AIDS and international security in the United Nations System

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Two assumptions underpin much of the literature that has examined the links between HIV/AIDS and security: (1) that HIV/AIDS is now firmly established as an international security issue; and (2) that Resolution 1308, adopted by the UN Security Council in July 2000, was the decisive moment in the securitization process. This article questions both of those assumptions. It argues that even within the Security Council, HIV/AIDS’ status as a bona fide threat to international peace and security is not entirely secure. Despite the fact that the Resolution was adopted unanimously, there is considerable doubt over the extent to which the Council members were persuaded that HIV/AIDS is genuinely a threat to international peace and security. Furthermore, the Council’s subsequent actions suggest a retreat from the issue. The article moves on to examine statements made in and by some of the other key UN System bodies grappling with HIV/AIDS. Focusing in particular on the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and UNAIDS, it is argued that the international security framing of HIV/AIDS has not generally achieved a great deal of traction within these bodies. Alternative framings, in particular international development and human rights, occur far more frequently. This raises issues for our understanding of both securitization theory and the global governance of HIV/AIDS.

Keywords HIV/AIDS, international security, securitization, United Nations, Security Council, General Assembly, ECOSOC, UNAIDS, international development, human rights

KEY MESSAGES

- It is widely assumed that HIV/AIDS is now firmly established as an international security issue and that UN Security Council Resolution 1308 was the defining moment in the ‘securitization’ of the pandemic.
- In fact, however, HIV/AIDS can best be understood as an example of a partial—or even perhaps a failed—securitization.
- If we look beyond the Security Council to the wider UN System, it becomes apparent that alternative framings of HIV/AIDS, in particular international development and human rights, are far more prevalent.
- This has implications both for securitization theory and for our understanding of the global governance of HIV/AIDS.

Introduction

The idea that infectious diseases can and should be treated as security threats has gained ground rapidly over the last decade, and the transformation of HIV/AIDS into an issue of international peace and security has been particularly widely discussed. Opinion has been divided over whether ‘securitization’ is to be welcomed or to be feared in this case, but almost everyone agrees that it has happened and that it represents a
significant development in the global politics of the pandemic. The generally accepted version of the securitization story rests upon two key assumptions: (1) that HIV/AIDS is now firmly established as an international security issue; and (2) that Resolution 1308, adopted by the UN Security Council in July 2000, was the decisive moment in the securitization process.

This article critically examines both of these assumptions. First, it discusses the process that led to the adoption of Resolution 1308 and scrutinizes both the text of the Resolution itself and the Security Council’s subsequent actions. Whilst in some ways it is true that the Council’s statement that HIV/AIDS represents ‘a threat to international peace and security’ was a significant moment, it is argued that it was in reality less decisive than the bald headline suggests. Resolution 1308 was certainly the result of a concerted attempt, spearheaded by the USA, to promote the HIV–security linkage, but that does not in itself constitute solid evidence of a successful securitization. Sustaining the claim that securitization has been successful would require evidence of a much broader acceptance of the claims made about the security dimensions of the disease. It is argued that even within the Council—often presented as being at the centre of the securitization story—HIV/AIDS’ status as a bona fide threat to international peace and security is not entirely secure.

The article then moves on to examine how widespread the framing of HIV/AIDS as an international security issue has been within the wider UN System. If securitization has indeed been successful it would be reasonable to expect this to be reflected in the discourse of other UN organs and agencies. Three UN bodies that have engaged with HIV/AIDS are examined: the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and UNAIDS. A decade after Resolution 1308, the article finds that international security issues have only been evident to a limited extent in statements on HIV/AIDS made in and by these other UN System bodies. HIV/AIDS is sometimes discussed as a security issue, but far more commonly as a matter of international development or human rights.

Overall, then, the article questions whether the received wisdom over the securitization of HIV/AIDS stands up to scrutiny. Whilst it was clearly the case that the backers of Resolution 1308, in particular key figures in the US government, were deliberately making a ‘securitizing move’ (Buzan et al. 1998: 25), the result may best be seen as an example of a failed, or at best a partial, securitization. In the immediate aftermath of Resolution 1308 it seemed reasonable to assume that securitization had been successful: the picture now is far less certain. This finding has implications for our understanding of both securitization theory and the global governance of HIV/AIDS. For the former it points to a need for greater research into securitization processes, particularly cases of failed and partial securitization. How does persuasion operate in this process and how far can power explain outcomes? How can we empirically determine the point at which an issue has been successfully securitized? In what institutional settings does security carry a particular weight, and what alternative framings are privileged elsewhere?

