



PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: LESSONS FROM MAURITANIA

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, Mauritania has been exposed to violent extremism, much like its neighbour Algeria. Between 2005 and 2011, the country was the target of attacks carried out by groups affiliated with the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), and later with Al-Qaeda. Since 2008, the Mauritanian authorities have dismantled several ' sleeper cells ' ¹. However, since 2011, Mauritania has stood out as an exception in a region where attacks occur daily and violence against civilians claims large numbers of victims, particularly in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, Mauritania is considered a country with ' no impact from terrorism ' ². In contrast, Burkina Faso is the most affected country in the world, while Mali and Niger rank fourth and fifth respectively ². Violent extremist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have established a lasting presence in the central Sahel, and pose a threat to all neighbouring countries.

Terrorism involves ' the use of violence in line with an ideological commitment to achieve political, religious, or social goals ', and these violent acts may be perpetrated ' by any individual or group from a range of beliefs and ideologies ' ³. Armed violence perpetrated by terrorist groups may therefore target both military and civilian targets, regardless of the age, gender, or religion of the victims, in order to instil widespread fear, as part of a practice based on their own interpretation of Islam. These violent actions undermine social structures, weaken states, and bring about forced displacement both within and outside national borders ⁴.

¹ Jeune Afrique (2013, 12 février), [La Mauritanie a démantelé beaucoup de cellules terroristes dormantes depuis 2008](#). All translations from French are our own, without exception. - ² [Institute for Economics & Peace. \(n.d.\). Global Terrorism Index. Vision of Humanity.](#) - ³ Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). (2017, September). [Preventing Violent Extremism: An Introduction to Education and Preventing Violent Extremism](#) - ⁴ Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement (PNUD). (2023, 2 juin). [L'Afrique, épicentre de l'extrémisme violent : un défi pour la paix et le développement. \(rapport\). ONU Info.](#)

Mauritania has been affected by this phenomenon, with large numbers of its young people joining extremist groups in northern Mali, Afghanistan, and Sudan⁵. The country is also a transit zone for trafficking activities that fuel armed groups, including illegal drugs, arms and ammunition smuggling, and irregular migration⁶. Nonetheless, the current situation of violent extremism in Mauritania, when compared with regional developments, makes the country appear something of an 'exception'.

Mauritania, which is an Islamic republic, developed a national strategy to combat terrorism and transnational crime in 2012, and introduced a number of measures, such as initiating dialogue with jihadists in prisons in an effort to combat extremism on the ideological front. This Policy Brief traces the origins of the strategy through documentary analysis and semi-structured individual interviews conducted in the country with institutional actors who participated in the development and implementation of Mauritania's strategy to combat terrorism and transnational crime. It presents the gradual development of this strategy and the recommendations that emerge from it.

1 THE CHALLENGES OF A COUNTRY FACED WITH THE RISE OF POLITICAL ISLAM

Islam has been present in Mauritania since the ninth century, and it is traditionally practised there according to the Maliki school of Sunni Islam. However, it was not until the eighteenth century that 'the establishment of Sufi brotherhoods [the Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya, and Shâdhiliyya] [...] marked the popular entrenchment of Islam and the development of a religious framework for society'⁷. Islam was tolerated during the colonial period; the Islamic Republic of Mauritania was proclaimed in 1960, when the country gained independence. Since then, successive political regimes and governments have gradually reinforced the role of Islam in national legislation, viewing religion as a key factor in national unity, against the backdrop of the considerable diversity of communities present in the country.

In 1980, Sharia law became the main source of legislation, by decision of the head of state at the time, Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla (1979–1984). Under the regime of Colonel Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (1984–2005), Islam was enshrined in Article 5 of the Constitution as the religion of the people and the state, while the preamble identified it as the sole source of law.

In the 1980s, Mauritania saw the emergence on its territory of a new school of thought, originating from Saudi Arabia: Salafism, which advocates a return to the original sources of Islam. The spread of this movement was supported by significant funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, which enabled the construction of mosques over which the state was unable to exercise any control⁸. Social aid, books, and other materials were also distributed to raise public awareness of these new norms, which impact both people's way of life (through strict dress codes) and religious practices (with a ban on praying at graves, venerating Sufi sheikhs, or celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad).

