

The Yemen Review

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The Yemen Review

The Yemen Review Launched in June 2016, The Yemen Review – formerly known as Yemen at the UN – is a monthly publication produced by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. It aims to identify and assess current diplomatic, economic, political, military, security, humanitarian and human rights developments related to Yemen.

In producing The Yemen Review, Sana'a Center staff throughout Yemen and around the world gather information, conduct research, hold private meetings with local, regional, and international stakeholders, and analyze the domestic and international context surrounding developments in and regarding Yemen.

This monthly series is designed to provide readers with a contextualized insight into the country's most important ongoing issues.

COVER PHOTO:

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths leaves after a news conference at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, September 8, 2018 // REUTERS/Denis Balibouse

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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Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi Mansour, President of the Republic of Yemen, addresses the general debate of the General Assembly's seventy-third session (Photo from UN Library)

The Sana'a Center Editorial

A Presidential Council: The Best of Bad Alternatives to Hadi

Despite all the talk of regional proxy wars in Yemen, after more than six years of conflict the same two primary obstacles to peace remain: the armed Houthi movement and Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, president of the country's internationally recognized government. The former, led by paranoid zealots, operates like an ideologically driven mafia in the areas it controls in the country's north. For those who have lived under Houthi rule, the social control has been suffocating, with free thought and expression quashed and religious indoctrination imposed as the Houthis attempt to establish a totalitarian theocracy in their image. While these ambitions are unlikely to materialize in a durable form over the long run, just as unlikely is the idea that the Houthis will cease to be a factor in Yemen. If, and hopefully when, there is a nationwide agreement reached to end the ongoing conflict, as unpalatable as it will be for many Yemenis, there will have to be some sort of national reckoning with, and accommodation of, the Houthis in Yemen's political future.

The same cannot be said for Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, president of the internationally recognized Yemeni government that would also have to sign on to any peace agreement to end the conflict. Hadi, whose mandate in office was meant to expire in 2014, will almost certainly be exiting power in any post-conflict arrangement, as neither the Houthis nor most parties in the anti-Houthi coalition would accept him remaining president.

Hadi is widely regarded as an inept statesman; he lacks domestic legitimacy, and his presidency is a siphon for corruption through which members of his inner circle have lavished wealth upon themselves. Indeed, his exit is so assured in any post-conflict arrangement that it is against his vested interests for the war to end. And other than pilfering, Hadi has primarily used his office to undermine rivals within the anti-Houthi coalition – in particular the Southern Transitional Council – fracturing the common front against the Houthis militarily and politically and contributing to the failure of basic state functions across areas the Yemeni government nominally controls.

In short, the Yemeni president is the rotten core of a failing government – as long as he is left to fester at the center of power, neither military progress against the Houthis nor headway toward peace will see sustainable gains, and even improvements in good governance will be only fleeting. For stakeholders in the Yemen conflict – in particular the foreign parties that have kept Hadi afloat – the immediate need should be clear: He must go (as this editorial column has previously argued). This then begs the question: What and how should come next?

A presidential council is not the optimal solution for Yemen; however, as a short-term, transitional measure it is the best possible option in the current circumstances. Holding a new election is impossible. Parliament is moribund and holds even less legitimacy than Hadi. The council's mandate, however, should be limited: with purview over peace talks, foreign and defense policies and the appointment of top government positions such as the prime minister. Importantly, the council's access to the state budget should be restricted, with the council's role focused on oversight rather than implementation. The handling of day-to-day government functions and ministries would be handled by a cabinet of technocrats.

There are historical precedents for a presidential council in Yemen, and the Sana'a Center has examined the concept in depth in a recent paper. In sum: Saudi Arabia would have to be the principal backer of the transition, given that Riyadh is the only party with the leverage to compel Hadi to acquiesce. The process would have to be facilitated through the UN and given international legitimacy through a new UN Security Council resolution. Membership on the presidential council should be made up of the political power brokers from across Yemen and also include representation from prominent women, youth and civil society figures. The body's voting process and regulations should be clear and the rights and responsibilities of each member made explicit.

This should be seen as a first step in a much-needed process of comprehensive governance reform, one that introduces transparency and inclusivity into major decisions of government. The details and context would come with implementation, and there are clearly potential pitfalls. Perhaps most obvious of these would be political deadlock on the council. Should that happen, however, given the separation between executive authority and basic government functions, the model aims to allow state ministries to continue providing services even as the parties bicker at the executive level.

Until elections are possible again, a presidential council is the best chance for a durable, interim executive body. Such a course of action may allow for enough stability for state institutions to resurrect their basic functions and serve the dire needs of Yemenis. Finally, a presidential council would also help prevent negotiations at any future peace talks from being held hostage to the corrupt self-interests of an elite clique.



Al-Ful Square in Aden's Crater district at night, April 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

Eye on Yemen

Aden has historically been a cultural and commercial intersection linking East and West. With a famed port and a long history of trade, people from all walks of life once flocked to the city and helped make it a cosmopolitan hub. But as ongoing war reshapes the city and its society, what will be left for the generations that follow? For an In Focus look in this month's Yemen Review, see 'Return to Aden'.

Our second In Focus article this month also looks into Aden's past, but through the camera lens and the city's role throughout much of the 20th century as a hub for cinema culture in Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. At its height, there were 40 operating movie theaters in Aden. That culture, however, has largely disappeared — a victim of modern technology and Yemen's political troubles. For more, see 'The Curtain Call for Cinema in Aden?'



Lutfi al-Hashemi, the grandson of the original owner of Aden's Hurricane Cinema, stands in the projection room where there remains the old film roll reader, May 4, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

May at a Glance

THE POLITICAL ARENA

By Casey Coombs

Developments in Government-Controlled Territory

STC chief returns to southern Yemen after year-long absence

May 1: Southern Transitional Council (STC) President Aiderous al-Zubaidi arrived in Aden after more than a year outside the country. His return came on the heels of a series of high-profile interviews with international outlets in which he discussed the group's plans for secession. Al-Zubaidi departed Aden in January 2020 for Abu Dhabi to complete negotiations for the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. Later that year, in March 2020, Saudi Arabia prevented Al-Zubaidi and other senior STC officials in Amman, Jordan from boarding a plane to Aden. His May 2021 return was marked by hostile rhetoric toward the internationally recognized government regarding implementation of the Riyadh Agreement and service provision in the interim capital, and hints of the pro-secession group's intentions to form an independent southern state.

STC orders news media in Aden to register with authorities

May 2: The local authorities in Aden, who are affiliated with the STC, issued a circular calling on private media, broadcasting and production companies to obtain licenses from the governorate's media office to continue operations. The document threatened administrative and legal measures against companies whose licenses are not reviewed within two weeks. The internationally recognized government's Minister of Information Muammar al-Iryani asked the governor of Aden, Ahmed Lamlas, to cancel the circular.

PM visits Marib city

May 4: During a visit to Marib city, Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek held a series of meetings with army commanders, Marib Governor Sultan Al-Aradah and other members of the local authority regarding the ongoing Houthi offensive threatening the city. Houthi-fired missiles struck the outskirts of the city shortly after his arrival.

STC supporters celebrate Aden Declaration

May 4: Thousands of southerners celebrated the fourth anniversary of the May 4, 2017, Aden declaration, which led to the founding of the STC. The celebrations included a flag-raising ceremony, at which members of the STC's Riyadh Agreement negotiating team raised the flag of the former state of South Yemen above the Presidential Palace, the headquarters of the internationally recognized government in the interim capital. Separately, STC chief Aiderous Al-Zubaidi called on the sponsors of the Riyadh Agreement to put pressure on the Yemen government to cancel unilateral decisions made by Hadi's presidential office that violated the agreement. He also accused the government of plans to move the interim capital from Aden to Sayoun, Hadramawt, and raised the possibility of the STC's return to self-governance.

Abyan officials killed by masked gunmen

May 5: Two officials in the local government of Abyan governorate were assassinated by unidentified gunmen in separate incidents. Masked gunmen on a motorbike assassinated the security director of Mudiyah district, Lieutenant-Colonel Nazim al-Salihi, in eastern Abyan in early May. Days earlier, gunmen shot dead the secretary-general of Al-Mahfad district's local council, Mohammed Salem al-Kazami, near his home in Aden's Al-Hawsa area. There are currently no known suspects.

Health ministry distributes coronavirus vaccines

May 8: The Ministry of Health said that it administered more than 18,000 COVID-19 vaccinations to health sector personnel and people with chronic diseases in areas nominally controlled by the internationally recognized government. The Aden-based

ministry said it also delivered 10,000 doses of the vaccine to health personnel in Houthi-controlled areas. By the end of May, officials in Taiz governorate reported that they had run out of vaccines.

Taiz governor meets with Tariq Saleh

May 8: Taiz Governor Nabil Shamsan and commander of the National Resistance Forces, Brigadier General Tareq Saleh, held their first direct meeting aimed at ending a crisis of confidence between the two camps. The governor called on the “legitimate government and the Arab alliance” to take a decision to open all fronts. In April, the governor announced a general mobilization to liberate the governorate after army forces broke the Houthi siege on the west side of the city and linked up with Saleh’s forces. The Sana’a Center held a Q&A with Tareq Saleh in April.

Government minister halts work of Houthi officials

May 9: The STC-aligned Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure in the internationally recognized government, Manea bin Yammine, froze the powers of the Houthis’ newly appointed head of the Roads and Bridges Maintenance Fund, Mouin al-Mas. In a document announcing the freeze, bin Yammine accused Al-Mas of administrative violations. The Roads and Bridges Maintenance Fund, along with the Roads Executive Corporation, are among the last government bodies administered jointly by the internationally recognized government and the Houthis, due to the significant amount of assets they control.

STC arrests opposition tribal shiekh in Socotra

May 15: STC forces in Socotra arrested prominent tribal sheikh Ali Sleemen Mohammed bin Malik after he called for a demonstration via WhatsApp against Emirati and Saudi interference on the Yemeni island archipelago. UAE-backed STC forces seized control of Socotra in July 2020 and ejected representatives of the internationally recognized government.

Al-Zubaidi commemorates South Yemen’s 1994 disengagement from unity pact

May 21: STC President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi marked the 27th anniversary of the former South Yemen’s disengagement from a unity pact with the former North Yemen, with which it had formed the Republic of Yemen in 1990. Four years later, on May 21, 1994, the southern People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen announced its intention to split with the north, which led to a brief but bloody civil war which the north won and forcibly kept the states united.

STC sharpens rhetoric on government failures in the south

May 24: In a news release following a meeting of STC leaders, the group stated that it remained open to all options to fill the void of government services in southern governorates. “Any slowdown in the return of the parity government emanating from the Riyadh Agreement to the capital, Aden, is a breach and a flagrant violation of the agreement.” Days later, the STC issued a statement holding the “presidency and the government” responsible for failing to uphold their obligations under the Riyadh Agreement, which includes the operation of the PetroMasila and Al-Haswa 2 stations, saying that the delay in operating the two electricity-generating stations, “is part of the service war being waged against the south and the capital, Aden, in particular.” Amid the heated rhetoric, Aden’s STC-aligned Governor Ahmed Lamlas appointed a new administration to run Aden’s electricity department, led by Salem al-Walidi.

Satellite images show under-construction military base on Yemeni island

May 26: The Associated Press published a report showing satellite imagery of what appears to be a military installation under construction on the Yemeni island of Mayun near the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. The UAE is thought to be building the base. Yemen’s Foreign Minister Ahmed Bin Mubarak stated that the internationally recognized government had no agreement with any foreign country to establish military bases, and Yemeni soil and water are basic constants that no party has the right to relinquish.

Developments in Houthi-Controlled Territory

Amnesty spotlights plight of Yemeni actress, model in Houthi custody

May 7: Amnesty International published a report detailing the mistreatment of Yemeni actor and model Intisar al-Hammadi, who has been arbitrarily imprisoned by Houthi authorities for more than three months on spurious grounds. Since her arrest, Al-Hammadi has been interrogated while blindfolded, physically abused and charged with drug and prostitution offenses. Al-Hammadi’s lawyer reported that Houthi authorities planned to conduct a “virginity test,” which Amnesty said amounted to a form of sexual violence and torture under international law. “She is being punished by the authorities for challenging the social norms of Yemen’s deeply patriarchal society,” said Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty’s Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director. Al-Hammadi’s case is part of a broader pattern of women’s rights abuses under Houthi rule, including harassment of women traveling without a male guardian, expelling women from their jobs, gender segregation and preventing access to reproductive health.

Houthi supervisor accused of killing elderly man leading Ramadan prayer

May 10: A Houthi supervisor killed an elderly man in his 90s at a local mosque in Mahwit governorate for leading a prayer typically performed in the month of Ramadan. Supervisors (mushrifin) are powerful Houthi loyalists who oversee the functioning of the formal state on behalf of the group's leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi. Embedded at all levels of government and other strategic institutions in Houthi-controlled areas, supervisors often have no prior experience in the work they oversee and are, in practice, immune from crimes committed during the course of their work.

*International Developments**Egyptian religious authority condemns Houthi crackdown on Ramadan prayers*

May 1: Al-Azhar, Egypt's Prominent Religious Authority, condemned the arbitrary Houthi campaign of preventing people from conducting the Taraweeh prayer at mosques during the holy month of Ramadan. Taraweeh prayers are a form of Islamic meditation. Al-Azhar described the forced ban as hateful racist practices and demanded the respect of religious freedoms and tolerance. The Arab Parliament, the legislative body of the Arab League, echoed Al-Azhar, criticizing the Houthis' lack of respect for the sanctity of religious rites.

