

U.S.-MAURITANIA RELATIONS AND THE *CORIOLIS* FORCE OF NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL

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INTRODUCTION

Mauritania's *normalization* with Israel has propelled post-Cold War relations between Mauritania and the United States and has somehow raised the stakes of Mauritania within the overall U.S. global geopolitical economy, particularly in the arena of counterterrorism. The U.S. government pressured the Mauritanian government to recognize Israel through the U.S. assistance programs, the U.S. leverage over loans from international financial institutions, and the U.S. annual country reports on human rights. Before the Israeli connection, U.S.-Mauritania relations were limited to the "traditional" bilateral track of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the multilateral track of the Breton Woods institutions. With the Israeli connection, Mauritania acquired a special status in U.S. and Israeli diplomatic circles when it became "the third" Arab country (after Egypt and Jordan) and "the first" member of the Arab Maghreb Union to have full diplomatic relations with Israel. After the outbreak of the Palestinian Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, Morocco and Tunisia broke off diplomatic ties with Israel, Oman closed Israel's trade representation office, whereas Mauritania warmed up its normalization with Israel. Mauritanian Foreign Affairs Minister Dah Ould Abdi visited Israel in May 2001, while Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres visited Mauritania in October 2002 in the aftermath of the Israeli bloody attacks on the Palestinian cities of Jenin and Nablus in April 2002 (Ould-Mey 2007). In March 2006, the Mauritanian government received an Israeli delegation amidst wide international condemnation of a military raid through which the Israeli Defense Forces destroyed the Jericho Palestinian prison, kidnapped

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Palestinian prisoners¹ and killed and injured a number of Palestinians. It seems that whenever the “peace” process appears deadlocked or whenever the Israelis commit atrocities against the Palestinians, they find in Mauritania a fig leaf and a cheap propaganda tool about Arab normalization with Israel, the real goal of the peace process.

This article presents a critical overview of the growing U.S.-Mauritanian relationships analyzing how such relationships grew vigorously in the context of Mauritanian-Israeli full normalization and in light of U.S. post-9/11 calls for more “democracy and reform” in the Arab world. First, the paper underlines Mauritania’s geopolitical status within the U.S. strategy and NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue. Second, it reviews U.S.-Mauritania relations in terms of humanitarian aid, economic liberalization, and political democratization. Third, it examines how the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative is dragging Mauritania deeper into the quagmire of the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism. Fourth, it highlights the Israeli *Coriolis Force* underlying the synchronism and synergism between the expanding U.S.-Mauritania relationship and Mauritania’s *normalization* with Israel.

MAURITANIA’S NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL PROPELS U.S. DEPLOYMENT IN MAURITANIA

Today the Mauritanian government is considered a *good* friend of the U.S. government and the State of Israel and a *useful* partner in the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism (there is no undisputed definition of “terrorism”²). In his remarks at the Leon H. Sullivan Summit in Abuja, Nigeria, on 12 July 2003, President George W. Bush said that the United States is “supporting the efforts of good friends all across this continent, friends such as Mauritania”³. U.S. Ambassador to Mauritania Joseph LeBaron provided a more articulate portrayal of the

¹ Including Ahmed Sa’daat, the Secretary General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who was jailed under British and U.S. supervision.

² So far the Global War on Terrorism has led to massive assaults on human rights and international law by the United States government and its friends and allies around the world. One of those assaults was the unprovoked and criminal destruction of the Iraqi state, society, and infrastructure. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has just acknowledged that the United States made “thousands” of “errors” in Iraq (*CNN Headline News*, 1 April 2006).

³ “President Bush Concludes Week Long Trip to Africa.” *The White House, President George W. Bush*. www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/07/20030712.html (last accessed 14 February 2006).

geopolitical basis of U.S.-Mauritania relations when he wrote “we are deepening and expanding our relationship with this important country that is situated so strategically between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, with hundreds of miles of Atlantic Ocean coastline” (U.S. Embassy, 2006a; 2006b; LeBaron, 2005). By the same token, the Mauritanian Embassy in the United States described the bilateral relations as “good” and “improving” in recent years due to common views on various issues, including “the recognition of Israel in 1999, which pleased the American authorities, and the fight against Islamic extremism and terrorism” (Mauritanian Embassy, 2006).

In this broad context of Mauritanian *normalization* with Israel in exchange for American normalization with Mauritania, *The Jerusalem Report*⁴ noted that Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom depicted his visit to Mauritania on 25 May 2005 as “the road map for relations between the Arab world and Israel.” Indeed Mauritania’s relationship with Israel was considered so important that there was some “panic” in Washington when Mauritanian President Maaouiya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya was overthrown in a bloodless coup on 3 August 2005⁵. A few months after the coup and in light of popular opposition to relations with Israel, Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall President of the Military Council for Justice and Democracy indicated on *al Jazeera* TV Channel (14 November 2005) that the transitional government will focus only on “domestic” issues without touching any significant “external” issue. He meant that the transitional government will (1) maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, (2) remain a U.S. ally in the war on terrorism, and (3) continue the ban on *Islamic* parties in Mauritania (the latter being a “domestic” issue of particular interest to the United States and Israel since 9/11). These official statements by Americans, Mauritians, and Israelis indicate the Mauritanian government’s consent and cooperation (some would say impotence and collaboration) when it comes to Israeli infiltration and U.S. deployment in Mauritania. They also underline Mauritania’s geopolitical economy within the U.S. European Command’s Area of Responsibility and the NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue countries.

The machinery of U.S. deployment in Mauritania

⁴ *The Jerusalem Report*, 30 May 2005.

⁵ “An Awkward friend for America; Mauritania,” *The Economist*, 3 September 2005, p. 58.

U.S. economic deployment in Mauritania came primarily through the USAID and the multilateral track of the IMF and the World Bank. It developed with U.S. food donation to Mauritania and the growth of Mauritanian imports from the United States. It is poised to grow more with the advent of oil discovery in Mauritania in connection with the grand Israeli strategy of weakening the predominantly Arab OPEC⁶ by declaring non-OPEC “West African” oil a “national strategic interest” of the United States, according to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Walter Kansteiner who was speaking before a meeting at the Washington office of the Jerusalem-based Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (Lobe, 2002). In their forward to the *Strategy Energy Policy* report, Edward Djerejian⁷ (Director of the Baker Institute) and Leslie Gelb (President of the Council on Foreign Relations) recommended several years ago that the U.S. “president has to begin educating the public about this reality and start building a broad base of popular support for the hard policy choices ahead” (U.S. Council on Foreign Relations and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University, 2001). That is exactly what President Bush did in his January 2006 State of The Union Address when he set a strategic national goal of replacing more than 75% of U.S. oil imports from the Middle East by 2025. In his 2007 State of the Union address, President Bush asked Congress to join him in pursuing a great goal, that of “cutting our total imports by the equivalent of three-quarters of all the oil we now import from the Middle East”⁸.

As for U.S. political deployment in Mauritania, it grew up within the broad discourse of democracy and human rights as well as within the framework of Mauritania’s bilateral and multilateral relations in a number of political and security initiatives conceived and sponsored by the United States, Israel, and the European Union in the aftermath of the 1991 U.S.-led war against Iraq and the concomitant disintegration of the Soviet Union. These politico-military initiatives are essen-

⁶ Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

⁷ Edward Djerejian is a former U.S. ambassador to Israel and a receiver of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League’s Moral Statesman Award. The James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University, <http://bakerinstitute.org/Persons/InsDir.htm>

⁸ CNN, Bush: State of union is strong, January 23, 2007, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/01/23/sotu.bush.transcript/index.html>

tially focused on the Arab Maghreb Union countries and include the Madrid Peace Conference, the NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Pan Sahel Initiative, the Five-Plus-Five Summit, and the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative.

