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Reviewed by Alanna O’Malley, Leiden University

From the 9/11/2001 attacks against the United States, to the shopping centre shootings in Nairobi, Kenya in September 2013 by the Islamist group al-Shabaab, to the recent kidnappings of young girls in Nigeria in April 2014 by the Boko Haram rebel group, international terrorism continues to dominate both headlines and the international agenda for peace. What is often lacking in analyses of these events is a sense of the broader historical context of international efforts to combat the acts of terrorists, and a discourse about how states define terrorism. These debates about “terrorism and anti-terrorism” (62) as Bernhard Blumenau highlights at the outset of his article, represent an often-overlooked battleground of the Cold War. He sets out to redress this imbalance by examining how the UN approached international terrorism in the 1970s. Focusing on three anti-terrorism projects, the Ad Hoc Committee on International Terrorism of 1972, the 1973 Convention on the prevention and punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons, and the 1979 International Convention against the Taking of Hostages, Blumenau argues that despite limited success in certain areas, the UN ultimately failed to find an effective solution.

The article is well-placed to fill the current void between the scholarship on the history of international terrorism¹ and the history of the United Nations (UN).² There are few works


which explicitly examine multilateral efforts to tackle terrorism, and even less which review the challenges of terrorism at the UN. Blumenau contributes to the literature on how states historically cooperate to stall international terrorism, by looking at multilateral efforts at the UN in the 1970s. In adding to the literature on the history of the United Nations, this article sheds light on how negotiations were conducted through General Assembly committees, adding to the growing field of literature that re-examines UN dynamics. Crucially, he also departs from the conventional view of the UN, expounded by scholars like Paul Kennedy and Mark Mazower, by arguing that the organisation functioned to provide a public stage for negotiations.3

Blumenau establishes the international dynamic of the Cold War by describing what he terms the West-East-South triangle at the UN. Introducing this “triangle of complex East-West, West-South and South-East relations” (62), he presents an accurate and inclusive impression of UN Cold-War relations which supersedes the usual East-West divide. Within this nexus he outlines the varying approaches of each bloc to the problem of defining terrorism, arguing that the disagreement between the West, the East and the South at the UN was fundamental to the failure to reach a consensus on how to approach the problem. Each bloc essentially conceived of terrorism in a different way. For the West, a terrorist was defined “as a person who committed political violence against a government or citizens of a state in order to force the government to concede to specific political demands” (67). The experience of Western states with domestic terrorist groups including the “Red Brigades in Italy, the Weathermen in the United States and the Movement of the Second of June in West Germany” (67) among others, created a consensus among these countries and a hard-line approach to how terrorists were defined. In particular, as Blumenau describes, the West objected to any efforts to make an exception to the definition for groups or individuals engaged in a struggle for independence. This was a fundamental distinction and one which was diametrically opposed to how the Third World defined terrorists. In addition, the West sought to utilise the UN to create or use existing legal instruments obliging cooperation between states in matters of extradition in order to avoid the existence of ‘safe-havens’ for terrorists.


3 See their works cited in footnote 2.
This definition of terrorist acts was fundamentally different from that of Third World countries, many of which had been through some form of armed struggle for liberation from colonialism. Rather than considering acts of political violence as illegitimate, Third World countries instead viewed ‘terrorist’ acts as inevitable in the struggle for self-determination and refused to sanction any international efforts that might suppress self-determination movements. At the heart of this disagreement was the Third-World vision of terrorism not as acts of terror perpetrated by individuals, but as state-sponsored regimes of terror such as those that existed under colonial administrations. In upholding this definition during debates, Third World states were adamant that all legal instruments include a reference to the legitimacy of the struggle for national liberation. Moreover, they were consistently resistant to any justifications of foreign intervention, thereby avoiding the pretext on which Western countries might “abuse terrorism as a pretext for interventionism and thus to abrogate the principle of sovereignty” (69).

For their part, the Eastern Bloc members viewed terrorists as “dissidents or people who wanted to escape the country illegally” (70). Their main aim in formulating international policy on the issue was to urge foreign governments to repatriate these dissidents. In addition, according to Blumenau, they sought to use the issue of terrorism to woo the Third World, which was an essential part of their broader Cold-War strategy, especially at the UN. In a rather limited analysis, the author argues that Moscow’s motives were “all-too-obvious” and alongside its “clumsy diplomacy,” and that the Soviet effort to damage Western prestige at the UN ultimately failed (72). So too, however, did efforts to reach a consensus between these varying definitions while the negotiations for the three most substantial efforts to coordinate international policy on terrorism took place through the 1970s.

The first effort in the early 1970s to breach the divide between the three blocs was with the UN Ad Hoc Committee on International Terrorism, established in 1972 at the urging of then UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. Prompted by the massacre of Israeli athletes by Black September terrorists at the Munich Olympics, a General Assembly Resolution was debated between the West and the Third World, aimed at devising measures to prevent terrorism. The fundamental difference of opinion between the two groups as to how to define terrorism was evident from the outset, with the Third World rejecting an American draft that they viewed as a “Western attempt to legitimize interventionism and a new form of colonialism” (73). The Third-World bloc presented instead an amended draft, which reiterated the right to self-determination, condemned state terrorism in racist and colonial regimes, and “called for an analysis of the ‘underlying causes’ of terrorism” (73). The resolution was interpreted in the West as essentially creating a scenario in which certain acts of terrorism might be justified and therefore most Western countries voted against Resolution 3034 on 18 December 1972.

Crucially, however, the Third-World bloc enjoyed a majority in the General Assembly and was therefore able to pass the Resolution and establish the Ad Hoc Committee. Blumenau argues that this success of the Third World in directing the debate about terrorism
towards addressing its root causes rather than measures to deal with the perpetrators caused consternation in the United States about the extent of cohesion between Third-World countries on issues concerning national liberation movements. In this atmosphere, very few real gains on these issues could be made at the UN.

The author also points out that this initial impasse between the groups was characteristic of how the Ad Hoc Committee operated during the 1970s. The committee was unable to reach any agreement on the definition of terrorism or what measures could be adopted to address the problem. Its only achievement was to “keep the issue on the UN agenda” (74). Although it was not until 1979 that the Committee managed to adopt a resolution that was aimed at addressing not just the root causes of terrorism but also measures to approve it, Blumenau rightly argues that the Committee served to “increase the normative condemnation of terrorism over the years” (75). In addition, he maintains that the Committee functioned as a public stage from which Third World countries could condemn actions of the West and support national liberation movements while simultaneously making silent compromises on “other more concrete issues” (76). Frustratingly, Blumenau offers no evidence of how this process of public-verses-private negotiation worked, or what it achieved.

The second effort to formulate a coherent international approach to terrorist activities was the Diplomats’ Convention. Blumenau points to a change in Western policy at the UN, what he terms “a piecemeal – or sectoral – approach” (76). The main evidence for this shift in attitude was manifested by the successful adoption at the UN of a resolution condemning attacks on diplomats in December 1973. The swift action on this issue was a direct result of an increasing number of attacks on diplomats from all three blocs. This created, as Blumenau points out, an exceptional moment of unity as the international community shared a sense of grief for the victims of such events. The fact that the convention directly benefitted the diplomatic personnel who devised it also aided the passage of the resolution. Blumenau explains how the conventional East/West divide was overcome but does not emphasise how this moment of unity fit into a broader pattern of contentious interaction.

The final substantial development Blumenau points to is the International Convention against the Taking of Hostages in 1979. He credits the West-German government with presenting the initiative following the December 1975 hostage crisis at the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. The negotiations between the West and the Third World are presented as a moment of cooperation that managed to shield the failure of the European countries to come to an agreement on the definition of ‘guilty’ or ‘innocent’ hostages. This moment of agreement was reached, according to Blumenau, due to the strategy of West Germany to secure Third-World support for the initiative in order to “avoid the impression that it was a neo-colonial project of the big Western states” (80). In explaining the negotiation of the resolution and its subsequent adoption, Blumenau skilfully sheds light on the meandering passage of the Convention, highlighting what he terms the “double strategy” (81) of the West Germans. In a rather oblique reference, he
argues that the Ad Hoc Committee functioned to facilitate the general debates while “the serious negotiations were conducted discreetly in the anti-hostage-taking committee” (82). Again, Blumenau does not offer much detail of the secret negotiations, neither how they functioned nor precisely how they produced the end result.

These ambiguous features of how the UN operated are brought together well in some interesting conclusions. Blumenau points to the focussing of public attention on international terrorism as exacerbating the difficulties in reaching a coherent position. In addition, despite the period of détente, the Cold War framework was evident throughout the discussions as both the East and the West sought to court Third-World influence. In this regard, Blumenau fails to shed any light on the agency of the Third World, despite conceding that many of the resolutions were adapted in part due to its domination of the General Assembly. This would have added interesting dimensions to the UN dynamics that he describes, especially given that he highlights how, with regard to the Diplomats’ Convention, Third World behaviour helped induce a shift in the position of the West. Rather, however, the article renders the Third World as a rather monolithic actor that lacks agency.

Similarly there is a distinct problem with Blumenau’s vague conception and treatment of the UN. Despite some insightful detail on how the various committees worked, the article does not offer a coherent impression of how the various dimensions of the UN operated together in the UN’s actions as a forum for facilitating debates and an instrument for creating international law. There is no mention whatsoever of the role of the Secretariat in promoting the agenda nor is there any mention of previous interventions by the Secretary-General to personally negotiate the release of hostages, such Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold’s successful negotiation with China for the release of 15 American pilots held hostage in 1955. In this sense the article fails to mention the structure-agency relationship within the UN and there is no clear justification for the location of the analysis at this level.

The paper is heavily based on sources from the West-German government archives, which, while they provide interesting points of detail, tend to obscure the broader reflection of how bloc dynamics worked. More detail would have been welcome in explaining how negotiations for the International Convention for the Taking of Hostages operated and how the West German government managed to persuade the Third World to lead the initiative. In this sense there is a flattening of the dynamics of each of the blocs and a particularly scant treatment of Soviet UN policy. In general, Blumenau could have explored these moments of collaboration more closely and contextualised this cooperation more in the broader context of either the pattern of relations between the groups or how this related to the political dynamics between them at the UN.

Perhaps the greatest feature of Blumenau’s work is his highlighting of the role of the UN in facilitating a discourse about international terrorism. This frequently overlooked dimension of Cold-War politics sheds light not just on the history of the issue but also on
the political dynamics of the institutions itself. While a firmer conception of what the UN was and how it worked would be an important aspect for further studies, Blumenau has successfully opened up two new avenues of new research.

Alanna O’Malley is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Leiden University. She was awarded the William Appleman Williams Junior Faculty Research Grant from SHAFR in January 2015. Her first book, which examines the Anglo-American Relationship at the United Nations during the Congo Crisis from 1960-1964, is forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press.

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