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Anti-Terror War: The Kingdom Strikes Back

Muhammad Haniff Hassan *

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AT LEAST 350 delegates from 51 countries and 8 international organisations attended the three-day Counter-Terrorism International Conference in Riyadh from 5 – 8 February 2005 organised by the Saudi government.

The conference provided a platform for the participating countries and organisations to share experiences and exchange information in combating international terrorism. It also sought to develop a broad consensus on fighting terrorism internationally. The gathering focused on four main areas - the roots, culture and ideology of terrorism; the relationship between terrorism and money laundering; lessons from the experiences of different countries; and terrorist organisations and formations.

In his opening speech, Saudi Arabia's leader, Crown Prince Abdullah, announced his government's initiative to establish an international centre for counter-terrorism - a move which received wide support from the delegates, although no details were released. It was proposed during the conference that confiscated terrorism-related funds be used to support victims of terrorist attacks the world over. This was however dropped from the final communiqué when some delegates sought to consult their respective governments first on the proposal.

The joint communiqué, announced by the Chairman, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, the Saudi Foreign Affairs minister, highlighted several points. Among others, the delegates from Muslim and non-Muslim countries agreed that terrorism has no specific religion, ethnic origin, nationality and geographic location. Any attempt to associate terrorism with any faith would only serve the interest of the terrorists, and thus should be rejected, the communiqué added. It also rejected the idea of a "clash of civilizations" and called for a fight against any form of ideology that promotes hatred and violence and which does not encourage dialogue, pluralism, co-existence and rapprochement between different cultures.

The conference was free from any incident. This was in itself remarkable, considering the prevalent perception of the presence of terrorists in the country. Major terrorist attacks had also taken place inside Saudi Arabia in recent years. It showed the confidence of the Saudi government in the level of security in the country. It would have been a major embarrassment to the government if a major attack had occurred during the conference which was attended by many of the international media. Indeed, the conference was a showcase to the international delegates that the Saudi government was in control of the situation and that the security of the country had improved tremendously.

Since Sept 11, the image of the Saudi government has been affected by the fact that significant numbers of the hijackers were Saudi citizens; Osama bin Laden himself was a Saudi citizen. There had been a spate of terrorist acts in Saudi Arabia over the last couple of years such as the attacks on the Saudi oil company in Khobar; the Al-Muhayya residential compound in May 2003; the beheading of Paul Johnson Jr., an American engineer working in a defence company in Riyadh; the United States consulate in Jeddah in 2004 and various skirmishes between security forces and militants. They had all created the impression of a strong terrorist presence in the country. The strict Salafi/Wahabi doctrine, which is closely associated with Saudi Arabia, is alleged to have been the inspiration for Al-Qaeda's ideology. It could be said then that the conference was an attempt by the Saudi government to clear its image and send a message that it was as committed as others in combating terrorism. Riyadh also hoped to gain back the world's confidence that its efforts to uproot Al-Qaeda cells within its borders were serious.

But the conference was also the kingdom's way of striking indirectly at its detractors who have been campaigning against it through writings and conferences, via various organisations and lobby groups. The critics have been attacking the kingdom, its people and its ideology for "promoting intolerance and hatred against others" as well as being a "sleeping partner" of Al-Qaeda. The Saudi government has also been accused of being in denial mode and of lacking credibility and transparency in its fight against terrorism.

Hitting back, Prince Saud Al-Faisal said at a press conference: "Our efforts are aimed at ending this scourge from the region, not to improve our image in any society.... No one can blame Saudi Arabia, saying it didn't do its due diligence when it comes to terrorism, because (terrorism) is a danger against it, and it has sacrificed the blood of its sons."

The conference coincided with the launch of a two-week nationwide campaign against terrorism – the largest ever held in the country. All government agencies were instructed to take part in the campaign, which aimed to isolate the remaining elements that support the domestic terror network. The media were used extensively through documentaries, forums and talks especially by *ulamas* from government institutions and social organisations. Theatrical performances were staged to depict the horror of terrorism. Billboards were also displayed and many exhibitions were held to reinforce the message.

The Saudi government also distributed two video cassette discs (VCDs) entitled *Kasyf Al-Haqaiq* (Revelation of the Truth) depicting destructions caused by terrorist attacks. They include accounts by a repentant member of a terrorist group and by a father who handed over his son to the authorities for his association with the terror network. There is also a depiction of the state's rehabilitation programme as well as the good treatment received by individuals who have surrendered or were arrested.

The initiative of the Saudi government in combating terrorism deserves some credit. There are lessons worth learning from. One can sense a certain comprehensiveness in its approach, involving both 'hard tactics' as well as persuasion. A group of *ulamas* has been assigned to participate in internet forums frequented by the radicals so as to engage them ideologically. Some independent *ulamas* are entrusted to keep in communication with the radicals so as to persuade and convince them that they have taken the wrong path.

The Saudi effort targets not only the human and logistical resources of the terrorist groups. It is a systematic engagement to rebut extremist ideology. The message is directed not only to

members of the terrorist groups and its sympathisers but also to the public at large so as to prevent them from falling into the same trap. The people are made aware of extremist ideology so that they can identify and help rebut its adherents.

Another important feature of the Saudi counter-terrorism effort is the prominent role played by the *ulamas* and their cooperation with the security agencies. There is a sense of solidarity between many of the *ulamas* and the government in the fight against extremism. Even the *ulamas* who have been critical of the government are playing their part to support the drive. It is true that there are significant numbers of Saudi *ulamas* who are very critical and vocal against the West, but they seem united in condemning terrorism and fighting against it.

US Homeland Security advisor Frances Townsend, who also headed the US delegation to the conference, praised the effectiveness of the Saudi security forces, telling the media that "the world cannot defeat terrorism without Saudi Arabia defeating terrorism on its own grounds."

Despite what the Saudi government has done in combating terrorism, some of its detractors remained critical. This is to be expected. Admittedly, there is still significant room for improvement in the Saudis' counter-terrorism efforts. But criticisms alone will not help the Riyadh government overcome the problem. A better approach is to engage it constructively. Crown Prince Abdullah's proposal to establish an international centre for counter-terrorism in the country would provide an excellent avenue for such an engagement. Would the detractors of the state come forward?

* Muhammad Haniff Hassan is a research analyst at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He was an observer at the Riyadh conference.