



MALDIVES

Quick Facts

Population: 392,709 (July 2017 est.)
Area: 298 sq km
Ethnic Groups: South Indians, Sinhalese, Arabs
Government Type: Presidential republic
GDP (official exchange rate): \$4.52 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2018)

INTRODUCTION

The Maldives, an Indian Ocean archipelago nation, has faced a number of internal challenges in recent years, from economic and environmental concerns to political infighting. However, what has attracted global attention is the country's status as a safe haven for the growth of a radical strain of Islam. This Sunni-majority Islamic nation has been confronting a grassroots Islamist surge that has been overlooked for over a decade, and the country has proven to be fertile ground for transnational jihadist recruitment. The nation has been struggling to cope with Salafi jihadist ideology, which has gained ground among large swaths of the population and among the nation's youth in particular, with reports emerging of young Maldivians participating in the ongoing civil war taking place in Syria.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Islamic Foundation of the Maldives (IFM)

The Islamic Foundation of the Maldives (IFM) is non-profit religious organization. IFM was founded in April 2009 by Ibrahim Fauzee, an Islamist previously detained at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for his links to al-Qaeda. According to its old website (now defunct), the IFM aims to “promote and protect Islamic tenets and ethics, create religious awareness, and to uphold social events within the boundary of Islamic principles and [the] Religious Unity Act in the Maldives.” The IFM’s Islamic activism was highlighted when Mohamed Nazim, a Maldivian, was assaulted on May 28, 2010 after he raised some doubts about Islam and his own religious beliefs during a meeting addressed by Islamic preacher Zakir Naik. The IFM immediately urged the government and court to strip Nazim of his citizenship and sentence him to death (based on Islamic sharia and the Constitution of Maldives), if he did not repent.¹ Nazim relented, reportedly under duress, and publicly apologized for questioning Islam.

The ongoing Rohingya conflict in Myanmar and resultant humanitarian crisis provides ample opportunities for groups like IFM to engage in charity work. In October 2017, IFM’s team of volunteers,

along with its chief Ibrahim Fauzee and a former Maldivian Minister for Islamic Affairs, Dr. Abdul Majeed Abdul Bari, visited a number of Bangladeshi refugee camps. The IMF's relief campaign's slogan was: "Maldivians are with Rohingya Muslims: We are One Ummah."² The group claims to have donated over 1 million Maldivian Rufiyaa (approximately \$65,000) to an international humanitarian organization, Islamic Relief Worldwide, to aid the Rohingya.³

Jamiyyatul Salaf

One of the most prominent Islamist groups in the Maldives is the Jamiyyatul Salaf (JS), a non-governmental religious group that propagates an ultra-conservative strain of Islam. JS has Wahhabi Salafi leanings and a strong anti-secular ideology. It supports Islamizing education and promotes intolerance toward other religions, especially Christianity. Many of its members are known to have been educated in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. As part of its campaign to raise Islamic awareness and promote the values of Islam, the group regularly invites Islamic preachers and scholars to the Maldives in conjunction with the country's Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The JS is also actively engaged in moral policing: in 2008, it declared music to be haram (forbidden) and forced a school library in Male to close because it contained Christian books. In 2012, vehement pressure from religious groups like JS prompted the Islamic Affairs ministry to issue guidelines on permissible public behavior, including prohibiting mixed-gender dance events.

In November 2011, Jamiyyatul Salaf activists demonstrated against the UN Human Rights chief Navi Pillay's comments on flogging and the country's "discriminatory" constitutional provisions. The JS has received some political support in its anti-UN campaign, especially from political parties, including the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) and the PPM. JS has recommended the use of Saudi-style beheadings and firing squads over lethal injections for a convicted murderer in accordance with the Islamic principle of Qisas (equal retaliation).⁴

JS remains at the forefront of pro-Islamic activities in Maldives and issues religious edicts and guidelines intermittently to enforce various Islamic grievances. For example, in June 2016, JS's member Sheikh Sameer issued an edict through social media discouraging Maldivians from participating in the International Yoga Day, which according to him "is not permissible for Muslims because it is part of Hinduism."⁵

