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Mauritania faces the challenges of growing instability in Mali



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Abstract:

Mali is experiencing a profound crisis of internal instability, which has been exacerbated in particular since April by coordinated attacks by JNIM terrorists and FLA separatists on six of the country's major cities. The inability of the Malian armed forces and the Russian Africa Corps paramilitary units to effectively combat such attacks may call into question the very survival of Assimi Goïta's regime. Neighbouring Mauritania is observing the escalation of hostilities and the rise in violence in Mali with great concern. The current escalation of the situation not only compels Nouakchott to respond to various incidents on the border involving Malian forces and Russian paramilitaries, but also puts its hitherto successful hybrid counter-terrorism strategy to the test, whilst placing considerable strain on regions grappling with the influx of migrants fleeing the chaos.

Keywords:

Mauritania, Mali, FLA, JNIM, Wagner, terrorism, migrations.

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Introduction

The Severe Deterioration of the Situation in Mali

Since 2020, the Republic of Mali has faced a state of violence and instability that is unfortunately far from unprecedented in its sixty years of independence. The country is governed by an administration installed through successive military coups, is affected by an ethno-territorial confrontation between the north and the south aggravated by jihadism, hosts a destabilising foreign presence, and suffers from a severely weakened economy. In recent months, however, this situation has deteriorated at an alarming pace, placing at risk not only the survival of the state itself but also the stability of the entire region.

Beyond the enduring separatist challenge emanating from the northern region of Azawad, since the end of last year the government in Bamako, controlled since 2021 by Assimi Goïta's military junta, has faced a sustained campaign of harassment conducted by the terrorist organisation *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM), or "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims", a coalition of several jihadist groups affiliated with *Al-Qaeda*[1].

In September 2025, JNIM launched an accelerated strategy aimed at toppling the regime. As a first step, it carried out a series of violent actions designed to block the flow of supplies to the capital, particularly targeting economic infrastructure and fuel tankers arriving from Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire[2]. Using rapid attacks and motorised guerrilla tactics against major roads and transport hubs, the organisation effectively disrupted communications and prevented the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) from responding in time. For months, the terrorist group fuelled a genuine fuel-supply crisis, forcing citizens to endure queues lasting several days at petrol stations. Bamako responded by deploying Operation *Fuka Kènè* ("clean-up" in Bambara)[3], which temporarily restored the circulation of supplies. Nevertheless, the extraordinarily high cost of the protection arrangements and the need to organise convoys consisting of hundreds of lorries made it impossible to

[1] NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. «Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin», CounterTerrorism Guide, May 2026. https://www.odni.gov/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/CT-Guide-JNIM_508.pdf

[2] HAJBI, Maher & ASCOFARÉ, Aly Asmane. « Mali : 5 questions pour comprendre la crise du carburant qui paralyse le pays». *Jeune Afrique*, 4 November 2025. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1736988/politique/mali-5-questions-pour-comprendre-la-crise-du-carburant-qui-paralyse-le-pays/

[3] AFRICA DEFENSE FORUM. « In Mali, General Appointed to Win Bamako's 'Fuel War'». 13 January 2026. https://adf-magazine.com/2026/01/in-mali-general-appointed-to-win-bamakos-fuel-war/

guarantee a sustained return to normal supply levels or their secure distribution to peripheral regions.

Through this strategy, JNIM achieved a dual objective. On the one hand, it inflicted a major reputational blow on the government by strangling the economy and exposing its inability to maintain order and ensure the basic supply of fuel. On the other hand, it compelled Bamako to redeploy part of its military contingent from central and northern Mali, where it had been engaged in operations against both terrorists and separatists, thereby multiplying the number of active fronts.

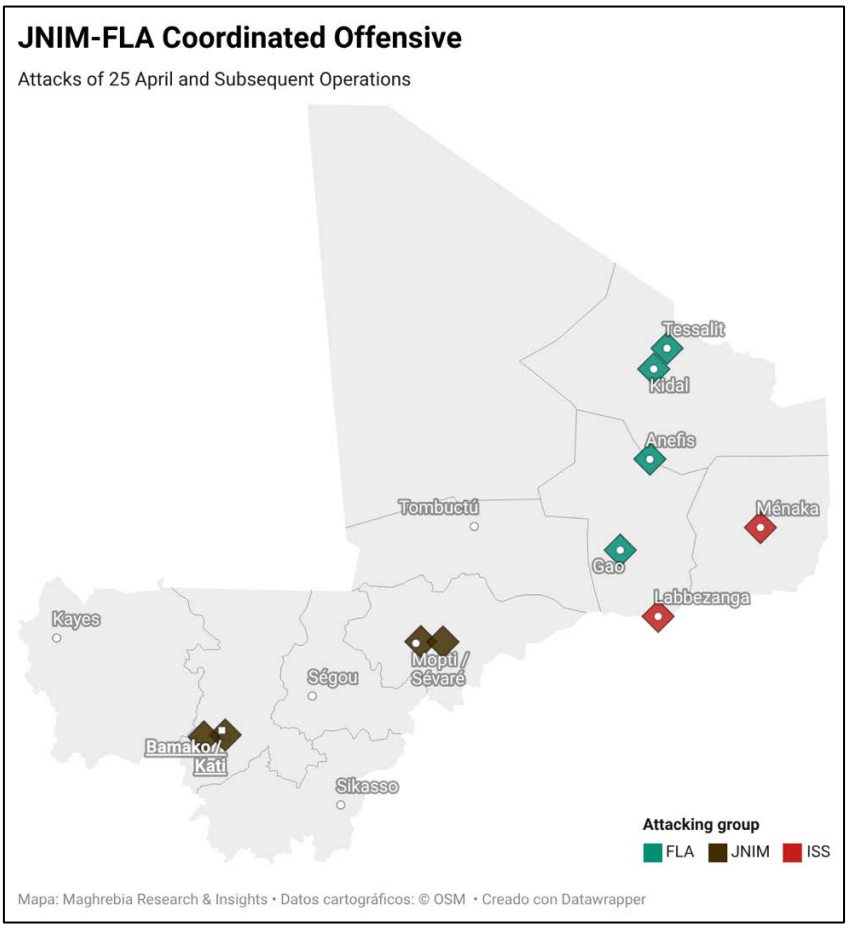
Indeed, on 25 April 2026, in explicit coordination with the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA, by its French acronym), a northern separatist militia, JNIM launched a series of simultaneous attacks[4] against six major cities: Bamako, Kati, Kidal, Gao, Sévaré and Mopti, plunging the country into chaos and violence. The first reports revealed the seriousness of the offensive. In Kati, on the outskirts of the capital and seat of the junta, a suicide attack killed Defence Minister Sadio Camara[5] and destroyed several city blocks. In the north, the FLA seized control of the city of Kidal, which had only been retaken in November 2023 by FAMA and Russian Africa Corps paramilitaries after a decade outside government control. In Gao, the separatist militia shot down a Malian military helicopter[6]. Even the Islamic State in the Sahel (ISS), a competitor and rival of JNIM, exploited the chaos to attack the eastern towns of Ménaka and Labbezanga[7].

