

# **A National Survey on Perception Towards Radicalisation, Extremism and Terrorism Among Students of Higher Secondary Schools and Higher Education Institutions in the Maldives**

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# Acknowledgement

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We would like to thank UN Maldives for funding this research. We are also grateful to Major Ibrahim Thaufeeq from National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), and the Management of Islamic University of Maldives (IUM) for their input and support. Our gratitude extends to the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) for granting approval to collect data for this research from the Higher Secondary (HSec) schools and the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and also the principals and coordinators from the islands who assisted us as focal points during data collection. We are especially thankful to all the students from HSec schools and HEIs who gave generously from their time and enriched our data.

Finally, much appreciation to the research consultant and the research team for their immense contribution in conducting this study in a timely manner.

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# List of acronyms

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**HEIs** - Higher Education Institutions  
**HSec** - Higher Secondary  
**MoE** - Ministry of Education  
**NCTC** - National Counter Terrorism Center  
**MDG** - Millenium Development Goals  
**EFA** - Education for All  
**SDG** - Sustainable Development Goals  
**TVET** - Technical and Vocational Education and Training  
**BTEC** - Business and Technology Education Council  
**NCF** - National Curriculum Framework  
**MGT** - Multi-grade Teaching  
**NALO** - National Assessment of Learning Outcomes  
**MCHE** - Maldives College of Higher Education  
**MNU** - Maldives National University  
**IED** - Improvised Explosive Device  
**UK** - United Kingdom  
**CVE/PVE** - Countering Violent Extremism / Preventing Violent Extremism  
**ICT** - Information and Communication Technology  
**MNDF** - Maldives National Defense Force  
**NBER** - National Bureau of Economic Research  
**CNBC** - Consumer News and Business Channel  
**ISIS** - Islamic State in Iraq and Syria  
**YMAG** - Young Muslim Advisory Group  
**ATA** - Anti Terrorism Act  
**IUM** - Islamic University of Maldives  
**CHSE** - Center for Higher Secondary Education  
**VIHS** - Villa International High School  
**VC** - Villa College

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# Executive summary

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Recent terrorist attacks in the Maldives and in the neighboring Srilanka sheds light to the fact that educated youth are vulnerable to radicalisation, religious extremism, and terrorism. This study therefore, aims to determine perceptions of students in HSec Schools and HEIs towards radicalization, religious extremism and terrorism.

The respondents believed that political dissonance is the main cause of violent attacks in the Maldives. They highlighted that politicians promote their own self-interest and personal agendas causing mistrust and, on occasion, a source of frustration that results in violent reactions. Additionally, the perception of some respondents is that there exists a degree of neglect at policy level as it relates to religion and that this could also act as a catalyst for violent radicalisation.<sup>1</sup>

Many respondents considered themselves moderate, however, they differed regarding levels of religiosity within Maldivian society. Opinions were evenly divided with 33% respectively considering society to be moderate, liberal or extreme. They also observed that religious extremism and liberal views were prevalent across society. To elaborate on this point, respondents asserted that liberal views actually pose more of a danger to the Maldives than religious extremism.

There was consensus that violent terrorist attacks can never be justified. A majority of those interviewed stated that anyone causing harm to others cannot be considered a true Muslim. They justified their positions by highlighting Islam as a religion of peace that does not promote violence. Many respondents also highlighted social media as the main vehicle of exposure to radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. Although a minority of them noted a lack of trust towards some religious scholars, this was considered inconsequential within the wider context of religious education received from reliable sources throughout their formative education.

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to interviews under Law and Order section page 33



# Introduction

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The Maldives is a small island nation grouped into 26 atolls consisting of 1,190 coral islands (of which 199 are inhabited) dispersed across 90,000 square kilometres in the Indian Ocean. The population is under 385,000 occupying a total land area of 298 square kilometres making it one of the most densely populated countries in the world.<sup>2</sup> Maldives is a 100% Muslim country.

The Maldives is regarded globally as a safe, tranquil society with moderate Islamic views. It continues to be a popular tourist destination hosting millions of holidaymakers annually. Today, the country is very much an integral part of the global mosaic in terms of access and exposure to various ideologies and faith through education, the Internet and tourism. Consequently, the emergence of changing attitudes towards faith among youth has resulted in increasing gravitation across two polarised extremes; radicalised views of Islam and liberal views. Radicalisation and/or extremism within these ideological constructs are a cause for concern in view of potential trajectories that result in violence and subsequently, the threat to national security.

Although violent extremism and terrorism are classified as relatively low risk in the Maldives, several incidences in the recent past have involved violent attacks, placing the threat of terrorism in the spotlight insofar as it jeopardises the serenity for which the country is renowned.

## Significance of the research

One of the key factors through which the orientation of young people towards radicalisation, extremism and terrorism in the Maldives can be assessed is academic research. Unfortunately, nationwide research exploring this phenomenon is sparse and whatever exists has been conducted via a securitised lens by the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC). Access to

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<sup>2</sup> UNDESA (2015) *Maldives' Population Dynamics*, PRB. Available at: <https://www.prb.org/resources/maldives-population-dynamics/> (Accessed: 26 November 2021).

much of the literature compiled by this governmental entity is restricted for security purposes. Therefore, research of this nature is not only timely, but also a priority.

### Research objective

This research aims to explore perceptions of students of higher secondary school (HSec) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in relation to radicalisation, extremism and terrorism, in view of recent incidents involving violence and extremism in the country. Analysis of young people's perceptions in this regard will help towards obtaining a comprehensive understanding of youth mentality and identify potential factors that are contributory to dangerous beliefs and/or behaviours. The research objective can therefore be summarised as follows:

- To examine the perceptions of students in HSec Schools and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) towards radicalisation, extremism and terrorism.

### The context of education in the Maldives

Maldivians attach great importance to education.<sup>3</sup> Throughout history, education was provided at varying levels to the population. As a result of the strong and abiding commitment to education, the Maldives has made significant progress towards achieving its goals over the past decade, despite various environmental and global challenges.<sup>4</sup> There have been remarkable gains in access to education, witnessing a high adult literacy rate of 98% as a result, which was first achieved and maintained since 1999.<sup>5</sup> By 2002, universal primary education was achieved with only a small gender disparity. The Maldives became South Asia's only Millennium Development Goals (MDG+) country by achieving five out of eight MDGs in 2010.<sup>6</sup> More poignantly, the Maldives achieved Education for All (EFA)/ MDG targets for primary education well ahead of its target dates.

The Maldives is adopting the Sustainable Development Goal 4 - SDG 4 and its Framework for Action.<sup>7</sup> The SDG, Target 4.1 articulates: *“By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and Secondary education leading to relevant and effective*

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<sup>3</sup> MoE (2019) *Education sector analysis Maldives*. Available at: <https://support.moe.gov.mv/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EDUCATION-SECTOR-ANALYSIS ESA.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Latheef, M., & Gupta, A. (2007). Schooling in Maldives. In A. Gupta (Ed.), *Going to school in South Asia* (pp. 112–125). Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.4

<sup>6</sup> MoE (2020) *Maldives Education Response Plan*. Available at: [https://www.moe.gov.mv/assets/upload/Final\\_Maldives\\_ERP\\_for\\_Covid19\\_13.06.2020.pdf](https://www.moe.gov.mv/assets/upload/Final_Maldives_ERP_for_Covid19_13.06.2020.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO (2016) *Education 2030 Framework for Action to be formally adopted and launched*, UNESCO. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/education-2030-framework-action-be-formally-adopted-and-launched>

*learning outcomes.*” In the Maldives, under the National Curriculum Framework, minimum standards are already defined to be achieved by grade in three domains (English, Dhivehi and Mathematics).<sup>8</sup>

Despite these achievements, the Maldivian education system faces particular challenges. There is a lack of trained teachers due to a limited human resource base. As a result, the education system is heavily dependent on expatriate teachers from other South Asian countries who generally teach secondary grades. Additionally, providing equitable education resources across the country is a greater challenge due to the geographical and demographic features of the Maldives. Moreover, all the services by the state are heavily concentrated in the capital, Male’. Thus, Male’ schools have better teaching facilities and higher numbers of trained teachers compared to island schools.<sup>9</sup>

### **The education act**

The Education Act was ratified in 2020. The Act provides a framework that ensures equal rights and opportunities for children and adults to pursue education, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Maldives. The Education Act also embraces the fundamental pillars of education: establishing the rights of the students as well as teachers in regard to education; the responsibilities of the state, parents, and tutors. It further specifies other aspects of education, including guidelines and methods of education in the Maldives.

The Act is also designed to protect the rights of tutors alongside promoting the core values of Islam across the national curriculum. The Act emphasizes the importance of Islamic values and ensures human rights are safeguarded in a manner consistent with society’s religion.

### **An overview of the Maldivian education system**

Education and skills are provided in the Maldives through the following stages of the Education system:<sup>10</sup>

1. 2 years of Preschool Education
2. 7 years of Primary Education

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.4

<sup>9</sup> Di Biase, R. and Maniku, A.A. (2020) ‘Transforming Education in the Maldives: The Challenges of a Small Island Developing State’, in Sarangapani, P.M. and Pappu, R. (eds) Handbook of Education Systems in South Asia. Singapore: Springer Singapore (Global Education Systems), pp. 1–29. doi:10.1007/978-981-13-3309-5\_14-1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p4

3. 5 years of Secondary Education (3 years of Lower Secondary and 2 years of Higher Secondary)
4. Skills development (Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Education
5. Programs through colleges and universities (Fig. 1)

### Structure of the education system

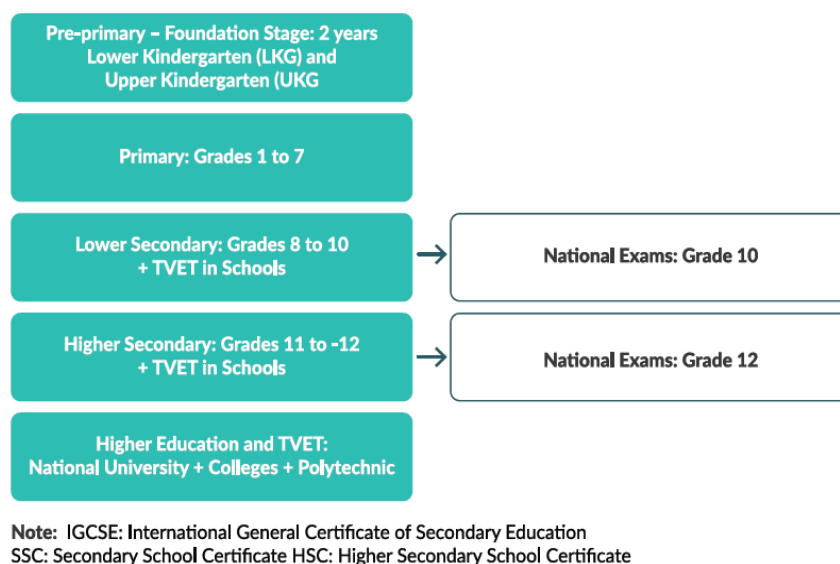


Figure 1: Structure of the Maldivian education system.<sup>11</sup>

There are four types of schools in the Maldives: government, community schools, public-private partnership schools, and private schools.<sup>12</sup> There are a total 348 schools and among these 198 are run by the government.<sup>13</sup> School education is offered at four levels: preschool, primary, lower secondary, and higher secondary as shown in Fig. 1.

Preschool has been an integral component of the formal education system since 2016. At the age of four, formal education begins with a structure of 2 years of preschool. Primary education begins at the age of six when children enter a 7-year cycle from Grade 1- 7. Lower Secondary education consists of 3 years; grades 8 -10 and higher secondary 2 years; Grades 11-12. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs are also offered through

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p4

<sup>12</sup> Di Biase R., Maniku A.A. (2020) Transforming Education in the Maldives. In: Sarangapani P., Pappu R. (eds) Handbook of Education Systems in South Asia. Global Education Systems. Springer, Singapore. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3309-5\\_14-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3309-5_14-1)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p4

the secondary education system and higher education programs in colleges and universities (Fig. 1).

An alternative to the national English medium education is offered via Arabic medium education. Madhrasathul Arabiyyathul Islaamiyya offers k-12 level classes. In addition, vocational education programs have been implemented successfully in schools. In 2018, Business and Technology Education Council

(BTEC) was offered in 178 schools at 2 different levels and Dhasvaaru in 162 schools. Moreover, one of the major success factors of the BTEC program is that schools have become increasingly proficient in the delivery, assessment, and verification of these courses.<sup>14</sup>

### Recent education policies and reforms

The Maldives witnessed the introduction of several reforms within the education sector by the time the international community migrated from MDGs to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. These reforms are in line with SDG 4 targets for improving quality and equity in education that are critical concerns at all levels of the system.<sup>15</sup> The recent policies and reforms include:

- The Inclusive Education Policy
- Diversification of Options at Secondary Level
- ICT in Education
- National Curriculum Framework (NCF) Reform
- Multi-grade Teaching (MGT)
- Pre-primary education integration in the public system
- National Assessment of Learning Outcomes (NALO)
- TVET in schools and outside schools

One of the major policy initiatives and education reforms is the implementation of a new National Curriculum Framework (NCF).<sup>16</sup> An overview of the NCF reform is presented.

