

# PRISON RADICALISATION IN THE MALDIVES

Transparency Maldives, the National Chapter of Transparency International in The Maldives is a non-partisan organization that promotes collaboration, awareness and undertakes other initiatives to improve governance and eliminate corruption from the daily lives of people. Transparency Maldives views corruption as a systemic issue and advocates for institutional changes that will punish and prevent corruption.



**AUTHOR**

**Dr. Anne Speckard,**



**International Center for  
the Study of Violent Extremism**

**RESEARCH TEAM**

**Molly Ellenberg,**

**Sheikh Ali Hashim Hammoodi**



**International Center for  
the Study of Violent Extremism**

**PUBLISHED BY**

**Transparency Maldives**

**Ministry of Home Affairs**

**SPECIAL THANKS TO:**

**Maldives Correctional Services**

This publication may be produced in whole or in part in any form for education or nonprofit use, without special permission from the holder of the copyright, provided acknowledgment of the source is made. Transparency Maldives would appreciate receiving a copy of any publication which uses this book as a source. No use of this publication may be made for resale or other commercial purposes without the prior permission of Transparency Maldives.

© Transparency Maldives 2022.

This document is made possible by the generous support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Ministry of Home Affairs and Transparency Maldives and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

# FOREWORD

Violent Extremism poses a significant threat to our society and our way of life. Prison radicalization is one vital factor contributing to the growing concern of violent extremism. Hence, addressing the problem of prison radicalization is essential to reduce the threat of violent extremism and ensure peace and security of our country.

In this regard, understanding the drivers for prison radicalization is important as it would be useful in addressing these issues in terms of segregation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of prisoners. This study lays a foundation for addressing prison radicalization from a broader perspective. Violent extremism cannot be addressed merely through dynamic security measures.

This study exposes the magnitude of the issue and identifies areas for improvement. And to reap the benefits of this study, we must work together.

The government of Maldives takes strides in prioritizing to detect, deter and disrupt these malicious activities and those who intend to harm our communities. In this regard, this study is a helpful tool in designing and planning prison-based rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

At the same time, we must remind ourselves that respecting human rights and dignity of prisoners is our utmost priority.

All of these actions contribute to our broader goal - Prison Reform. Our prison system must be a place to disengage violent extremist prisoners and a place that would facilitate their reintegration to society.

I am confident that we are moving in the right direction with our local and international partners and their generosity to build the capabilities and capacities of our institutions.

I take this opportunity to thank Transparency Maldives, the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), and the USAID for their role and commitment to bringing this study into the light.

**Imran Abdulla**

Minister of Home Affairs



# FOREWORD

Research in other parts of the world suggests that prisons and detention facilities can be a hotbed of radicalization into violent extremism. In the Maldives, too, there has been anecdotal evidence of prison-based radicalization. However, systematic research into the issue has been lacking, creating gaps in addressing violent extremism.

This report aims to contribute towards a better understanding of the phenomenon of prison radicalization in the Maldives. It specifically explores the phenomenon extensively in the main prison, Maafushi Prison, but it also has relevant findings towards a better understanding of the circumstances that may facilitate radicalization in some other detention facilities in the country.

A key finding of the research concerns the issues arising from the lack of a prison-based rehabilitation programme in the area of countering radicalization and violent extremism in the Maldives. Consequently, this research suggests, some inmates, who are already radicalized, could exploit this space for their own agenda. They do so by spreading their own extremist ideologies among other inmates, which can be especially attractive in the absence of an alternative rehabilitative support programme. The lack of such a programme also means those who are already radicalized have limited hope of successful reintegration into society once they come out of prison.

Transparency Maldives is grateful to the many government agencies who extended support to this research. We would, in particular, like to note the cooperation of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Maldives Correctional Services. TM also appreciates the work of the research team led by Professor Anne Speckhard in undertaking this very sensitive and difficult research project. We also acknowledge with appreciation the generous funding by USAID to this research project. We acknowledge the feedback and comments of many people, including representatives from several government agencies and NGOs. Finally, I would like to note with gratitude the hard work of all the staff of TM who made this research project a success.

Our hope is that the findings of this research and the recommendations in the report will contribute towards the efforts in preventing and countering violent extremism in the Maldives.

**Asiath Rilweena**  
Executive Director

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

04	FOREWORD BY ALI NAZEER, MINISTER OF STATE FOR HOME AFFAIRS, MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS
05	FOREWORD BY ASIATH RILWEENA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF TRANSPARENCY MALDIVES
07	INTRODUCTION
08	METHODOLOGY
11	LITERATURE REVIEW
	<i>A Note on Radicalization to Terrorism</i>
	<i>Overcrowding and Understaffing</i>
	<i>Lack of respected Imams</i>
	<i>Grievances with the Justice system</i>
	<i>Opportunities for Bonding</i>
	<i>Outside Influence</i>
	<i>General Conclusions</i>
22	THE PRESENT SITUATION: THE MALDIVES
	<i>Findings</i>
	<i>General Findings</i>
	<i>Staffing Challenges</i>
	<i>Understaffing</i>
	<i>Lack of Trained Staff</i>
	<i>Other prison based challenges</i>
	<i>Lack of adequate Rehabilitation Programs</i>
	<i>Challenges outside of Prison</i>
	<i>Recidivism and Problems with Reintegration</i>
	<i>Lack of Education</i>
	<i>Family Dysfunction</i>
	<i>Gang Involvement</i>
	<i>Drug Use</i>
41	RECOMMENDATIONS
	<i>Prisoner Daily Life Improvements</i>
	<i>Security Measures</i>
	<i>Benefit Reduction</i>
	<i>Societal-Level Measures</i>
	<i>Addressing Un- and Under- Employment</i>
	<i>Capacity Building for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism</i>
48	CONCLUSION
49	REFERENCES

# INTRODUCTION

The present report is comprised of the findings of a five month-long study, commencing in July of 2021, and ending in November 2021, of Radicalization in Prisons conducted by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism [ICSVE] with the support of Transparency Maldives. We begin by discussing the methodology used in this report before presenting the initial literature review, written in July of 2021, which comprised the bulk of our inception report and guided the subsequent steps of the project. Next, we discuss the findings from meetings with stakeholders that were conducted virtually in August and September of 2021 and interviews with prisoners, former prisoners, prison staff, and other stakeholders in the Maldives in October of 2021. These findings use qualitative and quantitative methods to triangulate information provided from many different sources and to paint a detailed picture of radicalization in prisons, juvenile detention, and state care facilities in the Maldives. It behooves us to mention that because all of the interviews with people who were actually radicalized to violent extremism were currently incarcerated at Maafushi Prison, we have the most data from this institution and hence the report largely focuses on the process of radicalization in prisons. However, information gleaned from the stakeholder meetings, as well as the life histories of the prison interviewees also provide limited insights into radicalization in juvenile detention and state care facilities. Finally, we present a list of recommendations for measures that can be taken in the short-term to better prevent and counter radicalization to violent extremism in prisons, juvenile detention, and state care facilities, as well as in the broader Maldivian context. We also name a few larger-scale societal recommendations that, based on the findings in this report, we believe could help curtail the spread of the militant jihadist ideology in the Maldives.

# METHODOLOGY

The project began with an extensive literature review regarding radicalization in prisons, particularly in the Maldives and in countries with similarities to the Maldives. The literature review was conducted by searching relevant terms, including "prison radicalization," "juvenile detention radicalization," "terrorist recruitment in prisons," and "prison radicalization in Muslim-majority countries," in Google Scholar. We used the articles found using these broader search terms as a launchpad to find more articles that were cited or were cited by those sources. Articles were selected for inclusion in the literature review based on the authors' expertise on the subject matter and the rigor of the research methodology. Although the number of citations and prestige of the journal in which the articles were published were considered, we also considered that many of the more niche articles, such as those about the Maldives specifically, may not have been as widely cited or published in American or European journals. Thus, we made sure to find articles that were as relevant as possible to the research mandate, regardless of the number of times that they had been cited. Finally, we prioritized articles that were published in 2014 or later, in order to best understand the current situation in prisons and detention facilities, juvenile and adult, around the world, which undoubtedly changed with the declaration of the ISIS Caliphate in 2014. ISIS drew an unprecedented number of men and women to join them in Iraq and Syria, and some of their radicalization and recruitment of potential foreign fighters occurred in prison. Therefore, we ensured that the literature review was most reflective of prison-based terrorist radicalization as it has occurred in the age of ISIS. However, other relevant articles about the process of prison radicalization and recruitment in general that were written prior to 2014 were also cited.

In addition to reviewing scholarly articles, we also included relevant government and legal documents in the literature review. These articles were provided to us in English by Transparency Maldives. These documents included the "National Criminal Justice Action Plan 2004-2008," "National Report Submitted in Accordance with Paragraph 5 of the Annex to Human Rights Council Resolution 16/21: the Maldives," "List of Issues in Relation to the Fourth and Fifth Periodic Reports of Maldives," "Youth Vulnerability in the Maldives," "National Strategy of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism," "National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism," and "Government Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023." These documents were particularly useful given their detail regarding prison reform plans. Each of the sources was reviewed and used to write a comprehensive Inception Report, the findings of which are summarized in the forthcoming section.

Following acceptance of the Inception Report, we worked with Transparency Maldives to schedule meetings with as many stakeholders as possible. These meetings were held virtually via Zoom and followed a semi-structured interview format which touched on the following issues: Vulnerabilities and motivations for radicalization in the general society, in prisons, juvenile detention and state care facilities, logistics of prison, juvenile detention and state care facility operations, extent of radicalization already existing within these facilities occurring prior to entering or when housed or incarcerated; issues related to juveniles both prior to detention or being housed or incarcerated and while being overseen by social workers; grievances of prisoners; concerns about and of prison and detention facility staff; and broader social issues related to militant jihadist radicalization. The meetings progressed naturally, with relevant questions being asked as appropriate.



Dr. Anne Speckhard led the meetings, and research fellow Molly Ellenberg attended several of them. The meetings were conducted in the following order: Maldives Correctional Services including officials from Asseyri Prison; Male' and Hulhumale Prisons and Maafushi Prison; Department of Juvenile Justice; National Counter Terrorism Center; National Drug Agency; Drug Rehabilitation Center (K. Himmafushi); Ministry of Education; Ministry of Islamic Affairs; Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services (including staff participation from Kudakudinge Hiya Children's Shelter in K. Villingili, Safe Homes established in Family and Children's Service Centres, Amaan Hiya in K. Villingili, and Fiyavathi Children's Shelter in Hulhumale'); President's Office; Human Rights Commission of the Maldives; Juvenile Court; Inspectorate of Prisons; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] in the Maldives; Journey; Advocating for the Rights of Children. The Ministry of Health, Prosecutor General's Office, Attorney General's Office, UNICEF in the Maldives, and Child Rights Ombudsperson were also invited to participate but declined or were unavailable. We look forward to future meetings and collaboration with these stakeholders. Ms. Ellenberg used content analysis, conducted by hand, to analyze the thematic content of these stakeholder meetings, as discussed below.

The last stage of the project was for Dr. Speckhard, along with ICSVE Islamic scholar Sheikh Ali to travel to the Maldives for a period of one month. Over the course of the month, the ICSVE team interviewed, with full informed consent, 20 prisoners and one former prisoner of Maafushi Prison, and staff at Asseyri Prison and at the Drug Rehabilitation Centre in K. Himmafushi, and also presented preliminary findings with feedback from representatives of the Ministry of Home Affairs, representatives from the United States Agency for International Development [USAID] and the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program [ICITAP], and representatives from the Maldives National Counter Terrorism Centre. Further face-to-face data collection meetings

were also arranged with the Islamic Ministry, Investigative Officers of Terrorism-Related Cases of the Maldives Police Services, and the Education Ministry. Dr. Speckhard also requested interviews with radicalized youth who had been or currently were in detention and with radicalized prisoners in remand. Given privacy and consent concerns, access to youth was not granted.

The sample of prisoner interviewees includes 20 prisoners currently held in Maafushi high-security prison, 17 men and three women. One former Maafushi prisoner currently in drug rehabilitation was also interviewed. The Maafushi prison inmate interviews started with a life and family history, leading to experiences in adolescence and any experiences of drug abuse, drug peddling, other criminality and extremism including extremist contacts in the prison and pathways out of drug addiction, which can be replaced by adherence to an extremist ideology and group in the prison. Beliefs throughout the lifespan were probed as well as plans, hopes, and expectations for and after release. Prisoners were asked about the prison units in which they had experienced and were currently housed, educational opportunities, counseling, Islamic guidance and training, prison experiences with staff and other prisoners, desires, and concerns, and their experiences under interrogation during their time in investigation and prison. They were also asked about their view of the legitimacy of the Maldivian government as well as their views on various topics espoused by extremists in support of militant jihadist ideologies (i.e., ideologies put forward by groups such as al Qaeda, ISIS, al Shabaab, and others that promote the concepts of suicide terrorism, violent jihad, the overthrow of governments claimed to be Islamically illegitimate by jihadists, and establishment of shariah states via violence). The interviews were run by Dr. Speckhard, who used a nonjudgmental, open approach to psychological interviewing. Questions that arose regarding Islamic topics during the interviews included Sheikh Ali, an Islamic scholar, who was able to deepen the discussion with the interviewees.

TABLE I: DEMOGRAPHICS

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age at first arrest	16	36	21.56	5.403
Age at interview	19	46	33.12	5.957
Education (In years)	6	10	8.2	1.207
Prison time prior to current sentence(in months)	0	144	69.7	58.875
Socioeconomic Status	64.7% poor/working class			29.4% middle class
				5.9% upper class
Marital status	41.2% single, never married		11.8% married	47.1% divorced
Legal status	64.7% serving limited sentence			35.3% serving life sentence

Using the verbatim notes from the interviews, Ms. Ellenberg coded each of the prisoner interviews in SPSS Version 26 using a coding scheme designed a priori from Dr. Speckhard’s extensive experience interviewing radicalized individuals (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020a). Each of the 20 interviews was coded on 329 variables covering demographic details, life histories and vulnerabilities, criminal and prison histories, influences and motivations for radicalization, roles and experiences within the militant jihadist cell, sources of disillusionment with the group (if any), and present psychological state and level of radicalization.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

It is a commonly held belief by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that prisons are hotbeds of radicalization into terrorist ideologies and groups. Those who believe this often point to notorious examples of terrorists all over the world who committed their acts of terrorism after release from prison, sometimes including stories of how they were befriended and radicalized by in-prison recruiters. There are famous examples of prison-based radicalization which resulted in mass atrocities, including that of Adolf Hitler, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, but the list of prisoners who have become “radicalized,” but not into terrorism, also includes now well-respected figures such as Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi (Hamm, 2013; Rushchenko, 2018). Looking more closely, it is clear that the issue is far more complicated than it seems. One of the most commonly noted examples of the link between prison conversion and terrorism is Richard Reid, the “shoe bomber,” who converted to Islam in prison as a juvenile but by all accounts practiced a moderate strain of the religion during the period of his incarceration. He became radicalized only through participation at an extremist mosque after his release (Neumann, 2010).

In line with the case of Richard Reid (Jager, 2018), many assumptions about prison radicalization are drawn from the fact that Islam is the most common religion to which prisoners in the West convert to (Jones, 2014; Hamm, 2013). Rather than being synonymous with radicalization, conversion to Islam more often than not has a positive effect on prisoner behavior, leading to increased self-discipline and tolerance of others (Hamm, 2008). This increased self-discipline, including abstaining from drug and alcohol use, is not always inconsistent with radicalization to terrorism. However, falling into the ranks of militant jihadists in prisons may be the necessary exposure to join them. The prevalence of gangs in many prisons can also be seen as a vulnerability for those prisons where terrorist radicalization is occurring, but some research has found that because gangs enforce their own moral codes, those

susceptible to terrorist ideologies may be shielded from radicalization and recruitment through their membership in prison gangs.

In cases when prisoners join gangs that hold violent extremist ideologies, research suggests that the inmates rarely act on those beliefs after release when they reintegrate into their original social circle. The true risk emerges when they reintegrate, often times with the help of their “brothers” in prison into terrorist cells or groups of supporters, rather than their home community, after release (Jones, 2014). The causes of prison-based terrorist radicalization are therefore much more nuanced than they appear and must be addressed as such. Common factors that can contribute to prison radicalization, and steps that can be taken to curtail them, are presented in the forthcoming literature review.

## NOTE ON RADICALIZATION TO TERRORISM

Before embarking on an exploration of the prison-specific factors that contribute to the radicalization of terrorism, it is important to understand the basic psychosocial underpinnings of radicalization, which apply to individuals across contexts. First, there are many psychosocial vulnerabilities that can make an individual susceptible to terrorist radicalization and recruitment. These vulnerabilities vary based on whether or not the individual resides in a conflict zone. For example, people who join terrorist groups that are already active in their areas, such as Iraqis and Syrians who joined ISIS, are made vulnerable by the trauma of war and loss. They may join a terrorist group in order to meet their basic needs for food and shelter, or in order to protect themselves and their families, or they may join out of a desire to seek revenge on those they feel have wronged them, whether that is the Western powers, led by the United States, which invaded Iraq in 2003, or the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which enacted countless atrocities upon Syrian civilians. Those living outside of conflicts may be angry at their own countries' inaction or reactions or to these geopolitical crises and desire to help those whom they see as their brothers, belonging to the global family of Muslims, the ummah.

They may also feel pushed out of their home societies through feelings of discrimination, alienation, and marginalization, in addition to perceived or real unfair treatment by the police or other government entities. These vulnerabilities are only a few of many, most of which contribute to a deep need for a sense of identity, purpose, dignity, belonging, meaning, and significance. These vulnerabilities are not sufficient for radicalization into terrorism, of course. There must also be an ideological narrative that clearly and simply lays out a course of action through which the individual can fulfill their needs.

In the case of militant jihadist terrorism, the ideology twists religious scriptures to bolster the claim that in order to lead a purposeful and meaningful life, one must fight in defense of victims around the world and establish lands that are ruled by God's laws alone. Terrorist ideologies explain the source of people's grievances, such as by saying that a European Muslim feels alienated because the West is at war with Islam, provide a clear enemy, such as Western governments and their allies, and detail a course of action through which the individual can fight back against that enemy, such as becoming a suicide attacker or traveling to fight with a militant jihadist group.

Finally, there must be a group or network which provides social support for the ideological narrative. This group may exist in person and even control territory, but it may also exist as a network of online connections who encourage one another in their radicalization processes and determination to engage in terrorist acts (Speckhard, 2016; Kruglanski, Bélanger, & Gunaratna, 2019).

All of these factors are at play in prison-based radicalization to terrorism, as will be illustrated in the forthcoming sections. It is important to note that trauma, in particular, plays a meaningful role in the pathway to radicalization to terrorism in addition to countless other negative mental and physical health outcomes (Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2017; Hughes et al., 2017). A history of trauma, abuse, and maltreatment is a common thread among many inmates incarcerated all over the world (Fox et al., 2015; Dierkhising et al., 2013). Therefore, although the present report focuses on prison-specific factors which support or curtail prison-based radicalization to terrorism, the impact of trauma on inmates should not be ignored and should be a cornerstone of any prison rehabilitation program, regardless of whether or not it directly relates to terrorism (Miller & Najavits, 2012; Wolff et al., 2015).

---

## OVERCROWDING AND UNDERSTAFFING

Overcrowding is a pervasive problem in prisons around the world. Beyond potentially being a violation of the prisoners' human rights, overcrowding can also be a primary vulnerability through which prisoners become radicalized. First, overcrowding creates chaos as well as a legitimate grievance. Chaos itself can lead an individual to seek out certainty, and terrorist ideologies provide just that, often capitalizing on any local grievances they can blame on the enemy other. Terrorist ideologies tell the individual what their purpose should be, whom they should hate, and with whom they should associate. In the seemingly purposeless landscape of an overcrowded prison, terrorist ideologies provide a sense of purpose and empowerment in a struggle against chaos, powerlessness, and grievance.

Terrorist groups' ideologies rely on exploiting grievances, such as prisoner abuse and corruption among the staff, which are often exacerbated in overcrowded, understaffed prisons, while exalting the prisoner's sense of significance as a chosen warrior for the group, oftentimes for God himself. Second, resources are scarce in overcrowded prisons. If prison staff cannot provide enough food, hygiene products, fresh air, or sleeping space to inmates, terrorist radicalizers and recruiters may find ways to provide those resources to inmates, who then feel that joining their group will ensure their survival. Protection is often afforded by the terrorist group. Finally, overcrowding makes monitoring and intelligence collection difficult. In an overcrowded prison, inmates who are becoming radicalized or who are recruiting others are able to fly under the radar or even when obvious, be undeterred due to staff and space limitations on shutting down terrorist recruiters and groups operating in the prison. If guards are dealing with violent fights over limited resources, they may turn a blind eye, knowingly or unknowingly, to individuals sharing terrorist propaganda (Jones, 2014).

---

## LACK OF RESPECTED PRISON IMAMS

The lack of knowledgeable, credible religious leaders has been an issue of much debate over the years. Although there have been a few prison-based imams who have acted as radicalizers and recruiters over the years, a more common problem among less knowledgeable prison imams is an inability to refute militant jihadist claims or implicit support of some of those claims. Fortunately, studies have demonstrated that knowledgeable prison imams can act as a buffer against radicalization by providing legitimate religious guidance that can protect inmates from the warped misinterpretations of scripture that are promoted by terrorist recruiters. As demonstrated by the prison imams working with new converts in prisons in the United Kingdom, simply helping a new convert to Islam understand how to judge for themselves the reliability and authority of Islamic scriptures, particularly hadiths from which terrorist groups often cherry-pick to support violence, is protective against prison-based terrorist recruitment (Pickering, 2012). Therefore, it is critical that prison imams are adequately prepared to counter militant jihadist claims.

Credibility, in addition to knowledge of militant jihadist ways of twisting Islam, is a key issue in the efficacy of prison imams. In pursuit of ensuring that prison imams are not radical, some prisons and their overseeing institutions have tried to standardize the teachings and methods of the imams. As a result, the imams have been perceived by inmates as practicing and preaching "state-sanctioned" or "official" Islam, which erodes their credibility (Rascoff, 2012). For example, al Qaeda and ISIS ideologues claim that the government of Saudi Arabia does just that (Bin Khaled Al-Saud, 2020). Similarly, untrained prison staff in charge of hiring imams may not understand the difference between Salafism and militant jihadism. In fear of hiring a radical imam, they may only hire those preaching more moderate strains of Islam.

Militant jihadists view their ideology as an extension of Salafism specifically, as opposed to any other orthodox theology of Islam. Therefore, a Salafi scholar standing firmly against militant jihadist teachings may be far more credible to the target audience and more knowledgeable about the interpretations of Islam which militant jihadists claim is the only true Islam (Neumann, 2010). Indeed, Hamm (2008) found that one-on-one interaction with charismatic proselytizing leaders was the most commonly cited and most important factor associated with prisoner radicalization. This is unsurprising given that relationships that promote a sense of significance, purpose, belonging, and dignity are as, if not far more, important as ideology in terrorist recruitment. These charismatic leaders fill the void left by a lack of knowledgeable and credible prison imams and would not be as influential if prisoners had the same one-on-one access to imams whom they respect and trust.

---

## GRIEVANCES WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM AND LACK OF STAFF DIVERSITY AND TRAINING

Lack of training for and diversity among prison staff is also a problem, primarily but not exclusively in Muslim-minority countries, as are complaints about the justice system in general. In Western countries, Muslim inmates almost always are overrepresented in prison populations, leading many Muslim inmates to perceive their imprisonment and what they view as disproportionately harsh sentencing as a legitimate grievance of discrimination and prejudice by the dominant society (Cilluffo et al., 2006). In non-Western and Muslim majority countries where corruption, *wasta*-type nepotism, and/or authoritarian rule are present, inmates often feel they were not given a chance to succeed by national leaders, whom they can be convinced is not following the true Islam (Al-Badayneh, Al-Assasfeh, & Al-Bhri, 2016; Yom & Sammour, 2017).

Further grievances can arise through arbitrary arrests, a conviction for “thought crimes,” and the use of torture. When inmates believe the justice system is corrupt, and prejudiced against Muslims in particular, terrorist groups are easily able to exploit that and push new recruits into embracing the terrorist interpretation of Islam and believing that the terrorist path toward establishing Islamic rule will result in true justice for all Muslims.

Militant jihadist groups exploit feelings of discrimination and alienation among Muslims living in the West, claiming that such discrimination is part of Western governments’ “war on Islam,” and that they are therefore obliged to engage in jihad to fight this war. In Western prisons, it is easy for Muslim prisoners to feel discriminated against by primarily white, Christian staff who do not understand or may even mock their beliefs (Jones, 2014; Neumann, 2010). They are thus susceptible to terrorists’ claims that their mistreatment is a symptom of the greater Western hatred of Islam,



perhaps going so far as to say that their imprisonment itself is a sign of persecution against Muslims, even if their crime was not at all linked to ideology. This sense of persecution and subsequent anger can result in reoffending after release (Awan, 2013). Moreover, even if overcrowding is not a significant problem and the prison has significant resources, a feeling among Muslim prisoners that they are being denied resources or proper treatment by Islamophobic guards can drive them to terrorist groups within the prison that can provide them with protection and access to commissary items including snacks and hygiene products (Jones, 2014).

Beyond actual and perceived discrimination by an ethnically homogenous staff, lack of training regarding Islam and prison conversions can also make a prison vulnerable to radicalization within its walls. As mentioned in the previous section, the majority of conversions to Islam in prison are a positive step toward criminal rehabilitation, often resulting in increased self-discipline and prosocial behavior (Hamm, 2008). Unfortunately, in the West, prison conversions to Islam are often regarded with skepticism for one or both of the following reasons:

First, prison conversions, especially conversions to more fundamentalist strains of Islam, tend to be misconstrued in the West with radicalization, leading new converts to Islam to be increasingly surveilled and treated with suspicion (Neumann, 2010). This enhanced securitization can inadvertently lead otherwise non-violent and non-radical prisoners to buy into terrorist ideologies regarding Western authorities' hatred of Muslims. Unfortunately, some studies of Western prison staff have found that prison guards often do not base their understanding of radicalization into terrorist violence on academic definitions, but rather on media portrayals and their own cultural opinions, thus leading to the targeting of Muslim prisoners while allowing radicalization to other violent extremist ideologies to continue unencumbered (Schultz, Bucerius, & Haggerty, 2021).

As previously mentioned, well-trained prison imams of a variety of different streams of Islam, including highly conservative ones, can provide solid guidance to new converts so that they are not pulled into the clutches of radicalizers and recruiters who claim to tell the truth about Islam. Similarly, a basic assumption that conversion is a positive step for prisoners, and subsequent encouragement by staff for converts to meet regularly with a prison imam to build upon their faith can have the dual result of making converts feel accepted for their religion and buffering against terrorist claims about religion that less well-educated converts might accept as true

Second, in countries where religious freedom is a matter of national law, Muslim prisoners are sometimes perceived by staff and other prisoners as receiving special treatment in the form of better-quality food and more time alone to pray, both rare commodities in most prisons (Jones, 2014). Therefore, some prison staff may assume that prison converts are not steadfast in their beliefs but are rather pretending to convert in order to reap the aforementioned benefits. As a result, these benefits may be denied to converts who are believed to be faking their newfound religiosity, leading them to feel discriminated against and that they cannot freely practice their religion. Likewise, new converts may also be denied regular access to prison imams for these same reasons, once again driving them into the arms of radicalizers who claim to be scholars and fill in the gap. Lack of training about Islam and radicalization is not a problem only in Muslim-minority countries, however. In some Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia and Pakistan, terrorist offenders are sometimes granted a higher status by other prisoners and staff, as they are seen as being the most devoutly religious and willing to sacrifice themselves for their religion.

Similarly, there have been reports of terrorist prisoners in Indonesia having a reputation as being "fearless of death," thus earning the respect of inmates and guards, which increases the likelihood of radicalization and



recruitment of other inmates desiring such esteem (Jones, 2014). Therefore, just as non-Muslim prison staff must be educated about Islam and the difference between Salafism and violent extremism, Muslim prison staff must also be educated to understand terrorist ideologies and recognize recruitment and terrorist activities. All prison staff must be educated regarding the nuances of fundamentalist forms of Islam, so that non-Muslim and Muslim staff alike do not mistake the devout as being violently radical, nor do they mistake the terrorist radical as being merely and admirably devout.

---

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR BONDING

Debates abound, particularly in Western non-Muslim majority countries, regarding whether terrorists should be segregated from the general population or dispersed among them (Christiansen, 2017). For instance, in the United Kingdom, segregating Irish Republican Army prisoners from the rest of the population led them to become even more staunch in their beliefs and committed to their cause (Jones, 2014). Similarly, members of the Philippine Abu Sayyaf group were found to have increased in their levels of religious extremism, support for violence, and negative attitudes toward the West over a period of two years of being imprisoned together with unlimited social interaction (Kruglanski et al., 2016). Perhaps the most notorious example of terrorists regrouping in prison, radicalizing others, and returning even stronger than before their incarceration happened in Camp Bucca in Iraq, where militant jihadists and ex-Ba'athists came together to form what eventually became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS]. Among those prisoners were future ISIS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and future ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adani (Rushchenko, 2018). While these infamous ISIS leaders were incarcerated at a time when Camps Bucca, Cropper, and Abu Ghraib had not yet segregated all the extremists together, many of those who became ISIS found each other in the camps, spread their ideology,

and even taught terrorist tactics, such as how to construct IEDs, to other detainees.

