow of refugees will dry up in the near future, and in the meantime, humanitarian funds are becoming increasingly limited. Furthermore, as the Mbera camp can no longer accommodate any more people, management of the refugee situation outside the camp will present much greater challenges. Mauritania is still a security 'lock', despite structural problems of security, governance, and development, but this situation calls for the implementation of targeted development strategies in regions that are very fragile and exposed to shocks (from the influx of refugees, insecurity, climatic events, etc.). The consequences of the security situation only increase the vulnerability of those regions.

Although the G5 Sahel no longer exists, in early January 2024 representatives of Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal met in Senegal to discuss security cooperation. A roadmap was adopted, aimed at strengthening security cooperation between the three border countries, particularly in terms of intelligence and border surveillance, but also through the implementation of joint counter-terrorism operations.

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- Hodh Ech Chargui Development Unit, 17 January 2024
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- Representative of SOS-Désert, Bassiknou, 26 January 2024
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- Several senior figures in Bassiknou, Néma, and Amourj, 26-30 January 2024
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- Mayor of Amourj, telephone interview, 30 January 2024

PASAS

PLATEFORME D'ANALYSE,
DE SUIVI ET D'APPRENTISSAGE
AU SAHEL



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The consortium has a dual role: (i) to produce knowledge in response to our operational challenges of consolidating peace in the Sahel, and (ii) to make the most of this knowledge through two main tools: a digital platform, accessible to external users, which will host all the results of the studies, and conferences to discuss the results of the studies. The platform will support the production and sharing of knowledge by bringing together robust analyses of the Sahelian and Lake Chad contexts.

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