

# The Role of the United Nations and its Special Envoys in the current Yemeni War: Floundering in a Tragic Reality

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## Introduction

In a new attempt to get Yemen out of its ongoing war, in 13 February 2018, Briton Martin Griffiths has been appointed as a new UN envoy to Yemen, succeeding the former UN envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh, who was appointed on April 25, 2015 and announced his resignation in February

**Whether the Western UN envoy will succeed in resolving the peace negotiations in Yemen and thus reaching peace**

2018. Ould Cheikh had replaced Jamal Ben Omar, who resigned in April 2015 after four years as Yemen's special envoy. Martin Griffiths is the first Western UN envoy to Yemen, unlike

his predecessors. Based on Griffiths's personal experience, there are new hopes in activating the international mediation efforts to resolve one of the most intractable and tragic crises in the Arab region. The main question to be addressed in this report is: What does it mean to appoint an international envoy of Western origins to the course of the current Yemeni crisis and whether the Western UN envoy will succeed in resolving the peace negotiations in Yemen and thus reaching peace; and to which extent the Yemeni conflicting factions will accept the Western UN envoy at the negotiating table?

The conflict in Yemen has become more intractable and violent. The devastation caused by this conflict is currently a major challenge to international peace and security. It is therefore necessary to emphasize the importance of a viable mechanism that is compatible with the complexities of the regional and local environment in order to end up the war and to achieve national reconciliation and peace-building in this defeated country.

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, and the emergence of conflicts over power, the United Nations has always played and still playing an important role in peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes. However, the UN faced and still facing multiple dilemmas and diverse problems in the negotiation processes. This situation is requiring urgent and positive adjustments and strategy to effectively manage the multilateral peace negotiations in the Arab spring countries.

In this report, we will present some of the challenges that have hampered the United Nations and its former envoys, which may hinder its new Western envoy to Yemen. These challenges are many and varied, but the most important of which are:

- The lack of incorporating local knowledge on the sensitivity of the local environment and all its social and political complexity. The lack of understanding the personal characteristics of the leaders of the conflicting groups.
- The failure to deal with the root causes or the causal mechanisms of the conflict and focusing more on marginal causes.
- The ineffectiveness of the prohibition of the supply and smuggling of arms to the conflicting factions and groups.
- Insufficient funding and necessary economic support for the political, negotiating and mediation process to create a highly effective and restorative environment that can be a solid basis for successful peace and community building.

## Understanding the complexities of the local environment

Considering the management process of the peaceful negotiation in Yemen by the United Nations, one can find out that there is weakness in the methodology of the international envoys to incorporate local information on the national and humanitarian issues. Obviously, these are frequent issues for quite a while amid the pre-war stage or as of now amid the war. There is weakness in planning, analyzing and studying the causal relationship and the preconditions for the appropriate environment to achieve the intrinsic value of the national reconciliation and negotiation processes that have been held under UN sponsorship during the pre-war phase.

For instance, the former UN envoy to Yemen, Ben Omar had managed the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (NDC), (18 March 2013, until 25 January 2014) and played a major role in sliding Yemen into a full-blown war. The lack of including the informal centres of power within the NDC was a major weakness. Ben Omar could not force the high political powers (i.e. the names not the Political Entities) to actually participate in the National Dialogue Conference. Especially those were politically active powers in the pre-Arab spring-Yemen 2011, whether they are powers from the government or the opposing parties – and the social tribal figures, who have sufficient power. That is because the indirect objective of the Dialogue Conference is to convince such influential parties and social figures- despite being rejected by most of the Yemeni people- to pursue the approach of peace and its tools such as debating away from using the force and keeping the country away from war accordingly.

Ben Omar acted in collusion with the obstructing and disruptive forces of the NDC's success at both political and military levels. Particularly those forces

**The impression is that political factions lacked 'willpower' to solve national problems and that basically their participation in the NDC mainly served the goal of keeping one's power base intact**

that were provoking conflicts and wars of expansionism in a few areas of Yemen. It is peculiar to discover that a few political forces sat at the table of the NDC and they possessed

military elements that are practically identical or comparable to the power of the state. The absence of a systematic or an indigenous planning and preparation for the NDC, all the warring factions were lurking around through the NDC. They all utilize the NDC as a warrior's rest with a specific end goal as to rearrange their political and military power and then to topple the government and to control the state.

Similarly the traditional forces that have had conventional power and polarization tools were working hard to obstruct the process of setting up a viable NDC that is capable of formulating an effective transitional stage and that would achieve the principle of popular sovereignty and civil liberties. Some of the participated political forces in the NDC were not representative of the interests and aspirations of their popular masses. They were political forces representing aristocratic and limited families that controlled for so long time the political power in Yemen. I.e., there was low level of community participation in the national dialogue as well as the lack of attention to create channels of communication to all levels of society. This has raised the question of the legitimacy of the NDC as a whole.

