

MAURITANIA in Perspective

An Orientation Guide



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: GEOGRAPHY.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Geographic Divisions and Topographic Features.....	1
Climate.....	2
Bodies of Water	3
Major Cities	5
Nouakchott	5
Nouâdhibou	7
Rosso, Bogué, and Kaédi.....	7
Hazards	8
Environmental Issues.....	9
Chapter 1 Assessment.....	11
CHAPTER 2: HISTORY	12
Introduction.....	12
The Western Sahara: Migrations and Trade	12
The Sanhadja Confederation and the Almoravids	13
The Sudanic Kingdoms.....	14
Arabs and Moors.....	15
Early European Contacts	16
French Pacification of Mauritania	17
The Later French Colonial Era	18
Independence and Unification	19
The Western Sahara Conflict.....	19
The Salek and Haidalla Regimes.....	21
Mauritania Under Taya.....	22
The Fall of Taya.....	23
The Third Republic.....	24
Recent Events	25
Chapter 2 Assessment.....	26
CHAPTER 3: ECONOMY	27
Introduction.....	27
Agriculture.....	27
Industry	29
Energy Resources	29
Mineral Resources	30
Trade	31
Tourism.....	32
Banking and Currency	33
Investment.....	34
Transportation.....	35

Standard of Living	36
Organizations	37
Chapter 3 Assessment	38
CHAPTER 4: SOCIETY	39
Introduction.....	39
Ethnic and Linguistic Groups	39
Moors.....	39
Black Africans	40
Language Policy	41
Religion.....	42
Gender Issues.....	42
Obesity.....	42
Marriage, Polygamy, and Divorce.....	43
Traditional Clothing.....	43
Arts	44
Music	44
Film.....	45
Sports and Recreation	46
Chapter 4 Assessment.....	47
CHAPTER 5: SECURITY.....	48
Introduction.....	48
U.S.-Mauritanian Relations	48
Relations with Neighboring Countries	50
Morocco/Western Sahara	50
Senegal	51
Mali.....	52
Algeria	53
Military	54
Terrorist Groups and Activities	55
Other Issues Affecting Stability.....	56
Political Instability.....	56
Ethnic Conflict.....	57
Chapter 5 Assessment.....	58
FINAL ASSESSMENT	59
FURTHER READING	61

CHAPTER 1: GEOGRAPHY

Introduction

Desert terrain, marked by a seemingly endless series of parallel sand dunes and barren rocky plateaus, is the enduring image of Mauritania. Its largely inhospitable climate and parched landscape make it the second least densely populated nation in Africa; only Namibia has fewer people per square kilometer.^{1, 2, 3, 4} Most Mauritians live in either the two urban centers on the nation's Atlantic coast or in the far southern area near the border with Senegal. The latter region, the wettest part of Mauritania, is where agricultural crop production is concentrated.⁵ Mauritania's mostly arid lands and offshore coastal regions contain several valuable natural resources, such as iron, copper, gold, and oil, but its most precious resource is that which is most lacking: water.⁶



© John Spooner
Sand Dunes of Mauritania

Geographic Divisions and Topographic Features

Mauritania is a relatively flat country. Only a few isolated peaks and scarp faces at the edge of eroded sandstone plateaus break up the level desert plains.⁷ Higher elevations are clustered in the plateaus that are located inland from the coast. One of the most prominent upland regions is the Adrar Plateau, marked by several spectacular gorges and the nearby, well-preserved remnants of Chinquetti and Oquadane, two caravan towns dating back to the 11th century C.E. that today are part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site.⁸

¹ Central Intelligence Agency, "Country Comparison: Area," in *The World Factbook*, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2147rank.html?countryName=Mauritania&countryCode=mr®ionCode=afr&rank=29#mr>

² Population Reference Bureau, "Population, Health, and Environment Data and Estimates for the Countries and Regions of the World," 2011 World Population Data Sheet, 6–7, http://www.prb.org/pdf11/2011population-data-sheet_eng.pdf

³ The disputed territorial region of Western Sahara also has a lower population density within Africa.

⁴ Carissa Wong, Marlene Roy, and Anantha Kumar Duraiappah, "Chapter 2: State of Ecosystem Services," in *Connecting Poverty and Ecosystem Services: Focus on Mauritania* (Nairobi, Kenya/Manitoba, Canada: United Nations Environment Programme/International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2005), 14, http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2005/economics_poverty_mauritania.pdf

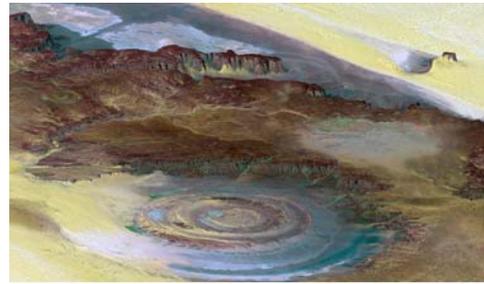
⁵ Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania," Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations, 2006, <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm>

⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania: Geography," in *The World Factbook*, 23 August 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

⁷ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 42.

⁸ UNESCO, "Ancient Ksour of Oquadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt and Oualata," 2011, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/750>

At the northeast end of the Adrar Plateau, near Ouadâne, lies the circular Guelb er Richat, a huge crater-like feature visible from space. Once thought to be the remnant of a meteorite strike, geologists now believe that the Guelb er Richat resulted from the erosion of a geologically uplifted dome structure.⁹ To the northwest of the Adrar Plateau is Kediët Ijill, Mauritania's highest point at 915 m (3,002 ft).¹⁰ Other major plateau regions include the Assâba Plateau near the south central border and the Tagânt Plateau. The oasis of Tidjikka is located on the Tagânt Plateau and is the economic center for the region's date palm plantations.¹¹



Courtesy Wikipedia
Richat Structure, Mauritania

Three quarters of Mauritania consists of desert or semi-desert terrain. This percentage has gradually increased as desertification slowly envelops the Sahel, the transition area between the northern Sahara Desert and the southern wetter regions that form the African savannas.^{12,13} Sand makes up 40% of Mauritania's surface; fixed and shifting sand dunes are found through all regions of the country except at the southern border. Here, the Senegal River forges a narrow valley that provides Mauritania's best agricultural lands.¹⁴

Mauritania's Atlantic coastal region is dry and very flat, with little in the way of vegetation. At the far northern end of the coast the Râs Nouâdhibou peninsula juts out into the Atlantic, creating Dakhlet Nouâdhibou, one of West Africa's largest natural harbors.¹⁵ Mauritania's two largest cities and the country's only ports—Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou—are located along the coastal zone, but little of the coastal area is populated beyond these urban centers.

Climate

The climate is hot and dry, driven by northeastern trade winds that blow most of the year in the country's north.¹⁶ In the late fall and winter months, the trade winds are intensified by the harmattan, a northeastern or eastern wind that flows off the Sahara Desert and frequently brings blinding dust storms.¹⁷ Mauritania is particularly hot during the summer months when highs of

⁹ NASA Earth Observatory, "Richat Structure, Mauritania," 26 June 2002, <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/IOTD/view.php?id=2561>

¹⁰ Peakbagger.com, "Kdyyat ej Joul, Mauritania," 2011, <http://www.peakbagger.com/peak.aspx?pid=11055>

¹¹ Tidjikja.mr, "Tidjikaja: L'Oasis en Bref," 2011, http://tidjikja.mr/oasis_bref.pdf

¹² LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 42.

¹³ Robert E. Gabler et al., "Chapter 9: Low-Latitude and Arid Climate Regions: Desertification," in *Physical Geography*, 9th ed. (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning, 2009), 244–245.

¹⁴ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 43–45.

¹⁵ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 46–47.

¹⁶ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: Land: Climate," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

¹⁷ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Harmattan," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/255457/harmattan>

over 38°C (100°F) are felt in most areas. At the coast, ocean breezes keep temperatures slightly cooler, but the humidity is higher.¹⁸ Within the northern Saharan parts of Mauritania, daily high and low temperatures may fluctuate by as much as 30°C (86°F) because of the lack of heat-trapping vegetation.¹⁹

What little rain that does occur in Mauritania comes during the summer and early fall (mostly between June and October). Southern areas have longer rainy seasons and greater rainfall totals (500–600 mm, 20–24 in) than areas to the north (0–100 mm, 0–4 in).^{20, 21, 22} The rain arrives via southwesterly winds carrying moisture from the South Atlantic, a weather pattern known as the West African monsoon.²³ During the summer months, the interaction between the monsoon winds and the weakened harmattan can produce tornadoes.²⁴

Bodies of Water

The Sénégal River, which forms the boundary between Mauritania and Senegal for about 515 km (320 mi), is Mauritania's only permanent waterway.²⁵ It flows through a valley up to 19 km (12 mi) wide that is completely filled by the river during the flood season. After the flood waters recede, the valley is planted with a variety of crops, such as millet, rice, and vegetables.²⁶ This narrow region of fertile land, known as the Chemama, is the agricultural heartland of Mauritania.²⁷ A dam built at Diama, near the Sénégal River's mouth, keeps salt water from flowing up the river's channel during the dry season.²⁸ All of the Mauritanian stretch of the river



© Joseph Hill
Blinding dust storm

¹⁸ BBC Weather, "Mauritania," 2007,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/weather/hi/country_guides/newsid_9384000/9384159.stm

¹⁹ Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "Geography," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 9.

²⁰ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 42.

²¹ BBC Weather, "Mauritania," 2007,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/weather/hi/country_guides/newsid_9384000/9384159.stm

²² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: Land: Climate," 2011,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

²³ BBC Weather, "Mauritania," 2007,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/weather/hi/country_guides/newsid_9384000/9384159.stm

²⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Harmattan," 2011,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/255457/harmattan>

²⁵ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 46.

²⁶ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Sénégal River," 2011,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/534498/Senegal-River>

²⁷ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 4.

²⁸ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Sénégal River," 2011,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/534498/Senegal-River>

is navigable during the rainy season, and several of the nation's larger towns (Rosso, Bogué, Kaédi) are located along the river.

The Gorgol and Karakoro Rivers are the primary tributaries of the Sénégal River that lie within Mauritania, but neither river flows year-round.²⁹ The Gorgol River enters the Sénégal River near Kaédi and is dammed upstream for irrigation purposes.³⁰ The Karakoro River joins the Sénégal River upstream from the Gorgol River's confluence with the Sénégal, near a point where the boundaries of Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal meet. The Karakoro forms the Mali-Mauritania border for most of its length.



© Christine Vaufrey
Boys at the Senegal River

Mauritania has several lakes, most of which are seasonal and fill up only after flood run-off during the rainy season. Among the larger of these are Lakes Rkiz, Lake d'Aleg, and Mare de Mamoude.³¹ Floodplain lakes are relatively common in the area around the Sénégal River delta; some of these occur in Diawling National Park, which was created in 1991 as an attempt to restore some of the delta habitat that had become overly saline after the construction of the dam at Diama.³²

²⁹ Ministry of Economy and Finance, Islamic Republic of Mauritania, "RAMS Project" Agro-Ecological Zones of Mauritania," 1980, 5, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAM221.pdf

³⁰ R. H. Hughes and J. S. Hughes, "1.3 Mauritania," in *A Directory of African Wetlands* (Cambridge, UK: IUCN/UNEP/WCMC, 1992), 58.

³¹ R. H. Hughes and J. S. Hughes, "1.3 Mauritania," in *A Directory of African Wetlands* (Cambridge, UK: IUCN/UNEP/WCMC, 1992), 50–54.

³² O. Hamerlynck and S. Duval, "Mauritania: Managed Flood Releases and Livelihoods—Lower Delta Senegal River," Associated Programme on Flood Management, January 2004, http://www.apfm.info/pdf/case_studies/mauritania.pdf

Major Cities

City	Census Population 2000 ³³	Population Estimate 2005 ³⁴
Nouakchott	558,195	719,167
Nouâdhibou	72,337	89,772
Rosso	48,922	59,592
Bogué	37,531	49,089
Adel Bagrou	36,007	58,429
Kaédi	34,227	37,616
Zouérate	33,929	37,977
Kiffa	32,716	40,281

Nouakchott

Prior to Mauritanian independence, Nouakchott was a small coastal fishing village near a French fort.^{35, 36} It was chosen as Mauritania's capital primarily because of its central location between the mostly black African population residing in the Sénégal River Valley, and the Arab-Berbers (white Moors) and the descendants of their slaves (black Moors) living in the northern and central interior.^{37, 38} Originally developed to accommodate a population of 15,000, this number has ballooned. In the 1970s severe drought in the Sahara drove a large percentage of Mauritania's nomad population to Nouakchott's fringes.^{39, 40}



© Francois Colin
Streets of Nouakchott

³³ Thomas Brinkhoff, "Mauritania," CityPopulation.de, 21 March 2010, <http://www.citypopulation.de/Mauritania.html>

³⁴ MongaBay.com, "2005 Population Estimates for Cities in Mauritania," 2007, http://www.mongabay.com/igapo/2005_world_city_populations/Mauritania.html

³⁵ Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, "1.1 Nouakchott," in *The Rough Guide to West Africa*, 4th ed. (London, UK: Rough Guides, 2003), 115.

³⁶ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Dickson Eyoh eds., "Nouakchott, Mauritania," in *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century African History* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), 408.

³⁷ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration: The Road to Independence and the Quest for National Unity," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 21.

³⁸ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Dickson Eyoh, eds., "Nouakchott, Mauritania," in *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century African History* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), 408.

³⁹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Nouakchott," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/420822/Nouakchott>

⁴⁰ Anthony Z. Pazzanita, "Nouakchott," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 208.

Nouakchott means “place of the winds” in Hassaniyya, the dialect of Arabic spoken in Mauritania, because the city is prone to extreme windstorms.^{41, 42} Although the city is a port, most of the population live a few kilometers inland because of the propensity for coastal flooding during heavy rains.^{43, 44} Nouakchott’s port is divided into two sections: an older Wharf Quay that grew during the late 1960s through 1977 to handle copper ore shipments from inland mines at Akjoukt, and a much larger Port of Friendship Quay to its south. The latter facility, a deep-water port built with Chinese assistance and operating since 1987, handles about 90% of Mauritania’s imports.⁴⁵

Nouakchott was once relatively isolated from the rest of Mauritania, but paved-road projects constructed during the last few decades have linked the capital to most of the country’s larger cities.⁴⁶ Nouakchott is the nation’s administrative center and hub of higher education. It hosts an international airport that is the gateway for most visitors to Mauritania.^{47, 48}

Until late 2010, all of Nouakchott’s water, a critically vital resource given the city’s parched location, came from an aquifer located 50 km (31 mi) inland from the city. With dated hydraulic equipment designed to serve a city roughly one-tenth the size of modern-day Nouakchott, water was increasingly difficult to supply to the sprawling outlying districts.⁴⁹ In October 2010, water from the Senegal River began flowing into Nouakchott’s water supply system after completion of an ambitious hydrological project.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, leaks in the city’s aging water pipe network have contributed to a rise in an already high water table beneath the city. This has added to the flooding problem in some of Nouakchott’s neighborhoods.⁵¹

⁴¹ Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, “1.1 Nouakchott,” in *The Rough Guide to West Africa*, 4th ed. (London, UK: Rough Guides, 2003), 115.

⁴² Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Dickson Eyoh, eds., “Nouakchott, Mauritania,” in *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century African History* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), 408.

⁴³ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Dickson Eyoh, eds., “Nouakchott, Mauritania,” in *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century African History* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), 408.

⁴⁴ Anthony Ham, “Mauritania,” in *Lonely Planet: West Africa*, 7th ed. (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2009), 548.

⁴⁵ U.S. Embassy Nouakchott, “Mauritania: Country Commercial Guide,” September 2004, 17, http://mauritania.usembassy.gov/uploads/images/jQdHYv3hOhJ_7zm9OBZ4Fg/CCG2004.pdf

⁴⁶ World Food Programme, “Mauritania,” 2010, <http://logistics.wfp.org/country-operations/africa/west/mauritania>

⁴⁷ Anthony Z. Pazzanita, “Nouakchott,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 209.

⁴⁸ USZ University Library, “Profile of the Education System in Mauritania,” n.d., http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/oseas_adsec/mauritania2.htm

⁴⁹ Phyllipe Rekacewicz, United Nations Environmental Programme, “Quenching Thirst in the Urban Sprawl,” *Poverty and Environment Times*, March 2004, 11, <http://www.grida.no/files/publications/environment-times/povertyNo2-section5.pdf>

⁵⁰ SADE, “Mauritania: Aftout-Essahli, a Major Undertaking,” n.d., <http://www.sade-cgth.fr/en/news/focus-on.html>

⁵¹ Med Abderrahmane, “Mauritania Could Lose Capital City to the Ocean,” *Africa Review*, 29 June 2011, <http://www.africareview.com/Special+Reports/Nouakchott+plunges+into+the+sea/-/979182/1191336/-/view/printVersion/-/126orhyz/-/index.html>

Nouâdhibou

Nouâdhibou lies halfway down the Râs Nouâdhibou peninsula near Mauritania's northern border with Western Sahara. Its location on Dakhlet Nouâdhibou, one of West Africa's largest coastal bays, has made it an important port city since the French colonial era, when it was known as Port Étienne.^{52,53} Nouâdhibou is the center of Mauritania's fishing industry. In addition, it plays an even more important economic role as the location from which Mauritania exports its valuable iron ore to steel mills in China and Europe.⁵⁴ A special port facility south of the main part of the city (Port Minéralier) connects Mauritania's only railway to the iron mines located far to the northeast near the town of Zouérate.⁵⁵



© 300td.org / flickr.com
Streets of Nouadhibou

Rosso, Bogué, and Kaédi

Southern Mauritania's three largest cities lie along the Senegal River. Rosso, furthest downstream of the three, is strategically located at a ferry crossing on the main road connecting Nouakchott with the Senegalese capital of Dakar. Until 1987, when Nouakchott's Port of Friendship Quay opened, most of Mauritania's imports passed through Rosso after they were offloaded at Senegalese ports and trucked northward.⁵⁶

Both Bogué and Kaédi are principally market towns for their surrounding agricultural areas and also serve as regional administrative centers.^{57, 58} Kaédi hosts one of Mauritania's most important collections of ancient Islamic scholarly manuscripts and one of two hospitals in the Sénégal River valley.^{59, 60} (The other is in Rosso.)⁶¹ An innovative annex to the Kaédi medical facility,

⁵² Anthony Z. Pazzanita, "Nouadhibou," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 206–207.

