

South Yemen Update

Dream no small dreams for they do not have the power to move the hearts of men

Newsletter of the Friends of South Yemen

Issue 25 JUNE 2022

Can the new presidential council seize the opportunity for peace in Yemen?

The Arab coalition worked on the formation of the presidential council in Yemen, a significant step towards establishing a united political and military front to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the Houthis to end the Yemen crisis.

The council itself comprises mainly of STC and GPC members with reduced representation of the Islah party. The new council, headed by Major General Dr. Rashad al-Alimi, will be in charge in a transitional phase.

In addition to the president there also seven vice presidents namely : Eidarous Qassem al-Zubaidi, Sultan Ali al-Arada, Tariq Muhammad Salih, Abdul-Rahman Abu Zara'a, Abdullah al-Alimi Bawazeer, Othman Hussein Megali, , and Faraj Salmin al-Bahsani. These members will share the title of Deputy Chairman of the Presidential Leadership' and are further supported by a commission of 50 members who will work in an advisory and consultative role with the eight-member committee. There are also separate legal and economic teams. The council will end its term upon election of a new president.

According to the presidential decree, the newly formed council has the authority to hold talks with Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis and find a solution to the incessant violence. Time will tell whether the council can function internally as a unified group or whether differences between and within the ruling council will begin to emerge particularly regarding the shape of the new politics, security and military developments.

I remain optimistic that the new leadership can draw upon the creativity and resilience of the Yemeni people and find ways of better governing the country. They of course, need to learn from the mistakes made in the past seven years by the Hadi regime. I suggest for the next phase that the following steps could be taken by the presidential council and the new government to enhance their chances of making progress;

1. The new Presidential Council should make immediate changes to the government and distance itself from political pressures in making government appointments, focusing solely on the candidate's ability and qualifications to carry out their role in the interests of the nation. The criteria for making appointments should be clear and transparent. Many of the appointments made during the last seven years have been done to please one political group or the other. A good example of this is the Yemeni diplomatic missions which are full of cronies unable to carry out their diplomatic duties. This has



resulted in a dysfunctional state with very little hope for change.

2. The Presidential Council should focus on the new government initiating developing and implementing a comprehensive economic reform program to improve essential government services like electricity supply, payment of salaries, improved security, job creation and fighting corruption. The Council with the new

government should initiate an Economic Transitional Plan solely focused on the liberated areas of the country and deal with these pressing problems.

3. The Presidential council needs to accelerate and double up the pressure on the Arab coalition as a matter of urgency to deposit into the Yemeni central bank the 3 billion dollars already earmarked to strengthen our foreign currency position and stabilise the local currency. At the same time, with the support of the UN, they also need to push for an urgent international aid conference for Yemen to ensure the flow of aid from international financial institutions in important donor-funded projects.

4. The new council and government should as a matter of urgency take charge of managing our oil and gas resources and initiating or igniting contracts with international companies to ensure we can economically benefit from high energy prices. Income from oil and gas must be under the control of the central bank and the new government with a clear chain of command.

5. A clear focus on running the city of Aden as a priority and ensuring that services to the city's inhabitants are delivered efficiently. Transferring central government powers quickly to localities (i.e. to cities, districts and provinces), including the transfer of local security arrangements to local governments, including traffic police and crime control is essential. This will ensure that government is brought closer to the people and will anchor decentralization at the local level to ensure services are functioning during the major process of establishing the future structure of the new state.

The reduction of the Islah party's influence in the new presidential council has brought the Arab coalition comprising of the two main partners, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, much closer together in their strategic approach to the crisis in Yemen. The practical step of removing Hadi and Ali Mohsen from the centre of power in Yemeni politics was welcomed by many Yemenis as a step in the right direction towards ending the crisis. The new presidential council is clearly trying to show it is different from the previous leadership which was seen by many as an external force living in their comfort zone outside Yemen in international hotels

ignoring the plight of their people. By remaining in Aden, the new presidential council has allowed the council to present itself as a unifier of Yemen’s anti-Houthi factions, working towards diplomatic and economic solutions and determined to govern the country from within.

Following more than seven years of warfare that have shattered the Yemeni state and left millions suffering from one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters, some believe there are grounds for being cautiously optimistic about the war winding down. The presidential council consists of members from northern and southern Yemen, an important balance considering the country’s regional divisions, and support for secession, even from within the council itself.

No doubt there will be some difficulties and obstacles between members of the northern-dominated General People’s Congress and the Southern Transitional council on some of the political issues that divide them. One distinct point of difference is the issue of Yemeni unification. However, it is more likely that the UAE and Saudi Arabia will intervene to resolve these differences between the new partners as they arise using their respective strong influence to iron out these difficulties to ensure the effective operation of the presidential council. This intervention was evident on the 22 May 2022 when the STC refused any official celebration events to be held in Aden on Yemeni unity.

Further financial support promised to the central bank and the improvements in essential services like electricity and payment of salaries would allow for a more pragmatic and effective presidential council and a new approach to engage all the warring parties in the expected forthcoming UN led peace talks. Any failure to ensure the operation of the presidential council will only lead to further political and military complications and significantly increase the suffering of Yemenis.

Yemen is already one of the most food-insecure countries in the world. According to UN estimates, more than 17.4 million Yemenis suffer from food insecurity, with an additional 1.6 million expected to fall into “emergency levels of hunger” in the coming months.

The Arab coalition has now made a series of concessions

to the Houthis in order to engage them in talks that would end military hostilities. The Coalition has implemented several key trust-building measures including allowing the removal of several oil tankers blocking supplies at al-Hodeidah port, which has allowed desperately needed energy supplies to enter Houthi-controlled territory.

On 6 May 2022, the Saudi government released some Houthi prisoners exchanged for prisoners held by the Houthis. Another significant step taken by the Arab coalition was to reopen Sanaa airport to commercial flights after six years of closure. Despite some technical difficulties the airport is now in operation - a measure that was welcomed locally and internationally. Throughout the two-month truce there has been no major exchange of military hostilities between the Houthis and the Coalition with minor skirmishes in Yemeni territory. The truce so far has proved a major turning point towards peace.

The new presidential council has on a number of occasions since its establishment signalled that they are ready to take important steps to engage with the Houthis in a peace process. The Houthis so far have not yet made a response with the same level of compromise. Their’ genuine engagement with this issue would be an important signal of their commitment to extend the truce for a further period and allow genuine peace talks to resume. However, they have continued to battle the forces of the internationally recognised government on key front lines, including in Marib – an oil-rich province east of Sanaa that the Houthis have long been trying to seize.

If the Houthis seize the opportunity for peace talks and are willing to end the military hostilities, this could create an opportunity for warring parties to engage in more constructive activities such as dealing with the dire economic situation.

The loss of such a significant proportion of the country’s source of wheat could fuel further extreme hunger and mass famine in the country, as well as a long-term political crisis that is not in the interest of Yemenis either in the South or North.

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