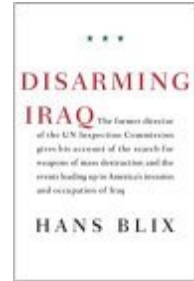


Hans Blix. *Disarming Iraq*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004.

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Picture an almost irresistible force meeting an almost immovable object. On the one hand, the United States was determined to force the Iraq question to a conclusion in the foreseeable future, and was not particularly looking for a reason to avoid the use of force in so doing. On the other hand, an Iraqi government with virtually no credibility behind its protestations of non-possession was indulging its ultimately fatal tendencies to underestimate the US, to haggle, and then to do too little far too late. In the middle of this was the inspection process. UNMOVIC (the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission), created by UNSC Res. 1284 (1999), was now called upon under UNSC Res. 1441 (2002) to provide Iraq with its “final opportunity” to comply with its disarmament obligations. Whatever other reasons might circulate in the policy and public debates over Iraq, it was the compliance issue that would serve as the public and legal grounds of justification. Ultimately, of course, the weapons of mass destruction that were the public grounds for the attack by the US-led “coalition of the willing” have not been found, and the jury may not be out much longer even on the question of the state of Iraq’s weapons production programs.

This is the setting for Hans Blix’s Disarming Iraq. Blix was the Executive Director of UNMOVIC from 2000 to 2003, but as well was the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency in the period spanning the first Gulf War, including, therefore, a role at one remove in earlier IAEA inspections of Iraq as well as the strengthening of IAEA safeguards which followed the disclosure of Iraq’s nuclear weapons program. In his IAEA capacity, he was also familiar with both the North Korean and the

South African nuclear issues. This book is a personal account, rather than a detailed, technical study. In that respect, it is usefully considered not simply in its own right but also against a background of other more technical and academic studies, and against a familiarity with the entire enterprise of disarming Iraq after 1991. Besides providing background on the UNSCOM and IAEA inspections prior to 1999 and on the creation and character of UNMOVIC as an organization, the book also provides a unique perspective on the movement towards the war and the place of the inspection process in this.

The broad story is quite familiar by now. As the US was building up its forces, it also turned to the UN mechanism – the Security Council and UNMOVIC in particular – in an attempt to garner international support and legitimacy for its move to push the Iraq issue to a conclusion. This was not welcome in all quarters of the US administration, since the capabilities of UNMOVIC were in question in some quarters. The turn to the UN was taken however, creating a tension between the inspection timeline on the one hand and the logic (whether or not inexorable) of the military build-up on the other. On this point, as on others, Blix is relatively charitable to the US. He states:

In the end, I think the amassment of an army of some 300,000 troops near Iraq and the approaching hot season made action inevitable. The armed force could not have been withdrawn without producing much more spectacular results than were taking place (...), nor could it sit idle by in rising temperatures and just wait for some clear-cut and convincing reason to invade. It had to invade.

My conclusion was and remains that the armed action that was taken was expected but not irrevocably predetermined. (p. 14)

Much of the action of the story is, of course, taken up by this tension. Blix notes his own initial gut feeling that “Iraq still engaged in prohibited activities and retained prohibited items,”(p. 112) and his initial sense that Iraq was not, in January of 2003, fully aware of its danger, though it became more frantic, yet still did too little too late, in the following weeks. Intriguing detail is provided on behind-the-scenes interaction with American officials – especially Secretary of State Powell and National Security Advisor Rice (of both of whom, on balance, Blix speaks reasonably well) – and with others. This is not, generally, a book that attempts to settle scores. Of course, given the subsequent course of events, neither does it have to be.

Blix notes Jacque Chirac’s comment in January 2003 that the intelligence agencies “sometimes ‘intoxicate each other’” (p. 128). As the inspections proceeded, not enough was found to provide convincing proof of either Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction or significant production programs on the one hand, or their non-existence on the other. As time passed, the US and Britain continued adamant in their conviction that these existed and UNMOVIC was not finding them, while UNMOVIC was frustratingly reluctant to concur. The US and UK insisted, as had become an established pattern, on treating the uncertainties and ambiguities the inspectors noted as certainties. As a result, argues Blix, two tracks that might initially have seemed complementary – support inspections in order to support a clear case for non-compliance – became instead antagonistic, with the US and UK increasingly having to challenge the very inspection process they initially led in instituting.

The struggle over interpretation of UNMOVIC’s findings and its effectiveness forms one clear theme of the book. A second is the peculiar relationship between UNSC

Res 1441 (2002) and UNSAC Res. 1284 (1999). While they might seem, at first glance, only different in technicalities, these details ultimately had an influence on events. Each generated its own reporting requirements, creating the steady stream of UNMOVIC reports and documentation that became grist for the mill of the interpretive struggle. Each also, however, had different criteria of assessment and different timelines. Under Res 1284 (1999), UNMOVIC's inspections were part of a longer process leading to the initial suspension and perhaps ultimate lifting of the sanctions on Iraq, but to be followed by an indefinite period of Ongoing Monitoring and Verification (something frequently overlooked in much of the discussion over sanctions and the inspection process). UNMOVIC was to generate a list of key issues and tasks for the disarmament process – which ultimately resulted in the “cluster document” of March 6, 2003. For the US, this became a useful litany of Iraqi non-compliance; for others, however, it became the basis for the “benchmarking” alternative to an immediate finding of non-compliance.

UNSC Res. 1441 (2002) worked on a different timeline – a “final opportunity,” if one without a clear deadline -- and lacked clear criteria of either compliance or non-compliance. This double ambiguity, to some degree understandable, then also fed into the movement towards the use of armed force. As time passed, the US and UK would point towards Res. 1441, while their opponents would tend to argue in terms that seem to reflect the process of Res. 1284. As time passed and clear indications of non-compliance were lacking – but also compliance was relatively undefined – the US and UK would turn increasingly towards the test of a “strategic decision” by Iraq (a public renunciation by Iraq) as the key test. When Iraq began to move in this direction, in March, it was, as usual, too little too late.

A third, related theme is the contest between the “benchmark” and “strategic decision” tests as the crunch approached. The search for a middle ground to accommodate both the US and UK on the one hand and their opponents on the Security Council on the other eventually seems to have focused on the possibility of devising some clear tasks to be accomplished within a short, but reasonable, time period by Iraq, as an effective demonstration of compliance. The “cluster document” provided a useful base for this attempt, but one that seems to have come far too late itself to stop the movement towards war. One gets the feeling from the book – and comparison with other accounts could be of interest here – that by the time the document had appeared the basic decision had been made, and only a dramatic and complete caving by Iraq would have prevented the use of force. But this leaves us with a tantalizing counterfactual, based on the differences between Res. 1284 (1999) and Res. 1441 (2002). If the “cluster document,” or something like it, had appeared, say, thirty days earlier, for example as part of the Res. 1441 process, rather than according to the Res. 1284 schedule, would this have strengthened the benchmark alternative?

The book will reward a close reading on the nature of intelligence, the nature of international inspections and inspection mechanisms, and of course in regard to the specific movement towards the ultimate attack on Iraq. It is a useful addition to the fast-growing ranks of books and articles on the coming of the 2003 war, but will also be of value for these other purposes.

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