⁵³ International Trade Centre, "Trade Performance HS: Export and Imports of Mauritania—26 Ores, Slag and Ash (2009, in USD Thousands)," 2011, <http://legacy.intracen.org/menus/countries.htm?as=%28S%28ghh4fd45wpfyo255q34ptr3k%29%29>

⁵⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Nouâdhibou," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/420820/Nouadhibou>

⁵⁵ Anthony Z. Pazzanita, "Port Minéralier," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 416–417.

⁵⁶ Anthony Z. Pazzanita, "Rosso," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 236.

⁵⁷ Anthony Z. Pazzanita, "Kaedi," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 163.

⁵⁸ Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, "1.2 Southern Mauritania," in *The Rough Guide to West Africa*, 4th ed. (London, UK: Rough Guides, 2003), 124.

⁵⁹ Anthony Z. Pazzanita, "Kaedi," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 163.

⁶⁰ Graziano Krätli, "The Book and the Sand: Restoring and Preserving the Ancient Desert Libraries of Mauritania—Part 2," *World Libraries*, vol. 14, no. 2, Fall 2004, http://www.worlib.org/vol14no2/kratli_v14n2.shtml

⁶¹ Engineering and Consulting Firms Association, Japan/System Science Consultants, Inc, "Preliminary Survey for the Integrated Improvement of Regional Health/Environment in Mauritania: Improvement of Drinking

the hospital was built in the late 1980s, and received the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1995.⁶²

Hazards

Mauritania is a mostly hot, dry country subject to intense dust-laden storms and periodic droughts. During the 1970s and 1980s, a series of severe droughts and below-average rainfall dramatically changed the nation's largely rural economy.⁶³ A large number of Mauritians moved to urban areas—most notably, Nouakchott. The remaining herders, at one time nearly 70% of the nation's population, were forced to move their herds southward to wetter areas, resulting in competition for land resources with the farmers in these regions.⁶⁴ The nomadic culture of these herders increasingly became the exception rather than the norm.⁶⁵



© Jason Finch
Sandy roads in Mauritania

Dust storms were once relatively rare in Mauritania, but their frequency has increased dramatically over the last half century. In the 1960s, only about 2 dust storms a year occurred in Mauritania, but today the country suffers from about 80 such storms each year.⁶⁶ These more frequent dust storms have negatively impacted Mauritania's road system, extending dunes to the south and southwest. These dunes have blocked major transportation arteries, including Mauritania's 1,200 km (750 mi) east-west highway that links Nouakchott with much of the southern part of the country.⁶⁷ By 1991, one quarter of the road's western half, extending from Nouakchott to the interior town of Kiffa, was sanded over.⁶⁸ The annual costs of clearing this sand are significant, and dune stabilization measures have been implemented around some of the road segments near villages and towns, where the threat of sanding is the greatest.⁶⁹

Water/Sanitation/Electricity in the Field of Medical and Health Care," March 2010, 5,
http://www.ecfa.or.jp/japanese/act-pf_jka/H22/molitania_ssc.pdf

⁶² ArchNet.org, "Kaedi Regional Hospital," n.d., http://archnet.org/library/sites/one-site.jsp?site_id=345

⁶³ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 41.

⁶⁴ Peter D. Coats, "Chapter 3: The Economy: The Rural Economy," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 98–101.

⁶⁵ Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "Lifestyle," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 79.

⁶⁶ Lester R. Brown, "Chapter 5: Natural Systems Under Stress: Losing Soil," in *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble* (Washington, DC: Earth Policy Institute, 2006), http://www.earth-policy.org/books/pb2/pb2ch5_ss3

⁶⁷ A. M. Jensen and M. S. Hajej, "The Road of Hope: Control of Moving Sand Dunes in Mauritania," 2001, *Unasylva* 207, vol. 52, 31–33, <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/004/y2795e/y2795e02.pdf>

⁶⁸ A. M. Jensen and M. S. Hajej, "The Road of Hope: Control of Moving Sand Dunes in Mauritania," 2001, *Unasylva* 207, vol. 52, 32, <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/004/y2795e/y2795e02.pdf>

⁶⁹ A. M. Jensen and M. S. Hajej, "The Road of Hope: Control of Moving Sand Dunes in Mauritania," 2001, *Unasylva* 207, vol. 52, 35, <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/004/y2795e/y2795e02.pdf>

Environmental Issues

Mauritania has become a classic case study of the global problem of desertification. The nation's numerous droughts in the 1970s and 1980s did not, by themselves, lead to desertification.⁷⁰ Overgrazing of the sparse vegetation that helped protect the fragile soil of Mauritania's arid and semiarid regions also contributed.⁷¹ In addition, much of Mauritania's southern forest cover has been cleared for farmland or used for fuel.⁷² Between 1990 and 2005, Mauritania lost almost 36% of its already limited forest cover.⁷³



© United Nations
Village struck by drought

Working in concert with nongovernmental agencies the government has embraced several land rehabilitation projects. Outside Nouakchott, semi-permeable wooden fences have been erected to create artificial, nonmigrating dunes. Once the dunes have been confined by the fences, they are planted with indigenous drought-tolerant trees and other vegetation to provide further sand stabilization and increased wind blockage. The result is a "green belt" designed to halt the westward spread of sand into the city.^{74,75}

Soil erosion and periodic locust infestations are additional problems that hinder Mauritania's agricultural output. Wind is the primary agent of soil erosion, assisted by poor farming and grazing practices that increase the susceptibility of the soil to wind.^{76,77}

Heavy rainfall during wet years can create conditions favorable for the breeding of desert locusts, which may ultimately form large swarms that destroy all vegetation in their wake.⁷⁸ Locust invasions in 2004 and 2005 caused serious crop losses in Mauritania, triggering a major food

⁷⁰ United States Geological Survey, "Desertification," 29 October 1997, <http://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/deserts/desertification/>

⁷¹ H.E. Dregne, "Desertification of Arid Lands," in *Physics of Desertification* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus, Nijhoff, 1886), <http://www.ciesin.columbia.edu/docs/002-193/002-193.html>

⁷² Carissa Wong, Marlene Roy, and Anantha Kumar Duraiahappah, "Chapter 2: State of Ecosystem Services," in *Connecting Poverty and Ecosystem Services: Focus on Mauritania* (Nairobi, Kenya/Manitoba, Canada: United Nations Environment Programme/International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2005), 17, http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2005/economics_poverty_mauritania.pdf

⁷³ MongaBay.com, "Mauritania," 2006, <http://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/archive/Mauritania.htm>

⁷⁴ Molly Theobald, "Innovation of the Week: Putting a Stop to the Spreading Sands," WorldWatch, n.d., <http://blogs.worldwatch.org/nourishingtheplanet/innovation-of-the-week-putting-a-stop-to-the-spreading-sands/>

⁷⁵ Charles Jacques Berte, "Chapter 4: An Experience in Sand Dune Fixation: Rehabilitating and Extending the Nouakchott Green Belt," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2010, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/i1488e/i1488e05.pdf>

⁷⁶ Lester R. Brown, "Why Healthy Soil Matters to Civilization," *The Futurist* (July/August 2011): 2, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go2133/is_201107/ai_n57807833/?tag=content:coll

⁷⁷ William S. Ellis, "Africa's Sahel: The Stricken Land," *National Geographic*, August 1987, 144.

⁷⁸ IRIN, "Mauritania: Peasants Overwhelmed by Locust Invasion, Resigned to Destruction," 21 September 2004, <http://208.106.251.104/Report.aspx?ReportID=51441>

deficit.⁷⁹ A potential repeat invasion in late 2009 was fortunately headed off through targeted pesticide spraying at a very early stage of the outbreak.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Carissa Wong, Marlene Roy, and Anantha Kumar Duraiappah, “Chapter 2: State of Ecosystem Services,” in *Connecting Poverty and Ecosystem Services: Focus on Mauritania* (Nairobi, Kenya/Manitoba, Canada: United Nations Environment Programme/International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2005), 14, http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2005/economics_poverty_mauritania.pdf

⁸⁰ World Bank, “Improved Ways to Prevent the Desert Locust in Mauritania and the Sahel,” 7 January 2010, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/0,,contentMDK:22433986~pagePK:146736~piPK:226340~theSitePK:258644,00.html>

Chapter 1 Assessment

1. Mauritania's Atlantic coastline offers no natural harbor areas.

FALSE

At the far northern end of the Mauritanian coast is the Râs Nouâdhibou peninsula, which juts out into the Atlantic, creating Dakhlet Nouâdhibou, one of West Africa's largest natural harbors.

2. Most of Mauritania's rainfall comes during the winter.

FALSE

What little rain that does occur in Mauritania comes during the summer and early fall months (mostly between June and October).

3. Iron ore, Mauritania's top export, is shipped to other countries through the port at Nouakchott.

FALSE

Mauritania exports iron ore from its port in Nouâdhibou.

4. Dakar, Senegal's capital, and Nouakchott are connected by road via a river ferry that crosses into Senegal from the Mauritanian city of Rosso.

TRUE

Rosso is strategically located at a ferry crossing on the main road connecting Nouakchott with the Senegalese capital of Dakar.

5. Desertification is one of Mauritania's challenging environmental problems.

TRUE

Droughts, overgrazing, and elimination of forest cover have all contributed to the southward expansion of the nation's deserts.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORY

Introduction

The country of Mauritania, like so many African nations, is a colonial construct. Its modern borders were defined by European treaties and the decisions of French administrators rather than by the territories of local peoples. Modern Mauritania has one foot in the Arabized regions of North Africa and one foot in the western sub-Saharan, where wealthy ancient black kingdoms thrived during the Middle Ages. Since gaining independence in 1960, the country has been challenged by ethnic clashes within its borders, regional fighting involving neighboring nations, and a string of military backed coups.^{81, 82, 83, 84}



© Magharebia / flickr.com
Celebrating Independence

The Western Sahara: Migrations and Trade

Much of modern-day Mauritania consists of the Sahara Desert, one of the more inhospitable areas to human habitation on Earth. Thousands of years ago, however, the climate of the Sahara region was considerably different. Grasslands and rivers predominated, supporting populations of large mammals such as elephants and hippopotamuses.⁸⁵ Agriculture and livestock herding took place in areas that today support little or no vegetation.



© Fred Lam
Camels in the desert

After the end of the last Ice Age about 10,000 years ago, Mauritania slowly became more arid.⁸⁶ The Bafours, a group of hunter-gatherers and fishermen lived in the region until around the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. They are believed to be the ancestors of the small Imraguen ethnic group

⁸¹ Howard W. French, “Dagana Journal; Where Proud Moors Rule, Blacks Are Outcasts,” *New York Times*, 11 January 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/11/world/dagana-journal-where-proud-moors-rule-blacks-are-outcasts.html?ref=mauritania>

⁸² Kenneth B. Noble, “Rosso Journal; Age-Old Hatred Burns as Hot as the Desert Sun,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/20/world/rosso-journal-age-old-hatred-burns-as-hot-as-the-desert-sun.html?ref=mauritania>

⁸³ Lyda Polgreen, “Army Officers Seize Power in Mauritania,” *New York Times*, 6 August 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/world/africa/07mauritania.html?ref=mauritania>

⁸⁴ *New York Times*, “Rebels Battle Loyalists in Mauritania’s Capital,” 9 June 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/09/world/rebels-battle-loyalists-in-mauritania-s-capital.html?ref=mauritania>

⁸⁵ Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, “History,” in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 23–24.

⁸⁶ Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, “History,” in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 23–24.

who continue in modern times to fish for a living along Mauritania's northern coast,⁸⁷ Around the 4th century, Berber tribespeople entered from North Africa and forced most of the remaining Bafours southward.⁸⁸ The Berbers (also known as the Imazighen) are thought to have pushed south in search of pasture lands for their herds and/or to avoid the Carthaginians who were uprooting the Berber tribes along the North African coast at the time.^{89, 90} More Berbers arrived in the Mauritanian deserts during the 7th and 8th centuries as Arab armies invaded the Maghreb (i.e., western North Africa).

The Berbers brought camels and used them to establish extensive trans-Saharan caravan trade routes between the northern trading center of Sijilmasa (located in modern-day southeastern Morocco) and Koumbi Saleh, the capital of the Ghana Empire.^{91, 92} The latter locality, which lay near modern-day Mauritania's southeastern border with Mali, was a large cosmopolitan city from which the gold, ivory, and slaves of the south were sent northward in exchange for salt, copper, and various other goods.^{93, 94} Several Mauritanian villages located along the Saharan caravan routes became important trading and religious centers. Four of them (Oualâta, Tîchît, Ouadâne, and Chinguetti), all founded in the 11th and 12th centuries, were honored as UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1996.⁹⁵ Their ruins are part of Mauritania's fabled legacy of Saharan trade routes from the Middle Ages.

The Sanhadja Confederation and the Almoravids

Three of the dominant Berber groups in Mauritania joined forces to form the Sanhadja Confederation during the 8th century. The Confederation was a highly lucrative trading operation that survived for several centuries. But, divisions arose between the nomadic Berbers who carried out the trade and the urban, sedentary merchants who managed it. Some of these

⁸⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Imraguen," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 264.

⁸⁸ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Early History," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 6.

⁸⁹ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Early History," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 6.

⁹⁰ Anthony Ham, Anthony Sattin, and Nana Luckham, "History: The Phoenecian Foothold," in *Lonely Planet: Algeria* (Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2007), 24.

⁹¹ Although it shares the same name, the modern country of Ghana is located hundreds of miles to the southeast of where the Ghana Empire was centered.

⁹² Pekka Masonen, "Trans-Saharan Trade and the West African Discovery of the Mediterranean World," University of Tampere, 19–22 June 1995, <http://www.smi.uib.no/paj/Masonen.html>

⁹³ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Sanhadja Confederation," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 6–7.

⁹⁴ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Koumbi Saleh," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 287–288.

⁹⁵ UNESCO, World Heritage Convention, "Ancient Ksour of Oudane, Chinguetti, Tichitt, and Oualata," n.d., <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/750/>

differences were religious. The nomadic Berbers retained much of their traditional religious beliefs, whereas the merchants were generally strongly adherent Muslims.^{96, 97}

The religious division between elements of the Sanhadja Confederation sparked a remarkable, if short-lived, political movement during the early 11th century.

Around 1039, Abdallah ibn Yassin, a Berber Islamic theologian, was recruited by the chief of the Djodala (one of the Sanhadja Berber groups) to help instill a more orthodox practice of Islam among the other Sanhadja Berbers.⁹⁸ Ibn Yassin's austere form of Islam was far from wholeheartedly embraced by the Djodala. After a

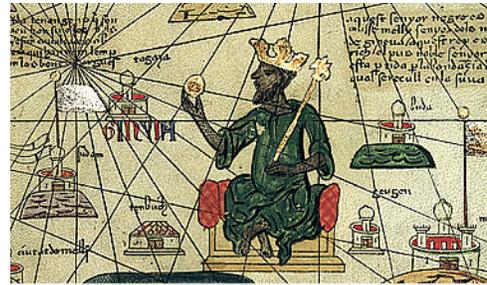
few years on a religious retreat with his followers, a period in which new adherents were recruited and armaments were secured, Ibn Yassin returned to the Sanhadja lands with a vengeance. He and his army quickly brought all the Sanhadja Berber groups under submission and forced them to reject their "heretical" religious beliefs. By 1054, Ibn Yassin's followers, known as the Almoravids (or *murabitun*), had conquered the northern city of Sijlmasa.⁹⁹ Ultimately, the Almoravid Empire, under the leaders who followed Ibn Yassin after his death in 1059, encompassed virtually all of modern-day Mauritania, Morocco, and Western Sahara and parts of Algeria, Mali, and Spain.



© Christophe André
12th Century writing

The Sudanic Kingdoms

Today, the term "Sudan" is usually connected with the country in eastern Africa, but traditionally it has referred to the African region immediately south of the Sahara and north of the tropical forests. To the Arabs, this region was known as *bilad al-sudan*, or "land of the blacks." In the western portion of the Sudan, three great kingdoms flourished between the 8th and 16th centuries, all of which claimed part of modern-day southern Mauritania during their heights.¹⁰⁰



Courtesy Wikipedia
Mansa Musa Mali Empire

The first of these Sudanic kingdoms was the Ghana Empire, which thrived during the early period of the trans-Saharan trade routes but began to decline during the Almoravid period. The

⁹⁶ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Sanhadja Confederation," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 6.

⁹⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Berbers," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 98.

⁹⁸ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Almoravids," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 7.

⁹⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Aoudaghost," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 64.

¹⁰⁰ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Sudanic Empires and Kingdoms," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 8–9.

Almoravids sacked Koumbi Saleh, Ghana's capital in 1076, marking the beginning of the end for that once-storied trading center.¹⁰¹

During the first half of the 13th century, the Mali Empire began its ascendancy under the Mandé leader Sundiata, eventually subsuming the remnants of the Ghana Empire.¹⁰² Timbuktu, a famed center of Islamic learning and commercial trade, became the new principal terminus of the trans-Saharan trade routes.¹⁰³ The Mali Empire began to decline in the late 14th century, about the time that the Songhai Empire began to expand.

The Songhai Kingdom, whose capital was Gao on the Niger River, never reached as far west into modern-day Mauritania as the Mali and Ghana empires had.¹⁰⁴ Its end came in the late 16th century following a disastrous invasion by the forces of the Moroccan Saadi Dynasty.^{105, 106}

Arabs and Moors

The Almoravid Dynasty rapidly declined during the 12th century. In its wake, Berber and Sudanic dynasties vied for power in Mauritania. Meanwhile, Arab invaders began to make incursions into the region from the north, sparking both Berber resistance and increasing Berber migration to southern regions. Black Mauritians, in turn, pushed southward beyond the Sénégal River valley as the Berbers entered their traditional lands. Those black Mauritians who remained behind often were forced into slavery.¹⁰⁷



Courtesy Wikipedia
Arab Slavers

Foremost among the Arab armies entering Mauritania were the Beni Hassan (also known as Maqil Arabs), a tribal people believed to have originated from Yemen in the southern Arabian Peninsula. As the Berber groups of the former Sanhadjan Confederation found themselves under the domination of the Beni Hassan, their resistance culminated in a period of extended warfare.

