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# MAURITANIA

AND NEWLY EMERGING ECONOMIES IN AFRICA

# TURKEY & CHINA



INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC RESEARCH ORGANIZATION  
USAK Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

Fouad Farhaoui

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July 2013

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**&**

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# **Turkey and China**

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# CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	7
Introduction.....	9
I. MAURITANIA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND SINCE FOUNDATION.....	13
II. MAURITANIAN ECONOMIC RESOURCES.....	15
A. Fisheries.....	15
B. Mining.....	16
C. Oil.....	19
III. TURKEY-MAURITANIA: ECONOMIC AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES.....	21
A. Legal and Institutional Framework for Turkey-Mauritania Economic Relations.....	21
B. Turkey-Mauritania Bilateral Trade.....	22
C. The Need to Target and Integrate Turkish and Mauritanian Economic Sectors.....	24
IV. TURKEY-MAURITANIA POLITICAL RELATIONS: INITIATIVES VITAL, BUT SLOW.....	29
A. The Mauritanian President’s Visit to Ankara: A Fresh Start for Relations with Turkey.....	29
B. Caveats about Turkish-Mauritanian Political Relations.....	30
V. TURKEY-MAURITANIA MILITARY AND SECURITY RELATIONS: AFRICAN CALCULATIONS OR TRANSATLANTIC CALCULATIONS?.....	33
A. The NATO Dimension: From Multi-Party Level to the Bilateral Level.....	33
B. The African Dimension: Staged Involvement in African Crises.....	35
VI. THE CHINESE INROADS: QUIETER BUT MORE PERVASIVE.....	37
A. History of China-Mauritania Relations.....	37
B. China and Mauritania: Established Social and Cultural Relations.....	38
C. Economic Relations: Major Projects with Strategic Targets.....	40
VII. CONCLUSION & REMARKS.....	45



## List of Tables and Figures

Table 1. List of Corporations Undertaking Mineral Exploration in Mauritania .....	17
Table 2. Mauritanian Iron, Copper Concentrate, and Gold Production .....	19
Table 3. Mauritanian Oil Production .....	19
Table 4. Itemised Turkish Exports to Mauritania (\$).....	23
Table 5. Itemised Turkish Imports from Mauritania (\$).....	23
Table 6. Turkey-Mauritania Friendship Group .....	30
Table 7. Distribution of Confucius Institutes in Africa (Classes).....	39
Table 8. Chinese Projects in Mauritania .....	41
Figure 1. Fish Production in Certain African States (2008-2009).....	15
Figure 2. Mauritanian Fish Trade (1999-2009) .....	16
Figure 3. Aid Provided by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency to Mauritania (2008-2011).....	22
Figure 4. Turkey's Imports From and Exports to Mauritania between 2003 and 2012 (Mn USD) .....	23
Figure 5. Turkish Fishery Production (2007-2011) .....	26
Figure 6. Countries Covered by NATO's Partnership for Peace Centre in Ankara Between 2002 and 2011 .....	34
Figure 7. Chinese Direct Investment in Mauritania (2003-2011) .....	40
Figure 8. Countries Hosting Activities of CNPC, a Chinese Corporation Holding a Mauritanian Oil Extraction License .....	42

## **USAK CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND AFRICAN STUDIES**

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**FOUAD FARHAOUI:** One of the researchers for USAK Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. His work and studies concentrate on matters concerning Turkish-Arab relations, the Middle East and Africa, social movements, history and international relations.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Pre and post-independence policies have yielded volatile problems for African States. North African states, in particular, have seen disintegration between their Arab, Berber, and Black ethnic groups.*

The method of drawing state boundaries that groups dissimilar ethnicities together shaped political movements during the colonial period.. Today, one can still easily discern the effects of these policies, which laid the groundwork for the current crisis in Mali.. Mauritania, too, is another country facing an “internal political identity” as a product of its colonial history. The Country is stuck between an *Arab-African* identity on one hand, and a *Black African* identity on the other.

