

Former British ambassador forecasts 50-year foreign role in Afghanistan

Harvey Thompson
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Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the former British ambassador to Kabul, has forecast a half-century role for foreign forces and outside agencies in Afghanistan.

Giving evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) into the UK's Foreign Policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan November 9, Cowper-Coles said a 50-year aid programme would be needed, backed up by a "vigorous" political process.

More importantly, he warned of "chaos and civil war" if UK troops left Afghanistan "precipitately", or within the previously mooted, but much derided, timetable of five years.

While serving as British ambassador to Kabul, Cowper-Coles had suggested UK forces retain a presence in Afghanistan for 30 years.

The former envoy's declaration is being presented as a projection of future UK aid to Afghanistan—which is largely for security and policing volatile areas. In reality, they dovetail with the increasing resolve in political and military circles in Washington and London to dispense with previous troop withdrawal timetables and to step up the occupation of Afghanistan.

Cowper-Coles has been in the diplomatic service of British imperialism for more than three decades, including in some of the most politically sensitive regions. He served as British ambassador to Israel from 2001 to 2003 during the Palestinian intifada and to Saudi Arabia until 2006. This coincided with the Serious Fraud Office investigation into allegations of multibillion-pound bribery of the Saudi ruling family by British Aerospace (BAe), Britain's leading defence contractor.

From May 2007 until April 2009, he served as ambassador to Afghanistan in Kabul, incorporating from February 2009 a new role as special representative of the UK Foreign Secretary to Afghanistan and

Pakistan.

In October 2008, an alleged conversation between Cowper-Coles and the French deputy ambassador, Francois Fitou, was leaked in full to the French publication *Le Canard enchaîné*. The former British ambassador was reported to have made the following comments:

"The security situation is getting worse. So is corruption and the [Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai] has lost all trust.... The foreign forces are ensuring the survival of a regime that would collapse without them. In doing so, they are slowing down and complicating an eventual exit from the crisis."

All that could be hoped for, Cowper-Coles reportedly advised, was the replacement of Karzai's regime with an "acceptable dictator. This is the only realistic outlook...and we must prepare public opinion [in the US and Europe] to accept it". (See: "British diplomat paints bleak view of Afghan war".)

Such comments, and Cowper-Coles's tendency to portray the future prospects of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan negatively, angered Washington and embarrassed London.

Earlier this year, it was reported that he had clashed with senior NATO and US officials over his insistence that the "military-driven" counter-insurgency effort was headed for failure, and that talks with the Taliban should be prioritised.

In June, the British high commission announced he had taken "extended leave" from his position—ending his role shadowing his US counterpart, Richard Holbrooke, in Afghanistan. No official reason was given.

Many of the elements of policy towards Afghanistan that Cowper-Coles has been arguing for—such as a "credible" puppet regime in Kabul and a political

agreement with sections of the Taliban—are not new, nor exclusive to him. But the renewed interest in the concerns shown by the former ambassador is significant.

In his FAC submission and in recent media interviews, he has expressed a deep anxiety over the probable failure of the US-led occupation forces to subjugate the insurgent populace. In a BBC radio interview, Cowper-Coles drew a comparison with the defeat of US forces in Vietnam.

Speaking before the FAC, Cowper Coles made the following points: “I think it is a question of politicians and civilian officials having the confidence to question some of the very optimistic military advice they get.... I am not in any way blaming the military. You could not have a serious military unless they were incurably optimistic. But I saw over my three-and-half years papers that went to ministers which were misleadingly optimistic.”

Officials and ministers who challenged the report, he said, were accused of being “defeatist or disloyal in some way”.

Part of the problem, he suggested, was the government of Hamid Karzai that British and US troops were fighting to prop up. It was less popular among much of the population in the south of the country than the Taliban, he said. The Taliban “are violent. They are unpleasant. But for many Pashtuns, in my view, they are a less bad alternative, a fairer, more predictable alternative than a corrupt and predatory government.”

Cowper-Coles warned that the longer the war went on, the more difficult it would be for US/NATO to win, adding, “There is no military solution. The more Taliban we kill, the more difficult it is to negotiate a sustainable settlement. This is a question of a political problem needing a multilevel political settlement—both regionally and internally.”

He also warned those arguing for a withdrawal of troops, “If we were to leave precipitately there would be chaos.”

After making a spurious distinction between having UK troops “in Afghanistan” but “not in combat”, Cowper-Coles said, “We will have a long-term British training mission in Afghanistan. DFID [Department of International Development] need to be in Afghanistan

for 50 years.”

In one of his more cynical but revealing comments, Cowper-Coles explained that “withdrawal timetables” can be a political tool for attempts to lessen opposition among a bitterly hostile Afghan population.

“Most Afghans,” he said, “believe that we are there...or that America is there, to seek some long term military presence, to seek some sort of neo-colonial long-term hegemony over the area. They don’t believe that rationally. Many people in Helmand believe we are there to avenge the Battle of Maiwand [one of the major battles of the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880, which resulted in a defeat for British forces but at the cost of thousands of Afghan casualties]. But, they do believe it. So *announcing that we’re going*...is in my view, a good thing” [emphasis added].

Adding weight to Cowper-Coles’s submission to the FAC, the recently appointed head of the British Armed Forces and former NATO commander in Afghanistan, General Sir David Richards, recently stated that the Afghan occupation could last up to 30 years.

“Make no mistake,” he told the November 14 *Sunday Telegraph*, “the global threat from al-Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates is an enduring one and one which, if we let it, will rear its head in states particularly those that are unstable.

“The national security of the UK and our allies is, in my judgement, at stake,” he said.

Both diplomat and general are in lock-step to the US-led policy of establishing a long-term occupation regime in Afghanistan, backed by an increase in military force and all the well-honed methods of counter-insurgency violence that have characterised the intervention thus far.



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