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Jean-Marie Guéhenno:

I am Jean-Marie Guéhenno, Director of the Kent Global Leadership Program on Conflict Resolution, and I'm honored and delighted to welcome to SIPA, Vice President in the Presidential Leadership Council and President of the Southern Traditional Council, His Excellency, al-Zubaidi. You know, when he's at the center of things in Yemen, and he has very heavy responsibilities, and I think we all look forward to his remarks, and the meeting will be on the record. I'm also grateful to Independent Diplomat for having facilitated this invitation, and to Peter Salisbury, who is a great expert on Yemen, and is also a professor at Columbia University to have this conversation with the Vice President.

Thank you. Thank you. Okay, so now I'll have remarks from the President.

[Speaker 5]

(To get a sample of that, of course. We can hand them over to Sifah, yeah.)

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

I'm the Vice President in the Presidential Leadership Council in Yemen and President of the Southern Traditional Council. I founded the Southern Traditional Council in 2017 as a political ally for the people of the South, which has been fighting for 30 years to gain independence for the people of the South. I'm here today to deepen my understanding of the issue of the people of the South, and to show my vision of building a modern, peaceful, democratic, and endless struggle that has been going on for more than 30 years.

Building a better future requires a commitment to what has failed in the past, and to reflect on it. And from that commitment, for the sake of the single project in Yemen, which died in its wake, we have to admit today that no matter how hard we try, we will not succeed in uniting Yemen. The people of the South and the people of the North have always been different societies, with different cultures and visions of a different future.

The presence of the Southern Traditional Council has been one of the reasons why it was impossible to establish a peaceful coalition since the days of the first coalition, only four years after the independence of the South, and after a long series of operations that targeted 152 Southern political and military cadres in the two previous wars between the two countries, despite the fact that the battles took place on one side of the North, on the other side of the well-known base in the days of the Arabs and the Afghans returning from Afghanistan, because Yemen has not truly been at peace since then.

Today, the Houthis are occupying the North of Yemen, while we, the people of the South, are occupying the most of the free provinces, which make up 90% of the South, while the Houthis...

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Okay. The Northern Traditional Council is talking about what is going on in Iran, and it is establishing a future that will rule for a long time. I would like to start by saying that we, in the South, are committed to establishing the principles and values of freedom, democracy, and freedom of expression.

We believe in our great heritage, in the diversity of religion, and in the state of coexistence between the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic sects. We remember that this identity has been transformed by the Houthis in the North. I would like to say that our people in the South of Yemen will not accept a state ruled by the Houthis.

We have always argued that the only way to defeat the Houthis is through a strategic retreat in which the local, regional, and international communities participate. This requires the local communities, such as the Southern Transitional Council, to work closely with the international community in the region to defeat the Houthis. In this regard, we need the support of the South, and a military coordination with our allies.

Unfortunately, we have not been able to implement this plan. Instead, we have developed a plan based on the hope that the Houthis will be suppressed and terrorized in the areas of their control in the North of Yemen. It is up to the international community to realize that the Houthis cannot be contained in the North of Yemen unless there is a strong Southern coalition to provide an alternative that can be launched.

Meanwhile, the Houthis cause terror in the North. Therefore, we in the South must be ready to provide security, stability, and strength. For this reason, we cannot allow the South to be subjugated to a state of non-democratic political vacuum and mismanagement.

Instead, we must work to build a modern democratic circle that will provide a strong alternative to the Houthis. This is the best way to contain the Houthis, to prevent extremism, to limit poverty in the South, and to achieve minimum stability. There are two essential elements necessary to achieve this.

First, a peaceful process that can be launched. Second, a strong Southern government and the support of the people. Peace is our top priority.

The Southerners want peace, but we know that peace must be negotiated and with the support of our people, not from the Creator. Unfortunately, this is what happened in the South. This is the way for the United Nations to organize and share power between the leaders of Yemen and the Houthis.

In this way, it is the third way for the United Nations to prevent the loss of the Houthis, and to show the truth about them, and to prevent this accused agent of Iran from taking over Yemen completely. This will not be accepted by our people in the South, no matter the circumstances. Therefore, the path of the United Nations has ended, and Yemen needs a new peace process, away from the failures of the revolution that the United Nations led, and to be based on the facts on the ground that Yemen is destined to be destroyed.

This is the solution of the two countries. In this way, the United Nations will be a democratic state in the South, and a democratic state in the North, where the Houthis will be eliminated. The second way is that any peace process is intended to give the Southerners the rights of freedom and security, and to reduce their destiny to a real peace process.

The people of Yemen also need an effective government that can meet their needs, and help them achieve their aspirations. This is the goal of the Southern Transitional Council.

The presence of the Southern Transitional Council has included the government of Yemen and the Houthis, and to work to provide services to our people, but the government has been unified, and has faced challenges from the beginning, because of the way it was designed, because it is a structure that does not break the facts on the ground, and as a result, the government of Yemen is not able to meet the needs of the Southerners. In view of these challenges, the Southern Transitional Council is still a part of the government and is working tirelessly to achieve its goals. For example, we have worked with the government to open a new solar power plant in Shibwa, and we have worked with the International Bank to implement our ambitious plan to convert electricity into coal, and we have increased the real value of electricity by 40%.

However, despite our efforts, the government still lacks the capacity and resources to serve the people on the ground. For example, during the floods that we witnessed last month, the Transitional Council was forced to close the floodgates on the ground. Dear friends, the truth is that the current situation does not benefit us in Yemen, because at the end of the day, it will be a severe disaster instead of continuing to fix it.