Adhaalath Party

Often tagged as an off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, the Adhaalath (Justice) Party (AP) is one of the most significant Islamist political parties in the Maldives.⁶ More radical political parties like AP control the nation's Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and they have long advocated for the strict implementation of sharia in all parts of the Maldives. The party holds conservative views on gender issues—opposing, for instance, the eligibility of women in presidential elections. Under its influence, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has regularly invited foreign scholars and preachers with extreme religious views to the Maldives to address large and small groups on religious matters. Foreign Islamic scholars and preachers like Zakir Naik (India),⁷ Bilal Phillips (Jamaica), and Sheikh Abdur Raheem Green (UK) with extreme religious views and misogynist outlooks are among those to have been invited to the Maldives by the Ministry.⁸ Zakir Naik, a "televangelist" who runs the satellite television channel "Peace TV," is known for his preaching sessions and his inflammatory comment that "every Muslim should be a terrorist."⁹ Beyond these new age Islamist preachers like Naik and Phillips, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the controversial Egyptian Islamist scholar and Muslim Brotherhood ideologue, presently self exiled in Doha (Qatar) who has argued in defense of suicide bombing and advocating death penalty for apostasy in the past, has significant followers in Maldives.¹⁰

AP has also banned visits to Sufi tombs and shrines because its leadership deemed praying there to

be un-Islamic. The party supports reinstating a ban on public visits to the Medhu Ziyaaraiy, the tomb of Abu Barakat Berberi, who is credited with introducing Islam to the Maldives.¹¹ The country's Islamic Ministry, however, has ordered the shrine to remain open on the condition that no flags would be hoisted in or around it.

AP has also urged the government to ban music and songs that have allegedly been harming Maldivian youths. According to the pro-Islamist political party, "Cigarettes, music and Internet are gateways to higher addictions like alcohol, pornography and hard drugs. Attack root cause and save our kids."¹² However, despite pressure from pro-Islamist groups, Malé refrained from imposing any legal proscription on music or dance.¹³

Members of JS and AP vehemently criticized former President Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik when he asked for a review of the conviction of a minor who was sentenced to flogging by a juvenile court on Feydhoo Island.¹⁴ According to AP, flogging is the penalty for fornication under sharia and maintains that the "purpose of penalties like these (flogging) in Islamic Sharia is to maintain order in society and to save it from sinful acts [...] and no one has the right to criticise any penalties specified in Islam."¹⁵

Malé Attack

The first and to date only Islamist terrorist attack in the country took place in the national capital, Malé, in September 2007, when a crude bomb blast injured nearly 12 foreigners, including tourists from the UK, Japan, and China. The attack targeted the tourism industry for its alleged un-Islamic practices and sinful influence on local culture. Subsequently, a massive crackdown prompted extremists to flee the country, mostly to neighbouring Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Three terrorists—Mohamed Sobah, Moosa Inaz and Ahmed Naseer—confessed to the crime and were sentenced to 15 years in jail in connection with the attack.¹⁶ The search and sweep operation that ensued after the bombing uncovered an illegal Dar-ul-Khair mosque located on an isolated island in October 2007, where many extremists were hiding. The situation erupted into a violent confrontation between radical members of the mosque and security forces. The standoff at Dar-ul-Khair was featured in an al-Qaeda propaganda video in November 2007, which raised concerns within the country's security circles that the transnational terrorist group was gaining a foothold in the country. The propaganda video, titled: "Your brothers in the Maldives are calling you," was made by a hitherto unknown group known as Ansar Al Mujahideen and posted on the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Ekhlaas web forum, in order to attract recruits and raise capital for militant activities in the Maldives.¹⁷ Maldivian authorities eventually unearthed similar Islamist outposts, such as an island located in North Ari atoll that provided safe heaven to extremists.

A subsequent al-Qaeda video circulated in November 2009 and featured Ali Jaleel, a Maldivian national who fought alongside pro-Taliban forces in Pakistan. Soon thereafter, another recruitment video featured a previously unknown al-Qaeda cell operating covertly in unregulated madrasas in the Maldives, and exhorted jihadists to travel to the country.¹⁸

The Pakistan Connection

There have been many instances of Maldivian citizens traveling to Pakistan to engage in terrorist activities. In 2009, nine Maldivians were arrested in Pakistan's Waziristan tribal region during security raids at the militant training camps there.¹⁹ Later that year, Maldivian al-Qaeda member Abu Jaleel and two of his associates carried out a suicide attack on Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence Agency headquarters in Lahore.²⁰ In the early weeks of February 2010, nine alleged Maldivian terrorists who had been arrested in Pakistan's troubled South Waziristan tribal region the preceding March were repatriated to the Maldives.