Furthermore, Mauritania is known to have certain undesirable social attitudes toward Black people.. These affronts to the honour and dignity of Black people are often categorically rejected and resisted by intellectuals of all ethnic groups. French colonial policy that discriminated between Arab and Black people in their rights to education, economic opportunities, and government was a key cause of disunity between the government, Black ethnicities, and others in Mauritania.

Mauritania is a country rarely on the national agenda of other states, including Turkey. Coups, natural disasters, droughts, and famines are the only factors that place Mauritania on any other country’s national agenda.

Mauritania, however, is of vast importance to states with growing interests in Africa. Despite the fact that Mauritania doesn’t have an important place in foreign policies of Arabic or non-Arabic eastern countries, Mauritania’s natural resources are a source of great interest for rising powers. In addition to this, West Africa expects geo-strategically important changes.

Turkey has become an emerging power over the recent years, and more of its interest is being directed at Africa. This fact has revealed itself plainly in the crisis in Somalia.



Ankara has started a number of diplomatic missions and opened many forums on the continent for the sake of developing relations. These strengthening relations have led to Turkey signing economic, cultural, security, and military agreements with a multitude of Arabic and non-Arabic African states.

Relations between Mauritania and Turkey are a part of the bigger trend. We observe that the legal framework for the economic relations between Turkey and Mauritania started to take shape on May 24th, 2005. In consequence, statistics show that bilateral trade has been expanding recently. Yet, Turkish efforts have fallen far short of the efforts of other countries like France and China. China's efforts, in particular, have shown the extent to which Beijing appreciates Mauritania in its geopolitical machinations.

Mauritania is considered as one of the most important centres for aquaculture in Africa, along with Morocco, South Africa, and some others. In this context, fisheries are one of the most promising industries for Turkish-Mauritanian relations. While the benefits of engagement in this particular sector may not be apparent in the short term, there may be great opportunities for investors in the medium and long term.

In the meantime, it should be noted that political and diplomatic relations between Turkey and Mauritania have begun developing at a higher rate in recent years. Recently, the two countries have taken various encouraging steps like mutually appointing ambassadors, conducting high-level official visits, and removing visa requirements for diplomats. Additionally, the presence of a number of bilateral agreements on military and security concerns, especially within the framework of NATO, is notable. However, further studies need to be conducted on this matter, as well as on economic and commercial relations. The political and diplomatic relations that Turkey creates with Mauritania should not only be implemented through the inter-parliamentary platform or within particular party organisations. In this sense, the higher the diversity of channels in which relations are to be set, the stronger they will become.

Turkey's presence in Africa, despite the uptick in activity, still remains weak compared to other rising powers of the region, like China. Considering the fact that Turkey is new to the African continent, and considering all the attendant difficulties of approaching a new region, Turkey's need to develop bilateral relations is evident.

This report intends to evaluate Mauritanian relations with Turkey and China, two increasingly dominant actors in this country. After outlining a historical background, the report lays out the various economic resources of the country that trigger the interests of emerging powers. The question of how economic relations with Turkey can be further developed is discussed separately. The following sections chronicle the overall progress of political relations between Turkey and Mauritania, in addition to making a review of relations in the areas of military and national security. Mauritania's relations with China which has continually extended its political, cultural, and economic spheres of influence in all over Africa, is the next subject of the report. In this way the report ends by making a comparative analysis of the two sets of bilateral relations and a vision assessment.

# INTRODUCTION

*History books mention that the relations between the lands of Chinguetti (today's Mauritania) and Turkey are in fact deeply-rooted. According to some sources, a certain group of Mauritanian people is rumoured to have migrated to Anatolia, seeking asylum from French colonialism.*

It is a readily known fact that Muhammad el-Emin bin el-Qalqami led a lengthy convoy of 600 families of the al-Basadin tribe in a mass emigration to Anatolia in 1908. These families integrated with the native population in southern Turkey.

In 1974, 14 years after Mauritania won its independence, al-Mukhtar Vild Dadah, the former President of Mauritania, paid a visit to Turkey and met with certain Turkish authorities<sup>2</sup>. In recent years an abundance of treaties have been signed dealing with trade, development, media, and transportation, in addition to some concerning national security and military issues.

