

MAURITANIA

Overview: Mauritania remained a key regional counterterrorism partner in 2015. The Mauritanian government actively and effectively countered terrorism, building on an approach that hinges on improving the capacity of security forces and securing the country's borders. As in years past, the Mauritanian authorities cooperated with U.S. counterterrorism efforts and took advantage of opportunities to participate in U.S.-sponsored training on counterterrorism tactics and techniques.

Mauritania is not a safe haven for terrorists or terrorist groups, although regions in the interior are imperfectly monitored as a result of their geographic isolation from population centers and inhospitable desert conditions. Al-Murabitoun and similar violent Islamist extremist groups have a presence in the region, although al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) remained the leading terrorist threat to Mauritania.

Government authorities were alert to the threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Mauritania, as evidenced by a series of arrests of subjects suspected of recruiting for, or those purporting to swear allegiance to the group. Mauritanian political and religious personalities periodically condemned ISIL's aims, methods, and activities in their public statements.

The Mauritanian government continued to develop its counterterrorism capabilities in order to implement UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) 2178 (2014), 2199 (2015), and the UN 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da'esh) and al-Qa'ida sanctions regime.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: Mauritania's counterterrorism legal framework is relatively new. Enacted in 2010, the national counterterrorism laws define terrorism as a criminal act, describe court procedure in terrorism cases, and prescribe punishment for perpetrators. The Mauritanian government continued to send prosecutors and investigative magistrates to terrorism prosecution training organized by the United States through the Department of Justice (DOJ) and other international partners. On November 3, Mauritanian representatives attended a DOJ workshop in Rabat, Morocco, focused on building the institutional architecture needed to combat transnational crime and terrorism through effective regional cooperation, mutual legal assistance, and extradition laws.

Although Mauritanian security forces successfully deterred or prevented acts of terrorism in 2015, they did not face any great tests of capacity. Mauritania's National Gendarmerie, a paramilitary police agency, and its National Security Directorate, which falls under the Ministry of Interior, were the primary law enforcement units performing counterterrorism functions. Cooperation and information sharing between the two organizations occurred sporadically.

Mauritania is committed to improving its counterterrorism capacity. Throughout the year, security forces personnel participated in eight separate courses funded by the Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance program.

In early December in Nouadhibou, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Mauritanian Ministry of Justice, the UN Development Program, and the French Cooperation Agency co-sponsored a seminar aimed at strengthening the criminal justice system in the northern regions of Mauritania. Over three days, U.S. experts and Mauritanian practitioners discussed best practices in the fight against organized crime and the ways to improve international cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

Border security is a priority of the Mauritanian government, yet it remained far from perfect in 2015 due to a lack of capacity and a standing policy that accords responsibility for different sections of the

country's long land borders to different formations of the security forces. Mauritania's border forces employ biometric screening capabilities at some – but not all – ports of entry. Information-sharing efforts within the government and with other countries are nascent.

Mauritanian authorities arrested terrorist suspects in 2015. On April 20, a former member of al-Qa'ida (AQ), Abdul Rahman Ould Mohamed Hussein (alias Younis Al Mauritanie), was sentenced to 20 years after being convicted on terrorism-related charges. Younis was born in Saudi Arabia and joined AQ in 2001, where he was arrested by Pakistani authorities and transferred to Mauritania in 2011.

On June 16, a Nouakchott court convicted three young men – Mohamed Ould Ely Lasfar, Yacoub Ould Miyah Ould Balah, and Bukhari Ould Dahane – to 10, seven, and five years in prison, respectively, for belonging to an organization committed to performing terrorist crimes, incitement to violence, the use of religious symbols in a terrorist organization, and providing a meeting place for people involved in a terrorist organization.

On August 3, Mauritanian authorities released Sanda Ould Bounama, alias Sidi Mohamed Ould Bouama, a former spokesman of terrorist group Ansar al-Dine. Bounama had been held under an international arrest warrant issued on February 8, 2013 by a Malian court.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Mauritania is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, a Financial Action Task Force-style regional body, and maintained observer status within the Inter-Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa. The Financial Information Analysis Commission is Mauritania's financial intelligence unit, which includes representatives of several ministries and agencies working together to counter financial crimes. In January, the Mauritanian government submitted to parliament a draft amendment to the 2005 law on money laundering and terrorism financing that aimed to harmonize legislation with its obligations under international law, including the UN 1267/1989/2253 ISIL and al-Qa'ida sanctions regime. Although passed by the legislature, this bill had not been signed into law at year's end.

Although legislation regulating alternative remittances exists, the Mauritanian government neither has the resources to monitor sizable flows of funds through the informal *hawala* money transfer system, nor considers doing so a priority. Terrorism financing is difficult to detect in Mauritania because of the informal nature of much of the economy and speculation that large amounts of drug money pass through the economy.

For further information on money laundering and financial crimes, see the *2016 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), Volume II, Money Laundering and Financial Crimes*: <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/index.htm>.

Countering Violent Extremism: The government continued to manage programs designed to counter violent extremism and offer alternatives to “at-risk” individuals. For example, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education inaugurated 17 pilot *mahadras* for 2015. Each *mahadra* supports a workforce of at least 30 students (boys and girls) who each receive a monthly grant of approximately US \$34. The government also continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious organizations to promote moderation, sponsoring radio and television programming on the themes of temperance in Islam, and paying monthly stipends to imams who fulfilled the government's selection criteria.

The government coordinated with the Mauritanian Institute for Strategic Studies to host a regional conference entitled, “The Culture of Peace and Moderation as a Way to Counter Violent Extremism:

the Mauritanian Approach,” in Nouakchott on August 19-20. Approximately 200 representatives from governments in West Africa and the Sahel and Maghreb regions, multilateral bodies, faith-based organizations, the international donor community, and other civil society members attended the conference. Building on many of the core themes of the February White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, the conference explored ways to research and identify the tools necessary to understand the local drivers of violent extremism; how to engage the whole-of-society in building and securing resilient communities by addressing social, political, and economic grievances; how to assess the factors that contribute to youth involvement in violent extremism; and how to evaluate the roles civil society, youth, women, and faith-based leaders can play in partnership with local and national governments to prevent violent extremism

International and Regional Cooperation: Mauritania remains an active member of the UN, the AU, and the Sahel G-5, a regional cooperation partnership. The G-5 Sahel was created in February 2014 to enable region-wide collaboration on the Sahel-Saharan region’s political and security situation, and Mauritania participated in G-5 Sahel meetings held among the five member countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, along with representatives of the AU, UN, the Economic Community of West African States, the EU, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Mauritania is also an active member of the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership.