

# Peace Opportunities in Yemen and Battle of Marib



## Case Analysis

## Political Analysis Unit

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## Introduction:

The Houthi group focused its military efforts to invade the city of Marib, the main stronghold of the Yemeni government in the northern governorates, which are rich with energy and wealth sources, without taking into account the humanitarian repercussions, despite international condemnations. The group continued to reject the ceasefire and the Saudi initiative, and to thwart efforts of the UN envoy Martin Griffith and the US envoy Timothy Lenderking, and deliberately continues its political trickery to waste time trying to impose a military reality on the ground.

The Muscat consultations revealed the weak influence of the Sultanate of Oman, as well as the crisis of the UN envoy position and the negative impact of Iran negatively reflected on persuading the Houthi group to positively respond to the truce initiatives that prepare for a peace process and a political solution to the conflict in Yemen. The negotiations in Muscat, Baghdad and Vienna have revealed size of integration between the Yemeni file and the Iranian complicated files with the regional and international powers, and how Tehran is using the Yemeni file to achieve its goals.

## Reflection of Negotiations on Battles in Marib:

As much as modern weapons affect the “Battle of Marib”, the international consultations on the Yemeni file have their effect as well. During the period of intense battles around the strategic city, negotiations related to Yemen began, the most important of which are:

### First: The Saudi Initiative

In March 2021, Riyadh presented an initiative to end the war in Yemen, which included: a nationwide ceasefire, opening Sana’a airport to specific destinations, allowing fuel and other goods ships to access to the Houthis-held port of Hodeidah on the Red Sea, and resuming the stalled political negotiations to end the conflict.

This initiative intersects with two other initiatives: the US initiative put forward by the US special envoy for Yemen, Timothy Lenderking, and the initiative presented by the UN envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths.

The Houthis have not presented a clear position towards the Saudi initiative, but they have provided a response through the Sultanate of Oman. According to sources familiar with the talks, the Houthis are calling on the Saudis to cease fire through three steps: to stop air strikes, then ceasing fire along the borders with Saudi Arabia, and then ceasing fire inside Yemen.<sup>[1]</sup>

Given that Saudi air strikes are one of the important ways that hamper Houthi attempts to invade Marib. The Houthis try to neutralize Saudi air strikes so they can reach Marib. Therefore, talking about Saudi initiative stopped after the Houthis submitted their request and rejected all international calls to stop the attacks on Marib, which affects nearly two million displaced people in the city - according to reports of international organizations and the Yemeni government.

## Second: Muscat Consultations

In early May, Lenderking, Griffiths, Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee Chris Murphy, and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan arrived in the Omani capital, Muscat, after obtaining initial acceptance from the Houthis regarding consultations. An initiative for a ceasefire in Yemen begins with ceasing the Houthi attacks on Marib in exchange for lifting the ban on Sana'a airport, and allowing imports to enter the Houthi-controlled ports of Hodeidah and Salif, in the west of the country, then a comprehensive ceasefire for several weeks before sitting on the table of negotiations with the Yemeni government.<sup>[2]</sup>

But after several days, Lenderking and Griffiths left home declaring the failure of intensive consultations that have continued since last April. The Houthis refused even to meet the two envoys alongside Saudi officials.

Griffiths tried to hide his disappointment at the bad conclusion, saying, "Unfortunately, we are not in the place where we would like to reach an agreement."<sup>[3]</sup> When the Houthis became close to accept the "agreement," they reversed and rejected the agreement. The refusal happened after the Houthi negotiators in Muscat contacted with the group's "military wing", which confirmed that the escalation against Marib, if succeeds, would change the calculations of negotiations,<sup>[4]</sup> although it is difficult for Houthis to achieve after several months of attacks on the city.

During the Saudi-Houthi talks in Muscat, western diplomats indicated that they had reached an agreement on nearly 90% of the issues on the table, including the complete opening of ports in Houthis-held areas and Sana'a airport, which would lead to a ceasefire<sup>[5]</sup> The talks in Oman were led by Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdul-Salam, who lives in Muscat and has been assigned as the lead negotiator.

On April 28, 2021, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met with Mohammed Abdul-Salam in Muscat. Zarif reiterated Tehran's position in favor of a ceasefire and a return to the negotiations table to end the war.<sup>[6]</sup> But, in fact, the Yemeni file is considered to be managed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (Quds Force), not by the Iranian foreign diplomacy, as a leaked audio of Zarif himself marking the killing of Soleimani, Quds Force commander, talked about Yemen and open fronts against Saudi Arabia.<sup>[7]</sup>

The Houthis' chief negotiator used to consults with officials in Tehran. Western diplomats also tried to communicate with Iran to pressure the Houthis to agree with talks.<sup>[8]</sup> But the Iranian response was always the same, they will try to persuade the Houthis to accept negotiations, but they will not force them to lay down their arms.

## Three Points Emerged Prominently During Muscat Consultations:

**A) The weakness of the Omani influence** on the Houthis to accept- in principle - a peace agreement that can help in reaching a way to end the war. According to diplomats, the Sultanate of Oman has raised the optimism of Western diplomats regarding Yemen in particular, especially those who reside in Jordan and constantly contact with the Sultanate of Oman to understand recent developments regarding Yemen. But Muscat failed even to persuade the Houthis to meet with Martin Griffiths and Timothy Lenderking.<sup>[9]</sup>

**B) The crisis of the UN envoy:** After the appointment of Tim Lenderking as US envoy for Yemen, it has become clear that most of the current efforts are American. This has contributed to undermining the position of Martin Griffiths, whom the Houthis refused to meet for several months, although they welcomed him as a UN envoy for Yemen to succeed Ismail Ould Cheikh.

The prominent appearance of Lenderking is due to the suspension of the UN Envoy's Office since mid-2020, as Biden's appointment of Lenderking came to revive Griffiths' efforts.

At the beginning of 2021, Martin Griffiths submitted a request to change his mission to the Secretary-General of the United Nations - apparently declaring his frustration - so that his request to be appointed as the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs was fulfilled in May 2021.

But the United States is still collecting information about the nature, causes and roots of the conflict in Yemen, and is deliberately providing "goodwill" - as officials in the White House describe it - to the Houthis based on the propaganda they receive, and this needs time until the new office of Lenderking, despite its association with the conflict during his previous position, can define multiple and practical mechanisms to deal with the parties to the conflict, particularly the Houthis. So when Lenderking returned from Muscat to Washington, he imposed new sanctions on two leaders of the Houthi group, Muhammad Abdul Karim Al-Ghamari and Youssef Al-Madani, who are linked to the Houthi attacks on Marib.<sup>[10]</sup>

**C) The influence of military leaders and Iran:** The Houthi negotiators were clearly unable to take decisions. They have agreed to a draft agreement, but then they retracted after multiple contacts with the Houthi "military wing" and officials in Tehran affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, who has the upper hand on the situation in Yemen, not the Iranian Foreign Ministry. Those contacts continued even after the failure of consultations, including the communication of Mohamed Abdul-Salam with Ali Velayati, advisor to the Supreme Leader in Iran.<sup>[11]</sup>

### Third: Baghdad Talks

In April 10, 2021, Saudi Arabia and Iran began secret negotiations in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, in an attempt to restore relationship between the two bitter rivals, and to reopen the Saudi embassy and consulate in Tehran after it was closed in 2016. But to reach this stage, Tehran and Riyadh must agree on the outstanding issues in the region. The Yemeni issue emerged at the forefront of the issues that were discussed by the two countries.

Through officials, both Iran and Saudi Arabia confirmed that negotiations took place in Baghdad- reports on consultations first appeared in the Western press and then were confirmed by the Iraqi president, who said that "Baghdad hosted more than one round of talks between the two countries." The Saudi delegation consisted of six people, including a high-ranking security advisor to the Saudi Crown Prince, headed by Khalid bin Ali al-Humaidan, head of the Saudi intelligence service.<sup>[12]</sup> As for the Iranian delegation, it was headed by Saeed Arafani, Deputy Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council.<sup>[13]</sup>

Saudi Arabia and Iran have strong motives in the direction of ceasing tension between the two countries at this particular stage, as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman hinted in a television interview that his country "aspires to positive relations with Iran, despite big differences with it."<sup>[14]</sup>

It was a noticeable change in Riyadh's tone towards Tehran. Bin Salman stressed in an interview in 2017 that there are no points of convergence with the Iranian regime and said the Tehran regime is based on "extremist ideology enshrined in its constitution that considers Saudi Arabia as a major target of the Iranian regime," vowing to move the battle into Iran.<sup>[15]</sup>

Commenting on Baghdad's consultations with Tehran, an official source in the Saudi Foreign Ministry said that his country "wanted to see verifiable actions from Iran". These statements came after the announcement of the failure of consultations in Muscat.<sup>[16]</sup> "We have had some contacts with Saudi Arabia and we hope that these contacts will be fruitful through greater cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia for making peace and stability in the region, especially in Yemen," said Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.<sup>[17]</sup>

### **So can the Saudi-Iranian consultations in Baghdad end the war in Yemen? How does it affect the battle of Marib?**

Saudi Arabia has always sought an honorable exit from the Yemen war without alienating any party, but there is no way to resolve a sustainable peace. The United Nations, the United States and the European Union want to end this conflict, which made those countries pressure Tehran to pressure the Houthis to engage in peace talks. Therefore, local parties and international actors need to agree on the size of the Houthi presence in Yemeni politics during the next stage and the mechanism of their participation. This depends on many issues: who controls the border with Saudi Arabia? Who is the group that owns the Marib oil fields? Who controls the area between the port of Hodeidah and Aden, including Bab al-Mandab? What is the size of each party's control over airports, ports, crossings and oil fields?

Addressing these issues will lead to a political government in the future stage, which currently seems to be extremely difficult. There are several questions: What is the share of each party in the power cake, and in what part of the power is this share? This solution will be at the expense of the Yemenis if the Houthis and other militias are not disarmed.

What the Iranian regime and the Houthi group want is the continuation of the Houthi hegemony over Yemen, which is a red line for Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Tehran and Riyadh will have to reach a consensus regarding the extent of the Houthis' dominance in the Yemeni politics, and this will require the opening of the files of other militias financed by Iran in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, means a security understanding between the two countries at the level of the region. This will encourage the US withdrawal from the region to focus on China and Russia.

The solutions offered by the United Nations, Washington, and the international community; the Iranian-Saudi negotiations, in addition to other internal reasons, the Houthis are rushing to reach the city of Marib to control the oil fields. As this will make them dominate Yemen in the coming period, and force Riyadh, which suffers from internal problems and external pressures, especially from the new US administration, to accept this level of Houthi hegemony on its borders.

#### **Fourth: Vienna Consultations**

Iran and the international powers (known as the P5+1) reached an agreement in 2015, called the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" or the "Iranian nuclear agreement", which refers to several stages preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb in exchange for lifting the international sanctions imposed on Iran for decades. But the United States withdrew from the agreement in 2018, in an attempt to implement a policy of maximum pressure on Tehran to force it to renegotiate while making more concessions.

Until the spring of 2021, quick consultations began for Washington's return to the agreement under the administration of current President Joe Biden. The policy of the Biden's administration was that "if Iran returns to strict compliance with its obligations ... the United States will do the same." However, the US administration also indicated that it intends to address "Iran's destabilizing regional behavior and ballistic missiles development and proliferation",<sup>[18]</sup> the goal which the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has vehemently rejected, calling these issues "non-negotiable."<sup>[19]</sup>

While the current negotiations are unlikely to achieve any significant results, the future may open up further negotiations on the basis of "more for more." So that the United States may return to the agreement and lift relevant sanctions, then it will be able to put additional sanctions on the table to get further Iranian concessions. This juncture will represent an opportunity to build a new regional security framework.<sup>[20]</sup>

To achieve this, Saudi Arabia and Iran began conducting secret consultations in Baghdad. Some leaks say that Tehran asked Riyadh to support the agreement in "Vienna" in exchange for pressuring the Houthis to end missile and drone attacks

on the kingdom,<sup>[21]</sup> which have already intensified since the start of the "Vienna Consultations" and the offensive attacks on the city of Marib. Iran also communicated extensively with the UAE over the past years, which is an influential regional actor in southern Yemen.<sup>[22]</sup>

