

THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE 4TH TH UN ENVOY TO YEMEN

DR. EMAN ZAHRAN

AN EXPERT IN THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE REGIONAL
SECURITY



SOUTH 24

The Opportunities and Challenges for the 4th UN Envoy to Yemen

Dr. Eman Zahran

An Expert in the international relations and the regional security

September 2021 | Analysis Paper



It has been Nearly 73 years since the emergence of the “UN International Envoys” pattern, under the category of “Bringing peace to the world”. It has intervened in more than 36 countries across different continents, sending about 100 envoys with different tasks including representatives of the Security Council and the United Nations, as well as mediators, regional and international coordinators and others. Although this pattern has made some acclaimed achievements, it still represents a small percentage compared with its failure. For example, the Yemeni arena has seen a failure of the three former UN Envoys in implementing their roles.

Noteworthy, the successive change of the UN envoys to Yemen, with no tangible results, risks weakening the role of the United Nations and highlighting the fragility of its movements, as well as raising doubts about its ability to make a more positive and effective mediation role for reaching an all-out political settlement in the Yemeni file. Thus, the announcement, made by the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, on August 6th 2021 about the appointment of the Swedish “Hans Grundburg” as a Special Envoy to Yemen, who officially assumed the positions at the beginning of September 2021 succeeding Martin Griffiths, stirs many questions about the odds of his success and the possibilities of adopting “new negotiation approaches”, as well the factors that may obstruct the special agenda of the fourth UN Special Envoy to Yemen, based on previous experience.

Entangled complexities

The continuation of the Yemeni War and the entanglement of its internal and external branches resulted in more political, security, and social humanitarian complications, which make the UN paths more difficult, along with the entanglement of the “regional conflict” pattern with various specific crises such as the Iranian nuclear file. All of this would affect the management of the “Yemeni file”. Moreover, the humanitarian situations, the poor infrastructure, the collapse of the service facilities, the internal fragmentation reality and the absence of minimum national consensus are factors that increase the difficulties related to traditional settlement paths, and the moves of the UN envoys to Yemen. After the end of his tenure as the third UN Envoy to Yemen, Griffiths summarized the nature of the coming situation by saying: “Over the course of the conflict, armed and political actors have multiplied and fragmented. Foreign interference has grown not diminished. What was possible in terms of conflict resolution years ago is not possible today. And what is possible today may not be possible in the future”. The following points monitor those successive UN stages:

The first UN Envoy, the Moroccan “Gamal Benomar”

IN April 2011, Benomar was appointed as the UN Envoy to Yemen, to lead the mediation efforts among the disputing parties, and the negotiations led to a power sharing agreement in 2015.

However, he adopted a flabby/fragile approach towards the Houthi that led to the failure of his mission, and he was forced to resign in April 2015. He was blamed as while the Houthi were demolishing the peace references resisting their implementation, the UN Envoy was negotiating with the Houthi leader, Abdulmalik Al Houthi, in Saada, about giving the group more positions and central roles in the transitional government. This came amid the Houthi attempts to create and consecrate a new reality in the country, and to complete the coup against the state and its legitimate institutions, as well as occupying Sana'a and other governorates.

The second Envoy, the Mauritanian "Ismail Ould Cheikh"

On April 25th 2015, after the resignation of Benomar, the UN announced the appointment of "Ismail Ould Cheikh " as its Envoy to Yemen, as a step towards enhancing the UN movements to restore the Yemeni legitimacy and solve the crisis. However, he was met with several barriers and obstacles due to the Houthi rebellion, despite his keenness during the three rounds of negotiations between the Yemeni parties, held in Kuwait and Switzerland, to resolve the crisis and to end the war, but he did not succeed in making peace because of the Houthi stubbornness, and their rejection of all peace initiatives, which forced him to resign on Jan. 22nd 2018.

