

OPINION

Iran, Hezbollah and Taliban could help West fight Islamic State



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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There's an old Sanskrit saying that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", and one might assume by extension that "the friend of my enemy is my enemy". But in the world of counter-terrorism, neither statement necessarily holds true.

The Afghan Taliban, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran are often considered enemies of the West, but they are also enemies of the most dangerous terrorist groups — Islamic State and al-Qa'ida. Meanwhile our allies Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, who are supposed to be faithful to us, seem to be "friends" of some Islamist terrorist groups.

The Taliban today is not the same Taliban that was displaced from government in Afghanistan in 2001 for harbouring al-Qa'ida. Most of its original senior leadership is dead, replaced by a younger generation. The Taliban today has more grassroots support in much of rural Afghanistan than the corrupt Kabul government. It is not listed as a terrorist group by most Western countries. We are still in conflict with the Taliban but the most effective way for the US-led coalition to contain the insurgency is to treat the conflict as a civil war and

work with the new generation of Taliban leaders towards reconciliation and participation in government.

From a positive counter-terrorism perspective, the Taliban is violently opposed to Islamic State, whose brutal influence is growing in Afghanistan, as evidenced by the deadly Kabul suicide bombing on December 28. Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban is a parochial Pashtun organisation that poses no external threat to Australia or other Western countries.

Another “pariah” group is Hezbollah, the Shia political and social organisation based in Lebanon and supported by Iran. The US lists the whole of Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation. Australia does not, restricting this designation to Hezbollah’s External Security Organisation, which has been linked to terrorism against Israelis. (Britain, EU and New Zealand also see Hezbollah as mainly a political and social organisation.)

The first terrorist attack attributed to the ESO was the March 1992 vehicle-bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 people and injuring 242. It was said to be retaliation for Israel’s assassination of Hezbollah secretary-general Abbas al-Musawi the previous month. Later attacks planned or carried out by the ESO seem to have been in retaliation for other Israeli attacks, including Mossad’s assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists.

From a counter-terrorism perspective, Hezbollah is a useful contact, as it is violently opposed to Islamic State and has been fighting against its forces in Syria.

Let’s turn next to Iran and why it too should be viewed more positively from a Western counter-terrorism perspective.

Since 1984 the US has charged that Iran is a “state supporter of terrorism” — a position promoted by Israel, which has a vested interest in limiting Hezbollah’s influence in Lebanon. A further black mark against Iran has been its nuclear ambitions, to counter nuclear-armed Israel, and enhance its status vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia. In 2006, the UN Security Council passed a resolution to impose sanctions on Iran after it refused to suspend its uranium enrichment program. But in 2015 the Security Council’s five permanent members and Germany reached a provisional agreement with Iran to lift sanctions in exchange for limits on Iran’s nuclear programs for at least 10 years. In January 2016, the International Atomic Energy Agency announced that Iran had adequately

dismantled its nuclear weapons program, allowing the UN to lift international sanctions immediately. The US did not lift its sanctions. (Australians who visit Iran are denied visa-free entry to the US.)

Although some US analysts have expressed concern about Iran establishing an “arc of influence” extending through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, from Australia’s counter-terrorism perspective Shia Iran could be a useful regional ally against Sunni Islamic State and al-Qa’ida. Iran’s Quds Force under Major General Qasem Soleimani is responsible for regional operations against Islamic State and providing counter-terrorism training in Syria; it has been effective against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Recent anti-government demonstrations in Iran, while attracting a great deal of Western media attention — and subversive tweets from Donald Trump — appear to lack the organisation needed to seriously threaten the Tehran government. The protests initially were based on economic grievances and then focused on the political structure, but so far they lack significant political and middle-class support. Nonetheless, they will have some effect on the government’s domestic policies — but not on foreign or counter-terrorism policies, which are not widely being questioned in Iran.

Now we turn to the “friend of my enemy” category — to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Saudi promotion of Wahhabi fundamentalism around the world has created a toxic religious environment that has spawned Sunni Islamist extremism. Many extremists in Muslim countries I have worked in received their radical religious training in Saudi Arabia (or Pakistan). Fifteen of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudis. In Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion, about 45 per cent of all foreign militants and most of the suicide bombers attacking US forces were Saudis. While Saudi government collusion is hard to prove, wealthy Saudis have provided financial support across at least the past three decades to al-Qa’ida and more recently to Islamic State, as well as to other Sunni Islamist extremist groups.

It seems the US has ignored apparent Saudi undermining of its security interests for commercial reasons. Saudi Arabia is the primary destination for US arms sales, according to the US Council on Foreign Relations. That also helps to explain why the US has ignored Saudi war crimes in Yemen.

The latest arms deal, sealed in May last year, is worth \$US350 billion in the next 10 years. The US is also looking to sell Westinghouse nuclear reactors to Saudi Arabia in a deal reportedly worth \$US300bn (\$382bn).

Meanwhile our South Asian ally Pakistan has a long record of supporting terrorism in Afghanistan and India to further its regional interests. Its former president, Pervez Musharraf, admitted in 2016 that Pakistan supported and trained terrorist groups. It also has tolerated the presence in Pakistan of violent jihadist organisations such as Lashkar-e-Toiba that have provided terrorist training to foreigners — including Australians.

Last month the US-based National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism reported that, internationally, Pakistan hosts the greatest concentration of entities financing terrorism.

Global counter-terrorism is a complex business. As Friedrich Nietzsche aptly said: “The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies but also to hate his friends.”

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