We must ask for the support of the effective elements, so that we have the ability to provide a real alternative to the Saudis. Finally, we must re-establish the Yemeni government, so that it can provide a better solution for the people of Yemen and the people of the South, to realize their aspirations for the transition to the future, and to establish a political, democratic and legitimate government. This was my message to the international partners of the United Nations, and I look forward to any questions about the vision of the future.

Peace be upon you.

[Speaker 14]

Good morning.

Official Interpreter:

Thank you, Jean-Marie, for hosting us.

Thank you, Peter, for sharing this event. Thank you to those who have joined us here today for participating and taking your time to learn more about South Yemen. I am here today as both the Vice President of Yemen and the President of the Southern Transitional Council.

The Southern Transitional Council, STC, was established in 2017 as a political umbrella for the Southern people, who have been striving for 30 years to achieve independence for South Yemen. Distinguished guests, I am here to broaden and deepen the understanding of the Southern cause, and to set out my vision for how to build a peaceful, democratic South Yemen and put an end to a conflict that has lasted for more than 30 years. Building a better future requires us to acknowledge and reflect on what has not worked in the past.

Chief amongst these failures is the Yemen Unity Project, which collapsed at its inception. No matter how hard we tried, the effort to unite Yemen has not succeeded. The people of the South and the people of the North were and remain two different societies with different cultures and visions for the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, the impossibility of a harmonious union was laid bare in the earliest days of the union, just four years after the South gave up its independence and after a long series of assassinations that claimed the lives of 152 Southern political and military leaders were erected between the armed forces of the two states. That battle was decided in favor of the Northern side, back at the time by Al-Qaeda, then known as the Afghan Arabs, returning from Afghanistan, and Yemen has not been truly at peace since. Today, the Houthis dominate North Yemen, while we, the Southern Transitional Council, govern most of what are known as the liberated territories, representing 90% of Southern territory.

While the Houthis in the North seek to establish sectarian democracy modeled after Iran, one that builds the future of harmony and cooperation, we in the South are working to lay down the principles and values of freedom, democracy, and prosperity. We take pride in our proud heritage of religious diversity, including coexistence between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. This identity has faced systematic terrorism by the Houthis in the North.

Distinguished participants, our people of South Yemen cannot and do not accept a country that is ruled by Houthis. I have long argued that the only way to defeat the Houthis is through a comprehensive deterrence strategy that engages the local population, as well as the regional and international communities. This requires local forces like the Southern Transitional Council to work side by side with the international community and the regional actors to defeat the Houthis.

To ensure this strategy's success, we need air support, military coordination, and intelligence sharing with our allies. Regrettably, however, this comprehensive approach has not been implemented. Instead, the current approach seems to be one of containment, in the hopes that the Houthis will confine their oppression and terror to the areas they control in the North.

Distinguished guests, the international community must realize that the Houthis cannot be contained in the North without the presence of a strong Southern state capable of providing a viable alternative. Where the Houthis saw fear and suffering in the North, we in the South must be poised to provide loyal stability and strength. That is why we cannot allow the South to thrive into a vacuum of undemocratic political mismanagement.

We must instead build a modern, democratic, pluralistic state that can serve as a strong alternative to the Houthis, a viable alternative that can succeed. This is the best way to contain the Houthis, prevent extremism, reduce poverty in the South, and achieve regional stability. There are two essential elements needed to achieve this.

First, a viable peace process, and second, a strong Southern government with popular legitimacy. Lasting peace is our foremost priority. All Southerners want peace, but we know that for peace to last, it must be negotiated and owned by our people, not imposed on us from the outside.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what has happened. The UN roadmap emphasized the power-sharing arrangement between the members of Yemen's Presidential Leadership

Council and the Houthis. In doing so, the UN roadmap erases Houthi atrocities, whitewashes their crimes, and gives this Iranian-backed proxy the chance to rule all of Yemen.

Our people in the South will never accept this under any circumstances. The UN roadmap is therefore dead. Yemen needs a new peace process, unburdened by the failures of the past UN-led processes.

Reversed on the reality from the ground that Yemen is destined for its own two-state solution, one that returns to the pre-1990 situation with a democratic, pluralistic state in the South and a separate state in the North, where the Houthis can be contained. Ladies and gentlemen, any future peace process must guarantee Southerners their right to freedom, security, and self-determination. Alongside the genuine peace process, the people of South Yemen also need an effective government capable of meeting their needs and helping them realize their aspirations.

This is the mission of the Southern Transitional Council. Distinguished guests, the Southern Transitional Council joined the Yemeni government to confront the Houthis and to help provide services for our people. But the United Government has faced challenges from the outset because of how it was designed.

Its structure does not reflect the facts on the ground. As a result, the government of Yemen is not representative of who it governs, nor is it capable of meeting the needs of Southerners. Despite these challenges, the Southern Transitional Council remains part of the government and is working tirelessly towards its goals.

For example, we work with the government to open a new solar power station in Shabwa, and we are working with the World Bank to implement our ambitious plan to transform electricity in Aden. Our economic measures have strengthened the value of pyramid riyadh by 40%. But the reality is that despite our efforts, the government still lacks the capacity and resources to serve the people on the ground.

