

## Focus 66 - The Maldives in the face of recurrent Jihadism

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### Introduction

The recent [Easter 2020 attack](#) in the Maldives, targeting ‘several boats anchored at the harbour of Mahibadhoo island, some of which belonged to the Maldives’ “apostate government” was claimed by ISIS through the Al Naba magazine (Zahir, 2020). It clearly indicates that Jihadism remains an issue of high concern in the country, as it proved fully ready to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic.

These fanatics seem to be very well organised and apt in using social media: ‘in social media outlets violent extremists made threats of revenge against the government. They established a Telegram channel by the name “TouristWatchMv” in January, suggesting a possible targeting of tourists in the country. It is now believed that individuals linked to the Maduvvari cell carried out the earlier attacks. (...) Individuals and small cells, networked through social media and other communications technologies, with excess to Salafi-jihadi ideology, have now taken up the cause of spreading violent extremism using various platforms like Facebook and Telegram.’ (Zahir, 2020).

This terrorist attack has been associated with the presence of Jihadists in the Levant war scenario. A [UN agency](#) analysing the Jihadi flux to this region observed that ‘On a per capita basis, Maldives is one of the largest contributors of FTFs [Foreign Terrorist Fighters] to the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq’. According to table 1 (p.12) of its report, the country had indeed the highest figure per capita both in terms of travels and arrivals of FTFs, as

well as FTFs prevented from leaving the country (including relatives, whose share of total bans was estimated at 30%).

A report from the [International Centre of Counter-Terrorism](#) in The Hague points to the same direction, while the [Maldivian Security Forces](#) in the wake of the Easter 2020 attacks kept the estimates drawn under the previous administration of 69 Maldivians having joined ISIS overseas.

At least since [1979](#), the US State Department has been conducting country reports on terrorism - under the series of ‘Patterns of Global Terrorism’ up to [2003](#) and ‘Country Reports on Terrorism’ thereafter. The Maldives have been present in the Reports series since 2010. The Maldivian [Mohamad Ameen](#) was denominated by the US Treasury in September 2019 as a ‘key leader for ISIS in Syria, Afghanistan, and the Maldives’, active as recently as April 2019 in recruiting Jihadis in Malé (Capital of the Maldives). This indicates a continued, serious concern.

A [2018 report](#) presented in an international gathering in Melbourne, Australia reveals the ways in which the Maldivian prison system has been instrumental to the fanatic indoctrination of youth.

In this brief we will consider Jihadism in the Maldives within our conceptual framework perspective, as defined in ‘[Terrorism Revisited](#)’. We aim to exemplify how Jihadism is independent from religious traditions, specific colonial grievances, or social conflicts – it must rather be understood at the indoctrination and geopolitical levels.

We further note that as the Maldives enjoy close ties with its South-Asian neighbours, any counter-Jihadism strategy should be tackled at the regional level.

### The Maldives’ Jihadi drift

The Maldives take part in a large range of over two thousand reefs extending from North to South-South-West from the Indian Lakshadweep to the Chagos islands. Its population stands in close relationship to its neighbours in the Indian subcontinent – both ethnically and historically.

The arrivals of the Islamic Califate to India and the Iberian Peninsula are contemporary - General Tariq ibn-Ziyad crossed the strait of Gibraltar in [711](#), and the next [year](#) Muhammad bin Qāsim started the conquest of India.

In both cases there is a contemporary, on-going debate regarding the relative role of armed conquest and a more peaceful commercial colonisation. Portuguese experts such as Cláudio Torres defend the [second vision](#) for the Iberian Peninsula; recent [historical works](#) defend similar views as regards India.

Simultaneously, there is also a debate regarding the traditions dominating Islamic expansion. Referring to a later period of expansion in Southeast Asia, Goucher and Walton (2008) note that ‘Sufi saints were travelling the same roads and the same ships as Muslim merchants, prepared to seek followers of their own version of Islam in the region’.

The Maldives’ transformation from a Buddhist to a Muslim chain of islands followed commercially linked, peaceful dynamics. As pointed out by [Maniku](#), Arab sea-traders had mastered the Indian Ocean centuries before the Muslim (or even the Christian) era - and dominated both sea-routes and techniques up to the advent of the Portuguese Discoveries.