²¹ According to national police, the nine suspects had ties to the bombing that took place in Malé's Sultan Park in September 2007, and they may have left the country for Pakistan via Sri Lanka for further training and indoctrination.²² They were repatriated by the government to the Maldives for de-radicalization. The

suspects included Yusuf Izaadhy (who, according to a leaked U.S. cable, was planning to establish a terror group in the Maldives with the assistance of a Pakistan-based group) and two other individuals identified as Easa Ali, and Hasnain Abdullah Hameedh.²³ In 2016, Mohamed Abdul Rahman was charged with terrorism and participating in a foreign war. Abdul Rahman travelled to Pakistan in 2007 under the pretext of continuing his studies, and engaged in militant activity there for almost ten years.²⁴

The offer of free education in Pakistani madrassas is widely acknowledged as a core means of radicalizing Maldivians locally, with well-meaning parents sending their children off on scholarships to “study Islam.”²⁵ Though there is no recent statistics regarding the number of Maldivians students are presently undergoing various educational courses, bilateral ties in the sphere of education was boosted with an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) during Maldivian President Abdullah Yamin Abdul Gayoom’s visit to Pakistan in May 2015.²⁶ In the past, the Maldivian government, including former President Mohamed Nasheed, has admitted that Pakistan-based terrorist groups have successfully recruited hundreds of Maldivian Muslims to fight against government forces in Pakistan.²⁷

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State

The transnational jihadi movement has affected the Maldives in the same way that it has affected other parts of the world. Maldivian youths are reportedly joining the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, (formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front), which has been active in Iraq and Syria, as well as the Islamic State (Daesh).

In March 2016, three Maldivians were arrested in Turkey while attempting to illegally cross over into Syria. These individuals, identified as Munnawar Abdulla, Ahmed Latheef and Ahmed Suhail, were extradited to the Maldives the same month.²⁸ All three, charged with traveling abroad with the intent of joining a terror group, were acquitted in October 2017 after a year-long trial.²⁹ Similarly, in September 2017, three Maldivians were arrested in a joint operation with Turkish law enforcement. They were planning to cross the border into Syria to join an unidentified jihadi group there. Several other Maldivians who attempted to cross into Syria to join jihadist factions have also been arrested and repatriated from Turkey in the last several years. Maldivians have also tried to reach Syria through Malaysia. In August 2017, two Maldivians among 19 suspected militants with links to the Islamic State were arrested in Malaysia for using Malaysia and Singapore as transit points before heading to Syria to join the Islamic State.³⁰

In September 2017, Maldivian authorities again arrested two Islamic State sympathizers for conspiring to carry out suicide bombings.³¹ This latest bombing plot came amid successive governments’ persistent denial of rising grassroots Islamic extremism in Maldives (with the exception of Muhammed Nasheed’s Maldivian Democratic Party administration).

One explanation for the interest among Maldivian youth interest in becoming foreign fighters is targeted media. The Bilad Al Sham Media (BASM) is an online media forum, presumably run by Maldivians in Syria, that propagates and publicizes Maldivian jihadists and their heroics in battle.³² It has detailed the experiences of Maldivian jihadis, mostly young university students, as they travelled to Syria through a transit country with the hope of establishing an Islamic state that would ultimately “liberate the Islamic world” and achieve the global of an “Islamic caliphate.”³³ One October 2017 BASM blog post focuses on the best and the most honorable way to die and the virtues of martyrdom.³⁴

Similarly to the BASM’s activities in enticing Maldivians into Jihad, another Maldivian pro-Islamic State (IS) media group, Haquq Media, too often releases literatures and songs to attract youths into its IS fold. This media in question released a video nasheed (chant) in local Dhivehi language shaming Maldivian Muslims for inaction and urged them to actively engage in jihad. It distributed the 7 minute, 41 second, English-subtitled video on Telegram messaging platform, featuring slain Maldivian Abu Yusoof, who carried out a suicide bombing in Wana, South Waziristan, in 2008. Yousuf in this dated clip questions Muslims as to why they have not arisen amidst the

killing of children and do not seek what awaits the faithful in Paradise.³⁵

Despite a series of Maldivians captured en route to Syria to join jihadi groups in recent years, Malé has expressed little interest in addressing the problem. These arrests mark the first time since the Male bombings of 2007 that law enforcement has apprehended homegrown militants plotting a suicide strikes inside the country. There are a few earlier examples of terrorist conspiracies being foiled without the arrest of local militants.