[4] HIERRO, Lola. « Fuerzas rebeldes desafían a la junta de Malí con un ataque coordinado en varios puntos del país». *El País*, 25 April 2026. https://elpais.com/internacional/2026-04-25/fuerzas-rebeldes-atacan-varios-puntos-de-mali.html

[5] RTVE. « Muere el ministro de Defensa de Mali en la ofensiva de los secesionistas del norte junto a la filial de Al Qaeda en el Sahel». 26 April 2026. https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20260426/muere-ministro-defensa-mali-ofensiva-secesionistas-del-norte-junto-a-filial-qaeda-sahel/17041937.shtml

[6] JEUNE AFRIQUE. « Mali : ce que l'on sait de l'offensive coordonnée du FLA et du Jnim visant Bamako, Gao, Kidal et Mopti», 27 April 2026. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1791602/politique/mali-ce-que-lon-sait-de-loffensive-des-groupes-armes-sur-bamako-kidal-et-gao/

[7] PÉREZ TRIANA, Jesús M. « Pausa Estratégica en el Norte De Mali». *OSINT Sahel*, 8 May 2026. https://www.osintsahel.com/2026/05/08/pausa-estrategica-en-el-norte-de-mali/



Map 1. JNIM-FLA Offensive. Author's own elaboration.

Despite the reorganisation undertaken by Goïta within the security forces, including his personal assumption of the defence portfolio; the detention of an unspecified number of military and civilian figures for their alleged involvement in the attacks, criticised by many as a merely propagandistic purge[8]; and the counter-offensive operations, particularly aerial strikes, conducted in the following days, sustained insurgent pressure forced FAMA and their Africa Corps allies to withdraw from the Tessalit base near the Algerian border on 1 May. Subsequently, JNIM maintained attacks in the country's central-western regions[9], foreshadowing a new phase of military and information operations by both sides. These resumed in northern Mali well into July, when rebel forces laid siege to the

[8] JEUNE AFRIQUE. « Mali : militaires, activistes, politiciens… Ce que l'on sait des arrestations après les attaques du Jnim et du FLA». 5 May 2026. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1793615/politique/mali-militaires-activistes-politiciens-ce-que-lon-sait-des-arrestations-apres-les-attaques-du-jnim-et-du-fla/

[9] EUROPA PRESS. « Fuerzas tuaregs lanzan una nueva ofensiva múltiple contra varias localidades del centro-oeste de Malí». 4 July 2026. https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-fuerzas-tuaregs-lanzan-nueva-ofensiva-multiple-contra-varias-localidades-centro-oeste-mali-20260704103832.html

strategic town of Anefis[10] on the Gao-Kidal axis.

Although the conflict appeared to have stabilised somewhat by the time of writing, with several prisoner exchanges taking place during August, the JNIM-FLA offensive has already placed both the Malian regime and its supporting structures under severe strain. On the one hand, the success of the attacks casts doubt upon the counter-terrorist effectiveness of the Russian Africa Corps contingent, on which the regime has reportedly spent close to one billion US dollars[11] and in which Goïta nevertheless appears to retain confidence. On the other hand, the offensive has reignited debate concerning the operational viability of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES, by its French acronym) and its difficulty in assembling and financing the promised counter-terrorist force of up to fifteen thousand troops agreed by its member states, namely Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger[12]. Ultimately, however, it is the credibility of the junta and its capacity to regain control over the entire country and guarantee the security of its citizens that the JNIM-FLA campaign truly calls into question.

This is precisely the weakness that the emerging JNIM-FLA partnership seeks to exploit: the unfulfilled promise of security invoked by the military junta in 2020 to legitimise its seizure of power. Yet each organisation pursues a different objective. The FLA seeks an essentially political goal, namely the recovery of control over Azawad, and advocates the convergence of all forces opposed to the junta so that, in any future post-regime negotiations, it may advance its claims to self-determination. JNIM, by contrast, appears currently incapable of governing a state or controlling extensive urban areas. Its primary objective is therefore to undermine and ultimately bring down the junta, enabling it to consolidate its position within Mali and expand the insurgency throughout the wider Sahel region. Nevertheless, some analysts have argued that the jihadist movement may seek to pursue its own "Syrian path", emulating the route to power followed by another former terrorist organisation, *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (the former *Al-Nusra Front*, affiliated with *Al-Qaeda*), potentially through a comparable process of de-jihadisation and international

[10] FRANCE24. « Mali rebels attack convoy of Russian reinforcements headed to besieged military camp». 9 July 2026. https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20260709-tuareg-separatists-attack-convoy-of-russian-mercenaries-and-malian-troops

[11] LE PATRIOTE. «Africa Corps: le partenariat militaire coûteux pour le Mali». 25 March 2026. https://lepatriotebenin.com/index.php/2026/03/25/africa-corps-le-partenariat-militaire-russe-couteux-pour-le-mali/

[12] APA NEWS. « Force unifiée de l'AES : chefs d'état-major réunis à Ouagadougou», 16 April 2026. https://fr.apanews.net/security/force-unifiee-de-laes-chefs-detat-major-reunis-a-ouagadougou/

legitimisation similar to that undertaken by the current regime in Damascus[13].

