

Maldives: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

On April 20, 2020, ISIS published a letter in their third issue of *Voice of Hind* magazine calling on Maldivians to join the jihad and to carry out extremist acts in the Maldives and India. The letter was in response to an ISIS-claimed attack on the Mahibadhoo harbor a few days prior. (Sources: [Small Wars Journal](#) [1], [Middle East Media Research Institute](#) [2])

On April 17, 2020, five bombs detonated at Mahibadhoo harbor, destroying a sea ambulance, four speedboats, and two dinghies. ISIS quickly claimed responsibility for the attack via its weekly Arabic-language newsletter, al-Naba, claiming the boats belonged to the “apostate Maldivian Government and its loyalists.” The attack was the first to be carried out by ISIS in the Maldives. Earlier this year on February 4, a group of ISIS-inspired assailants stabbed and injured three foreign nationals near the Hulhumale Redbull Park Fustal Ground in North Male Atoll. The attack was confirmed by an extremist media outlet called al-Mustaqim. The outlet released a message shortly after the attack stating that “the portrayal that this [Maldives] is paradise...had become a mirage. From now on, the only thing they [foreign travelers] will taste [in the Maldives] is fire.” (Sources: [Sun](#) [3], [Jamestown Foundation](#) [4])

Overview

The Maldives is a Muslim majority country with Sunni Islam serving as the state religion. In order to be a citizen of the Maldives, one must be a practicing Muslim, but most Maldivians are moderate in their practice. Although Islam is the primary subject in school and most businesses close five times a day for prayer, Islam has more or less remained a cultural guideline than an actual practice. Despite the nation’s Islamic identity, millions of foreigners travel to the archipelago every year, leading to a bustling tourism sector that has made the Maldives the country with the highest GDP in all of South Asia. (Source: [The Diplomat](#) [5])

It was not until the 1970s was the Maldives introduced to stricter interpretations of Islam. Many Maldivian students were given free education abroad at Wahhabi madrassas in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, later exporting the hardline ideology back to the island. During that period, the Maldives’ then president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, steadily shifted the country’s ethos towards a more Islamic-aligned identity. Gayoom, who held the presidency from 1978 until 2008, grew up in Egypt and studied at Al Azhar University—an institution that featured radical Islamic teachings. Gayoom’s legacy was steeped in autocracy, corruption, and the repression of political opposition. In 1994, Gayoom’s government enacted the Protection of Religious Unity Act, which imposed Sunni Islam on Maldivians by restricting their freedom to practice other religions. In 1997, Gayoom amended the country’s constitution to reinforce Islam as the only religion that could be practiced publicly, whereas individuals observing other religions were prohibited from exercising their faith in public spaces. Despite advancing the image of Islam in the country, Gayoom’s authoritarian administration did not provide Islamists with opportunities for political representation. (Sources: [The Diplomat](#) [5], [Jamestown Foundation](#) [6], [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#) [7])

However, when the Maldives held its first democratic presidential election, the country underwent a period of democratization and political liberalization. After assuming office in 2008, President Mohamed Nasheed allowed unrestricted freedom of speech. Religious extremism was now permitted under the category of freedom of expression and was quickly disseminated through mosques, public rallies, and on the radio. Furthermore, Wahhabi imams and activists were given greater access to influence the country’s politics and civil society. Nasheed’s ruling Maldivian Democratic Party even entered a political alliance with the Islamist Adhaalath Party which eventually took charge over the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Additionally, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has, at least indirectly, encouraged such Islamist extremism. In one such case, they, initiated crackdowns on media outlets for anti-Islamic content. Additionally, liberal writers and activists became targets for arrest, given that they were considered “threats to society for disrupting religious unity.” (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [6], [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#) [7], [Combatting Terrorism Center](#) [8], [Luminae Group](#) [9])

