

# ADDRESSING THE SOUTHERN ISSUE TO STRENGTHEN YEMEN'S PEACE PROCESS



By

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*COVER PHOTO: Yemenis gather at the annual Yafaxa heritage festival in Lahj governorate on August 9, 2020. Photo by Ahmed Shihab al-Qadi*



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A year after his appointment as the UN's special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths opened a branch for his office in the interim capital, Aden, where he met a wide spectrum of southern actors. But, until now, he has not significantly invested his office politically in what is known as the southern issue, instead focusing on efforts to reach a round of comprehensive political negotiations between the internationally recognized government of Yemen and the armed Houthi movement to consolidate a cease-fire throughout the country.<sup>[1]</sup> However, the Riyadh Agreement reached in 2019 has helped create an opportune moment to support and transform a political agreement that deescalates hostilities and tension in southern governorates into a more sustainable and comprehensive arrangement.

The success of this opportunity, however, requires that Griffiths adopt a new, proactive approach toward the southern issue that aims to achieve three main objectives: ensuring the political integration of the most prominent active southern forces into the future national peace negotiations process; supporting the political and institutional reform process in southern governorates and areas under the internationally backed government's control; and starting a serious and sustainable political dialogue as a part of the parallel tracks of UN mediation — one that focuses on, and builds a consensus around, the southern issue.

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1) "The necessary political settlement in Yemen between the Riyadh Agreement and Griffiths' initiative [AR]," Middle East News Agency, May 17, 2020, <https://www.mena.org.eg/news/dbcall/table/webnews/id/8435559>

## INTRODUCTION

By early 2018, Yemen's war had settled into a stand-off along relatively stable frontlines, with the armed Houthi movement controlling much of the north from Sana'a and the internationally backed Yemeni government exercising varying degrees of authority across southern areas. A newly appointed UN special envoy began sketching out a framework to move forward again after failed 2016 UN-mediated peace negotiations in Kuwait. Core transformations in the conflict since then, however, have resulted in a striking political dynamic, one that has slowly and steadily created a process that allows for negotiations between President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government and its main rival for authority in southern areas, the Southern Transitional Council (STC). In doing so, an opportunity has emerged to address what is known as "the southern issue" in a meaningful way that could be used as an entry point to a broader political settlement.

The southern issue is shorthand for the political and economic fallout from the 1994 civil war that created inequities and a sense of discrimination among southerners that has weakened the social fabric and strengthened identity-based separatist movements. North and South Yemen joined to form a republic in 1990, and southern parties' attempt to secede four years later was swiftly put down. After that, ruling authorities in Sana'a neglected southern Yemen and marginalized its people politically and economically. In 2007, southerners formed the peaceful Southern Movement, known as Al-Hirak, to mobilize politically with demands for equal access to jobs and government services as well as greater autonomy. After the Arab Spring rebellion ultimately forced President Ali Abdullah Saleh from power in 2012, southerners' predicament was formally recognized during the political transition process of 2013-14.

War halted that political process, but brought substantial change to the southern scene, with interim President Hadi's government forced to flee to Aden, and Saudi and Emirati forces leading a military coalition to oust Houthi authorities from the capital, Sana'a. General public discontent with the Hadi government and escalating rivalries between Hadi and leading southern figures spurred the STC's creation in 2017, uniting various Southern Movement factions with the backing of the United Arab Emirates. Friction among forces aligned with Hadi's government and those with the STC was constant but restrained, allowing them to continue fighting together against the armed Houthi movement, Ansar Allah.

By December 2018, UN intervention and international pressure were successful in engineering the Stockholm Agreement, which froze battles between the Houthi forces and government-aligned troops along Yemen's Red Sea Coast and ultimately doused what the new envoy, UK diplomat Martin Griffiths, described at the time as the “center of gravity of the war.”<sup>[2]</sup> But the fragile deescalation in the port city of Hudaydah did not create the political momentum necessary to restart the peace process. As implementation of further deescalation measures called for in the agreement stalled, core transformations began playing out. International anti-Houthi coalition partners, most importantly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), began to withdraw from the Yemen conflict while the coalition's local partners turned on each other with renewed ferocity. Southern separatists, strengthened by Emirati support for their allied forces, took full control of Aden in August 2019, driving out Yemeni government soldiers and making inroads elsewhere in the south.

