

## Mauritanian–Israeli relations: from normalization to freeze to suspension

Mahmood al-Kurwy<sup>a\*</sup> and Faysal Shalal Abbas<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Political Science, University of Baghdad, Iraq;* <sup>b</sup>*Ibn Haitham College of Education, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq*

This article explores the background to normalization of Mauritanian-Israeli relations in depth and detail and demonstrates why the case of Mauritania was unique both for Mauritians, who sought to replace their erstwhile French allies, as well as for the Israelis - who viewed it as one of the first and most important pillars of their Africa policy and who invested significantly throughout all sectors of the economy. Normalization of Mauritanian-Israeli relations initially began secretly during the regime of President Mu‘āwiyah Aḥmad Ould al-Ṭāya‘ and aside from the high-level political and diplomatic contacts, transpired in many different spheres from business, to medicine, to agriculture, telecommunications and lithium extraction and prospecting. The opening of respective embassies in both countries and high-profile visits brought about tensions in Mauritania among the general populace which was never comfortable with diplomatic or trade relations with Israel and which eventually factored in precipitating a coup. Mauritania eventually froze diplomatic relations and finally cut them off after Israeli aggression against Gaza during ‘Operation Cast Lead’ took public sentiment to the titration point. While Mauritania went on to develop relations with Iran, many of the commercial and industrial ties to Israeli corporations still persist if nothing more than for the reason that Israeli penetration of Mauritanian markets and various sectors was (and to a considerable degree still remains) significant. The future situation will likely be determined as a result of the dynamic and interplay of forces discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** normalization of Mauritanian–Israeli relations; freeze; Israeli commercial involvement; Mauritanian economy; military coup

### Introduction

Spanning a 650-km coastline along the shores of the Atlantic, in the westernmost Arab Maghreb, Mauritania obtained its political independence on 27 November 1960, and al-Mukhtār Ould Dādah assumed the presidency of the Republic. The country became a member of the United Nations on 28 November 1961 and a member of the League of Arab States in 1973. The political system in the country has witnessed a number of coups up to the present since 1978, and among the most significant of which are the two most recent:

- The coup of 3 August 2005 which overthrew President Mu‘āwiyah Aḥmad Ould al-Ṭāya‘<sup>1</sup> who was in Saudi Arabia to attend the funeral of King Fahd bin ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. This coup initiated a two-year interim regime after which presidential

---

\*Corresponding Address: Email: alkurwy2009@yahoo.com

elections took place in 2007 and brought to power President Ould al-Sheikh ‘Abdullah. This was the first government in Mauritania to be established according to the will of the people.

- The coup of 6 August 2008 under the leadership of General Muḥammad Ould ‘Abd al-‘Azīz who overthrew the President-elect Ould al-Sheikh ‘Abdullah and announced the formation of a Ruling Council of State (*majlis li-qiyādat al-dawlah*).

According to the Constitution of 1991, which named the country the Mauritanian Islamic Republic, the Mauritanian political system persists on the basis of a multi-party system as specified in Article 11 of Section 1 of the Constitution which states:

The political parties and associations participate in constituting the political will and expression of it. Political parties and associations are formed and practice their activities freely on the condition that democratic principles are respected and on the condition that they do not – through their goals or activities – adversely affect the national sovereignty, the territorial integrity (*al-ḥawzah al-turābīyah*) or the unity of the *umma* and the Republic.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, the Law of Political Parties was promulgated on 25 July 1991 to guarantee the democratic process and its protection.

This article focuses on Mauritanian–Israeli relations that are characterized by a number of dichotomies that include the vested interests of businessmen and political elites enmeshed with international and Israeli corporations and investment juxtaposed against the generally pro-Arab, pro-Islamic and pro-Palestinian sentiments of the general population. Israeli involvement in Mauritania became very extensive and pervasive across a wide spectrum of sectors – from agriculture to medicine, to finance and investment, to lithium prospecting and telecommunications – to the extent that the question of freezing or cutting of relations at the political level was never a simple matter or one tied exclusively to the political will. On 30 October 2007, at the end of his visit to France, former Mauritanian President Muhammad Ould al-Sheikh Abdullah admitted frankly that the relationship of his country with Israel did not have the approval of the majority of Mauritians who would have preferred that such had never been undertaken (Khūrī 2007). The process of normalization of Mauritanian–Israeli relations, which is extraordinary in the Arab world for numerous reasons and due to the extent which such reached, will be examined here in depth in order to understand the context and the events leading up to the eventual freeze and cutting-off of diplomatic relations, largely in response to popular outrage over the Israeli attacks on Gaza in ‘Operation Cast Lead’. From its standpoint, Mauritania represented for Israel an important point of departure and a special and first case in its Africa policy and investments in the country became very significant. The dimensions and dynamics of the Mauritanian–Israeli relationship, explored in depth in this article, have not ceased to be central and pivotal and will undoubtedly factor in whatever transpires in the future.

### **The path to normalization of Mauritanian–Israeli relations**

The beginnings of preliminary steps towards normalization of relations between Mauritania and Israel go back to the 1990s during the period of rule by Mu‘āwiyah Ould Aḥmad al-Ṭāyī‘ who engineered this relation<sup>3</sup> over the course of a series of

clandestine, high-level communications between Mauritania and Israel in New York, Madrid and Barcelona which transpired under special conditions and in complete secrecy. The first official ministerial communications took place between Mauritanian Foreign Minister Muḥammad Sālim Ould Likḥal and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres on 18 June 1995 in Madrid as hosted by former Spanish Foreign Minister Javier Solana just as another meeting took place between Likḥal and Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Yossi Belin in Amman. This meeting is only the second of its kind and was undertaken in the presence of former Jordanian Foreign Minister ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Kabārītī at the request of the Mauritanian Minister (al-Madyanī 2006, p. 146). The result of this communication was an official agreement to open offices for the supervision of interests in both capitals – Tel Aviv and Nouakchott on 27 November 1995 (al-Khalafī, 1999). Here, in conformity with the methodology of this research, it is worth examining the factors that impelled this new development on both sides.

### **Mauritanian incentives**

A number of factors, external and internal, impelled the Mauritanian political regime to normalize relations with Israel, and among the most prominent are the following:

- After Israel participated in some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercises in the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue of NATO, the countries of the Arab Maghreb, and Mauritania in the lead, strove to offer support for the alliance and to cooperate with it because it considered this to be the appropriate framework that could contribute to preserving Mauritanian stability and protecting it en force from any possible security tribulations (‘Awaḍ *et al.* 2007, p. 247) and which could guarantee its obtaining security and economic preferences through shared Israeli investments in this area.
- The Mauritanian authorities viewed peaceful relations with Israel as the most promising path towards perpetual peace in the Arab region, and in this context Mauritanian Minister of Media/Communications al-Rashīd bin Šālīḥ stated: ‘The goal of the visit was to convince the Israelis of the road to peace and to check the hostilities against the brother Palestinians’ (al-Azraq 2003).
- The desire of Mauritania to guarantee its stability over the long-term in the regions of the West Coast of Africa as well as the Arab Maghreb and to overcome threats posed towards it by these countries as exemplified by clandestine emigration, drug smuggling and the watching of borders (terrorist groups). This was consolidated through Mauritania engaging in a number of security and military meetings with the American side (Muḥammad 2007) and the American reception of Mauritanian officers for this purpose.
- The belief of the Mauritanian authorities that the process of continuing relations with Israel would assist it in securing the assistance of the United States instead of those of France as a consequence of its harsh differences with the latter which was providing assistance to the country.<sup>4</sup>
- The perception of Mauritania that it was perpetually threatened by Algeria and Morocco; and among that which solidified these feelings was the participation of Algeria during the rule of Houari Boumeddine in the coup to oust Mukhtār Ould Dādah for his support of Morocco over the issue of the Western Sahara, in addition to a previous stance taken by the Maghreb, which consolidates this

feeling, when it was against the idea of building a Mauritanian state as the land was considered to be that of the Maghreb (Abū Zakarīyah 2002, p. 96).

