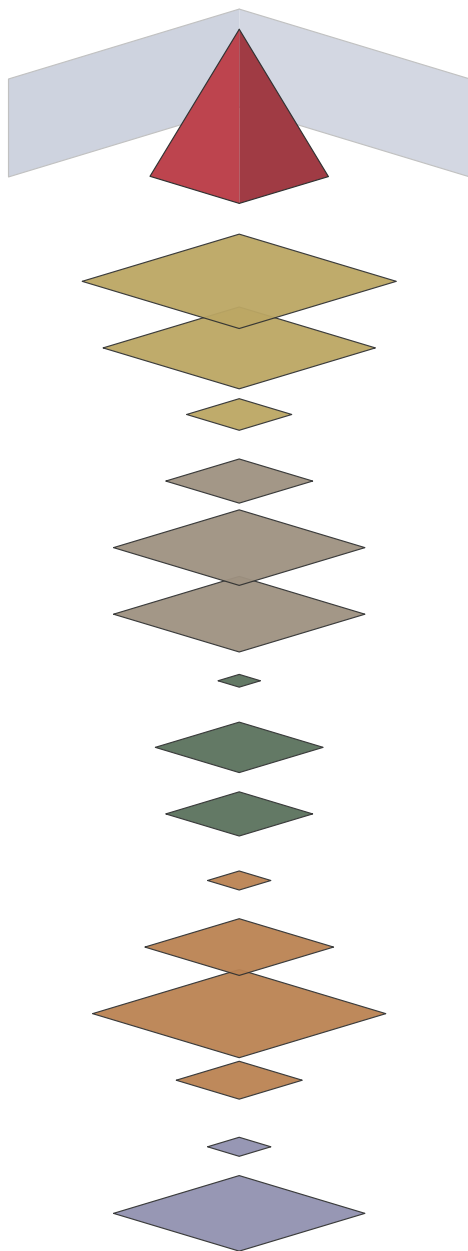




# MAURITANIA



## 4.38 CRIMINALITY SCORE

44<sup>th</sup> of 54 African countries  
6<sup>th</sup> of 6 North African countries



### CRIMINAL MARKETS **4.27**

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	7.5
HUMAN SMUGGLING	6.5
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	2.5
ARMS TRAFFICKING	3.5
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	6
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	6
FLORA CRIMES	1
FAUNA CRIMES	4
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	3.5
HEROIN TRADE	1.5
COCAINE TRADE	4.5
CANNABIS TRADE	7
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	3
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	1.5
FINANCIAL CRIMES	6



### CRIMINAL ACTORS **4.5**

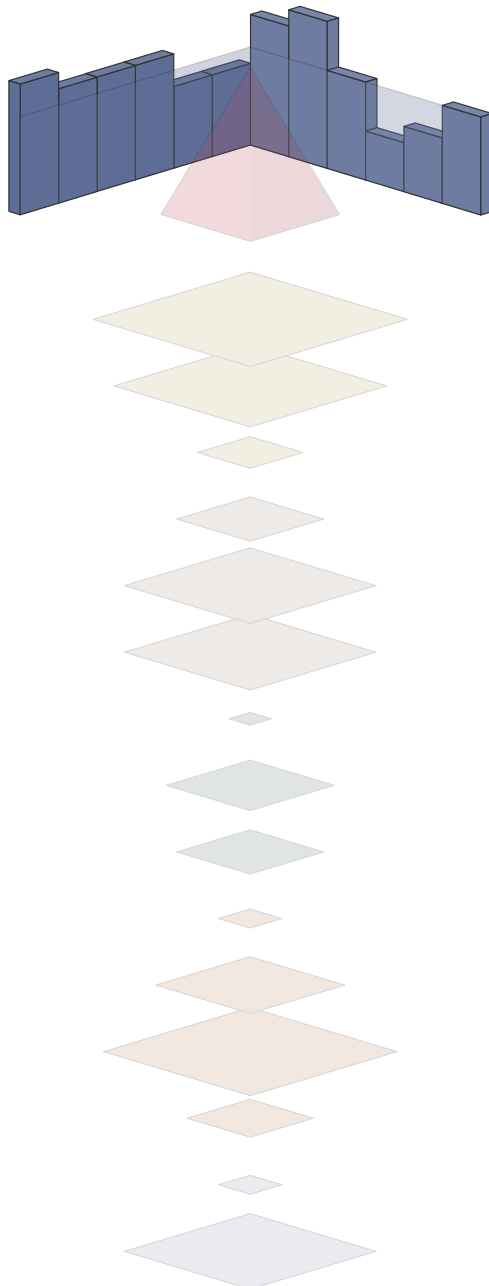
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	1.5
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	5
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	6.5
FOREIGN ACTORS	6
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	6



