Maldives joins Saudi-led anti-terrorism military alliance

The Maldives is among 34 countries that have joined a Saudi Arabian-led Islamic military alliance formed to combat terrorist organisations.

According to a statement from the state-owned Saudi Press Agency, “a joint operations centre shall be established in the city of Riyadh to coordinate and support military operations to fight terrorism and to develop the necessary programs and mechanisms for supporting these efforts.”

Announcing the new coalition at a press conference last night, Deputy Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, also the kingdom’s defence minister, said the coalition will “target all terrorist organisations in the Islamic world.”

The campaign would “coordinate” efforts to fight terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

“Every country will be participating according to its capabilities and we will not only fight [the Islamic State], but any terrorist group,” he said.

More than 100 Maldivians are thought to be fighting with militant groups in Iraq and Syria, including the Jabhat al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State (IS). At least seven Maldivian fighters have been killed in battles and local media reports suggest a steady outflow of would-be jihadis, including entire families and members of Malé’s criminal gangs.

Details of the Maldivian army’s participation in military operations remain unclear. The government has yet to officially comment on the decision to join the military coalition.

Ibrahim Muaz Ali, the president’s spokesperson, declined to comment and directed *The Maldives Independent* to the foreign ministry and the military. The spokesperson of the Maldives National Defence Force was not responding to calls at the time of publication.

The countries participating in the new alliance include Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Turkey, Chad, Togo, Tunisia, Djibouti, Senegal, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Gabon, Guinea, Palestine, Comoros, Qatar, Cote d’Ivoire, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Malaysia, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Yemen.

Saudi Arabia’s regional rival Iran and its allies Syria and Iraq are not part of the alliance. But the joint statement said “more than ten other Islamic countries have expressed their support for this alliance and will take the necessary measures in this regard, including Indonesia.”

The kingdom has been engaged in a nine-month-long conflict with Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and has carried out airstrikes against IS fighters in Syria.

IS, which controls large swathes of Iraq and Syria, has vowed to overthrow the monarchies of the Gulf states. The militant organisation has also targeted Saudi Arabia’s Shia minority and killed dozens in bomb attacks on mosques.

The formation of the new military alliance comes after the US urged Gulf Arab states to do more to aid the campaign against IS.

Meanwhile, since assuming office in November 2013, President Abdulla Yameen’s administration has fostered closer ties with Saudi Arabia and China. The president has regularly criticising alleged interference in domestic affairs by Western powers amidst persisting criticism of the

government's human rights track record.

Saudi Arabia and Maldives recently penned an agreement hailed as a "religious bridge" to maintain religious unity here. The kingdom's Islamic Affairs Minister Saleh bin Abdulaziz visited the Maldives last month and agreed to help improve the collection of Zakat, an Islamic tax, publish books on Islam in English, expedite ongoing mosque projects and train Imams.

The visit came after Saudi Arabia hosted a conference on moderate Islam in Malé. Islamic Minister Dr Ahmed Ziyad said at the time that the Saudis will help maintain the Maldives' 100 percent Muslim status.

"A lot of Maldivians may not be aware of this, but there is an organized effort to sustain Western influences here. Those in power in Saudi Arabia understood that it will not do to leave Maldives like this," he said.

The Saudi government has since agreed to send scholars to Maldives on a regular basis.

In August, Saudi Arabia established a diplomatic mission in the Maldives for the first time. The kingdom also granted US$20 million for budget support earlier this year, and agreed to provide a US$80 million loan for the development of a an urban centre on the artificial island of Hulhumalé.

The government has also revealed that during Yameen's September visit to Mecca, the Saudi government had agreed to provide cheap crude oil to the Maldives. The crude is to be refined in Singapore.

Two senior ministers meanwhile traveled to Riyad earlier this month to negotiate with the Saudi Investment Fund on investing in the northern iHavan transshipment port.