Indeed, since the rise of al Qaeda, militant jihadist ideologues have taught followers to expect to be imprisoned at some point in their lives and to see their imprisonment as a badge of honor. After the Detainee Rehabilitation Program was developed in Iraq in 2007 to attempt to deradicalize militant jihadists among the 23,000 detainees and 800 juveniles held by U.S. forces, militant jihadist ideologues even disseminated a complete manual of instructions telling militant jihadist prisoners what to expect in prison deradicalization programs and instructing them in how to resist these programs. Jermaine Grant, one of the 7-7 al Qaeda operatives and an al Shabaab member imprisoned in a Kenyan prison, explained to the first author that all jihadists expected to spend time in prison and that it is a badge of honor for them. Similarly, al Qaeda and ISIS both published online instructions for inmates detailing how to organize terrorist cells in prisons and how to avoid prison staff detection of such cells.

The examples of terrorist groups coalescing in prison should not be taken as proof that dispersal, rather than segregation, is the correct method of dealing with terrorist offenders. When terrorist offenders are incarcerated among the general population, there is a risk that they will radicalize other prisoners, exploiting their grievances about their treatment in prison and aiding them in their search for identity and meaning which, as mentioned above, happened for years in the detention camps in Iraq before the most extreme were segregated from the rest of the prison population, thereby curtailing their ability to recruit among the general population. A commonly cited example of American-based prison radicalization, that of Kevin James and his group, Jam'iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh [JIS], occurred among prisoners who radicalized and recruited one another and planned a terrorist attack, in the general population of a California prison.

In Europe, several convicted terrorists who were not segregated went on to become prolific recruiters in prison (Rappaport, Veldhuis, & Guiora, 2012). This has been particularly problematic in French prisons. This risk is especially high if other inmates, or even prison staff, view the terrorist offenders as being worthy of fear or respect. Likewise, it is dangerous when those with longer sentences can prey upon isolated and fearful shorter-term inmates without terrorism charges. If they draw these low-priority inmates into their fold, the newly radicalized actors may establish contact with violent extremist groups and even enact acts of terrorism at the behest of the recruiter, without being noticed by law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

In contrast, in some prison ecosystems, terrorist offenders are at the bottom of the hierarchy, judged through the lens of the moral codes of prison gangs, which look down upon those who harm innocent people, especially children. In these cases, the terrorist offenders themselves may be at risk of being victimized by other prisoners. However, those who leave terrorist groups are also at risk of being beaten and even killed if they are housed with terrorist offenders. The hardcore extremists of al Qaeda who were housed together in six or more barracks in Camp Bucca, for example, held shariah courts at night in which anyone judged as departing from or betraying the group was sentenced and punished accordingly—often with having their limbs broken by other groups members (Speckhard, 2011).

Likewise, an ISIS returnee in Kosovo stated that he preferred to stay in solitary confinement for months at a time because he feared being killed by other ISIS prisoners who would see his defection and return from Syria as a treasonous crime punishable by execution. He later rejoined the group after studying the jihadist teachings of Maqdisi translated into Albanian that was available inside the prison and became even more supportive of militant jihadist violence than he had been when first incarcerated (Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Yayla, 2018).

Mixing prison populations has also some advantages, however. For example, when ideologically indoctrinated inmates charged with terrorism are removed from their terrorist cells and instead mixed into a general population, their fundamentalist practices and extremist beliefs may be questioned and even ridiculed by other prisoners. Being forced to try to explain their beliefs to their new peers can allow them to start to question the ideology and group they once felt was central to their identity, sense of belonging, purpose, dignity, and significance as a person. Similarly, mixing deradicalized ISIS prisoners with hardcore adherents also started and accelerated a process of spontaneous deradicalization in Kurdish prisons in Northeast Syria, in which ISIS prisoners started to compare among themselves stories of ISIS's unislamic practices, corruption, injustices, and atrocities toward their own members, causing many to become disgusted and disillusioned of the group (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). However, these prisoners also expressed fear of the still-committed prisoners among whom they were mixed, as have the ISIS women held in detention camps, where female ISIS enforcers violently mandate that deradicalized women adhere to ISIS rules (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2019).

Given these twin problems of segregation and dispersal, some prison policymakers have advocated for the isolation of individual terrorist offenders in order to prevent them from working with other extremists or radicalizing ordinary prisoners. The decision to isolate a prisoner should not be taken lightly, however, as this practice is deeply detrimental to prisoners' mental health and also prevents them from participating in deradicalization or other rehabilitation programs in the prison (Clifford, 2018). In fact, some organizations view solitary confinement as a form of torture (Méndez, 2019). In the Netherlands, for example, the prolonged isolation of inmates charged with terrorism was highlighted as a violation of human rights (Open Society Justice Initiative & Amnesty International, 2017).

---

## OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

In addition to the influences of imprisoned terrorist offenders, influence by outside terrorist groups can also drive radicalization. Regardless of whether terrorist prisoners are kept together or apart, as discussed in the previous section, there also remains a challenge of preventing groups operating outside of the prison from supporting terrorist offenders and radicalizing and recruiting prisoners. At the most basic level, terrorist propaganda can make its way into most prisons, and this process is even easier in cases where prisons are overcrowded and understaffed. Indeed, many mosque leaders and prison imams do not realize that their libraries and bookstores contain militant jihadist writings. One militant jihadist interviewed by the first author referenced an entire shelf of such writings officially available in his Kosovo prison (Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Yayla, 2018). Many other such writings are illicitly available in prisons. For example, in the United Kingdom, tapes of Sheikh Faisal espousing extremism were passed among inmates. In the modern era, phones can easily be smuggled into prisons, allowing inmates to communicate with terrorist recruiters and operators on the outside to fundraise, access propaganda on the internet, arrange escapes, plan activities, and recruit. In addition to the influences of imprisoned terrorist offenders, being influenced by outside terrorist groups can also drive radicalization. Regardless of whether terrorist prisoners are kept together or apart, as discussed in the previous section, there also remains a challenge of preventing groups operating outside of the prison from supporting terrorist offenders and radicalizing and recruiting prisoners.

Although many terrorist groups have largely turned to the internet and social media to spread their message more effectively, they are still producing and disseminating written literature that may not be easily identified by overworked prison staff responsible for scanning incoming mail (Useem & Clayton, 2009).

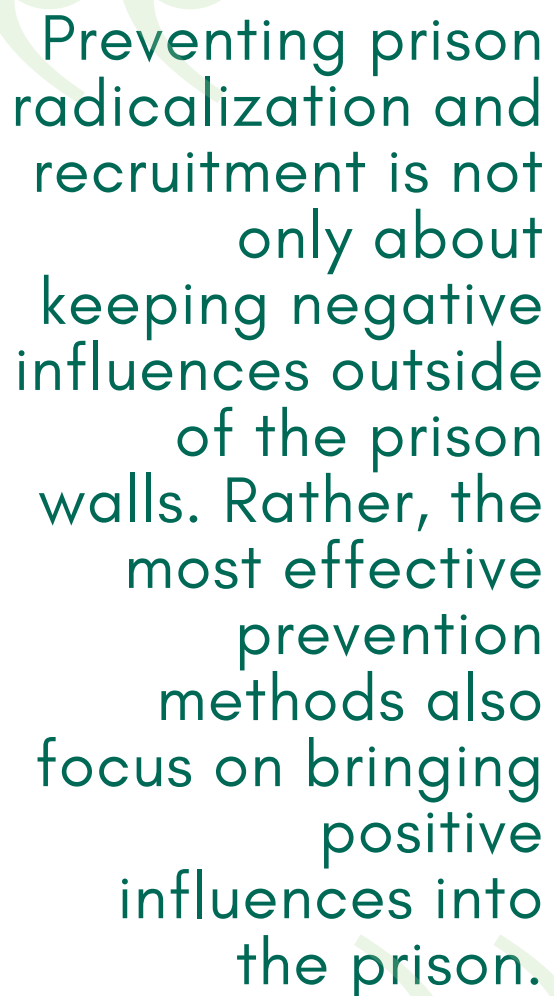
Resource scarcity can also open the door to these actions. If terrorist groups provide money or goods to their incarcerated members, non-members may see joining one such group as a path to survival. Though they might not initially buy into the group's ideology, these new members are likely to take on their beliefs as they spend more time with terrorist offenders and receive support from other terrorists outside of the prison, thus providing them with not only basic resources but with a sense of community as well (Jones, 2014). In Northeast Syria, many female ISIS inmates in Camp al Hol who have illicit phones and internet access claim to still be adherents to ISIS in order to accomplish internet-arranged marriages with Western men.

These men send them money to support their terrorist views as well as to help them buy necessary food and clothing items for themselves and their children. These well-funded women have also been known to arrange escapes from the camp (Speckhard, Thakker, & Ellenberg, 2020).

Prisoners who have illicit phones in prison can access members of the group outside the prison and terrorist propaganda, as well as create their own propaganda claims as well. For instance, the authors were amazed to find a Macedonian prisoner commenting on their Facebook-based ISIS counter-narrative campaign in which he claimed, ostensibly from inside the prison, that the claims of the counter-narrative were not true, disputed based upon his statement that he had been in Syria and knew the inner workings of ISIS.

Support from outside groups can also raise the status of terrorist offenders in prison, making their groups more appealing to other inmates. Terrorist groups typically view their members who have been imprisoned as political prisoners or even martyrs. Thus, a prison sentence is seen as an injustice carried out upon them by the enemy, while enduring the sentence is a badge of honor. If other inmates see that terrorist offenders are treated as heroes, they may be attracted to the idea of joining them. This effect can be exacerbated through isolation of terrorists, as “the use of isolation may also act to reinforce the psychology of exclusivity and ‘martyrdom’ among terrorist offenders and may even work to foster or magnify the root causes that led individuals towards terrorism” (Jones, 2014).

Of course, as Neumann (2010) astutely notes, preventing prison radicalization and recruitment is not only about keeping negative influences outside of the prison walls. Rather, the most effective prevention methods also focus on bringing positive influences into the prison. This can include respected prison imams, as discussed previously, but may also include non-religious resources such as educational and vocational programs (Esperian, 2010), art therapy (Gussak, 2007), counseling, and others which can provide prisoners with a sense of hope, purpose and meaning that might otherwise be supplied by terrorist groups.



Preventing prison radicalization and recruitment is not only about keeping negative influences outside of the prison walls. Rather, the most effective prevention methods also focus on bringing positive influences into the prison.

Neumann (2010)

# GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

As is clear from the references cited in the preceding section, with the adoption of best practices, terrorist radicalization in prison, juvenile detention, and state care facilities can be exceedingly rare. The literature demonstrates that the link between prison radicalization and actual terrorist action is tenuous and that most people who become radicalized in prison do not become terrorists after release, often leaving the group that protected and gave them resources and its ideology entirely when they are re-inserted into their old communities (Jones, 2014). However, those who are released into terrorist circles that build upon the radicalization that occurs in prison are at a high risk of carrying out terrorist crimes, as has been seen repeatedly in France. In order to reduce the incidence of radicalization in prisons, decision-makers can take a number of concrete steps, which are outlined in the present review.

First, improvement of prison conditions generally can be monumental in preventing radicalization. Increasing the availability of resources, from nutritious food to hygiene products, to physical space and availability of staff members, can all control the chaos and friction that arise in overcrowded, understaffed prisons. Doing so reduces the likelihood that prisoners will develop grievances and anger that can be exploited by terrorist groups, but it also allows for more effective intelligence collection and monitoring of radicalized or at-risk inmates. Furthermore, hiring, training, and supervising diverse, well-trained prison staff can reduce the incidence of prisoner discrimination, mistreatment, and outright abuse, all of which make prisoners especially susceptible to radicalization. These efforts comprise the concept of dynamic security, which holds that ensuring safety and security, as well as promoting rehabilitation, are aided by prison staff prioritizing frequent, professional, positive interactions with the prisoners that are based on an understanding of prisoners' personal situations, including their religious beliefs (Hill, 2020).

Second, security cannot be the sole focus of prison staff. Certainly, security is a priority in any prison system, but when it is the exclusive focus, rehabilitative programs often suffer, and positive steps toward rehabilitation may be seen through a securitized lens (Neumann, 2010). Providing prisoners with educational, vocational, and psychological resources that help them to have hope for a positive life upon release can all reduce the risk of radicalization as well as the risk of recidivism more broadly. Moreover, a desire to control the narrative put forward by prison imams can backfire if those imams are not viewed as credible by Muslim prisoners. Therefore, in the case of militant jihadists, allowing knowledgeable, credible imams to operate somewhat independently of the prison institution may benefit all Muslim prisoners, especially recent converts, who might otherwise turn to radicalizers and recruiters who claim to tell the truth about Islam. These prison imams, when allowed regular one-on-one visits with prisoners, can provide crucial religious guidance leading to greater discipline and respect within the prison environment.

Third, prisons in Muslim-majority countries must be especially careful to ensure that joining a terrorist group is not made attractive to prisoners. Strict monitoring of money transfers, phone and internet contact, and mail can limit the financial benefits of joining these groups, especially when coupled with increased provision of resources and services by the prison to all prisoners. Doing so will provide less of an incentive for prisoners to join terrorist groups even if they do not adhere to the radical ideology. Additionally, prison staff should receive training by Islamic scholars so that they understand that those adhering to a terrorist ideology are not practicing a purer or more pious form of Islam. As a result, prisoners will be less likely to believe that joining a terrorist group will earn them respect or fear from the guards.

# THE PRESENT SITUATION: THE MALDIVES



Over the last two decades, the Maldives Correctional Services has made a number of reforms aimed at improving prison conditions, including offering prisoners counseling and vocational courses, both of which can protect against radicalization. Many of the recommendations outlined in the present report are applicable to the Maldives, as we learned in discussion with Maldivian stakeholders and studying government documents. However, these courses are often available only to those incarcerated in lower security units of the prisons, meaning that those who pose the greatest threat and might be most valuable to terrorist groups do not have access to these resources (Naz & Ibrahim, 2019). Some recent reforms have aimed to directly address the potential threat posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters [FTF] who traveled to Iraq and Syria from the Maldives to fight with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS] and live under their so-called Caliphate. According to some measures cited by the United States Department of State, the Maldives had the highest per capita number of FTFs joining ISIS and al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq in the wake of Syrian Civil War. Concerns about returning Maldivian FTFs radicalizing others, both in and out of prison, are the focus of much international discussion (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The stakeholders mentioned a number of measures to deal with this challenge, including legal changes to make charging FTFs easier, building a National Reintegration Centre for returnees, and developing standards of practice, rules, and interventions to be used at that National Reintegration Centre.

Several specific cases of prison-based radicalization in the Maldives have been reported. Moosa Inaas was charged for setting a police boat on fire in 2020, ten years after having been released from prison when he was only three years into a 15-year sentence for his participation in the Sultan Park bombing. Although Inaas was not known to be radicalized in prison, his case makes clear that he was not effectively deradicalized or rehabilitated in prison (Counter Extremism Project, 2021). There is also anecdotal evidence that Maldivian FTFs

had been previously imprisoned for drug and petty crimes, and that they tended to join terrorist groups, particularly Jabhat al Nusra, “in part because of the sense of redemption that came from protecting Sunni women and children” (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). As a result, part of the Government’s Strategic Action Plan (Government of Maldives, 2019) specifically highlights the need to include Islamic education in prison rehabilitation programs, thus ensuring that prisoners are not taken in by terrorists’ claims of redemption through violent action. The Plan also aims to increase the number of prisoners participating in such programs by at least 50 percent by 2023.

The radicalization of juveniles is also a particular concern. Rehabilitation programs for minors dealing with substance abuse are increasingly being put into place, in part with the hope that such programs will make them less vulnerable to militant jihadists’ radicalization and recruitment tactics. Other programs which help juvenile offenders rebuild their lives and pursue futures as contributing members of society will similarly serve as a buffer against militant jihadist claims of redemption and of a better future in joining them.

As a Muslim country, the Maldives has more in common with countries like Pakistan and Indonesia, as reviewed by Jones (2014), but other factors suggest that some of the lessons from studies of radicalization in Western prisons may also be applicable. Given that all Maldivian citizens are Muslim, neither discrimination against nor special treatment for Muslim prisoners will likely be a concern for stakeholders looking to prevent and counter radicalization in Maldivian prisons. However, given the national respect for religiosity including Salafism, it is possible that less educated prisoners and staff may perceive terrorist offenders as being especially devout and willing to sacrifice for Islam (Naseem, 2020). This perception may be enhanced if the terrorist prisoners are compared to other prisoners convicted of blatantly unIslamic

crimes such as drug smuggling and prostitution, which comprise the majority of criminal offenses in the Maldives (Naaz & Ibrahim, 2019; Naaz, 2011). The concern about “state-sanctioned Islam” may also be relevant in the Maldives. The Maldivian government has taken great strides to ensure that imams undergo training aimed at countering violent extremism and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs also issued a fatwa in 2015 stating that fighting in foreign wars is not a religious obligation, contrary to what ISIS and other terrorist groups claim (Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, 2015). However, prisoners may view prison imams who have undergone such training as being tools of the government sent to surveil them (Awan, 2013). Therefore, the perceived independence and credibility of prison imams must be a priority. Likewise, they must be well equipped and trained in their understanding of militant jihadist teachings and how to counter them adequately

With regard to incarceration in general, the Maldives has a high crime rate as well as a high rate of recidivism, leading to overcrowding of some prisons, though this overcrowding is not as severe as it is elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia and has been reduced over the past years (as noted below, a stakeholder from ICITAP reported that Maafushi prison is 9.6 percent overcrowded)

The Strategic Action Plan (Government of Maldives, 2019) states that the Government aims to reduce the number of people incarcerated by at least 20 percent by 2023. Unfortunately, the prison system in the Maldives is not viewed by stakeholders as being effective in reducing crime. This lack of efficacy may be explained in part by circumstances also seen elsewhere around the world. First, prisoners in the Maldives have access to phones, meaning that they are able to communicate with criminal networks outside of the prisons. Those imprisoned for many years on terrorism charges may radicalize and recruit inmates with a closer release date and then connect them with their networks so that they may commit acts of terrorism upon release.

In a survey of Maldivian prison officers and prisoners, Shafy and bint Wan Muhammad (2018) found that 28.6 percent of officers and 61.9 percent of prisoners said that they had witnessed officers taking bribes from prisoners, and 57.1 percent of officers and prisoners alike said that prisons are understaffed. With regard to the potential for radicalization, both of these create openings for radicalization and limit officers’ ability to monitor the prisoners. Additionally, the prison officers and prisoners cited instances of prisoner mistreatment and abuse, which can be a source of grievance exploited by terrorist recruiters. Despite a largely critical tone, the article also highlighted some aspects of the Maldivian prison system that may serve as protective factors against radicalization. Notably, 85.7 percent of the respondents said that there were gangs and drug syndicates operating in the prisons. While presented as a criticism in the 2018 article, it is noteworthy that gangs, if not affiliated with or supportive of terrorists, can also be a buffer against radicalization. As explained by Jones (2014), prison gangs often maintain order and establish moral codes and behavior regulations to which prisoners must adhere; these codes and regulations are often incompatible with terrorist ideologies and therefore protective. It appears, however, that gangs in the Maldives are often very supportive of militant jihadists and the two cooperate well together. The relatively high GDP of the Maldives, compared to the rest of South Asia, is also a benefit that can allow for more services and resources provided to prisoners (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

Additionally, the goals outlined in the Government’s National Action Plan (2019) largely focus on many of the factors that can increase prisoners’ vulnerability to violent extremist radicalization and recruitment, particularly the education of prison staff and humane treatment of prisoners.



## A NOTE ON DERADICALISATION

The present report has addressed the factors that affect prison radicalization to terrorism and some of the steps that can be taken to reduce the risk that inmates will become radicalized and go on to engage in terrorist activity during or after their release. Although the specific mechanisms and best practices for deradicalization, particularly prison-based deradicalization programs, are outside of the scope of this report, it is nevertheless critical to outline the basic aspects that are necessary for deradicalizing incarcerated militant jihadists. These three aspects are Islamic challenge, psychosocial treatment, and vocational training. Studies of deradicalization programs all over the world have found that different prisoners benefit differently from and require greater or less emphasis on each of these three aspects, but all three are critical to the creation of a comprehensive deradicalization program. First, the Islamic challenge is led by a credible and educated imam who, as described above, can effectively refute militant jihadist claims and guide indoctrinated prisoners through a process of questioning and eventually disavowing their ideology and disengaging from their groups and violent behavior. The same is also important for preventing radicalization in the first place. Islamic challenge must be coupled with psychosocial treatment, which can address issues of trauma and psychological needs that play such a critical role in radicalization and the adoption of the terrorist ideology. For instance, in the Maldives, many prisoners were found to have a history of heroin use and addiction, which the militant jihadists successfully “treated” while simultaneously introducing them into jihadist thinking and actions.

If other treatment had been available, the addicted prisoners might not have fallen so deeply into radicalization as they left their addictions behind. Likewise, a realization that militant jihadist terrorism is not a reflection of the true Islam can lead to a crisis of identity and swelling of guilt, as the prisoner learns that the actions that they took were neither religiously nor morally justified. Frequent communication between the imam and the therapist providing these services allows the professionals to complement each other, with each offering unique guidance and help to the prisoner (Speckhard, 2011). Even if the Islamic challenge portion of the program is successful in helping the prisoner to disavow the terrorist ideology and the psychosocial treatment portion of the program is successful in helping the prisoner address their trauma and other psychological needs, long-term disengagement from terrorism after release will still be difficult if the person feels that they do not have other options to succeed in mainstream society. Therefore, prison deradicalization programs should include vocational training as well as job-seeking support as part of the reintegration program. The provision of vocational training has been found among Sri Lankan former Tamil Tigers to provide a new source of purpose and significance that was previously met through terrorist action. Indeed, former Tamil Tigers who were provided with this training, in addition to the other critical aspects of a prison deradicalization program, were less supportive of violent extremism after their release from prison than community members who were never official members of the violent extremist group (Webber et al., 2018).

# FINDINGS

From the stakeholder meetings and prison interviews, we were able to glean bits and pieces of information and triangulate them into a coherent picture of the radicalization process in Maldivian prisons, juvenile detention, and state care facilities. The information was confirmed and reiterated by prisoners, prison staff, and stakeholders, who were able to provide specific details when probed. Nevertheless, much of this information was not publicly available in news sources or research studies, so we could not independently confirm the statements made beyond noting that they were consistent with one another. When possible, we have cited documents that support the present findings. All prisoners' names are pseudonyms applied to protect their confidentiality. It is also noteworthy that all of the interviewed prisoners were incarcerated at Maafushi prison, and from stakeholder meetings, it was stated that other prisons do not experience the same level of radicalization to militant jihadism, if at all and when radicalization is observed those who don't immediately desist are moved to Maafushi. However, interviews from other facilities, as well as the meetings with stakeholders, provided a great deal of information regarding radicalization in the Maldives generally as well as in juvenile detention and state care facilities.

# GENERAL FINDINGS

From speaking with the stakeholders, 20 prisoners, staff members, and one drug rehabilitation patient previously incarcerated at Maafushi Prison, we were able to glean an understanding of the extremist cells in Maafushi as well as the general militant jihadist situation in the Maldives. All but three of the prisoners appeared currently radicalized in that they referenced adherence to militant jihadist views such as takfir (excommunicating and/or declaring other Muslims to be apostates who can be killed), a strict militant jihadist view of how shariah (Islamic law) and hukums (Islamic penalties for crimes) must be carried out in the Maldives, the illegitimacy of the Maldivian government for failing to adhere to their interpretations of Islam, taghuts (infidel and polytheist leaders), and others. These statements were often made carefully and only after being drawn out in conversation for quite some time and it was clear that these interviewees did not reveal all of the violent ideas to which they adhered. The three prisoners and one former prisoner who did not appear radicalized, although one sounded like he had been previously radicalized and then stepped away, spoke more openly about what they had previously believed (in one case), and what they had witnessed from radicalized fellow inmates.

It appears that in Maafushi Prison, there is one overarching emir who leads all of the militant jihadists in the prison, and each prison unit also has its own emir. The extremist cell also has a shura council (a sort of panel of Islamic judges) which metes out punishments, described in more detail below. The extremists in the prison claim to be in a state of war and are waging jihad against the Maldivian government, which they believe to be taghut and not a legitimate Islamic government. For that reason, they believe themselves to be asirs, prisoners of war held unjustly by the state. They collapse their prayers accordingly as allowed by Islam for those in times of battle.

Their overall goal is to establish what they see as a true Islamic State in the Maldives which is governed by shariah and applies hukum.

They prey upon the sense of injustice among prisoners who have long prison sentences, harsh conditions, and a feeling of general hopelessness by telling them that in a true Islamic State no Muslim would ever be held prisoner. Although the group's focus is on the Maldives in particular, they are, according to the National Counter Terrorism Center [NCTC], in contact over Telegram with other militant jihadists, primarily with ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra (now rebranded to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham [HTS]) in Syria. The informants among the prisoners stated that the radicalized prisoners are also in contact with militant jihadists living freely in the Maldives. Security officials from the NCTC reported that this community includes approximately 36 individuals, some of them returnees from the conflicts in Syria.

Most of the interviewees in the sample did not admit to holding any specific roles, either within the aforementioned militant jihadist community in the Maldives or within the violent extremist cells in Maafushi Prison. However, two referred to themselves as teachers in the prison and two said that they acted as prayer leaders or imams. None admitted to being emirs, although some were accused by other interviewees of playing a greater role in the prison-based militant jihadist cell than they may have let on. Additionally, two interviewees reported that they had been physically attacked by members of the cell. Such attacks were said by those who were informants versus radicalized prisoners to have been ordered by their unit emirs and carried out by other prisoners as punishment for their disagreeing with the militant jihadist ideology.

Abbas, aged 31, unintentionally incriminated another interviewee, 35-year-old Daoud, when he explained,

[Daoud] taught me tawheed. He's a teacher. If someone wants to become good and start praying, they become a source of information and mentor him [...] I was taught [that] taghut [is those] who makes a non-Islamic constitution and tries to get people to obey it. These institutions are taghut. Prison officials are part of this [...] He taught me that the sentence I got was not Islamic. In Islam, if you commit a murder, if the inheritors forgive you, then you are forgiven, but you are still here in jail. You are serving an unjust Islamic sentence.

Daoud himself balked at the notion that he was an extremist, stating that the "more pious and righteous get accused [of being extremists]. I was a high-ranking member in the gangs. When a person like that gets more religious, police and services get afraid, versus seeing a person getting better." Asked about his feelings about Anwar al Awlaki (a Yemeni-American ideologue, killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2011, whose sermons are used in al Qaeda and ISIS propaganda), he backtracks, realizing it may not be wise to admit to following Awlaki: "Maldivian people love Muslims, love all humans. I like him because he's a Muslim and human. I love Awlaki like I love all humans."

One of the dissenters, Faisal, describes the interactions he had with the extremist cell in prison:

"One group told me that if you are a drug user, you have to be executed. I said show me evidence from the Quran. They wouldn't show it but said this is the law of God, this is the Islamic religion. I responded that this is not the religion I know. I have heard the story of the Prophet where during a battle they had someone cornered and because he was cornered he said the shahada, but they killed him even. When they returned and told the Prophet, he said what you did was wrong, multiple times [...] About fifteen of them attacked me. I asked them how could you hit me? They answered, 'We were executing the emir's order.' The emir had declared me a kafir and I had to be executed."

Asked who the emir was, Faisal responds, "Daoud."

Interestingly, this same hadith, (Riyad as-Salihin, Book 1, Hadith 393) was referred to by another prisoner who said it was proof that executing others based on their external appearances (i.e., converting when cornered to save one's life), was correct and that only Allah could know the internal heart. Thus, they flipped the Prophet's condemnation and said that this hadith was evidence for takfir, which it is not, by any moderate interpretation.

The radicalized prisoners were adamant that the current Maldivian government is not legitimate and implied that its leaders are kafirs (unbelievers) because they do not apply the hukum as these prisoners believe it should be applied today. As one interviewee, Daoud, said about the Maldives legitimacy as an Islamic state, "If a nation is considering itself an Islamic nation and has an Islamic constitution, if a man's hand is not cut [when he steals], is it really an Islamic nation? [...] The Prophet said even if my daughter stole, I would cut her hand." Other interviewees referred to the need to fight jihad to bring about an Islamic State and referenced that we are currently in the "end times." Another interviewee, Najib, described militant jihad as the "same as prayer. It's fard al-'ayn in this time. It's an obligation individually. It's jihad against kafirs, munafiqs, and murtads."

It is important to note that no one joins an extremist or terrorist group without believing or actually experiencing that they will derive direct benefits from doing so (Speckhard, 2016). These benefits often include a sense of belonging, purpose, significance, and dignity, as well as direct benefits of marriage, access to sex, and material goods such as housing, salaries, and war booty. The extremist cell in Maafushi Prison appears well funded and offers new members a great deal of benefits, partially listed below. As will be discussed in detail in this report, based on the prisoner interviews, they appear to offer

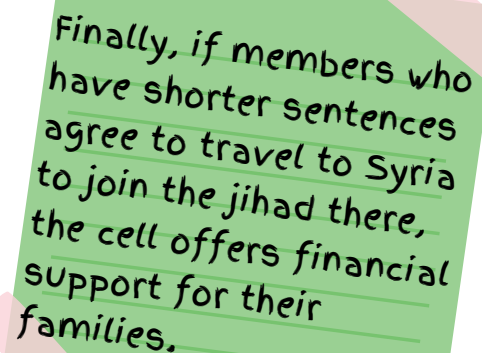
the best, if not only, in-prison rehabilitation program in Maafushi for people struggling with substance abuse problems.