- The arrest by French authorities in November 1999 of Mauritanian officer Captain 'Alī Ould Dādah on charges of torturing political prisoners, which incurred the anger of the Mauritanian leadership, which was manifested in the expulsion of French military advisors from Mauritania as well as the imposition of an entry visa on all French desiring to enter its territories. From another standpoint, Mauritania sought a normalization of relations with Israel with the goal of gaining the support of the Jewish lobby in the American administration in order for that to offset all types of French support (al-Azraq 2003) at a time when Washington had placed Mauritania on a black list for violations of human rights, the practice of torture and accusations of liquidations in the military of up to 500 military personnel between 1987 and 1991 (Centre for Arab Unity Studies 2002, p. 111).
- Educational levels in Mauritania are considered to be extremely low, where censuses indicate that the number of those who can read and write among the total population is approximately 41.2% (United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 2004, p. 177).
- Poverty in Mauritania is widespread and moreover its economic resources (iron and fishing industries) are insufficient to meet its needs. This has been accompanied by drought and its effects including migration to the cities. Moreover, Mauritania finds itself obliged to implement International Monetary Fund (IMF) measures in exchange for rescheduling its debts (Salāmah *et al.* 1989, vol. 1, p. 111).
- Among the goals of Mauritania's attempt to normalize its relations with Israel was finally to overcome the racist black-African 'Aflām' Movement which Israel was courting in order to assist it in achieving its projected goal of establishing a black-African state in the south of Mauritania. Mauritania had discovered hidden hands in the region endeavouring to increase the ferocity of tensions between Arab and African groups (Bāb and al-Amīn 2005, pp. 92–93).
- The poor state of healthcare in Mauritania, as indicated by the relative quality of services provided to citizens, when in 1960, for instance, the number of doctors in the country was eleven, which subsequently increased to 75 in 1970 (Naṣr *et al.* 1978, p. 51). Despite development in this area, the country still suffers from poor health conditions, and according to a United Nations programme report the number of doctors for every 100,000 patients is eleven (UNDP 2004, p. 200).

In light of the above, it is possible to assert that these are the reasons which pushed Mauritania towards normalization of its relations with Israel in the absence of Arab support of Mauritania to confront the challenges to which it is forcefully exposed. This is reinforced by explicit remarks of Mauritanian officials to the effect that the Arabs have abandoned economic support for Mauritania and to express the goal of normalization to extract Mauritania from its economic crisis and its poverty.

### **Israeli incentives**

A number of factors came together to push Israel towards the normalization of relations with Mauritania, which may be summarized as follows:

- The endeavour of Israel and the United States to establish a shared security vision and system into which factored interests and the stability of the Mediterranean states along the southern rim in a unified group that would assist in assimilating the Arab countries of the southern Mediterranean to their neighbour, the state of Israel, and subsequently transforming them into a part of the perpetual Mediterranean security system (‘Awaḍ *et al.* 2007, p. 247).
- Attempted integration of Israel into some NATO initiatives in light of the NATO Mediterranean dialogue with the goal of normalizing its military relations with those Arab countries which have a relationship with it: Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania – after the Oslo Accords failed to normalize Arab–Israeli relations in this context; and this is an approach undertaken by NATO by proxy (‘Awaḍ *et al.* 2007, p. 247).
- The geographic importance of Mauritania as a strategic point on the Atlantic with a coastline of 650 km (al-Şahāfī and al-Ṭāhīr 1981, p. 9) tangent to the Great Sahara renders it a strategic partner to exploit the hitherto unexploited resources of this vast area (Muḥammad 2007).
- The presence of vast material resources in Mauritania such as copper and iron, which is found in mountain deposits, is Mauritania’s historical resource (Abū Zakarīyah 2002, p. 97, also Ministry of Cultural Affairs 1960, p. 126). Most of these resources are exported to Europe, especially France (Brāhīmī 1996, p. 162). This is in addition to its reserves of fish and fishing, which is counted among the most important pillars of Mauritania’s economic activities; and Mauritania is one of the richest regions in fish with different kinds and various types of marine life as a result of warm-water sea currents (Ould Aslamū 1995, p. 162). Thus, Israel strove to benefit from what it could and to strengthen its position in the region ostensibly in order to develop economic interests, especially fish farming.
- The Israelis see that Mauritania constitutes a point of departure for inroads into the African continent; and its vast territorial area and weak government lend it, among other factors, a consideration as a base of Israeli operations rather than as a centre for dissemination of Arab–Islamic culture (al-Madyanī 2006, p. 149).
- Deepening dissention and rift in the Arab ranks and speeding up the course of normalization, and the pretence that all Arab nations – from the heart of the Arab world to the periphery – are on the road to formal relations with Israel (Ould Aḥmad 2001).
- Israeli aspirations for expansion, traceable back to the economic crisis which it is experiencing, where Arab markets have become a vital market for its economy – a fact confirmed by its being the nation to benefit most from the Economic Conference of the Middle East and North Africa which convened four times: in 1994 in Casa Blanca; in 1995 in Amman; in 1996 in Cairo; and in 1997 in Doha, where the trade between it and the Arab countries reached approximately US\$99.1 million in the year 2000 (Walīd 2005).

The normalization of Mauritanian–Israeli relations took multiple forms over a number of different stages as is clear from the following.

### ***Diplomatic normalization***

The normalization of Mauritanian–Israeli diplomatic relations began on 28 October 1999 in New York when the establishment of diplomatic relations was announced at the level of opening consulates in each of the two countries. US Secretary of State

Madeleine Albright participated in the signing of the agreement and was frank upon doing so, remarking, 'This agreement will have positive consequences for the people of Mauritania' (al-Azraq 2003).

In an interview with al-Sayyid Ould Musa, member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Mauritanian National Association, with regard to whether Mauritania had overstepped its bounds in normalizing relations with Israel, he responded,

No, to the contrary. There is no exaggeration in this talk. We opened an embassy/consulate in Israel and they opened one in our country, just as Jordan and Egypt have done. When former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat visited Mauritania, he met with the President who advised him to establish relations with Israel. Mauritania has confidence, through its relations with Israel, that there is no peace except through peace and mutual relations between the Arab countries and Israel. This will provide stability for the entire region, and peace will not be achieved if the principle of dialog is not implemented. (al-Azraq 2003)

The process of opening the two embassies/consulates was preceded by visits of officials from both countries. At the end of October 1998, Sheikh al-'Afiyah Ould Muhammad Khūnā, Mauritanian Minister of Foreign Affairs of the al-Ṭāya' government, undertook a visit to Tel Aviv in order to congratulate Benjamin Netanyahu on his victory in the Israeli presidential election; and during that time there were secret dispatches. Two weeks later, Ould Muhammad Khūnā was appointed President of the government of Mauritania by President Ould al-Ṭāya', which was considered to be a reward for his visit to Israel (al-Khalafī 1999).

The visit of Ould Khūnā was met with stringent popular and Arab rejection for its contravention of the decrees of the Arab League with regard to normalization of relations. In 2001, the Mauritanian Foreign Minister visited occupied Palestine and met with Ariel Sharon. Among that which indicated the strength of the relations between the two countries was that the Israeli ambassador in Nouakchott, Ariel Karam, held a celebration on the occasion of 'Israeli independence' day, which corresponds to the Palestinian *Nakbah*; and this was attended by a number of Mauritanian dignitaries and officials (al-Khalafī 1999). Also, in this context the Israeli ambassador engaged in a series of telephone calls to most of the Mauritanian officials of state, administrators and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Mauritania, introducing himself and explaining what he could offer to improve institutional performance (Ould Aḥmad 2001). Additionally, he was invited by presidential invitation to attend the closing celebration of the Third Mauritanian Youth Festival (Ṭsā 1999).