Therefore, Arab traders were certainly present in the Maldives from a very early time and continued to be present up to the official conversion of the Maldives to the Muslim faith during the 12<sup>th</sup> century (an event which [Maniku](#) thinks must be accurately dated 1147 rather than 1153). Antique sources claim that the conversion of the Maldives to Islam was linked to a Maghrebin or to Persian preacher. However, [Max Van Berchem’s Foundation of Genève](#) holds that ‘The Tarik or Sultans’ chronicles – written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and which present the genealogy of the Maldivian Sultans from 1141 to 1821 – credit the conversion to Islam to a Turkish Sufi, Yûsuf Shams al-Dîn al-Tabrîzî.<sup>1</sup>’.

Quoting the introductory words of [Peacock](#): ‘Sufi networks have been seen as constituting one of the prime means through which cosmopolitanism in a variety of senses was articulated in the pre-modern Islamic world. In emulation of the Prophetic <sup>3</sup>adîth, ‘seek knowledge though it be in China’, travel was one of the key duties of the Sufi, both in theory and in practice, and Sufi literature was permeated with the vocabulary of voyaging.’<sup>2</sup>

According to [Chapin](#)’s ‘Country Study of the Maldives’, other than a short Portuguese direct rule over the Maldives from 1558 to 1573, European presence has been mostly indirect. The Netherlands kept the Sultanate as a protectorate of Ceylon (then under their rule), and Britain did the same after gaining control of Ceylon and up to 1965.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Peacock (2018, p.65): ‘The Maldivians themselves claim Islam was brought by a twelfth-century Sufi saint from Iran, Shams al-Dîn of Tabriz’. Tabriz is located in what is now Iranian Azerbaijan. Its native majority language is Azerbaijani, which is close to Turk.

<sup>2</sup>Peacock’s (2018) main argument is that Sufism from the XVI century onwards was closer to the needs of Islamic Empires; however, he does not question the view of Sufism in early Islam. Consulted from ‘[Maldives Heritage Survey](#)’.

European presence in the Maldives is considered so superficial that '[The Encyclopaedia of Peace Psychology](#)' considers the country as the only Asian nation that did not experience a 'foreign occupation'.

The country is also quite homogeneous from an 'ethno-linguistic' point of view (Chapin, 1994) - with but small dialectal differences among the southernmost islands. The same study considers that the 'Maldives was a caste society well into the 1920s' with a sharp difference between 'Male, the traditional seat of the sultans and of the nobility [which] remains an elite society wielding political and economic power' and the remaining islands, where there are no sharp social divisions. According to the author (writing in 1994) these differences were being eroded rapidly.

Still, according to Chapin, the Maldives used to be a country with a high level of freedom for women: 'Islamic law, as practiced in Maldives, makes divorce easy for men and women. Divorce rates are among the highest in the world. According to the 1977 census, nearly half the women over the age of thirty had been married four times or more.' (...) 'The status of women has traditionally been fairly high, as attested to in part by the existence of four sultanas. Women do not veil, nor are they strictly secluded'.

It is also important to bear in mind that the Maldives holds the [highest per capita income](#) levels in the region. Although fishing and shipping remain important backbones of the country's economy, its present prosperity is mostly due to tourism, which has considerably increased in the last decades - simultaneously with the country's drift toward Jihadism. This unchecked Jihadi threat threatens the tourist industry directly.

One may see tourism and the cultural shock associated with it as a major impulse leading towards a conservative religious reaction (geared at rejecting modernity). However, what cannot be claimed is that there is here any relation between economic deprivation and the growth of Jihadism.

### Ideological indoctrination

The Maldives' history is not marred by any 'European colonial heritage'. Neither is it plagued by ethnic or social conflicts. The nation reached the end of the XXth century while espousing a relatively moderate interpretation of Islam, namely in the social domain.

