

**Interview of Al Arabiya with the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen  
Martin Griffiths, 22 February 2019**

**Talal**

Mr. Griffiths, the Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Yemen, welcome. We are so happy to have you once again among us on Al Arabiya.

**Griffiths**

Thank you very much for inviting me.

Thank you very much indeed. I mm very glad to be with you again.

**Talal**

On Tuesday you called on the parties to immediately implement the agreement of the first phase of the Hudayda redeployment plan. however, we have been reporting on Al Arabiya about the letter dated the 18<sup>th</sup> of February that you sent to the government of Yemen thanking their continuous commitment to implementing agreements especially with regard to the Hudayda agreement and promising your continued effort and with the support of the support mission and the United Nations and all parties to guarantee the mentioned implementation of the Hudayda agreement.

Can you explain to our viewers, sir, in your own words, phase 1 and phase 2?

**Griffiths**

Essentially, I think what has been agreed, and it is extraordinarily welcome that it has been agreed, is, as you said, the phase 1 of withdrawals in Hodeida of redeployments which we agreed together in Sweden on December 13<sup>th</sup> of last year, and that essentially includes a first step which is the redeployment of the Ansar Allah forces out of the two northern ports, Ras Issa and Salif, and secondly, in the second part of phase 1 still, redeployments out of Hudayda port itself by Ansar Allah and then some redeployments to the north and to the south by both parties in order to facilitate access to red sea mills.

As you know, we have all been very keen to get access to the Red Sea Mills which has up to 51,000 metric tons of wheat, sufficient to feed 3.7 million Yemenis for a whole month. so, it's very important to get that access. so, if we can get phase 1 done, as I hope we can, this will be a great day.

**Talal**

Despite your calls in the (Security) Council, for an immediate, immediate implementation of phase 1, we have not seen any tangible redeployment by the Houthis in the ports of Salif or Ras Issa until Thursday evening, until this evening. you called for immediate

withdrawal, and so far, we haven't seen anything. what can you tell us about any forthcoming withdrawal?

**Griffiths**

Well we're still wanting it. people don't always do what I tell them as you have probably seen. but the agreements that were made in that committee which met last Saturday and last Sunday in Hodeida, huge complement to government of Yemen delegation which crossed the lines, as you know, to go to the meeting in Hudayda.

Those 2 parties sat down for 2 days with general Michael Lollesgaard and they agreed on these redeployments. as you say, we are still looking for that process to start. I have every confidence that this will start very soon.

There is a lot of discussion about making sure that any redeployments that happen are properly monitored so that they can be verified internationally and appreciated, and we want to get this right and we want to get this done.

I am still very confident, indeed optimistic, in this particular case that we will see those redeployments happen.

This will be first time in years of this conflict that we see, based on a voluntary agreement between the two sides, redeployments of their forces. And we see that in Hudayda which is, as you know, I have said to the security council on more than one occasion, is the central gravity of this war, and the humanitarian hub that is needed for the humanitarian aid to all Yemenis. so, it will be a very good day when this happens and I am hoping and believing that this will happen within the next day or two.

**Talal**

You must appreciate and understand, sir, that the international community is rather doubtful about the implementation. we have seen what happened in December in Stockholm, the handshake, we have seen the timeframe then, 2 weeks or 3 weeks for implementation of the Hudayda agreement. Nothing happened on the ground, and I heard Karen Pierce, Ambassador Karen Pierce, the holder, the penholder on Yemen in the Security Council, say on the 19<sup>th</sup> to us reporters that they welcomed the agreement, the phase 1 agreement and phase 2, but it must be translated into facts on the ground. It is not enough to have agreements but they must be translated to facts on the ground. so, I am sure you appreciate the hesitance of the international community until they see action and implementation. Can you tell us a bit more, sir, on the details of the security forces to run Hudayda city and the ports after the mutual troops withdrawal?

**Griffiths**

I should first say that yes, indeed, we are all looking for both parties to translate promises into facts on the ground, and I am the one who has been talking to them in addition to General Michael Lollesgaard and so I can tell you that from my conversations, I have met

president Hadi 3 times recently, I have been in Sana'a actually every week also in the past period of these negotiations

and I can tell you, notwithstanding what you may see in the public domain, that the leaders of these parties are very committed to making this happen but it is not simple. It needs detailed operational planning which is exactly what goes on in that committee that General Michael chairs. We need to know exactly who is going to move along what line, to be monitored in which way, on which day and that is translating Sweden from 3 sentences of an agreement on this into detailed planning.

so I don't think it is that surprising that it's difficult to get it to happen according to a timeframe agreed in Sweden. My reliance is that the political will, that I see expressed to me very frequently, is in fact the determining factor which will turn those words into reality, as you rightly say.