U.S. deployment in the broader Arab world and Africa

In some of the reviewed literature, the U.S. deployment in the Maghreb has been theorized as a Euro-American or Franco-American rivalry (Masland, 1998; Greenberg and Hodgson, 2005). But it has also been argued that the U.S. and the EU play a complementary role in their post-Cold War rush for the Maghreb (Zoubir, 2005; Benantar, 2005). Indeed Franco-American rivalry must have declined when France rejoined NATO's military council in 1993 and when NATO proclaimed a renewed "Alliance for the 21st Century" at its April 1999 summit in Washington, DC. The rivalry seems even insignificant when viewed in the context of the more fundamental North-South divide within the world geopolitical economy (Ould-Mey, 2003). But in any case, the U.S. deployment in the Maghreb is part and parcel of a U.S. post-Cold War and post-9/11 strategy of deployment in the broader Arab world and Africa.

This deployment has been specifically advocated by Israeli think tanks such as the Jerusalem-based Institute for Advanced Strategic & Political Studies through the dissemination of the 1996 report entitled *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm* as well as through the current fanfares surrounding the alleged "strategic" importance of "African" "non-OPEC" oil (Institute for Advanced Strategic & Political Studies, 2006). Suraya Dadoo reported that the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASPS) "has been at the forefront of research on the strategic importance of West African oil to America." To underscore the strategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea for U.S. energy security, the IASPS organized a symposium in Houston, Texas, in January 2002.⁹ According to Okbazghi Yohannes, the IASPS was able to display "an impressive array of government officials, oil barons, energy specialists and diplomats to tackle what the institute termed: "African Oil: a Priority for U.S. National Security and African Development." Yohannes added that "the harmony

⁹ Suraya Dadoo, "When Uncle Sam comes calling in Africa," *The Michigan Citizen*, May 17, 2003.

among the speeches was so perfect that they could have been written by a single author.” Within the IASPS, a special think tank branch was created and called the African Oil Policy Initiative Group (AOPIG). Its mission is to conduct further research and prepare energy policy recommendations to be submitted to the U.S. government. The AOPIG comprises “representatives from Congress, various offices of the Bush Administration, oil companies, international consultants, and energy specialists. In order to give it an African look, George Ayittey, a Ghanaian intellectual with strong proneoliberalist credentials, was selected to head the group”¹⁰.

The deployment has also been advocated by (pro-Israel) U.S. think tanks such as the Council on Foreign Relations whose forty plus scholars focus on thinking, writing, and speaking to produce and disseminate ideas about U.S. foreign policy that can shape the worldview of policymakers, journalists, and others in and outside the United States. For example, one report co-chaired by Henry Kissinger titillates Western audiences by asserting that “the greater Middle East—the region stretching from North Africa to Southwest Asia—is the part of the world with the greatest potential to affect the security and prosperity of Europeans and Americans alike” (U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, 2004). In the same vein, another report co-chaired by Madeleine Albright proclaims that the “Middle East will be a central focus of U.S. foreign policy for the next generation and beyond” (U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, 2005). A third report co-chaired by Anthony Lake and Christine Todd Whitman argues that in the post-9/11 era, “Americans must pause and reflect on how Africa has become a region of growing vital importance to U.S. national interests” in terms of “energy, terror, and HIV/AIDS” as well as in terms of China’s “rapidly escalating engagement and quest for Africa’s energy and other natural resources” (U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, 2006). Mauritania’s historical geopolitics within the Arab world and Africa made it vulnerable to this U.S. deployment strategy, which Israel has strongly advocated.

U.S. deployment and Israel’s regional security framework

The reviewed literature indicates that the question of Arab *nor-*

¹⁰ Okbazghi Yohannes, “America’s new frontier: Oil in the Gulf of Guinea,” *The Black Scholar*, Summer 2003.

malization with Israel tends to set the thermostat of the U.S. deployment in the Maghreb and makes it distinguishable from the wider U.S. deployment in the global South. Therefore let us point out the Israeli *regional security concept* that appears to have inspired political and security initiatives such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Barcelona Process. A couple of years before the November 1995 Barcelona Conference, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres published a book entitled *The New Middle East*, in which he presented the Israeli strategic vision of a “regional framework” for solving the “problems of the region.” First, he argued that Israel’s ultimate goal was the creation of a “systematized regional structure” to provide security for Israel and regional stability against Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. Second, he linked the success of the regional framework with the success of the “Arab-Israeli peace process.” Third, he recommended that individual members of the regional structure be bonded by both bilateral (nation-to-nation) and multilateral (nation-to-region) obligations. Fourth, he suggested that the regional structure should implement a system of data collection on military activities via the use of space satellites “in collaboration with the superpowers.” To sound the alarm and give more credibility and urgency to his proposed plan, Peres sent an extortionate warning against what he called the “astonishing Western shortsightedness” and the “naiveté” of “Western nations” after the First World War when they “failed miserably” because they “had no means of collecting information or of guarding peace” and lacked the support of friendly countries “outside” Europe. Finally, he concluded his scheme by citing the Roman proverb: “let him who desires peace, prepare for war” (Peres, 1993).

One can reasonably argue without sounding conspiratorial that Peres’ proposal served as the blueprint that partly guided some of the political goals and operational mechanisms within regional structures such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue, the NATO’s Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, and U.S. European Command’s (USEUCOM) Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative. These regional structures became a *de facto* crucible for normalization between Israel and the Arab world. For example, Arab joint chiefs of staff and/or defense ministers or their representatives meet now routinely with their Israeli counterparts within the framework of the NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue, something unthinkable before these regional structures suggested first in the book *The New Middle East*. These brainstorming ideas put “normalization

with Israel” at the center of the Mediterranean Dialogue because joining the Dialogue means dealing with the Israelis one way or another.

MAURITANIA’S GEOPOLITICAL ECONOMY WITHIN THE U.S. EUROPEAN COMMAND’S AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY AND NATO’S MEDITERRANEAN DIALOGUE

One of the most visible manifestations of the U.S. deployment in the Maghreb was the February 2006 visit to Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in conjunction with a separate visit to Mauritania by a U.S. delegation led by Bobby Pittman, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, and representing the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the USAID, and the National Security Council. In this visit, Rumsfeld did compare the war on terrorism to the war on communism when he quoted Dwight Eisenhower (former NATO commander in the early years of the Cold War): “we face a hostile ideology, global in scope, ruthless in purpose and insidious in method,” and “we must carry forward steadily, surely and without complaint the burdens of a prolonged and complex struggle with liberty as the stake” (Banusiewicz, 2006). Rumsfeld also declared¹¹ that a terrorist foothold in North Africa is an “extremely low possibility” thanks to “the kind of steps” taken by the leaders of the Maghreb countries and their cooperation in security programs such as USEUCOM’s Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (patrolling the Sahara desert) and NATO’s Active Endeavor (patrolling the Mediterranean Sea).

Another manifestation of the U.S. deployment in the Maghreb is the June 2004 Free Trade Agreement between Morocco and the United States, a treaty viewed as another strategic instrument in the war on terrorism (White, 2005). Morocco was also granted Major Non-NATO Ally status in June 2004 and continues to allow U.S. Navy port visits and access by U.S. forces to its facilities including air and sea space (U.S. Department of State, 2005b). The U.S. deployment in the Maghreb could also be seen in the first Algerian presidential visit to the White House in July 2001, the August 2005 visit to Algeria by NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe and Commander of U.S. European Command, General James Jones, the increasing importance of Algeria’s petroleum and natural gas for the

¹¹ To the American Forces Press Service, 14 February 2006

United States, and Algeria's commitment to economic liberalization. In the meantime Libya announced in December 2003 its intention to end its "weapons of mass destruction" and "missile technology control regime" programs, while the U.S. terminated the applicability of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act to Libya and the national emergency with respect to Libya, effectively ending parts of U.S. economic sanctions and unblocking Libyan assets of about \$1.25 billion blocked in the United States. Moreover, the U.S. has already "good" relations with Tunisia and is "expanding" its relations with Mauritania.