¹⁰¹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Koumbi Saleh," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 287–288.

¹⁰² Kari A. Staros, "Route to Glory: The Developments of the Trans-Saharan and Trans-Mediterranean Trade Routes" (honors thesis, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1 May 1996), 7, http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1078&context=uhp_theses

¹⁰³ Kari A. Staros, "Route to Glory: The Developments of the Trans-Saharan and Trans-Mediterranean Trade Routes" (honors thesis, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1 May 1996), 9, http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1078&context=uhp_theses

¹⁰⁴ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Sudanic Empires and Kingdoms," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 10.

¹⁰⁵ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Sudanic Empires and Kingdoms," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 9.

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Michel, "The Invasion of Morocco in 1591 and the Saadian Dynasty," University of Pennsylvania African Studies Center, 1 December 1995, http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/morco_1591.html

¹⁰⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Beni Hassan," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 96–97.

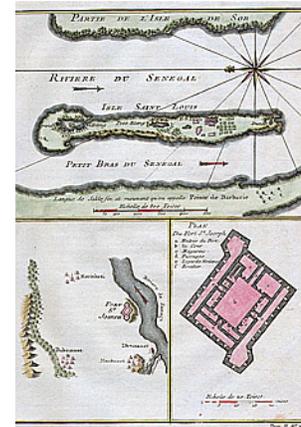
The Char Bobha, or 30 Years' War, took place between 1644 and 1674. It marked the end of the Berbers' attempts to push the Arabs out of Mauritania.¹⁰⁸

The conquering Arabs established a new social order in the region now known as Mauritania. Under this order, the Beni Hassan Arab warriors (*hassan*) held the top rung, followed by Berber tribes whose members became Muslim clerics (*zawiya*). Below these two groups were the *znaga*, or Berber vassal class, who were forced to pay exorbitant tribute to the *hassan*. Finally, at the bottom of the social hierarchy were the *haratines*, former slaves and their descendants. Collectively, these Arab-Berbers and blacks living in Mauritania's north came to be known as Moors (or, alternatively, Maures). The *haratines* were sometimes distinguished as "black Moors," opposed to the other "white Moor" (*beydane*) classes.^{109, 110}

Early European Contacts

Mauritania was far from immune to the European voyages of exploration along the African coast between the 15th and 17th centuries. The Portuguese arrived first, in about 1445, establishing a trading post at Arguin Island, located south of modern-day Nouadhibou. The trade at Arguin included gold, fish, gum arabic (extracted from the acacia tree), and slaves. As such, Arguin was the first European slave-trading harbor on the West African coast.^{111, 112} The trading post and accompanying fortress changed hands often over the next 250 years, with the Spanish, French, Germans, and Dutch all taking turns trying to wring modest profits from the increasingly remote outpost.¹¹³

Much of the local slave and gum trade moved southward during the 17th century to the French port of Saint-Louis, located at the mouth of the Sénégal River in what is today the country of Senegal. The French traders at Saint-Louis had little contact with the inland Moors north of the Sénégal River and the black tribespeople along the river except during trade discussions at the coastal port.¹¹⁴ In 1814, with the Treaty of Paris, France gained exclusive colonial "rights" to the coastal region of modern-day Mauritania and Senegal, but French interest in the area north of



Courtesy Wikipedia
Saint-Louis
nautical chart 1747

¹⁰⁸ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Beni Hassan," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 96–97.

¹⁰⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Moor/Moorish," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–353.

¹¹⁰ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Beydane," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 99.

¹¹¹ Marco Ramerini, "Arguin: A Portuguese Fort in Mauritania," n.d., <http://www.colonialvoyage.com/eng/africa/mauritania/arguin.html>

¹¹² Hugh Thomas, "Chapter 17: Slave Harbors I," in *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1870* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 333.

¹¹³ Hugh Thomas, "Chapter 17: Slave Harbors I," in *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1870* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 333.

¹¹⁴ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 12.

the Sénégal River was minimal.¹¹⁵ Only an attack on Saint-Louis in 1825 by Muhammad al-Habib, the emir of Trarza, broke the general mood of indifference toward the Mauritanian lands.¹¹⁶

French Pacification of Mauritania

In 1840 the French government declared Senegal (including the Mauritanian lands north of the Sénégal River) a permanent French possession.¹¹⁷ Louis Faidherbe was appointed governor of Senegal in 1854 with the mandate to secure the safety of the southern side of the Sénégal River from any further raids by the Moors on the northern side of the river.¹¹⁸ A year later, the armies of the emirs of Trarza and Brakna again unsuccessfully attacked Saint-Louis.¹¹⁹ After holding off the Moorish siege of Saint-Louis, the French went on the offensive, defeating the Trarza and Brakna forces in 1856. The conflict ended with a treaty granting the French protectorate status over the Trarza and Brakna emirates.¹²⁰



Courtesy Wikipedia
Louis Faidherbe

Beginning in 1901, the French government began exploiting social divisions among the Moors by using strategic alliances to pit regions and tribes against each other. Within three years, the emirates of Trarza, Brakna, and Tagant were firmly under French control.¹²¹ Resistance in the Adrar emirate, the most independent of the Mauritanian regions, only subsided after a French military campaign in 1909. By 1912, all of southern Mauritania was pacified. Foremost among the “winners” in this French campaign were the *zawiya* (or “marabouts,” as they were called by the French), who now found themselves at the top of the new Moor social order.¹²²

¹¹⁵ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Introduction: ‘Pacification’ and French Colonial Rule,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 4.

¹¹⁶ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–353.

¹¹⁷ Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, “History,” in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 28.

¹¹⁸ Rachel Warner, “Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 12.

¹¹⁹ Trarza and Brakna were the two emirates bordering the downstream stretch of the Sénégal River, closest to Saint-Louis and the French.

¹²⁰ Rachel Warner, “Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 12–13.

¹²¹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Introduction: ‘Pacification’ and French Colonial Rule,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 4.

¹²² Rachel Warner, “Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration: Pacification,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 14–15.

The Later French Colonial Era

Beginning in 1904, France formally recognized Mauritania as a civil territory separate from Senegal.¹²³ This distinction between the two was particularly important more than 50 years later when France's French West African colonies splintered into new independent nations. Overall, Mauritania once again returned to a state of general colonial neglect.



Courtesy Wikipedia
French West Africa 1955

In 1920, Mauritania became part of French West Africa, the collective federation of seven French colonies in that part of Africa.¹²⁴ Yet, it remained virtually undeveloped relative to the other parts of French West Africa until after World War II. In 1946, the new constitution of the French Fourth Republic established the French West Africa colonies as overseas territories of France, thus more tightly integrating them into the French Union. That year, Mauritania held its first election for a seat in the French National Assembly. The election was won by Horma Ould Babana, a member of the socialist Mauritanian Entente political party, who proved a disappointment; after a series of political defeats he became the Mauritanian figurehead for the "Greater Morocco" movement. In 1956 Ould Babana and several of his followers left for exile in Morocco, never to return to Mauritania.¹²⁵

Also in 1956, the French National Assembly passed the Overseas Reform Act (Loi-Cadre), a reform law that granted greater local governance rights to French territories and ensured more open elections. With this act, the eventual independence of the French West African colonies became increasingly likely. Mauritania, however, could hardly have been less prepared for independence. The colony was ethnically and culturally divided between the Moors (both white and black), who combined made up about two-thirds of the population, and the remaining one-third who were ethnically linked to the black African tribes of Senegal and Mali.¹²⁶ Many of the northern Moors favored Mauritania's consolidation with Morocco, an action promoted by Morocco's King Hassan II. By comparison, many Mauritanian blacks in the south favored that their region secede from Mauritania and join the Mali Federation, a short-lived union between Senegal and French Sudan (today known as the Republic of Mali).¹²⁷

¹²³ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration: French Administration Through World War II," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 16.

¹²⁴ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration: Pacification," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 15.

¹²⁵ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Horma Ould Babana," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 4.

¹²⁶ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration: The Road to Independence and the Quest for National Unity," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 21.

¹²⁷ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: French Colonial Administration: The Road to Independence and the Quest for National Unity," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 22.

Independence and Unification

Mauritania's first government was established in 1957. It was led by Moktar Ould Daddah, a member of a *zawiya* tribe in Trarza. One of Daddah's strengths was consensus-building, and he quickly reached out to all the ethnic and regional groups in Mauritania. One early symbolic action in this regard was the decision to establish Mauritania's capital in Nouakchott, a small village located along the central coast with no prior strong connections with either of the nation's two major ethnic groups.¹²⁸



Courtesy Wikipedia
Moktar Ould Daddah

Mauritania's independence came on 28 November 1960, when the country became the world's first Islamic republic.¹²⁹ Daddah faced no opposition in a presidential election held in August 1961 under the nation's newly drafted constitution. Four months later the new nation's political parties unified under the banner of a sole legal party—the Mauritanian People's Party (PPM).¹³⁰ The nation's first National Assembly closely reflected the nation's ethnic make-up, consisting of 10 blacks and 20 Moors.¹³¹

Although national unity marked Mauritania's independence, it was strained during the 1960s. Hassaniyya Arabic (the dialect of Arabic spoken by Mauritania's Moors) was made a compulsory language of study in secondary schools and one of the nation's two official languages. (The other was French.) This "Arabization" policy rankled many of Mauritania's blacks, who spoke their own languages, and sparked strikes in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This led to the formation of underground political parties favoring independent unions not tied to the PPM.^{132, 133}

The Western Sahara Conflict

Daddah's most glaring miscalculation, one that ultimately led to his downfall, was his decision to involve Mauritania in a dispute over the Western Sahara. By 1975, only a handful of European colonies had not gained independence. The only one of these remaining colonies in West Africa was Spanish Sahara, an arid region lodged between Morocco and Mauritania that was valued because of its extensive phosphate deposits. The inhabitants of this sparsely populated land were

¹²⁸ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Aleg, Congress of (May 1958)," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 55.

¹²⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Introduction: The First Three Decades of Independence," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 6.

¹³⁰ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Independence and Civilian Rule," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 24.

¹³¹ Etagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "History," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 33.

¹³² Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Independence and Civilian Rule: Emerging Tensions," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 25.

¹³³ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Independence and Civilian Rule: Emerging Tensions," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 25.

the Sahrawi, a nomadic people who (like the Moors) speak the Hassaniyya dialect of Arabic.¹³⁴ Both Mauritania and especially Morocco had designs on the Saharan territory, which by the mid-1970s Spain seemed increasingly willing to give up.¹³⁵ In November 1975, after Morocco's King Hassan II ordered a march of 300,000 unarmed Moroccans into Spanish Sahara, the three countries signed the secret Madrid Agreements. Under the agreement the northern two-thirds of the territory was granted to Morocco and the southern one-third to Mauritania.^{136, 137}

Previous to the Agreements, in 1973, anti-colonialist sentiment within Western Sahara sparked some of the indigenous Sahrawis to form the Polisario Front.¹³⁸ This organization initially fought against Spanish control of the Western Sahara region and later targeted Morocco and Mauritania after the signing of the Madrid Agreements. Daddah seemingly misread the threat posed by the Polisario Front, which immediately began a guerilla war against militarily weak Mauritania that dragged on for more than three years.¹³⁹ Mauritania was forced to increase its armed forces from 3,000 to 15,000 during this period, a rapid escalation that the nation's limited economy could not afford, especially when Polisario attacks began to focus on Mauritania's economically vital iron mines at Zouérate and Nouakchott.¹⁴⁰



© Western Sahara / flickr.com
Sahrawis war museum

As the Western Sahara war grew increasingly unpopular in Mauritania, Daddah's relations with his senior military command frayed. In February 1978, he appointed Colonel Mustapha Ould Salek as his new army chief. Four months later, Salek and a group of junior military officers overthrew Daddah in a bloodless coup, thus ushering in 14 years of military leadership in Mauritania.^{141, 142}

¹³⁴ M. Paul Lewis, ed., "Hassaniyya," in *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 16th ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2009), http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=mey

¹³⁵ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Conflict in the Western Sahara," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 27.

¹³⁶ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Conflict in the Western Sahara: Background to Mauritanian Policy: Madrid Agreements," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 29–30.

¹³⁷ BBC, "Regions and Territories: Western Sahara," 9 November 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/3466917.stm

¹³⁸ BBC, "Regions and Territories: Western Sahara," 9 November 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/3466917.stm

¹³⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Frente Popular par al Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Polisario Front)," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 221–223.

¹⁴⁰ Etagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "History," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 35.

¹⁴¹ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Conflict in the Western Sahara: Background to Mauritanian Policy: Overthrow of the Ould Duddah Madrid Agreement," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 29–30.

¹⁴² Roberto Ortiz de Záarate, "Leaders of Mauritania," Terra.es, 2009, <http://www.terra.es/personal2/monolith/mauritan.htm>

The Salek and Haidalla Regimes

Salek became leader of a new 20-man military regime known as the Military Committee for National Recovery (CMRN;), but he was unsuccessful in extracting Mauritania from the Western Sahara conflict. Salek's desire for a comprehensive agreement that included both Morocco and the Polisario Front also proved infeasible, given Morocco's resistance to a settlement.¹⁴³ He also showed bias toward Moors in his appointments to a National Consultative Council, which contributed to increasing ethnic tensions during the early months of 1979.¹⁴⁴



© Magharebia / flickr.com
Mohammed Haidalla, Mauritania 1983

Less than a year after taking power in a coup, Salek was removed from office by fellow military officers in April 1979. The reshuffled governing military committee, renamed the Military Committee for National Salvation (CMSN), was controlled by Colonel Mohammed Khouna Ould Haidalla. Under Haidalla, the CMSN government took a less pro-Moroccan stance. In August 1979, Mauritania signed the Algiers Agreement in which it abandoned all territorial claims to Western Sahara.¹⁴⁵ This was followed by a January 1980 declaration by Haidalla that Mauritania would henceforth be neutral in the ongoing conflict between the Polisario Front and Morocco.¹⁴⁶

Haidalla also took steps to address the complaints of black Mauritians. Slavery was declared illegal in Mauritania in November 1981, although this was not the first time that such a ban had been announced. In addition, the Arabization policy in schools was relaxed to allow usage of sub-Saharan languages for instruction at the primary and secondary levels.¹⁴⁷ Haidalla also briefly brought in civilian members to the governmental cabinet. But strict military control of the government was reinstated after a March 1981 coup attempt (one of several during Haidalla's regime) by members of a pro-Moroccan opposition group.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Downfall of Ould Salek," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 32–33.

¹⁴⁴ Kate Bullard, "Chapter 5: National Security: Public Order and Internal Security: Internal Security Threats," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 179.

¹⁴⁵ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Mohammed Khouna Ould Heydallah," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 333–334.

¹⁴⁶ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Consolidation of Power," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 34.

¹⁴⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Mohammed Khouna Ould Heydallah," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 333–334.

¹⁴⁸ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: Consolidation of Power," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 34.

By early 1984, Haidalla's frequent purges and increasingly autocratic behavior had left him with few allies and little popular support.¹⁴⁹ In December of that year, while he was out of the country attending a conference in Burundi, Haidalla's reign ended in a bloodless military-led coup.¹⁵⁰

Mauritania Under Taya

Maaouya Ould Ahmed Taya, Haidalla's successor, had served as prime minister and minister of defense under Haidalla after the 1981 coup attempt. He served in those roles until 1984, when he was ousted in one of Haidalla's increasingly frequent government reshufflings. Taya subsequently came to power after leading the December 1984 coup against Haidalla. He retained his position as leader of Mauritania for more than two decades.



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After the coup

The early years of Taya's leadership were challenging.

An ongoing epic drought reached its peak in 1987, completely changing the fabric of Mauritanian life. The largely nomadic culture of the mid-1960s (73% of the population was nomadic in 1965) became primarily sedentary in just one generation's time (12% nomadic in 1988).¹⁵¹ Only large amounts of foreign food aid kept many Mauritians from starvation during this time.¹⁵² Ethnic tensions between Mauritania's black population and the *beydane* (white) Moors continued, enflamed in 1989–1990 by a conflict between Senegal and Mauritania. The Sengalese-Mauritanian conflict was sparked by a grazing-rights dispute in the border region that eventually resulted in tens of thousands of black Mauritians fleeing to Senegal. In some cases black Mauritians were deported by government officials and hundreds were killed in rioting and in targeted attacks on immigrant communities.^{153, 154, 155}

In 1992, Taya dissolved the CMSN, formed an almost completely civilian cabinet, and inaugurated what he called the "Second Republic." These actions followed the 1991 passing of a referendum on a new constitution allowing for multiparty elections. The first elections for

¹⁴⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Mohammed Khouna Ould Heydallah," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 334.

¹⁵⁰ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: The Haidalla Regime: Political Disintegration," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 32.

¹⁵¹ A. M. Jensen and M. S. Hajej, "The Road of Hope: Control of Moving Sand Dunes in Mauritania," *Unasylva* 207, vol. 52 (2001): 32, <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/004/y2795e/y2795e02.pdf>

¹⁵² Edward Schumacher, "Drought Turns Nomads' World Upside Down," *New York Times*, 2 March 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/03/02/world/drought-turns-nomads-world-upside-down.html?ref=mauritania>

¹⁵³ Howard W. French, "Dagana Journal; Where Proud Moors Rule, Blacks Are Outcasts," *New York Times*, 11 January 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/11/world/dagana-journal-where-proud-moors-rule-blacks-are-outcasts.html?ref=mauritania>

¹⁵⁴ Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "History," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 38.