Saudi Arabia negotiated a peace deal between the Yemeni government and the STC — the November 2019 Riyadh Agreement — giving the STC its first formal acknowledgement from key stakeholders in the war. But attempts to follow through on commitments to integrate the two sides politically and militarily quickly stumbled. Anti-Houthi forces began fighting sporadically again for control of the south, a division Houthi forces exploited to escalate their ground campaign, as seen in early 2020 in Al-Jawf and Marib.

Still, the Riyadh Agreement can be politically effective for two main reasons. First, it placed as mediator Saudi Arabia, which has the political and military clout, as the protector of and the central power behind the anti-Houthi coalition, to steer the behavior of both parties. Second, the agreement addressed several underlying core issues feeding the Yemen conflict — most critically, formalizing a share of authority for southerners and addressing general principles for the political and institutional reform of state structures. Under the agreement, 12 of 24 ministerial positions are explicitly reserved for southerners and are to be divided among a variety of southern actors, rather than to be chosen only by Hadi. It also requires the cabinet to work from inside Yemen, rather than from Riyadh as has been the case through much of the war, and mandates steps be taken to address corruption and government waste.<sup>[3]</sup>

2) Martin Griffiths, “Security Council Briefing of the Special Envoy for Yemen, 16 November 2018, Text as Delivered,” Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, November 17, 2018, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/security-council-briefing-special-envoy-yemen-16-november-2018-text-delivered>

3) “Text of the Riyadh Agreement signed between the Yemeni government and the Transitional Council, [AR]” Al-Masdar, November 5, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/173797>

## *Capitalizing on the Opportunity*

The UN envoy's recommendations and actions have been linked to what amounts to his golden rule: "For a political settlement to be sustainable, it must be inclusive."<sup>[4]</sup> He has laid out his approach in successive stages: listen to all of the influential actors, conduct bilateral negotiations aimed at securing a lasting cease-fire, and finally enter a transitional period.<sup>[5]</sup> It is during this transitional period, which would be led by an all-inclusive government, that Griffiths has proposed achieving a "just resolution" to the southern issue.<sup>[6]</sup>

The envoy has at times allowed for a parallel method to address developments on the ground and political complications that arise. On this front, Griffiths has reviewed issues including the handling of Hudaydah port revenues, the reopening of Sana'a airport, deescalation in Taiz, and the release of prisoners and detainees — all issues related to the primary conflict between the Hadi government and the Houthis. However, he has thus far steered clear of the southern issue, even though he has acknowledged its dynamics are critical to ensuring long-term peace and has warned the UN Security Council of "unfinished business" in Yemen's south.<sup>[7]</sup>

Indeed, attempts to address southern complaints at the 2013-14 National Dialogue Conference provided recognition of the extent of the problem, but the proposed solutions fell short, especially in the eyes of those demanding immediate separation. After the years following the regional intervention into the civil war in March 2015, new power centers developed in the south as southern groups aligned themselves with the internationally backed Yemeni government and Saudi Arabia, the STC and the United Arab Emirates, and other regional and domestic powerbrokers, which has played a significant part in the militarization of the civil conflict.

Some of these power centers competed for representation of southerners chafing under central government authority but not necessarily favoring separatism. Such groups, whose loyalties are more tied to their localities, include various tribal and political power-brokers in Hadramawt who are loosely grouped under

4) Ibid.

5) "A Matter of Momentum: Challenges facing the UN's New Envoy to Yemen," Emirates Policy Center, May 15, 2018, <https://epc.ae/brief/a-matter-of-momentum-challenges-facing-the-uns-new-envoy-to-yemen>

6) Martin Griffiths, "Security Council Briefing of the Special Envoy for Yemen, 16 November 2018, Text as Delivered" Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, November 17, 2018, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/security-council-briefing-special-envoy-yemen-16-november-2018-text-delivered>

7) Ibid.

the umbrella of the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference as well as a wide range of similar small groups that constitute a social movement in neighboring Al Mahra governorate.<sup>[8]</sup> In the separatist camp, not all have lined up with the STC. The Supreme Hirak Council under the leadership of Fadi Baoum is considered the biggest political competitor to the STC among separatist movements. Baoum's political influence is strongest in Aden and Mukalla; the group rejects Saudi and especially UAE influence and involvement in southern affairs. Another southern faction, the Supreme Revolutionary Council of Al-Hirak, led by Fouad Rashid and active mainly in Mukalla, Shabwah and Aden, seeks separation, but is currently aligned with Riyadh and the Hadi government.

