



MAURITANIA

Quick Facts

Population: 3,758,571 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 1,030,700 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Black Moors (Haratines - Arab-speaking slaves, former slaves, and their descendants of African origin, enslaved by white Moors) 40%, white Moors (of Arab-Berber descent, known as Beydane) 30%, sub-Saharan Mauritaniens (non-Arabic speaking, largely resident in or originating from the Senegal River Valley, including Halpulaar, Fulani, Soninke, Wolof, and Bambara ethnic groups) 30%

GDP (official exchange rate): \$4.985 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Despite its long history of Islamic influences and its location in a region known for its political turbulence and instability, Mauritania has historically avoided the path of radical Islamism. After independence in 1960, the country adopted the name La République Islamique de Mauritanie, which scholars believe was part of an effort by a number of the country's rulers to consolidate some form of national identity that could be shared by Mauritania's diverse Arab and African populations.¹ Islam, the one feature both groups had in common, served as a tool for securing some degree of national unity. To avoid the temptation of radical Islamism, and to harness the diversity of the country's population, emphasis was laid on the republican nature of the state, rather than on its Islamic theocracy.²

In Mauritania, the legalization of Islam and its practices at the state level has never translated into support for radical Islamism, and the small minority groups with Islamist agendas have often been marginalized and suppressed. Nevertheless, the same dynamics that have generated support for Islamist movements in other Middle Eastern and North African countries—among them poverty, unemployment and a frustrated, largely urban population seeking improved material conditions and an ideological sense of direction—have led to an increased Islamist political presence in Mauritania. By and large, these groups so far have steered clear of using violence, preferring instead to assert their presence within the country's political system.

Although the Sahel is generally seen as a hotspot for Islamist terrorism and violent extremism, Mauritania is something of an exception. According to the U.S. government, "Mauritania is not a safe haven for terrorists or terrorist groups, although regions in the interior are imperfectly monitored as a result of their geographic isolation from population centers and inhospitable desert conditions."³ However, research indicates that, although Mauritania has not witnessed as many terrorist attacks as most countries in the region, it has produced a significant number of jihadist ideologues and high-ranking terrorist operatives per capita,⁴ many of whom have left Mauritania to join various global Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State or the Islamic State (ISIS).

Despite the absence of any terrorist attack in Mauritania since 2011, the U.S. government maintains a standing travel advisory to Mauritania (as of January 2018) color-coded ‘orange’ which warns American citizens to exercise increased caution in Mauritania and to reconsider their travel plans to Mauritania due to crime and terrorism. The advisory further states that “[v]iolent crimes, such as mugging, armed robbery, rape, and assault, are common. Local police lack the resources to respond effectively to serious crimes. Terrorists may attack with little or no warning, targeting places frequented by Westerners.”⁵

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In 1960, Mauritania declared its independence from France, and a series of military coups saddled the first two decades of independence. In 1978 the country’s first post-independence President, Moktar Ould Daddah, was overthrown in a military coup.⁶ Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla took control of the country in 1980, and in 1982, he implemented sharia as the law of the land.⁷ Haidalla’s hold on power was short-lived, and Maouiyya Ould Taya took control of the country via a coup in 1984. Taya continued the Haidalla government’s practice of traditional Islam, and imposed various restrictions, such as banning the sale of alcohol. But Taya was careful not to allow Islamist-oriented political and social movements to gain traction in politics and society, or to become strong enough to threaten his rule.

While supportive of Islam, the Taya regime was an unequivocal opponent of Islamism. Under Taya, Islamist activists were pursued and persecuted by authorities. The regime’s unpopular policies, its repression of expression and violations of human rights and its corrupt nature ultimately led to its demise. In 2003, Taya added an amendment to the constitution of Mauritania that made Islam the state religion and made sharia the primary source of law.⁸ The military overthrew Taya in 2005, and subsequently held democratic elections in 2007. This led to the election of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, a veteran Mauritanian political figure who had received the endorsement of key social constituencies. However, Abdallahi was ousted from power in 2008 in yet another coup. That coup’s leader, General Mohamed Ould ‘Abd al-Aziz, became a civilian president in 2009 as a result of elections conducted under an agreement with other Mauritanian political parties.⁹ He remains in office as of mid-2018.