### The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) reform

The Maldives national curriculum was introduced in 1984 and was revised in 2000. A major revision of the curriculum was undertaken in 2006 seeking to draw on educational best practices on curricula internationally.<sup>17</sup> The NCF is an outcomes-based curriculum promoting a holistic approach to education and is also underpinned by constructivist child-centered

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p6

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p7

<sup>16</sup> NIE. (2014). The national curriculum framework. Retrieved from [https://www.moe.gov.mv/assets/upload/National\\_Curriculum\\_Framework\\_English.pdf](https://www.moe.gov.mv/assets/upload/National_Curriculum_Framework_English.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> MoE (2019) *Education sector analysis Maldives*. Available at: <https://support.moe.gov.mv/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EDUCATION-SECTOR-ANALYSIS ESA.pdf>.

learning. The new NCF is based on eight key competencies and key learning areas and articulates effective pedagogical dimensions. Additionally, NCF promotes major pedagogical change in the system including changes in the way subjects are assessed. The map of the National Curriculum Framework is shown in Fig. 2 below:

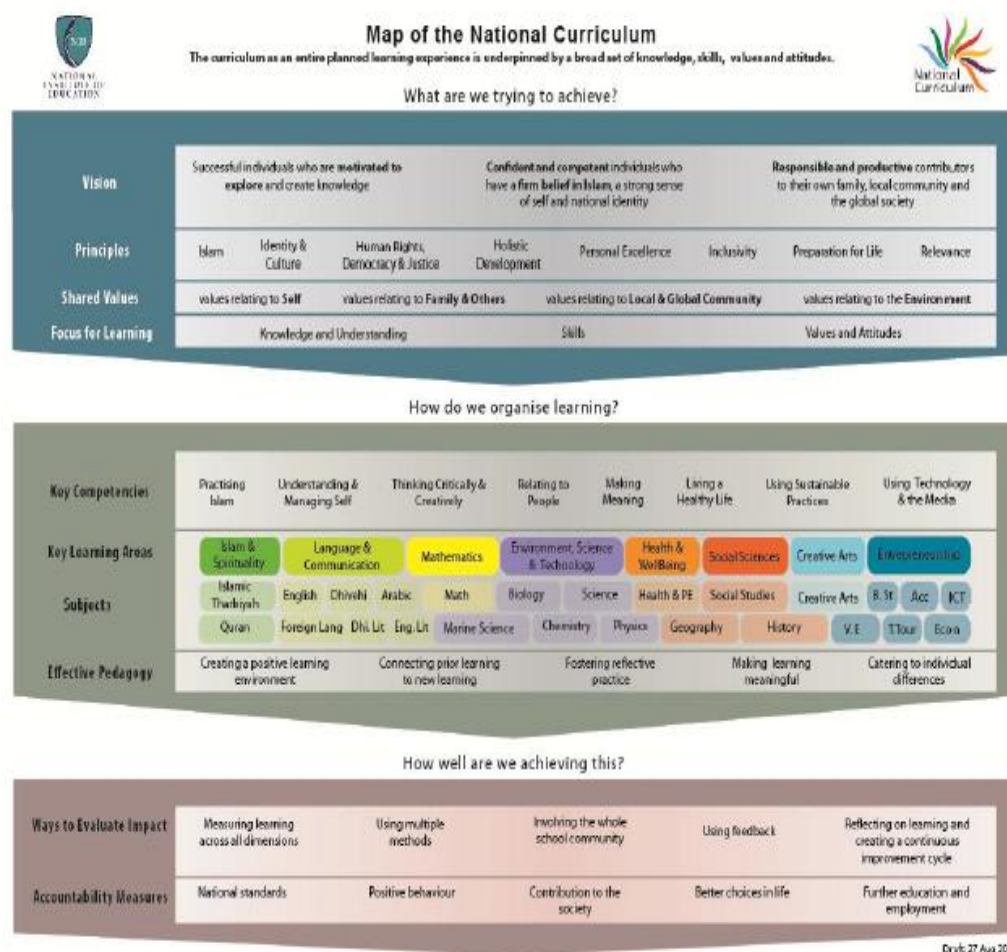


Figure 2: Map of National Curriculum

## Tertiary Education

Tertiary education started in the Maldives informally with the establishment of the vocational and trade center in 1974. Later in 1984, the Institution for Teacher Education was established. Afterwards, a tourism school for the development of the Tourism Industry was created in 1987. At the same time, along with the realization of the importance of training staff for public and private sectors, an Institute of Management and Administration was established as well. Additionally, in 1998 the Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE) was established and

provided a Bachelor's Degree.<sup>18</sup> Later in 1999, another faculty under the name of Institute of Shari'ah and Law was created. The MCHE was the only public degree granting institution in the Maldives in those times. Previously, the institute only offered degrees, diplomas, education, tourism, and management courses. In 2000, the College launched its first degree program. In February 2011, MCHE was upgraded to the Maldives National University (MNU) with 9 Faculties.<sup>19</sup> Initially, higher education was only provided in Male'; however, since then it has expanded to a further 17 areas.<sup>20</sup> That same year, the National University Act was passed. Initially, only 5 colleges were established. Today, there are a total of 192 higher education institutes in Maldives.<sup>21</sup> In addition to this, there are 9 government colleges and 1 government college and 2 government universities conducting a total of 843 programmes, including all the higher education institutes.<sup>22</sup>

### **Terrorism in the Maldives: An overview**

One of the earliest violent extremist attacks in the Maldives happened in Male' on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2009 wherein a homemade bomb was detonated in Sultan Park wounding 12 foreign tourists.<sup>23</sup> The attack according to authorities was motivated by a group of local individuals with extremist views.

Another significant incident motivated by extremist views was the abduction in 2014 of prominent journalist Rilwan Abdulla who openly expressed his views on secularism and extremism. To date, he has not been found and assumptions have developed surrounding his abduction by an extremist entity that regarded his journalism and positions regarding secularism and extremism particularly offensive.<sup>24</sup>

Another high-profile attack with extremist implications concerns the gruesome murder of liberal blogger, Yameen Rasheed in 2017 by a local group that rejected his liberal positions on

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p4

<sup>19</sup> The Maldives National University (nd). Available at: <https://mnu.edu.mv/history/>

<sup>20</sup> Higher Education Statistics (2019) Available at: <https://www.mohe.gov.mv/images/resources/resources/Higher%20Education%20Statistics%202019.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p9

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p9

<sup>23</sup> Makan, A. (2007) 'Bomb Blast wounds 12 in Maldives Capital,' Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-maldives-explosion-idUSCOL8415420070929> [accessed 25th November 2021]

<sup>24</sup> Junayd, M.(2019) 'Commission says Maldives journalist was murdered by Islamists militants,' Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-maldives-rights-journalist-idUKKCN1VN0E8> [accessed 25th November 2021]



various issues shared across social media platforms.<sup>25</sup> According to reports, he was threatened on several occasions prior to his murder. Information released by the police about the assailants highlighted the young age of the culprits behind Rasheed's murder; however, the actual motivation behind this crime remains unclear.<sup>26</sup>

The most recent attack occurred on May 6th, 2021 against the Speaker of the Parliament and ex-president Mohamed Nasheed. An IED hidden in a motorcycle within the vicinity was detonated using a remote control as he walked towards his vehicle. He sustained serious injuries along with his bodyguards, tourists and other pedestrians in close proximity. Fortunately, nobody was killed. The investigation is ongoing so details are unclear as to the motive behind this incident, however, it possesses the hallmarks of a terrorist attack.<sup>27</sup>

Further afield - but still connected to the Maldives - are the number of reports regarding young Maldivians leaving the islands to travel and participate in what they have perceived to constitute jihad in trouble spots/war zones like Syria. More recent updates include details regarding several of these youths being detained by the police in the Maldives or other countries as they attempted to travel to these destinations.

Incidences like those described above have been extremely rare in the Maldives until recently. Since the first attack in Sultan Park in 2009, similar incidents have escalated at a rate that have become an increasing cause for concern. In fact, this and more recent incidents are now considered indicative of the severity of the threat to the country's national security.

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<sup>25</sup> Moosa, M; Schultz, K. (2017) 'Outspoken Maldives Blogger who challenged Radical Islamists is killed,' New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html> [accessed 25th November 2021]

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Sub Committee, National Security Services (July 2021) 'Report on how the inquiry on 6th May 2021 was carried out'



# Literature Review

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## Understanding terminology: The nuances and pitfalls

The research focus aims to evaluate target audience perceptions of three significant and often interrelated aspects of terminology around which governments, academics or practitioners have reached no consensus. Existing terminologies continue to be referenced with an approach encompassing a ‘one type fits all’ approach as highlighted by academic and counter extremism expert, Peter Neuman during the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence convened in London in 2008:

*The idea of radicalisation is a relatively recent one. As late as the early 2000's, hardly any reference to radicalisation could be found in academic literature on terrorism and political violence. The term was used casually, but little was done to systematically develop it into a conceptual tool through which to understand the process that may lead individuals to support violent extremism. Even now, the term continues to lack definition.... Some critics have voiced their concern that the idea of radicalisation could be used to criminalise protest, discredit any form of 'radical thinking' and label political dissent as potentially dangerous.<sup>28</sup>*

To further emphasise continuing challenges surrounding the confluence of terminologies with various interpretations and applications, the following observation will suffice:

*Terrorism is defined by law as a serious crime and subsequently treated as a clear and present danger... Radicalisation and subsequent expression of extreme opinions, on the other hand, are to be considered as an exercise of constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech and/or as an expression of the freedom of religion – and thus to be tolerated.<sup>29</sup>*

When considering the above-mentioned classification of radicalisation, it is important to identify additional categorisations that emerged relatively recently in an attempt to distinguish between potential trajectories of non-violence and violence. Research and analyses conducted by authors of the UK think-tank, Demos observed:

*Terrorists, radicals and young Muslims had all experienced some degree of societal exclusion, had a distrust of government, a hatred for foreign policy, many felt a disconnection from their local community, and many have had*

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<sup>28</sup> Neuman, P. (2008) ‘Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence’ The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence; Papers from the First International Conference’ (ICSR), London, p.3

<sup>29</sup> Fraihi, T (2008) ‘(De-)Escalating Radicalisation: The Debate within Muslim Immigrant Communities’, taken from ‘Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe’, Ashgate Publishing Ltd. Chapter 12, p.138

*an identity crisis of sorts. Of particular note was a high level of distrust among young Muslims towards policing and intelligence agencies, with obvious implications for counter- radicalisation efforts. However, young Muslims and radicals also felt genuine affection for Western values of tolerance and pluralism, system of government, and culture. Terrorists, on the other hand, were unique in their loathing of Western society and culture. Interestingly, radicals were more likely than terrorists to have been involved in political protest, to have studied at university (and studied humanities or arts subjects) and to have been employed.<sup>30</sup>*

The dichotomy between non-violent and violent has been extended across the terminologies focused on throughout this research. Non-violent and violent radicalisation, alongside non-violent and violent extremism have become familiar terminology utilised to differentiate between low and high risk actors:

*Being radical is not always the first step on the path to violence. In fact, radicalisation that leads to violence can be distinguished by different indicators from those that indicate purely 'religious', non-violent radicalisation.<sup>31</sup>*

Additionally, the Demos authors observed:

*Becoming a terrorist was not always a natural or linear progression from being a radical. Those who turned to violence often followed a path of radicalisation which was characterised by a culture of violence, in-group peer pressure, and an internal code of honour where violence can be a route to accruing status.<sup>32</sup>*

Interestingly, the differentiation and nuances regarding such terminologies do not appear to extend toward terrorism. Academic literature, alongside government policy and law, fail to make a similar distinction between *non-violent* terrorism and *violent* terrorism. Within the context of CVE/PVE, questions could therefore be posed regarding the consistency of using such delineation as part of the same terminology used with radicalisation and extremism. Additionally, and of equal import, is the plethora of evidence surrounding forms of non-violent terrorism to support this distinction.<sup>33</sup> Instead, a more religiously nuanced description has emerged among academic, political and securitised vocabulary; that of *non-violent Jihad* and

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<sup>30</sup> Bartlett, J; Birdwell, J & King, M (2010) 'The Edge of Violence: A Radical Approach to Extremism,' Demos, p. 10

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.13

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.12

<sup>33</sup> Ganor, B.(2008) 'Terrorism as a Strategy of Psychological Warfare,' Taylor & Francis Online, pp. 33-43

violent Jihad, utilising faith-based scriptural texts and narratives as justification to incorporate such terminology.<sup>34 35</sup>

Contrasting the differentiation between terminologies of terrorism and Jihad with those of radicalisation and extremism, serves to illustrate a lack of consistency and absence of uniform principles applied to language around vitally important concepts that are often conflated with one another and/or at most, misapplied due to a lack of consensus regarding the succinctness of their meanings and subsequent application. This research aims to avoid such conflation through clear demarcations of key terminologies referred to, using data extrapolated with the primary objective of providing respondents with an opportunity to articulate their respective understandings of the three terminologies in question (radicalisation, extremism and terrorism).

### Age of cognisance and radicalisation

Research suggests that vulnerable youth are actively engaged in acts of violent radicalisation and terrorism. This is consistent across all regions and cultures worldwide. For example, in Mauritania those arrested for terrorist related acts were aged between 16 and 24 whereas in the Middle East, males between 15 and 25 were more likely to be involved in terrorism and acts of violence.<sup>36</sup> Research also identified that youth are aware and concerned about the issue of radicalisation. For instance, specific research exploring perspectives of Pakistani university students on terrorism and associated violence revealed teenagers were concerned about domestic catalysts of extremism, and that their respective places of origin have impacted on their personal experiences.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Daily Hadith Online: 'Start with Jihad against your own soul.' Available at: <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2018/03/20/abdullah-ibn-amr-jihad-al-nafs/> [accessed on 10th November 2021]

<sup>35</sup> The Holy Quran, Chapter 2, (Al Baqarah - The Cow - verse 216) - Also known as the Verse of the Sword

<sup>36</sup> Hutson, R., Long, T. and Page, M. (2009) 'Pathways to Violent Radicalisation in the Middle East: A Model for Future Studies of Transnational Jihad', *The RUSI Journal*, 154(2), pp. 18–26. doi:10.1080/03071840902965570.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmed, Z.S., Yousaf, F. and Zeb, K. (2018) 'Socio-economic and Political Determinants of Terrorism in Pakistan: University Students' Perceptions', *International Studies*, 55(2), pp. 130–145. doi:10.1177/0020881718790689.

## Youth familiarity with radicalisation, extremism and terrorism

It is important to clarify the extent to which young people are prepared to consciously engage in acts of extremism based on “*ideational considerations*”<sup>38</sup> and the “*degree of consciousness of the ideational motives for extremism*”<sup>39</sup> can be evaluated on the basis of how much young people understand radicalisation, extremism and terrorism.

A study conducted to examine the perception of youth regarding radicalisation in the Western Balkan region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia) revealed that radicalisation and violent extremism, as well as multiculturalism and social cohesiveness, were all terms that the young people were familiar with in Albania. Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia however, connected 'radicalisation' with terms such as 'radical social changes', and 'extremism'. Many interlocutors are unable to explain the term and demonstrated a lack of knowledge of these terminologies. Others, particularly Bosnian youth explained their understandings using descriptions and examples but were unable to provide any formal or theoretical references. This could be because the majority of the adolescents interviewed in the study had never discussed radicalisation with friends, family, or professors before.

Unlike the above mentioned countries, young people interviewed in Kosovo did not consider religious-based radicalisation as an immediate concern or threat. However, they took issue with so-called returnees from combat zones returning to Kosovo. This trend resulted in an increase in Islamophobia, with reports of prejudice against women wearing hijab, males with long beards, and men wearing [short] trousers (symbols distinguishing pious religious practitioners). Islamophobia is also an issue in the Balkans. In a particular study conducted in Britain, it was revealed that a section of Asian Muslims were utilising their physical appearance as a means of resistance to anti-Muslim speech or Islamophobia. This was particularly manifested by Muslim women wearing the Hijab and men growing beards alongside wearing religious caps. Rather than moving toward a more violent ideology, these young Muslims appeared to be undergoing a type of cultural identity transformation.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Zubok, Iu.A. and Chuprov, V.I. (2010) 'The Nature and Characteristics of Youthful Extremism', *Russian Education & Society*, 52(1), pp. 45–68. doi:10.2753/RES1060-9393520104. p35

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.13

<sup>40</sup> Abbas, T. and Siddique, A. (2012) 'Perceptions of the processes of radicalisation and de-radicalisation among British South Asian Muslims in a post-industrial city', *Social Identities*, 18(1), pp. 119–134. doi:10.1080/13504630.2011.629519.