Additionally, the extremists offer new members an in-depth religious education, which many crave as a combined result of their lack of schooling and their shame over being addicted to drugs and guilt for the crimes they have committed. The extremists also, according to both stakeholders and prisoners, have illicit mobile phones, money, and other material assets that are offered to new prisoners who are struggling to find their place in prison. Finally, if members who have shorter sentences agree to travel to Syria to join the jihad there, the cell offers financial support for their families. It appears also that family members of committed prisoners who do not travel may also be supported. These findings were also verified by the NCTC.

The interviews, particularly those with non-radicalized prisoners, also revealed information about the broader militant jihadist landscape in the Maldives. The cells run training camps, with weapons (mostly knives and machetes) in Male' and in uninhabited islands. Many of the individuals in the cells are linked to an initial group of militant jihadists who trained in Pakistan and created an isolated, separatist, extremist enclave in Himandhoo. These individuals have been linked to the 2007 Sultan Park bombing and the 2021 attempted assassination of former President and current speaker of parliament Mohamed Nasheed, among other murders and acts of arson. The prison extremist cells are also well funded and many being former gang leaders, work closely with gangs, organizing murders to silence their opponents as well as violent robberies to fund their activities. One of the non-radicalized prisoners claims that the extremists have also paid off politicians to turn a blind eye to their activities. It was also communicated that politicians have used the extremists for political gains. The same non-radicalized prisoner also stated that the extremists are able to bribe prison guards to receive phones and to have literature and internet access to allow for

spreading violent extremist propaganda that has been translated into Dhivehi throughout the prison. We were not able to verify these allegations. Additionally, the groups are in contact with people fighting in Syria, primarily members of ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra/HTS, and have sent youth and former prisoners to fight in Syria as well. The description of the militant jihadist community in the Maldives presented by the stakeholders and prisoners is consistent with research by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Ramakrishna, 2021).

In the forthcoming sections, we discuss a variety of challenges that play a role in radicalization in prison, juvenile detention, and state care facilities, approaching these challenges from the perspectives of stakeholders and prisoners.



Finally, if members who have shorter sentences agree to travel to Syria to join the jihad there, the cell offers financial support for their families.



## STAFFING CHALLENGES

### UNDERSTAFFING

Many concerns voiced by the stakeholders were about understaffing. First, stakeholders who oversaw both prison staff and social workers who work with children in conflict with the law (but who are not necessarily incarcerated) stated that they simply lacked enough staff members to do their jobs at the most effective level. Those who work in prison settings expressed concern that they were not able to monitor radicalized prisoners and collect intelligence as much as they would like because they did not have the number of staff required to oversee daily happenings in the prisons as well as ensure that prisoners were not being radicalized to militant jihadism. As a result, another contributing factor to radicalization in prisons is the spread of propaganda materials.

These materials include photocopies of written al Qaeda ideological literature promoting militant jihad and “martyrdom” operations, mostly in English and Dhivehi but occasionally in Arabic as well, and audio and video recordings from notorious ISIS and al Qaeda ideologues such as Anwar al Awlaki, sometimes translated or subtitled in Dhivehi, as well as widespread access to the internet via illicit cell phones.

The NCTC suggested that Maldivian militant jihadists were linked more to HTS, which is aligned with al Qaeda, than to ISIS. However, the propaganda materials distributed within the prison are published and used by both groups.

Those from the Juvenile Justice under the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports also expressed concerns regarding understaffing, sharing that their case and social workers are overburdened and unable to devote a proper amount of time to each of the children and families whom they oversee. Although many of these individuals do not work with children who are incarcerated, their perspectives are nonetheless critical to understanding how children in conflict with the law, who may become incarcerated, become radicalized.

### LACK OF TRAINED STAFF

A representative from the Ministry of Gender mentioned that a concern that some of their social workers were not equipped to deal with radicalized children and families, leading to a fear that some social workers may become radicalized to militant jihadism as a result of their interactions with these clients. The representative from the Ministry of Gender also referred to challenges in state care facilities where radicalized youth were witnessed radicalizing other youth. The Ministry of Education also referred to youth who had been in state care who continued to be highly radicalized and for whom no adequate interventions were being made due to the lack of trained staff to carry them out. The stakeholder who referred to state care facilities expressed concern that staff was not equipped to deal with radicalized children and youth, nor was it possible to sequester them adequately to prevent the spread of radicalization. Additionally, many of the stakeholders expressed a dearth of specially trained staff whom they felt would improve their agencies. These stakeholders stated that their agencies lacked sufficient psychological staff who could appropriately assess prisoners’ and clients’ needs and risk factors and provide therapeutic services. Finally, nearly all of the stakeholders stated that there is a lack of prison-specific Islamic scholarly staff to interact with radicalized prisoners and clients.

The representatives from the Islamic Ministry stated that there were programs in place to train Islamic scholars to refute militant jihadists’ claims, but prison and social worker representatives were nevertheless concerned that the scholars who interact with the prisoners were not able to adequately challenge their beliefs. The conversations during the interviews between the prisoners and one of the researchers suggested that even those who expressed the staunchest and most extreme views were amenable to Islamic challenge and counseling. Their discussions demonstrated the potential impact that a well-trained scholar could have in

preventing and countering radicalization in prisons, juvenile detention, and state care facilities.

Seven interviewees appeared to have a concrete understanding of the militant jihadist ideology (as it relates to jihad, takfir, and extremist views of the Maldivian government as previously described) and were entrenched in the extremist cell in the prison. However, these individuals were very receptive to an Islamic scholar refuting their claims, asking thoughtful questions, and showing genuine interest in learning more about Islam. As Jabbar explained when asked about his religious upbringing, “They taught us how to pray but no knowledge.” These people may benefit most from more intensive, perhaps one-on-one, sessions with credible Islamic scholars who are able to clearly correct militant jihadist arguments with passages from the Quran and Sunnah. Even those who were either self-proclaimed imams or were identified as emirs by other interviewees were extremely respectful and curious to question and learn from the researchers. All of the radicalized interviewees listened intently when one of the researchers asked about the scriptures upon which they were basing their claims and recited these scriptures in Arabic, often nodding their heads in recognition and then to the translations and asked many questions, bringing even more scriptures into the discussions. Their body language was extremely attentive and open, smiling and laughing even when chided about their incorrect interpretations and contradictions, and leaning forward eagerly to learn more about genuine Islam.

---

## OTHER PRISON-BASED CHALLENGES

Beyond the problem of understaffing and lack of trained staff, the stakeholders expressed a number of other concerns regarding prison conditions. The stakeholders referred to overcrowding in cells, sometimes related to long trial wait times, hindering intelligence collection, and monitoring of radicalized prisoners, as well as allowing for greater ease of disseminating propaganda materials. According to a stakeholder from ICITAP, Maafushi prison is 9.6 percent overcrowded, with an inmate to staff ratio of 7.7 to 1. This level of overcrowding is not as severe as in other countries but nevertheless was worrisome enough to the stakeholders to raise as an issue. Problematic communication is not limited to only between prisoners, however. Stakeholders also stated that mobile phones are prevalent in prisons and allow people convicted of terrorism-related offenses to continue to communicate with their compatriots in the Maldives and elsewhere. When asked about prisoners’ grievances, representatives from the Ministry of Home Affairs, Male’ and Hulhumale Prisons, and the Inspectorate of Prisons all mentioned that some prisoners, especially those of advanced age, were not receiving adequate medical care and those with psychiatric issues were not always getting needed care. This problem seems to have been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented some prisoners from being transported to Male’ for medical treatments. However, even before COVID-19, 93.9 percent of prisoners reported to UNDP that the prison’s medical care was not satisfactory (Glass, 2011). Even if the problem has abated, it is nevertheless important to be aware of the grievances that militant jihadist radicalizers may exploit.

---

# LACK OF ADEQUATE REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

Finally, nearly every stakeholder lamented the lack of rehabilitation programs for offenders convicted on terrorism charges. These programs would require both Islamic and psychological staff and education efforts. With the lack of a dedicated rehabilitation program, it is the extremist cell that appears to be offering counseling to deal with the guilt and shame over crimes committed. Eight individuals were motivated to join the militant jihadists by the idea that becoming involved in militant jihadism would redeem them in the eyes of Allah and offer them the chance to truly atone for the crimes and sins that they committed in their lives. Two of these men had been convicted of murder. Many of these prisoners, including those who had committed murder, took the opportunity to ask one of the researchers if they could be forgiven and what was necessary for that to occur. Similarly, staff at Asseyri Prison stated that one of the main topics the prisoners asked the Islamic teachers coming from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs was concerned with anxiety over guilt, referring to what is necessary for repentance and forgiveness as well as when and if Islam could allow drug use. This made it clear that lapsing with addictions and forgiveness for criminality is a huge issue that extremists may manipulate with those coming out of drugs and criminality. Notably, many prison stakeholders mentioned and were hopeful about the at the time upcoming and ongoing efforts to conduct risk assessments (which are now completed) and to establish a special management unit for radicalized prisoners with the hope of thereby identifying those following terrorist ideologies and prevent them from spreading their movements further inside the prison. These steps are quite promising, with the caveats that the training for conducting the risk assessments are comprehensive and that the administration of the special management unit adheres to human rights standards. We have reviewed the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's [UNODC] 2020

"Manual for the Risks Assessment of Violent Extremist Prisoners," which gives a general outline of how to conduct a risk assessment. The manual appears to be quite well-researched. It is likely to be useful in this effort if applied in a manner that takes a holistic approach, that it collects data from many sources, including from the prisoners themselves, and is carried out by seasoned professionals who are neither intimidated by prisoners nor too brusque to establish rapport. We should note that the prisoners were all anxious about the assessment process and its potential punitive outcomes for them.

---



## CHALLENGES OUTSIDE OF PRISON

### RECIDIVISM AND PROBLEMS WITH REINTEGRATION

Many of the stakeholders' concerns seep beyond the prison walls. A number of stakeholders expressed that there is a high rate of recidivism among offenders, which they attributed to difficulties with reintegration and stigma, particularly when drugs are involved. It is commendable that many prisoners receive vocational training during their sentences, specifically those in Asseryi Prison and in lower security units in Maafushi. Unfortunately, the stakeholders explained that employers do not hire people with criminal records, even those with certificates attesting to their completion of vocational training and their good behavior in prison.

Stakeholders from Asseryi Prison, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and UNDP all mentioned that newly released prisoners, finding themselves homeless and hungry, often commit petty crimes in order to be sent back to prison, where they are guaranteed a bed and three meals a day. Likewise, drug addicts who may have stopped using but return to the same friends and social pressures in addition to stigma and joblessness can easily fall back into drug use and peddling to support their addictions. This high rate of recidivism enhances the risk that inmates charged with non-terrorist crimes such as drug-related crimes will come into contact with militant jihadists and become radicalized. It also increases the risk that these people will be attracted to an opportunity to make money and find meaning in their lives outside of prison that does not require them to find a legal job. In fact, one prison interviewee stated that he was motivated to join the militant jihadists in prison because of the perceived opportunity to make money through his association with these individuals (n = 1).

### LACK OF EDUCATION

Another concern overlapping prison and the general society is a lack of education among prisoners. Many stakeholders mentioned that prisoners were poorly educated and desired to have access to educational programs in prison. There were three aspects of this lack of education that stood out in particular. First, that prisoners who had dropped out of school had not necessarily done so due to lack of interest in their education. Rather, the high dropout rate appeared to be more so related to poverty. Although none of the prison interviewees completed secondary education, only three left school early due to a lack of interest. The prisoners who were interviewed for this research all appeared intelligent and many claimed a strong desire to study and learn more. The reasons for leaving included the following: One left school because he wanted to get a job to support his family. Two left school unwillingly because their families needed them to work. Three were expelled from school for a variety of offenses. Two could not afford the costs of books or traveling to Male' to continue their schooling. One left school due to family dysfunction and another due to his frequent drug use. The statistics related to the educational background of the interviewees are consistent with the UNDP finding in 2011 that 72 percent of prisoners had less than an O level education (equivalent to tenth grade) (Glass, 2011). The prisoners who left school in order to earn a living to support themselves and their families had limited opportunities to do so because of their lack of education, even after they were old enough to work legally. They subsequently became involved in gangs and drug use, leading to their eventual imprisonment. There seemed to be a consensus among the stakeholders that prisoners would be excited to participate in educational programs, and that this might reduce the recidivism rate if it provided them with more opportunities for legal work after their release.

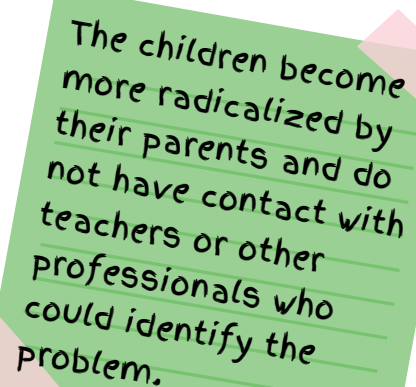
However, the stakeholders and prisoners both reported that those in medium- and high-security units did not have access to educational and vocational training, a report which was consistent with the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives 2018 report regarding prison conditions (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2018).

Second, many of the prisoners lack a thorough Islamic education. According to the stakeholders, although they understand the basic tenets of Islam, the prisoners are easily swayed by militant jihadist claims that they read in propaganda materials or that are told to them by recruiters in the prison. Essentially, they have enough knowledge to understand what a recruiter or ideologue means when he says that he is quoting directly from the Quran and/or Sunnah, but they do not have enough knowledge to identify when these people are misquoting or misinterpreting these scriptures, manipulating their meanings.

The third concern related to lack of education is a generational concern. The stakeholders working with children mentioned that there are cases of parents who are radicalized into militant jihadism who pull their children out of school because they see the schooling system in the Maldives as being Western and illegitimate. The Education Ministry alone identified at least six such cases of children who need interventions currently and it appeared that there were more whom they were struggling to figure out how to address with adequate interventions. This action of pulling children out of school, illegal in and of itself, can lead to numerous detrimental outcomes. The children become more radicalized by their parents and do not have contact with teachers or other professionals who could identify the problem. The children are likely to become involved in militant jihadist action, encouraged by their parents, or put in dangerous situations by their parents in accordance with the militant jihadist ideology, such as in the case of a 13-year-old girl who was married to and impregnated by an adult man (Mohamed, 2019).

Additionally, the lack of education makes rehabilitation all the more difficult. If these children do become imprisoned as adults and are able to be deradicalized, their risk of recidivism remains high if they are not able to find meaningful, legal employment upon release, as their family network is not supportive of such ideologies.

