Mauritania

Quick Facts

Population: 4,005,475 (July 2020 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 Mauritanians (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): $4.935 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated October 2020)

Introduction

Mauritania has historically avoided the path of radical Islamism. Rather, Islam helped unify Mauritania's Arab and African populations when the country earned its independence in 1960.[1] Nevertheless, dynamics that fostered 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 in recent years. By and large, however, these groups have so far steered clear of using violence to achieve their objectives.

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 centres and inhospitable desert conditions."[2] However, research indicates that Mauritania has produced a significant number of jihadist ideologues and high-ranking terrorist operatives per capita.[3] Many Mauritanians have left home to join global Islamist groups. As a result, while there have been no terrorist attacks in Mauritania since 2011, the U.S. government maintains a standing travel advisory to the country.[4]

Islamist Activity

A series of military coups marked Mauritania's first two decades of independence. In 1978, the country's first post-independence President, Moktar Ould Daddah, was overthrown in a military coup.[5] Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla took control of the country in 1980 and instituted *sharia* law two years later.[6] Haidalla's hold on power was short-lived; Maouiyya Ould Taya took control of the country via another coup in 1984.

While supportive of Islam, the Taya regime was an unequivocal opponent of Islamism. Under Taya, policies typically associated with Islamist governments, such as banning the sale of alcohol, were codified

and adopted. At the same time, however, Islamist activists were pursued and persecuted by authorities. 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.[7]

The regime's unpopular policies – including its repression of freedom of expression, violations of human rights, and endemic corruption – ultimately led to its demise. The Mauritanian military overthrew Taya in 2005 and held democratic elections in 2007. Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, a veteran Mauritanian political figure who had received the endorsement of key social constituencies, was elected president. However, Abadallahi's reign turned out to be short-lived, and he was in turn ousted from power in 2008. That coup's leader, General Mohamed Ould 'Abd al-Aziz (who had also played an influential role in the 2005 coup) was elected president as a civilian in August 2009 following international pressure for a return to democratic rule.[8] He was reelected for another five-year term by over 80 percent of voters in 2014.[9] After serving two terms, Abd al-Aziz complied with Article 28 of the 2006 Constitution and voluntarily stepped down in 2019.[10] The election of Mohamed Cheikh Ghazouani, a former military general and defence minister under al-Aziz, on June 22, 2019, marked the first peaceful transfer of power in Mauritania's post-independence history.11 Since then, it appears as though the Ghazouani administration seeks to continue its predecessor's efforts to counter violent extremism (see "Islamism and the State.")

Scholars have identified three main trends in Islamism in Mauritania. The first relates to the founding of Jama'a Islamiyya (JI) in 1974 in Nouakchott. JI became Mauritania's first Islamist organization, and was similar in nature to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.[12] Second, apolitical preachers advocated non-violence emerged in the 1990s.[13] The third tendency has been the spread of Wahhabbi or Salafist ideas.[14] Some Wahhabbi adherents advocate for *jihad* and the establishment of *sharia* as a form of government. Some scholars have emphasized poverty, a high rate of youth unemployment, racism, the government's heavily militaristic approach, and religious extremism as specific factors that drive this radicalization.[15]

Tawassoul[16]

In Mauritania, the 2011 Arab Spring ushered in 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.[17] The official motto of Tawassoul is: "Our reference is Islam. Our affiliation is with Mauritania. Our choice is democracy."[18]

Tawassoul participated in the 2013 elections for the first time, and won 16 seats in parliament, becoming the second strongest party after the ruling Union for the Republic (UPR) party of president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.[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 regional Islamist parties, 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] Tawassoul helped refocus national debates on issues around Islam and poverty in Mauritania. In both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, Tawassoul fielded Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, former prime minister and ambassador to the United Nations, to represent their party. He came in second and third, respectively.[21]

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]

The leader of the party, Jemil Ould Mansour, has, on a number of occasions, clarified the relationship between the party and Islam. He has disassociated both the party and himself from Salafi theology and stressed the importance of religious freedom while condemning the Salafists' destruction of mausoleums, shrines, and other cultural edifices in 2012. He also supported the deployment peacekeepers in Mali in 2013.

Some observers have commented that Tawassoul is 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 issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) against 2013's "Operation Serval" and other French-led military operations in the region, framing the Malian crisis as part of the global *jihad*.[25]

While violent extremism was not an issue in the June 2019 presidential election, there was tension on social media networks between Arab-Berber and Haratin communities. In a January 2019 rally in the capital city of Nouakchott, President Abd Al-Aziz averred that, "The people who are behind this speech are a minority, but we have to put an end to their toxic behaviour for the sake of the future."[26] The social media dispute was a bitter reminder of Mauritania's delicate ethnic and racial balance, which could be exploited by violent extremist groups.