The third UN Envoy, the British "Martin Griffiths"

He was appointed on Feb. 15th 2018 as the first "western" Envoy to Yemen, unlike his predecessors. He made some success in leading the Stockholm consultations in Sweden on December 13th 2018 ¹ between the delegations of the Yemeni government and the Houthis, In the presence of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, and the resulting Agreement that included a full cease-fire, all parties' military withdrawal from the governorate of Al Hudaydah, the supervision of local Forces on imposing the order in the city to keep Al Hudaydah as safe passageway for humanitarian aid. The Agreement stipulates also that the Houthis should withdraw from the city and the port within 14 days, and to eliminate any barriers or obstacles that hinder the local institutions' doing their jobs. Nevertheless, he failed at implementing the Stockholm Agreement due to the Houthi stubbornness and their evasive attitude towards applying any obligations under the international decisions. The flexibility adopted by Griffiths in the face of the Houthis' transgression, violations and assaults led to his failure as an impartial international mediator, who tried to be neutral towards all parties. This led to his failure, as he had to resign after sending a brief to the Security Council in March 2021, in which he described the situation in Yemen

¹ Full text of the Stockholm Agreement, December 13th 2018

[النص الكامل لاتفاق استوكهولم | OSESGY \(unmissions.org\)](https://www.unmissions.org/ocs/easydocedit.php?id=1144)

as “tragic” due to the Houthi attack on the governorate of Marib, as well as opening other fighting fronts in different governorates such as Hajjah and Taiz. In the same letter, he expressed his worry about the Houthi insistence on launching their Ballistic missiles and drones’ attacks against the civil and commercial Saudi infrastructure.

Accordingly, it's notable that the work paths of the “three Envoys” regarding the Yemeni file ended by obvious failure. Despite the differences in their time, contexts and agendas, there have been two common reasons behind those failure triggers:

- **The first reason** is that the failure was always a result of the Houthi stubbornness and the group’s attempts to forcefully dominate and control the field. This confirms that the main goal behind the Houthi participation in any negotiation tours is to procrastinate and create a new reality on the ground in their favour. For example, Griffiths declared 3 important features for the peaceful settlement path, including pulling out weapons, then a following transitional period that includes the Houthi participation in the government, and to hold elections afterwards. However, this plan was obstructed by the Houthi Intransigence.
- **The second reason** is that the international Envoys’ adoption of Permissiveness policy and providing concessions for the Houthis led to their failure due to their bias which enabled the Iran-backed group to implement its agendas to take over new locations for boasting its political and field bargaining cards, which make the situation more complicated.

The pillars of success:

THE fourth UN Envoy begins his new tenure amid the Yemeni file’s internal and external complexities and entanglement that constitute in their overall interaction 3 main challenges as follow:

- **The map of Yemen’s field components:** This can be clarified by showing the extent of their impact on the “political settlement” reality, based on one of the most important negotiation rules, that what happen on the “negotiation table” is just an extension to the field facts on the ground, which has been reflected in the magnitude of the field moves of both the Yemeni government and the Houthis to assert their strength for improving their negotiation position. For example, after the Houthi control on the capital Sana’a and parts of North Yemen, they are attempting now to control the oil -and- gas rich Marib, the last bastion for the Governmental Forces, as the Houthi Forces don’t respond to cease-fire initiatives. They believe that controlling Marib would impose a new field

reality, giving them the upper hand during the following negotiation process. This is considered a real test of the fourth UN Envoy's success to reach an imminent cease-fire, and to begin a political process that takes into consideration the common spaces regarding the aspirations of the interested parties and to impose mandatory implementation of it.

- The problem of trust-building measures among the conflicting parties: Complex wars, such as the Yemeni case, require that the "mediation strategy" are being based upon persuading the parties to implement "initial trust -building" measures, for gradually encouraging them to engage in negotiating major issues. In the article, we find that in recent years, the "Yemeni experience" has proven that this theory has failed to bear fruit, as the 2018- Stockholm Agreement between the recognized government and the Houthis has been unable to reach a permanent ceasefire despite its limited success in sparing the two sides a bloody confrontation in the Hudaydah, in addition to its role in the success of "Prisoners Exchange", which was considered a limited measure of "trust-building" without reaching a solution to the core problems. For example: The UN mission to monitor the Implementation of the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) failed to work in areas under the Houthi control. Moreover, the "Redeployment Coordination Committees" have been unable to resume work after the government suspended its participation in March 2020. The UN Envoy failed also to pass his four-points initiative, including "a cease-fire across the country, the opening of Sana'a Airport, the lifting of shipping restrictions in Al Hudaydah, and launching a political process." Therefore, the approach of relying on gradual progress in trust-building measures as a prelude to achieving a breakthrough in key issues did not succeed in achieving its objectives. Additionally, the adoption of a top-down solution strategy and focusing on mediation between two parties did not make any progress. Consequently, there is a determinative test to measure the extent of success of the new Envoy's mission, by reviewing "trust-building" strategies, and producing a new vision with which the various regional and international active forces in the conflict would engage. This is backed by the new Envoy's awareness of the full picture and all the previous UN experiences, as well as his prior political and field knowledge of conflict mechanisms and the reasons behind the failure of mediation initiatives in the Yemeni file, based upon his previous experiences as the European Union's Ambassador in Yemen.

