

Jon Wilks is a distinguished British diplomat whose career has been defined by deep expertise in the Middle East and a series of high-profile ambassadorial and policy roles in often challenging, not to say dangerous circumstances. Born in Worcestershire, he was educated at The Chase School in Malvern before going on to Durham University, where he graduated in 1989 with a BSc in Natural Sciences. During his time here, he served as President of the Durham Student's Union.

Immediately after graduation, Jon joined the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), beginning what would become a 34-year career in the UK Diplomatic Service. His focus was always the Middle East. After initial work as an Assistant Desk Officer covering Iran, he undertook intensive Arabic language training in London and Cairo between 1991 to 1993. This linguistic and cultural grounding shaped the trajectory of his career, enabling him to take on a series of postings across the Arab world.

His first overseas assignments included Khartoum (1993–1996) and Riyadh (1996–1999), where he developed practical diplomatic experience in often-complex regional environments. Following these postings, Jon returned to academia to deepen his expertise, completing a master's degree with distinction in Middle East Politics at IMEIS, Durham University in 2000, followed by an MPhil in International Relations at St Antony's College, Oxford, in 2002. Returning to government service, Jon played a significant role in UK policy during a particularly turbulent period in the Middle East. He was part of the team that reopened the British mission in Baghdad following the Iraq War in 2003, serving as deputy head of mission. Indeed, he was responsible for re-opening the British Embassy in Baghdad. He subsequently held senior policy roles in London, including Deputy Head of the Iraq Policy Unit (2004–2005) and the Security Policy Group (2005–2007).

In 2007, he was appointed the UK government's first Regional Arabic Spokesman, based in Dubai, where he became a prominent media figure, frequently appearing on networks such as Al Jazeera. His ability to communicate effectively in Arabic was crucial in strengthening the UK's engagement with local audiences amid the wider upheaval across the region. Jon returned to Baghdad in 2009–2010 before being appointed Ambassador to Yemen (2010–2011). His particular expertise in conflict and post-conflict environments was then recognised through a series of senior roles focused on Syria, including UK Special Representative to the Syrian Opposition (2012–2013) and UK Special Representative for Syria (2013–2014). During this period, he also completed the Higher Command and Staff Course at the UK's Military Staff College, Camberley.

Jon went on to serve as Ambassador to Oman (2014–2017), followed by Ambassador to Iraq (2017–2019), and then Ambassador to Qatar from March 2020 until December 2023, his final diplomatic posting before retirement. Over the course of his career, he held four ambassadorial posts and became widely regarded as one of this country's foremost authority on Middle Eastern politics. In recognition of his service, he was appointed Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) in 2012. He is widely considered to have been among the finest Arabists ever to serve this country.

Since retiring from the Diplomatic Service, Jon has remained active in international affairs. He was the Registrar and Azman Hashim Fellow in International Relations at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies where he remains a Senior Associate. He contributes to policy

discussions as a fellow of several think tanks, including Chatham House (The Royal Institute for International Affairs), the Royal United Services Institute, and the Atlantic Council where he advises the Rafik Hariri Centre's Transatlantic Project. This looks to strengthen US and European dialogue over Middle East affairs.

Closer to home (and his heart) he continues to be active in supporting the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Durham University - he delivered the 2024 Ambassadorial Lecture – and chairs the Sir William Luce Committee, dedicated to sponsoring innovative research into the Gulf region and Sudan, areas where its named benefactor once served.

Chancellor, I present Jon Wilks to receive the degree of Doctor of Philosophy *honoris causa*.