Given the political and religious shakeup in the administration, Nasheed consequently faced pushback from Gayoom loyalists disgruntled by Nasheed’s efforts to increase transparency and reduce corruption throughout the government. Nasheed began to target loyalists and arrested the criminal court judge, Abdulla Mohamed, who he accused of acting on behalf of Gayoom and compromising the integrity of the courts. Protests erupted following the arrest, eventually leading to Nasheed’s resignation. (Sources: [The Diplomat](#) [5], [Jamestown Foundation](#) [6], [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#) [7], [Combatting Terrorism Center](#) [8], [New York Times](#) [10])

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Following Nasheed's presidency, Abdullah Yameen—former President Gayoom's half-brother—was elected into office from 2013 and held the position until 2018. Yameen followed in Gayoom's legacy, and sought to transition the Maldives back into an authoritarian regime that was guided by hardline Islamist principles. In particular, Yameen developed closer ties with Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi community to boost his political support. Yameen's closer affinity with fundamentalist groups further institutionalized the practices of a conservative Islam, which resulted in repressive policies towards liberal dissidents as well as those who endorsed basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech and religious practice. In 2018, Yameen was surprisingly replaced with Ibrahim Mohamed Solih who has pledged to remedy the corruption rampant throughout the government, combat the growing rise of extremist sentiment throughout the masses, and deal with the threat of returning Maldivians who fought abroad in Syria and Iraq. (Sources: [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#) [11], [Al Jazeera](#) [12])

Although Gayoom prevented the politicization of radical Islam, following a major tsunami in 2004, hardline Islamic charity organizations were able to provide infrastructural resources and even offer education abroad for Maldivians hard hit by the disaster. Many Maldivians were offered the chance to study abroad at Salafi-aligned madrassas in Pakistan which led to the importation of violent jihad back to the atoll. Further adding to the rise of violent extremism on the islands was due to Nasheed's relaxation of religious observation, allowing many extremist-leaning mosques and preachers to attract vulnerable communities into the violent creed. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [6], [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#) [11])

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Radicalization and Recruitment

Although extremist sentiments and radicalization are present on the islands, it is uncertain if there are large organized extremist outfits throughout the country. Organized jihadi groups from other countries recruit from within the country's population, but as of yet, al-Qaeda and ISIS have only maintained a small presence throughout the atoll. Most of the violence on the islands stems from one of the many criminal gangs rampant in the country. There have been reports, however, of small cells on the islands that have been spreading their messages of violent extremist throughout social media and other communication platforms. (Sources: [UNDP](#) [13], [The Diplomat](#) [14])

Despite boasting the largest GDP in South Asia, economic opportunity is limited for many Maldivians. Around 5 percent of the population holds 95 percent of the country's wealth, making crime and violence an appealing alternative to obtaining a living. There are scores of gangs throughout the islands, and organized crime has been essentially normalized throughout the atoll. Given the lack of employment and active crime on the streets, hard-pressed Maldivians are likely to romanticize a religious state that seemingly promises income, safety, and moral duty to their fellow umma—the community of Muslim believers. (Source: [Norwegian Refugee Council](#) [15])

Pakistan-based organizations also have had an impact on the importation of Islamic fundamentalism. Following a disastrous tsunami in the Maldives in 2004, a number of Pakistani Islamist organizations set up rehabilitation and relief programs throughout the country. Charitable organizations such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) affiliated Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq, went to the Maldives to not only assist in redevelopment, but to also recruit Maldivians to study at madrassas in Pakistan. Madrassas in Pakistan primarily follow the fundamental edicts of Salafi Islam and have been known to groom students towards eventually participating in violent jihad. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [6], [Times of India](#) [16])

Although the Maldives has not been immune to terror plots over the past few decades, it was only recently that ISIS claimed an attack on the archipelago. In April 2020, ISIS claimed a boat attack on the Mahibadhoo harbor, and later released a statement in its online magazine calling for Maldivians to support the jihad. However, supporters of ISIS were first documented in the islands in September 2014 when more than 300 people waving ISIS's black flags marched in the Maldives capital of Malé. The demonstrators protested against democracy and chanted that Islamic jurisprudence—sharia—was the only solution to widespread social, economic, and political discontent. (Source: [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#) [7])

