



PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

**MAURITANIA PRISON TERRORISTS ESCAPEES KILLED IN
SPECIAL OPERATION**

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A. INTRODUCTION

The Mauritania Elite Unit of the National Gendarmerie, supported by the First Commando Battalion, and the Mauritanian Military Aviation, on Saturday **11th March 2023**, about **10 a.m**, succeeded in neutralizing four Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) prisoners who escaped last Sunday **5th March, 2023** from the Central Prison in the country's capital, Nouakchott. The Mauritania Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior issued a joint statement confirming the incident. During the operation, three prisoners were killed and a fourth arrested in the operation. On the side of the security, a member of the elite battalion in the National Gendarmerie, **Al-Mustafa Olad Al-Khadir Obaid**, martyred.

B. THE INCIDENT

A joint statement released by the Mauritania Defence and Interior Ministries on **12th March, 2023**, disclosed that three out of the four fugitives who broke jail in the **5th March, 2023**, terrorist attack on the central prison in the capital, Nouakchott, were neutralized in a shoot-out during a search operation conducted by the army and counter-terrorism forces while one other was captured. Two soldiers were also killed in the gunfire, and several others were reportedly injured in the operation.

Operations report indicate that the four (4) escapees after breaking jail, moved in a four-wheel-drive vehicle in surrounding municipalities in Nouakchott with plans to reach Timbuktu, northern Mali through Al-Maddah, within the Lamasidi area, on the outskirts of Adrar state, in the remotest desert of Mauritania. Reports indicate that residents in the surrounding towns had earlier spotted them while soliciting for assistance for a suitable location to pick up communication signals in order to make calls, and to gather other items. The escapees in order to conceal their identities claimed that they were state workers.

On the way to their destination, the fugitives are reported to have taken refuge in rocky heights making it difficult for search teams to identify their locations. In addition to ground operations, security forces deployed a reconnaissance aircraft to augment surveillance in rocky

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patches while sending images and real time information to a Supreme Security Committee meeting that was being held in Nouakchott.

In the unfolding event, a unit of the land operations team clashed with the main terrorist, **CHEIKH OULD SALEK**, killing him in the process. The latter during the shoot-out killed one gendarme before being taken out. Similarly, two of the escaped detainees were killed while one was captured. Apparently the captured fugitive, who was out of weapons, informed them that the car was rigged with bombs.

With respect to weapons in possession by the fugitives, it was revealed that they had a single machine gun and four pistols, and large amount of bullets. The escaping prisoners were aboard a 2018-wheeled four-wheel drive Toyota hilux. Further, the vehicle had fuel of three barrels of gasoline, each of which had a capacity of 75 liters, and three other barrels of water, each of which was 75 liters. The car was also carrying two large bags of sardines, four mosquito nets, some medications, 10 mobile phones and 100 SIM cards belonging to different companies. Interestingly, documents covering the vehicle used by the escaped terrorists found in the car were issued by Malian authorities as well as other documentations of Malian origin.

For the avoidance of doubt, the escaped terrorist prisoners killed in the operation are **Cheikh Ould Salek, Muhammad Ould Chebih, and Muhammad Yeslim Muhammad Mahmoud**. During the process, the fourth escaped prisoner, **Abu Bakr Al-Sidiq Abdul Karim**, who was sentenced to seven years in prison, and had been in prison since 2021, accused of trying to create a rally to commit terrorist crimes and receive training abroad surrendered.

The area where the National Gendarmerie intercepted the fleeing prisoners, is 327 kilometres northeast of the capital Nouakchott. Lamasidi region, which follows Ojft County, lies on a desert road that was previously taken by smugglers towards the north of the neighboring Mali. When Al-Qaeda took the Spanish hostages between Nouakchott and Nawazibu in 2009, they took the same route and successfully crossed the Mauritanian territory without notice. However, in recent years, the Mauritanian armed forces and security forces, have closed all the roads, and put them under intense security surveillance.

C. BACKGROUND

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 was **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.

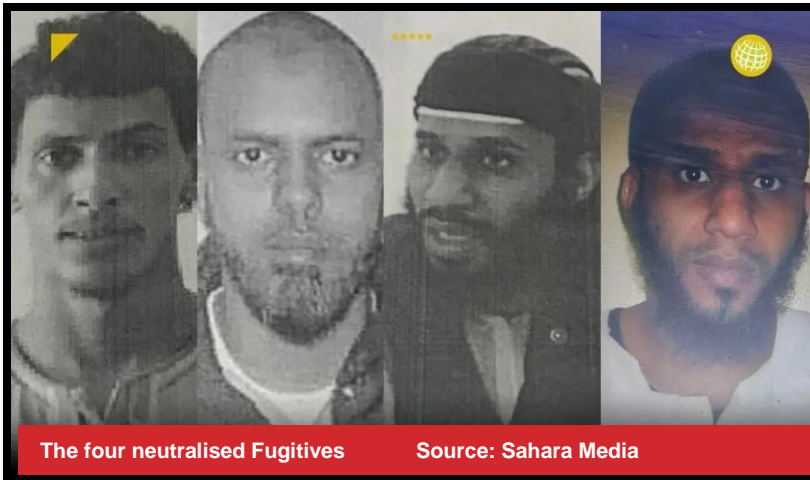
The identities of the escaped detainees, crimes committed and their sentences as conveyed in our initial report are under-listed:

- **Cheikh Ould Salek** was accused of high treason while carrying arms. **Conviction:** Death Penalty
- **Muhammad Ould Chebih** was accused of taking up arms against Mauritania and committing assaults with the aim of killing. **Conviction:** Death Penalty
- **Muhammad Yeslim Muhammad Mahmoud** was accused of attempting to join an existing gathering for the purpose of committing terrorist crimes. **Sentence:** 10 years
- **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.