In any event, Mali is experiencing a profound period of uncertainty and instability capable not only of plunging the already turbulent Sahel into chaos, but also, unless checked, of spreading instability to neighbouring Maghreb states. Among these, Mauritania currently faces the most direct risks, owing not only to its extensive shared border with Mali, which has long been a source of confrontation, but also to its exposure to jihadist terrorism and its growing population of Malian migrants fleeing violence and disorder. The following sections examine how Mauritania is responding to these challenges and why preserving its stability is of the utmost importance to Spain.

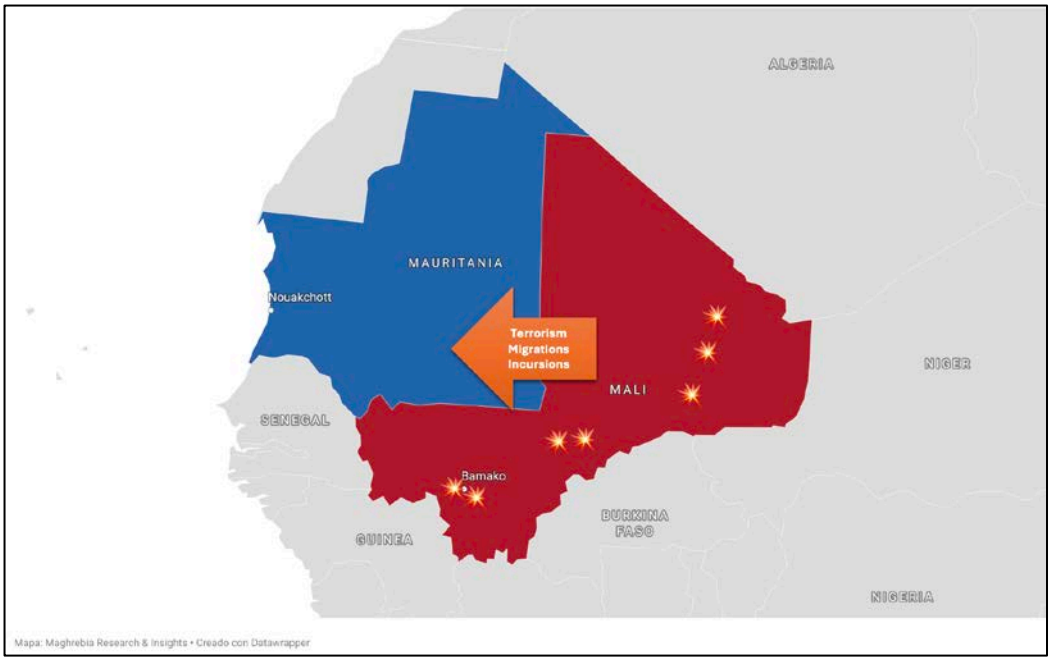
Nouakchott-Bamako: A Troubled Diplomatic Relationship

Mauritania is profoundly affected by anything that occurs in Mali, a country with which it shares more than 2,200 kilometres of border to the east and south, most of it desert terrain and, in certain areas, only loosely demarcated. This lengthy and porous frontier means that Mauritania's principal concern regarding Mali is the security of its citizens, which in recent years has increasingly been threatened by instability emanating from its neighbour.

Mauritania's response to Mali's *coups d'état* of 2020 and 2021 was more pragmatic and restrained than that of many neighbouring states. Although, in its capacity as chair of the G5 Sahel[14], it called for a return to constitutional order, Nouakchott carefully avoided antagonising the military junta, both because it hosted the organisation's headquarters and because it needed to maintain cooperation with Mali on matters of regional security.

[13] LAREDJ, Bassem. «L'impact de la crise malienne sur l'Algérie et la Mauritanie : enjeux, dynamiques et répercussions régionales», *IRIS*. February 2026. www.iris-france.org/limpact-de-la-crise-malienne-sur-lalgerie-et-la-mauritanie-enjeux-dynamiques-et-repercussions-regionales/

[14] AMI. « Les Présidents du G5 Sahel appellent au retour à l'ordre constitutionnel au Mali et exigent la libération immédiate et inconditionnelle du Président et les membres du gouvernement», 18 August 2020. https://ami.mr/fr/archives/84550



Map 2. Mauritania and Mali in the Sahelian Environment. Author's own elaboration.

Nevertheless, relations with the regime have not been free from diplomatic confrontations and periodic tensions between the two capitals, particularly since the rise of Assimi Goïta and the arrival of Russian Wagner Group/Africa Corps paramilitaries, accompanied by the withdrawal of French and UN forces. In 2022, the execution of twenty-nine Mauritanian nationals in the Malian region of Ségou[15] triggered a first major diplomatic crisis. This episode was eventually defused thanks largely to Nouakchott's firm determination to preserve open channels of communication.