Since the early 2000s, young Maldivians have gone to Pakistan to join the ranks of [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#) [17] (LeT), an extremist group that has ties to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). While some Maldivian nationals in Pakistan were

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funneled into Afghanistan to support the jihad, others were sent to India to carry out attacks. In 2008, Maldives national Ali Assham was reported to have been involved in the LeT-linked 2008 attack against the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru, and according to former President Nasheed, undisclosed Maldivians were thought to have played a role in the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Those Maldivians who were extremely susceptible to radicalization in Pakistan and Afghanistan were reported to have allegedly traveled to Iraq and Syria to join extremist groups such as ISIS and the al-Qaeda linked al-Nusra Front. Media reports suggest that over 200 to almost 300 Maldivians have joined these terrorist groups. The figures suggest that about 1 in every 1,500 Maldivians becomes a terrorist fighter. (Sources: [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#) [7], [European Foundation for South Asian Studies](#) [18], [UNDP](#) [13])

According to information shared by the country's top police official, Mohamed Hameed, there are around 1,400 radicalized individuals in the Maldives who subscribe to violent extremist ideology and, "who would not hesitate to kill in the name of Islam." According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, one out of every 500 Maldivians has joined an extremist group in the Middle East. As of 2020, the Maldives has the world's second highest per capita of people fighting for ISIS. According to CNBC, 48 percent of the Maldivians who traveled to Syria had criminal records and 39 percent were members of Malé's criminal gangs. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [4], [Benar News](#) [19], [CNBC](#) [20])

Al-Qaeda

According to government officials, it has been reported that al-Qaeda has had an active branch in the Maldives since 2009, but was split into two factions after ISIS declared a caliphate in 2014. One faction supported Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ISIS, while the other faction supported al-Nusra Front which was active in Iraq and Syria as an open al-Qaeda affiliate. Before the split, the extremist factions were able to produce and distribute a large number of Salafi-Jihadist literature in the local language. The *Maldives Independent* reported that mosques on the island—particularly the Furqan and Noor mosques in Malé—have been hubs where al-Qaeda-linked groups recruited locals for jihad. The leader of the Maldives cell of al-Nusra Front is Pakistani-trained Mohamed Mazeed who is currently detained by the Maldivian Defense Forces following details that he orchestrated the August 2014 kidnapping and murder of Maldivian liberal activist and writer, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, in Hulhumalé. (Source: [One Online](#) [21], [The Diplomat](#) [14], [South Asian Rights](#) [22])

Although it is unreported how many Maldivians have joined the ranks of al-Nusra Front, a number of Maldivian nationals have been connected to al-Qaeda-linked attacks in Pakistan. In 2002, Maldivian cleric Ibrahim Fauzee was arrested in an al-Qaeda safe house in Karachi, Pakistan. He was later held in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp until he was released and repatriated back to the Maldives in 2005. Additionally, a Maldivian al-Qaeda member and two accomplices carried out a 2009 suicide attack on the Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency headquarters in Lahore. Around the same time, nine Maldivians were arrested in Pakistan's Waziristan region, which borders Afghanistan, during an attempt to travel to jihadist training camps. (Sources: [One Online](#) [21], [Maldives Independent](#) [23], [Jamestown Foundation](#) [6])

The most recent al-Qaeda-linked attack was on August 8, 2014, when Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a liberal journalist for the *Maldives Independent*, was abducted by members of al-Nusra Front, and was orchestrated by Mazeed. It was not until September 1, 2019, that Maldivian authorities confirmed that Abdulla was killed shortly after his abduction in 2014. According to Maldivian authorities, al-Nusra Front regularly targets liberal intellectuals, writers, and activists. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [24], [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) [25], [One Online](#) [21], [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [8])