At the same time, the South has become an open geopolitical arena for a number of regional forces, especially Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. These three actors worked directly to increase their political influence in the South through alliances, financial support, and the arming of the most prominent and influential local power centers. Cities of the south have endured political unrest as alliances and areas of control shift and sporadic violence throughout the war years, which has further complicated the comprehensive political settlement process in Yemen. While the Emiratis and Saudis have acted in concert with the STC and the Hadi government's supporters, respectively, the Omanis have concentrated their support on interests in Al-Mahra governorate, with which Oman shares a border and many cultural and familial ties.<sup>[9]</sup> It backs Baoum's southern separatist faction—Baoum himself is based in Muscat—and is influential among local tribes. Unlike the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Oman has not formally intervened militarily, but rather uses soft diplomacy in the form of mediation efforts and humanitarian aid that it sends across the border. The political and military situation polarized further with each passing year, without a serious initiative being presented to settle the various dimensions of the southern issue, whether identity-related, political, economic or social.

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8) Hussam Radman, *The South Rises Again*, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 4, 2020 <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9829>

9) Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's Al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 5, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

## *Challenges to Mending Southern Rifts*

Over the past year, southern Yemen has witnessed two negotiating tracks that were not destined to succeed as envisioned. One was the Riyadh Agreement, in which southerners in power are negotiating with southerners in the opposition; it has not advanced in its military and security objectives and only recently resulted in the two sides agreeing to on the formation of a new cabinet — a key political aspect that had been due under the agreement by December 5, 2019. The other track became known as the Southern-Southern dialogue, which was based on an invitation from the STC and held in May 2019 in Aden in an attempt to sway the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference and Rashid's separatist-leaning Revolutionary Council of Al-Hirak with the stated goal of mending southern rifts.<sup>[10]</sup> However, no real progress was made. It was only cosmetically supported by the Office of the UN Special Envoy in Aden. In neither case, however, did the UN have a tangible role in pushing the negotiation processes forward.

Both tracks faced obstacles: Hadi's monopoly over the representation of southerners in the internationally backed government, clearly evidenced in the delays that plagued the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement; the STC's monopoly over the representation of southerners during any negotiations by positioning itself as the sole representative of the south, which has pushed most other southern political actors to ignore the call for an intra-south dialogue, preferring to ally themselves with the government; and Riyadh's control over the political mediation process, which has made it difficult to implement agreed-upon measures. Saudi Arabia lacks experience when it comes to negotiations. Historically, it was the place where deals got signed, not where negotiations took place; the Riyadh Agreement has been criticized for its imprecise language and unclear sequencing,<sup>[11]</sup> and Riyadh did not have the foresight to ensure agreed-upon terms could be implemented. The Saudis did not, for example, anticipate the sides would try to capitalize on delays to create facts on the ground — such as the STC's April announcement of self-rule and its seizure of Socotra island in June or the government's military operations in Abyan — before implementation actually began. Now, it is left to face larger obstacles as it tries on the political side to strengthen state institutions in the southern governorates and, on the military side, to end clashes in Abyan, redeploy military and security forces in Aden and integrate STC forces into the ministries of Defense and Interior—all while presenting a united front against Houthi forces to the north.

10) In the Presence of the UN and International representatives, Chief Al Zubaidi launches the second stage of the Southern-Southern Conference, Al Ameen Press, May 2019, <https://alameenpress.info/news/12753>

11) Elana DeLozier, "Saudi leverage not enough to achieve peace in Yemen," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 29, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-leverage-not-enough-to-achieve-peace-in-yemen>

## *Looking Ahead*

Including southern interests has become necessary to achieve peace in Yemen, and the UN's reticence to approach the southern issue in an independent and in-depth manner appears inconsistent with its vital role in Yemen's war and peace tracks. As part of his policy of inclusiveness, Griffiths has listened to the views of southerners. He has not, however, directly involved the UN in resolving them.