However, the situation changed rapidly. [Animesh Roul](#), author of a very comprehensive report on Jihadism in the country, tells us that:

‘For hundreds of years, Sunni Muslims in the Maldives have largely practiced a more liberal form of the religion. Yet during Maumoon Abdul Gayoom’s three-decade autocratic rule, the Egyptian-trained religious scholar enacted a number of measures that, at least inadvertently, encouraged more hard-line Islamist elements in the country’. In 1994, the Protection of Religious Unity Act was passed, which restricted the freedom to practice any other religion besides Islam. In 1996, Gayoom constituted the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (which was renamed the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in 2008) charged with overseeing religious affairs in the country. This body of clerics pressured the government to carry out moral and cultural policing of alleged “anti-Islamic activities.” In 2008, it asked the police to ban night clubs and discotheques for New Year’s Eve celebrations, saying that they were contrary to Islam.

‘By the end of Gayoom’s time in office in 2008, the dress code for women had grown increasingly conservative, and more and more men grew out their beards. Whereas women used to dress in bright coloured clothes, they increasingly wear black robes and headscarves today. On more conservative islands such as Himandhoo, women wear black abayas and face veils. Ahmed Naseem, the Maldivian foreign minister until the coup in 2012, said that the Maldives “had no one wearing headscarves 10 years ago,” but it is common now. From imposing a ban on Christian missionary radio to apprehending migrant service providers for allegedly preaching and practicing their own religion, Gayoom’s regime initiated an era of state-backed religious intolerance and radicalization in the Maldives.’

Roul (2013) unequivocally points out to the role of Jihadi indoctrination: ‘The offer of free education in madrasas in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is widely acknowledged as a core means of radicalizing Maldivians locally, with well-meaning parents sending their children off on scholarships to “study Islam.”

The same point of view is shared by [Gunaratna](#), who gives the example of the ‘Jamia Salafiya Islamia’ - a Madrassa in Faisalabad, Pakistan, famous for training several leaders for both Lashkar-e-Taiba and Al-Qaeda and which received dozens of Maldivian students. According to the author, in 1989 there were 23 Maldivian students in this Madrassa, and many more in other Pakistani indoctrination centres.

There is a point raised by Roul (2013) which must be clarified - the responsibility of the former Maldivian autocratic ruler Gayoom in the country's Jihadist drift. [Naseem and Mohamed](#) also make the point of the lack of historical tradition or grievances that could justify the rising of Jihadism (they posted an undated history of Islam in the country in the news blog [Inzuna](#)).

However, these authors also show that, for a long period, Gayoom violently repressed Jihadists. Chapin (1994) as well saw Gayoom as having an influence opposed to the conservative Islamic take-over of the country. Gayoom led the country for 30 years (1978-2008), and he did not always have the same policy towards Jihadism. As often happens with dictators, Gayoom was flexible in choosing an ideological framework as long as he could continue his rule.

Naseem and Mohamed (n.d.) clarify: 'Gayoom was brutal in his crackdown on the practise of fundamentalist Islam, driving those who practised it to unite against his authority. The Adhaalath Party was the result. Since then the party has undergone many changes and has evolved into the most vocal Islamist party in the history of the country. Its founding members are no longer together, some having left to join the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) while others have remained with Adhaalath which has, in a volte face hard to fathom, now aligned itself with Gayoom and his People's Party of the Maldives (PPM). Adhaalath Party's most successful time came during the first three years of democracy in the Maldives, flourishing in the environment of free expression fostered by President Mohamed Nasheed.'

The Adhaalath Party made still another volte face, and is now [supporting](#) the MDP, wherein it appoints the Home Minister. In recent times it successfully pressed authorities to [ban](#) the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) for its role in denouncing Jihadism under the accusation of 'blasphemy against Islam'. Both the leaders of the Adhaalath Party and of another extremist Islamist conservative party, the Jumhooree Party, are presently on [trial](#) for steering political violence.

We thus see that Jihadism has a non-linear relation with political systems, being able to successfully press both autocratic and democratic leaders and adapt to political shifts. As elsewhere – for instance in the case of [Jamaat-e-Islam](#) – Jihadi organisations were able to exert a political influence incommensurate with their political weight, mostly due to a successful ideological labelling of those who question their views as 'apostates'.

Further to this point, the Maldivian reality also shows how Jihadism is remarkably adaptable to different political realities. Whereas misogyny is a hallmark of Jihadism – and quite clearly so in the Maldives – the Adhaalath Party was able to provide a theological justification (the existence of different hadiths) for accepting the [nomination](#) of two female judges to the Supreme Court. The move, of course, was strongly denounced by local clerics, but very much supported by the Maldives democratic establishment.

