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# **MAURITANIA'S PRECARIOUS STABILITY AND ISLAMIST UNDERCURRENT**

Anouar Boukhars

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## About the Author

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## Summary

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.

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## Introduction

Against all odds, Mauritania has been a rare bright spot in the Sahel and Sahara region. The country has the regular sort of built-in vulnerabilities that every country in the region has: chronic poverty, acute social conflicts, recurrent military coups, and violent extremism. Yet, despite these weaknesses, Mauritania has escaped the cycles of crises rocking North Africa and the Sahel and Sahara region.

The fact that Mauritania has not collapsed into havoc is due partly to the fragmented nature of social protests, which are driven by social, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and regional cleavages, and partly to the resoluteness of Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz in combating violent militancy.<sup>1</sup> Aziz's outmaneuvering of dissent and his successes in building a fragile stability in the country do not mean, however, that the political and security risks will remain manageable. The country is at a structural disadvantage marked by climate vulnerability, inequality traps, and the precarious geopolitics of the Sahel and Sahara region. Mauritania's volatile ethnic and racial mix adds to the uncertainties that underlie its fragility.

Racial tensions are bubbling just below the surface. Ethnic conflict runs deep, and ethnic identities are being politicized, while the Islamist community is fragmenting. Mauritians are becoming progressively radicalized around issues of race, ethnicity, and religion, presenting a serious challenge.

When these issues and economics collide, they tend to engender opposing economic and political interests. In Mauritania, the battle over the distribution of opportunities and resources is gradually becoming an us-versus-them game. This raises the specter of a dangerous slide into social conflict along the racial and ethnic fault lines that cross the country. The clash would pit the Arab-Berber Moors, who hold political power, against the black populations—namely, the Haratin underclass, also referred to as black Moors, and the aggrieved Afro-Mauritians who come from the south of the country. Both the Haratin and Afro-Mauritians face structural and institutional discrimination.

New forms of popular mobilization have already coalesced around generally radical positions.<sup>2</sup> The Haratin have become more confrontational in their claims and demands.<sup>3</sup> Protests and strikes are occurring with increasing frequency in a tense political and economic context.

This trend toward radicalization is also evident in the religious sphere. Inspired by notions of Islamic egalitarianism, some Haratin groups are

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**Against all odds, Mauritania has been a rare bright spot in the Sahel and Sahara region.**

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aggressively challenging the ideological and political underpinnings of religious teachings and legal codes that seem to sanction caste-based racism.

These developments are not occurring in a vacuum. Mauritanian Islamic scholars and religious schools are important contributors to the regional and global debates about the permissibility of violence and rebellion in Islamic law, so what happens outside of Mauritania impacts its domestic realities and what happens domestically has regional implications. Mauritanian advocates of reformist or violent change, for example, occupy a disproportionate position in the broader ideological configurations of Islamic thought and practice.<sup>4</sup> Mauritanians also figure prominently in violent transnational extremist networks and regional insurgencies.<sup>5</sup>

The dangerous brew of race, socioeconomic grievances, and religion in Mauritania portends an escalation in the broader battle over the country's identity, its religious orientation, and the future of democratic equality there. Indeed, with discontent alive and well among thought leaders and other grievances brewing, ideological and political challenges could soon turn into action. Understanding Mauritania's internal sources of conflict and their interactions with transnational and regional dynamics is the first step toward addressing the forces that endanger political and social stability.

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## The Relationship Between Society and the State

In Mauritania, a sparsely populated and poor country straddling the Arab Maghreb and black sub-Saharan Africa, religion has had a profound effect on the country's politics and social life.<sup>6</sup> Islam shapes the social fabric of the country, and Islamists are a central part of Mauritania's story of fragile stability. The problems that underlie this fragility go beyond religious politics, however, also including an entrenched racial-ethnic hierarchy and other social differences that have been sore spots since Mauritania gained independence from France in 1960.

Islam provides a common bridge for the country's three main ethnic groups: the Arab-Berber Moors or Bidhan (30 percent of the population), the Haratin (40 percent) commonly referred to as descendants of slaves, and the Afro-Mauritanians (30 percent). The Haratin share the same language and culture as their former masters, the Bidhan. But underneath religious commonalities and cultural affinities, there is deep smoldering resentment and distrust. The black populations of Mauritania are indignant about and aggrieved by the light-skinned Moors' political, economic, and cultural dominance.

Since independence, identity politics and racial differences have in large part driven conflict between the state and society in Mauritania. Ethnic malaise on

the parts of both the black and white populations has been a constant fixture in certain regions of the Senegal River valley where pastoral Bidhan and black farmers coexist despite conflicts. Tensions escalated in the second half of the 1980s when black intellectuals grew more assertive in their denunciation of the state's discriminatory land policies and other exclusionary practices.<sup>7</sup> A failed coup attempt in 1987 by a number of black African officers against the Bidhan president unleashed a wave of state repression of black agitators. In April 1989, a minor dispute between Mauritanian herders and Senegalese farmers over grazing rights in the Senegal River valley, which demarcates the border between the two countries, ended in several hundred deaths, devastating waves of reprisals, and massive expropriation. About 100,000 Mauritanian nationals were expelled from Senegal and 85,000 Senegalese from Mauritania. More than 40,000 Afro-Mauritanians were also forced out of the country under the pretext that they were Senegalese.<sup>8</sup> Their land was acquired by Arabic-speaking Bidhan and Haratin people. The regime justified its assault as a necessary response to contain racial and ethnic extremism.

