

War of words against terrorism



Behind the headlines by Bunn Nagara

Far too often, the more shrill the rhetoric the less effective the policy- and the international rhetoric against IS terrorism is now very shrill indeed.

THE week that was began loudly with spirited declarations on the world stage against the scourge of terrorism, particularly of the Islamic State (IS) variety.

It was Tuesday morning in New York, and also the 69th UN General Assembly meeting. National leaders around the world took turns at the rostrum to denounce the heinous barbarism of IS' several atrocities.

Just hours before, the United States had begun an air campaign of bombing and strafing IS targets in Syria. F-22 Raptor stealth fighters and Tomahawk Cruise missiles devastated IS meeting places, training camps, checkpoints and other physical locations.

This had followed weeks of agonising brutality of IS fighters kidnapping, torturing and slaughtering anyone who crossed their path. Reports of grisly videos of beheadings went viral, nauseating much of the rest of the world.

IS fighters had already overrun and captured large areas of Iraq and Syria. Their goal is nothing short of global domination, recruiting and training foreign militants in their immediate and future battles.

As US forces swung into action, the impression created by many Western mainstream news reports is of a US-led international coalition coming together at last to rout the IS terrorists for good. Unfortunately none of that is ever likely to come true.

First, the context or the occasion – the UN General Assembly (UNGA) – is virtually custom-made for high-sounding pronouncements and platitudes, not effective or meaningful action. It is quite unlike, say, passage of a UN Security Council Resolution.

Next, the United States is practically alone in flying into Syrian airspace. True, US officials had made it known to their Syrian counterparts that they were about to hit IS targets on Syrian territory and Damascus did not protest or object.

But that only made the military incursion unofficially acceptable even as it remained officially illegal. It was a violation of the UN Charter, as many Western commentators and others have pointed out, while remonstrations supporting the action were made at the UN rostrum.

That may be why US allies have not exactly been lining up to join the air war. They have several good reasons to be wary.

France made the appropriate supportive noises but refrained from venturing into, or over, Syria – preferring to continue the fight in Iraq instead. It denied that the legal implications of attacking Syrian targets had been an issue.

Turkey fudged and hedged, being another Nato member that was reluctant to fight in Syria or even to sign the Jeddah communiqué. Washington piled on the pressure, but Ankara still resisted.

Britain, the United States' closest ally, represents the most telling case: Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond candidly ruled out any air campaign in Syria.

But Hammond was swiftly overruled by Prime Minister David Cameron, who expressed sentiments in support of the US air war. Cameron was at the UNGA rostrum.

So what of the US' Arab allies that had helped form the "multilateral" effort? From Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, military fighter pilots had actually flown alongside their US counterparts.

However, dig only a little deeper to find their shallow commitment to the US mission. These Arab "allies" on average provide only a handful of air force jets to fly a limited number of sorties.

Their other reason for being hesitant: a sense of realism that any air campaign, however superior it may be over IS targets on the ground, is not going to amount to much.

In their more private and cloistered moments away from their policy positions, Western officials concur. Former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, in the luxury of impartiality that comes with retirement, recently said as much.

Evans is among critics of US policy who find that the same methods had been used, and continue to be used, in Iraq without success. Since IS has not only remained in Iraq but also spread to Syria, how is the US effort over Syria going to be different?

Even the United States may well be convinced that all the shells and missiles fired at IS could be in vain. President Obama had already ruled out ground troops, making it a remote-controlled fight monitored from afar.

All policy preferences aside, nobody can even think of winning a hands-off war in a country like Syria.

With an enemy as determined, disciplined, ruthless and elusive as IS, losing the fight in which so little has been invested has to be a foregone conclusion.

The United States and any other country seeking to attack distant moving IS targets must feel like trying to swat a swarm of bees with a sledgehammer. They lack human and other resources at the level of their targets, from vital intelligence to a reliable support structure.

IS has so far commanded and dominated the battleground, not any other militant group, the Syrian opposition, the Syrian government or foreign interlocutors in the air. And that situation looks like remaining, with no reset switch.

It is asymmetrical warfare that happens to give IS the advantage. Unlike other militant groups, it swells its ranks with volunteer fighters from around the world, then harnesses and drives them with lethal extremist fervour.

IS also enjoys the most funds and best supplies of all militant groups in the region. Its access to weapons, ammunition and convoys of new Toyota Hilux trucks make a statement to behold.

The US air attacks are also said to target IS' financial nerve centres and commercial oil wells. But that may not mean much if they continue to be funded and supplied in different ways from some countries in the region.



Ready to go: A US Air Force Central Command photo shows an F-15E Strike Eagle prior to leaving for strike operations in Syria last week. The aircraft was part of a large coalition strike package that was the first to strike IS targets in Syria. - AFP

Many national leaders at the annual UNGA meeting tend to become so blasé about the set ritual as to not expect much from it. So they compensate by making fiery and promising speeches as a substitute, leading others to think they are now determined to make a difference.

Beyond everything else, the fundamental realities on the ground continue to matter by shaping events and their consequences. Countries ignore this at their peril.

Among these realities is that militant groups may change their names or flags, but many of their people are the same. And more than a few of these, including those in IS today, had been trained and funded for years by the very governments now hounding them.

Another key reality is that ultimately any difference between IS, “Khorasan” or other militants is one of degree. According to some US intelligence analysts, there are no “moderate” opposition fighters in Syria.

Third, the US reaction in attacking IS sites may be motivated largely by fear of the enlarged flow of foreign terrorists across borders, including US borders. Dealing in thousands of foreign terrorists (with 1,000 from France alone) who may strike in any country is IS’ most significant feature.

Not least, IS shares its most immediate objective with all other rebel groups in Syria and all Western governments: the overthrow of President Bashar Assad’s government.

Perhaps, realistically, the call to arms against IS at the UN may be intended as just a call. If it were anything more, such as a fully-fledged effort that could annihilate the strongest force against Assad, it might never have been made at all.

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