Salafist and Islamist militant groups

The Sahel is inundated with various Islamist groups, many of which formed as splinters of other, larger ones. It is not exactly known how many are in the region, as some disappear just after their establishment as a result of military crackdowns or dwindling funding. Others merged with or joined other groups, or simply transformed into something else. Those often cited as major groups in the region include al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), AQIM in the Sahara, Ansaroul Islam, Katiba Salaheddine, Jama'at al Nusra al Islam wal Muslimina (JNIM), Ansar-Dine, and the Movement for Unity of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO.)[27]

Between 2018 and 2020, no specific reports emerged about Mauritanians joining extremist groups, though many of them remained active in terror groups in Mali, Libya and most of the Sahel. In April 2020, the U.S. State Department Overseas Security Advisory Council cautioned American against traveling to Mauritania because of crime and terrorism. The report claimed that "[t]here have been numerous cases of Mauritanians self-radicalizing and pledging allegiance to violent extremist organizations," and that "[a]uthorities have arrested and incarcerated those who have done so publicly."[28]

Despite the fact that the country has not experienced a terrorist attack since 2011, scholars still believe that Mauritania contains all the ingredients for violent extremism. In June 2020, a study released by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) observed that Mauritanians represent a disproportionate number of violent extremist ideologues and senior commanders in AQIM, one of the region's strongest violent Islamist actors.[29]

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

AQIM is the modern incarnation of Algeria's Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which was recognized by al-Qaeda as its representative in North Africa back in September 2006. AQIM executed its last major terror attack in Mauritania on December 20, 2011, when Ely Ould Mokhtar, a gendarmerie officer, was kidnapped at Adel Begrou.[30] Mokhtar was released almost a year later.

Whether AQIM still maintains a presence in Mauritania remains a matter of debate. After Algeria, Mauritania has the largest number of nationals who make up the ranks of AQIM leadership and commanders. While the Mauritanian government is quick to dismiss claims about AQIM's presence in the country, researchers such as Geoff Porter of the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point consider Mauritania "a Locus of Passive Jihadi Activity."[31] According to Porter, Mauritania "is an ideological wellspring. It is a source of personnel. And it is a communications channel."[32]

In October 2016, the U.S. government issued a terror alert for Mauritania: "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."[33] AQIM has not yet left a lasting imprint on Mauritanian society, however; analysts believe that the potential for greater local support for such a movement exists

(primarily among a younger generation). That is due to growing disaffection, social media, and reactions to the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and between Israel and the Palestinians.[34]

A controversial report – recovered after the 2011 raid on Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad residence in Pakistan – alleged that al-Qaeda had contemplated a peace deal with the government of Mauritania. In return, AQIM would promise "not to carry out any military activity in Mauritania," initially for a year, with the possibility of renewal; in return, Mauritanian authorities would release all al-Qaeda prisoners, commit not to attack the AQIM, and pay millions of euros ($11 million–$22 million) a year to "prevent the kidnapping of tourists."[35] While there is no previous record of Mauritania negotiating with terrorists, and the government denied any such deal, some observers believe that such a deal was possible.[36] Indeed, at the 2017 annual Dakar (Senegal) Forum on peace and security in Africa, the Mauritanian ambassador to Senegal reportedly stated that his country engaged in a dialogue with sixty-five terrorists detained in Mauritanian prisons.[37] The goal of the negotiations was to convince the terrorists that their path had nothing to do with Islam. In May 2018, AQIM issued a communiqué urging its followers to attack foreigners in countries across the Sahel, including Mauritania.[38] Since that announcement, however, no terror attacks have occurred in Mauritania.

Movement for the Unity of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)

Founded in 2011 as a AQIM splinter group under the leadership of Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, a Mauritanian, MUJAO merged with Mokhtar Belmokhtar's brigade to form al-Mourabitoon in 2013. A number of MUJAO's militants have been arrested and imprisoned in Mauritania and Algeria.[39] Neither MUJAO or al-Mourabitoon has carried out an attack in Mauritania to date.