The people of Yemen want to see facts on the ground and so do we all. When it comes to the issue of local security forces which you mentioned, I won't go into details because this is something which has now come back to me and to my office to resolve to the satisfaction of both parties, so that it will be clear what, in fact, will be the status of those forces, and how they will be managed, in a way that is loyal to what we agreed in Sweden.

That has come back to me to resolve and it is an urgent matter and we are keen to get this resolved in the sense of a mutual understanding and an agreement on what was agreed in Sweden and then we implement it, and I want that understanding to happen before we move to the implementation of phase 2.

and phase 2 of the implementation of the Hudayda agreement is, if anything, even more important than the first phase, because it essentially leads to the demilitarization of the city and returning the city of Hudayda to the civilian, peaceful life that it used to enjoy so long ago, will be an even more important day in the history of Yemen.

### **Talal**

I have mentioned the security arrangements because I can hear high officials within the coalition, within the government of Yemen, worried about Houthi withdrawals and if it's genuine withdrawals, not leaving members of the Houthis disguised as the local security people behind, and they want to verify this before declaring the genuine withdrawal, as they say. so that's why I raised it. But concerning Hudayda city, which is home to roughly 600,000 people, half of whom are children. Are you concerned if the redeployment of forces does not go according to plan that these people will be in greater danger than they are now?

### **Griffiths**

The agreement to provide for the demilitarization of the city and indeed the ports of Hudayda precisely is intended to allow those children, those women, those fathers to return

to a normal life in Hudayda. Life in the city of Hudayda, I have been there, more than once recently, it is no picnic what's going on there.

We need to return it to the kind of daily life which Yemenis want, as you know, across the whole of their country. The idea of this agreement is to show, for the first time, on the basis of an agreement between the parties and then their actions that this can happen.

and you know what is interesting already in Hudayda, in small ways, we are seeing people return to the city. I think it's about 150,000 people left the city in recent weeks because of the battle, some of them are coming back. Some of the shops are opening again. Some of the restaurants are opening. you see the small signs of life which, frankly, is the reward that the parties have for what they promised in Sweden and what they will deliver, I am sure, in the coming days and weeks.

**Talal**

Do we know when to expect negotiations to start in earnest between the parties on phase 2 to demilitarize Hudayda, as you said, and open the humanitarian corridor to the Mills on the Red Sea?

**Griffiths**

As you and I have discussed before and as you can imagine this is the primary focus of my attention and the attention of my colleagues, because Hudayda was never intended to be a solution to the conflict in Yemen as you know. It's a stop gap. it's an interim arrangement. it's there to make sure that that port delivers food to the 12 million people in Yemen who daily depend on it and that city is returned to normal life. but it is not a solution to the conflict. It is an achievement that the parties are giving to the people of Yemen on the way to a political solution.

so, we need to get back to consultations, in my view, as soon as we see tangible progress in Hudayda. I don't want to go to the next round of consultations, and neither does President Hadi and, I am sure, neither does the Ansar Allah leadership. I don't want to go to the next round to talk about Hudayda.

I want to go to the next round once Hudayda is on the road to what we promised the people of Yemen, and go to the next round to talk about what are the issues that we need to address to resolve the conflict permanently.

**Talal**

Do we envisage having these direct talks on the future of Yemen and finding a political, peaceful solution for the whole crisis so that the Yemeni people can start living again, can we envisage having these talks this summer?

**Griffiths**

Oh yes, indeed, I am sure we can envisage that. I am always cautioned, and as I think you know, I sometimes err on the side of speaking too much. I am always cautioned for not speaking publicly about timing of consultations, but my hope and my plan and my aspiration on behalf of the Security Council and my senior, Mr. Guterres, is that we will be able to reconvene those talks in the near future.

After we see that tangible progress on Hudayda, which shows that promises made at consultations lead to action, after that test, if you like, is passed by the parties, then I think we should not hesitate to go swiftly to the next round of consultations, and it should happen as soon as is practical at that point.

