

# Addressing Malian Refugees' Concerns in Mauritania

by Alia Ziati



King's Policy Journal

KCL Policy Research Centre

Centre for Refugee Studies (with STAR)

Word Count: 2,500 words

January 2026

## **Addressing Malian Refugees' Concerns in Mauritania by Alia Ziati**

### **Introduction**

This article will seek to introduce policy recommendations for the Mauritanian government on how to better accommodate Malian refugees in their territories. Firstly, the article will introduce a brief historical background on Mali's instability and will explain the high number and recent increase of Malian refugees going to Mauritania. Then, this article will seek to address Malian refugees' concerns and needs in Mauritania. It will explain the history of immigration policies of Malian refugees in Mauritania, helping to gain a comprehensive overview on the treatment of Malian refugees and the potential obstacles in their integration in the country. Then, continuing on understanding the main limits of potential policies, limitations of existing policies will be discussed. Finally, policy recommendations will be given, trying to overcome the limitations of existing policies and guarantee a sustainable social development for refugees' integration and ensure their full participation in the working force of Mauritania.

### **Mali's Historical Background**

This part will introduce the historical background of conflicts occurring in Mali, where the government failed to protect their citizens due to ongoing civil conflicts but also the intervention of foreign forces, disrupting the internal dynamics of the country. In 1991, Tuareg separatists clashed with the Malian army in the Timbuktu region and refugees already resulted in displacement. In 2012, large-scale displacement from Mali was due again to the military coup of armed groups, including Tuareg and Islamists that seized territory from the North and led Malians to flee to neighbouring countries (Ndoye et al., 2024). The government was held accountable for failing to deal with insecurity due to Islamic insurgencies, and the president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was overthrown in a coup in August 2020. General Goita promised to fight jihadists in the north of the country which has been fought by the UN peacekeepers and the French military until they left in 2022 (Radio France Internationale, 2025). In 2021, Goita became interim president and promised fair and transparent elections but he never did and Mali shifted its alliances from France to Russia (Radio France Internationale, 2025). Since 2021, the Russian mercenary group has led operations in Mali with the Malian army against Islamist militants in a goal of fighting terrorism. But in reality, Wagner could not help Mali regain control of its territory as there were still jihadists and the Wagner group was frequently accused of abuse against civilians (Roger, 2025). Although they withdrew, they will still play a role in the country's security. And Fighters from Africa Corps, a rival Russian mercenary group intend to still play an active role to replace Wagner operations (BBC News, 2025b). In June 2025, an al-Qaeda linked group carried out a major attack in Boulikessi and killed more than 30 soldiers, and targeted Timbuktu with gunfires and explosions (BBC News, 2025a), and also in Mahou with 5 deaths. In July 2025, Mali's legislative body granted Goita a renewable presidential mandate as many times as he wants without election and the situation for

civilians has quickly degraded : no freedom of the press or civilians to express themselves (Radio France Internationale, 2025).

At the end of 2024, in Mauritania, over 150 000 people were registered as refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly from Mali. (UNHCR, 2024a). By June 2025, there was a 75% increase compared to 2023 in the number of refugees. Mauritania was hosting around 300 000 refugees and asylum seekers, with registered individuals (UNHCR, 2025a). It has shown an “open-door policy” by including refugees in national systems for health, education and social protection but restrictive regional migration policies made the situation difficult for Mauritania to host refugees.

### **Existing Policies Affecting Malian Refugees**

Drawing from the historical context in Mali, to understand better the increase in refugees in Mauritania due to the forced displacement of Malian refugees, a brief introduction to existing policies helping Malian refugees to integrate will help us understand the potential limitations to overcome later in the policy recommendations.

