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Islamic State-Inspired knife attack exposes the vulnerability of the Maldives

By Animesh Roul

The James Town Foundation (25.02.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2vAns03> – The image of the Maldives as a tropical paradise received a significant jolt on February 4, when three foreign nationals—two Chinese and one Australian—were stabbed and injured by Islamist militants near the Hulhumale Redbull Park Futsal Ground in the country's North Male Atoll. The incident happened amid growing concerns about secret extremist networks inspired by transnational jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) that are active in the country.

The hitherto unknown extremist media outlet al-Mustaqim released a video message on February 5, shortly after the stabbings, featuring three unidentified masked men. The nearly three-minute video message was in the local Dhivehi language with a couple of Quranic verses in Arabic. However, the video has English subtitles claiming responsibility for the knife attacks, stating, “We announce to you that we claim responsibility for the recent stabbings of tourists [in the Maldives].” It further states that “the portrayal that this [Maldives] is paradise [...] has become a mirage. From now on, the only thing they [foreign travelers] will taste [in the Maldives] is fire” (Twitter.com/nautymatox, February 5).

This short video was shared on multiple social media platforms and warned of future violence and heavily criticized the Maldivian government and its leaders as “apostates.” While inciting Maldivians to take up arms for retribution, the message urged them to “stand up against the oppression of Muslims.” It also accused the Maldivian government of causing distress to Muslims only to please “the *taghout* (unbelievers) from America, the West and India.” Broadly, the Islamists have threatened to launch further knife attacks (“sharp blades”) on travelers to spread fear among visitors and hurt the tourism industry. The message suggested hitting the “vulnerable” parts of the country, i.e., the tourism sector, which is the backbone of the Maldivian economy (Raajje.MV, February 6). Though the message didn’t claim any IS links or inspirations or use any IS insignia, it had a jihadist *nashid* (or *tarana*, meaning anthem) running at the start of the video that was previously used by IS propaganda units. [1] Nevertheless, IS has not officially claimed the knife attacks in the Maldives, yet.

Stabbing or knife attacks are prevalent in the Maldives, and knives and machetes seem to be the preferred weapon for criminal and gang entities. However, knife attacks against tourists or foreigners are rare. The recent incident was a stark reminder of the first-ever Islamist terrorist attack in the Maldives, which took place in Male in September 2007, targeting foreign nationals. A crude improvised explosive device (IED) injured nearly 12 foreigners, including tourists from the United Kingdom, Japan, and China in the capital's Sultan Park area. The attack targeted the tourism industry for its alleged un-Islamic practices and sinful influence on local culture. A massive crackdown across the country prompted extremist elements to flee the country (see Terrorism Monitor, February 12, 2010).

Meanwhile, by February 13, Maldivian police claimed to have arrested seven Islamists for the early February incidents, some of whom previously engaged in spreading extremist ideologies in Madduvarri, Raa Atoll (Edition, February 15). Though security agencies investigating the recent attacks have yet to divulge any details about the connection, the knife attacks could be revenge for the search and sweep operation codenamed Operation Asseyri, which was conducted on Madduvarri Island in December 2019.

Maduvvari, Radical Paradise

Operation Asseyri was conducted to check religious extremism, to investigate cases of separatism that were being conducted under the guise of Islamic practices, and to cease the exploitation of women and children. The operation also aimed to curb the spread of terrorist propaganda and recruitment drives in Maduvvari. During the weeklong crackdown, which

commenced in the sparsely inhabited island on December 18, a joint force of Maldivian Army and police arrested several Islamists who had denied their family members (women and children) education and primary health care under the garb of strict adherence to Islamic practices (The Sun, December 21, 2019; Edition, January 8). Close scrutiny of the recent Islamist video message reveals a cryptic mention of this operation that perhaps led to the attack: "Your presumption that after deceiving the masses you can snatch our wives and children from us and dismantle our families and then live in peace is false."