Latif, for example, was radicalized to violent extremism on the outside. His cousin brought him to a mosque after years of opium use. He says that the community he found “filled this place of opium with prayer and brothers,” thus demonstrating the benefit of religion in bolstering sobriety through belonging, accountability, support, ritualized and habitual gathering for prayer and accountability, and belief in a higher power, but also the danger of seeking out more and more extreme versions of that religion. When ordered by the drug court into regular drug rehabilitation which is run in a professional manner, Latif explains that he voluntarily moved to a longer prison sentence to remove himself from a secular-based rehabilitation program, as he was “unhappy about rehab. [They were] always talking about using and saying if you are in this circle you will have to come back. [There was] no focus on religion [...] I felt that things were happening that were not up to religious standards: Mixing sexes, music, dancing. That’s why I moved to jail.” Latif would have been released from rehab after only six months, but he prefers his longer jail sentence because “There are people who want to be better, people with a history of drug abuse [who] have come for help, even four new [people] that want to be more religious.”



The children become more radicalized by their parents and do not have contact with teachers or other professionals who could identify the problem.

With regard to a specific lack of religious education, Jabbar, 39, recounts how he was influenced by his cohorts in prison: "Before I came to prison, I literally didn't know anything about religion. My mom told me to pray, so I did." He thus had an extremely rudimentary respect for Islam and introduction into the idea that he should pray and obey but no idea how to evaluate Islamic teachings or scriptures. "I learned here the principles and tenets." About becoming a shaheed, he says, "All I know is that in Islam one of the highest positions you can attain is to die a martyr in the way of jihad. Everyone wishes for this." Asked about suicide bombers, he admits, "I don't know if they would become a shaheed or not."

Another man, Mansur, espoused extremist beliefs and said that he was the imam of his cell. Perhaps in an effort to draw attention away from the extremist cell in the prison, he credits his prison-based radicalization as having come not from fellow prisoners, but from those in the Islamic Ministry charged by the prison with his education. This claim, which has no independent evidence, points to the importance of ensuring that prison-based religious counselling is carefully delivered so that militant jihadists do not exploit and use it to support their extremist claims. Many militant jihadists have cited some books used by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in their justification of takfir and of 'al-wala' wal-bara', claiming that the Maldivian government is not legitimate and is run by taghuts. An example of this confusion in communicating religious information that results in supporting extremist thinking is made by Mansur as he explains about takfir, "In the [prison] rehabilitation program in phase one, I was taught if a person gives up the prayer, then all of the religious scholars of the ummah agree that this person should be beheaded." While that may be the case for a renouncer of Islam, the extremists in prison take takfir much further, declaring the government and its officials as kafirs as well. He defensively recounts being recently interviewed by prison staff to identify whether he was an extremist: "What I highlighted in those interviews [is that] I am not saying anything in this population [as an imam] anything more than what I was taught in this educational program. I repeat what I was

taught." This brings up a serious issue regarding the religious counseling given to prisoners. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and all those working to provide protective religious education should be sure to challenge particular interpretations of the aforementioned concepts, as well as the idea that terrorist groups represent Islamic principles, that an endless jihad is called for and that one can achieve martyrdom by becoming a suicide attacker.

---

## FAMILY DYSFUNCTION

Two issues tied to the concern about radicalized parents taking their children out of school are family dysfunction and targeting of youth for radicalization. Stakeholders from Asseryi Jail, the Ministry of Health, Juvenile Court, Journey, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports expressed that the children who came in contact with the law, as well as the adults in prison, come from dysfunctional families, often with divorced parents living on different islands. Although it is important to recognize that divorce can resolve some family dysfunction, especially in cases where there is domestic violence in the home, it can nevertheless cause children to have difficulty forming an identity, sense of belonging and security, and finding a place that they feel that they belong. It can also contribute to poverty and financial stress. Gangs and militant jihadist groups alike offer children and young adults acceptance and a sense of belongingness that they may not have felt during a tumultuous childhood, as well as financial opportunities. The Maldives has the highest divorce rate in the world, with 10.97 divorces per 1,000 people per year. By comparison, the second and third highest divorce rates, belonging to Belarus and the United States, are 4.63 and 4.34, respectively (Guinness World Records, 2021).

It is certainly possible that the frequency of divorce in the Maldives has created a substantial pool of children who are more vulnerable to groups that offer them the chance to be a part of a cohesive, loyal family, to earn easy money, and to use drugs to numb their emotional pain. As a result, gangs and militant jihadists target youth, specifically vulnerable youth, for recruitment. This is not uncommon. All over the world, violent groups target youth to act as foot soldiers because they are perceived as being easier to manipulate and control, as well as less likely to be stopped by law enforcement or seen as a threat in high-security locations (Bloom 2019).

In the case of Maldives, the pathway seems to be getting involved in drug use and peddling, ending up in state facilities and prisons and then being preyed upon by militant jihadists who offer drug rehabilitation alongside the introduction into extremism. Of the 17 men in the sample, 52.9 percent (n = 9) had divorced parents; indeed, many reported having parents who divorced in their early childhood and that they did not have frequent contact with their fathers or financial support to their families. Additionally, seven reported growing up in households marked by conflict and dysfunction. This tended to result in a feeling of a lack of security and positive identity among the interviewees and a subsequent desire to join any group that felt like a family, even a drug-dealing gang. Fewer numbers of interviewees also reported experiencing emotional abuse (n = 1) and emotional neglect (n = 1), witnessing domestic violence in their homes (n = 2), having a parent who struggled with substance abuse (n = 1), having a parent who was incarcerated (n = 1), having a parent who died during the interviewee's childhood (n = 2), and a significant number left their childhood homes before the age of 18 (n = 4).

## TRAUMATIC PAST EXPERIENCES

Six interviewees also reported experiencing specific, impactful, traumatic events during their lives. One interviewee was in a traumatic car accident, but the other five reported experiencing instances of torture and abuse by law enforcement and prison staff, primarily during the prior to the most recent ratification of the Maldivian Constitution in 2008. One of the five said that he was traumatized by hearing and seeing other people tortured, one said that he was tortured while he was in prison, and three said that they were tortured during interrogations. Although they acknowledged that these events had occurred in a previous era in the Maldives, the experiences nevertheless left them resentful and distrustful of the government. These feelings made them particularly susceptible to extremist claims that they were being unjustly imprisoned and mistreated by the state. While many prisoners have made allegations of torture in recent years, the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives found that most were unfounded, forwarding only four of 275 allegations of torture for prosecution between 2014 and 2018 (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2018). Ehan, 38, was arrested for the first time when he was just a teenager. He was badly tortured and humiliated by the guards, and a close friend died in prison after a torture-related incident. After leaving prison, he found it difficult to deal with his mood swings and anxiety without using drugs. He was able to stay clean for one year, during which he completed a rehabilitation program and made a pilgrimage to Mecca with his parents. Then, one night, Ehan was "drinking vodka. I was hungover. [My friends] said smoke some, you'll feel better. I said I know. I've done this before. [It] progressed [and I] went back to heroin." Soon enough, he was caught with just over a gram of heroin (which incurs a 16-year sentence) and sentenced to life in prison. His father, sick with high blood pressure and heart problems, was concerned, remembering his son's traumatic experience in prison as a teenager. His father died soon after the arrest.

Rafiq, aged 37, grew up poor in a thatched house after his father, who had been physically abusive toward his mother, left the family. During his formative years, he left his mother's home to join his father in Male'. His father told him he would put him in school, but instead forced him to work on construction projects and prevented him from contacting his mother. He recalls, "There was no happiness once I came [to Male']. Father kept promising when this project is finished I will enlist you in school. I never lived with my father. [I] lived in the workers' housing unit. My father lived at home with his wife." Rafiq got married later, but his wife took their children and left him to live with an ex-partner of hers, emotionally devastating him. After that, "I started hanging out with violent drug users, let them hang at my house, and gave them money. I lost my way with them." He was soon arrested in relation to these friends' crimes and says that the police "cuffed me from behind and hit me with a plastic that had a paper on it, so it was very heavy. The plastic paper-covered beam that they used to beat me on [my] chest, hands, body, and they beat me with military boots, kicked me with these military-style boots." Although he appeared to have previously been aligned with the extremists in prison, he emphatically and emotionally stated that he was not currently a part of the extremist cell and was terrified that they would hurt him or his family if he spoke out against them.

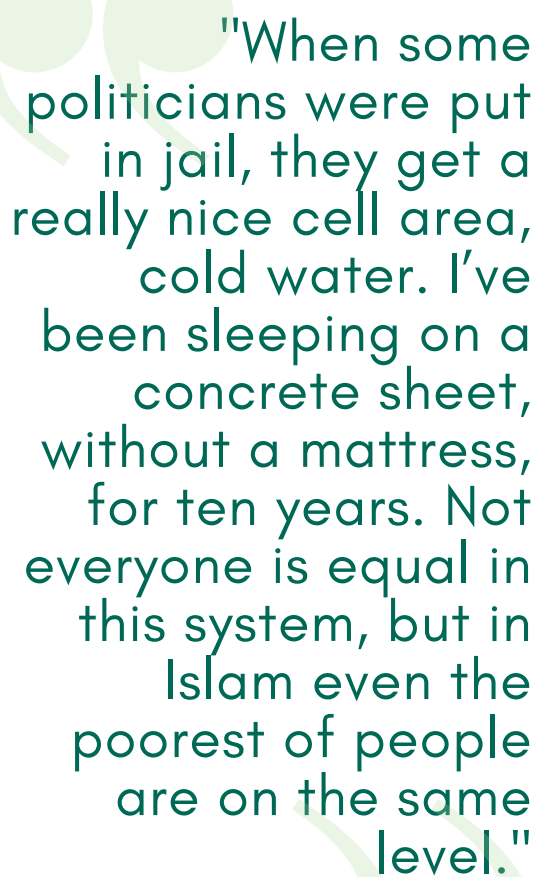
Faisal, also aged 37, started selling heroin at age 15 to augment his earnings which he was using to support his mother and family. Soon after, he started using heroin himself, quickly spiraling into addiction: "One day I was really depressed about a little problem going on in my family. One of the guys I sold drugs to said you look really depressed, listen, use some of this, you'll feel better, as long as you don't use it all the time you'll be okay." Faisal says that when he ran out of heroin, "I started getting really sick, fever. I had no idea what it was. I didn't know what it was. [The] supplier showed up and said yeah, you're sick, [and the] only way you will get over it is if you use it more. It turned out to be true."



Faisal's substance abuse was exacerbated by the confusion and unfairness that he perceived during the change in government in the Maldives: When I was first sentenced to jail, I quit. It was difficult but I got over it and then I was trying to be really good. Then, when the coup happened, when the military took over, when the Vice President took over and became the President, I got a pardon. I had married someone when I was in prison. I went to Male' and she had come to pick me up. There was a group who was being released one at a time. I asked why I haven't been released, there is my wife outside. They sent her away [and said] we're sorry but your pardon was a mistake. I [had] seen the letter, how can it be a mistake? They returned me to jail. I relapsed. I used as soon as I got back, and I had been clean for two years. I never quit again.

As a result of these traumatic interactions with representatives of the government, some of the interviewees were specifically motivated to join the militant jihadists in prison. These motivations included anger at the injustices they believed are being committed by the Maldivian government (n = 2), belief in the extremist concept of takfir (i.e., that people who do not adhere to their militant jihadist interpretation of Islam are apostates who may be executed) (n = 1), perceived harassment by law enforcement for their beliefs (n = 1). While some prisoners talked about seeing themselves as "asir," i.e., prisoners of war, most referred to this indirectly and said that they felt it was unjust that Muslims receive prison sentences at all, much less lengthy and harsh incarcerations, some having been tortured, those in the high-security unit saying they didn't get enough exercise and fresh air and were overcrowded together, and some even made clear statements that they resonated with the extremist claims that they should be let free and the government is illegitimately holding them.

Equality in Islam is a centrally important tenet. One man, Qasim, was staunch in his belief that the Maldivian government is not truly Islamic, stemming in part from being tortured during interrogation as well as the inequality he reported having witnessed in prison: "When some politicians were put in jail, they get a really nice cell area, cold water. I've been sleeping on a concrete sheet, without a mattress, for ten years. Not everyone is equal in this system, but in Islam even the poorest of people are on the same level." He believed that the government was not following the laws of the Quran, and that he was essentially a prisoner of war. As a result, he admitted, "Takfir I can do when taking everything into consideration."



"When some politicians were put in jail, they get a really nice cell area, cold water. I've been sleeping on a concrete sheet, without a mattress, for ten years. Not everyone is equal in this system, but in Islam even the poorest of people are on the same level."

Qasim

## GANG INVOLVEMENT

Gang involvement does not appear to be incompatible with radicalization to militant jihadism in the Maldives, as was suggested in the international studies cited in the inception report. The stakeholders working with both adults and children stated that there is a great deal of overlap between gangs and militant jihadist groups. Youth may be initially recruited into gangs, promised a sense of belonging as described previously while being used as young drug peddlers that have wide reach among other youth and are more likely to evade criminal sentences. The risk of youth being recruited into gangs by people who exploit their family dysfunction and lack of employment opportunities was highlighted in a 2012 report, which stated that "inadequate drug rehabilitation services and a lack of gang prevention programs in prisons encourage involvement in gang activities when inmates are released." (Naaz, 2012). Instead of receiving services in prison or from other public agencies, once these people become addicted to drugs, they may then be approached by militant jihadists, sometimes but not always in prison settings, and told that they are destined for hell because of their unIslamic activities, particularly drug use, which will be discussed in the forthcoming section. They are told that the only way to redeem themselves is through militant jihad. This may inspire them to travel abroad to fight in Syria with groups like ISIS as was evidenced in the high per capita numbers who left the Maldives for Syria, but they appear to join the Maldivian violent extremists as commonly in their actions at home (Bateman, 2019). In contrast to previous studies (see Jones, 2014) which found that joining a militant jihadist group is accompanied by leaving a gang, however, the stakeholders expressed that Maldivian gang members may be told, that they can continue most of their gang activities, as stealing from kafirs (unbelievers), especially in order to finance militant jihad, is halal (permissible). Thus, the criminal/terrorist nexus is forged and the two support each other's activities. Other Maldivian laws prohibiting gang-related activities may also be broken since the militant jihadists do not recognize the Maldivian government as legitimate.

## DRUG USE

Drug use was the most commonly noted concern expressed by stakeholders, including the Ministry of Home Affairs, Asseryi Jail, Correctional Services, Maafushi Prison, Department of Juvenile Justice, the Juvenile Court, the Inspectorate of Prisons, United Nations Development Programme, and Journey. The topic was also emphasized during the meeting with the National Drug Agency. The stakeholders stated that drug use is alarmingly common in the Maldives today, with primarily young men using heroin, methamphetamines, and benzodiazepines, among other substances. The UNDP reported in 2011 that 66 percent of all prisoners had been convicted of drug offenses, primarily usage or possession of small quantities (Glass, 2011). Prison officials noted that drugs abound in the prisons and that there are no formal drug rehabilitation programs inside the prisons, including methadone or other substitute medications for heroin addiction, available to inmates. As a result, prisoners, who are most often in prison because of drug-related offenses, are eager to seek out drugs while in prison as the alternative to suffering painful withdrawal symptoms and dealing with life unmedicated. Rampant drug use in the Maldives thus contributes to radicalization in prison in two ways. First, drug use leads to imprisonment, which simply puts vulnerable people in contact with militant jihadists as will be further elaborated from the prisoner interviews. Second, militant jihadists may offer drug-addicted prisoners their best possible option for rehabilitation – a distorted interpretation of religion delivered within the context of accountability, belonging, and group support. Without access to other means of detoxification and achieving sobriety, prisoners may be taken in by the idea that by committing themselves to a perceived noble cause, that of militant jihad, they can get clean and redeem themselves in the eyes of God.


