Desperately Seeking WMD

by **Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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Articles & Testimony

BOOK REVIEW Disarming Iraq By Hans Blix Pantheon, 285 pages, $34

Hans Blix has produced a straightforward, easy-to-read account of the UN's Iraq inspections and the crisis at the UN in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq war. With its clear style and blunt but polite language, Disarming Iraq will be much appreciated by those critical of that war. But the book ill serves the UN and its arms inspectors, because it will feed the stereotype that they are more interested in accommodating dictators than in assuring global security.

After briskly walking through the history of arms control in Iraq up to 2000, Blix begins his detailed account of the reorganized UN inspection program. He crisply tells the story of the restart of inspections in 2002, and then the breakdown of consensus at the UN about inspections, with the slide toward war. He keeps the focus on high politics, but with enough human detail to keep the story lively and entertaining. He closes with a 20-page assessment of what went wrong.

Some of Blix's judgments will sit poorly with war critics, such as his assessment, "Military pressure was and remained indispensable to bringing about Iraqi compliance." But more often, he slips from a neutral analytical stance to stand clearly on the side of Washington's critics. For instance, he refers repeatedly to those countries, such as France, which refused to join the military pressure, as wanting "to further strengthen the inspections regime," and to those countries supplying soldiers as skeptical about the inspections, if not uninterested in their success. Blix would have done better to acknowledge the possibility that there were differences of opinion about how best to strengthen the inspections regime, and that there was something to be said for the U.S. argument that its 2002 troop deployments did more to achieve that than all the fine words of French diplomats.

Blix -- the Swedish diplomat who supervised international inspections for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq until they were suspended in March, 2003 -- cites with approval U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's statement that "the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence." Yet he then falls into the old habit of the International Atomic Energy Agency (which Blix headed from 1981 to 1997) of sliding from "there is no evidence" to "it must not be happening." For instance, he criticizes U.S. and British claims that Iraq had chemical weapons on the eve of the war: "Had it not made the slightest impression that the inspectors ..... had searched all over Iraq for a number of years without finding any traces of chemical weapons?" In fact, the inspectors had not been in Iraq for almost three years until their return only a few months before the war, and in that short period, had hardly "searched all over

Iraq."

Given that Iraq before 1990 successfully carried out activities undetected by either the IAEA or foreign intelligence agencies, it would have been imprudent to conclude that any outsider had full knowledge of what it had done while the inspectors were gone. Blix could have made the careful, accurate statement that there was no evidence Iraq had chemical weapons on the eve of the war. By suggesting instead that UN inspectors knew Iraq did not have chemical weapons, he makes the error Rumsfeld cited, confusing absence of evidence with evidence of absence.

In a book so full of criticism of others, there is remarkably little self-criticism. For instance, the attitude of key Washington decision-makers toward Blix was much affected by his role in the IAEA's pre-1990 inspections, but Blix gives this period a mere page and a half, with no reference to his own role as the organization's head and with some incomplete references to how far Iraq had gone with its nuclear programs. In his extensive writings in 1992-93, Blix was much more forthright about the failures of that period and the inherent limitations in an inspections system.

In Disarming Iraq, Blix asks what made U.S. and British leaders "listen so little and, in the cases of Mr. Cheney and Mr. Wolfowitz, seem to have had such disdain for the assessments and analyses of the IAEA." Perhaps part of the reason is that IAEA had been so wrong for so long about what Iraq was engaged in before 1990. For that matter, Blix finds nothing noteworthy in Iran's ability to mislead the IAEA for 18 years or Libya's to purchase plans for a nuclear weapon without the IAEA or any intelligence agency having a clue. The only aspect of the 2003 revelations he finds noteworthy is that U.S. assessments of the Iranian and Libyan programs were "too alarming or exaggerated."

In fact, the CIA's reports to Congress over the years about both Iranian and Libyan nuclear programs significantly understated what those countries accomplished. IAEA director Mohammed El Baradei -- no puppet of Washington -- has given a more sober assessment of the lessons to draw from these cases, namely, that the current international non-proliferation regime is inadequate.

Some self-reflection would also be welcome on why Blix had the poor relationship with Washington he so candidly acknowledges. He implies clearly that the fault lies with the crazed ideologues of the Bush administration. Perhaps so, but surely part of the skill of a diplomat is to find the points of agreement and to enlarge them, rather than to ignore the other side's concerns. Consider, for instance, the U.S. concern that the focus on inspection was diverting attention from the non-proliferation goal -- that sustaining the process was instead becoming the objective.

Washington's view was that inspections were a useful way to verify Baghdad's detailed and compete declaration of WMD activities, but that in the absence of such a declaration, inspectors could not find what Iraq had hidden, given the vastn"ess of the country. One would search Disarming Iraq hard and long for any acknowledgment of this U.S. view.

He would have done better to repeat his 1992 assessment: "Without information about the location of possibly hidden nuclear material and installations, no meaningful inspections are possible."

Blix spends much space on "why intelligence failed." He might have asked how Iraqi actions looked to leaders charged with protecting their country -- a country that on Sept. 11, 2001, was attacked by an opponent much more potent than had been known by the intelligence agencies watching him closely. It would have been gracious of Blix to acknowledge the possibility that George W. Bush was as concerned as his public statements indicated by the possibility of terrorists having access to weapons of mass destruction and using them in ways not anticipated by intelligence agencies. After all, the limitations of those agencies were on prominent display; consider the inability of the FBI to assign responsibility for the anthrax attacks that disrupted life in Washington and created such fear throughout the United States.

To Blix, this appears as "a theoretical nexus between terrorists and weapons of mass destruction"; to those dead from anthrax, the nexus was not so theoretical. To Bush, the intelligence failures that led to 9/11 and the anthrax attacks

suggested that threats such as those from Saddam Hussein had to be taken more seriously.

Disarming Iraq is well worth reading. It is likely to be one of the most important books critical of the Iraq war. But the cause of UN-mandated arms control would have benefited even more had Blix acknowledged Washington's concerns and contributions.

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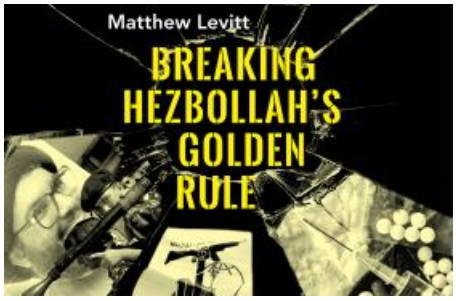

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