The Islamic State of Maldives

Reports of the establishment of the Islamic State of Maldives (ISM), purportedly a local branch affiliated with the Islamic State, emerged in July 2014, coinciding with the country's Independence Day celebrations. An Islamic State flag was hoisted for the first time in the Raalhugandu area of the national capital, Male. ISIS flags were also seen during the early August 2014 protest march against Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip, with protesters burning both American and Israeli flags. There were banners and flags clearly displaying the Maldivian flag crossed out with a message in the local Divehi 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 Shari'a. Don't mock yourself, talking about independence.'³⁶ The other banner with ISIS's flag depicted the message: "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 Kuffar and celebrate. Insha Allah."³⁷

ISM has been active on social networking sites popular for jihadist propaganda, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Its primary purpose is to promote the Islamic State in the Maldives, to create awareness about the Islamic State and to convey its messages to the Maldivian people. It has urged Maldivian youth to: "strive for the Caliphate and to stand up against the existing democratic system of governance," which, according to the ISM, has "ruined Maldives."³⁸ In early September 2014, hundreds of Islamists staged demonstrations (complete with Islamic State flags) in Malé, calling for the enforcement of sharia in the Maldives.³⁹ A recent protest took place in early May 2017, near the skating ground of the artificial beach in Malé and later online on social media website Facebook, where a post depicted a picture of the Islamic State with tagline "Soldiers of the jihadist group are active in the Maldives."

A whole new generation of young men appears to be gravitating to radical Islamist ideals, using social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, to propagate violence and intolerance, and to display the flags and insignia of jihadist groups. These youths have two things in common: the desire to have strict sharia implemented in the Maldives, and a hatred for democracy (which is viewed as un-Islamic). 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 journalist Ahmed Rilwan in August 2014, the Islamic State of Maldives released a video on YouTube that depicted the execution of U.S. journalist James Wright Foley. It also contained a message threatening to kill Maldivian atheists, stating, "We shall borrow your heads."⁴⁰ While Rilawan's mysterious disappearance remains unsolved, his friend and fellow blogger Yameen Rasheed was threatened and later killed in April 2017.⁴¹ A few of Rilawan's other friends (Muju Naeem and Zaheena Rasheed) went into hiding after ISIS supporters in Maldives threatened to target them for their "anti-Islamic" views.⁴²

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The Maldivian population is almost 100% Muslim, with citizenship strictly confined to practitioners of the Islamic faith. Most Maldivian Muslims belong to the *Shafi* school of Sunni Islam. The official language of the Maldives is Dhivehi.

The culture of the Maldives has undergone changes in recent years, and many believe it is progressively

being Wahhabized. More and more adherents (particularly among young people) are following a Salafi-jihadi ideology. In January 2011, an investigative report citing Maldivian intelligence officials concluded that Maldivian youths are increasingly attracted to the idea of transnational jihad, as discussed above.⁴³ Maldivian women in particular are targeted in this environment. They face public floggings for adultery and rape. A 2009 investigation found that Muslim courts in the country had sentenced almost 150 women to public flogging for adultery.⁴⁴ Reports citing data from the Criminal Court show that there were 67 women who were flogged for adultery in 2010. Out of the 129 fornication cases that were filed in 2011, 104 people were sentenced. 93 of those sentenced were women. A young woman from the island of Feydhoo was raped by her stepfather, and then convicted of premarital sex in a juvenile court. She was sentenced to 100 lashes and eight months of house arrested in February 2013.⁴⁵

In 2014, the Islamic jurisprudence body known as the Fiqh Academy publicly rejected a woman's right to consent to sex in a spousal relationship. The vice president of the academy, Dr. Mohamed Iyaz Abdul Latheef, said, "With the exception of forbidden forms of sexual intercourse, such as during menstrual periods and anal intercourse, it is not permissible under any circumstance for a woman to refrain from it when the husband is in need... [and should show] complete obedience to her husband."⁴⁶ The Academy has also endorsed other degrading and harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation.⁴⁷

In 2015, a mother of five was convicted by a local judge on a remote island for adultery and giving birth out of wedlock, and sentenced to death by stoning. This sentencing, the first of its kind in Maldivian history,⁴⁸ was reportedly issued under section 1205 of the penal code, which states that Islamic sharia punishments must be meted out to persons found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of committing a crime for which punishment is prescribed in the sharia.⁴⁹ However, the Maldivian Supreme Court overturned the ruling.

