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COMMENTARY**Recolonizing Africa**By **DAVID MCCORMACK**
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The overthrow of Mauritanian president Maaoui Ould Sid Ahmed Taya last month by a military junta calling itself the Council for Justice and Democracy passed almost without comment among Western observers. The little attention paid to Mr. Taya's downfall and the failure to fully understand its broader implications underscore the West's continued failure in Africa.

For decades, sub-Saharan Africa has been treated as nothing more than a dumping ground for humanitarian aid -- an instrument the West occasionally employed to ease its collective guilt for slavery, colonialism and its own prosperity, only to turn its attention elsewhere as soon as that guilt was temporarily assuaged. This arrangement unfortunately obscured the mechanism by which the West might truly have invested itself in the region's well-being. The fact that the subcontinent is an important piece of the international security framework, due primarily to the level of Islamist penetration it has experienced, has yet to sink in.

Precisely because the gaze of international security has neglected sub-Saharan Africa, the region presents itself as rather inviting to Islamists hoping to operate in obscurity. Its Muslim population of 250 million provides a massive base from which Islamists can draw support. Weak and corrupt states and economies make Islamist ideologies attractive to disenchanted populations. And porous borders and a steady flow of illicit arms contribute to an ideal operating environment for Islamists with militant appetites.

African Islam's historically moderate traditions have been undermined in recent decades by the introduction of Islamist influences from foreign sources. The usual suspects -- led by Saudi Arabia, Iran and Libya -- have, over the last 40 years, gained a great deal of control over the Islamic message reaching sub-Saharan Muslim populations. A volatile mix of Wahhabism, Khomeinism and pan-Islamism has subsequently corroded African Islam's temperance.

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With Saudi Arabia leading the way, tens of billions of dollars have been poured into the region in support of Islamist activities. This money, among other things, funds mosques and madrassas that one Ethiopian journalist, Alem-Zelalem, in a 2003 article termed "jihad factories." It also trains African clerics in extremism and even directly finances terrorism.

What's more, Islamism's advance often functions through nominally nongovernmental organizations. Saudi Arabia's first attempt at continent-wide Islamist coordination, interestingly enough, took place in 1976 in Mauritania's capital of Nouakchott under the auspices of the Riyadh-controlled Muslim World League. Saudi and other foreign-sponsored Islamist groups have since continued to operate in the country and throughout Africa.

An environment permeated with radical Islamic thought has, not surprisingly, created legions of terrorists and provided them a hospitable base of operations. In Mauritania alone, prominent international terror groups such as al Qaeda have established training camps, while lesser-known but nevertheless dangerous groups such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat have emerged to wage jihad. In fact, al Qaeda along with other terrorist outfits such as Hezbollah have a continent-wide footprint -- from Liberia to Eritrea to Tanzania -- often linking up with local extremist groups such as al-Ittihaad al-Islami, which has terrorized the Horn of Africa, or Qibla, which operates in South Africa.

The U.S. and other Western governments can check Islamism's designs on the region only by acknowledging that Africa is an important piece of the global security architecture. For its part, Washington could take a practical first step by establishing a separate military command for sub-Saharan Africa, as suggested by Gen. James Jones, currently charged with the military's oversight of most of the subcontinent as the Supreme Allied Commander for Europe.

To its credit, the U.S. has begun to deploy troops in several African countries to train African forces to combat terrorism -- including Mauritania, under what is known as the Pan-Sahel initiative (though it would be surprising if this exercise withstands the coup). Given America's other priorities, however, it can scarcely afford a stronger military presence in Africa -- a reality revealed in by militant Islamists. Fortunately, much can be done to demonstrate the strategic importance the West attaches to Africa without putting boots on the ground.

Efforts must focus on choking Islamism of its authority and popularity, an imperative for long-term security. Pressure should be applied on those states from the heart of the Muslim world that export Islamism. Similarly, pressure should be applied on African governments contributing to the continent's democracy deficit that makes Islamism's

offer of empowerment appealing to frustrated populations.

While the ideological persuasions of the Mauritanian coup leaders are still unclear, the virulent Islamism that exists in the country should be cause for concern. It is disconcerting, at the very least, that those who overthrew Mr. Taya prefaced their announcement on the state news agency with the phrase "In the name of Allah." Having observed the violence caused by the militarily-led Islamist regime in Sudan, one can imagine the results of another in Mauritania or elsewhere in Africa.

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