Since independence in 1960, scholars have discerned three main trends in Islamism in Mauritania: the first relates to the founding of Jama’a Islamiyya in 1974 in Nouakchott, which became Mauritania’s first Islamist organization with a similar design and ideological premise to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.¹⁰ This was followed by the emergence of preachers in the 1990s, who pursued an apolitical agenda and advocated non-violence.¹¹ The third tendency is the spread of Wahhabist or Salafist ideas,¹² drawing inspiration from similar currents in the Middle East and North Africa. Adherents to Wahhabism advocate for jihad and the establishment of Sharia as a form of government in Mauritania. This tendency has always been associated with violence and political instability in Mauritania.

Islamist Political Parties

Tawassoul¹³

A military coup in 2005 helped pave the way for democratic elections in 2007, and subsequently was followed by yet another military takeover in August 2008. Throughout, the country largely maintained its pro-Western foreign policy and kept its distance from Islamist groups and ideas. Nevertheless, the advent of the Arab Spring in 2011 changed the political dynamics in Muslim countries that previously kept Islamists out of politics. The rise of pro-democracy Islamist parties in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, resuscitated—if not generated the momentum for the creation of—similar movements in other parts of the region. In Mauritania, it led to the emergence of Islamist parties onto the national stage. The most renowned of these is le Rassemblement national pour la réforme et le développement (RNRD), more commonly known as Tawassoul, a moderate Islamist party.¹⁴ The party was formed as a result of the democratic overture¹⁵ in 2007 and was legalized in 2008.¹⁶ To dispel fears, Tawassoul proclaimed, during

its official inauguration on August 8, 2007, its motto as a threefold designation: “Our reference is Islam. Our affiliation is with Mauritania. Our choice is democracy.”¹⁷

Tawassoul participated in the 2013 elections for the first time and won 16 seats¹⁸ in parliament, thereby becoming the second strongest party after the Union for the Republic (UPR), the ruling party of president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, which claimed 74 of the 147 legislative seats.¹⁹ The results of the 2013 elections demonstrated the potential of Mauritanian Islamists to win elections and take power. It also revealed the influence of Islamist parties in the region such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahdha in Tunisia and the Party for Justice and Development (PJD) in Morocco, on Islamism in Mauritania.²⁰ Despite its links with these Islamist parties,²¹ Tawassoul has proved to be a moderate Islamist party and has helped to refocus national debate on issues around Islam and poverty in Mauritania. It is important to note however, that Islamism has not been a source of violence in contemporary Mauritanian political culture, and whenever it is used in the political context, it serves as an appeal for development, unity and social cohesion.

For many analysts, the sudden rise of Tawassoul is attributable to two important factors. The first is the general boycott of the 2013 elections by major opposition parties like the National Front for the Defence of Democracy (FNDD).²² Secondly, many have blamed “the failure of the autocratic Mauritanian elite to construct a cohesive nation state and to confront the country’s legacy of slavery,”²³ for providing the springboard for the rise of Tawassoul. The latter was highly criticized for taking part in the 2013 elections and its refusal to join other opposition parties in the mass boycott. The leader of the party, Jemil Ould Mansour, has, on a number of occasions, clarified the relationship between the party and Islam, emphasizing that Tawassoul is a party of moderate Islam. He not only disassociated the party from Salafi theology, but also distanced himself from it as well. In this context, Mansour has stressed the importance of religious freedom and condemned the Salafists’ destruction of mausoleums, shrines and other cultural edifices in the historic Malian city of Timbuktu in 2012. He also supported the deployment of French, United Nations and African peacekeepers in Mali in 2013. Some observers have commented that the party is often seen as being more concerned about its own survival than promoting ideological tenets. Its long-term impact on Mauritanian society and Islam remain an open question.²⁴ Although Tawassoul generally supported the government position in the Malian crisis, a small group of Islamist scholars opposed any support for foreign intervention in Mali and it was widely reported that this group of scholars issued a fatwa (a religious edict) against ‘Operation Serval’ in 2013 and other French-led military operations in the region, and framing the Malian crisis as part of the global jihad.²⁵ Even though they constituted only a small minority, it is believed that they contributed to Mauritania’s ambiguous role in the Malian crisis.

