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Control and Contain: Mauritania's Clerics and the Strategy Against Violent Extremism

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Introduction

In early May 2018, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) issued a communiqué urging its followers to attack foreigners in countries across the Sahel, including Mauritania.¹ Nearly a year later, jihadists have not made good on this threat in Mauritania, underscoring how far the country has come from the wave of attacks it faced from 2005 to 2011.²

Since this violent period, Mauritania has proven remarkably resilient against jihadism, despite the presence of factors that breed extremism: deep social cleavages, corruption, authoritarianism, mounting economic despair, and the presence of nearby jihadi safe havens and foreign battlefields, most recently in Mali. According to government sources, Mauritania has weathered the storm partly due to an adroit mix of dialogue and rehabilitation with some imprisoned jihadists and harsh judicial punishment for others, along with greater surveillance and control over mosques and Islamic schools. The latter seems particularly important in the official narrative, according to which Mauritania's strong historical tradition of Islamic scholarship and learning serves to inoculate would-be radicals from the misguided ideas of jihadism. But this narrative obscures the deeper socioeconomic roots of radicalization.

Drawing from fieldwork in Mauritania and interviews with officials, clerics, and ex-jihadists, this paper surveys these roots of radicalization and assesses the durability of the regime's response, focusing in particular on the co-option of outspoken Salafi clerics with ties to the jihadists. Though the violent jihadi trend is not dominant among its Islamists, Mauritania has long produced a significant number of jihadists in regional militant groups, especially relative to its small population size. Mauritians continue to fight in jihadi organizations in the Sahel (particularly in Mali) and some have filled high-ranking positions, most notably in al-Qaeda—often as spiritual and legal figures.³ Meanwhile, formerly imprisoned Mauritanian Salafi scholars are given latitude to preach and speak on political matters—sometimes skirting the boundaries of militancy—provided they do not directly threaten the government. The government also allows its media outlets to publish statements by Saharan and Sahelian jihadi groups. Jihadi violence in Mauritania is thus circumscribed by firm state control and conventional military counterterrorism, leavened with tactical permissiveness toward jihadi media and “soft” measures such as clerical intercession with imprisoned jihadists.

The government has put forward this “Mauritanian model” of rehabilitation, societal resilience, and clerical co-option as a template that can be replicated elsewhere, hosting conferences to promote this idea. U.S. officials have sometimes echoed this line, praising Mauritania as an exemplar of “countering violent extremism.”⁴ But such methods of dealing with violent jihadism—and Salafism writ large—are not necessarily replicable; rather, they are the products of calculated ambiguity and a political gamble, and are therefore unreliable.

The government’s triumphalist narrative is ultimately built on a shaky foundation, especially given Mauritania’s bleak socioeconomic picture, ongoing corruption, and existing societal tensions—afflictions that violent extremists have exploited in the past.

The Sociopolitical and Religious Landscape

A vast desert country with a small population of just over 4 million, Mauritania is beset by a dizzying array of socioeconomic problems and by an authoritarianism that have made it vulnerable to instability and jihadi violence. Literacy hovers at just above 50 percent.⁵ Despite the presence of abundant resources—iron ore, natural gas, and fish stocks, to list a few—it currently ranks 159 out of 189 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index.⁶ Politically, Mauritania has long experienced repressive conditions, persecution of journalists and activists, and military interference. Freedom House describes the country as “not free” and ranks it near the bottom on scores of civil and political rights.⁷ International observers and domestic critics see the country’s presidential elections—the latest of which is due this year—as little more than a facade to perpetuate the rule of a narrow clique of military and commercial elites. Corruption among these elites is endemic; Transparency International ranks Mauritania 144 out of 180 countries for perceptions of public sector corruption.⁸

Mauritania is also defined by strict ethno-linguistic and racial stratification. The main divide, which affects political and economic life, is between an elite, former slave-owning caste, the *bidane*—Arab-Berbers, also known as “white moors”—and the *haratine*—former slaves and their descendants (known as “black moors”), who only gained their freedom with the official abolition of slavery in 1981. Slavery is an issue and a history that remains deeply contentious in Mauritania today, with *haratine* activists and outside rights organizations charging that its practice still persists.⁹ The *bidane* and *haratine* comprise 70 percent of the population; the remaining 30 percent consist of Afro-Mauritanian ethnicities hailing from the south.¹⁰ Relations among these groups are fraught due to disparities in social class and to ethno-linguistic tensions, as well as long-standing bitterness due to a purge of black military officers in 1987, intercommunal violence on both sides of the border with Senegal in 1989, and subsequent state crackdowns targeting black Mauritians. Successive governments led by serving or former military officers have only worsened the cleavages by concentrating wealth among business networks of elite *bidane*, perpetuating corruption, and keeping the education system decrepit.¹¹

At its core, Mauritania’s domestic jihadi violence can be seen as a reaction against worsening domestic factors: demographic fissures, socioeconomic misery, corruption, and the policies of

successive military regimes that have closed the political space for Islamist currents and free expression. Ideologically, however, militant jihadism has drawn on long-standing Islamic traditions in the country,¹² and especially aspects of the literalist, conservative variant known as Salafism. While Salafism in Mauritania stretches back centuries, its modern manifestation received a boost from the influx of Saudi and Gulf funding beginning in the 1960s as well as the increased travel of students to the Gulf, a process that had actually begun decades earlier during the colonial era.¹³ Yet these influences have been molded by Mauritania's local sociopolitical context and endogenous Islamic practices.¹⁴ In particular, Salafism and its militant expression has been shaped and to an extent tempered by Mauritania's heritage of Islamic learning and scholarship. Religious knowledge has historically been accorded a high social status.¹⁵ Moreover, the country has a strong tradition of Maliki jurisprudence, stemming back to the period of the Al Murabit (Almoravid), a Berber dynasty that ruled the western Maghreb and Andalusia in the eleventh century.¹⁶ Throughout the centuries, Maliki juridical traditions were perpetuated by Mauritania's *zwaya* caste, a *bidane* tribal network described by one Mauritanian scholar as an "occupational group" with premodern, Berber roots that sees itself as the guarantor of religious and mystical knowledge.¹⁷

But perhaps the most unique and influential religious institutions in contemporary Mauritania—with important implications for its counterterrorism strategy—are the Islamic schools known as *mahadir* (singular *mahdara*), which are often described in the press as "desert seminaries."¹⁸ Originating in the nomadism of the desert, and reportedly dating back to the time of the Al Murabit dynasty, they provide free Islamic instruction to males and females, starting at age six or seven and continuing through their twenties.¹⁹ The instruction includes the Quran, the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), as well as Arabic grammar, logic, arithmetic, rhetoric, and literature.²⁰

Understudied and the subject of many ill-founded assumptions, the *mahadir* also attracted foreign students from across the Islamic world, some of whom were drawn by an idealized vision of desert austerity that comported well with their picture of Islam during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.²¹ The *mahadir* thus served as important forum for the commingling of different Islamic currents, including figures that would become high-ranking members in al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups, many of them from Algeria and Libya.²² This prompted a heavy government effort starting in 2005 to regulate and oversee the *mahadir*, including the registration and tracking of students and vetting of curricula—what one former minister of Islamic affairs called "control and containment."²³

The Rise of Islamist Dissent

The modern jihadi challenge in Mauritania developed against this backdrop of Islamic tradition and more modern demographic, economic, and political changes, including growing authoritarianism and the rise of political Islam. In the 1970s, severe drought conditions in rural areas resulted in rapid urbanization. The dislocation created by this shift created new opportunities for empowering ideologies to challenge entrenched hierarchies, especially among the new arrivals to urban areas who often lacked social capital.