ISIS

Following the split of al-Qaeda's Maldivian branch in 2014, a growing number of Maldivians began to align with ISIS's ideology—even going so far as to travel to Iraq and Syria to join the jihad. It is reported that the leading ISIS recruiter on the islands is U.S.-designated Mohamed Ameen. Ameen has allegedly been radicalizing youth for years, and was a part of an ISIS cell on Maduvvari island that boasted around 30 members. According to Commissioner of Police Mohamed Hameed, it was reported that as of December 2019, at least 1,400 Islamist extremists adhere to ISIS ideology. Furthermore, at least 423 citizens attempted to travel to warzones in Iraq and Syria. (Source: [European Foundation of South Asian Studies](#) [11], [The Diplomat](#) [14])

It was not until 2019 or so did ISIS claim attacks in the Maldives. On April 20, 2020, a pro-ISIS group released its third version of the *Voice of Hind* magazine which is meant to appeal to Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. *Voice of Hind*

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congratulated the perpetrators of an arson attack in the Maldives claimed by ISIS on April 15, and mentioned the February 4 stabbing of an Australian in the Maldives claimed by a pro-ISIS group, but not officially declared by ISIS. (Source: [Counter Extremism Project](#) [26])

Given the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019, the Maldives is now faced with the return of Maldivian nationals who fought abroad in Iraq and Syria. However, the country is unwilling to repatriate the children of over 200 Maldivian ISIS fighters due to the central government's unwillingness to negotiate with any entity other than a formal government. The camps, where the children are located, are currently run by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) rather than Syria's government, and the SDF will not release detainees unless they directly communicate with formal governments. Additionally, Maldivian nationals are split when it comes to repatriating former fighters and their families as some citizens fear that the returnees would further mobilize extremism on the atoll. According to the Maldives National Defense Force (MNDF), one of the largest security concerns is the threat of returning foreign fighters propagating their extremist views, potentially influencing and recruiting additional fighters for violent extremist organizations. (Sources: [Financial Times](#) [27], [U.S. Department of State](#) [28])

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Mahibadhoo Harbor Arson Attack

On April 17, 2020, five bombs detonated at Mahibadhoo harbor, destroying a sea ambulance, four speedboats, and two dinghies. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, claiming the boats belonged to the "Apostate Maldivian Government and its loyalists." The attack was the first to be claimed by ISIS on the atoll. It is unreported if there were any injuries or casualties in the attack. The attack was the first to be carried out by active ISIS members. In response to the attack, later that month on April 20, ISIS published a letter in their third issue of *Voice of Hind* magazine calling on Maldivians to join the jihad and to continue carrying out extremist acts in the Maldives and India. (Sources: [Sun](#) [3], [Edition](#) [29], [Small Wars Journal](#) [1], [Middle East Media Research Institute](#) [2])

Sultan Park Attack

On September 29, 2007, a bomb exploded in Sultan Park in Malé. The attack injured 12 foreigners—two British nationals, two Japanese, and eight Chinese. After the bombing, there was a standoff between police and islanders at Dhar-ul-Khair mosque in Himandhoo. More than 60 suspects were arrested and over 30 police officers were injured in the standoff. Three men—Mohamed Sobah, Moosa Inaz, and Ahmed Naseer—were eventually convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison after confessing to planting the bomb. The men confessed their goal was to "target, attack, and injure non-Muslims to fulfill jihad." However, only two of the suspects served short prison sentences and were released in 2010. Although over 16 suspects were charged with committing an act of terror, the majority of the suspects had fled to Pakistan and Sri Lanka. A month after the stand-off, the al-Qaeda linked al-Ekhlhas web forum posted a video by the group Ansar al-Mujahidin as a way to attract financing and recruits for violent jihad in the Maldives. The video featured scenes of the confrontation at Dar-ul-Khair mosque and flashed the message, "your brothers in the Maldives are calling you." (Sources: [UNDP](#) [13], [Reuters](#) [30], [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [31])