In terms of the global governance of HIV/AIDS, the argument here raises a number of questions and highlights some areas where further research is needed. There is a clear need for a better understanding of the ideas that shape the approaches adopted by the various actors and institutions engaged in tackling the pandemic. Are the various ways in which different agents understand and respond to ‘the AIDS problem’ compatible? How do the hierarchies and relationships between these bodies operate? How much does security thinking really matter, and where?

Methods

A literature review using a number of online databases was conducted to identify scholarly work that has examined the links between HIV/AIDS and security, focusing in particular on those works that have discussed the national/international security dimensions of the pandemic. Like a large proportion of this existing work, the theoretical underpinnings of this article are taken from the model of securitization developed by the ‘Copenhagen School’ (Buzan et al. 1998).

This article critically analyses the empirical claims about Resolution 1308 that have been made in the literature, comparing those claims with information contained in the official UN records of the relevant Security Council sessions (available through the UN’s Official Document System at http://documents.un.org/) and contemporary news sources. This was supplemented by Freedom of Information requests made to the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the US Department of State for material relating to the adoption of Resolution 1308. One notable result of these requests was the release of telegrams exchanged between the UK Mission to the UN in New York and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London and between the US Mission to the United Nations (USUN) in New York and the State Department in Washington, DC. Both sets of documents provide a number of valuable insights into the background to the adoption of Resolution 1308.

In order to gauge the extent to which international security-based discussions of HIV/AIDS have been in evidence across the wider UN System, the article examines three other UN bodies: the General Assembly (specifically its adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and the 2001 Special Session on HIV/AIDS); the Economic and Social Council (which founded UNAIDS and which has passed a number of Resolutions on the topic since 2000); and UNAIDS, the body charged with coordinating the UN System’s response. These particular bodies and events have been selected because they, along with Resolution 1308, have been perceived within and outside the UN as particularly notable in the UN System’s engagement with the pandemic (UNAIDS 2009). These sections of the article again make use of official UN Records, published reports and speeches by key personnel. A textual analysis of speeches, resolutions, decisions and reports was carried out in order to show the prevalence of an international security-based framing of HIV/AIDS, and a comparison is made with international development and human rights, two of the principal alternative frames.

Defining the HIV–security linkage

As William Aldis (2008) argued in a recent article in Health Policy and Planning, the field of ‘health security’ has been
characterized by a variety of often incompatible definitions, with little agreement over who is being secured or from what. This is not unique to health, and reflects broader definitional and conceptual contestation over the meaning of ‘security’, a phenomenon that is well-recognized within Security Studies (Baldwin 1997) and which has led to security being described as an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Buzan 1991). In recent years HIV/AIDS has been presented as a security threat at a variety of levels of analysis: human security (Fourie and Schonteich 2001); national security (Ostergard 2002); regional security (Gebretsensae 2004); international security (Singer 2002); and global security (Prins 2004). It has also been linked to a number of other ‘securities’, including food security (de Waal and Whiteside 2003) and reproductive health security (Pallikadavath and Stones 2003). It is, therefore, obviously important to be explicit about the type of security being discussed in this article. The focus here, as it was in the Security Council, is on international security. Whilst HIV/AIDS has been linked with other kinds of security—perhaps most notably the concept of ‘human security’—this article concerns itself with the attempted construction of HIV/AIDS as a threat to international peace and security (and, by extension, regional and national security).

In practice, as has been rightly pointed out on many occasions (e.g. Feldbaum et al. 2006; McInnes 2006), attempts to present HIV/AIDS as an international security threat have been characterized by three major claims.

1. That HIV is a threat to the stability of states or regions. A variety of ways in which the disease can contribute to instability have been proposed: the ‘hollowing out’ of state institutions through illness and premature death (Garrett 2005: 41); the economic and social consequences of lost productivity (Fox and Kassalow 2001: 1555); the creation of AIDS orphans, which could fuel the child soldier problem (Singer 2002: 151); illness and premature death having a detrimental impact upon the effectiveness of the military and security services charged with maintaining order (Ostergard 2002: 342–4).

