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## **Weapons of the Weak, and of the Strong: Mauritanian Foreign Policies and the International Dimensions of Social Activism<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the forms of interplay between the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and the international standing recently gained by some of the country's socio-political activists. These different forms of political argumentation are affected by Mauritania's 'Islamic republic' label, which, adopted following independence in 1960, has been opportunistically used by the state and has become a double-edged sword when used to legitimate foreign and domestic policies. After discussing official expressions of foreign policy, the article moves on to examine the forms of social activism that have more recently questioned the country's social landscape. The article concludes that Mauritanian foreign policy is in clear relation with a recent shift in the social agenda that questions Mauritania's social structures, political apparatus and the state's formal designation as an Islamic republic.

### INTRODUCTION

This article will discuss the current forms of interplay between Mauritania's foreign policy practices and the international standing recently gained by some of the country's socio-political activists. The local impact of these protest movements has led the country's political leadership to openly debate with these agents and to externally justify, for example, the active presence of an abolitionist movement in the Mauritania. The article argues that questions of race and social stratification—which are clearly noticeable in the local arenas—permeate foreign policy structures and force the government to present arguments regarding these matters at different international levels. The current questioning of the country's social status quo is now clearly inscribed in international forums, mainly through the innovative media uses made by different Mauritanian activists.

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The intricate debate explored in this article—and one that turns Mauritania into a particularly compelling case study—is also related to a critique of traditional Islamic scholarly traditions and their role in the definition of a stratified social milieu. Contrary to what has happened in other contexts more directly associated with the ‘Arab Spring’ (Diaw 2015), in Mauritania one notices not only an interrogation of the eminently political spheres, but a global movement concerned with the country’s overall social landscape, and with the uses of different Islamic readings which have supposedly helped stigmatize large sectors of Mauritanian’s Hassanophone populations. The complexity of these involvements should highlight the intertwined character of Mauritania’s foreign policy structures, as well as its effective debate with the activists presently questioning the social fabric of the country.

The article starts by outlining a global framework for the foreign policy structures that have defined Mauritania since its independence in 1960. It then debates the forms and uses associated with the ‘Islamic Republic’ label; and concludes with a presentation of activist movements and social actors who currently question both the country’s political leadership and its social design.

#### MAURITANIA’S FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGIES (1960–2016)

The foreign policy strategies associated with Mauritania are characterised by their diversity, if we consider the different—and often contradictory—policies which have been implemented since the country’s independence in 1960: the now-famous declaration by the country’s first president, Moktar Ould Daddah, that Mauritania would play the role of a *trait d’union* between the north and the south of the African continent; the country’s diverse post-colonial ties with France; its association with the *Négritude* movement; several ‘Marxist’ approaches (in connection with the Soviet Union, China, or Algiers); its proximity to Sudan’s Islamist project; and its familiarity with the Egyptian Pan-Arabism project. For more than half a century these ideological projects have at various points been associated with Mauritania’s foreign policy expressions (Diaw 1998). These different and sometimes oppositional approaches highlight the effort by the country’s first presidency to consolidate its identity, while simultaneously trying to define Mauritania as an effectively continental player, equidistant from the Maghreb and from Africa south of the Sahara.

When taking a closer look at contemporary events, the succession of regime-change coups that from 2005 have marked Mauritania make it somewhat difficult to assess the country's current foreign relations policy.<sup>2</sup> One can nevertheless point to the development of ties with the European Union, with the People's Republic of China, and with different Arab States from the Persian Gulf as indicators of the country's policy direction. The protocols established with these different entities have been followed by the three presidents who have succeeded Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (ousted in August 2005) in the presidency of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.<sup>3</sup>

There has also been a strong bilateral rapport established with neighboring Morocco. This relationship has been marked by the development of economic ties between both countries and, more recently, by common security concerns. The first aspect is closely associated with the opening of an asphalt road connecting Nouakchott with the northern border town of Nouadhibou, facilitating the circulation of merchandise along the Atlantic coast from Tangiers (and Europe) in the north to Dakar in the south.<sup>4</sup> Under President Abdel Aziz relations between Mauritania and Morocco have been somewhat strained, although there is no officially declared reason for this.<sup>5</sup> This tension is made evident by the fact that despite his frequent travels in Africa, the Moroccan king, Mohamed VI, has not yet landed in Nouakchott; additionally, the diplomatic post of ambassador to Rabat has remained empty since 2015. After a de

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<sup>2</sup> Chronology of Mauritania's nine heads of state: Moktar Ould Daddah (1960–1978), Mustapha Ould Mohammed Salek (1978–1979), Ahmed Ould Bouceif (1979), Mahmoud Ould Ahmed Louly (1979–1980), Mohammed Khouna Ould Haidallah (1980–1984), Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (1984–2005), Ely Ould Mohamed Vall (2005–2007), Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (2007–2008), and Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (2009–2017).