Mauritania has been defined by its geopolitics. Its territory was progressively carved as a French colony beginning with the French re-occupation of Saint Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River in 1815, the conquest of Algiers in 1830, the delimitation of Franco-Spanish possessions in the Peninsula of Nouadhibou in 1891, and the conquest of Timbuktu at the great curve of the Niger River in 1893 (Ould-Mey, 2007). Mauritania's independence from France in 1960 and admission to the United Nations in 1961 were unsuccessfully opposed by Morocco and other Arab League members (except Tunisia). Its independence has also caused a split among African states and prompted a superpower compromise between the United States and the Soviet Union (the Soviets promised not to veto the admission of Mauritania to the UN if the Americans do not veto the admission of Mongolia).

Within the Maghreb, the governments of Mauritania shifted between the 1974 Madrid Accords with Morocco and Spain and the 1983 Treaty of Fraternity and Concord with Algeria and Tunisia, in addition to some ups and downs in their relations with Libya. In connection with its opposition to Zionism in Palestine, Mauritania broke off diplomatic relations with the U.S. in 1967 and with Egypt in 1979 and banned its citizens from visiting Israel. After the military coup of December 1984, the Ould Taya government embarked on an economic liberalization program backed by the USAID, the IMF, and the World Bank. With the decline of the Cold War and in connection with the ethnic riots in Senegal and Mauritania in 1989, the Ould Taya government searched for strategic friends as far as Iraq. But when Iraq was driven out of Kuwait and when oil-rich-Arab states and the U.S. cut their aid and support to Mauritania, the Ould Taya government discovered that normalization with Israel is a *sine qua non* condition for normalization with America if not with some of America's Arab friends. This meant that any "northwestward" step towards the U.S. must be accompanied by a "northeastward" step towards Israel around

which U.S. Middle East foreign policy rotates. This metaphoric anecdote is referred to in the title of the article as the (Gaspard) *Coriolis Force*.¹²

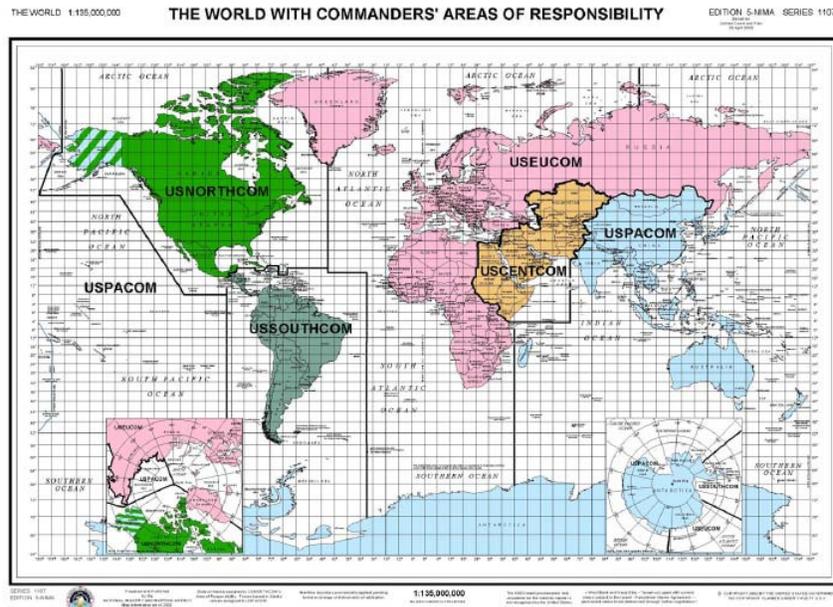
Mauritania falls within the U.S. European Command AOR

The U.S. military deployment in Mauritania began in 1984 when Mauritania agreed to the conditions of eligibility for the U.S. International Military Education and Training program (U.S. Department of State, 1984). Today it is visible on the new world military maps of U.S. combatant commands (see Figure 1). According to the U.S. Department of Defense, current operational control of U.S. combat forces is assigned to nine Unified Combatant Commands. Five of those commands have geographic responsibilities (commanders are each assigned a specific Area of Responsibility, AOR, for war plans and operations) and four have functional responsibilities (commanders are each assigned worldwide functional responsibilities not bounded by geography). The map in Figure 1 shows that literally every square inch of the planet falls within the AOR of a U.S. military commander in one of the five geographic Unified Combatant Commands: U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), and U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM). A new Africa Command (USAFRICOM) has just been added. On 6 February 2007, President Bush announced the creation of a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command for Africa. He pointed out that U.S. Africa Command will be operational by 2008 and will “create new opportunities to bolster the capabilities of our partners in Africa”¹³. A pertinent reassurance for U.S. partners in Africa who remember that in 1994 the U.S. pulled out of the “failed state” of Somalia and was the most notorious bystander to the Rwandan genocide.

¹² The nineteenth-century French engineer-mathematician Gustave Gaspard Coriolis discovered that as air begins flowing from high to low pressure, the earth rotates under it, making the wind follow a curved path and turn to the right of its direction of motion in the Northern Hemisphere and to the left in the Southern Hemisphere.

¹³ “President Bush Creates a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command for Africa,” *The White House*, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/02/20070206-3.html>

Figure 1. Geography of U.S. Unified Combatant Commands
 SHAPE* MERGEFORMAT



Source:

http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/unifiedcommand/images/areaof_responsibility.jpg
 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2006b.)

USEUCOM has a specific responsibility for all of Europe and Russia, most of Africa, and parts of the Middle East. USEUCOM is the only geographic command whose headquarters is deployed outside the United States in Germany. USEUCOM considers the vast ungoverned spaces of the Sahara (including some of their remote routes in Mauritania) to be of growing strategic importance in the Global War on Terrorism. Each one of the five Arab Maghreb Union countries is defined by USEUCOM as “an African country within the Area of Responsibility (AOR) of the United States European Command” (U.S. European Command, 2006). Within the AOR, the commander of USEUCOM has authority to plan and conduct a variety of combat and other operations, such as the joint-combined medical training and civil assistance exercises planned in 1990 and 2000 in Mauritania, the 2001 visit of units from NATO’s Standing Naval Force Mediterranean to the *Port de l’Amitié* (Mauritania’s first and major deep water port), and the 2005 Flintlock military exercises in Mauritania (U.S. Department of

Defense, 2000; GlobalSecurity.com, 2006).

USEUCOM and NATO in Mauritania

USEUCOM and NATO have deep political and military relations as the U.S. commander of USEUCOM is also the commander of NATO's military forces in Europe. Philip Shishkin noted that NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue is "the kernel of the U.S. vision for NATO in the greater Middle East"¹⁴. The basis of the Mediterranean Dialogue was decided at the Brussels Summit in January 1994, when NATO Heads of State and Government proclaimed that "security in Europe is greatly affected by security in the Mediterranean" and that the Middle East peace process has opened the way "to consider measures to promote dialogue, understanding and confidence-building between the countries in the region" (NATO, 2005b). The Mediterranean Dialogue countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) meet regularly after NATO ministerial or summit meetings (or exceptionally as in October 2001 after 9/11) and their military representatives meet twice a year. On the political level, NATO organizes annual meetings and conferences as well as visits of parliamentarians, opinion leaders, academics, journalists and government officials from the Dialogue countries to NATO Headquarters. On the security level, NATO's Standing Naval Force undertakes regular port visits to the Mediterranean Dialogue countries for which NATO provides (1) courses at the NATO School in Oberammergau, (2) courses at NATO Defense College in Rome, and (3) specific activities under the responsibility of Allied Command Europe and Allied Command Atlantic (Bin, 1998).

Alberto Bin from NATO's Political Affairs Division underlines the synergism between NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, the Middle East Peace Process, and the Barcelona Process (Bin, 1998). In a *Jerusalem Post* article¹⁵, Ron Prozor, Director General of Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, praises the first decade of Israeli contacts within NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue countries and expects closer cooperation in the future. Uzi Arad head of the Institution for Policy and Strategy at Herzlia's Interdisciplinary Center and former foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Mossad (the Israeli

¹⁴ *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 February 2004.

¹⁵ *Jerusalem Post*, 24 February 2005.