Initially, leftist groups had some success among these uprooted populations, particularly in the capital, but by the late 1970s Islamist movements had started to supplant them.²⁴ The rise of the latter was facilitated by an influx of Gulf funding of mosques, charities, and institutes starting in the late 1960s, as well as a concerted Arabization and Islamization program by the country's successive military rulers.²⁵ By the mid-1980s several Islamist movements had taken root in the country, the strongest of which were the Muslim Brotherhood, the Tablighi Jama'at, and the Salafists, who became increasingly active in politics and nonviolent activism, particularly against corruption.²⁶ But very quickly these movements ran up against the state.

Mauritania's rulers, many of them either military officers or former ones, have approached Islamists with a mix of co-option, regulation, and repression to shore up their sagging legitimacy ever since the establishment of the country as an Islamic Republic in 1960.²⁷ The reign of Colonel Maaouya Ould Taya is particularly important here, especially in the context of jihadi violence. From 1984 (when he seized power in a coup) until 2005, his rule was marked by seesaw relations with Islamists and Salafists, with a cycle of endorsement, arrests, and pardons, which may have contributed to further radicalization. Under pressure from the international community to democratize, Taya announced the implementation of a multiparty electoral system in 1991. But the opening proved illusory. As Islamists and in particular Salafists became increasingly active, more restrictions followed.²⁸

In 1991, Taya tightened the state's control over clerics with the creation, as part of the constitution, of a religious oversight body called the High Islamic Council.²⁹ In 1992, he refused to recognize the efforts of Islamists to form a political party on the grounds that the country was already an Islamic republic.³⁰ In 1994, after Mauritania's first municipal elections, in which Islamists and other oppositionists won 17 of 208 districts, the government took even harsher measures, arresting scores and banning several Islamic associations and clubs.³¹ A popular cleric named Mohamed Ould Sidi Yahya was briefly placed under house arrest while other clerics endured far worse, including deportation, imprisonment, alleged torture, and release only after confessions on state television.³²

Yet the Islamists were not cowed; many simply shifted to educational and charitable activities, or shifted their organizations underground.³³ Others fled abroad only to return with an even stronger resolve against the government.³⁴ And a minority resorted to violence.³⁵

The Jihadi Challenge

The Salafi jihadi challenge that started under the Taya regime and rattled Mauritania from 2005 to 2011 was sparked by the country's worsening domestic situation and fueled by regional developments. But it also traced its lineage back to a confluence of local and global events decades prior. In the 1980s, young Mauritians went to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, connecting to global jihadi networks in the process; several of them would ascend to the upper ranks of al-Qaeda. This generation can be considered the progenitors of the most recent cohort of jihadists and its most famous representative is Mahfouz Ould al-Walid, hereafter referred to by his *nom de guerre*, Abu Hafs al-Mauritani.³⁶ His motivations and his journey in and out of jihad carry lessons for understanding the trajectories of more contemporary jihadists.

Born in southwest Mauritania into the Idab-Lihsen, a *zwaya* tribe famous for its religious scholarship, al-Mauritani received a traditional *mahdara* education and graduated from the Saudi-funded Advanced Institute for Islamic Studies and Research in Nouakchott.³⁷ Renowned as a poet, he traveled to Sudan and Afghanistan where he became a judicial and religious adviser to Osama bin Laden before breaking with al-Qaeda before the 2001 attacks on the United States. The United States suspected al-Mauritani of some type of involvement in planning the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and on the USS *Cole* in Yemen in 2000—an accusation that he denies.³⁸ After a period of detention in Iran, he returned to Mauritania in 2012 where he was imprisoned and then released.³⁹

The turn of the millennium saw a new surge of jihadi mobilization. Just as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had mobilized al-Mauritani and others before, young Mauritians were now incensed by the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the suffering of Muslims in Palestine and Chechnya. Those who were unable to travel and fight in these struggles turned their rage on the regime. At the same time, new jihadi battlefields opened in the Sahel and Sahara. The spillover of Algeria's civil war spawned the creation of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, GSPC), which was later rebranded as AQIM.⁴⁰ The Taya regime's association with the Western-led war on terror after September 11 provided powerful fodder for militants to mobilize against it. Commenting on this dynamic, one Salafi cleric formerly connected to the jihadists spoke bitterly about the regime's counterterror "marketplace," arguing that it actually increased the radicalism it sought to diminish. "The person who fights terrorism creates terrorism," he noted.⁴¹

The latter phase of Taya's rule provided the spark for attacks by jihadists. In April 2003, he undertook the most severe crackdown since 1994, detaining thirty-five Muslim clerics, judges, and other figures.⁴² Among them was Mohamed El Hacem Ould Dedew, an immensely popular cleric, who had attracted a following among Mauritanian youth since the turn of the millennium, partly through his criticism of the country's foreign policy, such as its alignment with American counterterrorism and its burgeoning ties with Israel.⁴³

Mosques, schools, and institutes outside of state control were shuttered and the minister for Islamic affairs at the time famously threatened to "turn the mosques into bakeries"—a crude boast that would become a lightning rod for jihadists who accused the Taya regime of heresy and hypocrisy.⁴⁴ In the years that followed, coup attempts (in June 2003 and August 2004) gave further pretext for the government to go after Islamists, even though there is no evidence they were connected.⁴⁵ The alleged torture of those detained was cited later by young jihadists as part of the motivation for the wave of violence that followed.⁴⁶

That wave started in June 2005 when over 150 GSPC fighters stormed a military base in the country's northeast, killing fifteen Mauritanian soldiers. In a statement, the GSPC decried the Mauritanian regime's association with the U.S.-led war on terror and stated that the attack was "to avenge our brothers imprisoned by the miscreant regime in Nouakchott."⁴⁷ Over the next six years, Mauritania was rattled by fourteen attacks on its soil, conducted by Mauritanian GSPC and AQIM cells, as well as cross-border attacks by those same groups operating out of northern Mali. The terrorists struck foreign targets—embassies, aid workers, and tourists—as well as the regime's security forces.⁴⁸ The scale and ferocity of the violence was unprecedented in the country, prompting a flurry of introspection and reflection among local and foreign observers.