<sup>3</sup> Regarding foreign policy, one aspect stands out from the Ould Taya regime: the establishment of diplomatic ties with the state of Israel in 1999, after Saddam Hussein's defeat in the second Gulf War. In this moment RIM became the third Arab country to do so (besides Egypt and Jordan). Israel's embassy in Nouakchott was closed in March 2009, as a response to the Israel's assault on Gaza in the winter of 2008–2009.

<sup>4</sup> Special attention should also be paid to the role played by the social actors directly involved in the commercial operations established along this extended geography. The Oulad Bisbah *qabila* ('tribe')—which the current Mauritanian president comes from—is historically identified with this region, circulating between Agadir in Morocco and Dakar in Senegal. This is a relevant fact to be taken into account while considering the more recent trading bonds developed by the kingdom of Morocco and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

<sup>5</sup> A more recent minor diplomatic incident has been described as further proof of this malaise: in the summer of 2016 Mauritania refused to grant work permits to twelve Moroccans working for the mobile phone company Mauritel.

facto very tense period following Mauritania's independence,<sup>6</sup> both countries had apparently established a peaceful relationship—one that is now being called into question by different actors.<sup>7</sup>

Mauritania's foreign policy relationship with neighbouring Senegal is somewhat similar to its relationship with Morocco. During the period immediately following Mauritania's independence, Senegal represented one of the country's major partners at all levels (contrary to Morocco), but more recent developments led us to coincidentally portray a difficult, and many times strained, neighbourly relationship (culminating in the dramatic events that in 1989 nearly led both countries into war; see Pazzanita 1992: 298–300). In the present status quo, Mauritania views Senegal as a highly significant trading partner, with a noteworthy population flow across the Mauritanian-Senegalese border.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the present regional turmoil—largely associated with the latent conflict in Mali, but also involving global actors and agendas—the Mauritanian regime has received strong support from the European Union and the United States, both in the form of military aid and financial partnership. When Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz took power through a military coup (August 2008), and was latter elected president of the country (August 2009), both the EU and the US strongly supported Aziz's newly acquired role (he was for decades an important part of the country's intelligence community). The EU and the US made clear, on different occasions, their appreciation for the role President Aziz played in the stabilization of the region, notably during the Malian conflict (2011–2013). Since 2011 Mauritania has in fact been seemingly immune to militant extremist attacks, and the French-led Operation

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<sup>6</sup> Problems between the two countries emerged from the moment that Mauritania obtained its independence from France (concerning the Western Sahara question, see also Serrano & Rodríguez-Esteban, 2017: 48). Morocco did not accept this ruling, and peaceful bilateral relations between both countries were only established in 1969. In African arenas this problem became clear during the process leading to the creation of the Organization of African Union (Addis Ababa, 1963): Mauritania is one of the founding member states, but Morocco only became a full member four months later (19 September, 1963), precisely because of Mauritania's presence in the foundational meeting. The Alawite Kingdom would latter abandon this organization in 1984, this time because of the inclusion of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic as a member state. Morocco has more recently (2016) requested its re-adhesion to this organization, now renamed African Union. See also Correale and López Bargados 2017: 228–230.

<sup>7</sup> Another significant fact adding to this situation has to do with the sulfurous declarations of the leader of the Moroccan Istqlal party, Hamid Chabat, who, in December 2016, stated that his country's borders extended from the Mediterranean sea to the River Senegal (<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=30608>; accessed 02/03/2017). At present, border conflicts have also been noticed in northern Mauritania: <https://ledesk.ma/enclair/guerguerat-10-cles-pour-comprendre-le-bras-de-fer-avec-le-polisario/> ; [https://telquel.ma/2016/06/29/maroc-mauritanie-querelle-voisinage\\_1504184](https://telquel.ma/2016/06/29/maroc-mauritanie-querelle-voisinage_1504184) (accessed 06/03/2017). Regarding cross-border tensions and their significance in North African countries' foreign policies, see Fernández-Molina and Hernando de Larramendi, 2015: 249.