Yet, the most significant event which bears scrutiny is the visit of Silvan Shalom, Israeli Foreign Minister, to Mauritania in 2005, where he was met by Mauritanian Foreign Minister Muhammad Fāl Ould Bilāl. This visit was the most prominent of its kind as the Israeli Foreign Minister's visit was the first he had engaged in and the second contact at the level of Israeli foreign ministers. The significance of Shalom's visit also key in this context, given that Mauritania was singular in having refused to cut its relations with Israel at the beginning of the Intifada in September 2000 – in contradistinction to a number of Arab nations that recalled their representatives (al-Madyanī 2006, p. 147) – and it maintained its ambassador at its embassy/consulate in Israel. The fruit of these relations and repeated visits was the meeting between al-Ṭāya' and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres on 5 September 2002 on the sidelines of the World Summit in Johannesburg (al-Shanqīṭī 2004).

In the context of the efforts to consolidate relations, a high-level Israeli Knesset delegation visited Mauritania in April 2000, headed by Naomi Shazan of the Labor

Party and including among its members Maxim Levy and Gideon Ezra of the Likud Party as well as Hāshim Maḥāmīd of the Unified Arab List. The delegation was received by President Ould al-Ṭāyaʿ at the presidential palace where talks focused on consolidating relations between the countries and exchanges of visits. The result of meeting with the Mauritanian Parliament was the establishment of a Mauritanian–Israeli Association for peace. The visit was conducted amidst stringent security measures in the face of objections and disavowal on the part of Mauritanian political and popular movements (*al-Ittiḥād* 2000, p. 20).

Mauritanian Foreign Minister Ahmad Ould Sīdī Aḥmad met with his Israeli counterpart Shalom on the sidelines of the 60th General Assembly of the United Nations (ʿAwwād 2005)<sup>5</sup>; and remarked, ‘The Mauritanian Military Council has taken a decision to abide by all treaties and agreements which were made in the name of Mauritania’, and he confirmed that relations with the United States were excellent and those with Israel ongoing (*al-ʿArab al-Yawm (Amman)* 2007). That is, the price paid by the new regime for obtaining American recognition and that of Western nations was the preservation of these relations. Thus, there are those who see that the coup transpired in order to save Mauritanian–Israeli relations, as a result of the increasingly fierce opposition to the al-Ṭāyaʿ regime which climaxed with armed action within the military. It was feared that this might threaten the American–Israeli presence in Mauritania, especially since most of the opposing orientations were Arab Islamist (ʿAwwād 2005).<sup>6</sup>

### ***Security and strategic normalization***

The strategic and security sphere witnessed the last ‘decisive’ cooperation between the two sides when sources in the Mauritanian leadership confirmed that they had been availed of Israeli strategic and security expertise in order to remain in power (al-Ḥarīrī 2003, p. 6), and especially after the collapse of Mauritanian–French relations. This cooperation was epitomized in the Mauritanian leadership removing some of its military officers from their positions, while acting on the advice of Israeli foreign intelligence to President Muʿāwiyah during a period when the number of Israeli advisors in the country reached 100 (al-Azraq 2003). The cooperation witnessed a noticeable development when Mauritania ceded to an Israeli request to bury Israeli nuclear waste in the Mauritanian Sahara in exchange for some fiscal assistance. An Israeli aircraft carrying nuclear waste landed at Tajkajah Airport (Bambā 2004), despite the denial of the Mauritanian leadership of its agreement to store Israeli nuclear waste in Mauritania (Fārūq 2007) and, moreover, Mauritanian agreement to allow the testing of Israeli long-range missiles launched from Israel against targets in the Mauritanian Sahara. The issue of nuclear waste was presented to the Supreme Court in London which issued an order of denial and affirmed that there had been a lie regarding the Mauritanian authority (al-Khalafī 1999). This degree of normalization confirms the extent of the Israeli infiltration into the arena of Arab strategic security in Africa, that which represents a threat to Arab national security.

### ***Normalization in the agricultural sector***

Israeli businessmen have invested in every sphere with the goal of normalizing relations with Mauritania and among these, in the agricultural sector. Businessmen who represented NGOs were at the forefront of those who participated in normalizing

agricultural relations with Mauritania, despite the fact that these relations were never acknowledged officially. Israel oversaw a project to protect date palms in one of the northern cities of Mauritania as part of United Nations anti-desertification initiatives, in cooperation with a Mauritanian businessmen with close ties to President Mu'āwiyah (al-Azraq 2003). Also as a part of this initiative, Israeli date palms were planted on the grounds of the new presidential palace and the Organization to Save the Date Palm, under the supervision of a Mauritanian businessman, sent its workers to Israel in 1992 to attend the International Forum on Desert Palms on cultivation in desert regions. The result of this was that Israel provided agricultural assistance to Mauritania and carried out a number of projects in the north and south, the most prominent of which was the 'drip irrigation' initiative and the introduction of modern technology to regulate the process by computer so as to water thousands of hectares of vegetation. Mauritanian horticulturalists and those working on this project received training tours in Israel under the rubric of technical exchange programmes and education of personnel. The end of the initiative was a court case between Mauritanian and Israeli businessmen in which the reasons for differences are still unknown (Bambā 2004).

Among other Israeli initiatives undertaken in Mauritania was that of river potatoes, estimated to cost 6.2 million ouguiya (MRO) – or approximately US\$26 million – bearing in mind that the Israeli date palm initiative was afflicted by a disease known as 'white-palm disease' (*Fusarium oxysporum* f.sp. *albedinis*),<sup>7</sup> which led plantation owners to attribute the cause of the disease to Israeli pesticides. Additionally, Israel also offered scholarships in agriculture/horticulture (Ould Aḥmad 2001).

### ***Economic normalization***

Economic normalization was and has not ceased to be a fixed Israeli goal in its 'peace' strategy with Arab nations, the goal being to nullify the Arab embargo of Israel on all its levels as well as to open up Arab markets and integrate Israel into the region: realizing its aspirations in water and energy on the consideration that the Israeli economy was suffering from a marked scarcity in both these imports (Awaḍ *et al.* 2007, p. 93). Within this sphere, Israel was able to undertake very serious efforts in order to control the Mauritanian economy and trade and to subjugate it to Israeli orientations and future projections in a form that would serve its goals in Mauritania and in the region in general. The various steps in this sphere can be summarized as follows:

- Purchase of real estate in various and numerous locations in Mauritanian cities and building the largest hotels in the country (Sabah Hotel) in addition to coffee factories.
- Introducing Israeli goods into the market and presenting them to the Mauritanian consumer via French corporations. The most important of these goods are modern devices produced by the Israeli RAD Group corporation in addition to Israeli dates, retail garments/clothing and pharmaceuticals (Awaḍ *et al.* 2007, p. 93).
- Engaging in running a number of training tours for the Mauritanian banking sector in Israel and offering educational grants for such. Two Mauritanian accountants refused to be sent to Tel Aviv in these circumstances (Ould 'Abdullah 2002).



- Economic ‘normalization’ took the form of a monopoly over drilling and processing of raw lithium in Mauritania (‘Awaḍ *et al.* 2007, p. 11), for which Mauritania possesses the largest reserves in the world (and which is utilized in a variety of agricultural products and specialized industrial applications such as in cell-phone lithium batteries). A number of international and Israeli corporations have achieved marked economic gains through economic cooperation in this sphere, and this led Israel to sign an agreement with Mauritania in 2000 authorizing an Israeli monopoly over lithium exploration and prospecting/drilling within its territories. As a proviso of this agreement, Israel established fourteen lithium extraction and adjoining production facilities throughout various regions after scientific confirmation of deposits and cost assessments. Supervision of this was handled by the two largest telecommunications companies in Israel: Pelephone and Orange Telecommunications, along with a number of Israeli agricultural firms (‘Awaḍ *et al.* 2007, p. 114).

The military coup in Mauritania on 3 August 2005 precipitated grave fear among Israeli corporations over their investments in the country, and some of these demanded protection of Israeli facilities and factories in Mauritania by force. Ehud Olmert, then Minister of Trade and Industry, sent a communiqué to investors that Israel would protect its investments, by force if necessary, and that it would remain the foremost in lithium prospecting and extraction and the primary source in the world, and especially with regard to its huge financial investments in Mauritania, and Israel’s international position in the world market, which it had attained as a result of this control (‘Awaḍ *et al.* 2007, p. 115).