Indeed, the Mauritanian government repeatedly demonstrated solidarity and friendship towards Mali during the JNIM blockades of 2025. The Mauritanian Foreign Minister visited Goïta in October[16], President Ghazouani publicly expressed his solidarity in November and his desire to support his "Malian brothers"[17], while in December the Minister of the Interior instructed border administrations to take account of the difficult circumstances

[15] TV5 MONDE. « Mali: l'ONU confirme l'implication de soldats maliens et "blancs" dans la mort de 33 civils dont 29 Mauritaniens». 5 August 2022. https://information.tv5monde.com/international/mali-lonu-confirme-limplication-de-soldats-maliens-et-blancs-dans-la-mort-de-33

[16] PRESIDENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALI. « Le Président Assimi GOÏTA reçoit une délégation mauritanienne porteuse d'un message du Président Mohamed Cheikh El GHAZOUANI». 8 October 2025. https://koulouba.ml/le-president-assimi-goita-recoit-une-delegation-mauritanienne-porteuse-dun-message-du-president-mohamed-cheikh-el-ghazouani/

[17] CRIDEM. « Le président Ghazouani réaffirme les liens historiques et fraternels entre la Mauritanie et le Mali», 12 November 2025. https://api.cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=788633

facing Mali[18].

Tensions, however, have increased steadily in recent months due to a series of new diplomatic incidents. In February and March, reports emerged of separate cases involving the execution of Mauritanian nationals by members of FAMA and Russian personnel operating in the Malian border region[19]. Mali subsequently accused terrorist groups of abducting two of its soldiers at the M'Berra refugee camps in Mauritania, an allegation firmly rejected by Nouakchott[20]. Later that month, two Mauritanian shepherds in one incident, and three Mauritanians together with a Malian national in another, were reportedly killed by an "armed force" in border communities, although responsibility remains unclear[21]. Although Nouakchott has recently sought to restore calm by taking the diplomatic initiative, including dispatching its Minister of Defence to meet Goïta in June[22], the accumulation of disagreements has left bilateral relations fragile. Consequently, Mauritania has temporarily prohibited its livestock herders from crossing into Mali with their herds[23].

The Hybrid Struggle Against Terrorism

Despite these tensions, Mauritania explicitly and immediately condemned the JNIM-FLA attacks of April, expressing solidarity with Mali and concern regarding the deterioration of the situation. The spread of terrorism in neighbouring Mali constitutes another major concern for the Mauritanian government because of the potential risk that JNIM could infiltrate Mauritanian territory should it succeed in consolidating its position within Mali.

[18] SAHARA MEDIA. « Le ministre de l'intérieur appelle à tenir compte des conditions particulières que vit le Mali». 17 December 2025. https://fr.saharamedias.net/le-ministre-de-linterieur-appelle-a-tenir-compte-des-conditions-particulieres-que-vit-le-mali/

[19] JEUNE AFRIQUE. « Mort de citoyens mauritaniens au Mali : Nouakchott exprime sa « profonde inquiétude »». 28 March 2026. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1784084/politique/mort-de-citoyens-mauritaniens-au-mali-nouakchott-exprime-sa-profonde-inquietude; BACHÉ, David. « Mali: sept personnes tuées par l'armée et l'Africa Corps russe près de la frontière mauritanienne». RFI, 9 March 2026. https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20260309-mali-sept-personnes-tuees-par-l-armée-et-l-africa-corps-russe-près-de-la-frontière-mauritanienne

[20] BACHÉ, David. « Mali-Mauritanie: Nouakchott reste ferme mais privilégie l'apaisement ». *RFI*, 18 March 2026.

[21] FRANCE24. « Frontière Mali-Mauritanie : nouvelles tensions après des accusations d'exactions civiles », 29 March 2026. https://www.france24.com/fr/vidéo/20260329-frontière-mali-mauritanie-nouvelles-tensions-après-des-accusations-d-exactions-civiles

[22] APA NEWS. « Mali–Mauritanie : un émissaire de Ghazouani reçu à Bamako ». 15 de junio de 2026. https://fr.apanews.net/diplomacy/mali-mauritanie-un-emissaire-de-ghazouani-recu-a-bamako/

[23] BACHÉ, David. « Condamnant des «attaques répétées», la Mauritanie demande à ses éleveurs de ne pas aller au Mali». *RFI*, 24 March 2026. https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20260324-condamnant-des-attaques-répétées-la-mauritanie-demande-à-ses-éleveurs-de-ne-pas-aller-au-mali

Indeed, some analysts[24] have argued that the terrorist group's short-term objective is to use Mauritania as a source of recruitment and financing before eventually expanding its activities into the country and destabilising it following a potential collapse of the Bamako regime.

Mauritania has not suffered a terrorist attack since 2011, having previously endured five years of violent assaults, numerous fatalities and the kidnapping of foreign nationals, including four Spanish aid workers who were eventually released after the payment of a ransom[25]. For the government in Nouakchott, this remarkable achievement is the result of an innovative and carefully designed National Counter-Terrorism Strategy[26] which, unlike those of most neighbouring states, was codified in a dedicated policy document. Formally in force since 2012, although subsequently modernised and supplemented through various implementation roadmaps, this strategy is founded upon three fundamental pillars: Religious and socio-cultural (preventive); Security and military (repressive); and Legal and diplomatic.

At the preventive level, the Mauritanian government places particular emphasis on preventing the religious radicalisation that may lead to jihadist terrorism. To that end, it exercises close oversight of religious education and discourse, seeking to prevent the dissemination of manipulated interpretations of Islam that encourage violence. As part of this effort, the authorities have not only strengthened monitoring of mosques and *mahdras* (traditional nomadic Qur'anic schools), but have also actively involved Islamic scholars (ulema) in successive processes of national dialogue and theological debate aimed at dismantling the ideological foundations of radicalism and countering violent Salafist ideology. Numerous international peace conferences have been organised with the participation of prominent scholars and religious leaders, including the Malian cleric Mahmoud Dicko[27], an opponent of the military junta who currently lives in exile in Algeria. Within this broader ideological campaign, Mauritania also promotes the social

[24] TIMBUKTU INSTITUTE. *JNIM Threat in the Tri-Border Area of Mali, Mauritania and Senegal*. May 2025. https://timbuktu-institute.org/media/attachments/2025/05/16/raport-jnim-threat-in-the-tri-border-area-of-mali-mauritania-and-senegal.pdf