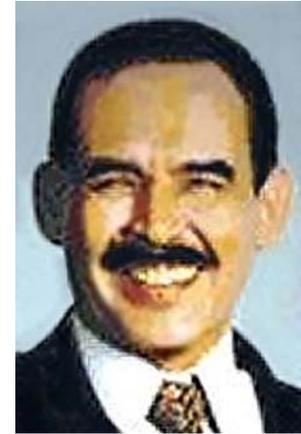
¹⁵⁵ Kenneth B. Noble, "Rosso Journal; Age-Old Hatred Burns as Hot as the Desert Sun," *New York Times*, 20 September 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/20/world/rosso-journal-age-old-hatred-burns-as-hot-as-the-desert-sun.html?ref=mauritania>

president were held in 1992, with Taya defeating Ahmed Ould Daddah, the younger brother of Mauritania's first president, by a convincing margin.^{156, 157}

Taya's political party subsequently won a large majority in national elections held thereafter, providing him with the mandate needed to demilitarize the government. Taya later was reelected president in 1997 and 2003, although the 1997 election was boycotted by the main opposition parties. Taya's primary 2003 challenger, former Mauritanian leader Mohammed Khouna Ould Haidalla, was jailed the day prior to the election.^{158, 159} Several opposition political parties were also banned prior to the 2003 election.¹⁶⁰

The Fall of Taya

Even before his controversial election win in November 2003, there were clear signs that Taya's regime was in trouble. Reports of repressive governmental actions were on the rise and military morale was low, a result of underfunding and frequent top personnel changes. In addition, the effects of corruption and political favoritism were being felt by all segments of society.¹⁶¹ Several of Taya's foreign policy decisions, including Mauritania's diplomatic recognition of Israel in 1999 and the nation's increasingly close ties with the United States, were unpopular among diverse elements of the Mauritanian political spectrum.^{162, 163, 164} A violent coup attempt in June 2003 narrowly failed and resulted in the death of the army's chief of staff.^{165, 166}



Courtesy Wikipedia
President Taya

¹⁵⁶ African Elections Database, "Elections in Mauritania," 8 August 2011, http://africanelections.tripod.com/mr.html#1961_Presidential_Election

¹⁵⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Maouiya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 312.

¹⁵⁸ African Elections Database, "Elections in Mauritania," 8 August 2011, http://africanelections.tripod.com/mr.html#1961_Presidential_Election

¹⁵⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Mohammed Khouna Ould Heydallah," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 336.

¹⁶⁰ Rawiya Tawfiq, "Mauritania: Another Coup d'Etat," *The International Politics Journal*, October 2005, <http://www.mafhoum.com/press9/254P8.htm>

¹⁶¹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Maouiya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 312.

¹⁶² Mauritania became the third Arab nation to recognize Israel, following Egypt and Jordan, who signed peace treaties with Israel in 1979 and 1994, respectively. Mauritania subsequently broke off its ties with Israel in 2010. See Voice of America, "Mauritania Affirms Break With Israel," 21 March 2010, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/middle-east/Mauritania-Affirms-Break-with-Israel-88763857.html>

¹⁶³ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Maouiya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 315.

¹⁶⁴ Associated Press, "Mauritania Frees Political Prisoners Jailed by Ousted Leader," *New York Times*, September 2005, 3, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/03/international/africa/03mauritania.html?ref=mauritania>

¹⁶⁵ *New York Times*, "Rebels Battle Loyalists in Mauritania's Capital," 9 June 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/09/world/rebels-battle-loyalists-in-mauritania-s-capital.html?ref=mauritania>

In August 2005 Taya was removed from office while attending a funeral in Saudi Arabia. Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall and Colonel Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, two prominent insiders within the Taya regime, led the overthrow. Vall, at the time of the coup, was Mauritania's long-time director of national security; Aziz was the commander of the Presidential Security Battalion, which had played a major role in putting down the 2003 coup attempt against Taya.^{167, 168} Vall, as leader of the new Military Council for Justice and Democracy (CMJD), promised that the new military government would not remain in power more than two years and would clear the way for new elections of a civilian government.¹⁶⁹

The Third Republic

In late 2006, Mauritania had its first National Assembly elections since the coup, followed by a presidential election in March 2007 won in a closely contested runoff by Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. The 2007 election was judged free and fair by international observers and it ushered in what came to be known as Mauritania's Third Republic.^{170,}

¹⁷¹After Abdallahi took office, several measures addressed Mauritania's ethnic divide. Stronger criminalization laws against slavery were passed, and repatriation began for the 24,000 or so remaining black Mauritanian refugees who either fled or were expelled to Senegal during the 1989–1990 conflict between the two countries.^{172, 173,}

Unfortunately for Abdallahi's fledgling regime, food prices began to spike at the end of 2007 in the wake of a poor year for domestic food crops. Some of Mauritania's rural areas soon faced near-famine conditions. Riots ensued over the high prices for food and other commodities, weakening Abdallahi politically. In addition, concerns about both corruption and some of Abdallahi's political appointments (former Taya regime cabinet members) helped spur a revolt in the Mauritanian parliament against the Abdallahi regime. In a desperate attempt to hang on to power, Abdallahi tried to fire four of his top military leaders in August 2008, including the 2005 co-coup leader Mohamed Ould Abdel



Courtesy Wikipedia
President Abdallahi

¹⁶⁶ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Maaouiya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 316.

¹⁶⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 339–340.

¹⁶⁸ BBC News, "Mauritania's New Military Leader," 8 August 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4746387.stm>

¹⁶⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Ely Ould Mohamed Vall," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 189–190.

¹⁷⁰ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 474.

¹⁷¹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Third Republic," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 563.

¹⁷² United Nations News, "Thousand of Mauritians to Return Home From Senegal With Help of UN Agency," 13 November 2007, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=24629&Cr=mauritania&Cr1=senegal>

¹⁷³ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 475.

Aziz. But he was swiftly removed from office in another bloodless coup.¹⁷⁴ Less than 16 months after it began, Mauritania's Third Republic was no more.¹⁷⁵

Recent Events

Aziz assumed leadership of the Mauritanian government amid widespread international condemnation of the latest coup, the fifth in Mauritania's post-independence history.¹⁷⁶ The African Union placed financial and travel sanctions on Mauritania in early 2009, following earlier suspensions of financial aid by France, the United States, and the World Bank.^{177, 178} In July 2009, new presidential elections were held, with Aziz winning a plurality of the vote in the first round.¹⁷⁹ (Due to a Mauritanian law forbidding military officials from running for the presidency, Aziz resigned his army position prior to the election.) While opposition candidates raised claims of fraud after the results were announced, international observers found the election process free and fair.^{180, 181}



© Magharebia / flickr.com
President Aziz

Since Aziz's election victory in 2009, the nation has been relatively stable, although most of the chronic economic, ethnic, and corruption problems remain. Sit-ins and protests by Mauritanian youths in early 2011, during the so-called "Arab Spring," called for national political reforms and an increased minimum wage.¹⁸² The Aziz government has also focused on countering the ongoing terrorist activities of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in remote areas of the nation.^{183, 184, 185}

¹⁷⁴ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 476–477.

¹⁷⁵ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Third Republic," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 563.

¹⁷⁶ Lyda Polgreen, "Army Officers Seize Power in Mauritania," *New York Times*, 6 August 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/world/africa/07mauritania.html?ref=mauritania>

¹⁷⁷ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: History: Struggle for Postindependence Stability," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

¹⁷⁸ Nordic Africa News, "African Union Places Sanctions on Mauritania," 7 February 2009, <http://www.nanews.net/MAIN.asp?ID=2377&PageID=176>

¹⁷⁹ Associated Press, "Coup Leader Wins Election Amid Outcry in Mauritania," *New York Times*, 19 July 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/20/world/africa/20mauritania.html?ref=mauritania>

¹⁸⁰ Associated Press, "Coup Leader Wins Election Amid Outcry in Mauritania," *New York Times*, 19 July 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/20/world/africa/20mauritania.html?ref=mauritania>

¹⁸¹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, "2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mauritania," 11 March 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/af/135965.htm>

¹⁸² Sara Ghasemilee, "Protests Stun Mauritania," 25 April 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/25/146709.html>

¹⁸³ *Eurasia Review*, "Mauritania Boosts Counter-Terror Capacities," 15 July 2011, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/mauritania-boosts-counter-terror-capacities-15072011/>

Chapter 2 Assessment

1. The first European slave-trading harbor in West Africa was established in the territory of what is today the nation of Mauritania.

TRUE

The Portuguese established the remote trading post on Arguin Island in about 1445. The practice of slavery continued by Europeans during this time was not made illegal in Mauritania until 1981.

2. Mauritania's first president, Moktar Ould Daddah, was removed in a military coup that was largely the result of Mauritania's disastrous attempt to annex part of Western Sahara.

TRUE

Daddah's miscalculation, which ultimately led to his downfall, was involving Mauritania in the Western Sahara war. After the coup that removed him from power in 1978, Mauritania abandoned all territorial claims to Western Sahara.

3. Maaouya Ould Ahmed Taya, who came to power in a 1984 coup, served as the leader of Mauritania for more than 20 years.

TRUE

Taya came to power after leading a December 1984 coup. He served as Mauritania's leader for more than two decades.

4. During 1989–1990, Mali and Mauritania were involved in a bloody conflict that left hundreds killed in rioting and attacks on immigrant communities.

FALSE

The 1989–1990 conflict was between Mauritania and Senegal.

5. Mauritania has never recognized Israel.

FALSE

Although Mauritania became the third Arab-ruled nation to recognize Israel in 1999, it suspended relations in 2009 in protest of Israeli military operations in Gaza.

¹⁸⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Combating Terrorism: Actions Needed to Enhance Implementation of Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership" (report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, July 2008) <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08860.pdf>

¹⁸⁵ United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, "Securing the Borders of the Magreb and the Sahel," 13 April 2011, http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/news/2011-04-13_mauritania.html

CHAPTER 3: ECONOMY

Introduction

When the French pulled out of Mauritania in 1960, the newly independent nation had little to show for its decades of colonial rule. France largely ignored the Mauritanian colony until after World War II and did not begin construction of a capital city until 1958.^{186, 187} Only limited transportation was developed under French rule, and virtually nothing was done to develop the country's economic resources.^{188, 189} Large deposits of iron ore and copper, along with rich fishing grounds off the coast, remained largely untapped.



© John Spooner
Mauritania food production

Mauritania's economy today—plagued by the ongoing problem of providing food for a growing population lacking water and arable land—still resembles that of the first decades following independence. Minerals and fish, now augmented by modest oil production, are the nation's economic engine; however, food production is an ongoing concern that frequently necessitates foreign assistance during periods of drought.¹⁹⁰ Providing more jobs for Mauritians, ideally in the private sector through the development of a more diversified economy, remains the elusive goal for governmental economic planners.

Agriculture

Mauritania's dry climate makes farming a difficult, if not impossible, proposition in all but the southernmost region near the Senegal River and in isolated oases.¹⁹¹ Less than one-half of 1% of Mauritania's total land is suitable for food crops, and many of these arable areas require irrigation.¹⁹² Rice is the principal crop grown in these irrigated areas located along the Sénégal

¹⁸⁶ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Nouakchott," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 369.

¹⁸⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Introduction: 'Pacification' and French Colonial Rule," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁸⁸ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 4.

¹⁸⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Roads," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 437–438.

¹⁹⁰ Agence France-Presse, "Some 147,000 to Receive Food Aid in Mauritania," 23 March 2010, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iuLxmTw5XBeH--hNuFjgFjR1NeQ>

¹⁹¹ Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania," Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations, August 2006, <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm>

¹⁹² Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania," Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations, August 2006, <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm>

River and its major tributaries. Other crops grown in Mauritania include sorghum, corn, millet, wheat, barley, pulses (e.g., dry beans, peas), and dates.^{193, 194}

Approximately 50 to 60% of Mauritania's workers are in the agricultural sector, primarily involved with subsistence livestock herding.^{195, 196} The meat and milk of sheep, cattle, and goats are among the top food products in Mauritania.¹⁹⁷ While herding and farming were once largely separate systems, in recent decades they have been combined. This change mirrors the rapid decline of nomadic pastoralism in Mauritania owing to drought and desertification.¹⁹⁸

While fish is not a major part of the typical Mauritanian diet, fishing provides a significant portion of Mauritania's economic output. It is the second-largest source of export revenue (behind only iron ore).¹⁹⁹ Foreign fishing vessels dominate this sector. Their access to Mauritanian coastal waters is licensed through several bilateral and international agreements with the Mauritanian government.²⁰⁰ The fees and taxes from these licenses contribute a great deal to the national budget. The fishing agreement with the European Union, for example, provides about one-third of Mauritania's national income.²⁰¹ Octopi are among the most valuable and heavily fished species for both the international and local fleets.²⁰² Concerns about overfishing of octopus



© Ferdinand Reus
Catch of the day

¹⁹³ FAOSTAT, "Mauritania: Production (Tonnes), 2009," 2011, <http://faostat.fao.org/site/567/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=567#ancor>

¹⁹⁴ Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania," Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations, August 2006, <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm>

¹⁹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 16 August 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

¹⁹⁶ Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania," Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations, August 2006, <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm>

¹⁹⁷ FAOSTAT, "Top Production–Mauritania–2009," 2011, <http://faostat.fao.org/site/339/default.aspx>

¹⁹⁸ Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania: 4. Ruminant Livestock Production Systems," Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations, August 2006, <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm#4.%20RUMINANT%20LIVESTOCK%20PRODUCTION%20SYSTEMS>

¹⁹⁹ International Trade Centre, "Trade Performance HS: Exports of Mauritania (2009, in USD Thousands)," 2011, http://legacy.intracen.org/appl1/TradeCom/TP_EP_CI.aspx?RP=478&YR=2009

²⁰⁰ United Nations Development Programme, "Country: Mauritania: Annex 4: Summary of DTIS (2001) Concerning Commodity Development (Original in French)," 2001, http://content.undp.org/go/cms-service/stream/asset/?jsessionid=aeHIYJhx0SYg?asset_id=2208737

²⁰¹ Marie-Martine Buckens, "The Controversial Example of Mauritania," *The Courier*, April/May 2008, <http://www.acp-eucourier.info/The-controversial-ex.280.0.html>

²⁰² Marie-Martine Buckens, "The Controversial Example of Mauritania," *The Courier*, April/May 2008, <http://www.acp-eucourier.info/The-controversial-ex.280.0.html>

reserves have generated calls for Mauritania to significantly reduce the number of licenses issued to fish the species.²⁰³

Industry

Excluding mining and construction, Mauritania has very little industry. Overall, manufacturing contributes only 3.8% of the nation's total gross domestic product.^{204, 205} Food processing is the most important manufacturing segment, with small processing plants producing packaged milk, pasta, couscous, biscuits, rice, oils, and beverages.²⁰⁶

Energy Resources

Oil is Mauritania's primary energy resource, the only one presently contributing to the economy. Mauritania also has reserves of natural gas and uranium, but to date these energy resources have not been tapped.^{207, 208}

Oil was discovered off the coast of Mauritania in 2001, with production beginning in 2006.²⁰⁹ Initial estimates of the size of the Chinguetti oilfield (where the first production took place) proved overly optimistic, and oil output from the offshore wells has declined by more than 60% since the first year of production.²¹⁰ Nonetheless, oil exploration, both offshore and onshore, continues in Mauritania, with several foreign oil companies having leased blocks for test



© Benoit Rivard
Manantali Dam

²⁰³ Marie-Martine Buckens, "The Controversial Example of Mauritania," *The Courier*, April/May 2008, <http://www.acp-eucourier.info/The-controversial-ex.280.0.html>

²⁰⁴ The World Bank, "Data: GDP (Current US\$)," 2011, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD/countries/1W?display=default>

²⁰⁵ The World Bank, "Data: Manufacturing, Value Added (Current US\$)," 2011, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.IND.MANF.CD/countries/1W?display=default>

²⁰⁶ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "An Investment Guide to Mauritania: Opportunities and Conditions," March 2004, 40, http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/iteiia20044_en.pdf

²⁰⁷ Mowafa Taib, "The Mineral Industry of Mauritania," in *2009 Minerals Yearbook*, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2011, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2009/myb3-2009-mr.pdf>

²⁰⁸ Jane's, "Natural Resources (Mauritania)," 2 June 2010, <http://articles.janes.com/articles/Janes-Sentinel-Security-Assessment-North-Africa/Natural-resources-Mauritania.html>

²⁰⁹ Neil Ford, "Mauritania Bounces Back," International Communications, 21 May 2008, <http://www.gasandoil.com/news/africa/7f3cb56a050a2ee3ad8d0bf21395a7fc>

²¹⁰ Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy, "International Energy Statistics," 2011, <http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/IEDIndex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=53&aid=1>

drilling.²¹¹ With the closing of a small refinery at Nouâdhibou in 2001, Mauritania continues to import all of its petroleum products while exporting its crude oil.²¹²

Mauritania's electricity is mostly supplied by oil- and diesel-fired generation plants. In addition, about 22% of its electricity is received via transmission lines from the Manantali hydroelectric power plant in Mali, built on a tributary of the Sénégal River.²¹³ Nouakchott and the three main Mauritanian towns on the Sénégal River (Rosso, Bogué, Kaédi) all receive power from the Manantali Dam.²¹⁴

Mineral Resources

Mauritania is richly endowed with mineral resources. Foremost among these is iron, which has long been the economy's linchpin. Presently, Mauritania is the second-largest producer of iron ore in Africa (behind only South Africa) and the 15th-largest producer in the world.²¹⁵ Nearly 50% of the 2009 export revenues were generated by iron ore extracted from three mining centers clustered near the northern town of Zouérate.²¹⁶ The iron ore is transported via Mauritania's only railway to a port south of Nouâdhibou. The mines, railway, and port are owned and operated by a government-run consortium.²¹⁷



Courtesy Wikipedia
Train with iron ore

Mauritania also has extensive reserves of copper and gold. All of the copper and about one-third of the gold that is mined comes from an open-pit mine outside the town of Akjoujt, the capital of Inchiri region.²¹⁸ The remaining gold production comes from the Tasiast mine, also in the Inchiri region. In 2010, this mining operation was obtained in a merger by Kinross Gold, the world's

²¹¹ Mowafa Taib, "The Mineral Industry of Mauritania," in *2009 Minerals Yearbook*, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2011, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2009/myb3-2009-mr.pdf>

²¹² Thomas R. Yager, "The Mineral Industries of Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger," in *2002 Minerals Yearbook*, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2011, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2002/uvmlmmgmyb02.pdf>