2. That the threat posed by HIV will increasingly be a global one. Although to date attention has largely focused on sub-Saharan Africa, much of the same logic could apply in other regions, including Asia where prevalence rates in the ‘next wave’ of states (including emerging powers seen as critical to regional and global security such as China and India) are on the rise (National Intelligence Council 2002; Schneider and Moodie 2002; Thompson 2004; Hunter 2005). As Alan Dupont (2001: 225) has argued: “If HIV continues to proliferate in East Asia, as seems likely, the virus will undermine civil society, slow the democratization process and intensify poverty, resource scarcity and conflict, directly affecting the national security interests of afflicted states, the region’s collective security interests and the lives of millions of people. What is especially worrying about the AIDS pandemic is that even though Asia has already overtaken Africa as the epicentre of the disease, its full impact will not be felt for perhaps another decade because of HIV’s lengthy incubation period.”

3. That HIV/AIDS is detrimental to the effectiveness of international peacekeeping forces in those areas of the world where stability has already broken down. Furthermore, there have been concerns that UN peacekeeping troops could actually be vectors for the spread of HIV in the host population (Prins 2004: 942; Tripoliti and Patel 2002). Clearly these issues were particularly troubling to the UN Security Council.

Thus, the types of securitizing claims in question reflect traditional international security concerns: instability, armed conflict, military effectiveness and international peacekeeping operations.

The overwhelming view in the literature (especially the International Relations literature) is that these claims have become a widely accepted basis for understanding and responding to HIV/AIDS; that the pandemic has been successfully securitized and that Security Council Resolution 1308 was the most high-profile symbolic manifestation of that process (e.g. Prins 2004; Elbe 2005; McInnes 2006; Fidler 2007).

It is certainly true that some do approach HIV/AIDS, at least in part, as an international security issue. The USA is the clearest example. It was within the US intelligence agencies that the idea that HIV/AIDS is a threat to security was first incubated (CIA 1987; National Intelligence Council 2000). To some extent this has fed through into US policy responses, with the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) being partly a response to security concerns, alongside economic, humanitarian and religious rationales for action (Garrett 2005; Feldbaum 2009: 5). Whilst it is impossible to quantify the extent to which security as opposed to these other concerns has motivated US action, there are some clear examples of activities that do have an explicitly security-oriented focus, not least the Department of Defense’s HIV/AIDS Prevention Program, which focuses on reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS in (particularly African) militaries (Department of Defense 2010; McInnes and Rushton 2010: 240–2). As Ingram (2005) has noted, however, in this respect the US approach is often divergent from those of other states (Ingram contrasts US policy with UK policy).

The key question, then, is the extent to which the HIV–security linkage has been accepted and adopted by other actors. This is a crucial point for the Copenhagen School, who are careful to distinguish between a ‘securitizing move’ and successful securitization. The latter would require the audience to be persuaded that HIV genuinely is a security issue (Buzan et al. 1998: 25). They also dismiss the idea that securitization is a binary either/or state, with Ole Waever (2003) having called for more attention to be paid to partial and failed examples of securitization. For the majority of commentators, however, HIV/AIDS is a case of successful securitization and Resolution 1308 is viewed as powerful empirical evidence that the audience (in that case the 15 members of the Council who adopted the Resolution unanimously) were persuaded (e.g. Elbe 2005: 403–4; Prins 2004: 941–2; McInnes 2007: 93–4). In the next section this article subjects that claim to greater scrutiny, arguing that there is in fact good reason to doubt the extent to which real persuasion took place.

The article then moves on to examine the extent to which a security-based discourse of HIV/AIDS has been evident in other parts of the UN System in the decade since Resolution 1308.
Although this article focuses solely on the UN System, it is clearly true that many non-UN bodies are important actors in the global governance of HIV/AIDS, including international funding mechanisms such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria; bilateral programmes; NGOs and civil society groups; and private foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Cohen 2002). Nevertheless, there are good reasons for focusing the analysis here within the UN System. First, through its various fora, agencies and funds, the UN has been at the forefront of debates around appropriate global responses to HIV/AIDS since the establishment of the World Health Organization (WHO)’s Global Programme on AIDS in 1987. Secondly, given the widespread identification of the Security Council, in many ways the senior organ of the UN, as a crucial actor in the securitization of HIV, if the international security discourse was to gain traction anywhere it is within the UN System that we could most obviously expect to see it. How far has the splash created by 1308 rippled out across the UN System?