**Talal**

Let's talk about the second test of the confidence-building measures: prisoners release agreement, the agreement that was signed even before the parties left to Stockholm in December, on the release of prisoners, detainees, and kidnapped persons, which was signed, as I said, before they left. Have we seen any fruit for this agreement, and since the government announced they are ready to apply your principle "All for All", why the delays?

**Griffiths**

I am very glad you raised this question because it is very close, not just to my heart, obviously it is to us, but it is very close to the heart, it was the thing that President Hadi said to me when I first met him back in March, about a year ago now. The first thing he said was let us work to get all prisoners out, on both sides, all prisoners out. and a similar sentiment was given to me a few weeks later when I had my first meeting with Mr. Abdul Malik al-Houthi. So, it is a cherished ambition to get All for All prisoners out. but let me be clear. Getting all prisoners out, and that is our ambition and aspiration, doesn't meant to say that they all have to come out today. It means we have to work to get all of them out in a process of releases. my view, as I, indeed, said to the security council the other day, is that we have a proposal on the table which is being discussed between the parties that will provide for the release of a significant number.

Though, I know that unless and until both parties agree that this is one step in the larger process to get them all out, we need to reassure them on this, and once we have reassured them on this, I would like to think that we can get those prisoners who are currently verified as being in particular prisons and jails and being of good health, that they can be released with the help, as you know, of the international committee of the red cross.

I had the privilege a couple of weeks ago here in Amman, in Jordan, to sit with the president of ICRC, Peter Maurer, and he was telling me how committed his organization is to working very closely with ours, in fact, with the UN on this. it's a very, very important issue and I would love to see the day come very soon when we can get at least the first batch of prisoners out.

**Talal**

Mr. Griffiths, can you assure us and our viewers that prisoners who are not Yemeni nationals, that belong to countries friendly to the government of Yemen or from the coalition, will get a fair treatment also and will not be used by the Houthis as bargaining chips within this frame of prisoner exchange?

**Griffiths**

I can assure you, indeed, and I can point to the fact that a Saudi, by the way, one of those nationalities, a Saudi prisoner, tragically ill, was released unconditionally and unilaterally by the Ansar Allah a few weeks ago and because we all felt very strongly and I know they obviously felt very strongly in Riyadh as well for good reason, that there are cases where there should be unconditional releases, just allow people to go home. in this case this man was very, very ill.

and you know what happened after that? there was an equal act of generosity, an act of nobility, I think I described it as at the time, in which 7 prisoners, Houthi prisoners, were released and ICRC flew both of these parties if you like back home in the day or 2 after the decision had been made.

so, there isn't any sense that there's a conditioning by nationality. what we're trying to do, in great detail, by the way, with the parties, we've had 2 very long meetings in Amman, Jordan, thanks to the willingness of the government of Jordan to allow us to meet here, where we go through detailed lists of prisoners: are they alive? where are they? can they be released? in return for which? how do we get the numbers up so we can have a significant release that looks fair to both sides?

This is not a small matter. this is a detailed discussion. we have ICRC present giving us all the advice and support that we need, and we have a very good cooperation not only with the 2 parties but also with the coalition. so, I mean, I have no complaints about the efforts of all sides. I just hope that we can see that magic day soon when there will be that airlift of released prisoners going from one side to the other.

**Talal**

indeed, it's no small matter and it is a very serious humanitarian issue that affects the lives of thousands and thousands of families on both sides. I would like to move here to the Taiz understanding which is another part of the confidence-building measures

**Griffiths**

Exactly

**Talal**

Where are we on the Taiz understanding? are we anywhere closer? what small steps you have in mind to open a humanitarian corridor to the people in Taiz and stop the shelling and stop the sniper actions?

### **Griffiths**

Yes, Taiz is very important. Taiz is important in a different way. we've discussed it, again, you and I, before. and we agreed then that it was important, partly because Taiz is very important in the history of Yemen. it's a major population center as we know and it has been stuck in this gridlock of battle for years, and the specific focus, as you've just been saying, in an agreement on Taiz is to allow the free passage of people to go from home to work and back, or down that road that links Sana'a and Aden.

and then, secondly, of goods, both commercial and humanitarian, which are impeded or blocked by those same battle lines. So we want to do 2 things in Taiz.

over time, we want to start small and build to this, firstly we want to open some of the corridors that exist, that have been identified, to allow people to cross those lines. I think there are 3 of those potentially in the central area of Taiz which could be opened over time.

and secondly of course, we want to, as you say, to stop the war. let's see a local ceasefire. let's see what we can do with the help of United Nations and its Security Council to stop that sniping, stop those shooting, bring a certain amount of peace back - while we again focus eventually on the overall solution to the conflict.

now what have we been doing: since Sweden we have held a number of meetings with representatives from both sides separately, bilaterally, both sides, the government of Yemen and the Sana'a authorities have nominated representatives to this committee in Taiz that will eventually, and soon I hope, will meet together once we can find a safe place for that to happen.