Intelligence Service) argues that Israel is poised to join NATO for protection under Articles 5 and 6 of the Washington Treaty (Arad, 2005). NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has recently reminded NATO members and partners that NATO's strategic war needs for the 21st Century will have to include more air-to-ground surveillance, air-to-air refueling, and strategic lift operations (NATO, 2006). But the new *mission civilisatrice* of the Mediterranean Dialogue goes also beyond Israel's security and Arab normalization with Israel to include control of labor migration from the South to the North. Ali Bensaad pointed out in *Le Monde*¹⁶ that at crossfire between the flows of African migrants and the European Union fortress, the Arab Maghreb Union countries dress again as "auxiliary troops" of repression against African migrants, a key issue on the agenda of the European Union summits, the 2003 Five-Plus-Five Summit, and the 2005 Africa-France Summit. Mauritania is considered a transit country for many African migrants to Europe and has (reportedly) agreed with Spain on the establishment of a sort of "transit center" in the port city of Nouadhibou (some already called it "Guantanamo Nouadhibou") for those migrants. This idea of building "transit" and "regional processing" centers for European-bound migrants in the Maghreb countries was suggested in 2003 by British Prime Minister Tony Blair¹⁷.

U.S.-MAURITANIA BILATERAL RELATIONS: HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION, AND POLITICAL DEMOCRATIZATION

Beyond the "standard" relationship between a Northern super-power country and a Southern peripheral one, U.S.-Mauritania bilateral relations have always been affected by agreement or disagreement over the Palestine-Israel conflict. Occasionally the relations were also influenced by the perceived dualism in ethnic composition and ethnic relations ("Arabs" versus «Africans», "Whites" versus "Blacks", and "Masters" versus "Slaves") in Mauritania¹⁸. Before 1967 U.S.-

¹⁶ *Le Monde*, 29 October 2005.

¹⁷ *Global Information Network*, 14 October 2004.

¹⁸ In the 1960s, *The New Times* (27 November 1960 and 20 January 1964) presented Mauritania as a nation of "Moorish nomads" with a large "African minority." In the 1990s, some of its reports (17 June 1991 and 16 January 1996) read "Mauritania persecutes its black citizens" and "U.S. falters on slavery in Mauritania". Similarly

Mauritania relations were somehow “normal,” even though the first two ambassadors shared accreditation with Senegal and resided in Dakar. In 1962 the U.S. embassy opened in Nouakchott but remained headed by a chargé d’affaires until resident ambassadors were exchanged in 1972 (Handloff, 1990). In June 1967 Mauritania (and five other Arab countries led by Nasser’s Egypt) severed diplomatic relations with the United States because of its support for Israel. Though relations were restored two years later, conflicting positions on the Palestine-Israel conflict continued to upset U.S.-Mauritania relations until 1995 when official contacts between Mauritania and Israel were made public. But humanitarian aid and economic policy constitute the areas of lower profile cooperation but deeper bilateral relations between Mauritania and the United States.

U.S. humanitarian assistance to Mauritania

The U.S. provides assistance to Mauritania under food and other programs. According to the USAID, total Fiscal Year 2005 USAID assistance to the Sahel countries amounted to \$13.91 million for Mauritania, \$33.44 for Senegal, \$13.75 for Niger, \$36.42 for Mali, and \$16.20 for Burkina Faso¹⁹. The most recent U.S. food donation to Mauritania was the delivery in December 2005 of 12,000 tons of wheat and 5,000 tons of rice to the Mauritanian Commission for Food Security (U.S. Embassy, 2006c). This is a significant and needed aid. But as explained elsewhere, major lenders and donors from Northern

some Peace Corps stories present Mauritania as “the barrier between the Sahara and Africa to the south” (<http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/water/africa/countries/mauritania/mauritaniasories.html>). Currently the CIA Factbook divides Mauritians into the following “ethnic” groups: “mixed Maur/black 40%,” “Moor 30%,” and “black 30%.” While it would be interesting to know who provided these percentages, it should be noted that the single criterion used in this classification seems to be skin color, an obsession in American culture. The racial classifications used by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000 define “White” as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa,” and define “Black or African American” as “a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.” Indeed the “projection” of U.S. demographics to Mauritania constitutes another example of U.S. sociopolitical and cultural deployment in the country

¹⁹ U.S. Agency for International Development, *Fact Sheet, Drought in Africa: USAID Assistance to Niger/Sahel*. FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, August 3. <http://www.usaid.gov/press/factsheets/2005/fs050803.html> (last accessed 19 January 2006).

countries give openly with one hand (via loans, grants, and technical assistance) what they retake stealthily by the other hand (via currency devaluation, capital flight, debt service, and deteriorating terms of trade) from Southern countries. For example, 1 U.S. dollar could buy only 45 units of the Mauritanian currency (Ouguiya) in 1980. By 2002, 1 U.S. dollar could buy 289 units of the Ouguiya (Ould-Mey, 2003). This unequal exchange in the trade of currencies, goods and services is made possible because Northern countries often use their bilateral and multilateral relations to have some “remote control” over the conception and formulation of economic policies of individual Southern countries. This is possible thanks to the collaboration and cooperation of local elites.

U.S. influence on Mauritania’s political economy

The first U.S. attempt to influence Mauritania’s political economy began in 1975 when a USAID-sponsored paper proposed the elements of an assessment plan for human resources development in Mauritania²⁰. Thereafter the USAID prepared a CDSS (Country Development Strategy Statement) for Mauritania and launched the RAMS (Rural Manpower Assessment Surveys) project, which attacked and discredited Mauritania’s nationalist economic policies and advocated economic liberalization. The 44 RAMS reports provided Mauritanian policymakers and academicians with a *prêt-à-porter* neoliberal analysis of the economy combined with a functionalist approach to society, emphasizing descriptive ethnography over other social theories as illustrated by the titles of the two major RAMS sociological studies: (1) *Les Maures* [The Moors] and (2) *La Mauritanie Negro-Africaine* [Negro-African Mauritania]. It could be argued that the epistemological and political ramifications of these studies had impacted ethnic consciousness in Mauritania and could still impact national unity (as the ongoing tragedy in U.S.-occupied Iraq warns us). Since its inception, the U.S. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices continues to follow this racist and sometimes sectarian approach in its collection of data, its measurement of human rights, and its analysis of domestic politics à l’Americaine.

²⁰ USAID, *Comprehensive human resources development and its application to Mauritania*. 1975, Prepared by Edward Rubin, president, Action Programs International, as part of a USAID contract concerned with human resources development in Mauritania.

The epistemology and politics of this sectarian approach could be illustrated by one passage from the U.S. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2004 in Mauritania. The passage reads «The 56-member Senate had 3 Black Moors, 4 Halpulaars, 3 Soninkes, and the remaining 46 were of either White Moor or mixed White Moor/Black Moor heritage. The 81-member National Assembly had 9 Black Moors, 8 Halpulaars, 2 Soninkes, and 2 Wolof. Minorities such as the Black Moors, Halpulaars, Soninkes, and Wolofs were underrepresented in senior government positions. However, Sghair Ould M'Bareck was appointed as the country's first Black Moor Prime Minister in July 2003 and reappointed in mid-November 2003, and the first Black Moor woman to occupy a ministerial level position was appointed Minister of Public Records on November 2003 ... The full 26-member Cabinet, including secretaries of state, had 2 Black Moors, 3 Halpulaars, and 1 Soninke (U.S. Department of State, 2005a). While this approach can certainly help Mauritians see themselves in the mirror, no one can miss the intended or unintended credo of "divide and conquer". The impact of this sectarian approach on a fragile and largely indigent society could ultimately amount to that of "a bull in a China shop".

