

Situation Assessment | 24 May 2021

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Briefing to UNSC and the International Peace Efforts: Blocked Channels

Studies and Research Division



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WCYS- Studies and Research Division

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On Wednesday, May 16th, the Security Council members held their monthly briefing and consultations on Yemen via videoconference (VTC). The Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths presented what is more likely to be his last briefing as a Special Envoy for Yemen after being nominated to take on a top UN humanitarian position as an Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. However, Griffiths remains in his post as a Special Envoy until a new Envoy is nominated.

The briefing occurred days after the unsuccessful attempt at a round of talks with the Houthis delegation in Muscat. For the last few months, intensified diplomatic efforts continued supporting Griffiths' proposals for peace in Yemen.

Who Hindered the Diplomatic Efforts?

In past briefings, Griffiths appeared confident in his plan to achieve progress and bring together the political parties involved. However, the UN Envoy acknowledged his failure to achieve results on the ground and deemed Ansar Allah, the Houthis, responsible for 'disrupting' the peace efforts due to their ongoing offensive on the city of Ma'rib. "Ansar Allah's offensive, which has been ongoing for more than a year, has caused an astonishing loss of life, and the offensive has been continuously and still until now disrupting our efforts to end this war and bring the chance of peace. So, of course, I once again, and this is my message of the day Mr. President, call on Ansar Allah to immediately stop its attack on Ma'rib."

Griffiths emphasized that the continuation of these offensives will widen the scope of the war and reach areas it has not yet. Therefore, exacerbating the suffering of the Yemenis. "The longer the Ma'rib offensive goes on, the greater the risks to Yemen's broader stability and social cohesion. And indeed, it has every chance, of leading to the transfer of conflict to other areas of Yemen, including those which have remained mercifully far from the main theaters of conflict." He described the ongoing assault on Ma'rib as "unjustifiable."

In a clear reference to the Houthis, the UN Envoy warned against believing a military solution would end the current conflict in Yemen. "I fear that the Ma'rib offensive may suggest to some, only to some, a belief that the war can be won outright militarily. But military conquest will not decisively end this war. It will only inevitably and certainly invite further cycles of violence and unrest. Yemen cannot be governed effectively except through inclusive partnerships of various, different political forces and components."

Griffiths' Peace Proposal

In his last briefing as the UN Envoy for Yemen, Griffiths reiterated what he called 'the terms of the deal' or the framework of his proposal to the conflicting parties in Yemen, which he has been working on since; the terms are as follows:

First, a commitment to a nationwide ceasefire would provide immense humanitarian relief. It would allow for the opening of roads in many parts of the country, including Taiz, Hudaydah, and Ma'rib itself.

Second, re-opening Sana'a Airport to commercial air traffic, ensuring the uninterrupted flow of fuel and other commodities into Yemen through Hudaydah port.

Third, a commitment to resuming the political process to reach an inclusive political settlement.

Strikingly, the UN Envoy did not refer to the three agreed upon terms of reference (i.e. the GCC initiative and its implementation mechanism, the National Dialogue outcomes, and relevant Security Council resolutions, in particular 2216) that the Yemeni government has been emphasizing as necessary for any proposed peace process. Moreover, Griffiths made clear concessions to the Houthis by adopting their demands and including them in his proposed 'terms of the deal' to persuade them to engage in the political process, but to no avail. The Houthis refused to deal with him or meet with him in Muscat earlier this month. On the other hand, despite ignoring their demands, the Yemeni government has been more cooperative with Griffiths' proposal. He noted in his briefing that: "cooperation with the Government of Yemen on these negotiations has been excellent."

Next Steps

In his statement, Griffiths emphasized that as a mediator he does not have any real authority on the warring parties, to force them to sit down at the negotiation table. “The mediator cannot force the parties to negotiate. That is their obligation. That is their responsibility. And frankly, Mr. President, that is their duty to the people of Yemen,” said Griffiths. The strength of the UN Envoy’s proposal, as mentioned, is rooted in the international support from the international community and regional states, especially the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Thus, calling for more pressure on the various parties, the Houthis in particular, to push them to sit down at the negotiation table. Griffiths stated: “In the coming weeks, looking ahead, in the short- to near-term, my aim is to work with the parties to conclude the negotiations - to use the language that we know is appropriate- for that deal and put it in front of them so that fighting is stopped and the various benefits that I have been outlining may be obtained.”

Although it does not look practical nor viable at the moment, the UN Envoy indicated, in his briefing, that he might call the conflicting parties for direct negotiations. He said: “And if needed, I will, of course, call on the parties to meet face-to-face, finally, to take their chances with what is in front of them and to be accountable for the decisions that they will make in such a meeting. And I would like to be able to resolve that before we meet again.” However, the developments on the ground indicate that the UN Envoy failed, yet again, to convince the parties of his peace proposal, and he will not be able to in the few days and weeks left for him
in office.

The UN Envoy's Efforts Since the Last Briefing

For the last few weeks, Griffiths visited four countries in the region, including Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Jordan. The visits were encouraged by international momentum and optimistic signs that understandings between the Yemeni government and the Houthis will soon be reached, and lead to negotiations between the two parties.