For example, during last month's devastating floods, the Southern Transitional Council had to step in to fill in the gaps in the humanitarian response. The stark reality is that the status quo in Yemen is untenable because, ultimately, it is a deeply divided country. Rather than continue to insist on a fair union, we must support those actors that can provide a genuine alternative to loboties.

In conclusion, we must restructure the government of Yemen so that it better represents the population that it actually governs. My promise to the Southern people is to fulfill their aspirations to determine their own future. Our people deserve a democratic, legitimate, sustainable political unity.

This is the message I shared with international partners at the United Nations General Assembly, and I look forward to answering any questions about our region for the future. Thank you very much.

[Speaker 9]

We'll have a nice fireside chat.

Peter Salisbury:

Good evening. My name is Peter Salisbury. I am an assistant adjunct professor here at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

I am a former journalist and where I worked extensively in Yemen. And I'm a fellow at Century International, a think tank here in New York, where I lead a project on illicit trade in the Middle East and North Africa. Vice President Zubaidi and I have encountered each other on a number of occasions in the past.

Before we get to some of the very interesting comments from his speech, I'm just going to give you a little bit of background on where we're at in Yemen, a little bit of background on sort of the times we've met before. But first, I'll let the interpreter catch up. OK, so where is Yemen today?

Three years ago, a ceasefire was agreed, a truce between the internationally recognized government of Yemen and the Houthi movement that controls much of the northwest of the country. Concurrently, a new executive administration was formed, replacing President Abdullah Abu Mansur Hadi.

As I said, three years ago, after a number of years of conflict, after seven years of armed conflict, a truce was agreed in Yemen between the Houthis who control the northwest of Yemen and seize much of the north of the country between 2014 and 2015 and Yemen's internationally recognized government, then under the auspices of President Abdullah Abu Mansur Hadi. Shortly afterwards, President Hadi ceded power to a new executive body, the Presidential Leadership Council, which is made of a president and seven vice presidents, of whom Vice President Zubaidi is one. After that, Saudi Arabia and the United Nations pursued a roadmap to political talks to end the conflict sustainably.

But after the 7th of October 2023, the Houthis decided that they would quite like to join the regional conflict as part of the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance and started targeting shipping in the Red Sea and latterly Israel. In March of this year, the United States entered the fray, started bombing Houthi positions in Yemen, but in May agreed a ceasefire with the Houthis themselves. And to this day, Israel and the Houthis continue to launch what you could call tit-for-tat attacks between the two of them.

Yesterday morning, a Houthi drone struck the outskirts of a hotel in Eilat. And just as we were entering this room today, IDF strikes hit positions in Sana'a in the north of the country. So we have a very strange situation in Yemen, where we have an internal, extremely unstable truce, but the country is also part of a highly regionalized conflict in which the United States also has a truce with the Houthis themselves.

I apologize if that was a lot.

Official Interpreter:

I'll try my best. Okay, so... (translation)

Peter Salisbury:

The next decade plus was the leader of a pro-independence movement called Hatem, and would have been described by people like me, journalists, as a southern rebel at times. So I

have next to me a gentleman who has been a soldier, he has fought for independence, he has been a rebel, he has been the governor of Aden, and now he is both the vice-president of Yemen and the president of a body that seeks independence from the same country which he is the vice-president of.

Official Interpreter:

Before the war, President Aidarous bin Qasim al-Zubaidi was a member of the People's Republic of Yemen. In 1990, there was a truce between the south and the north, and in 1994, the north attacked the south, and President Zubaidi was one of the resisters to this attack, and he established the Hatem movement, the movement to change destiny, so we consider him to be the southern revolutionary who resists and defends the revolution, and he was the governor of Aden, and now he is the president of the Southern Revolutionary Council, and the vice-president of the Presidential Council.

Peter Salisbury:

So before we get into the contentious politics of modern Yemen, I'd quite like to take a little bit of a walk down memory lane and ask the vice-president to reflect on this evolution from his time in the socialist south, to being a rebel leader, to his current position. Can you reflect on that journey from the 1990s to the current day?

Official Interpreter:

I'd like you to express your opinion on this long experience of your history as a rebel, and what you feel about it now, the historical experience.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

First of all, of course, I'd like to thank this great scientific platform for hosting us today, and through this platform, we were able to embark on our journey, which may have lasted up to this moment, maybe 30 years, of course. Of course, my name is Aydan Othman bin Abdulaziz Zubaydi, I was born in 1967, in the same year that the Republic of Southern Yemen was established or recognized. As I mentioned earlier, we studied elementary and high school in the province of Dhale, which is hundreds of kilometers away from the capital, Aden.

We entered the Air Force Academy, and graduated in 1988 with a second degree, and began our military career, of course. Translation?

Official Interpreter:

Thank you very much for you here, for us, for being in this very distinguished scientific and academic institution. I was born in 1967, the same year when the South obtained its independence from the British, and I studied my elementary, middle and high school in Al-Dhale, which is about 30 kilometers from Aden. And then later on, I joined in 1980, the Aviation College in Aden, and I was graduated from that college as a second lieutenant.

In 1980, I graduated from the Aviation College as a lieutenant, and this is my brief background so far, yes.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

As I mentioned earlier, after 1994, and the war that broke out in the north and the occupation, the story began, of course. We said to ourselves, as officers of the army outside

our institution, and we said to ourselves, without a homeland or an identity, of course. From this point, the story began.

Official Interpreter:

In 1994, when the war started between the north and the south, and we saw the army for the north conquering the south, we found ourselves as being officers of the south, that we need to do something and to face this threat. And then, we did a lot of resistance to the occupation.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

In 1996, of course, we started with the army officers inside, and in communication with the White House and some officers abroad, we established the Reductionist Movement, Hatem.

