

Mauritania

Ethnicity in Mauritania

Group selection

Three different ethnic groups can be distinguished: The population is divided between the **White Moors**, commonly called Beydhanes, who are descendants of the Arabo-Berber conquerors called Mourabitounes, and the **Black Moors**, commonly called Haratines, who are descendants of slaves. The **Black Africans**, 30% of the population, comprise the Halpoulars (Toucouleurs and Peulhs), the Soninkos (or Sarakollos), the Wolofs, and the Bambaras, farmers and sheperds that live in region of the Senegal River. Even though the Black Africans are currently much fewer in number than the Black and White Moors, Black Africans are the group experiencing the most demographic growth.

Power relations

1960-1979

Following independence, the White Moors dominated politically and economically as President Moktar Ould Daddah and his Parti du Peuple Mauritanien (PPM) ruled under a dictatorial presidential regime. He ruled until a military coup on the 10 July 1978. In this time, no political parties were allowed. President Daddah was a white Moor, who reportedly conducted a policy of “Arabization” and promoted White Arab supremacy, particularly in the areas of education and institutional language, above the black Moors and black Africans (³²⁶⁸, 94). Particularly regarding his education policy, riots ensued from the non-Arab communities in the 1970s. His First Republic ended on the 10th of July 1978 with a non-violent military coup, following the war in Western Sahara. From independence in 1960 until 1979, the White Moors are hence coded “dominant”.

³²⁶⁸ [Bales, 1999]

There are differing opinions regarding the inclusion of the “Black Moor”, also known as “Heratine”, in the government of Ould Daddah. On the one hand, until the official abolition in 1980, slavery was commonplace in Mauritania, and the Heratines were the main group in society who were slaves (under the white Moors). Even when freed, ex-slaves remained dependent on their former masters, and were clearly second-class citizens (³²⁶⁹; ³²⁷⁰, 159). In 1974, El Hor was formed by a group of Heratines, to promote their rights within an increasingly arabized society, and the two-class system which was dominated by White Moors (³²⁷¹, 160-162). Following

³²⁶⁹ [Minorities at Risk]

³²⁷⁰ [Maimone, 2012]

³²⁷¹ [Maimone, 2012]

EPR coding rules, however, it is not evident that this system “systematically and intentionally discriminates” against the group “in the domain of public politics”. On the contrary, slavery was officially “abolished” in 1961, but continued in practice (some sources argue until this day, ³²⁷²) which nevertheless does not explicitly count as “political discrimination”.

³²⁷² [Minorities at Risk]

There is, however, little evidence to suggest that the Heratins or the third group, the Black African were sufficiently represented in the government under Ould Dadda, to warrant any power-sharing coding in the EPR. The Black African people are commonly cited as the third class of citizens in Mauritania, underneath the Heratin and the White Moors (³²⁷³, 2). Although there were members of both ethnic groups included in the upper-limits of the PPM (Dadda’s political party a product of a merge of four parties at independence), his autocratic regime and the dominance of the Arab culture supports a “powerless” coding for the Heratin and Black Africans from 1960-1978 (³²⁷⁴, 159; ³²⁷⁵, 48). A “discriminated” status would be too strict for this case, as the existence of socio-economic inequality and persecution does not, in theory at least, apply to the political sphere (³²⁷⁶, 219).

³²⁷³ [Human Rights Watch, 1994]

³²⁷⁴ [Maimone, 2012]

³²⁷⁵ [Ibrahim & Lawson, 2010]

³²⁷⁶ [Pazzanita, 1996]