Islamic State (IS, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS)

In recent years, observers have warned about the increasing vulnerability of Mauritania to IS. Such reports have cited the possible presence of IS cells in the country's interior, particularly in regions such as Awkar and along border areas not frequented by security forces.[40] In October 2014, the Mauritanian government uncovered an Islamic State cell in the mining city of Zouérate. Four men were accused of embracing Salafist ideology and establishing contact with the Islamic State.[41] While one of these men was released two days later, the other three were sentenced to a varying number of years in prison in June 2015.[42] In March 2015, ISIS is alleged to have issued a threat to bomb the Iraqi embassy in Nouakchott.[43] The letter that was sent to the Iraqi embassy did not explain the reason for the threat that did not materialize. In September 2016, Mauritanian authorities arrested more than 20 people believed to be ISIS members planning to attack Nouakchott.[44]

Some recruits to the Islamic State occupy leadership positions in both regional and international networks. For example, in 2014, Algerian security forces apprehended Safiuddin al-Mauritani, a Mauritanian and leader of an ISIS-affiliated group called the Uqba bin Nafi Brigade based in Tunisia, who was later sentenced to 20 years in jail.[45]

Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM)

In March 2017, several Sahel and West African Al Qaeda affiliated Islamist groups, namely, Macina Liberation Front, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, Al-Mourabitoun, and the Al Qaeda in the Sahara Branch (a branch of AQIM) merged to form one umbrella organisation called Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Mulimin (JNIM) under the leadership of Iyad ag Ghali, a Mauritanian. According U.S. sources, between 2017 and November 2019, JNIM claimed responsibility for numerous attacks and kidnappings, killing more than 500 civilians.[46] In an audio message, the JNIM leader threatened to attack Sahel countries (including Mauritania) that were collaborating with France to fight terrorism in the region.[47] Although JNIM has continued to carry out attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso, it has yet to attack Mauritania. With over 2 000 fighters,[48] JNIM poses the biggest security threat in the region, accounting for nearly 1,000 attacks

between 2017 and 2020.[49]

Islamism and Society

Islamism as a political force has remained limited and restricted in Mauritania over the years. Rather, whenever Islam is politically invoked, it more often serves as an appeal for development, unity, and social cohesion. As one report has noted, "Islamist-oriented activity has had various manifestations, ranging from mostly charitable organizations to a loose set of political groups inspired by Wahhabbism, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and several Islamist figures (including the Sudanese activist Hassan al-Turabi)."[50] The successful repression of Islamist political activity by Mauritanian authorities has further weakened attempts to establish a strong Islamist political presence in the country. Nor has Islamist activity, when it has occurred, generated much sympathy for the political concept at large. The AQIM attack near the French embassy in August 2008, for example, was largely condemned by Mauritanians, including *Tawassoul*; the group's spiritual leader deemed the attack "an act of barbarism" and "completely foreign" to Mauritanian Islam.[51]

Thousands of Mauritanians peacefully demonstrated in January 2015 when the French satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo* published a drawn likeness of the prophet Mohammed.[52] By contrast, however, the republication of the cartoon in September 2020 was met with very little protest in Mauritania, though a key member of Tawassoul, Imam Mohamed Hacen Ould Dedow, condemned the decision and called for the termination of diplomatic and trade relations between Mauritania and France.[53]

One observer noted that Mauritanians view AQIM as a vehicle for a hostile foreign ideology.[54] Further, Salafism is widely seen as a fringe movement. Violent Islamism is also frowned upon and as a source of disorder and instability.[55]

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 Islamic parts of Spain.[56] Some scholars have observed that Islam has shaped the imagination, social structures, and part of the political landscape of Mauritania for over a millennium.[57] Mauritania's demographic and cultural heritage is very diverse, reflecting the confluence of the major groups from the South and North of the Sahara.

Mauritania is also one of the world's most impoverished countries, with a GDP purchasing power parity of $17.37 billion (2017 est.) and per capita GDP of U.S. $4,500 (2017 est.).[58] Socio-economic hardships range from limited educational opportunities to unemployment and poor health services. Life expectancy is low, 58 for men and 62 for women.[59] The World Bank's indices for Mauritania between 2018 and 2020 show a marked improvement in the country's economic performance, signalling an economic recovery. According to a June 2020 World Bank report, 2019 saw a significant increase in economic growth, the country's GDP grew from 2.1% in 2018 to 5% in 2019.[60] However, some analysts have argued that this economic growth is unlikely to benefit everyone.[61]

Mauritania's 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 adds to economic woes. Much of the national government's potential – and, really, the success of the entire region – in countering extremist groups depends on food security and drought conditions. According to various humanitarian organizations, including the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS Net), Mauritania's livelihood protection deficits are increasing in rural areas.[62] 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.