Meanwhile, Islamists came to prominence in the 1980s when transnational revivalist movements like Tablighi Jamaat and politicized groups like the Islamic Political Movement in Mauritania challenged the preeminence of Sufi Islam, which has deep roots in the country.<sup>9</sup> The Islamists' goals were focused on gaining legal political recognition and building a bottom-up movement to Islamize Mauritanian society while eschewing political violence and aggressively politicizing religion and ethnic identity. Their interaction with Saudi cultural and religious networks gave rise to new forms of Islamic social activism.<sup>10</sup> Although they did not form singular networks of proselytization, transnational groups like Tablighi and Saudi Salafists became linked with local religious organizations.

This blending of global religious flows with local particularities contributed to the reconfiguration of religious values, practices, and traditions in Mauritania. Ideological connections across countries helped shape the trajectory of both leading preachers and political Islamists. The proliferation of these groups also impacted the sociopolitical and conflict dynamics in Mauritania.

Yet, by deliberately avoiding politically and socially divisive issues that antagonized the regime, leaders of Islamist movements managed to avoid confrontation with the military rulers of Mauritania. Until the early 1990s, Islamism and other new forms of religion had not been the most significant source of political and societal tensions.

Indeed, Mauritania's leaders sought to harness Islam to boost their own legitimacy to wield their authority and state power. Following almost two decades of devastating droughts (from 1968 to 1986) and the country's defeat in the 1970s Western Sahara war, the successive regimes sought to increase their legitimacy by associating the state with Islam, in particular by making

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the legal system more compliant with sharia law.<sup>11</sup> This state-led reinforcement of the role of Islam in the political arena, combined with an increase in financial aid from Arab Gulf countries and the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, created a perfect environment for politicized religious ideas and their associated entrepreneurs to gain confidence and influence.<sup>12</sup>

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The situation shifted in the 1990s. The regimes in Tunisia and Algeria brutally collided with Islamists, leading to concerns in Mauritania that the burgeoning Islamic foundations and clubs in the country might fuel Islamist challenges to the regime. New forms of globally networked religious outreach organizations developed, and Islam became anything but benign to a Mauritanian military regime intent on holding onto power. As a result, Islamism became the regime's main discursive benchmark for excusing state repression, helping to fragment Mauritanian society.<sup>13</sup>

The security services cracked down on Islamists that were considered a challenge to the government. First, the authorities rebuffed attempts by some Islamists to form a political party. Then, the security services increased surveillance of Islamist organizations and influential clubs where local grassroots activists congregated with foreign Islamist cadres and preachers. This hardening of government attitude peaked in 1994 with the banning of several Islamist foundations and associations, the incarceration of their leading figures, and the deportation of foreign preachers accused of radicalizing Mauritanian Islam.<sup>14</sup>

The regime's assault on the organizations and capabilities of Islamists disrupted but did not fully cripple their infrastructure or activism. Most religious organizations repositioned themselves under different names or simply moved their activism underground.<sup>15</sup>

Two major events escalated confrontation between the regime and its opponents: Mauritania's 1999 establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel and the onset of the war on terror following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. Most Islamists and preachers, including some supportive of the regime, blasted the normalization with Israel in a fatwa. This dissent led the government to launch a new round of repression. And Maaouya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya, the president at the time, used September 11 as a pretext to join the worldwide witch hunt against Islamists.<sup>16</sup>

Ould Taya presented himself as saving Mauritania from the fanaticism and violence of so-called bad Islamists, as opposed to the good and moderate Muslims who acquiesced to the politics and values of the rulers of the day. The bad Islamists were those that resisted exploitation and the dominance by the bureaucratic-authoritarian enterprise.<sup>17</sup>

As in all other facades of constitutional order, the crackdown on dissent was not limited to Islamists. In October 2000, the regime dissolved the Union of Democratic Forces, a political party, for questioning Ould Taya's ties with

Israel. In 2002, the party Action for Change, which advocated for the rights of blacks and descendants of slaves, was outlawed.

The intensification of repression led to growing malaise among large swaths of Mauritians, already frustrated by Ould Taya's mismanagement of state resources. During the 1990s, Mauritania's currency entered a free fall, losing half of its value. In 2005, the country's gross domestic product was stuck at \$654 per capita compared to \$1,283 in 2012. The politics of patronage, cronyism, and tribalism enriched an exclusive and incestuous elite connected to the president's tribe of Smassid and to the Awlad Bu Sba, to which the current leader, Aziz, belongs. These tribes are, for example, important actors in the marketplace. Together with their allies in the financial, bureaucratic, and military sectors, they constitute a hegemonic bloc with oligopolistic power.

Corruption, predation, and exploitation were trademarks of the Ould Taya regime alongside mounting economic insecurity, pervasive poverty, and high levels of unemployment.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, repression of dissent failed to crush the Islamists or secure Ould Taya's political longevity. Between cycles of oppression and coup attempts, Islamism evolved into the main conduit of resistance. Most Islamists opted for nonviolence as the best means of producing political and societal change. A minority, however, was radicalized by the state's indiscriminate repression. This radicalization dynamic began in earnest only after the escalation in torture, imprisonment, and unfair trials of Islamists.<sup>19</sup> The repression lent weight and legitimacy to radical Islamists who adhered to violence as the only possible means to advance the Islamist political project.

