



THE YEMEN CRISIS: A CHRONOLOGY OF FAILURES

By Dr. Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi

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COVER PHOTO: Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi addresses the general debate of the 68th session of the General Assembly as Yemen's foreign minister on September 2013 ,28. (UN photo/Devra Berkowitz)

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



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.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Dr. Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi served as Yemen's foreign minister from 2001-2014, beginning in the aftermath of the October 2000 USS Cole bombing in Aden's port, which shaped Yemen's diplomatic agenda for more than a decade. Dr. Al-Qirbi, a member of the General People's Congress (GPC) party founded by the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh, was involved in negotiating Saleh's 2012 departure from office, then continued to lead the Foreign Ministry under the interim government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi until being replaced in 2014. He was also a member of the 2013-2014 National Dialogue Conference in the state-building working group. While he did not serve in an official role in the Houthi-GPC "Government of National Salvation," he helped communicate the Sana'a alliance's positions to the world. Dr. Al-Qirbi was a GPC member of the negotiating delegation from Sana'a to the peace talks in Switzerland in 2015 and in Kuwait in 2016. He also is a UK-trained physician and has served as vice rector of Sana'a University as well as dean of the university's medical school.

The signing of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative and its implementation plan in November 2011 prompted a sigh of relief from the people of Yemen and the region. Yemenis were proud they had chosen a political settlement for their crisis and had averted armed conflict. Yemen was set then on a course of stability and development, with regional and international donors promising aid for development. Unfortunately, the path of stabilization was full of hurdles, and poor implementation of the GCC initiative turned the model political agreement into a protracted crisis.

In this essay, I will offer my assessment of why efforts to resolve Yemen's political crisis and end the war have failed and explore how future efforts can avoid similar failures, which stem from misjudgments, poor management of the peace negotiations or interference by regional and international players with their own agendas and rivalries.

There is no doubt that the reason for the protracted Yemen crisis is in part due to the intransigence of the Yemeni parties, but the United Nations' special envoys, the ambassadors of the countries sponsoring the peace process, and the coalition military intervention, in addition to UN Security Council resolutions, have all contributed to the protraction of the conflict. The reality of the conflict is confused by the blame game of the conflicting parties and by the multitude of articles and reports written by journalists and research centers, especially those funded by regional powers that sponsor conflicting parties in Yemen to promote their agendas and defend their positions. Additional factors preventing progress were the special envoys' perceptions of Yemen's crisis and of the Yemeni people as well as their experience in resolving conflicts or working in conflict areas. Thus, they came with readymade and theoretical solutions, which they believed could be applied to Yemen's crisis in a copy-and-paste method.

One mistake made by those non-Yemeni actors involved in trying to resolve Yemen's crisis was their lack of understanding of the roots of Yemen's political crisis. The current crisis started long before the Arab Spring; it bears the marks of the many political upheavals in both North and South Yemen, internal political conflicts and the influences of regional powers as well as sectarian, tribal and local grievances due to poor governance and unequal distribution of wealth and power.

Support from some of the international sponsors of peace for the passing of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2216, which essentially required unconditional surrender from the armed Houthi movement, Ansar Allah, demonstrated their lack of impartiality and complicated a resolution of

the conflict. These sponsors for the resolution of the conflict, especially the five permanent members of the Security Council, ignored the GCC initiative, which was confirmed in all UNSC resolutions at the time as the basis of the 2011 political agreement. They have never adhered to it in subsequent phases of the conflict.

Acceptance of the GCC initiative by Yemenis resulted from the fact that its original draft was written by negotiators from the GPC who understood the roots of the conflict and the positions of the different opponents. More importantly, they were committed to preventing the escalation of the political crisis into military conflict. Unfortunately, the first UN special envoy, Jamal Benomar, despite his success in getting the parties to agree on the implementation mechanism for the GCC initiative, failed – along with the sponsors of peace – to ensure that President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the presidency committee of the 2013-14 National Dialogue Conference (NDC) adhere to the GCC initiative and the conference's rules. Ignoring irregularities contributed to the subsequent failures and impacted progress in the transitional period. Especially damaging was the inclusion of non-consensual recommendations in the final NDC report in order to satisfy Hadi's interest in marginalizing certain political parties and his desire to impose his own vision for the system of federal regions, which would maintain the presidential system instead of the parliamentary system chosen by the state-building working group.