The country's inhabitants are divided between the Arab elite and black Africans, many of them referred to as Haratins. The country's largest ethnic group, Haratins suffer from various forms of both official and

unofficial discrimination and occupy the lowest rungs of Mauritanian society. Even worse, slavery is still practiced in Mauritania despite being officially banned in 1981. Because of their socioeconomic caste in what has been called Mauritania's own apartheid system,[63] Haratin peoples are the most common victims of slavery, further exacerbating existing tensions between them and Arab elites.[64] This dynamic stokes conflict between abolitionists and those who still believe some aspects of the practice should continue.[65] Such conflict could exacerbate insecurity, which could be exploited by groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda.

Even with its rich natural resources,[66] Mauritania is one of the world's most impoverished countries. Further, Mauritania's youths have escaped recent undercurrents of violent Islamism spread by ISIS and al-Qaeda, accentuated by widespread poverty, unemployment, and aggressive propaganda campaigns on social media.

Mauritania's divided and belligerent military is also a vehicle for youth radicalization while it remains central to controlling political and economic activities in Mauritanian society.[67] This means that the state's responses to social, economic and political issues are primarily militaristic in focus, which frustrates disaffected youths join violent nonstate groups terrorist group.

Mauritania's vulnerability is further complicated by transnational organized crime. The country's strategic location offers an important transit point for the trafficking of goods and people. 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 fuelling the rise of al-Qaeda."[68]

Despite the absence of any solid evidence, claims persist that ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram have training camps in Mauritania. Some sources have gone so far as to state 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."[69]

ISIS and al-Qaeda pose as alternatives to corrupt and poorly governed secular governments. The ISIS model, particularly the group's declaration of an Islamic caliphate in 2014, which it encouraged all Muslim youths to be a part of, attracted a record number of 40,000 foreign fighters.[70] Analysts believe that IS is now 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

Mauritania's first major response to the global growth of Islamism was the adoption of counterterrorism Law No. 2005/047 of 2005, which was subsequently repealed and replaced by Law No. 2010/035 of 2010. The 2010 update provided a definition of terrorism and outlined the parameters for the fight against it in Mauritania (extradition, mutual legal assistance and international cooperation), as well as creating a number of specialized institutions (including a special Federal Police).[71] A second law adopted in 2005 was Law No. 2005/048, dealing with money laundering and the financing of terrorism. Article 2 of the law defined money laundering any transfer and manipulation of any funds or assets originating from criminal sources, while Article 3 broadly updates the definition of financing terrorism to include any support or management of assets – financial or otherwise – with the intention of committing a terrorist act.[72]

Two AQIM attacks in 2009 –the murder of an American aid worker, and a subsequent suicide attack near the French embassy in the country's capital – caused Mauritania to intensify its security measures. The government sought 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.[73] Lawyers for the suspects on trial in 2010 stated that their clients refused to confess to crimes that the government had coerced through torture.[74]

The 2012 counterterror strategy marked a switch from a "softer" approach to a more proactive one; it provided the Mauritanian government with an operational framework to eliminate terrorism, with the 2005 law on money laundering and financing of terrorism as its basis.[75] The strategy prioritizes intelligence gathering and defines roles for each of the country's security forces, including the military.

Significantly, much of the effort has focused on border security. The Mauritanian government created fifty functional border control posts that cover over 5,800 km of territory, ten of which are situated at the busiest border access areas and are equipped with biometric information collectors. Mauritania has also taken a wide range of initiatives to promote international cooperation, including deploying troops in Mali, as well as participation in the Nouakchott process[76] and in the Sahel Group of Five (G5S).[77] The G5S Secretariat has organized a series of colloquiums on the prevention of radicalization and fight against violent extremism in the Sahel, emphasizing the need for a common understanding of the causes of terrorism and violent extremism, and the importance of promoting common approaches, national, laws, strategies, and action plans.[78]

Mauritania has used international and regional forums to focus on peace and security issues, particularly those relating to violent extremism. Within the framework of the African Union (AU), Mauritania spearheaded the creation of what would become the Nouakchott process – a platform for sharing information and intelligence among Sahel countries. In 2018, Mauritania hosted the 31st AU summit, which strengthened regional cooperation in the fight against violent extremism.

Among the "soft" approaches championed by the Mauritanian government was a 2011 deradicalization program designed to foster dialogue between incarcerated youths and moderate *imams*.[79] Law no. 2016–015 adopted in April 2016 to amend and complement Law no. 2010–035 of July 2010, called for the immediate freezing of funds and assets belonging to terror financiers. The law also grants the Minister of Finance the power to freeze financial assets at their discretion.[80]

However, despite these measures, many researchers believe that Mauritania still does not have adequate capacity to preserve and sustain peace indefinitely.[81] 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 potential future instability.[82] One issue in particular is the Haratin struggle, which provokes sporadic ethnic and religious tensions. Haratins make up 40 percent of the population, but 80 percent of those living in abject poverty in Mauritania.[83] As the scholar Anouar Boukhars points out, the Haratin people have become more assertive in their claims and demands, potentially threatening future stability.[84]

