

Situation Assessment | 21 June 2021

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Briefing to UNSC and the International Peace Efforts: A Bleak Picture



Studies and Research Division

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A Bleak Picture

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WCYS- Studies and Research Division

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Introduction

Since his last briefing to the UNSC last month, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, conducted rounds of shuttle diplomacy with the conflicting parties and their regional allies. In his last month in the office as the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, he conducted intensive rounds in the region hoping to reach any understanding between the warring parties but unfortunately in vain. His efforts were supported by regional and international pressure on the different parties. Sultanate of Oman continued its active mediating role between the parties, thanks to its strong relations with the Houthis, as it hosts the Houthi negotiating delegation in Muscat.

Griffiths' plan for settlement

The United Nations' settlement plan in Yemen, proposed by Griffiths to the various parties in Yemen, includes a nationwide ceasefire, ease restrictions on the movement of people and commodities to and from the country (i.e., to open Sana'a airport for international flights and lift restrictions on Hudaydah ports), and commit the parties to the conflict to the resumption of a political process to end the conflict.

The Government of Yemen was praised many times on different occasions by the UN Envoy for their 'excellent' cooperation with his plan¹. They welcomed this plan with a condition to be implemented as a package, particularly focusing on getting that ceasefire started, as Mr Griffiths said in his briefing. However, the Houthis' crippling terms hindered Mr Griffiths' efforts. When Mr Griffiths met Abdelmalik al-Houthi, the Houthis rebel leader, in Sanaa, al-Houthi insisted on a stand-alone agreement on the Hudaydah ports and Sana'a airport, as a condition precedent for the ceasefire and the launch of the political process².

Rounds of Shuttle Diplomacy

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

The first leg of Mr Griffiths' rounds got him to Riyadh on May 24th for a three-day visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where he met senior Saudi and Yemeni officials to discuss the United Nations' plan for settlement in Yemen. He also discussed the military development and critical situation in Ma'rib, where he stressed that the battle must stop. Implementing the Riyadh Agreement between the

¹ The UN Envoy Briefing to the UNSC in May.

² The UN Envoy Briefing to the UNSC in June.

government and the Southern Transition Council was also discussed with the different parties to protect Yemeni unity.

During his visit, Mr Griffiths met the Saudi Deputy Minister of Defense, Prince Khalid bin Salman, the Yemeni Vice President, Ali Mohsen Saleh, the Yemeni Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik, the Saudi Ambassador to Yemen, Mohamed Al Jaber and the US Special Envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking, as well as other diplomats.

It seems that both the Government of Yemen and the Saudi officials welcomed Griffiths' plan and appreciated his efforts to achieve a settlement for the Yemeni conflict.

Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman

From Riyadh, Mr Griffiths flew to Muscat on May 27th to discuss his plan with the Houthi delegation living there. Unlike last month's visit when the Houthi delegation refused to meet him, he met with the Houthis spokesperson and the chief negotiator, Mohammed Abdel Salam. It is more likely that Omani officials may press on the Houthis to cooperate with the UN envoy. However, the Houthis continued dictating their terms on Griffiths' plan and refused to deal with it. They demanded lifting the restrictions on the Hudaydah ports and opening Sanaa Airport first before any negotiation for a ceasefire or involvement in the political process.

In Oman, Mr Griffiths met with senior Omani officials. He discussed the UN plan for settlement in Yemen which includes the reopening Sana'a airport and lifting restrictions on Hudaydah ports to enhance the freedom of movement of people and

commodities to and from Yemen, achieve a nationwide ceasefire, and commit the parties to the relaunch of a political process to end the conflict.

Oman has started an active role in mediating between the conflicting parties. Despite that no statement was released after the meeting with Mr Griffiths, the Omani efforts later supported the UN Envoy plan for settlement. In his briefing later of the month, Mr Griffiths praised the Omani efforts and pinned hopes on its efforts to bear fruit soon. He said in his last briefing to the UNSC: "Now we have offered different solutions to bridge these positions. Unfortunately, as of now, none of these suggestions has been accepted. I hope very very much indeed, I'm sure we all do, that the efforts undertaken by the Sultanate of Oman as well as others, but the Sultanate of Oman in particular, following my own visits to Sana'a and Riyadh will bear fruit and that we will soon hear a different turn of fate for Yemen³."