Serval seems to have achieved its goals of silencing open military actions in the country.<sup>8</sup>

The US, in particular, has acknowledged Mauritania's participation in the fight against radicalization (also known as CVE, 'Countering Violent Extremism'), especially following an international summit on the subject in 2015, which Mauritania hosted. American officials have praised Mauritania's longstanding tradition of 'peaceful Islam'; according to Bisa Williams, US Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of African Affairs, Mauritania is particularly 'well equipped to respond to assaults on the practice of Islam and espouse messages of peace'. Williams also described the (mostly tentative) dialogue established between 'moderate' scholars and 'radicalised' prisoners in Nouakchott as a pioneering initiative, 'offering an inspiring example to neighbouring countries like Mali and Niger'.<sup>9</sup>

Working within the framework of the 'Cotonou Agreement' (the ACP-EC Partnership Agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States; latest revision signed June 2010), the EU and Mauritania held a meeting on 9 December, 2016 in Nouakchott, which concluded by reiterating the EU's commitment with Ould Abdel Aziz's government and with the development programmes of his government (notably the 'Stratégie de Croissance Accélérée et de Prospérité Partagée').<sup>10</sup> The final joint statement by the officials present at this meeting highlights the merits of the Mauritanian president in areas of extreme importance for the EU, such as illegal immigration, the fight against terrorism, and the region's overall political stability.<sup>11</sup>

Another important aspect of Mauritania's political geography involves the country's relationships with the Arab world. These links are layered and complex, ranging from simple political partnerships to significant ideological and identity-related issues connecting this country on the Saharan edges with the cradle of Islamic civilization. There have also been migratory flows of some significance between the

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<sup>8</sup> The security operation in the Sahel region, still led by the French, is now entitled 'Barkhane' (since August 2014), and extends its geographical scope to Niger, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2016/08/23/debunking-mauritania%E2%80%99s-islamist-militancy-mythology> (accessed in 15/02/17). See also Otayek 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the EU's direct participation in Mauritania, one might also point to the funding of border controls, roads, infrastructure, and renewable energy producing facilities, as well as the fisheries agreements currently in force; at an official level the EU's High Commissioner Federica Mogherini as more recently (April 2017) reiterated the importance of a reinforced partnership between the EU and Africa ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/mauritania/25533/communication-conjointe-un-nouvel-%C3%A9lan-pour-le-partenariat-afrique-ue\\_fr](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/mauritania/25533/communication-conjointe-un-nouvel-%C3%A9lan-pour-le-partenariat-afrique-ue_fr)).

<sup>11</sup> See [http://cridem.org/C\\_Info.php?article=691944](http://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=691944) (accessed 20/02/2017).

two regions, signaling the social and economic value of this relationship (Ould Ahmed Salem 2007: 34). Contrarily to what has been signalled in other geographies, Mauritanian migration to the Gulf states has not led to a significant change in local religious learning and practice (Freire 2014). Nevertheless, such alterations have been identified in Mauritania, through the direct action of agents who have been working in the country (and the overall western Sahara region) at least since the late 1970s.

Still regarding the Arab world, one important event should be pointed out in particular: from 25–27 June, 2016, President Ould Abdel Aziz hosted the 27<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Arab League in Nouakchott. The participants of this meeting released a concluding statement establishing their opposition to Israeli presence in Palestine; a desire for a rapid resolution of the Syrian conflict (with no mention made as to the future of the Assad regime); the hope that Iraqi forces will prevail in their combat operations against ISIS, as well as the necessity to maintain Iraq's internationally recognised borders. This Sunni forum also made a statement against Iran's interference in Middle Eastern affairs. However, the summit fell short of actually forming a unified Arab alliance that might effectively help to solve the Syrian or Iraqi conflicts. Of the twenty-two countries forming this assembly, the heads of state of only seven (Sudan, Somalia, Comoros, Yemen, Djibouti, Qatar, and Kuwait) travelled to Nouakchott; this could be considered as something of a failure of Abdel Aziz's presidency, which could not attract high-level diplomatic representatives from many Arab countries.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>The future of the presidency which currently leads Mauritania's foreign policies is currently being questioned by opposition figures, who doubt that President Abdel Aziz will leave office, as constitutionally declared, in 2019. President Abdel Aziz has nevertheless repeated on several occasions that he will in fact leave office by the end of his second term. See [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/12/09/il-n-y-a-pas-d-effervescence-islamiste-en-mauritanie\\_5046599\\_3212.html?xtmc=abdel\\_aziz&xtr=1](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/12/09/il-n-y-a-pas-d-effervescence-islamiste-en-mauritanie_5046599_3212.html?xtmc=abdel_aziz&xtr=1) (accessed 25/02/17).

