
The UN and the Future of Multilateralism: An Interview with Chef de Cabinet to the UN Secretary-General S. Iqbal Riza

Syed Iqbal Riza, Chef de Cabinet to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, is a widely respected international diplomat. He has served his country as a Pakistani diplomat on assignments from Khartoum to London and was Director of the Pakistani Foreign Service Academy in Lahore. For the past 20 years, Mr. Riza has served with the United Nations in numerous senior posts. With this plethora of experience, Mr. Riza sat down with The Fletcher Forum's Ben Sklaver on October 24, 2002, to discuss the future of multilateralism and the perceived role of the United States in international affairs today.

In this interview, Mr. Riza considers limits on the number of peacekeeping actions that the United Nations can undertake and the potential role of the United Nations in a post-Saddam Iraq. Mr. Riza delves into what he sees as the underlying political causes of terrorism and critiques current international anti-terror efforts. He concludes with personal reflections on his experience as the senior United Nations official responsible for the UN mission in Rwanda in 1994 and offers powerful advice for aspiring global diplomats.

FORUM: Mr. Riza, do you think we are witnessing the end of multilateralism?

RIZA: In my view, no. Undoubtedly in Washington there are strong reservations about the multilateral system and the need to resort to multilateral decision-making. In other words, there is a tendency towards unilateralism. That is to be expected when there is a more conservative influence at work in Washington.

I think these will come and go, but the trend will be toward accepting the

multilateral system, strengthening it, and working within it. Eventually, the whole international community must be regulated by a system that is based on the rule of international law. The United States itself is a society which is fundamentally based on the rule of law.

FORUM: Do you think that this growing unilateralism will have an effect on future peacekeeping or peace enforcement missions?

RIZA: We have to keep in mind that while we are seeing a unilateralist trend in Washington, the fact remains that the United States government has brought before the UN Security Council a resolution under which it would seek authorization for any action it would take in Iraq. The United States is either inclined to, or feels obliged to, come through the multilateral route.

The United States has given its full support to all the United Nations multilateral peacekeeping missions that are now on the ground. In the future, this trend towards unilateralism is unlikely to reach the extent where the United

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States would wish to take such situations on itself to try and be the "world's policeman," in the well-known phrase. It is unlikely that the United States would like to be on the ground in all post-conflict situations or simply form coalitions outside the United Nations. I would not expect that.

The record of United Nations peacekeeping has had its pluses and its minuses, but the potential is recognized, and there is a consistent pattern that when a situation

has really deteriorated to the degree where it is out of control, it has been brought to the United Nations, usually at a stage when a peacekeeping mission is required. The United States has always joined in authorizing such missions.

FORUM: We are seeing increasing calls for peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions all around the globe. Do you think there is a limit to the number of peacekeeping actions the United Nations can take and are there additional resources the United Nations needs to achieve these missions?

RIZA: There certainly is a limit, and the limit is determined by several criteria. We can assume that the Security Council would be inclined to authorize these missions wherever they are required. But where then do we run up against limits? First, in terms of financing. Is the rest of the membership willing to pay the rather heavy bills that come with peacekeeping? Obviously, the United States takes the major share. Then the question becomes whether the other resources are available. More and more we have had difficulty in finding the human resources, particularly the military and the police. The military because there is a tendency—which

is worrying—that where there are very messy and dangerous peacekeeping operations in certain areas of the Third World. Western countries, although supporting it politically and financially, are reluctant to contribute troops.

So we have to go to other countries which do not have troops as well-equipped or well-trained. Then we have to get troops and either train them or equip them, which takes a lot of time. Or we have to get troops who remain ill-equipped and ill-trained, and are therefore not effective, or not as effective as they should be. That is where we are coming up against the limits.

We haven't reached them. In the mid-1990s, we had almost 80,000 troops deployed, and now we have around 40,000, I think. So, obviously, the capacity is there. We can manage it, especially after the Brahimi report.¹ We have received resources which have enabled us to manage these peacekeeping operations much more effectively. But these are the two main limiting factors that come into play, apart from any political constraints that one can run into in a particular situation.

FORUM: Has there ever been talk of privatizing the peacekeepers?

RIZA: There has been talk, but no serious consideration, and I do not see it happening. The UN is an intergovernmental organization. Governments have assumed obligations and responsibilities, one of which is to provide troops for United Nations operations and money to buy troops.

There is the question of responsibility. Obviously, troops that are sent out from a particular country remain responsible not only to the United Nations but also to their own government. That would not be the case in private operations. It would be very difficult to control private personnel who did not keep to the rules or infringed limits, and so on. Right now, if this happens with personnel that come from a government, that government is responsible for trying them. Can that arrangement be worked out nationality-by-nationality with private personnel? I doubt it. It would be very difficult, so I do not see this as something that is likely to happen.

FORUM: Moving to the War on Terrorism, do you think the United States' position on preemptive strike conflicts or comports with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, "the right to self-defense"?