Sanaa

After he did not succeed to make any progress with the Houthi delegation in Muscat, Mr Griffith went to Sanaa on a first visit to the city in a year. It was not clear the purpose of this visit whether he hoped to hear something different from what he had got in Muscat from the Houthi delegation there or present another amended proposal to Sanaa other than what he proposed to their team in Oman. Anyway, the result was disappointing for Mr Griffiths and he returned without making any breakthrough. According to Mr Griffiths briefing to the UNSC, he met with the Houthi leader, Abdelmalik al-Houthi, to discuss the settlement plan, including a nationwide ceasefire, lifting restrictions on Hudaydah ports and the

³ The UN Envoy Briefing to the UNSC in June.

reopening of Sanaa airport. He said: "And indeed, in my recent and useful meeting with Ansar Allah leader Abdelmalik al-Houthi in Sana'a, he said to me that only after an agreement on ports and airport were implemented would Ansar Allah begin negotiations on the ceasefire⁴."

Even though he spent two days in Sanaa, the outcomes of his meetings were not different from his meetings in Muscat therefore, he was back to square one again. He did not manage to convince them to stop their offensive on Ma'rib and attacks against Saudi territory, and cease all types of aggression, putting the civilian population at risk as UNSC called on the Houthis many times.

Mr Griffiths was so upset about the outcomes of this visit, and he expressed this in his press conference at Sanaa Airport on June 2nd when he concluded the visit. He said: "Nobody can be more frustrated than I am. We have spent a year and a half on things which are relatively simple to describe, the ceasefire, the opening of Sana'a Airport, the opening of Hudaydah ports, the much-delayed start of the political negotiations. We have been negotiating this in detail word by word by word with both parties for a year and a half"⁵.

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Following his visit to Sanaa, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, made a quick visit to Riyadh on June 3rd. He met with Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmed Bin Mubarak and Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohamed Al Jabr. He

⁴ The UN Envoy Briefing to the UNSC in June.

⁵ The UN Envoy press conference at Sanaa Airport: <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/transcript-special-envoys-press-conference-sanaa-airport>

discussed with them the demands of the Houthis for a nationwide ceasefire and the outcomes of his talks with the Houthis in Muscat and Sanaa.

Tehran, Iran

On June 10th, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Mr Martin Griffiths, concluded a two-day visit to Iran. He met with Iranian Foreign Minister Mr Mohammed Javad Zarif and senior Iranian officials to discuss the latest developments in Yemen. It is clear that Mr Griffiths hoped to reach some understanding from the Iranian officials to press on the Houthis to deal positively with the UN peace plan.

Mr Griffiths reiterated that the solution to the conflict is a Yemeni-led, inclusive, negotiated political settlement. However, Mr Zarif repeated the Houthis view on the peace settlement proposal that must start with lifting the restrictions on ports before going to the next steps, including a nationwide ceasefire and launching a political process.

It is the second visit for Mr Griffiths to Tehran since he was appointed UN Envoy for Yemen.

Kuwait

A day before his briefing to the UNSC, Mr Griffiths visited Kuwait where he met with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. They discussed the situation in Yemen and the need for resumption of the political process. Griffiths commended the tireless support of Kuwait to the peace efforts in Yemen. Noteworthy, Kuwait had hosted the Yemeni peace talks in April 2016 for three months. However, the

talks broke down in August after negotiations failed to yield a deal between the warring parties. Kuwait is also a member of so-called P5 + 4 countries (five UN veto powers plus Germany, Sweden, Kuwait and the EU). They are the countries that have been mainly engaged in supporting a political solution in Yemen within the UN Security Council. Kuwait has reiterated many times its willingness to host Yemeni peace talks in the last few years.

Key points of Mr Griffiths briefings to the UNSC

This briefing is the last one for Mr Griffiths as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Yemen. He was appointed last month as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). He strived to make a breakthrough in the mediation between the conflicting parties this month, but he could not. In his 'farewell' briefing, he emphasized some key points, including:

- The conflicting Yemeni parties hold full responsibility for the ongoing war: "Ending a war is a choice. Yemeni men, women and children are suffering every day because people with power have missed the opportunities presented to them, to make the necessary concessions to end the war." He also added: "The parties to the conflict need to be courageous enough and willing to choose that path over the continuation of the conflict. And over the past three years of my assignment on Yemen, we have put together many opportunities to the parties. But in vain."
- He disclaims any responsibility for the failure of the diplomat efforts because he is just a 'mediator'. "A mediator is not responsible for the war nor for the peace. His – or her - privilege is not to have the power to end the war, despite

a common assumption to the contrary. The mediator's privilege is to present to the parties the ways the war can end. And again so far in vain."