The Muslim Brotherhood movement also took root in Mauritania during the same period. Originating in Egypt and associated with a conservative outlook, this politico-religious movement, which advocates a return to Islam as the foundation of political, social, and moral life, has established itself in many countries. Relations between the government and Islamist actors harde-

ned in the early 2000s under the presidency of Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya⁹. As early as the mid-1990s, his regime began repeatedly accusing Islamist leaders of 'conspiracy against the state', leading to arrests, prison sentences, and even the use of torture. For example, the scholar Mohamed El Hacen Ould Dedew, who was a respected figure in the Arab and Muslim world, was imprisoned on several occasions during this period¹⁰. Later, in the 2000s, he would go on to play an important role in dialogue efforts with imprisoned Mauritanian jihadists.

The Mauritanian authorities' crackdown on Islamists, which could be described as a 'witch hunt', notably involved the dismantling of all groups, clubs, associations, and NGOs with links to foreign countries. In this context, the Saudi Institute, which hosted students from Mauritania and West Africa for Arabic and Islamic study, was shut in 2003. Finally, the situation further hardened when the authorities refused to grant political recognition to Islamist-affiliated parties, despite the broader democratic opening that the country was experiencing at the time.

Although Mauritania was no longer experiencing violence linked to religious extremism on its own territory, many Mauritaniens joined the ranks of armed groups in Afghanistan in response to the call of Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda. This was notably the case of Mahfoudh Ould al-Walid, also known as Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, who became bin Laden's mufti (religious scholar) before returning to Nouakchott¹¹, as well as Ahmed Ould Abdel Aziz¹² and Mohamedou Ould Slahi¹³, both suspected of links to senior Al-Qaeda figures, and held for more than a decade as prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

In addition, young Mauritaniens also headed to northern Mali, where they took part in attacks on Malian territory, and later in attacks on Mauritanian soil¹⁴. Some of them were recognised as 'influential and over-represented in the Saharan branch of the GSPC, which was renamed Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007'¹⁵. Mauritians came to 'constitute the second largest source of fighters and ideologues for AQIM, just behind Algerians'¹⁶.

⁵ Aidara, C. (2013, 26 janvier). *Guerre au Mali : La jeunesse mauritanienne et les groupes jihadistes*. CRIDEM. - ⁶ SENALIOUNE. (2025, 20 mai) *"Le cercle des Idées" publie la synthèse de ses débats sur la question des trafics illicites en Mauritanie*. Antil, A. (2009, 20 juillet) *Contrôler les trafics ou perdre le Nord. Notes sur les trafics en Mauritanie*. Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI). - ⁷ Ould Ahmed Salem, Z. (2012). *Les mutations paradoxales de l'islamisme en Mauritanie*. Cahiers d'études africaines, (206–207), 635–664. - ⁸ Ould Ahmed Salem, Z. (2012). *Les mutations paradoxales de l'islamisme en Mauritanie*. Cahiers d'études africaines, (206–207), 635–664. - ⁹ President of the Republic from 1984 to 2005, he was overthrown by a coup d'état in August 2005 and went into exile in Qatar. - ¹⁰ RFI. (2004, 12 octobre). *Les islamistes en ligne de mire*. Amnesty International. (2004). *Mauritanie, Les islamistes en ligne de mire*. Amnesty International. (2005). *Mauritanie*. - ¹¹ Mandraud, I. (2012, 16 avril). *L'ancien prêcheur de Oussama Ben Laden de retour en Mauritanie*. Le Monde. - ¹² Associated Press News. (2015, 29 octobre). *Guantanamo prisoner from Mauritania back home after 13 years*. - ¹³ Mouton, A. (2021, 14 novembre). *Entretien avec Mohamed Ould Slahi*. Jeune Afrique. - ¹⁴ Aidara, C. (2013, 26 janvier). *Guerre au Mali : La jeunesse mauritanienne et les groupes jihadistes*. CRIDEM. - ¹⁵ Boukhars, A. (2020, 20 juin). *Contrer le terrorisme en Mauritanie*. Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique. - ¹⁶ Boukhars, A. (2020, 20 juin). *Contrer le terrorisme en Mauritanie*. Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique.

2 THE 2000S: A COUNTRY IN THE GRIP OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The year 2005 marked a turning point in the fight against violent extremism in Mauritania, with an increase in armed attacks against military targets and the kidnapping and murder of Western civilians. Between 5 June 2002—the date of the first attack on the Lemgheyti garrison in the north of the country, which killed 15 officers and soldiers—and December 2011, Mauritania suffered around 15 attacks¹⁷. On 24 December 2007, three French tourists were killed in Aleg¹⁸. This event was followed three days later by an attack on a military patrol in Elghalawiya.

