

In his address at the Indian Ocean Conference (IOC) in Male city, the Republic of Maldives (hereafter Maldives) on 04 September 2019, former Maldivian President—[Mohamed Nasheed highlighted](#) concerns over the emerging threat posed by radical Islamist group in the Maldives. He called it the biggest challenge faced by nations spanning over the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

The Maldives— a nation comprising 26 Atolls of more than 1,000 Islands, has nearly 100 percent Islamic population. Islam is not only the State religion, but its citizens are also required to adhere to it as per the 2008 revised provisions of the country's Constitution. According to [Article 9 \(d\) of the Constitution](#), *“a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives”*, and also [Article 10 \(a\)](#) stating, *“The religion of the State of the Maldives is Islam. Islam shall be one of the bases of all the laws of the Maldives”*.

Despite attacks by Islamic extremist groups targeting bloggers and free-speech activists promoting the practices of moderate Islam, the previous government had been denying the existence of such extremist groups within the Island nation. However, since its inception in November 2018, the new administration led by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has initiated the policy-oriented efforts to contain the spread of radical Islam in the Maldives. The Maldives' government's policies on counter-terrorism and violent extremism do acknowledge every act of terrorism and take active steps against all of its manifestations.

During the recent visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the Maldives (08-09 June 2019), President Solih thanked PM Modi for providing capacity building measures to Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). Further, [both leaders agreed](#) to enhance bilateral cooperation on a range of issues, including terrorism, establishing Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism (JWGCT), Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), and De-Radicalisation. Aligning with the United Nations' Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS), Maldives takes necessary measures against terrorism and violent extremism. The country has also [joined the Saudi Arabian initiative](#), 'Islamic Military Alliance' to fight terrorism.

Last month, on 19 September 2019, the Maldivian government released the 'watch-list' of 17 terrorist organisations under the 'Prevention of Terrorism Act'. The list includes entities like Islamic State (IS), al-Qa'ida, NTJ (National Thoweeth Jamaat), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and Harkat ul-Jihadi-Islami (HuJI). Based on the recommendations made by the Parliamentary Committee on National Security, the list was [approved by President Solih](#).

Radical Islamist Threat in the Islands



Mohamed Nasheed/ Maldives Times

Strategic planning had revealed that both transnational terrorist organisations, al-Qa'ida and Islamic State (IS), were trying to penetrate Maldives' security establishments including police, military, immigration division, and the education ministry. An analysis of the unfortunate episode of the Easter Sunday bombings on 21 April 2019 in Sri Lanka, suggests that the Islamic State (IS) had established its ideological presence in the Indian Sub-continent. Post-Easter Sunday bombings, the Maldives Government had [directed its security forces to tighten up vigilance](#) at the sea-borders and conducted emergency response exercises. In a day-long joint exercise on 05 May 2019, the Maldives police and military focused on inter-agency coordination to test the response and handling capabilities in countering terrorism and public protection. Despite counter-terrorism efforts and peacebuilding measures undertaken by the new government, some incidents that had happened during the previous government, do continue to haunt the authorities and their residual impact will take time to vanish.

The spark of the existence of radical Islam ignited with the infamous kidnapping case of Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla in 2014 within a year of the appointment of former President Abdulla Yameen Gayoom. Ahmed Rilwan (28 years), a journalist with *The Maldives Independent* newspaper, used to write about corruption in the government body and the activities of Islamist elements in the Maldives. Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla was [abducted and killed](#) on 08 August 2014. The new President, Ibrahim Solih set up a Presidential inquiry commission to investigate the incident. On 01 September 2019, the committee headed by Husnu Suood, in its report concluded that Rilwan was murdered by radical Islamists associated with the foreign jihadi group— al-Qa'ida, which had threatened him earlier on several occasions. Addressing a Press Conference, Husnu claimed that former [President Yameen had diverted](#) the focus of the Police investigation from Rilwan's case.

In another infamous case of 23 April 2017, a Maldivian blogger—Yameen Rasheed (29 years), a critic of the then government, had also received several threats to his life for his anti-Islamic views on his blog—*The Daily Panic*. Rasheed was actively involved in the public campaign to find his missing journalist friend— Ahmed Rilwan. [Rasheed was found dead](#) in his apartment with multiple stab wounds on his body. According to the police, seven radicalised young men had concluded that Rasheed had '[mocked the religion](#)' and was doing things against Islam and he needed to be killed.

Al-Qa'ida and the Maldives



Maldivian Al Qaida recruits/ Image: Twitter

As the first case of nexus between al-Qa'ida and the Maldives appeared via Facebook page of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) affiliated Bilad al-Sham Media (BASM), an online group which claimed to be the media representatives of Maldivians fighters in Syria. Reportedly, BASM was a group consisting of 20 Maldivian jihadists and had [featured in the stories of Maldivian fighters carrying out the attack](#) for JN. In Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra was affiliated with al-Qa'ida's Central Command and often described as Al-Qa'ida in Syria (AQS) or al-Qa'ida in the Levant (AQL). In October 2009, the then President Mohamed Nasheed had admitted that few hundreds of Maldivians had been [recruited by the terrorist groups such as Taliban](#), al-Qa'ida based in Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to Nasheed, Maldivians who left on the excuse to study in Madrasas in Pakistan and Afghanistan got in the clutches of the Taliban and started actively supporting the group. A month later, on November 2009, al-Qa'ida's media wing released a video featuring Ali Jaleel aka Musab Sayyid—a Maldivian national who had joined the pro-Taliban group in Pakistan, died during a [suicide attack on Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence \(ISI\) Head-Quarters in Lahore on 27 May 2009](#).