Mauritania is not given much focus in scholarly research about relations between Turkish and Arabic communities, and between Arab Africans and Black Africans--a significant oversight. Even as a member of the Arab League, Mauritania does not come up to the forefront in international policy papers or policies of other League states. The name Mauritania has grown to be synonymous with military coups and its troublesome, on-again, off-again diplomatic relations Israel. After the initial attention paid to its crises, Mauritania is again relegated to the archives as an old news item. Coups, severe droughts bringing the country to the verge of starvation, massive locust infestations of local crops, are the only kinds of events that move Mauritania to the agendas of other countries.

Mauritania is a broad country measuring over one million square kilometres and is largely covered by deserts. With a population barely over three million, Mauritania's human resources are notably disproportionate to its territory. Experts consider Mauritania a less-developed country.

as the weakest link among North African countries. However, a disturbance occurring in this country is capable of igniting the entire region. In fact, a crisis in Mauritania may easily lead to ruptures not only in the relations between African and Arab governments,

but also between Black African states and their peoples. As a weak state Mauritania carries the potential to threaten international peace and security.

Although Mauritania is assigned with low or least priority of importance in international policy papers and actions of both Arabic and non-Arabic eastern states, the crucial changes occurring in these countries bring forth the need to carefully think the future potentials of Mauritania. The reason of this is because the West Africa region expects geo-strategically important changes. All the past events as witnessed by the Republic of Mali and that covered Mauritania, Algeria, Nigeria, Senegal and others are just but solid proof of such changes, without doubt. Furthermore, consideration of Mali as the “Albania of Africa” by international media organs in time of crisis, has certain aims. At this end, it can be said that the conceptual and terminological preliminary information that have started to be used before the process have a particular role to play in creation of problems and crises.

Mauritania’s internal dynamics, its relations with the established powers in North Africa, as well its relations with rising powers warrant its own particular study in the sense of understanding the power relations of traditional powers in the region. Such a study would facilitate to study and analyse prospects for future cooperation and integration and resolution of disputes that arise between the powers expanding their interests in West and North Africa—China, Turkey, Brazil, and India for example. Other studies on African states with characters similar to Mauritania may also provide insight into changing interregional dynamics, and the interplay between foreign powers and local resources in the region

Recent statements from French authorities on the changes they expect to see in Africa bear a special significance given France’s traditional weight in Africa. Soon after coming into office, French President François Hollande visited the Senegalese Parliament where he declared that the period of “French Africa... has terminated,” and went on to say that “*now there is France and there is Africa. There is cooperation between Africa and France based on mutual respect, transparency and solidarity.*” In a sense, the high level of strategic changes taking place across the continent compelled France to make this statement. It is no coincidence that this statement was made in Senegal, one of the political pillars of West Africa. Considering the developments that took place in the African Continent a few years before the “Arab Spring” events, it is apparent that there is a band of crises across North Africa extending from Mali, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan to the Horn of Africa. Mauritania lies on this band.

Turkey on the other hand, has become an emerging power in recent years, with a growing interest in Africa. This fact has revealed itself more plainly, in the example of the crisis in Somalia. Ankara, in an effort to develop relations with Africa, has started several diplomatic missions and opened many fora on continent, including the Turkish-African Forum. Turkey has signed economic, cultural, security, and military agreements with a multitude of Arab and non-Arab African States. Despite this, Turkey’s presence in Africa still remains limited compared to other rising powers like China. Considering that Turkey is a new presence in Africa, it must develop its bilateral relations with countries in the region to ease its rise. In fact, this need for developing bilateral relations is especially important for states exposed to international interventions.

In light of all these arguments, it's clear how important relations between Turkey and Mauritania are from the aspects of politics and economics and from the aspects of national security and military. This study also attempts to observe the potential difficulties that Ankara may encounter in its relations with Africa, due to China's strong presence in the continent. Beijing sees Mauritania as one of the countries through which China may extend its influence and use as a tool against international forces who claim to be Chinese rivals in the future.



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