Who Are the Jihadists?

Profiles of Mauritanian jihadists—imprisoned suspects as well as those confirmed killed at home and abroad—come from government sources and must necessarily be treated with caution. Still, ethnic and socioeconomic patterns can be discerned. According to one widely cited case, out of seventy arrested persons (included those accused of violence and their supporters), *bidane* accounted for nearly 75 percent while *haratine* and Afro-Mauritanians made up 17 percent and 9 percent respectively.⁴⁹ Economically, the majority of them were from middle- or lower-income backgrounds, and most were under the age of thirty.⁵⁰ Other common experiences seemed to link their lives: underemployment and delinquency, service or attempted service in the army, followed by a conversion to Salafism in a mosque and then recruitment and training for jihad, usually in northern Mali, Algeria, or, less frequently, remote parts of Mauritania.⁵¹ Many passed through a *mahdara*, though, as mentioned above, officials and scholars deny that this was the direct source of radicalization or recruitment.⁵² Even so, the presence of jihadists from Libya, Algeria, and Mali in

these schools spurred a concerted government effort to monitor foreign attendance starting in 2005.⁵³

Another data set provided by a Mauritanian scholar connected to the rehabilitation effort comprises twenty-one deceased Mauritanian jihadists, four of whom died in the country and the rest outside it. Here too the vast majority of them were young, usually between seventeen and twenty-one years old, and overwhelmingly *bidane* (only four were *haratine*).⁵⁴ One of them, a twenty-two year old member of the *haratine* named Abu Ubayda al-Basri, who attacked the French embassy in 2009 in Mauritania's first suicide bombing, seems to have embodied many of the common traits among jihadists, especially the alienation born of urbanization.⁵⁵ Having moved to Nouakchott from the desert town of Dar El-Barka, his working-class parents raised him in the hardscrabble neighborhood of Basra. He was the fourth of eight children and his upbringing was not especially pious, according to his mother. Though he avoided petty criminality, his early life was marked by successive failures: two failed attempts at his baccalaureate and a rejection from the gendarmerie in 2008.⁵⁶ That same year, he left home, apparently to attend a jihadi training camp in Algeria or northern Mali, based on a subsequent video released by AQIM.⁵⁷

The story of al-Basri's underachievement and the troubled family lives and criminality of other suspects have given officials a useful diagnosis of the root causes of jihadism. They often add that jihadi violence was enabled by a faulty or "incorrect" understanding of Islamic texts.⁵⁸ To be sure, these psychological, socioeconomic, and educational dimensions exist. But what is clear from the pronouncements of several prominent jihadists is that their use of violence is also politically motivated and directed against real and well-articulated grievances, such as Mauritania's relations with the West, authoritarianism, torture, and corruption.

Nowhere is this political dimension more apparent than in the worldview of a pivotal cell leader in Mauritania's AQIM network, Khadim Ould Semane. Born in 1974, Semane worked as a used-car dealer and studied briefly at a Sufi school in Senegal before drifting back to Nouakchott. He reportedly led a bohemian lifestyle that included frequenting nightclubs before his "awakening" and attendance at Salafi mosques. Angered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he went to northern Mali and, at some point, was reportedly directed by the AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar to set up clandestine cells in Mauritania.⁵⁹ Swept up in Taya's arrests of jihadists in 2005, Ould Semane escaped from prison in 2006 only to be captured again in 2008.⁶⁰ In a 2006 interview, he listed his motivations, which included the corrupting threat of foreign influence on the oneness of God (*tawhid*), the pervasive role of U.S. and Israeli intelligence, the need to liberate Muslim lands from unbelievers, and especially the torture of Mauritanian clerics.⁶¹ Discrimination by the regime toward citizens of the country's south also featured heavily in these accusations of torture.⁶² (Ironically, many of the clerics cited by Ould Semane were later deployed against him during a government-sponsored program of re-indoctrination and rehabilitation.)

The Government's Response: Blending Crackdown and Dialogue

Mauritania's government confronted the jihadi challenge through a number of "hard" counterterrorism measures that included arrests, raids, the creation of new military and intelligence capabilities, strengthened border control, and increased cooperation with both the United States and regional neighbors.⁶³

But it also took the fight into the realm of theology and doctrine to dissuade imprisoned jihadists (a vague and broad category that included those who committed violent acts, supported them, or sympathized with them) of the legitimacy of violence against the state.⁶⁴ In pursuing this "soft" counterterrorism approach, the state mobilized its religious bureaucracy into lengthy sessions of dialogue, debate, and re-indoctrination with the jihadists combined with programs to help them reintegrate into society through the intercession of family members and jobs training.⁶⁵

The central figure enlisted by the regime was the popular cleric Mohamed El Hacen Ould Dedew. His overtures had a particular effect on Ould Semane, who had attended Dedew's mosque and had reportedly served as his bodyguard.⁶⁶ But more important was an ideological affinity. Dedew's criticism of the government, especially its corruption and its alignment with the West in the war on terror, paralleled the grievances of Ould Semane and other jihadists.⁶⁷ His repeated incarceration added to his credibility.

In 2009, Dedew, in conjunction with other Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Tawassoul party, reportedly proposed the government's initiative to the prisoners, who by this time numbered roughly seventy.⁶⁸ What followed at first were exchanges in the local press before face-to-face dialogue took place in prison in January 2010. Besides Dedew, a broad swath of clerics participated over successive rounds, including pro-government figures such as Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, the imam of the Grand Mosque in Nouakchott, and Hamdan Ould al-Tah, the secretary general of the League of Mauritanian Ulama.⁶⁹

So did clerical figures with closer connections to the jihadists: Abu Hafs al-Mauritani and Ahmed Mazid Ould Abdel Haq, an important Salafi scholar with jihadi leanings. A student of the venerated Salafi cleric Buddah Ould al-Busayri, Ould Abdel Haq taught at the Advanced Institute for Islamic Studies and Research where one of his students was al-Mauritani. Like al-Mauritani, Ould Abdel Haq was drawn to bin Laden; in the late 1990s he went to Khartoum where he tutored bin Laden's sons in Arabic until the al-Qaeda leader fled to Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁷⁰ He was imprisoned by the regime from 2005 until 2007 on the basis of collaboration with AQIM. Ould Abdel Haq reportedly attributes his delayed release, after other Islamists had been freed, to the regime's desire to use Salafi prisoners as a form of barter with the West.⁷¹