The comprehensive NDC started on wrong footing by first ignoring the principle of consensus in the formation of the preparatory committee for the conference, its presidency and secretariat. Hadi, with his confidants, and the special envoy took control of the whole process, which lacked transparency and failed to adhere to the rules and procedures of the NDC. The second factor for the NDC's failure to achieve its objectives was the inability of political party' leaders to understand that the NDC was about saving Yemen, and not a platform for settling old feuds. In other words, the parties participating in the conference were neither reconciliatory nor prepared to make concessions.

Instead of attempting to regain the confidence of the political parties that expressed written objections on the final report, Hadi continued to implement some recommendations of the NDC in a selective manner while ignoring others. For example, Hadi disregarded the recommendations and criteria for selecting members of the national authority that was to oversee implementation of NDC recommendations. He also changed the list of candidates for the constitution committee, individuals who had been selected by a committee formed according to the NDC recommendations over which Hadi himself had presided. Still, he changed half of the selected members without consulting with the selection committee or any of the political parties.

These events, plus Hadi's continuous efforts to influence the constitution committee while the draft constitution was being prepared, heightened tension and mistrust, especially among members of Ansar Allah. Hadi's main concern at the time was to save his presidency by ensuring that the draft constitution reflected his own vision for a unified multi-region state under a presidential system.

While the crisis between Hadi and Ansar Allah was escalating, the special envoy played the role of a mediator between them. At that time, Hadi was losing control and Ansar Allah was gaining momentum, fighting Salafi groups in Damaj, Sa'ada governorate, and progressing toward Sana'a. For their part, the team of ambassadors sponsoring the peace process, if anything, emboldened Ansar Allah by their inaction both on the ground and within the UNSC as the situation seriously deteriorated.

The transitional period also was plagued by poor leadership across the board and a deteriorating relationship between Prime Minister Mohammed Basindwah and the president because Hadi bypassed the prime minister to deal directly with cabinet ministers. Hadi also failed to consult with Basindwah or call him to meetings on security and military issues. Thus, all security and military decisions were taken by the president, with the government completely excluded from any decisions pertaining to them. The prime minister, for his part, failed to challenge the president; he did not insist on his shared responsibility with the president in security issues, which had a direct impact on government performance.

Another point ignored during the transitional period was that Hadi was a consensus president chosen as part of a political agreement and that, as such, he must work with the transitional government as equal partners in running the country. As differences between the president and the prime minister increased and became public, neither the special envoy nor the sponsors of the political settlement intervened to rectify it. Leaders of Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), an alliance of opposition parties, eventually abandoned their chosen prime minister, siding with the president to safeguard their privileges. This further weakened the prime minister's position and worsened the political, economic and security situations. With the prime minister excluded from all developments in the conflict between the president and Ansar Allah, he had no option but to resign when Ansar Allah took control of Sana'a in September 2014.

After Ansar Allah took control of Sana'a, the special envoy, to save his UN mission from failure, called the political parties involved in the conflict for consultations to try to resolve the new developments. The proposed solutions reached during these consultations were blocked in part by Hadi's refusal of two separate proposals for

the formation of a presidential council, and by Ansar Allah raising the ceiling on its demands as it gained control of more governorates.

Hadi's escape to Aden in February 2015 further isolated him and deprived him of his team of advisors who remained in Sana'a. Thus, he was unable to effectively run the government or command the country's armed forces, which were demoralized and fragmented by the restructuring plan and indecisiveness in facing Ansar Allah.

