

MAURITANIA

Overview: Mauritania remained an important regional counterterrorism partner in 2016. The Mauritanian government continued to oppose terrorism actively and effectively, building on an approach that hinges on community outreach, 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 seized opportunities to participate in U.S.-sponsored training on counterterrorism tactics and techniques.

Mauritania is an excellent security partner with a strong record of taking direct action against al-Qa'ida in the Maghreb (AQIM), ISIS, and similar groups, defending its borders from infiltration and opposing the spread of violent extremist ideology. In the wake of three major terrorist incursions in 2011, which were defeated by Mauritanian security forces, terrorist activity in the country has been reduced substantially.

Mauritania is strategically located. It is both a Sahelian country, hosting the headquarters of the Secretariat of the G-5 Sahel countries (along with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger), and a member of the Arab Maghreb Union (along with Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia). Mauritania hosted the Arab League Summit in July.

Regions in Mauritania's interior are imperfectly monitored owing to their geographic isolation from population centers and inhospitable desert conditions. AQIM remained the leading terrorist threat to Mauritania, but al-Murabitoun and like-minded terrorist groups also had a presence in the region, particularly in the southeastern border with Mali.

The number of Mauritians participating in terrorist activities remained at similar levels since 2011, including Mauritians in senior-level positions within groups such as AQIM. Local sources estimated 55 Mauritians as members of AQIM, mainly from the Beydane tribes of Brebich, Eterchane, Ijemmane, Kounta, Oulad Daoud, and Oulad Talha. Government authorities were also alert to the threat of ISIS in Mauritania, as evidenced by a series of arrests of subjects suspected of recruiting for the group.

Mauritanian political and religious personalities – including Islamic figures – periodically condemned ISIS' aims, methods, and activities in their public statements.

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 and prescribed punishment for perpetrators. Additionally, the Mauritanian government continued to sharpen its counterterrorism capabilities in ways that satisfied the obligations in UN Security Council resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2199 (2015). For example, in 2016, Mauritania amended its 2010 counterterrorism statute to expand the impact against foreign terrorist fighters. The 2016 amendments significantly broadened the scope of terrorism, criminalizing for the first time aiding and abetting, inciting, and advising the commission of terrorist acts. The new amendment also provides more clarity in criminalizing as a terrorist offense the intentional act of financing, supporting, or assisting in the organization of a journey by a foreign terrorist combatant to train or train other terrorist combatants for the purpose of committing terrorist acts. It criminalizes as a terrorist offense the intentional act of committing a murder, abduction, or assault against an internationally protected person (diplomat) or an attack on the diplomat's office or private residence.

Mauritania's National Gendarmerie, a paramilitary police agency; and its National Security Directorate, which falls under the Ministry of Interior; are the primary law enforcement units

performing counterterrorism functions. Cooperation and information sharing between the two organizations occurred sporadically.

Although Mauritanian security forces were able to successfully deter and prevent acts of terrorism, Mauritania is committed to further improving its counterterrorism capacity. Throughout the year, personnel from the security forces participated in eight separate courses funded by the Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance program. This training conferred expertise in relevant tactical and technical skills, to include investigations, evidence gathering, and border security. 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.

Border security remains a priority of the Mauritanian government, but challenges remain due to a lack of capacity and the lack of a standing policy that accords responsibility for different sections of the country's long land borders to different formations within the security forces. The vast Mauritanian borders traversing inhospitable and hard-to-access areas of the Sahara desert further complicated efforts to monitor and secure borders, particularly those with Mali. To address this challenge, the Mauritanian government designated significant portions of northern and eastern Mauritania as a military zone. Citizens and personnel operating within the zone are required to gain authorization prior to entering. This control allows the Mauritanian military to monitor personnel traversing the country. 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 in the region were nascent.

Mauritanian authorities continued to arrest terrorism suspects in 2016. In June, during security preparations in advance of Mauritania hosting the Arab League Summit, Mauritanian authorities arrested several individuals believed to be ISIS sympathizers. In October, Mauritania authorities arrested three individuals perceived to be a security threat to Western interests.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Mauritania is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force and maintains observer status within the Intergovernmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa; both are Financial Action Task Force-style regional bodies. In January, the Mauritanian government submitted to parliament a draft amendment of certain provisions relating to their Law No. 2005-048, which pertains to money laundering and terrorist financing. This amendment aims to harmonize domestic legislation with international conventions. The updated counterterrorism law introduced new provisions on the immediate administrative freezing of the assets of terrorist individuals and entities listed in the UN Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and al-Qa'ida sanctions regime. Mauritania's current regulations require banks and formal money exchange and remittance offices to report suspicious transactions to its financial intelligence unit, the Financial Information Analysis Commission. The government also adopted in October a new anti-corruption regulation that has a component on international judicial cooperation on terrorist asset forfeiture and seizure.

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.

For further information on money laundering and financial crimes, see the *2017 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: Although the Mauritanian government does not have a Countering Violent Extremism National Action Plan, it continued to manage programs designed to counter violent extremism and offer alternatives to at-risk individuals. In 2016, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education inaugurated 19 pilot Islamic schools. Each school supports a workforce of at least 30 students (boys and girls) who each receive a monthly grant of 10,000 ouguiya (US \$28) and each teacher receives a salary of 100,000 (US \$280).

The government also continued to collaborate with independent Islamic religious organizations to promote moderation, sponsor radio and television programming on the themes of temperance in Islam, and pay monthly salaries of 50,000 ouguiya (US \$140) to 200 moderate imams who fulfilled stringent selection criteria.

Regional and International Cooperation: Mauritania remained an active member of the United Nations; the Arab League; the African Union; and the G-5 Sahel, a regional cooperation partnership organized in 2015 with five member countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The Mauritanian government also played a supportive role in regional Global Counterterrorism Forum meetings that took place in Nouakchott in 2016.

On November 3, Mauritania attended a DOJ workshop held in Rabat, Morocco. This regional workshop focused on building and augmenting the institutional architecture needed to counter transnational crime and terrorism through effective international cooperation, mutual legal assistance, and extradition.

On November 3 and 4, Mauritania hosted the annual meeting of the G-5 Sahel Security and Defense Committee in Nouakchott. During the two-day meeting, Chiefs of Defense of the member states discussed increased cooperation, coordination, and information sharing between their security services to address regional terrorism concerns. On November 20, in N'Djamena, the heads of state of the G-5 Sahel announced the creation of a regional joint force.