RIZA: Every constitution or legal document lends itself to differing interpretations. In the common view, if you take the words of Article 51, which authorizes the resort to military action if an armed attack occurs, then those who would take this literal interpretation would say that "no, this is not authorized" because it is anticipating an attack, not waiting. The practical argument, of course, on the American side is "why wait to be attacked if we know we are going to be attacked or if there is a strong chance that we will be attacked." In these situations, a decision has to be taken in the Security Council. Then it is really up to the country that is pressing this line to convince the other members of the Security Council

to accept its arguments, to recognize its point of view, and to act in the way it wishes the Security Council to act.

FORUM: Clause three of Security Council Resolution 1368, which was adopted unanimously on September 12, 2001, "calls on all states to work together urgently to bring to justice the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of the terrorist attacks on New York, Washington DC and Pennsylvania." It also stresses that "those

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responsible for aiding, supporting or harboring the perpetrations, organizers and sponsors of these acts will be held accountable." Can you evaluate how the international community has responded to this clause during the past year?

RIZA: The major focus of activity has been the Counterterrorism Committee, which was established by the Security Council, headed by Ambassador Greenstock of the United Kingdom. This is where all govern-

ments are required to send in whatever information they have related to international terrorism or for that matter, even national or local terrorism that can have effects across borders.

A large majority of countries have really responded genuinely and have given information that can be very useful in devising the tactics for counterterrorism. Some may not have done so. I'm not aware of it because I'm not directly associated with the committee. Of course, I read the reports, but I cannot recall what they have said on this point.

What is really relevant is that even those governments that might have thought that terrorism was a distant threat now realize that it is a threat to every country. Obviously, the attack in Bali was another horrifying demonstration of what can happen. Whether the measures that are being taken now in what is being called the "War against Terrorism," including the tactics, the operational measures of controlling entries and exits, visas, interdicting currency transfers, sharing information, giving technical assistance to countries to strengthen their security apparatus, whether these measures will really eliminate or largely counter the threat of terrorism is an open question.

In my view, they can only have limited effects. The unavoidable steps to be taken are the resolution of the political issues that underlie the disputes with which the terrorist actions are linked. Until those underlying issues are resolved, civilian societies will always remain vulnerable. There is no way of giving a total hermetical security against a determined enemy or small groups of individuals who feel driven by a sense of injustice or any other motivation to commit these

criminal acts which cannot be condoned in any way. However, we should be aware of what drives people to commit acts of terror.

FORUM: Can you talk a bit more about these underlying political issues?

RIZA: Yes, perhaps it's oversimplifying, but I don't think it's without reason. The fact is that in the attack against the World Trade Center, all the persons who took control of the aircraft and who crashed them were Muslims. They were all from the Middle East. They all expressed in one way or another a resentment for the United States' role in the Middle East. There have been specific references to the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia as being the focus of their rage, which of course is linked to the Gulf War.

In my view it does not stop there, nor did it actually originate there in the early 1990s in Iraq. It goes back much further, and the roots really lie in the Palestine issue and the fact that after five decades there are still millions of refugees. The fact that after three decades there is still a very draconian occupation—these are the roots. There will be others also, but they will be of a more local nature such as in South Asia, the Kashmir issue, or Indonesia—the many issues that certain Muslim militants have been fighting for. But if there is one root—and there may not be, there may be many—but if there is one root of international, global terrorism, I would say that it is Palestine.

FORUM: Do you see any role for peacekeepers in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

RIZA: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has now simmered and boiled for decades, especially after 1967. But now the level of danger is such that there is a compulsion to resolve it. And the United Nations, which has been on the sidelines for almost 30 years, is now in the center of it, along with the United States, which has been the driving force all these years, the European Union, and Russia. The quartet, as it is known.

There is a very concerted, determined effort in the quartet framework to devise a formula, a direct agreement. There is a paper, a roadmap, which lays out the stages to reaching this agreement. It will require at some point a conference, a rather compre-

hensive conference, which will not only resolve all the issues, but will demonstrate the determination of the international community to commit itself to make sure that these solutions are actually put into practice and work.

I think the very fact that the three major centers of power, the United States, Europe, and Russia, have converged, and that the United Nations is included, underlines the point that I made. It is Palestine which is at the root of not only

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regional tensions between Arabs and Israel, Israel and the other Arab countries, but also has radiated out beyond the Middle East region to reach global proportions.

FORUM: Turning back to Iraq, if the United States causes a regime change there, which President Bush has said he intends to do, what will the role of the United Nations be in a post-Saddam Iraq?

RIZA: That will, of course, depend on what decisions are taken in the Security Council, and that will depend on what course the United States decides to adopt. There have been articles in the press speaking about a United States occupation or a Western occupation of Iraq. In my personal opinion, that would be a very difficult and even dangerous option.

