John Sawers

Former Chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6)

Sir John Sawers is the former chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, also known as MI6). “Tall, dashing, an astute judge of character, and an excellent dancer…[he] could indeed be a character out of Ian Fleming,” according to BBC News. During his tenure, he modernised the Service and led it through major changes in operations, technology, and public accountability.

In presentations, Sawers is able to draw from his personal experience in managing the most challenging foreign and security policy issues of the last 20 years, including the rise of China, the evolution of Russia, the threat of terrorism and cyber attack, the changes in the Middle East, and the nuclear negotiations in Iran. The BBC said, “In complex negotiations, he mastered the art of delivering sound bites which sum up the issues.” His is a powerful look at the unpredictable global landscape, the forces and key players shaping the world, cyber security, and how organizations can make it work for them. He also remains closely involved in current affairs through his advisory work with leaders of corporations, financial institutions, and governments.

A Legacy of Transparency. With a total of 36 years working for the British government, Sawers is a diplomat with close ties to Downing Street and the foreign policy establishment. He was the first outsider to be appointed to SIS in decades, and he was the first head to give a public speech, lifting the veil of secrecy surrounding the notorious agency. He will likely be remembered for bringing unprecedented openness to the role as he regularly appeared in media to describe the agency’s work.

But a Career in the Shadows. Sawers began his career with MI6 in 1977, serving in Yemen and Syria. He then left MI6, joined the Foreign Office, and rose rapidly. He served in South Africa, the EU, and Washington DC until 1998. Geopolitically, that period was dominated by war in Bosnia, crises in the Middle East, and the debate in Britain on the European Union.

Sawers then served as the foreign affairs adviser to Tony Blair, covering a period that included the Kosovo war. He also contributed to negotiations on Northern Ireland and the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. He served as the ambassador to Cairo from 2001–2003 and was a special envoy in Baghdad for three months after the invasion of Iraq. He served as the Foreign Office political director for four years at the height of the Iraq conflict from 2003–2007. He then became the UK’s permanent representative to the UN in New York in August 2007, where he played a central role in the key resolutions on Iran, North Korea, and the Middle East. He served there until being tapped to become the new chief of MI6 in 2009. He was the first MI6 chief appointed from outside the service since Sir John Rennie in 1968.

Work Post MI6. Sawers was appointed Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (GCMG) in the 2015 New Year Honours for services to national security. After retiring as chief of SIS, he became partner and chairman of Macro Advisory Partners, a geopolitical advisory firm that provides strategic advice and insights to investors and governments. He also became a visiting professor in the department of war studies at King’s College London.