Griffiths' Visit to Egypt

To discuss the military and political developments in Yemen Griffiths paid a two-day visit to Egypt on April 25th and 26th. During his visit, he met with the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Ahmed Aboul-Gheit, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, and several representatives of Yemeni political parties, tribal leaders, women, civil society members, and journalists, according to the Envoy office press release. He also held a meeting with the Speaker of the Yemeni Parliament, Sultan Al-Barakani.

Griffiths' Visit to Saudi Arabia

The UN Envoy, accompanied by the US Envoy to Yemen, Tim Lenderking, started his visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on Thursday, April 29th, amid an optimistic atmosphere about the possibility of converging views and reaching a mutual understanding between the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels.

Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., Commander of U.S. Central Command, stated on April 28th, “I actually think there's a chance for a peace agreement in Yemen. I think Saudi Arabia is interested in doing that. And I believe they're behaving with good faith. And I would hope that the Houthis would do the same.”

It was clear that both the Yemeni government and Saudi officials have shown a great response to the peace proposals presented by the UN Envoy. Griffiths described the cooperation of the Yemeni government, in his briefing to the members of the UN Security Council, as "excellent."

Griffiths' Visit to Oman

Recently, Oman started playing a more active role in bringing the views of the conflicting parties together. These efforts are paid by the highest levels in the country, the Sultan himself, as the UN Envoy indicated in his briefing to UN Security Council. In a statement issued at the end of March, António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, expressed his appreciation to Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said for supporting the UN's efforts to bring peace to the region. He said, “Over the years, the Sultanate of Oman has played an important role in building bridges for peace in the region, including in Yemen. In particular, I am grateful to His Majesty, Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq Al Said, for his constructive and essential support to my Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths.”

In this context, the UN and US Envoys arrived in Muscat on Sunday, May 2nd, for a visit during which they aimed to convince the Houthis of the peace plan proposed by the UN Envoy. They met with Omani officials and members of the Houthis' negotiating delegation.

However, contrary to the expected, the Envoys failed to achieve any significant progress. It was clear from the reactions and the media statements of the Houthi delegation members they were not interested in cooperating with all of these efforts. They refused to meet and talk to the UN Envoy during his visit. Abdul-Malik Al-Ajri, a member of the Houthi negotiation delegation and a member of its political office, tweeted a day after the visit: "It is reported in the media that the American and international Envoys returned from Muscat empty-handed, to be more accurate they actually came empty-handed." The official spokesman for the Houthi delegation, Muhammad Abdul Salam, also tweeted: "They are talking about a partial battle (referring to the battle of Ma'rib) and leaving the besieged Yemen (meaning the restrictions imposed on the outlets run by the Houthi group)." He considered it a "shorthand for conflict which does not address the problem, but rather exacerbates it, and it does not help achieve peace, but rather prolongs the war." This statement was considered an announcement of the failure of international efforts.

Consequently, on May 5th, the UN Envoy issued a press release on his latest meetings expressing his regrets for failing to talk with the Houthis, "Unfortunately, we are not where we would like to be in reaching a deal. Meanwhile, the war continued unabated causing immense suffering to the civilian population."

The US and UN Envoys' visit to the Omani capital, Muscat, coincided with the visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, who arrived in the Omani capital as part of a Gulf tour that included both Qatar and the UAE. The Saudi Foreign Minister met with his Omani counterpart, Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, and the Omani Deputy Prime Minister, Fahd bin Mahmoud Al-Said.

Democratic Senator Chris Murphy, who was optimistic about achieving progress in this round of talks, also arrived during the same period to participate in this

negotiation. After meeting with the Omani foreign minister, Sen. Murphy tweeted: "The time is now for peace in Yemen and Oman can play a critical role."

Heading Back to Jordan

The UN Envoy left Muscat and returned to the UN Special Envoy regional office in Amman on May 4th. During his meeting with Tim Lenderking, the US Envoy, and US Senator Chris Murphy, Griffiths discussed the efforts to reach a ceasefire agreement in Yemen.

Subsequently, the US State Department issued a statement denouncing the Houthis' refusal to meet with the UN Special Envoy, Martin Griffiths, in the Omani capital Muscat. "The Houthis passed up a major opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to peace." The statement held the Houthis responsible for failing the process with their intransigence and refusal to meet with the UN Envoy. The US State Department also held the Houthis responsible for exacerbating the human suffering in Yemen by continuing their assault on Ma'rib Governorate, east of Yemen. "Contradictory to their pronouncements regarding the humanitarian situation in Yemen, the Houthis worsen it by continuing to attack Ma'rib and exacerbating dire conditions for already vulnerable, internally displaced Yemenis."

Griffiths Leaves Office

On May 11th, Reuters reported that Martin Griffiths, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, was nominated as the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. The news came as a surprise, although, the agency mentioned that Griffiths had been nominated for the position last April. There are conflicting analyses about the motives and timing of this decision. Was it

at the request and desire of the UN Envoy himself? Was he unable to fulfill his promises to achieve any progress in resolving the conflict in Yemen? Or was this decision made after Griffiths failed to meet with the Houthis during his recent visit to Muscat, due to their refusal to deal with him, hence raising doubts about his ability to continue working as a mediator & resolve the conflict in Yemen without hindrance?

Many observers compare the end of Griffiths's career as a UN Envoy for Yemen to his Mauritanian predecessor, Ismail Ould Sheikh Ahmed, who also faced the challenge of presenting himself as a neutral mediator acceptable to the Houthis before leaving his post in February 2018.