The attempt to implement strict sharia in the Maldives has on occasion triggered confrontation and violence. Many liberal intellectuals, writers, and activists who have challenged the idea of the strict implementation of Islamic practices have been targeted. Dr. Afrasheem Ali, a renowned liberal religious scholar and lawmaker, was assassinated in early October 2012,⁵⁰ and there were attempted assassinations against writers and social activists: Aishath Velezinee in January 2011,⁵¹ Khilath Rasheed in June 2012,⁵² and Yameen Rasheed in April 2017.⁵³

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs claims to have developed de-radicalization methods and has been taking measures to curb the activities of the various transnational Islamic organizations that have arrived in the Maldives in recent years.⁵⁴ However, radical interpretations of Islam and calls for jihad against non-believers are finding an increasing number of supporters in the Maldives. Islamist hardliners have called for the adoption of "Arabesque" alternatives in all aspects of life, including determining the age at which women reach puberty and proscribing how convicts should be executed in an "Islamic way."⁵⁵

Hundreds of Maldivians took to the streets in September 2012, protesting against a film made by an independent filmmaker based in the U.S. entitled *Innocence of Muslims*, which was widely perceived as offensive to the Prophet Muhammad and sparked protests worldwide. The rally, which was called "In Protection of the Prophet Muhammad," resulted in the burning of an American flag and the display of placards with anti-American and anti-Jewish slogans such as "May Allah Curse America" and "Maldives: Future Graveyard of Americans and Jews."⁵⁶

In early 2018, during the heights of State of emergency in Maldives, the European parliament adopted a resolution over the lack of freedom of religion in the Maldives and expressed concern over the fact that Maldives' Religious Unity Act is being used to limit freedom of expression.⁵⁷ This development was strongly criticised by the government of the day reiterated the fact the constitution of country do not allow for religions other than Islam to be publicly practiced.⁵⁸

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

With the adoption of the country's 1997 constitution, Islam became the state religion, and the chain of nearly 1,200 coral islands that make up the Maldives was declared officially Islamic.⁵⁹ Non-Muslims are forbidden from proselytizing and conducting public worship in the Maldives. Any Muslim who converts to another faith is breaking sharia law and can lose his or her citizenship. Migrant workers of other religions are denied the ability to practice their faith. The government also prevents the importation of non-Muslim books and other religious items. However, people from other religions are given permanent residence permits to work, mostly in the country's hospitality industry, which serves as the economic lifeline of the Maldives. Despite its economic benefits, many radical Islamic groups active in the Maldives have denounced what they view as tourism's negative influence on local Islamic culture.

Reiterating its status as 100 per cent Muslim country, a most recent Islamic ministry statement late last year (December 2017) "Allah does not accept any other religion but Islam. And he has said anyone who believes any other religion than Islam will be amongst the perishable on Judgement Day." The statement in Divehi also cautioned citizens "to stop spreading unnecessary sayings in the society that imply giving space for any other faiths but Islam." The statement aimed at rebutting growing clamour especially from Shahindha Ismail, a firebrand human rights activist who urged for space and scope for other religions in the country.⁶⁰

After almost three decades of authoritarian rule, the Maldives became a multi-party democracy in 2008 with the election of the liberal Mohamed Nasheed as President. Although Nasheed's party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), has progressive views on religion, its main ally, the Adhaalath Party, holds conservative views on religious and cultural matters. According to one official, there were at least seven Islamist radicals running in the 2008 elections, though all of them lost.⁶¹ However, Nasheed did not remain popular for long. Due to his economic strategy and alleged anti-Islamic policies, discontent reached a crescendo when Nasheed's government arrested Judge Abdulla Mohamed on January 16, 2012. A politico-religious coalition (the December 23 Alliance for Defending Islam) then accused Nasheed of violating the Maldivian constitution.