- He thanked the international community "for their tireless diplomatic support". He named a few countries, including Saudi Arabia and Oman, but Iran was not included despite he just visited it three days before the briefing.
- He explained the main differences between the government of Yemen and the Houthis towards his peace plan. The Houthis insist on "a stand-alone agreement on the Hudaydah ports and Sana'a airport, as a condition precedent for the ceasefire and the launch of the political process". On the other hand, "The Government of Yemen insisted all these issues, the ports, the airport, the ceasefire, the political process launch, all these issues be agreed to and implemented as a package, and in particular with the focus on getting that ceasefire started." He said that he proposed many suggestions to bridge the differences, but no party was willing to compromise. In his briefing, he did not indicate or mention any example of these suggestions.
- Strikingly, it is the first time that the UN Envoy talks about Taiz and the suffering of people there even though he did not refer to those responsible for the criminal acts that the civilians in the city face. He said that: "These people have suffered regular shelling of their homes, schools, difficult to get to schools, landmines obstructing their roads to their schools and places of worship, and also extraordinary impediments to get to work to provide a minimum of livelihood for their families."
- The UN Envoy warned about the rising threat of the disintegration of Yemen. He said that: "The war has also exacerbated divisions in the southern governorates. The situation there has come perilously close frequently to all-out conflict'. And he stressed the implementation of the Riyadh agreement between the Government of Yemen and the Southern Transitional Council.

- He, in the end, presented his view of what the future should be look like: "stability based on rights and freedom. And Yemen needs, for its survival and the welfare of its citizens, a government accountable to its people, united to support fundamental rights, and an open and prosperous economy linked to the region and beyond."

What's Next?

With this closing briefing, Martin Griffiths concludes his term as an envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Yemen after more than three years in this position. Many believe that he has not achieved much. In this briefing, he was expected to clearly identify the obstructing parties of the proposed peace deal. However, he did not. In return, he held all parties responsible for the continuing cycle of violence and repudiated any responsibility for failing to achieve a settlement to the conflict in Yemen. Mr Griffiths tried to sound optimistic in his speech about peace efforts and the possibility of a peaceful settlement. Still, the overall picture he presented was really "bleak", as he stated at the end of the briefing. It was clear that he relies on international and regional support, especially Omani efforts, to reach a settlement agreement. In his briefing, he did not hint about the upcoming UN envoy to Yemen and whether he could break the deadlock in the peace process in Yemen, which Griffiths could not achieve during his three-year term in office.

Consequently, in the short and medium-term, peace efforts stand at a crossroads after Griffith left his post, leading to several scenarios, including the following:

- The success of Omani mediation: This is the most optimistic and least likely scenario at the same time. The least likely, given that nothing occurred on the scene,

would require the parties to change their positions - especially the Houthis - and therefore, each party will likely continue to cling to its position. This means the outbreak of military confrontations again.

Calming down the strenuous regional and international peace efforts, either due to the preoccupation with more critical and sensitive issues, regionally, such as the Iranian Nuclear File, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or internationally. This scenario is still not likely to happen, as Yemen remains a focus of interest and influence in the region. Even if some international powers intend to remove their hands from the Yemeni file, the conflict in Yemen remains one of the elements of stability/conflict in the region. Therefore, this complicated conflict has to be settled to contribute to the stability of the region.

- International parties adopt a different approach in dealing with the parties obstructing the settlement proposal to accept the deal of the UN peace plan: Consequently, we may see other methods dealing with the parties that insist on impeding the negotiations. This scenario could be seen in the statements of US officials about their exertion of more pressure on the Houthis. The statements were applied in several accelerated decisions that were taken. Decisions such as the US Treasury's sanctions on Yemeni entities and individuals for actions linked to Iran and the Houthis, followed by the US seizing websites belonging to Iran, including the Al Masirah TV channel, the official TV channel of the Houthis. The United Nations also included the Houthis in the blacklist of countries and groups violating children's rights.

Conclusion

The UN envoy leaves his post at the end of this month, and the conflict in Yemen is still raging despite the efforts made by regional and international parties to reach peace. It does not seem that there are solutions in the short term. In his briefing, Mr Griffith describes the current situation as a "bleak picture", and this description sums up the whole scene. Consequently, the upcoming envoy will inherit a complicated mission from his predecessor. These burdened and complex files require a lot of wisdom, perseverance, and careful reading of the complexities of the scene to find the keys to the solution that the previous envoys missed.