Official Interpreter:

In 1997, we did the communication with the officers inside Yemen, inside Aden, and also at the outside, with the coordination of the former president, Ali Samer Bidh, and then we established our movement, the Hatem, which is the movement to self-determination. So, we started our secret activities with the aim of regaining our right for independence and to regain our state, the southern state, which was merged with the north in 1990.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

We worked in two paths, the path of resistance and the path of political work, represented by the Popular League at that time, and continued for two years, from 1996 to 1998, and in 1998, the death penalty was imposed and the entire region was bombed by the former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Official Interpreter:

So, we started our resistance on two sides, on two areas, the political side as well as the popular committee organization side, during the year from 1996 to 1998, and then the former president of the north, Ali Abdullah Saleh, issued a rule against his life, what do you call it?

[Speaker 6]

A death sentence.

Official Interpreter:

A death sentence, sorry, yes, a death sentence against our president, and they started, they bombarded actually the area where the president was there, in Al-Talab.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Of course, the movement began in all the southern provinces, and military training began for some officers and youth, and the resistance began to spread in all the southern provinces.

Official Interpreter:

Then, we founded the movement in different parts, and then it spread over to different areas. And the main drive and the main goal was to regain our state that was hijacked in 1990. Now, our area is being liberated fully from the northern forces.

Peter Salisbury:

Just to note, and not to push back too much, I should note that Ali Salam al-Bidh, who was the leader of the Hiraq, the southern movement, did enter willingly into unification with the north, is that correct?

Official Interpreter:

Was the former president, Ali Salam al-Bidh, who was the founder of Hiraq, the resistance movement in the south, did he enter into unification willingly?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

We wish him a speedy recovery. If he was healthy, he would have entered into unification.

Official Interpreter:

We are wishing him good health now, because if he is in good health, he should have answered that question fully.

Peter Salisbury:

Sure. But just to note, the north and the south willingly unified, so could you maybe tell us why there was this strong push in 1994 to separate from the north, and why that desire for a southern independence has continued since?

Official Interpreter:

Why was there a strong push in 1994 to separate the north? The second question was what?

Peter Salisbury:

I mean, it just continues, I'm saying, why the attempt to secede in 1994 and what are the drivers, the motivators, for the continued desire for independence?

Official Interpreter:

And what are the reasons for this desire to separate from the north?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Of course, I was in my late 20s, I'm not a political person, but according to my estimates, the first constitutional referendum and the first parliamentary elections were the ones that revealed the secret. They were the ones that showed us, as southerners, that we are about 20% of the parliamentarians, and this percentage put us out of the political equation.

Official Interpreter:

So, when I was 28 years old at that time, I was not really engaged fully in politics, but then we felt that the referendum on the constitution at that time, and also the parliamentary elections that followed, our participation was very weak, it was only 20%. This raised an alarm in my head about the situation, and where it's headed to.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

After the referendum on the constitution was announced by the people, of course, Ali Abdullah Saleh assured that the matter became under his control in a democratic way, and also the first parliament of the Yemeni unity was the percentage of southerners, 18%, and the percentage of the north, 82%. So, the matter was completely separated from the power.

Official Interpreter:

This first referendum on the constitution allowed the former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to feel relieved, because he gained the democratic mandate, and then we found the participation of the south was not more than 18% in the parliament, in the first parliament, and the northerners were occupying 82%. The southerners tried to review the agreement, but it was too late to do that.

Peter Salisbury:

Thank you. So, there was a loss of power in the south, the sense was that they did not have agency over their parts of the country, the country writ large, and maybe the way they had anticipated.

Official Interpreter:

So, they were looking forward for better results in the parliamentary elections, but then it was too late to take care of the results at that time.

Peter Salisbury:

Well, for those of you who attended the International Conflict Resolution course at this school, you will note that power-sharing agreements are often challenging, and elections can lead to armed conflict. Let's bring things closer to the present day. At this moment in time, you navigate these very challenging dual roles.

You are the president of the Southern Transitional Council, on the one hand, and you're the vice president of the unified Yemen's executive. You've just given what I think one could describe as a quite fiery speech, and I believe that you have declared that you think that unity in the future is not possible. Did I capture what you said correctly?

Official Interpreter:

When you were studying the International Conflict Resolution, you mentioned power-sharing agreements, and there is an agreement on power-sharing to resolve conflicts. You are now in two positions, you are in the Presidential Council and also in the Southern Transitional Council. You have now reached a point where it is impossible for this unity to continue.

Isn't that so? Of course. The continuation of the union while Houthis are present is really an impossible thing to last or to continue.

Peter Salisbury:

Right. But then we do have this fundamental challenge, don't we? Where the PLC is made up of many people from the North, the president is a northerner from Taz, we have Tariq Saleh from the North, we have Sultan al-Radha, who is the governor of Marib, also part of the Presidential Council.

So a large part of the Presidential Council seeks to create preconditions for an end to the conflict, that like yourself, means the Houthis are no longer in power in the North. But your answer seems to be, unless I'm incorrect, more to do with obtaining for your side, if you like, independence in the South, and these colleagues of yours right now would really be left to fend for themselves. Is that fair?

