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# The Maldives's Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Theories and Perspectives

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In February 2020, the Indonesian government decided not to repatriate its 689 citizens that had joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This decision was welcomed by citizens of the world's most populous Muslim nation, including by former militants of the Jemaah Islamiyah, a notorious Indonesian ISIS-affiliate terror organisation. The Indonesian government recognised its lack of resources and infrastructure to rehabilitate these individuals, but also that their return could contaminate, so to speak, thousands of other Indonesians vulnerable to extremist Islamist ideology.

Across the Indian Ocean, another Asian archipelago is placed in a similar predicament. The Republic of Maldives is debating whether or not to repatriate its citizens from Iraq and Syria. Similar to its Indonesian counterpart, the government fears that the return of these fighters will only add fuel to the fire of extremist Islamist ideology on its territory.

While the Maldives is only a fraction of the size of Indonesia, and its population is 500 times smaller, proselytization of radical ideology is just as, if not more, threatening. The Maldives has become the country with the highest rate of foreign fighters per capita in the world, and it faces internal menaces that push the country's youth towards joining foreign terror organisations. The paradisiac white sand beaches and azure waters that the Maldives is known for is far from the reality for the local population. Crowded living conditions in the capital Malé contrast the isolated atolls, but the consequences of both these types of living conditions have proven to create a vacuum.

In December 2019, the Commissioner of Police, Mohamed Hameed, disclosed that there could be up to 1,400 Islamist extremists in the Maldives who adhere to ISIS ideology. Moreover, he revealed that 423 citizens had attempted to travel to warzones in Iraq and Syria and 173 had succeeded. Further underlying conditions, such as poverty, unemployment and crime, may also have contributed to the vulnerability of Maldivian youth, exploited by the narratives of recruiters.

## Overview

Compared to other South Asian countries, the number of terror attacks in the Maldives is relatively low. One of the most infamous attacks took place in 2007, when 12 tourists were injured following the detonation of an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) near Sultan Park in Malé. Three suspects were arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison after confessing to having orchestrated the attack, however no organisation claimed responsibility for the bombing. The most recent attack to occur on Maldivian territory took place in early February, when three tourists were stabbed in Hulhumalé by Islamist extremists. A video was then posted on the *Telegram* channel *Al-Mustaqim Media*, in which individuals with suspected ties to ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack in Dhivehi, the local language. Fortunately, the victims survived.

This attack highlights the daunting threat of ISIS' reach in the Maldives. Since the organisation lost its self-proclaimed *Caliphate* in the Middle East, it has operated underground networks with the aim to inspire other terror organisation to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State and established self-declared provinces, notably the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) covering Afghanistan and Pakistan. As such, the Af-Pak region presents itself as a potential destination for ISIS foreign fighters, since the group continues to endeavour to recruit fighters and indoctrinate locals. Factors such as the Maldives' geographical proximity, Sunni-majority population, and the presence of multiple extremist groups facilitating the infiltration of ISIS' doctrine on its territory has created fertile ground for recruitment activities.

## What is a foreign fighter?

While there are certain conditions specific to the Maldives that have facilitated the brewing of extremism and accelerated the flow of fighters from the Maldives to conflict zones in the Middle East, it is imperative for policy makers to recognise that foreign fighters have gone through a process of radicalisation, which can occur in many ways, that explains their decision to leave their country and take up arms for a foreign armed group. As defined by De Guttry, Capone and Paulussen (2016) foreign fighters are, "*individuals, driven mainly by ideology, religion and/or kinship, who leave their country of origin or their country of habitual residence to join a party engaged in an armed conflict*". While the '*drive*' of foreign fighters is often as unique as the foreign fighter him-/herself, researchers have identified certain motivational factors for fighting abroad. Noted scholars, such as Frennett and Silverman (2016), highlight three primary reasons why foreign fighters would take the final step to leave their country to fight in a foreign conflict: outrage at what is happening in a conflict and empathy

for the people being affected, adherence to the ideology of the group an individual wishes to join, and a search for identity and belonging.

As such, it would be impossible to understand the motivations of Maldivian foreign fighters without tackling the subject of radicalisation, as halting the flow of foreign fighters and preventing radicalisation are intricately linked. A foreign fighter does not decide to stand up and leave for the battlefield overnight, rather, it is a decision made after a period of exposure to extremist ideology and indoctrination.