Overall, the policies of economic liberalization and multiparty democratization contributed to what has been conceptualized and analyzed elsewhere as the *denationalization* of the Mauritanian state, the *devaluation* of its economy, and the *fragmentation* of its sociopolitical system (Ould-Mey, 2007; 2003; 1999; 1996). Indeed after more than twenty years of such policies, the World Bank Country Brief of September 2005 put Mauritania's per capita gross national income at \$420 in 2004 [compared to \$497 in 1980], the UN 2006 Human Development Report ranked Mauritania 153 among 177 countries (UN Development Program 2007), and the U.S. Department of State considered that Mauritania's minimum monthly wage for adults (\$42, or 11,300 ouguiya) is not enforced and does not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family (U.S. Department of State, 2005a). Perhaps the most recent cases of popular disillusionment with these neoliberal policies could be seen in the successive victories of Leftist parties in several major Latin American countries²¹.

Mauritania and the geopolitical shift in U.S. energy policy

²¹ T, Padgett, "To the Left, March!", *Time*, 9 January 2006, pp. 3637.

Today there is little or no U.S. investment in Mauritania. The Mauritanian Embassy describes U.S.-Mauritania economic relations as “very weak.” For some four years Mauritania was eligible for “duty free exports” to the United States under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). But Mauritania does not produce or export the kind of agricultural or textile products eligible under AGOA. While Mauritania exports almost nothing to the U.S., it imports heavy machinery for its Iron mining company in addition to growing imports by Mauritanian agents/distributors of American companies and trademarks. For example, Mauritania Commercial Guide (prepared by the U.S. Embassy in Nouakchott in September 2004) lists the following American companies and trademarks and their Mauritanian agents/distributors or representatives: Caterpillar (Bechir El Hassen); Dell, Echostar, Hewlett-Packard, Lanier, and 3M (Echbih Ould Ahmed Saleck); Mining Services International (Noureddine Ould Allaf); Harris Corporation (Chighali Ould Amara); IBM (Elimane Kane); MEDISCO Healthcare Pharmacy (Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Cheikh Abderrahmane); Philip Morris (Mohamed Ould Bouamatou); Phyto-Riker Pharmaceuticals (Cheikh Brahim Ould Taki), UNISYS (Abdalahi El Moctar), UPS (Ahmed Baba Ould Azizi); and Atlantic Motors (Sid'Ahmed Ould Abeidna) (Mauritanian Embassy, 2006; American-Mauritanian Business Council, 2006a). However, the United States is “looking towards Mauritania with great interest” since the discovery of oil in Mauritania and in light of the new energy policy of replacing U.S. oil imports from the Middle East (Mauritanian Embassy, 2006). In fact, an Independent Task Force of the U.S. Council for Foreign Relations has recommended a “geopolitical shift” in U.S. energy policy and the establishment of a U.S.-Africa energy forum, at the cabinet or sub-cabinet level to promote such a geopolitical shift (U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, 2006).

Mauritania's oil was discovered some 90 km offshore southwest of Nouakchott in 2001 by the Australian company Woodside whose production from the Chinguetti oil field (in 800 meters of water) has begun in February 2006 and is expected to reach a maximum production of 75,000 barrels per day. According to Woodside, the project involved a capital expenditure of about US\$720 million and the oil field has estimated reserves of about 120 million barrels (Woodside 2006b). Mauritania has also awarded onshore Taoudenni blocks (in the north-

east deserts of the country) to a host of oil companies²². Moreover, the Mauritanian government passed a Simplified Tax Regime for the oil sector in mid-2004 (American-Mauritanian Business Council, 2006b). But the “rent” nature of oil production could worsen corruption as revealed in January 2006 when the Mauritanian authorities arrested former energy and oil minister Zeidane Ould Hmeida in connections with amendments to agreements signed with Woodside. They charged him with “serious crimes against the country’s essential economic interests” because the amendments would cut Mauritania’s share in the oil revenue by up to \$200 million a year²³. Woodside denied any wrongdoing (Woodside, 2006a). But while Woodside and Mauritania have apparently resolved this dispute in late March 2006, the whole affair brings to mind the famous report entitled *Crude Designs: The Rip-Off of Iraq’s Oil Wealth* in which Greg Muttitt from the Institute for Policy Studies argued that “with the active involvement of the US and British governments a group of powerful Iraqi politicians and technocrats is pushing for a system of long term contracts with foreign companies which will be beyond the reach of Iraqi courts, public scrutiny or democratic control” (Muttitt, 2005).

U.S.-Mauritania relations and the politics of Islam and democracy

The political impact of two decades of economic devaluation, state denationalization, and sociopolitical fragmentation in Mauritania can be seen in successive military coups and attempted coups, widespread arrests and/or trials of opposition leaders, endless Byzantine political party maneuverings, contested elections, erratic geopolitics, and widespread poverty. In this context, the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 came to further stir up anti-U.S. popular anger in Mauritania and intensify opposition to the Ould Taya government²⁴. It could

²² Explorers prepare to evaluate Taoudeni basin in Mali, Mauritania,” *Oil & Gas Journal*, 6 December 2005, pp. 4243.

²³ “Mauritania and firm row over oil”, *BBC News* (February 6). <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4684836.stm> (last accessed 4 March 2006).

²⁴ In November 2003, there were three main political parties (Democratic and Social Republican Party, Rally for Democracy and Unity, and Union for Progress and Democracy) backing the Ould Taya government, four main parties opposing it (Rally of Democratic Forces, Popular Progressive Alliance, Union of Forces of Progress, and Popular Front), three banned parties (often led by either Arab, Islamic, or African nationalists), sixteen small parties, and six political or ideological movements or currents (mostly focused on either Arab, Islamic, Marxist, or African

be considered the straw that broke the camel's back of the Ould Taya government. Ould Taya's support for the war alienated Mauritians and "further strained relations with France"²⁵. Massive demonstrations against the war led to campaigns of repression against opposition leaders, opposition parties, and opposition newspapers. It seems that combined popular anger and government repression created a favorable climate for Saleh Ould Hanenna and his companions from the *Vurtaan Ettaghyeer* (Knights of Change) politico-military organization to set up the "zero hour" for the attempted coup of June 2003, which persuaded other military officers of the vulnerability of the Ould Taya government and set the stage for the bloodless coup of August 2005.

While all of the above domestic and international factors could be sufficient to justify the military coup of August 2005, it could also be argued that some elements within the Mauritanian military and security forces must have been concerned about repeated accusations of human rights violations they may have committed under the Ould Taya government. Their concern must have been raised to the level of anxiety when the French journal *Le Monde*²⁶ reported that a former Mauritanian army officer, Ely Ould Dah, was sentenced in absentia to 10 years in prison in France by a French court for acts of torture committed in Mauritania. *Le Monde* stressed that this was the first time a French court has sentenced a foreigner for crimes committed in a foreign country against foreign persons. Whatever the true motives behind the coup, the new Military Council for Justice and Democracy received as much popular welcome as received by its predecessors: the Military Committee for National Salvation in December 1984 and the Military Committee for National Recovery in July 1978.

Though initially the U.S. condemned the coup, now it seems satisfied with the transitional government's position on holding free and fair elections, maintaining relations with Israel, releasing only "non-salafist" political prisoners, and remaining a U.S. partner in the war on

cultural identities and/or political aspirations as they relate to domestic and/or international social justice). *Alakhar*, 4 November 2003. Currently a great deal of party restructuring is taking place on eve of the forthcoming legislative and president elections. The *CIA Factbook* notes that the Party of Democratic Convergence was banned in October 2005 because it was regarded as «Islamist» and therefore in breach of Mauritania law.

²⁵ *EIU ViewsWire*, 18 August 2004.

²⁶ *Le Monde*, 1-2 July 2005.

terrorism. In December 2005 U.S. Congressman Bennie Thomson visited Mauritania as did Bobby Pittman, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, in February 2006 (U.S. Embassy, 2006e; 2006f). They met with the President of the Military Council for Justice and Democracy and key members of the transitional government, the National Independent Electoral Commission, political parties, civil society, and religious and business leaders. They expressed hope to tackle additional issues²⁷ of human rights, press freedom, economic issues, and counter-terrorism, once Mauritania completes its transition to democracy (the U.S. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2004 proclaims that government's "human rights record remained poor" in each and every country of the Arab Maghreb Union). Perhaps a better indication of the expanding U.S.-Mauritania relationship could be read between the lines from the stature and experience of the U.S. ambassador to Mauritania, Joseph LeBaron.