We question whether the NDC conformed to the 'theory' that is behind national dialogue processes. The theory of dialogue sets out different stages in the process, one of which being reconciliation. This stage seems to have been skipped altogether in Yemen. The reconciliation is one of the main mechanisms of solving conflicts among Yemeni tribes at local levels.

In a similar vein, The lessons from past attempts at dialoguing in Yemen (in 1962 and 2009) have not fed into the current one, hence represents a missed opportunity when it comes to learning about how to do a dialogue in the context of Yemen.

After that Mr. Ould Sheikh Ahmed appointed by the UN as the second UN envoy to Yemen. He inherited from Ben Omar a heavy legacy and a tragedy of a comprehensive war with the existence of an Arab military alliance that supports the legitimate government of Yemen, and another regional non-Arab alliance that supports the Houthis rebel to seize the power in the Northern part of Yemen. This tragedy of this war is manifested as now more than 70% of Yemenis are suffering of a severe food shortage, 20 % of them are facing a severe famine, and there are thousands of men, women, children and other civilians who loosed their lives.

From the very first moment, Ould Cheikh tried to present himself as the impartial mediator of any faction in order to avoid the criticisms that were given to his predecessor. Ben Omar as the later was criticized as being dipped in the conflicting factions in Yemen. The others critics went furfure to argue that Ben Omar was not any more an agent of the United Nations as much as he turned into a troublesome figure inciting the contentions and the war. There are those who add that the poor management of negotiations by Ben Omar in coordination

with the close decision making circle of the President Hadi represented a major reason for the failure of the transitional phase in Yemen and the entry of Yemen to a complete war.

Some Yemeni experts in peacebuilding argue that Ben Omar's ability to speak Arabic language helped him to integrate into the conflict but it did not help him to end up the conflict. This was

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due to his lack of understanding of the local knowledge of the Yemeni society and the informal power structure and its interactions. To incorporate information on local knowledge, one needs to stay a long time inside Yemen, but the problem is that Ben Omar stayed most of his time outside Yemen.

With the intensity of violent conflict and fighting in the different Yemeni armed fronts: North, South, West and East, Ould Cheikh did not succeed in his mission. Between 2015 and 2016, he led three main negotiations between the Yemeni conflicting factions. First, in Geneva in June, 2015, the second, in Bell Swiss in December 2016, and the third, which is the largest and most important in his mission, was the consultations of Kuwait, which was held for more than three months between April and August 2016. However, all of these negotiations failed. Some noted that the reason for this failure could be in the fact that Ould Cheikh was not neutral as previously indicated and also due his lack of experience in the international mediation.

It can be said that international experience in mediation as well as the impartiality are important for an UN envoy. Once again, we emphasize that, more importantly, an UN envoy must recognize the importance of local knowledge

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and the knowledge of informal power networks at local levels. Accordingly, the new UN envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths, must take advantage of the local expertise as by individuals or institutions, such as academics or universities and research centers, and to give them room to share their expertise. The former UN envoys to Yemen were not interested in using the Yemeni local expertise. Instead, the former UN envoys to Yemen had relied on the external experts, who do not have local knowledge in the affairs of Yemen and this was a major handicap for their mission' success.

It is so important for Martin Griffiths to utilize the local expertise as he has an incomplete strategy to solve the Yemeni crisis, that was presented in his lecture, entitled "Putting out the Fire: How to End the Armed Conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen", held by the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, November 20, 2017 in Riyadh. Griffiths believes that for successful negotiations in Yemen, we must be fully aware of the following :

- The tribes should be involved in the solution and not only the southern movement. All the Yemenis have the right to participate in building a new Yemen. Yemen needs to build up a new political environment, including political institutions, interest groups and other social groups.

- Iran is the biggest winner of conflicts and wars in the Arab world. Its goal is to find and secure a land corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean through Syria and Lebanon. Iran is contributed to the conflict inside Yemen in order to export its Islamic revolution.
- The economy of war can be detrimental to the interests of many, but at the same time, it can benefit many others.
- There is a need for opening the Yemeni airports and ports and establishing a system of inspection by the United Nations and the Arab Alliance. This is to facilitate the entry of food and energy and to reduce the severity of the crisis and the humanitarian disaster in Yemen.