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## A Shift Toward Moderation

A military coup in 2005 put an end to Ould Taya's reign, which combined a broken economy with a broken polity. The military coup leaders freed political prisoners, including Islamists and presumed radical Salafists, and set Mauritania on a promising though short-lived transition to civilian democratic rule. For a brief period of time, it appeared that the country was on the path to unity and stability.

Moderate political Islamists quickly took advantage of this political opening to regroup under the label of centrist reformers and to contest municipal and legislative elections as independent candidates. Their performance was noteworthy in local elections in which they won dozens of municipalities, including in the capital.<sup>20</sup>

The breakthrough for Islamists came with the election to the presidency of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, who quickly acceded to the Islamists' demand for legalization of their political party, the National Rally for Reform and

Development, better known by its Arabic acronym, Tawassoul. Under the leadership of Jemil Ould Mansour, Tawassoul adopted a cooperative stance toward the government.<sup>21</sup> This search for normalization with the powers that be continued even after another military coup in August 2008 that overthrew Abdallahi.

The brief democratic interlude was caught in several traps that squeezed the most vulnerable Mauritians. Among them was a bout of food inflation—triggered by the dwindling global supply of grain and surging prices of wheat and rice—that led to civil unrest. In addition, the Paris-Dakar auto rally, which would have traversed the Mauritanian desert, was canceled in 2008 and damaged the tourism sector.

After a short period of hesitation following the coup, the Islamists distanced themselves from those politically opposed to the new military rulers of Mauritania, even though the rulers distrusted Islamists and opposed their political integration. Jemil Ould Mansour endorsed the election of Mohamed

Ould Abdel Aziz, a general and the architect of the coup, to the presidency in July 2009. He sought further accommodations from the new regime by briefly allying Tawassoul with Aziz's newly created party, the Union for the Republic. The pace of the thaw picked up when Aziz suspended Mauritania's diplomatic relations with Israel.

Jemil Ould Mansour has presented his movement as a political party with Islamic references that takes the middle ground in politics. As proof of this faith in religious moderation and political gradualism, the party has taken a leading role in debunking religious extremist ideas and challenging their promoters.

eration and political gradualism, the party has taken a leading role in debunking religious extremist ideas and challenging their promoters.

This gradual transformation in the dynamics of Islamist politics in Mauritania propelled reformist Islamists to the center of the Mauritanian political arena. Their relative success in the 2013 parliamentary election consolidated their rise as the second-largest political force in the country, though the bulk of the opposition boycotted that election. Although Tawassoul did pull out of the presidential election in 2014, criticizing the contest as unfair, the strategy of the party remains the same.

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## The Rise of Violent Extremism

This political and ideological moderation by Islamists coincided with a rise in violent extremism. There was an uptick in terrorist activity between 2005 and 2011. The terrorist activity was not the work of an ingrained Mauritanian jihadi movement but rather that of a hodgepodge of regional and local violent extremists. Still, Mauritanian involvement in amateurish attacks and attempts by uncoordinated groups of radicals are no comfort when the underlying political and socioeconomic causes of militancy in Mauritania are left unaddressed.

Contextual conditions such as poverty, relative deprivation, endemic corruption, and historical abuse influence paths to violent extremism.

For radicalized Mauritians, the model for violent resistance was embodied by an Algerian terror group, the Groupe Salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC), which emerged in 1998 before expanding into the Sahel and changing its name in 2007 to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a networked structure with autonomous cells in many Sahelian and Saharan countries. Starting in 2005, the GSPC engaged in luring a small group of Mauritians into its camps in the Sahel and Sahara region. This union was crystalized by the GSPC's June 2005 attack on the Lemgheity military garrison—situated 350 kilometers, or about 217 miles, from the Algerian border—that killed fifteen military personnel and injured seventeen.<sup>22</sup> The integration of regional jihadi influences into local experiences intensified after the Lemgheity terror attack.

Despite their potential for lethality, terrorist networks operating in Mauritania lacked capacity, especially in terms of personnel and finances. This made radical Islamist insurgent warfare quite unsophisticated in its conception, tactics, and impact.

Still, deep political disaffection and societal inequalities in Mauritania combined to create a class of frustrated young people at risk of radicalization. The profile of Mauritians associated with regional terrorist networks is as varied as their motives and focus. The two common denominators, however, seem to be the militants' age and trajectory toward violence.

The starting points and processes of radicalization overlap to a certain degree.<sup>23</sup> The Mauritians arrested, convicted, or killed for terrorist crimes show that the path to violent radicalization goes first through periods of unemployment or stints in menial labor, punctuated by low-level criminality and delinquency. Aspirations for religious radicalism only emerge when jihadi propaganda catches on.<sup>24</sup> Once Mauritians have bought into radical preaching, the journey to the training camps of AQIM in Algeria and later the Saharan zones of the Sahel begins.

Indicators identifying at-risk groups point to socially disadvantaged communities living in urban areas and peripheral regions.<sup>25</sup> Many were trapped in crisis-driven migration patterns that have remolded Mauritanian society over the last thirty years. Consecutive droughts combined with state neglect to contribute to uncontrolled urban expansion. These transformations resulted in widespread cultural dislocations and social disruptions. Other attendant problems included the breakdown of the traditional institutions and mechanisms of social control that had bound families and communities. The decline of social support networks exacerbated the social and emotional impact of rising rates of divorce and the resulting parenting deficits. The weakening of social bonds contributed to a rise in juvenile delinquency and higher school dropout rates as well.<sup>26</sup>



Flaws in the education system have also contributed to the fragmentation of society. An appreciable number of Mauritania's poorest children attend only religious seminaries, known as *mahadras*. Only a minority of mahadras engage in radical preaching or provide space for those that espouse violence, while most act as ideological guides for young people that suffer from interpersonal loss and identity instability. In some cases, these mahadras create an enabling environment for radicalization by providing a shared space for interaction between individuals, some of whom are nominally violent extremist group supporters or sympathizers. Graduates of such systems can be more receptive to revolutionary calls for action against unjust political orders at the domestic or international level.