Mauritania, which had as an objective to integrate Malian refugees in the workforce, also benefiting the economic activity of its productive sector wanted to guarantee an easier access for refugees to the workplace. Thus, Section 15 of decree no. 2022-063 of 5 May 2022 considers that beneficiaries of refugee status receive the same treatment as nationals regarding access to medical care, the labour market, social security and education. Therefore, all refugees have the right to work in Mauritania. Drawing from this national effort to integrate Malian refugees in the workforce, international programs were also implemented by foreign agencies to help improve the employability of refugees, which was an urgent issue to remedy in refugee camps. Thus, within the Framework of the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS), the International Labor organisation and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) implemented a project to empower young refugees through activities to improve their employability in the construction sector (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, 2020)

It is also worth noting that existing policies do not function solely under the national authority but also rely on international organisations and agencies, seeking to establish longer sustainable development goals to help those refugees. Thus, international actors such as the UNHCR and other organisations actively contributed in helping to improve living conditions for Malian refugees. Indeed, the refugee policy in Mauritania has been supported by many strategic allies : at the national level :

UNHCR works in collaboration with the ministry of Interior and local authorities Responses are made by the UNSDC that works in humanitarian coordination with WFP, UNICEF, WHO, IOM . Development partners such as the World Bank and the EU are investing and humanitarian NGOS such as Action Contre la Faim (ACF) et the Croix-Rouge Français (CRF) are also contributing, along refugee-led organisations such as SOS nomades who develop community-cantered solutions (UNHCR, 2024b).

### **Limitation on Existing Policies**

However, despite existing policies through national and international efforts to help integrate Malian refugees into the work force, several limitations on existing policies have been observed throughout those programs, and most importantly the tension between Mauritania's open-door policies who seek to integrate refugees but also repressive arrests due to the European Union pressure.

One limitation of existing policies is the difficulties in education for children in refugee camps, where access to many resources is scarce. Indeed, inadequate infrastructures, classrooms and unattractive learning environments with a lack of certified teachers create an obstacle for children to access education in the Mbera camp. Educational infrastructures such as electricity or roads are rudimentary in the region, primary classrooms are crowded, only 23% of 147 teachers are certified (UNHCR, 2025b). There are also concerns that Malian refugee parents lack awareness about the importance of school that leads to late entry, grade repetition and increase the inefficiency of the educational system (UNHCR, 2025b).

Furthermore, recent cuts in foreign aid made the camp resources scarce, creating a difficult humanitarian situation for Malian refugees to have their basic needs fulfilled and have decent living conditions. Aid workers from the UN World Food Programme and UNICEF office worry about the decrease in resources as major foreign donors such as the USAID cut funding in 2025 : they have gone on to support 90 000 people with food and cash every month to 53 000, and issues with malnourished children and mothers (UNHCR, 2025b). Meals are given thanks to the South Korean government. Moreover, for 2025, Mauritania will need 45.5 million USD to ensure its programmes for refugees. Thus, these cuts of foreign aid had a direct impact on the living conditions of the camp that were made very difficult, due to the lack of resources. Many people are suffering from respiratory infections and diarrhea due to lack of access to water, exposure to high temperatures and sand storms (UNHCR, 2025b). Médecins sans frontière run medical and humanitarian programmes with 4 primary health care centres in Mbera camp (Doctors Without Borders, n.d.b.). According to a policy brief made by UNHCR

and World bank, housing conditions are precarious with 64% of households living in tents and 18% are homeless, water and sanitation services are lacking, refugees rely on informal employment (UNHCR, 2024b).

In addition, despite continued efforts by Mauritania to integrate Malian refugees, several arrests were made against them due to external migratory pressures from the European Union. Indeed, mass arrest and detention for days or weeks with no food, collective expulsions, beatings and tortures have been experienced by migrants and asylum seekers in border and migration control in Mauritania. Due to the increasing migratory pressures and insecurity in Sahel, Mauritania has grown closer to the European Union that announced in 2024 a 210 million euros for funding to Mauritania to reinforce migration management. After detention, Mauritania has expelled tens of thousands of African migrants to the borders of Mali where armed conflict puts people at great risk (Africanews, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

### **Policy Recommendations**

Taking into consideration the historical background of conflicts in Mali making the experiences of Malian refugees very difficult and leaving them no choice but to flee their homes; but also taking into account existing policies to integrate Malian refugees but also limitations of other policies with a negative impact, this final part will help us to provide effective policy recommendations towards the government of Mauritania, helping to shape and restructure the existing infrastructures around the integration of Malian refugees.