Notwithstanding the significance of the new UN Envoy's inclusion, in his strategy, of all segments of the Yemeni local communities in any future negotiations. It is imperative that regional and international parties must enter into such direct negotiations alongside with the Yemeni local factions. The historical truth in Yemen says that the external dictates of some of the internal factions and their dependence on the outsiders, who have interests positioned in the failure of any serious Yemeni dialogue and thus the continuation of the chaos and devastation in Yemen. Therefore, it is necessary for the new UN envoy to focus on the main causes of the conflict, to avoid the marginal reasons to overcome the stage of a deep chaos in Yemen.

### **The core issues for a more effective dialogue**

The international community and the United Nations should explore parallel channels of peace by encouraging popular or political initiatives that

contribute to the promotion of security and stability in Yemen.

We are all aware of the difficulty of dealing with the thorny issues in the Yemeni war and conflict. However, the

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lack of prioritization among these issues will present a major weakness in any future dialogue. The major issues must be placed in front of the Yemeni

public opinion, the local communities and the international community as the main discussion hubs for a future and an effective dialogue in Yemen. This argument is based on what happened in the Yemeni NDC that managed by Ben Omar as the UN envoy. The breadth/scope of the NDC in terms of issues covered. It started out with two issues only, one of these being the Sa'ada issue, but then the number of issues exploded to unmanageable proportions. All the political, economic, cultural and administrative issues were raised at the dialogue table,

The NDC lost focus as a result of the failure to characterize the main issues for building peace in Yemen accurately before entering into the dialogue itself. For example, the participants in the NDC talked about how to withdraw heavy weapons from armed militias and at the same time they discussed the legal frameworks for natural reserves - this does not diminish the importance of resolving Yemeni environmental issues. A second example relates to the NDC starting point that Yemen should remain one federal state. This was decided overnight without duly considering alternative options.

The issue of withdrawing weapons from armed groups is still a priority for the success of any future peace negotiations in Yemen, which requires genuine guarantees of implementation. Despite the state of consensus in any negotiations, the absence of a guarantor force that ensures implementation of the outputs. These guarantees can be placed at both regional or international levels, especially from those regional countries that are encouraging the local factions for intransigence and hegemony. As mentioned above, these regional countries have played negative roles in the course of the Yemeni conflict, imposing themselves by force in the internal affairs of Yemen. They have contributed to a full collapse of a Political Mechanism to deal with the Yemeni war and conflict.

The failure to adjust the main constants for the management of the Yemeni former NDC, and to agree on them before engaging in dialogue was one of the main weaknesses. Despite the fact that the Gulf initiative had provided some guidelines and some national constants, the pursuit of consensus among the conflicting factions made the NDC as a dense subject with no limits. The NDC was missed between sectarian and regional calls, some of which have military force and some of them unarmed. The period of the NDC was prolonged the consensus among the conflicting factions became impossible issue. This situation led President Hadi to often resolve some of the thorny positions himself, which caused some of the cracks that later turned into appeals in the outputs of the NDC itself. For example, what happened in Hadi's decisions on the case of Sa'ada and the southern issues.

Certainly, there is a great importance in accurately defining the major issues before entering any future negotiations. All conflicting factions must understand their role well, what they should discuss

and what their true roles are to society and the humanitarian disaster in their country.

### **Prohibition of supplying and smuggling arms to the conflicting factions**

As noted above, the continued flow of arms to the conflicting factions is fueling the conflict, threatening the internal security of the country for long periods and paving the way for increased criminality and violence among civilians. This is even after the end of the current armed conflict and war. The security's arrangement for any successful negotiations must take place by controlling the factions that are possessing arms so as they cannot put pressure on the ground.

A comprehensive blockade of all arms transfer to Yemen could help to end the conflict, dry up the military power of the conflicting parties and to create a new balance of power. Especially as some of the Yemeni political experts believe that the new UN envoy will not be able to provide more than its predecessors. The political solution is not likely to happen in Yemen because of the ideological tendencies of the Houthis. They will not accept any real settlement unless they are militarily defeated and their authority ends up completely on the ground.

Recently, war studies have concluded that the various groups involved in armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Libya, Sri Lanka and Yemen are relying heavily on the official market and the black market within States to get arms. These studies recommended that the United Nations should pay adequate attention to this serious phenomenon within the international dimension and to end the

delivery of arms to criminal groups and militias around the world.

In this regard, the International Security Council should stop any arms flows to Yemen. ISC have to stop the countries that are engaged in smuggling weapons to Yemen under the UN Charter on Responsibility 2 Protect Victims of Wars and Conflicts (R2P). The weapons are used to commit further serious violations of international law and human rights in Yemen.

