

The Gambia: Extremism and Terrorism

On January 28, 2017, days after being inaugurated into office, The Gambia's new president, Adama Barrow, renounced the country's status as an Islamic republic. The previous president, Yahya Jammeh, had declared The Gambia to be an Islamic republic in 2015. Jammeh had also expressed his desire to introduce sharia law into The Gambia and presented Zakir Naik—an Islamic extremist preacher wanted in his home country of India for alleged involvement in terrorist acts—with The Gambia's highest honorary award. (Sources: [Daily Post](#), [BBC News](#), [Freedom Newspaper](#), [PeaceTV](#))

Overview

The Gambia spent 22 years under the authoritarian rule of Yahya Jammeh, who seized power in a 1994 coup and whose government has been accused of several human rights violations regarding the ruthless tactics it used to silence opponents. Jammeh embraced Islamic fundamentalism during his rule of The Gambia, whose 1.9 million population is at least 90 percent Muslim. In 2015, Jammeh declared the Gambia to be an Islamic republic—making it the second Islamic republic in Africa after Mauritania—and some months later, pledged to introduce the rule of sharia law into the country. Additionally, Jammeh invited [Zakir Naik](#)—an Islamic extremist preacher wanted in his home country of India for alleged involvement in terrorist acts—to visit The Gambia as a special guest, and presented him with the country's highest honorary award. In 2014, Jammeh signed a bill into law which punished some homosexual acts with life imprisonment. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), [Overseas Security Advisory Council](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#), [BBC News](#), [Freedom Newspaper](#), [Guardian](#), [Guardian](#), [PeaceTV](#), [All Africa](#), [All Africa](#))

In The Gambia's December 2016 presidential elections, Jammeh was unexpectedly defeated by another candidate, Adama Barrow. Jammeh initially accepted the election results, but days later, condemned them and refused to step down from the presidency. On January 19, 2017, Senegalese, Nigerian, and other West African troops invaded The Gambia as part of a U.N.-backed military intervention to force Jammeh to cede power. Jammeh agreed to leave the country following the initial military incursion. The same day, Barrow was sworn in as The Gambia's president at the Gambian embassy in Dakar, Senegal. Jammeh was subsequently sanctioned by the U.S. government in December 2017 for his human rights abuses and financial crimes, but as of January 2019, was not added to a list of wanted criminals released by The Gambia's intelligence authorities. On December 10, 2018, the U.S. Department of State blocked Jammeh and his immediate family from entering the United States, in pursuance to his designation as a foreign government official who was involved in "significant corruption or a gross violation of human rights." (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#), [BBC News](#), [Guardian](#), [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), [Point](#), [Associated Press](#))

On January 28, 2017, just days after taking office, Barrow reversed The Gambia's status as an Islamic republic. Barrow has pledged to run a more democratic government and increase economic and political liberties in The Gambia. Barrow has rekindled diplomatic relations with neighboring Senegal, which disapproved of Jammeh's poor human rights record, as well as several Western nations. Nonetheless, the Jamestown Foundation warns that Barrow's reversal of Jammeh's Islamist stances could make The Gambia an attractive target for Islamic extremists. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Daily Post](#), [Overseas Security Advisory Council](#))

The Gambia has not yet experienced the same level of extremist activity as other West African nations. [Mali](#), [Côte d'Ivoire](#), and [Burkina Faso](#) have experienced deadly terrorist attacks carried out by Islamist extremist groups such as [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\)](#) and [al-Mourabitoun](#). Senegal, which surrounds The Gambia, has reportedly arrested several Islamic extremist militants. Nonetheless, with the exception of a U.S.-sanctioned Hezbollah financier expelled from the country in 2015, The Gambia has yet to experience any terrorist attacks or militant activity inside its borders. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Telegraph](#), [Gov.uk](#), [Reuters](#), [Overseas Security Advisory Council](#))