We are not in the same situation of dealing with a totally destroyed Japan or Germany, where practically the whole world outside of the Axis powers supported the allies in the Second World War. This is a different situation where a large number of countries will resent any type of occupation of Iraq itself. The

internal situation of Iraq is very complex and very fragile, as is the regional structure and composition of its population.

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The role of the United Nations would really then depend on whether the United States decided to go down this route, despite all the difficulties that could be encountered, or whether it would choose to come to the Security Council. If it came to the Security Council and there was a decision that there should be a United

Nations presence in Iraq, that would then be the responsibility of the secretary-general to execute.

Whether it would be on the Afghanistan model, where there would be a transitional government supported by the United Nations, or whether it will be on the, shall we say, East Timor model, where the United Nations would actually provide the transitional administration, would again depend on the mandate that emerged from the Security Council. The formal composition of the transitional government in turn would depend on whether the opposition to Saddam Hussein is capable of providing that option. If it is not, then you may have only one option left.

FORUM: You were the assistant secretary-general in the department of peacekeeping operations during the genocide in Rwanda and have taken much criticism over the United Nations' reaction to the war. What lessons have you drawn from this entire episode?

RIZA: Yes, although Mr. Annan was the head of peacekeeping, we had shared responsibilities, and I was responsible for the operation in Rwanda.

Much has been made of the fact that we did not inform the Security Council of a certain very worrying cable that was received from the force commander about information that he had been given. The allegation is that our failure to share that with the Security Council left the way open to genocide.

We see it quite differently. First, the preparations that may have been in progress could be seen as clearly by anyone else who was there, including the embassies and the intelligence services who were in Rwanda. We had no particular insight into that. The only specific information that we received was this cable.

We did not take it to the Security Council because we tried to deal with it in another way, but we did take it to the three governments that were most directly involved, which were Belgium, France, and the United States. Two of these governments, as you know, are permanent members of the Security Council. Nothing would have impeded them from sharing it if they felt that it should be shared with other members of the Council in addition to the information that they had from their own sources.

The secretary-general, on his own initiative, asked for an independent inquiry to be conducted. The inquiry has found that yes, there were errors of judgment, but that the information was actually widely available. So the failure to react does not lie only with the secretariat, it lies with the governments who had that information. Beyond that, the responsibility really in the end lies with the people who conducted this genocide.

We may not have seen the preparations or realized [what was coming] probably because...we simply could not imagine that anything like this could happen. Nobody could imagine it. It was unimaginable until it actually exploded.

What are the lessons we have learned? I suppose to pay more attention, to go more quickly to the Security Council, to share information more quickly. But even if we

had done so immediately in January, the genocide started in April. It would have given less than three months. Would that be a guarantee that the Security Council would have reached an immediate decision? Would that have been a guarantee that governments would have sent troops to go to Rwanda? Would there have been a guarantee that those troops, which take us six or eight months to deploy even in less difficult conditions, and this is a landlocked country, would there have been a guarantee that these troops would have arrived in time to actually prevent the genocide? There are these difficult questions to be answered.

It is very different for researchers to look back in hindsight and say, "ah

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hah—with the brilliant light of hindsight, we see that this is how it should have been done.” But when the actual events are unfolding without waiting for hindsight, you just do the best you can. You exercise the best judgment you can. That judgment can turn out to be wrong.

FORUM: One final question, on a personal level, do you have any advice for aspiring global diplomats?

RIZA: Of course, prepare yourselves, and Fletcher is among the best places that you can prepare yourself. Study history, not just international law and international organizations. Study diplomatic history especially over the last century. It will stand you in very good stead when you deal with contemporary problems even though the nature of international society has changed. There are still con-

stants in state behavior, and you can learn a great deal from studying diplomatic history.

The failure to react to genocide in Rwanda does not lie only with the secretariat, it lies with the governments who had that information.

Go out in the field. See the programs outside New York and Geneva. This will make your work more effective.

You have to have a certain degree of idealism and dedication. You cannot look at the United Nations simply as a career among other careers unless you are dedicated to those ideals and to the ideas that underlie them—ideas of multilateralism, of collective

action, of collective security, and the common good. [You have to recognize that] we are all on one planet, that we all essentially are one, despite the color of our skin or the way we live in our different societies. It is only then that you can really become part of this splendid endeavor in which we are engaged. It has lasted half a century, and I have no doubt that it will endure to future centuries.

At the same time, a word of caution. All these organizations must have bureaucracies. The bureaucracy that we have in the United Nations, I’m afraid, is not the most agile, not the most accommodating, not the most innovative. So you have to be prepared for a certain degree of culture shock when you come face-to-face with that bureaucracy. At that time you need a good dose of luck to navigate.

FORUM: Thank you very much for your time and insightful words.

RIZA: Thank you. ■

NOTES

- 1 “The Brahimi Report” refers to the Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations, <http://www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/>. The panel convened in March 2000 and was chaired by Algerian Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi.