The former UN weapons inspector on his love of old rugs and how he blames the invasion of Iraq for upheaval in the Middle East

It’s a sunny morning in Stockholm and, walking past a café on a downtown street, it’s easy to miss the entrance to the functional 1930s building that’s home to Hans Blix, the 86-year-old former UN weapons inspector and Swedish diplomat. A cheerful Blix opens the door to his third-floor flat. “I have some time to talk before we leave for the cottage,” says Blix, who has a family compound in the Stockholm archipelago. “We Swedes crave light. We creep out into the light in the summer and crawl back into our lairs in the winter.”

Blix, whose inspections famously found no trace of weapons of mass destruction before the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq, is now busy opposing the world’s arms stockpiling. “It’s not going so well, is it?” he says.

“You’re seeing a tremendous increase in military spending in China, Africa, Brazil, Indonesia and, of course, the Arab world. In 2012, the world spent some $1.700bn on the military – it all looks pretty black.”

Blix leads into the dining room where a bank of windows offer views out on to a city park with grand elm trees and an outcrop of natural rock. “It’s a nice little park they’re refurbishing. But they’ve cut down five trees. They love the rocks. I hate the idea of cutting down big trees,” he says.

The flat walls are covered in art: paintings and prints, many by Swedish artist Waldemar Sjölander, who lived in Mexico. “He was fascinated by life there,” says Blix. “We like his art.”
big abstract oil, by Björn Wessman, depicts Lapland. “It’s supposed to be ice,” says Blix, who often takes hikes “above the Arctic Circle” with his wife, Eva Kettis, a retired diplomat. “She was an ambassador [in the foreign ministry] in charge of Arctic and Antarctic issues,” he adds. “Luckily, she didn’t have to live there.”

View of the living room in the diplomat’s Stockholm apartment
The couple moved into the flat in 1968. “It was when our first son was born,” explains Blix, who has two sons and five grandchildren.
He produces a watercolour of red cottages in the archipelago. “Here is my niece’s house; my brother’s house; the children’s house. We live in an old cow-house that we refurbished,” he says. In the dining room is a birch table with papers on it. “My father designed this table,” says Blix, who grew up in Uppsala, where his father was a professor of medicine at the university. After graduating from Uppsala, Blix went on to Cambridge where he was awarded a PhD in international law, with further studies at Columbia and Stockholm University. He became a legal adviser to the foreign ministry and, from 1961-81, was a Swedish delegate to the UN General Assembly. “I’ve seen a lot of the UN,” says Blix. A member of the centre-right Liberal party, he was foreign minister from 1978-79.

Favourite thing

“That’s my favourite rug,” Blix says of a blue carpet hanging on the wall. “It’s Caucasian. It’s got lively colouring and I like the various subtle colours, what they call abrash, that come from simple dye – the patterns vary.” Blix collects rugs as a hobby while working to cut the world’s nuclear arms build-up and construct safe nuclear energy plants. “It’s a balance, but not quite symmetry,” he says.

In 1981, he was picked to head the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna. “I ran it for 16 years. Those were meaningful years. I was actively contributing to the international legal infrastructure of nuclear energy; conventions about safety; plant waste disposal.”
He was plucked out of retirement in 2000. “Kofi Annan asked me to set up the new UN inspection group,” he says. “We did more than 700 inspections.”

Hanging over the birch table are two Persian prints. “I bought them in Tehran and had them framed in Vienna – we found [one] hidden behind the other,” he adds.

Today, Blix firmly blames the Middle East upheaval on the invasion of Iraq. “The US went in to create democracy but they found no weapons of mass destruction and created anarchy,” he says. “The invasion was illegal. It was in violation of the UN charter.”

He leads the way into the kitchen. “I was given that by Doctors Against Nuclear Weapons,” he says, pointing to an orange tree on the windowsill. A framed poster on the wall advertises a 2003 New York protest against the Iraq war. “It was picked up off the street by UN ambassador Pierre Schori,” says Blix. “It’s got the protest time: 11am.”

The world, says Blix, looked “lighter” in 2009. “I thought Iraq would be a watershed because the Americans discovered it was a failure; and Afghanistan was a failure,” Blix adds, before saying that Barack Obama should be praised for getting Start [the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] through the Senate in 2010. “But he had to pay dearly, by adding on new weapons industries – around $80bn worth,” he estimates.

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The Start-linked “love-fest” with Russia, he notes, was short-lived. But he says that he roots the current crisis in Nato expansion: “It was not subtly done. It’s the expansion that has triggered the [Ukraine] crisis. What Russia has done in Crimea and the east is unacceptable; at the same time the Russians fear being encircled. They won’t accept Ukraine in Nato.”

Blix recalls talk, in the 1990s, of inviting Russia into Nato. “Both [Boris] Yeltsin and [Vladimir] Putin expressed some interest in joining Nato. Then Nato could have been a military arm for the UN.”

Perusing a book on rugs

Now Blix is urging the Swedes to stay out of Nato: “Embedding in Nato will increase tensions in the Baltics. Russia will take measures in response.”

Standing in the flat’s corridor is a wooden cabinet. “It’s from before 1500. We bought it in an extravagant mood, in Venice,” says Blix. He pops open the cabinet doors. “It smells of soot because it was burnt at some point in history.” We pass into a front room with a fireplace and Lego boxes on the floor. “The grandchildren were here this morning,” he says.

More art is displayed in the sitting room. Blix points to a sculpture of a Mexican woman: “It’s by Sjölander. It has great dignity.” He pauses at a bookcase. “These are my books on rugs,” says
Blix, who dates his enthusiasm for rugs to a Vienna exhibition in the 1980s. “It opened my eyes to the beauty of old rugs. Russia was just opening up and carpets were coming from the Caucasus.”
He notes that the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, which took place while he was at the IAEA, marked the start of glasnost. “We organised a forum where the Russians explained to the world, very freely, what had happened,” he says.

A wooden cupboard from Venice
Blix insists that, despite the current crisis, Russia should be included in tackling Isis and other threats. “Integration of Russia and China is crucial in the international community. You need what I call the five warlords plus Germany in the UN – the junta of the big warlords,” he says. Time is running short and packed groceries on the kitchen table await the trip to the cottage. “It’s a two-hour drive,” says Blix, who delays his departure to discuss another pressing issue: the environment. “I helped to write large parts of the Stockholm [environmental] declaration [of 1972]. I feel strongly about the environmental degradation, I see it at our cottage.”
If nuclear weapons harbour the risk of “a quick suicide”, he says, environmental destruction offers “slow suicide”. What’s the solution? “It should include nuclear power.”
He describes Chernobyl as “terrifying”, but argues that “damage made by nuclear accidents is tiny compared to the enormous dangers caused by fossil fuels. I’ve devoted myself to helping raise safety,” adds Blix, who chairs the United Arab Emirates international advisory group on nuclear power.
Stockholm, from Blix’s apartment
So is he putting his faith for our future in nuclear technology? “New nuclear technology – and good practice,” Blix says. Westinghouse Electric Company, he notes, has designed a new nuclear reactor, the AP1000: “It can’t technically have a core meltdown. We can’t go backwards.” Blix leads into his study. On his desk there are some drafts for forthcoming speeches. “They’re on geopolitics,” says Blix, who has a packed travel calendar this year. He also plans to focus on a lighter, and more local concern: a home improvement at the cottage. “I have just purchased seven tonnes of sand. I’m going to make a little sand beach between the rocks, for the children.”

*Photographs: Lina Haskel*