The Gambia has legislation in place that officially outlaws terrorist activity and terrorist financing, and in 2014, worked to develop a national anti-money laundering/counter-terrorist financing (AML/CTF) strategy. Apart from these, however, The Gambia does not have any other domestic counter-extremism initiatives in place. Furthermore, The Gambia is currently operating with a weakened security environment, as its military and National Intelligence Agency (NIA) are under reform due to their past loyalty to Jammeh and his authoritarian government. This weakened security environment puts The Gambia at increased risk for violence perpetrated by both Islamic extremists and Jammeh loyalists angered by their present marginalized status. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Point](#), [Africa Review](#))

According to the U.S. Department of State's Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC)'s 2018 Crime and Safety report, The Gambia is not a known base of political support for terrorists, and Gambians have not been known to sympathize with militant terror groups or their activities. However, West African countries remain at-risk due to porous borders, regional instability, and activities from al-Qaeda and ISIS-affiliated terrorist groups in neighboring areas. (Source: [Overseas Security Advisory Council](#))

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Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Yahya Jammeh, ruler of The Gambia until 2017, verbally condemned violent Islamic extremism in 2011. Nonetheless, Jammeh promoted extremism in The Gambia through his use of Islamic fundamentalism as a political tool during his 22-year authoritarian rule of the country. Jammeh sought to extract political support from a generation of Gambian Muslims who were influenced by radical Wahhabi Islam at universities in the Middle East, as well as financial support from Middle Eastern donor nations, such as Qatar and Kuwait. Jammeh declared The Gambia to be an Islamic republic in 2015, citing a desire to break from the country's colonial past and stating that "accepting Allah's religion as your religion and as your way of life is not negotiable." In a speech to The Gambia's Parliament in 2016, Jammeh criticized the West's stance toward ISIS, stating that "it is hypocritical for the West to designate ISIS as a terrorism organization, when the KKK in the United States of America is being treated differently," and pledged to introduce the rule of sharia law into the country. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Culture and Customs of Gambia](#), [Reuters](#), [BBC News](#), [Freedom Newspaper](#), [AllAfrica](#))

Jammeh also displayed support for Zakir Naik, a prominent Islamic extremist preacher and televangelist who is wanted in his home country of India for allegedly influencing the July 2016 terror attack in Dhaka, Bangladesh, that killed 24 people. President Jammeh invited Naik to visit The Gambia as a special guest in October 2014 in honor of the twentieth anniversary of the coup that brought Jammeh to power. During his visit, Naik gave several public lectures and was presented with the country's highest honorary award—"The Insignia of the Commander of the National Order of the Republic of The Gambia"—by President Jammeh, as well as an Honorary Doctorate from the University of The Gambia. Naik made a second visit to The Gambia in July 2016, and also claimed credit for President Jammeh's decision to declare The Gambia as an Islamic republic, stating that he encouraged Jammeh to do so during his first visit to the country. (Sources: [All Africa](#), [All Africa](#), [PeaceTV](#), [Freedom Newspaper](#), [YouTube](#))

In 2014, Jammeh signed a bill into law which punished some homosexual acts with life imprisonment. This was not the first time Jammeh demonstrated his vehemently anti-gay views: earlier that year, he had declared that "we will fight these vermins [sic] called homosexuals or gays the same way we are fighting malaria-causing mosquitoes, if not more aggressively." In 2008, Jammeh had advised gay people to leave The Gambia under threat of decapitation. According to OSAC, although Barrow's administration has not actively enforced legislation that punishes homosexuality, it has yet to reverse the discriminatory laws. (Sources: [Guardian](#), [Guardian](#), [Overseas Security Advisory Council](#))

The Jamestown Foundation reports that Jammeh's seemingly ambivalent stance toward Islamic extremism caused a "real sense of unease" for The Gambia's minority Christian population amidst fears that the country could become an attractive base for Islamic extremists. Nonetheless, although the surrounding country of Senegal has reportedly arrested militants with links to ISIS, AQIM, and Boko Haram, and other West African countries have experienced attacks perpetrated by groups such as AQIM and al-Mourabitoun, there have been no reports of militant groups operating in The Gambia to date, or of Gambians supporting militant groups abroad. In February 2017, however, Senegalese authorities arrested two suspected jihadists in the Senegalese capital of Dakar, one was reportedly en route to The Gambia. They were linked to deadly attacks on hotels in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire that were perpetrated by AQIM and al-Mourabitoun. On April 20, 2018, after receiving a tip from Spanish intelligence, Italian police arrested Gambian Alagie Touray as he was leaving a mosque in Naples. Touray had reportedly pleaded allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and was plotting an attack on the terror group's behalf. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#), [Freedom Newspaper](#), [Reuters](#), [News24](#), [Overseas Security Advisory Council](#), [Reuters](#))

Adama Barrow, The Gambia's incumbent president, reversed the country's status as an "Islamic republic" days after taking office in January 2017, and has reportedly been striving to increase economic and political freedoms in the country. Nonetheless, the Jamestown Foundation warns that such steps could be making The Gambia an attractive target for Islamic extremists, especially those loyal to Jammeh's regime. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation](#))

The Gambia has also been host to Hezbollah supporters. In June 2013, The Gambia expelled Hussain Tajideen, a Hezbollah fundraiser designated as a terrorist by the United States in 2010, who had been running multiple businesses in The Gambia since at least March 2006. Tajideen was expelled on charges of profiteering, but received a presidential pardon in October 2013 and returned to The Gambia. Tajideen was expelled for a second time in June 2015 on accusations of "unacceptable business practices that [were] detrimental to the Gambian economy." Jammeh again intervened to block his expulsion, saying in a statement that Tajideen had pledged to adhere to standard business practices. There have been no official reports of his whereabouts. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [All Africa](#), [Reuters](#), [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#))

In 2013, the U.S. Department of Treasury designated Hicham Nmer Khanafer for fundraising and recruiting on behalf of Hezbollah in The Gambia. Khanafer is accused of holding weekly fundraising and recruitment meetings at a local Gambian mosque. Khanafer's current status in the country is unknown. (Source: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#))

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Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Although nearby West African nations such as Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso have experienced deadly terrorist attacks carried out by Islamist extremist groups such as AQIM and al-Mourabitoun, The Gambia has yet to experience any terrorist attacks inside its borders. (Sources: [Telegraph](#), [Gov.uk](#))

