

# Low-lying threat

## Risk from domestic radicals rises in the Maldives

The Maldives is experiencing a growing undercurrent of Islamist extremism. **Animesh Roul** examines this trend and the domestic risk posed by Maldivian youths travelling to fight alongside Islamist groups in jihadist theatres such as Syria.

### ► KEY POINTS

- Reports from Syria in May suggested that two Maldivian nationals had died while fighting alongside anti-government jihadist groups.
- The reports of Maldivians fighting in jihadist theatres such as Syria come against the backdrop of increasing extremist Islamist activity within the Maldives, including ongoing rhetorical and physical attacks against atheists or those perceived to hold moderate beliefs.
- Although the Maldivian security forces are likely to be able to contain the direct threat posed by returning Maldivian militants, there is a greater risk that current extremist propaganda efforts will create a new generation of domestic radicals willing to undertake attacks in the Maldives.

Reports emerged in May on the social media pages of Islamist militants in Syria of a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attack against a government position near the northern city of Idlib. Such an event is far from extraordinary in the Syrian civil war. However, the militant statements also revealed that one of the perpetrators of the attack was a Maldivian national known as Abu Turab. Reports later emerged in the domestic media that another Maldivian, named as Hasan Shifaz, was killed fighting in Syria in the same month.

News of the Maldivians sacrificing their lives fighting alongside radical Islamist groups

in the Middle East emerged around the same time as social media statements regarding the establishment of an 'Islamic State of Maldives', a suspected jihadist front affiliated with Islamic State. These two related developments have shed light on an extremist undercurrent in the Maldives, a small island state traditionally known as a destination for holidaymakers. For the Maldives, such revelations are profoundly shocking. However, this Sunni-majority Islamic state has been confronting a grassroots radical Islamist surge that has been overlooked by the authorities for over a decade.

### Call of the caliphate

Despite attempts by Islamic clerics and scholars in the Maldives to clarify why fighting other people's civil wars should not be considered jihad or lead to martyrdom, the threat of Maldivian youths travelling and joining jihadist theatres in places such as Iraq and Syria has already been realised. There are approximately 20 Maldivians fighting in the Syrian civil war at present, according to various international and domestic media reports.

Reports of radicalised Maldivian youths travelling to Syria emerged for the first time in October 2013, when a group of Maldivians was detained at the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport in the capital Malé on suspicion of leaving the country to join jihadist forces in Syria. Subsequently, information emerged that Shifaz and Turab had died in Syria fighting alongside the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamist militant group Jabhat al-Nusra against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's forces. Bilad Al Sham Media (BASM), an online media forum

presumably run by Maldivians in Syria to propagate and publicise Maldivian jihadists' activities on the battlefields, confirmed on social media platforms that the dead Maldivians were with Jabhat al-Nusra. Further confirmation of Maldivian nationals fighting in Syria was provided by a senior member of Jabhat al-Nusra, Sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Australi, who on 25 May stated on his Twitter account, "Maldivians are some of the most courageous and well-mannered Mujahideen."

BASM has provided details of the Maldivians operating in Syria, who are mostly young university students, and how they travelled to the Middle East through an unnamed transit country with the hope of establishing an Islamic state, which would ultimately "liberate the Islamic world" and establish a global Islamic caliphate. According to BASM, this Maldivian group initially engaged with the radical Islamist Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya battalion of the Free Syrian Army, before joining up with Jabhat al-Nusra. It appears that a number of Maldivians are fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra, although information from BASM and social media sites suggests that an increasing number are also linking up with the group's ostensible rival, Islamic State.

Amid these rapidly unfolding events, the announcement of the establishment of the Islamic State of Maldives on its own Facebook page, purportedly a local branch affiliated with Islamic State, emerged in the last week of July, coinciding with the Maldives' Independence Day celebrations. An Islamic State flag was hoisted for the first time in Malé's Raal-hugandu area; Islamic State flags were also

in evidence during a protest march against Israel's Operation Protective Edge in Gaza during early August. During the protest, there were banners and flags showing a picture of the Maldives' flag crossed out and a message in the local Dhivehi language stating, "This flag is directly under the slavery of America. If there was any independence, it would have been possible to implement Allah's Sharia. Don't mock yourself, talking about independence." Another banner with the Islamic State's flag read, "If you want real independence, try and get under the shelter of this flag. That will be the day when we break free from the shackles of the Kaffir (unbeliever) and celebrate. Inshallah."

With the Islamic State's flag as a masthead, the Islamic State of Maldives has made its presence known on popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. As its name and flag suggest, the Islamic State of Maldives owes its allegiance to Islamic State. According to the information available on its social media sites, its primary purpose is to promote Islamic State in the Maldives, to raise awareness of the group, and to convey Islamic State's message to the Maldivian people. It urges Maldivian youth to "strive for the caliphate and to stand up against the existing democratic system of governance", which, according to the Islamic State of Maldives, has "ruined Maldives".