Results of these factors include high youth unemployment and idleness—and such young people are easy targets for criminal gangs and militant propaganda. Some individuals are drawn into illegal acts or extremist narratives to fill their emptiness with meaning, recognition, and social affirmation.<sup>27</sup> Radical or criminal groups become sort of fictitious families to individuals craving a sense of belonging and purpose. Membership in an extremist group can boost self-esteem and confidence, giving ostracized youths a sense of control over their lives and the hope of future rewards in the hereafter.<sup>28</sup>

The path to radicalization of Sidi Ould Sidna, a young Mauritanian militant linked to AQIM, is revealing in this regard. Before being drawn into the orbit of violent extremism, he dabbled in drug use, binge drinking, and petty theft. He was also at the center of sexual assault and rape allegations. His spiritual regeneration and embrace of radical Islamist ideology occurred sometime in his late teens when he stumbled on the world of leading jihadi theologians and revolutionary militants. Through an acquaintance, he became a frequent visitor to an Islamic seminary just outside the capital. There, he became drawn to the apocalyptic ideology and vicious vision of the dark prince of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, the GSPC was transforming into a franchise of al-Qaeda with an expanded geographic scope in the Islamic Maghreb. This transformation attracted new recruits who saw violent jihad as the best of deeds and the only possible means to liberate Muslim territories from the shackles of ignorance and servitude to corrupt and secular despotism. AQIM capitalized on the anger and zeal of Mauritanian youths to recruit them, train them in northern Mali, and then ship them back to their home country to conduct raids on military targets, Western embassies, Western tourists, and aid workers.

The case of Sidna illuminates how global jihadi ideology is intoxicatingly rooted in pure Mauritanian political traditions. Sidna defended his political violence and terrorist acts as jointly rooted in divine legitimacy and local circumstances, equating the jihadists' attempts to conquer the regime through violence with the military's use of coercion to maintain its grip on the Mauritanian state and society. In Mauritania, coup leaders always end up going from rogue to

vogue, even if only temporarily. Some jihadists, like Sidna, see themselves following the same trajectory from bearded villains to redeemers.<sup>30</sup>

Sidna's rationale for moral equivalence is characteristic of a number of young Mauritians who were lured into the orbit of violent extremism.

Understanding this deadly interplay of political grievances and social exclusion is necessary for tackling the underlying causes of radicalism in Mauritania. Structural factors such as corrupt governance, socioeconomic discrimination, and state repression create grievances and contribute to radicalization. Equally important is the presence of extremist organizations that frame grievances in religious terms and channel them into violent actions. The pull exercised by these networks is crucial in molding young extremists.

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## Restoring a Fragile Stability

Mauritania was long considered a natural candidate for terrorist recruitment and destabilization.<sup>31</sup> Its frontiers were restless and undergoverned, and its social fabric was fraying because of rigid social hierarchies, economic injustices, and political corruption. But since Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz ascended to the presidency in 2009, the Mauritanian government has neutralized the terrorist threat to the country.

The Mauritanian state under Aziz adopted a multipronged approach to contain the spread of violent extremism. It encouraged Islamists to engage in theological debates about violence and rebellion in Islamic law.<sup>32</sup> It also implemented aggressive counterterrorism approaches.

This active defense policy has helped Mauritania escape the cycles of crises rocking the Sahel and Sahara region. This is especially noteworthy given that just a few years ago Mauritania was considered a weak link in the region's security chain against terrorism. The country was a favorite target of attacks by Saharan-based terrorist groups. From the 2005 terror assault on an army base that killed fifteen soldiers to the multiple terrorist offensives that struck at the heart of Nouakchott between 2007 and 2011, Mauritania seemed primed for destabilization by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

The theological housecleaning was led by moderate Islamists and their theoreticians who were eager to position themselves as intermediaries between the state and radicals. The theological debates allowed these Islamists to reemphasize their theological moderation and political utility to the regime.

The duel between mainstream Islamists and radicals began in 2009 from the halls of prison in Nouakchott. A number of detainees defended their normative conceptions and the religious underpinnings of the acceptability of violence to bring about political change and social control. They actively contested the sacred bounds on violence advanced by the religious establishment.

The jihadists especially reserved their vitriol for political Islamists and their embrace of political pluralism.

In newspapers, the intellectual stalwarts of Islamist militancy took on the reformist current of Islamic thinking that reappropriates Islam's message and redefines its norms and values. Mohamed Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, who goes by the alias Almajlissi, for example, singled out the imam of the grand mosque of Nouakchott for devising Islamic grounds for democratic politics. For Lemine, equating the Quranic principle of *shura* (mutual consultation) with democratic governance was pure sophistry and an egregious intrusion of man-made rules on God's sovereignty.<sup>33</sup> Al-Khadime Ould Semane, another major leader of Mauritanian jihadism linked to al-Qaeda's North African wing, also spoke out against the perfidious theological housecleaning by proponents of civil-democratic Islam. His diatribes targeted senior figures of moderate political Islam such as Mohamed Ould Dedew, whom he accused of wandering off the right path and naively believing in peaceful political contestation. Ould Semane and others draw from the same intellectual repertoire of transnational radical Salafi references used by their jihadi counterparts in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen.