## Drivers of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism

Research on violent radicalisation and violent extremism have resulted in a vast and continually growing list of risk factors that could lead to terrorism. In support of this assertion,<sup>41</sup> in their study on South Asian Muslims identified factors like the 'war on terror,' as well as other worldwide crises now affecting Muslim countries, pointing out that these have the potential to radicalise particular sections of Muslim communities in the UK. They also identified exclusion, anti-Islamism and discrimination as other drivers of potential radicalisation and extremism. With specific reference to political violence,<sup>42</sup> highlight that moral violent extremist ideas, a lack of self-control and exposure to violent situations contribute to political and religious violence.

## Comparative parallels

To date, terrorism directed towards foreign visitors in the Maldives remains minimal; however, attempted attacks on the local population and societal infrastructure appear to be on the increase.<sup>43</sup> Parallels between these attacks and other societies that have and continue to experience similar acts of terrorism can yield important lessons, highlighting possible trajectories for further violence and measures to counteract them. For example, the high-profile killing of blogger, Yameen Rasheed on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017<sup>44</sup> as a result of his social media posts conveying socially liberal perspectives can be juxtaposed with the satirical Charlie Hebdo magazine killings in France on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2015, when gunmen stormed the offices and murdered staff due to a publication that depicted and defamed Prophet Muhammed.<sup>45</sup> While there remain wider and ongoing issues surrounding western media depictions of Prophet Muhammed, the example in this instance is still predicated by liberal manifestations defending freedom of speech where such contentious perspectives continue to be vocalised. This

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>42</sup> Schils, N. and Pauwels, L.J.R. (2016) 'Political Violence and the Mediating Role of Violent Extremist Propensities', *Journal of Strategic Security*, 9(2), pp. 70–91. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26466777> (Accessed: 26 November 2021).

<sup>43</sup> Pantucci, R; Siyech, M S. (2021) 'Targeting of a former president highlights the growing challenge of extremism in Maldives,' Observer Research Foundation. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/targeting-of-a-former-president-highlights-the-growing-challenge-of-extremism-in-maldives/> [accessed 25th November 2021]

<sup>44</sup> Moosa, H & Schultz, K.(2017) 'Outspoken Maldives Blogger Who Challenged Radical Islamists Is Killed,' The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> March 2021]

<sup>45</sup> BBC News (2015) 'Charlie Hebdo attack: Three days of terror.' Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237> [accessed 30th March 2021]

inalienable right is not only enshrined in laws across western democracies but is also, more recently, championed by more liberally inclined entities among predominantly Muslim societies where religion remains sacrosanct and blasphemy laws have largely been consigned as marginal if not redundant. Within this climate, liberal perspectives that challenge the status quo are also likely to be deemed another form of extremism by the more socially conservative sections of society and among this population, an even more insular, marginalised cohort that may already be radicalised, will proceed along a similar trajectory of violence to those examples cited earlier. It is this latter entity where focused interventions at both government and civic society levels are urgently required in order to preempt a downward spiral towards extremism. The following three-dimensional illustration in figure 3 shows the positioning of particular communities societally and the ‘*gravitational pull*,’ towards violent radicalisation. The framework also highlights the most critical stage where a radicalised individual is considered most vulnerable to violent extremism:<sup>46</sup>

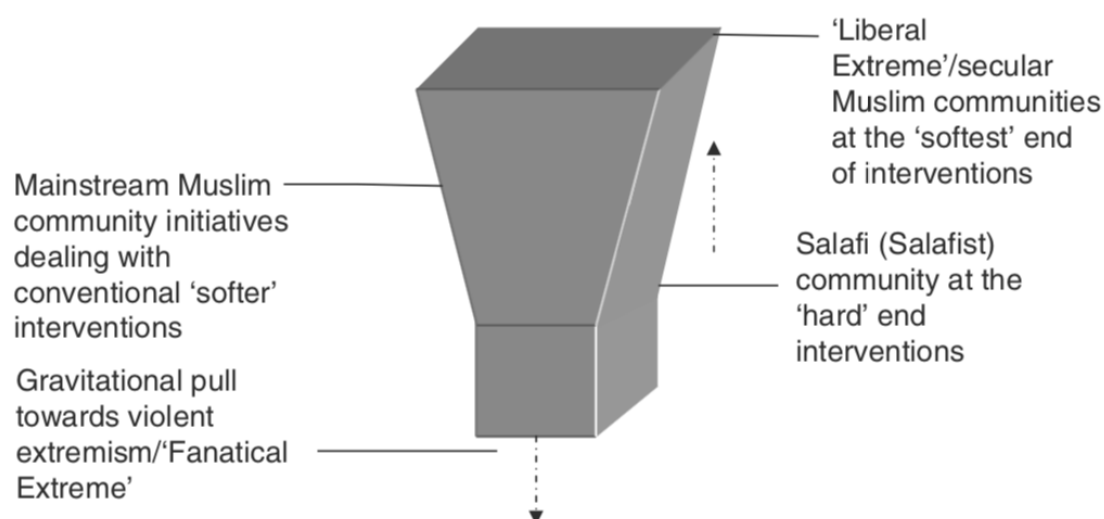


Figure 3: The funnel model

## Risk and education

The general assumption is that those who engage in terrorist activity are low skilled. Several research shows this not to be the case. For example,<sup>47</sup> highlighted in a recent article, that

<sup>46</sup> Baker, A H (2011) ‘Extremists in Our Midst: Confronting Terror,’ Palgrave MacMillan

<sup>47</sup> Ayub, S. (2017) Why does a university-educated student turn to terrorism? - Pakistan - DAWN.COM. Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1327546> (Accessed: 26 November 2021).

education does not prevent militancy, nor is it restricted to the disadvantaged,<sup>48</sup> He refers to Sindh's Counter Terrorism Department's report describing 64 militants imprisoned in Sindh state obtaining Master's degree while another 70 inmates attained Bachelor's degrees.<sup>49</sup> Sageman's<sup>50</sup> research included 172 biographies of Jihadists highlighting that more than 60% of them possessed undergraduate degrees. Additionally, a further 88% of the group leaders had obtained higher degrees with 20% of them possessing PhDs.

Schools and universities are cited as places of recruitment in some research. The Home Affairs Committee<sup>51</sup> (2012) revealed three potential platforms where extremists recruit their members, namely; prisons, the internet and the school environment. In addition, university campuses were found to be central locations for extremist activities.<sup>52</sup> Social media and the internet are also cited in literature as contributory factors of radicalisation. According to one study, individuals possessing a high propensity for political violence are more likely to be exposed to extremist propaganda on social media.<sup>53</sup>

## Opposition and prohibition of academic education

The latest intelligence operation that resulted in the MNDF arresting 8 suspects, who planned to detonate IEDs in Th. Atoll's education centre on Thimarafushi Island while students participated in Cambridge 'O' Level examinations, is further evidence of an increasing trend to target local sites and interests.<sup>54</sup> However, this thwarted attack symbolises a widening of targets extending to the educational sector. This is synonymous with another terrorist organisation that originates from an altogether different global region. The targeting of

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<sup>48</sup> Anwar, M. (2017) Pakistan's Emerging Threat: Highly Educated Youth Gravitate to Radicalization, VOA. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-emerging-threat-highly-educated-youth-gravitate-to-radicalization/3840686.html> (Accessed: 26 November 2021).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p15

<sup>50</sup> Sageman, S (2004) Understanding Terror Networks,' Available at: <https://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/14036.html>

<sup>51</sup> Home Affairs Committee 2012, *Roots of Violent Radicalisation*; The Stationery Office Limited, London, UK, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhaff/1446/1446.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Latif, A 2006, 'Democratization and Radicalization in Iraqi Campuses', *Iraqi Prospect Organisation*: Baghdad, Iraq.

<sup>53</sup> Extremist Propaganda in Social Media: A Threat to Homeland Security (no date) Routledge & CRC Press. Available at: <https://www.routledge.com/Extremist-Propaganda-in-Social-Media-A-Threat-to-Homeland-Security/Erbschloe/p/book/9780367779078> (Accessed: 26 November 2021).

<sup>54</sup> The Sun Newspaper (2021) 'Police seek charges against 8 arrested in Thimarafushi plot.' Available at: <https://en.sun.mv/64957>. [accessed 25th November 2021]

educational institutions has been the *raison d'être* of the Nigerian based terrorist organisation, Boko Haram (translated to mean western education is forbidden):

*Boko Haram's brutal leader, Abubakar Shekau, has never hidden his disdain for formal education. Before the group even began kidnapping students, he warned they "will not allow adulterated conventional education (Boko) to replace Islamic teachings," and he reinforced those words during a statement claiming responsibility for the 2014 Chibok abductions when he said, "Western education should end." <sup>55</sup>*

Earlier examples of extremists actively seeking to prohibit academic education can be seen in the case of Shukri Mustapha in Egypt. Al-Mutairi refers to the prohibition of education and advocacy of illiteracy as one of the extremists' behavioural characteristics.<sup>56</sup> This extreme trait became prominent and was considered identical to the Taliban's ascendancy to power in Afghanistan during the late 90s and up until their demise following the US led coalition's 'War on Terror' in October 2001. Al-Mutairi, highlights Shukri Mustafa's justification for eschewing education in preference for illiteracy and correctly counters the latter's claim while, at the same time, contextualising the misapplication of the prophetic narratives (hadeeth) cited by him:<sup>57</sup>

*Forbidding attaining knowledge via newly introduced means, such as colleges...is also forbidding something while there is no evidence for that prohibition. Hence, it is also a form of extremism.<sup>58</sup>*

Further examples in this regard are witnessed in Juhyaman Al Utaybi's group in Saudi Arabia during the mid to late 1970s that eschewed public school education. Prior to storming the Holy Mosque in Mecca on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1979, his group declared its rejection of public schools:

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<sup>55</sup> Obaji Jnr, P. (2021) 'Boko Haram Won't Stop Targeting Schools in Nigeria,' Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/23/boko-haram-nigeria-kidnappings-school-children/> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> March 2021]

<sup>56</sup> Mustafa, S (2001) *Kitaab al-Khilaafah*, vol.3, p.20 cited in Al- Mutairi, Dr. A R M L: 'Religious Extremism in the Lives of Contemporary Muslims' translated by Zarabozo, J M M, Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, pp.488-506

<sup>57</sup> Baker, AH (2010) 'Contemporary Takfeerism and its relation to historical extremist ideology and movements.' Available at: <https://www.abdulhaqqbaker.com/wp-content/uploads/Part-8.pdf> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> March 2021]

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.494



*Another sign of the Salafi Group's estrangement from mainstream society was its rejection of public school. One Salafi treatise claimed that public schools disobeyed God because they tolerated images...*<sup>59</sup>

### **Legal framework on counter terrorism in Maldives**

Terrorism did not become an actual issue in the Maldives until 2007. The Male' Sultan Park bombing and the Himandhoo Island mosque attack on 6 October 2007 compelled the Maldivian government to confront the reality of the country's society's polarisation and increasing intolerance towards other cultures and ideas, prompting policymakers to develop a policy to combat extremism in the country.<sup>60</sup>

In 2009, it was discovered that terrorism had increased in various parts of the country, including vandalism, where a rock was thrown at Holiday Inn's Head Office building in Male', where a permit to sell alcohol had been applied for. Further examples of perceived intolerance can be cited in the case of the deportation of an American family to the island of Kinbidhoo in Thaa atoll for allegedly spreading Christianity. Yet another example, provides an account of a bomb detonated during a music concert that was held as part of a Muslim festival.<sup>61</sup> According to the 2015 Country Reports on Terrorism, 50 Maldivians were prepared to fight alongside foreign terrorists, while some placed this figure at 200. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), one out of every 500 Maldivians has joined an extremist group in the Middle East and up to 2020, the Maldives had the world's second highest per capita of people fighting for ISIS. CNBC has estimated that 48 per cent of the Maldivians who travelled to Syria had criminal records and 39 per cent were members of criminal gangs.<sup>62 63</sup>

The phenomenon of young people travelling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS affected a significant number of Muslim and non-Muslim societies. A myriad of research into the reasons for young people – including a number of women – has been conducted, revealing drivers such as disillusionment with their respective societies and the subsequent pursuit of a utopian ideal, falsely offered by ISIS propaganda:

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<sup>59</sup> al-Huzaimi, N. (2021) 'The Mecca Uprising: An Insider's Account of Salafism and Insurrection in Saudi Arabia,' translated by David Commins, IB Taurus, p. 57

<sup>60</sup> Niyaz, A. (2010) 'Terrorism and Exterism: Threat to Maldives tourism Industry'. Available at: <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/UNIS/article/download/UNIS1010330221A/26960>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p18

<sup>62</sup> Maldives: Extremism & Counter-Extremism. *Counter-Extremism Project*. 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Strategic Territorial Regional Alliance & Partnership proposal, p. 1, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2021

*...the UK was shocked at the disappearance and subsequent reemergence of three biological sisters and nine of their children travelling to live in the so-called Islamic State. They left behind husbands and other extended family in Bradford to reside with their brother, a British ISIS fighter. Even more recently, another British mother of three went missing, suspected of travelling to ISIS controlled territory.*<sup>64</sup>

In order to address the above as well as the influx of Foreign Returning Fighters and their families, civil society and grassroots actors, alongside government and security agencies are required to implement a comprehensive strategy of engagement among marginalised sections of society, adopting measures of good practice from other societies that have addressed similar challenges. It is evident from NCTC's National Action Plan that significant steps have been taken to mitigate these challenges.

The above-mentioned incidents and threats led the Maldives government to a realisation that the country lacked a comprehensive legal framework to combat terrorism.

In recognising the necessity of preventing terrorism, the first Act based on the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Act (Act No. 10/2014) was passed and ratified in 2015, resulting in the establishment of the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) in 2016.<sup>65</sup> The vision of the NCTC is "*mandated to coordinate the Maldives' 'whole-of-society' counter-terrorism and counter-violent extremism efforts,*" as derived from the Presidential decree and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (32/2015), as well as other laws and directives. Other Acts that have been passed include the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Act No. 32/2015), the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Act No. 32/2015) Amendment 1 (1-2016).

In addition to this, a national strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism was developed outlining the Maldives' efforts to prevent violent extremism and its aim to build a more cohesive society, strengthening and empowering more resilient communities in the process.<sup>66</sup> Additionally in October 2019, the government strengthened the Anti Terrorism Act (ATA) in by enacting an amendment. The amendment called for the creation of a rehabilitation and reintegration center for returning Maldivian fighters from Syria and Afghanistan, with a separate provision for women and children deemed victims who had not participated in terrorist

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<sup>64</sup> Baker, A H 'Jihad Jane, Jihadi Brides & Jamie: Idealistic Commonalities.' Available at: <https://www.abdulhaqqbaker.com/jihad-jane-jihad-jamie-jihadi-brides-idealistic-commonalities/> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> March 2021]

<sup>65</sup> (Permanent Mission of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations — Statement by H.E. Dr. Ibrahim Zuhuree, Deputy Permanent Representative at the Plenary on Agenda item 38: Question of Palestine, 2020)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p19

activity. The government continues to take steps in order to ensure terrorism does not proliferate, thereby threatening the Maldives security even further.