French ambassador says Houthis leading Yemen to endless war

May 4: The French ambassador to Yemen, Jean-Marie Safa, issued a pointed criticism of Houthi authorities, stating that Houthi ideology is leading Yemen toward endless war. He said that Houthi discourse on peace is nothing but "empty phrases" because their actions are all directed toward war, the seizure of the country and the domination of society.

Hamas' leader welcomes Houthi donations

May 11: Osama Hamdan, a senior official with the militant Palestinian organization Hamas, expressed appreciation, via the Telegraph instant messaging app, for the donation drive launched by Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi, stating: "On the same day Sayyed al-Houthi calls for support for the Palestinian resistance, we received the first batch of funds quickly and directly." The Houthi authorities launched fundraising efforts for Palestine under the slogan "Jerusalem is closer" in response to the recent escalation violence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Martin Griffiths' promotion opens vacancy for fourth UN special envoy for Yemen

May 12: UN special envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths was named Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. Griffiths will continue in his role as special envoy until a successor is chosen. Griffiths is Yemen's third UN special envoy in the past six years. The announcement of Griffiths' promotion came after a week of meetings with diplomats in Oman earlier in May, following which Griffiths said that he was unable to secure a ceasefire. Houthi representatives reportedly refused to meet Griffiths at the time. Griffiths later met with the chief Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdel Salam in Amman, Jordan on May 27, and held discussions with senior Houthi officials, including the group's leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi, while Griffiths was in Sana'a, on May 30.

Massive arms shipment seized in Arabian Sea

May: American naval forces captured a massive shipment of arms from a vessel in the Arabian Sea. US Ambassador to Yemen Christopher Henzel said in a statement that the dhow carrying the weapons – which included anti-tank guided missiles, thousands of rifles, hundreds of machine guns, sniper rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers – recently came from an Iranian port and suggested that they were bound for the Houthis.

US designates two Houthi military leaders

May 20: The US Treasury Department imposed new sanctions on two Houthis leaders.

Muhammad Abd Al-Karim al-Ghamari, head of the General Staff of the Houthi armed forces and the most senior commander within the Houthi military leadership structure, was sanctioned for his role overseeing the Houthi military offensive in Marib governorate. The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) cited Executive Order 13611 as the legal basis for the designation, which is intended to sanction persons threatening the peace, security, or stability of Yemen. OFAC also designated Yusuf al-Madani, commander of the Fifth Military Region in western Yemen, pursuant to Executive Order 13224, a counterterrorism authority. The bulletin announcing the sanctions said that Al-Madani "poses a significant risk of committing acts of terrorism that threaten the security of US nationals or the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the US." Al-Madani is related to the ruling Houthi family by marriage to one of the daughters of the founder of the Houthi movement, Hussein Badreddine al-Houthi. Al-Madani was appointed commander of the Fifth Military Region in April 2017, when it was becoming clear that the Saudi-led coalition was preparing for an offensive to take the Houthi-controlled port city of Hudaydah.

US envoy to Iran meets Yemen FM

May 28: US special envoy to Iran Rob Malley met with Ahmed bin Mubarak, the foreign minister of Yemen's internationally recognized government. In the last week of May, US special envoy to Yemen, Tim Lenderking, met with officials in Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia to push Yemen's warring parties and their regional backers toward a ceasefire and political negotiations to end the war. Lenderking and a US congressional delegation wrapped up similar meetings in the Gulf and Jordan earlier in May. It was Lenderking's sixth visit to the region since his appointment as special envoy to Yemen was announced in February.

Casey Coombs is an independent journalist focused on Yemen and a researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. He tweets @Macoombs

STATE OF THE WAR

In Marib

The fighting in Marib slowed in May, as pro-government and Houthi movement forces focused mostly on solidifying positions currently under their control. The majority of the fighting was centered on the areas of Al-Tala'ah Al-Hamraa, Al-Zour, and Jabal Al-Balaq, and Al-Mashjah and Al-Kassarrah frontlines, northwest of Ma'rib city. On May 26, clashes between Houthi and government forces were reported for the first time in weeks in Kherfan front, southern Al-Abdiyah district, near the border with Al-Bayda governorate.

Saudi-led coalition forces conducted frequent airstrikes along the frontlines to deter advances by Houthi forces. Houthi forces launched several drones and missiles targeting Marib city. On April 28, a ballistic missile fell on the Sahn al-Jin military base in Marib city, killing Brigadier-General Abdulghani Salman, the director of the government's Officers' Affairs Department, along with three other government soldiers. Several Houthi missiles were also fired toward the city on May 5, the same day Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek arrived for a visit to Marib city. On May 10, seven civilians were injured by shrapnel from a Houthi ballistic missile that landed in a residential area of Marib city.

The slowdown in the fight for Marib is mostly attributable to the high number of casualties suffered by both sides in the months-long battle thus far. Casualties have been particularly high on the Houthi side, according to estimates from pro-Houthi media reports. The group arranged funeral processions for over 500 fighters during the month of Ramadan. At least three prominent AA commanders were killed in fighting in Al-Mashjah and Al-Kassarrah fronts, northwest of Marib. Despite the relative decrease in the intensity of the fighting, casualty figures reported by international and regional media outlets during the month of May remained high.

Two high-ranking government officials, speaking to the Sana'a Center on condition of anonymity, confirmed that two separate deals were finalized in May to purchase weapons intended for fronts in Marib. One deal was made to purchase weapons from local Yemeni arms dealers. Another deal was struck with an unnamed country in Eastern Europe for a package worth between US\$50-70 million, which includes infrared-guided missiles.

In Taiz

In Taiz, the majority of the fighting was focused in Hayfan and Maqbanah districts, with smaller bouts of violence occurring within Taiz city itself.

In Maqbanah district, in western Taiz, clashes focused on the areas of Al-Quhayfa Al-Ulya in Al-Tabbah Al-Sawda, Al-Tabbah Al-Ghabra, Jabal Al-Sen, and Al-Qa'shah village, southeastern Maqbanah, as well as Al-Quhayfa Al-Sufla area, eastern Maqbanah. Pro-government and Houthi forces both sent reinforcements to frontlines in Maqbanah throughout the month. No new advances were made by either side. In Hayfan district, clashes were focused on Al-'Abous frontline in the south of the district.

In the second half of May, fighting broke out in northern Taiz city near the Air Defense headquarters, in northern Taiz city. Houthi forces were able to seize several sites on May 13 before pro-government forces, backed by reinforcements, recaptured the areas, according to a government military source. Clashes were also reported on frontlines in western Taiz city after a long period of relative calm. The renewed fighting came as Houthi forces, seeking to take advantage of the limited number of GoY forces in the area, attempted advances in several locations. Fighting also occurred in the last week of the month in Al-Salou district, southeastern Taiz, and Salah district, eastern Taiz city.

Meanwhile, several moves during the month by the pro-Islah Taiz Military Axis risk increasing tension among pro-government forces, weakening unity on the pro-government side and presenting an opportunity for Houthi forces to advance. On May 20, the command of the 35th Armored Brigade announced several appointments, including Amin al-Burihi as commander of Al-Salou front, Rashad al-Aouni to the military staff of Al-Salou front, and Ahmed al-Qadasi as commander of Al-Kadahah front. The 35th Armored Brigade had been perceived as close to the Socialist and Nasserist parties and for years enjoyed Emirati support as a counterweight to the Islah party in Taiz. In 2020, the pro-Islah Taiz Military Axis moved against the brigade, pushing it out of Taiz city and placing sympathetic commanders within its ranks. A pro-Islah commander, General Abdul Rahman al-Shamsani, was appointed to head the 35th Armored Brigade following the assassination of the brigade's previous commander, Adnan al-Hammadi, in December 2019.

On May 25, new checkpoints, manned by the 3rd Support Brigade (part of the Taiz Military Axis), were established and directed to control entry points to Souq al-Ahad, northern Al-Ma'afer district, according to a memorandum sent by the security director of Al-Ma'afer district to the commander of the 3rd Support Brigade. The order was carried out without reference to the Ministry of Defense and outside the framework of GoY forces. In response, MP Ali bin Masaad al-Lahbi sent a letter to the speaker of the GoY parliament on May 30 calling on the Ministry of Defense to address Islah's establishment of brigades outside GoY control. The Taiz Military Axis previously established a military camp for the 4th Support Brigade in the Al-Hujariah area in August 2020, during which time the 4th Support Brigade was able to tighten its influence over areas previously controlled by the 35th Armored Brigade. The 3rd Support Brigade was established by Islah in Al-Ma'afer district in 2020 and was later redeployed to Tur al-Baha in Lahj governorate.

In Aden

Deteriorating conditions in Aden governorate and increased security incidents during the month of May have piled additional public pressure on both the government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in the interim capital.

On May 2, the secretary-general of the local council in Al-Mahfad district, Abyan, Mohammed Salem Al-Kazami, was killed near his home in Al-Burayqah district, western Aden, by unknown gunmen. The next week, Abdullah Abu Arab, the deputy commander of the STC Security Belt forces, survived an assassination on the Al-Arish road in Khor Maksar district on May 8.

Following the Eid holiday, new security checkpoints were erected by STC security forces outside Aden in Al-Burayqah, preventing Yemenis from northern governorates from entering the city. Citizens were also blocked from entering Aden at Al-Rabat checkpoint, at the northern entrance to the city.

Uptick in AQAP Activity in Abyan

The southern governorate of Abyan has witnessed a resurgence in suspected activity by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) since March, and several violent incidents linked to the group were reported in May.

At the end of April, a man was killed when his home was raided by government Special Forces during an anti-AQAP security operation in Al-Kadaw village, eastern Al-Wadee' district, eastern Abyan governorate. The raid came two days after suspected AQAP gunmen killed an STC Security Belt fighter in Jabal Lasba in Al-Wadee', approximately 15 km west of Al-Kadaw village. On May 5, the head of security in Mudiya district, eastern Abyan, Lieutenant-Colonel Nadhem Fadhl Al-Maysari, was assassinated by gunmen believed to be affiliated with AQAP in Thaw'ah area, northern Mudiya, according to security sources. On May 17, militants believed to be affiliated with AQAP threw a grenade at the gate of the STC Security Belt forces headquarters in central Lawdar district, eastern Abyan, according to an STC security source.

STC-aligned Security Belt forces conducted two operations against AQAP militants on May 19. The first, an ambush in Al-Mahfad district, eastern Abyan, killed an AQAP commander, Saleh Ahmed Al-Samil, and his escort, Nasser Saeed Karra, according to STC security sources. Al-Samil was allegedly the AQAP emir in Al-Mahfad district. On the same day, an alleged AQAP financial official, Fadl Mohammed Al-Shakali Al-Kazami, was wounded in an ambush by STC forces in Wadi Sabab area, between Al-Mahfad and Ahwar districts. STC security sources said the two ambush operations came in retaliation for earlier AQAP attacks on STC checkpoints. AQAP released a video of an attack on May 18 against an STC checkpoint in Dahuma area, southwestern Ahwar district, and a May 19 attack against Imridah checkpoint, Al-Wadi' district, central Abyan. The attacks killed 13 soldiers and injured three others, according to STC security sources.

On May 25, gunmen believed to be affiliated with AQAP blew up a building located near the deserted Al-Tunukh security checkpoint in Al-Khadeera area, northwestern Al-Wadee' district, eastern Abyan governorate, according to government security sources. Al-Tunukh checkpoint was previously manned by STC-affiliated Security Belt forces before they abandoned it as part of their withdrawal from Khanfir district in August 2019 during battles with government troops. Days later, residents in Lawdar district, northeastern Abyan, reported an increase in US surveillance drone activity. On May 30, a soldier in STC Security Belt forces survived an attempted assassination by a gunman believed to be affiliated with AQAP, near his house in southern Lawdar district, northeastern Abyan governorate, according to STC security sources.

Military Developments in Brief:

- Clashes between Houthi forces and the Saudi-led coalition-backed Joint Forces were reported in the southern Hudaydah districts of Al-Durayhimi, Al-Tuhayta, and Hays, as well as Hudaydah city during the month of May. However, the intensity of fighting in the governorate has experienced a relative lull since April.
- Frontlines in Jawf had been quiet for most of April, but on May 4, Houthi forces conducted what government military sources described as the most intense attack on government forces in Al-Jadafer front, eastern Al-Hazm district, southwestern Jawf, in terms of the number of fighters and clashes, since fighting in the area began.
- In Lahj, government-affiliated security forces opened fire on May 15 near a residential area in central Al-Musaymir district while storming the house of Khaldoun Badi al-Hoshabi, a journalist and official spokesman for the STC's 10th Saiqah Brigade. Local sources and eyewitnesses said the security forces terrified citizens and caused severe damage to the journalist's house and several neighboring homes before withdrawing after two hours.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

By The Sana'a Center Economic Unit

No Fuel Imports Via Hudaydah

During May no fuel arrived at Hudaydah port, as the standoff between the Houthis and the internationally recognized Yemeni government continued for the fifth consecutive month. Increased volumes of fuel arrived via Aden and Mukalla ports, in addition to fuel Saudi Arabia sent to Aden as part of a US\$422 million fuel grant announced at the end of March. On May 31, the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the internationally recognized Yemeni government, Ahmed bin Mubarak, stated that the government had ‘allowed a number of oil derivatives vessels to Hudaydah to alleviate the current humanitarian situation.’ It was unclear whether bin Mubarak was referring to previous months or alluding to a change in the current status quo, but imagery on MarineTraffic on June 1 showed no fuel vessels either at berth or heading in the direction of Hudaydah port.