In contrast to Iran's strong rejection of the nuclear agreement, the Gulf States accept it - as the Americans see - at the present time.<sup>[23]</sup> The US Democratic Senator Chris Murphy said the success of the "Vienna Consultations" will represent a step forward to end the war in Yemen. After his visit to the region, Murphy said, "Tehran's nuclear agreement with the world's powers is very important, and perhaps crucial for peace in Yemen." He added, "I believe that a dialogue with the Iranians that comes through restarting the JCPOA will be beneficial to push the peace path in Yemen forward."<sup>[24]</sup> In addition, achieving progress in the "Vienna" consultations will mean achieving similar progress in consultations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Baghdad.<sup>[25]</sup>

The Houthi battle against the city of Marib is related to transformations and consultations related to Iran, as the Houthis' control of Marib is a victory for the resistance axis that Iran leads in the region,

and a full-fledged confirmation of a long-term and influential presence in the politics and national security of the Arabian Peninsula. The approach which the Biden's administration adopted towards the Houthis and Iran during the past period contributed to strengthening Iran's and Houthis' position against the United States and its allies in the region.

While the "Vienna Consultations" were taking place, Tehran continued to supply Houthis with weapons. In May 2021, the US Navy intercepted a ship loaded with weapons a large amount of weapons, including advanced missiles, at a time when fierce battles were taking place in Marib.<sup>[26]</sup> It is not known how many ships Iran has already sent the Yemeni coast under Houthis control. Iranian officials continued to publicly boast about providing the Houthis with drone and missiles technology.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Repercussions of Transformations and Foreign Consultations on Yemen:

The end of the war in Yemen is related to the position of the local parties and their intention to end it. But this intention is mainly related to the Houthi group, which rejected solutions recently proposed in Muscat as well as the Saudi initiative.

Through this public defiance and apparent disregard for negotiations, the Houthis have demonstrated that they are not interested in peace and that they are willing to continue the conflict. This challenge also underscores that the Houthis do not intend to let the conflict end any time soon, and that "open war" is their clear long-term intent, as their main goal is not the "city of Marib", but rather the control of all Yemeni lands and ruling them by force.

The Houthis believe that imposing their control over all Yemen will push Saudi Arabia to end the coalition and the war without "negotiations," as happened to the United States in Vietnam.

It seems unlikely that the Houthis would be willing to accept any significant form of settlement or deal in any potential peace negotiations with Saudi Arabia in the future. Moreover, the Houthis, by displaying their military power, want to show that they are far from "desperation" and weakness. All of this was manifested in their recent attack on Marib,<sup>[28]</sup> which the Houthis failed to reach until now.

**It seems that the Houthis reached this level of "arrogance" and refuse to negotiate and end the war for several reasons:**

**A) Increasing local actors within the hostile camp:** they present themselves to the world as the only party that is most organized and able to control security, confront Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and protect Bab al-Mandab. They consider that the other party, the legitimate government, has only the international recognition, and if it loses control over Marib, it will have not any effective field presence for it.

**b) The disintegration of regional actors supporting the legitimate government:** the UAE withdrew from battles with the Houthis, Qatar forcibly left the coalition, and other countries freely left the coalition, such as Jordan, Morocco and other countries.

The cessation of the battle to liberate Hodeidah from the Houthis' control - as a result of external pressures - has made the government and the coalition lose a powerful tool of pressure on the Houthis to engage in consultations.

The 2018 Stockholm Agreement, which led to a "fragile" ceasefire in Hodeidah governorate - the important strategy - represented a vision of what the Houthis want to achieve in the peace talks, as the Houthis transferred their forces from Hodeidah to other fighting fronts, and since the beginning of the "Marib battle", the Houthis have transferred most of their trained strength towards the city. The cessation of this battle also led to the formation of what it is called the Joint Forces, led by Brigadier General Tariq Saleh, the nephew of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, backed by the UAE. In March 2021, Tariq Saleh formed a political bureau to represent his forces to ensure his role and influence in any expected political quotas. Adding a new burden on the legitimate government, just like the "Southern Transitional Council."