Findings

The Security Council

It is difficult to think of a body more qualified than the Security Council to make a judgement on whether an issue constitutes a threat to international peace and security, and no doubt this is one of the reasons that Resolution 1308 has been so widely interpreted as proof of the securitization of HIV/AIDS. Yet there is room for considerable doubt over whether it was actually the culmination of a successful securitization process. Three issues in particular call this interpretation into question.

Firstly, despite the fact that Resolution 1308 was adopted unanimously by the Security Council, there are doubts over whether the members of the Council at the time—not to mention others outside the Council—ever fully accepted the case that HIV/AIDS should be addressed as a threat to international peace and security. The Council’s seizure of the issue was the result of concerted efforts by key individuals in the Clinton Administration to highlight the international peace and security dimensions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Richard Holbrooke, at the time the US Ambassador to the UN, was the driving force behind this process, placing the issue on the Council’s agenda, convincing key colleagues in the Clinton Administration—not least Vice-President Gore—to actively support the Council’s discussion of the issue, and later persuading his fellow Council members to adopt the Resolution. Although the degree to which this was a contested process has largely been ignored (e.g. David 2001: 561) there is ample evidence that the issue was controversial behind the scenes. A number of accounts of the negotiation process refer to the necessity of convincing reluctant Council members that HIV/AIDS fell within the Council’s remit (Holbrooke 2000: 1; Sternberg 2002). Those states that initially had serious reservations included three of the permanent five members: Russia, China and France (Prins 2004: 941). The report on the negotiations sent by the US Mission in New York to the State Department included a comment specifically focusing on the difficulty of persuading the Chinese and Russians to back the resolution (and also noting the debates with France, which was pushing for an international conference or a General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS):

“USUN pushed the Russians and Chinese as far as they could go to get this Resolution passed. If we are going to follow this up with additional Council measures – as many other Council members support – we should expect opposition from Russia and China, as well as trouble with the French on the conference idea.” (USUN 2000: para 10)

In addition to this, many of the major peacekeeping troop contributors were unhappy about the Resolution (UK Mission to the UN 2000; USUN 2000: para 7). Even the UK—the USA’s strongest ally in getting the Resolution through the Council—had private qualms about whether HIV should be on the Security Council agenda at all (Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2000a; 2000b).

Ultimately, as we know, Holbrooke was successful in steering the Resolution through the Council despite these various sources of opposition. But being persuaded to support the Resolution is not necessarily the same as being persuaded by the securitization claims: Council members are required to weigh up a wide range of interests in deciding whether or not to vote in favour of a Resolution. In this case this undoubtedly included the political and reputational costs of opposing a Resolution addressing such a major human tragedy in addition to the usual US influence over the Council. If the other 14 Council members were genuinely persuaded, we might expect them to repeat the securitizing claims in other contexts. As will be shown below in the examination of the General Assembly’s Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001, there is little evidence that they are particularly prone to do so.

Secondly, the Resolution focuses on HIV as an international peace and security threat in only a limited sense, conforming to what Barnett and Prins (2005: 11) refer to as the ‘narrow construction’ of HIV/AIDS as a security issue. The January 2000 Security Council debate had been couched in a somewhat broader manner, but the Resolution that was eventually passed in July was a far more tightly focused document. The changes in the nature of the debate over those 7 months have not been widely flagged up in the literature, but this is an important shift which again gives an indication of the controversy that surrounded the issue, with USUN documents noting that:

“The Russian delegation made it clear that they had instructions from Moscow (A) to link the Resolution as closely as possible to peacekeeping operations only, (B) to weaken or remove language declaring that AIDS was already a global threat, and (C) to work with the United States delegation to find common ground…” (USUS 2000: para 10)

Although Resolution 1308’s preamble does indeed rehearse many of the claims about the link between HIV/AIDS and international security outlined above, these are couched in relatively soft language—for example, ‘the HIV/AIDS pandemic, if unchecked, may pose a risk to stability and security’ (emphasis added). As Michael C. Wood (1998: 86–7) states, the preambles to Council resolutions ‘need to be treated with caution since
they tend to be used as a dumping ground for proposals that are not acceptable in the operative paragraphs’. When we look at the operative paragraphs we find that they focus solely on HIV/AIDS in relation to peacekeeping personnel. This is an important subject, no doubt, but a very specific one, which falls clearly and uncontroversially within the Security Council’s remit. So, far from indicating a unanimous acceptance of the broader claims about the potential security consequences of the pandemic, the fact that they appear only in the preamble may in fact show the opposite.