We have had extraordinary levels of help and commitment from the leadership of both and I know that even just in the coming days, on Saturday, we will be holding a very serious meeting with the leader of the Government of Yemen part of that committee in Aden.

So we are slowly making progress, we need to find a safe place for the two sides to meet, we need to narrow down our aspirations to something small that can be done quickly, and finally what I think will be an unusual and important aspect of the work on Taiz is the involvement of civil society and women's groups.

I mean as you know it has been local women's groups who have been instrumental in the lead in arranging local ceasefires in these tortured years that the city and the governorate have suffered.

civil society, women's groups in the lead have been in the lead trying to do what we now want to follow up and help them to do. So there will be a large aspect in any program of

work in Taiz of the role of civil society, monitoring ceasefires. providing agreements, identifying priority needs for the humanitarian program, opening up that city so that it can play its normal role in Yemen which is to link the north and south of the country.

**Talal**

Where are we in the removal of landmines or the cooperation between the parties in the removal of land mines?

**Griffiths**

On the demining that is an absolutely essential part of these redeployments, each side is responsible principally for the demining of its own mines. they know where the mines are and they can pick them up, it is much safer that way but in addition the united nations has 2 teams under UNDP's remit, ready to demine in areas which go beyond immediate redeployment requirements.

and it is a massive issue because once we are able to demilitarize the city people won't be able to come back until it is safe and that means demining, getting rid of improvised explosive devices and so forth. There is quite a lot of work to do but so far the demining has principally been done by each party as agreed in that committee.

**Talal**

UK Ambassador Karen Pierce spoke about a possibility of a new Security Council resolution in consultation with your good-self. Do you see a need for a new resolution to reflect realities on the ground?

**Griffiths**

No I don't. I don't. in fact, far be it from me to take a different view from Karen Pierce who knows these things much better than I do but, from where I sit, I think we've got what we need in terms of resolutions to make Hudayda and the Sweden agreements happen. I think we have enough clarity about that and we have, as I was saying earlier, the political will, which is obviously the essential ingredient to turning words into action, we have that too.

and we have something which I know you and I discussed before Yemen is rich for a change and that is in the diplomatic unity in that council that you are referring to and more generally a diplomatic consensus in this region as well to resolve this conflict with all speed.

and there are many good reasons for that. one of which of course is the threat of famine and we are having a pledging conference opened by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Geneva on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, just next week, which will be seeking to raise 4 billion dollars for our humanitarian aid program for this year.



it's a vast amount and it is a massive program as you know. That is the backdrop which obliges us to go as quickly as possible, and I think encourages the kind of diplomatic unity that we see to move to the main event which is the political solution of this conflict.

**Talal**

The Yemeni Government in addition to governments within the coalition have complained that you don't call a spade a spade, meaning they are voicing concern when one party does not implement - you come out and say "the parties" did not do this or that, and they have raised this point with the Secretary-General as well. is it a fair complaint?

**Griffiths**

Thank you for the question. Let me just say that for those who expect me to pronounce judgements and to assign blame, they will continue to be disappointed. I am going to be who I am, and I will continue to be who I am. and I haven't assigned blame to either side except privately where I am very frank.

but my judgement is based on this: there may be some satisfaction in some quarters, and this goes across the political spectrum by the way, to finding fault with or assigning blame to one side or the other but does this actually in my view move us swiftly toward agreements and resolution to the conflict?

I don't think so. I may be wrong. I may well be wrong, in fact I am sure in many cases the judgement is very fine on this, but I will continue in what I think is the right thing and what I think many people would agree, which is we will find agreements. Blame is something which I am sure will come later. There will be many inquiries as to who did what to whom. That is not my business. my business is getting this conflict resolved as soon as possible.

**Talal**

Mr. Martin Griffiths, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, we thank you for this interview. We wish you all the very best of luck in your endeavors to bring peace to Yemen and to the people of Yemen.

**Griffiths**

Thank you, Talal. thank you to my favorite interviewer. I always really appreciate it. it is a very good experience, I am very grateful, thanks a lot.