1980-2021

Following the coup of 1978, Ould Dadda was replaced by a military rule for 6 years, with President Haidalla as the main ruler (³²⁷⁷). During these 6 years, it is difficult to assess the exact power relations of the three ethnic groups due to the turbulence of the military rule. However, it seems that the Heratins increased their access to power compared to the previous period: El Hor publically supported the government, and their wishes were granted by President Ould Haidalla in 1981 when “all forms” of slavery were abolished in Decree No, 81,234 of November 8th (³²⁷⁸, 164). Furthermore, Heratines were further included in the CMSN (The Military Committee for National Salvation) through Ould M’Barek, a captain in the army (ibid). However, the president at this time is the White Moor Ould Haidalla. Therefore, the White Moors retain their status as “senior partner”, and Black Moors become “junior partner”. Regarding the status of the Black Africans, their position has not changed significantly: Their rights remained secondary to the rights of Heratin Slaves, which were defended by El Hor. Furthermore, as many sources suggest that the military hold the power in this period, and there is little evidence to suggest they held high-up positions in the military, the Black Africans are coded “powerless”. In addition, the para-military organisation “FLAM” was founded in 1983, which sought to expose the oppression of all Black Mauritians, particularly Black African (³²⁷⁹ 28). This does not provide evidence that they were politically oppressed in this period, but is important to show the hopelessness felt at the lack of increased rights despite the change in government.

³²⁷⁷ [Human Rights Watch, 1994]

³²⁷⁸ [Maimone, 2012]

³²⁷⁹ [Handloff, 1987]

Another coup in 1984 led to Ould Taya, another White Moor, taking over power. Although his 20-year regime was renowned for deepening the Arabization policies of previous years, Ould Taya did include the Heratine elite in the decision-making process, through offering ministerial posts to El Hor leaders, such as Minister for Rural Development, who was tasked to improve life-quality for the Heratines (Bare-foot Activists Salem:166). For this reason, the White Moors retain their “senior partner” status, and the Heratins remain “junior partner”. The Black Africans remain relatively powerless in an Arab dominated society in this time period (³²⁸⁰).

³²⁸⁰ [Minorities at Risk]

In the 1989-1990 period, a border dispute between Senegal and Mauritania led to expulsions of Mauritians of Senegali origin from the country - a Black African minority ethnic groups, who share similarities with the Senegali groups. The number of these groups expelled is listed in some reports as 70,000, with as many as 50,000 remaining in exile as the Mauritanian government is seen as refusing to improve their rights (³²⁸¹). At least 30,000 of those that fled were regarded as Black African. Many live in refugee camps in poor conditions in Senegal, and mass repatriation processes are thought to have began in full swing only in 2008 (³²⁸², 21, 30). The outflow of Black Africans was certainly significant, but in a population of 2 million, the change in population is not large enough to warrant a new time period (³²⁸³). However, the events of 1989 certainly underline some unfair treatment towards the Black Africans - the government was party to the expulsion of the 30,000 Black African, although they claimed at the time to have been unaware of the cross-over between Sengalese natives and Mauritanian Blacks. Furthermore, until 1992, the Black Africans were not represented in the executive and political opposition remained banned. However, to label them as “discriminated” at this time period would require active political discrimination - not only socio-economic or cultural. It is prudent to argue, that “powerless” coding is more valid, as the government-led discrimination is difficult to offer support for. Therefore, there is no separate time period coded for the 1989-91 actions.

³²⁸¹ [Minorities at Risk]

³²⁸² [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012]

³²⁸³ [U.S Department of State, 2016]

On the 3rd of August 2005, under the doubtful watch of the international community, a military coalition, led by the old head of security, deposed President Ould Taya after 21 years. To allay national and international concerns, they promised that they would not stay more than two years—the time needed to put into place a democratic process that would lead to the organization of free, just, and transparent elections. During the period of transition, municipal, legislative, senatorial, and presidential elections were organized. The lower chamber of parliament comprises 95 deputies. The political parties together obtained 54 deputies.

Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, who led the coup d’etat on August 3, 2005, organized democratic elections in April 2007 without running for office himself and leaving power as previously promised. The elections were won by Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, a white Moor. However, the country slid into a political and economic

crisis in 2008 and 2009. Moreover, the new president displaced the military leadership. The military conducted yet another coup, led by Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz who then became president and organized new elections in July 2009 won by himself. Three months before these elections he temporarily stepped back. During this time the country was governed by Ba Mamadou dit M'Baro, a black African (Halpoulaar) for the first time in the country's history. However, this did not change the fact that most political power rests in the hands of the white Moors. Therefore, the coding remains the same for this period.

