



PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

MAURITANIA: TERRORISTS PRISON ATTACK AND JAILBREAK

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A. INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Interior in Mauritania announced on Monday 06 March 2023, the escape of four terrorist prisoners from the country's Central Prison in the capital, Nouakchott. The escapees exchanged gun fire with the National Guards on duty, killing two in the process and injuring two others. While search is currently underway, authorities have since strengthened security controls in key critical installations and have called on the citizenry to provide any critical information that may lead to the recapture of the fugitives.

B. THE INCIDENT

At about **9 pm** on Sunday **05 March 2023**, four terrorists who were imprisoned at the Central Prison in the country's capital, Nouakchott escaped after attacking National Guards on duty. The attack resulted in an exchange of gun fire between the guards and the terrorists. Two members of the National Guards were killed during the exchange, while two others were slightly injured.

The terrorists are believed to have smuggled small arms into the prison which they used to attack the guards. They then seized the AK-47s of the guards to engage in further atrocities. The prisoners, after the attack, jumped into a waiting Toyota Camry vehicle that had been parked outside the prison for their escape and headed towards Dar Naim neighborhood, a suburb of the capital. The vehicle was eventually abandoned and later found Northeast of Nouakchott by Security authorities.



It has been reported that one of the four terrorists who escaped was **Cheikh Ould Salek**, a senior fellow of the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) and a Mauritanian national who was sentenced to death for terrorism offences. Cheikh Ould Salek was sentenced to death in 2011 over an AQIM plot to assassinate **President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz**. Another escapee is

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Mohamed Ould Chebih, who was involved in the 2005 terrorist attack in Mauritania. The Nouakchott central prison houses more than thirty (30) jihadist fighters, most of whom are on death row.

The detailed identities of escaped prisoners, crimes committed, and their sentences are as follows:

1. **Cheikh Ould Salek** was accused of high treason while carrying arms. Conviction: Death Penalty
2. **Muhammad Ould Chebih** was accused of taking up arms against Mauritania and committing assaults with the aim of killing. Conviction: Death Penalty
3. **Muhammad Yeslim Muhammad Mahmoud** was accused of attempting to join an existing gathering for the purpose of committing terrorist crimes. Sentence: 10 years
4. **Abdul Karim Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq** was accused of attempting to belong to an existing group for the purpose of committing terrorist crimes and receiving training abroad. Sentence: 7 years

C. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Mauritania recorded her first terrorist attack on 04 June 2005, when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) now ***Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM)*** attacked an army barracks in **Lemgheity** in the northern part of the country, close to the Algerian and Malian borders. Officially, 17 Mauritanian soldiers were killed, and nine attackers also died in a reprisal attack. **Mohamed Ould Chebih** was involved in that famous attack which is considered the deadliest terrorist incident in the history of Mauritania. The Lemgheity attack was symbolic as it was the GSPC's first terrorist attack outside of Algerian territory and played a significant role in facilitating the group's immediate recognition by Al-Qaeda as an affiliate.

Following the 2005 attack, nine other incidents occurred between 2007 and 2011. The most prominent were the attacks in December 2007, -when four French tourists were assassinated in **Aleg**, and military targets were attacked in **El Ghallawiya** killing four soldiers. A September 2008 attack in **Tourine** killed 12 soldiers. In February 2011, -a double attack planned against the Ministry of Defence and French Embassy was thwarted by security forces. Drivers of two vehicles, each loaded with 1.5 tons of explosives, were neutralized at the entrance of Nouakchott. The February 2011 foiled plot was to blow up sensitive places. A Mauritania police officer was killed, and eight others wounded, while four suspected AQIM fighters died in the firefight.

Cheikh Ould Salek was involved in the February 2011 plot, one of which motive was to assassinate President Mohamed Ould Adbel Aziz using two car bombs. Cheikh Ould Salek fled with one car packed with explosive and was later intercepted by Mauritania security and arrested with a fellow AQIM fighter in **R'kiz**, near the country's border with Senegal. Cheikh Ould Salek was imprisoned in Nouakchott but escaped and fled to Senegal in 2015. From Senegal, he moved to Guinea-Bissau, where he was arrested and returned to Nouakchott in 2016 to face his death sentence.