Ambassador LeBaron²⁸ arrived in Mauritania in August 2003 in the wake of the U.S. occupation of Iraq in April 2003 and the attempted coup in Mauritania in June 2003. In the aftermath of the coup of August 2005, LeBaron indicated that the U.S. is "working very hard to help Mauritania" meet the timeline of its transition to "democracy," a timeline that should culminate in a presidential election in March 2007 (U.S. Embassy, 2006b). In the posted photos on the occasion of the Ramadan Iftar 2005 offered by LeBaron at the U.S. Embassy Compound in Nouakchott, one can see political party leaders such as Ahmed Ould Daddah (Rally of Democratic Forces) and Ahmed Ould Sidi Baba (Rally for Democracy and Unity) along with the President of the High Islamic Council, several mosque imams, and some local journalists (U.S. Embassy, 2006d). It should be noted that Ahmed Ould Daddah has always opposed the Ould Taya government,

²⁷ These four issues could constitute "timed bombs" for future governments. *Alakhbar* (20 February 2006) reported that Ould Taya agreed (before he was overthrown) on establishing «U.S. military bases» in Mauritania, whereas Ould Mohamed Vall expressed his concern about this issue to a U.S. delegation in February 2006.

²⁸ Among the posted biographies of U.S. ambassadors in the Arab world, only LeBaron was listed (as of 13 December 2005) with a Ph.D. degree in Near Eastern Studies (U.S. Embassy, 2006a). His post-Vietnam Foreign Service appointments and assignments include working with the U.S. military in northern Iraq, serving in the bureau of Intelligence and Research with oversight responsibility for issues of terrorism, and working in/on Qatar, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Bahrain, and Iran. His languages include Arabic, French, Turkish, and Persian (U.S. Embassy, 2006a; 2006b).

whereas Ahmed Ould Sidi Baba has always supported it. This smart flirting with domestic politics and Islam by an ambassador who can greet Mauritians in Arabic with *Asslamou Alaikoum Wa Rahmatou Llahi Wa Barakatouhou* and wish them *Ramadan Mubarak* seems to be accepted (if not welcomed) by at least some Mauritanian “liberals” (whether Islamist or secular), is likely to have some impact on the forthcoming elections, and appears also congruent with the much broader U.S. strategy known as the Muslim World Outreach.

According to an investigative report in *U.S. News & World Report*²⁹, the Muslim World Outreach (or the strategic communications component of the War on Terrorism) was designed as a strategy to win the hearts and minds of “moderate” Muslims against “radical” Muslims. The strategy calls for an “Islamic Reformation” through the “quiet” funding of Islamic foundations, reform groups, radio and TV shows, schools, think tanks, mosques, Islamic media, religious leaders and political parties. For example, the report cites a workshop for Islamic political activists and a journal on moderate Islam in Morocco as well as a workshop for Islamic political activists and the preservation of over 1,000 ancient Islamic manuscripts in Algeria (Kaplan et al, 2005). We have to wait and see whether or not this Muslim World Outreach will impact (one way or another) the forthcoming elections in Mauritania. Richard Murphy (a former U.S. ambassador to Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) and Gregory Gause once wrote that “when real elections do occur [in the Muslim Middle East], American policy goals can be set back” (Murphy and Gause, 1997) as indicated by the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. But the U.S. government could simply be looking less for “democrats” than for “partners” (among liberals, Islamists, and others) in the War on Terrorism as it did in the War on Communism. Such partnership within the framework of a *formal* multiparty democracy seems to be satisfying many of Mauritania’s political elites (political parties, civil society associations, and academics) who continue to hold on to the obsolete tenets of representative democracy and who clearly lack any original theory or practice for a genuine sharing of national political power and economic wealth. Their internal struggle for power consumes much of

²⁹ Mortimer B. Zuckerman is Editor-in-Chief of *U.S. News and World Report* and he is a strong Zionist supporter of Israel. He wrote recently that «The world must not support Hamas simply because it was able to win the vote of a desperate people» *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 February 2006. http://www.usnews.com/usnews/opinion/articles/060213/13edit_2.htm

their energy, makes them lose the big geopolitical picture, and opens the door for outside intervention (often to mediate their fratricide feuds).

U.S. TRANS-SAHARA INITIATIVE IS DRAGGING MAURITANIA DEEPER INTO THE COMBAT THEATER OF THE U.S.-LED GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM

In his testimony before the U.S. House Armed Services Committee (24 March 2004), USEUCOM Commander General James Jones explained that in partnership with 43 Offices of Defense Cooperation and 72 Defense Attaché Offices, USEUCOM provides “security assistance programs” that promote interoperability between U.S. forces and militaries in friendly and allied nations. The chief programs he refers to are: Foreign Military Financing, International Military Education and Training, Foreign Military Sales, Joint Combined Exchange Training, The George C. Marshall Center, The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, The Near East-South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, The NATO School, and The African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance Program. These programs provide “partners” such as Mauritania with limited access to U.S. military goods, education and training, joint military exercises, and seminars and conferences in support of USEUCOM strategy and policy (GlobalSecurity.org, 2004). In addition to the “regular” deployment of USEUCOM throughout “its” AOR in Africa, 9/11 led to the creation of several U.S. antiterrorism programs in Africa, “including stationing 1200-1800 U.S. and allied troops in Djibouti, patrolling Africa’s east coast, assisting countries in tracking terrorists in the Sahel region of West Africa, and helping several countries in East Africa to enhance their intelligence capacities” (U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, 2006). In this context, the G8 member countries have even agreed to a U.S. proposal to train up to 40,000 African peacekeepers to help implement negotiated peace settlements.

Mauritania and U.S. counterterrorism initiatives

So far the U.S. has designed and funded the Pan Sahel and Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism initiatives in which Mauritania is a U.S. partner. The Pan Sahel Initiative came to light in October 2002 when a U.S. delegation visited the Sahelian countries of Chad, Mali, Maurita-

nia, and Niger and briefed them on the initiative as a program designed “to protect borders, track movement of people, combat terrorism, and enhance regional cooperation and stability”³⁰. USEUCOM came up with a \$6 million for the Pan Sahel Initiative to train and equip light infantry companies from those Sahelian countries. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*³¹ reported that the Pan Sahel Initiative was renamed the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative and its funding was increased to \$100 million a year to train battalions from nine countries (Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia). Under this initiative some 1,000 U.S. troops, including 700 Special Operations forces, were to train some 3,000 soldiers from those countries and provide them with a variety of equipments (Toyota Land Cruisers, radios, uniforms, global-positioning devices, and fuel trailers). The initiative calls also for assigning more military officers to U.S. embassies in these countries, linking the militaries of these countries with secure satellites, and expanding military cooperation to other arenas. For example, the U.S. Justice Department could train local police in those countries, the Treasury Department help develop financial controls, the Customs assist with border security, and the Agency for International Development construct local schools.

It is in this context that an armed group (believed to be the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, better known by its French acronym, GSPC) led a surprise attack against an isolated Mauritanian Army outpost (Lemghaitti, near the border with Algeria) that killed 15 Mauritians in June 2005, less than two months before the coup of 3 August 2005. This attack exposed Mauritania’s collaboration in the war on terrorism since the United States has officially designated the GSPC as a terrorist organization and instituted sanctions against it (U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, 2006). Also the first visit of NATO Secretary General to Mauritania took place (14 July 2005) after the attack and before the coup (though the visit was probably scheduled before the attack). He held discussion with President Ould Taya and other cabinet members on (1) how to continue to deepen the cooperation between NATO and Mauritania, including in such areas as joint training and defense reform and (2) how the inter-

³⁰ US. Department of States, *Pan Sahel Initiative*. Office of Counterterrorism, Press Release, 7 November 7 2002.