Political power in Mauritania largely remained a White Moor affair. Between 2011 and 2013, White Moors controlled 19 of a total of 27 to 29 cabinet seats, leaving Haratins (Black Moors) and Black Africans significantly underrepresented (³²⁸⁴, ³²⁸⁵; ³²⁸⁶). Similarly biased distributions of power can be observed in the country's security apparatus, the judiciary, and other administrative divisions (³²⁸⁷). On this basis, the White Moors are continued to be coded as "senior partner" and Haratins as "junior partner", as they still remain a clear second in line to power next to the Black Africans. The executive positions held by Black Africans are, according to one report, relatively "token", and they have been subjected to some forms of government discrimination (³²⁸⁸). This is in addition to ethnically motivated demonstrations and riots that took place at this time involving Black Africans (ibid). Most notably, a national registration campaign launched in 2011 spurred ethnic tensions. Apparently, identification cards were distributed in an ethnically biased way that disenfranchised many Black Africans. Municipal and legislative elections originally scheduled for April 2011 were delayed due to registration problems, protests and political impasse, but were finally held in late 2013 (³²⁸⁹; ³²⁹⁰). For these reasons, the power status of this group remains "powerless".

President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, a White Moor, was elected to his final four-year term as president in 2014 (³²⁹¹). The military and other institutions, such as the judiciary, are also dominated by White Moors (³²⁹²). However, the Heratins and Black Africans retain their respective power statuses in this period, as their presence in the cabinet has not declined. There are growing calls of unfair treatment, yet this is increasingly religiously motivated, as the White Moors are also predominantly Muslim (³²⁹³).

A note on Slavery: Regardless of the 1981 ban on slavery, and the subsequent Acts in 2007 and 2015 that further criminalised slavery-related activities, it continues to this day. As it is reported that the Heratine group are the most enslaved (³²⁹⁴, ³²⁹⁵, 3), we should also ascertain whether this impacts on their political inclusion or exclusion. However, as explicitly written in the EPR coding notes, for a group to be discriminated, they must be victim to "active, intentional, and targeted discrimination by the state, with the intent of excluding them from political power". The evidence presented in recent reports on slavery in Mauritania (³²⁹⁶) indicates that although

³²⁸⁴ [U.S Department of State, 2011]

³²⁸⁵ [U.S Department of State, 2012]

³²⁸⁶ [U.S Department of State, 2013]

³²⁸⁷ [Freedom House, 2011]

³²⁸⁸ [U.S Department of State, 2012]

³²⁸⁹ [U.S Department of State, 2011]

³²⁹⁰ [U.S Department of State, 2013]

³²⁹¹ [U.S Department of State, 2016]

³²⁹² [Boukhars, 2016]

³²⁹³ [Manson, 2014]

³²⁹⁴ [Minorities at Risk]

³²⁹⁵ [Minority Rights Group International , 2016]

³²⁹⁶ [Minority Rights Group International , 2016]

the government has taken procedural steps to ban slavery of the Heratines, the substantive effect has been minimal, and the institutional ignorance or reluctance to prosecute those accused of carrying out illegal acts has been well documented (see various cases in the study of Minority Rights Group International). This is still not evidence enough to suggest that this institutional bias has impacted upon the political exclusion of the Black Moors or Heratins. This should, nonetheless, not be ignored and paid attention to should the situation worsen.

In 2019, Mauritania marked the first democratic transition to power between two presidents since the country declared its independence from France in 1960. The country has been marred by government overthrow via military ever since. On June 22, 2019, former Minister of Defense Mohamed Ould Cheikh el Ghazouani won the majority of the votes on the first round of presidential elections, thus securing his first term as head of the county ⁽³²⁹⁷⁾. While the UN and AU considered these elections relatively free and fair, opposition parties challenged the victory of Ghazouani, which was backed by the former president. One of his strongest opponents was Biram Dah Abeid, an anti-slavery advocate, who received a total of 18.5% of the votes. It should however be noted that this is the first time in which opposition parties participated in elections and did not boycott them ⁽³²⁹⁸⁾.