### ***Normalization in the health sector***

The Mauritanian health sector has also witnessed Israeli activity. Since the beginning of normalization, four Israeli medical delegations have visited the country; the first delegation went to assess health conditions and promised to provide medical equipment and training tours in Israel (Ould Aḥmad 2001).

As for the second delegation, it took the form of an Israeli eye clinic at the National Hospital in Nouakchott that commenced operation on 11 July 1999 under the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s Center for International Cooperation (MASHAV). It included treatment for various eye diseases and surgeries performed by Dr Irit Rosenblatt and Dr Anat Robinson of the Rabin Medical Center in Petach Tikva. Despite the provision of medical supplies and these services, a young Mauritania medical worker in the hospital laboratory slapped Dr Rosenblatt on the face as an expression of his rage at the doctor’s presence in Mauritania (al-Azraq 2003).

Israel provided material and technical assistance to Mauritania in constructing a cancer research institute in Nouakchott which was subject to stringent security measures and precautions, including the prohibition of motor vehicles stopping in proximity to it (Fārūq 2007).<sup>8</sup> The equipment provided to this centre had console interfaces and printed matter in Hebrew, and the Mauritanian Ministry of Health prohibited some specialized medical personnel from looking into the nature of this initiative, and despite concerted efforts remained unable to ascertain such, according to the Director of the National Institute for Medical Specializations (Ould Aḥmad, 2001). Subsequently, an Israeli delegation provided a device for diagnosing cancerous tumours, and they indicated that all visits had been undertaken with full coordination

between the Mauritanian security services and the Ministry of Health (Bambā 2004, Ould al-Sālim 2008, p. 59).

### *Normalization in the sciences*

Israeli–Mauritanian normalization in the sciences goes back to 1997 when a scientific conference was held under the title of ‘The Human Being, Water and Carbon’ at the College of Sciences at the University of Nouakchott, in which three Jewish scientists took part. For its part, Israel pledged a number of educational tours for university students and employees of various Mauritanian ministries in certain areas including: English-language specialization; administration of agricultural cooperatives; facilitation of developmental and social initiatives; increased livestock production in high-temperature/arid regions; and modern irrigation techniques. These were conducted at Israeli universities and institutes such as the (International) Histadrut Hamorim Institute in Tel Aviv; the Golda Meir Mount Carmel Training Center (MCTC); the International Centre for Agricultural Development Cooperation (CINADCO) (of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Centre for International Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – MASHAV); as well as the Peres Institute for Peace. These grant and educational tour offerings, however, did not find any willing to accept among Mauritanian students or employees (Ould Aḥmad 2001).

### *Normalization in the media and journalism sector*

Normalization of relations in the media and journalism sector, as confirmed by a Mauritanian journalist to the Saudi newspaper *al-Watan*, can be traced to Israeli Ambassador Boaz Bismuth – former correspondent for *Yediot Ahronoth* – who covered the opening of the Israel embassy in Nouakchott in 1999 and who subsequently became ambassador after Ariel Karam (Kamāl 2006).

The Israeli ambassador directed his activities towards two different types of personalities: the first constituted the fact that journalists and their number did not exceed eight; the second were some of al-Ṭāya’s men (Kamāl 2006). The Mauritanian journalist, who refused to give his name and was among the first to agree to cooperate with the Israeli Embassy, explained that the means and behaviour upon which the Israeli ambassador relied were in contradiction with mores and behavioural norms of conservative Mauritanian society (al-Ṭayīb 2006). The journalist asserted that Boaz Bismuth targeted the senior members of the Mauritanian Arab press, and he offered some of them sums of money for cooperation with the embassy. He approached them by saying: ‘The Mauritanian people will not accept normalization so long as their journalists do not’ (al-Ṭayīb 2006). In fact, a group of Mauritanian journalists visited Israel with the coordination of the embassy in Nouakchott, and there they met with Israeli journalists. In order to effect a certain level of normalization, the Mauritanian newspaper *Humūm al-Nās*, conducted an interview with Ambassador Bismuth, the result of which was a boycott of the newspaper by readers, but which also permitted the transformation of the paper from a weekly into a daily with Israeli support (al-Ṭayīb 2006).

A response to this step came in a communiqué from the head of the Professional Union of Independent Journalists of Mauritania who applauded all the journalists who

refused Israeli enticements; and he absolved Mauritians of ‘those who sold their souls for a few dirhams’.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Effects of normalization in the telecommunications sector***

The telecommunications sector is another that witnessed normalization of relations as represented in the entrance of the French–Israeli corporation Vario 5 into the Mauritanian market in internet and wireless services. The corporation represented itself as ‘French’ in an attempt to mislead the general Mauritanian population as well as opposition forces which rejected any form of cooperation. This company participated in a forum organized by the Mauritanian government with the aim of facilitating the investment of other communications corporations in the country.<sup>10</sup> This constituted the first time that an Israeli company had directly entered the Mauritanian market, after it had been distributing its products to local markets via French companies. Vario 5 endeavoured to accomplish an initiative to provide Mauritania with internet services in cooperation with the Mauritanian company WiMAX, the General Director of which (Muhammad Ould Ould) says this technology is the fruit of a partnership between his corporation and the Israeli Vario 5 and which will enable the inhabitants of remote regions to benefit from internet and wireless/mobile telephone services at all times.<sup>11</sup>

There is an Israeli mobile telephone company bearing the name of a Mauritanian athletic club which is the Mauritel soccer team. Mauritel is a joint Mauritanian–Israeli venture set up under the Mu‘āwiyah Aḥmad Ould al-Tāya‘ regime after diplomatic relations were established. The athletic club and football team affiliated to Mauritel remains one of the wealthiest in the country (*Al-Qabas* 2007).

In light of the preceding, it can be asserted that Mauritanian–Israeli relations turned a corner and the foundations for mutual economic interests of both sides were laid with huge economic benefits and profits, likely unseen by the general population. Thus, to desist from such is not a simple prospect, despite the decision by the Mauritanian government to freeze relations in what affects unseen interests and unknown reactions at the level of the two actors in making political, military and economic decisions. The decision to freeze relations, even if a political procedure, was a difficult one as relations at such a level entail repercussions in various spheres that reflect the depth of interaction and correlation between Israel and Mauritania. Moreover, Israeli concerns rendered Mauritania, with the passage of time, a point of departure for Israeli influence in Africa via various and unseen means through its vast territory and just as such might permit the extension of influence outside this scope (al-Madyanī 2006, p. 149).

## **Positions with regard to normalization**

### ***The popular reaction***

Reactions opposing the normalization of relations with Israel began immediately with their declaration, and Mauritania witnessed vast and powerful, popular protest demonstrations, refusing to acknowledge diplomatic relations with Israel. Journalists’ associations and workers’ unions submitted formal complaints of protest to the government over its continued diplomatic relations with Israel, and signatories to these asserted that the government’s position besmirched the reputation of the country

and was extremely detrimental to the Palestinian case (Ould Sīdī Bāb 2005, p. 176). Rejection of normalization of relations with Israel remained the prevailing sentiment, just as the discourse justifying such was refused (Ould Sīdī Bāb 2005, p. 91). Throughout the rule of the government of Ould al-Ṭāya', the Mauritanian authorities crushed these protests with impunity, initiating a far-reaching campaign of arrests and engaging in open conflict with any who demanded severing ties with Israel; and the prisons began to overflow with opposition leaders, military personnel and others opposed to these relations (Ould Aslam 2008).

With the 2005 visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom to Mauritania, the capital city witnessed a series of demonstrations and protests in opposition which compelled the Mauritanian police to use tear gas to disperse hundreds of student demonstrators who were availing themselves of rudimentary means. The students had organized a procession in front of the university, carrying banners which read 'Down with Zionism', and all roads leading to the campus were closed by the police. Similarly, there was a demonstration of support in front of the Palestinian embassy in Nouakchott with placards calling for the cutting-off of diplomatic relations with Israel in addition to a letter protesting Shalom's visit delivered to the embassy. These coincided with demonstrations in Mauritanian schools, which impelled the government to deploy security forces and a large number of Presidential Guards, especially along routes and in places to be utilized by the Israeli minister, including the airport, the presidential palace, the city centre, the cancer centre and the Israeli Embassy (*Taht al-Mijhar* 2009). Specialized Israeli security forces also participated in the heightened security measures (Ould Aḥmad 2001).