²¹³ Hamdi Ould Cheikh, "France Supports Mauritania Electricity Sector," *Magharebia*, 25 July 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/07/25/feature-03

²¹⁴ Ahmadou Aly Mbaye, "Aid Effectiveness to Infrastructure: A Comparative Study of East Asia and Senegal," Japan Bank for International Cooperation, July 2008, 28, http://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/research/archives/jbic/pdf/rp36_e08.pdf

²¹⁵ Mowafa Taib, "The Mineral Industry of Mauritania," in *2009 Minerals Yearbook*, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2011, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2009/myb3-2009-mr.pdf>

²¹⁶ International Trade Centre, "Trade Performance HS: Exports of Mauritania: 26 Ores, Slag and Ash (2009, in USD Thousands)," 2011, http://legacy.intracen.org/appli/TradeCom/TP_EP_CI_HS4.aspx?IN=26&RP=478&YR=2009&IL=26%20Ores,%20slag%20and%20ash&TY=E

²¹⁷ Mowafa Taib, "The Mineral Industry of Mauritania," in *2009 Minerals Yearbook*, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2011, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2009/myb3-2009-mr.pdf>

²¹⁸ Mowafa Taib, "The Mineral Industry of Mauritania," in *2009 Minerals Yearbook*, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2011, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2009/myb3-2009-mr.pdf>

fifth-largest gold-mining company. Overnight the company became Mauritania's largest foreign investor and leading employers.²¹⁹ The new corporate owner of the Tasiast mine is investing tens of millions into the exploration and development of the site, betting that it will one day become one of the world's largest gold-mining operations.²²⁰

Beyond metal minerals, gypsum and salt also are mined in Mauritania.²²¹ Gypsum reserves are among the world's largest, but their remoteness has made transportation costs an inhibiting factor in their development.²²² Mauritania's extensive phosphate deposits have yet to be mined for similar reasons.²²³

Trade

In 2009, Mauritania's trade balance was only marginally negative, but as in previous years this relative balance masked a significant difference in the nature of the goods imported and exported.²²⁴ Virtually all exports were "primary" products (iron ore, copper, fish, crude oil), extracted natural resources exported without any additional processing or "value added."²²⁵ The only notable exception was some processed fish products. On the other hand, imports were dominated by refined petroleum products, processed foods (sugar, cooking oils, milled rice), and numerous manufactured items. The only primary products imported were generally unprocessed food items such as wheat, raw milk, tea, and raw fruits and vegetables.²²⁶



© Ferdinand Reus
Mauritania fish

Mauritania's major trading partners included the European Union countries (45.6% of imports, 31.2% of exports), China (13.1% imports, 42.8% exports), Japan (1.5% imports, 6.3% exports), the United States (3.9% imports, 2.3% exports), Côte d'Ivoire (0.4% imports, 5.3% exports), and Brazil (4.8% imports, 0% exports).²²⁷ The United States primarily exports fuel oil and

²¹⁹ Eric Reguly, "Kinross CEO Tye Burt: Staking His Claim, and His Reputation," *The Globe and Mail*, 14 March 2011, <http://m.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/managing/the-lunch/kinross-ceo-tye-burt-staking-his-claim-and-his-reputation/article1920959/?service=mobile>

²²⁰ Kinross Gold, "Tasiast: Transforming Our Future," YouTube, 5 May 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-bQ0kd-A-s&feature=related>

²²¹ Mowafa Taib, "The Mineral Industry of Mauritania," in *2009 Minerals Yearbook*, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2011, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2009/myb3-2009-mr.pdf>

²²² Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Gypsum," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 235–236.

²²³ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Phosphates," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 407–408.

²²⁴ World Trade Organization, "Mauritania," March 2011, http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfiles/MR_E.htm

²²⁵ International Trade Centre, "Stage of Processing: Mauritania (2009, in USD Thousands)," 2011, http://legacy.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_EP_CI_StageP.aspx?RP=478&YR=2009

²²⁶ International Trade Centre, "Stage of Processing: Mauritania (2009, in USD Thousands)," 2011, http://legacy.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_IP_CI_StageP.aspx?RP=478&YR=2009

²²⁷ European Commission, "Mauritania: Mauritania's Trade With Main Partners (2010)," 2011, http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2011/january/tradoc_147323.pdf

construction machinery to Mauritania, while its imports from Mauritania were almost entirely crude oil.^{228, 229}

Tourism

Mauritania, while never a major tourist destination, does offer several unique travel experiences. Foremost among these are the ancient Saharan caravan towns of Chinguetti, Oudane, Oulata, and Tichit, all of which are designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Attacks by suspected Islamic militants that killed four French tourists on Christmas day in December 2007 caused the cancellation of the famed Paris-Dakar road rally in 2008. The off-road race—which traditionally crossed part of the Mauritanian desert in the race from Paris to Dakar, Senegal—has since been relocated to South America.^{230, 231}



© John Spooner
Chinguetti tourism down

Charter flights from Paris to a desert oasis town in Mauritania also were cancelled in December 2007 following a subsequent deadly attack that killed Mauritanian soldiers in the southeastern part of the country.^{232, 233, 234}

Responding to the violence, Australia, France, the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries have issued travel warnings against visiting the desert regions of Mauritania.^{235, 236, 237}

²²⁸ Data Disseminations Branch, U.S. Census Bureau, “Foreign Trade: U.S. Imports From Mauritania by 5-Digit End-Use Code, 2002–2010,” 2011, <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/product/enduse/imports/c7410.html>

²²⁹ Data Disseminations Branch, U.S. Census Bureau, “Foreign Trade: U.S. Exports From Mauritania by 5-Digit End-Use Code, 2002–2010,” 2011, <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/product/enduse/exports/c7410.html>

²³⁰ Voice of America, “Mauritania’s Tourism Fails to Rebound Following Attacks,” 24 June 2008, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/a-13-2008-06-24-voa26-66821537.html>

²³¹ Agence France-Presse, “Terrorism Kills Off Tourism in Mauritania,” e-Turbo News, 19 November 2008, <http://www.eturbonews.com/6312/terrorism-kills-tourism-mauritania>

²³² U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, “Travel Warning: Mauritania,” 11 March 2011, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5381.html

²³³ Richard Trillo, “Terrorism in the Sahara and Sahel: A ‘False Flag’ in the War on Terror?,” Royal African Society, 2 August 2011, <http://www.royalafriansociety.org/component/content/article/945.html>

²³⁴ Jemal Oumar, “Al-Qaeda Endangers Mauritania Tourism,” *Magharebia*, 25 February 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/25/feature-02

²³⁵ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, “Travel Warning: Mauritania,” 11 March 2011, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5381.html

²³⁶ United Kingdom Foreign Service, “Travel & Living Abroad: Mauritania,” 8 July 2011, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/middle-east-north-africa/mauritania>

²³⁷ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 31 August 2011, <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/mauritania>

Travel by U.S. citizens to Mauritania is strongly discouraged.²³⁸ Given that prior to the attacks Mauritania had become a popular destination for French tourists, it is not surprising that the number of international adventure seekers entering the country dropped by 60% in the year following these attacks and has since continued to decline.²³⁹ Chinguetti, a centuries-old trading center, was once one of Mauritania's top draws. Yet only 173 travelers visited the site in the 2011 tourism season, an astonishing drop for a town that had been expecting more than 100,000 visitors in 2008.

Banking and Currency

The Mauritanian unit of currency is the ouguiya (symbol UM; currency code MRO). In August 2011, the U.S. dollar (USD) was converting at a rate of 1 USD = 281.6 MRO.²⁴⁰ Established in 1973 as Mauritania's currency, the ouguiya's value was initially pegged to the French franc at a 10-to-1 ratio.²⁴¹ In the late 1980s, under austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the Mauritanian government allowed the ouguiya's exchange rate to float.²⁴² The ouguiya's value sank during the late 1990s, and by 2003 its worth relative to the dollar was only one-third as much as it was in 1992.²⁴³ Since 2003, the ouguiya has generally traded in the range of 1 USD to 250–260 MRO.²⁴⁴



Courtesy Wikipedia
Mauritania currency (Ouguiyas)

Mauritania's banking system consists of 11 commercial banks, which combined control more than 80% of the assets of the nation's financial system. A 2007 banking reform law improved access to credit, as did the 2007 entry of two French banks into the Mauritanian banking sector. Overall, the interest rates on Mauritanian bank loans declined from 30% in 2007 to 11–12% in 2009, but most foreign investors continue to secure their financing from lending institutions outside the country, where rates are more favorable.²⁴⁵

²³⁸ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Travel Warning: Mauritania," 11 March 2011, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5381.html

²³⁹ Agence France-Presse, "Terrorism Kills Off Tourism in Mauritania," e-Turbo News, 19 November 2008, <http://www.eturbonews.com/6312/terrorism-kills-tourism-mauritania>

²⁴⁰ GreenwichMeanTime.com, "Mauritania Currency," 12 July 2011, <http://www.greenwichmeantime.com/time-zone/africa/mauritania/currency/>

²⁴¹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Ouguiya (UM)," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 383.

²⁴² Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Currency," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 162–163.

²⁴³ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Currency," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 162–163.

²⁴⁴ GoCurrency.com, "Historic Exchange Rates: Mauritania," 2011, <http://www.gocurrency.com/v2/historic-exchange-rates.php?ccode2=USD&ccode=MRO&frMonth=4&frDay=1&frYear=2009>

²⁴⁵ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Economic, Energy and Business Affairs, "2011 Investment Climate Statement: Mauritania," March 2011, <http://www.state.gov/e/eeb/rls/othr/ics/2011/157322.htm>

A lingering problem has been the limited reach of banking services among the nation's large poor population. Overall, only 7% of Mauritians have bank accounts.²⁴⁶ Micro- and small enterprises (MSEs), most of which operate in the economy's large informal sector of employment, generally are unable to acquire loans from the commercial banks. Various governmental and nongovernmental initiatives have targeted the development of Mauritanian micro-financial institutions as one way to help broaden the MSEs' access to savings and loan services.²⁴⁷

Investment

Mauritania is generally not viewed as an easy country for foreign investors to operate in, ranking 165th out of 183 countries on the World Bank's 2010 Doing Business measure.²⁴⁸ Bureaucratic red tape, political uncertainties, terrorism risks, infrastructure weaknesses, and corruption have hindered foreign investment in most economic sectors.²⁴⁹ The most notable exceptions have been oil and mineral companies, who have provided roughly 80% of the total foreign investments in Mauritania.²⁵⁰ The fishing, banking, and telecommunications sectors have received most of Mauritania's remaining recent foreign investment.²⁵¹ Investment in telecommunications has been hindered by a very competitive local market, which has forced mobile phone companies to place more of their investment in marketing areas rather than telecommunication infrastructure improvements.²⁵²



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Aid to businesses

Foreign aid in the form of grants and concessional loans has consistently been an important part of the Mauritanian economy, helping to finance governmental projects to improve infrastructure and meet human-development needs. At times, as much as one-third of the national budget has come from outside assistance.²⁵³ Numerous multilateral investment agencies—such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, the Islamic

²⁴⁶ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Economic, Energy and Business Affairs, “2011 Investment Climate Statement: Mauritania,” March 2011, <http://www.state.gov/e/eeb/rls/othr/ics/2011/157322.htm>

²⁴⁷ African Development Fund, “Islamic Republic of Mauritania: Project to Build the Capacities of Microfinance Operators (PRECAMF),” January 2007, <http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/MR-2007-010-EN-ADF-BD-WP-MAURITANIA-REV-AR-PRECAMF.PDF>

²⁴⁸ Doing Business, The World Bank, “Economy Rankings,” June 2010, <http://www.doingbusiness.org/rankings>

²⁴⁹ African Development Bank, “Mauritania 2011,” 2011, 12, http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/fileadmin/uploads/aeo/Country_Notes/2011/Full/Mauritania.pdf

²⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Economic, Energy and Business Affairs, “2011 Investment Climate Statement: Mauritania,” March 2011, <http://www.state.gov/e/eeb/rls/othr/ics/2011/157322.htm>

²⁵¹ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Economic, Energy and Business Affairs, “2011 Investment Climate Statement: Mauritania,” March 2011, <http://www.state.gov/e/eeb/rls/othr/ics/2011/157322.htm>

²⁵² African Development Bank, “Mauritania 2011,” 2011, 7, http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/fileadmin/uploads/aeo/Country_Notes/2011/Full/Mauritania.pdf

²⁵³ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Aid, International,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 46–48.

Development Bank, and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development—have provided aid, sometimes with requisite requirements that the Mauritanian government make economic “structural adjustments” (e.g., currency devaluation, decreased state subsidies for goods and services, increased privatization of state-owned businesses).²⁵⁴

Transportation

Mauritania’s vast Saharan expanses have long created difficult and expensive challenges for opening the nation’s interior to economic development. When Mauritania became independent in 1960, there were no paved roads and only 204 km (127 mi) of graded track running between Nouakchott and Rosso.²⁵⁵ The situation slowly but steadily improved, most notably with the completion in 1985 of the “Road of Hope,” which linked Nouakchott with eastern Mauritania. In 2004, Mauritania’s two largest cities, Nouakchott and



© John Spooner
Old coast road

Nouâdhibou, were connected by paved road for the first time. By 2011 Mauritania had nearly 3,000 km (1,860 mi) of surfaced roads.^{256, 257} Unfortunately, many of the older paved roads, such as the section from Nouakchott to Rosso, have deteriorated badly because of a lack of maintenance and shifting sand dunes. New Mauritanian road projects are increasingly focused on rehabilitating existing roads.²⁵⁸

Mauritania has but one railway section—the line running from the iron mines near Zouérate to the iron ore port just south of central Nouâdhibou. Although built to handle ore shipments, the railway also is used by people traveling to Zouérate and other areas of the desert interior. Some of these travelers ride (uncomfortably) for free atop the many open-air iron ore wagons that strung together make the Zouérate-Nouâdhibou trains among the world’s longest.^{259, 260}

²⁵⁴ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “International Monetary Fund,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 267–271.

²⁵⁵ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Roads,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 437–438.

²⁵⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “Mauritania: Transportation,” in *The World Factbook*, 16 August 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

²⁵⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Roads,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 439.

²⁵⁸ The World Bank, “Project Information Document (PID Appraisal State,” 19 May 2010, 1–4, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2010/05/26/000020953_20100526113434/Rendred/PDF/547020PID0MAU0road0corridor0rev.pdf

²⁵⁹ Joanne Lane, “On the Move in Mauritania: The Iron Ore Express,” Go World Publishing and Productions, 2011, <http://www.goworldtravel.com/ex.aspx/articleGuid.43cf98b2-cf7d-49be-89f5-0d33608f0b24/xe/print.htm>

²⁶⁰ Sharon LaFraniere, “Train to (Almost) Nowhere in Mauritania,” *New York Times*, 8 July 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/world/africa/08iht-journal.4.6553086.html>

In 2008, a Chinese firm signed an agreement to help finance a new railway line connecting Kaédi to Nouakchott.²⁶¹ The economic motivation for the new line was to transport phosphate deposits located near Kaédi to the port at Nouakchott. Various plans to develop these deposits since their discovery in the early 1980s had gone nowhere, but a spike in world phosphate prices beginning in late 2007 helped spur new discussions.^{262, 263} Thus, the eventual construction of the mine and railway seemingly depend on whether world phosphate prices remain high.

Mauritania's only major airport is at Nouakchott. It is served by several West and North African airlines, Air France, and Mauritania Airlines International, the nation's flag carrier. The latter airline is entirely state owned and is the latest incarnation of two prior Mauritanian carriers that went out of business due to financial and safety issues.²⁶⁴

Standard of Living

Mauritania's poverty rate, although slowly but steadily decreasing in recent years, is high.²⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the structure of the economy makes it difficult to address some of the root causes. Fundamental to this problem is the economic disparity between growth sectors and employment sectors. Much of the nation's economic growth comes from mining, oil production, and fishing, as well as service-sector segments such as telecommunications and transportation.^{266, 267} However,

an estimated 50–60% of the Mauritanian workforce are employed in the agricultural sector. This sector lags economically and contributes relatively little to Mauritania's overall GDP compared to the other economic sectors.²⁶⁸ The government has identified increased agricultural productivity, by means of improvements in irrigation and



© Niko Viramo
Poverty in Mauritania

²⁶¹ Xinhua, "China Exim Bank to Finance Railway Project in Mauritania," China Daily, 23 January 2008, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-01/23/content_6416219.htm

²⁶² Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Phosphates," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 407–408.