- **April 28, 2020:** ISIS publishes a letter in their third issue of *Voice of Hind* magazine calling on Maldivians to join the jihad and to carry out extremist acts in the Maldives and India. Sources: [Small Wars Journal](#) [1], [Middle East Media Research Institute](#) [2]
- **April 17, 2020:** Five bombs detonate at Mahibadhoo harbor, destroying a sea ambulance, four speedboats, and two dinghies. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, claiming the boats belonged to the "Apostate Maldivian Government and its loyalists." It is unreported if there were any injuries or casualties in the attack. Source: [Sun](#) [3]
- **February 22, 2020:** Maldivian police forces raid three houses on the Naifaru island of Lhaviyani Atoll. According to police reports, the residences were of three individuals accused of planning to set off an explosive device on the island. Although no arrests were made, the police confiscated mobile phones and other electronics. Source: [The Edition](#) [32]
- **February 19, 2020:** The Maldivian government suspends an event featuring Canadian Jamaican Islamic scholar Dr. Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, who is banned from entering several countries, including the United States and Britain. Philips is alleged to have promoted extremism and suicide bombings in his speeches. Source: [Rajje](#) [33]

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- **February 4, 2020:** Islamist extremists, suspected to be inspired by ISIS, stab and injure three foreign nationals—two Chinese and one Australian—near Hulhumale Redbull Park Futsal Ground in the Hulhumale city of Kaffu Atoll. In a video posted on Al-Mustaqim Media’s Telegram channel, some people speaking in Dhivehi (the native language of the Maldives), claimed responsibility for the attack. They alleged that the Maldivian government was being run by infidels and warned of more attacks in the future. Sources: [Guardian](#) [34], [Reuters](#) [35]
- **December 26, 2019:** The multi-disciplinary Maldivian armed forces raise the security alert status to “Yellow-2,” indicating an “increased or predictable threat” to the nation. The alert status was raised due to reports that over 1,400 Maldivians have been radicalized and are “ready-to-kill-for-the-cause.” Source: [Observer Research Foundation](#) [36]
- **December 18, 2019:** Under “Operation Asseyri,” Maldivian army and police forces arrest three suspected extremists in Maduvvari. The operation was launched jointly with the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services as the children and wives belonging to radicalized families were denied basic rights. According to police statements, the group promoted radicalization and the recruiting of people for foreign extremist organizations. Sources: [Sun](#) [37], [Associated Press](#) [38]
- **December 16, 2019:** Commissioner of Police Mohamed Hameed discloses that there were approximately 1,400 extremists in Maldives. Hameed also claims that 432 Maldivians from across the island nation sought and attempted to travel to Syria. Source: [Observer Research Foundation](#) [36]
- **December 5, 2019:** The Prosecutor General’s Office indicts Mohamed Ameen on terrorism charges and sends the case to the Maldivian Criminal Court. Source: [South Asia Terrorism Portal](#) [39]
- **November 25, 2019:** Maldives Police Commissioner Mohamed Hameed releases statistics of religious extremism cases recorded between January 1, 2014, and October 31, 2019. More than 188 extremism cases were reported in that timeframe. Source: [South Asia Terrorism Portal](#) [39]
- **November 23, 2019:** Islamist radicals vandalize Meraki Coffee Roasters in Malé city. The assailants left a message that read, “Women [expletive] don’t be men! Men don’t be women!” The coffee shop was identified as a “hangout for liberals and secularists” and was targeted due to a former employee not adhering to an “Islamic way of dressing.” Source: [Eurasia Review](#) [40]
- **October 23, 2019:** Maldivian authorities arrest “terrorist leader” Mohamed Ameen. The month prior, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Ameen as a foreign terrorist leader of ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) who allegedly mobilized fighters in Syria and Afghanistan. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#) [41]
- **September 10, 2019:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control lists Mohamad Ameen as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. Ameen allegedly assisted, sponsored, or provided financial, material, or technological support to ISIS-K. Ameen and his subordinates provided recruitment sessions in Malé, and recruited heavily among Maldivian criminal gangs, originally sending his recruits to Syria but recently sending them to Afghanistan. Source: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#) [42]
- **September 1, 2019:** Husnu Suood, head of the Presidential Commission on Deaths and Disappearances, disclosed that al-Qaeda was responsible for three murders and one attempted murder in the country, between 2012 and 2017. The commission commenced its work officially on November 21, 2018, with a two-year deadline to investigate 27 cases. Source: [South Asia Terrorism Portal](#) [39]
- **March 21, 2018:** Maldivian authorities charge Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the Maldives’ former dictator, with terrorism. Prosecutors also charge Supreme Court Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed, Justice Ali Hameed, and four lawmakers including Mr. Gayoom’s son, as well as a former police commissioner. Saeed, Hameed, and another judicial officer were charged with receiving bribes to help overthrow the government. Prosecutors did not elaborate on why the accused were charged with terrorism. Source: [Wall Street Journal](#) [43]
- **April 23, 2017:** A group of extremists stab and kill Yameen Rasheed, a progressive writer who spoke out against extremism, at his home in Malé. On August 1, a Maldivian court files charges against seven individuals connected with the murder. Sources: [Rajje](#) [44], [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) [45]
- **February 2016:** Maldivian security forces receive intelligence that five males are planning to travel to Syria to join ISIS. International partner agencies are contacted, leading to the suspects being intercepted and detained in Turkey and three being deported back to Maldives. However, upon return they had no physical evidence of their planned activities. The trial ends with the court stating that there was insufficient evidence to support the charges of the accused traveling abroad with the intent of joining a terrorist group. Source: [United Nations](#) [46]
- **2014:** Minivan News reports that a vigilante gang made up of extremists and criminals kidnap people associated with a Facebook page that supported secularism. Although being threatened with death, the hostages are later released. Source: [UNDP](#) [13]
- **April 8, 2014 - September 1, 2019:** On August 8, 2014, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a liberal journalist for the *Maldives Independent*, is abducted by an al-Qaeda affiliated group. It was not until September 1, 2019, that Maldivian authorities confirmed that Abdulla was killed shortly after his abduction in 2014. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#) [24], [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) [25]