Official Interpreter:

As for the Presidential Council, of course, the Northerners, I mentioned their names, like Rashad al-Aleemi, and all the members of the Presidential Council belong to the North, there are four of them, they belong to the North. Now, if I understood you correctly, if you want to separate the South from the North, how would that be for those members of the Presidential Council? Wouldn't that be an unusual situation for them?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

No, for them, of course, as Northerners, we are only 10% of the liberated areas. As Southerners, we are 90% of the liberated areas, that is, the whole of the former South Yemen is liberated. So this is a logical situation for us, whether it is elections or a referendum on the fate of the report, we are ready for it.

As for the Northerners, this is a matter of course in our lands, and they can continue with us as good citizens in the South.

Official Interpreter:

For the Northern members of the Presidential Council, they are really not controlling more than 10% of the liberated territories. They control or represent not more than 10%, while the Southerners are representing 90% of the liberated territories. So if you do, for example, a referendum or any attempt to know the opinion of the people there to determine their future, you will find that the majority is going with the South.

But for those who are in the North, they are living in our territories mainly, and they can leave and continue living like good citizens as others. They used to have a chance, they were given a chance. They were provided with the chance, with the opportunity during the last eight years when the Arab Coalition supported us for them to really raise up and then liberate their territories, but they didn't do anything. But contrary to that, we are in the South.

During three to six months maximum, we were able to liberate our territories from Houthis. 10% of the liberated territories, of course.

Peter Salisbury:

So how then do we navigate this tension? How do you work with your colleagues in the PLC on a day-to-day basis when this is your position? What are the challenges in working with colleagues who have a very different vision of the future for Yemen?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Two days ago, we had an interview with Sky News Arabic.

Official Interpreter:

The media, the lady who was presenting me in this interview, she asked me about the recent decrees that I took, I signed recently in Aden. I told her that this is really a Southern right. We are exercising here since we are in charge of 90% of the liberated territories.

In fact, this government and the PLC, they are really supposed to be 100% from the South. There is a mistake that the Northerners rule the Southerners without the Southerners being there to say something. This is wrong and the equation is a political mistake.

Peter Salisbury:

So what then is your solution? What is the solution for Yemen?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Since the Houthis are a terrorist organization that was formed by the United States and the international community, we have committed and agreed with the Arab League and the international community that we will fight the Houthis until the last moment. We are committed to the Presidential Council and the Presidential Council in respect of the international community and the neighbors.

Official Interpreter:

We are doing our part in coordination with the Arab Coalition as well as with the international coalition against the Houthis. And we are in the PLC are united on this issue to fight the Houthis.

Peter Salisbury:

But then I will give you an example. Earlier this year, during the American airstrikes on Yemen, there was an opportunity, it has been widely argued in Yemeni circles, for the PLC to formulate a military campaign to at a minimum put pressure on the Houthis and force them to the table. The claim in media, and maybe you can tell me this is wrong, was that because the PLC could not work together for a variety of reasons, including these differences over the future of Yemen, over power sharing within the PLC, it was not possible to formulate a unified campaign.

So on the one hand, you're saying the PLC is united in the fight against the Houthis, but these tensions may also play a role in limiting their ability. Is that fair? Do you disagree with that position and that view?

Official Interpreter:

At the beginning of the year, when the United States launched the Houthi bombing, the Presidential Council did not work together to benefit from this new situation and the Houthi situation. On the other hand, you're saying that the Presidential Council is united against the Houthis, but because of the problems and tensions within the Presidential Council, and the disagreements within the Presidential Council, the Presidential Council was not able to form a state. What do you think about that?

I disagree with you on this. I really disagree with you on this.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Please. Yemen is a two-state state. A state in the south and a state in the north.

When the war broke out in 2015, and the Arab League intervened, the state in the south was liberated within 90 days. The state in the north has not been liberated for 10 years, despite the fact that every day there are fighting operations, with Arab support and American and non-American support, but nothing is happening.

Official Interpreter:

Yemen is actually two states. And since the war in 2015, when the Arab Coalition intervened in the war against the Houthis, it took the southerners only three months to liberate their territories, while the northerners have been really, for 10 years now, they could not do anything against the Houthis. Despite all the support that they are getting from the Arab Coalition throughout these 10 years.

The conclusion is that the north will not be liberated from the Houthis, unless there is an independent state in the south that is strong enough to confront the Houthis. And this state in the south will be supported by the region, as well as by the international community. Without this solution, we have already been trying for the last 10 years solutions, but they were not really working.

And this is the only choice, the only chance to contain the Houthis and dismantle their forces. These are our options.

Peter Salisbury:

So what then is the solution in the near term? You said that you propose reform within the PLC. Clearly, you would like for the south to be internationally recognized as an independent state.

What is the timing on this? And what does reform within the PLC look like?

Official Interpreter:

You said that you propose reform within the PLC. And at the same time, you are calling for the establishment of relations and the establishment of the Southern Revolution. What is the timing on this?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Within the PLC, we have a common goal in all political institutions, to fight against the Houthis to the end. And this goal is still there. And it does not mean that we in the south will achieve our goals in a transitional phase.

Official Interpreter:

The current objective of the PLC, the Presidential Leadership Council, is to confront Houthis. But this doesn't contradict our efforts to establish our independent state. But of course, we are talking about a transitional period that would allow us to go to that end, to get this objective of a free south, of independence of the south.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

This transitional period will accommodate both aspects.

Official Interpreter:

First, that we answer the aspiration of the southern people for their independence and freedom. And also at the same time, we join the force against Houthis and to contain them or defeat them.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

And we will continue with this strategy.