In any event, the popular rejection of relations with Israel persisted along with demands for the severing of relations by various means until the Israeli attack, code-named 'Cast Lead', on Gaza beginning in December 2008. At this point the Mauritanian domestic situation erupted and the subject of cutting-off relations attained top priority among the demands of the masses whose protests as an expression of outrage at the government and in support of the Palestinian people spread throughout Mauritanian cities. Due to the extreme nature of the crisis and the unprecedented popular outrage, the government was obliged to recall its ambassador to Israel, Aḥmad Ould Takdī, who had been appointed nine years earlier by President Mu'āwiyah Aḥmad Ould al-Ṭāya' (Muḥammad 2009a).

### ***The position of Mauritanian government coalition parties***

The government coalition is comprised of the following parties: the Social Democratic Republican Party; the Party of the Association for Democracy and Unity; and The Party of Union for Democracy and Progress. The position of the government coalition parties was characterized by silence over what was transpiring in the normalization of relations in all spheres without explanation or a word of criticism. The government position became clear to observers when the Mauritanian Foreign Minister met Israeli Foreign Minister Shalom at Nouakchott airport in May 2005 which had been preceded by a visit by previous Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in 2002 (Muḥammad 2005). These visits proved very costly to Mauritania given the security measures to secure roads and the involvement of Israeli security which they necessitated (Ould Aḥmad 2001).

It appears that the Republican Social Democratic Party controls the political scene in Mauritania through its position of control over authority. Thus, its working goal in

the normalization of relations was to establish an external point of support for the country after French abandonment of it; and it found in Israel and America the best allies to improve its position – especially with regard to human rights organizations and the like of such among international institutions (Muḥammad 2005). The ruling party found suitable, fertile ground in its relations with Israel, even after the overthrow of the al-Ṭāyaʿ regime and the coming to power of the military council and its attempt to co-opt the various political factions and organizations of civil society in its vision of the future for extrication out of the transition period in safety and security, without adversely affecting the relations with Israel (Ould ‘Abdullah 2002). The Israeli Foreign Ministry announced on 4 August 2005 its regret over the military coup, exercising caution in establishing relations with the new government (al-Ṣādiq 2009).

From another standpoint, a high-ranking official in the Israeli Foreign Ministry remarked frankly that:

We regret military coups in any country, and we wait to see the nature of the relations that will persist with the new authority with the international community, and especially with Israel. No member of our diplomatic mission in Nouakchott has been harmed, and the demonstrations in the street were not directed towards Israel. (al-Ṣādiq 2009)

Previous to this, one of the most significant points in Mauritanian–Israeli relations was in 2003 when a team of Israeli commandos participated in quashing an attempted coup against al-Ṭāyaʿ just a few hours after it had been announced. The movement known as ‘Ḍamīr wa Muqāwamah’ (literally, ‘Conscience and Resistance’) was behind the attempted coup and was led among others by Ṣāliḥ Ould Ḥanānah who had been thrown out of the army. Over 60 pilots were expelled and the Mauritanian security and intelligence services were backed up by Israeli and American support (Ould al-Ṭāyiʿ 2005). The Palestinian newspaper *al-Manār* reported on 7 August 2005 that the military council under the leadership of Colonel Ali Ould Muhammad, Director General of National Security – the Military Council for Justice and Democracy – which took control during the absence of President Muʿāwiyah Aḥmad Ould al-Ṭāyaʿ, had secretly sent an emissary to Israel to reassure the Israeli leadership and affirm support for relations between the two countries. Moreover, the Mauritanian emissary asked the Israelis – on the basis of their close relationship with President Muʿāwiyah Aḥmad Ould al-Ṭāyaʿ – to convince him to keep silent and live in exile or to return to Mauritania and live as an ordinary citizen. It appeared to political observers that there would be no backing down from relations in the short-term and that they would not be affected by the overthrow of the former president. Immediately after the coup, Colonel Ali Ould Muhammad met Israeli Ambassador Maoz and initiated special heightened security precautions for the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott, closing all roads leading to it (al-Ṣādiq 2009).

After Ould Sheikh Abdullah assumed the presidency of Mauritania in March 2008, he was explicit:

The subject of relations with Israel will be referred to the people in a popular referendum, which is the first of its kind, in order to *define* the nature of the relation but not to freeze relations or to cut them off, especially when the legacy of the al-Ṭāyaʿ regime cannot possibly cast aside with ease – as some imagine – after the Israelis have penetrated every aspect of political, economic and social life.

He added that the dossier would be submitted to Parliament, the politicians and the associations of civil society (Hirmat Allah 2010). He did not, however, undertake this

step during his period of rule; and relations persisted, even after the military coup which overthrew him as president-elect on 6 August 2008. This situation persisted until the Israeli attacks on Gaza, between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, that precipitated eruption of the domestic situation in Mauritania and prompted the government to recall its ambassador to Israel, Aḥmad Ould Takdī, on 5 January 2009, in order to attempt to placate popular outrage.

### *The position of Mauritanian opposition parties*

Mauritanian opposition parties are comprised of the following: the Islamic Front; the Democratic Power Bloc (formerly, the Party of the Union of Democratic Power); and the Arab National Front. The position of the Mauritanian opposition parties did not differ from that of popular rejection of normalization of relations, especially since the opinion of the opposition forces is an expression of the popular will. Among that which reinforced this sentiment was the exposure of the opposition parties to arrest and prison as a result of their explicit rejection of normalization of relations with Israel. In an interview with al-Sayyid Muhammad Ould Mawlūd, one of the founders of the Union of Progressive Forces Party, said on this topic: ‘We were at the forefront among political forces to renounce and condemn a connection to relations with Israel at the end of the 1990s, and this has been our position ever since so nothing is new’.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the Student Initiative to Resist Zionist Penetration denounced the engaging of the Mauritanian government in receiving Israeli ministers and delegations, and on numerous occasions it demanded the closing of the Israeli Embassy through student-organized marches. All such attempts were met with beatings and prison detentions at the hands of the Mauritanian police forces.<sup>13</sup>

The leadership of the Mauritanian Islamic front was subjected to arrest after the government announced that it had uncovered military plans for staging an Islamic revolution in the country, according to the Minister of Communications, Walīd ‘Abdī. The Islamic front denied what the government asserted through its official spokesperson Walīd Maṣṣūr<sup>14</sup> in a communiqué bearing his signature, casting doubt on the assertions of ‘Abdī and asserting that the government was working to distort the facts, and the proof of this was ‘the lack of documentary evidence pertaining to us, inside the mosques’ (Fārūq 2007).

It seems that the escalation in the Mauritanian government response to the opposition was a result of the escalation in its rejection of Mauritanian–Israeli relations; and among such was the position of the nationalists who represented the Arab Nationalist or Islamist currents and who subsequently formed a front to boycott Israeli goods and to confront normalization. Consequently, the government arrested a number of youths as well as some prominent personages including al-Ṭāhir Ould A‘l Maḥmūd – a well-known merchant in the main marketplace of the capital; the journalist Muhammad Maḥmūd Ould Abū al-Ma‘ālī, Editor-in-Chief of the weekly *Akhbār Nouakchott* (News of Nouakchott); and reporters of the Arabic section of German Broadcasting in the capital (Fārūq 2007). Moreover, the government arrested a number of members of the political forces who stood against a normalization of relations with Israel despite the fact that they did not advocate violence as a means for achieving their political ends. Also, despite the continuing attacks of the government, the Islamic front became one of the most important political forces of the opposition in the country. Likewise, one of the most important opposition groups in Mauritania is the National Affiliation for

the Resistance of Zionist Penetration, which demanded that the government cut-off its relations with Israel and called all its supporters to participate in all marches and mass gatherings convened to this end and in order to express the genuine Mauritanian sentiment (Muḥammad 2005).