However, this intellectual resistance to indigenous Islamist politics and democratic citizenship was not unanimous among the 67 radical Salafists imprisoned for colluding or sympathizing with violent extremists and terrorist organizations.<sup>34</sup> As Ould Dedew argued, it is critical to draw a distinction in the radical fringe of Islamism between those amenable to argument and revision of their rigid thinking on armed action and those bent on sowing discord and chaos. The first, according to Dedew, are salvageable and need to be engaged in persuasion. Such emotional debates are necessary for debunking faulty religious assumptions and thinking that justify terrorism, killings, and *takfir* (excommunication). As for cold-blooded, unreformed jihadists, the judicial process needs to take its course.<sup>35</sup>

The government bought into this formula for behavioral modification of terrorists in custody. The flexibility shown by several detainees to enter into dialogue with the government helped convince the authorities of the merits of the approach proposed by moderate Islamists. January 2010 marked the official launch of the dialogue with detained jihadists. For fifteen days, Dedew led the intellectual combat to challenge the mind-set that legitimizes violence and terrorism.

This government-led initiative helped dissuade an appreciable number of those who had lost their moral compass from supporting violent radicalization, even if many still upheld illiberal views. Liberalism was not the aim—the goal of any rehabilitation program is to induce change in attitudes toward violence rather than democratic pluralism.

However, in some cases, the debates did not yield any positive results. About two dozen detainees stuck to their ideological framework and norms that condone and incite the use of violence to bring about political and social change.

Questions also remain about the true rate of recidivism. Two recent examples of recidivism include two major Salafi figures, Almajlissi and Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Sebti, alias Dahoud. Almajlissi was pardoned by Aziz in 2010, and Dahoud was released in 2015 after spending seven years in prison. Both were rearrested later in 2015, suspected of involvement in a busted Salafi-jihadi network.

Mauritanian authorities supplemented this soft counterterrorism campaign with a proactive and hard counterterrorism strategy. President Aziz boosted the country's antiterror defenses, modernized its army, and enacted counter-radicalization strategies designed to mitigate the radicalization of vulnerable populations. The launching of ambitious deradicalization programs aimed at rehabilitating detainees convicted of terrorist crimes was accompanied by the ratcheting up of military pressure on violent extremist networks.<sup>36</sup> The Mauritanian government also reinforced its presence in the hinterlands by building its capacity to control border crossing routes and their interconnections, with help from the United States and the European Union.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the Mauritanian government tightened its grip on mosques and increased its monitoring of preachers and suspected extremists. Individuals who voice support for violent extremism or express their intentions to join militant groups in Syria are regularly arrested.

This aggressive posture adopted by President Aziz was in stark contrast to his Malian counterpart who governed remote areas through divide-and-rule tactics that rewarded subservient tribes and social groups with access to state patronage and illicit markets.<sup>38</sup> The manipulation of the informal structures of governance in Mali and the perverse ways that state officials, ethnic groups, local elites, and armed groups used trafficking to advance their strategic interests set the country's downhill trajectory apart from Mauritania.<sup>39</sup>

Contrary to some of its neighbors, Mauritania was quick to realize that the nature of governance in Mali facilitated the submerging of its northern region in transnational flows of crime and violent extremism. Such integration of crime, politics, and society posed a direct threat to Mauritanian stability given the transborder dimension of social relations that makes ethnic and tribal interconnections difficult to constrain within territorial boundaries.<sup>40</sup> Ethnic and tribal affiliations straddle the Malian-Mauritanian border. The leading actors in the terrorist group Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) hail from the Lamhar tribe, an influential Arab group based in Gao that also has tribal and business ties in southern Algeria and Mauritania. The same applies to the so-called Arab Mauritians who operate in MUJAO or AQIM.<sup>41</sup> These cross-border networks of dense political and tribal ties make Mauritania an important player in efforts to resolve the conflict between the Malian government and rebel groups in the north of the country.

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**Mauritanian authorities supplemented a soft counterterrorism campaign with a proactive and hard counterterrorism strategy.**

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Violence spilling over from neighboring conflicts often expedites the gradual transformation of border communities into malignant epicenters of radicalized ethnic claims, cross-border militancy, and organized crime. Fears of northern Mali's rise as a terrorist sanctuary led Mauritania to conduct as early as 2010 and 2011 several cross-border air and commando raids on militant cells linked to AQIM.<sup>42</sup> After the outbreak of the separatist insurgency in 2012, Nouakchott became indirectly involved in intergroup crisis negotiations in northern Mali. Mauritanian leaders leverage their historic links to Arab tribes in Mali and rebel groups to better anticipate events to control them.<sup>43</sup>

All this has had some positive effect on the trajectory of radicalization in Mauritania. Cross-border threats seem to be contained, and the government's counterradicalization efforts show progress. But more needs to be done.

## The Hard Road Ahead

While counterterrorism efforts may well have helped to counter violent Islamism, they have not addressed the underlying causes of dissent in Mauritanian society. Mauritania's overall success in fending off terrorist

attacks does not mean it is out of the woods yet. Finding a solution to the problems of radicalization requires the adoption of a full-spectrum approach that balances kinetic engagement of violent extremists with nonkinetic activities such as enhancing governance, investing in neglected areas and ensuring equal access to economic opportunity for aggrieved subpopulations, and improving social justice.