Salafist and Islamist Militant Groups

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the new incarnation of Algeria’s Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which in September 2006 was recognized by al-Qaeda as its representative in North Africa. Throughout the early months of 2009, Mauritania witnessed an uptick in violence instigated by AQIM. That June, an American aid worker was murdered in Nouakchott, and in July, a suicide attack (the first of its kind in Mauritania) was carried out near the French embassy in the capital, wounding three people. AQIM claimed responsibility for both of these attacks. The last major terror attack in Mauritania occurred on December 20, 2011, when Ely Ould Mokhtar, a gendarmerie officer, was kidnapped at Adel Begrou, east of Nouakchott by AQIM,²⁶ though he was subsequently released almost a year later. Other than this, Mauritania has not experienced any major terrorist attack since 2011. However, as of mid-2018, AQIM has been resurgent throughout northwest Africa. In March 2016, the U.S. government published documents captured during the 2011 raid on Osama bin Laden’s base in 2011, that revealed that al-Qaeda leaders had discussed negotiating a peace deal with the Mauritanian government.²⁷ The plan entailed

AQIM promising not to attack Mauritania for one year, with a potential renewal of the agreement, in exchange for Mauritania releasing all al-Qaeda prisoners, promising not to attack AQIM, and to pay it 10 to 20 million euro per year. There is no evidence that such a deal ever took place, or even that al-Qaeda leaders even discussed it with Mauritanian officials.²⁸

Most analysts contend that the group is deeply rooted in Algeria's Islamist violence, and the January 2013 attack on a gas plant in the southwestern Algerian town of In Amenas by a brigade led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar reaffirmed these roots. The magnitude of the attack, during which 48 people from Britain, Japan, Norway, the U.S. and the Philippines were killed during a four-day siege,²⁹ gave AQIM new energy. AQIM has also expanded its influence further south of the Sahara with attacks in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire. The expansion takes advantage of the extensive desert region of the Sahel for AQIM operations.³⁰ AQIM has been described as more of a criminal organization with a veneer of religious ideology, or, in the words of one U.S. official, "a criminal organization with an attachment to al-Qaeda."³¹ The group has proven its ability to carry out attacks in Mauritania, but its overall support among local Mauritians (except those within its ranks) remains unclear. There are mixed claims as to whether AQIM still maintain a presence in Mauritania. In October 2016, the U.S. government issued a terror alert for Mauritania and stated that: "In recent years, AQIM terrorist activity in Mauritania included kidnapping, murder, and attacks on foreign diplomatic missions and private citizens, gendarme military installations and personnel. Although not currently active in Mauritania, the threat of terrorism remains."³² By most estimates, the involvement of Mauritians in AQIM's activities is minimal, and cannot truly reflect any form of local endorsement. It has not yet left a lasting imprint on Mauritanian society, and its attacks have not been linked to domestic developments. Analysts note that the potential for greater local support for such a movement does exist, primarily among a younger generation due to growing disaffection, social media and the effect of the television images of the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and between Israel and the Palestinians.³³

A controversial report recovered after the 2011 raid on Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad residence in Pakistan alleged that al-Qaeda contemplated a peace deal with the government of Mauritania. According to the document, AQIM would promise "not to carry out any military activity in Mauritania," initially for a year, with the possibility of renewal, and in return, Mauritanian authorities would release all al-Qaeda prisoners, commit not to attack AQIM, and pay it 10 to 20 million euros (\$11 million-\$22 million) a year to "prevent the kidnapping of tourists."³⁴ There is no previous record of Mauritania negotiating with terrorists and the government denied any such deal. However, some observers believe that such a deal was possible,³⁵ and the absence of significant attacks by Islamists since is likely due to the terms of such an agreement. Indeed, at the 2017 annual Dakar (Senegal) Forum on peace and security in Africa, the Mauritanian ambassador to Senegal, Mr Cheikhna Nenni Moulaye Zeine, is reported to have stated that his country engaged in a dialogue with sixty-five terrorists in prisons in Mauritania and that the negotiations were led by the Ulemmas delegated by the government.³⁶ The goal of the negotiations was to convince the terrorists that their path had nothing to do with Islam.

