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Jihadism in Maldives: Impact on Vital Tourism Industry

By Iromi Dharmawardhane

Synopsis

There has been in recent years a disproportionate number of Maldivian fighters in Syria amid increased grassroots radicalisation in the Maldives, traditionally a religiously-relaxed Muslim country. Effective domestic and regional counter-extremism measures can reverse these trends.

Commentary

JIHADIST ACTIVITY and a radicalised community have been visibly growing in the past decade in the Maldives, traditionally a religiously-relaxed Muslim country. Maldives experienced a terrorist attack in 2007 wounding 12 foreigners towards the end of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's 30-year administration.

Mohamed Nasheed's administration (2008 – 2012) saw a huge increase in violent extremism and the spread of radical ideology among the population. The present administration of Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom is contending with an increasing number of Maldivians participating in transnational terrorist activity and an actively radicalised community.

Maldivian fighters in Syria and Iraq

The exact number of Maldivians fighting for terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq today is not known. However, various reports point to a figure of over 100 Maldivian fighters. It is known that at least seven Maldivians have died in Syria and Iraq to date. Until recently fighters have included students, those convicted or accused of terrorism-related or other crimes in the Maldives, religious figures and former military personnel.

In 2015, departures to Syria have mostly been young men who belong to criminal gangs in Male, the capital of the Maldives. Maldivian jihadists travel through Sri Lanka, India or Thailand (popular holiday destinations for Maldivians), then travel to Pakistan for training or Turkey to cross into Syria.

Most Maldivian fighters have joined the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra (JN) terrorist group, although Maldivians also fight for the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and other groups. The Islamic State of Maldives (ISM) group, which claims to be a local group affiliated to ISIS, emerged in July 2014.

While the younger population is more socially liberal (60% of the Maldivian population of approximately 394,000 are under the age of 25), there is a growing radicalised community in the Maldives. For example, there was a protest conducted by about 200 people on 5 September 2014, some carrying ISIS flags, calling for the full implementation of the Shariah and an end of secular rule in the Maldives.

Radicalisation and recruitment of Maldivians to fight in Syria occur online and offline and are conducted in conjunction with the collecting of funds. On the ground, there is a Maldivian network of recruiters working with the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in Pakistan and operatives in India as well as other terrorist groups. Radicalisation also occurs as a result of jihadist preaching carried out in certain mosques in the Maldives.

The high level of internet penetration in the Maldives (about 43% of the population), makes its population of active social media users susceptible to the radical jihadist ideologies propagated online. Extremist Maldivian NGOs and radical Maldivian preachers have thousands –some tens of thousands –of supporters on Facebook, their primary online medium of communication. Both groups have a presence across the social media platform on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr and other sites.

There are also dedicated websites such as *Haqqu* which was launched in August 2014 and promotes ISIS. There is the website of Bilad Al-Sham Media (BASM) which started in August 2013, which supports Al Qaeda-affiliated JN. BASM calls itself the official media representative of Maldivians fighting in Syria, and has produced detailed accounts of Maldivians who have died while conducting suicide attacks for JN. BASM and Haqqu presently also have active Facebook pages.

The Maldives needs help, not isolation

The Maldives is a fertile ground for jihadist recruitment, as seen in the disproportionate number of Maldivian fighters in Syria, despite its geographical remoteness and little population. Maldivians have also been recruited for other transnational suicide terrorist attacks, notably the 27 May 2009 attack on Pakistan's intelligence service in Lahore carried-out by the Maldivian jihadist Ali Jaleel, and the two Maldivian suicide bombers who were reportedly recruited for the foiled plot to attack the US and Israeli consulates in southern India in April 2014.

As such, the growth of jihadism in the Maldives is a serious security concern, particularly for India and other South Asian countries. However, organised terrorist networks operating inside the Maldives and grassroots radicalisation are both relatively recent phenomena of the past decade, and thus have the potential to be fully reversed. Further, the Islam practised in the Maldives has historically been moderate and holistic, and was introduced in the 12th century by a Persian Sheikh and a Sufi saint.

There have been some decisive counter-terrorism measures taken by the Maldivian government recently. However, more comprehensive measures are needed. Counter-extremism measures must be greatly augmented in islands with radicalised communities. There must be an immediate crack-down on criminal gangs, particularly radicalised gangs, many of which are connected to transnational drug cartels.

A national counter-ideology programme conducted online and on the ground with community support is direly needed to popularise moderate and true Islam once more. Comprehensive terrorist and extremist rehabilitation programmes are needed, especially for radicalised gang members and returning fighters.

Need for regional effort

However, the Maldives, a 1,200-island archipelago scattered across about 90,000 sq. km of the Indian Ocean, with its limited resources, cannot achieve all this alone. A regional effort is required to dismantle the jihadist and drug-trafficking networks which span the region. Regional and international aid and cooperation are required to address the country's counter-extremism needs and socio-economic issues.

There is an on-going international call to boycott the tourism industry of the Maldives, due to the present government's alleged violations of international law and complications in domestic politics. While the matter is contentious, it is clear that as a young democracy and a developing country with very limited resources, the Maldives needs help, not isolation. A boycott of its tourist industry would inflict great suffering on the already poor country, as tourism is its main industry and source of income. The tourism industry also employs approximately 50% of the labour force of the Maldives.

A substantial decrease in tourism would further increase the unemployment rate of youth (approximately 25% of Maldivian youth are unemployed), and in turn increase the level of radicalisation among the youth. Moreover, getting rid of the tourism industry is also one of the main objectives of extremist groups within the Maldives, who care not for the well-being of the people or strength of the nation.

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