

The Sahelization of Military Education in Mauritania

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The G5 Sahel Defense College shows the value and limitations of military education as a means of regional integration.

The 2018 creation of the G5 Sahel Defense College, a war school for the Sahel area, provides a revealing case study of how Mauritania has used military education as an instrument of regional integration. It also underlines a key assumption: that there could be a Sahelian strategic space with its own security issues, driven by local dynamics.

The Mauritanian Logic of Sahelization

Before the creation of the G5 Sahel in 2014, Mauritania intended to establish the Mauritanian War School in its capital, Nouakchott, to train Mauritanian officers who usually relied on foreign programs in Europe or in Arab partner countries. But the establishment of the permanent G5 Sahel secretariat in Nouakchott created an opportunity to support the [modernization of the five national armed forces](#) through a rebranded defense college.

This Sahelization of Mauritanian military education reflected the nature of the operational challenges faced by its military leadership, which has been waging [counter-terrorism operations](#) for the last decade. At the same time, the shift to a G5 Sahel Defense College meant that Mauritania conceived its national security as intrinsically linked to defense cooperation with its Sahelian neighbours. At a practical level, the decision was also informed by the realization that the Sahelization of the school would enable Nouakchott to attract funding and partnerships (from France, Germany, the European Union, or the United States) that a national program would have struggled to raise.

Although Mauritania was by far the largest contributor to the school, it carefully avoided depicting the organization as its brainchild. In numerous documents, the College defined itself as the “[first transnational war school in the world](#).” Beyond the catchy branding, the managers of the organization aimed to design courses that would not cover strategic and military matters like they would in the United States or in Europe but tailor courses to local needs. French Colonel Charles Michel, the first director of studies at the College, observed in an October 2020 author-conducted interview that it was meant as “a school for the Sahelians looking at their own issues with their own thinking on them.”

To that purpose, the school relied in large part on speakers from the academic community of the five countries and started a process of accreditation of its master's degree with Nouakchott University. As emphasized by official materials, the program looked at the Sahel as a [coherent security complex](#), with its own logic in terms of history, geography and culture. This is more than a mere intellectual debate: positing the Sahel as a region with its own security identity implied that the Islamist challenges member states faced were not simply shaped by global terrorism trends but rather by local issues that specifically required local responses.

Sahelization Versus Western and Arab Influences

While the Sahelization of Mauritanian military education promoted a truly new strategic identity shared with four other countries, it also highlighted the challenge of implementing an educational program without external influence. Other Arab or African military schools encountered similar issues, starting with the Western influence on strategic studies and military education. The absence of a substantial [local strategic literature](#) has hindered the goal to move beyond classic thinkers, such as Clausewitz, Thucydides, or European strategists on irregular warfare.

Additionally, foreign instructors also relied on case studies outside of the region to avoid hurting diplomatic sensitivities among participants. One former French instructor at the College noted in an interview in October 2020 that it was more convenient to discuss European wars than the Chadian conflicts.

In addition to the challenge of adapting the Western-oriented strategic knowledge, the College has also been exposed to the coexistence of different working languages. French was chosen as the main language of the institution, but Mauritania, as an Arab country, has steadily pushed for Arabic to be inserted into the program. The construction of the college campus, dubbed the Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Military College, was made possible by financial support from the [United Arab Emirates](#). According to a September 2020 interview, Saudi Arabia sent six officers to attend the course in 2020. In the future, if the Arabization of the program is not only a linguistic matter but also impacts curriculum choices, it might challenge the initial goal of Sahelization, which is one of the reasons why the four non-Arabic speaking countries have insisted on maintaining French as the primary language of work.

Hub for Regional Integration?

The G5 Sahel Defense College highlights the way that professional military education is increasingly used as a tool to support regional integration. If joint training and military exercises can improve interoperability of the G5 nations, the courses delivered at the college in Nouakchott can help create a bond among these armed forces and build a common strategic culture. It also illustrates the efforts of a country—in this case Mauritania—to position itself as the anchor of this enterprise, as Estonia did with the [Baltic Defense College](#) in 1998 and Kuwait did with the [NATO-Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Centre](#) in 2017. Eventually, the G5 Sahel Defense College also reflects the challenges of building the strategic identity for a new geopolitical space such as the Sahel.

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