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**Cross-border threats seem to be contained, and the government's counterradicalization efforts show progress. But more needs to be done.**

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Mauritanians still constitute an appreciable number of battle-experienced jihadists operating in the Sahel and Sahara region. Their cohort of fighters also boasts several top-ranking members in the Saharan insurgent and militant enterprise. 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.<sup>44</sup> Mauritania has benefited from militarily driving its most hardened militants beyond its borders as well as from the voluntary influx of jihadi wannabes into Mali and Libya. The potential return of these battle-hardened combatants must be a cause for concern to Mauritanian authorities.<sup>45</sup> Mauritania also remains highly exposed to a resurgence of violence and militancy in northern Mali. The country still hosts tens of thousands of Malian refugees in the Mberra camp in the east.

Other critical vulnerabilities consist of the government's slow progress in addressing deep-rooted social inequalities and ethnic and racial grievances. All the examples of radicalization show that the suffocating political, social, and ethnic hierarchies play an important role in driving the most disaffected Mauritanians to political radicalism and militancy.<sup>46</sup> Until the country's

systemic deficiencies in good governance, the rule of law, social justice, and inclusiveness are seriously tackled, Mauritania's path from vulnerability to viability will be filled with obstacles.

Unfortunately, President Aziz has avoided the hard reforms that would address the roots of societal tensions and radicalism. His presidential achievements are incontestably in the security realm, and the threat of terrorism has subsided. Economic growth has averaged more than 5 percent a year since 2012.<sup>47</sup> Progress can also be noted in infrastructure development and the reduction of absolute poverty.<sup>48</sup>

But much is left to be desired. Mauritania still suffers from high levels of corruption, an uneven distribution of wealth, and an inequitable and unfair distribution of public resources. Public education remains in crisis while access to drinking water, electricity, and health services is very limited and unbalanced. The government's efforts to invest in human capital and provide targeted cash transfers to the most vulnerable households are poorly executed.

Social polarization and political turbulence over land rights and racial and ethnic representation in the political and bureaucratic apparatuses of the state are worsening.<sup>49</sup>

The Haratin, who make up the majority of the population (40 percent) and the majority of the soldiers in the army (70 percent), have become increasingly assertive in their demands for social equality and inclusion into positions of power and authority.<sup>50</sup> This pent-up impatience over accumulated grievances burst out during the 2014 presidential campaign as a galvanizing force for the candidacy of Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid, an anti-slavery activist.

The increasing activism by the Haratin has become a major irritant for the government, which fears the prospect of the creation of a united front of black Mauritians (the Haratin and Afro-Mauritians) against the Bidhan, the so-called white Moors. And many of these social and ethnic conflicts are intertwined with religion.

Ould Abeid, who came second in the 2014 presidential election, is one example. His troubles with the authorities began in earnest in 2012 when he burned copies of a text from the Maliki school of Islamic law that he deemed to be promoting slavery. The book-burning caused a firestorm in Mauritania, with protesters and religious clerics denouncing Ould Abeid and his organization, the Initiative for the Resurgent Abolition Movement in Mauritania, for stoking religious strife. An imam in Nouakchott blasted him and his fellow activists in a sermon as "devils ... criminals who will also burn Korans, the Ulama [Muslim scholars] and the whole country if nothing is done to stop them."<sup>51</sup> In November 2014, Ould Abeid was arrested for spreading "racist propaganda" and "belonging to an illegal organization, leading an unauthorized rally, and violence against the police," the *Guardian* reported.<sup>52</sup> Several of his companions were charged with disturbing social peace for sensitizing and mobilizing the Haratin and other

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**Critical vulnerabilities consist of the government's slow progress in addressing deep-rooted social inequalities and ethnic and racial grievances.**

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black Mauritians to challenge the discriminatory laws and practices that govern access to land and the protection of land rights.<sup>53</sup>

Tensions over religious texts that seem to condone social and racial discrimination also flared up when a court in Nouadhibou in the northwest of the country sentenced Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir to death for writing an article that spoke “lightly of the Prophet Mohammed,” according to Agence France-Presse. Ould Mkhaitir’s piece denounced some religious texts

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**Mauritania still suffers from high levels of corruption, an uneven distribution of wealth, and an inequitable and unfair distribution of public resources.**

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that perpetuate “an iniquitous social order” against an underclass that is “marginalised and discriminated against from birth.”<sup>54</sup> The article led to massive protests in front of the presidential palace, forcing President Aziz to call for restraint and calm while promising that he would take “all necessary measure to defend Islam and its prophet.”<sup>55</sup>

Group mobilization has also become more organized in the Mauritanian part of the Senegal River valley where

Afro-Mauritians militate for justice and equality through several organizations like the Don’t Touch My Nationality movement. Ethnic tensions in the valley, deeply rooted in mutual mistrust and suspicion between black and light-skinned Mauritians, are prevalent between herders (white Moors) and farmers (Fulani). The hardening of organized ethnic claims can also be seen in the campaign of resistance to both the president’s investment projects and multinational food and agricultural corporations. Both the Haratin and Afro-Mauritians are vociferously opposed to such agribusiness projects, usually controlled by white Moors.