As adolescents and young adults, all but two interviewees reported struggling with substance abuse, with most reporting starting with opium and then using hard, addictive drugs like a form of

heroin they called “brown sugar”, a couple even moving onward to injecting heroin. About “brown sugar,” the street name for heroin previously distributed in the Maldives, Hakim, aged 34, recounted, “Someone older asked me to sell drugs in the island. I experimented and couldn’t live without it anymore. [I was] 14 years old.”

All interviewees who were involved in opium and heroin use (all but one prisoner) said that when they started using, they had no idea of its highly addictive nature nor that they would suffer extreme withdrawals upon stopping. Many described being completely unable to function without using it multiple times a day once they started. This particularly points to the need for widespread drug prevention and education programs to protect youth.

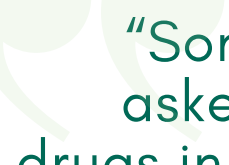
In deciding to join the militant jihadists in prison, ten interviewees (58.8 percent) were motivated by the idea that joining such groups would help them be rehabilitated from their substance abuse problems, and indeed, this does seem to be the case. When the researchers acknowledged that the extremists did seem to be running a fairly effective drug rehabilitation program based on the interviewees’ accounts, the prisoners eagerly spoke about the fact that the extremists had helped them stop using heroin, with some relapses, at least for their time while incarcerated. While none spoke of an extremist “aftercare program,” in hindsight, the researchers realize that many spoke with confidence about “friends” they were sure would hire them in the sea cucumber trade, for example, when they were released and that they intended to replace their former friends who were still using drugs.

Najib, who was motivated by the informal extremist drug rehabilitation program, explained, “I was clean for six years. I was with people who followed the Sunnah for six years.” He recalled reading illegal, censored religious books that the extremist group printed themselves, which taught him about the extremist interpretation of tawheed and convinced him that the Maldivian government was illegitimate.



“After I stopped using, [I] started praying and learning about religion. I felt a lot of satisfaction that I could stop, and not use again [...] My hope is that my sins are forgiven. I get really good feelings when I pray and fast.”

**Bilal, aged 28**



“Someone older asked me to sell drugs in the island. I experimented and couldn’t live without it anymore. [I was] 14 years old.”

**Hakim, aged 34**



# RECOMMENDATIONS

---

## PRISONER DAILY LIFE IMPROVEMENTS

Concrete steps may be taken at both the prison and the societal level to address some of the concerns delineated in this report. Many of the steps that we recommend are aligned with those set forth in the National Action Plan published in part by the NCTC in 2020. Within the prisons, it is clear that the prisoners have needs for dignity and forgiveness that are not being met by prison staff or by prison conditions, driving them to turn elsewhere to have those needs met. We recommend improving the physical conditions of the prison. Prisoners reported extreme heat and dismal living conditions, particularly in the high-security unit. Additionally, we recommend implementing strict requirements that all prisoners, regardless of security level, are allowed regular exercise periods with exposure to fresh air and the outdoors. Given the prison's access to the sea, it would be a great benefit to those showing good behavior to be able to exercise in a walled-off area that allows the sea air and views to be enjoyed giving them a sense of connection to their Maldivian roots and hope for a future on the outside. We also recommend increasing access to educational and rehabilitation programs for all prisoners. It is clear from both the stakeholder and prisoner interviews that the prisoners are eager to learn and rehabilitate themselves, especially from drugs. Therefore, increasing the availability of and access to a variety of educational programs, Islamic and general studies, may be effective in preventing radicalization and in countering the radicalization process of those in its earlier stages. Granting parole and shortening prison sentences with good oversight on the outside can also increase a sense of hope for a better life in the future. These programming improvements will contribute to the NCTC's aims of enhanced education to improve citizen engagement skills around critical thinking, communication, and online literacy, as well as a stronger engagement with a shared national understanding of a tolerant religion and culture to reduce the effect of malign external influences.

---

## SECURITY MEASURES

We also recommend the segregation of the most radicalized prisoners as soon as possible. The leaders of the extremist cells in Maafushi Prison are both respected and feared, neither of which are conducive to positive change in the prison. The interviews revealed that the "emirs" and teachers in the various units are adept at taking new prisoners under their wing and exploiting their fears, guilt, and painful withdrawal symptoms, as well as offering them material benefits of joining. Based on our professional experience and judgment, efforts to segregate extremist prisoners should prioritize the leaders, teachers, and imams, as they are the most likely to radicalize others and these are likely the same individuals providing tangible benefits of joining: handing out cell phones, arranging money, better food, and family support for them. In addition to potentially radicalizing others, these leaders having contact with their followers and those followers having access to other inmates is also dangerous (Speckhard, 2011). As long as the extremists are able to communicate with the outside, organize financial incentives for joining, and allegedly bribe prison guards to obtain phones and other material goods, they will be able to continue to incentivize joining their cause. They also pose a danger to those who do not adhere to their ideology.

Rather, vulnerable prisoners should be greeted instead by trained staff who are able to offer them a new narrative for atoning for their sins (one that does not involve militant jihad or becoming a shaheed) and for belonging, accountability, meaning and purpose for getting their lives back on track. The smooth, charismatic radicalizers should not have access to these people at all. Additionally, breaking up the network in the prison must also involve restricting access to or blocking the internet so that prisoners cannot communicate with other militant jihadists in the Maldives, in Syria or Afghanistan via Telegram or on other online

platforms or even with each other inside the prison across units. The prisoners made clear that the extremists have a lot of money and they alleged that guards are able to be bribed to bring phones and drugs into the prison. The jamming system should be designed that no corrupt guard can turn it off to allow for communications, sharing propaganda, ordering punishments, or arranging for cash influxes or payments outside the prison.

---

## BENEFIT REDUCTION

We recommend reducing the benefits that the extremists can offer and increasing those that are offered by the prison, and by rehabilitation centers. One of these benefits, as mentioned above, is the provision of Islamic education and effective drug rehabilitation. Segregation of the extremist leaders and improved official services, especially rehabilitation programs that include a strong Islamic component, can shrink this perceived benefit of radicalization. Other material benefits, such as access to mobile phones and money, can also be treated in this way. Prison staff should balance their actions by conducting more thorough sweeps for illicit phones and penalize those who smuggle the phones into the prison, while simultaneously allowing prisoners more regular and longer supervised access to phone calls through the prison. If prisoners are not able to regularly communicate with their families, they may turn to extremists in order to call their young children or ailing parents and to be a substitute family. If the prison itself can provide them with this access, there will be less of a need to associate with extremists if they do not already adhere to the ideology, and prison staff can ensure that phones are used only for official, sanctioned purposes, rather than for communicating with co-conspirators or fellow jihadists around the world. Prison staff may also restrict, within the confines of human rights law, extremist prisoners' access to amounts of money that would be large enough to entice poorer prisoners to join them.

Extremist literature that is currently circulating in the prison via photocopy and viewed online

should be identified and Islamic scholars should dispute the arguments made in that literature in a convincing manner that turns the followers away. As at least three prisoners admitted to being aware of Anwar al Awlaki's teachings, if not outright admitting to following them, we recommend starting with an Islamic program that goes through his claims and shows why they are wrong in every case. Similarly, the al-wala' wal-bara' teachings in some religious books that are used to support the practice of takfir and view of the Maldivian government officials as taghut needs to be deconstructed. Doing so would discredit the extremist leaders and redirect the followers to better ways of following and applying Islam in their lives (Speckhard, 2011).

## SOCIETAL-LEVEL MEASURES

### BREAKING THE CYCLES OF POVERTY AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

We recognize that changes are far more difficult to implement at the societal level than within the prisons. However, it is evident that the cycles of poverty and substance abuse have taken their toll on Maldivian prisoners, as in so many other countries around the world. When people are born into poverty, they are already at a disadvantage, for their parents and caregivers do not have the time or resources to give their child the best start in life and marriages often disintegrate over financial stressors. This effect is exacerbated by family dysfunction, including abuse and neglect, domestic violence, and abandonment by a parent, particularly a father. All of these contributing factors were present in the interviewees' early lives. Poverty and family dysfunction also contributed to the participants leaving school early, often around age 13 or 14. As a result, many found low-paying jobs, if they found legal jobs at all, and supplemented their income by selling drugs, often recruited to do so by gang members.

Lacking effective drug awareness education, they were tempted to try these drugs, often starting immediately with hard, addictive drugs like smoking opium or heroin. The interviewees were shocked at how quickly they became addicted and at how painful their withdrawal symptoms were. By then, however, many felt that it was too late to quit. The interviewees were generally arrested for their first offenses in their late teens and early twenties for drug- or gang-related crimes. After leaving prison, they found reintegration near impossible. If it was hard to find a job to support themselves and their families before being imprisoned, it was even harder with a conviction on their record. They did not have access to effective rehabilitation while in prison or aftercare and returned to using drugs on the outside if they ever stopped using at all. Rehabilitation workers also noted that former patients do not receive adequate aftercare when they leave the rehabilitation center, and

also find it difficult to gain employment with their reputation as a drug addict. Eventually, the interviewees find themselves back in prison, this time with an understanding that there is little hope of ever living a life free of drugs or crime if they followed the mainstream trajectory. Thus, they turn elsewhere – to the militant jihadists in prison – for solutions.

Hence, the cycle is broken only when the individual becomes radicalized. One can identify, however, other points where the cycle can be broken through government and civil society actions. According to UNICEF, only 45 percent of students in the Maldives continue to the higher secondary level of schooling, and none of the interviewees continued to this level. UNICEF attributes this high level of drop-off, despite schooling until grade 12 being free to everyone, to the fact that only 59 of 212 schools in the Maldives offer higher secondary level courses. This means that children must often move away from their home island in order to achieve this level of education (UNICEF, 2018). Poverty is a clear barrier to being able to migrate in order to go to school and those who do move away from home become vulnerable to the risks of living on their own before reaching adulthood and to the risks of living with people who are not their parents. In the Maldives specifically, these include increased risks of truancy, abuse, forced labor (UNICEF, 2015). As an example of this, the 2014 census found that five percent of children in Male' were living with relatives other than their biological parents, compared to only 2 percent of children on the islands, and 1.2 percent of children in Male' were living with non-relatives, compared to only 0.5 percent on the islands (UNICEF, 2014). All children should also receive a comprehensive drug education while in school. Currently, heroin and meth are being mixed and sold on the market, and stakeholders from UNDP reported that children in the Maldives as young as 8 are trying drugs. Reviews of best practices for drug use prevention among children and adolescents have found that the "just say no" model is ineffective (Pan & Bai, 2009). It is clear from the interviews analyzed in this report that the prisoners would have benefitted from more information about the physiology of

addiction, the severity of withdrawal, and the effects that drugs have on the developing brain. An understanding of the risks of substance abuse is another possible exit point from the cycle. Previous studies have found that the most effective prevention programs are those that are interactive and conducted in small groups (Tobler & Stratton, 1997); are delivered both prior to, during, and after initial exposure to drugs; are tailored to the needs of the participants in the program; and use social influence and peer-to-peer interactions to drive behavior change (McBride, 2003; Nation et al., 2003).

## ADDRESSING UN- AND UNDER-EMPLOYMENT

Later on in the lifespan, access to stable, substantive employment which provides a sense of purpose in life can be highly influential in steering people away from criminality, substance abuse, and radicalization alike. Of course, lack of education, drug use, and criminal history can each be barriers to obtaining such employment, and this makes reintegration after a prison sentence all the more difficult. The struggles of obtaining fulfilling employment may be surprising.

In 2019, the male unemployment rate in the Maldives was only 5.6 percent. However, youth male unemployment (aged 15 to 24; meaning not in school, training, or work) was 21.5 percent in 2016, the last time it was measured by the World Bank. Additionally, 15- to 35-year-olds make up 75 percent of the unemployed population in the Maldives (Rasheed, Mohamed, & Inaz, 2019). Hence, it appears that if men are able to stay in school and stay out of trouble throughout their adolescence and young adulthood, they are likely to have good prospects for their future. If not, their chances may be more dire, leaving them to vie for low-paid work. It may be prudent to address two problems at once in this case by reforming the system of migrant labor in the Maldives. As Human Rights Watch reported in August of 2020, "The Maldives government, as well as some international and domestic companies, are failing to protect workers from serious abuses, including trafficking, forced labor, subminimum wages, involuntary and unpaid overtime, wage theft, and squalid living quarters" (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Maldivian citizens with histories of criminality and substance abuse are competing for the same jobs as migrant workers, but at a greater cost to the companies. Reforming regulations and oversight of companies' treatment of migrant workers may subsequently reduce the advantage of employing migrant workers over Maldivian citizens, thus improving the chances that released prisoners will be able to find work. Additionally, decentralizing government functions to some of the islands might give educated Maldivians more opportunities for well-paying work.

## CAPACITY BUILDING FOR PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Other society-based actions may be more feasible in the short term than the aforementioned broad changes. One action currently being undertaken by the NCTC working with the Islamic Ministry is to bring prevention and awareness raising to the schools in islands, youth workers, local government councils, and others about the real issues involved in radicalization and raising their alertness and cooperation in fighting extremism in the Maldives. Another NCTC initiative is to work with activists who are elected to local island councils to help them become leaders in preventing radicalization to violent extremism. These types of grassroots leaders can be very influential, especially in more isolated or insular islands. They must maintain their grassroots identities, however. If local leaders are viewed as being tools, puppets, or even plants of the government, they will lose all credibility among those most at risk for committing violent extremist acts. Indeed, this perception may put these leaders at risk of physical harm if they are declared as apostates by militant jihadists on their respective islands.

We also recommend implementing education and capacity building at all levels of society. Given the understaffing challenges highlighted in this report, especially the lack of specially trained staff, it is prudent to focus resources on training existing staff before shifting focus to recruit more staff, who are already in short supply. Teachers, social workers, drug rehabilitation healthcare workers, prison staff, and law enforcement officers should all be educated as to the process of radicalization so that they understand the underlying psychosocial needs and drivers; the political, social, and economic context in which radicalization occurs; and the details and fallacies of the militant jihadist ideology itself. Wider-spread awareness campaigns about the realities of joining a militant jihadist group, traveling to join ISIS in Syria,

and engaging in other violent extremist activity can also be instituted through the use of Facebook ad campaigns which utilize counter narrative videos, possibly making use of those produced through ICSVE's Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project, which have been found to be impactful in a variety of local contexts around the world (Speckhard, Ellenberg, & Baddorf, 2021; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020c; Speckhard et al., 2018; Speckhard et al., 2020).