Hours after prisoners escaped, the Mauritania National Guard took control of the prison and immediately began tracking down the fugitives with a view to arrest them as soon as possible. A high-level security committee was formed, charged with the responsibility of overseeing a plan to arrest fugitive prisoners, while border security measures were tightened.

D. ANALYSIS

The well-coordinated efforts of the Mauritanian security forces coupled with the intelligence based manner in which the search operations were conducted, leading to the deaths of the three fugitives, portends a positive development in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. Given the route taken by the fugitives for their escape, it is instructive to note that the escapees were enroute to join the ranks of other similar terrorist groups in northern Mali in the Sahel region. Indeed, this indication was confirmed by the fourth captured escapee. It must also be noted that this special operation leading to the neutralization of the terrorists became possible due to enhanced air support by the military aviation which was essential to the ground operations. The Mauritanian airmen exhibited advanced capacities to provide close air support, surveillance, and reconnaissance. This capacity made it possible for security forces to detect suspicious movement of vehicles and other motion equipment on ground. The importance of continuously retooling the security forces to have advanced capability to fight threats of terrorism, violent extremism and transnational organized cannot be overemphasized. Security forces require advanced capabilities to be able to fight terrorists who have become more complex in the planning of attacks against their targets. More of such retooling is required in Mauritania.



Intelligence played a critical role in the special operations. The Toyota Hilux four wheel drive in which the escaped fugitives were travelling in developed a fault. Community members having noticed the fugitives signaled security forces. This brings to the fore the importance of community engagements and building trust between border communities and security forces. Communities well informed have the capability to help

security forces fight cross border crimes and serve as intelligence agents for security forces. Over time, Mauritania government has developed strategy of community engagement and whole-of-society approach as part of its counter terrorism efforts. The strategy of community engagement in border communities are critical component of effective counterterrorism approach. Improving the living conditions of local populations make them loyal to the government, which in turn pays dividends in terms of intelligence collection regarding any suspicious movements of terrorist and violent extremist groups. This also makes the population resilient to infiltration of extremist groups.

The need for the Mauritanian authorities to conduct thorough investigation to understand the circumstances that led to the prison break is reiterated. Many issues and information need to be uncovered. Circumstances leading to the attacks and jail break are urgent questions that need answers. This will inform the basis of restructuring the national security architecture to enhance the capabilities of the intelligence and counter-intelligence services to thwart similar attack in the future. The possibility of terrorists' sleeper cells in Mauritania that have escaped the surveillance of security forces cannot be underestimated. Given that the prison break was clearly aided from the outside, owed to the fact that weapons were smuggled inside the prison and the ease by which the terrorists were able to conduct the operations raises the notion that there are terrorists' cells in Mauritania coordinating with affiliates in the Sahel region. This stem from the fact that Mauritania nationals were considered influential in the Algerian home grown Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), now known as the al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Indeed, Mauritians comprised the second largest source of fighters for AQIM after Algerians. To avoid recurrence of such incidents, authorities may want to overhaul the security arrangements at the Central Prison to enthrone efficient protection.

The killing of three terrorists and capture of one may lead to reprisal attacks on Mauritania by AQIM and its affiliate **Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM)**. This calls for the need to raise the preparedness level of the security agencies and developing their intelligence capabilities for early detection of planned terrorist attacks. JNIM in recent times have attacked close to the Mauritania border with Mali. On **06 February 2023**, JNIM militants attacked a security checkpoint in the western town of Nara, close to the Mauritanian border killing at least three Malian security officers. Similarly, on **20 February 2023**, at least two people were killed in Nara region, western Mali close to the border with Mauritania. Given the resurgence in terrorist activities in the Sahel, following sophisticated and renewed attacks by JNIM, Mauritania security forces may have to reinforce their border surveillance/security.

E. IMAGES FROM TOYOTA HILUX USED BY THE TERRORISTS



F. CONCLUSION

Given its geographic location in the Sahel region, where terrorism is a continuous threat, Mauritania cannot consider itself totally immune to the expansionist trend of terrorist groups. Terrorist and violent extremist groups in the Sahel in recent times appear to be executing a grand strategy of geographical expansion into new areas beyond their originally operated theatres. Within the first quarter of 2023, the situation in Sahel has worsened than same period in 2022. Attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have become more complex and deadly. Mauritania must therefore, continue to consolidate its capacity, share its experience and contribute to the Sahel regional stabilization plan and strategy. Meanwhile, neighboring countries such as Algeria, Guinea, Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso may enhance collaboration and intelligence sharing to strengthen border security given the porous nature of borders in the region. There is the need for continuous intelligence sharing and coordinated efforts in the region to nip the menace of terrorism and violent extremism in the bud.

Additionally, the role that the G5 Sahel Joint Task Force, headquartered in Mauritania could play to rekindle the state of security preparedness of the member countries needs to be urgently pursued. Terrorist and violent extremist groups in the Sahel have become more organized and resilient, particularly the JNIM affiliated groups. The transnational nature of the threat, which is crucial for the terrorist and violent groups' operational sustenance, surely commands priority attention and synergy in response generation efforts by countries within the Sahel region and the broader West Africa region.

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