## A SAHARAN ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Mauritania's foreign policy is also influenced by the fact that since the late 1950s it has officially been designated as an Islamic Republic. The use of this term places Mauritania alongside Pakistan (1956), Iran (1979), and more recently Afghanistan (1992), as the sole representatives of this kind of political structure. Of these countries, only Iran seems to have consolidated a structured approach to such a project (Mottahedeh 2008; Bayat 2013: 35–70), while the others—including Mauritania—have seemingly adopted this designation for mostly ideological reasons (Salomon 2016).<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the moniker gives Mauritania a particular status on the political map, and particularly in the Arab-Islamic forums. At a regional level, it signals a clear demarcation from neighbouring Morocco, Algeria, Mali, and Senegal—and also from the laical character of French colonial administration. Islam's inscription in the country's name declares Mauritania's undeniable link with Islamic culture (and signalling at the same time a clear distinction from its 'pagan' neighbours), which should guarantee Mauritania a pivotal role in regional history as a protagonist in the expansion and protection of Islamic values.

The large majority of the political actors behind Mauritania's modern state project came from *zwaya* ('religious') social backgrounds in the Trarza region of southwestern Mauritania. The country's first president, Moktar Ould Daddah (1960–1978), was himself a product of a southwestern Mauritanian religious scholarship tradition (Stewart 1973; Cleaveland 1998)—and, of course, of colonial education as well. In Trarza (the Mauritanian region bordering the French colonial headquarters of St Louis du Senegal), colonial educational efforts were more clearly felt, leading social actors from this region to ascend to political leadership during the country's founding period. This particular reading of the local context remains, at the present, a significant marker for the emergence and development of Mauritania's statehood.

Contrary to this view, Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem has argued that the true reasons for the naming of Mauritania as an Islamic Republic were 'opportunistic' in nature. According to this author, the Islamic label was chosen simply because it enabled the country to rapidly unify its multi-ethnic populations: Islam was used as an

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<sup>13</sup> Today the most visible narratives of identity (focusing mainly on the Hassanophone population) are those reflecting proximity with the Arabic Peninsula at the time of the Prophet (see Freire 2011: 58–59).

integrative and conciliatory element—probably the only one available at the time—that could hold together the fragile social equilibrium during the transition years from colony to state (1957–1960). A clear indication of this can be found in the laconic statement that Mauritania’s first president devotes to the topic in his lengthy autobiography: ‘On the 28th [November 1958], the Territorial Assembly was reunited for the first time in Nouakchott, and it unanimously opted to become a member state of the Franco-African Community, proclaiming the ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF MAURITANIA (Ould Daddah 2012: 183; my translation). In this same text, Ould Daddah also points to Mauritania’s social diversity as one of the country’s relevant features: ‘Mauritania, whose national unity was far from effective’ (Ould Daddah 2012: 182; my translation).<sup>14</sup>

Even if the Islamic label could effectively work as a marker that was recognised by all Mauritanian citizens, its application as an effective state apparatus was not immediately clear from the start. The very limited development of eminently Islamic policies has led many observers to argue that this designation has no practical value, thus turning Mauritania merely into what Ould Ahmed Salem has called a ‘pseudo-confessional’ state (2013: 53–60).

However, there are some threads that might connect the ideological project of the ‘Islamic Republic’ characterization to actual political practices. For example, one could single out the adoption of a national currency (cutting ties with the West African common monetary policy), or Mauritania’s joining the Arab League in 1973. According to Pazzanita (1992: 282), the establishment of diplomatic ties with Morocco was pivotal in Mauritania’s acute policy switch from African to Arab partners and political allies. Additionally, in 1980, twenty years after the country’s independence, Arabic was formally declared as the nation’s official language (Taine-Cheikh 2007: 45–6).