Throughout the October 2014 to March 2015 negotiations to end the conflict, Ansar Allah maintained its drive toward the southern governorates without any effective resistance and with little firm opposition from international or UN actors. This situation might have been the result of the conflict of interest of the international sponsors of peace in Yemen, and ineffective Yemeni leadership. Ansar Allah – refusing to accept the advice of many political leaders – continued its advance toward Aden and its air bombardment of the presidential residence in Ma'ashiq. This prompted Hadi to resort to the route Vice President Ali al-Beedh took in 1994 – fleeing toward Oman – which probably prompted the Arab coalition's intervention. The timing of the coalition military intervention on March 25, 2015, while Hadi was en route to Oman, and not while he was still in Aden is not understood, especially as Hadi expressed surprise when he heard about the intervention on his way to Oman.

The coalition military intervention in Yemen could not have been a mere response to Hadi's call for help to confront the Ansar Allah rebellion. Rather, the main priority for taking action likely had been to prepare for the eventuality of an Ansar Allah takeover of Yemen or to contain any possible threat to Saudi Arabia. Whatever the motive behind the Saudi-led coalition's intervention, its objectives and long-term strategy were unclear, and it lacked an exit plan, especially at the beginning of the conflict when it amounted to an outright rejection of a political solution. It was unfortunate that supporters of the coalition, including the United States, United Kingdom and France, rather than restraining the military intervention and exploring a political solution instead supported it without any consideration for an exit plan, as they believed it would only take a few weeks for the coalition to defeat Ansar Allah. For the US and other coalition supporters, the war was an opportunity to make arms deals, and thus the exit plan was not necessary as victory was the only option.

GCC countries' military intervention was hasty and neglected the fact that the GCC initiative remained a strong card in their hand. They had the opportunity to reactivate it to overcome the new escalation by updating the initiative with

a supplementary annex that would address developments in the conflict since 2011. A new diplomatic initiative could have involved sponsoring a new round of negotiations between the Yemeni parties with financial incentives and political and security guarantees aimed at halting the fighting. Unfortunately, such an undertaking is now unlikely because of the divisions among the GCC states.

The initial military success of the coalition in liberating Aden and other southern governorates was marred by its mismanagement of the security and economic situations, and an inadequate response to the people's needs. Plus, there was poor coordination between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and with the legitimate government of Yemen. As the war took hold, all efforts were directed at defeating Ansar Allah, but without a clear and comprehensive political and military strategy. The policies of the coalition in the so-called liberated governorates and the marginalization of the legitimate government led the coalition war to be portrayed amongst Yemenis as an aggression rather than an intervention to reinstate the legitimate government.

This divide between the conflict parties became more evident during the 2016 Kuwait negotiations when the government delegation obstructed the process by refusing to negotiate unless Ansar Allah implemented UN Resolution 2216, a resolution that was clearly biased in favor of the government and, more importantly, didn't have an implementation plan. The government side further demanded that the military articles of the resolution be implemented before resolving political issues. At the time, there also were escalations of the aerial bombardment by the coalition and incursions into Saudi territory by Ansar Allah. During the Kuwait period of negotiations, Saudi Arabia held several direct talks with Ansar Allah that resulted in seven signed agreements. However, none of them were implemented because these secret negotiations raised concerns and suspicions amongst Yemenis about Ansar Allah. These agreements addressed basic Saudi security concerns, which could have been achieved through Yemeni-Yemeni negotiations because the Sana'a side was aware of the kingdom's security concerns and that they must be addressed as part of any peace agreement among Yemenis. Furthermore, the Sana'a delegation had similar concerns to address about Yemen's security.

There were two additional factors that prevented the conclusion of an agreement in Kuwait. The first was the UN's special envoy at that time, Ismael Ould Cheikh Ahmed, who had the best of intentions but unfortunately could not liberate himself from coalition pressures and demands. On two occasions when the Sana'a delegation met privately with him to discuss proposals to address coalition concerns in order to help him achieve a breakthrough, the envoy responded by

saying the coalition would not accept them. This stance was on occasions repeated by ambassadors of the permanent members of UNSC.