As the government's first dialogue efforts with the jihadists started in 2010, Ould Abdel Haq criticized the initial composition of the clerical committees as too broad in outlook, since they comprised Sufis, Malikis, Muslim Brotherhood adherents, and Salafists. But more importantly, he argued, they included former government officials who were notorious for their crackdown on Islamists.⁷² After a presidential pardon in 2010 when thirty-five prisoners were released, Ould Abdel Haq and others successfully advocated in 2012 a different approach for the hardcore detainees: a three-person committee comprised of himself, Dedew, and another cleric who was a presidential counselor and also trusted by the detainees.⁷³

In the sessions that followed over the next seventeen days, Ould Abdel Haq and others deployed a variety of approaches in their dialogue with the jihadists. They started with a recognition that, even in the latter stages of the dialogue, those who were imprisoned had not necessarily committed violent acts. Among the central ideas deployed by the cleric in the dialogue was the Islamic scriptural precedent of “security” or “a guarantee” (*al-‘aman*) for foreign and non-Islamic guests inside Mauritania—categorized as “protected persons” (*al-musta‘min*). “If an infidel fights us kill him,” he said he told the detainees, “if he enters the country peacefully with a visa you can’t kill him.”⁷⁴ In addition, Ould Abdel Haq told them it was lawful to call for *sharia* in the country but not to use violence to do so. To bolster these arguments, he not only drew from the Quran and *hadith* but also more contemporary thinkers, some of them former jihadi ideologues. Among the latter, he cited the towering Syrian ideologue Abd-al Mun’im Mustafa Halima (also known as Abu Basir al-Tartusi) whose condemnation of al-Qaeda’s suicide bombings in London marked a major salvo in jihadi juridical debates about killing civilians.⁷⁵ Specifically, al-Tartusi deployed the concept of a “covenant” (*‘abd*) of security between Muslims residing in non-Muslim countries and non-Muslims residing in Muslim states.⁷⁶

These themes were repeated by another respected Salafi cleric who joined latter rounds of dialogue following his release from prison. In an interview in early 2018, he acknowledged the jihadists’ frustration at corruption and their desire to be ruled by Islamic law. “Muslims want to be governed by their religion; this is not extremism,” he said.⁷⁷ Despite this, he told the imprisoned jihadists that it was impermissible to use force to demand Islamic law and that the government, for all of its imperfections, presented the opportunity to call for Islamic law.⁷⁸

Were the dialogues successful? When thirty-five prisoners were amnestied in 2010, government architects of the program and supportive clerics answered a resounding yes.⁷⁹ The very prospect of dialogue split the prisoners into two groups, one that welcomed the intercession and another, more hostile and recalcitrant group led by Ould Semane.⁸⁰ Semane was especially defiant; in one of the sessions he wore a white T-shirt upon which he had drawn a grenade, an assault rifle, and the words “al-Qaeda.”⁸¹ He wrote letters to Dedew and Ould Abdel Haq accusing them of betraying the Salafi

creed and marshaled an array of clerics—mostly from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Jordan—to refute their arguments for moderation and peaceful activism.⁸²

Beyond some of the jihadists' obstinacy, several other caveats apply to the Mauritanian model of dialogue. First, the regime was circumspect from the beginning about those it considered redeemable. The criteria for choosing those to be released was often opaque, at least according to the dialogue's clerical participants. At the conclusion of their initial sessions, Dedew and his clerics recommended freeing those who had not participated in violence and lighter sentences for the rest. He was reportedly shocked when lengthy prison terms and death sentences were handed down instead.⁸³ Though the sentences have not been carried out as of this writing, they nevertheless show that the "soft" approach was always accompanied by punitive measures including incarceration and, reportedly, torture.⁸⁴

Second, the reintegration of ex-prisoners has reportedly been uneven. According to local media, the government provided micro-funds to each of the pardoned detainees to start their own income-producing projects such as the selling of phone credit and buying, fixing, and selling cars.⁸⁵ Yet, according to a released prisoner and to a cleric who participated in the dialogue and maintains contact with former prisoners, the government has not kept its promises of providing sustainable jobs for the young men.⁸⁶ Among those still imprisoned, rights activists have alleged that the government is denying them access to census documentation, which effectively cuts off their children's access to certain schooling and overseas medical care.⁸⁷ Echoing this, in an extensive interview in 2015, the cleric Ould Abdel Haq said that parts of the prison dialogue had failed, listing a lack of follow-up by the government as one of several deficiencies. Even so, he acknowledged that the endeavor had helped stem recruitment into the jihadists' ranks.⁸⁸

For nearly a decade, Mauritania has not had a major terrorist attack on its soil—a remarkable turnaround, given the spate of violence that shook the country from 2005 to 2011. But questions remain about the durability of the peace, as well as its price. Most famously, a document dated March 2010 that was recovered from Osama bin Laden's compound during the 2011 raid by U.S. Special Operations Forces hints at a quid pro quo deal between AQIM and the Mauritanian government. In return for the freeing of its imprisoned members and paying a fee to militants, AQIM would agree to cease attacks on Mauritanian soil.⁸⁹ Feeding into this suspicion was the Mauritanian government's release in 2015 of Sidi Mohamed Ould Mohamed Ould Boumama, a former spokesperson for a branch of AQIM in Mali called Ansar Dine, which baffled many observers.⁹⁰ Yet the Mauritanian government and figures close to al-Qaeda have denied any agreement. And at any rate, many of hardline AQIM prisoners, like Ould Semane, have not been released.⁹¹

What seems more likely is that the government has pursued a policy of calculated ambiguity in its foreign and domestic policy that serves as a pressure release and insulates itself from jihadi critiques. A key example of this approach occurred during the 2013 French-led military intervention in northern Mali against a coalition of jihadists and Tuareg separatists. Dubbed Operation Serval, the campaign proved to be a major source of societal debate and clerical opposition in Mauritania.⁹² As it unfolded, thirty-nine Mauritanian clerics issued a fatwa condemning the intervention as a neocolonialist campaign and exhorting citizens—but not the government directly—to stand in solidarity with their fellow Muslims in Mali. Beyond this statement, several voices added to the chorus of condemnation, including the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated Tawassoul party and the cleric Dedew.⁹³