³²⁹⁷ [U.S. Department of State, 2019]

³²⁹⁸ [BBC, 2019]

The presidential elections were possible after the peaceful step down of former president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. His political party, however, won the majority of seats in the National Assembly following the 2018 parliamentary elections. However, by August 2020, Mauritania's PM as well as his entire cabinet submitted their resignation to President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani as a result of an investigative report related to the former president Aziz, which was submitted to the judiciary. Mohamed Oul Bilal was sworn in as prime minister instead ⁽³²⁹⁹⁾.

³²⁹⁹ [BBC,2020]

Haratines and sub-Saharan ethnic groups remain politically weaker and underrepresented in leadership positions, industry and military. However, this political imbalance has been addressed by the new president through some initial steps. For example, out of the current 25 cabinet ministers, five were Haratine (25%) and four Africans (sub-Saharan) (16%), the latter are considered to be token representatives. The rest of the cabinet still remains in the hands of White Moor Arabs which comprise only 30% of the population in comparison to Haratines, which constitute around 40% of the population. During the former regime, 80% of top government positions was obtained by White Moors (Beydans). According to the Department of State, Haratine and sub-Saharan (Africans) ethnic groups face discrimination, for example when trying to obtain national ID cards, in contrast to Beydane ethnic groups which enjoy government preference even when they are not legally qualified to do so ³³⁰⁰.

³³⁰⁰ [U.S. Department of State, 2019]

Slavery remained widespread in Mauritania regardless of the official abolition in 1980 and its criminalisation in 2015. However,

several human rights groups and anti-slavery advocates raised the issue of persistent slavery and rare or weak convictions (usually one to five years sentence). According to them, the country has jailed anti-slavery activities more often than slave owners ³³⁰¹. While estimates vary, it is believed that at least 1% of the population still lives enslaved, usually Haratins, who were historically enslaved by lighter skinned Arabs. A positive step in this regard was taken by the justice system in Mauritania, which gave the toughest sentence since the country's existence to two slave owners convicting them with 10 and 20 years respectively ³³⁰².

³³⁰¹ [BBC, 2018]

³³⁰² [BBC, 2018]

Western Sahara (1976-1979)

Western Sahara was a Spanish colony until 1976. When internal political unrest in mainland Spain made decolonization of the Western Sahara imminent, Morocco and Mauritania started to scramble for the still Spanish colony. After a ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1975 which established the right of the Western Sahara for self-determination, Morocco and Mauritania decided to ignore the ruling of the ICJ and divided up the territory of the Western Sahara between themselves while granting Spain the continued exploitation of Phosphat in the Western Sahara. "The Spanish government finally terminated its claim to the Spanish Sahara in February 1976 and bequeathed the territory—renamed the Western Sahara—jointly to Morocco and Mauritania, both of which consented to allow Spain to exploit the Bu Craa phosphates." ⁽³³⁰³⁾ The anti-colonial rebels from POLISARIO turned against their new occupants and proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) on 27 February 1976, one day after the Spanish had officially handed over power to Morocco and Mauritania. The SADR is today recognized by the African Union and over sixty countries world-wide.

³³⁰³ [Library of Congress, 1988]

The inhabitants of the Western Sahara are mainly Sahrawis, a formerly nomadic tribal people who are politically united in their struggle against foreign occupational forces ⁽³³⁰⁴⁾. They are of mixed Arab, Berber and Black African descent and population numbers are disputed but several sources indicate a number around 500,000 today ⁽³³⁰⁵⁾. The calculated population share of Mauritania was calculated based on present-day population numbers for both Mauritania and the Western Sahara, assuming that both populations were growing at a similar rate. Moreover, it was assumed that the majority of Sahwari people were not living in the area claimed by Mauritania (about 1/3 of the entire territory of the Western Sahara) but in the area controlled by Morocco, arriving at a population share of 7% for Sahwaris in the period in question. All other population figures were adjusted accordingly.