Thirdly, the Council’s subsequent treatment of HIV/AIDS can be seen as a retreat from Resolution 1308 and a return, post-9/11, to a more ‘traditional’ security agenda. Some concrete actions did follow from the Resolution, in particular UNAIDS’ work with the UN’s Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNAIDS 2005), but far from becoming a major player in the global governance of HIV/AIDS (as many predicted in 2000), the issue seems to have dropped off the Council’s agenda. The failure of UNAIDS and other key movers behind securitization to produce hard evidence to substantiate the securitizing claims seems to have been one of the key reasons for the Council dropping it. Indeed, in preparation for the planned Council meeting in September 2005, UNAIDS commissioned Tony Barnett and Gwyn Prins of the LSE to produce a report that would represent, in Peter Piot’s words, ‘part of UNAIDS’ effort to provide the Security Council with an evidence base about the AIDS-security nexus’ (Barnett and Prins 2005: 5). Yet the report Barnett and Prins produced was not what UNAIDS was expecting at all, and indeed was scathing about the quality of evidence upon which many of the claims about the military and HIV/AIDS in particular were based. They noted that ‘asserted statistics about high prevalence rates tended to be recycled from one secondary source to another’, and that much of the literature is based upon ‘Factoids’—‘soft opinions that have hardened into facts’—that are ‘the intellectual viruses of quick and dirty synthetic studies’. They bemoaned ‘the failure to recognise the gaps [in the evidence] and therefore a willingness to engage in extrapolations with weak anchorage’ (Barnett and Prins 2005: 7). Whilst the report did not deny the potential impact of HIV/AIDS on peacekeepers and other uniformed services, its tone was hardly likely to enthuse the Council members to devote further time to the issue, particularly if they had not previously been fully persuaded that it belonged on the agenda at all. Far from bolstering the securitization case the Barnett and Prins report contributed directly to HIV/AIDS dropping off the Council’s agenda. The biannual pattern established by the Council’s 2001, 2003 and 2005 meetings on HIV/AIDS has not continued; there has been no formal Council discussion of HIV/AIDS since 2005, although a Council meeting on the subject is apparently scheduled for autumn 2010.

One of the great hopes of securitization is that it can bring an issue to the top of the political agenda (e.g. Altman 2003). HIV/AIDS, however, was already clearly established on the international political agenda prior to July 2000, so to attribute its profile to securitization is highly problematic. Neither can the Council be given the credit for the huge increase in resources that have been devoted to tackling HIV since the turn of the millennium. There has been no major effort by the Council to improve global responses (although some of the individual Council members, particularly the USA, have spent heavily). Indeed, UNAIDS points to the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS (discussed below) rather than Resolution 1308 as the turning point in global financial commitments (see Figure 1).

If the Council’s actions provide a less than solid basis for asserting that HIV/AIDS has been transformed into an international security issue, does the linking of HIV/AIDS and security in other key parts of the UN System suggest that we have witnessed a successful case of securitization? Here the article moves on to examine some key statements made in and by three other UN bodies—the General Assembly, ECOSOC and UNAIDS—and attempts to judge the prevalence of the international security framing in relation to two prominent alternatives: international development and human rights.

The General Assembly

Although it is derided by some as a mere ‘talking shop’ the General Assembly has in fact made a number of significant interventions on HIV/AIDS. Three of these—and the ideas that underpinned them—are worthy of particular attention.

The first was the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Goal 6 of which commits states to reverse the tide of HIV infection. Although what became the MDGs had been under discussion within the OECD and the UN System since at least 1996 (OECD DAC 1996; Vereker 2002: 135; Hulme 2007), it was at the General Assembly’s Millennium Summit in September 2000 that they were formally adopted. There has been a good deal of scepticism over whether the targets will be achieved by 2015, but the MDGs have at least focused international attention on those challenges included in the goals and have heightened the political costs of failure to at least make progress on achieving them. Doing so may, of course, have relevance to a security agenda in the indirect sense that development might reduce the likelihood of conflict and increase international security (High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change 2004). In terms of the ideas underpinning the MDGs, however, it was clearly international development itself rather than international security, which was the primary motivation.