MUJAO

The Movement for the Unity of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) also exists in Mauritania. Founded in 2011 as a splinter group from AQIM under the leadership of a Mauritanian, Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, MUJAO merged with Mokhtar Belmokhtar's brigade to form what they called al-Mourabitoon in 2013. MUJAO played a key role in the seizure and control of northern Mali. A number of MUJAO's militants have been arrested and imprisoned in Mauritania and Algeria, the terror group warned the two countries and threatened to attack them to liberate the prisoners.³⁷ Apart from these verbal threats, MUJAO or al-Mourabitoon has not carried out any known attack yet in Mauritania.

ISIS

Although AQIM has traditionally been the biggest terrorist threat to Mauritania, with cells in different parts of the country, in recent years various observers have warned about the increasing vulnerability of the country to ISIS. Such reports have cited the possible presence of ISIS cells in the country's interior, particularly in regions such as Awkar and along border areas not frequented by security forces.³⁸ To confirm such allegations, in June 2016, a Mauritanian court sentenced three men to prison for having ties to the Islamic State. The charges against the men included "belonging to an organization established with the goal of committing terrorist crimes, instigating religious violence, using symbols relating to a terrorist organization for the sake of glorifying it, and providing a meeting place for persons with a relationship to a terrorist organization."³⁹ In September 2016, Mauritanian authorities arrested more than 20 Islamists believed to be members of ISIS, and who were allegedly planning to attack the capital Nouakchott.⁴⁰

The Islamic State's greatest impact on Mauritania, however, lies in recruitment of fighters. The figures for Mauritians who have joined foreign Islamist groups are highly contested, but there is consensus among researchers that the number is fast growing and raising concern that Mauritania is a growing exporter of jihadists, estimated to be at least 200, serving various Islamist groups around the world.⁴¹ Some of these adherents occupy leadership positions in both regional and international networks. For example, in 2014, Algerian security forces apprehended a Mauritanian called, Safiuddin al-Mauritani, who at the time was the leader of an ISIS-affiliated group called the Uqba bin Nafi Brigade based in Tunisia.⁴²

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Mauritania is often referred to as the cradle of the Almoravid movement, which during the 11th century spread Islam throughout most parts of north and West Africa, and controlled the Islamic part of Spain.⁴³ Some scholars have observed that Islam has shaped the imagination, social structures, and part of the political landscape of Mauritania for over a millennium, and that the religious radicalization of the society only strengthened in the shadow of Islamist repression.⁴⁴ Mauritania's demographic and cultural heritage is very diverse, reflecting the confluence of the major groups from the south and north of the Sahara. In comparison with its huge landmass, the population is sparsely distributed and estimated to be 4,205,468,⁴⁵ divided among the following ethnic groups: Black Moors—also known as Haratines or Arab-speaking descendants of slaves (40%), White Moors—of Arab-Berber descent, also known as Bidhan (30%), and Black Africans—comprising non-Arabic speaking Africans, Halpulaar, Soninke, Wolof, and Bamara ethnic groups (30%).⁴⁶

Mauritania is one of the world's most impoverished countries, with a per capita GDP of U.S. \$1,060.⁴⁷ Socio-economic hardships range from limited educational opportunities, unemployment, poor health services and a very low quality of life. The country's economic figures offer a glimpse of this reality: Life expectancy is low, at 58 for men and 62 for women.⁴⁸ Its arid climate and desert landscape impede the possibility of developing a strong agricultural sector, which could at least provide a framework for a sustainable economy. In addition, the country suffers from periodic climatic calamities, such as severe droughts, which further add to its economic woes.

Socially, the country's inhabitants, although entirely Muslim, are divided between the Arab elite and black Africans, many of them referred to as Haratins. This ethnic group, the largest among the country's ethnic composition, suffers from various forms of official and unofficial discrimination, and occupies the lowest rungs of Mauritanian society. Indeed, slavery altogether remains an ongoing issue in Mauritania. Although officially banned in 1981, many contend that slavery is still practiced in various forms throughout the country, further exacerbating existing tensions between the Arab elites and the "Black Mauritians," as they are commonly known.

Islam has served as the sole unifying element in this highly fractured society. But, despite this role, Islamism as a political force has remained limited and restricted in Mauritania over the years. Islamism-

oriented activity has had various manifestations, ranging from mostly charitable organizations to a loose set of political groups inspired by Wahhabism, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and several Islamist figures (including the Sudanese activist Hassan al-Turabi). The Mauritanian authorities' successful repression of Islamist political activity over the years has further weakened any attempts to establish a strong Islamist political presence.

Despite the rise in Islamist activity in the region, the Mauritanian public has not displayed great sympathy or support toward these actions. The AQIM attack near the French embassy in August 2008, for example, was largely condemned by Mauritians, including Tawassoul, whose spiritual leader, Mohamed Hassan Ould Dedew, deemed the attack "an act of barbarism" and "completely foreign" to Mauritanian Islam.⁴⁹ One observer has noted that Mauritians view AQIM as serving a foreign ideology that is hostile to their traditional societal values.⁵⁰ Salafism is not viewed with high regard; it is seen as a fringe movement. Violent Islamism is also frowned upon and seen as a source of disorder and instability.⁵¹

Even with its rich natural resources such as oil, iron ore, copper, fish, gypsum, phosphate, diamonds, and gold,⁵² Mauritania by any standards is one of the world's most impoverished countries. Although Mauritania largely escaped the wave of terrorism that swept across North Africa in the 1990s and the Arab Spring that began in 2011, Mauritania's youths have not been able to escape the recent undercurrents of violent Islamism spread by ISIS and al-Qaeda. Youth vulnerability has been accentuated by widespread poverty and unemployment and the aggressive propaganda of Islamist groups on social media. Observers have stressed the importance of online social media as the fastest growing pathway to youth radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism.

Mauritania's divided and belligerent military is also seen as one of the forces of youth radicalization. The military remains central in the Mauritanian society controlling political and economic activities.⁵³ This means that the state's responses to social, economic and political issues are primarily military in nature, which turns to frustrate disaffected youths, who may seek revenge through an option of joining a terrorist group. The vulnerability of Mauritania is further complicated by transnational organized crime. The strategic geographic location of the country offers an important transient point for arms smuggling, human trafficking, cigarette and drug trafficking (including cocaine from South America destined for Europe). Cigarette smuggling and contraband have been highlighted by various reports as having contributed to the emergence of the practices and networks that have allowed drug trafficking to grow in the Sahel, in which Mauritania plays an important role.⁵⁴ According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "State complicity with organized crime is at the heart of instability in the Sahel and Sahara region, fomenting conflict and fueling the rise of al-Qaeda."⁵⁵

Observers also fear the historic tension between the Haratins (former slaves and their descendants) and former slave owners, which has been referred to as Mauritania's own apartheid system.⁵⁶ Despite the abolition of slavery in 1980 in Mauritania, the practice has persisted and today stokes conflict between abolitionists and those who still believe some aspects of the practice should continue.⁵⁷ Such conflict could exacerbate insecurity, which could be exploited by groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. Despite the absence of any solid evidence, there are claims that ISIS, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram have training camps in Mauritania, with some sources going as far as stating that at least "80 trainees, recruits from the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe, including France, are known to be training at the camps."⁵⁸

ISIS and al-Qaeda are posing as better alternatives to corrupt and poorly governed secular governments. The ISIS model, particularly the declaration of an Islamic caliphate in 2014, which the group is encouraging all Muslim youths to be a part of, has attracted a record number of foreign fighters, which the Soufan Group estimated in October 2017 to be approximately 30,000 people over 80 countries.⁵⁹ Although it is known that a sizable number of Mauritians have joined the Islamic State, the exact number of Mauritanian foreign fighters is not known. Mauritania is one of the African countries that may suffer an increased threat from ISIS following the recent defeats suffered by the group in Syria and Iraq. Analysts believe that ISIS

is in search of safe havens in Africa and Mauritania could provide that. Such a cell in Mauritania may not necessarily attack targets in Mauritania, but rather use the country as a base to plan attacks on Western interests in the region.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In response to the terrorist threat facing the country, the Mauritanian government has taken a wide range of measures, only some of which are highlighted here. The first major response was the adoption of counterterrorism Law No. 2005/047 of 2005, which was subsequently repealed and replaced by Law No. 2010/035 of 2010, which provided a definition of terrorism and outlined the parameters for the fight against terrorism in Mauritania (extradition, mutual legal assistance and international cooperation), as well as creating a number of specialized institutions (including a special Federal Police) to deal with issues of terrorism.⁶⁰ A second law adopted in 2005 was Law No. 2005/048, dealing with money laundering and the financing of terrorism. In Article 2, the law included in the definition of money laundering any transfer and manipulation of any funds or assets originating from criminal sources, while Article 3 criminalizes the financing of terrorism from a broad perspective, to include any support or assembling or management of funds or any assets with the intention of committing a terrorist act.⁶¹