³³⁰⁴ [UCDP, 2008]

³³⁰⁵ [CIA World Factbook, 2011]

Mauritania never managed to achieve de facto control of the Western Saharan territory and even struggled to defend its own state territory in the period from 1976-1979. In 1978 a truce was reached and in 1979 Mauritania pulled out its troops and recognized

POLISARIO as the official representative of the Western Sahara, although it never recognized the state itself. Moroccan troops moved quickly into the former Mauritanian territory and holds it since 1979. Neither were Sahwari representatives ever included into a Mauritanian government nor were citizenship rights ever extended to Sahwari people. The political status of Sahwari people can thus be coded as “discriminated”.

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Political status of ethnic groups in Mauritania

From 1960 until 1975

| Group name | Proportional size | Political status |
|------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| White Moors (Beydan) | 0.43 | DOMINANT |
| Haratins (Black Moors) | 0.41 | POWERLESS |
| Black Africans | 0.16 | POWERLESS |

From 1976 until 1979

| Group name | Proportional size | Political status |
|------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| White Moors (Beydan) | 0.4 | DOMINANT |
| Haratins (Black Moors) | 0.39 | POWERLESS |
| Black Africans | 0.14 | POWERLESS |
| Sahrawis | 0.07 | DISCRIMINATED |

From 1980 until 2021

| Group name | Proportional size | Political status |
|------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Haratins (Black Moors) | 0.4 | JUNIOR PARTNER |
| White Moors (Beydan) | 0.3 | SENIOR PARTNER |
| Black Africans | 0.3 | POWERLESS |



Figure 654: Political status of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1960-1975.

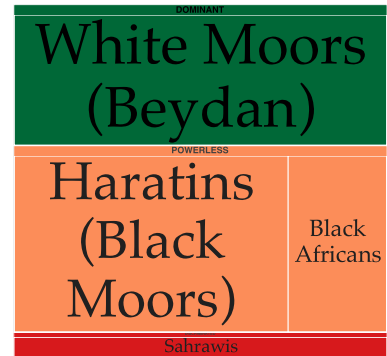


Figure 655: Political status of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1976-1979.



Figure 656: Political status of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1980-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Mauritania

From 1960 until 1960

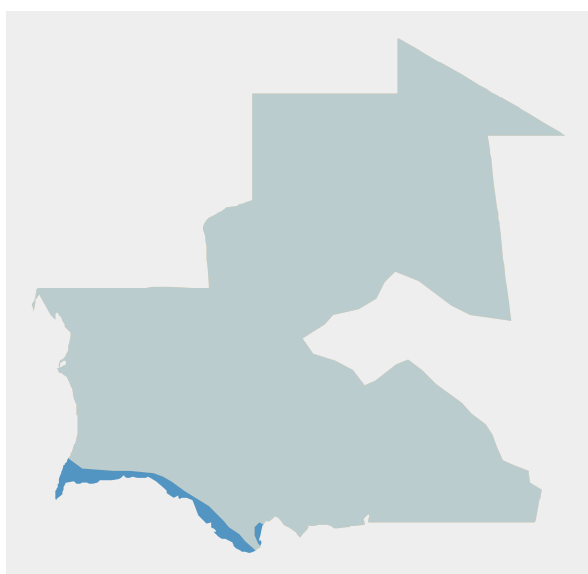


Figure 657: Map of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1960-1960.

| Group name | Area in km ² | Type |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| White Moors (Beydan) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Haratins (Black Moors) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Black Africans | 17 274 | Regionally based |

Table 242: List of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1960-1960.