In February 2012, Nasheed was ousted in what was purported to be a bloodless coup⁶² and replaced by then-Vice President Mohammed Waheed Hassan Manik. Though the alleged coup was never proven,⁶³ Nasheed claimed that he was forced out of office by security personnel at the behest of opposition political parties. The President of the Adhaalath Party, Sheikh Imran Abdulla, and PPM Vice President Umar Naseer were reportedly responsible for orchestrating the ouster of Nasheed.⁶⁴

Nasheed's MDP government had resisted calls from extremists to shut down the country's luxury tourist resorts that serve alcohol, pork, and facilitate "pleasure tourism." Since Nasheed's ouster from power, the Islamic Ministry, which is responsible for religious affairs in the Maldives, has proposed the adoption of "Islamic tourism" without these basic elements, arguing that it works in Saudi Arabia where alcohol is not available, even at posh hotels frequented by Westerners. Political parties like the Gayoom-led PPM call for an alternative economy based on oil, rather than depending on the "anti-Islamic" tourism industry that facilitates public dancing, singing, and massage parlors. Gayoom and others who propagate this Islamic tourism may find more takers among the conservative populace, but this development will certainly impact the future of the Maldives' famed tourism industry.

In the post-Nasheed era, there was a renewed call for the implementation of sharia in all walks of life in the Maldives. His immediate successor, President Mohammed Waheed Hassan, was seen as more favorable to radical Islamist ideas, or at least passive in the face of their overtures, ignoring extremists and allowing them to freely advocate their beliefs.⁶⁵ The Islamic Ministry has admonished young jihadis in only the mildest terms, stating that "No Muslim scholar in the Maldives has called on Maldivians to participate in foreign wars, but there are youth, who get emotional from what they see, of the suffering of Muslims, there are Maldivian youths who want to avenge that." The October 2015 Anti-Terrorism Act

criminalized the act of leaving the Maldives to fight in a foreign war or joining a banned terror group. The offense is punishable by a jail term of between 10 to 20 years.

Under Waheed Hasan's administration, Islamic Affairs minister Sheikh Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed, who is a member of the Adhaalath Party, waged a virulent campaign against Christians and what he termed "Freemasons" for conspiring to erase Islam from the Maldives.⁶⁶ This tactic was not unexpected, as a common political smear in the Maldives is more liberal politicians being accused of promoting Christianity or conducting business with Jews. Shaheem Ali, who remains among the chief advocates of puritanical Islamic beliefs in the Maldives, reportedly published a book where he proposed that the Maldives should become an emirate of a Middle Eastern country, such as Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Shaheem indeed appears to be working towards this goal, as he has made significant effort as a Minister to steer Maldivian foreign policy towards Arabic countries, while distancing it from the West.⁶⁷ Islamic Minister Dr Ahmed Ziyad said at the time that the Saudis would help maintain the Maldives' 100 percent Muslim status. In late 2015, Saudi Arabia and Maldives agreed to maintain religious unity between their two countries.⁶⁸ Subsequently, in 2017, the Maldives became the first non-Middle Eastern country to back the Saudi Arabia-led group of five Arab countries who severed diplomatic relations with Qatar for its activities that encourage terrorism and extremism, and thereafter joined the 34-nation regional bloc led by Saudi Arabia to pressure Qatar to, among other things, sever its ties with Iran.⁶⁹

Under the new Progressive Party of Maldives government led by President Abdulla Yameen, which has been in power since November 2013, there are now efforts to replace the ultra-conservative Fiqh Academy, in spite of vehement criticism from various Islamic organizations as well as opposition political parties. In April 2016, the country's parliament amended the 1994 Religious Unity Act to set up Fatwa Majlis (a new Supreme Council for Islamic affairs) with the authority to issue fatwas or legal opinions on religious disputes.⁷⁰ It is to be noted, however, that the same Fiqh Academy of Maldives that is currently under fire issued a fatwa in August 2015 prohibiting participation in foreign civil wars.⁷¹

Irrespective of the government's intention to confront terrorism and Islamic radicalism in the Maldives, the religious extremism represents an ever-growing risk, as underground Islamic vigilante and criminal groups continue to intimidate progressive voices. As noted above, a string of young people has already joined global jihadi organizations and traveled to remote war zones and undergone trainings and indoctrination. With the collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, their return to Maldives will be dangerous to the Maldivian society and for the region at large. Indeed, in early 2017, in recognition of this fact, both the UK and Australia issued travel advisories to their citizens to be vigilant while visiting Maldives for a heightened threat of terrorist attacks.⁷² This perception of danger and heightened risk may well become a reality as surviving Maldivian extremists return home from Syria and Iraq.