## 3.13 RESILIENCE SCORE



# MAURITANIA



3.13

## RESILIENCE SCORE

39<sup>th</sup> of 54 African countries

5<sup>th</sup> of 6 North African countries

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	4
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	3.5
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	3.5
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	3.5
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	2.5
LAW ENFORCEMENT	2.5
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	4
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	4.5
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	3
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	1.5
PREVENTION	2
NON-STATE ACTORS	3



4.38

## CRIMINALITY SCORE



CRIMINAL MARKETS

4.27



CRIMINAL ACTORS

4.5



# CRIMINALITY

## Criminal Markets

### PEOPLE

Human trafficking remains a major challenge in Mauritania, with the country being both a source and destination point. A small segment of the population is affected by descent-based slavery, with some Afro-Saharan groups born into servitude. Slavery cases are discovered from time to time; however, it is dangerous for victims and human rights organizations to report on the issue. There has been an increase in the number of women and girls from traditional slave castes and Afro-Mauritanian communities being trafficked to the Gulf region, particularly Saudi Arabia and forced child begging in Quranic schools is also an ongoing concern. Senegalese children have reportedly been exploited in Mauritania's fishing industries, sex trafficking and drug production rings.

The country has emerged as an important transit zone for human smuggling, with migrants from West Africa seeking to reach Europe, primarily through Spain's Canary Islands. Human smuggling is dominated by Mauritanian-Malian networks, sometimes incorporating Senegalese actors. The victims are smuggled from near the port cities of Nouakchott, the capital, and Nouadhibou. Human smuggling across the country's land borders is also increasing because of a combination of growing numbers of migrants and heightened border security in the south. However, it is limited across the country's northern borders because of the punitive militarized policy in place to prevent unauthorized movement in the northern desert areas. Registered refugees and asylum seekers in Mauritania do not seem to be among the populations departing from the country's littoral areas towards Europe.

Non-state armed groups, which frequently move across the Mali-Mauritania border, have been known to fund their operations by running a protection racket within nomadic populations. However, because of the low density of the population and the lack of resources this does not constitute a significant financial flow.

### TRADE

Although arms trafficking is not a major issue, it is still a concern in Mauritania. Because weapons tend to maintain their value, families store them and trade them, primarily

along the borders with Algeria and Morocco (Western Sahara). Arms trafficking has also been observed along the Mauritania-Mali border, where seizures of mostly AK-pattern rifles have been carried out in recent years. Nouakchott has been affected by an increase in petty crime associated with arms trafficking.

Mauritania, which faces a significant problem with counterfeit goods, is considered a large key commercial zone for these products. Counterfeit pharmaceuticals are the items most commonly seized, with tens of thousands, including antihistamines, corticosteroids, antibiotics, antimalarial tablets, analgesics, pregnancy tests and vitamin supplements confiscated every year. Carcinogenic cosmetics have also been seized. With regards to the illicit trade in excisable goods, Mauritania serves as a hub for illicit tobacco, for which there is a significant market within the country. It is also one of the main distribution hubs for illicit cigarettes destined for Senegal, Morocco and Algeria.

### ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes in Mauritania are rare because most of the country is desert, which does not allow for much plant growth. However, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing remains a significant issue, with Senegalese, Chinese and Turkish actors involved in overfishing in Mauritanian waters. The recent deployment of a Turkish fleet has been blamed by authorities for a sharp decline in the octopus population. Despite this, corruption related to monitoring of IUU fishing and obtaining fishing licences for foreign vessels remains an ongoing issue.

In relation to non-renewable resource crimes, Mauritania has experienced several incidents of gold trafficking. While the smuggling of other minerals is not widely reported, there is some petrol smuggling from Algeria into Mauritania. Local fuel-smuggling gangs are active on the road between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, with little action taken against them. Although Mauritania is also a popular destination country for semi-precious stone smuggling, mostly carried out by foreign tourists, authorities do not seem to be concerned about this. However, with a potential surge in post-COVID-19 tourism in the coming years, it could become a more pressing issue.



## DRUGS

Mauritania does not appear to have a significant market for heroin, but it remains an occasional transit point for cocaine in the region and there have been reported cases of cocaine seizures by Mauritanian authorities. Drug smugglers use traditional transportation methods to traffic cocaine to Europe via the country. The drug, which is landed in West Africa, is then transported overland through Mauritania to Morocco. Corruption among customs officers and border guards creates a relatively low-risk route for traffickers.

Despite being illegal, cannabis consumption is widespread and the country is a significant transit point for Moroccan-sourced cannabis destined for Europe and the Middle East. Cannabis trafficking remains robust and large quantities are frequently seized despite the fact that there is less law enforcement at the Morocco-Mauritania border than at the Algeria-Morocco one. Some shipments are smuggled near the coast and the city of Nouadhibou is an important entrepôt for onward transport. There has been an increase in the use of synthetic drugs in the country, especially in bigger cities, due to the increased availability of such substances.

## CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

The increasing use of technology has made Mauritania more vulnerable to cyber-dependent crimes. The most common technological crimes are attacks on both government and private sector websites. Officials suspect that the perpetrators are located abroad.

## FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes are widespread, with corruption and embezzlement of public resources the primary offences. The country's financial intelligence unit's effectiveness

in curbing financial crimes is highly questionable. Low wages and the lack of parliamentary control over the budget contribute to financial corruption at all levels of society. People close to the executive have been linked to several financial scandals, including the allocation of fishing quotas and government contracts.

## Criminal Actors

Foreign actors, including groups from Morocco, Algeria, Mali, Senegal, as well as Sahrawis, are involved in Mauritania's drug and human smuggling markets. Malian criminal networks are also known to be involved in human trafficking activities in the country, collaborating Mauritanians and Senegalese as facilitators. Foreign armed groups engage in various illicit economies, with some Malian drug traffickers on the border with Mauritania involved with Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), a coalition of terrorist groups in northern Mali. There are also indications that drug traffickers in Mauritania cooperate with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and cross-border smuggling in northern Mauritania is linked to the Polisario Front.

While there is no evidence of the existence of mafia-style groups in Mauritania, limited border control means that criminal networks, including smuggling networks, remain increasingly active in the country and its neighbours. State-embedded actors continue to be involved in certain criminal markets, especially the smuggling of goods.

Mauritania's large informal sector makes the country vulnerable to the activities of criminal groups. Sectors involved in illicit activities include mining companies (primarily gold miners), the fishing and pharmaceutical industries and the banking sector. It is not known to what extent criminal groups control the private sector, given the intertwined nature of the legal and illicit economies.

# RESILIENCE

## LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

State collusion with criminals is a common problem. Although one reason is the lack of capacity in the security and defence forces, the most intractable problem is the unwillingness of high-level officials to uphold the rule of law when it threatens their interests or those of their associates. However, there has been

some progress in political leadership and governance since the 2019 election. Additionally, the government has launched an anti-corruption campaign that has resulted in the conviction of the former president and the arrest of notorious figures among the elite. Despite these improvements, corruption remains a contentious issue, and Mauritania is still ranked as one of the most



corrupt countries in the world. The government has been criticized for its lack of response to demands by opposition members of parliament to dismiss officials implicated in financial irregularities. Corruption poses a significant challenge to the country's development, especially since more than a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line.