### Grassroots realities

The foundation of the Islamic State of Maldives and presence of Maldivian nationals fighting in Syria come at a time when a new generation of young people in the country has begun adopting Arabic pseudonyms and using social media platforms to propagate violence and intolerance, and to display the flags and insignia of jihadist groups.

This has come as a shock to the Maldivian government, and to civil society more generally, which have maintained the consistent line that Maldivians are religiously moderate. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs responded to reports of Maldivians fighting in Syria by saying, "No Muslim scholar in the Maldives has called on Maldivians to participate in foreign wars, but there are youths who get emotional from what they see of the suffering of Muslims. There are Maldivian youths who want to avenge that." The radical Maldivian youth who are active on social media sites have two things in common: the desire to implement strict sharia (Islamic law) in the Maldives and a hatred of democracy.



A Maldivian holds a placard during a protest calling on the government to enforce sharia (Islamic law) in Malé, Maldives, on 23 December 2011. Radical Islamists' efforts to implement sharia in the Maldives have occasionally triggered confrontation and violence.

Within Maldivian society, instances of violent extremism and intolerance towards other faiths are becoming more frequent. International events, such as Israel's Operation Protective Edge or the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in European newspapers and magazines since 2005, have triggered large protest rallies. Hundreds of demonstrators gathered in Malé in September 2012, protesting against the film *Innocence of Muslims*, widely perceived to be offensive to the Prophet Muhammad. Protesters burned a US flag and displayed placards with anti-American and anti-Semitic slogans, such as "Maldives: Future Graveyard of Americans and Jews".

In mid-February 2012, a group of Islamist radicals vandalised archaeological artefacts, mostly ancient Hindu and Buddhist relics, at the National Museum in Malé. An estimated 25 exhibits, including rare sculptures and statues, were damaged in an apparent attempt to destroy the Maldives' pre-Islamic historical heritage.

These developments are not isolated events. Although they have caught the attention of the international community recently, the history of religious conservatism and intolerance in Maldivian society is almost a decade old. On the ground, the early signs

of radicalisation can be traced back to 2003, when posters of Osama bin Laden adorned the walls of houses on Edhyafushi island and shops displaying Santa Claus during Christmas in 2005 were attacked by radical Islamist activists in Malé.