Some years latter, in 1984, President Ould Taya decided to combine the ministries of Culture and Islamic Affairs. For its head he chose the reputed Islamic scholar Mohamed Salem Ould Addoud (minister from 1989–1992; d. in 2007). This renowned personality is linked both with the traditional Maliki scholarship of southwestern Mauritania and with the new religious trends emanating, notably, from

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<sup>14</sup> Mauritanian populations comprise a large majority of Hassaniyya speakers (formed by the *bidan*, the name attributed to the populations of ‘noble/free’ status, and various other groups of tributary status, with a clear emphasis on the Haratin population, of slave descent), and different—if significant—Pullar, Soninké, and Wolof ethnic minorities.

Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> This act of delegation is probably the closest that one can get to the classic partition between the sultan and the ‘ulama (Islamic scholars) as leaders of an Islamic state, where religious officials distance themselves, or simply ignore, the more mundane aspects of governance, notably military affairs.<sup>16</sup>

The political use—or pure and simple instrumentalisation—of Islam and Islamic culture has been made clear since the founding period of Mauritania as an independent state, with significant examples transversely occurring throughout all of the country’s presidencies. In 1985, during a dramatic period of social instability, the then-president Ould Taya declared that in Mauritania, ‘you can find people who try to create conflicts between black and white, but they don’t succeed because all of us are Moslem’ (cited in Pazzanita 1992: 294).

The complexity of the Mauritanian Islamic Republic label makes it difficult to attach to well-known formulas of political science, following which one can give a ‘primordialist’, ‘instrumentalist’, or ‘constructivist’ label to identity-related foreign policy practices (Cook-Huffman 2008: 25; Guillaume 2011: 34). The Islamic reference in Mauritania’s official title is evidently related to primordial ties with Islamic culture in the western Saharan region, but a close reading of political expressions since independence also provides evidence for both an instrumental and constructivist use of Islamic credentials by political actors (Marty 2002: 63–65). Mauritania’s ‘Islamic Republic’ label seems to have been used by different political agents in order to achieve opportunistic objectives, rather than utilised in a concerted effort to provide an Islamic-based political administration to this Saharan country.

#### SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN AN INTERNATIONALISED CONTEXT

Resuming the argument made above regarding the use of the Islamic label for purposes of social cohesion, it is nonetheless surprising that more than fifty years after Mauritania’s independence this debate has again been placed in the socio-political agenda. President Abdel Aziz has recently initiated a campaign defending Mauritania’s absolute and unbreakable unity, in a response to a series of protests from diverse social

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<sup>15</sup> Presently his nephew, Mohamed Ould Hassan Ould Dedew, is probably the most respected Islamic scholar in the country, with a clear influence at a global level. Regarding Mauritania’s inclusion in the acknowledged global transits of Islamic theological debates, see Hill 2012 and Ould Mohamed Baba Moustapha 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Both ministries are presently separated between “Culture and Crafts” and “Islamic Affairs and Original Education”.

spheres, notably from the abolitionist movement IRA-Mauritanie (led by the Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid) and from a ‘blacksmith’ status group which has been publicly contesting their continued stigmatisation. Answering to these movements—which clearly have potential international repercussions—the official state response was anchored in a rhetorical return to the National Unity narrative.<sup>17</sup> If present media uses (notably mass and social media) are generally known as ‘weapons of the weak’—for their low cost, rapidity, and wide diffusion—(Soares & LeBlanc 2015), one should not forget that these same ‘weapons’ are also being used by the state.<sup>18</sup>

In Mauritania, this social unrest—which one might theoretically still associate with the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring of the early 2010s (Fernández-Molina, 2015; Ojeda García 2013)—in particular questions the purported appropriation of different written sources of Islamic scholarship, which, according to some, have been used in order to maintain the hierarchised social model known to the region (McDougall 2010; Ould Ahmed Salem 2009). The activists questioning the social inequalities noticeable in Mauritania have openly declared that Islamic readings are, to a large extent, responsible for the perpetuation of social stratification policies. This was not at all the kind of argumentation used in the movements that occurred in Egypt or Tunis; in these cases, public demonstrations were eminently associated with the direct contestation of specific political leaderships. In the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, in contrast, public expression of dissatisfaction with the political spheres has turned into a wider discussion which calls into question the country’s entire social fabric as well as the reputedly incorrect uses made of Islamic texts by some of the region’s more prominent scholars.