³¹ *The New York Times*, 10 June 2005; *The Washington Post*, 26 July 2005.

national community can most effectively work together to defend against terrorism (NATO, 2005a). An example of such military cooperation on terrorism is Operation Enduring Freedom—Trans Sahara.

U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom and African auxiliary troops

In what could be described as a case of “classic imperialism”³², the U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom—Trans Sahara is reorganizing North African and Sahelian militaries into “auxiliary troops” in the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism, while encouraging NATO members to shift from defensive to offensive strategies. European Command Deputy Commander Charles Wald stresses that “the first meeting ever” between the chiefs of defense of North African states and Sahel states took place at Stuttgart, Germany, the Headquarters of the European Command. He noted that 9/11, oil, and migration to Europe were the main concerns. He also warned that “NATO’s interests are not now sitting in garrisons in Germany or France or UK, waiting for a million Russians to invade across the border. Europe needs to get out, go forward and do some prevention” (Cobb, 2004). In partnership with these countries, the USEUCOM has defined “plans to detect, exploit, deter, seize, defeat, or destroy targets throughout the AOR” through two military approaches.

The “Unconventional Warfare” approach consists of achieving the “strategic goal” by conducting military and paramilitary operations of long duration “through, with, or by” indigenous and/or surrogate forces. This approach enables indigenous forces to combat terrorism on their own, while it improves the capabilities of partners to support war-related coalition operations. It also denies safe havens to terrorists in the USEUCOM AOR and assures access throughout the AOR for U.S. “basing and logistics” to support operations. The “Deliberate Engagement” approach consists of achieving the strategic goal primarily by USEUCOM forces conducting short-duration strikes against terrorist targets or networks, crisis response to humanitarian disasters, or noncombatant evacuation operations. One of the declared strategic goals of these Trans-Sahara Africa operations is to drive the terrorist threat away from Europe towards “the south and the east” and displace terrorist networks from their indigenous habitat while isolating terrorist operations in the Arabian Gulf Region from expanding west-

³² *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 September 2005.

ward into the USEUCOM AOR (GlobalSecurity.com, 2006; see also figure 1). Another declared strategic goal is to help partner countries establish and exercise sovereignty over previously under governed spaces of their national territories. The role of USEUCOM is to help conquer those under governed spaces and then transfers them as “safe havens” to partner countries so USEUCOM can focus on new emerging threats in other regions. The new USAFRICOM will coordinate these and other military operations across the continent.

This form of military expansion and empire building is expected to “reduce U.S. forces footprint in certain regions”³³ while maintaining U.S. presence and commitment and expanding U.S. influence in the entire USEUCOM AOR. A typical example of the above operations was Flintlock 2005, a series of multi-national military exercises conducted throughout the Trans-Saharan region of Africa and focused on ground and air operations, land navigation, human rights training and collaboration between militaries. Jennifer Cooke, an Africa expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, was quoted saying that Flintlock may already be sparking a backfire because an American military presence in Africa can create “more suspicions than it wins friends” as indicated by those who described the attack on Mauritania as a “hit against the Flintlock plan put in place by the enemy of God, America, and its agents in the region”³⁴. But the February 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* stressed that the United States is “a nation engaged in what will be a long war,” a war that will not be won “by military means alone.” For example, USEUCOM’s Trans Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative is using both military and civilian engagements with North and West African states “to help them” police «their» national territories (U.S. Department of Defense, 2006a). This strategy is lining up USEUCOM, NATO, and NATO’s Mediter-

³³ This is the same military strategy that *de facto* turned the U.S.-trained Iraqi army and police into auxiliary troops that help reduce U.S. casualties in the war and could even help reduce U.S. footprint in Iraq, especially if other Arab (and perhaps Turkish) forces are willing to serve as additional “auxiliary forces” or “peace keeping forces” in Iraq. This political scenario could be inferred from the speech of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan before the March 2006 Arab Summit in Khartoum as well as from the U.S. use of the Iranian nuclear program and Iranian-Iraqi relations as a scarecrow for the *never-secure* countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. One can only hope that the current or coming Mauritanian government will not pledge to participate in this clearly perilous politico-military enterprise.

³⁴ *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2005.

anean Dialogue partners to fight “terrorism,” the declared enemy of Israel.

U.S.-MAURITANIA RELATIONS AND THE *CORIOLIS FORCE OF NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL*

While Mauritanian officials maintain that Mauritania’s decision to normalize with the State of Israel was “a sovereign decision taken by a sovereign state”³⁵, U.S. State Department officials have a different story. According to John Shattuck, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, the central tools for promoting “democracy and human rights” in Africa include (1) the U.S. assistance programs, (2) the U.S. leverage over loans from international financial institutions, and (3) the U.S. annual country reports on human rights, all of which were used against Mauritania (U.S. Department of States, 1995) before 1995 when it began the process of *normalizing* its relations with Israel as a price for normalizing its relations with the United States. For example, in 1991 Congressman Thomas Lantos (Democrat from California) led and managed to pass a U.S. Congressional motion on human rights violations in Mauritania (Ould-Mey, 1996). Though the motion expressed some concerns about the 1989 ethnic riots and border crisis between Mauritania and Senegal, its focus was on Mauritania’s verbal opposition to Israel and the 1991 U.S.-led war against Iraq. But U.S. pressure eased and Lantos kept quiet about human rights concerns in Mauritania as soon as Mauritania began a process of normalization with Israel.

It was also in 1991 that Thomas Lantos (the only Jewish Holocaust survivor in the US Congress) used his Congressional Human Rights Caucus to foster the infamous “Nurse Nayirah hoax” (a fabricated story), which consolidated public and congressional approval for the 1991 Gulf war. It turned out later that the 15-year-old “nurse” (Nijirah al-Sabah) was actually the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the US and a member of the Kuwaiti royal family. Claiming she was a refugee volunteering in a hospital in Kuwait City, Nijirah tearfully testified before the US Congress in October 1990 about how the Iraqis threw 312 babies out of their incubators when they took over the hos-

³⁵ «Albright praises new diplomatic ties between Israel, Mauritania.», CNN.com (28 October 1999). <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9910/28/israel.mauritania/index.html> (last accessed 30 March 2006).

pital and shipped the incubators back to Baghdad.³⁶ The “Nurse Nayirah hoax” helped President George Bush declare war on Iraq in 1991 while the “weapons of mass destruction hoax” helped President George W. Bush invade Iraq in 2003 (Ould-Mey, 2007).

Moreover, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*³⁷ reported that it was Thomas Lantos who led the introduction of the Palestinian Democracy Act of 2006 to Congress following the victory of HAMAS in the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee has warned about this Act, which stipulates that failure to meet some “congressionally defined democracy qualifiers” would end U.S. assistance to the Palestinians, prohibit Palestinian diplomats entry to the United States, would designate Palestinian territories as a terrorist sanctuary and would reduce U.S.-based contribution to money spent on UN Palestinian bodies. These examples illustrate that Thomas Lantos was more concerned with Israel’s security and Arab normalization with Israel than with human rights or democracy in Mauritania or Kuwait. They also point to the answer to the critical question: if recognizing the State of Israel was not a very specific U.S. condition for normalizing with the Mauritanian government, why does the Mauritanian government establish diplomatic relations with Israel despite the overwhelming opposition of the Mauritanian people (opposition that partly contributed to the overthrow of the government of Ould Taya)?

The process of normalization between Mauritania and Israel took at least four years and was seen as an important milestone in the process of normalization between Israel and the Arab world. The first publicly known³⁸ stage of normalization began in June 1995 when Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres met with his Mauritanian homologue Mohamed Salem Ould Lekhal in Madrid. Israeli press provided coverage of this meeting, which must have been embarrassing to discuss publicly in Mauritania at the time. According to the Israelis, Ould Lekhal expressed to Peres his government’s “complete support for the peace process and its readiness to offer every possible assistance in

³⁶ *The Guardian*, 25 February 1992 and 26 January and 17 August 2003; *The New York Times*, 12 and 15 January 1992; *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 September 2002.