As pointed out earlier, the killing of Maldivian journalist—[Rilwan Ahmed was directly linked to the al-Qa'ida](#), before his kidnapping on 28 May 2014. The group administrator of BASM—

Yameen Naeem *aka* Abu Dujana, another Maldivian al-Qa'ida affiliated terrorist had warned Rilwan, "There will be no cooperation between you and us. Know this very clearly. Your days are short".

Ties between the Maldivians and transnational terrorist groups, including al-Qa'ida reportedly began way back in 2008, and with the Islamic State (IS) in 2014 when some Maldivians responded to the call of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—the self-declared Caliph of IS.

Islamic State and the Maldives

The Maldives, to an extent, had started turning out to be a fertile ground for the IS. In an interview to the British newspaper, *The Independent* on 14 September 2014, former President Mohamed Nasheed, then in exile, had emphasised that radical extremist groups in the [Maldives were getting "silent" support from the then government](#), describing it as a matter of grave concern for the society of the Maldives. One could see [his statement as a political-rivalry, but it was backed-up with the reports of around 200 Maldivians](#) who had travelled in 2014 to IS-controlled territories in Iraq and Syria to fight alongside the IS warriors and its other affiliated groups. In July 2014, an IS-affiliated group— The Islamic State of Maldives (ISM) emerged in the country, marking the first presence of IS in the Islands nation. Likewise, its parent organisation, ISM's objective was to propagate the IS ideology in the Maldives. Through a video message, ISM had urged the Maldivian youth "[to strive for the Caliphate](#) and to stand up *against the democratic system of governance, which has ruined the Maldives*".



Screenshot of IS's video "A message to the Maldives Government" [Source: IB Times] [18]

On 31 August 2015, the IS media wing released a video titled, "A Message to the Maldives Government" on its YouTube channel in which three of its terrorists threatened to kill then-Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen and to execute attacks in the country. The trio had also demanded the [withdrawal of Maldives' anti-terror bill and release of jailed opposition leader](#)—Sheikh Imran Abdulla. This was for the first time that the IS had directly addressed the Maldivian government with a strong statement which had been considered as a terror threat to the country's tourism industry leading to the possible impact on the economy.

The previous government had remained inconsistent denial about the growing threat of radical Islam in the Maldives. Contrary to this position, in 2017, the Maldivian security forces arrested two IS sympathisers for conspiring suicide bombing in the Islands nation. In September 2017, the [Maldivian police arrested—Ishag Ali, and Hussein Afeef](#), for their alleged connection with the IS terrorists based in various locations in Iraq and Syria, and for conspiring a suicide bombing attacks in the Maldives. Earlier, on 12 May 2017, a Maldivian youth was arrested for hoisting IS flag in the late hours of the evening at the artificial beach in Male. Earlier, on 05 September 2014, a group of 200 Maldivians including 30 women wearing the black niqab, and 10 children had staged a march, carrying the IS flag and calling for the "enforcement of the Islamic Shariah in the Maldives". Some of the [banners carried by the protesters read](#) "We want the laws of the Quran,"; "Islam will eradicate

secularism”; and “Shari’a will dominate the world”.

Despite reports of Maldivians joining IS group in Syria and Iraq, the Maldivian government paid little attention to the developments. However, the arrests were first since 2007 Male bombing attacks marking the alertness of security agencies to address the issue of home-grown Islamist extremism within the country. The socio-economic situations, poverty, could have been the drivers behind local radicalisation. Reportedly, Maldivians who travelled to IS-controlled territories in Iraq and Syria, either [belonged to the poor fishing communities, or came from the Capital city which is a mixture of radical preaching](#), and organised crime in the Maldives.

Conclusion

Being an island nation with the flourishing tourism industry, the Maldives has been on the target map of the transnational terrorist organisations. The existence of radical Islam fuels the growth of jihadi groups, which in turn would be a serious concern for the Maldives and other South Asian countries, including India. From a national security perspective, the issue of the growing presence of radical Islamists in the Maldives is a matter of grave concern.

While the government of the Maldives has taken steps to face this challenge, there is still a great deal to be done. Considering the proximity of the Maldives to India, both nations have been cooperating broadly in the field of intelligence sharing, as is the norm, joint efforts to contain the religious extremism, radicalisation and terrorism, need serious attention. Focusing on neighbourhood security, India has a proven track record of advising and issuing timely terror alerts to its neighbouring countries, Sri Lanka incident being a case in point. Besides, India’s National Investigation Agency (NIA) officials have been assisting the Sri Lankan investigators post-Easter Sunday attacks. As part of its neighbourhood first policy, it will be in India’s best interests to maintain vigil about the possibility of IS-inspired threat to and from the Maldives.

Statements of the influential former Maldivian President Nasheed expressing concerns over growing threat of radical Islam in the Maldives, should be taken seriously as the IS, having lost their territories in Iraq and Syria, the Maldivian fighters may try to return home, bringing with them dangerous radical ideologies that would be harmful to the Maldivian society as well as for its neighbourhood. Much worse would be the prospect of the returnees trying to set up recruitment and operational bases/modules either in India or elsewhere in the region.

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