Former Iraq Weapons Inspector Speaks on International Security and Disarmament at Columbia Law School

Hans Blix Tells Students About the Changing Security Landscape and What He Learned as Weapons Inspector in Iraq.

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New York, October 23, 2014—When Hans Blix took over the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1981, there were no spy satellites, and the Soviet Union was the big nuclear weapons threat, not Iraq. That all changed rapidly during his 16-year tenure, which included the first Gulf War.

Blix, who lives in Sweden, also served as the United Nation’s chief weapons inspector from 2000 to 2003 and as Sweden’s minister for foreign affairs earlier in his career. He spoke to Columbia Law School students on October 23 about his career and understanding the psychology of leaders.

After the first Iraq War, the U.N. Security Council mandated weapons inspections in the country. The inspections themselves—performed by IAEA under Blix—were controversial.

“Some people want to think of that as a war continued by other means,” Blix said. “I never saw it that way. I did not think we were at war with Iraq. I thought we were rather like a police force mandated by the Security Council.” The inspections lasted until Iraq expelled the monitors in 1998.

Managing personalities was a big part of Blix’s work. When his team was in Iraq destroying weapons, the Iraqis present asked that no pictures be taken.

“My intuition is that they felt humiliated by being exposed to the world how they had to destroy under international supervision some weapons,” he said. “There are so many matters in conflict in the world that are affected by pride and human nature. It’s not only the kings of the 16th century who could start a war because of some slight made.”

Blix’s talk was sponsored by the Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy Faculty-Student Intellectual Life Series and the CENTER ON GLOBAL GOVERNANCE.