Production of LPG Set to Increase

On May 30, representatives from SAFER Exploration & Production Operations Company (SEPOC), more commonly known as Safer, met with Yemen Gas Company (YGC) officials. Among different topics discussed included a proposed increase in liquified petroleum gas (LPG) production. Current daily production rates at the Safer facility in Marib are an estimated 21,000 barrels per day, which equates to roughly 75 LPG trucks, with each truck carrying a total of 2,200 gas cylinders on board for a combined total of 165,000 cylinders.

Saudi Arabia Delivers Fuel to Aden for Electricity Power Generation

During the month of May, Saudi Arabia delivered the first shipment of fuel to Aden for electricity power generation, per the \$422 million fuel grant pledged on March 30, 2021. A further two shipments arrived during the month, bringing the combined estimated total for all three shipments to just under 150,000 metric tons (MT). In April 2021, the Saudi Press Agency reported that Saudi Arabia plans to deliver a total of 1,260,850 metric tons (MT) via the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY) to power “more than 80 power stations” located in areas nominally under the government’s control.

Yemeni Rial Depreciates in Non-Houthi Areas

The value of the Yemeni rial (YR) in areas outside Houthi control further depreciated during May. At the beginning of the month the value of the Yemeni rial stood at YR893 per \$US1; by May 26, the value depreciated to YR933 per US\$1. One of the main reasons for the depreciation was, as expected, related to the recurrent trend of local traders and retailers exchanging a higher volume of Yemeni rials following Ramadan and the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

Another key contributor concerned the misleading reports and speculation surrounding the arrival of new Yemeni rial banknotes to Mukalla. An estimated total of 180 billion Yemeni rial banknotes did in fact arrive to Mukalla on May 12, but contrary to some reports the money is currently being held at the local Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) branch in Mukalla and has yet to be fed into the market and added to the total currency supply. The speculation surrounding the arrival of more Yemeni rial banknotes almost certainly contributed to the depreciation of the value of the Yemeni rial in non-Houthi areas, owing to decreased trust and confidence as well as concerns related to inflation stemming from the expansion in the money supply.

Houthis Normalize Parallel Market Fuel Price

During May the ‘official’ price of fuel in Houthi-controlled territories was set at a rate of YR11,000 per 20 liters. Although there was no formal announcement from the Houthi-run Yemen Petroleum Company (YPC) regarding the notable rise in the official price of fuel from YR5,900 Yemeni rials per 20 liters, the fact that certain YPC-run stations and private fuel stations that are agents of YPC were selling fuel at the YR11,000 rate indicates that YPC sanctioned the new ‘official price.’ YPC is technically the sole authorized distributor of fuel in Houthi-controlled territories and plays a key coordinating the amount of fuel sold at YPC-run stations, and the amount diverted and sold on the parallel market.

The new YR11,000 rate found at a limited number of fuel stations in Sana’a represents a formalization of trade activity that began on April 20 when the Houthi-run YPC reopened a number of YPC fuel stations and sold fuel at the new ‘official’ rate. The move brings the ‘official’ price near to the average rate that fuel was trading for on the parallel market between January and March 2021. After the formalization of the new ‘official’ rate, the price of fuel on the parallel market also increased and currently ranges between YR14,000-16,000 per 20 liters in Sana’a. It is important to note that there are only a limited number of fuel stations selling fuel at the new ‘official’ rate where consumers have to queue for much longer compared to other stations selling fuel at the parallel market price.



UN envoy Martin Griffiths leaves after a news conference on Yemen talks at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland September 8, 2018. REUTERS/Denis Balibouse

Features

In Search of a Peacemaker Who Can Deliver

In May the United Nations announced that Martin Griffiths, the UN's special envoy to Yemen, would be stepping down to take a new position as under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs. His successor, unnamed as of this writing, will be the fourth person to hold the position since Houthi forces entered Sana'a in September 2014. To mark this transition, the Sana'a Center asked five experts to reflect on Griffiths' time leading the UN's peace mediation efforts in Yemen and look ahead to the challenges awaiting the new special envoy.

This feature section of The Yemen Review is part of a series of publications by the Sana'a Center examining the roles of state and non-state foreign actors in Yemen.

SPECIAL ENVOY GRIFFITHS: A RETROSPECTIVE

By Benjamin Villanti

Martin Griffiths will soon end his tenure as the UN special envoy to Yemen to become UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs. The UN made the announcement last month, following his May 12 briefing to the UN Security Council. During more than three years as special envoy, Griffiths presided over UN mediation efforts and intensified UN engagement in Yemen; however, as he is set to depart, a deal remains elusive.

When Griffiths became the UN envoy in March 2018, UN efforts to negotiate an end to the war had been at a standstill for over a year-and-a-half following the breakdown of peace talks in Kuwait in 2016. Upon starting the post, Griffiths considered whether a new Security Council resolution in place of resolution 2216 would be helpful. Resolution 2216, adopted at the outset of the military intervention by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, has been often criticized as obstructing mediation efforts; the resolution makes a number of demands on the Houthi movement, including that they withdraw from seized territory and handover arms in what would amount to surrender. After completing one round of regional consultations in April 2018, Griffiths determined that obtaining a new resolution would create more trouble than it was worth.

Griffiths' initial priority was developing a framework for negotiations. This was largely in line with what was discussed at the Kuwait peace talks: a Houthi withdrawal and disarmament in exchange for a role in Yemen's political future. Griffiths' key challenge was figuring out how to sequence the security and political steps, which had upended the Kuwait talks, along with questions about the appropriate level of Houthi representation and how to include the voices of Yemen's many other factions and stakeholders.

Hudaydah

Within months, however, Griffiths became focused on the fighting around the critical port city of Hudaydah. By early June 2018, Emirati-led forces had advanced to the city's outskirts. If the Houthis lost Hudaydah it would be a major blow to the group. Hudaydah was the Houthis only outlet to the sea and the group benefited from revenues earned by controlling Yemen's largest port.

The UN and NGO community warned about the consequences of an urban battle for control of the city of roughly 600,000. Not only would fighting cause civilian casualties, but it would also likely damage Hudaydah port and lead to a prolonged closure. This, UN officials and the NGOs argued, would have massive ripple effects for much of Yemen's population, which depended on imports of food, medicine and other goods entering Yemen through the port, exacerbating what was already described as the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Under strong international pressure, the UAE initially paused the attack, announcing it would give Griffiths more time to work out a negotiated Houthi withdrawal from the city.

Still, the humanitarian situation worsened. In September 2018, OCHA head Mark Lowcock, whom Griffiths will replace, began warning that a “great big famine” may engulf the country. This occurred just as Saudi Arabia was coming under more scrutiny in western media for its conduct during the war, following the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October. By the end of the month, the US had lost patience with the worsening situation. On October 30, in separate statements, both US Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for a ceasefire and the resumption of peace talks in the next month.

Five weeks later, in December, Griffiths oversaw eight days of negotiations in Sweden. (To make sure the talks would actually happen, Griffiths flew with the Houthi delegation to Sweden, avoiding a repeat of attempted consultations in Geneva three months earlier in which the Houthis never left Sana’a.) The December negotiations produced the Stockholm Agreement, which included a deal to end the fighting in Hudaydah, a statement of understanding to de-escalate the situation in Taiz, and the creation of a prisoner exchange mechanism to carry out a prisoner swap.

Much of the Stockholm Agreement would never be implemented. But the deal did achieve the international community’s objective of stopping a battle for Hudaydah. A small UN observer mission, the UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement, was deployed, and its presence likely helped to deter future battles for the city. The agreement also seemed to increase the Security Council’s consideration of Yemen, as it began holding monthly meetings with Griffiths. One of the unattended consequences of the Stockholm Agreement was that while it neutralized the threat to Hudaydah, it eventually allowed the Houthis to refocus their attention on other frontlines, including Marib.

Post-Stockholm Agreement

Griffiths spent much of 2019 working to implement aspects of the Hudaydah agreement, particularly the redeployment of forces from the port and city. But this became bogged down by the lack of details and definitions in the original agreement. Neither side could agree on what constituted “local security forces,” who were to replace Houthi and government-affiliated forces.

Peace talks, which were planned to start again at the end of January 2019, never resumed. The Yemeni government said it would not return to talks until the Hudaydah agreement was implemented.

Under pressure from Security Council members to demonstrate progress, the UN prematurely announced in May that the Houthis had withdrawn from Hudaydah port. This was not accurate. The coast guard force that took over security at the port was commanded by Houthi figures. The controversy strained relations between Griffiths and the Yemeni government, which called for his replacement.

Later that summer, in August 2019, fighting broke out between government forces and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC). The crisis forced the international community to realize that it could no longer postpone peace talks on a comprehensive solution to the conflict, while it waited for the Hudaydah agreement’s implementation. By then, Griffiths had also determined that resolving the issue of local security forces in Hudaydah was unlikely to happen outside of a broader political process that would address future power sharing arrangements.

A promising period of de-escalation began that fall as the Houthis and Saudi Arabia entered talks following the Houthi-claimed drone attack on the Abqaiq oil processing facility deep in Saudi territory. Saudi Arabia also brokered the Riyadh Agreement between the government and the STC, and the kingdom assumed responsibility for its implementation. The reduction in violence, however, was temporary. In early 2020, the Houthis launched an offensive on the government stronghold of Marib.

Joint Declaration

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe in March 2020, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a worldwide ceasefire to combat the pandemic. In Yemen, Griffiths used the Secretary General's call to discuss a "joint declaration" for a nationwide ceasefire, a series of economic and humanitarian measures, and the resumption of peace talks.

On 8 April, Saudi Arabia announced a unilateral ceasefire because of the threat of COVID-19. But the prospects of an agreement "in the immediate future", as Griffiths told the Security Council at an April 16, 2020 briefing, soon turned into months of negotiations. The Houthi offensive continued in Marib, reaching the outskirts of Marib City early in 2021. Griffiths repeatedly warned that the offensive threatens to undermine a future peace process. The UN Security Council repeatedly called on the campaign to stop and for all parties to engage with the UN Envoy.

Since February 2021, Griffiths and newly appointed US Special Envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking have worked together in an attempt to broker an agreement around the Joint Declaration's four key elements: a ceasefire, the opening of Sana'a airport, the lifting of restrictions on imports into Hudaydah and the resumption of peace talks. Despite this latest push for a deal, there is little indication a diplomatic breakthrough is imminent as Griffiths prepares to depart.

During his tenure, Griffiths was most effective when he was able to leverage US pressure on the Saudi-led coalition. In 2018, US pressure on Saudi Arabia was key to getting the Yemeni government to Sweden and then to accept the Stockholm Agreement. Similarly, US support in 2021 has been key to mobilizing international support for Griffiths' latest cease-fire initiative. However, Griffiths has lacked a partner on the other side, a country that possessed leverage with the Houthis and was willing to use it. One potentially hopeful sign, which the next special envoy may be able to build upon, was Griffiths' February 2021 visit to Iran.

But Griffiths could only mediate. He could not create peace when one or both of the parties themselves did not want it. Over the past three years, he has often recalled the role of a mediator. "I seek common grounds for agreements," Griffiths told the UN Security Council in February 2021. "That is my job. With the support of the international community, we persuade, we facilitate, we encourage dialogue and we try to get past the events of the war." He continued: "[There is] nothing anybody can do unfortunately to force the warring parties into peace unless they choose to put down the guns and talk to each other. And this is their responsibility."

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THE UN'S MESSENGER

By Abdulghani Al-Iryani

To evaluate Martin Griffiths performance as a mediator and special envoy is a tricky task. UN special envoys are not ordinary mediators. They bring with them the full diplomatic weight of the international community as well as an array of carrots and sticks. They can commend good behavior, suggest rewards – funding for humanitarian response and early recovery projects – and extend technical support. Above all, they can recommend international recognition for parties to the conflict.

Special envoys can also point out bad behavior, reveal misdeeds, uncover criminal acts and recommend sanctions. Perhaps most importantly, they also shape the international community's perception of the warring parties. While peace cannot be achieved until the parties are ready for it, a skilled UN envoy can create the conditions for peace by using these various tools to change the calculus of the warring parties so that peace becomes more profitable than war.

When Martin Griffiths was appointed in February 2018, advisors warned him that there were a number of obstacles to peace in Yemen. (Full disclosure: I was one of those advisors.) The war economy was one such obstacle. A large part of this war profiteering was the markup on petroleum products. One proposal suggested that the UN support the Yemen Petroleum Corporation in distributing petroleum products at cost, eliminating the markups that went to the pockets of warlords and warring parties. Griffiths ignored the proposal, markups proliferated, and the war continued.

Another obstacle was the vague objectives of the Saudi-led coalition, including its intention to establish a gateway to the Indian Ocean through eastern Yemen. Instead of dealing with this head-on and examining other alternatives, such as an international treaty among concerned countries that would provide access without compromising Yemeni territorial integrity, the special envoy took no action. A senior Saudi official responsible for the Yemen file recently told a Yemeni political activist “If we do not achieve our objectives, we intend to keep the situation in Yemen as it is.”