Official Interpreter:

We will cooperate fully with the international community to contain Houthis, because as long as the Houthis are in power, there will be no peace and no stability in the region.

Peter Salisbury:

So I'm still not quite sure on how you suggest that we reform the PLC though. And I wonder if you could just...

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

The strategic objective is there. And we all agree on it, that defeating the Houthis.

Official Interpreter:

There are some details regarding the structure of the government. We are looking for a government that's more effective and has more active rule. I'll give you just an example.

Recently, when we were working with the revenue system, one of the main disagreements within the PLC on this issue was the existence of a parallel government in Ma'rib region. And that government in Ma'rib, local government in Ma'rib, really weakened the main government of the PLC. And in Ma'rib, for example, there were a lot of revenues not being sent to the central bank, to the central government.

Many military officers were not really under the command of the defence ministry of the central government. And many other things that really weakened the functionality of the central government. The president of the PLC, he failed really to control or convince this parallel government in Ma'rib to join the central government in Aden.

And he failed also to force this government in Ma'rib to send the remittances and the revenues to the central bank in the central government during the last four years. These are central causes that are really very striking and very clear.

Peter Salisbury:

I'm really not trying to be provocative here. I'm just interested to know, you spoke yourself, you talked about an interview with Sky News in Arabia, where you talked about appointments that you yourself made without consulting other members of the PLC. Doesn't that sound a little bit like a parallel government as well?

Official Interpreter:

Of course, I'm not trying to be provocative here, but you had conversations with Sky News and other activities without consulting the PLC. Do you think this is normal? I came here without consulting, and this is my right.

I just came here to this university without coordinating with the PLC.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

This is my right as a leader. I'm talking about facts that are 100% real. I'm not talking in front of the media and I'm not talking in closed rooms.

Official Interpreter:

I'm very clear, I speak about facts and truth, and I'm not going to hide myself or speak from behind in closed rooms. I want to correct the situation. And I'm working with them there, with some members.

We want to achieve something on the ground and we want to contain the Houthis and solve the problem.

Peter Salisbury:

All right. I'm going to ask two more questions with my chair's prerogative and then I'm going to turn it over here to the floor. What I'm going to ask people to do in just a moment is to start raising hands if you would like to ask a question.

A gentle reminder to those present, a question is where you ask something of the speaker. It is not where you yourself take five minutes to make a speech. If you decide to do so, I will cut you off.

I'm very, very sorry. Two more questions for you before we get to questions. First, the role of Israel.

Israel has been bombing the Houthis increasingly intensively. You yourself said that a future STC or southern state could sign the Abraham Accords and could make peace with Israel. Does this suggest that you think that there is some form of future strategic partnership between either the PLC or the STC and Israel?

What do you see the Israeli role? How do you read it within the conflict completely objectively? And then what do you see your own organizations or if there were a southern and independent south, what would their relations be with Israel?

Official Interpreter:

As you know, Israel has bombed the Houthis. And, of course, you said about the future that there is a possibility for the southern state to sign an agreement with the Abraham Accords. So, what is the relationship now between, for example, the Presidential Leadership Council and the Transitional Council regarding the relationship with Israel?

And what is the role of Israel that you think there could be if the Abraham Accords were signed?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Thank you very much for asking this question. It is an important question and this forum is also important and well-known and prominent. We will look at all from this point of view.

Official Interpreter:

Thank you very much for asking this question. And I'm really happy that I'm going to answer it now in this particular institution, which is very important and has a very academic status that is important for us. And I'm trying to answer this question.

As you know, we have this Palestinian question that's lasting for more than 70 years now. And as you know that there are many recognitions of the Palestinian state now with a few objections and see that this has been really the center of the attention of the world nowadays.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Today I was listening to the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the United Nations General Assembly.

Official Interpreter:

He said that we recognized Israel in the Oslo Agreement for the Israelis to recognize the Palestinian state, the Palestinian entity. So if the state of Palestine is being recognized, I strongly believe that the Abraham Accords will be successful. And the Palestinian state will be part of this Accord, the Abraham Accords.

And if there is no recognition of the Palestinian state, then the Abraham Accords will not really be succeeded forever.

Peter Salisbury:

So you wouldn't join the Abraham Accords unless there was a Palestinian state.

Official Interpreter:

Without the recognition of the Palestinian rights, it would be very hard for us to join the Abraham Accords at this moment in time. So we have seen that in Oslo, both the Palestinian and the Israeli sides, they agreed to ensure reunification among themselves, so there should not be a problem. Once they reach that, it should be easy for others to follow.

So once the Palestinian state has been recognized, I think it will be very easy to expand this agreement of the Abraham Accords, and then I'm sure that the Palestinian state itself will be part of the agreement. And then the same thing, the Arabs and Muslim communities and states will recognize Israel, as long as Israel is recognizing the Palestinians.

Peter Salisbury:

And now the last question, if we start three years or two years from now, will there be peace or war in Yemen?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

Of course, we in the Transitional Council, and as South Sudanese, and even in the Presidential Council, we all want to spread peace. But in the presence of the Houthis, there is no peace in the presence of the Houthis. But we want to spread peace in every sense of the word.

Peace is a strategic goal for all of us.

Official Interpreter:

We all, including the STC, we are looking for peace, and we'd like to have peace in general. So that's our goal, our main goal.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

And I'm sure that once we get through the Houthis, peace and stability will prevail in our country.