Faced with this succession of violent acts, the political authorities drew up a national strategy aimed at curbing and preventing the phenomenon¹⁹. In 2008, the attack in Tourine, in the northern Mauritanian desert, in which 12 soldiers were kidnapped and beheaded, had a profound impact²⁰. This event prompted the political authorities to take real action and 'sound the alarm in the upper echelons of the army', as the attack focused attention on 'an army that was poorly paid, demoralised, and lacking in weapons'²¹.

On 21 July 2010, Law No. 2010-035 repealed and replaced Law No. 2005-048 of 26 July 2005 on the fight against terrorism²². The new law defines the concept of terrorism and undertakes to guarantee Mauritanian society the right 'to live in peace, security, and tranquillity, free from anything that could undermine its stability or destabilise its institutions', and 'to reject all forms of extremism, violence, fanaticism, racial segregation, and terrorism that threaten the peace and stability of society'²³. It also sets out the penalties (imprisonment and fines) applicable for those concerned.

However, it was not until the democratic election of President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in 2007, and the occurrence of new attacks, that a national strategy to combat terrorism in general, and violent extremism in particular, was developed by the government of Prime Minister Zeine Ould Zeidane (2007–2008) and then adopted in 2012 under the presidency of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.

3 BUILDING A NATIONAL STRATEGY TO COMBAT TERRORISM

A steering committee with representatives from several ministries—including Defence, the Interior, Justice, Islamic Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Economy and Finance, Health, Education, and Culture and Communication—was set up to create a special commission with the task of developing a counterterrorism strategy. The document, which was finalised in 2012, focuses on the following areas²⁴:

A legal component which strengthens both prevention and enforcement through two key laws designed to combat terrorism and its financing:

- Law No. 2010-035 of 21 July 2010, which repeals and replaces Law No. 2005-047 of 26 July 2005 on counterterrorism, defines the offences classified as terrorist, the applicable penalties, and procedural rules. An anti-terror-

ism prosecutor's office was also set up within the Ministry of Justice.

- Law No. 2005-048 of 18 July 2005 on money laundering and terrorist financing established the Financial Information Analysis Commission (CANIF).

A security component which places the defence and security forces 'at the heart of the counterterrorism strategy'²⁵.

- Intelligence is at the heart of the strategy, with significant investment in technical and technological resources (satellites, radar, telephone tapping), the strengthening of information exchange with neighbouring countries, and the use of human intelligence based on collaboration with the population. This military and security apparatus is considered one of 'the most important military reforms in Mauritanian history'²⁶.
- All parts of the armed and security forces are involved in the strategy, including the police, gendarmerie, customs, and the national guard. The focus is on special ground forces with appropriate logistical support, command structures, and air support, particularly through the establishment of units such as special intervention groups (GSIs), special battalions (paratroopers and commandos), and mobile companies and patrols of the national gendarmerie. New joint command bodies—both inter-service and combined-arms—have also been created at central and regional levels.
- This security aspect is accompanied by measures such as an increase in border checkpoints, the creation of military zones in the north of the country, and the introduction of secure identity documents.

A political component : Mauritania's strategy can be considered holistic in that security is seen as being placed 'at the service of development'²⁷, while taking into account the need to meet the political and socio-economic needs of the population, with priority given to poverty reduction and youth employment. This involves the deployment of public services in education, health, and infrastructure, with particular attention to disadvantaged social groups. To this end, the National Agency for Integration and Combating Poverty and the Legacy of Slavery, known as 'Tadamoun', was created in 2013 (it was replaced in 2019 by the Taazour Agency²⁸, the Agency for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion), with the aim of helping the needy (with cash transfers, food distribution, and the construction of dykes and schools). This political component aims to strengthen national unity and social cohesion, as well as to develop mutually beneficial partnerships with neighbouring countries in order to promote good relations and cooperation. The G5 Sahel, established in 2014, was one such attempt, centred on strengthening military, economic, and political cooperation among its members, until it collapsed following coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