A third obstacle was the insufficient representation of various Yemeni stakeholders in the UN's proposed peace negotiations. The UN reduced the multi-layered Yemen conflict to the two most visible actors: the internationally recognized government and Ansar Allah (the armed Houthi movement). The Special Envoy did little to address the situation. Even after the Southern Transitional Council used military force to take control of Aden, ensuring it a seat at the negotiating table, Griffiths' framework didn't change. There was no “big tent” that would have allowed all key stakeholders a voice in the peace process from the start of negotiations. By not doing this, Griffiths provided incentives for some groups to obstruct the commencement of serious peace negotiations.

The “Joint Declaration Framework” that Griffiths is proposing to halt the fighting will not make peace. It does not address the need for a more comprehensive representation. It does not recognize that the Yemeni state has fallen apart, and that a new model of collective leadership has become a vital necessity. It does not recognize that an agreement on the outline of a scheme for power and wealth sharing that reflects the new facts on the ground is a prerequisite to a cessation of hostilities, so as to prevent

Yemen from slipping into a Somalia-like reality. Nor does it recognize that at this stage of state disintegration the international community needs to start building peace from the bottom up, stabilizing governorates and empowering them to anchor stability even when turmoil engulfs national-level politics.

The Joint Declaration is not designed with a scheme of balances among warring parties, and among the demographic components of Yemen to produce the minimum level of stability required to restore the Yemeni state, or even to keep the peace for a meaningful length of time.

The list of Griffiths' flaws and shortcomings is long, but did he fail? The answer is: it depends.

One of the privileges of such a senior international post is that the holder has some latitude in defining his or her mission, and Griffiths was smart enough to define his mission in Yemen as one "to end the war, not to make peace." Griffiths recognized that making peace requires a deep understanding of the politics and history of Yemen. It also requires an appreciation of the regional political dynamics that have had a tremendous influence on the conflict. That is a tall order for an outsider, so early on Griffiths told staff that he did "not want to be confused by the details."

According to Griffiths' definition of his mission, he did not fail by much. A nationwide cessation of hostilities is almost at hand.

However, the Joint Declaration Framework is a sure formula for a return of hostilities, probably in line with what the Saudi official meant by "keeping the situation as it is."

During Martin Griffiths' tenure, Yemen inched further towards collapse. Many opportunities to reverse or stop that were missed. However, we cannot blame him. That was not his responsibility. As per his definition, he was not a peacemaker, he was only the messenger.

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AN OPPORTUNITY TO REVISIT THE UN APPROACH IN YEMEN

By Nadwa Dawsari

Last month, the UN announced that its special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, had been selected as the international body's new humanitarian chief. It is unclear when a new envoy will be appointed to replace Griffiths, but whomever that will be, he or she must not pick up where the current envoy left off. Instead, this is an opportunity to revisit the UN-led approach to mediating the Yemen conflict. The UN needs to learn from its past mistakes, realistically assess its capacity to mitigate the conflict, and plan its next steps accordingly.

Since his appointment in February 2018, Griffiths has been unable to make any notable progress. It did not help that he inherited a rigid UN framework

centered around power-sharing as a prescription to end the conflict in the country. By allowing the Houthis and the Yemeni government to monopolize the negotiations, UN mediation has incentivized violence and reinforced the power dynamics that led to the war. This elite-centric approach has overlooked other key local actors who have power and legitimacy as well as unaddressed grievances. Griffiths overestimated his ability to influence political parties and was so eager for a quick victory that he underestimated the complexity of the conflict.

Almost immediately after taking the job in early 2018, Griffiths launched a broad diplomatic campaign, engaging powers including the US and UK to pressure the Saudi-led coalition and the Yemeni government to end their offensive to retake the key seaport of Hudaydah from the Houthis. This pressure resulted in the Stockholm Agreement, which ultimately stopped the Hudaydah offensive in December 2018, but the agreement was far from a success.

Griffiths managed to gather enough international support to force the coalition and Yemeni government to halt their military operations, but he did not exercise the same pressure on the Houthis. As a result, the Houthis took advantage of the situation and repositioned their forces and made significant military gains by capturing Al-Jawf governorate, Nehm, and strategic areas in Al-Baydha and east of Marib province. The Houthis are now threatening the city of Marib, home to three million Yemenis including over 1 million IDPs and the last stronghold of the Yemeni government.

A new UN envoy should be more realistic. Putting pressure on one party while failing to successfully exercise the same pressure on the other will inadvertently tip the scale in favor of the party that refuses to cooperate. The Houthis have demonstrated time and again that they are unwilling to de-escalate or accept a political solution with other parties.

Even if the current international pressure manages to achieve a political settlement between Hadi's government and the Houthis, it will likely backfire. It would legitimize the Houthis military gains with political recognition, setting a precedent for incentivizing violence. Such a two-party deal would also sideline key political

and armed actors, reinforce elite power dynamics, and exacerbate long-standing grievances. Having the upper hand militarily, Houthis will most likely continue their military offensive to capture Marib. The result will be intensified internal conflict, the spread of violence, and a safe haven for extremist groups. Rather than trying to impose a hasty top-down solution, a more realistic approach would be to focus on mitigating the impact of the war on Yemenis and increase demand for peace by widening the representation in the negotiations.

The UN envoy can and should come up with a solid mechanism to engage other Yemeni actors directly or indirectly. For example, additional stakeholders such as the Southern Transition Council, the political wing of Tariq Saleh's National Resistance Forces, and the Tehama Council can be included as part of the Yemeni government delegation. Others, such as civil society leaders and tribes, can be engaged through Track II negotiations but the envoy needs to ensure Track II discussions feed into and inform Track I, which has not previously been the case.

Meanwhile, negotiations can focus on opening roads and airports as well as easing entry of humanitarian aid and access to food and goods. The new envoy should take advantage of the international commitment to end the war in Yemen and bring in key international players to help. For example, the envoy can ask the European Union, which is largely perceived to be a neutral player in Yemen, to lead negotiations on economic issues such as salary payment or engaging the private sector in the negotiations.

Business as usual for the UN in Yemen will not result in a change in the status quo. It will only heighten prospects of a Houthi takeover in Marib which, in turn, will prolong the war and increase the risk of long-term fragmentation. A collapsed Yemen will pose a security threat that will spillover throughout the region.

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THE IRAN DILEMMA OF THE NEXT UN ENVOY

By Thomas Juneau

The next UN special envoy in Yemen will face an extraordinarily difficult task given the multiple and complex obstacles that the peace process in the country faces. One of those challenges is the role of Iran.

The Islamic Republic is one of the few winners of the devastating war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia intervened in 2015 at the head of a coalition of 10 countries partly with the stated objective of rolling back Iran's influence on the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, but the war has had precisely the opposite effect. Indeed, in barely more than six years, Iran has gone from having limited ties to the Houthi movement to an entrenched position in northwest Yemen. In 2014, Iran only provided limited amounts of small weapons and ammunition to the Houthis; by now, this support has significantly increased in both quantitative (more small weapons) and qualitative (more advanced kit too, such as parts for drones and missiles) terms.

This creates a dilemma for the UN. On the one hand, Iran has emerged as an indispensable power broker in Yemen. In theory at least, no peace process can be viable if it excludes key players. This is, presumably, why the outgoing envoy, Martin Griffiths, traveled to Iran in February for the first meetings that his office has officially held with the Islamic Republic.

This reality raises the question of Tehran's views on the peace process. It is not opposed – in theory. But it is, first, willing to be patient: It assesses, correctly, that the Houthis are winning the war. As such, any stalling of the fledgling peace process further bleeds its Saudi rival and allows its Houthi partners to continue expanding and consolidating the territory under their control. Second, Iran will only support a peace process if it entrenches Houthi influence in any post-war settlement. Any effort that calls, in particular, for the Houthis to unilaterally disarm – as UN Security Council Resolution 2216 does – is a non-starter from Iran's perspective. And, as the past two decades have clearly demonstrated, the Islamic Republic is highly skilled at spoiling regional political developments that it believes fail to sufficiently take into consideration its interests.

This puts the next UN envoy into a delicate position. On the one hand, an emboldened Islamic Republic has managed, as the result of a fairly limited material investment, to emerge as an indispensable player in Yemen. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, backed by the US, will undeniably work hard to deny Iran space at the table of the peace process. Concretely, this means that Tehran and the Houthis will continue to oppose a peace process they view as a US-backed, Saudi-led effort to marginalize them and deny them the space they believe they have earned. This will only prolong what is already a long and devastating war.

There is another layer of complication: The Houthis are by no means Iranian proxies. Even though they benefit from growing Iranian support, they are largely autonomous and certainly do not take orders from their Iranian partner. Moreover, Iran and the

Houthis largely agree on key strategic issues. There is, as such, no serious prospect of driving a wedge between them. Engaging Iran in the peace process, in other words, is unlikely to be a viable channel to pressure the Houthis to make concessions.

The bottom line is that the next envoy will have to strike a difficult balance: Failing to involve Iran in the peace process will provoke Iranian spoiling, but Saudi Arabia and the US – whose cooperation the envoy will need – will continue to resist Iran's involvement. Furthermore, by trying to bring Iran into the equation, the envoy would expose himself or herself to criticism that he or she is facilitating the entrenchment of Iranian support for what is an increasingly repressive and brutal Houthi rule in the parts of Yemen they control.

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20 RULES TO LIVE BY FOR THE NEW SPECIAL ENVOY TO YEMEN

By Farea al-Muslimi

1. Don't take the job. Seriously, don't. But if you must, then apologize in advance to your kids and partner.
2. Condition accepting the post on a new UN Security Council Resolution that replaces 2216. Without it, you're just wasting everyone's time.
3. Be patient. Things in Yemen take time, a lot of time. Trying to do too much too quickly is how your predecessors made mistakes (See: Jamal Benomar's rush toward federalism and Martin Griffith's rush and over ambitiousness with the Stockholm Agreement of 2018).
4. Don't try to reinvent the wheel. Instead, study the efforts of previous envoys and build on what is already in place. And always have Plan 'B' & 'C' ready, because Plan 'A' probably isn't going to work.
5. The Golden Rule regarding Yemen is that the devil, and his entire tribe, are in the details (See: the Riyadh Agreement (2019), the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (2014), and the economic and security aspects of the Stockholm Agreement (2018)).
6. If you do manage to get an offer on the table, take it. There is no "better deal" tomorrow. Start small and build big.
7. "There is no military solution to the war in Yemen." We all know that, and it's true. But neither is there a "UN solution to the war in Yemen." You'll need help, a lot of it.
8. Make women your allies. Yemeni women have released more prisoners than all the UN envoys combined. You're going to need their help, assistance and advice.
9. Spend time in Diwans (Qat gatherings). Being around Qat Chews will help you understand how Yemen works.
10. Listen to your Yemeni advisors. They have the local historical context to know what has and has not worked in the past, and why. They also crucially understand the unwritten social and political rules in Yemen. And equally important, regarding the international experts you surround yourself with, make them people who are willing to tell you: "You're wrong."
11. Don't fight with other diplomats for space, control or time. It's childish and will distract you from more important work. On the contrary, cooperation and coordination with them will increase your leverage.
12. Don't accept gifts or favors from regional powers.

13. Don't ignore the southern issue or the economic file. Every one of your predecessors did and all of them failed.
14. Stay out of humanitarian issues. That's not your lane. They'll suck up your energy, derail your plans and, even worse, humanitarian issues will become hostage to the political track (See: Safer FSO and Sana'a airport).
15. Only promise what you can deliver. Promises can't be "undone" in Yemen. If you say something and you don't follow, trust will be irreparably broken.
16. Threats won't work. Don't even try them. Everyone else has guns, you don't.
17. Stick to a Yemeni calendar. Thursdays and the month of Ramadan are not good times to get things accomplished in Yemen. Understand that there are things you can change and things you can't. Also, know which is which.
18. As a starting point for your research, read Steve Caton's "Peaks of Yemen, I Summon" and Paul Dresch's "A History of Modern Yemen". And, of course, everything the Sana'a Center publishes.
19. Know that you will be accused, bullied, vilified and attacked by the parties to the conflict and everyone else in Yemen and the region. This is the most thankless job. Make sure you have the stomach for it. Speak clearly, regularly and frankly. Do not take bullshit. This is more important than you might actually think. Being "nice", "neutral" and "schmoozy" is neither useful nor welcomed when it comes to Yemen. Also know that you'll probably fail, but don't let that stop you from trying new things. You have to hope that the future can be brighter even when everyone else says it will only get darker. As the outgoing special envoy once told me: "Hope is the only currency a mediator has."
20. Finally, in the spirit of George Orwell's rules on writing: "Break any of these rules sooner than [do] anything outright barbarous." But the more you break, the harder your task.

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Screen grab of Yemen Media Call with Abdullah al-Alimi and Maged al-Madhaji Sana'a Center Executive Director Maged Al-Madhaji (L) conducts a video-conference interview with Dr. Abdullah al-Alimi, the chief of staff for Yemeni president President Abdo Rabbu Mansour, on May 7, 2021.

‘HADI IS IN THE HEARTS OF THE YEMENI PEOPLE AND HE’S ALWAYS BEEN THERE’

– A Q&A with Abdullah al-Alimi

On May 7, 2021, the Sana’a Center held a media briefing with President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi’s chief of staff, Dr. Abdullah al-Alimi. The session was facilitated by Sana’a Center Executive Director Maged Al-Madhaji, who, along with local and international journalists, posed questions to Al-Alimi.

[Editor’s note: This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.]

Sana’a Center: Dr. Al-Alimi has been one of the most important individuals in Yemen over the past six or seven years. He is chief of staff to President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi. He is a prominent politician. He is said to be the main decision-maker behind President Hadi as well as “the black box” of the Yemeni government.

Abdullah al-Alimi: We are in very serious discussions on all of the different political issues and on different political levels to try to deal with the situation. Over the past two or three days, I’ve met twice with Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy, who is doing everything he can. I’ve also met with [US Envoy to Yemen] Mr. Tim Lenderking, whose appointment was a very important addition to the situation in Yemen. I found him to be very serious, dynamic and understanding of the situation in Yemen. He’s also doing everything he can to resolve the situation.

During these two meetings that we have had with the special envoys, we [the internationally recognized government] announced that we are fully prepared to go into direct talks with the Houthis again in order to put several points on the negotiating table: achieving a cease-fire; allowing humanitarian access; and also resuming political negotiations.

Sana'a Center: Are you saying that you offered to start direct negotiations between the government and the Houthis?

Al-Alimi: Yes, we said we are prepared to go into direct talks with the Houthis on these issues. We are prepared for any efforts, any proposals that will help alleviate the humanitarian situation, that will help implement the cease-fire and to help resume the political process and talks.

We understand the humanitarian situation, and the government, despite all of the difficult conditions that it has been [faced with] and despite all of the battles that it is involved in, is still doing everything it can to resolve or alleviate the humanitarian situation. You know the obstacles that stand in the way of the government, the most recent of which was the government having to leave Aden. I don't want to go into too much detail. I think, you know, what has occurred in the south.

President Hadi believes that it was very important for the government to start working from Aden to try to normalize the situation and provide services. The president conducted the first meeting with the government after it was sworn in in December 2020, and he gave the Cabinet a list of priorities for the economic situation, basic service provision and normalizing the security situation in the governorate. Unfortunately, there was an assault on [the Cabinet] by the Southern Transitional Council (STC). We are still in direct contact with our brothers who sponsored the agreement (Saudi Arabia) to resolve this issue and for the Cabinet to return. We still don't know why the STC is attacking this cabinet when its own members are in it.

[Editor's note: Al-Alimi is referring to the storming of Al-Maashiq palace, the seat of the government in the interim capital Aden, by demonstrators on March 16, after which most members of the cabinet, including Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek, decamped to Saudi Arabia.]

This new government requires political support. It also needs urgent economic support while state revenues and revenue collection are reorganized, restructured and stabilized. We have a very active battle in Marib, and we have a very dire security, economic and service provision situation in Aden.

With regard to the military situation in Marib, I wanted to mention an important point: People are worried about what is occurring with the battle of Marib. This is not a battle that we can lose. For Yemenis, Marib is an existential part of their lives — for them, for their children, for their future. It is the final battle between the republic and democracy versus this religious theocracy that the Houthis are trying to install. If Marib falls, millions of people will become IDPs [internally displaced persons] and the military battle will turn from one trying to restore the state into a battle between various armed groups.

The Houthis are collecting much more revenue than the state, but all of the services and roads or infrastructure are being sponsored and paid for by international organizations, and we thank them for their efforts. But we need to ensure that funding for the Yemeni people is not used as funding for the Houthis.

Sana'a Center: Thank you very much, Dr. Abdullah, for this introduction. Let me start with some of the most recent developments of what is occurring in Muscat. Does the government have a representative there participating in the talks in Muscat?

Al-Alimi: We don't have anyone in Muscat. These are indirect talks involving the special envoy, Mr. Griffiths, as well as the US special envoy. And we have meetings here with the special envoys, but the government does not have any presence in the talks.

Sana'a Center: So the government is not involved at all in the talks that are occurring in Muscat?

Al-Alimi: No, no, it's not this way. The special envoys are obviously conducting shuttle diplomacy between the two sides. They are being helped by international efforts, as well as the efforts by our neighboring countries and the sultanate of Oman. We appreciate Oman for these efforts. These are indirect talks and this is not the first time that this has occurred; this has been the case for a long time.

Sana'a Center: What about President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi: Where is he? Why is no one seeing him and how is his health?

Al-Alimi: Hadi is in the hearts of the Yemeni people and he's always been there. He follows up with the performance of the government. He also follows up with the military situation. He is regularly doing his work. Before meeting the special envoy, I met with his excellency the president, and then after my meeting with the special envoy I met with his excellency the president again. His health is good, thankfully, and I think we have to also understand that these are exceptional circumstances. The situation is complicated. There are difficulties, and the president is not in Sana'a or Aden to be seen regularly.

Sana'a Center: One final question, Dr. Abdullah, is something, I think, that we all think about. You manage the office of the presidency and there is a lot of talk about the president's sons (Nasser and Jalal) also having a lot of influence. You also work with businessman Ahmed al-Essi. So how do you manage this situation?

Al-Alimi: The office of the presidency is very important, and it could have around 3,000 employees: 1,500 employees in the office itself and around 2,800 in the secretariat. This would be under normal circumstances. But now we are in a very difficult situation. We are moving between Riyadh and Aden and other areas. We are trying to bring everyone's efforts together. There are some shortcomings or some difficulties, but we try to deal with them.

With regard to the president's sons, let me try to be very honest with you. They do not have any political role. The president's sons do not play any political role. And just one of them has a military rank as the commander of the Presidential Protection Brigades – this is Colonel Nasser Abdo Rabbu Hadi. Because the military forces that were in Aden were part of the Presidential Protection Brigades, Nasser had a very important role in resolving the situation for the Riyadh Agreement. During multiple stages of the talks, he and I were the envoys of the president. But other than that, the president's sons do not have anything to do with politics or administrative issues.

With regards to Sheikh Ahmed (al-Essi), he is the deputy chief of staff to the president's office. The title is an honorary position, and there is nothing that he actually does practically within the office.

AFP: Hello. I have two questions for Dr. Abdullah. The first is about the Islah party. Is it true that this party has control over political and military decision-making in Yemen? With regard to the government returning to Aden, we saw that the government left Aden because of protests over electricity and services. Is there an opportunity for the government to be able to return soon? Thank you very much.

Al-Alimi: Thank you for the question with regard to the party. I have an excellent personal and professional relationship with all of the political parties in Yemen, and we're in touch with them because of my position. But my position is not part of any political quota.

I was never nominated on behalf of Islah for this position. I was the deputy head of the president's office for two or three years, and before that I was also responsible for the CSOs department at the presidential office for two or three years, and this had nothing to do with any political activities. Ever since I've taken this position, I have had no specific relationship with any political party. I'm responsible for getting all of their opinions to the president of the republic and trying to reflect them.

You can ask the political parties themselves about this. We hear about this a lot: about Saudi Arabia being in control, about Islah being in control, about the president's sons being in control, or [Vice President] Ali Mohsen being in control. Almost every single day we hear all of these rumors, but they are not true at all. The Islah party is a political party, and we deal with it like any of the other Yemeni political parties. It has a very active role in the Yemeni political system, and this is how we deal with it.

With regard to the government returning to Aden, we are very keen to return as soon as possible. We appreciate the efforts of our brothers in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia who are supporting the provision of fuel and fuel derivatives and providing for the needs of the people. Also, we appreciate their attempts to de-escalate the situation [in Aden], to end the escalations by the STC and to go back to the implementation of the [Riyadh] Agreement.

We want the STC to return and continue the implementation of the [Riyadh] Agreement. The government will hopefully return urgently to Aden.

Sana'a Center: Thank you. We have a question from De Volkskrant. She asks: Has the Yemeni government signed any arms deals and if yes, please elaborate. And there's a question from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists: How many soldiers are in the Yemeni army? What is the reality of corruption, military spending, and ghost soldiers? Is the military fighting with its full capacity?

Al-Alimi: We're in a battle, and the state, like I've said before, is doing everything it possibly can to deal with this battle, whether politically or militarily. We will not allow Marib to fall. This is as clear as I can make it. And we will do everything. We will sacrifice everything and [make any] arms deals, any expenditures for the military. We will do everything we need to do. There is no question about this. This is something that is holy to us. It's an

existential threat not just the government, but the Yemeni people who refuse to allow what happened to Iran to happen to them, and who also reject the Houthis.

With regard to the number of soldiers on this issue of corruption, I don't think anyone doubts that there are some real issues and some real problems with the state. Anyone whose country is living through a conflict like the one we are experiencing, I think there will be problems within state institutions.

Some of these institutions are security and military institutions. For example, when resistance forces were integrated into the military, there were many additional burdens that were imposed by this. There will come a time when these issues must be dealt with and when duplicate or ghost soldiers need to be removed from the payrolls. This is an issue that nobody denies. But in the context of the situation that we're living through now, in the exceptional situation we're living through now, and the situation that we are faced with, our priority is defending the state and restoring its institutions.

Saudi support for Yemen is important and vital. Saudi Arabia is a very influential partner, and we appreciate their political, military and economic support.

Sana'a Center: What about the arms deals?

Al-Alimi: I've said that we will do everything, whether its arms deals internally or externally. There's nothing that we will not do to defend [Marib]. We will do everything we can in the political arena, and at the same time, we will maintain the military situation. We will support the national army with everything we can.

Sana'a Center: There's a question from The Washington Post: you just said that the battle in Marib is not a battle we can lose. If the Houthis will not agree to a cease-fire, to what extent will the Yemeni government push for battle? And what kind of military support will be asked of Saudi Arabia and the GCC?

Al-Alimi: We still have hope that the efforts of the UN special envoy and the efforts of the United States and the international community will actually be fruitful in pressuring the Houthi militias to respond to the dire need of the Yemeni people and the dire humanitarian need for a cease-fire. We still hope that these efforts will actually lead to a resolution. But in any case, if they agree or do not agree, we will continue to provide extensive military support in Marib, and we will have other options for some of the other frontlines in the country. Anything that the government can do, we will never try to save it for later. We will ask for as much as possible from our partner states and the coalition to intensify their support because Marib falling is not an option at all.

Sana'a Center: There are a few other questions on the roles of Qatar and Turkey, and how they are seen in Yemen.

Al-Alimi: Any role or any country in support of the government will be welcomed, whether it is through the coalition in support of the legitimacy or any economic support. But there is no real role for the Turks. As of yet, we haven't seen Qatar, which was a part of the coalition but then left it, and so

we are focused on the interests of the Yemeni people. Anything that will help alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people and will improve their conditions will be welcomed. Anything that is against the interests of the Yemeni people, or that will strengthen the Houthi militias or support them economically or militarily or politically, will not be welcomed by us or the Yemeni people. We are at the forefront of a very clear battle, and anyone who stands with the Houthi militias is our foe. Anyone who stands with the Yemeni people and against these militias is our ally.

AP: There is information that the UAE established military bases on a number of islands, like the island of Mayun (Perim Island) very recently, as well as a number of other islands in the Red Sea. Has the Yemeni government or the president gone into any military agreement regarding this? Or are these unilateral actions or steps by the UAE?

[Editor's note: The Associated Press published a report on May 25, 2021, on an airbase recently built on the island of Mayun.]

Al-Alimi: With regard to our brothers in the UAE, our relationship with the UAE has taken a number of different turns, at times in agreement and in partnership, and sometimes, having differences and disagreements.

With regards to military bases, we haven't found clear evidence that supports [this claim related to] these bases. But for President Hadi, there is no agreement between the president and the UAE to establish military bases on any of these islands ... I have an excellent relationship with many officials in the UAE, and we hope that the relationship between the two states can improve, become more positive and develop in a positive way in the future.

Sana'a Center: Thank you, Dr. Abdullah. We have two final questions before we end. The first is from Yemen Future.

Yemen Future Agency: Tareq Saleh said he offered, to government officials in Riyadh, to participate in the defense of Marib, but said that you rejected his offer. Could you please clarify why that is or what has occurred?

Sana'a Center: A second question asks about the UN panel of experts report and the implications that it has had, and how has this report been released without the Yemeni government taking any official accountability?

Al-Alimi: We in the government welcome any support that is presented to defend Marib. We have had some very positive communication with [Tareq Saleh] over the past period, and there is a very clear position that the government has taken. This position is that everyone needs to work within the legitimacy of the state and against the Houthis.

Any military support that Tareq Saleh can provide or any other forces that are allied with the legitimate government against the Houthis will be welcomed and we have absolutely no problem with any of the support. We said very clearly during the Riyadh Agreement [negotiations] that we recommended the agreement include all of the armed groups that are outside of the state, including Tareq Saleh and his forces. We wanted the Riyadh Agreement to be more comprehensive and inclusive for all of them: for the STC; for Tareq

Saleh; and for all the others. We said this very clearly. But unfortunately, the situation at the time was very complicated, and they (Saudi Arabia) believe that their efforts should be focused on resolving the problems between the government and the STC. That was what was attempted. But we very clearly welcome any efforts to support the defense of Marib.

With regards to [the panel's report], we have taken steps to deal with it. There were committees that were formed, some of them were publicly announced and others were not, and we are following up with the efforts of this committee. Some of these issues were hindered recently, unfortunately, with the situation in Aden. But with any report that is released we have to form committees to deal with it.