The example that best portrays this ongoing debate is the dramatic case involving Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir, a condemned apostate currently on death row. In January 2014 this thirty-year-old published an online text that led to public outrage, with significant crowds demonstrating in different Mauritanian towns calling for his punishment, notably in Mkhaitir’s native Nouadhibou (northwestern Mauritania).

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<sup>17</sup> The urgency of the ‘national dialogue’ publicised by President Aziz more closely resembles a monologue, as the large majority of the political forces in the country have chosen not to engage in this presidential initiative. See, for example, the recent interview by Mauritania’s former president, Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, to the newspaper *Le Monde*: [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/26/le-regime-mauritanien-a-mis-le-pays-dans-une-situation-deplorable\\_5020735\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/26/le-regime-mauritanien-a-mis-le-pays-dans-une-situation-deplorable_5020735_3212.html) (accessed 05/03/17).

<sup>18</sup> We have recently witnessed the launching of different websites promoting this cause (see <http://www.mp.mr>), as well as a campaign across television, radio, and newspapers, guaranteeing the saturation of their message in Mauritania.

Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir was swiftly imprisoned, and a court decision declared him guilty of apostasy—something absolutely unprecedented in Mauritania.

The text in question—which was only available online for a few days—commented on some actions of the prophet of Islam: Mkhaitir stated that the prophet Mohamed had been unfair when he chose not to punish his Qureishi relatives (who, as it is widely known, had on previous occasions questioned and affronted his authority), whereas he decided to do the opposite when dealing with the Bani Qurayzah (Jewish) tribe, after they had already decided to surrender during the ‘Battle of the Trench’. Mkhaitir additionally criticised the subsequent Quranic readings of the prophet’s actions made by different authors, and in particular the way these readings had been used for segregationist purposes in the western Saharan region. According to Mkhaitir, from the death of the prophet onwards the sacred text had been often put to unsound uses, altering its original principles. He argued that these biased interpretations of Islam’s sacred text were especially associated with the *zwaya* (‘religious’) status groups, which for centuries kept Mauritania’s Islamic traditions and were considered the legitimate interpreters of Islamic scholarship in the region—as well as being preponderant actors in Mauritanian political life (see above). According to Mkhaitir’s manifesto, this group’s use of scholarly works served to legitimise a hierarchised social order that was particularly cruel to his ‘oppressed brothers’, the *muallemin* (people of ‘blacksmith’ ancestry; one of the more clearly stigmatised Saharan populations).

Why, exactly, did Mohamed Mkhaitir decide to engage in this doctrinal controversy, beyond confronting Mauritania’s social status quo? Why did he choose to speak out on the seventh-century massacre of the Jewish Bani Qurayzah in Medina, when popular imagination aggressively associates the *muallemin* status group precisely with a Jewish origin? Indeed, after Mkhaitir posted his arguments online, many in Nouakchott wondered if he was, in fact, Jewish; others suggested that his writing had simply been commissioned by Israel.

In court, Mohamed Mkhaitir insisted that he was not an apostate and that his sole intention had been to call attention to an unfair use of religious knowledge in Mauritania. The country’s political leadership did not question the decision of the court to sentence Mkhaitir to death, and President Abdel Aziz has recently confirmed that Mkhaitir will be executed: *‘I’ve listened to the Mauritians who protested against the writings of this blogger, and they were the ones demanding his condemnation to death’*

(my translation).<sup>19</sup> More recently this court ruling has also been confirmed by a majority of the country's Islamic scholars (in November 2016), who have declared capital punishment as the appropriate treatment for apostates, such as Mkhaitir.<sup>20</sup>

In twenty-first-century Mauritania, Mohamed Mkhaitir developed an argument against the discriminatory treatment of a group associated with a tributary origin,<sup>21</sup> and, for that purpose, he chose to debate prophet Mohamed's role in a seventh-century dispute that took place in Medina. This oblique itinerary, covering more than a thousand years of history, illustrates the pervasive importance of Islamic debates in present-day Mauritania (confirmed by the popular outrage that the text triggered). Additionally, the international campaigns against the Mauritanian court's decision point to the global reach of this event and to the connections of the Mauritanian Islamic spheres with the wider world.<sup>22</sup> The Mauritanian president has repeatedly stated in interviews with international media organizations that the court's decision in this case is legitimate and that it is the government's duty to abide by it, as the political representatives of a *de facto* Islamic republic. One might point out that it has taken more than half a century for any local political entity to openly assume the Islamic character of the Mauritanian state, and the impetus to do so now has come from a case not only about the discussion of Quranic exegesis but also—and perhaps more importantly—the traditional social structure of Mauritania's Hassanophone populations.

The much better known case of Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid constitutes another example of the kind of debates around the 'Islamic republic' label in Mauritania—and of their international dimensions. In 2008 Biram became a decisive actor in Mauritania's public arenas after founding the abolitionist movement IRA-Mauritanie

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<sup>19</sup>When asked if Mkhaitir's condemnation to death was a ruling imposed by 'extremists', President Aziz answered: '*Non, il s'agit tout simplement d'une expression de certaines personnes attachées à leur religion, dans un pays musulman à 100%. Nous ne sommes pas extrémistes, nous pratiquons un islam modéré et tolérant*'. See President Aziz's interview with the newspaper *Le Monde*, 09/12/2016, [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/12/09/il-n-y-a-pas-d-effervescence-islamiste-en-mauritanie\\_5046599\\_3212.html?xtmc=abdel\\_aziz&xter=1](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/12/09/il-n-y-a-pas-d-effervescence-islamiste-en-mauritanie_5046599_3212.html?xtmc=abdel_aziz&xter=1) (accessed 13/03/17).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mauritania-trial-idUSKBN1380P0?il=0> (accessed 07/12/2016).

<sup>21</sup> The Mauritanian president had previously tried to appease social tensions felt over the *muallemin* stigma when he appointed figures with a 'blacksmith' origin to crucial roles in the administration (notably the minister of Foreign Affairs and the head of the Gendarmerie Nationale), following the unparalleled public demonstrations that during 2013 had demanded the incorporation of *muallemin* figures in the state apparatus.

<sup>22</sup> Freedom Now (<http://www.freedom-now.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Mkhaitir-Urgent-Action-to-SR-11-28-2916.pdf>); International Publishers Association (<https://www.internationalpublishers.org/news/press-releases/460-ipa-appeals-for-mercy-for-mauritanian-death-row-blogger>); Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/26/mauritania-blogger-faces-execution-apostasy>); or Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr38/0002/2015/en/>).

(*Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste*). His vehement interventions gained him significant prominence as the most active figure promoting the rights of the Mauritanian Haratin population (of slave descent). The fact that he ended up second in 2014 presidential election confirms his influence in Mauritania's politics (even if he only obtained 9% of the ballots, against Mohamed Abdel Aziz's 82%).

After several short periods in jail (between 2010 and 2012), Biram and two of his collaborators (Brahim Bilal and Djiby Sow) were arrested and sentenced to two years' imprisonment in November 2014, condemned for taking part in an unauthorised assembly, failing to comply with police orders, and resisting arrest during an anti-slavery march in Nouakchott (Cervello, 2015). He served twenty months in jail and was released in May 2016.<sup>23</sup> He is an important figure today not only for a large spectre of Mauritanian society, but also for the international community at large:<sup>24</sup> in 2013 Biram was one of six world personalities awarded the Human Rights Prize by the United Nations,<sup>25</sup> and when he was released from jail, the UN's Secretary General issued a statement commending this gesture from Mauritanian authorities.<sup>26</sup>

In December 2014 a resolution concerning Biram's case was voted and approved in the European Parliament ('Resolution on Mauritania, in particular the case of Biram Dah Abeid', 2014/2999), calling on European authorities to "increase their efforts to address slavery in Mauritania, specifically by ensuring a clear and workable foreign affairs and human rights policy in line with the EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy, and by promoting a human rights dimension as part of the EU Sahel Strategy, and in dialogues with the Mauritanian Government, including formal bilateral agreements".<sup>27</sup> This parliamentary Resolution was not formally answered by the European Commission.

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<sup>23</sup> According to the Amnesty International Annual Report, Biram had been arrested 'after taking part in a peaceful protest': <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/mauritania/report-mauritania/> (accessed 24/03/2017).

<sup>24</sup> IRA-Mauritanie was heard in the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights in December 2015 (<http://unpo.org/article/18765>; accessed 20-05-2017).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/newyork/Stories/Pages/HRPrizesawardedinNewYorkonHumanRightsDay.aspx> (consulted 28/11/2016); see also Biram's interview with the newspaper *Le Monde* in 03/10/2016: [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/03/biram-dah-abeid-la-voix-des-esclaves-modernes-de-mauritanie\\_5007366\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/03/biram-dah-abeid-la-voix-des-esclaves-modernes-de-mauritanie_5007366_3212.html) (accessed 12/03/2017).