Social and educational workers need training in both recognizing and more importantly effectively intervening in cases of radicalized youth. When youth were identified as radicalized in care facilities, social workers said it was hard to isolate them and they were at a loss of what to do to help deradicalize them. Similarly the Education Ministry pointed out many cases of known radicalized youth but were unequipped to effectively intervene. These types of interventions require coordination of numerous individuals and skill sets and coordinated programs need to be built to train these specialists to not only identify youth while still early in the process of radicalization but also to effectively address radicalized youth.

Additionally, age-appropriate prevention and countering violent extremism programs should be instituted in schools, alongside in-depth Islamic education, so that children and adolescents feel confident in their understanding of Islam and are prepared to reject the claims of militant jihadist radicalizers and recruiters when they inevitably encounter them on the internet making emotionally evocative claims that may evade any sense of critical thinking to those unprepared ahead of time. This inoculates them against militant jihadist claims they are most likely to encounter particularly over the internet. Teachers of these programs should be able to confidently address and deconstruct militant jihadist claims. They should not shy away from potentially provocative questions to and from their students; if children feel that they cannot ask their teachers questions about the militant jihadist ideology or if they are shut down when they do ask these questions, they may be tempted to turn to other sources, whether online "scholars" or local

extremists on their islands. One such question that should be answered thoughtfully was asked by Khalid in his interview with Dr. Speckhard and one of the researchers. He asked: "What I am confused about is, who are the true people who are fighting in wars? ISIS, Hezbollah, al Qaeda. Among these groups, who are the people who are on the true path?" Clearly he is asking for guidance in good faith and is interested in learning.

---



## CONCLUSION

In line with the principles of the National Action Plan, the present report is based on behavioral science research and includes input from young men and women and stakeholders from government and civil society organizations. The recommendations that we have outlined are aimed at enabling and empowering Maldivian communities to resist radicalization and at bolstering human rights, gender equality, the dignity of the person, the rule of law, and the right to privacy. It is evident that radicalization to violent extremism is a sizeable yet manageable problem in the Maldives generally and in Maldivian prisons specifically. This challenge can be linked, as in so many other countries, to economic, political, and social contextual factors. These factors can be addressed through a whole-of society approach which could include increased employment opportunities, improved access to higher secondary level education, more comprehensive Islamic education which inoculates students and adults against violent extremist ideologies, and in-depth drug awareness and prevention programs which highlight the neurobiological process of addiction. There are also many steps that can be taken in prisons and rehabilitation centers that can alleviate some of the grievances that augment prisoners' vulnerability to violent extremist radicalization and recruitment. These include making physical improvements to prisoners' quality of life, increasing access to general and Islamic education programs, providing prisoners with effective drug rehabilitation that includes an Islamic component, and decreasing the benefits that militant jihadists can offer to prisoners by blocking their Internet access and their leaders' ability to communicate or hand out benefits. Likewise, deconstructing the militant jihadists' claims and teaching the prisoners how to interpret Islam in ways that benefit their lives rather than making them a danger to themselves and society is of utmost importance.

## REFERENCES

- Al-Badayneh, D. M., Al-Assasfeh, R. A., & Al-Bhri, N. A. (2016). Social causes of arab youth radicalizing. *Journalism*, 6(12), 743-756.
- Awan, I. (2013). Muslim prisoners, radicalization and rehabilitation in British prisons. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 33(3), 371-384.
- Bateman, K. J. (2019). Emerging violent radical Islamism in the Maldives. In *Countering Insurgencies and Violent Extremism in South and South East Asia* (pp. 91-106). Routledge.
- Bin Khaled Al-Saud, A. (2020). Deciphering IS's narrative and activities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(3), 469-488.
- Bloom, M. (2019). Weaponizing the weak: The role of children in terrorist groups. In *Research Handbook on Child Soldiers*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism (2015). Maldives. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*.
- Christiansen, S. (2017). Preventing Radicalization in Prisons: A comparative analysis of the Danish and Swedish Prison and Probation Service's counter-radicalization strategies within prisons.
- Cilluffo, F., Saathoff, G., Lane, J., Cardash, S., Magarik, J., Whitehead, A., ... & Lohr, G. (2006). *Out of the shadows: Getting ahead of prisoner radicalization*. Washington, DC, USA: Homeland Security Policy Initiative.
- Clifford, B. (2018). *Radicalization in Custody. Towards Data-Driven Terrorism Prevention in the United States Federal Correctional System*, Program on Extremism Policy Paper, The George Washington University.
- Counter Extremism Project. (2021). *Maldives: Extremism and terrorism*. Counter Extremism Project.
- Dierkhising, C. B., Ko, S. J., Woods-Jaeger, B., Briggs, E. C., Lee, R., & Pynoos, R. S. (2013). Trauma histories among justice-involved youth: Findings from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 4(1), 20274.
- Esperian, J. H. (2010). The effect of prison education programs on recidivism. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 316-334.
- Fox, B. H., Perez, N., Cass, E., Baglivio, M. T., & Epps, N. (2015). Trauma changes everything: Examining the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and serious, violent and chronic juvenile offenders. *Child abuse & neglect*, 46, 163-173.
- Dierkhising, C. B., Ko, S. J., Woods-Jaeger, B., Briggs, E. C., Lee, R., & Pynoos, R. S. (2013). Trauma histories among justice-involved youth: Findings from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 4(1), 20274.
- Esperian, J. H. (2010). The effect of prison education programs on recidivism. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 316-334.
- Esperian, J. H. (2010). The effect of prison education programs on recidivism. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 316-334.
- Fox, B. H., Perez, N., Cass, E., Baglivio, M. T., & Epps, N. (2015). Trauma changes everything: Examining the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and serious, violent and chronic juvenile offenders. *Child abuse & neglect*, 46, 163-173.
- Glass, D. (2011). *Prison Assessment and Proposed Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Offenders Report*. Government of Maldives. (2019). Strategic action plan, 2019-2023. Government of Maldives.
- Guinness World Records. (2021). Highest divorce rate. Guinness World Records. Retrieved from <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/highest-divorce-rate>
- Gussak, D. (2007). The effectiveness of art therapy in reducing depression in prison populations. *International Journal of Offender therapy and comparative Criminology*, 51(4), 444-460.
- Hamm, M. S. (2008). Prisoner radicalization: Assessing the threat in US correctional institutions. *NIJ Journal*, 261, 14-19.
- Hamm, M. S. (2013). *The spectacular few: Prisoner radicalization and the evolving terrorist threat*. NYU Press.
- Hill, G. (2020). *Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Prisons: a Practical Guide*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT).
- Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., Hardcastle, K. A., Sethi, D., Butchart, A., Mikton, C., ... & Dunne, M. P. (2017). The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Public Health*, 2(8), e356-e366.
- Human Rights Commission of the Maldives. (2018). Submission from the human rights commission of the Maldives for information on the initial report submitted by Maldives under Article 19 of Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Human Rights Commission of the Maldives. Retrieved from <http://hrcm.org.mv/publications/otherreports/HRCMSubmissionToCAT2018.pdf>
- Human Rights Watch. (2020, August 25). Maldives: COVID-19 exposes abuse of migrants. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/25/maldives-covid-19-exposes-abuse-migrants>
- Jager, A. (2018). *The "Shoe Bomber" Richard Reid-His Radicalization Explained*. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 1-14.

- Jasko, K., LaFree, G., & Kruglanski, A. (2017). Quest for significance and violent extremism: The case of domestic radicalization. *Political Psychology*, 38(5), 815-831.
- Jones, C. R. (2014). Are prisons really schools for terrorism? Challenging the rhetoric on prison radicalization. *Punishment & Society*, 16(1), 74-103.
- Kruglanski, A. W., Bélanger, J. J., & Gunaratna, R. (2019). *The three pillars of radicalization: Needs, narratives, and networks*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Sheveland, A., Babush, M., Hetiarachchi, M., Ng Bonto, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2016). What a difference two years make: Patterns of radicalization in a Philippine jail. *Dynamics of asymmetric conflict*, 9(1-3), 13-36.
- Maldives. (2020). National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21. United Nations.
- Méndez, J. E. (2019). *Torture, Solitary Confinement, and International Law. Solitary Confinement: Effects, Practices, and Pathways toward Reform*, 117.
- Miller, N. A., & Najavits, L. M. (2012). Creating trauma-informed correctional care: A balance of goals and environment. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 3(1), 17246.
- Mohamed, S. (2019, November 24). Police investigate case of 13-year-old impregnated "bride." *The Edition*. Retrieved from <https://edition.mv/news/13582>
- Naaz, A. A. (2011). Prison assessment and proposed rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders report. United Nations Development Programme in the Maldives and the Government of Maldives.
- Naaz, A. A. (2012). Rapid situation assessment of gangs in Male'. *The Asia Foundation*.
- Naaz, A.A., & Ibrahim, A. S. (2019). Maldives: Towards the reformation of the criminal justice system. In Jaishankar, K. (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of South Asian criminology*. Routledge.
- Naseem, A. (2020). Maldives embraces a Salafi future. *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Religions*, 371.
- National Counter Terrorism Centre. (2017). *National strategy on preventing and countering violent extremism*. National Counter Terrorism Centre, Republic of Maldives.
- National Counter Terrorism Centre. (2020). *The national action plan on preventing and countering violent extremism, 2020-2024*. National Counter Terrorism Centre, Republic of Maldives.
- Neumann, P. R. (2010). *Prisons and terrorism: Radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries*. ICSR, King's College London.
- Open Society Justice Initiative & Amnesty International. (2017). *Inhuman and unnecessary: Human rights violations in Dutch high-security prisons in the context of counterterrorism*.
- Pan, W., & Bai, H. (2009). A multivariate approach to a meta-analytic review of the effectiveness of the DARE program. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 6(1), 267-277.
- Pickering, R. (2012). Terrorism, extremism, radicalisation and the offender management system: The story so far. *Prison Service Journal*, 203, 9-14.
- Ramakrishna, K. (2021). The global threat landscape in 2020. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 13(1), 1-13.
- Rappaport, A. J., Veldhuis, T. M., & Guiora, A. N. (2012). Homeland security and the inmate population: The risk and reality of Islamic radicalization in prison. *Special needs offenders in correctional institutions*, 431.
- Rascoff, S. J. (2012). *Establishing Official Islam-The Law and Strategy of Counter-Radicalization*. *Stan. L. Rev.*, 64, 125.
- Rasheed, A. A., Mohamed, M., & Inaz, M. (2019). Agents for Development: The Booming Youth Population in the Maldives. *International Journal of Social Research & Innovation*, 3(1).
- Rushchenko, J. (2018). *Prison management of terrorism-related offenders: is separation effective*. The Henry Jackson Society, London.
- Schultz, W. J., Bucerius, S. M., & Haggerty, K. D. (2021). The floating signifier of "radicalization": Correctional officers' perceptions of prison radicalization. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 48(6), 828-845.
- Shafy, M. A., & bint Wan Muhammad, R. (2018). Imprisonment As a Form of Punishment: A Case Study of Maldives. *Journal of Asian and African Social Science and Humanities*, 4(4), 1-8.
- Shakoor, A. A. (2004). *National criminal justice action plan*. Attorney General's Office, Republic of Maldives.
- Speckhard, A. (2011). Prison and community-based disengagement and de-radicalization programs for extremist involved in militant jihadi terrorism ideologies and activities. *Psychosocial, organizational and cultural aspects of terrorism*, 1-14.
- Speckhard, A. (2016). The lethal cocktail of terrorism: the four necessary ingredients that go into making a terrorist & fifty individual vulnerabilities/motivations that may also play a role. *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism: Brief Report*.
- Speckhard, A., & Ellenberg, M. D. (2020). ISIS in Their Own Words. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 13(1), 82-127.
- Speckhard, A., & Ellenberg, M. (2020). *Spontaneous Deradicalization and the Path to Repatriate Some ISIS Members*. *Homeland Security Today*.
- Speckhard, A., & Ellenberg, M. (2020). Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Facebook Campaigns in Europe. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 13(3), 120-148.
- Speckhard, A., Ellenberg, M., & Baddorf, Z. (2021). *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project: Understanding, Preventing, and Intervening in Militant Jihadi Terrorism and Violent Extremism*. In *From Territorial Defeat to Global ISIS: Lessons Learned* (pp. 94-111). IOS Press.
- Speckhard, A., & Shajkovci, A. (2019). Waiting for the return of the Islamic state Caliphate among ISIS enforcers in Syria's al Hol, Ain Issa and Roj Camps. *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE)*.

Speckhard, A., Shajkovci, A., Wooster, C., & Izadi, N. (2018). Mounting a facebook brand awareness and safety ad campaign to break the ISIS brand in Iraq. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12(3), 50-66.

Speckhard, A., Shajkovci, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2018). Defected from ISIS or Simply Returned, and for How Long? – Challenges for the West in Dealing with Returning Foreign Fighters. *Homeland Security Affairs*, 14.

Speckhard, A., Thakker, M., & Ellenberg, M. (2020). Social media tracking of ISIS women and real-life actions of ISIS men on their behalf. *Homeland Security Today*.

Templer, R. J. (2019). Youth vulnerability in the Maldives. *United Nations Development Programme*.

UN. Committee on the Rights of the Child. List of issues in relation to the 4th and 5th periodic reports of Maldives. *United Nations*.

UNICEF. (2014). Children in Maldives. Analysis of children of the Maldives from Census 2014. *UNICEF*.

UNICEF. (2015). Assessment of the situation of students who migrate to Malé for education: Abridged report. *UNICEF*.

UNICEF. (2018). The Maldives: Education. *UNICEF*.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2020). Manual for the risks assessment of violent extremist prisoners, Maldives Correctional Service. *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*.

U.S. Department of State. (2019). Integrated Country Strategy: Maldives.

Useem, B., & Clayton, O. (2009). Radicalization of US prisoners. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 8(3), 561-592.

Webber, D., Chernikova, M., Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Hettiarachchi, M., Gunaratna, R., ... & Belanger, J. J. (2018). Deradicalizing detained terrorists. *Political Psychology*, 39(3), 539-556.

Wolff, N., Huening, J., Shi, J., Frueh, B. C., Hoover, D. R., & McHugo, G. (2015). Implementation and effectiveness of integrated trauma and addiction treatment for incarcerated men. *Journal of anxiety disorders*, 30, 66-80.

Yom, S., & Sammour, K. (2017). Counterterrorism and youth radicalization in Jordan: Social and political dimensions. *CTC Sentinel*, 10(4), 25-30.

**PARTICIPANTS IN THE VALIDATION MEETING:**

- Ministry of Home Affairs
- Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services
- Ministry of Education
- President’s Office
- National Drug Agency
- National Counter Terrorism Centre
- Department of Juvenile Justice
- Ministry of Islamic Affairs
- Maldives Correctional Service
- Juvenile Court