President Aziz has managed to contain these social tensions. He appointed General Sultane Ould Mohamed Siyad, who belongs to the marginalized caste of the blacksmiths in Mauritania, as chief of staff of the gendarmerie and Mamadou Diallo Bhatia, an Afro-Mauritanian, as minister of national defense. This is a good step forward even though both positions fall under the supervision of close allies of the president. The promotion of a few Haratin to the rank of general is another signal from the president that he understands the necessity of integrating minorities into the system. In addition, in 2013 Aziz created the National Solidarity Agency for the Fight Against the Vestiges of Slavery, for Integration, and for the Fight Against Poverty and established an interministerial committee to oversee the coordination and implementation of the road map to combat the residual effects of slavery adopted by the government in concert with the United Nations. In August 2015, the government passed stringent new laws replacing the 2007 law criminalizing slavery. One of the new laws stipulated the creation of special tribunals to pursue those accused of slavery and an increase in the length of prison sentences. Recognized

nongovernmental organizations were also granted the right to defend the victims of slavery.

But his ability to navigate the minefield of racial and ethnic politics will not last without more extensive reform. His government has made only slow progress in tackling the long-festering grievances of the Haratin and Afro-Mauritians, and these problems are fueling the rise of radicalization in communities that have few outlets to seek redress.

Whether the president is willing and able to press forward with more reforms to the formal and informal institutions, rules, and procedures that sustain discrimination, clientelism, and neo-patrimonialism is far from clear. The political system grants Aziz substantial powers to rule and effect change, but at the same time the president is hamstrung by the special interest groups to which he is beholden. The overall pattern of political and economic domination has remained unchanged for decades despite the country's many regime changes. At the center of influence are often the same protagonists who share family ties and clientelistic linkages.<sup>56</sup> When there is a reconfiguration in the distribution of power, as is usually the case when there is a coup, change happens in the same dominant bloc. For example, when Aziz ascended to the presidency, the monopoly that Smassid businessmen had enjoyed under Ould Taya shifted toward Aziz's allies and the members of his own tribe.

Trying to reform such a deeply entrenched neo-patrimonial system that resists change is a monumental task that Aziz has been reluctant to take on. After all, his political future depends on elite networks and clientelistic relationships.

## Conclusion

Aziz's accomplishments are important for a country bedeviled by fragile politics, military factionalism, and ethno-racial tensions. But despite the progress toward stability, Mauritania remains at risk of social and political unrest.

The international community, mainly the United States, France, and the European Union, can play an important role in promoting stability in Mauritania, a major pillar of the West's Sahel strategy. States that are weak but willing to tackle their many problems can be salvaged by filling their capacity gaps, but those with neither the determination nor the means to accomplish the basic functions of statehood are not salvageable unless persuaded or pressured to mend their ways. Such a distinction between capacity and will has policy implications for the Western powers that must differentiate between several categories of weak states.<sup>57</sup> The goal is to strengthen relatively capable states that are in distress, increase the performance of those willing but unable to better govern their territorial space, and help restore the functionality of unwilling and incapable states.



Mauritania falls into the category of fragile states that are weak but willing to build their national capacity. Unlike Mali's leadership, which succumbed to terrorist blackmail and the pressures of criminal influences, Aziz has confronted such security challenges. Such determination is worthy of international support. U.S. and EU military and security assistance remain crucial in helping Mauritania secure its borders and strengthen its defenses against the armed militants roaming the Sahel and Sahara region. Mauritania's international partners should deploy more resources to train border officials and help the Mauritanian government upgrade equipment as well as improve communication and information-sharing mechanisms among law enforcement agencies (including the police, the gendarmerie, and customs).<sup>58</sup>

Aid, however, cannot be limited to propping up the coercive apparatus of the state. The United States and its international partners would be well served by not falling into the trap of giving unqualified support to Aziz. Mauritania's strongman has weathered the turbulence of the popular Arab uprisings in 2011, contained political opposition to his rule, and severely weakened the threat of militancy. But his hold on power is not as secure as it might seem. His popular and political support is largely dependent on distribution of patronage resources and other clientelistic transactions.

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**Mauritania falls into the category of fragile states that are weak but willing to build their national capacity.**

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As Aziz's predecessors experienced, even strong leaders remain in a precarious position, as Mauritania's dominant institution, the military, is riven by factions. In 2005, 90 percent of its officers were white Moors of Arab and Berber origin while only 7 percent were Haratin and 3 percent black Africans. At the base of the power pyramid, some of these statistics were reversed, with the Haratin constituting 70 percent of conscripted soldiers, black Africans 5 percent, and white Moors 25 percent.<sup>59</sup> Tribal divisions in the military's command structure compounded this situation of ethnic and racial disequilibrium. Officers hailing from tribes that dominate the country's political and economic structure are minoritarian in the military caste. This built-in instability increases regime vulnerability to acts of disloyalty and defection at times of crisis.<sup>60</sup> Aziz's reliance on this establishment for political survival makes him vulnerable to an internal challenge to his rule from the eastern faction, which is numerically the dominant force in the officer corps.<sup>61</sup>

The United States, France, and the European Union must pressure Aziz to work on transitioning the country toward more equitable social development. In training the country's armed forces and law enforcement, they must focus on improving fighting skills, intelligence gathering, and security coordination. But such programs also need to enhance civil-military relations and respect for human rights.

Economic growth and military modernization without inclusiveness and accountability eventually run into a dead end.