The second reason for the failure was the position of the G18 ambassadors, a group of GCC and international ambassadors including from UNSC permanent member states, that was formed in Sana'a after the signing of the GCC initiative to facilitate and sponsor the peace process in Yemen. It subsequently moved to Riyadh when the Saudi capital became Hadi's base. This group of ambassadors was present at all locations of negotiations, but instead of being at equal distance from the two conflicting parties, they used their meetings with the Sana'a delegation to pressure and threaten it about the cost of refusing the special envoy's proposal for resolving the conflict. Instead of addressing the concerns of the Sana'a delegation and helping to resolve them, they continued to demand implementation of Resolution 2216. This position was maintained until then-US Secretary of State John Kerry identified Resolution 2216 as the reason for the stalemate and, through the Omanis, brokered a breakthrough agreement with Sana'a delegates in Muscat in December 2015. Unfortunately, this US initiative, which might have revived comprehensive peace negotiations, came at the end of US President Barack Obama's term and was rejected by the coalition and the internationally recognized legitimate government.

Before his 2018 appointment as the UN special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths gave a lecture at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh in November 2017, in which he stated that the Yemen conflict was easier to resolve than the conflicts in Syria or Libya. Already known to be a strong candidate for the vacant Yemen special envoy position, his speech raised a great deal of optimism. Griffiths' hopeful prediction was probably based on his short visit to Sana'a a few months before his appointment during which he met with the Ansar Allah leadership.

After two and half years in the position, Griffiths remains optimistic, but this optimism is neither supported by the turns of events on the ground nor shared by Yemenis. It appears that Griffiths has fallen into the trap of false promises and assessments. He has pressed for the signing of agreements that had pitfalls and, worse, that lacked any real intent from the signatories to implement them. However, his biggest mistake came at the beginning of his mission, when neither he nor the ambassadors sponsoring the peace process had given thought to the best way for the new envoy to revive the political process. The strategic error made was to decide to start the process at ground zero instead of restarting from the outcome of the Kuwait negotiations and building on the principles for a settlement that were reached there. Losing sight of this point has led to the subsequent loss of direction.

The UNSC also cannot avoid blame for the turn of events in Yemen. First, it failed to realize that part of the lack of progress by the special envoys was the result of hasty and unbalanced resolutions, such as 2216, which the UNSC passed by consensus among the permanent members, acquiescing to the influences of regional players. The situation became worse due to UNSC reluctance to question why its resolutions were unimplementable or, as in the case of 2216, obstructive to achieving a settlement. An additional failure of the UNSC was its lack of serious consideration of the UN special envoys' briefings to find out the obstacles they faced. It may also be that the envoys avoided reporting on issues the major players wouldn't like raised, such as the negative impact of 2216 on the progress of the negotiations.

The inability of the UN to resolve Yemen's crisis is only one of its many failures in the region. These failures result from the UNSC's reluctance to explore the reasons for past missteps and change a false belief that appointing a new envoy would correct the course. Repeated UN failures to resolve conflicts are diminishing confidence in it, especially as the world sees the five permanent members of the UNSC putting their interests above the UN charter and the values of justice and international law.

Yemen stands today at a crossroads between reconciliation and peace, or becoming a hotbed for dissent, rebellion and regional instability that could spiral completely out of control. It is, therefore, time for the coalition and regional players to accept that the first step toward resolving Yemen's conflict is to abandon their hidden agendas and proxy wars that will not serve their long-term interests and regional stability. These players must instead join forces and work together to end the war and preserve a united and stable Yemen, which will partner with all in securing regional security, for the benefit of all.

The spoilers of peace and the beneficiaries of the conflict, whether warlords or arms manufacturers, must reconsider their positions in view of the devastation they are causing to Yemen, and in order to ease the danger of the spread of the conflict to other countries in the region. This is unlikely to be achieved without getting the non-Yemeni players to end their proxy conflict in Yemen. Therefore, there must be a fully concerted effort by the UNSC to sponsor regional and international powers to agree on a process for peace that will form the basis for Yemeni-Yemeni comprehensive negotiations. It must be based on bringing all Yemenis to the negotiating table, without any exclusions or impositions, and making it their responsibility to negotiate a peace agreement that is fair and equitable to all with the necessary guarantees and incentives from international and regional powers. At the same time, Yemeni spoilers to the process must understand that they will be held accountable for their obstruction of the peace process.



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