Firstly, to address recent cuts in foreign aid that made the resources in the camp scarce and made difficult for refugees to meet their basic needs, it would be relevant to advise the Mauritanian government to build another refugee camp and improve urbanization plans of camps. Initially, the Mbera camp was made to host around 120 000 refugees according to the UNHCR and 154 000 refugees reside in nearby villages, and half are under 18. It would be more efficient for the government to build other centers in another region to concentrate a lesser population density there. Integrating the camps in the cities or suburbs to also give more working opportunities for the refugees that could participate more efficiently to the country's economy. A potential limitation could be around the financing of this other refugee camp, but the presence of international organisations' programs such as the UN in the country could help to fulfil the financial requirement for the project.

Secondly, on the educational level, related to the issue around the difficult education of the children in the refugee camp and the overcrowded rooms that make education difficult for local teachers, it would be recommended for Mauritania to build a transnational network of teachers that would come as volunteers in a limited contract to teach children in the camp. It would also be recommended to build infrastructures for them to be able to teach and provide a welcoming environment for the children. As many teachers don't have certifications, it would be challenging to offer education for children. Creating a broader network with volunteers could allow them to gain experience in refugee camps and at the same time offer children an education that would not cost anything to Mauritania. However, for building the infrastructures, Mauritania could ask the help for foreign donors and the international community to build a joint program to finance this project

Thirdly, related again to education as the children of today represent the working force of tomorrow and as the parents do not fully comprehend the importance of education, It would be recommended for Mauritania to organise awareness campaigns to sensitize parents around the importance of school for their children. Many parents might not see the benefits for children to go to school, and might encourage them to work to have a salary that would help improve the family's living conditions. However, literacy is an important long-term goal of a country that could help Mauritania achieve higher levels of development if refugees have access to a higher level of education. It is worth noting that children faced psychological difficulties they have faced after being constrained to quit their home country, so also inviting therapists as volunteer in schools would be efficient to offer the best support for the children

Fourthly, related to issues on the legislative level, it would be recommended for Mauritania to fully develop an asylum law for Malian refugees as many principles are lacking in the existing one. As Mauritania has a finalised draft of the asylum law but not yet being fully adopted (UNHCR, n.d.). Thus, the UNHCR has the responsibility of registration, documentation and refugee status determination (UNHCR, n.d.). With the development of an asylum law for Malian refugees, their integration would be easier, with a different legal status that might make them find a job more easily, access basic healthcare services faster or even make them feel psychologically more integrated with basic needs that are fulfilled.

Fifthly, concerning the integration of the refugees in the work force and continuing on pre-existing policies of Mauritania, it would be useful to build other centers for professional formation and equip them with the necessary skills. Given the fact that 100% of refugees work in the informal sector,

with 1 in 3 claiming that they can't provide for their family and beg for money in the street, work as labourers or sell firewood products. It could be useful to put those centers in relation with companies so it could facilitate the direct recruitment of the refugees, and lead them out of the informal sector to the formal sector. Thus, they could make a measurable impact in the economy and be considered for their positive impact for the economic development of Mauritania in the longer term. They could also be paid higher, if they are professionally trained and equipped with higher skills that could be more valuable and help them improve their living conditions on the individual level. Financing can be an issue in this policy recommendation, but local firms in need of more workers could offer their services to professionally train refugees and then recruit them, thus providing them a long-term solution to their financial situation.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the situation of Malian refugees is a complicated issue to address, as the historical context shows a forced and massive displacement of Malian refugees where civil wars and local instability were recurring factors locally. Existing policies of Mauritania show an open-door seeking to include refugees but also a more constrained and dependent side on international pressures from the European Union but also financial constraints leading to unsanitary conditions in the camp, making life there more difficult. Thus, conflicting trends in existing policies for Mauritania show the tension between very repressive migration control and inclusive policies to integrate refugees in the work force. Thus, policy recommendations, for feasibility and practical purposes, can be implemented around the real-life limitations of existing policies, related to overcrowding classrooms, the difficulty of education, difficult living conditions. Thus, policies in terms of infrastructures, education, legislation, and the integration of refugees in the work force are highly relevant given the ongoing situation and difficulties faced by refugees in the camp.