Radicalisation itself is a heavily debated topic, with various scholars offering various interpretations and explanations. Yet, the phenomenon can be approached as a process that occurs in phases, namely on an individual-, group- and mass levels (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). Studies have shown recurring factors for succumbing to radical ideology, such as the influence of interpersonal relations and groups, personal grievances and the search for social identity. Some of the first Maldivian men to travel to join ISIS in conflict zones claimed they saw the journey as a chance to escape rampant poverty, severely overcrowded living conditions, and lack of economic opportunity.

Groups such as ISIS have succeeded in recruiting such high numbers of foreign fighters from various backgrounds and nationalities because they have been able to exploit the vulnerabilities of potential recruits and construct narratives that would encourage an individual to join the group. A study conducted by Bouzar and Flynn (2017) on 809 French nationals that had attempted to leave France to join ISIS highlighted seven separate narrative used by ISIS recruiters online. Social media has become a catalyst for ISIS recruitment, and as 63% of the Maldivian population has access to the Internet, this maximises ISIS' reach in the country. In comparison with the Maldives closest neighbours, India and Sri Lanka, respectively only 51 and 34 per cent of their populations have access to the Internet.

As online recruiting methods become more and more sophisticated, and similar to those employed by intelligence agencies, recruiters are able to gather a psychological, social and cultural profile of the intended recruit and through customised messages tailor the '*jihadist ideology*' to fit the future recruit. For example, the '*search for a better world*' narrative is employed once a recruiter identifies an individual who is disillusioned with society. The recruiter then tries to convince the target that equality, brotherhood, and solidarity truly reign in the society being built by the Islamic State. The videos shown to the recruits portray men and women of all origins sharing meals together and helping one another, of children in nurseries playing with toys, of sacks of rice being distributed to the poor, etc. Hence, a utopian society is pictured in order to consolidate an alternative society that may enchant the recruit. While no such study has been conducted on Maldivian individuals, the first

documented cases of Maldivians suggest that the notions of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘liberating Muslims’ were common motivating factors for Maldivian foreign fighters.

### The Maldivian context

As described in EFSAS study paper, [‘The Maldives: Return of democracy and challenges ahead’](#), the Maldives’ recent political history has been tumultuous. From 1978 to 2008, the country was ruled by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who modelled his regime after former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. During this time, the country’s political system was fuelled by autocracy, corruption and intimidation, and elections were manipulated as to avoid the rise of political opponents. Moreover, Gayoom’s rapid transformation of the economy in the direction of luxury tourism was extremely beneficial for the wealthiest one per cent of Maldivians, but disastrous for the rest. In 2008, Gayoom was forced to open up the political space and he was eventually defeated in the country’s first free Presidential elections, in which Mohamed Nasheed became President. Despite the successful economic and social reforms set in place by Nasheed, his rule was challenged from the onset by remnants of the Gayoom regime. Paradoxically, his development of democracy in the Maldives gave space to conservative and extremist voices which eventually succeeded in ousting him from power in 2012. Abdullah Yameen, Gayoom’s half-brother, held the Presidential seat from 2013 to 2018, reverted the country on an authoritarian path, and developed closer ties to Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi community which inevitably caused a shift from the Maldives’ traditionally tolerant and liberal Islamic religious practices to more fundamentalist interpretations. In the 1970s and 1980s, numerous Maldivian students travelled to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to receive free education from Madrassas and returned home to preach Wahhabi-inspired discourses. While these Imams and religious figures were kept in check during Gayoom’s Presidency, Yameen’s developing ties with Saudi Arabia greatly augmented Wahhabi religious influence in the Maldives. Moreover, Yameen’s tenure was also marked by the eruption of numerous corruption scandals, conflicts over freedom of speech and religious practice, and the death and disappearances of liberal bloggers such as Yameen Rasheed.

The consequences of this political turmoil proved to be drastic for the local population. As phrased by Zaheena Rasheed, Editor of the prominent English-language news website *Maldives Independent*, *"...In no other country would you find that in one lagoon you have an island that is catering exclusively to tourists with all the best services of the first world. Then, right next to it, where the Maldivians live, it's a slum. There's no fresh water. There's no education. There's no hospital. This is what it's like for a majority of Maldivians, who live in the atolls"*.