[25] MUÑOZ, Fernando. « Cooperantes españoles en el mundo: cuando ayudar se convierte en una pesadilla ». *ABC*, 29 November 2012. https://www.abc.es/historia/abci-cooperantes-mauritania-aniversario-201211290000_noticia.html

[26] MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND COOPERATION OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF MAURITANIA. «La Mauritanie fase au défi terroriste. De la Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre le Terrorisme et la Criminalité Transnationale». April 2012. https://www.unodc.org/cld/fr/treaties/strategies/mauritania/mrt0001s.html

[27] APA NEWS. « À Nouakchott, Mahmoud Dicko plaide pour une refondation du Mali». 12 February 2026. https://fr.apanews.net/news/a-nouakchott-mahmoud-dicko-plaide-pour-une-refondation-politique-et-morale-du-mali/

reintegration of certain former jihadists. Some presidents, including Ghazouani himself recently[28], have adopted pardoning measures for former militants, generally those not convicted of murder, in exchange for their participation in de-radicalisation programmes involving interviews with imams and vocational training. The objective is not only to facilitate their reintegration into society but also to offer a visible example to young people at risk of joining jihadist organisations. Through these programmes of re-education and socio-religious reintegration, the authorities seek to neutralise the grievances exploited by jihadist recruiters, who typically portray non-Salafist governments as "apostates"[29] because of their cooperation with Western countries, their alleged marginalisation of ethnic or religious minorities, or their supposed persecution of the "true" faith.

It is important to note that Mauritania is an Islamic Republic in which Malikite Sunni Islam overwhelmingly predominates, as throughout much of the Maghreb, and whose religious culture is deeply marked by Sufism, both of which favour a predominantly peaceful interpretation of Islam. This has historically limited the influence of more rigid or literalist Islamic currents, although such movements gained a degree of presence from the 1960s onwards through financial support originating in the Gulf region[30]. Nonetheless, Salafist rhetoric and its later dissemination through non-traditional channels such as the internet and social media did find some resonance between 1984 and 2005, during the rule of president Maaouya Ould Taya[31]. Certain young people became attracted to more radical and violent interpretations of Islam, particularly among marginalised or under-represented groups, impoverished individuals with limited opportunities, and populations linked to areas characterised by significant migratory exchanges.

Furthermore, because religious conviction alone is no longer regarded as the sole factor motivating individuals to join terrorist organisations[32], the Mauritanian authorities also seek to prevent recruitment through improvements in the socio-economic conditions of

[28] RFI. « Mauritanie: le chef de l'État accorde sa grâce à neuf détenus condamnés pour extrémisme et terrorisme », 21 June 2026. https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20260621-mauritanie-le-chef-de-l-état-accorde-sa-grâce-à-neuf-détenus-condamnés-pour-extrémisme-et-terrorisme

[29] BENMOUMEN, Bechar. *Mauritanie 2030 : la stabilité à l'épreuve des vents contraires*. Fondation Jean Jaurès. 4 February 2026. https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/mauritanie-2030-la-stabilite-a-lepreuve-des-vents-contraires/

[30] WEHREY, Frederic. *Control and Contain: Mauritania's Clerics and the Strategy Against Violent Extremism*. Working Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. March 2019. https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/research/2019/05/control-and-contain-mauritanias-clerics-and-the-strategy-against-violent-extremism

[31] Idem.

[32] KONÉ, Hassane & MODERAN, Ornella. *Dialogue with jihadists: Mauritania offers lessons for the Sahel*. Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa). 1 April 2022. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/dialogue-with-jihadists-mauritania-offers-lessons-for-the-sahel

vulnerable groups susceptible to jihadist mobilisation. Employment policies have therefore been implemented alongside the construction of wells in border regions, financed by the European Union, with the additional objective of encouraging the sedentarisation of nomadic populations[33] and thereby improving oversight of population movements among which terrorist elements might otherwise conceal themselves.

The second pillar of Mauritania's counter-terrorism strategy is the security and military domain, traditionally the core instrument of counter-terrorism efforts. In this area, the Mauritanian approach combines three distinct sets of capabilities.

First, it places considerable emphasis on strengthening and modernising intelligence-gathering activities. These functions are carried out primarily by the General Directorate of National Security (DGSN, by its French acronym), the General Directorate for External Security and Documentation (DGSED, by its French acronym), and specialised units operating within institutions such as the National Gendarmerie, the National Guard, Customs, and the Armed Forces. In addition, intelligence collection benefits from an extensive network of civilian informants and from the strongly defined ethnic character of Mauritanian society, which tends to make the movement of foreign elements more conspicuous and helps reveal suspicious activities, particularly attempts to infiltrate border communities[34].

Second, the Mauritanian government has devoted substantial effort to modernising and expanding the capabilities of its armed forces in border protection and counter-terrorism operations. Particular emphasis has been placed on the deployment of highly mobile special forces supported by both logistics and air assets.

One of the most significant developments in this regard was the creation in 2017 of the Rapid Action Groups for Surveillance and Intervention (GARSI, by its French acronym). These units emerged from a project led by Spain's Guardia Civil in partnership with the French National Gendarmerie, Portugal's National Republican Guard, and Italy's Carabinieri. The initiative sought to replicate operational units possessing a structure, equipment and competencies similar to those of the Guardia Civil's Rapid Action Group

[33] LAREDJ, Bassem. Vid. Supra 13.
[34] AHDANI, Jassim. « Lutte contre le jihadisme en Mauritanie : les gardiens du désert ». *Jeune Afrique*, 20 June 2026. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1798216/politique/lutte-contre-le-jihadisme-en-mauritanie-les-gardiens-du-desert/

(GAR, by its Spanish acronym)[35], one of Spain's most experienced counter-terrorism formations. These units operate in close coordination with the National Guard's Nomadic Groups (*Méharistes*), light camel-mounted formations which have recently been equipped with drones to expand their surveillance radius[36]. Beyond their direct role in combating terrorist organisations, these units contribute in a less visible manner to operational mobility while fulfilling two important functions. First, they gather intelligence from the border settlements they visit on a regular basis. Second, they embody the presence of the state in remote territories by providing supplies and assistance to local populations. Through this approach, the authorities seek to rebuild trust among local communities and prevent the establishment of radical or jihadist elements in these isolated areas[37].

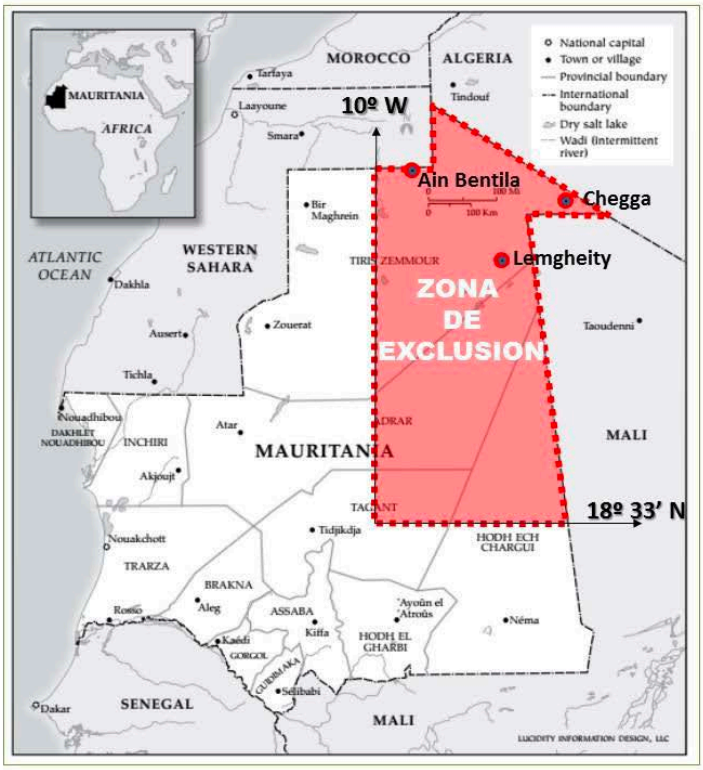
Furthermore, the security-military dimension of Mauritania's strategy relies heavily on territorial-control measures regarded as essential for the effective monitoring and management of vast desert areas. The National Strategy specifically envisages the establishment of border posts at intervals of roughly one hundred kilometres, the creation of a vast military exclusion zone along the borders with Western Sahara, Algeria and Mali, the incorporation of biometric and technological features into identity documents, and stricter criteria governing the issuance of visas to foreign nationals[38].

[35] GUARDIA CIVIL. «Efeméride 25 de enero. Inicio del proyecto internacional GARSI-SAHEL». https://web.guardiacivil.es/es/destacados/efemerides/25-de-enero.-Inicio-del-proyecto-internacional-GARSI-SAHEL

[36] EL MOUDJAHID. « Mauritanie : Des soldats méharistes contre la menace terroriste ». 23 May 2025. https://elmoudjahid.com/fr/monde/mauritanie-des-soldats-meharistes-contre-la-menace-terroriste-235086

[37] ICI ET AILLEURS, VOYAGES. « Los Méharistes, los soldados de Mauritania » (Video).5 de marzo de 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF1PVJ_aWPk; BBC. « The Meharists: Mauritania's camel cavalry fighting jihadists in Sahel » (Video). 9 March 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-64898915

[38] Vid. Supra 26.



Map 3. Mauritanian Military Exclusion Zone. Source: J. Mora Tebas[39].

The third pillar of Mauritania's counter-terrorism strategy places significant emphasis on legal and diplomatic instruments. Mauritania has had a dedicated counter-terrorism law in force since 2010. This legislation not only established up to twenty categories of terrorism-related offences, but also increased penalties, relaxed certain procedural requirements, introduced provisions preventing statutory limitations from applying to terrorist crimes, and strengthened the powers available to judges. The legal framework is further reinforced through direct action against the financial resources of jihadist organisations. To that end, Mauritania has increased the resources allocated to combating money laundering and established a specialised authority dedicated to these efforts. Within this legal framework, the strategy considers international police and judicial cooperation to be of fundamental importance. Such cooperation is intended not only to facilitate intelligence-sharing between states but also to enable the arrest and extradition of terrorists and the development of effective judicial cooperation mechanisms with partner countries. Consequently, Mauritania has joined a wide range of international

[39] MORA TEBAS, Juan. *Control de fronteras en el espacio sahelo-sahariano: el caso de Mauritania.* Documento Marco IEEE 15/2015. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2015/DIEEEM15-2015_ControlFronteras_EspacioSahelo_MoraTebas.pdf

initiatives and has ratified thirteen of the nineteen United Nations international legal instruments against terrorism. It is also a party to the 1999 Organisation of African Unity (now African Union) Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism and its 2004 Protocol.

The Migratory Surge

The third major consequence of instability in Mali is the migration challenge. Although Mauritania has been receiving large numbers of Malian refugees since 2012, when people fled the violence associated with the Tuareg rebellion, the subsequent coup d'état, and the terrorist activities of *Ansar Dine*, the extreme violence inflicted upon civilians in recent years by all parties to the conflict, including FAMA, Wagner/Africa Corps, separatist forces and jihadist organisations, has triggered an exponential increase in arrivals. Indeed, over the past two years, government offensives in Azawad and jihadist attacks in central and southern Mali have resulted in a threefold increase in the number of migrants fleeing the chaos.

