

How to lose to terror



BY BUNN NAGARA

Countries supposedly fighting Da'ish (Islamic State) militants can begin to succeed only if they can acknowledge their weaknesses and errors, which still seems unlikely.

THE sordid trail of death and destruction perpetrated by so-called Islamic State or Da'ish militants continues to grow longer and bloodier.

Reports of more threats, attacks and beheading of hostages, random prisoners and those simply refusing to conform grow in number and detail.

At the same time, official rhetoric against such barbarities is cranked up between global capitals. The only effect seems to be just more of the same.

A tragic sense of surreal doom envelopes all that Da'ish touches. However, the fault and the flaw are not Da'ish's alone, but shared at both ends of the spectrum.

At one end is ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-'Iraq wash-Sham, or Da'ish, the militant extremist group with pretensions to a global caliphate. It was first known in English as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or al-Sham), then as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and finally as just Islamic State.

At the other, supposedly distant end is a loose global community of nations led mostly by the United States, the sole superpower with the world's biggest economy and strongest armed forces.

Yet despite all of the latter's warnings, pledges and plans, Da'ish continues to grow in power and influence, seemingly unimpeded. What exactly is happening?

Several criteria may be used to gauge the political strength of a movement or government: the territory it directly controls or influences, the effectiveness of its rule, the number of supporters it enjoys and the internal cohesiveness of its organisation.

Da'ish scores highly on all these fronts, surpassing previously known terrorist groups on such standard performance criteria. It was also reportedly deprived of al-Qaeda affiliation for surpassing everyone else on graphic brutality.

The al-Qaeda of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri was supposed to be the ultimate terrorist organisation of the 21st century. Now that seems such a long time ago.

Even at its supposed height, al-Qaeda could not claim to control any identifiable territory. Its roving fighters inhabited desolate caves, always on the run, their communications tenuous, with Osama himself in hiding.

But as a fighting force, Da'ish militants appear far more impressive.

They could face down the enemy, even when outnumbered, and triumph. They enjoyed a warm camaraderie and a cool confidence not found in other terrorist groups.

They could take over towns and cities in several countries and then hold and administer them. They operate oil fields and other enterprises for revenues to fund on-going operations.

Their geographical spread is steady and systematic, taking over ground conceded by government forces. Besides territory in Iraq and Syria, they continue to spread their wings to Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Da'ish enjoys pledges of allegiance from various terrorist groups and individuals around the world. Its recruitment drive equals or exceeds those of other entities, whether terrorist group or government force.

Meanwhile, several of the world's best-endowed governments have spent considerable time and effort in voicing disgust, expressing disquiet and promising action against Da'ish's string of atrocities.

Government officials have invested heavily in briefings and seminars between their speeches. Some patchy support work by several NGOs or CSOs has been aimed at an otherwise vulnerable public open to Da'ish influence.

The US alone has launched well over 2,000 air strikes purportedly targeting Da'ish fighters, particularly their leaders. But despite US official claims of success, the actual results are not verifiable.

The larger picture remains one of an advancing transnational Da'ish force, retreating government forces in West Asia and North Africa, and ineffectual efforts by the rest of the world to stem the tide.

There have been particular "high points" of Da'ish performance and luck. These add to its mystique and stature, further boosting its image and recruiting appeal.

Such moments include last June's travesty in Mosul when some 30,000 Iraqi troops facing just 800 Da'ish fighters turned tail and ran. That left the militants free to loot a huge army store of weapons, empty the city's banks of some RM1.5bil in cash and release hundreds of prisoners.

Another incident that wowed government forces and added to Da'ish's allure was the raid on the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli in January. The complex and sophisticated operation impressed Libyan authorities and earned more bragging rights for Da'ish.

In meeting the Da'ish challenge, a government's success or failure may be regarded in several respects: psychological, tactical, military and political. In all these respects, government failure is far more evident than success.

Among the psychological setbacks for governments is the group's name itself: "Islamic State". This lends further credence to the group, rightly called Da'ish instead, in its claims and pretensions to operate as an alternative country or state.

The group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi communicates in Arabic rather than English, calling itself Da'ish or the complete name in Arabic. It is therefore inexplicable that the international media, in particular the Western media, continue to call it "Islamic State."

The broad tactical failure of governments and the international status quo generally is to think nothing of having videos of Da'ish atrocities freely available everywhere. Even without restrictions on the Internet, some expression of concern would not have been out of place.

Time was when al-Qaeda's videos had very limited distribution, while Aljazeera Arabic was routinely criticised for airing them. Such videos, whether of boring speeches or bloody beheading, are still propaganda material but they have now become readily available.

The military setback that governments confronting Da'ish face is the standard tactical asymmetry between state and non-state forces. As a terrorist group, Da'ish uses guerilla tactics with even fewer inhibitions than guerilla armies, while state forces remain bogged down by regular army tactics and training.

The closest that governments get in fighting Da'ish on its own terms is through special forces operations. But special forces units are limited in size and number, with difficulties blending into the environment to fight on the ground albeit in clandestine form.

Bombing alleged targets from the air at a distance is safer, without any guaranteed degree of success. Invariably, these targets will include civilian populations, thereby turning aggrieved local populations into fertile recruiting ground for Da'ish.

The political setback in fighting Da'ish involves the split among Arab countries over it. While some are determined to exterminate these terrorists, others have been supporting them in various ways.

This is the dilemma US strategists face in daily operations. The challenge covers a general lack of cooperation and trust as well as uncertainty over issues like intelligence sharing and logistics, since leaks can lead directly to Da'ish itself.

Elsewhere, the endless talk of developing an urgent counter-narrative to Da'ish's deviationism is inversely proportional to the work of actually developing such a counter-narrative. Little had been done on that score, even as Da'ish continues to make great strides forward.

Despite all their huddles, governments are also far behind in the use of psychological warfare in tackling Da'ish. For whatever reason, the vital element of psy-war is conspicuous by its international absence.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.