# Research methodology

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## Study design and population

This is a population-based survey designed to get an overall picture of perceptions of students from HSec School and HEIs in Maldives on radicalization, extremism and terrorism. The study also included interviews with selected survey respondents from the survey population mentioned above so as to get an emic perspective regarding the issue under investigation. Therefore, the research design chosen for this study is an explanatory sequential mixed method. In this design, the research results from the survey (first phase: quantitative aspect) will be used to identify areas and issues to inform the interview process (second phase: qualitative aspect).

## First phase: quantitative aspect

Multistage Cluster Sampling was used to select the required sample for the study. Cluster sampling is used since a complete list of the members of a population cannot be attained easily and a simple random sample may produce a list of survey respondents so widely scattered across the islands that surveying them would be far too expensive. Hence, for logistical purposes a cluster sampling approach was utilized for this research.

## Sampling technique

The study population comprised all the students from the HSec schools and selected HEIs (IUM, MNU, VC and atoll campuses of the three institutions) in the 18 clusters (Atolls) identified.

A multi-stage cluster sampling technique was used to select the overall study Atolls (see Appendix). At the first stage of sampling the two main study groups were divided into two main clusters; higher secondary grade 12 students and Higher Education Institution students.

At the second stage (for Higher secondary) 18 Atolls where higher education was available were identified to select individual schools and survey respondents. Hence, 17 schools were selected using systematic sampling methods (see Appendix). From the HEI cluster, 7 Atolls were selected to select students for participation. At the third stage, schools and HEIs were

selected through systematic sampling and finally at the fourth stage, proportionate stratified sampling was used to select the male and female survey respondents.

### **Sample size**

The sample sizes for survey respondents were determined with consideration to whether HSec/HEI is available in the selected islands. Sample size was calculated using the Raosoft sample size calculator with 95% confidence level. From the 18 Atolls, 17 schools were selected (see Appendix) using systematic sampling method. The total population of grade 12 students in the Maldives at the time of the data collection was 1,765 (School statistics, 2019) and from the 18 Atolls, 10 HEIs were selected (see Appendix). The actual sample size according to Raosoft online sample size calculator is 316. Therefore, the survey questionnaire was administered for 316 respondents.

### **Second Phase: Qualitative Aspect**

Once the data from the first (quantitative) aspect were collected and analysed, interviews were conducted with those who indicated willingness to continue in the second phase.

### **Selection of interviewees**

A total of 20 interviewees were selected based on purposive sampling. Among these interviewees, 06 were from Male' campus and 08 were from outer atolls (MNU, IUM and VC). The remaining 06 interviewees were from HSec schools in Male' and outer atolls (see Appendix).

Ten interviews were conducted via Google Meet video conference for atolls with Covid restrictions on travelling and ten face-to-face interviews were conducted in Hdh. Kulhudufush and in the greater Male' Region.

## **Data collection instruments**

### **Questionnaire**

A close-ended questionnaire was formulated for data collection. The questionnaire contains 5 sections; Demographics, Faith and Belief, Terminology/ labels, Maldivian society and personal experience (see Appendix). The survey respondents were given the choice of completing the questionnaire either in Dhivehi (local language) or English, whichever is their preference.

The instrument was pilot tested for accuracy and level of comprehension with a minimum of 50 sample size range with a similar sample who are not part of the original research and necessary amendments were brought to it before using for data collection.

The Dhivehi translation followed the back to back translation procedure where the English questionnaire was translated to Dhivehi first and then back translated to ensure there is alignment between two translations.

### **Interview guide**

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview guide was prepared.

### **Data collection procedure**

A Google form was prepared and the link was sent to selected focal points in the schools and campuses selected for the study. The focal points assisted in administering the questionnaire. Data coding of the questionnaires was also prepared. Once the results of the questionnaire were obtained, a semi structured interview guide was prepared for interviewing.

### **Data entry and data cleaning**

The data from the completed questionnaires underwent a process of data checking to ensure that invalid data was eliminated. Data error reports were generated and there was close interaction with the survey respondents for data validation.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcribed interviews went through a coding process using Atlas- ti to identify key themes arising from the interviews and these are discussed in connection with the results obtained from the questionnaire.

## Limitation

Limitations to the scope of this research include restrictions arising due to ongoing constraints of movement and social interaction due to the Covid19 pandemic. Nevertheless, a subset of students were selected to participate from 8 geographical regions throughout the Maldives. However, the research team was only able to physically interview a small section of the target audience on one island while conducting others online. This invariably impacted on the quality of interview data obtained insofar as face-to-face engagement yielded more in-depth empirical data as a result of direct interaction between interviewers and interviewees.

# Analysis of Results

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## Demographic Information

### Gender

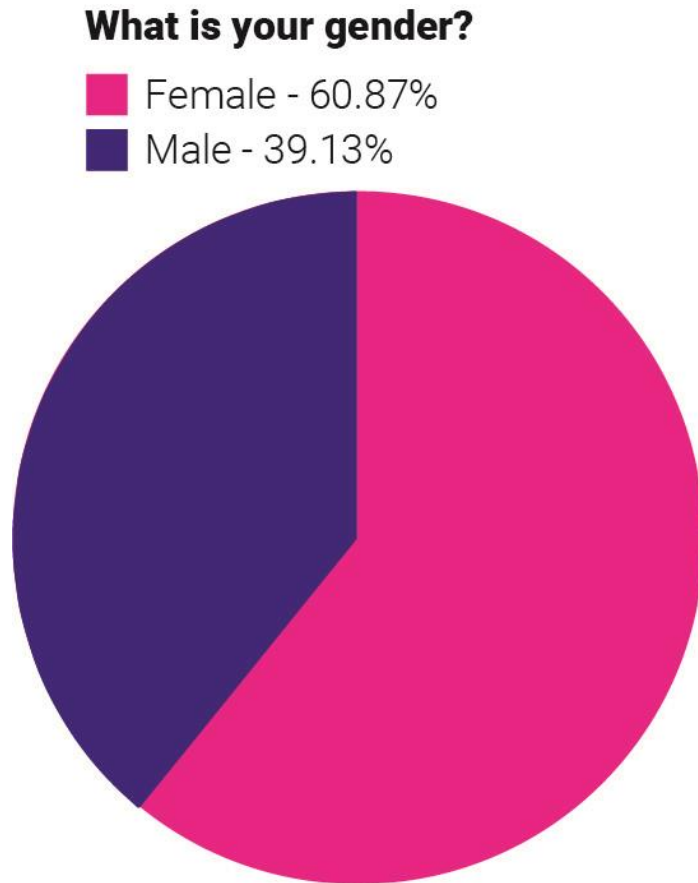


Figure 4: Gender

As evident from the pie chart above, the respondents comprise of grade 12 and Higher Education Institutions education students. This data shows that the majority of the respondents are females at 60.87% while the remaining 39.13% comprises males. Similar to other research within a Maldivian societal context, the number of female respondents outnumbers the males.



## Age of respondents

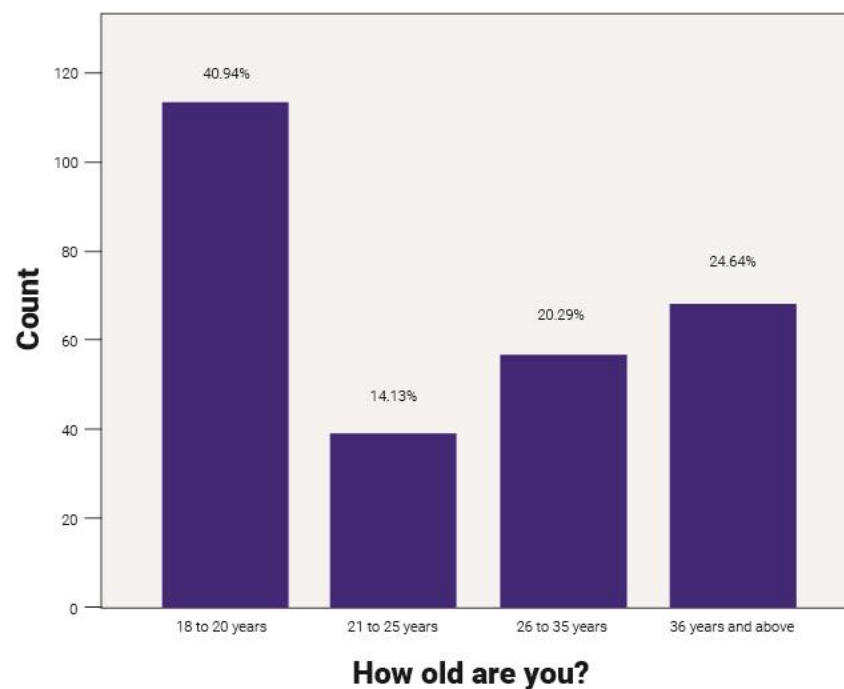


Figure 5: Age of respondents

Figure 5 illustrates participant age groups in the survey conducted. These survey respondents comprise of grade 12 and Higher Education Institutions education students. This data highlights that the majority of the responses were provided by the 18 to 20 year group (40.94%), followed by 36 years and above (24.64%), and 26 to 35 years (20.29%) with the 21 to 25 years age range being the lowest (14.13%). However, when combining the above 20 age groups, 21 to 25 years with 26 to 35 years and 36 years and above, their collective response supersedes the 18 to 20 cohort (58%). Higher Education Institutions students in this regard therefore provide the majority of data.

## Grade Level and Area of Study

Figure 6: Grade level

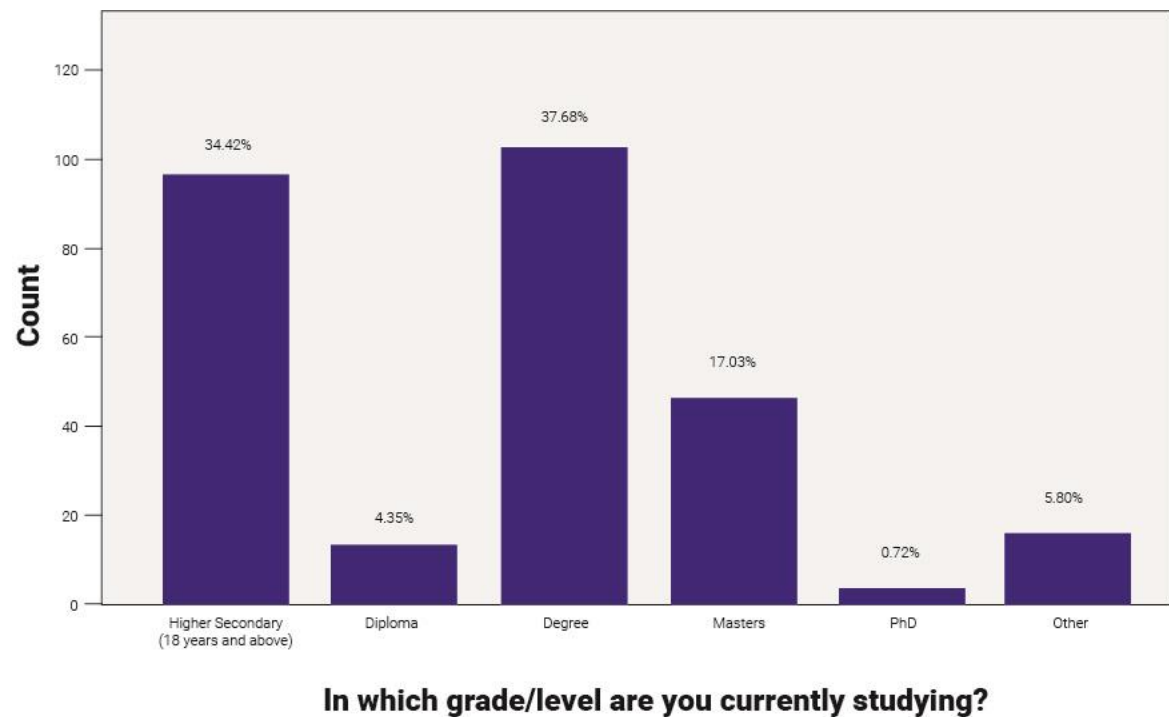


Figure 7: Area of study

### What is your area of study?

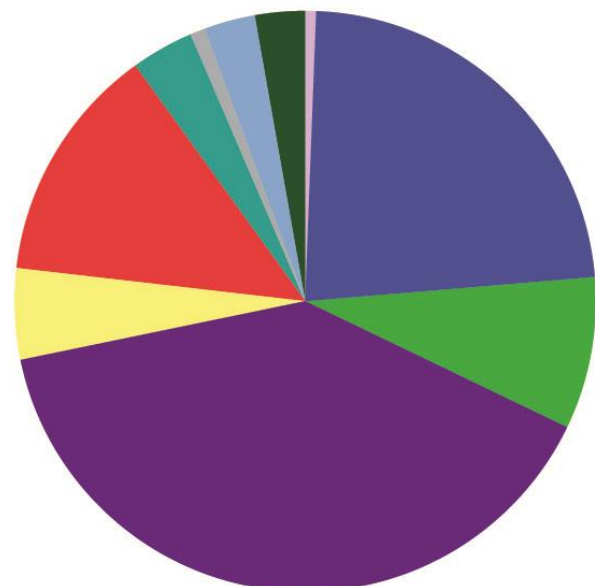
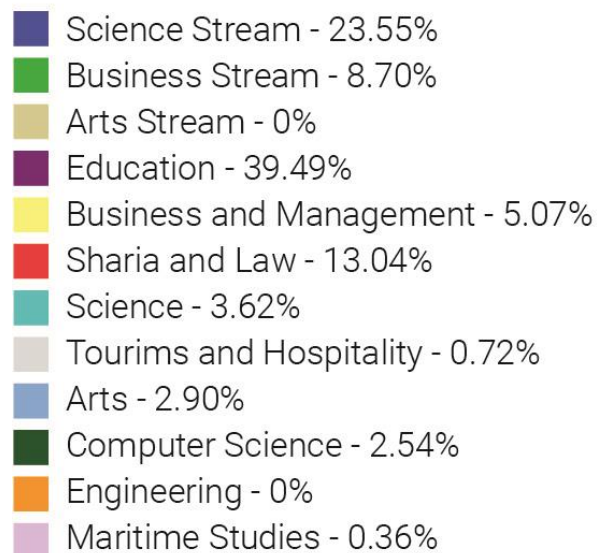


Figure 6 confirms the grade levels of survey respondents in the survey. Data shows that 34.42% are from higher secondary, 4% from Diploma courses, 37.68% from Degree, 17.03% from Masters, 0.72% from PhD and 5.80% from other programmes. According to this data, the majority of survey respondents are from Higher secondary and Degree programs followed by Masters and Diploma. The greatest number of survey respondents from a grade or level is from Degree programmes reflecting the high educational literacy levels of students participating in this research.