## Notes

- 1 Alain Antil and Céline Lesourd, “Une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps. Grammaire des mobilisations sociales et politiques et retour de la question negro-mauritanienne” [One swallow does not make a summer: Principles of political and social mobilization and return of the negro-Mauritanian question], *L'Année du Maghreb* 8 (2012): 407–29.
- 2 See Armelle Choplin, “Post-Politics and Subaltern (De)Mobilization in an African City. Nouakchott (Mauritania),” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2014): 49.
- 3 Riccardo Ciavolella and Marion Fresia, “Entre démocratisation et coups d'État Hégémonie et subalternité en Mauritanie” [Between democratization and coups d'état: Hegemony and subalternity in Mauritania], *Politique africaine* 114 (2009): 5–23.
- 4 See, Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, “Les mutations paradoxales de l'islamisme en Mauritanie” [The paradoxical metamorphosis of Islamic activism in Mauritania], *Cahiers d'études africaines* 206–207 (June 2012): 635–64.
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- 8 Kenneth Noble, “An African Exodus With Racial Overtones,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/22/world/an-african-exodus-with-racial-overtones.html>.
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- 10 Saudi networks benefited from the resentment of lower classes of some Sufi institutions that have been important actors in using religious tradition to defend the political and socioeconomic status quo in exchange for political patronage and support for their networks of solidarity. Some Mauritians are simply suspicious of the Sufi orders co-opted into state-sponsored religious institutions.
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- 14 Salem, "Les mutations paradoxales de l'islamisme en Mauritanie."
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Jourde, "Politique des récits de l'islamisme en Mauritanie."
- 18 Vincent Bisson, "Echec et mat chez les Maures!: Coups d'Etat et attentats en République islamique de Mauritanie" [The Moors' checkmate: Coups and terrorist attacks in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania], *Recherches internationales* 97 (October–December 2013): 163–78. <http://www.recherches-internationales.fr/R97/RI97Bisson.pdf>.
- 19 Jourde, "Politique des récits de l'islamisme en Mauritanie."
- 20 At the parliamentary level, their electoral level was quite modest. They won four seats in the senate and an equal number in the national assembly, which is represented by 96 parliamentarians.
- 21 Tawassoul has sought a voice in any political institution it can. Its involvement in an important network of Islamic nongovernmental organizations, charities, and humanitarian organizations has facilitated its presence in poor neighborhoods, especially in Nouakchott. Tawassoul has also appealed to the urban middle class, though it has failed to make inroads with Afro-Mauritians who usually equate Islamism with Arabism.
- 22 Stephen Ulph, "Algerian GSPC Launch Attack in Mauritania," *Terrorism Focus* 2, no. 11, (June 13, 2005), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=503&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=238&no\\_cache=1#VprUC1MrLVo](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=503&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=238&no_cache=1#VprUC1MrLVo).
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- 24 Salem, "Les mutations paradoxales de l'islamisme en Mauritanie."
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- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Nicholas Schmidle "The Saharan Conundrum," *New York Times*, February 13, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).
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- 38 Ivan Briscoe, *Crime After Jihad: Armed Groups, the State, and Illicit Business in Post-Conflict Mali* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, May 2014).
- 39 This remote-control style of governance—which privileged the vassal tribes of Imghad and Idnan Tuareg at the expense of the Ifoghas and the Lamhar Arab tribe over the Kounta Arab chieftains—subverted traditional hierarchies, poisoned ethnic relations, and exacerbated group rivalries in Mali’s north. The fragmentation of politics and breakdown in societal relationships also accentuated a reshuffling of alliances and partnerships, especially among the losing groups who recognized the competitive advantages that criminal associations and other illicit connections provide in a zero-sum power struggle. This embittered and factionalized landscape also explains the alliances of convenience that certain ethnic and tribal groups struck with violent extremist organizations and outside patrons like Algeria and Libya to protect their power positions and ethnic identity. The result is that tribe, illicit commerce, and jihad have become to intermix freely in the north.
- 40 Northern Mali has always had solid family, economic, and cultural ties with countries of the Maghreb, especially Algeria and Mauritania. Since the early twentieth century, Algerian merchants have played a major role in transborder commerce with Mali. Their trade dominance is attributed to the matrimonial alliances struck with Arab families in the north of Mali who shared kinship, religion, and identity. These links were deepened in the 1970s after waves of light-skinned northern Malians migrated to southern Algeria to escape a severe, decade-long drought. Though many returned to their country of origin, they sustained the networks of social relations and connections they built in Algeria. Like their predecessors, the Algerian Islamist insurgents who first sought refuge in northern Mali in the late 1990s also adapted to their new environment. They socially integrated through marriage to locals and over time became embroiled in long-ingrained theological disputes and socioeconomic conflicts.
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- 42 In retaliation for such joint military operations by France and Mauritania, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) executed Michel Germaneau, a retired engineer, who was abducted by AQIM in April 2010 in northern Niger.
- 43 Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, “Mauritanie: la stratégie d’un ex-futur maillon faible” [Mauritania: the Strategy of a former and potential weak link], Centre de Recherches Internationales, SciencesPo, July 2013, <http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/ft/content/dossiersduceri/mauritanie-la-strategie-dun-ex-futur-maillon-faible>.
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- 52 Monica Mark, "Mauritania Activists Jailed as Police Quash Resurgent Anti-Slavery Protests," *Guardian*, January 17, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/17/mauritania-anti-slavery-activists-jailed-biram-ould-abeid>.
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- 56 Ciavolella and Fresia, "Entre démocratisation et coups d'État."
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