³⁷ *Haaretz*, 1 February 2006.

³⁸ Another source (*Asharq al-Awsat*, English edition, 20 February 2006) cites 1993 as the year in which the United States promised to normalize with Mauritania if the latter normalizes with Israel and severs ties with Iraq.

order to promote the peace process” and that “there is no greater crime than fighting in the name of Islam against the peace process.” Ould Lekhal suggested that he and Peres should “appear before the local and international press in order to make their meeting public.” He also promised that at the forthcoming Amman (MENA) Conference, Mauritania will “appear as one of the Maghreb Islamic nations supporting the peace process without reservation” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995).

Speaking ahead of the November 1995 Barcelona Conference, Peres said that this Conference has a very important role in supporting the peace process and he proposed that Spain should take upon itself the goal of bringing closer the “three religions” of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995). In fact the peace process and the Barcelona process were so close in reality and in the mind of observers that Michael Bavly, Israel Foreign Ministry’s Deputy Director General for Western Europe, felt the “political” necessity to point out that “the Barcelona Conference is not intended to replace the peace process”³⁹. Along the same lines, the Barcelona Declaration itself stresses that “this EuroMediterranean initiative is not intended to replace the other activities and initiatives undertaken in the interests of the peace, stability and development of the region, but that it will contribute to their success.” Moreover, the work program of the Barcelona Declaration states clearly that “fighting terrorism [often meaning violent resistance to Israel’s occupation of Palestine] will have to be a priority for all parties. To that end, officials will meet periodically with the aim of strengthening cooperation among police, judicial and other authorities”⁴⁰.

The second stage of normalization between Mauritania and Israel came in November 1995 when the foreign ministers of Israel, Mauritania, and Spain met at the Barcelona Conference and decided that Spain accept to represent Israeli interests in Mauritania through its Embassy in Nouakchott and Mauritanian interests in Israel through its Embassy in Tel Aviv. In May 1996 Mauritania opened a diplomatic mission in Tel Aviv. To be sure Mauritania has been and continues to

³⁹ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Background on Barcelona Conference* (26 November 1995, <http://mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0a690> (last accessed 28 February 2006).

⁴⁰ European Union, 2006. *Barcelona declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference, 27-28 November 1995*. http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euromed/bd.htm (last accessed 7 March 2006).

be influenced in its relations with Israel by a long list of Arab and Muslim governments' "normalizations" or "capitulations" to "Zionism" (Ould-Mey, 2006; 2005a; 2005b; 2004)⁴¹.

The third stage of normalization began with the establishment of full diplomatic relations on 28 October 1999. This was possible through the efforts of Israel Foreign Ministry Director-General Eytan Bentsur and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Martin Indyk (former research director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, an advisor to President Clinton on Arab-Israeli issues, and a United States ambassador to Israel). Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that both Israel and the United States view such diplomatic relations "as a milestone in the promotion of normalization, which is widely seen as the goal of the peace process which has evolved since the Madrid Conference" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999). The ceremony of signing diplomatic relations between Israel and Mauritania in Washington, DC was scheduled around the eighth anniversary of the 1991 Madrid Conference and the fifth anniversary of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan. In her remarks at the ceremony, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright noted that "Mauritanian President Taya and Foreign Minister Sid'Ahmed have shown courage and determination in supporting the Middle East peace process. Those qualities, and this new opening, will bring real benefits to the Mauritanian people." Israel Minister of Foreign Affairs David Levy expressed his appreciation of the "courageous vision of President Taya" and noted that thanks to the United States and Madeleine Albright, "we have reached this moment." His Mauritanian homologue Ahmed Ould Sid'Ahmed noted that "After consultations between the governments of the two countries, with the help of the government of the United States, it has been decided that the diplomatic representation between the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and

⁴¹ The list of "normalizations" or "capitulations" includes the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement in 1979, the upgrading of Turkish-Israeli relations in 1991, the signing of the Palestinian-Israeli declaration of principles in 1993, the signing of the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty in 1994, the opening of an Israeli liaison office in Morocco in 1994, the opening of Israeli trade representation or interest offices in Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia in 1996, the meetings of Pakistani-Israeli foreign ministers as well as Indonesian-Israeli foreign ministers in 2005, and the beginning of Saudi-Israeli trade relations via the U.S. and the WTO.

Israel be updated to the level of embassy” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006a).

Since the Madrid Conference, the Israelis seem to be focused mainly (if not only) on the “normalization” process, not the “peace” process or the rights of the Palestinians. According to the Israelis, the number of states which renewed or established diplomatic relations with Israel since the signing of the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles in 1993 was 36, as of 12 July 2006 (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006b). Mauritania is significant in this strategy because of its Arab, African and Islamic connections and relations. Moreover, indigence in developing countries makes it possible for Israel to use a small humanitarian or economic aid for propaganda on a global scale. For example, for years Israel has been sending eye doctors to treat cataracts and other eye diseases for a couple of weeks at specifically designated Eye Camps in a number of countries (Angola, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, India, Tanzania...). According to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, two “female” Israeli eye doctors were selected and dispatched to Mauritania in July 1999 apparently in anticipation of the ceremony of signing full diplomatic relations between the two countries. When they arrived they found some five hundred eye disease patients waiting for them outside “the only” hospital in Nouakchott. This operation was designed as a “humanitarian” and “political” “mission” through which the two Israeli doctors “miraculously” “change lives” of some patients by treating cataracts and other eye diseases in order to “change attitudes” and perceptions of Mauritians vis-à-vis Israel⁴². But to paraphrase Quran expression (2:263) “charity followed by harm” (صدقۃ يتبعها أذى) and Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb’s saying “a truthful statement used to justify something wrong” (كلمة حق أريد بها باطل), this Israeli humanitarian gesture could be viewed as a good deed covering up the far greater evil of dispossessing and displacing the now more than 10 million Palestinians inside and outside Palestine and opposing their right of return to their homes in defiance of UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of 11 December 1948.

⁴² See *with your own eyes- Israeli Eye Doctors in Mauritania* (28 August 2000), 2000, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Mashav+%E2%80%93+International+Development/Publications/2000/See+with+your+own+eyes-+Israeli+Eye+Doctors+in+Mau.htm> (last accessed 4 January 2006). Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

CONCLUSION

It is regrettable to come to the simple and straightforward conclusion that U.S.-Mauritania relations are not really U.S.-Mauritania relations. This is because both sides are putting Israel at the center of those relations. First, U.S.-Mauritania relations carry a dose of opportunism that clearly spills over political realism and mutual interest. Mauritania normalized with Israel in order to normalize with the United States. The United States normalized with Mauritania because Mauritania normalized with Israel. Israel normalized with Mauritania in order to normalize with the Arab world (without concessions to the Palestinian people). Second, one can argue that U.S.-Mauritania relations are volatile because they are subject to maintaining controversial relations between Mauritania and Israel. Third, Israel-Mauritania relations are turning Mauritania into a political *pariah* in the Arab Maghreb Union. Fourth, Israel-Mauritania relations continue to face strong popular opposition within Mauritania. From day one of the establishment of full diplomatic relations on 28 October 1999, organized popular opposition began with the founding of the National League for Resistance against Zionist Infiltration and the Students' Initiative for Opposing Zionist Infiltration. These civil society associations together with several political parties (*Essawab, El-Wahdawi Ed-Dimuqraty El-Ishtiraky, Et-Tihad Qiwa Et-Taqaddum, Et-Tahaluf...*) continue to call on the Mauritanian government to sever diplomatic relations with the State of Israel⁴³. Their organized popular opposition must have played a role in encouraging the attempted coup of 8 June 2003 as well as the coup of 3 August 2005 against the Ould Taya government, the champion of normalization with Israel.

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⁴³ *Akhbar Nouakchott* (in Arabic), 16 & 20 March 2006, *al-Akhbar* (in Arabic), 16 March 2006.

e-mail research questions on some of the claims on their website. Last but not least, I did consider conducting some fieldwork research in Mauritania for this article but unfortunately my plan did not materialize.

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