From 1961 until 1974

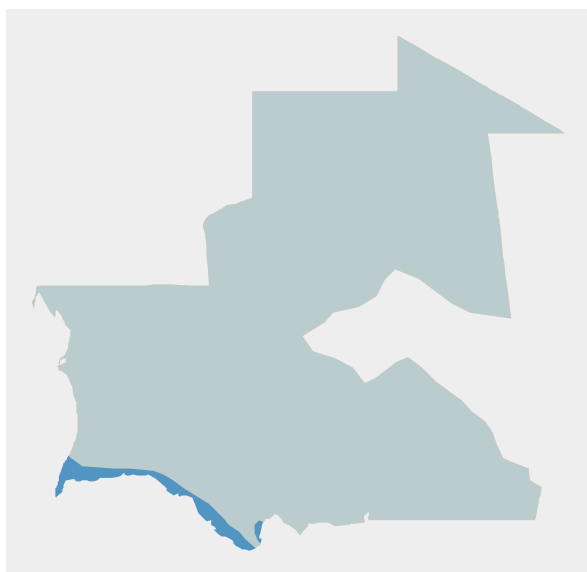


Figure 658: Map of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1961-1974.

| Group name | Area in km ² | Type |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| White Moors (Beydan) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Haratins (Black Moors) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Black Africans | 17 274 | Regionally based |

Table 243: List of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1961-1974.

From 1975 until 1975

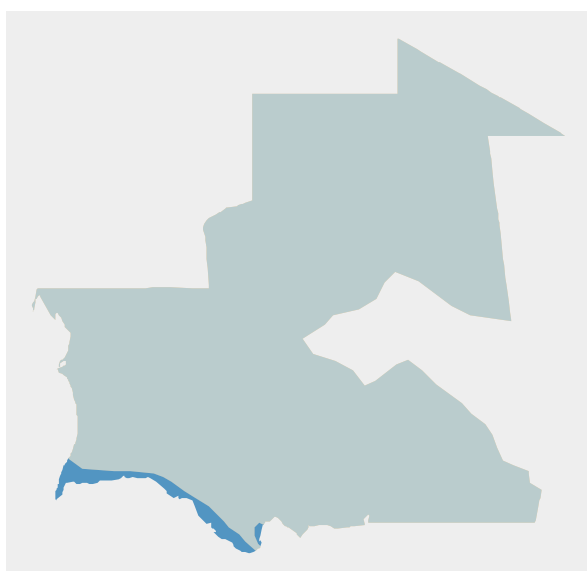


Figure 659: Map of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1975-1975.

| Group name | Area in km ² | Type |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| White Moors (Beydan) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Haratins (Black Moors) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Black Africans | 17 274 | Regionally based |

Table 244: List of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1975-1975.

From 1976 until 1978

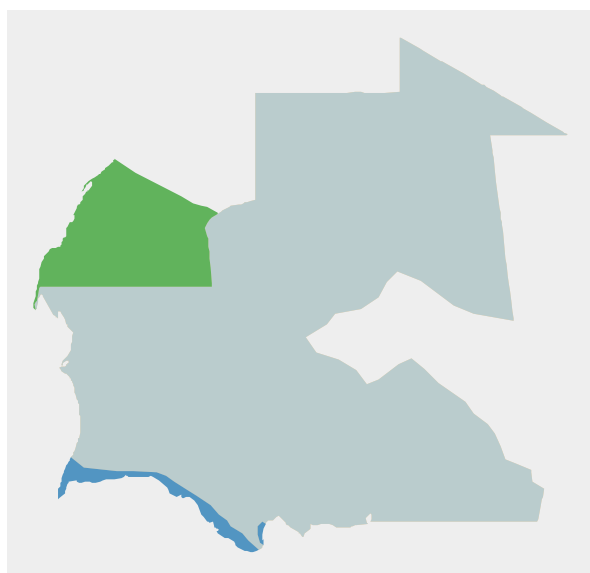


Figure 660: Map of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1976-1978.

| Group name | Area in km ² | Type |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| White Moors (Beydan) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Haratins (Black Moors) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Sahrawis | 97 791 | Regionally based |
| Black Africans | 17 274 | Regionally based |

Table 245: List of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1976-1978.