The Souk al-Milh (the Salt Market) in Sana'a's Old City during Ramadan, May 8, 2019 //
Sana'a Center photo by Asem Alposi

A RAMADAN DIARY FROM SANA'A

By Shuaib al-Mosawa

April 13

Ramadan begins today. Every year I think I'll be ready for a month of dawn to dusk fasting, and every year I'm not. This year I'm helping my aunt move. The process to find an apartment in Sana'a – dealing with various real estate agents and landlords – has already taken a month.

I'd prefer not to deal with the hassle, but I promised. So, at 3 p.m. on the first day of Ramadan – which is like 8 a.m. on a normal day – I find myself standing on the rooftop of my aunt's new apartment watching Hifdh Allah, the plumber, try to figure out why my aunt doesn't have any water.

He spends two hours inspecting pipes, reinstalling pipes, and checking meters, none of which work. Eventually, Hifdh Allah, who is in his 50s, gets frustrated and grabs a wrench from his tool box and smashes it into the water tank three times, which is how we eventually find out the tank is empty.

As we're leaving the rooftop, a random .31 caliber bullet, probably from a celebration

somewhere nearby, hits the edge of the tank and falls on the roof, a few inches from my foot. Hifdh Allah picks it up, almost burning his hand in the process, tosses it off the roof, and continues collecting his tools.

It turns out getting a tanker truck to deliver water in Sana'a isn't always the landlord's job; in this case it's the responsibility of the tenant. But no one else in my aunt's building is interested. They all have plastic containers full of water they get as sabeel, or free of charge, from a neighborhood tank that provides for the poor. I manage to convince three of the tenants in the building to buy water and split the cost at the end of the month. That means my aunt has water, but it also means that I'm on the hook if anything goes wrong.

April 15

Around midnight my phone rings with a number I don't recognize. "Hello," I say.

"Have you changed your mind yet?" the voice on the phone asks.

I have no idea who's calling.

"This is Fat-hi," the caller says, and then I understand. Fat-hi is a mechanic I met the week before at a bakery when I was looking for an apartment for my aunt. He said he knew of a place to rent, but when we met later that day, he was mostly interested in my car, asking about its model, and if the "carbon" was still intact.

I had no idea what a "carbon" was or whether my car even had one. Fat-hi crawled underneath my car but couldn't determine if the "carbon" existed. He suggested we go over to his shop to check. "If it's there, I'll give you \$500, right away."

I could use the money, but I was skeptical. The whole "carbon" story seemed like a hoax. For the past few years in Sana'a, old sewing machines and lanterns rumored to contain "red mercury" were selling for over \$2,000. Some people sold their cars, others sold cattle, all so they could snap up a sewing machine or a lantern before it was too late. At the time, a person with one such lantern could be considered lucky. Two lanterns made you a rich man.

I thought this was something similar, but the real estate agent, who was helping me with my aunt's apartment, told me the story of selling his car's "carbon." He said he regretted selling his carbon so cheaply. He only got about \$15.

Intrigued, and on the lookout for a little extra money, I asked Fat-hi what exactly the carbon was. He explained it as an "extra" part of the exhaust system, which environmentalists are obsessed with. He assured me no harm would come to my car if it was uninstalled.

Another mechanic I knew advised me not to sell, saying it was key in the exhaust system.

So, my answer to Fat-hi during the midnight call is "no."

He insists and offers to repair any damage that might result from removing the “carbon.”

I tell him I’ll think about it. But an online search suggests that the “carbon” Fat-hi is after is actually my catalytic converter, a device that reduces toxic gases and pollutants from the vehicle’s exhaust system. It also includes palladium and rhodium, two rare metals now worth more than gold, which I’m sure is what Fat-hi is after.

For many Yemenis it is worth selling the catalytic converter. What’s a bit more pollution compared to starving to death?

April 22

Mohammed, or Sheikh Mohammed, as he’s known in my neighborhood, has upgraded the mosque he runs with more loudspeakers. This was in preparation for Ramadan’s Taraweeh, the optional congregational prayers held after Isha prayers during Ramadan. During Taraweeh, the imam reads long Surahs aloud, which last for roughly two hours.

Before the upgrade, the loudspeakers were working just fine. You could hear Sheikh Mohammed from a mile away. Now if you’re his neighbor, like I am, he’s even louder.

The upgrade is good news for Salafis, but bad news for me and probably a few others. When the call to prayer sounds it echoes throughout every room in my apartment. It wakes me up day or night. It’s even worse for the kids. They wake up frightened and calling for help.

I can’t help it. I can’t wait for the call to prayer to end.

Salafis have a unique prayer call. In fact, it is easy to tell if the muezzin is a Salafi or not. My rule is this: if the call to prayer is a performance full of high drama then you know it is a Salafi doing the call.

With the upgrade finished and the call to prayer louder than ever, I’m thinking about moving. But maybe it will end when Ramadan does. Fingers crossed.

April 29

With Eid al-Fitr approaching, people are starting to shop for their holiday clothing. Traditionally, people wear new clothes to celebrate the end of the month of fasting.

Quality doesn’t matter, only the fact that the clothing is new. Oftentimes, the rich will help the poor so everyone manages to get new clothes for the holiday. Even Hamoud Jubur, a well-known ‘mad man’ who threw stones at pedestrians in my hometown of al-Udain, 93 miles west of capital Sana’a, now deceased, used to get a new robe every Eid.

Today, my wife asked me what kind of clothing I was planning to buy for myself, a thobe, jeans or a shirt?

She already knows my answer – nothing at all – but she likes the tradition.

“Listen,” I tell her. “You know I hate shopping in crowded places.” All the stores in Yemen are notoriously crowded during the last ten days of Ramadan.”

I also warn my wife not to have anyone do the shopping for me. Over the last several years, my family has lost interest in the tradition. We think it’s a trivial issue, something only kids should be obsessed with. Plus, with the war, it is getting harder for everyone to afford new clothes and people who can’t afford them stand out. I’ve seen the misery in the eyes of children without new clothes.

Once, when I was a kid, I was shocked to see that my late dad’s thobe, dishdasha and shoes, given to him as a Ramadan gift, were still in his room. He had left the house for Eid prayers in old clothes. I was so angry and ashamed that I raised the issue with my father when he came back.

“Come on, son,” he told me. “Aren’t these clothes clean?”

I admitted they were, but said it would have been more elegant if he wore his new clothes.

“I look fine now,” he said. “And don’t worry so much about new clothes. Even Hamoud Jabur has a new outfit.” We both smiled.

May 3

I fell asleep around 7 a.m., two hours later than my usual bedtime during Ramadan. As I drifted off I could hear my neighbors dragging their gas cylinders to the aqil al-hara, a neighborhood representative. People give their gas cylinders to the aqil so they can be refilled at a lower price amid the chronic fuel shortages.

Usually it takes about a week for the cylinders to be refilled. You have to wait in a long line until you finally see the aqil, who gives you a reference number so you can collect your cylinder later on. I hate waiting in lines. I’m usually willing to pay extra— about 10,000 Yemeni rials more – to refill my cylinder on the black market to expedite the process.

Outside my window, the cylinders clink and clank until after noon. I heard some neighbors complaining that the aqil ran out of fuel before they could be refilled. At 2 pm, I finally give up on sleep and get up.

For a while I’m grateful that I can afford to refuel on the black market. But on my way this evening, my wife called to inform me that our cylinder ran out of gas before she could cook our Ramadan meal. I call every agent and black market seller I can think of, but Yemen is about to break its fast, and none of the sellers can be bothered to come refill my tank, even when I raise the price.

May 5

When I meet a friend today, he's wearing a mask. It's considered weird to wear a mask in Sana'a, so I ask him why he has one on.

He says it's because of his chapped lips.

There have been some reports on social media about COVID-19 related deaths, but unlike last year, there have been no announcements from the health authorities here.

I don't go out much, but I'm curious, so I ask a mini-bus driver if he's seen a lot of people wearing masks.

"None," he says. He thinks COVID-19 is a hoax.

I remember the panic of fear of last year when COVID-19 hit Yemen. Many of my family got sick with symptoms associated with COVID-19, although none of us got tested. I coughed for five months, and we all lived in fear. But what can we do? Today, I've even stopped reading about the disease. Why invite trouble when you're feeling well?

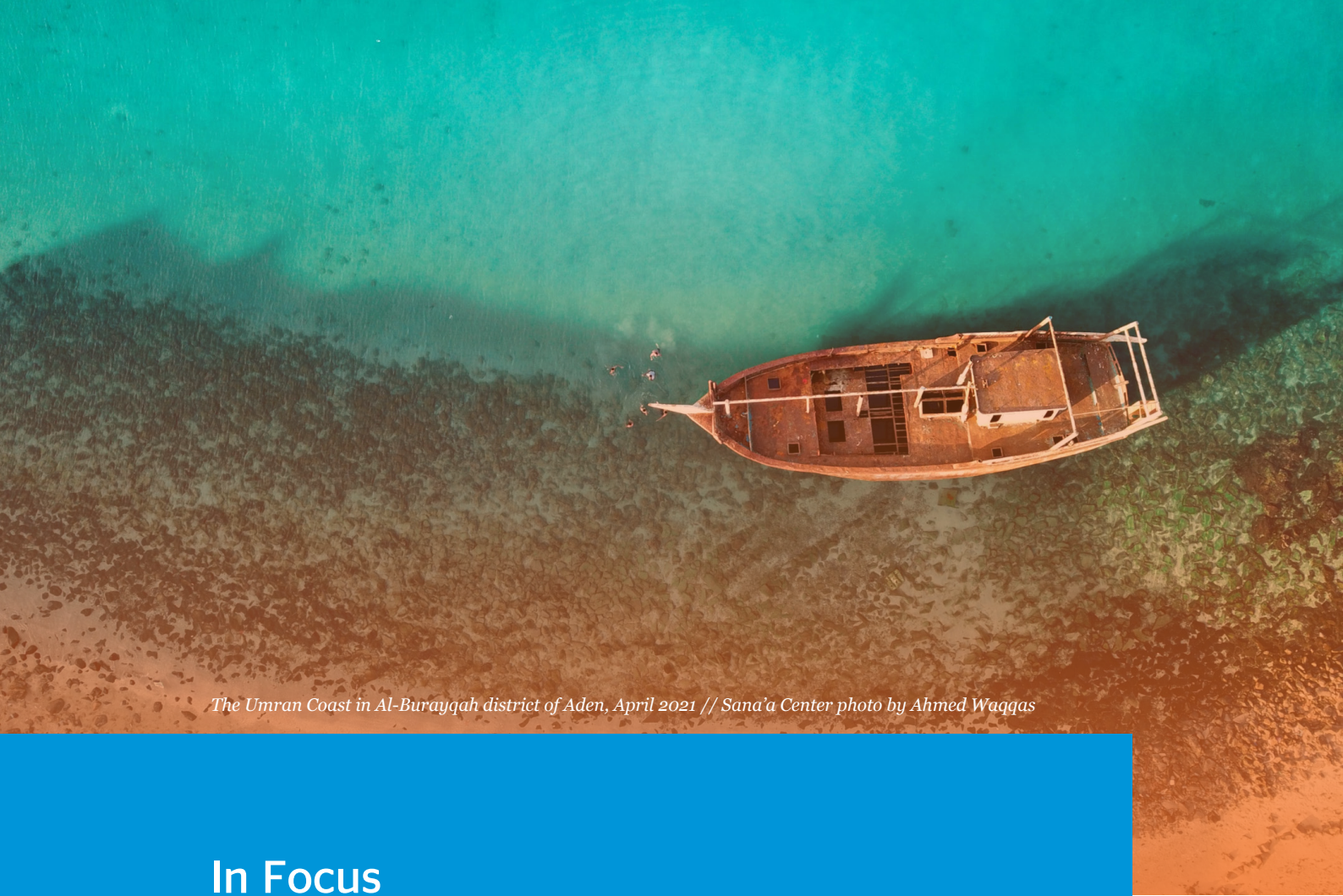
May 8

Sheikh Mohammed's upgraded loudspeakers are going full blast. During the last ten days of Ramadan, mosques hold an extra prayer around 1 a.m., which lasts for an hour and a half and is broadcast over the loudspeaker. I don't understand why loudspeakers need to be used for anything other than the call to prayer, but one needs to be careful what they inquire about – questioning the loudspeakers can be easily construed as questioning prayer itself.

And now is not the time for questions. There's always extra drama at the end of Ramadan. The imam cries as he recites the Quran. Clerics encourage crying while praying as a sign of awe, which they say increases one's chance of getting their prayers answered.

Not for me; I'm a fan of keeping one's own prayers to God private. I'm not a scholar, but there's a verse in the Quran that discourages performing a prayer out loud. One does need to connect with God at some point for guidance, forgiveness, and relief. It's pretty easy for anyone to get distracted by the everyday hustle. That's not a sin but normalcy of life.

Shuaib Almosawa is a freelance Yemeni journalist based in Sana'a. He tweets at @shuaibalmosawa



The Umran Coast in Al-Burayqah district of Aden, April 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

In Focus

RETURN TO ADEN

By Ghaidaa Alrashidy

In February 2016, after 29 years in Aden, I left my city to live in another country. My mother asked me to leave because of the security situation. In the five years since I've returned three times – my latest trip home was earlier this year.