¹⁷ Choplin, A. (2008, 29 avril). *La Mauritanie à l'épreuve de l'islamisme et des menaces terroristes*. EchoGéo. - ¹⁸ La Croix. (2007, 25 décembre). *Quatre touristes français d'une même famille tués en Mauritanie*. - ¹⁹ Key information interview, 19 March 2025, Nouakchott. - ²⁰ France 24. (2008, 15 septembre). *Douze soldats tués dans une embuscade attribuée à Al-Qaïda*. France 24. - ²¹ Boukhars, A. (2020, 20 juin). *Contre le terrorisme en Mauritanie*. Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique. - ^{22 & 23} République Islamique de Mauritanie. (2010). *Loi n°2010-035 du 21 Juillet 2010 Abrogeant et Remplaçant la loi n°2005-047 du 26 Juillet 2005 relative à la Lutte contre le Terrorisme*. - ^{24 & 25} République Islamique de Mauritanie. (2012). *La Mauritanie face au défi terroriste. De la Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre le Terrorisme et la Criminalité Transnationale*. Ministère des Affaires étrangères et de la Coopération. - ²⁶ Boukhars, A. (2020, 20 juin). *Contre le terrorisme en Mauritanie*. Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique. - ²⁷ République Islamique de Mauritanie. (2012). *La Mauritanie face au défi terroriste. De la Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre le Terrorisme et la Criminalité Transnationale*. Ministère des Affaires étrangères et de la Coopération. P20 - ²⁸ Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement. (2019). *Décret n°385-2019 portant création d'une administration de mission publique dénommée Délégation générale à la solidarité nationale et à la lutte contre l'exclusion « TAAZOUR »*. Journal officiel de la République Islamique de Mauritanie, n° 1452F du 30 décembre 2019.

In addition to this formal strategy, rumours circulated in 2016 about the establishment of a non-aggression pact between AQIM and the Mauritanian State²⁹. However, there is no evidence to confirm that the Mauritanian authorities agreed to such a pact³⁰. According to the sources consulted, Mauritania's strategy has not involved any bargaining of this sort. Nonetheless, during one of the interviews conducted, a respondent mentioned the possibility that communication channels may exist between AQIM and the Mauritanian government. Mohamed Mahmoud Ebou El Maali, a journalist and former director of Mauritanian Television, recounted that in 2012, while reporting in northern Mali for Sky News Arabia, he met Mokhtar Belmokhtar, nicknamed 'Belaouer' (the One-Eyed), who leads one of AQIM's katibas (armed units) in the region. Ebou El Maali claimed to have passed on a message from Belmokhtar to the Mauritanian authorities, calling on them not to participate in the international coalition against AQIM. Regional analysts, such as Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, do not rule out the existence of a 'tacit pact'³¹.

On a religious level, the causes of violent extremism in Mauritania are both exogenous—echoing conflicts in Palestine and Afghanistan—and endogenous, linked to poverty, injustice, the stigmatisation of certain communities, and perceived governance failures. Faced with these challenges, Mauritania has made the fight against terrorism a 'civic and patriotic duty' for all citizens. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Original Education has thus become a key actor in the strategy by supervising religious education, conducting dialogue with radicalised prisoners, and issuing recommendations to imams to prevent all forms of violence in their sermons³². The authorities have encouraged religious authorities to increase preaching in mosques and mahdaras³³ (Koranic schools) in order to promote a tolerant and peaceful vision of Islam and explain the true conditions surrounding the concept of holy war. In this context, jihad is defined as 'an act of defence of Muslim states' which 'falls under the authority of the government'. It should not, therefore, be initiated by 'individuals or small groups'. Furthermore, jihad 'does not mean war, it refers above all to the struggle against evil and the constant effort to achieve good'³⁴. This awareness-raising work has been accompanied by an innovative initiative: religious dialogue with extremist prisoners, led by recognised scholars. The aim is to engage with them 'on theological ground'³⁵, countering violent ideological reasoning with arguments based on an orthodox interpretation of religious texts. This approach has made it possible to deconstruct certain radical discourses.

Communication has also been a key component of the counterterrorism strategy, involving inter-ministerial coordination. The aim was to strengthen information-sharing activities and improve the protection of the population. The initial focus was on raising awareness of the consequences of violent extremism through public and private audiovisual media. Through the broadcast of information spots and discussion programmes, the authorities sought to deconstruct extremist discourse, promote a culture of peace, and encourage the early detection of signs of radicalisation.

Finally, the role of women in preventing violent extremism

has been an important component of the strategy³⁶. Women were identified as key actors owing to their closeness to children and young people. A national network was set up by the Association of Women Heads of Household (AFCM) to train and connect female scholars of Islamic sciences who undertake awareness-raising activities at different levels (local, regional, national) and act as an 'early warning system'. These women, known as Mourchidates³⁷, were initially volunteers, and have since received support from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)³⁸ and the Mauritanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs to help them combat violent extremism, particularly through training. They have been recruited in all regions of the country to engage in dialogue in any place that could serve as a potential space for recruitment and radicalisation (markets, prisons, mosques, clubs, etc.). The Mourchidates have been recognised for their work in Mauritania, and have been asked to share their experience in other countries, such as Senegal, Mali, and Austria³⁹.

Another type of dialogue has also been established, involving ulama (Islamic scholars)⁴⁰. The Mauritanian authorities, aware of the need to preserve the country's territorial integrity and maintain civil peace within its borders, have shown themselves open to dialogue initiatives with young people recruited by, or close to, extremist actors. Such dialogues were established within Nouakchott prison, bringing together ulama and Islamist prisoners⁴¹. The aim of these exchanges was to 'deconstruct the theological-political arguments used by Salafi jihadists to justify their actions, and to encourage them to repent and renounce violence'⁴². Few prisoners seemed able to mount a theological argument in response to the ulama, instead limiting themselves to condemning the fact that 'the regime does not apply Sharia law, and the country's leaders are impious because they maintain good relations with the West, which is responsible for the crises facing Muslims'⁴³. The spiritual dialogue between the ulama and radical Islamists in Nouakchott prison is said to have convinced 90% of the prisoners⁴⁴.

4

MAURITANIA, A MODEL OF SECURITY IN A SAHEL IN CRISIS?

Faced with developments in the Sahel and the influx of Malian refugees into its territory⁴⁵, with a resurgence since 2023, Mauritania is a country at risk. The challenges are immense, but so far the country has stood out as an exception, having adopted a holistic security strategy that combines security, religion, and socio-economic development.

The GSIs—highly mobile armed response units—can be considered the 'main reason for Mauritania's security success'⁴⁶. The security strategy has been improved, especially by reforming the status of military personnel, with an increase in bonuses and pensions. Regular inspections of military facilities and garrisons across the country also help to maintain the vigilance and operational readiness of combat units. In terms of logistics, the army has received more modern and effective equipment, such

²⁹ RFI. (2016, 2 mars). [La Mauritanie aurait-elle conclu un pacte de non-agression avec Aqmi ?](#) - ³⁰ Simoncelli, M., Gerth-Niculescu, M. (2024, 26 janvier). [Mauritanie. Sur les traces des "sentinelles du désert"](#). Afrique XXI. - ³¹ RFI. (2016, 2 mars). [La Mauritanie aurait-elle conclu un pacte de non-agression avec Aqmi ?](#); Simoncelli, M., Gerth-Niculescu, M. (2024, 26 janvier). [Mauritanie. Sur les traces des "sentinelles du désert"](#). Afrique XXI. - ³² RFI. (2018, 31 mai). [Mauritanie : le gouvernement accentue la surveillance des mosquées](#). - ³³ A type of school where the Quran and Islamic teachings are taught, from nursery school to higher education. Similar schools can be found in Senegal (Dara) and Chad (Khalawa) - ³⁴ Bellal, C. M. L. (2015). [Contre le terrorisme en Mauritanie, la déradicalisation des extrémistes](#). Revue Défense Nationale, (779), 45–52. - ³⁵ Ould Ahmed Salem, Z. (2012). [Les mutations paradoxales de l'islamisme en Mauritanie](#). Cahiers d'études africaines, (206–207), 635–664. - ³⁶ Key informant interview, Nouakchott, April 2025. - ³⁷ Nations Unies en Mauritanie. (2024, 20 mars). [Mourchidates : les femmes leaders religieuses qui luttent contre l'extrémisme violent en Mauritanie](#) [Vidéo]. - ³⁸ Office des Nations Unies contre la drogue et le crime (UNODC). (2022). [The Mourchidates: The Mauritanian Women Religious Guides](#). - ³⁹ Key informant interview, 15 April 2025. - ⁴⁰ Among them is Mohamed El Hacen Dedew, considered a spiritual leader and respected for his theological knowledge. - ⁴¹ Le Monde. (2010, 3 juin). [Le dialogue avec les islamistes encouragé par le pouvoir laisse sceptiques les religieux](#). RFI. (2010, 4 février). [Dialogue réussi entre oulémas et islamistes radicaux](#). - ⁴² Bellal, C. M. L. (2015). [Contre le terrorisme en Mauritanie, la déradicalisation des extrémistes](#). Revue Défense Nationale, (779), 45–52. - ⁴³ Key informant interview, 4 April 2025 - ⁴⁴ RFI. (2010, 4 février). [Dialogue réussi entre oulémas et islamistes radicaux](#).