²⁶³ IndexMundi.com, World Bank, "Rock Phosphate Monthly Price: US Dollars Per Metric Ton," July 2011, <http://www.indexmundi.com/commodities/?commodity=rock-phosphate&months=120>

²⁶⁴ DefenceWeb, "Mauritania Begins Operation of New National Airline," 28 April 2011, http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15063:mauritania-begins-operation-of-new-national-airline&catid=35:Aerospace&Itemid=107

²⁶⁵ International Monetary Fund, International Development Association, "Mauritania: Joint Staff Advisory on the Third Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper," 7 June 2011, 3, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2011/cr11253.pdf>

²⁶⁶ International Monetary Fund, International Development Association, "Mauritania: Joint Staff Advisory on the Third Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper," 7 June 2011, 3, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2011/cr11253.pdf>

²⁶⁷ Tania Rajadel, Nicola Pontara, and Maria Laura Sanchez Puerta, "The Mauritanian Labor Market Through the Lens of the 2004 National Household Survey," World Bank, June 2009, 1, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/serlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2009/06/04/000158349_20090604085727/Rendered/PDF/WPS4954.pdf

²⁶⁸ International Monetary Fund, International Development Association, "Mauritania: Joint Staff Advisory on the Third Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper," 7 June 2011, 3, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2011/cr11253.pdf>

distribution networks for fertilizers, as one way many rural poor could improve their economic status.²⁶⁹

By measures of a nation's standard of living other than average income (e.g., life expectancy, average education level for adults, expected education level for current students), Mauritania has improved over the last 25 years. Compared to 1985, the average Mauritanian today now lives more than 2.6 years longer, adults 25 years or older have attended schools nearly twice as long, and school children are expected to have more than four additional years of schooling by the time they complete their studies.²⁷⁰ Despite these improvements, the country still suffers from high unemployment, particularly among youth ages 15–24. Low skill levels among workers also force some of the mining companies to recruit internationally for technical positions. Additionally, Mauritania's large percentage of unskilled workers has inhibited new private-sector investment.²⁷¹

Organizations

Along with Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, Mauritania is a member state of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). Since its founding in 1989, the AMU has never been able to establish the level of trade and economic integration originally envisaged, largely because of the political rifts between several members.²⁷² In December 2010, negotiators for the five nations reached a free-trade agreement on agricultural products that will take effect in 2011.²⁷³ Despite several bilateral trade agreements with other AMU members, it is questionable whether the free-trade agreement, if ratified, will have any significant effects on Mauritanian agricultural trade.²⁷⁴

²⁶⁹ International Monetary Fund, International Development Association, "Mauritania: Joint Staff Advisory on the Third Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper," 7 June 2011, 6–10, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2011/cr11253.pdf>

²⁷⁰ United Nations Development Programme, "Mauritania: Explaining HDI Value and Rank Changes in Human Development Report 2010," 2011, 4, <http://hdrstats.undp.org/images/explanations/MRT.pdf>

²⁷¹ International Monetary Fund, International Development Association, "Mauritania: Joint Staff Advisory on the Third Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper," 7 June 2011, 5–9, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2011/cr11253.pdf>

²⁷² Ali F. Darrat and Anita Pennathur, "Are the Arab Maghreb Countries Really Integratable? Some Evidence From the Theory of Cointegrated Systems," October 2002, 1–3, http://www.erf.org.eg/CMS/uploads/pdf/1185355279_T-B_Ali_Darrat.pdf

²⁷³ Walid Ramzi, "Maghreb States Agree on Agricultural Free Trade Union," *Magharebia*, 9 December 2010, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2010/12/09/feature-01

²⁷⁴ African Development Bank, "Mauritania: Results-Based Country Strategy Paper (RBCSP) 2011–2015, August 2010, 6, <http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/Mauritania-RBCSP%202011-2015x.pdf>

Chapter 3 Assessment

1. Despite Mauritania's long Atlantic coastline, fishing plays only a limited role in the national economy.

FALSE

Fishing is Mauritania's second-largest export, contributing a significant amount to the nation's economy.

2. About 20% of Mauritania's electricity is generated at a hydroelectric plant in Mali.

TRUE

Mauritania receives about 22% of its electricity via transmission lines from the Manantali hydroelectric power plant in Mali.

3. Most of Mauritania's exports consist of natural resources recovered from both its land and offshore regions.

TRUE

Virtually all of Mauritania's exports (iron ore, copper, fish, crude oil) are "primary" products, meaning they are extracted natural resources exported without any additional processing or "value added."

4. The largest share of foreign investment in Mauritania's economy has been in the banking and telecommunications sectors.

FALSE

Oil and mineral companies have provided roughly 80% of the total foreign investments in Mauritania. The fishing, banking, and telecommunications sectors have received most of the remaining recent foreign investment.

5. The largest employment sector in Mauritania is mining.

FALSE

Roughly 50% of Mauritanian workers are in the agricultural sector, which continues to lag economically and contributes relatively little to Mauritania's overall GDP compared to the other economic sectors.

CHAPTER 4: SOCIETY

Introduction

Mauritanian society has traditionally been highly stratified and hierarchical. In recent decades, some of the social structures by which groups of people identify themselves have weakened. Nevertheless, ethnic, tribal, and sub-tribal affiliations remain crucial to the Mauritanian class system, and in turn, the political and economic affiliations that have played out through the nation's five decades since independence.^{275, 276}



© Ferdinand Reus
Mauritanian man

Ethnic and Linguistic Groups

Ethnic classifications in Mauritania can be controversial because government numbers may not accurately reflect the nation's true ethnic composition.²⁷⁷

Moors

Roughly 70–75% of Mauritania's population are Moors. People in this somewhat broad category share a language and a traditionally nomadic history.^{278, 279} Virtually all Moors speak Hassaniyya Arabic as their first language. This Arabic dialect draws some of its vocabulary from Arabized versions of Amazigh (Berber) words.²⁸⁰ The dialect is distinct and may not be understood by all Arabic speakers.²⁸¹

Among the Moors, there are several differences based on ethnic background and social status. Traditionally, Moors have divided between those tracing an Arab-Berber lineage (*beydanes*, or “white Moors”) and those having a Sudanic African lineage (*haratines*, or “black Moors”). The *haratines* generally are the descendents of former slaves to white Moor masters. (It should be noted that the institution of slavery, although officially illegal in Mauritania for many decades, has lingered on in some pockets of the country, despite recent government efforts to clamp down

²⁷⁵ The Estimate, “The Attempted Coup in Mauritania: Mauritania's Social Structure,” 13 June 2003, <http://www.theestimate.com/public/061303.html>

²⁷⁶ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Political Transition in Mauritania: Problems and Prospects,” *Middle East Journal* 53 (Winter 1999): 56–58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329283?seq=1>

²⁷⁷ The Estimate, “The Attempted Coup in Mauritania: Mauritania's Social Structure,” 13 June 2003, <http://www.theestimate.com/public/061303.html>

²⁷⁸ Tore Kjeilen, “Mauritania: Peoples,” LookLex.com, n.d., <http://looklex.com/e.o/mauritania.peoples.htm>

²⁷⁹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

²⁸⁰ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Mauritania: People: Languages,” 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

²⁸¹ M. Paul Lewis, ed., “Hassaniyya,” in *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 16th ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International), http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=mey

on continuing practitioners.)²⁸² Given the extensive amount of intermarriage over the years, *haratines* with “white” features and *beydanes* with “black” features are not uncommon.^{283, 284}

There are three traditional warrior and religious social classes of “white Moors.” The *hassan* tribes trace their background to the original Beni Hassan warriors from Yemen. The *zawiya*, tribes of religious scholars, are often of Berber heritage. The *znaga*, descendants of Berber tribespeople, became tributary vassals of the *hassan* tribes.²⁸⁵ Of the three *beydane* groups, the *znaga* have intermarried the most with non-*beydanes*.²⁸⁶



© Magharebia / flickr.com
Haratine child maids

Below the warrior and religious castes are the occupational castes, which include those who claim descent from craftsman, weavers, carpenters, musicians, bards, and storytellers. A person may identify with one of these castes even if they are not employed in the field.^{287 288} The latter three occupations are collectively known as the *iggawin*, a low caste better known in other parts of West Africa as *griots*.^{289 290}

Black Africans

Mauritania’s black African population primarily consists of members of five ethnic groups from southern areas of the country. The largest of these groups are the Toucouleur (also known as Halpulaaren), who traditionally have lived as sedentary agriculturalists in the Sénégal River Valley.²⁹¹ The Fulbe (or Fulani), traditionally nomadic pastoralists, live mostly in the Trarza region. They share social customs and a language (known both as Pulaar and Fula) with the Toucouleur.^{292, 293} Droughts and desertification in recent decades have forced some of the Fulbe

²⁸² Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Slavery,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 477–486.

²⁸³ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

²⁸⁴ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Haratine,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 240.

²⁸⁵ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–354.

²⁸⁶ LaVerle Berry, “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages: Maures,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 52.

²⁸⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 352.

²⁸⁸ Countries and Their Cultures, “Mauritania,” n.d., <http://www.everyculture.com/Ma-Ni/Mauritania.html>

²⁸⁹ Capital Ethiopia, “Dimi Mint Abba: Mauritania’s Gold,” 23 February 2009, http://www.capitalethiopia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11007:dimi-mint-abba-mauritanias-gold&catid=18:arts-and-culture&Itemid=10

²⁹⁰ U.S. Embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, “Mauritanian Social Structure,” n.d., http://mauritania.usembassy.gov/uploads/images/o39wji-r0pvc5_y22VocA/MauritanianSocialStructure.pdf

²⁹¹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Halpulaar,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 352.

²⁹² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Mauritania: People: Languages,” 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

into a sedentary lifestyle.²⁹⁴ The Soninké live in south central Mauritania, in the region where the Senegalese, Malian, and Mauritanian borders meet. The ancestors of this sedentary group of farmers and traders are generally believed to be the founders of the ancient Ghana Empire.²⁹⁵ The fourth of the major black African groups are the Wolof, who like the Fulbe mostly live in the Trarza region. There are relatively few Wolof people in Mauritania but they are the dominant ethnic group in neighboring Senegal.²⁹⁶ Finally, the Bambara, the easternmost of the black African ethnic groups, are mostly sedentary herders and farmers who make up a much larger part of the population in adjacent Mali.²⁹⁷

Like the Moors, the black African ethnic groups of Mauritania have a traditional caste system that includes nobles, servants (formerly slaves), and a hierarchy of numerous occupational groupings.²⁹⁸

Language Policy

Language has long been divisive in Mauritania. Classical Arabic is the nation's official language, although the Hassaniyya dialect is used by the majority of the Moorish population. The constitution also recognizes Fulani (Pulaar), Soninké, and Wolof as "national languages" (along with Arabic). In primary schools, French and Arabic are the languages of instruction, with the former used to teach math, natural sciences, and (in secondary school) computer science. Other courses are taught in Arabic.²⁹⁹

Many black Africans in Mauritania oppose any attempts to lessen the governmental and educational role of French in favor of Arabic, viewing Arabization as a culturally discriminatory policy. The Arabization question continues to periodically flare up, illustrating the continuing divide concerning Mauritanian national identity.³⁰⁰ In 2010, for example, comments by Mauritanian Prime Minister Moulaye Ould Modhamed Laghdaf promoting the use of Arabic



© zbili / flickr.com
Bambara women and children

²⁹³ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Fulbe," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 227.

²⁹⁴ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Fulbe," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 227.

²⁹⁵ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Soninké," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 499–500.

²⁹⁶ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages: Black Africans: Wolof," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 52.

²⁹⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Bambara," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 91.

²⁹⁸ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages: Black Africans," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 56.

²⁹⁹ Overseas Advising and Admissions, Credential Evaluation Liaison Link Project, "Profile of the Education System in Mauritania," n.d., http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/oseas_adsec/mauritania2.htm

³⁰⁰ Islam Today, "Tensions in Mauritania Over Equating National Identity With Arabic Language," 14 April 2010, <http://en.islamtoday.net/artshow-233-3583.htm>

spurred clashes between rival Moor and black African groups at the University of Nouakchott. Riot police eventually had to break up the fighting.³⁰¹

Religion

Mauritania, the world's first declared Islamic Republic, is an almost entirely Sunni Muslim country. In a nation with major ethnic divisions, religion has been a key unifying factor since independence.³⁰² The few Christian churches in the country's biggest cities are almost exclusively attended by non-Mauritanians.³⁰³



Courtesy Wikipedia
Central mosque in Nouakchott

Within Mauritania's larger Islamic community are religious brotherhoods (*tariqas*) that cross ethnic and tribal lines. These brotherhoods embrace the teachings of a founder and blend the mystical strain of Islam (Sufism) with orthodox Sunni Muslim beliefs.³⁰⁴ The largest brotherhoods in Mauritania are the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyyah. Each brotherhood is headed by a sheikh, often referred to as a *marabout*, whose many functions include leading religious prayer, performing rites to help cure the sick, and making and providing religious amulets believed to have spiritual properties that can ward off misfortunes.³⁰⁵

Gender Issues

Obesity

There has been much publicity about the unhealthy and potentially dangerous methods that some women in Western nations use to keep themselves excessively thin. In Mauritania, however, an opposite type of problem exists. In a country where many people live below the poverty level, being overweight has traditionally indicated a young woman's wealth and general well-being. Being overweight makes her a more attractive potential marriage partner.³⁰⁶ In the late 20th century, more than one-third of young women were estimated to have been force-fed during childhood, making Mauritania one of the few countries in Africa where girls averaged a higher caloric intake than boys.³⁰⁷

³⁰¹ Reuters, "Mauritania Arrests 20 as 'Arabisation' Row Heats Up," 15 April 2010, <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJOE63E0G820100415>

³⁰² Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Islam," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 278.

³⁰³ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, "Mauritania," in *2010 Report on Religious Freedom*, 17 November 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148705.htm>

³⁰⁴ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Religious Life: Brotherhoods and Saints," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 62.

³⁰⁵ LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Religious Life: Brotherhoods and Saints: Marabouts," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 64–65.

³⁰⁶ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Mauritania: Beauty's Big Problem," IRIN News, 21 February 2011, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=91956>

³⁰⁷ Pascale Harter, "Mauritania's 'Wife-Fattening' Farm," BBC News, 26 January 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3429903.stm>

Although the practice of force-feeding is declining, particularly in urban areas, some young Mauritanian women continue to take cortisone products and ingest appetite-stimulating syrups.³⁰⁸ The medical problems related to obesity—cardiovascular disease, kidney failure, diabetes, etc.—have been publicized by both the government and non-governmental organizations, but changing long-standing cultural norms has proven difficult even when the threats are known. Indeed, one animal-fattening drug taken by some women is informally known as “dregdreg,” which in Hassaniyya means “heart shaking,” a reference to the drug’s physical ill effect.³⁰⁹



© Ametxa / flickr.com
Mauritanian girl

Marriage, Polygamy, and Divorce

Arranged marriages, common in some Islamic countries, occur less frequently in Mauritania, where the law requires the consent of both parties.^{310, 311} Polygamy is legal under Mauritanian law, which follows Islamic shari’a law on family matters. Yet, it is only commonly practiced within the country’s black African population.³¹² Among the Moors, women commonly negotiate a prenuptial agreement dissolving the marriage should the husband take a second wife.³¹³

Mauritania’s divorce rate is very high, particularly for an Islamic country. Among the Moors, more than one-third of marriages end in divorce.³¹⁴ As a result of this trend, roughly 42% of rural households and 37% of urban households are supported by women.³¹⁵

Traditional Clothing

In rural areas and often in cities, Mauritians wear several layers of loose clothing designed to protect the skin from the sun and provide natural cooling produced by the air circulation between the layers. Black African men and women favor the *boubou*, an ankle-length robe usually worn over a shirt and loose trousers known as *seroual*. Women wear an elaborately tied scarf on top of their heads, usually matching the pattern of the *boubou*. Moorish women traditionally favor the

³⁰⁸ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Mauritania: Beauty’s Big Problem,” IRIN News, 21 February 2011, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=91956>

³⁰⁹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Mauritania: Beauty’s Big Problem,” IRIN News, 21 February 2011, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=91956>

³¹⁰ African Online News, “Moroccan Govt. Speaks With Two Tongues on Women Rights,” 10 October 2000, http://www.afrol.com/html/News/mor002_womens_rights.htm

³¹¹ Social Institutions and Gender Index, “Gender Equality and Social Institutions in Mauritania,” n.d., <http://genderindex.org/country/mauritania>

³¹² Social Institutions and Gender Index, “Gender Equality and Social Institutions in Mauritania,” n.d., <http://genderindex.org/country/mauritania>

³¹³ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania,” in *2010 Human Rights Report*, 8 April 2011, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/af/154358.htm>

³¹⁴ Social Institutions and Gender Index, “Gender Equality and Social Institutions in Mauritania,” n.d., <http://genderindex.org/country/mauritania>

³¹⁵ Sukaina Asneeb, “More Women Support Own Households in Mauritania,” 27 December 2010, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/12/27/131119.html>

malahfa, a long piece of cloth that is wrapped around the body and then draped over the head.^{316, 317} In the dust storm-prone desert regions, men wrap their heads (and even mouths) with a piece of long fabric known as a *chéche*.³¹⁸



© Joseph Hill
Traditional dress

Arts

Music

The classical music of Mauritania (known as Azawan) reflects traditions passed down through generations of the *iggawin* (troubadour) caste. It follows a strict musical progression consisting of five sequential modes, and musicians must train for many years to master it.^{319, 320} Typical instruments used in Azawan music include the *tidinit* (a fretless, hourglass-shaped four-stringed lute played by men), the *ardin* (a 10- to 14-string harp played by women), and the *tbel* (a large drum with an animal-skin head).^{321, 322, 323} Modern additions include the electric guitar tuned to mimic the sounds of the *tidinit*, and even synthesizers.^{324, 325}

Mauritania has no recording industry, and its musicians and singers rarely perform in public. Weddings and other private events are still the most likely places to hear many *iggawin*.³²⁶ Despite the dearth of recorded music and limited public engagements, some Mauritanian musicians have become well known throughout West Africa and beyond. Foremost among these is Dimi Mint Abba, whose father composed the Mauritanian national anthem and introduced the

³¹⁶ Cultural Website of the Sahara, “Al Malahfa,” 2011, <http://www.sahara-culture.com/eng/FashionClothes/Almalahfa.aspx>

³¹⁷ Etagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, “Lifestyle: Traditional Dress,” in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 82–83.

³¹⁸ Etagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, “Lifestyle: Traditional Dress,” in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 82–83.

³¹⁹ Fes Festival of World Sacred Music, “Artists: Aicha Mint Chighaly,” 2007, <http://www.fesfestival.com/en07/aicha-mint-chighaly.php>

³²⁰ Dave Muddyman, “Mauritania & Western Sahara: Ways of the Moors,” in *World Music: The Rough Guide. Vol. 1: Africa, Europe, and the Middle East* (London, UK: Rough Guides, Ltd., 1999), 564.

³²¹ SahelSounds, “Find Your Quiet Place,” 4 August 2010, <http://sahelsounds.com/?p=184>

³²² Banning Eyre, “Mauritania,” AfroPop Worldwide, n.d., http://www.afropop.org/explore/country_info/ID/12/Mauritania/

³²³ Dave Muddyman, “Mauritania & Western Sahara: Ways of the Moors,” in *World Music: The Rough Guide. Vol. 1: Africa, Europe, and the Middle East* (London, UK: Rough Guides, Ltd., 1999), 563–564.