For the first time, the country's security apparatus geared up against groups of radicalized individuals in Maduvvari, which is fertile ground for terrorist recruitment and indoctrination. Many of the radical individuals who have traveled to Syria and Afghanistan have a connection with Maduvvari and its version of radical Islam. According to media reports citing security sources, radicalized individuals in the community consider the Maldives a "land of sin," and believe people who do not subscribe to their extremist views are "infidels" (Edition, December 22, 2019). There were also cases related to "child brides" in Maduvvari that surfaced in November last year, which prompted the authorities to monitor the island closely (Maldives Independent, November 24, 2019).

The operation in Maduvvari is not the only eye-opening case for the Maldivian government and security agencies. The lack of monitoring and surveillance on its remote inhabited islands led them to become hubs of extremism in the past. A similar situation surfaced in October 2007 following the Sultan Park bombing, when security forces unearthed a breeding ground for extremists in the illegal Dhar-ul-Khair mosque on the isolated island of Himandhoo after a violent confrontation.

Subsequently, an al-Qaeda linked jihadist forum showcased the mosque standoff in its propaganda video (Minivan News/Web Archive, October 9, 2007 ; Minivan Archive, February 10, 2010).

IS Still has Traction

In October 2019, Maldivian security agencies arrested Mohamad Ameen, an Islamist militant recruiter associated with IS. Local media reports blamed Ameen for changing the religious profile of Maduvvari during his banishment there a decade ago (The Sun, December 19, 2019). Security officials also came out publicly and raised concerns over the recent high rate of radicalization in the country. 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" (Maldives Independent, December 17, 2019). Around the same time, Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) sources revealed that several radicalized individuals operating in the Maldives think of education as a "Western idea" and kept their children away from mainstream schooling. The MNDF official also revealed how Islamists are averse to vaccination drives in the country's remote islands and consider preventative healthcare "antithetical to reliance on God." In mid-January, Maldives Police initiated an investigation into ongoing anti-vaccination campaigns on social media purportedly run by Islamist groups (The Edition, December 16, 2019; Edition, January 15).

Officially, 173 radicalized Maldivians have traveled to Syria to fight alongside jihadist groups linked with al-Qaeda and IS, while 432 have reportedly attempted to travel to Syria

(The Edition, December 18, 2019). These official statistics did not mention Maldivians who traveled and joined IS' branch in Afghanistan, where a court has sentenced a Maldivian couple for charges related to terrorism. Unsurprisingly, the Maldives has earned notoriety for being one of the most significant per capita contributors of foreign jihadist fighters to Syria and Iraq. Even though there maybe discrepancies in official numbers, it portrays a bleak picture of how radicalized Maldivians desire to join the ongoing jihad in Syria or Afghanistan.

A 2015 landmark report titled, "A Preliminary Assessment of Radicalisation in the Maldives," warned long before about this prevailing situation in the country. [2] The report was produced by the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)—which was dissolved following lobbying by Islamists—and warned about growing extremism in the country, the role of Salafist NGOs and the role social media plays in radicalization in the Maldives (Maldives Times, October 8, 2019). The report also exposed how the extremist ideal is diluting the religious belief system of Maldivian society at large. Long after the MDN report, the government-approved Commission on Disappearances and Deaths unearthed and revealed for the first time al-Qaeda and IS networks and their crimes in the country. The present coalition government under President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has no choice but to tackle the long-ignored extremist threat, irrespective of political pressures and religious orientations.

Notes

[1] A shorter version of the video is still accessible at the time of this writing. See, [Twitter](#), February

05, <https://twitter.com/i/status/1225093264883122176>

[2] The Full text of the Report Titled “A Preliminary Assessment of Radicalisation in the Maldives” can be accessed at <https://www.docdroid.net/qyCy9gk/preliminary-assessment-of-radicalisation-in-the-maldives-final80856731625919353631.pdf>

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