Figure 1  Estimated total annual resources available for AIDS, 1996–2005
Perhaps the most high-profile General Assembly event to focus exclusively on HIV/AIDS was the June 2001 three-day ‘UN General Assembly Special Session’ (UNGASS) devoted to the issue. These special sessions are used relatively sparingly and it was held at a high political level (many of those representing their countries were heads of state or government, or in some cases Ministers of Health or Development), showing the importance that member states attached to the issue. As is characteristic of such occasions, most countries were keen to take the opportunity to speak: 182 state representatives made speeches over the 3 days, along with Secretary-General Kofi Annan, UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot, and representatives of some 20 international organizations, civil society groups, regional organizations and UN agencies.

What is striking when one examines the speeches made at the UNGASS is that mentions of the link between HIV/AIDS and international security were surprisingly rare. Of the 182 states that made statements, only 33 (just over 1 in 6) referred to the disease in terms of national or international security.1 Where they did so, those references tended to be brief and bland statements noting that, amongst other things, HIV/AIDS represents a potential threat to state stability. This example, taken from the statement of Nigeria, is typical of the genre:

“Nigeria welcomes the convening of this United Nations special session to set the agenda for meeting the immense challenges posed by a disease so deadly that it has become one of the greatest obstacles to human development and security.” (UN General Assembly 2001a: 14)

In fact, statements focused overwhelmingly on alternative discursive framings of the pandemic: HIV/AIDS as a public health problem of course, but also as an international development challenge and as a human rights issue. Despite coming only a year after Resolution 1308, the international security dimensions were only a minor feature of discourse at the UNGASS. Resolution 1308 itself was scarcely mentioned.2 International security concerns did not even feature prominently in the statements made by those states that had been on the Council at the time Resolution 1308 was adopted: only four of those 15 states (Bangladesh, France, Mali and the USA) mentioned international security issues. The other 11 were silent on international security. This might further add to the doubts expressed above over the extent to which the Council members in July 2000 were genuinely persuaded by the US-led securitizing move.

The culmination of the UNGASS was the adoption of a ‘Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS’ (UN General Assembly 2001c), a declaration that has, like the MDGs, been both heralded as a major achievement in its own right (e.g. Parker 2002) and used as a yardstick against which to judge progress made. The Declaration made little reference to international security at all. It did highlight the fact that conflict and disasters can contribute to the spread of HIV (UN General Assembly 2001c: paras 75 and 76), and called on states to take action to reduce rates amongst their uniformed services (paras 77 and 78) but did not make the claim that HIV can contribute to bringing about instability and conflict. Neither did it make reference to Resolution 1308.

Four years later a second high-level meeting on HIV/AIDS was held with the primary aim of measuring progress on the commitments made in the 2001 Declaration and MDG 6. Once again in the statements made in the plenary sessions there were relatively few references to the international security implications of HIV/AIDS. Again the overwhelming emphasis was on international development and human rights. This time the text adopted by the Assembly (the so-called ‘Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS’) did note that ‘HIV/AIDS constitutes a global emergency and poses one of the most formidable challenges to the development, progress and stability of our respective societies and the world at large’ (UN General Assembly 2006: 1), but it emphasized human rights (e.g. paras 11, 12) and international development (e.g. para 13) far more than security.

In short, the international security-based framing of the pandemic seems to have had only a limited impact within the General Assembly. It is international development and human rights, not security, which have largely defined the Assembly’s treatment of HIV/AIDS.

ECOSOC

The UN Charter sets out the area of ECOSOC’s competence as ‘international economic, social, cultural, educational, health and related matters’ (Article 62) as well as human rights. One of its key tasks is coordinating the work of the UN System’s various specialized agencies, funds, commissions and other subsidiary bodies. As such, it would in many ways appear to be the ‘natural home’ for HIV/AIDS amongst the organs of the UN, and it is clear that at least some of the states who opposed the Security Council’s involvement in the issue believed that HIV/AIDS ‘belonged’ in ECOSOC.3 Despite this, ECOSOC’s treatment of HIV/AIDS has gone almost entirely unexamined in the academic literature. Indeed, other than dutiful sections in the UN textbooks, which cover it largely for the sake of completism, ECOSOC scarcely receives any academic attention at all.