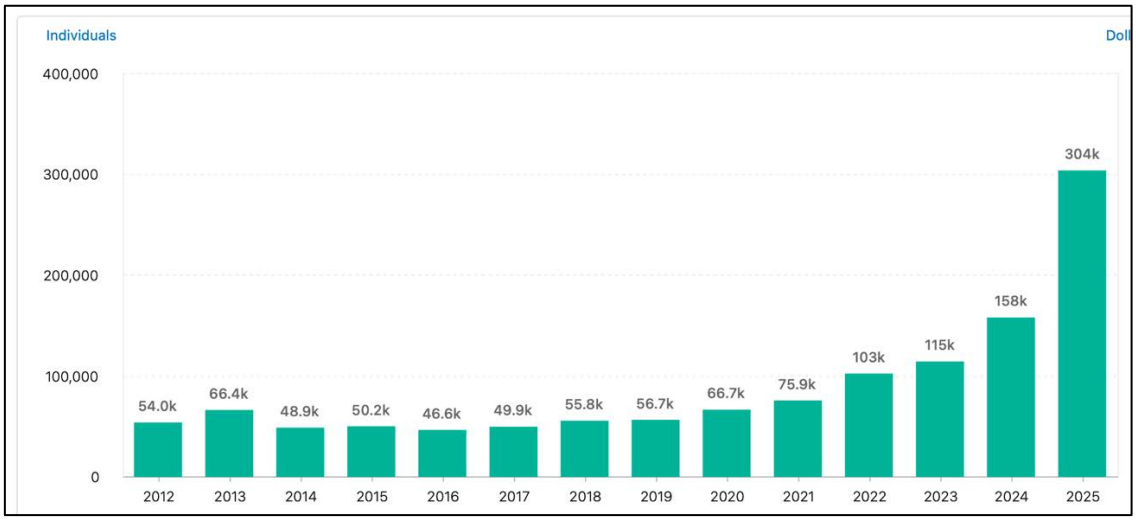


Figure 1. Malian Refugees in Mauritania. Source: UNHCR.

Most refugees escaping the violence have settled in the Mauritanian region of Hodh El Chargui, where the M'Berra refugee camp is located. Situated barely sixty kilometres from the border, this vast settlement, originally designed to host seventy thousand people,

currently accommodates more than 120,000 registered refugees[40], while a further 170,000 reside in its surrounding areas. According to Mauritanian government figures, the country currently hosts around 400,000 Malian refugees[41], nearly half of whom are formal asylum seekers owing to the situation of violence prevailing in their country of origin.

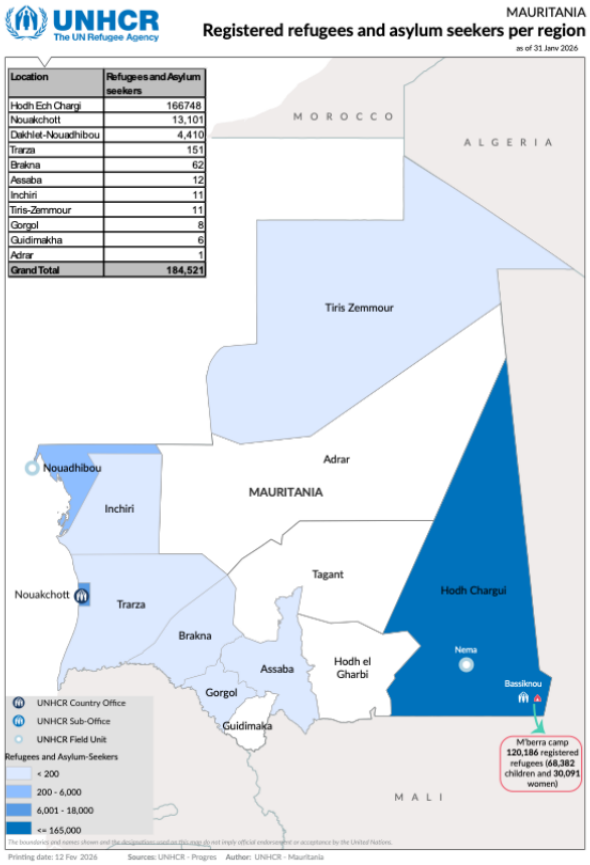


Figure 2. Refugees and Asylum Seekers by Region, 30 January 2026. Source: UNHCR.

Despite the Mauritanian government's willingness to support its Malian neighbours and assist the enormous refugee population on its territory, the migratory tsunami witnessed over the past two years poses a serious threat to the country's own internal stability and has raised questions abroad regarding its capacity to cope with this challenge.

In the first instance, it should be remembered that Mauritania has a population of only 5.4

[40] UNHCR, vid. Figure 2.
[41] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. « European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. Mauritania». https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/africa/mauritania_en?prefLang=es

million inhabitants, according to 2026 estimates. The overwhelming majority live in urban areas along the Atlantic coast and in the south of the country, while more than half of the population (56.9 per cent) experiences multidimensional poverty[42]. Within this context, the Malian refugee population represents approximately 7.5 per cent of the country's total population, a proportion that rises to more than 35 per cent in the poor and arid region of Hodh El Chargui[43]. The scale of this refugee presence places extraordinary pressure on the allocation of public resources. Furthermore, it may eventually generate local tensions and even outbreaks of violence among host communities, which are themselves affected by poverty and by restrictions on their traditional pastoral activities resulting from border closures. The management of such a vast population is also exceptionally complex. Although supported by a network of international organisations coordinated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugee management remains vulnerable to a wide range of incidents and disputes, including the entrance of political grievances and rivalries into the refugee camps themselves.

Mauritania also faces growing pressure from its international partners, particularly the European Union, which regards the country as a key ally in efforts to combat irregular migration. Within the framework of the New Pact on Migration, the European Commission and several Member States, including Spain, seek to promote a policy of containment at origin, providing financial and human resources to enable countries such as Mauritania to manage population movements and prevent migration towards Europe.

