

MAURITANIA'S PRECARIOUS STABILITY AND ISLAMIST UNDERCURRENT

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Mauritania is a rare bright spot amid regional tumult. Tucked between Arab North Africa and black West Africa, the state has weathered the storms of revolt and militancy gathering around it. This is no small feat for an impoverished country bedeviled by fragile politics, military factionalism, ethno-racial tensions, and budding militancy. After all, this medley of built-in vulnerabilities threw neighboring Mali in 2012 into a perfect storm of *political turbulence* and *separatist insurgency*. Mauritania's success, however, does not mean it is out of the woods yet.

Precariousness Unbound

- Relative to its population size, no other country in the Sahel and Sahara region produces as many jihadist ideologues and high-ranking terrorist operatives as Mauritania does. The government has driven the most hardened militants out of the country, and some would-be jihadists have voluntarily left. But the country is still vulnerable to terrorist destabilization, with the potential return of combatants representing a serious threat.
- Experience suggests that frustration and strong anti-system feelings are the two primary common denominators that drive political and religious radicalization.
- An unequal distribution of wealth, political opportunities, and public resources among racial and ethnic groups is also a major cause of instability. The Haratin (the freed slaves) and Afro-Mauritanians who come from the south of the country in particular face structural and institutional discrimination.
- The government has been slow in tackling long-festered social inequalities and grievances. This has given rise to new forms of popular mobilization that have coalesced around generally radical positions.

Moving From Vulnerability to Viability

- Mauritania's resolve in fighting terrorism is worthy of international support. U.S. and European Union military and security assistance remain crucial in helping the country protect its borders and bolster its defenses against the armed militants roaming the Sahel and Sahara region.
- Aid must be predicated on the government making progress on building more open and accountable state institutions. Without such conditionality, externally led efforts to empower the executive branch and prop up its coercive apparatus—namely the military, police, and judiciary—are counterproductive.
- The United States, France, and the European Union must pressure President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz to work on transitioning the country toward more equitable social development.
- The president should be prodded to take more steps to incorporate the Afro-Mauritanians and Haratin into state institutions, including in senior positions in the army, interior ministry, and public media. He should also implement the laws criminalizing slavery.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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