³²⁴ BBC Radio 3, “Chapter 4: Dramatic Guitar-Playing Style,” Mauritania: The Festival of Nomad Music, May 2005, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p005y128#p007153m>

³²⁵ BBC Radio 3, “Chapter 14: Aicha Mint Chighaly Concert,” Mauritania: The Festival of Nomad Music, May 2005, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p005y128#p007n415>

³²⁶ Matthew Lavoie, “The Music of Mauritania, Part One,” Voice of America, 23 January 2008, <http://blogs.voanews.com/african-music-treasures/2008/01/23/the-music-of-mauritania-part-one/>

acoustic guitar into traditional Mauritanian music.^{327, 328} Tours of Europe, beginning in 1989, and recordings internationally released in the early 1990s brought attention to Mauritanian music.^{329, 330} In June 2011, Abba died at age 52 from a brain hemorrhage while touring Morocco.³³¹

Several other Mauritanian performers, many of them women, have become known outside the country in recent years, including Malouma Mint Moktar Ould Meidah, Khalifa Ould Eide, Noura Mint Seymali, and Aicha Mint Chighaly. Malouma (as she is generally known) has brought elements of other African, Arab, and Western styles of music into her songwriting.³³² Eide is probably best known outside Mauritania by the 1990 album *Moorish Music From Mauritania*, a collaboration with his wife, Dimi Mint Abba. Seymali, like Malouma, has blended non-Mauritanian styles like reggae and techno into her music and has become a favorite on the international music festival circuit.³³³ Chighaly, from the Senegal border region, has generally stayed true to traditional Azawan forms, dazzling audiences with her vocal abilities and harp skills on the *ardin*.^{334, 335}



© Marc Ball

Mauritanian singer Malouma

Film

While Mauritania has no film industry, one of West Africa's leading young directors, Abderrahmane Sissako, was born in Mauritania. Raised for much of his early life in Mali, Sissako studied in the Soviet Union, where he lived for 12 years.³³⁶ He returned to Mauritania in the early 2000s to make *Waiting for Happiness*. Set in Nouâdhibou, Mauritania's

³²⁷ BBC Radio 3, "Chapter 4: Dramatic Guitar-Playing Style," Mauritania: The Festival of Nomad Music, May 2005, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p005y128#p007153m>

³²⁸ *The Times*, "Songs of Home From a Diva of the Desert," 4 August 2006, http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article699474.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1

³²⁹ *The Independent*, "Dimi Mint Abba: Musician Known as 'la Diva du Désert' and Hailed by Ali Farka Touré as Africa's Greatest Singer," 17 June 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/dimi-mint-abba-musician-known-as-la-diva-du-d233sert-and-hailed-by-ali-farka-tour233-as-africas-greatest-singer-2298745.html>

³³⁰ Carter Grice et al., "Overlooked Gems of the '90s," Southwest Roots Music, December 1999/January 2000, <http://www.thirstyearfestival.com/features/overlooked.html>

³³¹ Robin Denselow, "Dimi Mint Abba Obituary," *The Guardian*, 9 June 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/jun/09/dimi-mint-abba-obituary>

³³² BBC Radio 3, "Moulama (Mauritania): Nour," 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/worldmusic/a4wm2008/2008_malouma.shtml

³³³ OkayAfrica.com, "Noura Mint Seymali: Diva of Mauritania," 3 September 2010, <http://www.okayafrika.com/stories/noura-mint-seymali-diva-of-mauritania/>

³³⁴ Fes Festival of World Sacred Music, "Artists: Aicha Mint Chighaly," 2007, <http://www.fesfestival.com/en07/aicha-mint-chighaly.php>

³³⁵ Tom Pryor, "World Music Stars Shine at 2007 Festival of Sacred Music," Nat Geo Music, 15 June 2007, http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/view/page.basic/article/content.article/fes_2007_part_two/it_IT

³³⁶ Robin Buss, "Africa at the Pictures," *The Guardian*, 23 October 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2003/oct/23/features>

primary port town, the movie addresses themes of alienation and cultural displacement, no doubt reflecting the director's own feelings after many years away from West Africa.³³⁷

Another Mauritanian film director of note is Med Hondo, whose 1969 breakthrough *Soleil O* was one of the first to be made by an African.³³⁸ In *Soleil O* and subsequent work, Hondo has focused on Africans in foreign surroundings who have moved either voluntarily (emigrants to Paris) or involuntarily (West Indian slaves). Cultural alienation, neocolonial exploitation, and Marxist controversies are all thematic elements embedded within his sometimes jarring, fragmented narrative style.³³⁹

Sports and Recreation

Football (soccer) is the principal sport played in Mauritania.³⁴⁰ Most of the club teams in the nation's Premier League are in Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou.³⁴¹ Mauritania, one of the lesser populated nations in Africa, has had little success in international or African competitions; as of August 2011, the national team was ranked 190th in the world, only better than Somalia and Djibouti among African teams.³⁴²



© Christophe André
Playing in the sand

Rugby is another ball sport played in Mauritania, although its popularity is much less than that of football. Away from the playing fields, *kraur*, better known as *mancala*, is popular in many variants throughout Africa.^{343, 344} All that one needs to play this game are pebbles and dug-out holes in the sand, although wooden boards also are used.

³³⁷ Robin Buss, "Africa at the Pictures," *The Guardian*, 23 October 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2003/oct/23/features>

³³⁸ Mark Reid, "Hondo, Med (1954–) Biographical Highlights, Personal Chronology, Personal History, Influences and Contributions, Contemporaries, The World's Perspective, Legacy," Online Encyclopedia, 31 March 1986, <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/5727/Hondo-Med-1954.html>

³³⁹ Françoise Pfaff, "The Films of Med Hondo: An African Filmmaker in Paris," *Jump Cut*, March 1986, 44–46, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC31folder/HondoFilms.html>

³⁴⁰ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: Cultural Life: Sports and Recreation," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/283207/Sports-and-recreation>

³⁴¹ SoccerWay.com, "Premier League: Venues, 2010/2011," 2011, <http://www.soccerway.com/national/mauritania/premier-league/2010-2011/regular-season/venues/>

³⁴² FIFA.com, "FIFA/Coca-Cola World Ranking: CAF," August 2011, <http://www.fifa.com/worldfootball/ranking/lastranking/gender=m/fullranking.html#confederation=23913&rank=207>

³⁴³ Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "Leisure," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), 115.

³⁴⁴ Anouk Zijlma, "African Games: Games Played in Africa: Traditional African Board Games," About.com, 2011, <http://goafrica.about.com/od/peopleandculture/tp/African-Games-Games-Played-In-Africa.htm>

Chapter 4 Assessment

1. Both the Moors and black African groups in Mauritania have a hierarchical caste system.

TRUE

The Moors and the black African ethnic groups have a traditional caste system that includes nobles, servants (former slaves), and a hierarchy of numerous occupational groupings.

2. Arabic is Mauritania's official language and one of four "national languages," along with Fulani (Pulaar), Soninké, and Wolof.

TRUE

Classical Arabic is the nation's official language, although the Hassaniyya dialect is used by the majority of the Moorish population. The constitution also recognizes Fulani (Pulaar), Soninké, and Wolof as "national languages" (along with Arabic).

3. Mauritania is an Islamic country with a substantial Shia Muslim minority.

FALSE

Mauritania, the world's first declared Islamic Republic, is an almost entirely Sunni Muslim country.

4. Although Mauritania has no film industry, several Mauritania have gained attention as film directors.

TRUE

Abderrahmane Sissako and Mel Hondo are the two best-known Mauritanian film directors.

5. The memberships of *tariqas*, Mauritania's religious brotherhoods, are strictly defined by ethnic or tribal affiliation.

FALSE

Within Mauritania's larger Islamic community are religious brotherhoods (*tariqas*) that cross ethnic and tribal lines.

CHAPTER 5: SECURITY

Introduction

Much publicity has been given to the Trans-Sahara region in recent years as terrorism analysts try to identify areas susceptible to becoming “safe havens” for violent Islamist groups.^{345, 346} Most of Mauritania—along with Mali, Niger, and southern Algeria—lies within this Trans-Saharan region; all of these countries, with the exception of Algeria, are among the poorest in the world and have limited resources for policing extensive desert regions.^{347, 348, 349}



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Al-Qaeda spies captured

In the 2000s, an al-Qaeda affiliate known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) increased its activities within the Trans-Sahara region. As a result, Mauritania shifted its security goals toward halting the spread of radical Islam within its border. Recent rises in the number of local al-Qaeda recruits have come from Mauritania, despite the nation’s moderate tradition.³⁵⁰

U.S.-Mauritanian Relations

The United States was the first nation to officially recognize Mauritania upon its independence in 1960. Since then, relations have generally been good between the two countries with a few notable periods of exception. One of these came in 2005, when the U.S. Government condemned the successful coup that removed President Maaouya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya from power and ushered in a military-led regime.³⁵¹ Three years later, yet another coup toppled the regime of democratically elected President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. This led to U.S. sanctions against

³⁴⁵ Yonah Alexander, “Maghreb & Sahel Terrorism: Addressing the Rising Threat From Al-Qaeda & Other Terrorists in North & West/Central Africa,” Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, January 2010, http://www.potomac institute.org/attachments/524_Maghreb%20Terrorism%20report.pdf

³⁴⁶ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, “Chapter 5: Terrorist Safe Havens (Update to 7120 Report) 5.1. –5.1.b: Strategies, Tactics, and Tools For Disrupting or Eliminating Safe Havens,” in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2010*, 18 August 2011, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2010/170262.htm>

³⁴⁷ Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, “Mauritania’s Goals in Its Struggle Against Al-Qaeda,” 25 July 2011, http://www.aljazeera.net/mritems/streams/2011/7/26/1_1076198_1_51.pdf

³⁴⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, “Country Comparison: GDP–Per Capita (PPP),” in *The World Factbook*, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html?countryName=Mali&countryCode=ml®ionCode=afr&rank=207#ml>

³⁴⁹ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, “Chapter 5: Country Report: Africa Overview,” in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005*, 29 April 2006, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2005/64335.htm>

³⁵⁰ Andre Le Sage, “The Evolving Threat of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” Institute for National Strategic Studies, July 2011, 4, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/StrForum/SF-268.pdf>

³⁵¹ Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Mauritania,” 1 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5467.htm>

Mauritania, including the pull-out of U.S. counterterrorism units.^{352, 353} These sanctions were lifted in October 2009 after a new presidential election was judged to be free and fair by international observing groups.^{354, 355}

Since 2002, the U.S. has partnered with Mauritania and several neighboring countries in counterterrorism programs. The initial program was the Pan-Sahel Initiative (2002–2004), followed by the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP; 2005–present). The latter program is noteworthy for its “holistic” approach to counterterrorism. In addition to focusing on training and equipping local military and law enforcement groups, the program strengthens economic, democratic, and good-governance capacities in order to inhibit extreme Islamist philosophies from spreading.^{356, 357}



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Shariif & Hillary Clinton

TSCTP is perhaps the highest profile U.S. foreign assistance program to Mauritania, but it is certainly not the only one. The U.S. regularly supplies food aid to Mauritania through its Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Food for Peace program. Some of the non-emergency USAID food is sold to fund development projects in Mauritania, such as improving agricultural productivity and promoting maternal and child health.³⁵⁸ In addition, the U.S. Peace Corps program in Mauritania has sent more than 1,200 volunteers to the country since 1966. Currently, however, the Peace Corps program in Mauritania is suspended because of ongoing security concerns.³⁵⁹

³⁵² Nicholas Schmidle, “The Saharan Conundrum,” *New York Times*, 13 February 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html?ref=mauritani>

³⁵³ Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Mauritania,” 1 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5467.htm>

³⁵⁴ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania,” in *2009 Human Rights Report*, 11 March 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/af/135965.htm>

³⁵⁵ Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Mauritania,” 1 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5467.htm>

³⁵⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Combating Terrorism: Actions Need to Enhance Implementation of Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership,” July 2008, 1, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08860.pdf>

³⁵⁷ Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Johnnie Carson: Opening Remarks for Hearing on Counterterrorism in Africa (Sahel Region),” 17 November 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/2009/132062.htm>

³⁵⁸ USAID/Senegal, “Regional Office Food for Peace: West Africa,” 8 February 2010, <http://senegal.usaid.gov/node/17>

³⁵⁹ Peace Corps, “Mauritania,” 2011, <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.wherepc.africa&cntry=mauritania>

Relations with Neighboring Countries

Morocco/Western Sahara

Although Mauritania does not directly border Morocco proper, it does share an extensive border with Western Sahara, which Morocco has exerted *de facto* control over for more than three decades.³⁶⁰ The two countries had very tense relations during the 1960s, and it was not until 1970, a decade after Mauritania became independent, that Morocco abandoned all territorial claims to Mauritania. The Western Sahara conflict during the last half of the 1970s embroiled both nations in a guerilla war. Eventually, militarily weak Mauritania signed a peace treaty with Western Sahara's Polisario Front in August 1979.³⁶¹



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Border crossing into Mauritania

Since 1991, Morocco and the Polisario Front have been in a cease-fire standoff. During the 1980s, Morocco constructed a “defensive wall” of earth, reported to be between 1,600 and 2,414 km (1,000 and 1,500 mi) and guarded by the world's longest continuous chain of land mines.³⁶² The berm, as it is called, divides Western Sahara into two parts: a western part, making up roughly 80% of the total region and including all of Western Sahara's valuable phosphate deposits, and the eastern 20% controlled by the Polisario Front.³⁶⁴

Mauritanian territory borders the Polisario side of the Western Sahara, except for a small section where the berm actually crosses into Mauritania.^{365, 366} The Polisario side of Western Sahara, commonly known as the Free Zone, is sparsely populated because of a limited water supply and the constant threat from landmines and unexploded ordnance.³⁶⁷ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, approximately 26,000 Sahrawis from Western Sahara now

³⁶⁰ Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Morocco,” 20 April 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5431.htm>

³⁶¹ Alexis Arieff, “Western Sahara” Congressional Research Service, Report for Congress, 15 February 2011, 1, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS20962.pdf>

³⁶² Land Mine Action, “Survey and Clearance: Western Sahara,” n.d., <http://www.landmineaction.org/activities/activity.asp?PLID=1021>

³⁶³ Tom Parry, “Clearing the Sahara's Bombed Berm,” 7 November 2007, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/top-stories/2007/11/07/clearing-the-sahara-s-bombed-berm-115875-20074655/>

³⁶⁴ “Western Sahara,” in *Landmine Monitor Report 2001* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2001), 1060.

³⁶⁵ Western Sahara Project, “Historical and Political Contexts,” 18 February 2007, <http://www.nickbrooks.org/WS/WSahara-conflict.html>

³⁶⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Western Sahara Atlas Map,” February 2006, <http://www.unhcr.org/453f1b104.html>

³⁶⁷ Western Sahara Project, “Historical and Political Contexts,” 18 February 2007, <http://www.nickbrooks.org/WS/WSahara-conflict.html>

live in Mauritania, where they have largely integrated themselves as a result of close tribal and clan ties with the Moorish Mauriticians.^{368, 369}

Since its exit from the Western Sahara conflict and the accession of Mohammed VI to the Moroccan throne in 1999, Mauritania's relations with Morocco have improved.³⁷⁰ Mauritania participates as an "interested observer" in informal UN-sponsored settlement talks between Morocco and the Polisario Front. Since August 1979, Mauritania has avoided any direct involvement in the Western Sahara conflict and has generally adhered to a stance of neutrality in the dispute.^{371, 372}

Senegal

Excluding the Western Sahara conflict, the closest Mauritania has ever come to war with one of its neighbors came in 1989–1991, when Senegal and Mauritania narrowly avoided armed hostilities. The crisis was set in motion by a dispute over grazing rights in the S n gal River valley that quickly escalated and spurred ethnic violence. *Beydane* ("white Moor") Mauritanian shopkeepers in Senegal were forced to flee northward, while Sengalese in Mauritania fled in the other direction.

Ultimately, each country began deporting the other's resident citizens. By 1990, diplomatic relations had been broken off, and military activity was ominously increasing in the border region. Eventually international diplomatic efforts helped defuse the situation, and diplomatic ties were restored in April 1992. Nevertheless, strained relations have marked the ensuing decade, a period marked by several brief but contentious border "incidents."³⁷³

In 2000, a dispute between the two nations concerning water diversions from the S n gal River briefly brought back memories of the 1989–1991 conflict, when Mauritanian President Taya abruptly ordered the expulsion of tens of thousands of Sengalese living in Mauritania. Within three days, more than 25,000 Sengalese had left Mauritania, and more than 5,000 Mauritians



© 300td.org / flickr.com
Crossing the Senegal River

³⁶⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee, "Annexes: Table 5: Refugees and People in a Refugee-Like Situation, Excluding Asylum-Seekers, and Changes By Origin and Country of Asylum, 2010," in UNHCR Global Trends 2010, 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a02afce6.html>

³⁶⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Refugees," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 434.

³⁷⁰ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Foreign Relations," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 218.

³⁷¹ What's in Blue, "Western Sahara Talks," 19 July 2011, <http://whatsinblue.org/2011/07/western-sahara.php>

³⁷² Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Western Sahara Conflict," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 539–542.

³⁷³ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Senegal-Mauritania Crisis," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 454–462.

left their homes in Senegal, mindful of the violence that had broken out a decade earlier. On this occasion, however, the dispute was quickly mediated before it had a chance to escalate.³⁷⁴

Beginning in 2008, the first of more than 20,000 Mauritanian refugees still living in Senegal as a result of the 1989–1991 conflict returned to their native country. The repatriation operation took place over three years, concluding at the end of 2010.³⁷⁵

Mali

Of all its neighbors, Mauritania has had the most consistently cordial relationship with Mali. In 1963, the two settled a boundary dispute from the colonial days, and since then have generally been on positive terms.³⁷⁶ Although the two countries share extensive borders, these boundaries mostly lie in remote unpopulated desert regions.



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Protecting the Mali border

The terrorist organization al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operates with impunity in these remote border regions, increasingly seen as marking a “no man’s land.” Both Mauritania and Mali view AQIM as a mutual regional threat and have worked to increase cross-border security cooperation.³⁷⁷ In recent years, however, the two countries have not always agreed on the extent to engage AQIM, whose southern forces are generally based in Mali.³⁷⁸ In June 2011, the armies of both countries launched a joint attack on an AQIM camp in the Wagadou Forest region of western Mali, killing at least 15 AQIM fighters.³⁷⁹

The Senegal River Basin Development Authority (OMVS by its French acronym) has also linked Mali and Mauritania, along with Senegal, since 1972. The organization was formed to build and manage dams and related infrastructure on the Sénégal River.³⁸⁰ The most prominent OMVS

³⁷⁴ Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Senegal-Mauritania Incident,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008, 462–464.