This policy appears to have yielded tangible results. The number of migrants using the Atlantic route has declined dramatically since the visit of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez in early 2024, during which they announced an assistance package worth more than €500 million[44]. Following the record number of arrivals in the Canary Islands during 2024, which approached 47,000 individuals, arrivals fell by 60 per cent in 2025 and by a further 70 per cent during the first six months of 2026 compared with the previous year[45]. A substantial part of this decline

[42] MPPN. « Mauritania launches Multidimensional Poverty Index». 13 March 2023. https://www.mppn.org/es/mauritania-launches-multidimensional-poverty-index/

[43] UNHCR. «Where we work – Mauritania. Executive Summary». https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/mauritania

[44] CUÉ, Carlos E. « Sánchez y Von der Leyen prometen más de 500 millones para desarrollar Mauritania y frenar los cayucos a Canarias». *El País*, 8 February 2024. https://elpais.com/espana/2024-02-08/sanchez-y-von-der-leyen-prometen-mas-de-500-millones-para-desarrollar-mauritania-y-frenar-los-cayucos-a-canarias.html

[45] MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR. Fortnightly Irregular Migration Report 2026 (Cumulative Data from 1 January to 30

appears to be attributable to intensified internal identity-document inspections, which in 2025 led to the detention of up to 30,000 migrants[46]. These individuals were either transferred to temporary reception centres funded by the European Union or returned to their countries of origin.

Nevertheless, this more restrictive approach has not been free from criticism. Non-governmental organisations have denounced what they describe as inhumane treatment of migrants by the authorities. Human Rights Watch, for example, accused Mauritanian institutions of serious human rights violations, although it also acknowledged recent improvements in migrant protection[47]. Criticism has also emerged from neighbouring countries such as Senegal and Mali, both of which have repeatedly questioned the conditions under which their nationals have been detained and repatriated[48].

Conclusion

Mauritania currently enjoys a period of relative stability both politically, since the accession to power of President Ghazouani, and in terms of security, as demonstrated by the absence of terrorist attacks since 2011. Economically, the country is likewise experiencing a promising phase, driven by its mineral wealth, its recently discovered energy resources, and its evident willingness to attract greater foreign investment. In international affairs, Mauritania pursues a policy of "positive neutrality" at the regional level, enabling it to maintain constructive relations with both Morocco and Algeria. Globally, it displays a tendency to align itself with Western partners, as reflected in its status as a strategic partner of the European Union, its participation in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, and its membership of the Union for the Mediterranean. At the same time, it continues to engage with Gulf and Islamic countries while maintaining

June). https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/es/prensa/balances-e-informes/

[46] NARANJO, José. « Mauritania intercepta a 30.000 migrantes y desmantela 80 redes de tráfico en cuatro meses ». *El País*, 11 May 2025. https://elpais.com/espana/2025-05-11/mauritania-intercepta-a-30000-migrantes-y-desmantela-80-redes-de-trafico-en-cuatro-meses.html

[47] HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. *Mauritania: Years of Migration Control Abuses*. 27 August 2025. https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/08/27/mauritania-years-of-migration-control-abuses

[48] FRANCE24. « Migrants en Mauritanie : Dakar s'indigne des conditions d'expulsion de ses compatriotes ». 13 March 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8vBcS9XVyY ; JIMÉNEZ, José Luis. « Mauritania y Mali se enzarzan en una disputa vecinal por las devoluciones de inmigrantes con destino a Canarias ». *VozPópuli*, 11 March 2025. https://www.vozpopuli.com/espana/canarias/mauritania-mali-enzarzan-disputa-vecinal-devolucion-inmigrantes-canarias.html

economic cooperation with both China and Russia.

This entire edifice of stability painstakingly constructed over recent years is now threatened by the grave situation unfolding in neighbouring Mali. The crisis has not only disrupted bilateral diplomatic relations but also poses a major challenge to Mauritania's security. Such risks stem both from the potential expansion of terrorism into Mauritanian territory and from the tensions associated with the large-scale influx of Malian migrants, together with the resulting transformation of local social and economic dynamics.

Mauritania's stability is therefore of critical importance to both Spain and the European Union. First and foremost, this is due to the migration challenge. As demonstrated throughout this article, the country is receiving a growing number of Malians fleeing conflict. They already constitute a significant proportion of Mauritania's population and add to the hundreds of thousands of migrants already present from elsewhere in the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa. Cooperation between Madrid and Nouakchott through the provision of financial, human and material resources has proved effective and has substantially eased pressure on the heavily congested Atlantic route to the Canary Islands. Consequently, this level of cooperation should be maintained and strengthened, while being accompanied by appropriate accountability mechanisms regarding the treatment of migrants and the adequacy of EU-funded reception facilities.

Mauritania is equally an indispensable partner in containing the terrorist wave spreading throughout the Sahel. Spain should reinforce the hybrid strategy implemented by Mauritania since 2012 by providing additional resources, training and financial support. Efforts should focus on replicating demonstrably successful initiatives, such as the establishment of the GARSI units, as well as supporting other programmes aimed at monitoring and securing extensive territories. At the same time, maintaining a fluid exchange of intelligence remains essential. Such cooperation should include full transparency regarding the success or failure of individual and collective programmes for the social reintegration and pardon of former jihadists. This would facilitate appropriate monitoring and assessment should such individuals seek entry into Spanish territory.

Indeed, surprising though it may seem, the Mauritania-Mali border lies barely 800 kilometres from the island of Fuerteventura. By comparison, this is roughly the same distance that separates Seville from Barcelona, whereas Ukraine, for example, lies more

than 2,000 kilometres from Spain. The proximity of two serious threats, terrorism and large-scale migration, both of which could increasingly affect Spain as instability spreads from Mali, should therefore be treated as a strategic priority by Spanish authorities. This necessarily entails attaching the highest importance to relations with Mauritania, strengthening its counter-terrorism and migration-management capabilities, and recognising that, in the current international environment, Spain's own security is closely linked to the stability and resilience of its Mauritanian partner.

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