- The variable odds of the division scenario/the federation: This point ends with a new challenge related to "the increasing possibility of Yemen's division". While the international community seek to achieve the requirements of a "political settlement" for resolving the Yemeni crisis according to the references of preserving the "unity of the Yemeni territories", but on the other hand, there are preferences towards dividing Yemen into two states, North and South, and returning to the pre-1990 situation. This has the support of people in the South and some external parties. For example, in spite of the alliance of the Southern forces with the governmental Forces in the war against the

Houthis in Marib, most of the parties feel the “temporary nature” of this alliance, as once the war ends, there is a possibility that the “STC” will seek to take the necessary steps to build independent institutions. These implicit interactions between North and South appear every now and then through the clashes between the two parties, while the 2019- Riyadh Agreement did not succeed in decisively solving this.

On the other hand, the Houthi control on Sana’a and Northern regions creates a problem of the possibility of establishing a state, controlled by the Houthis in North Yemen, as this Houthi perception- in spite of the availability of its determinants- won’t be met with the approval of the parties involved in the Yemeni issue, especially the KSA amid its political and ideological disputes with Iran and its regional arms, especially the Houthis. It is more likely that the Saudis won’t swallow the idea of establishing a state, on its southern borders, controlled by a group which is affiliated with Iran. Moreover, The USA, which took some steps for drying up the Houthi financial sources, and escalates its criticisms towards their Human rights violations won’t easily accept them as a legal regime which controls a state in North Yemen. This challenge tests the “adaptation mechanisms” of the new UN Envoy, and the tracks through which an agreement among the parties could be reached.

Consequently, the opportunities of the new UN Envoy’s success to develop a new approach and reach a political settlement that gather all disputing parties depends on changing some elements of the negotiation context including:

- **The creation of political attraction tools:** by finding the tools that are able to convince the Houthis of cooperating with the Envoy’s mediation efforts. For example, the “Iranian nuclear deal” card could be exploited to extract concessions which can be used in pushing the path of “settlement in Yemen”. The Yemeni file can be attached with the regional issues. For example, the Arab Coalition Forces can escalate its military campaign in Marib against the Houthis, to prevent its expansion, in order to confuse their negotiation strategy, based upon the “gains on the ground” principle, and push them to neutralize the field tool and complete the political negotiation process.

- **Structuring consensus approaches:** by developing negotiable political and strategic approaches of the Yemeni crisis that enjoy the acceptance of regional and international parties, based upon intensifying dialogue with the various groups in Yemen, and making use of local mediation initiatives that have been able to create common spaces of consensus on some basic elements, to pave the way for a possible peace agreement.

- **Reconsidering the UN references:** by presenting a possible new “UN reference” that takes into consideration the current field developments, as well as involving the various actors of the Yemeni issue in the current negotiation process. For example: the international resolutions on which the UN efforts have been based, especially Security Council Resolution No. 2216², have not helped in providing the appropriate negotiating framework for the UN mission. The International Crisis Group report, issued on June 18th, 2021, noted that the interpretation of Resolution 2216 acted as an obstacle to achieve progress towards a political settlement, and that many observers and politicians demanded for replacing it.³

- **Bargaining with the US card:** By exploiting President Biden’s vow, at the beginning of his presidential term, to end the war in Yemen, and the following serious steps which could be built upon in the UN mission, top of which are: firstly: the appointment of A Special US Envoy to Yemen, secondly, the coordination with Russia and benefiting from the outcome of its latest talks with different parties such as the STC’S leaders, Tariq Saleh, nephew of the former Yemeni president and the head of the Political Council of the National Resistance, and Ali Nasser Mohammed, the former President(of South Yemen state).