From 1979 until 1979

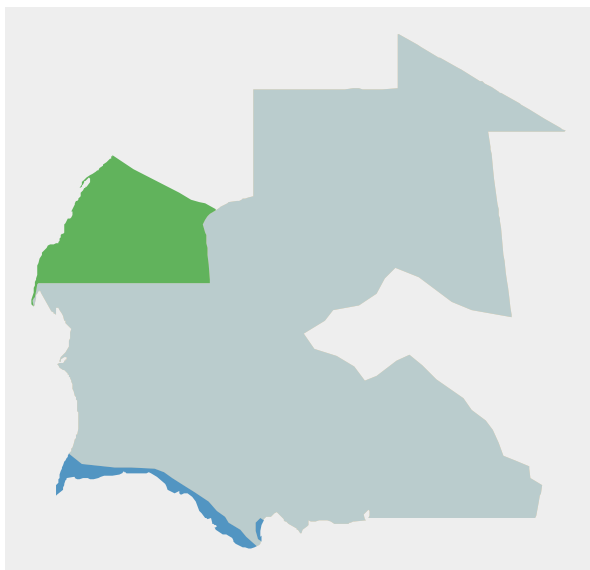


Figure 661: Map of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1979-1979.

| Group name | Area in km ² | Type |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| White Moors (Beydan) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Haratins (Black Moors) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| Sahrawis | 97 791 | Regionally based |
| Black Africans | 17 274 | Regionally based |

Table 246: List of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1979-1979.

From 1980 until 2021

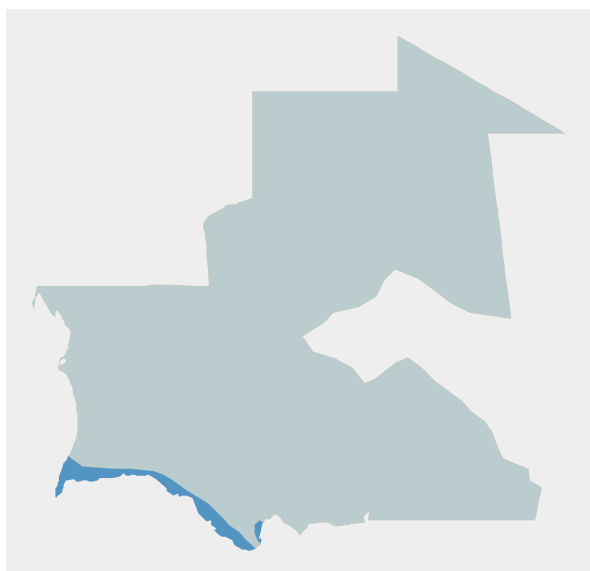


Figure 662: Map of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1980-2021.

| | Group name | Area in km ² | Type |
|---|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| ■ | White Moors (Beydan) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| ■ | Haratins (Black Moors) | 902 699 | Regionally based |
| ■ | Black Africans | 17 274 | Regionally based |

Table 247: List of ethnic groups in Mauritania during 1980-2021.

Conflicts in Mauritania

Starting on 1957-01-11

| Side A | Side B | Group name | Start | Claim | Recruitment | Support |
|----------------------|--------|------------|------------|-------|-------------|---------|
| Government of France | NLA | | 1957-01-11 | | | |

Starting on 1957-11-22

| Side A | Side B | Group name | Start | Claim | Recruitment | Support |
|---------------------|--------|------------|------------|-------|-------------|---------|
| Government of Spain | NLA | | 1957-11-22 | | | |

Starting on 1975-12-09

| Side A | Side B | Group name | Start | Claim | Recruitment | Support |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|------------|----------|-------------|---------|
| Government of Mauritania | POLISARIO | Sahrawis | 1975-12-09 | Explicit | Yes | Yes |

Starting on 2008-09-14

| Side A | Side B | Group name | Start | Claim | Recruitment | Support |
|--------------------------|--------|------------|------------|-------|-------------|---------|
| Government of Mauritania | AQIM | | 2008-09-14 | | | |