The Yemeni poet Abdullah Al-Bardouni wrote about how a person leaves a part of her soul in her country and takes parts of her country into exile. I've thought about this every time I've come back. With each visit I had hoped to restore my memory of Aden, this city that I love above all cities. But each time I return I find I lose more and more of my soul. I feel like a stranger here now. The roads are different. The buildings have changed. I don't recognize the faces in Al-Mansoura, the neighborhood where I grew up. Each time I leave, I carry with me new pieces of Aden. Most are neither good nor pleasant; they are the fragmented pieces and scattered remains of what our cities were and what they have now become.

I used to make fun of expatriates who returned to Aden to search for ancient memories of the city they remembered. I didn't understand how small details and daily rituals connected them to their past. Maybe it was because I lived in the city and I changed as it changed, morphing daily with new realities, or maybe I was just young. But I used to wonder why each generation believed its version of the city was better than all the versions that followed.



Al-Mualla district in Aden, March 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

But I will not write about the past. I will write in all melancholy about the scenes I see today in this city. Crisis and war have imposed themselves on Aden before, each time reshaping its identity. But what seems different this time is society's acceptance of what we are becoming. I fear for the future and the intimate memories Aden will leave to the next generation.

From Civilian Coexistence to a Militarized Society

For my birthday in January, my older brother gave me a V. Bernardelli 7.65 Italian pistol. Now, he said, everyone carries a weapon in Aden. Everyone has to defend themselves, by themselves.

The idea of expressing love by gifting a weapon is not strange in Yemeni society, but it was never common in Aden. I was surprised to see how many homes in Aden now have weapons, and how many people – people you wouldn't expect – now carry them.

Arms and military checkpoints have proliferated throughout Aden. Almost as if a city that was once characterized by civility, coexistence, and harmony has become an army camp. Aden was liberated from the Houthis six years ago, but the armed men have remained.

Hardly a day goes by without clashes between military forces of various names. Some days the conflicts are over politics, other days they are personal or criminal. But each one is violent and a resort to the force of arms to win a dispute. This violence isn't limited only to Aden's various armed groups. You can see young men and teenagers buying military uniforms at the Haraj Market, even if they aren't soldiers. They believe people will respect and fear the uniform.

More than half of the young people I know have become soldiers with this or that force, both inside and outside of Aden. Many of them have a scientific education, but they chose a military livelihood. Not that there are really any other options. Doctors, engineers, university students, and teachers all seem to prefer to join an armed group that can provide them with a stable income and financial security for their families.

Others have benefited from the insecurity to implement their own agendas. News websites report on kidnappings, assassinations, and raids by individuals wearing military uniforms, only to discover later – if they are ever arrested – that some do not belong to any official security forces. The city's tenuous security situation since 2015 has made it a fertile environment for committing crimes.

Today children play war in the streets of Aden. They divide themselves into two teams – a Houthi team and a Security Belt team – and play, imagining they are older brothers and fathers as they shoot pretend weapons at one another. Perhaps that is normal, given what they've lived through, what they've seen and heard. But what isn't normal is their knowledge of different armed groups, their leaders, and the roles they play. Adeni children name their wooden sticks and plastic toys after light and medium weapons. Names I still don't know.

Because Yemeni society is armed in general, firearms are used in wedding processions in various regions across the country. But in Aden, this was never the case. I remember a few years ago that if firearms were used in a wedding, security forces would come and take the bridegroom to prison to spend his first night of marriage in jail.

Today, wedding processions are mobile battlefields, in which various types of light and medium weapons – from pistols and Kalashnikovs to anti-aircraft guns and sound bombs – are fired into the air. Not surprisingly, this has resulted in many civilian casualties and injuries as gravity returns the bullets to residential neighborhoods and homes.

Governed by the Gun

On my last trip home, my mother, a university professor, returned one day from work upset and shocked. She told me about a student, also 'enrolled' in a security force, who entered campus with an army vehicle and soldiers. The student threatened a professor who had failed him, insulting him publicly and forcing him to change the student's grade.

This is what Aden has become. People use the law of the gun in government ministries, secondary schools, and even hospitals. The absence of the state has made many believe that they are above the law, that their guns permit them to fulfill whatever desires they might have.

Several days after my arrival in Aden, my friends took me around the city. We ended up at a beach resort in Al-Tawahi district. Surprisingly for me, there was a checkpoint at the entrance. There we saw individuals and families from another governorate tell resort administrators that they'd been sent by a well-known military commander. The administrator allowed them to enter without a ticket. Unjustified transactions like this are happening all over the city. If you have military connections, doors open for you.



The Crown Resort in Khormaksar district of Aden, May 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

It is the same on the streets. The new traffic law in Aden is the law of military vehicles. No one else matters. They have priority over pedestrians, public transportation, and private vehicles; even ambulances are forced to wait for them to pass.

In the past, government officials used to visit facilities and lay the cornerstones of new projects in front of local media. Today it is the military officials who are in the news, visiting schools and inaugurating new projects. Is this because the state is absent, or because armed groups have become the state?

One day, I noticed my friend browsing pictures of weapons on his smartphone. I joked with him, saying: “What are you doing, Faris Manna?” (Manna is one of the most famous arms dealers in Yemen and around the Horn of Africa). He answered me with optimism: “From your lips to God’s ears.” He told me that there are WhatsApp groups devoted to trading weapons. Many people in Aden are members of these groups, exchanging pictures of light and medium guns without fear of accountability or accusation. He said that many people have begun working in this field; even those who do not have weapons work as intermediaries between the seller and the buyer.

When I expressed surprise at the situation, he said these groups include people from different governorates and all sides. Some groups buy and sell weapons from individuals loyal to the internationally recognized Yemeni government and others from those belonging to the armed Houthi movement.

In the past, a girl in Aden would brag about if a doctor or engineer proposed to her; she would boast if he was from a well-known family or had relatives in the university. Education was the mark of stature in society. Today, we brag if a soldier proposes. I listened to a conversation between two girls who were no more than 20 years old. The first girl was engaged to a soldier with the Yemeni government, the second to a man in the Security Belt forces. They argued for more than half an hour over whose fiancé had a higher salary and more privileges. I thought this was an outlier, unrepresentative. But the more women I spoke to in Aden, the more I realized how prevalent this view had become.



Little Ben in At-Tawahi district of Aden, March 2021. The clock tower was built in 1890 during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I when Aden was still a British Crown colony //
Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

Shooting the Messenger

Another new development in Aden is that anyone seen criticizing the current situation is ridiculed and smeared, with those personal attacks more severe if the person resides outside of Yemen, as if whoever is not living through the current conditions and the suffering of the people has no right to criticize, even if they are from the city.

Given this, I know some people will be upset reading my thoughts and observations here, especially Southerners and the people of Aden. Maybe they will accuse me of bias and focusing on the negatives. Others may say that all this has existed for years, and that former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime and his forces did worse both during and after the war in 1994.

So, to my critics: Yes, I am biased toward Aden and its people, who have repeatedly been violated by the various governments. Yes, I am focusing on the negatives, because they were not part of the Aden I knew before the war. Yes, I am opposed to the armed groups. And, yes, Aden and its people suffered worse conditions during the Saleh regime. But that was being done to us. Today, we are doing this to ourselves.

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Lutfi al-Hashemi, the grandson of the original owner of Aden's Hurricane Cinema, stands on the upper level of the now decrepit theatre overlooking the seating area, May 4, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

THE CURTAIN CALL FOR CINEMA IN ADEN?

By Khaled Lekra

[Editor's Note: The following article was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.]

Aden has historically been a cultural and commercial crossroads, home to a famed port linking East and West. Its setting, on the Gulf of Aden, at the confluence of the Red and Arabian seas, long brought trade and people to the city, making it a cosmopolitan hub. Throughout much of the 20th century, the city played a prominent role in – among other things – cinema culture in Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula.

That culture, however, has largely disappeared – a victim of modern technology and Yemen's political troubles. At their height, there were 40 operating movie theaters in Aden. Today there are none. Sadly, prospects for a rebirth of that culture are slim at this time.

Movies Arrive in Aden

The British occupied Aden in 1839, seeking to secure their lines of commerce and communication with India. They would only withdraw in 1967. Although this occupation entailed British influence and control of resources, it also heralded a kind of cultural and commercial renaissance. Cinema was introduced to the city during this time, and it would go on to become one of Aden's hallmarks. Movies first came to Aden in 1910, when British colonial authorities screened silent black-and-white films for soldiers stationed in the Crater district of the city, as well as British diplomatic and civil service employees and Adeni residents working in British protectorates throughout south Yemen.^[1] Soon, films began to be screened throughout the city.

The first local screenings were also held in Crater in 1910, by Mohammed Hammoud al-Hashemi, known as "Master Hammoud." He began outdoor screenings of Charlie Chaplin's silent movies in fields or small hangars. He also offered mobile screenings of silent films in the area of Al-Tawahi, in available halls and locations ranging from parking lots and yards.^[2] Meanwhile, Abdulaziz Khan screened movies in a square near the Ziko coffee shop, in the old city of Aden.^[3]

Mohammed al-Hashemi's son, Taha Hammoud – known as "the King of Cinema" – built the first movie theater in the city, in the 1930s. It was built in Crater, near the neighborhood of Al-Midan, and called the Hurricane Cinema, after the British fighter plane.^[4] It originally had an area of approximately 600 square meters, which Taha doubled in 1942.^[5]

Taha Hammoud established other cinemas over the years, up until the 1950s: Al-Jadidah Cinema, in Al-Tawahi; Radio Cinema, in the area of Al-Mualla; and Al-Sharqiyyah Cinema in Sheikh Othman.^[6] He worked as a movie distributor for major production companies and a number of movie stars.

By 1972, Aden had 10 cinemas. Besides the four owned by Taha Hammoud, there were: Al-Ahliya Cinema (or Al-Baderi Cinema), owned by Hussein Ismael Khodabakhsh, in Crater; Al-Bunyan Cinema, known as "Barafeen," in Crater; Bilqis Cinema, owned by Jaafar Marza; Regal Cinema, known as "Shahinaz," owned by Master Haq, in Khormakser; Al-Shaabiya Cinema, owned by Abdo Abdelqader, in Sheikh Othman; and Dar Saad Cinema and Al-Buraiqeh Cinema, in the nearby district of Al-Buraiqeh (or Little Aden). By unification, in 1990, the city had around 40 cinemas,^[7] compared to nine in Sana'a, whose first movie theater didn't arrive until 1959.^[8]

[1] "Cinema in Aden, Past, Present and Future," Al-Ayyam, October 6, 2019, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/7YHJBNJ5-VVDRYM-E5B2>

[2] Yasmina Tawil, "A Brief History of Yemeni Cinema," Arab Film Institute, August 29, 2020, <https://arabfilmstitute.org/history-of-yemeni-cinema/>

[3] Abdelqader Baras, "Cinema back in the old days in Aden," Aden Alghad, November 5, 2013, <https://m.adengd.net/news/75291/>

[4] Amal Ayyash al-Omri, "Report: Let's Go to Adeni Cinema," Aden Alghad, January 8, 2013, <http://old.adenghd.net/news/36087/#.YFPRgp0zbIU>

[5] Lutfi Taha Mohammed Hammoud al-Hashemi, personal interview by the author, Aden, January 26, 2021.

[6] Marzouq Yassen, "Remembering the king of cinema in Aden, Master Hammoud," Saba.net, June 22, 2009, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news187158.htm>

[7] Amal Ayyash al-Omri, "Report: Let's Go to Adeni Cinema," Aden Alghad, January 8, 2013, <http://old.adenghd.net/news/36087/#.YFPRgp0zbIU>

[8] Khawla Fouad, "Cinemas in Yemen," May 11, 2020, <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/7180>



Lutfi Al-Hashemi, the grandson of the owner of Aden's Hurricane Cinema, holds up an old film negative roll, May 4 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

A Thriving Cinema Culture

Movie screenings were available in many districts in the Aden governorate, and cinemas competed to play the best films. The Hurricane Cinema and Al-Ahliya Cinema focused mainly on Arabic movies, while Al-Buraiqeh Cinema and Rejal Cinema – and Bilqis Cinema, later on – played movies from the West. Shahinaz Cinema was the only theater in Aden to screen Charlie Chaplin's films. Bilqis Cinema and Al-Bunyan Cinema played the best Indian movies.^[9]

During the golden years of Egyptian cinema (1940s thru to the 1960s), films released in Cairo were also screened in Aden. The price of a cinema ticket in Aden during these years was higher than in Egypt.^[10] Movies starring Egyptian icons Farid al-Atrash, Abdelhalim Hafez and Mohammed Abdelwahhab were shown. Master Hammoud owned the rights to screen the movies of Farid Shawqi, a well-known Egyptian actor. The movies were exclusively screened at the Hurricane, according to a deal published by newspapers at the time. Khodabakhsh, owner of Al-Ahliya Cinema, monopolized the movies of Al-Atrash, based on a contract he signed with the star. Al-Atrash visited Aden in the mid-1950s at Khodabakhsh's invitation.^[11]

[9] Amal Ayyash al-Omri, "Report: Let's Go to Adeni Cinema," Aden Alghad, January 8, 2013, <http://old.adenghd.net/news/36087/#.YFPRgp0zbIU>

[10] Ibid.

[11] Abdelqader Baras, "Cinema back in the old days in Aden," Aden Alghad, November 5, 2013, <https://m.adengd.net/news/75291/>

Popular movies shown in Aden in the 1950s and 60s included *Mother of India*, *Summer Holiday* (released in 1963 and starring Cliff Richard), *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (made in 1922), various Robin Hood movies, *Eyes in the Night*, and *Hobby Fi al-Qahira* (*My Love is in Cairo*). The latter, which was released in 1966, saw Adeni singer Ahmed Qassem act alongside Egyptian actress Zizi El-Badrawy. It was the first movie starring and produced by a Yemeni.