Figure 7 shows the area of study. It indicates that 39.49% of survey respondents were from the field of education, 23.55% from the field of science, 13.14% from the field of Sharia and Law, 8.70% from the field of Business, 5.07% from the field of Business and Management, 3.62% from Higher Education Institutions education science, 2.90% from Arts, 2.54% from Computer Science, 0.72% from Tourism and hospitality and 0.36% from maritime studies. The majority of the respondents are from the education field followed closely by students from the science stream from higher secondary.

## Geographic Location

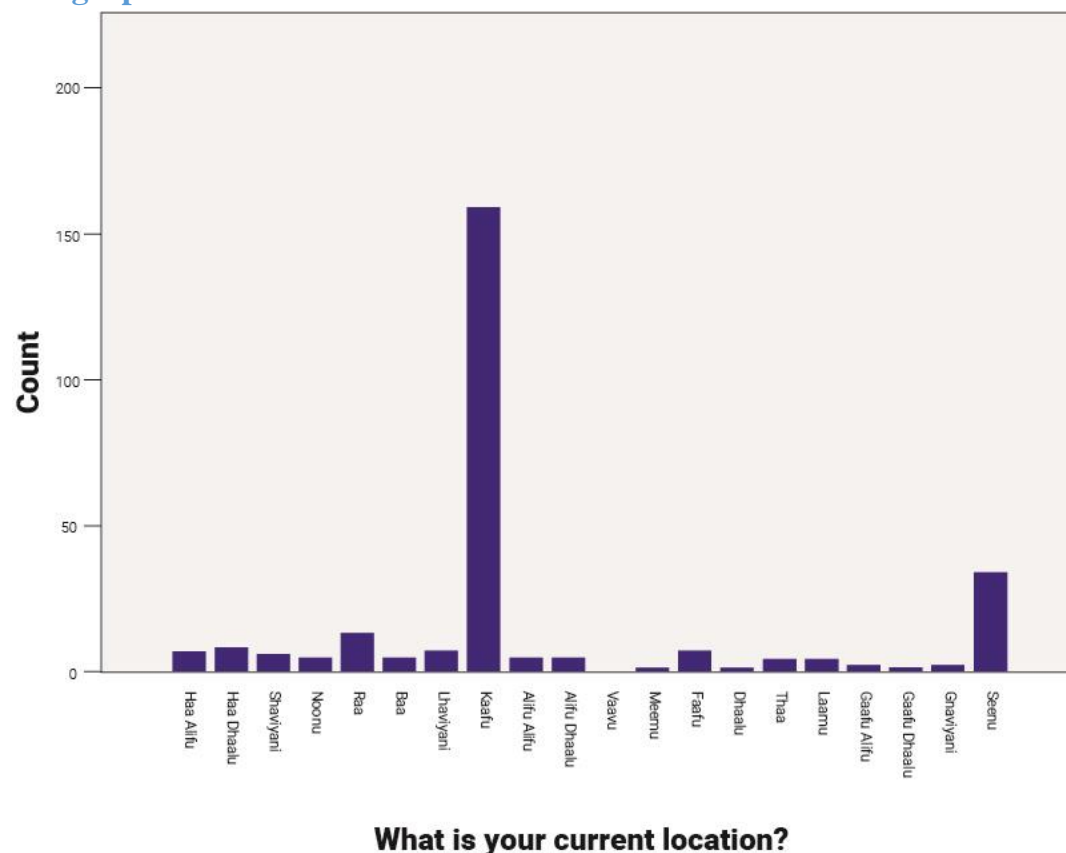


Figure 8: Current location

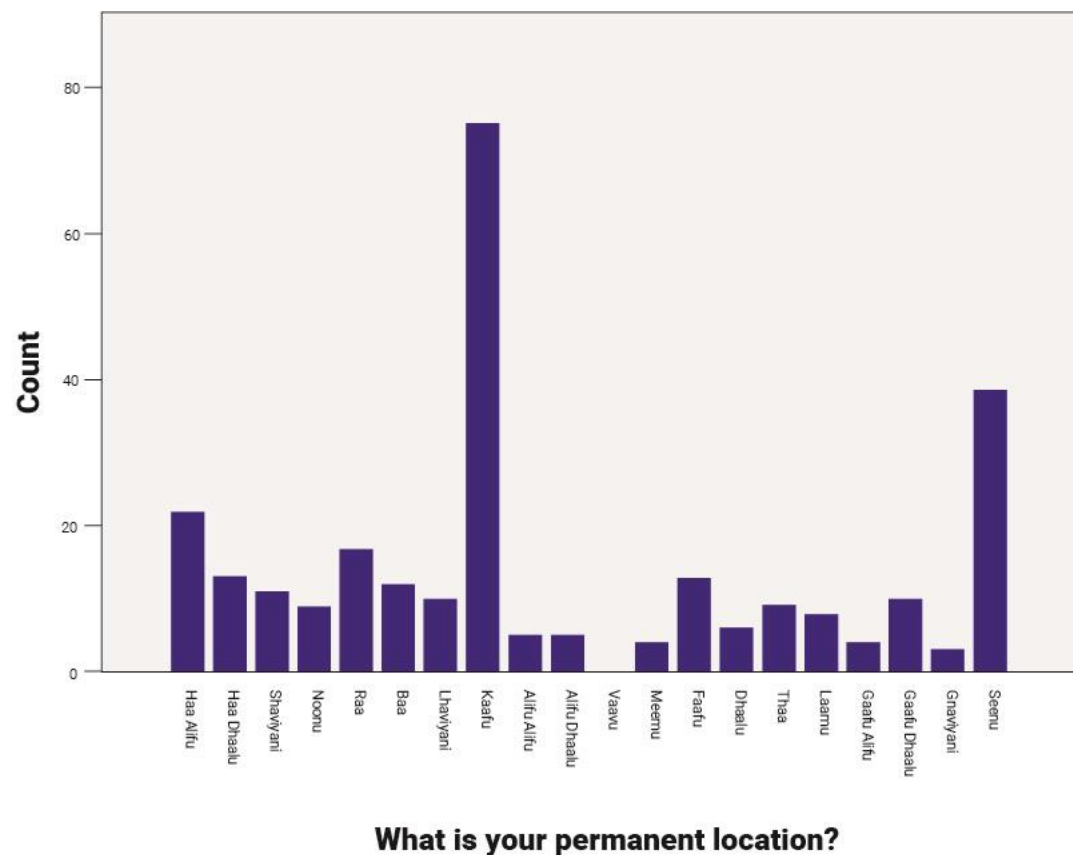


Figure 9: Permanent location

Figure 8 and 9 show the current and permanent locations of the respondents of this survey. This data shows that the majority of respondents' current and permanent location is the capital city Male' while the remaining respondents are mostly from Seenu Atoll. In the Maldives, it is common for people to migrate for employment and study purposes. This data is important as it relates to previous violent incidents and which islands they occurred on, in contrast to the attacker's place of residence and where they were influenced.

# Key findings and trends

## The root cause of religious extremism and violent attacks: Political Dissonance?

Maldives is popular globally as a tourist destination that is relatively peaceful with low levels of social issues. However, recently, the issue of extremism and terrorism has come to fore, more so, after the recent attack on the Speaker of Majlis. The survey results as seen in Fig. 10 indicate that most of the respondents (55%) believe that the threat of religious extremism in the Maldives is high.

However, in contrast, interview data reveals the opposite; namely that liberal views pose a greater threat (68% as opposed to 55%)

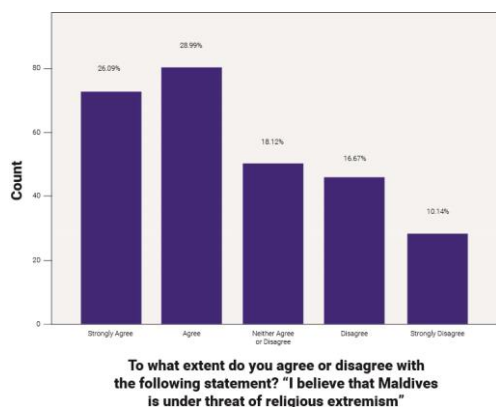


Fig. 10 illustrates survey responses to the question regarding perceptions of Maldives facing the threat of religious extremism. Data indicates that most of the survey respondents (55%) believe the Maldives is under threat of religious extremism while contrastingly, a smaller number (26%) disagree with this statement with (18.12%) neither agreeing or disagreeing.

Figure 10: Threat of religious extremism

The interviews revealed that many respondents believe the threat has increased after the attack on the Speaker of Majlis on 6th May 2020. They explained that if an attack on a public figure possessing high levels security was successful, the threat to the public is presumably even higher:

Yes, as the attack was made on a high official so we can deduce that anyone is at risk from Ministers to other parliament members, especially for citizens. (FZ)

Because such attacks had happened on a prominent figure in Maldives, and us being ordinary citizens, I believe it can just happen to anyone, as there are now such people in our society. (H)

When asked about the reasons for violent terrorist attacks in Maldives, 49.28% of respondents said they believe politics to be the main cause. This was closely followed by extreme religious views (16.30%). Western influence, liberal ideology, radicalised religious views and backlash against violent attacks on Muslim countries were also highlighted as is evident in Figure 11:

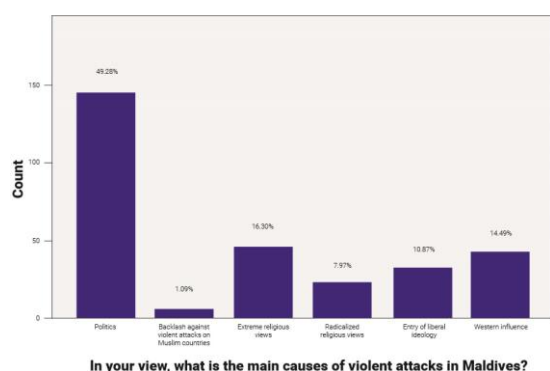


Fig. 11 highlights that 49.28% of survey respondents view politics as the main cause of violent attacks in the Maldives with only 1.09% considering it being as a result of a perceived backlash against other violent attacks on Muslim countries by western/non-Muslim countries. A further 19.30% view it as being as a result of extreme religious views while 7.97% view it as being due to radicalized religious views. Yet another 10.87% view it as because of the emergence of liberal ideology and a final 14.49% consider attribute it to western influence.

Figure 11: Causes of violent attacks in the Maldives

Although religious extremist views are mentioned by a significant percentage of respondents in the survey, reference to the terms ‘politics and politicians’ generally dominated interview data across many themes insofar as perceptions of their inadvertent contribution towards violent attacks in the Maldives.

Many of those interviewed believed politicians promote their own self-interest and personal agendas. They further described how this becomes frustrating for the public and some people retaliate through violent means as a result:

*Politics has the biggest influence in Maldives and I believe those attacks result from politics (Sh)*

*Now I would say, things are not in order. Actually, the Maldivian community is really aware of many things. Even with regard to religion...and for the majority, people go for extreme levels as well. They believe that the government or the political people, they only work for the betterment of themselves. And the public gets more and more frustrated day by day. They may do anything in anger, targeting the political people. (F)*

Interviewees also believed that anti-religious discourse contributed towards terrorism and extremism in the Maldives, highlighting that this type of message is found more commonly among politicians and those who opposed to practicing religion:

*I think it's because some people who do not believe in the religion, or who do not want to follow their religion that these things are happening. There are leaders in our country who openly talk against religion, so that's it. They want others to hate the religion as they do. So more than the politics...We*

*know politics is about fights between the ruling families...mostly...so I think it's their view towards the religion, which plays a major role rather than politics. (FS)*

The above point is supported by survey data highlighting motives for terrorist attacks in the Maldives. The data (see Figure 10) illustrates that 32% of respondents consider the main motive for religious extremism in the Maldives is to express opposition against government laws and policies considered antithetical Islam. Another 24% consider the motive behind extremism to be as a result of misunderstanding of Islam due to an outdated curriculum. A further 16% view it to be as a result of general hatred towards non-Muslims and their lifestyle while 13% were of the opinion that it serves as means to express opposition to non-Muslims and their lifestyle.

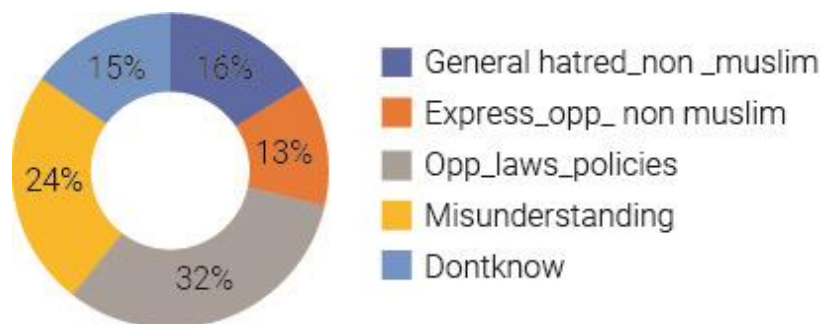


Figure 12: Motive for terrorist attacks in the Maldives

The data extrapolated appears definitive in this instance highlighting interviewees' assignment of blame towards politics, revealing a degree of political awareness among this particular cohort.

#### Existing vs. Emerging Threats: Religious Extremism or Liberal Views?

The issue of threat can be more accurately portrayed when considering how interviewees:

- I. defined two diametrically opposed concepts of religious extremism and liberal views.
- II. confirmed their familiarity or otherwise within the context of Maldivian society and,
- III. how they portrayed themselves within this context.

The definitions of terminology provided by the surveyed respondents intimated their level of familiarity with the above-mentioned opposing concepts, thereby providing a lens through

which to also evaluate, as well as compare with interviewee data, how they regarded themselves and the society within the same societal context.

Responding to the question; “*have you heard of religious extremism/terrorism?*” 98.19% of surveyed respondents confirmed they had heard about religious extremism while an almost equally high proportion (91.30%) affirmed their familiarity with the term, terrorism. Radicalisation and liberal views were among the terminology surveyed respondents had the least familiarity (1.15% and 0.36% respectively.) as shown in Figure 13

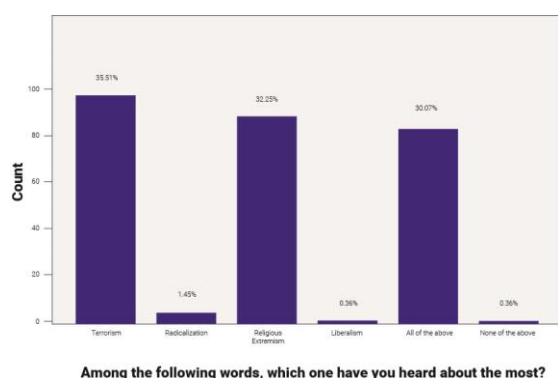


Figure 13: Most frequently used terminology

Interviews revealed more definitive descriptions of what the interviewees meant by these terminologies. In contrast to the survey responses, in which familiarity with terminology regarding liberal views was recorded at a minimal 0.36%, interview data yielded significantly higher findings, suggesting this particular sample group were more conversant with a wider geopolitical climate extending beyond Maldivian society.

