

Interview - Abi Williams

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Abi Williams was appointed the first President of The Hague Institute for Global Justice in 2013. From 2008 to 2012 he served at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington, DC, first as Vice President of the Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention, and later as Senior Vice President of the Center for Conflict Management leading its work in conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. From 2001 to 2007 Dr. Williams was Director of Strategic Planning for United Nations Secretaries-General Ban Ki-Moon and Kofi Annan in New York. He gained valuable field operational experience, serving with the United Nations from 1994 to 2000 in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and Haiti, in senior political and humanitarian roles. He served as Associate Dean of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, and held faculty appointments at Georgetown, Rochester, and Tufts universities, winning several awards. Dr. Williams serves on the boards of a number of non-profit organizations including ACUNS, and the Netherlands Fulbright Commission. He has published widely on conflict prevention and management. He holds an M.A. (Hons) from Edinburgh University, and an M.A.L.D. and a Ph.D. from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

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What do you consider the most exciting evolutions in international relations and politics?

I think the internet and social media have played a transformative role in international politics. On the one hand, more people than ever before are able to make informed decisions about the political, economic, social and cultural issues that affect their lives. Knowledge is power and the internet and social media have had a tremendous democratizing effect. On the other hand, we see terrorist groups making effective use of the same tools to spread fear, hatred and disinformation. I believe an important way to counter the malicious use of the internet and social media is to invest in creating positive narratives that unify, rather than divide people.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

It is my view that societies – and the world they form – can only truly thrive when justice and security work in tandem. Without justice, security is a chimera, and without security, justice can never be achieved. However, security and justice do not prevail through good intentions alone, but through committed action of individuals, organizations and states. Nelson Mandela demonstrated the importance of visionary leadership that can transcend old animosities and bring a suffering people to the negotiating table, even when painful compromises must be made. Mandela's creed is compelling: that healing begins with forgiveness and that justice can prevail in even the darkest of places.

You are President of the 'think and do' tank The Hague Institute for Global Justice. What in your opinion is the role of think tanks and similar organizations in international relations and how does The Hague Institute for Global Justice stand out?

Think-tanks play a critical role in international relations by ensuring that the best ideas find their way into policy and practice. The Hague Institute emphasizes both thinking and doing. We believe that through sound, evidence-based, policy-relevant research we can create lasting change. We also focus on convening experts, practitioners and

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policymakers to facilitate knowledge-sharing and build capacities. The Institute has honed the niche in which we operate by concentrating on issues at the critical intersection of peace, security and justice.

In 2013, the Institute presented its signatory set of ‘The Hague Principles’ to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands. Could you tell us more about the idea behind these principles and how they influence the work of The Hague Institute?

“The Hague Approach” is a set of principles for achieving sustainable peace in post-conflict situations. While each post-conflict situation is unique and requires a tailored response, we have identified general principles that can improve the effectiveness of current peacebuilding efforts.

“The Hague Approach” emphasizes the importance of engaging in conflict prevention to avoid a relapse into violence; fostering a rule of law culture to buttress the institutions and procedures integral to the rule of law; adopting a network response to peacebuilding that encourages cooperation between a shifting constellation of actors relevant to the specific tasks at hand; engaging the private sector by creating a business enabling environment; utilizing strategic communication to manage expectations and build rapport between local and international stakeholders; and ensuring an adequate base of knowledge by engaging in continuous learning that draws on both local and international expertise.

“The Hague Approach” is emblematic of the interdisciplinary and holistic approach of the Institute to contemporary global challenges. Through our work, we seek to ensure that peacebuilders have access to reliable information, practicable tools and opportunities for sharing their knowledge and learning.

The Hague is known as the ‘the international city of peace and justice’ and houses most of the world’s international courts and tribunals. What are in your opinion the challenges facing international courts and tribunals? Similarly, what are the opportunities?

The international courts and tribunals in The Hague have done much to further the development of international law and international criminal justice. They have established clear precedents for holding perpetrators of mass atrocities accountable and established fact-based historical records, which are essential for reconciliation and sustainable peace. To operate effectively and independently, the Hague-based institutions require the cooperation of states. This can sometimes be a challenge, particularly when national or regional interests are involved. The international courts and tribunals can only achieve their full potential if states support and respect their mandates.

An issue that multilateral institutions face is the emergence of a trend of more flexible ad-hoc coalitions that challenge the ability of ‘traditional’ multilateral institutions to solve crises. One can think of the G7 or BRICs, among others. Do you think that multilateral institutions are still relevant in the 21st century?

Multilateral institutions have a vital role to play in promoting a peaceful and just global order in the 21st century, including preventing the eruption of deadly conflict and providing normative leadership. It would be a mistake, however, to think that only those institutions established in the aftermath of the Second World War should be involved in global governance. The world has changed and we must adjust to the inevitable shifts of geopolitical power if we are to address new global challenges effectively. Innovative mechanisms of global governance are being forged, with new partnerships emerging between traditional actors, businesses and civil society, some of which have proved dynamic in tackling global problems from malaria to climate change.

You have had an extensive career at the UN serving as a principal advisor to former Secretary General Kofi Annan and current one Ban Ki-moon. The UN as an organization is criticized, especially the structure of the Security Council and veto power. What are your thoughts on UN reform?

The UN, like many septuagenarians, has some impressive accomplishments, and unsurprisingly, in other respects, it shows its age. To have a UN which is fit-for-purpose in our times will require meaningful reform, including to the Security Council. On the issue of the P5 veto, I think there is merit in the proposal made by The Elders that the P5

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should publicly justify the use of veto power in situations where populations are being subject to atrocity crimes, and propose alternative solutions for protecting the vulnerable. The UN is the sum of its parts; it is only as strong as its weakest link. Reform must blend farsightedness with political reality and be rooted in a deep understanding of how change happens at the global level. But even if reformed, the UN will still have its limits, and will remain an imperfect institution.

Antonio Gutérres has been elected the new Secretary General of the UN. What did you make of the selection process? Were you surprised by the choice?

The selection process has been more transparent than ever before and the open General Assembly hearings made important contributions in this regard. Antonio Gutérres is a highly-qualified leader with wide ranging experience and can provide the bold leadership the UN requires in the face of so many grave global challenges.

What is your advice for young academics or researchers?

Young academics and researchers should not forget that scholarly insights and conceptual innovation are essential to meet global challenges. They have a responsibility to communicate effectively their research to policymakers, to ensure that the divide between academia and practice does not grow, just as innovative solutions are increasingly necessary.

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This interview was conducted by Bart de Vos. Bart is an Associate Students Editor at E-International Relations.