The establishment of UNAIDS was ECOSOC’s most significant contribution to date to the global response. Although there was widespread agreement that the UN System’s efforts in this area needed to be improved, the process of designing the new coordinating mechanism was a difficult and drawn-out one (Knight 2008). ECOSOC Resolution 1994/24 marked the formal establishment of UNAIDS, although the new body did not begin work until January 1996. In terms of the ideas underpinning UN responses this was an interesting historical moment: the creation of UNAIDS was in part a reaction against the narrower medical/public health-based approach of the WHO and a recognition of the multisectoral and multi-faceted nature of the problem (Parker 2000: 43). This, however, predated the securitizing move made by the USA in 2000. It should not be surprising, therefore, that Resolution 1994/24 referred to the particular challenges HIV/AIDS posed in developing countries and to the necessity of the UN System working with other development partners, but made no reference to international security.

But even post-2000, ECOSOC has not seriously addressed the security dimensions of the pandemic. There have been three relevant ECOSOC Resolutions passed in this period. Two of these have concerned the work of UNAIDS. The first, in 2005
(UN ECOSOC 2005), reaffirmed the outcomes of the UNGASS and the Millennium Declaration, but made no mention of the Security Council (or, indeed, international security) noting only that HIV/AIDS ‘Exacerbates poverty and poses a major threat to economic and social development and to food security in heavily affected regions’. The second (UN ECOSOC 2007) directly quoted the General Assembly’s Political Declaration of 2005, repeating the phrase: ‘HIV/AIDS constitutes a global emergency and poses one of the most formidable challenges to the development, progress and stability of societies and the world at large.’ It did not expand upon this statement. The third post-2000 ECOSOC Resolution on HIV/AIDS (UN ECOSOC 2004) was quite different in character, dealing specifically with HIV/AIDS in prisons and correctional facilities. As such it treated HIV primarily as a human rights issue, specifically the rights of prisoners.

As in the General Assembly, then, development and human rights have been foregrounded by ECOSOC. Security has scarcely figured at all, other than in the ritualistic quotation of other declarations.

UNAIDS

The story with UNAIDS is somewhat different. From the outset one of its explicit purposes was to increase the profile of the disease as an international political issue (UN ECOSOC 1994). As the Executive Director Peter Piot stated in 1999, ‘In the coming year, the UNAIDS Secretariat and Cosponsors will need to intensify their advocacy with the most senior policy makers and opinion leaders’ (UNAIDS 1999: 34–5). The Copenhagen School suggest that securitization is an excellent way of achieving this and it seems fitting that UNAIDS was involved from an early stage in the attempt to get the issue on the Security Council agenda. UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot played a central role, seizing the opportunity to get increased attention (and, he no doubt hoped, resources) for the battle against AIDS. As Richard Holbrooke (2006) recalled:

“I didn’t know Peter Piot very well until the Security Council session, but he was excited by it. He realized that the world was going to pay more attention. We were breaking the issue out of the field of health specialists and into the international consciousness as a security issue. Peter told me later that it was the best day of his first four years as head of the UNAIDS.”

Piot has himself spoken about the benefits that he sees as accruing from presenting AIDS as a security issue, saying in 2005 that:

“When we look at the history of the fight against AIDS, there is no doubt that resolution 1308 (2000) is a milestone in the response to the epidemic. By underscoring the fact that the spread of HIV/AIDS, if unchecked, may pose a risk to stability and security, the Security Council...has transformed how the world views AIDS. I say “transformed” because many now view AIDS as a threat to national security and stability, in addition to being a threat to development and public health alone.” (UN Security Council 2005: 5)

No doubt because of Piot’s involvement—unlike in the General Assembly or ECOSOC—the security discourse gained a reasonably high level of traction within UNAIDS. Furthermore, in terms of practical responses UNAIDS has been at the forefront of working on some of the security-related aspects, in particular with national militaries and UN peacekeeping forces (UNAIDS 2005).