Although a number of interviewees equated liberal views with atheism, their ensuing negative perceptions that it constituted, “*...not believing in any religion...*” (FS) and observations like, “*...they don’t believe in God*” (FS), were mitigated against by a few who considered the impact upon Maldivian society in a more favourable light:

*Liberal views are good to some extent. Under liberalism there are civil Frights and gender equality, which covers equal pay, therefore it is not just freedom of expression. (S)*

Another interviewee remarked, “Liberalism is freedom” and explained what she meant by adding, “freedom of speech, freedom of religion and religious practice” (Z).



Many interviewees perceived liberal views and religious extremism as two extremes of the same continuum. For example, S: associated religious extremism with ‘violent’ acts and as an attempt to violate human rights and dignity utilising religion in the process:

*In the name of religion, women are confined to their homes and [married off] to a relative and underage girls are married off to much older men by their family and not given proper schooling.*

Other interviewees echoed similar sentiments:

*Religious extremists are those who say they are Muslims, but harm others. they don't have the right perception of the religion, and they are mostly violent in nature. People who preach this are religious extremists. (FS)*

Additionally,

*...religious extremists are those whose view conflicts or disagree with the religious ideologies. (N)*

Commenting on what they thought were reasons for terrorist and extremist incidents, interviewees described religious extremists as engaging in this kind of act due to ignorance; “...they do it because they think it is the right thing to do” (AA). They also believed that such actions also adversely impacted the wider Islamic community:

*It gives a bad image of those people who try to follow religion in the proper way. So their name is also spoiled because of that. (FS)*

When questioned about whether they considered themselves to be moderate, extreme or liberal in their adherence to Islam, the majority of interviewees (15/20) responded, describing themselves as moderate Muslims:

*I try to practice the religion in the most appropriate way. That is to be a moderate person. (F)*

*I do my best - as I mentioned before, I believe and practice the five pillars of Islam and the articles of faith. That is how you can be an ideal, moderate Muslim. (L)*

*Moderate as I have never entertained any liberal beliefs nor had extreme views on religion: I believe that we are prescribed to only fulfill the obligatory and supererogatory acts of worship; I cannot live as I aspire, so I wish to attain that. (M)*

*I am not an extremist nor a liberal person. I disagree with most of the liberal ideologies and some of the extremist beliefs; so I am moderate. (Z)*

In fact, a few of described how they were careful not to be associated with friends who they considered to have gravitated towards an extreme mentality:

*Sometimes if it is a trustable friend. Most of the time my friends and I think alike. We have a common set of beliefs. They also try to be moderate. They are not extremists. I don't mingle with such people because they may change our mind at any time and deviate us. so, I try not to get in contact with such people. I choose friends who have a similar set of minds with me. (F)*

While, on an individual basis, interviewees considered themselves moderate, most of them also believed Maldivian society to comprise a spectrum of Muslims ranging from liberal, moderate towards extreme. As one respondent stated, *“I think we have everything here.” (F)*. Further investigation revealed this perception emanated from their personal conceptualisations of society:

*The society is represented by a large number of individuals, each of whom is unique. There will be moderate Muslims among them, as well as those who are extremists. (Rd)*

*Yes, as I said earlier, if you look at the comments on the post on social media advocating corporal punishment on children, you can see a wide array of beliefs from both extremes and those who hold a moderate belief that a child can be reprimanded without physical punishment. From this alone we can see the many opinions on the same topic. (Y)*

When asked further about whether liberal views or religious extremism posed a larger threat, 55% of interviewees pointed to religious extremism, whereas the response to the same question regarding liberalism witnessed a slightly larger proportion (68%) considering this particular concept to pose the more imminent risk (Figure 12).<sup>67</sup>

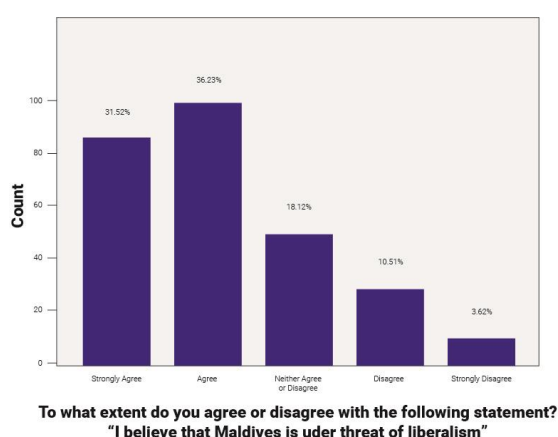


Fig.14 shows indicates that most of the survey respondents (68%) believe that the Maldives is under threat of liberalism. A smaller number (18.12%) do not agree or disagree with this statement while only (14%) disagree with this statement.

<sup>67</sup> respondents understood liberalism which was used interchangeably with liberal views on this occasion

Figure 14: Threat of liberalism

The variance in percentage between surveyed respondents who strongly agreed with either question is relatively small, in contrast to the larger segment that disagreed with religious extremism constituting a greater threat as opposed to those rejecting the higher risk posed by liberal views. In any event, interview data highlighted the general perception among a significant number of interviewees that both concepts could be considered threats when misapplied or expressed in extreme forms. Interview data is therefore congruent with the above findings, confirming 40% of interviewees agreed that both pose greater threats.

*Freedom of religion invites other religions and the respect and honour of Islam is compromised. We hardly see mosque-goers even now and liberal belief would diminish such observances completely. (SA)*

*They attack using religious extremism as well as using people with liberal beliefs. People with liberal views abuse it and provoke religious extremists. So in my view both are equal. (TH)*

The inclination towards liberal views posing a greater threat remained evident as illustrated in Figure 14 where over 50% of interviewees expressed this concern. The threat, according to this particular cohort was concerning because freedom without boundaries, according to their perception of liberal views, would result in the corrosion of basic principles of Maldivian culture and Islamic identity:

*I would say liberal extremist views as it could lead to apostasy, whereas religious extremism leaves the core beliefs intact- albeit the additions- unless they act upon it. So, I would say liberal extremist views (L)*

*I think it is liberal view. Religious extremism keeps one on the threshold of religion while liberal views enjoins the forbidden like alcohol; these liberties are out of the boundaries of religion whereas they follow religion to the best of their beliefs in religious extremism (M)*

### **Terrorism as a justification?**

There is consensus that violent terrorist attacks can never be justified. According to the majority of those interviewed, anyone who cause harm to another cannot be considered a true Muslim. They justified their stance, by saying Islam is a religion of peace and it does not promote violence.

*Isn't it true that Muslims should demonstrate ideals such as unity and brotherhood? So, because we must practice these ideals, I believe that a decent Muslim will not damage a place's peace and harmony, and that those who will cause such disputes in a society will be those who do not value the religion's teachings. (Rd)*

*Not justified - to go to the extreme of killing someone for religion would not be done by someone who abides by religion; there are other actions they could have taken like advising. (N)*

Extending this discussion further, interviewees explained that many of those who become radicalised or committed terror attacks in Maldives and other parts of the world, did not have a true understanding or knowledge of Islam:

*People do not have adequate information [in religious matters]. Radical ideologies disseminated due to misinformation, lack of religious knowledge leading to immorality and especially the targeting of [impressionable] teenagers [by extremist groups].(Z)*

*...I personally think it is people not knowing the proper knowledge about Islam and getting influenced by the social media and Internet about other religions and moving away from Islam. so they're doing acts which are not actually permitted in this land and people are thinking such things are now very normal and moving away from Islam. (A)*

The response to the survey question about whether there is any religious justification for terrorist attacks in Maldives revealed that 50% of the respondents believe there is no religious justification. This data complements the general sentiments expressed in the interviews.

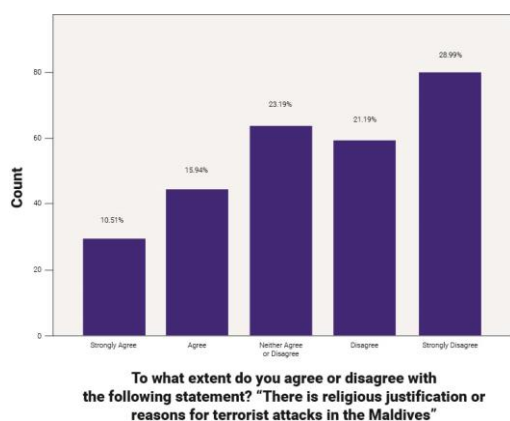


Fig.15 illustrates survey response to the question regarding whether a religious justification existed for terrorist act in Maldives. Data indicates that 50% of survey respondents do not believe there is religious justification or reasons for terrorist attacks in the country. A further 23.19% do not agree nor disagree with this statement while a 26% agreed with this statement.

Figure 15: Religious justification for terrorist attacks

Commenting on why interviewees believe people engage in terrorism, extremism and radicalisation, some referred to “confusion”. This term is related to a number of factors that came to light during the interviews. One is the confusion caused by the type of information and incessant broadcasting of news related to violence and terrorism in the media. One interviewee further elucidated upon this observation regarding people that, *“are engaged in such things (terrorist attacks, radical views, extremism) in the name of religion. They have been exposed to those things through the media. I believe the media encourages people to engage in such activities”*. (FS)

This exposure through media is supported by data extrapolated from the survey. As seen in Figure 16, respondents are exposed to notions of terrorism, radicalisation and extremism mostly through social media (a total no. of 211) followed by TV (a total no. of 207), online (a total no. of 156) and newspapers (a total no. of 151).

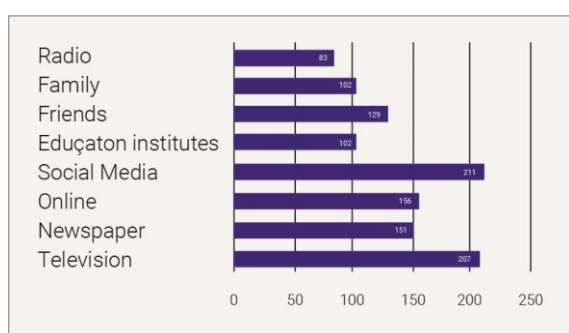


Figure 16: Exposure via media

Secondly, confusion related to interviewees’ perception of people from whom they sought information about terrorism, radicalisation and extremism, and the level of trust they had. One interviewee expressed distrust of information provided by religious scholars. This interviewee referred to the many disagreements and contradictory positions regarding Islam, disseminated from religious scholars, particularly those in the Maldives, who the interviewee considered difficult to trust:

*I used to listen to religious lectures, but I stopped when I found them dubious. So, I listen to the weekly religious lectures at school during assembly. (SA).*

Generally, all respondents believed no reasons exist to justify extremist and terrorist attacks, and anyone who is conversant with the true teachings of Islam will not engage in any activity that would cause harm to others or destroy the peace and harmony of Maldivian society.

### **Law, order and justice in the Maldives**

The interviewees strongly believe that those involved in terrorism and violent attacks must be punished by law. The rise in attacks in the Maldives, according to several interviewees, occurred due to a failure to adequately implement existing laws:

*...actually these things (attacks) happen because of lack of law and order... It's due to the change in the mindset of people, because of what they see in the community. There are a lot of things that we have to do in order to stop these things. In Maldives, there is virtually no punishment even if somebody committed a serious crime, he may come out of jail after three days. (F)*

*There are no sufficient encouragements (enforcements) to fulfil obligations and the criminal justice system is not equitable- there is a marked difference in outlooks and discriminations in sentencing- as people have free-will. (SA)*

Several interviewees referred in particular to the fact that in some cases, the Maldivian legal system is not based on principles of Islamic Sharia. As one interviewee remarked “*we have democracy in Maldives, not Islamic Sharia.*” (F) Another interviewee made similar observations:

*I believe such attacks keep coming because the culprits are not being brought to justice. So when such attacks are not investigated, it becomes widespread. For example, Maldives being a Muslim country and not implementing the pre-declared punishments in the religion (leads to such attacks) .... there are reasons why such punishments are declared in the religion, for instance cutting off one's hand for stealing and robbery... Religion and politics should not conflict with each other. Political decisions should be in harmony with the religion and priority should be given to the religion. So giving priority to conventional laws ignoring the divine law (shariah) affects. We only know what we are being informed by the sources. (FA)*

### **Religious extremist propaganda and jihad**

The survey data (Figure 17) indicates that the majority of respondents (72.10%) had not been exposed to any kind of extremist propaganda from religious groups. There is, however, a small percentage (15.22%) who claim they had been.

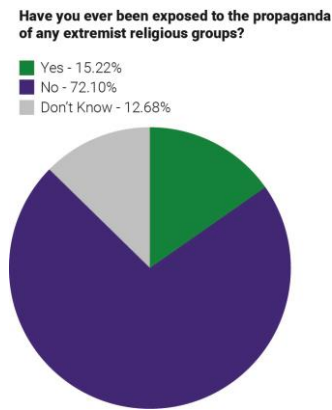


Figure 17: Exposure to extremist religious propaganda

The latter percentage, although small, can be considered a cause of concern in view of some of these interviewee accounts. Data obtained highlights that such encounters were a common experience among the interviewee cohort. For example, one interviewee shared that *“three to four of my school mates are presently involved and radicalized. This includes those I studied together with for seven years”*. (L). Another narrated a particularly sensitive encounter with propagandists her brother engaged with:

*I think it was back in 2015 or 2016 (I am not sure with the date). He would go to the mosque and pray regularly on time. He met one of his friends at the mosque and became close friends.*

*One time he said, “Hey, I have an offer to go to Egypt- would you join me?”.*

*So, my brother said, “That is a great opportunity for me to travel.” He discussed with my mother that maybe it could be a scholarship. She found it a little suspicious but considered it a good opportunity.*

*Luckily, he had an exam on the day they were supposed to take him to Egypt.*

*They visited my mother and asked her where her son was. They wore white garbs and had full beards.*

*They asked, “Where is your son?” and she said, “He is at school.” Then, a few months passed, and my brother figured out they were recruits for ISIS.*  
(S)

These accounts became more descriptive with the additional details provided by interviewees, including how propagandists targeted potential victims. Conversations revealed how aware and perceptive the interviewees were with regards to radicalisation even though the specific terminology itself was unfamiliar to them;

*They would approach and speak just like normal. but they would explain about the religion, and other things. they would explain these things from their perspective. During the course, they would identify whom they should target, and then they will get very close to them. and after some days, we may hear that this person might have engaged in something. That's how I can identify them. (F).*

The change in behaviour of those victimised after such encounters were also related by some interviewees: “Before she didn’t pray...then she started wearing longer dress”, (S), “They started posting stuff [from] Mufti Menk, that he is not a righteous leader, just because he had a friendly approach...” (S), and “...became reserved” (F).

When questioned about their reaction if extremist propagandists approached them, some interviewees said they would probably listen to them but remain vigilant.

*I will want to know their mindset first. I will also listen to them and express my opinion and work to prevent them from brainwashing others. (AA)*

*By being open and listening to what the other person has to say. If it goes against my beliefs in Islam, I give it a blind eye and turn a deaf ear- I don't listen to what they have to say; they can keep their beliefs to themselves, and I am just going to be myself. (S)*

Other respondents provided an alternative response, stating that they would try to ignore propagandists, avoiding their attempts to engage on anything related to the subject of religion.