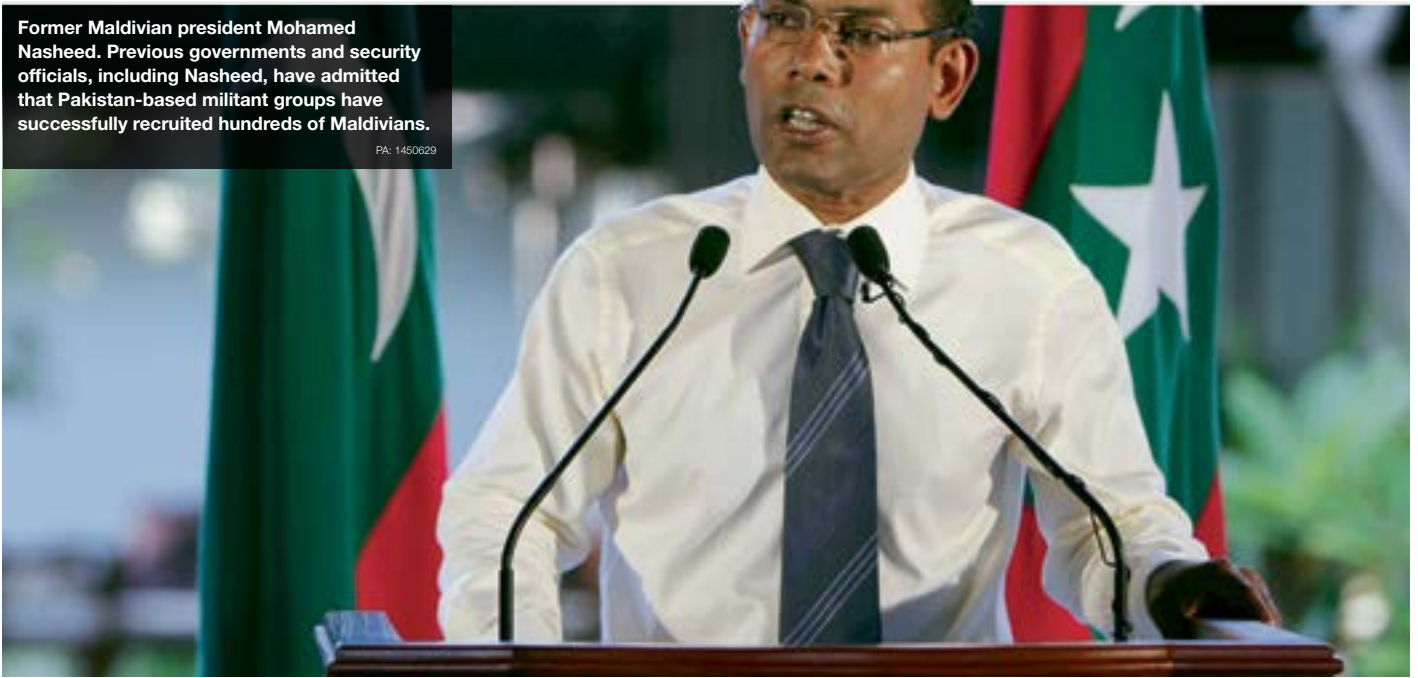
### Acts of terrorism

The first and so far only Islamist terrorist attack in the Maldives took place in Malé in September 2007, when a crude improvised explosive device (IED) injured nearly 12 foreigners in Sultan Park in Malé, including tourists from China, Japan, and the United Kingdom. The attack targeted the tourism industry for its alleged un-Islamic practices and sinful influence on local culture. A large-scale crackdown across the country prompted extremists to flee, mostly to Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Three militants – Mohamed Sobah, Moosa Inaz, and Ahmed Naseer – were detained. They confessed to involvement in the attack and were sentenced to 15 years in prison. During their trial they admitted that their goal was to "target, attack, and injure" non-Muslims in order to fulfil the duty of jihad.

The security forces' search operation that followed the bombing unearthed an illegal mosque located at Dar-ul-Khair on the isolated island of Himandhoo in October 2007.

Former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed. Previous governments and security officials, including Nasheed, have admitted that Pakistan-based militant groups have successfully recruited hundreds of Maldivians.

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A number of suspected extremists had taken refuge at the mosque, and when the security forces attempted to take control of the building there was a violent stand-off in which the mosque's occupants resisted the police using wooden planks and other makeshift weapons. The siege ended after the Maldivian armed forces took control, although several people were injured during the incident.

In November 2007, the stand-off at Dar-ul-Khair was featured in an Al-Qaeda propaganda video that raised apprehensions within the country's security establishment that Islamist militant groups were gaining a foothold in the country. The propaganda video 'Your brothers in the Maldives are calling you' was made by a previously unknown group called Ansar Al Mujahideen and posted on the Al-Qaeda-linked al-Ekhlaas web forum to attract recruits and finances for militant activities in the Maldives. The Maldivian authorities subsequently unearthed similar Islamist outposts. For example, following a search of a small island located in North Ari Atoll, self-proclaimed radical Islamist scholars were found to have virtually taken control, and were advancing their cause through disseminating extremist literature and audio-visual materials in illegal makeshift mosques.

In November 2009, another jihadist video emerged online featuring Ali Jaleel (alias Musab Sayyid), a Maldivian national who fought alongside pro-Taliban forces in Pakistan and who carried out a suicide attack on the headquarters of Pakistan's Inter-Services

Intelligence (ISI) in Lahore on 27 May 2009. Previous governments and security officials, including former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed, have admitted that Pakistan-based militant groups have successfully recruited hundreds of Maldivians. In 2008, a US diplomatic cable, leaked by WikiLeaks, outlined concerns in Washington about three Maldivians – Yoosuf Izadhry, Easa Ali, and Hasnain Abdullah Hameedh – who were being monitored by the Maldives Police Service due to suspicions that they were planning to establish a militant group in the Maldives with the assistance of Pakistan-based Islamist groups, and were clandestinely recruiting individuals who had undergone training in Pakistan. The three men were arrested in Pakistan in 2009 before being repatriated to the Maldives the following year, where they were released without charge.

### Grassroots extremism

Pakistani madrassas (Islamic religious seminaries) are also believed to be a source for the growing level of radical Islamism within Maldivian society. Ibrahim Fauzee, a radical Muslim cleric from the Maldives, was arrested in May 2002 in Karachi, Pakistan, and subsequently held in the US-operated Guantanamo Bay detention centre until his release and repatriation to the Maldives in March 2005. Having returned home, he later founded the Islamic Foundation of the Maldives (IFM), focusing on preaching and activism. It is now known for its anti-Israel

activism and hard-line stance against liberal and secular Maldivians.

Another Islamist organisation that has contributed to grassroots radicalisation in the Maldives is the Jamiyyathu Salaf (JS), a non-governmental religious group that propagates an ultra-conservative strain of Islam. With a strong anti-secular ideology and Salafist lineage, the JS openly promotes intolerance towards other religions, especially Christianity, and calls for moral policing. Many of its members are known to have been educated in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Espousing the concepts of dawah (proselytising), al-walaa (loyalty), and al-bara (disownment), the JS and its leaders claim that Islam was wiped out in Spain because Jews and Christians were allowed to live with freedom, and Muslims built relations with non-Muslims. The group has warned that this could also happen to the Maldives.