No terrorist attacks have been recorded on Mauritanian soil since 20 December 2011. On that day, a gendarme, **Ely Ould Mokhtar**, was kidnapped in the town of **Adel Bagrou** on the border with Mali by armed men suspected to be members of AQIM. Mauritania's Counter-Terrorism efforts have been praised as model for emulation by Sahel countries and other African Countries in the eye of the storm of

terrorist attacks, though it has been alleged that Mauritania during the time of President Aziz brokered a deal with AQIM not to attack the country. The alleged 'non-aggression pact' with AQIM was unveiled by documents seized in Osama Bin Laden's refuge in Abbottabad, Pakistan, by American special forces. Mauritanian officials have always denied existence of any such pact and indicated the country is able to protect itself through its security forces' capacity and related effective responses. Indeed, Mauritania has adopted a multidimensional approach combining preventive and repressive measures which take into account the factors that are conducive for the development and spread of terrorism. These measures have been efficiently implemented that has seen the country free from attack until the recent attack.

D. ANALYSIS

The 05 March 2023 evening prison attack is first terror attack in over 12 years. For more than a decade, Mauritania has not witnessed any such incident. The attack completely changes the national security dynamics and situation of the country and considerably alters the terrorism threat level. The attack further raises the spectre of terrorists attack outside the prisons. The ability of the terrorists to smuggle small arms inside the prison exposes the vulnerabilities in the security of such high-profile criminal prison. The Mauritanian authorities needs to conduct immediate and thorough investigation to understand the



Cheikh Ould Salek

circumstances that led to the breaches. This will inform the way forward in terms of enhancing the capabilities of the intelligence and counter-intelligence services to thwart similar attack in the future given how coordinated and planned the prison attack was executed.

The security implications of the escaped terrorists on the neighboring countries such as Algeria, Guinea, Senegal, and in more particular the Sahel countries is a case to look out for. In the meantime, the group may want to find a haven in places where terrorist groups have exhibited freedom of movement within their mobility corridor.

Burkina Faso and Mali, which in recent times have recorded high incidences related to Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), of which AQIM is a member, provide a probable safe hiding abode. Given the renewed counter terrorism activities along the Algeria border with Mauritania, the escapees may not find southern Algeria as a conducive environment, and given the previous escape routes of **Cheikh Ould Salek**, the Mauritania-Senegal zone could provide safe corridor for the escapees from where they could later relocate into a safer place. Neighboring border countries will have to put their cross-border crimes surveillance on high alert for possible capture of the escaped terrorist. Countries may also have to enhance their intelligence sharing cooperation efforts so as to provide timely and actionable intelligence information that may lead to the arrest of the terrorists. The G5 Sahel Joint Task Force could prove extremely helpful in this regard.

The prison break was clearly aided from the outside, owed to the fact that weapons were smuggled inside the prison and arranged getaway vehicle. It is also alleged that a considerable number of Mauritanian citizens have joined terrorist groups operating in the Sahel region over the years, therefore there could be a terrorist cell operating in the Mauritania that had escaped the radars of security forces for some time. Following this incident, the country could witness renewed terrorist attacks along the southern part bordering Burkina Faso and Mali.

Overall, the analysis of the situation shows potential escalation of terrorist activities by JNIM and its affiliates in the countries that the group currently operates including Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Coastal States of Benin and Togo. The successful rescue of **Chiekh Ould Salek** and **Mohammed Ould Chebih**, both of whom senior fellows of AQIM, would bolster the enthusiasm of AQIM fighters and escalate the overall activities of JNIM. The latter part of 2022 and the beginning of 2023 have witnessed the growing confidence of JNIM in its operational zones. The group has expanded its geographical reach beyond its traditional theater of operations to include the coastal West Africa. In 2023, JNIM has intensified its attacks and particularly, making inroads into the Savanes region of northern Togo and northern Benin in spite of intensified counter terrorism operations in the countries and the greater western Sahel. This demonstrates the resilience of JNIM and reveals the momentum, cohesion, and capability of the group to plan and attack critical civilian and military installations. The ability of AQIM and for that matter JNIM to plan the escape of the four terrorists will further enhance the confidence of the rank and file of JNIM fighters and reassure them of the group's ability to protect its members.

E. CONCLUSION

The well-coordinated nature of the attack and the escape exposes the vulnerabilities within the security protection mechanism of the central prison currently holding about 30 jihadist fighters. It must be recognised that it is the second time **Chiekh Ould Salek** has escaped arrest, first in 2015 and now in 2023. Given his history of arrest and escape, much attention and surveillance should have been provided on him. The escaped terrorists pose a great deal of security threats to the neighboring countries, the Sahel and by extension littorals states of the West African sub-region. Under the prevailing circumstances and owing to the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel and littorals states, countries may have to elevate their respective states of preparedness to effectively respond to the fallout of the insecurity and national security threats that may be posed by the escaped terrorists. Enhancing cross-border surveillance and cooperations, as well as intensifying intelligence sharing among neighboring countries could prove helpful under the circumstances.

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