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsId=53973#.WNk2HY5JlcA> (accessed 28/03/2017).

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=B8-2014-0382&language=EN> (accessed 22/05/2017). I would like to thank the information provided on this subject by the office of Ana Gomes, member of European Parliament, and signatory of this resolution.

It's probably because of this kind of international pressure that Biram, Brahim Bilal, and Djiby Sow—as well as other, lesser-known actors of the abolitionist cause—have more recently seen their convictions reduced or have been released from prison.<sup>28</sup>

The Mauritanian political sphere cannot ignore the presence of Biram as a decisive actor; indeed, he has recently announced his second candidacy for the country's presidency (in the forthcoming 2019 election). He has also stated his opposition to some of the Islamic readings disseminated in the country, that, for him—as it was for Mohamed Mkhaitir—serve to guarantee the perpetuation of genealogically based social stratification in Mauritania. For example, in April 2012, after Friday prayers, he promoted the burning of religious jurisprudential literature (notably the *Abrégé de Khalil*) outside a mosque located in a poor neighborhood in Nouakchott, declaring that this text, among others, was being used to sustain Mauritania's blatant social iniquities.

Mauritania's pivotal role in the history of Islam, and especially its transmission in the western Saharan region and in West Africa, is today a well-known fact; much less known is the social milieu within which a scholarly tradition of Islamic knowledge was actually formed. It is this question in particular which is presently under scrutiny, with its implications affecting not only local levels but also Mauritania's foreign-policy agenda.

## CONCLUSION

This article states that Mauritania's foreign-policy strategies (1) try to respond to local concerns and reflect the current state of affairs in the country (cf. Marchesin 2010: 21–22); (2) are closely linked to the country's definition as an Islamic Republic (and the pragmatic use of this label); and, (3) to a large extent, serve the preservation of the verticalised social structure known to Mauritania's majority Hassanophone populations.

The country's affiliation with the Arab-Islamic world constitutes another important trend in foreign policy—one that can be clearly tracked from the post-independence period to the present, including political landmarks such as President

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<sup>28</sup> In November 2016 a group of thirteen activists, declared by Amnesty International as 'prisoners of conscience', had their sentences significantly reduced by a Mauritanian Appeals Court, which also ordered the immediate release of some of them: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/mauritania-10-anti-slavery-activists-released/> (accessed 26/03/2017).

Ould Taya's decision to incorporate Mauritania in the Union du Maghreb Arabe in 1989, thus joining Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia in a common political forum, and declaring Mauritania's 'Maghrebian' character). Mauritania's proximity with the Arab world constitutes a decisive element in its trajectory since independence, influencing everything from its reformist views on Islamic knowledge and practice to its overall view of cultural and political expression. The famous '*trait d'union*' declaration by President Ould Daddah in the founding period of independent Mauritania now comes into question, as there seems to be a lack of interest in developing deeper bonds with the country's southern neighbours, and a drive in favor of stronger connections with the Arab world.

The arguments presented in this article also seem to confirm the crossing of a 'great divide' between an 'ulama-centered religious authority (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996: 122) and a variety of non-specialised voices when it comes to debates associated with Islamic culture and its scholarly readings. Mohamed Mkhaitir's and Biram's cases affirm the prominence of voices that were until recently disregarded in Mauritania, or which were simply incapable of making their opinions accessible to a global audience. Actors such as Mohamed Mkhaitir or Biramould Abeid can now influence state policies, and thus challenge a *zwaya* monopoly on Islamic matters in Mauritania.

The forms of knowledge transmission now accessible to most Mauritians nurture a questioning of Islamic traditions and their association with the country's particular social landscape. Contrary to what has happened in other North African countries, Mauritania's 'civil society' (if this designation can be used in this context) has prompted a process of questioning the political and social status quo. The current call to alter the social order of Mauritania's Hassanophone population has been overtly counter-argued by the state through a narrative that campaigns—inside the country as well as at an international level—for the country's unbreakable 'unity'. Only after an ongoing contestation of these issues (as well as the resolution of legal procedures, notably regarding Mohamed Mkhaitir) will one be capable of clearly measuring the success of Mauritania's 'weak', or, following a more common trend, assume the narrow success of these far-reaching projects of effective revolutionary character.

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