Movie theaters played newsreels before the films began, to keep Adenis up to date with the latest developments – including, for instance, the evolution of Arab nationalism during the days of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Advertisements for shops and businesses in Aden were also shown, as were segments of Muhammed Ali's fights and Woody Woodpecker cartoons.

According to writer Abdelqader Baras, there was also an attempt to make movies more accessible to those who could not afford tickets to the cinema. "The municipal council held mobile movie screenings using a car that roamed popular neighborhoods and played international silent movies," Baras reported. "It also played segments on astronauts. The mobile cinema screened the movies on the walls of houses and citizens welcomed this initiative."^[12]

At the time, in the mid-20th century, movie theaters accommodated social traditions regarding women's modesty. A day was set aside for women, at the request of the citizens, but at the same time, mixing was not a problem, and women were present with men watching some movie shows. The theaters were also used for educational purposes; some movies were screened specifically for students, according to Abdullah Ali Muqbel, a former employee at the now-closed Al-Mualla Cinema.^[13]

The General Association for Cinema: Improvements and Restraints

From 1967 to 1990, the southern provinces of what is now Yemen – including Aden – were consolidated as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (often referred to simply as South Yemen), a Communist-Socialist state. Initially, after the establishment of the new government, cinema owners paid taxes to the state for the establishment of a General Association for Cinema and Theater. They hoped the association would support them and work to improve cinema in Yemen. But, in 1969, the Economic Corporation Law for the Public Sector and National Planning (Law No. 37) was issued, stipulating that cinemas in South Yemen would be nationalized on December 20, 1970.^[14] They became the property of the state and were represented by the General Association for Cinema and Theater.^[15]

[12] Ibid.

[13] Amal Ayyash al-Omri, "Report: Let's Go to Adeni Cinema," Aden Alghad, January 8, 2013.

[14] "Text of the nationalization law of 'the national front' against Aden and its economic rise in 1969 [AR]," Shabwa Press, December 16, 2019, <https://www.shabwaah-press.info/news/62057>

[15] Amal Ayyash al-Omri, "Report: Let's Go to Adeni Cinema," Aden Alghad, January 8, 2013.



Lutfi al-Hashemi, the grandson of the original Hurricane Cinema owner, leans over an old poster, May 4, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

Cinema owners were shocked. The association completely took over the work of the cinemas, signing contracts with movie production companies across the world. During these years of communist South Yemen, the Adeni cinemas also sometimes played segments about Lenin and the Socialist International organization before the features.

The nationalization law stirred controversy, because it seized capital and destroyed the private sector and commercial competition. According to Law 37, the Hurricane Cinema, its contents and contracts with production and distribution companies, became state property.

“When they nationalized Hurricane Cinema, we had 850 movies, plus equipment as well as contracts with film companies that were arriving in Aden,” Master Hammoud’s grandson Lutfi Taha Mohammed Hammoud al-Hashemi – who currently owns the Hurricane – told the Sana’a Center. “We used to give 10 percent of our income to the General Association of Cinema but then they nationalized the cinema and confiscated everything. This was a grudge, not nationalization.”^[16]

Although the law was harsh on cinema owners, the state maintained support for the sector. The amount of screenings increased, and agreements were struck with Arab and international production companies. Everyone went to the movies; it’s said that even President Salim Rubai Ali (known as “Salimin”) used to stand in line to get tickets.

[16] Lutfi Taha Mohammed Hammoud al-Hashemi, personal interview by the author, Aden, January 26, 2021.

Nevertheless, cinemas did face constraints in terms of screening some movies, particularly those that addressed topics, causes or figures related to Arab nationalism, revolution or the Socialist International ideology. The work of all movie theaters was supervised, and the Censorship and Categorization Department was formed for the purpose of this oversight. Rather than censoring elements of films (a complicated process that required editing equipment), movies deemed problematic were banned wholesale.

Film censorship was strict but not entirely consistent. The 1972 film *Al-Asfour* (The Sparrow) provoked outrage across the Arab world but was nonetheless screened in Aden after a long discussion. The movie – written, produced and directed by Youssef Chahine – dealt with the defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan in the 1967 Six Day War with Israel. Considered an insult to Arab nationalism, it was banned in many Arab countries. The General Association's Censorship and Categorization Department in Aden objected to the film's screening, but South Yemen President Abdul Fattah Ismail intervened to allow the movie to be shown.

The movie's stars, Salah Kabil and Samiha Ayoub, along with editor Rashida Abdelsalam, even visited Aden. A celebration was held in honor of the movie at Bilqis Cinema, and Kabil sat in the front row.^[17]

Cinema Struggles

In the latter part of the 20th century, several factors made it challenging for Adeni cinemas to continue functioning. The nationalization law was one of these factors. Although the state supported the role of cinema, the appropriation of cinemas by the state undermined the cinema owners, appropriating their businesses and venues and destroying their capital. The state also acquired cinemas' film archives and equipment.

In the mid-1980s, regulations changed to allow children to accompany their parents to the movies. This produced conflicting interests among the audiences: some cinemagoers felt that children, often boisterous, disrupted the cinematic experience, while at the same time families in attendance often complained that the films shown were inappropriate for children. Moreover, during this decade, political instability – coming to a head in the South Yemen Civil War, in 1986 – made many families reluctant to go to the movies.^[18]

[17] Amal Ayyash al-Omri, "Report: Let's Go to Adeni Cinema," Aden Alghad, January 8, 2013, <http://old.adenghd.net/news/36087/#.YFPRgp0zbIU>

[18] Ibid.



An old poster of an Indian blockbuster film is propped against old rolls shelves in Hurricane Cinema in Aden, May 4, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

The Movies After Unification

In 1990, the unification of North and South Yemen was announced, and the nationalization law was repealed. But the struggles of Aden's cinemas weren't over. The new Yemeni government placed the theaters back in the hands of their original owners but did not provide these owners with any financial or technical support. No operational budgets or compensation for the cinemas' initial seizure were granted. Moreover, the government required the cinema owners pay taxes even before they had resumed their operations. This move was, it seems, designed to push the owners to relinquish their businesses to influential figures.

"In the first week after we took back the [Hurricane] Cinema, my father and I were surprised when three employees from the tax department came to see us," Lutfi al-Hashemi recalls. "I remember how my father explained to them that it hasn't even been one week since the cinema was returned to us, after it was confiscated 30 years ago, and we haven't made any income! He asked them what they wanted, and they said they wanted us to prepare a monthly report of the number of tickets sold and to pay 30 percent of our income to the tax department."^[19]

[19] Lutfi Taha Mohammed Hammoud al-Hashemi, phone interview by the author, January 26, 2021.

Lutfi added that when he and his father took back the cinema in 1995, the local officials mocked the fact that his father was still alive and said they had expected someone much younger, possibly coming from outside Yemen, to try and reclaim the property. The officials, according to Lutfi, had prepared exhausting bureaucratic hurdles with which they had hoped to make the prospective reclainer despaired and eventually give up their claim to cinema.^[20]

In 2007, Lutfi submitted a written complaint about this treatment to then President Ali Abdullah Saleh.^[21]

For cinema owners who did hang onto their businesses, the numbers weren't favorable. It cost thousands of dollars to buy movies to screen. Citizens' average incomes had declined after unification, and there was consequently a lack of support for movie theaters. Since viewership was down, movies were only screened twice per week, meaning that the returns from screening movies could not cover the cost.

Particularly following the 1994 civil war, the movie sector was marginalized by the new authorities. Financial and administrative corruption also played a decisive role in the decline of cinema in Yemen, in general, and in Aden, in particular, during this period. Many movie theaters closed their doors in the 1990s.

Aref Naji is a civil activist and the manager of Al-Taj Wedding Hall, which was formerly Al-Tawahi Cinema. Naji attributed the closure of many cinemas to "the absence of the government's role in looking after this arts and cultural sector and the attempts to appropriate some movie theaters."^[22]

The absence of state support and the frustration of cinema owners led some cinemas to be used as theaters for live performances while others (like the Al-Tawahi) were transformed into wedding halls. Still others were sold and demolished. The Hurricane operated, playing increasingly few movies, until 2010. According to Lutfi, during the end of this period, the elderly in Aden, who had witnessed the city's golden age of cinema, would ask him to open the cinema and play some movies. Their numbers eventually decreased as many died, and many were too old to go to the movies – and eventually Lutfi stopped. The cinema was then only used for events and plays every now and then, and then the war erupted.

[20] Ibid.

[21] "Appeal submitted to the President – Owner of Hurricane Cinema in Aden complains of appropriation of property [AR]," Al-Ayyam, November 6, 2007, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/35R7ZEO0-8NCUBL>

[22] Samir Hassan, "Demise of the role of cinema in Yemen [AR]," Al-Jazeera, August 1, 2013.



An old rusted sign of the Hurricane Cinema on top of the building in Aden, May 4, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas

Wartime Dilapidation

Over the course of the current Yemen war, the situation for movie theaters in Aden has further deteriorated. Many of the cinemas have fallen into disrepair. The absence of the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the disinterest of the de facto authorities have been a death blow for the sector, which has had to struggle with poor security and service provision. The electricity crisis and the high exchange rates have been particularly problematic. Movie theater owners in the city have been reluctant to operate their cinemas, due to the rise of social tensions, the deteriorating economic situation and the authorities' approach.

"When people were not allowed in without first buying a ticket, thugs would start throwing things inside the cinema hall," Lutfi said. "And when someone got injured, the police would come after the owner of the cinema. When I'd tell them that I have simply signed a contract with the person renting the cinema for the event – a play, for instance – and that the latter should secure the event, the police would reject this. They [used to] say, 'You are the owner of the cinema and you are the one responsible.' As a result, I had to close the theater." He said he closed the business shortly before the current armed conflict began.

At one point, Lutfi recalls, an official from the internationally recognized government's Ministry of Culture tried to convince him to reopen the Hurricane. "But I told him there was no point doing so, as I was losing more than I was making." In addition to financial losses, the running of the business was also complicated, as he faced many obstructions.

The internationally-recognized government's Ministry of Culture claimed on October 30, 2019 that it repaired Cinema Hurricane in Aden, which Lutfi denied in a statement published by Aden Time saying: "We'd like to note that what's been said (about repairing the cinema) is entirely false... the office of the Ministry of Culture did not voice any interest (in repairing the cinema), and there hasn't been any communication. We demand that it apologizes."^[23]

Other Adeni cinemas have also suffered. Al-Sharqiya Cinema, in Sheikh Othman district, was established in 1965, making it one of the city's oldest movie theaters. It was demolished in 2019, after the relevant authorities failed to intervene. The site of the cinema will host a new shopping mall: the final touches are currently being made.^[24] Not a single cinema now functions in the city.

Despite the challenges that face the Hurricane and cinemas in Aden in general, Lutfi still resides in Aden and hopes that one day there will be institutions that will show interest in cinema and its revival in the city.

Will the Show Go On in Aden?

Given the current circumstances, it seems unlikely that movie theaters will relive their glory days in Aden any time soon – or even just start showing movies again. (Currently, movies are occasionally shown in weddings halls.) Security challenges, service shortcomings and official negligence have curtailed the city's cinema culture. The cinema buildings would need extensive rehabilitation in order to function again, and modern equipment would be required in order to screen movies.

Modern technology also presents a challenge: one Adeni cinemagoer, Sami al-Masaoui', who witnessed the city's golden age of cinema, believes that shifts in entertainment technology have impacted consumer habits today and made theaters obsolete. "Many people used to go to the cinema, even women," he recalled. "I remember that whenever my aunt heard a new Indian movie had been released, she'd say, 'Let's go Sami!' I used to go with her and I was her bodyguard. After satellite dishes became popular, it was no longer important to her [and others] to go to the cinema to watch movies. Things have changed."^[25]

[23] "Owner of Hurricane Cinema: Ministry of Culture did not carry out restoration works of cinema, we demand an apology," Aden Time, October 31, 2019, <http://www.aden-tm.net/NDetails.aspx?contid=103977>

[24] "Photos: Demolishing one of the oldest movie theaters in Aden [AR]," Aden Time, April 4, 2019, <http://www.aden-tm.net/NDetails.aspx?contid=76851>

[25] Sami al-Masaoui', personal interview by the author, Aden, February 5, 2021.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, cinema attendance and revenues had dropped off in many countries.^[26] Given the rise of televisions then streaming services, cinemas are having to compete with easier, cheaper entertainment options. The pandemic, meanwhile, has shuttered cinemas across the world.

In Yemen, however, it is the economic, political and security situation that will determine the future of Aden's movie theaters. Reviving Adeni cinemas will require the will and dedication of a national government and the support of businesses and civil institutions. Popular awareness and interest – the real engine behind the rise of any form of art – are also crucial. So, too, are stronger purchasing power, basic security and social trust.

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[26] Brooks Barnes, "Hollywood's Shaky Summer Box Office Points to Larger Issues," New York Times, September 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/01/business/media/summer-box-office-movies.html>; Mark Sweney, "UK cinema admissions on course to be lowest since records began," The Guardian, October 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/oct/12/uk-cinema-admissions-on-course-to-be-lowest-since-records-began-covid>

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