The rejection of Mauritanian opposition parties came to a head with the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom in 2005 where all were unanimous in their demands to sever relations and desist from mutual exchanges of visits (Muḥammad 2005). With the Israeli attacks on Gaza in 2009, opposition positions were further unified and the demonstrations to cut-off relations with Israel that spread throughout various Mauritanian cities led to violent clashes between police and demonstrators that wounded 50 civilians and eight police in the capital city (Muḥammad 2009).

### **Decisions to freeze and then cut-off relations: possibilities of the future**

#### *The decision to freeze relations*

In light of the foregoing, it can be asserted that Mauritania represents a special case in the subject of political normalization with Israel, when it was the one Arab nation outside of those immediately contiguous to it to establish full diplomatic relations. These were relations that exceeded the threshold of Arab government normalization, just as they exceeded parameters of normalization in the Maghreb; and this relation has not ceased to be the subject of fierce struggle within Mauritania as well as the most prominent manifestation of the integration of opposition forces against the government. Thus, the decision to freeze relations which Mauritania took at the emergency Gaza Summit in Doha on 16 January 2009, represented – on the face of it – a response to the demands of the Mauritanian people and their solidarity with the Palestinians during the Israeli attacks on Gaza. The decision carried other implications:

- Precautionary measures taken by the ruling Council of State in the context of confronting and dealing with the political crisis through which Mauritania was passing, six months after its eruption as a result of the military coup on 6 August 2008, and what followed on it of ensuing internal and external threats to the country.
- An attempt to make political gains, in particular to win some legitimacy for the ruling Council of State, especially given that the decision to freeze relations, met with the support of the range of political parties and forces including the opposition parties to the ruling Council of State, which had led the coup. As a result of this new position, popular and political support for the president and the ruling Council of State swelled, culminating in demonstrations of support organized by the various parties and political forces as a result of the announcement of the decision throughout Mauritanian cities and the capital. Muḥammad Ould ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, President of the Council of State, gave an address before hundreds of students at the University of Nouakchott saying, ‘The ruling Council of State will always remain close to the pulse of the national street for which the Palestinian case constitutes one of its focal points’ (al-Sayyid 2009a).
- An attempt to break out of the isolation to which Mauritania was subjected, with the goal of improving its international and regional relations, especially with Arab nations and in order to obtain Arab and Islamic financial support in order to confront its ongoing economic crisis. In this light, the suggestion by Libya’s Mu‘amar al-Qadhafi to the military to prepare an estimate of what it would cost

(in economic terms) to cut-off Mauritanian–Israeli relations might represent an attempt to provide an exit from the embargo imposed by the West on Mauritania as a result of the military coup (Ould Aslam 2009).

- Realization of popular desire of the Mauritanian people and the political parties supporting the Palestinian cause at the level of the media, and in order to absorb growing popular outrage over the continuation of these relations which the opposition parties and forces had used politically against the Ruling Council. The decision to freeze relations represented the loss of one of the cards that opposition forces could play against the coup and, similarly, the Ruling Council was able to utilize popular support for freezing relations in the service of dealing with the obstructive political crisis, via the effectiveness of calling for a target dialogue with all political parties and forces – with the aim of arriving at a successful solution. This was also an attempt to break up the front opposed to the coup and with the aim of pushing it towards participating in formations of the political scene while exiting from the crisis with a minimum of losses.

### *The decision to cut-off relations*

Mauritania witnessed sudden, surprise political developments after the decision to freeze diplomatic relations with Israel was taken, embodied in notification given to employees of the Israeli Embassy that they must leave the capital of Nouakchott after a month; the closing of the embassy and taking down of the Israeli flag from atop the building also entailed the shutting down of surveillance cameras and security measures around the perimeter. These were buttressed by the victory of Muḥammad Ould ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in the presidential elections conducted on 18 November 2009 and his legitimacy was supported and position consolidated to the extent that he failed to make mention of relations with Israel in his first address on 11 August 2009 as president-elect, only mentioning in general that the path to achieving peace in the world and in the Middle East in particular demanded the concerted and integrated efforts of the international community and particular associations’ (Al-Sayyid 2009b).

Immediately following this was a surprise political development which cast new light on this sudden transformation in the development of Mauritanian diplomatic relations with Iran, and the endeavouring of both sides to establish strategic relations in the context of the loss of hope among the rulers of Nouakchott over intransigent Western positions, despite direct normalization with Israel. It appears that Iran hastened to benefit from the opportunity provided by the vacuum that occurred between Western powers and the Mauritanian political regime and in order to add it to its axis of opposition to Western politics. These relations led to exchanges visits by high-level official delegations of both sides; and the most recent visit by Mauritanian President Muḥammad Ould ‘Abd al-‘Azīz to Iran took place at the end of January 2010 when he signed a number of military agreements as well as others in the areas of development and geological cooperation as well as investment in the banking sector. Funding was provided to solve transportation problems in Mauritania and the latter pledged to stand by Iran in international assemblies and consolidate relations with it to the extent of cancelling entry visas (Mawlūd 2010).

This sudden transformation and new political alliance caused concern across three different axes (Mawlūd 2010):



- Concern in Morocco as being the first to ally with President Muḥammad Ould ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in the coup of 6 August 2008 as Morocco had severed its relations with Iran in 2009 and was therefore uncomfortable with Iran’s entry en force into the affairs of its neighbour Mauritania.
- Concern among Arab nationalists within Mauritania that had stood by Muḥammad Ould ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in hopes that he would remain devoted to them and not to other Arab salafists.
- Israeli concern over Mauritanian–Israeli relations having considered its presence in the country to be a strategic one.

In the midst of these political developments, al-Sayyidah al-Nāhah bint Ḥamdī Ould Miknās, Foreign Minister of Mauritania, declared a mass gathering of the majority parties in the capital on 22 March 2010 and announced the cutting-off of diplomatic relations with Israel saying, ‘Let the world know from here on that Mauritania has severed its relations with the Israeli state in a final form’ (‘Abd al-Wadūd 2010). This decision was welcomed by Mauritanian political parties and opposition ones that had called for such previously. President Muḥammad Ould ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, during his meeting with ‘Adnan Abū al-Hayjā’, Palestinian Ambassador to Nouakchott said, ‘Mauritania did not obtain any benefits from its relationship with Israel’, and he confirmed the support of his country for the Palestinian struggle to establish a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital (*al-Ṣabhā (Baghdad)* 2010, p. 7).

### *Views of the future*

The decision by Mauritania to cut-off diplomatic relations with Israel on 22 March 2010 falls in the framework of attempting to effect an exit from the political crisis experienced by the country; and it represented a response to the demands of parties as well as popular and political forces that had been demanding such. At the same time it confirmed the ability of the Mauritanian leadership to benefit from the popular reaction in support of the decision and to utilize this in its interests, when this card had been previously utilized by opposition parties as leverage against the government. Moreover, the decision followed immediately on important political developments, the most significant of which was when the Mauritanian leadership found a new and powerful ally in the regional and international arena in its establishing relations with Iran. This behaviour reflects a high level of political savvy as nations often consider searching for new allies when they lose one in order to restore balance, whereas the Mauritanian leadership secured a new ally (in Iran) before cutting-off its relations with Israel.

In the context of considering future possibilities for Mauritanian–Israeli relations, three scenarios can be suggested on the basis of the findings of this research.

#### *The first scenario: relations remain cut-off*

This scenario envisions that diplomatic relations will remain cut-off in the present stage because it appears that there are two sides struggling over power in Mauritania and skirmishes over economic interests and the matter of the preponderance of regional influence of both of them. On the one side, there are Mauritanian figures who welcome utilizing Arab and Islamic influence in the country and their political currency in order to control its rule. On the other, there is another political side in

retreat, the interests of which are enmeshed with Israeli influence in the country. Thus, the decision to cut-off relations reflects the success of the ruling stratum in creating a situation of balance between the acceptance of Arab and Islamic political currency over the severing of relations and between the influence of some persons within this ruling group itself who are possessed of vested interests linked to Israeli corporations active in the European, international and Mauritanian markets. The influence of Arab and Islamic political currency has not ceased to be more powerful and influential than international or Israeli influence on the regime itself at the present stage, and if the cut-off of relations persists, it will be a result of this.