Though it had intervened in Mali in 2010 and 2011 to pursue AQIM, the Mauritanian government did not elect to join Operation Serval in 2013. Instead, it focused on fortifying the 2,237-kilometer-long border with Mali, a policy of defensive containment akin to that pursued by Algeria.⁹⁴ Whether or not this was tied to domestic pressure from the clerics is unclear; at the very least, it was one factor of many that influenced the government’s calculus. And the government’s resulting reticence on Mali cannot be ruled out as one of the reasons for the lack of AQIM attacks on Mauritanian soil. In an interview last year, an influential Mauritanian cleric close to the jihadists cited this as one of the reasons. “The Mauritians didn’t attack Mali,” he said, “but Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso did, so they got attacked.”⁹⁵ In addition, the draw of Mali as a battlefield diverted youths who might otherwise direct their ire against the regime—though many of them were reportedly drawn to Mali by cross-border tribal ties as much as by religious ideology.⁹⁶

Aside from this foreign policy ambivalence, the Mauritanian government has allowed the country’s media organizations to serve as conduits for jihadi messaging. These outlets have provided platforms for regional jihadi groups to post statements and communiqués, while at the same time offering exclusive reportage and insights that are valuable for counterterrorism researchers.⁹⁷ Much of this may reflect pure expediency and opportunism on the part of Sahelian jihadi organizations: some of their spokespersons are Mauritanian. And the news agencies themselves put forward this access as proof of their independence and their diligence in reporting jihadism.⁹⁸ Even so, the permissiveness suggests that some degree of buy-in from the Mauritanian government is probably also at play.

The government has created space for some outspoken clerics to continue speaking and preaching, provided they do not cross certain redlines such as calling for violence against it. For example, the cleric Mohamed Salem Ould Mohamed Lemine, also known al-Majlissi,⁹⁹ has been able to keep expounding his hardline views on democracy, specifically U.S. efforts to subvert Islam through projects such as “Democratic Islam,”¹⁰⁰ and his critique of neocolonialism.¹⁰¹ He has also criticized the pro-government imam of Nouakchott’s Grand Mosque.¹⁰² In 2015, he was briefly arrested on

the suspicion of supporting the self-proclaimed Islamic State.¹⁰³ Though he was released, he continues his role as a provocateur.

Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, in particular, is given a degree of latitude. He has spoken favorably of jihad against foreign occupation but criticized the jihadists' attempts to topple Muslim governments and has condemned the Islamic State. With regard to Mauritania's politics, he presents himself as a principled, loyal oppositionist. For example, in early 2018 he criticized the government's invitation to the grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar Mosque to attend a counterextremism conference in Nouakchott.¹⁰⁴

Such figures are allowed some stridency but within the boundaries proscribed and enforced by the government. Government supporters of this mix of coercion and co-optation have argued that it has defanged the ideology of the violent jihadists, leaving them without a spiritual guide. "The jihadists don't have a head," said one of them.¹⁰⁵

Even so, the question then becomes how much of the clerics' moderation is temporary and tactical. The case of the prominent cleric Mohamed Ould Ahmed Zarouq (known as al-Sha'ir or "the Poet"), whose imprisonment was cited by Khadim Ould Semane in 2006 as one of his grievances against the government, is illustrative. In 2009, Zarouq wrote a letter renouncing militancy against Muslim governments, but only because it was impractical and the jihadists had no chance of winning. Toward the other exclusionary and extremist aspects of jihadi ideology, particularly his endorsement of *takfir* (the excommunication of Muslims), he never relented.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion: Looming Risks

Jihadi violence in Mauritania has peaked and appears to have been contained through a mix of coercion and co-optation. Meanwhile, Salafi impulses toward political activism and party politics appear to have been stifled as well; the Salafi cleric Ahmed Mazid Ould Abdel Haq told an interviewer that Salafists do not have the financial or human capital to establish a party.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Salafism in the country seems to be confined to two poles, each centered on nonviolent preaching and media: a pro-government strain embodied in the figure of the imam of the Grand Mosque, Ahmedou Ould Lemrabott Ould Habibou Rahman, and a more activist and critical one embodied by Abu Hafs al-Mauritani and al-Majlissi that is provocative but still respects the regime's redlines.

Yet the government's triumphalism should be treated with care. Mauritania remains mired in corruption and poverty. Peripheral and border areas, the sites of much jihadi activity, desperately need development.¹⁰⁸ The recent discovery of offshore gas on the border with Senegal has brought an attendant influx of foreign direct investment, raising hopes for economic improvement.¹⁰⁹ Yet some

Mauritanian observers privately wonder whether the money will reach the public, given the government's corruption and nontransparency.¹¹⁰ And, perversely, the windfall could be new fodder for the jihadists' critique of the government: AQIM may try to portray the investments as infringements on the country's sovereignty.

Added to this is the growing authoritarianism and clampdown on free speech by the regime of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who won the election in 2009 and again in 2014.¹¹¹ In January 2019, He seemed dispel rumors that he would seek a third term by endorsing the candidacy of one of his longtime loyalists, Defense Minister Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, for the presidential elections due later this year. Observers of Mauritania saw this as a skillful move to perpetuate the grip on power of the president's coterie of elites drawn from the Union for the Republic Party—as well as the tradition of military influence over politics.¹¹² In the run-up to the election, Ould Abdel Aziz has also cracked down on Islamists. In September 2018, for example, he closed the Center for Training Islamic Scholars run by the cleric Dedew, accusing it of promoting radicalism: in a speech before a military parade, he said it was necessary to safeguard a “correct” Islam against the distortions of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹¹³ The continued closure of political space for Islamists and the future imprisonment of venerated clerics like Dedew could inspire a new cadre of Mauritanian militants, repeating a cycle of the past.

All of this suggests that the specter of violent jihadism has not disappeared. To be sure, Mauritania is not a base for a base for the Islamic State, despite alarmist predictions, and the percentage of young Mauritians joining jihadi groups abroad has dwindled in the last several years.¹¹⁴ But jihadi groups continue to exploit the unregulated media and use the country's territory as a thoroughfare and logistical base.¹¹⁵ A resurgent AQIM in Mali and Burkina Faso remains a potent threat, given its May 2018 communiqué urging attacks on foreigners in the Sahel. Moreover, Mauritania's longtime reticence about sustained, extraterritorial military operations, which may have insulated it from jihadi attacks, is changing. Specifically, it has recently raised its regional profile in the G5 Sahel—a regional security and counterterrorism coalition of five Sahelian countries that has struggled with organization and resources.¹¹⁶ In tandem with future cross-border operations, this growing prominence could give Mauritania-focused jihadists a new propaganda boon.¹¹⁷

At the moment, however, it remains unclear whether and how militants will act in Mauritania. What seems certain is that the post-2011 lull in violence may not last indefinitely.