Official Interpreter:

And then there will be a long stability in the whole Middle East region. So Houthi is the last proxy of Iran in the region, and then once they are done with the Houthis, then more peace

and stability will be prevailing in the whole region. We will coexist as neighbors with everybody.

But Houthis must vanish.

Peter Salisbury:

All right, Vice President Zebedee, thank you for answering my questions, and now questions from the floor. I believe we have someone here.

[Speaker 13]

My question is, if your vision comes true, and you say, so what would be your stance for development environment in the Middle East?

Official Interpreter:

Good. This is very excellent. Very excellent question.

We are in our state, we already had the experience since from 1967 to 1990, where we had a state that ensured the equality of men and women in society. And this equation of equality prevailed throughout this period from 1967 to 1990, and it is one of the famous cities, cosmopolitan cities, where everybody coexists in justice and in harmony. And also it has been really playing a role for ensuring the rights of the citizens, irrespective of their background.

So, like syndicates also, freedom to establish the unions and syndicates movement was very open and very flourishing at that time.

Peter Salisbury:

Thank you. We got the gentleman with the baseball cap. Do you want to stand up and introduce yourself first?

[Speaker 12]

Assalamu alaikum. Wa alaikum salam. I'm Abdullah.

I'm a student here at Columbia. And my question is, looking back at your career to fight for the liberation of the people in the South, what is one thing that you would have done differently in your career and in that situation?

Official Interpreter:

We have been really doing a lot to liberate the majority of our territories, and just a little bit remains for us to regain the control of other territories. And that's going to be soon. Sorry.

[Speaker 9]

He said that we control all the territories and we're just waiting for the international recognition of our state.

Official Interpreter:

Sorry for that. Thank you.

Peter Salisbury:

The lady at the back here.

[Speaker 7]

My question was, in your future aspirations, if you see a role for other Arab nations to play, and if so, how would you want that they respond?

Official Interpreter:

For the Arab? Sorry.

[Speaker 7]

If you desire other Arab nations to be involved in your future aspirations, and if so, how?

Official Interpreter:

Okay. If you desire other Arab nations to be involved in your future aspirations, and if so, how?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

For the Arab nations, of course, we are in constant contact with them and we explain our cause, and they know that we were a member of the Arab League, and a member of the United Nations, and everyone knows the political map, our flag, our currency, our e-mail, so this is not strange to them, and I think that one of the factors for the stability of the region is the recognition of the Arab countries and the international community.

Official Interpreter:

We are really in continuous contact with our Arab friends, different Arab nations. They know very well that we were members in the United Nations and also in the Arab League organization, and they know about our flag, they know about our currency, they know about everything, so that's been for a while, for a long, long time, and we, of course, we are still continuing our efforts to seek their support to our struggle. Thank you.

We have the lady here.

[Speaker 15]

Hello.

[Speaker 14]

Hello.

Official Interpreter:

I was hoping that you could speak to the role that the U.S. and other Western countries will play in the future in defeating the U.S. I would like to clarify how the role of the international community and the U.S. will play in supporting the goals of defeating the Houthis.

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

The United States has classified the Houthis as terrorists, and the United States is in control of this planet, so any support from the United States will achieve complete success for the Houthis or non-Houthis.

Official Interpreter:

As you know, the United States has listed Houthis in the FTO list, the Foreign Terrorist Organization, and America, the United States, is a global power, and they are very important in the fight against the Houthis. The United States is leading an international coalition against terrorism. Any gathering that the United States or any coalition the United States establishes is for sure to be a successful one.

We will be on the ground helping our friends in the United States to achieve that goal of counter-terrorism and defeating terrorism. We are a truthful partner. We are a faithful partner with the United States.

Peter Salisbury:

Thank you. Do we have one more question there?

[Speaker 11]

I have one online. What went wrong in the National Dialogue Conference 2013-2014? What should the international community learn from it?

Official Interpreter:

What were the mistakes in the National Dialogue Conference in 2013-2014, and how could it be overcome?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

The National Dialogue Conference overcame the Southern Movement and the Southern Resistance, and there was no representation.

Official Interpreter:

This strategic mistake that was committed during this National Dialogue Conference was that this conference has excluded the Hiraq, the peaceful Hiraq movement, the peaceful movement in the South. So they were not represented in that conference. So the organizers of the conference brought other people from the South, but they were not represented in the movement of the South for freedom.

This is a strategic mistake that they committed at that time.

Peter Salisbury:

We have Jean-Marie.

[Speaker 8]

While you are concerned about your Netherlands not supporting you on the financial issue which you mentioned is correct, is it not a good idea that you have to fight against two enemies that are non-partners? One is Houthis, the other is your partners. Will it not weaken your fight against Houthis?

Will Houthis strengthen your internal conflict?

Official Interpreter:

Will the conflict between the two parties in the PLC prevent you from confronting Houthis? Will it affect the Houthis' confrontation?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

I don't think so. Houthis are united by the Gulf, the Arab League, and the international coalition. All of them are against Houthis.

I think this is a help to the PLC.

Official Interpreter:

that everybody agrees on confronting the Houthis at this time, not only within the PLC but also the Arab coalition who are supporting us. So the PLC, the reason for the PLC to continue is based on the confrontation of the Houthis. If it's not there, then the PLC won't really succeed.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno:

Don't worry. I would have a meeting this morning where the drone attack on Qatar was discussed. And from this meeting, it seemed that this has brought the GCC countries much closer together, because that came as quite a shock that there could be an attack in a country that has a big U.S. base and the U.S. did not protect Qatar from that attack. And that doesn't lead the Gulf countries to become friends of Iran, but it does suggest that there's a kind of reevaluation of the risks in the country for security. Those coming from a very powerful Israel today, those coming from Iran. So is that risk endangering the coalition against the Houthis because there are other concerns that are emerging?