Two AQIM attacks in 2009—the first the murder of an American aid worker, the second a suicide attack near the French embassy in the country’s capital—caused Mauritania to further intensify its security measures. The government aimed to decrease AQIM’s presence and its ability to carry out attacks on Mauritanian soil. Scores of people, mostly suspected Islamist activists, were arrested as part of the government’s counterterrorism measures. Many detainees, including those accused of belonging to AQIM, were kept incommunicado for prolonged periods. Some, especially alleged Islamist activists, reported that they had been tortured with electric shocks, a practice which has been reported in previous government crackdowns against Islamist activity.⁶² Suspects accused of carrying out an attack on French tourists in December 2007 were put on trial in May 2010. Their lawyers stated that their clients refused to confess to the crime, and that state forces tortured them to obtain confessions.⁶³

Another major response was the adoption of a counterterrorism strategy in April 2012.⁶⁴ The strategy marked a switch from a “softer” approach, in which the government attempted to dissuade youth from supporting violent radicalization, to a hard and proactive counterterrorism strategy.⁶⁵ The national counterterrorism strategy provides Mauritania with the operational framework to eliminate terrorism, using the 2005 law on money laundering and financing of terrorism and its basis. The main pillar of the strategy is intelligence, which is seen as the first line of defense against terrorism, and it also defines roles for each of the country’s security forces, including the military.

An important operational measure taken by the government has been the the creation of 40 functional border control posts, ten of which are situated at the busiest border access areas and which are equipped with biometric scanners and readers. Mauritania has also taken a wide range of initiatives to promote international cooperation. Those initiatives include deploying troops in Mali, participation in the Nouakchott process,⁶⁶ and in the Sahel Group of Five (G5S).⁶⁷ Mauritania plays a leading role in the G5S, whose headquarters is in Nouakchott. In July 2017, the five countries launched a regional force of 5,000 men and women, referred to as the “G5 Sahel Cross-Border Joint Force,” in Bamako. This joint military force has been endorsed by the African Union and recognized by the UN Security Council by resolution 2359 (21 June 2017), sponsored by France.⁶⁸ The mandate of the force is to combat terrorism, transnational organized crime, and human trafficking in the G5 Sahel area. Its first operation took place in November 2017 with the participation of the armies of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.⁶⁹ The G5S Secretariat, led by Nigeriens, Najim El Hadj Mohamed (2014-2017) and Maman Sambo Sidikou (since February 2018)⁷⁰ have organized a series of colloquiums on the prevention of radicalization and fight against violent extremism in the Sahel. These colloquiums have emphasized the need for a common understanding of

the causes of terrorism and violent extremism, and the importance of promoting common approaches, including the adoption of national laws, strategies, and action plans specifically to target terrorism. The G5S have agreed on a diverse set of needs: a conflict prevention early warning system, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogues, strengthening of good governance, respect for human rights, involvement of local population and communities, mobilization of youths and promotion of gender equality, strengthening of skills and education to facilitate access to employment, effective use of strategic communication and social media, and security sector reform.⁷¹ These are priorities that will steer Mauritania's future responses to terrorism and violent extremism.

Among the “soft” approaches championed by the state was a 2011 deradicalization program, which was designed to foster dialogue between incarcerated youths and moderate imams in the hopes of diminishing the chances of those youths being radicalized.⁷² Law no. 2016-015 adopted in April 2016, to amend and complement Law no. 2010-035 of July 2010, calls for the immediate freezing of funds and assets belonging to individuals and groups related to the financing of terrorism and/or the financing of weapons of mass destruction. The law also grants freezing powers to the directly to Minister of Finance.⁷³