*The second scenario: a new military coup*

In a case where the Mauritanian leadership proves incapable of maintaining internal equilibrium, the country would be a candidate for a new, future military coup where control over rule would alternate between the two sides mentioned in the previous scenario. The degree of their influence over the system of rule in Mauritania – especially given that the phenomenon of military coups has become a situation connected to the modern history of Mauritania which is often described as an unstable state – will remain attached to the nature of the personalities who may seize power with the occurrence of a coup, and such will remain contingent upon the political equilibrium between accepting Arab and Islamic political currency and the continuation of a cut-off of relations with Israel or inclining towards new hypothetical possibilities in this subject on the basis of time and condition.

*The third scenario: capitalizing on new favourable opportunities*

The decision to cut-off diplomatic relations with Israel did not reach the level of economic or contractual agreements between the two countries in what pertains to Israeli industrial/manufacturing investments in Mauritania. Thus, as for what pertains to cooperation in the security and anti-terrorism spheres, which have become essential articles in agreements of the Union for the Mediterranean to which Mauritania belongs and for which Israel serves in the capacity of Deputy to the Director General of the Union, it appears that economic relations will persist as they are. Further, these will remain a source of pressure impelling towards capitalizing on favourable opportunities to restore relations. Such an opportunity might arise in the form of a military coup (as indicated in the second scenario) or in the pressure from Mauritanian businessmen whose interests are enmeshed with those of Israeli corporations. Or, such might transpire as a result of changes in the Mauritanian sides which utilize Arab and Islamic political currency connected to the domestic front that might make these back down from their intransigent position with regard to the continued cut-off of relations.

## Notes

1. He was born in 1943 in a town called Iṭār located south of Mauritania. In 1960 he was sent with a military delegation to France where he joined the military academy (the armoured division). In 1978 he participated in the coup that overthrew Mukhtār Ould Dādah; and was appointed Minister of Defense. In 1979 he was also appointed Chairman of the Military Commission while assuming the responsibilities of the acting President. In 1981 he was

- assigned Minister of Defense and Prime Minister until he led a military coup against Muḥammad Khūna Ould Haidallah and assumed power. In 1992 he was elected President of the republic and was later overthrown by a military coup on 3 August 2005.
2. For the constitution of 20 July 1991, see Faculty of Legal and Economic Sciences (1993), appx, p. 198.
  3. Some say that Israel's relation with Mauritania started in the 1960s, where several individual calls have been conducted with high-ranking officials in Mauritania, but this theory was formally rejected in Mauritania in such a way that even passports still contain the phrase 'prevented entry to Israel and South Africa' (Ould al-Sālim 2008, al-Najm, p. 59).
  4. Broadcasted on Radio London on 7 April 2007.
  5. Ṣalāḥ 'Awwād informed the journal that the interim period will not exceed two years.
  6. Badr al-Ḥaṣan comments that the *coup d'état* took place as an attempt to salvage Mauritanian–Israeli relations.
  7. It is a dangerous disease that appears in the form of wet paper, which will dry out and slowly dissolve, causing the palm tree to die. Ten million palm trees died this way in the Maghreb, and a couple of million died in Algeria (Bambā 2004).
  8. For further information on this centre, see Ould al-Sālim (2008), p. 6.
  9. 'al-Safīr al-Ṣahyūnī Yuhāwil Ikhtirāq al-Sāḥah al-ʿĪlāmīyah al-Mūrītāniyyah (Whyusa.net and Assabeel.net 2005).'
  10. 'Ḥukūmat Muqadīshū Tusahhil li-Sharikah Isrāʿīliyyah Ikhtirāq al-Sūq al-Mūrītānī (Assabeel.net 2002).'
  11. 'Mūrītāniyā wa al-Taṭbīʿ maʿ al-Kayān al-Ṣahyūnī (Assabeel.net 2002).'
  12. Interview with Sayyid Muḥammad Ould Mawlūd.
  13. See note 10.
  14. A prominent Islamic leader in the Tayyār al-Islāmī (literally, the Islamic current), who came back from Brussels in 2004 after having been there for reasons of political asylum. For more information, see the interview with Dr Muḥammad Jamīl Ould Maṣṣūr.

## References

- 'Abd al-Wadūd, R., 2010. Qat' al-'Alāqāt ma' Isrāʿīl wa al-Taḥāluf ma' Irān ... Mādhā Yajrī fī Mūrītāniyā. *al-Murābiṭ al-Rāṣid*. Available from: [http://www.alrassedonline.com/2010/04/blog-post\\_22.html](http://www.alrassedonline.com/2010/04/blog-post_22.html) [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- Abū Zakarīyah, Y., 2002. Limādhā Ikhtārat Mūrītāniyā al-Taṭbīʿ. *al-Bayān (Islamic Forum, London)*, no. 172, p. 96.
- al-Aḥdāth (Casablanca)*, 26 January 1999. As reported in detail by *Jarīdat al-Ahrām*, 27 January 1999, anbā' 'an Ittifāq Mūrītānī Isrāʿīlī ḥawl Dafn al-Nifāyāt al-Nawawīyah. Also confirmed by *Jarīdat al-'Arab* (London) "Al-Ittiḥād al-Maghāribī wa Faḍīḥat Mūrītāniyyah", no. 5743, 3 November 1999, p. 1.
- al-'Arab al-Yawm (Amman)*, 6 November 2007. Dayf Taḥt al-Mijhar. Available from: <http://www.alarabalyawm.net/pages.php?guest=1&guestArchID=2007-05-16> [Accessed 31 January 2011].
- 'Awaḍ, M., Mamdūḥ, S. and Aḥmad, U., 2007. *Muqāwamat al-Taṭbīʿ: Thalāthūn 'Āman min al-Muwājahah*. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies.
- 'Awwad, Ṣalāḥ, 2005. Wazīr KhārijīyatMūrītānā: al-'Alāqāt ma' Isrāʿīl Bāqiyah, *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, no. 9798, 25 September.
- al-Azraq, I., 2003. *Mūrītāniyā ... w-al-nafaq al-Ṭawīl!* *Almoslim.net*, 10 June. Available from: <http://almoslim.net/node/85230> [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- Bambā, S.M., 2004. al-'Alāqāt al-Mūrītāniyyah al-Isrāʿīliyyah. In: *Taḥt al-Mijhar* [TV programme], *al-Jazeera*, Aug 8.
- Brāhīmī, 'A., 1996. *al-Maghrib al-'Arabī fī Muftaraq al-Ṭuruq fī Dhul al-Taḥawwulāt al-'Ālamīyah*. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies.
- Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2002. *al-Jaysh w-al-Siyāsah w-al-Silṭah fī al-Waṭan al-'Arabī* [Seminar]. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies.
- Faculty of Legal and Economic Sciences, 1993. *al-Majallah al-Mūrītāniyyah li-l-Qānūn wa-al-Iqtisād*, no. 9.
- Fārūq, Aḥmad 2007. *Mūrītāniyā, al-Taṣīd bayn al-Ḥukūmah wa al-Islāmīyīn*. Available from: [www.noormagazine.com](http://www.noormagazine.com), 20 December 2007.