- **Balancing the humanitarian aid file:** By achieving significant progress in the humanitarian aid file, along with moving the political path forward, as it is not possible to achieve an appropriate environment for settlement negotiations among the various parties in a country described as witnessing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

The triggers of failure:

Although the increase of determinants that may support the chances of success of the fourth UN Envoy in the Yemeni file, there is a number of failure triggers, such as:

- **The confusion about the role of the UN Envoy:** as the failure of the former three UN Envoys created confusion in understanding the “Job role” of the UN Envoy, amid attempts to reduce his role and powers. For example, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, noted that the Envoy is not responsible for war or peace, and that his role is limited to present ways to diffuse conflict in front of the disputing parties. On the other hand, there are reservations about this description as one of the

² The UN Security Council NO. 2215 regarding Yemen [قرار مجلس الأمن التابع للأمم المتحدة رقم 2216 – وزارة الخارجية \(mofa-ye.org\) وشؤون المغتربين – الجمهورية اليمنية](#)

³ [A New UN Envoy is an Opportunity for a New Approach in Yemen | Crisis Group](#)

most important UN goals is to “achieve international security and peace”. Thus, if the Envoy is not responsible for war, he has to be concerned with achieving peace according to his mission. Therefore, the fourth UN Envoy should keep in mind the pursuit of opportunities and paths to achieve peace in Yemen.

- **The Internal complexities of the Yemeni society:** the former UN Envoys failed to understand the tangled complexities of the Yemeni society, including doctrinal, regional, cultural, social and political aspects. They ultimately engaged in dialogue with some political leaders and representatives of the civil society who don't represent the “large spectrum” of the Yemenis. Moreover, the tribal society and the clan impacts, as well as the effects of the “political money” are all tools which actively affect the continuation of the specific impasse status of the Yemeni file.

- **The regional entanglements on the Yemeni land:** Those complexities are represented in the support by regional countries to certain Yemeni parties against others. Therefore, the Yemeni war has become engaged with interests which are related to the regional influence of some states, or what is dubbed as “the proxy war” such as the Iranian, and sometimes, the Turkish intervention in the face of the Arab Coalition.

- **The continuation of the “negative flexibility” approach:** as the former Envoys constantly adopted policies of neutrality, motivation and flexibility towards the Houthis. This led to more Houthi military escalation, especially on the Marib Front, as well as continuous targeting of civilians and Saudi territory. This may push further complications towards prolonging the conflict.

- **The partitioning of peace negotiations “regionally”:** this means resorting to the outcome of the 2018 “Stockholm Agreement” as a basis to build paths for political settlement in Yemen. The Agreement's aim was to end the conflict in Al Hudaydah, which accordingly was delivered to the Houthis based upon the partitioning of peace negotiations “regionally”, as a humanitarian measure. However, this has contributed in prolonging the conflict, and the lack of a decisive peace process. There has been a selective approach towards the Agreement, as only its clauses, related to Al Hudaydhah, are what have been implemented while ignoring others such as opening crossings to the city of Taiz, which confirms the failure of such a partial settlement.

Accordingly, In spite of efforts made by some international parties to solve the Yemeni crisis, the reality confirms that there is international misunderstanding towards what happen in Yemen, and the magnitude of internal and regional complexities surrounding the existing crisis, which led to the failure of the UN “model approach” to reach consensus formulas towards achieving “political settlement” process in Yemen, especially that the international community approach in managing the Yemeni file is dominated by the traditional “bureaucratic type”, while the entire Yemeni issue

are affected by the emergent regional transformations like what happened in Iran and the impact of the nuclear Iranian file developments as well as the Iranian Presidential elections and the ascendance of Ibrahim Raisi. This is in addition to the international developments such as the variable impacts of the US Democrats' rise to power, and Biden's removal of the Houthis from the terror list.

Consequently, the "peaceful political settlement" process of the Yemeni file does not only require changing the UN Ambassador, in spite of his awareness of the internal overlapping components of the Yemeni crisis, and his long experience in managing conflicts. This requires searching for a new approach, different from the one adopted in managing the political settlement process in Yemen. The new UN approach should take into consideration 4 basic dimensions: to deter the Houthi stubbornness, to review the UN decisions according to the field developments of the Yemeni issue, working to restore the state's official and service institutions and the involvement of the civil society organizations, for establishing consensual formulas regarding the political settlement's nature and the determinants of a fair peace for all civilians.

The Opportunities and Challenges for the 4th UN Envoy to Yemen

Dr. Eman Zahran

An Expert in the international relations and the regional security

“The opinions expressed in the article are those of the author”

Cover: CANVA.COM

WWW.SOUTH24.NET



All rights reserved to South24 Center for News and Studies