Despite its success thus far in containing Islamism, many researchers believe that Mauritania does not have adequate capacity to preserve and sustain peace indefinitely.⁷⁴ Several reports point to a number of structural and resource inadequacies, as well as the divided nature of society and the prevalence of corruption, as important indicators of future instability.⁷⁵ One issue in particular is the Haratin struggle, which provokes sporadic ethnic and religious tensions. The Haratins make up 40 percent of the population, but 80 percent of those living in abject poverty in Mauritania.⁷⁶ It is therefore likely that the Haratins have both the numbers and the reason to swing the nation toward a more violent path if their expectations and basic human needs are not met. Indeed, as the scholar Anouar Boukhars contends, the Haratin have become more confrontational in their claims and demands.⁷⁷ Scholars also see a potential for the country's upcoming 2019 elections to tilt the nation toward greater instability if appropriate measures are not taken to address existing, politically loaded issues—key among them the looming possibility that the current President, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, may wish to change the constitution in order to extend his term in office,⁷⁸ as some quarters of government are already calling for a constitutional change to give a third term to Abdel Aziz.⁷⁹ Mauritania's fragile democratic processes mean that any such scenario is possible. Notably, the election will also mark the second participation of Tawassoul. Although the party has officially rejected violent Islamism, it may nonetheless tilt in that direction if societal expectations are not well managed ahead of the 2019 vote. Also of importance to security in Mauritania, like in the rest of the Sahelian region, is the issue of drought, which affects food security. Currently, Mauritania is classified to be at crisis level (level 3) by Humanitarian organizations including the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS Net). Should the current drought affecting the country intensify, it will exert added pressure on the government and could lead to a breakdown of order, including incidents of violent extremism.

ENDNOTES

1. See “l’Islamisme en Afrique du Nord IV: Contestation Islamiste en Mauritanie: Menace ou Bouc Émissaire?” International Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report no. 41, May 11, 2005, 4, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/mauritania>.
2. Ulrich Rehstock, “Democracy, Islamicity and Tribalism In Mauritania,” in Thomas Bierschenk, ed., *Islam und Entwicklung in Afrika* (Kö ln: Kö ppe, 2007), 51-65.
3. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, Country Report on Terrorism 2015, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257514.htm>.
4. See Anouar Boukhars, “As Threats Mount, Can Mauritania's Fragile Stability Hold?” World Politics Review, June 16, 2016, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/19084/as-threats-mount-can-mauritania-s-fragile-stability-hold>.

5. See Mauritania Travel Advisory, State Department website: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mauritania-travel-advisory.html> (accessed 11 February 2018).
6. See Mohamed Ben-Madanie, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, Independent, 17 October 2003, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/mokhtar-ould-daddah-37295.html>
7. See Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, “Les mutations paradoxales de l’islamisme en Mauritanie,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* nos. 206-207, February 2012, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-cahiers-d-etudes-africaines-2012-2-page-635.htm>.
8. Salem, “Les mutations paradoxales de l’islamisme en Mauritanie.”
9. Boubacar N’Diaye, “Mauritania, August 2005: Justice and Democracy, or Just Another Coup,” *African Affairs* 105, no. 420, July 2006, 421-441; Boubacar N’Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’-and Abort-A Democracy: Mauritania’s Transition from Military Rule, 2005 to 2008,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no. 1, March 2009, 129-152.
10. Raquel Ojeda-García, *Islamic Groups in Mauritania: Evolution and Analysis*, in Ferran Izquierdo Brichs, John Etherington and Laura Feliu (eds.), *Political Islam in a Time of Revolt*, 2017, p.260.
11. Ojeda-García, *Islamic Groups in Mauritania: Evolution and Analysis*, 261.
12. Ojeda-García, *Islamic Groups in Mauritania: Evolution and Analysis*, 261.
13. For an in-depth discussion on Tawassoul, see, “Mauritanian Islamists: Political Islam beyond the ‘War of Ideas’,” *The Moor next Door*, 13 November 2009, <https://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2009/11/13/mauritanian-islamists-political-islam-beyond-the-war-of-ideas/>.
14. Tawassoul is commonly referred to as a progressive party, which recognizes representative democracy as “the sole path towards political responsibility.” See Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, *The paradoxes of Islamic radicalization in Mauritania*, in George Joffe (ed.), *Islamist radicalization in North Africa: Politics and Process* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 193.
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