## Fertile ground for recruitment

As mentioned above, poor socio-economic factors can contribute to an individual's decision to become a foreign fighter. For example, 6.6% of the Maldivian population lives below the international poverty line (less than \$5 a day) but 90% of them live on isolated atolls, where extremist preachers have access to vulnerable populations, and can therefore expose them to radical ideology. Following the devastating 2004 tsunami which hit all but 9 of the Maldives' 1,200 islands, killed scores of citizens, and rendered hundreds homeless, Wahhabi religious figures exploited this disaster and framed a narrative in which the tsunami was God's retribution for sinful and irreligious behaviour. Funding from Saudi and Pakistani sources, including Lashkar-e-Taiba's (LeT) charitable front, Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq, provided relief to hard-hit communities but also took the opportunity to undertake '*religious reformation*' to further embed Wahhabist and Salafist beliefs. This also created an opportunity for LeT to recruit Maldivian fighters.

Youth has been a constant target for recruiters of extremist organisations, and the lack of economic opportunity for 18% of Maldivian individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 renders their susceptibility to extremist ideology even greater. ISIS has attempted to exploit the youth's poor scope of future possibilities to lure them into delusions of grandeur in the *Caliphate*. Poor living conditions in Malé, where 32% of the country's population is crammed on an island of 6 km square kilometres, have further engendered frustrations and gang violence. It is estimated that 20-30 gangs, each consisting of 50 to 400 members, operate in Malé. Some are believed to have ties to extremist groups and political organisations, thus perpetuating the cycle of corruption, intimidation and extremism. Furthermore, the motivations for joining a gang are comparable to those for joining a terror organisation (i.e.: brotherhood, social identity etc.), and this could explain why a significant portion of Maldivian foreign fighters has roots in criminal gangs.

The grievances caused by the socio-economic factors mentioned above are further accelerated by religious non-governmental organisation with dubious agendas. An increasing number of Islamic NGOs have voiced concerns over existing social norms and endeavour to morally police communities, calling out practices such as dancing, art and music as '*haram*', criticising supposedly '*anti-Islamic*' aspects of the national education curriculum and organising '*religious retreat camps*' as to spread their fundamentalist ideology. In 2018, the Maldives Police Service confirmed that these retreats and programmes "*held under the banner of religious teaching and togetherness provide a unique platform for high profile recruiters and radical preachers*".

## Conclusion

Poor socio-economic factors fomented by political instability combined with the proselytization of fundamentalist and extremist ideology has fermented the Maldives as a recruitment ground for terror organisations. Jihadi recruitment networks have extended their reach to the Maldives, and as such the South Asian nation faces a security threat that continues to evolve with the regional context. ISIS' advancement in Afghanistan could accelerate the flow of Maldivian fighters to the conflict zone, and those that left to fight in Syria and Iraq could potentially regroup in the self-declared Islamic State Khorasan Province. The arrest of Muhammad Ameen, a Maldivian national arrested in late 2019 for spreading extremist ideology and allegedly mobilising individuals to fight for ISIS in Syria, then Afghanistan, shows that this menace is very much underway.

As such, the Maldivian government must take measures to effectively curb the flow of foreign fighters as to avoid fuelling the flames of conflict in volatile areas in South Asia. It is imperative to impose stricter monitoring of Imams and religious preachers, as to prevent those with sympathies to jihadist ideology from spreading destructive and nefarious discourses. Additionally, the creation of effective counter-narrative campaigns that respect Islamic religious practices and beliefs without promoting extremism must be implemented as to shift vulnerable populations away from radical ideology. Coordinated regional approaches and cooperation with countries that are facing such a predicament, like Indonesia, could reinforce infrastructure and resources as to not only prevent radicalisation, but also eventually rehabilitate those who have already succumbed to the narratives of ISIS and other terror organisations, in order to avoid the migration of foreign fighters and the perpetuation of violent Islamist extremism in the Middle East and South Asia.

Finally, the Maldivian government must earn the trust of its young citizens and provide them with concrete prospects that would diminish the vulnerability that ISIS has so easily exploited.



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