as drones, helicopters, and armoured vehicles from China, the United States, and the European Union⁴⁷.

Intelligence is a very important aspect of Mauritania's strategy. As part of this strategy, telecommunications operators (Mauritel, Mattel, and Chinguitel) are only permitted to issue SIM cards to persons holding a national identity card. The protection of civil status documents is also part of this strategy, with an improvement of services at the National Agency for Population Registration and Secure Documents (ANRPTS). Finally, as part of the fight against money laundering, money transfers and banking operations have been subjected to stricter controls.

However, this strategy needs to be updated. Its operational bodies, such as the National Unit for the Fight against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (CELLRAD), continue to play an important role in developing an alternative narrative⁴⁸. This unit, made up of 15 members representing public and private institutions, in close collaboration with the Association of Mauritanian Ulama, carries out awareness-raising and training activities, in particular through the Mourchidates initiative, with support from the government and technical and financial partners such as UNODC and the European Union.

Although Mauritania's national strategy to combat and prevent violent extremism is resolutely multidimensional, combining security and socio-economic elements with dialogue, its economic and social aspects remain the weakest links.

On the military front, the empowerment of national forces needs to be strengthened, particularly their ability to adapt to the terrain, especially in terms of mobility. The deployment of soldiers in difficult conditions also requires better economic, social, and medical support throughout their careers and even afterwards⁴⁹. In addition, the regional approach needs to be re-established to allow the pooling of resources such as intelligence.

Preventing and combating violent extremism requires strong institutions that are committed to their populations, in order to respond effectively to accusations of corruption, poor governance, and injustice, which provide fertile ground for recruitment rhetoric. Improving basic social services (water, electricity, health, education) is an absolute priority.

Finally, dialogue initiatives should be maintained and expanded, particularly with the most vulnerable groups, such as young people and disadvantaged individuals.

The Mauritanian experience shows how important it is for any prevention policy to be rooted in the national historical, political, and economic context, taking into account local and regional specificities in order to best meet the expectations of populations, which are often relegated to the background. In the West African context, coastal countries such as Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana are also facing threats of violent extremism and radicalisation, particularly in their northern areas, bordering the countries of the central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger).

Although these countries differ from Mauritania in their local contexts, they have all (with the exception of Ghana) been struck in their northern regions by attacks attributed to violent extremist groups that exploit local vulnerabilities (forms of governance, risks linked to climate change, scarcity of natural resources, marginalisation of certain communities, youth unemployment, etc.). In this sense, the holistic approach developed by Mauritania could offer an alternative for the governments of coastal countries, in contrast to the almost exclusively security-based strategy adopted in Mali, which has not yielded convincing results in the central Sahel. As in Mauritania, local responses focused on economic and social problems, equitable and sustainable access to basic services, and the need for efficient and transparent local governance are essential, and can complement the efforts of defence and security forces to maintain control of territories.

However, it would be difficult to replicate the Mauritanian strategy in its entirety, as it is based on specific local factors that cannot easily be transposed to other contexts, particularly with regard to the religious dimension.

⁴⁵ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 263,000 people as of 30/11/2024; 318,000 estimated by the end of 2025 : UNHCR. (2024, 30 novembre). [Plan de Réponse et de Résilience pour les réfugiés Maliens en Mauritanie 2025](#). ⁴⁶ Antil, A. (2020, 3 mars). [La Mauritanie, modèle sécuritaire dans un Sahel en crise ?](#) France Culture. ⁴⁷ Boukhars, A. (2020, 20 juin). [Contrer le terrorisme en Mauritanie](#). Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique. ⁴⁸ Key informant interview, 14 April 2025. ⁴⁹ Key informant interview, 17 April 2025.

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