*My reaction would normally be to ignore them. I'm not such a social person. I would mingle with people who are close to me. I would be able to identify such people. For example, when they start talking, I would be able to know that he is having such kind of thinking. As soon as I got to know that they are such people, I tried to keep them at a distance. I try to communicate with them that I have no interest in them. and then naturally they may go away. they would also not try to convince someone who would not believe in them. So I try to do that and them to keep away from my circle. (F)*

*I would probably ignore them or try to get away from such things. maybe I could tell my parents or someone that people are trying to convince me, some people are approaching me in a certain mosque or so. (A)*

The incidents related by interviewees reveal attempts to influence young people are real, highlighting the importance of victims reporting such threats to the authorities as a means to prevent it proliferating further. However, some interviewees expressed reluctance, stating they would not report incidents in the event of being approached by those spreading religious propaganda. The only exception would be unless they perceived there was a discernible risk or



threat to them or their family. Some even went so far to say they did not trust the authorities while others commented on their fears of being labelled or suspected as extremists as a result of notifying authorities. A smaller number also mentioned their fears of being threatened by extremists if they reported their concerns:

*I would not report to the police as the reporter often gets falsely accused: It is a huge accusation to say that someone is a radical and unless there is proof, you are suspected of Islamophobia, so I would hesitate. (Z)*

*I believe that but my intuition says to not trust the authorities either. You don't really know with Maldives, which is built up on corruption and connections. (S)*

*Yes, if they go to some extreme I may report, like if there is any risk to me or to my family or to a friend, if we are in danger I will report it to the police. I have family members in the police. I would share this incident with one of them. If it has become a life-threatening issue, I will do so. (F)*

Several interviewees highlighted they would alert friends and family if they encountered individuals disseminating extremist religious propaganda. One interviewee remarked that if such cases went unreported it might lead to Jihad, resulting in a huge loss for the family involved, hence, the importance of reporting such matters to avert this:

*There is a high possibility that I would keep it with me and make sure that the people I know (friends and family), know about it. (S)*

*Yes because radical matters can lead to Jihad and it would be a loss to their families so, of course I would report it before it goes out of hand. (Nb)*

The research also explored interviewees' perception of Jihad. A few explained their understanding of jihad highlighting: *"It should be something that you do for religion and for your country...protecting your country from attacks..."* (H). One interviewee stated that if the fight was to protect other Muslims, like those in Palestine, it would be necessary to do whatever possible as a fellow Muslim to protect them from atrocities:

*For instance, if you are trying to defend Muslims from persecutions from other religious groups, it is okay- it won't be considered obligatory but as a Muslim you should fight for them.*

*But I wouldn't say it is Jihad when it is sectarian violence/conflict among Muslims.*

*In the case of Palestine, if Jews are trying to take over the Muslims, then you should try to look for a way to protect Muslims. If fighting Jews is obligatory to protect Muslims, then I guess you can do that. (Nb)*

However, there is consensus among many of the interviewees that fighting in a foreign land, like Syria or Afghanistan, is not Jihad, particularly if the prerequisites and conditions outlined in Islam are not met. This was echoed by many other interviewees, several referring to one's responsibilities towards family, especially parents:

*According to them they are going to defend the Muslims but you never know if they can survive there for even two days. So their wives become widowed and children orphans. Rights of family, such as wife, children and parents are very important. Leaving old parents alone is very wrong. (SA)*

### What constitutes religiosity?

Perceptions of religiosity, i.e. what it means to be religious and the characteristics of a religious person, are usually varied. When questioned about this, 98.19% of surveyed respondents characterised a religious person as one who practices the Sunnah in addition to obligatory religious duties and tries to adhere to the religion (Figure 18).

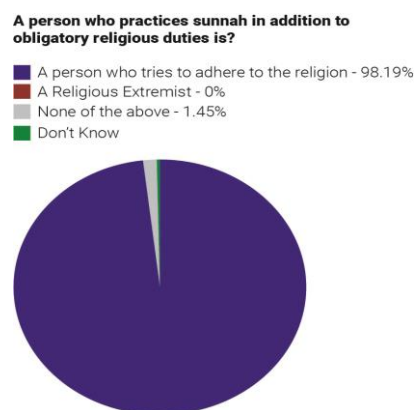


Figure 18: Practicing Sunnah and obligatory duties

Similarly, interviewees echoed the above survey findings. A significant number of interviewees considered a religious person someone who performed obligatory duties while adhering to the Sunnah and attempting to emulate Prophet Mohamed's life:

*I believe that it's not only the obligatory acts that we should be doing. we should also try to perform the preferable acts (Sunnah). I don't say that they are obligatory, but we should try to perform them as much as possible, considering these acts as something we should do. (F)*

Interviewees also believed religiosity extended beyond the fulfillment of obligatory and supererogatory duties, facilitating a balanced perspective between peace and conflict, the latter being a final option:

*A person who observes the supererogatory acts of worship in addition to the obligatory. But he must not go to extremes in religion; he must favor peaceful discourse over violence and the latter must be a last resort. (FZ)*

According to the interviewees, many have played a significant role in shaping their religious behaviour. Such key actors have provided knowledge about Islam, influencing some interviewees' perceptions regarding what constitutes religiosity.

Half of those interviewed admitted their religious beliefs were influenced by family, with many citing their mother as the primary influencer. One interviewee described his mother's influence on his behaviour:

*I'm still in school. Even now, my mother will remind me every day, asking if I have prayed and if I have performed any other religious duties. My mother used to perform all of the obligatory prayers, as well as many Sunnah acts as she could. (F)*

Another interviewee shared similar sentiments:

*From a very young age...mother (parents) paid attention to the religious matters, and I always see my mother and father praying and going to the mosque for the prayer. So I would also want to copy them right? and I was the only kid of my parents back then.(AA)*

In contrast, half the interviewees confirmed that their religious beliefs were shaped by schools, particularly Islamic studies teachers:

*There is a proverb in Dhivehi, which actually puts down those people who are patient. but that thinking was changed because of his (teachers) explanations.. that he(teacher) gave about the importance of being patient in Islam and the reward for those who are patient.. so he (teacher) related many stories about the messenger being patient during several incidents.. so I believe those who are patient will not have to suffer, but would really be rewarded ultimately. (FS)*

*...school teachers, especially Islam subject teachers. (FZ)*

## Appearance, attire and its relation to religiosity

Attire and appearance were recurring themes in interviewees' definition of religious adherents. A few (15%) believed that the way someone dresses, or their outward appearance is a reflection of their devotion to the religion:

*Some people say that for women they should cover all parts of their body except the hands and the face, whereas other people say that they should cover the entire body revealing only the eyes. so those who cover their entire body, that's their viewpoint of the religion. they act so for their love of religion (F)*

*In Maldives, religious people dress up in a certain way. Therefore, if we see such a person, that's how we describe him here - that he is a religious person. (AA)*

A majority (55%) of interviewees do not associate appearance or clothing with religiosity:

*We cannot say they are religious as some wear hijab due to their parents or similar reasons. I have friends who don't wear hijab but do all the obligatory acts of worship.(SA)*

*I cannot say she is a religious person because no one can tell the connection between religion, dress and devotion to God. So, we cannot say that she is religious just because she wears niqab. (S)*

*You don't become religious by wearing face veils, rather it is how much you comply with the religion and its commandments. If one does not pray their five daily prayers, they cannot be considered religious even if they wear face veils. (AA)*

*Isn't it true that even if they don't wear the headscarf, they are still Muslims? Because they would be following other Islamic beliefs even if they did not wear a headscarf. Also, even if they haven't worn a head scarf, if they have covered all of the body parts that are required to be covered, we may conclude that the person is religious; after all, I can't say that the person isn't religious in any way. (Rd)*

One interviewee explained why he considered the niqab as not being reflective of religiosity, emphasising that it is part of the culture of the middle east and does not have anything to do with Islam: *“I don’t believe niqab is mandatory in the religion. It is a culture of others...it cannot be said that they are religious or not based on the outfit”*. (TH)

Survey results support the views expressed by the interviewees as evidenced in Figure 19:

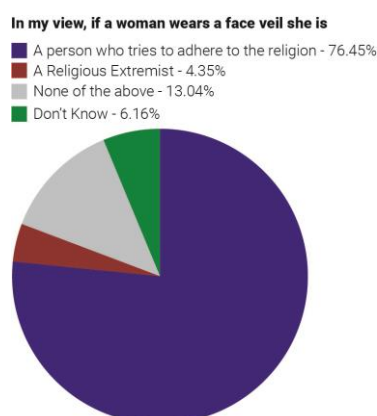


Figure 19: Face veil and religiosity

Seventy-six percent (76.45%) believed a woman wearing a face veil is someone trying to adhere to religion. However, in contrast, a minority (4.5%) consider wearing the niqab a manifestation of extremist behaviour.

A similar question was posed to interviewees in relation to men growing full beard and wearing ankle length trousers. The majority believed these aspects were not indicators to determine levels of religiosity:

*But that doesn’t mean that they follow Islam as some grow beards for superficial reasons: there are some who do not know that it is prescribed in Islam and only grows beard for fashion.* (SA)

*Even if he is long bearded and have his trousers in ankle length, if he is not cautious about the religious matters he cannot be a religious person. It is your deeds that makes you religious* (FA)

*We cannot say the person is an extremist for having his shorts or trousers up to his ankles. (S)*

Figure 20 highlights 72.4% of surveyed respondents believe an individual maintaining a long beard is one trying to adhere to the religion, while a minority (1.81%) consider it to be indicative of extremism. Interestingly, this minority is less in comparison to those who consider the niqab an extreme manifestation (4.5%).

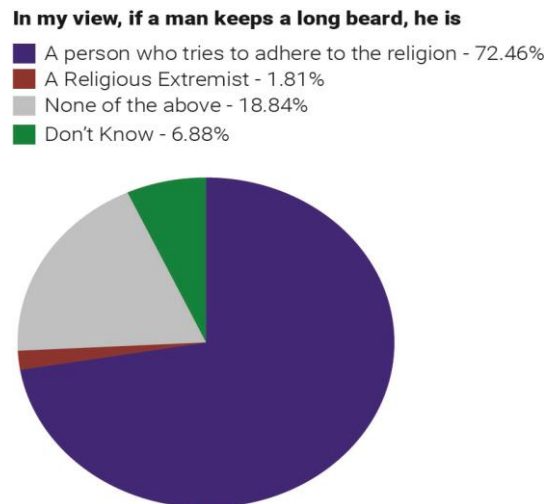


Figure 20: Appearance and religiosity

According to some interviewees, males adhering to the above dress codes are generally considered religious until news highlighting terrorist attackers fitting such descriptions alters their initial perceptions:

*I usually see them to be religious unless I hear contradicting news. For instance, there are news of people with long beards committing crimes; thereafter they are more likely to be extremists.(FZ)*

*There are both religious and extremist women who wear niqab. I have friends who are niqabis- they are not exactly extremists in concept but have strict religious views in following the Sunnah and teachings of Islam. Their actions are not of the extremists nor do they reprimand me for not wearing niqab. (Y)*

## Personal Experiences of Islamophobia

Surveyed respondents shared personal experiences of Islamophobia. Seventy seven percent (77.17%) of the respondents did not personally experience Islamophobia in person or online, however, 22.83% experienced such abuse. Data reveals the existence of Islamophobia among a minority of the target population, albeit to a lesser extent as highlighted in Figure 21.

### Have you personally experienced any anti-muslim abuse, in person or online?

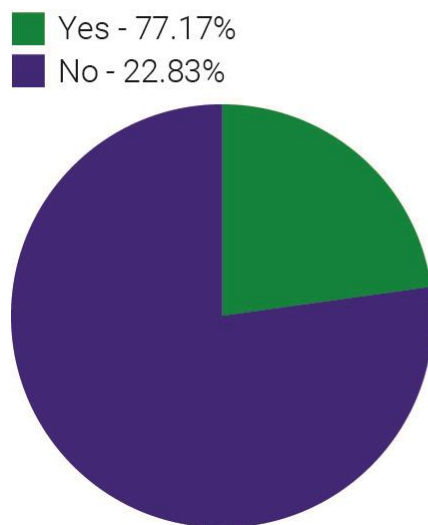


Figure 21: Experience of anti-muslim abuse

Interviewees also shared their personal and second hand experiences:

*...you guys are really weird- you act however you want, when you want to...sometimes you are covering; sometimes you wear long clothes and sometimes baggy clothes.(SA)*

*... I have seen those who wear jubba being called extreme. (M)*

*A British man talked about the oppression of hijab and I quote-tweeted that it is not oppression, at least not to most of us and is a symbol of modesty. I was a minor then (17 as shown on my bio) and I was told off that I am being oppressed. (Z)*

# Conclusion

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The remit of this research has been to ascertain students' perceptions surrounding particular terminologies and their effects within a specific Maldivian context. Radicalisation, extremism and terrorism have become pervasive terms across many societies; however, the absence of universal and official consensus regarding their respective definitions suggests that an even greater vacuum exists between policy and societal perceptions. By examining students' perceptions surrounding these terminologies, this project endeavoured to identify their understanding insofar as these terms relate to a Maldivian societal context.

Empirical data yielded an unanticipated finding; namely, concern among a significant percentage of respondents that considered the political and legislative structures of Maldivian society to be contributory components of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism due to the polarising and divisive narratives that proliferate within them. For example, a significant number of respondents (80% interviewees and 68% of those surveyed) referred to liberal views as being among the precursors to radicalisation, extremism and terrorism, yet this does not appear to feature prominently in any political discourse. Instead, political discussion continues to be centred around already established terminologies of extremism without acknowledging existing societal perceptions that the continuing embrace of liberal views will only serve to exacerbate the threat of terrorism.<sup>68</sup>

Views regarding religiosity were consistent across the research groups with a majority in agreement that physical appearance and attire are not necessarily reflective of extremist inclinations. Conversely, such outward displays could also be reflective of liberal persuasions, including fashionable trends. The research remit did not extend to distinguishing between ideological and behavioural delineations that could have, perhaps explored respondent perceptions of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism further. Although a minority of respondents (4.35%) did, however, consider the observance of the niqab, growing the beard and raising the trousers to be extremist manifestations, in the absence of additional data against which to triangulate and validate these observations in order to test their efficacy, such accounts may be considered subjective within the context of this report.

Respondents' assumptions regarding religious devotion and practice were also congruent with observations relating to appearance and attire with the majority (98.1%) agreeing that

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<sup>68</sup> Maldives Anti Terrorism Act 2015 and Laadheene Bill 2020



foundational and supererogatory acts of worship are consistent with devout Muslims seeking to emulate the Prophet Mohamed's life. Regular adherence and the resultant devotion to Islamic tenets therefore, were not considered unusual or extreme within the Maldivian context. It is important to reiterate at this juncture that research questions were designed to explore the target audiences' perceptions of outward manifestations in as much as they related to appearance, attire and religious practice. Ideological inclinations and their relationship with the terminology focused upon throughout this research were avoided in view of the sensitivities surrounding these areas, particularly the age ranges and vocations of the target audience, namely, students. However, with that being said, research instruments were designed to extrapolate a rich source of data resulting in findings that have sufficiently addressed the research questions. The ensuing results have not therefore been compromised by an absence of an ideological interrogative approach as it relates to the terminologies used.