## **Bibliography:**

Africanews. (2025, August 27). *HRW: EU-funded crackdown drove torture, expulsions in Mauritania.*

<https://www.africanews.com/2025/08/27/hrw-eu-funded-crackdown-drove-torture-expulsions-in-mauritania/>

BBC News. (2025, June 2). *Al-Qaeda-linked group says it carried out huge attack on Mali's army.*

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17152685>

BBC News. (2025, June 6). *Wagner to withdraw from Mali after “completing mission”*.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce3ve0e7ndzo>

Doctors Without Borders. (n.d.). *Mauritania: Refugees stranded in the desert*.

<https://www.msf.org/mauritania-refugees-stranded-desert>

Doctors Without Borders. (n.d.). *Mauritania: Thousands of refugees from Mali facing poor conditions*.

<https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/mauritania-thousands-refugees-mali-facing-poor-conditions>

Human Rights Watch. (2025, August 27). *“They accused me of trying to go to Europe”: Migration control abuses and the EU*.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/08/27/they-accused-me-of-trying-to-go-to-europe/migration-control-abuses-and-eu>

Ndoye, D., Beltramo, T., Muhlen-Schulte, A., & Nichanametla Ramasubbaiah, R. G. (2024, October 30). *Understanding the new Malian refugees in Mauritania: A path forward amid growing challenges*. UNHCR Blog.

<https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/understanding-the-new-malian-refugees-in-mauritania-a-path-forward-amid-growing-challenges/>

Radio France Internationale. (2025, August 18). *Five years after the 2020 coup, where is Mali today?*

<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20250818-five-years-after-the-2020-coup-where-is-mali-today-assimi-goita>

Roger, B. (2025, June 12). *Russian Wagner Group fighters secretly detained and tortured civilians in Mali*. *Le Monde*.

[https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2025/06/12/russian-wagner-group-fighters-secretly-detained-and-tortured-civilians-in-mali\\_6742284\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2025/06/12/russian-wagner-group-fighters-secretly-detained-and-tortured-civilians-in-mali_6742284_124.html)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.). *Document 96867*. Data UNHCR.

<https://data.unhcr.org/ar/documents/details/96867>

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2024, June). *Mauritania regional refugee response plan 2023* (Archived).

[https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/+https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/MENA%20-%20Mauritania%20ARR%202023\\_0.pdf](https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/+https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/MENA%20-%20Mauritania%20ARR%202023_0.pdf)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2024, October). *Policy brief: Understanding the socio-economic profile of refugee arrivals in Mauritania since 2023*.

<https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/policy-brief-understanding-the-socio-economic-profile-of-refugee-arrivals-in-mauritania-since-2023.pdf>

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2025). *Mauritania*.

<https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/mauritania?year=2025>

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2025, April). *Mauritania: Measuring holistic learning outcomes for the forcibly displaced*.

<https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/mauritania-measuring-holistic-learning-outcomes-for-the-forcibly-displaced.pdf>

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.). *Mauritania fact sheet*.

<https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/50a9f82516.pdf>

United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel. (2020, February 25). *UNHCR and ILO facilitate the integration of Malian refugees in Mauritania*.

<https://unowas.unmissions.org/unhcr-and-ilo-facilitate-integration-malian-refugees-mauritania>