Peter Salisbury:

So to what extent is recalibration within the region or rethinking of strategic posture maybe changing the calculus on Yemen for Gulf-Arab partners?

Official Interpreter:

So, they said that there was a meeting today where there was a discussion about the Houthi attack on Qatar. And this attack came to Qatar and all the Gulf Arab countries became united in their position. Because there's a feeling that America is not defending Qatar, as it happened.

We have a new, different theory, we see Qatar has been subjected to a strike from Israel
Two months ago, there was a strike from Iran, and now from Israel

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

It happened in a minute, Iran hit the US forces in Qatar, and Israel hit Hamas in Qatar Qatar has become a stronghold, two opposing sides, two different sides

Official Interpreter:

It's interesting to see that Qatar was subject to two kinds of attacks One from Iran against the US forces in Qatar, and then from Israel against Hamas in Qatar And Qatar has been receiving these two strikes at the same time from different forces

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

For us, we see that we are friendly with Qatar, and we have been subjected to the first attack from Iran And we have been subjected to the Israeli attack, but the last minute was a lot

Official Interpreter:

We see that there was an attack from both sides, so we expressed our sympathy with Qatar at that time And also now, and we see that there is a lot of noise after these attacks, which will take some time Qatar has to clean up their territories from whatever could really cause trouble for them

[Speaker 6]

I would also like to add to his question, that after the Israeli attack on Qatar They saw that the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Gulf countries united together How did this unification affect the war in Yemen?

Does this unification reflect the fact that the Gulf countries united Because of the Israeli attacks in Yemen?

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

The crisis in Yemen has nothing to do with the Israeli attack in Qatar The Israelis attacked Hamas in Qatar

Peter Salisbury:

If we can just wait for a moment to interpret, and then we can make the answer Thank you

VP Aidarous al-Zubaidi:

The Gulf countries, Qatar, Al-Houthi attacked Abu Dhabi one day Al-Houthi attacked Riyadh one day Al-Houthi threatens the region completely He does not discriminate against Al-Houthi Israelis From the Arab and military areas I don't think that the Gulf countries will change their position from Al-Houthi

Official Interpreter:

Even if they are united now Because what happens in Qatar has no relationship with our fight against Al-Houthis The strike was against Hamas, recently by Israel against Hamas So there was a very clear objective on the strike Which has nothing to do with us fighting Al-Houthis in Yemen So we have to recognize that every state has the right to defend itself against foreign attacks So we are supporting the Palestinians in their rights to gain their freedom And the same thing with the Israelis, they have the right to defend themselves as well In the same token This is the reality and we are cousins at the end The religion sent by God came for everyone So everyone should really have the equal right to defend themselves And have the equal right to live and co-exist So we are looking forward to have this equality in the human relations And to have the same equal human rights for everybody

Peter Salisbury:

Thank you very much for the insightful discussion

[Speaker 5]

We've heard today a lot about bombings, terrorist attacks It's sort of like President Ali's words of aspiration What does he see as something slightly different away from war In Yemen and in the southern region

Official Interpreter:

Let's look at the attack on us with drones and missiles How do you see the future of Yemen?

[Speaker 6]

We've heard a lot today about bombings, terrorist attacks and missiles And he wants to hear something like hope Do we see anything that brings hope and peace in the future? He wants to hear something that brings hope and peace Not war and bombings Can you simplify it too?

Peter Salisbury:

What is his positive vision for the south of Yemen and the region?

Official Interpreter:

A strong state in the south is the state that is going to spread hope And aspirations for the region at large Can I borrow the microphone?

Peter Salisbury:

Thank you sir I would like to thank everybody for attending today I apologize that we started a little late But we will try and end on time I thank the Vice President for discussing with me I thank him for agreeing and disagreeing Very very politely With my sometimes provocative questions to him I think that we've heard a lot today I'm not sure that I'm any more confident About Yemen's future I will be honest But I will hope to catch up with Vice President Sevaidi very soon And hear more about what's happening in Yemen Jean-Marie I'll let you wrap up

Official Interpreter:

Thank you very much

Jean-Marie Guéhenno:

Well I want to thank the Vice President And the President for I think a very strong speech You did not convince your words And that's helpful And then very interesting conversations Because I think you were not spared tough questions And that's the role of a university So I think this is This leaves us with a sense that Maybe we are witnessing in this room A kind of historical moment Because you have announced your vision In no unclear terms And so we will Let's meet in three years As Peter was suggesting And see where we've gone between now and then

[Speaker 18]

Thank you so much

[Speaker 17]

I'm very well How are you?

[Speaker 9]

I'm all right How are you doing?

[Speaker 14]

Anyway, I'm moving on to the next one.

[Speaker 5]

I'm sorry. Yes, please. Thank you very much.

[Speaker 9]

Thank you. It was a pleasure. You get to keep up.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno:

You can find the website. I'm not the expert, but thank you very much for coming.

[Speaker 14]

Thank you. How are you?

[Speaker 5]

Okay. Okay. Okay.

Okay. Okay.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno:

Okay.

[Speaker 5]

Okay. Okay. Okay.

All right.