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- **February 7, 2012:**Six men attack the National Museum, destroying ancient Buddhist sculptures. The incident takes place on the same day that President Mohamed Nasheed is forced to step down. Sources: [UNDP](#) [13], [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [8]
- **June 4, 2012:**Ismail Khilath Rasheed, a religious freedom advocate and journalist, is stabbed in the neck by an assailant. A year earlier, Rasheed had been arrested after organizing a rally for religious freedom during which he was attacked and his skull fractured. The government censored his blog for containing “anti-Islamic matter.” Sources: [UNDP](#) [13], [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [8]
- **December 2011:**A group of unidentified men throw stones at Khilath Rasheed, a Sufi Muslim, during a rally Rasheed organized in Malé. One of the stones fracture’s Rasheed’s skull, and he is later arrested and jailed for 24 days under the charge of “disrupting the religious unity of the Maldives, and a threat to society.” Source: [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [8]
- **January 3, 2011:**A group of extremists attempt to kill Aishath Velezinee, an activist who was vocal against the country’s justice system in November 2010. However, security officials never identify the motive behind the attack. Source: [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [8]
- **May 27, 2009:**Ali Jaleel, a Maldivian al-Qaeda member, and two of his associates carry out a suicide attack that was originally meant to target Pakistan’s Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) Agency headquarters in Lahore. The suicide attackers instead ram a carload of explosives into a building a police emergency response unit. At least 23 people are killed and over 300 are wounded in the attack. Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [47], [New York Times](#) [48]
- **April 2, 2009:**Nine Maldivians are arrested in Pakistan’s Waziristan tribal region during security raids at several militant training camps. In 2010, the nine were sent back to the Maldives to undergo deradicalization. Source: [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [8]
- **2008:**Maldives national Ali Assham, alleged to have been involved with the LeT network and accused of attacking the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore in 2005, is deported from Sri Lanka to Maldives. Despite Indian demands, he was never prosecuted. Source: [CNBC](#) [20]
- **October 9, 2007:**More than 70 masked men carrying swords and iron rods capture a policeman and hold him at Dhar-ul-Khair mosque on Himandhoo island. Hundreds of soldiers then raid the mosque, leading to an armed confrontation between the assailants and security forces. The attack injures two of the security forces. The standoff between the radical members of the mosque and the security forces was later featured in an al-Qaeda propaganda video in November 2007. Source: [Guardian](#) [49]
- **September 29, 2007:**A bomb explodes in Sultan Park in Malé. The attack injures 12 foreigners—two British nationals, two Japanese, and eight Chinese. After the bombing, there is a standoff between police and islanders at Dhar-ul-Khair mosque in Himandhoo. More than 60 suspects are arrested and over 30 police officers are injured in the standoff. Three men are eventually convicted after confessing to planting the bomb, but only two served short prison sentences and were released in 2010. Sources: [UNDP](#) [13], [Reuters](#) [30]
- **2002:**A Maldivian cleric named Ibrahim Fauzee is arrested in an al-Qaeda safe house in Karachi, Pakistan. He was then held in Guantanamo Bay until his repatriation to the Maldives in 2005. Source: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [6]