Southerners' views are not uniform and include conflicting political visions of the identity of southern Yemen and its future; numerous actors claim the right to represent the South. Recently, the entanglement of local animosities conflicting with the agendas of regional sponsors, which Saudi Arabia has struggled to control through the Riyadh Agreement, has decreased the influence of and opportunities for UN mediation. Still, there is room for UN engagement in the South, particularly if it can play an active part in ensuring the success and development of the Riyadh Agreement, transforming it from a deal among elites to divide authority between the STC and the forces that make up the internationally backed government into a more inclusive and sustainable transitional settlement.

The Riyadh Agreement differs from the Stockholm Agreement in that the Stockholm Agreement was very specific regarding its objectives. The Riyadh Agreement, however, went beyond a partial deescalation deal to curtail open fighting among anti-Houthi local forces and into establishing the start of a new political structure. Still, it remains less than sustainable or comprehensive. Supporting its transformation into a transitional settlement will, in the short- and medium- terms, create a foundational government in the South with enough political momentum to enter comprehensive peace negotiations in the country. It also will facilitate the integration of southern interests into the framework of the political process and transitional period.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A MORE PROACTIVE UN ROLE:

- **Call for the transformation of the Riyadh Agreement and ensure more inclusive comprehensive peace negotiations by expanding the southern voices represented in it beyond the STC to include as many unarmed southern actors as possible. This does not need to be limited to seats at the negotiating table, but can also be achieved through inclusive committees overseeing implementation of the political mediation or contributing to it.**
- **Coordinate with and enlist the support of the three regional powers with interests in southern Yemen who have geopolitical influence: Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE. Deescalation of the military conflict in the south cannot be ensured without it.**
- **Ensure sustained diplomatic intervention through UN sponsorship of a Southern-Southern dialogue, based in Mukalla, where all of the key actors have a presence.**
  - Ensure it is sustainable and represents a wide group of stakeholders by, in coordination with the internationally backed government and the STC, announcing Mukalla as its venue as proposed by Hadramawt Governor Faraj al-Bahasani.<sup>[12]</sup> Conducting this dialogue in Mukalla will also allow the use of the Hadrami reconciliation experience as inspiration, an experience that was able to cleverly and pragmatically maintain a balance among its independent interests as Hadramawt, its commitments to the Yemeni republic, and its bias toward southern interests. In this situation, the UN special envoy would have to open a permanent office in Mukalla.
  - This dialogue could include three distinct groups:
    - Separatist and influential unarmed factions such as the STC, the Southern Hirak that participated in the National Dialogue Conference, the Supreme Council of the Revolutionary Hirak led by Rashid and the Supreme Hirak Council under Baoum's leadership;

12) Al-Bahsni calls for ending military escalation and uniting efforts to confront Covid-19, June 5, 2020, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/8863QNHK-QPZYJT-B388>

- southern branches of political parties and groups influential within authorities, including the president's advisors, parliamentary leaders and governors; and
  - intellectuals, businesspeople and civil society actors from unions, associations, the media, rights organizations and research centers as well as groups representing local communities with collective demands, such as members of the social movement in Al-Mahra, the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference, and the Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy, which supports Hadi but seeks greater self-rule for the governorate, as well as tribal and social dignitaries in most governorates of the South.
- Through expansive representation or high-level workshops, create a general consensus surrounding the southern issue that is removed from identity-based or mobilizing rhetoric. In this way, southern public opinion will be primed for a reconciliatory environment.
  - Focus on decentralized governance, good governance, just distribution of power and wealth, and resource management.<sup>[13]</sup>
- **Work in concert with Riyadh to bring respective strengths to the table and mitigate each others' weaknesses. As events since November 2019 have shown, Saudi diplomacy has been largely ineffective in ensuring successful negotiations or in implementing specifics of the Riyadh Agreement because it is inexperienced in crafting complex peace and security plans. The UN's institutional experience in such diplomacy combined with Riyadh's will, financial capacities and resources can create an effective "experience for capacity" arrangement.**

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13) For further information on the need to directly address conflict over access to resources, see also: Rafat Ali Al-Akhali and Zaid Ali Basha, "Economic priorities for a sustainable peace agreement in Yemen," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 2, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/10093>

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