Prior to the country's 2019 presidential elections, al-Aziz proposed national changes that included the dissolution of the supreme court, the abolition of the Senate, and a modification of the country's flag. In justifying the controversial reforms, the president argued that the Senate is "useless and too costly" for the country and that scrapping it will enhance governance.[85] Despite their overwhelming approval from voters, the reforms were also met with serious opposition.[86] The "no coalition" was drawn from broad social and political currents across the country, including major opposition parties, Islamists, and anti-slavery activists, who boycotted the referendum and called for mass protests.[87] The government banned rallies and protests, which resulted in violent clashes between opponents of the reforms and law enforcement officials. On July 15, 2017, several thousands of people took to the streets to protest against the reforms, or what some denounced as a "coup d'etat against the constitution."[88]

Abd Al-Aziz deliberately allowed for controversy to percolate over his ambition to run for a third term before ultimately deciding against it. Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, a former Minister of Defense and current head of the Union our la Republique (UPR) party, won the 2019 presidential election with 52 percent of the vote; these results were rejected by opposition parties, who complained of "multiple voting

and many other irregularities"[89] and threatened to organise 'protest demonstrations.'[90] The allegations of fraud and other electoral malpractice were overturned by the Constitutional Council, which upheld the results on the basis of "insufficient proofs."[91] Indeed, following the announcement of the results, there were public demonstrations that resulted in the arrest of a hundred foreigners.[92]

The new president has continued to prioritize the fight against terrorism and has sought to consolidate a regional response. Since Ghazouani took power, Mauritania has hosted key regional counter-terrorism events and conferences, attended by *ulemas* from all over the world.[93] His administration has also continued military reforms that began under al-Aziz, while Ghazouani was the country's defense minister. These include expansion of the national defense budget (which quadrupled between 2008 and 2018), as well as an overhaul of facilities, uniforms, and pay increases for soldiers – all in an effort to improve morale. The country's military acquisitions have also been reoriented to support the country's counter-terror apparatus and curtail trafficking networks.[94] The military's Nomad Group (GN) – units that travel on the back of camels in the country's most remote locations – give the central government the opportunity to build social infrastructure in the isolated communities typically targeted by extremist groups for recruitment.[95]

Ghazouani is also utilizing regional mechanisms like the G5 Sahel to strengthen the fight against violent extremism. In 2018 Mauritania hosted the inaugural class of the G5 Sahel Defense Academy, which will train mid-career officers in "organizing operations and carrying out combat missions."[96] In February 2020, Ghazouani assumed the mantle of president of G5 Sahel.[97] Under Ghazouani's leadership, in September 2020, the G5 renewed commitments to the European Union and the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), both of which are involved in security campaigns in the Sahel.[98] To date, Mauritania has committed 650 troops and armed police officers to the effort.[99]

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, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/mauritania.
2. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, 2016, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257514.htm.
3. 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
4. See U.S. Department of State, "Mauritania Travel Advisory," n.d., https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mauritania-travel-advisory.html.
5. See Mohamed Ben-Madanie, "Mokhtar Ould Daddah," *Independent* (London), October 17, 2003, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/mokhtar-ould-daddah-37295.html.
6. 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.html.
7. Ibid.
8. 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 'Mid-wife'-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.
9. "Mauritanian President Abdel Aziz easily re-elected in boycotted vote," Reuters, June 22, 2014, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mauritania-election/mauritanian-president-abdel-aziz-re-elected-with-82-percent-idUKKBN0EX14F20140622
10. The President first aired his intention not to run for a third term in 2016, but few took him at his word. "President to step down in 2019," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, October 25, 2016,

http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1684740552&Country=Mauritania&topic=Politics&subtopic=Forecast&subsubtopic=Political+stability; See Article 28 of la Constitution de la Republique Islamique de Mauritanie (avec les projets d'amendaments soumis au Référendum du 25 juin 2006).

11. "Mauritania gets new president in first peaceful transition of power," *Gulf Times*, August 1, 2019, https://www.gulf-times.com/story/638035/Mauritania-gets-new-president-in-first-peaceful-transition-of-power
12. 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* (Palgrave, 2017), 260.
13. Ibid., 261.
14. Ibidem.
15. See, for example, Asako Okai and Ulrika Modeer, "Une nouvelle approche pour prévenir l'extrémisme violent," UNDP, April 25, 2019, https://www.undp.org/content/undp/fr/home/blog/2019/new-approaches-to-preventing-violent-extremism.html.
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