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### **A parallel Economic support with the peace-building process**

One of the most important issues that contributed to the lack of popular support for the NDC in Yemen is the intensification of food and economic crises that have imposed more difficult conditions on people's lives. The majority of the poor Yemenis lost confidence on the national dialogue. The United Nations has had a weakness in methodology since it began to lead and manage the idea of national dialogue. It was important to ensure first that the NDC is fitting well with economic and humanitarian issues in the country.

For example, the decision of the Yemeni government issued in July 2014 to raise the price of oil created a popular resistance. The Houthi armed group smartly used such as situation to control the capital Sana'a by its armed groups. The Houthi armed group exploited the

frustrations among the society of such a wrong governmental economic decision. They could organized demonstrations in Sanaa to demand the resignation of the Yemeni government and to end up the political partnership with the other factions. The escalation of this crisis destroyed the state, and ignited a comprehensive war in Yemen running at the present time.

The intervention of the World Bank in committing the Yemeni government to take such a decision, as to raise the price of oil, was a serious and catastrophic mistake, but it is believed to be the main factor of destructing the peace-building process in Yemen. There was a need for full economic support from the international community and donors to stabilize the pillars of the Yemeni economy after the events of the Arab Spring to reconsider the decision of lifting Support for fuel in Yemen.

In the political economic analysis (PEA) of war, there are multiple propositions that the donor community is facing a fundamental dilemma in the fragile states or conflicting countries. This dilemma is located between the short-term funding required by the international military efforts to fight against separatist and terrorist movements and the demands of sustainable economic development for a long term in these states.

The search for a solution to this dilemma is essential to understanding how to shape foreign aid policy in conflict areas such as Yemen, and this requires great efforts by the new UN envoy as well as by

**Foreign aid must be re-pumped to build the legitimate State's power through social and economic construction programs, not just to strengthen the legitimate government's power over war**

international donor institutions and the Friends of Yemen. The success of the foreign aid community in helping the legitimate government of Yemen economically will help the Yemeni government ( 1) to defeat the Houthi rebels in the North and the separatist council in the South (2) and to prepare the country's economic structure for the future. This is the central issue in the economic file of supporting the process of ending the war and building peace process in Yemen.

International experts should stop reducing the effectiveness of economic aid to countries of conflict and war, arguing that economic growth in these countries will not be achieved under conditions of war. We argue and emphasize the importance of economic support in conflict areas, and agree with them that aid will not generate economic growth but it can contribute to the economic growth and mitigate the negative and catastrophic effects of war at local levels. Once again, we recommend the new UN envoy to Yemen to discuss and encourage the donor community to re-open development channels and foreign aid to Yemen. This is to increase his ability in political and negotiating maneuver between the conflicting factions. Although the humanitarian assistance is currently important for Yemen, development and economic assistance have a parallel importance to stimulate the process of ending the war and building peace in Yemen.

### **In conclusion:**

If the above mentioned challenges properly addressed through the solutions presented in the report, we can end the Yemeni war and conflicts and avoiding

their recurrence in the future. Needless to say, the United Nations will remain an indispensable tool in the promotion of peace in the international community. This is because of its role in providing a legitimate and fair response to the conflict; an opportunity to share burdens; an effective way to take concrete action; bridge to stability and peaceful long-term development.

The solution for the Yemeni is not linked to what can each new UN envoy provide to Yemen. Instead, it is linked to what efforts the international community can provide to resolve this crisis and to stop the human suffering occurring in Yemen because of the ongoing violations. Peace can only be achieved if the international community and the regional powers have a united approach to effectively resolve the Yemeni crisis rather than having different approaches and conflicts surrounding the current Yemeni catastrophe.

In the end we can point to the following points:

- The United Nations should bring together all the conflicting factions in order to come up with a unified vision on different issues.
- It is necessary to identify central issues, outlines and issues of national priorities in any future negotiations. These issues will be the framework for dialogue such as: the unification, combating terrorism, building the state, political system, constitution, and reconstruction and building the unified national army.
- It should be there inclusion for civil society organizations and women, and all segments of society in villages, isolation and governorates as to ensure support for the outputs of the national dialogue.

- A separate point concerns the participation of the CSOs. The invitations to participate in the NDC were sent out quite broadly, but a lack of transparency in the final selection of civil society delegates. The impression is that (political) friends among CSOs to the “state” (VIPs) were eventually selected.
- There is a need to strengthen and build up a confidence between the various conflicting factions through comprehensive national reconciliation before starting any national dialogue.
- The United Nations needs to work more closely with international and regional donors to find a solution on how economic and development support, along with humanitarian assistance, can be pursued to achieve a peaceful solution to the war in Yemen.
- The United Nations needs to deal with the question how to finance the implementation of the solutions that would be agreed on in any future negotiations, as it was puzzling in the implementation of the NDC’s outputs.

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