

Victor D. Comras. *Flawed Diplomacy: the United Nations & the War on Terrorism*. Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2010. 265 pp. ISBN: 978-1-59797-438-7 (hc). US \$ 29.95

Reviewed by Naureen Chowdhury Fink

Even to close observers, the United Nations can be frustratingly opaque, with decisions often being taken in hushed corridors, smoky coffee shops or behind closed doors. Victor Comras' book, *Flawed Diplomacy: the United Nations and the War on Terrorism*, therefore provides a welcome insight into the complex processes which shaped the UN's response to the terrorist threat since September 11, 2001. As the tenth anniversary of those events approaches, the UN and its members will find themselves asking what impact their decisions have had on the threat posed by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Are mechanisms set in place a decade ago still relevant to contemporary realities on the ground? Comras, a senior US career diplomat, addresses these questions with a 'no-holds-barred' approach that makes for a distinct change from the more diplomatic language used around Turtle Bay. But these are important questions and it is a particularly timely reminder of the need for the UN and its membership to consider the necessary answers.

*Flawed Diplomacy* begins with a history of the UN's engagement on international terrorism, highlighting Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim's efforts to put it on the agenda after the attacks at the 1972 Munich Olympics - after some earlier efforts to take a more technical approach to international counterterrorism policy. Comras then moves into the heart of the matter: the sanctions regime and the related monitoring mechanism against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1267 (1999), and those entities established to help implement resolutions 1373 (2001) and 1540 (2004). The UN's Global Counterterrorism Strategy (2006) and the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (2005) established to support it receive a brief mention but there is little analysis about their potential impact and the important diplomatic and political steps that they represent.

The relative speed with which the UN has established its counterterrorism architecture since 9/11 is especially appreciable given its members' historical reluctance to address international terrorism in the UN. However, as the book notes, the focus has largely been more on process and less on results. This underscores Comras' key argument: that the 1267 sanctions regime is weakened by the Council's lack of enforcement mechanisms and its reluctance to "name and shame" noncompliant states and hold them accountable.

These arguments are not without merit. Comras rightly echoes an often-made critique that the UN's counterterrorism efforts lack "teeth" and that they are usually so influenced by political dynamics among states as to be watered down to the lowest common denominator. His argument that the 1267 regime risks being outdated has been raised by several states themselves; they have

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also suggested that the very technical nature of this anti- Al-Qaeda/Taliban regime often isolates it from political dynamics on the ground. This is particularly relevant given ongoing discussions about the role of the 1267 Committee's "Consolidated List" of individuals and entities supporting terrorism in the political dialogue underway in Afghanistan. Comras also argues that the list captures only a small number of Al-Qaeda operatives and supporters, making it "sorely out of date." This is a vital question as Al-Qaeda reportedly moves towards a more decentralized structure and states are increasingly concerned about the threat posed by lone actors or "homegrown" terrorists who are, of course, not on the Consolidated List.

Comras reserves some of his most pointed criticism for the political culture and diplomacy that he believes transformed the original independent Monitoring Group (of which he was part), able to publicly cite non-compliant countries, into the Monitoring Team, more closely supervised by the Security Council's 1267 Committee and the UN Secretariat. To address these deficiencies, Comras suggests a return to the "name-and-shame" approach, giving the Monitoring Team some means of holding non-compliant states accountable. Additionally, he pleads for "concrete results" such as the adoption of a comprehensive counterterrorism convention, a consensus definition of terrorism and a report on steps actually taken by states to implement the Security Council resolutions.

Creditable though Comras' recommendations may be, these call for an apolitical response – a technical monitoring exercise – in what he acknowledges to be a "heavily politicized international forum." He comes across as dismissive of any challenges to the validity of the UN's counterterrorism efforts, whether by groups of states or in the form of ongoing legal challenges to the sanctions. Yet, the perceived legitimacy of the regime and buy-in from the broader UN membership is vital to ensuring their compliance and making it effective. Comras admits that no studied assessment exists about the effects of asset freezing; yet he presumes that they nonetheless have a deterrent value and claims that the 'criticality' of the Consolidated List cannot be understated. No evidence is presented to actually substantiate that claim.

*Flawed Diplomacy* also faces the challenge of trying to capture a moving target. Its historical approach is valuable but, while much of its commentary was relatively valid at the time of writing, it does not keep pace with the contemporary discourse. Between the time the manuscript was submitted and the time many readers will pick it up, events and discussions at the UN and within the international community more broadly, have moved forward. Many of the critiques he raises are being echoed by the 1267 Committee and its Monitoring Team members themselves and there are efforts underway to address them – most notably, in terms of updating the list and considering its relationship to ongoing political events, in particular, in Afghanistan.

Like Comras, experts at the UN have also themselves raised the question of the 1267 regime's impact. And, like the experts, Comras offers ways of improving the system without quite

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challenging its existence altogether. However, if the sanctions regime cannot deliver on asset freezes, travel bans or in any way inhibit the activities of listed individuals and groups, what is its real purpose? Given the diffuse nature of today's terrorist threat, is such a list still an appropriate response? If states feel that it is, they must act to ensure that its keeper is granted all the necessary tools to make it truly effective. However, if not, then - as one ambassador recently noted in a query - we may be paying too high a price with civil liberties for such a regime.

Comras' book is valuable in that it provides a timely description of what is often an opaque political process; it raises valuable questions about international efforts to address terrorism. However, for this reviewer, it is clearly a very personalized perspective that would have done better had it focused more on the 1267 regime and the author's own experiences with the Monitoring Group, rather than including a historical overview, and commentary on the definitional question or the role of the Secretary-General. Comras fails to appreciate that, given states' sensitivities regarding the counterterrorism agenda, it is often not that the UN diplomacy is flawed but that member states act to prevent the UN from adopting measures perceived as contrary to their interests.

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