Since the amendment of the constitution in 1997, Islam remains the state religion of the Maldives. People from other faiths are forbidden from proselytising and conducting public worship. The government has also imposed a ban on importing non-Muslim books and other religious items.

### Struggle for sharia

Radical Islamists' efforts to implement sharia in the Maldives have occasionally triggered confrontation and violence. Liberal intellectuals, writers, and activists who have challenged the idea of the strict implementation of sharia

have been targeted in the past. The October 2012 assassination of Dr Afrasheem Ali, a liberal religious scholar and member of parliament, is one such case. Ali was stabbed to death close to his home, with the perpetrator, Hussain Humam, found guilty of the murder in January 2014 and sentenced to death. The rising culture of extremism and intolerance in the Maldives is also manifested through brutal attacks, abductions, and harassment of secular journalists and scholars. Radical Islamists have even issued threats through SMS messages on mobile phones to violently attack anyone they regard as 'laa dheenee' (non-religious).

The most recent victim at the time of going to press was a well-known journalist and free speech activist, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, who has been missing since early August 2014. Domestic media speculated that he had been abducted by Islamist extremists in order to silence progressive voices in the country.

There have also been repeated incidents of Islamist vigilantes abducting and interrogating young men in Malé and elsewhere and forcing them to identify online activists advocating secularism or professing atheism through social media sites. Soon after the abduction of Ahmed Rilwan, on 23 August, the Islamic State of Maldives released a video on YouTube that depicted the execution of US journalist James Wright Foley. It also contained a message threatening to kill Maldivian atheists, stating, "We shall borrow your heads."

In an escalation of this violent rhetoric, BASM is openly criticising Shia Muslims in the Maldives and threatening to "chop [the religion] off from its roots before it spreads". BASM and the Islamic State of Maldives have released a number of video lectures translated into Dhivehi, including one called "The obligation of Jihad". These sermons include messages delivered by bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Maldivian nationals who are said to be fighting in Syria. One such message from December 2013 states, "The Maldives is today being ruled by unbelievers, and if they are unbelievers we have to wage war against them."

The Maldivian militants operating in Syria have even gone to the extent of threatening the government in the Maldives and warned the country's security services not to carry out any investigation against the Maldivians fighting in Syria. Through its media arm, BASM proclaimed, "We will throw the bait and you [the security forces] will bite. And you will find no other choice except to bite.

A security guard outside the National Museum of the Maldives on 14 February 2012. In mid-February 2012, Islamist radicals vandalised archaeological artefacts in an apparent attempt to destroy examples of the Maldives' pre-Islamic historical heritage. PA: 1450827



We will throw out the map and you shall go step by step just the way we want until you land in that pit of doom which you are headed to right now." BASM chided the Maldivian police, calling it "an institution that defends a sacrilegious state".

### Outlook

There are currently no organised Islamist militant groups with an operational base in the Maldives. Nevertheless, considering its small size (its estimated population is approximately 340,000), the country has proven to be a fertile ground for jihadist recruitment, as illustrated by the involvement of Maldivian nationals in radical Islamist groups in Syria.

The country has been struggling to cope with radical Salafist ideology, which has already gained traction among significant sections of the population, particularly among the younger generation. This has raised concerns among moderate and secular political parties and organisations that the government is not doing enough to prevent this upsurge in radical activism. In particular, they point to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs' description of those going to fight in Syria as having "good intentions, [but] the wrong path".

Despite the country witnessing only a single terrorist attack, there is a growing risk of religious extremism as underground Islamist vigilante groups are increasingly coming out in the open and intimidating moderate voices. Social media can influence hundreds of those who are actively participating in online discussions, with activist organisations such as BASM further propagating extremism.

With young Maldivians travelling to join

jihadist groups in places such as Syria, where they are undergoing further training and indoctrination, their return to the Maldives will pose a risk to the country, although their relatively small numbers should mean that the Maldivian security forces will be able to contain the direct threat. More dangerous will be the effect that their exploits in theatres such as Syria will have when they are broadcast back home. Combined with the ongoing radical propaganda efforts of organisations such as BASM, this could draw more domestic followers for radical organisations, creating a home-grown risk. This would primarily manifest itself in further small-scale attacks against those perceived as moderate or atheist, but could also include larger-scale terrorist attacks, particularly against Western tourists and the resorts they visit. ■

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### Author

Animesh Roul is the executive director of the Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, a New Delhi-based policy research think-tank.

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