- **April 20, 2018:** Italian police arrest Alagie Touray, an immigrant from The Gambia, who discussed launching a vehicular attack on behalf of ISIS. Investigators reveal that Touray swore allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Foreign Policy](#)
- Two exiled Gambian army generals loyal to Jammeh enter The Gambia unnoticed. Hamat Bah, The Gambia's Minister of Tourism and Culture, states that corruption and a lack of professionalism on the part of Gambian security officials poses a serious security risk to the country. The Gambia subsequently releases a list of "most wanted criminals," though Jammeh himself—accused of several human rights abuses—is not included on the list. Sources: [Africanews](#), [Africanews](#), [Point](#), [Point](#)
- **December 21, 2017:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctions Yahya Jammeh for alleged financial crimes and his regime's gross human rights violations. Source: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#)
- **February 23, 2017:** Senegalese authorities arrest two suspected jihadists, one en route to The Gambia, in the Senegalese capital of Dakar. The men are linked to deadly attacks on hotels in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire that were perpetrated by AQIM and al-Mourabitoun. Sources: [Reuters](#), [News 24](#)
- **January 28, 2017:** Days after being inaugurated into office, The Gambia's new president, Adama Barrow, renounces the country's status as an Islamic republic. Source: [Daily Post](#)
- Zakir Naik praises President Jammeh during his second visit to The Gambia, saying, "there are very few [leaders of Islamic countries] who have the passion, the courage, and the Taqwa [consciousness of Allah] like the President of the Gambia." Source: [Freedom Newspaper](#)
- Zakir Naik takes credit for President Jammeh's decision to declare The Gambia as an Islamic republic, stating that he encouraged Jammeh to do so during his 2014 visit to the country. Sources: [Standard](#), [YouTube](#)
- **March 31, 2016:** President Jammeh proposes legislation to officially transform the Gambia into an Islamic state. In a speech to Parliament, Jammeh also pledges to introduce sharia law and criticizes the West's stance toward ISIS, stating that "it is hypocritical for the West to designate ISIS as a terrorism organization [sic], when the KKK in the United States of America is being treated differently." Source: [Freedom Newspaper](#)
- **December 11, 2015:** President Jammeh declares The Gambia to be Islamic republic, citing a desire to break from the country's colonial past. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **June 3, 2015:** The Gambia expels Hezbollah fundraiser Hussain Tajideen from the country for a second time, accusing him of "unacceptable business practices that are detrimental to the Gambian economy." Source: [Reuters](#)
- President Jammeh signs a bill into law that punishes some homosexual acts with life imprisonment. Earlier that year, Jammeh had stated that "we will fight these vermins [sic] called homosexuals or gays the same way we are fighting malaria-causing mosquitoes, if not more aggressively." Sources: [Guardian](#), [Guardian](#)
- The Indian Islamic extremist preacher Zakir Naik visits The Gambia as a special guest of President Jammeh. He gives several public lectures during his visit. On October 15, Jammeh presents Naik with "The Insignia of the Commander of the National Order of the Republic of The Gambia"—the country's highest award. Naik is also presented with an Honorary Doctorate from the University of The Gambia. Sources: [All Africa](#), [All Africa](#), [PeaceTV](#)
- The Gambia ratifies the United Nation's 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of Financing Terrorism. Source: [Africa Review](#)
- The Gambia begins working with the Intern-Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA) to design and implement a national anti-money laundering/counter-terrorist financing (AML/CTF) strategy. Source: [Point](#)
- The Gambian government expels Hussain Tajideen on charges of profiteering, though U.S. Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen states that he believes that the expulsion is linked to U.S. sanctions on Tajideen. However, Tajideen later receives a presidential pardon and returns to The Gambia. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#)
- The Gambia enacts an Anti-Money Laundering and Combating of Terrorism Financing Act. Sources: [Africa Review](#), [United Nations](#)
- **December 9, 2010:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury designates Hussain Tajideen, a Lebanese national and fundraiser for Hezbollah in The Gambia, as a terrorist.

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It also designates two of his businesses located in The Gambia, Tajco and Karaiba Supermarket, as terrorist entities. Tajideen served as managing director of Tajco since at least March 2006. Source: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#)

- President Jammeh advises gay people to leave The Gambia or risk being beheaded.
Source: [Guardian](#)
- The Gambia passes an Anti-Terrorism Act officially outlawing terrorist activity.
Sources: [Africa Review](#), [United Nations](#)

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Given the lack of extremist militant activity in The Gambia, the country does not have many domestic counter-extremism initiatives in place apart from anti-terror legislation, such as a 2002 Anti-Terrorism Act that officially outlaws terrorist activity. Furthermore, according to the Jamestown Foundation, The Gambia is currently operating with a weakened security environment as it lacks a stable and reliable security apparatus at present. The Gambia's military and National Intelligence Agency (NIA) were entities closely linked with former president Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian government and accused of human rights violations during his rule. President Adama Barrow is currently working to reform both entities and has already replaced the army chief, who remained loyal to Jammeh following his electoral defeat. However, The Gambia will operate with a weakened security environment until trust in both agencies is fully restored. In the meantime, this weakened security environment puts The Gambia at increased risk for violence perpetrated by Islamic extremists, as well as by Jammeh loyalists and former members of the security forces angered by their present marginalized status. For example, in January 2018, two exiled Gambian army generals loyal to Jammeh entered The Gambia unnoticed. Gambia subsequently released a list of "most wanted criminals." The Gambia's new government has also accused Jammeh supporters of harboring foreign rebels in order to destabilize the country. Nonetheless, Hamat Bah, The Gambia's Minister of Tourism and Culture, stated that corruption and a lack of professionalism on the part of Gambian security officials posed a serious security risk to the country. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#), [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), [BBC News](#), [OSAC](#), [Africa Review](#), [United Nations](#), [Point](#), [Africanews](#), [Africanews](#))

The Gambia also has legislation in place to combat terror financing. In 2012, The Gambia enacted an Anti-Money Laundering and Combating of Terrorism Financing Act. The Inter-Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA) regularly assesses The Gambia's compliance with the Financial Action Task Force (FAFT) recommendations on anti-money laundering/counter-terrorist financing (AML/CTF) practices. In 2014, GIABA worked with The Gambia's Financial Intelligence Unit to design and implement a national AML/CTF strategy, which the country previously lacked. Also in 2014, The Gambia ratified the United Nation's 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of Financing Terrorism. (Sources: [Africa Review](#), [Point](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [United Nations](#))

In June 2013, The Gambia expelled Hussain Tajideen, a Hezbollah fundraiser designated as a terrorist by the United States in 2010, from the country. Tajideen had been running multiple businesses in The Gambia, including a real estate trading firm called Tajco since at least March 2006 and a subsidiary business called Karaiba Supermarket, which were also designated as terrorist entities by the United States. Although Tajideen was expelled on charges of profiteering, then-U.S. treasury undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence David Cohen stated that he believed that the expulsion was actually linked to the U.S. sanctions on Tajideen. However, Tajideen later received a presidential pardon and returned to The Gambia, only to be expelled for a second time in June 2015 on accusations of "unacceptable business practices that [were] detrimental to the Gambian economy." There have been no official reports of his whereabouts since his expulsion. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#))

In December 2017, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned Yahya Jammeh for alleged financial crimes and his regime's gross human rights violations, such as the creation of assassination squad used to terrorize and kill political opponents. Nonetheless, The Gambia's intelligence services did not include Jammeh on a list of "most wanted individuals" compiled in January 2018. Jammeh is currently living in exile in Equatorial Guinea, where he is being granted protection by the government there. (Source: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), [Point](#), [Guardian](#))

International Counter-Extremism

Due to former president Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian rule, The Gambia did not have strong relations with surrounding Senegal and other countries in its vicinity until after President Adama Barrow's inauguration in January 2017. The Gambia signed a security agreement with Senegal, which has arrested militants with links to several terror groups including Boko Haram, AQIM, and ISIS, in March 2017. President Barrow also reportedly requested the presence of a Senegalese military unit in The Gambia for additional security support as he works to reform the Gambian military. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation](#))

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Barrow also reportedly attended a regional security meeting with French President Francois Hollande before his inauguration in January 2017. As of April 2017, French troops were reportedly expected to begin training The Gambia's military. (Source: [SMBC Gambia](#))

In June 2015, The Gambia expelled Hezbollah fundraiser Hussain Tajideen from the country in compliance with his status as a U.S.-designated terrorist. However, Jammeh rescinded his expulsion on June 27, 2015. Tajideen's whereabouts are currently unknown and the current administration has not publicly announced his status. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), [Reuters](#))

Public Opinion

Public support for governments and their policies in The Gambia is difficult to gauge outside of elections, as the country does not have polls to check the approval ratings of political figures. In The Gambia's December 1, 2016 presidential election that ultimately ended former president Yahya Jammeh's 22-year autocratic rule, current President Adama Barrow won 43.3 percent of the vote, while Jammeh received 39.6 percent. (Source: [AllAfrica](#), [BBC News](#))

According to OSAC's 2017 Crime and Safety report, The Gambia is not a known base of political support for terrorists, and Gambians have not been known to sympathize with militant terror groups or their activities. (Source: [OSAC](#))