³⁷⁵ African Press Agency, “More Than 20,000 Mauritanian Refugees Return Home From Senegal,” *SousLeManguier*, 6 January 2011, <http://english.souslemanguier.com/nouvelles/news.asp?id=11&idnews=29627&pays=245&rub=>

³⁷⁶ Robert E. Handloff, “Chapter: 4: Government and Politics: Foreign Relations: Relations With Other African States,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 152.

³⁷⁷ Jemal Oumar and Bakari Gueye, “Mauritania, Mali Ally Against Shared Terror Threat,” *Magharebia*, 1 August 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/08/01/feature-01

³⁷⁸ Agence France-Presse, “Mali Joins Mauritania to Fight AQIM,” *News24.com*, 7 November 2010, <http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/Mali-joins-Mauritania-to-fight-AQIM-20101107>

³⁷⁹ RTT News, “Reports: Mauritania Forces Repel Militant Attack on Army Bases,” 6 July 2011, <http://www.rttnews.com/Content/GeneralNews.aspx?Id=1660463&SM=1>

³⁸⁰ Paul F. Uhler, “The Senegal River Basin and Related Data Sources,” in *Scientific Data for Decision Making Toward Sustainable Development: Senegal River Basin Case Study* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2003), 6.

project is the Manantali Dam, located in Mali, whose power station supplies more than 20% of Mauritania's electricity.³⁸¹

Algeria

Algeria has long been the most prominent regional supporter of the Polisario Front, whose headquarters are at the refugees camps clustered around the western Algerian oasis town of Tindouf, situated near both the Western Saharan and Mauritanian borders.^{382, 383}

Relations between the two countries, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, have been heavily influenced by the Western Sahara conflict and the related rift between Morocco and Algeria.³⁸⁴ Algeria and Mauritania broke off diplomatic relations in 1976 during the Western Sahara conflict, restoring them in 1979 after Mauritania signed the Algiers Accord in which it dropped any claims on Western Saharan territory.^{385, 386}



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Sahrawi refugees

During the early 1980s, Mauritania drew closer to Algeria in almost inverse relation to its deteriorating ties with Morocco.³⁸⁷ In 1984, Mauritanian leader Mohammed Khouna Ould Haidalla formally recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the name for the self-proclaimed government-in-exile of the Polisario Front. The decision was unpopular among several members of Mauritania's governing military council. Their concern about potential Moroccan military retaliation against Mauritania contributed to Haidalla's removal from office via a coup a few months later.³⁸⁸ Subsequently, Mauritania has largely taken a careful, balanced approach to the Western Sahara issue.³⁸⁹

Mauritania's border with Algeria is very remote. Zouérate, the iron-mining center, is Mauritania's closest town to Algeria. The town is still far removed from the border, which is only reachable by a dirt road traversing desolate desert regions prone to criminal and terrorist

³⁸¹ Hamdi Ould Cheikh, "France Supports Mauritania Electricity Sector," *Magharebia*, 25 July 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/07/25/feature-03

³⁸² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Tindouf," 2011, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/596552/Tindouf>

³⁸³ Jacob Mundy, "Algeria and the Western Sahara Dispute," *Maghreb Center Journal*, Issue 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 1, [http://maghrebcent.web137.discountasp.net/journal/MaghrebCenter Journal Mundy Algeria-W Sahara.pdf](http://maghrebcent.web137.discountasp.net/journal/MaghrebCenter%20Journal%20Mundy%20Algeria-W%20Sahara.pdf)

³⁸⁴ Robert E. Handloff, "Chapter 4: Government and Politics: Foreign Relations: Relations With Other States of the Maghrib," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 149.

³⁸⁵ HistoryOrb.com, "Today in Algerian History," 2011, <http://www.historyorb.com/countries/algeria>

³⁸⁶ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Foreign Relations," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 210–211.

³⁸⁷ Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: The Haidalla Regime: Consolidation of Power," in *Mauritania: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), 36.

³⁸⁸ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Western Sahara Conflict," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 539–542.

³⁸⁹ Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Western Sahara Conflict," in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 542.

activities.³⁹⁰ Nonetheless, import trade from Algeria makes its way to Zouérate, especially during the Ramadan season.³⁹¹ Some of this trade is diverted food aid to the Sahrawi refugee camps near Tindouf in southern Algeria, producing a black market economy that the refugees refer to as *el comercio*.³⁹² Apart from this cross-border “intermediate trade” (i.e., goods imported customs-free unless transported beyond Zouérate to other Mauritanian cities), Algeria and Mauritania have very little trade with each other.^{393, 394}

Military

Although Mauritania’s total forces are not large in number, the nation’s military has long taken a front row seat in the political affairs of the nation. Only two of Mauritania’s noninterim heads of state since independence—presidents Moktar Ould Daddah (1960–1978) and Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (2007–2008)—have not been active or former military leaders.³⁹⁵



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Mauritanian military

Mauritania’s military consists of slightly less than 16,000 active troops, 15,000 of which make up the army. A small navy based out of Nouâdhibou and an even smaller air force make up the rest of the nation’s military. Another 5,000 or so active paramilitary forces are divided between the *Gendarmerie* (National Police) and the National Guard.³⁹⁶ An estimated 400 Mauritanian soldiers have been trained in various antiterrorist techniques via the U.S.-led Pan-Sahel Initiative and TSCTP programs.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁰ The Moor Next Door, “Mauritania Update,” 5 April 2010, <http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/mauritania-update/>

³⁹¹ Mohamed Yahya Ould Abdel Wedoud, “Roaring Ramadan Trade Boosts Algeria-Mauritania Ties,” Magharebia, 20 August 2009, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2009/08/20/feature-02

³⁹² Nicola Cozza, “Food and Identity Among Sahrawi Refugee Young People,” in *Deterritorialized Youth: Sahrawi and Afghan Refugees at the Margins of the Middle East* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2010), 132.

³⁹³ EUROSTAT, European Commission, “Mauritania,” 8 June 2011, 6, http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2011/january/tradoc_147323.pdf

³⁹⁴ Mohamed Yahya Ould Abdel Wedoud, “Roaring Ramadan Trade Boosts Algeria-Mauritania Ties,” Magharebia, 20 August 2009, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2009/08/20/feature-02

³⁹⁵ Ben Cahoon, “Mauritania,” WorldStatesmen.org, 2009, <http://www.worldstatesmen.org/Mauritania.htm>

³⁹⁶ “Chapter 7: Middle East and North Africa,” in *The Military Balance 2011* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011), 322.

³⁹⁷ United Nations, Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), “Mauritania: Military Launches Anti-Terrorist Units Amid Donor Cutbacks,” 28 November 2008, http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher_IRIN,,MRT,4934ffbe29,0.html

Terrorist Groups and Activities

Mauritania's strongest terrorist threat comes from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This organization was originally founded in 1998 as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC by its French acronym), a splinter group of the Algerian-based Armed Islamic Group (GIA).³⁹⁸ The GSPC's original goals, like that of the GIA, were the overthrow of Algeria's military government and the establishment of an Islamic state in its stead. The primary difference between the two groups was that the GSPC initially did not consider civilians to be legitimate targets for its attacks.³⁹⁹



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Military prepares for al-Qaeda

The GSPC quickly grew in strength and replaced the GIA as Algeria's most dangerous insurgency group. A southern Algerian GSPC branch, operated semi-independently by former Afghanistan fighter Mokhtar Belmokhtar, soon expanded operations to the Saharan and northern Sahel region, including Mauritania.⁴⁰⁰ In September 2006, after several years of increasing contacts with the leadership of the al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, GSPC leader Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadoud (aka Abdelmalek Droukkel) formally aligned the GSPC with al-Qaeda; the group's name subsequently changed to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.⁴⁰¹

GSPC strikes against Mauritanian military targets began in 2005, with the attack on a remote northern Mauritanian military base that left at least 15 Mauritanian soldiers dead.^{402, 403} The first AQIM attack against foreigners in Mauritania came in December 2007, when four French tourists were gunned down while picnicking near the town of Aleg.⁴⁰⁴ Several months later, in February 2008, five civilians were wounded during an attack on the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott. Since then, AQIM has carried out several attacks against Mauritanian military police personnel and has targeted civilians in kidnappings and shootings.⁴⁰⁵

³⁹⁸ BBC News, "Top Algerian Militant Surrenders," 5 October 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7031042.stm>

³⁹⁹ Sara Daly, "The Algerian Salafist Group for Call and Combat: A Dossier," *Terrorism Monitor* 3, 5 May 2005, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=311](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=311)

⁴⁰⁰ Andrew Black, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad's Southern Amir," *Terrorism Monitor* 7, 8 May 2009, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=34964](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34964)

⁴⁰¹ Andrew McGregor, "Leadership Disputes Plague Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Terrorism Focus* 4, 25 September 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4433&tx%20_ttnews\[backPid\]=240&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4433&tx%20_ttnews[backPid]=240&no_cache=1)

⁴⁰² Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, "Chapter 5: Country Report: Africa Overview," in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005*, 29 April 2006, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2005/64335.htm>

⁴⁰³ Stephen Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group Into an Al-Qaeda Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," *Concerned African Scholar Bulletin*, no. 85, 16, <http://concernedafricascholars.org/docs/bulletin85harmon.pdf>

⁴⁰⁴ Souad Mekhennet et al., "Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline From Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, 1 July 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01algeria.html?ref=africa&pagewanted=print>

⁴⁰⁵ National Counter-Terrorism Center, "Worldwide Incidents Tracking System: Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, Islamic Extremist (Sunni)," 2011,

Kidnappings, in particular, have been a main revenue source for AQIM.⁴⁰⁶ One Algerian government official has estimated that nearly 95% of AQIM's financing comes from ransoms paid to recover kidnapped victims.⁴⁰⁷ Belmokhtar's group continues to raise money for AQIM through kidnapping ransoms, gun and drug trafficking, and cigarette smuggling. Also operating in the southern Saharan region is an AQIM cell led by Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, who has been associated with several hostage killings and is viewed as the more brutal and fanatical of the two southern AQIM leaders.^{408, 409}

Other Issues Affecting Stability

Political Instability

As noted in *The Economist* in 2008, “[w]hile the rest of Africa seems to be slowly ridding itself of its penchant for coups, Mauritania seems to be perfecting its ability to stage them.”⁴¹⁰ Mauritania has had two military coups since August 2005 and five altogether since independence. The 2008 coup, in which a democratically elected civilian president was removed from power after trying to fire several senior military officers, triggered an onslaught of protest and sanctions from all corners of the world. The rapidly called 2009 presidential election, won by coup leader Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, largely defused the crisis, but the root causes of Mauritania's long string of political disruptions remain.



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Youth protest in Nouakchott

Contributing to Mauritania's political instability are extensive poverty, high-level corruption, political and economic inequities between ethnic and tribal groups, and an economy sensitive to disruptions from drought and/or worldwide commodity prices. Attempts to address these issues can result in further problems. For example, current President Abdel Aziz has tried to alleviate some of the problems of the poor through subsidized pricing on food, electricity, and water and

https://wits.netc.gov/FederalDiscoverWITS/index.do?Rd=GroupType|4294967065|Islamic+Extremist+%28Sunni%29||ICRegion|4294955815|Africa|Country|4294948480|Mali|Country|4294953013|Mauritania|Country|4294943274|Niger&Nrc=id+8063+dynrank+disabled&Ns=p_IncidentDate|1&N=0&Nf=p_IncidentDate|GT+20021001

⁴⁰⁶ Andre Le Sage, “The Evolving Threat of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” Institute for National Strategic Studies, July 2011, 4, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/StrForum/SF-268.pdf>

⁴⁰⁷ Mohamed Ould Khattat et al., “Al-Qaeda Looks to Sahel For New Funding Sources,” Magharebia, 10 November 2010, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2010/11/10/feature-01

⁴⁰⁸ Leela Jacinta, “Key Figures in Al Qaeda's North African Branch,” France 24, 17 September 2010, <http://www.france24.com/en/20100924-aqim-al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-key-figures-north-africa-branch>

⁴⁰⁹ Edward Cody, “‘Emir of the South’ Abu Zeid Poised to Take Over Al-Qaeda in NW Africa,” *Washington Post*, 20 October 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/20/AR2010102005252.html>

⁴¹⁰ *The Economist*, “Mauritania: Another President Booted Out,” 7 August 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/11893595>

by spending on social and economic infrastructure. But these measures may prove financially unsustainable and weaken the nation's economy.⁴¹¹

Ethnic Conflict

Mauritania's legacy of slavery has been ethnically divisive among white Moors, black Moors, and black Africans. At some points in Mauritania's history, tensions and fears between the white Moors and the black Africans have spilled over into ethnic-based violations of human rights. One such case occurred in 1989–1991 during the conflict with Senegal, a period in which many black African Mauritians were forced to leave the country and tens of thousands of black Africans were purged from the military and government. The events of these years resulted in lasting anger and resentments that the government has only begun to redress in the last few years.⁴¹²



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Activist push for action

A voluntary repatriation program for Mauritania refugees living in Senegal began in January 2008 and finally was completed at the end of 2010.⁴¹³ In 2011, the Mauritanian Ministry of Defense initiated a compensation program for black African Mauritians and their descendants who were either unfairly dismissed from military duty or abused/killed during the Senegal crisis.⁴¹⁴ These actions to come to terms with the human rights violations of Mauritania's recent past have been praised by some as a gesture showing "Mauritania is a country for all in spite of its different cultures and ethnicities."⁴¹⁵ Whether Mauritania has truly turned the corner in realizing such sentiments remains to be seen.

⁴¹¹ Muna Abdalla, Institute for Security Studies, "The Future of Mauritanian Politics," 17 August 2009, http://www.iss.co.za/iss_today.php?ID=1139

⁴¹² Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Mauritania," 1 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5467.htm>

⁴¹³ Agence France-Presse, "Senegal's Repatriation of Mauritanian Refugees Ends," AllWestAfrica.com, 8 January 2011, <http://www.allwestafrica.com/080120118106.html>

⁴¹⁴ Jemal Oumar, "Mauritanian Army to Compensate Abuse Victims," 6 September 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/09/06/feature-07

⁴¹⁵ Jemal Oumar, "Mauritanian Army to Compensate Abuse Victims," 6 September 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/09/06/feature-07

Chapter 5 Assessment

1. Mauritania, since ending its participation in the Western Sahara conflict, has consistently supported Morocco's claim to the territory.

FALSE

Since August 1979, Mauritania has avoided any direct involvement in the Western Sahara conflict and has generally adhered to a stance of neutrality in the dispute.

2. Mauritania's border with Western Sahara lies on the Polisario Front side of the earthen berm built by Morocco to separate the region.

TRUE

During the 1980s, Morocco constructed a defensive wall of earth that divides Western Sahara into two parts. Mauritanian territory borders the Polisario side of the Western Sahara, except for a small section where the berm crosses into Mauritania.

3. Mali and Mauritania staged a joint attack on an al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) base in Mali.

TRUE

In June 2011, the armies of both countries launched a joint attack on an AQIM camp in the Wagadou Forest region of western Mali, killing at least 15 AQIM fighters.

4. All but two of Mauritania's noninterim heads of state since independence have been active or former military leaders.

TRUE

Only presidents Moktar Ould Daddah (1960–1978) and Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (2007–2008) have not been active or former military leaders.

5. The Mauritanian government recently tried to redress human rights abuses in the country.

TRUE

Beginning in 2008, the government began a voluntary repatriation program, and later the military offered compensation for black Africans who were forced to leave the country and purged from the military and government almost 20 years earlier.

FINAL ASSESSMENT

1. Mauritania's generally flat terrain is broken up by raised plateau regions and isolated peaks in its interior.
TRUE or FALSE
2. There are no permanent rivers either within or bordering Mauritania.
TRUE or FALSE
3. Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital, was a small village prior to the nation's independence from France.
TRUE or FALSE
4. During the last decade, Mauritania has suffered serious agricultural losses from locust infestations.
TRUE or FALSE
5. Mauritania has always had many destructive dust storms each year.
TRUE or FALSE
6. Mauritania is the world's first Islamic republic.
TRUE or FALSE
7. Conquering Arabs established a new social order in the region now known as Mauritania that today continues to ignite ethnic clashes.
TRUE or FALSE
8. The French did not recognize Mauritania as a territory separate from colonial Senegal until the early 20th Century.
TRUE or FALSE
9. Mauritania's current population is mostly nomadic.
TRUE or FALSE
10. Since 1978, most of Mauritania's leaders have come to power by means of military coups.
TRUE or FALSE
11. Mauritania's oil output has been increasing every year since production began in 2006.
TRUE or FALSE
12. Iron ore is Mauritania's largest export and revenue source.
TRUE or FALSE
13. Mauritania's tourism revenue has increased rapidly in recent years.
TRUE or FALSE

14. Mauritania's two largest cities, Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou, were not connected by a paved road until less than 10 years ago.
TRUE or FALSE
15. Life expectancy for average Mauritians has increased during the last 25 years.
TRUE or FALSE
16. "Black" Moors in Mauritania trace their lineage to Arabs and Berbers.
TRUE or FALSE
17. Although Mauritania is an Islamic Republic, many Mauritians oppose any attempts to lessen the governmental and educational role of French in favor of Arabic.
TRUE or FALSE
18. Polygamy is widely practiced by Muslims in Mauritania.
TRUE or FALSE
19. Musicians hold a high position among Mauritanian castes.
TRUE or FALSE
20. Overweight Mauritanian women have traditionally been viewed as more attractive potential spouses than their thinner counterparts.
TRUE or FALSE
21. Mauritania, along with several neighboring West African countries, is a participant in the U.S.-sponsored Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership.
TRUE or FALSE
22. Mauritania once nearly went to war with Senegal.
TRUE or FALSE
23. Algeria and Mauritania have had consistently close relations since Mauritania became independent in 1960.
TRUE or FALSE
24. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a terrorist organization that evolved out of a group trying to establish an Islamic state in Mauritania.
TRUE or FALSE
25. Most of AQIM's financial support comes from radical Islam groups located in other Muslim countries.
TRUE or FALSE

FURTHER READING

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