Jihadism was a crucial reaction against democracy in the Maldives in the beginning of the present century and is still unequivocally contrary to any political establishment based on democracy. It considers its own reading of religion to be the only legitimate basis for the decisions of society.

[Modern Jihadism](#) is totalitarian in its aims and does not compromise with any sort of secularism. However, it is capable of tactical compromises for the sake of its strategic goals.

In geopolitical terms, the connection between the Maldivian Jihadist drift and Pakistan is relatively straightforward, as we have already seen through the importance of Pakistani Jihadi indoctrination centres for Maldivian youngsters. According to Indian intelligence sources quoted by the [press](#), the Maldives has been thought as an important Jihadi ground by Lashkar-e-Taiba in its strategy for encircling India. In this respect, Jihadism may be seen mostly in a regional context.

Saudi Arabia has a significant influence in the country, and it has been blamed for Jihadi indoctrination. This may be partly true, as the country's religious establishment did enjoy until recent times a great autonomy in its foreign policy. However, it certainly is not the case under the present grip of Mohammad Bin-Salman.

The twists in political positions of the main Islamist Party seem to pay special attention to the country's alignment with Qatar. In 2015, the [Adhaalath Party's representatives](#) resigned from government and joined the democratic opposition in protests. In-between, the party had been very active in supporting the '[Qatar Red Crescent](#)' in Gaza - and made it plain, after the Maldivian authorities followed the Arab coalition in severing diplomatic ties with Qatar in 2017, that '[any government in alliance with Adhaalath will renew Qatar ties](#)'.

The most recent and important geopolitical game and concern in the region regards the expanded Chinese presence - which alarmed India in particular. For China, Jihadism in the Maldives has not constituted a critical concern, either as a potential geopolitical instrument or as a strategic threat. As [Madatali](#) observed, there is no Chinese policy regarding Jihadism as an ideology - it just observes it according to changing geopolitical circumstances.

## Conclusion

As we have stressed in our [Policy Brief on education in South Asia](#), the educational system is the most strategic field to combat Jihadism. Countries wherein Jihadism is most deep-rooted – such as Pakistan – are the same countries wherein the official educational system is geared to Jihadi indoctrination. Whereas our South Asian study did not address the issue of Jihadism in the Maldivian educational system, there are strong evidences of its presence. According to a [press report](#): ‘A Class IX Islamic studies textbook, for example, tells students, “performing jihad against people that obstruct the religion” is an obligation.’

A national educational syllabus that provides a truthful description of the ethnic, religious, and economic reality of the country - based on human values and wherein science is valued by itself - constitutes the highest priority.

However, this by itself is not enough. According to the same press report, ‘Local Islamist communities, the government says, illegally marry underage girls out of court, refuse to vaccinate their children or send them to school as “they consider education to be a Western ideology.” Over 250 cases of parents refusing to send children to school have been reported to the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services.’ Stopping the influx of Jihadi preachers from Pakistan and elsewhere in the Middle East and preventing those already existing from spreading a culture of fanatic violence is a priority of national defence, but one should not stop there.

Regional integration is an important mechanism to counter fanaticism, starting with the conscience of a South Asian shared identity, culture, and history. The movement of Maldivian students does not have to be directed to religious sectarian centres but can be thought as a bilateral movement towards high-level education institutions starting in its regional vicinity – India and Sri Lanka – and coupled with reverse movements from these countries to Maldivian high-level education centres. Other than regional integration in educational matters, all other types of economic integration and contact flows are important tools in combatting religious supremacism.

A broader strategy – both national and regional – is needed so as to fight terrorism in South Asia, as individual nations with limited resources are grappling with rising threats. Additional resources – both national and regional – are needed so as to detect and thwart any increase in terrorist threats and extremist ideologies.

One cannot assume that the circulation of different philosophies will only benefit negative ones. This will happen only if there is a lack of will to wage an uncompromising ‘war of ideas’ against ideologies of hate.

As concerns security and fanaticism prevention, the Maldives can gain from strengthening regional cooperation with more experienced and wider security services such as the Indian ones, thus improving its counter-terrorism techniques.

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