ENDNOTES

1. "Maldivian renounces Islam, gets attacked by Zakir Naik audience", Haveeru Daily May 30, 2010; See, IFM's previous webportal had published this release titled, "Islamic Foundation's views about the apostate," May 29, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131006040534/http://islamicfoundationofthemaldives.org/sites/default/files/Press%20release%202.pdf>. Also "See, Islamic Foundation calls for death sentence if apostate fails to repent", *Minivan News Archive*, June 1, 2010 <http://minivannewsarchive.com/politics/islamic-foundation-calls-for-death-sentence-if-apostate-fails-to-repent-7606>
2. Islamic Foundation of Maldives, October 9, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/islamicfoundation.mv/photos/pcb.2197735330453139/2197735307119808/?type=3&theater>.
3. "Situation of displaced Rohingya beyond words: ex-minister", October 8, 2017, <http://en.mihaaru.com/situation-of-displaced-rohingya-beyond-words-ex-minister/>
4. "Religious NGO Jamiyyathul Salaf recommends beheading, firing squad over lethal injection," *Minivan News Archive*, February 26, 2013, <http://minivannewsarchive.com/society/religious-ngo-jamiyyathul-salaf-recommends-beheading-firing-squad-over-lethal-injection-53689>

5. “Despite cloud of Islamist criticism, Yoga Day events in the Maldives go off without a twist,” *Scroll India News*, June 22, 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/810439/despite-cloud-of-islamist-criticism-yoga-day-events-in-the-maldives-go-off-without-a-twist>.
6. “Any govt in alliance with Adhaalath will renew Qatar ties,” *Miharu*, June 07, 2017, <http://en.mihaaru.com/any-govt-in-alliance-with-adhaalath-will-renew-qatar-ties/>.
7. Zakir Naik’s visit (May 25-31, 2010) was organized by the Islamic Foundation (IFM) and Islamic Affairs ministry. See the transcript of Zakir Naik’s response to Mohamed Nazim at the Male’s Maafaanu stadium, 28 May 2010, *Minivan News Archive*, http://minivannewsarchive.com/files/2010/05/Dr_Zakir_Naik_and_Nazim-1.pdf
8. Bilal Philips created a major controversy when he preached that it was Islamic to marry off young girls as soon as they reached puberty, irrespective of their age, an idea that was endorsed by the Salaaf (JS). Phillips visited the Maldives along with Abdur Raheem Green on the invitation of JS in the first week of June 2010. The JS’s misogynistic ideals and preaching have drawn criticism in the past and triggered the creation of a feminist movement in Maldives, known as *Rehendhi*. JJ Robinson, “Feminist group launches letter writing campaign against sponsors of Dr Bilal Philips event”, *Minivan News Archive*, May 27, 2010.
9. Naik was banned from entering the UK for his speeches in June 2010 and most recently, in November 2016, his organization Islamic Research Foundation (IRF) was banned by Indian government. See, “Modi govt bans Zakir Naik’s NGO Islamic Research Foundation for 5 years”, *Firstpost*, November 15, 2016, <http://www.firstpost.com/india/modi-govt-bans-zakir-naiks-ngo-islamic-research-foundation-for-5-years-3107076.html>. For his most outrageous comment, see, for example, “Every Muslim Should be a Terrorist,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bxk5AAA5FbI>
10. The level of support of Muslim Brotherhood in Maldives, See, “Opposition voices concerns over Maldives cutting ties with Qatar”, *Mihaaru*, June 6, 2017, <http://en.mihaaru.com/opposition-voices-concerns-over-maldives-cutting-ties-with-qatar/>
11. “Sacred Shrine Opened to Public,” *Dhivehi Observer*, March 29, 2009, (Archived in) <http://doreview.blogspot.in/2009/03/sacred-shrine-opened-to-public.html>
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