

Losing to terror by default



BUNN NAGARA

Instead of choosing win-win opportunities, some countries are still opting for lose-lose situations against international terrorist threats.

WHAT many cynical analysts will not admit is that not everything being contested politically has to be a zero-sum game.

“Neo-realists” who assume the worst about everyone’s motives seem averse to win-win situations, such as when countries with very different systems can cooperate for a common cause.

And among the most prominent common causes today is the struggle against terrorism. Countries have much to gain and little to lose in banding together against it.

But there is a major zero-sum disparity between the terrorist agenda and that of a civilised state. One scores only at the expense of the other; both cannot win at once.

Yet, even when faced with the grisly consequences of terrorism, nations that should know better can fail to act appropriately. The rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran illustrate this muddled mindset.

The Saudis executed 47 prisoners last weekend, including Syiah community leader Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr.

Syiah-majority Iran, along with the UN and some Western countries, criticised the executions. Demonstrators attacked two Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran.

The Saudis claimed that only terrorists were executed, and cut ties with Iran. A war of words between Teheran and Riyadh quickly developed.

Sunni allies of Saudi Arabia and Syiah supporters of Iran – as majority populations or significant minorities in the region – lined up on both sides accordingly.

However, the “cold war” of mutual recriminations is led by rhetoric rather than actions. Saudi Arabia and Iran both have good reasons to avoid conflict, but only if their sectarian bluff is called.

The Saudi claim of executing only terrorists is flawed with four of the 47, including Sheikh Nimr, being Syiahs who had merely opposed arbitrary rule without propagating terrorism.

Riyadh had also been seen as cool over terrorist suspects by letting some of them languish in jail for more than a decade.

To the Saudi state, the greater danger that dissidents like Nimr represented was leading a groundswell of public opinion against the monarchy. After he championed the Syiah community in the east of the country, authorities feared his appeal was growing in other provinces as well.

Nimr was sentenced to death in October 2014. His brother tweeted about the sentence and was arrested as well.

A critic of the Saudi monarchy, Nimr had called for democratic elections in Saudi Arabia. He had been leading a version of the Arab Spring with growing grassroots support.

He was repeatedly assaulted, abused and arrested in 2004, 2006 and 2012 as his popularity peaked.

Despite accusations of being a stalking horse for Iran, Nimr opposed foreign interference and said Iran was acting on its own self-interests.

He also championed the rights of the Kurds, which found him at odds with Turkey. Ankara soon allied itself with Saudi Arabia.

The repercussions of last weekend's mass executions are still reverberating through the region and have yet to settle. Independent analysts and human rights NGOs have condemned the specious action.

Iran is leading international criticism of Saudi Arabia so the differences seem to be only sectarian, when any sectarianism is only symptomatic of the decline of regional regimes relying on divide and rule to perpetuate themselves.

Saudi forces have led air attacks against Iran-backed Syiah Houthis in Yemen, further promoting the view that this is another round of the sectarian war.

Bahrain, Djibouti and Sudan also cut ties with Iran; Qatar and Jordan admonished Teheran, but the UAE and Kuwait are still mulling over the prospects.

The latter two, like Oman, are unlikely to sever relations with Iran because the costs to them would be too great. Countries that have not cut their ties by now are not likely to do so.

Syria, Lebanon and Syiah-majority Iraq are, meanwhile, leaning more to Iran, whether on government level or on the streets. On the surface at least, the alliances are primed in their respective alignments for whatever they are worth.

Iran also detects something of an informal alliance between the Saudis and Israel against it. This is reminiscent of sentiments three years ago against Teheran's nuclear programme, and even to the 1981 Saudi-led Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to contain Iran.

Throughout this self-absorbed and all-consuming melee, the common enemy of terrorism is virtually forgotten. Just when Arab and Iranian leaders can join forces to defeat Da'ish (Islamic State) effectively, they choose to turn away from that prospect.

In 2011, Saudi Arabia proposed that the GCC tighten political and military cooperation, with the unofficial purpose of neutralising Syiah influence in the region. The present membership of six monarchies has also been weighing the inclusion of Jordan, Morocco and Yemen.

A joint Arab military force is also being planned, possibly merging with an enlarged and more muscular GCC. But whatever nation state this is intended to oppose or support, it is unlikely to be bothered with non-state actors such as terrorist groups.

Iraq is currently seen as the leading front against Da'ish, as militant strongholds like Ramadi are successfully rolled back by newly energised security forces. But since Iraqi groups have been fighting proxy battles for their Iranian and Arab patrons, even Baghdad's vital efforts against Da'ish may now be compromised.

Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki failed to defeat Da'ish and lost his job. Now his successor Haider al-Abadi must be starting to consider his options.

Meanwhile, Oman, Russia and even China have considered playing a mediating role between Iran and Saudi Arabia, if invited. China relies heavily on oil supplies from both countries, so any conflict may endanger more than half its vital energy imports.

In recent days, Vice-Foreign Minister Zhang Ming had been in Riyadh and Teheran, urging calm and a diplomatic resolution. China has long had a hands-off approach to issues in the region but now has good reason to regret it.

China's booming trade ties with the region may also be at risk. Within a decade its trade with West Asia multiplied seven-fold, without any appreciable increase in diplomatic involvement.

The latest friction has given China cause to upgrade its regional presence. Some reports indicate PLA counter-terrorism advisers at work in Syria, while PLA Navy assets patrol the Mediterranean to provide support and evacuation assistance if needed.

Among the countries in the region, several issues seem clear despite some camouflage and subterfuge.

Saudi Arabia and Iran will not go to war. There is just too much at stake, and they have already "proven" their clout and intransigence yet again.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, has demonstrated its muscle against dissidents. The animosity with Iran is now likely to see a mutual decline in rhetoric.

However, the strategic build-up of their respective fortifications in the region is set to grow. Saudi Arabia will be seeking stronger regional alliances through such instruments as the GCC, while Iran may develop its communal linkages.

Arab alliances with the US would continue if possible, but the new Saudi trajectory appears to prioritise regional relationships. Meanwhile, Da'ish would have more space to linger and grow by default.

Da'ish militants have their differences with al-Qaeda and Syiah opponents of Riyadh, but the execution of the 47 inmates has moved Da'ish to champion them.

Nobody seems bothered by the terrifying implications, least of all the Saudi authorities.

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