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security

The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) is the Maldives primary legislation for preventing and prosecuting terrorism. However, the U.S. Department of State suspects that the ATA has been enforced by the government not as a way to deter extremist sentiment but as a way to prevent and oppose political opposition and criticism. According to Maldivian authorities, over 188 cases related to “religious extremism” were reported between January 1, 2014, and October 31, 2019. Of the 188 cases, only 14 were brought forward for prosecution. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [50], [UNDP](#) [13])

The Maldives Police Service (MPS) is responsible for counterterrorism investigations and often leads counterterrorism operations. The MPS can make warrantless arrests for criminal acts defined as terrorism which includes supporting extremist ideologies, departing for a war zone without government authorization, assisting individuals who attempt to join militant groups, and withholding information regarding terror act from authorities. In February 2019, then President Yameen established the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) specifically to investigate cases of radicalization in the Maldives. The NCTC coordinates interagency counterterrorism policy and liaises with international security partners. However, information sharing between agencies remains limited. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [50], [Benar News](#) [19])

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On September 30, 2019, the People’s Majlis (parliament) passed an amendment to the ATA, which includes essential elements to assist authorities seeking to prevent terrorism by incorporating early intervention strategies. Additionally, the amendment categorizes political and religious extremism and radicalization as terrorist acts. Any promotion of radical ideology or participation in extremist activity is legally considered a terrorist act. In October of 2019, a further amendment was passed, which required the establishment of a rehabilitation and reintegration center for returning Maldivian foreign terrorist fighters. It also entails a separate space for women and children who were victims and were indirectly tied acts of terrorism. The amendment established a Counter Terrorism risk assessment committee to assess whether repatriated foreign fighters carried out terror acts and if they were inclined to orchestrate attacks or radicalize others in the future. (Sources: [The President’s Office – Republic of the Maldives](#) [51], [U.S. Department of State](#) [50])

Countering the Financing of Terrorism

The Maldives is a member of the Asia/Pacific Group on Money laundering (APG), a FATF-style regional body. In 2016, the Maldives passed the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Act, which criminalized money laundering and terrorist financing. Although there have yet to be any cases prosecuted under the Act, it is suspected that individual Maldivians and extremist cells finance terror operations through informal money transfer networks across the islands. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [52])

Operation Asseyri

On December 2019, the Maldives Police Service and the Maldivian army launched Operation Asseyri as a way to curb the spread of terrorist propaganda and recruitment. In the first joint-operation between the MPS and the Maldivian army, the country’s security apparatus mobilized against groups of radicalized individuals in Maduvvari, which is fertile ground for terrorist recruitment and indoctrination. Security forces were directed to investigate questionable organizations or individuals who were suspected of proselytizing violent extremism. Many of the radical individuals who have traveled to Syria and Afghanistan have a connection with Maduvvari and its version of radical Islam. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [4])