Even within UNAIDS, however, international security has not been the dominant way in which HIV/AIDS is framed. Rather, the securitizing move was one way in which UNAIDS sought to build a sense of emergency. Other framings—international development and human rights again being the most prominent—have also been deployed as ways of encouraging governments and donors to do more. Although not a scientific test, some persuasive support for this claim can be seen in the frequency of the security framing of HIV/AIDS in the biannual UNAIDS/WHO Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic. These reports are the most high-profile of UNAIDS’ publications, and thus are a key part of its strategy for increasing international attention. Although they have on occasion included discussions of HIV/AIDS as a national/international security issue, this has not by any means been the primary frame. The development and human rights aspects of HIV/AIDS dominate the reports, dwarfing the number of references to security (see Figure 2).

So whilst UNAIDS has played a role in promoting the security dimensions of HIV/AIDS, it would be impossible to conclude that it is the dominant frame within the reports. Rather what we can see is a willingness to frame HIV in any (or all) of the available ways. Security is one weapon in the armoury, but only one amongst several.

Conclusions

In short, it has been argued here that the securitization of HIV/AIDS has been far less successful than is often supposed. Even the Security Council—identified frequently as the key actor in the securitization process—agreed only reluctantly to pass what was, after all, a relatively non-committal resolution, and has subsequently seemed to back away from the issue. A securitizing move was certainly made, but the result may best be understood as a partial—or perhaps even a failed—case of securitization. If we look beyond the Council to the wider UN System we find that the international security dimensions of HIV/AIDS are evident in the discourse, but only to a limited extent. Alternative framings are given far more weight. Although some states (the USA being the clearest example) continue to view HIV in part as a security threat, there is certainly no unanimity on this. These findings have implications both for securitization theory and for our understanding of the global governance of HIV/AIDS.

For one, the HIV/AIDS case demonstrates the difficulty in determining whether the securitization threshold has been crossed. On the face of it a Security Council Resolution would seem to be powerful evidence that it has, and in the early–mid 2000s there were good reasons for believing in a successful securitization. A decade after Resolution 1308 the picture looks somewhat different. Yet the mere existence of a Resolution may
give a false impression of consensus: divisions often lie beneath the surface.

It also calls into question whether security is always a trump card. In fact different approaches are required in different fora and for different audiences. In large part this is about institutional agendas, and this can be seen extremely clearly in the UN System context. The Security Council is primarily concerned with threats to international peace and security, and thus constructing HIV/AIDS in those terms was a prerequisite to getting it on the Council agenda. But security does not seem to override other concerns in the same way elsewhere in the UN family. The dominance of the G77 within the General Assembly has made international development one of the key buttons for states to push in that forum. ECOSOC’s work is in areas such as human rights and development. It should come as no surprise, then, that the discourse within these fora reflects these biases. For those seeking to raise the profile of an issue, then, it is a case of horses for courses.

This has obvious implications for our understanding of the global governance of HIV/AIDS. Whilst a lot of attention in the academic literature has centred on the actions of the Council, the Assembly’s commitments on HIV/AIDS seem to have done far more to increase the resources available. This points to a need for further research into which bodies have the biggest impact on global responses, how the relationships between them work, and what ideas and concepts underpin their engagements.

The debate around AIDS and security has recently moved on in a positive way, with work such as that emanating from the Netherlands-backed ‘AIDS, Security and Conflict Initiative’ (ASCI) beginning to set out some important and promising new research agendas (e.g. de Waal 2010; de Waal et al. 2009). We must certainly remain alert to evidence of the potentially troubling side-effects of securitizing HIV (Elbe 2006), but also to the implications of different understandings of the nature of the HIV problem (and consequently the appropriate way of responding). It is far from certain that the demands of international security, economic development and human rights can be reconciled. There is thus a need for a holistic view of global responses to the pandemic and the ways in which the international community seeks to deal with what is, after all, at its heart a human tragedy.

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Endnotes
1 Those that did so were (in the order in which they addressed the Assembly): Botswana, Mozambique, Nigeria, Portugal, Rwanda, Norway, USA, Pakistan, Algeria, Mali, Thailand, Barbados, France, Mexico, Germany, Panama, Monaco, Brunei, Bolivia, Yemen, Nepal, Congo, Antigua & Barbuda, United Arab Emirates, Swaziland, Belize, Saint Lucia, Cyprus, Bangladesh, Fiji, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, D.R. Congo.
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