About the Author

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Notes

- ¹ The Arabic text of the statement is posted here: <https://www.max-security.com/security-blog/aqim-statement-threatening-western-companies-in-area-from-libya-to-mauritania-africa-mena-alert>.
- ² Geoff D. Porter, “The Renewed Jihadi Terror Threat to Mauritania,” Combatting Terrorism Center (West Point) *Sentinel* 11, no. 7 (August 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/renewed-jihadi-terror-threat-mauritania>
- ³ Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, “Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania,” Sahel Research Group Working Paper, no. 3 (August 2014), 17.
- ⁴ For a useful critique, see Chris Simpson, “Debunking Mauritania’s Islamist Militancy Mythology,” *New Humanitarian*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2016/08/23/debunking-mauritania%E2%80%99s-islamist-militancy-mythology>.
- ⁵ CIA World Factbook, 2018, https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/mauritania/mauritania_people.html
- ⁶ “Human Development Index: Country Profile of Mauritania, United Nations Development Program, 2018, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MRT>
- ⁷ “Freedom in the World 2019,” Freedom House, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/mauritania>
- ⁸ “Corruption Perceptions Index, 2018,” Transparency International, 2018, <https://www.transparency.org/country/MRT>.
- ⁹ See, for example, “Mauritania Country Report, 2019,” Human Rights Watch, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/mauritania>.
- ¹⁰ These include the Halpulaar, the Bambara, the Soninké, and the Wolof. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie*, [Preaching in the desert: political Islam and social change in Mauritania] (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 160.
- ¹¹ Ibrahim, “Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania,” 10.
- ¹² The argument that jihadism or revolutionary violence is a wholly “foreign” import resulting from Gulf ideology is convincingly rebutted by Philip D. Curtin, who traces a tradition of religiously sanctioned Mauritanian militancy against unjust rulers to the 1600s. See Philip D. Curtin, “Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Inter-Relations in Mauritania and Senegal,” *Journal of African History* 12, no. 1 (January 197): 11–24.
- ¹³ Specifically, French colonialism helped facilitate the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and other Mauritanian contacts with the Gulf.
- ¹⁴ In contrast to common assumptions, Mauritanian scholars have been active influencers in the development of global Salafism, even in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, rather than being passive consumers of a “Saudi import.” To be sure, Saudi influence is present: the Grand Mosque in the capital is colloquially known as the “Saudi Mosque” in reference to its funding. But the religious exchange is more bi-directional than is commonly assumed, as evidenced by the Mauritanian scholar Muhammad al-Amin al-Shinqiti’s travel to Saudi Arabia and his subsequent incorporation into the Islamic University of Madina and the kingdom’s senior clerical body, the Hay’at al-Kibar al-‘Ulama. See Michael Farquhar and Alex Thurston, “How Mauritania exports religion to Saudi Arabia—And not just the other way around,” Brookings Institution, December 13, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/12/13/how-mauritania-exports-religion-to-saudi-arabia-and-not-just-the-other-way-around/>.
- ¹⁵ Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, “The Paradoxical Metamorphosis of Islamic Activism in Mauritania,” (in English) *Cahiers d’études africaines*, no. 206–207 (2012/2): 4.
- ¹⁶ Chouki El Hamel, “The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society From the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, fasc. 1 (February, 1999): 62–87.

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- ¹⁷ Elemine Ould Mohamed Baba Moustapha, “Negotiating Islamic Revival: Religiosity in Nouakchott City,” *Islamic Africa* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 46. The scholarly *zwaya* coexisted uneasily with and often struggled against a political and warrior caste, the Banu Hassan, who claimed Arab lineage. Modernity and urbanization has diluted the distinction between the two—but not completely. The *zwaya* continue to fill the ranks of the civil service and merchant class.
- ¹⁸ El Hamel, “The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society from the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century,” 72.
- ¹⁹ Tarek Ladjal and Benaouda Bensaid, “Desert-Based Muslim Religious Education: Mahdara as a Model,” *Religious Education* 112, no. 5, (May 2012): 529–41.
- ²⁰ Ould Ahmed Salem, “Islam in Mauritania Between Political Expansion and Globalization: Elites, Institutions, Knowledge, and Networks,” in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin F. Soares and Rene Otayek (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 37.
- ²¹ Author interview with a Libyan graduate of a Mauritanian *mahdara*, Tripoli, Libya, December 5, 2017. In 2012, the Mauritanian government estimated that one-quarter of *mahdara* students came from abroad. See Meimouna Saleck, “The Foreign Students of the Mahadhra in Mauritania Courted by Jihadists,” *Dune Voices*, March 12, 2015. http://media-diversity.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3052:the-foreign-students-of-the-mahadhra-in-mauritania-courted-by-jihadists&catid=15:mdi-news&Itemid=33
- ²² Prominent Libyan Islamic Fighting Group members who passed through Mauritanian *mahadir* include Abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiyah Abd al-Rahman .
- ²³ Author interview with a former minister of Islamic affairs now working on counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018. The government also promoted the establishment of *mahadir* in urban areas, ostensibly for greater oversight.
- ²⁴ Author interview with a Mauritanian scholar of Islam, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
- ²⁵ The reign of Colonel Mohamed Haidalla from 1980 until 1984 was particularly important for the growth of Islam in social and political life. In 1980, for example, he made sharia the country’s sole source of legislation.
- ²⁶ In the mid-1980s, disparate Mauritanian Islamist currents formed an umbrella grouping called the Haraka Siyasiya Islamiya fi Muritanya (the Islamic Political Movement in Mauritania or HASIM) quickly established itself as an opposition force to the reign of Haidalla. In this, it was aided by the teachings of a charismatic cleric named Mohamed Ould Sidi Yahya. See Ould Ahmed Salem, “The Paradoxical Metamorphosis of Islamic Activism,” 6.
- ²⁷ Constant Hames, “Le Rôle de l’Islam dans la Société Mauritanienne contemporaine” [The role of Islam in contemporary Mauritanian society], *Politique africaine*, no. 55 (October 1994), 46–51.
- ²⁸ Regional developments, especially the growing assertiveness of Islamists in Algeria reportedly played a role in Taya’s turn to repression. See Sebastian Elischer “Governing the Faithful: State Management of Salafi Activity in the Francophone Sahel,” *Comparative Politics* 51, no. 2 (January 2019): 210.
- ²⁹ Cédric Jourde, “Politique des récits de l’islamisme en Mauritanie. Entre ‘marée montante’ et ‘islamisme kalachnikov’,” [Politics of Islamist Narratives in Mauritania. Between ‘Rising Tide’ and ‘Kalashnikov Islamism’], *Politique africaine* 2, no. 114 (2009): 67–86, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-africaine-2009-2-page-67.htm#>.
- ³⁰ See the 1994 report on Mauritania by Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/184000/afr380031994en.pdf>.
- ³¹ Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 6–7.
- ³² Ibid.

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- ³³ Francesco Cavatorta and Raquel Ojeda Garcia, “Islamism in Mauritania and the Narrative of Political Moderation,” *Journal of Modern North African Studies* 55, no. 2 (May 2017): 313.
- ³⁴ Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, “Islamic Radicalisation in Mauritania,” in *Islamist Radicalisation in North Africa: Politics and Process*, ed. George Joffe (London: Routledge, 2012), 185.
- ³⁵ Elischer, “Governing the Faithful,” 210.
- ³⁶ For a list, see: Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 146–49. For background on Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, see this Al Jazeera interview: <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2012/10/23/2ج-سبتمبر-11-هجمات-الموريتاني-حفص>.
- ³⁷ Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018. Also see Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 147. On the Idab-Lihsen, see Moustapha, 77.
- ³⁸ See National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (2004), 130. http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report_Ch4.pdf.
- ³⁹ Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018.
- ⁴⁰ Hamed El-Said, *New Approaches to Countering Terrorism: Designing and Evaluating Counter Radicalization and De-Radicalization Programs* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 118.
- ⁴¹ Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 25, 2018.
- ⁴² Ould Ahmed Salem, “Islamic Radicalisation in Mauritania,” 189.
- ⁴³ Born in Boutilimit, a center of Islamic learning in southwestern Mauritania, Dedew grew up in a distinguished family of Islamic scholars, the most famous of which was his maternal uncle, Muhammad Salim ‘Abd al-Wadud (1929–2009), who served as minister of culture and as the head of the High Islamic Council. Dedew’s educational background combined a traditional *mahdara* schooling with a more modern, Saudi-sponsored Salafi education, including a stint at the Advanced Institute for Islamic Studies and Research, and then the College of Sharia at Saudi Arabia’s Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, where he was exposed to the thought of Salafi luminaries such as Nasr al-Din al-Albani and Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, and later served as a mosque imam. In Nouakchott’s Arafat neighborhood, he founded the Center for Training Islamic Scholars (Markaz Taqwin al-Ulama). His doctrinal and ideological outlook defies categorization. See Alex Thurston, “Shaykh Muhammad al-Hasan al-Dedew (b. 1963), a Salafi Scholar in Contemporary Mauritania,” University of Cape Town, Center for Contemporary Islam, 10 February 2009; http://www.cci.uct.ac.za/usr/cci/publications/aria/download_issues/2012/Alex%20Thurston,
- ⁴⁴ According to interlocutors, this was broadcast on Radio Mauritanie. Author interview with activists and observers in Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 2018.
- ⁴⁵ Ould Ahmed Salem, “Islamic Radicalisation in Mauritania,” 189–90.
- ⁴⁶ Author interview with a former Mauritanian detainee, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018. For the scope of the torture allegations see “Mauritania: Torture at the Heart of the State,” Amnesty International, December 3, 2008, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/52000/afr380092008en.pdf>.
- ⁴⁷ Coincidentally, perhaps, the attack happened two days before the U.S.-led Flintlock exercise was supposed to take place in which U.S. troops trained alongside soldiers from Sahelian countries, including Mauritania. Hacen Ould Lebatt, “Généalogie d’Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique,” *Les Cahiers de la Revue Défense Nationale* (May 2011): 28, <https://en.calameo.com/read/000558115c614e762cfb0>. Also, Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 13.
- ⁴⁸ Among the more prominent attacks were the 2007 killing four French tourists near Aleg, a 2008 assault on the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, the 2009 assassination of American aid worker Christopher Leggett in Nouakchott, the 2009 suicide bombing of the French embassy, and a 2010 suicide bombing against a

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- Mauritanian military outpost at Nema. For a list see Ibrahim, “Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania,” 13.
- ⁴⁹ See Ibrahim, “Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania,” 14 and Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 13–14.
- ⁵⁰ Ibrahim, “Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania,” 14.
- ⁵¹ Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 17.
- ⁵² Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 161.
- ⁵³ Author interview with Mauritanian scholar involved in counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ This is a *nom de guerre*; Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem names him as Ahmed Ould Vih al-Barka. See Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 17.
- ⁵⁶ Author interview with a Mauritanian scholar involved in counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Author interview with a former minister of Islamic affairs now working on counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018.
- ⁵⁹ See this biography of Ould Semane: “Essirage Publishes the Full Story of the Ansar Allah al-Murabitun Organization in Mauritania” (in Arabic), Essirage, October 18, 2010, <http://essirage.net/archive/index.php/news-and-reports/447-2010-10-18-22-11-44.html>.
- ⁶⁰ Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 16.
- ⁶¹ “Interview with Khadim Ould Semane,” Al-Jazeera, July 15, 2006, <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2006/7/15/الخدم-ولد-السمان-الحركة-السلفية-الموريتانية>
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Author interview with a U.S. government official involved with counterterrorism in Mauritania, Washington DC, January 31, 2019. See also, Porter.
- ⁶⁴ Author interview with a former minister of Islamic affairs now working on counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018.
- ⁶⁵ This “soft” approach was following a template that had been applied with uneven results in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Libya.
- ⁶⁶ Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 18.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 19.
- ⁶⁹ Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 173.
- ⁷⁰ Author interview with a Mauritanian scholar of Islam, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
- ⁷¹ Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018.
- ⁷² Ibid.
- ⁷³ Ibid.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ For a discussion, see Reuven Paz, “Islamic Legitimacy for the London Bombings,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Center for Special Studies, July 20, 2005, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_537/537E_1855722352.pdf.
- ⁷⁶ See Abu Basir al-Tartusi, “Covenants and Security in Islam,” <http://www.en.altartosi.com/Covenants.htm> (no longer active)
- ⁷⁷ Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.