According to media reports citing security sources, radicalized individuals in the Maduvvari community consider the Maldives to be a “land of sin,” and believe people who do not subscribe to their extremist views are “infidels.” The operation in Maduvvari showcased that the lack of monitoring and surveillance on its remote inhabited islands led them to become hubs of extremism. A similar situation occurred in October 2007 following the Sultan Park bombing, when security forces discovered dozens of al-Qaeda linked extremists in the illegal Dhar-ul-Khair mosque on the isolated island of Himandhoo after a violent confrontation. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [4])

Countering Violent Extremism

In 2017, the Maldives launched a National Strategy on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism. Under the national strategy, the NCTC has identified islands that are prone to radicalization and have provided these areas with workshops and youth-focused leadership and training programs to prevent radicalization among Maldivian youth. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [52])

On March 3, 2020, the Maldives held a national workshop on addressing Border Security and Counter Terrorism. The joint-agency workshop by Maldives Immigration, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) focused on good practices in border security and management to strengthen coordination and capacities to tackle terrorism and transnational organized crimes in the Maldives. (Source: [Maldives Immigration](#) [53])

International Counter-Extremism

In 2018, the Maldivian government sent officials to multiple international and regional workshops on counterterrorism efforts. The Maldivian government sent participants to U.S.-sponsored regional counterterrorism workshops and courses, such as the Comprehensive Security Response to Terrorism course at the Daniel K. Inouye-Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies. In February, the U.S.-based National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) worked with the United Nations Office on

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Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to conduct a “train the trainers” session for South Asia on Investigation, Prosecution, and Adjudication of Foreign Terrorist Fighter Cases. In March, the U.N. Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) carried out a sub-regional counterterrorism workshop in New York that focused on the implementation as well as the current practices of countering violent extremism (CVE) in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and the Maldives. In November, NCTC collaborated with UNODC in hosting a workshop on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Gender Mainstreaming in Criminal Justice Response to Terrorism. Also in November, legal experts and port and maritime security officers from the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh attended a sub-regional workshop in London on implementing maritime counter terrorism instruments at the International Maritime Organization. In December, the Maldives National Defense Force (MNDF) focused one of its annual bilateral military exercises with India on capacity building and developing interoperability for a joint response to terrorist incidents. In December, NCTC Director General and MPS officers participated in a UNODC-organized workshop in Singapore on countering terrorism financing and the proliferation of WMD. (Sources: [INTERPOL](#) [54], [United Nations](#) [55])

Project Scorpius was a two-year capacity building initiative for law enforcement agencies in South and Southeast Asia aimed at preventing and disrupting terrorism and related transnational crime. Funded by INTEPROL and the Government of Canada from 2017 to 2019, Project Scorpius brought together relevant actors and key decision makers across the law enforcement and counterterrorism community in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Timor Leste. (Source: [INTERPOL](#) [54])

On September 3, 2019, India and the Maldives signed a treaty at the Indian Ocean Conference (IOC) which detailed mutual assistance in criminal matters, particularly crime related to terrorism. The treaty also outlined that the two countries would aid one another in investigating and obtaining evidence for those crimes. Following the April 2019 Sri Lanka bomb attack which killed more than 250 people, the two countries have been sharing intelligence and other methods of preventing violent extremism. (Sources: [Observer Research Foundation](#) [56], [Economic Times](#) [57])

On October 16, 2019, Japan granted 500 million yen to the Maldives to bolster their counterterrorism and public safety capabilities. Japan provided the aid as a way to offset the growing influence of ISIS and other extremist factions in South Asia. (Source: [Kyodo News](#) [58])

Public Opinion

In a survey carried out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in February 2019, 60 percent of respondents stated that they believe violent jihad to be a national concern. However, only 10 percent of respondents believed that people on their islands supported extremism. (Source: [United Nations](#) [13])