Respondents alluded to an important distinction between radicalised individuals and the larger, more mainstream Muslim community within Maldivian society – knowledge of the religion. As has been highlighted at the outset of this research, the target audience is at varying levels of academic education. Within the education system, the majority have been recipients or exposed to religious instruction from teachers within the institutions, enabling them to obtain a more nuanced understanding of their religion while combining this with their academic progress and development. Some respondents (24%) highlighted the lack of knowledge and comprehension of Islam among the reasons for radicalisation. This observation accords with a plethora of existing research confirming the same. Al Mutairi highlights:

*Most of the deviations that occurred in Muslim history, regardless of whether they be related to creed or law, have been as a result of a shortcoming related to one of...two matters.<sup>69</sup>*

He proceeds to outline specific contributory factors behind these deviations which result in radicalisation and extremism, among them being:

- I. Ignorance of the sources of the Shari'ah, Qur'an, Sunnah, consensus ('Ijma') and analogy ('Qiyas') and,
- II. Contradicting established principles and methodologies generally accepted by the Muslim community.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Al-Mutairi, Dr. A R M L. (2001) 'Religious Extremism in the Lives of Contemporary Muslims' translated by Zarabozo, J M M, Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, p.114

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p.114-115

Earlier reference to contemporary terrorist groups' antipathy towards academic/secular – or as they perceive it to be, western education – has been made in the literature review when highlighting movements, like Boko Haram within a Nigerian societal context and Al-Juhayman al-Otaibi within a Saudi Arabian one.<sup>71</sup> These provided illustrative examples that coincide with research findings in this report insofar as the lack of religious and indeed, academic/secular knowledge are concerned.

Research findings provide reassuring statistics insofar as they relate to the overwhelming majority of respondents rejecting terrorism as a justifiable means to address perceived grievances (100%). Such data is unsurprising when taking into account the educational literacy and sense of belonging each of the interviewed respondents possessed. Having said this, their contributions and participation at higher socio-political and socio-cultural levels are noticeably absent based on the data obtained from the interviews.

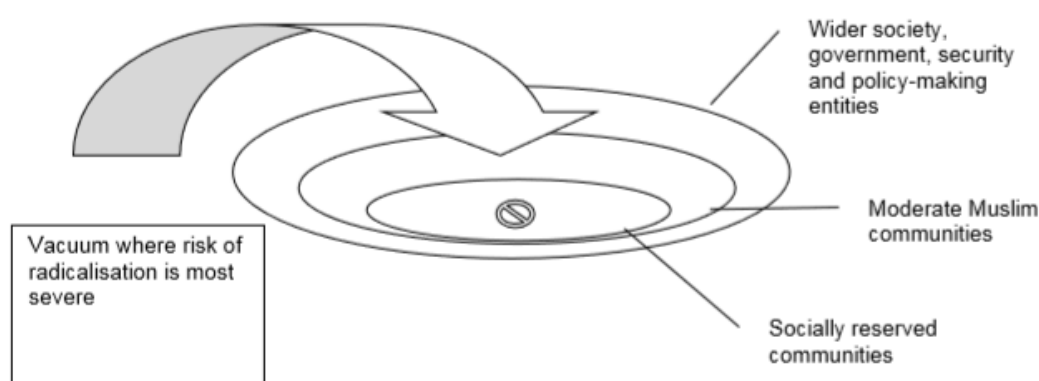


Figure 22: Revised cross section of funnel model<sup>72</sup>

The above Figure 22 encapsulates important elements derived from the research findings. It illustrates the positioning of societal actors in relation to the vacuum where radicalisation, extremism and terrorism have been identified to proliferate. Additionally, this framework positions moderate Muslim communities, which include the majority of the target audience,

<sup>71</sup> Refer to pp. 16-17

<sup>72</sup>Baker, A H (2011) 'Extremists in Our Midst: Confronting Terror,' Palgrave MacMillan, (Revised framework provided by author, 2021)

beyond the parameters of higher socio-political participation, indicating a perceived disconnect between government and civil society.

# Recommendations

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1. Empirical data has highlighted respondents' high levels of educational literacy and political awareness, however, despite this, there appears to be an absence of active engagement or consultative forums in which young people can communicate with government and policy makers. It is therefore recommended that the government explore the viability of establishing a youth forum comprising students following an election process across educational institutions in which the latter elect representatives from among themselves before a final screening process at governmental/security level. This body could mirror similar entities established by other democratic societies, like the UK which founded a Young Muslim Advisory Group (YMAG) whose remit was:
  - To facilitate an ongoing and meaningful dialogue between Government and young people on the experience of being a young Muslim in England and the opportunity to influence government strategy and policy on issues that affect them.
  - To explore the causes and impact of violent extremism and underlying causes of disaffection (including anti-terror legislation, stop and search, identity issues, foreign policy, Islamophobia, discrimination, etc.) on Muslim young people and Muslim communities.
  - To support and encourage young people to be active in their communities in order to tackle disaffection, increase civic engagement and respond to concerns felt by other young people.
  - To support young people to develop confidence and skills and in making appropriate contributions to the development of their communities.<sup>73</sup>

The above mentioned example could provide the basis for establishing a similar entity that is representative of students in the Maldives' education system, acting as an effective conduit to the current socio-political spectrum.

2. Contrary to political assertions that the school Islamic curriculum acts as a precursor to extremism, this report has ascertained it has, by way of religious instruction from various school Islamic Studies teachers, facilitated students better understanding and contextualisation of their faith. The curriculum therefore serves as bedrock for the moderate teachings and understanding of Islam for a majority of students.

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<sup>73</sup> UK Parliament, Hansard (2009), 'Young Muslim Advisory Group,' Volume 486. Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2009-01-13/debates/09011348000129/YoungMuslimAdvisoryGroup> [accessed 26th November 2021]

3. In light of this, a recommendation for the Ministry of Education (MoE) to conduct a comprehensive review of the school Islamic curriculum in order to align government and religious educational policies, as well as eliminate or, at least reduce, the current vacuum that is causing existing misunderstandings and/or misrepresentations at a political level, is proffered in this report.
4. Subsequent to recommendation 2 above, is the requirement to adequately equip religious teachers across academic and vocational education sectors, providing resources that will enable further embedment, alongside any modifications, of the existing Islamic curriculum, i.e. professional and religious development, 21st Century learning educational tools etc. in order to provide more engaging and interactive lessons in Islamic Studies.
5. Resources should be made available to conduct further research that build upon the ambit of this report, expanding the remit to a larger target audience that also includes young people who have not been educated to secondary or tertiary education, dropping out beforehand. This will enable exploration as to whether latter perceptions surrounding the same terminology used in this research accords with the findings obtained from more academically proficient respondents in this report.
6. Additional resources should also extend to initiating research regarding perceptions of terminology at the polar end of the socio-religious spectrum; namely, liberalism, atheism, cultural pluralism etc. and the ensuing impact, if any, upon Maldivian society in view of the country's dependency on tourism as its primary industry.

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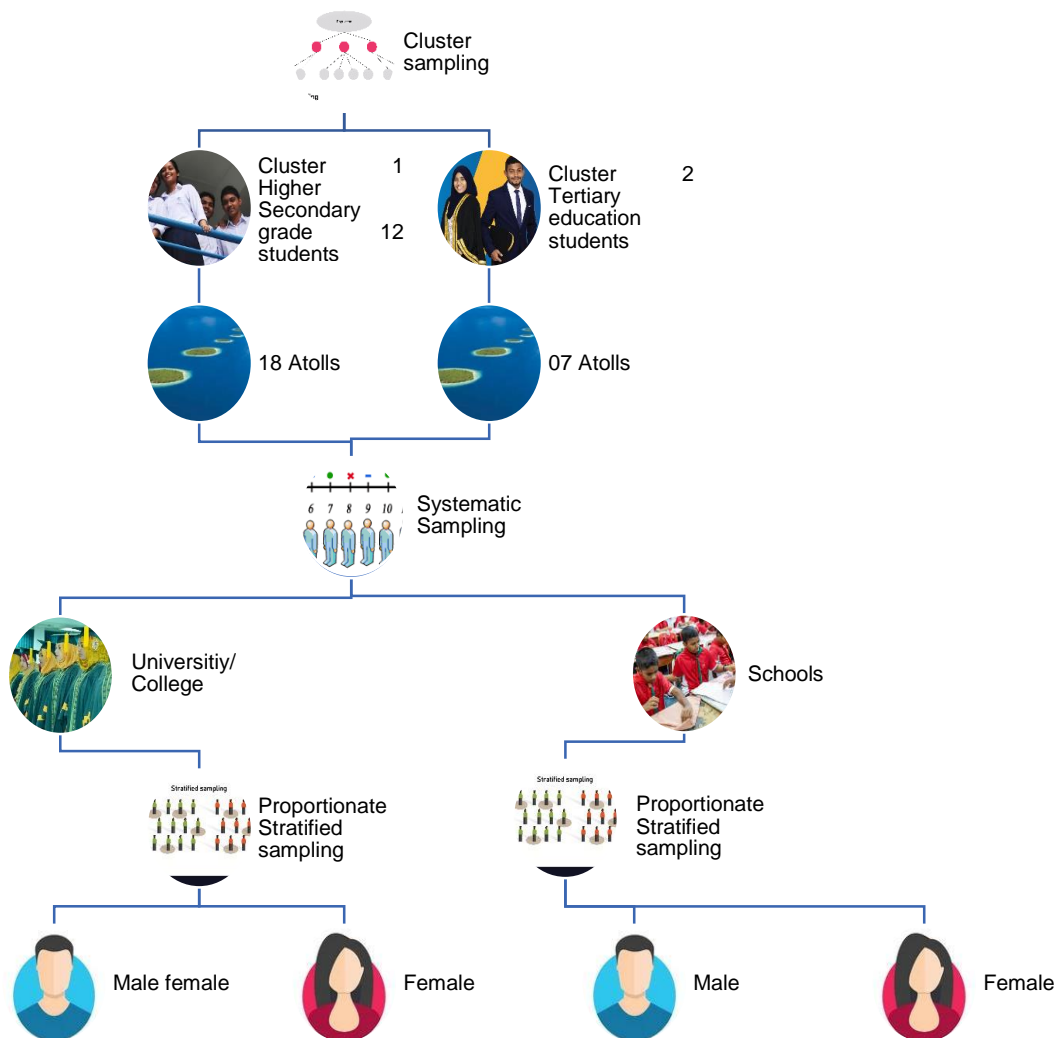
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# Appendix

## Sampling procedure



### Higher secondary schools selected for survey

| No | Atoll           | Island           |
|----|-----------------|------------------|
| 1  | Haa Alif Atoll  | Ihavandhoo       |
|    |                 | Dhidhoo          |
|    |                 | Hoarafushi       |
| 2  | Haa Dhaal Atoll | Neilaidhoo       |
|    |                 | Kulhudufushi     |
| 3  | Shaviyani Atoll | Funadhoo         |
|    |                 | Foakaidhoo       |
|    |                 | Milandhoo        |
| 4  | Noon Atoll      | Holhudhoo        |
|    |                 | Ken'dhikulhudhoo |
| 5  | Raa Atoll       | Meedhoo          |
|    |                 | Dhuvaafaru       |
|    |                 | Hulhudhufaar     |
| 6  | Baa Atoll       | Dharavandhoo     |
|    |                 | Eydhafushi       |
| 7  | Lhaviyani Atoll | Hinnavaru        |
|    |                 | Naifaru          |
|    |                 | Olhuvelifushi    |
| 8  | Kaafu Atoll     | Male             |
| 9  | Alif Atoll      | Ukulhas          |
| 10 | Meemu Atoll     | Muli             |
|    |                 | Dhiggaru         |
| 11 | Faafu Atoll     | Nilandhoo        |
|    |                 | Biledhdhoo       |
| 12 | Dhaalu Atoll    | Meedhoo          |
|    |                 | Kudahuvadhoo     |
| 13 | Thaa Atoll      | Guraidhoo        |
| 14 | Laamu Atoll     | Fonadhoo         |
|    |                 | Kunahandhoo      |
|    |                 | Gan              |

|    |                  |            |
|----|------------------|------------|
| 15 | Gaaf Alif Atoll  | Villingili |
| 16 | Gaaf Dhaal Atoll | Thinadhoo  |
| 17 | Gnaviyani Atoll  | Fuahmulah  |
| 18 | Seenu Atoll      | Hulhudhoo  |
|    |                  | Hithadhoo  |

### Higher education institutions selected for survey

| Atoll            | Island             | Institution                        |
|------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Haa Alif Atoll   |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Haa Dhaal Atoll  | Kulhudhuffushi,    | Kulhudhuffushi campus              |
|                  | Hanimadhoo         | MNU                                |
|                  | Hanimadhoo         | IUM campus                         |
| Shaviyani Atoll  |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Raa Atoll        |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Noon Atoll       |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Baa Atoll        |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Lhaviyani Atoll  | Hinnavaru, Naifaru | Hinnavaru campus MNU               |
|                  |                    | IUM campus                         |
| Kaafu Atoll      | Male               | MNU main campus                    |
|                  |                    | Villa college                      |
|                  |                    | MAPS college                       |
|                  |                    | IUM                                |
|                  |                    | Cyrix college                      |
| Faafu Atoll      |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Dhaalu Atoll     |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Thaa Atoll       |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Laamu Atoll      | Gan                | Gan Campus MNU                     |
|                  |                    | IUM campus                         |
| Gaaf Alif Atoll  |                    | No Higher educational institutions |
| Gaaf Dhaal Atoll | Thinadhoo          | Thinadhoo Campus MNU               |
| Gnaviyani Atoll  | Fuvamulah          | IUM campus                         |

|             |               |                                 |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Seenu Atoll | Addu Hithadhu | Addu Hithadhu Campus<br>MNU     |
|             |               | Zikura international<br>College |

(Higher Education Statistics, 2019).

### Higher education institutions selected for interviews

| No | Campus            |
|----|-------------------|
| 2  | MNU, Male'        |
| 2  | IUM, Male'        |
| 2  | VC, Male'         |
| 1  | MNU, Kulhudufushi |
| 1  | IUM, Hanimaadhoo  |
| 2  | IUM, Naifaru      |
| 1  | MNU, Gan          |
| 1  | IUM, Fonadhoo     |
| 1  | MNU, Hithadhoo    |
| 1  | IUM, Fuvamulah    |

### Higher secondary schools selected for interviews

18 atolls are divided into 4 groups and an island is chosen randomly from each of the four categories.

| No | Schools from cities |
|----|---------------------|
| 1  | Male'               |
| 1  | Male'               |
| 2  | Kulhudhufushi       |
| 2  | Addu                |