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- 79 Author interview with former Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Islamic Affairs officials involved in the dialogue, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23–24, 2018.
- 80 “The First Session of Dialogue with the Salafis began with a Struggle for Leadership Among the Prisoners” (in Arabic), *Al-Anbaa*, January 18, 2010, <https://www.anbaa.info/?p=4068>.
- 81 Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 173.
- 82 Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 21.
- 83 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 84 In recent years, according to the United Nations, torture is no longer “rampant” but still “occurs frequently.” See Amnesty International, “Mauritania, 2017/2018,” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/mauritania/report-mauritania/>
- 85 “Pardoned Salafist Prisoners Benefit from Income-Generating Loans” (in Arabic), Sahara Media, July 15, 2011, <https://www.saharamedias.net/%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%B1/>.
- 86 Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018.
- 87 Ahmed Ould Sidi, “Children of Salafist Prisoners... Collective Punishment for Parents and Children” (in Arabic), *Al-Araby*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/investigations/2016/6/6/%D8%A3%D8%B7%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A2%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1>.
- 88 “Ahmed Mezid: The majority of the Salafi trend opposed the establishment of a political party”, (Arabic) *Essirage*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.essirage.net/node/3490>.
- 89 See Mark Hosenball, “Al Qaeda Leaders Made Plans for Peace Deal With Mauritania: Documents,” Reuters, March 1, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-binladen-mauritania-idUSKCN0W356G>.
- 90 Joe Bavier, “Mauritania Frees Wanted Senior Malian Islamist Insurgent,” Reuters, August 6, 2015, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mauritania-mali-insurgency/mauritania-frees-senior-malian-islamist-insurgent-idUKKCN0QB1M120150806>.
- 91 Author interview with former Mauritanian officials in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 2018.
- 92 See Alex Thurston, “A Mauritanian Fatwa against the French-Led Military Intervention in Mali,” *Al-Maydan*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.themaydan.com/2017/01/mauritanian-fatwa-french-led-military-intervention-mali/>.
- 93 “La Mauritanie affectée par la crise malienne,” [Mauritania affected by the Malian crisis], Xinhua, January 24, 2013, <http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/96852/8105195.html>; Al-Mokhtar Ould Mohammad, “Mauritanian Consensus Against France Intervention in Mali,” *Al-Akhbar English*, January 18, 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/14695>.
- 94 “La Mauritanie affectée par la crise malienne,” [Mauritania affected by the Malian crisis], Xinhua, January 24, 2013, <http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/96852/8105195.html>.

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- ⁹⁵ Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 24, 2018.
- ⁹⁶ One Salafi cleric told the author, “Mali is good for us; the people with extremist ideas go there instead of staying here.” Author interview with a Mauritanian Salafi cleric, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 26, 2018. See also Ibrahim, “Managing the Sahelo-Saharan Islamic Insurgency in Mauritania,” 23.
- ⁹⁷ These include the Nouakchott News Agency (ANI), al-Akhbar, and Sahara Media. See, Laurent Prieur, “Mauritania media opens window on Saharan Islamist world,” Reuters, February 13, 2013, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mali-rebels-mauritania/mauritania-media-opens-window-on-saharan-islamist-world-idUKBRE91C0XB20130213>.
- ⁹⁸ Porter.
- ⁹⁹ A major intellectual force behind Mauritanian jihadism, al-Majlissi was arrested for involvement in Mauritania’s first AQIM cells. For representative writings on jihad, see http://www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS_2318.html and on *takfir* see <http://www.alwahabiyah.com/file/Occation/vijename/T-K12-ar.pdf>.
- ¹⁰⁰ Al-Majlissi’s critique refers to a well-known study by the U.S.-based RAND Corporation think tank arguing for the promotion of “civil democratic Islam” as a counterterrorism strategy. See Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2004), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1716.html. The RAND concept became a lightning rod for criticism among Islamists and especially jihadists who saw it as a neocolonialist project. See al-Majlissi, “Democratic Islam Is an American Alternative,” http://www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS_16887.html.
- ¹⁰¹ See al-Majlissi, “Independence and the Loss of Identity” (in Arabic), *Mauritania al-Yawm*, November 30, 2014, <http://rimtoday.net/?q=node/2599>.
- ¹⁰² Ould Ahmed Salem, “Paradoxical Metamorphosis,” 19–20.
- ¹⁰³ For the background of his arrest, see “The Reasons for the Arrest of the Salafist Leader Muhammad Salem al-Majlissi” (in Arabic), *El Watan*, August, 29, 2015, <http://www.elwatan.info/node/2179>.
- ¹⁰⁴ “Abu Hafs al-Mauritani: No Welcome to the Sheikh of al-Azhar” (in Arabic), *Mauritania News*, March 15, 2018, <https://maurinews.info/opinions/18308/>.
- ¹⁰⁵ Author interview with a Mauritania scholar involved in counter-radicalization, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ould Ahmed Salem, *Prêcher dans le désert*, 168.
- ¹⁰⁷ “Ahmed Mezid: The Majority of the Salafi Trend Opposed the Establishment of a Political Party” (in Arabic), *Essirage*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.essirage.net/node/3490>.
- ¹⁰⁸ This is a phenomenon across the Sahel. See “Forced out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa’s Jihadists Go Rural,” International Crisis Group, January 11, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural>.
- ¹⁰⁹ “Mauritania-Senegal summit yields accord on giant gas field,” Agence France Presse, February 9, 2018, <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/mauritania-senegal-summit-yields-accord-on-giant-gas-field-20180209>.
- ¹¹⁰ Author interview with activists and observers in Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 2018.
- ¹¹¹ Interview with Noel Foster, “Mauritania’s Weak Opposition Could Make Abdel Aziz President for Life,” *World Politics Review*, May 31, 2016, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/18929/mauritania-s-weak-opposition-could-make-abdel-aziz-president-for-life>.
- ¹¹² See Alex Thurston, “Mauritania: An Ould Ghazouani Presidency?,” *Sahel Blog*, January 29, 2019, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2019/01/29/mauritania-an-ould-ghazouani-presidency/>.
- ¹¹³ “Fermeture d’un centre islamique jugé ‘extrémiste’ en Mauritanie,” [Closure of an Islamic center considered ‘extremist’ in Mauritania], Voice of America Afrique, September 25, 2018, <https://al->

[ain.com/article/mauritania-military-parade-independence-terrorism](https://www.saharamedias.net/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%B5-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84/). Abu Hafs al-Mauritani was reportedly involved in mediating and pushing for the center to be re-opened. Cheikhany Sidi, “Abu Hafs al-Mauritani Mediates to Resolve the Crisis of the ‘Islamists’,” (Arabic) Sahara Media, October 3, 2018. <https://www.saharamedias.net/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%B5-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84/>.

¹¹⁴ For a good discussion of the extent of the ISIS threat, see Alex Thurston, “Is Mauritania Really A New ISIS Front,” IPI Global Observatory, July 2, 2015, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/07/mauritania-isis-al-qaeda-terrorism/>.

¹¹⁵ Author interview with a former jihadist detainee, Nouakchott, Mauritania, March 23, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Formed in 2014, the G5 Sahel consists of Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. A Mauritanian general recently took over command of the joint force. Pascal Airault, “Le général Hanena Ould Sidi à la tête de la force du G5: la Mauritanie reprend en main la sécurité sahélienne,” [General Hanena Ould Sidi at the head of the G5 force: Mauritania takes over Sahelian security], *L’Opinion*, July 13, 2018, https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/general-hanena-ould-sidi-a-tete-force-g5-mauritanie-reprend-en-main-156652?utm_source=twitter.

¹¹⁷ Author interview with a U.S. government official involved with counterterrorism in Mauritania, Washington, DC, January 31, 2019.



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