- al-Ḥarīrī, J., 2003. Mūrītāniyā wa al-Tawatturāt al-Dākhilīyah. *Awrāq Duwalīyah (Center of International Studies, University of Baghdad)*, no. 122.
- Ḥirmat Allah, A. 2010. Qiṣṣat al-Taṭbī' fī Mūrītāniā: Bidāyah wa Nihāyah!, Inbaa online, 29 June. Available from: <http://www.inbaa.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=28719> [Accessed 1/2/2011].
- Ṭsā, L. 1999. *al-Aḥzāb al-Mūrītāniyyah ta'ahhadat bi Qaṭ' al-'Alāqāt ma' Isrā'īl. al-Ittiḥād (Abu Dhabi)*, 2000. Tashkīl Jam'iyah Balamāniyah Mūrītāniyah-Isrā'īliyah la da'm al-Salām!, no. 9045 10 April, p. 20.
- Kamāl, A., 2006. Safīr Isrā'īl Sayastakhdīm al-māl l-il-Ṭiqā' bi-Shakhṣiyāt Muhimmah. *al-Waṭan*, 24 March.
- al-Khalafī, M., 1999. *Ḥummā al-Taṭbī' Tajtāḥ al-Miṭṭaqah al-Maghāribīyah*. Islamonline.net, 7 November. Available from: [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite%3F%3DZone-A\\_C%26pagename%3DZone-Arabic-News/NWALayout%26cid%3D1172072045485](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite%3F%3DZone-A_C%26pagename%3DZone-Arabic-News/NWALayout%26cid%3D1172072045485) [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- Khūrī, Ā., 2007. Al-Ra'īs al-Mūrītānī: Ghālībīyah Sha'bīyah Tu'arīd al-'Alāqāt ma' Isrā'īl. *al-Hayāt*, 18 January.
- al-Madyanī, T., 2006. *Ittiḥād al-Maghrib al-'Arabī bayn al-Iḥyā' w-al-Ta'jīl: Dirāsah Tārīkhīyah Siyāsīyah*. Damascus: Manshūrāt Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab.
- Mawlūd, Ā., 2010. Al-Ra'īs al-Mūrītānī Ya'ud Ilā Ṭahrān. *al-Quds al-'Arabī*, 20 January.
- Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1960. *Kitāb Abyaḍ 'an Mūrītāniyā*. Rabat: Ministry of Cultural Affairs.
- Muḥammad, A., 2005. *Bilād Shaṅqīt Tastaqbil Shālūm: al-Khalfiyāt wa al-Dawā'ī. al-Jazeera.net*, 21 April. Available from: <http://islamtoday.net/bohoot/artshow-14-5493.htm> [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- Muḥammad, A., 2007. Mā Warā' al-Ta'āwun al-'Askarī bayn Mūrītāniyā wa al-Wilāyāt al-Muttaḥidah. *Al-Jazeera.net*, 17 August. Available from: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/EXERES/290A4DB3-987F-4A3E-939F-77E40ABEA3E5.htm> [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- Muḥammad, A., 2009a. *Mūrītāniyā Tastaḍī Safīruhā fī Isrā'īl wa Tastaḍīd Qaṭ' al-'Alāqāt. al-Jazeera.net*, 6 January.
- Muḥammad, A., 2009b. *Mūrītāniyā Ta'tabir Istid'ā' Safīruhā bī Isrā'īl Muqaddimah li-Qaṭ' al-'Alāqāt. al-Jazeera.net*, 11 January.
- al-Najm, 'Abd al-Bārī 'Abd al-Razāq, 1966. *Jumhūriyat Mūrītāniyā al-Islāmiyah [The Islamic Republic of Mauritania]*. Beirut: Dār al-Andalus li-l-Tibā'ah wāl-Nashr.
- Ould 'Abdullah, A., 2002. *Ilā Matā Yā 'Arab al-Taṭbī'? al-Jazeera.net*.
- Ould Aḥmad, S., 2001. *Mūrītāniyā ... Ikhtirāq Ṣahyūnī li-Aḥfād al-Murābiṭīn!! Islamonline*, 21 March. Available from: [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite%3F%3DArticle\\_A\\_C%26pagename%3DZone-Arabic-Namah%252FNMALayout%26cid%3D1177155877207](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite%3F%3DArticle_A_C%26pagename%3DZone-Arabic-Namah%252FNMALayout%26cid%3D1177155877207) [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- Ould al-Sālim, Ḥ.A., 2008. Mūrītāniyā fī Muwājahat al-Ikhtirāq al-Isrā'īlī. *al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabī*, 31(352), 48–49.
- Ould Aslamū, L., 1995. al-Iqtīṣād wa al-Tanmiyā. In: Al-Sayyid, O.A., ed. *Mūrītāniyā: al-Thaqāfah wa al-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama'*. Silsilat al-Thaqāfah al-Qawmīyyah. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies.
- Ould Aslam, A., 2008. al-Mūrītāniyyūn Yuṭālibūn Bi-Qaṭ' al-'Alāqāt ma' Isrā'īl wa al-Ḥukūmah Ṣāmitah. *Al-Quds al-'Arabī*, 11 February.
- Ould Aslam, M., 2009. *Mūrītāniyā ... Mawqif fī al-Mazād. al-'Arabīyah.net*, 19 January. Available from: <http://96.31.95.42/~archive/news.php?action=view&id=932> [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- Ould Sīdī Bāb, M., 2005. *Madhāhir al-Mushārakah Siyāsīyah fī Mūrītāniyā*. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies.
- Ould al-Ṭayī', M., 2005. Niṣf Qarn min al-Farnasah wa al-Amrakah wa al-Asralah. *al-Kifāh al-'Arabī*, 9 August.
- Al-Qabas (Kuwait)* 2007. Gharābah!, no. 12373, 11 November.
- al-Ṣabāḥ (Baghdad)*, 25 March 2010.
- al-Ṣādiq, H., 2009. al-Inqilāb al-'Askarī fī Mūrītāniyā wa Mustaqbal al-'Alāqāt ma' Isrā'īl. *al-Quds online*, 6 January.

- al-Şahāf, M. and al-Ṭāhir, M., 1981. *Hādhihi Mūrītāniyā: Dirāsāt fī Jughrāfiyyat Mūrītāniyā al-Ḥadīthah*. Baghdad: Dār al-Rashīd.
- Salāmah, Ghassan. *et al.*, eds, 1989. *al-Ummah wa al-Dawlah wa al-Indimāj fī al-Waṭan al-‘Arabī*. 2 vols [Seminar]. Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies.
- al-Sayyid, ‘A., 2009a. Ḥākīm Mūrītāniyā Amām Ṭullāb al-Jāmi‘āt: Tajmīd al-‘Alāqāt ma’ Isrā’īl Maşlahah wa Wājib. *al-Quds al-‘Arabī*, 21 January.
- al-Sayyid, ‘A., 2009b. Ould ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Yaqud Mūrītāniyā Ilā Marḥalah Jadīdah. *al-Quds al-‘Arabī*, 8 August. Available from <http://www.eljedid.mr/index.php?ArtID=611&alles=1> [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- al-Sayyid, N. *et al.*, 1978. *Al-Jumhūrīyah al-Islāmīyah al-Mūrītāniyā: Dirāsah Maşḥīyah Shāmilah*. Cairo: Ma’had al-Buḥūth wa al-Dirāsāt al-‘Arabīyah.
- al-Shanqīṭī, M., 2004. Fī Ḍaw’ Liqā’ Mu‘āwīyah ma’ Pīrīz: Mūrītāniyā wa Isrā’īl ... mādhā Warā’ al-Rabwah. *al-Ma’rifah*, 3 October. Available from: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/90AC3531-FF23-4BBF-AA40-F2A7C6E5ED38.htm> [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- Taht al-Mijhar*, 2009. Ashyā’ lā Tushtarā (2): Rafḍ Sha’bī li-l-Taṭbī’. In: *Taht al-Mijhar* [TV], *al-Jazeera.net*, 17 May 2009. Available from: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/A04C3DC6-17BB-408C-BA7B-3F4B7B639607.htm> [Accessed on 13 December 2010].
- al-Ṭayīb, Khadījah. 2006. al-Safīr al-Isrā’īlī fī Mūrītāniyā Yuhāwil al-Ḥuṣūl ‘alā Ma’lūmāt ‘an al-Wazīr al-Akthar Sha’bīyah wa Zā’irih min Rijālāt Ould al-Ṭāyī’. *al-Waṭan online*, no. 2002, 24 March.
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2004. *The human development report, 2004*. New York, NY: UNDP.
- Walīd, F., 2005. al-Taṭbī’ ma’ Isrā’īl Ḥalaqah Asāsīyah fī al-Mukhaṭṭatāt al-Impiryālīyah b-il-Mintaqaḥ. *al-Munāḍil*, no. 6 (April).