Mauritania has taken steps towards international cooperation in fighting human trafficking and illegal fishing activities, with the support of the US and international organizations. The government has ratified relevant international treaties, but its engagement with the international community is seen as ineffective. Although it receives aid from the US the two countries do not have an extradition treaty. There are still concerns about the effectiveness of national policies and laws relating to organized crime because of widespread corruption and the fact that the state lacks the capacity to implement them.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The Mauritanian justice system is heavily influenced by the government, and very few government officials accused of corruption in relation to human trafficking and descent-based slavery have been prosecuted or convicted. Violence, inadequate sanitary conditions, lack of medical care and indefinite pretrial detention make the country's prisons and detention centres dangerous for inmates. The largest prison in the country, Dar Al-Naim, is three times over capacity and inmates awaiting trial are often housed along with dangerous convicts. Gang activity is a concern and reports of torture at the hands of state officials in the prisons are common.

The country's security system is weak, with some law enforcement officials facilitating organized criminal activities. The police force is underfunded, lacks personnel and is widely corrupt, which hinders its ability to keep up with current issues and with the growing population. The country faces many risks and challenges in terms of territorial integrity, due to its long and porous borders as well as to tribal overlap between Mauritania and Mali's northern regions. This facilitates the infiltration of violent extremists and criminals into the country, taking advantage of the similarity between Mauritians and populations in northern Mali and the competition between al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State in the Sahel. Border control efforts focus primarily on counter terrorism rather than on organized crime. Mauritania's desert geography and its sparse population make it easy for smuggling networks and violent extremists' groups to operate.

## ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Mauritania's informal sector and underdeveloped financial infrastructure make it difficult to detect money laundering, although this crime may not occur often. Anti-money laundering legislation exist, but enforcement is difficult. The state has taken steps to combat both money laundering and the financing of terrorism at the national level by subjecting associations to the control of the tax authorities. Their efforts, however, have not been particularly successful so far.

There are multiple obstacles to promoting the private sector, including weak human, technical and financial resources, strong subordination to the political system and financial constraints caused by a weak banking sector. Although the economy is expected to recover after contracting during the COVID-19 pandemic it relies heavily on mineral exports, particularly iron, and on fisheries, agriculture and livestock. The government has adopted a private-sector promotion strategy, but its development depends on institutionalization, regulation and the promotion of an entrepreneurial culture.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Victims of trafficking in Mauritania often lack access to justice and support programmes. The government's victim and witness support initiatives are limited and there are few concrete measures in place to identify trafficking victims. Criminalization of sexual relations outside of marriage further hinders support for victims of trafficking and sexual assault. The emphasis is on prosecution rather than prevention.

While the government has provided financial support for an NGO to create a hotline for victims of crime, it struggles to regulate the large informal sector and prevent abuse and trafficking. Fishing vessels and processing plants are rarely inspected, despite reports of abuses and potential trafficking indicators. In addition, arrests of anti-trafficking activists continue despite the government's attempts to raise awareness and establish an inter-ministerial committee on child forced begging.

Civil society is reported to be heavily constrained by the country's regime and intimidated by security forces. According to some journalists, action on sensitive topics such as slavery is a particular target. Authorities use repressive laws that criminalize defamation, spreading false information, cybercrime and blasphemy to prosecute and imprison human rights defenders, activists, journalists and bloggers. Civil society groups are deeply concerned



about the adoption of a law concerning the protection of national symbols, fearing it will have a negative impact on freedom of expression in the country. However, recent positive developments include the introduction of a simplified registration process that allows NGOs to operate legally in the country. The Mauritanian authorities have also resurrected the abolitionist movement known as the 'Era' movement, with the aim of calling for the abolition of slavery and defending the rights of former slaves.