**C) International Pressure and Economic Losses:** Saudi Arabia is incurring great economic losses due to war with the Houthis and the Corona virus spreading, so the "2030" vision, presented by the Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, is severely affected.

Bin Salman's project is based on the economy, so he will do whatever he can, including the stopping of Houthi attacks on vital installations.

The international pressure on Saudi Arabia and the cessation of arms sales to it, and its "distorted image" that is increasing globally due to alleged violations by the coalition and prolonging the war in Yemen, this may push Riyadh to seek a safe exit from the war to protect itself from any future prosecution, and to secure its borders with the Houthis, and then moves to imposing a strict policy to force the Houthis and the next government in Yemen to succumb to its demands.

D) The Iranian support and international lack of understanding: Iran's continued provision of military and financial support to the Houthis - including planning for the Marib battle through its "ambassador" to Sanaa, Hassan Irlu, and other leaders of the Quds Force, including "forces restructuring" and securing weapons access to the group through seaports,<sup>[29]</sup> have contributed to the group's strength and influence in its areas of control.

### **The international community's concern:**

There is a global concern about the fall of Marib in the hands of the Houthis. The Houthis victory will make it difficult to talk about a "peace agreement", as they will expand to other areas, which are not under their control until now. The influence of the legitimate government will become weaker with multiplicity of regional actors. This result may change the balance of regional powers in Yemen.

The influence of Abu Dhabi and Iran may increase with decline of the Saudi influence, and there may be a Russian-Chinese presence as potential actors with decline of the US influence. This can be highlighted in the following:

**The American need:** Since January 2021, the Biden's administration has managed to pressure Saudi Arabia and push it to present an initiative to end the war, but now it needs to pressure Iran to stop arming and assisting the Houthis, while Tehran needs a pressure card to pass what it wants in the "Vienna talks" and return to the nuclear agreement. Tehran may use this card in the "Baghdad talks" with Saudi Arabia as well, in exchange for understandings about a new security system in the region that includes Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

In all cases, the Houthis will remain an influential force in the Yemeni political decision-making, but the point is the size of such an influence and the nature of the Houthi role in the future of Yemen that will be agreed to in the coming negotiations. If Marib falls under the Houthis control, Saudi Arabia will have no choice but to accept what Iran offers in exchange for stopping its attacks.

**Emirati influence with a Russian nature:** The Houthis present their battle in Marib according to three messages. The first one is to their supporters that they are fighting "mercenaries, hypocrites and agents." The second message is to their enemies that they are fighting the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islah party, this rhetoric is consistent with the UAE. And the third message is to the West that they are fighting "Al-Qaeda" and "the Islamic State" (ISIS) in Marib.

The UAE wants to exclude the Islah party and the legitimate government from any future political solution - in which it agrees with the Houthis - to be replaced by its local agents. During the war years, Abu Dhabi managed to introduce Russia into the Yemeni war, and used its influence and relationship to organize visits by representatives of the "Southern Transitional Council" and the family of former president Ali Saleh, represented by Tariq Saleh, to Russia. The policy of Moscow, which has good relations with Iran, seems to be balanced in Yemen, given the possibility of becoming a mediator.

The continuation of the current US policy - as mentioned above – increases the possibility of a Russian mediation in the Yemeni crisis, as Washington loses its cards against the Houthis and Iran, and its new policy towards its ally, Saudi Arabia, further creates a feeling in Riyadh and the rest of the regional capitals that America has desire to withdraw from the region. This step may lead to the weakening of Riyadh and the legitimate government in any upcoming political process, and Abu Dhabi, Moscow, and Tehran and their local allies will become the most influential in the coming stage of Yemen's future.

It is clear that "the peace agreement (Riyadh Agreement) between the Southern Transitional Council and the legitimate government is on the way to collapse, so we may witness the disappearance of the influence of the legitimate government, and Saudi Arabia in the next few months, <sup>[30]</sup> unless Riyadh rearranges its priorities in the region, especially in Yemen, by prioritizing the security and military needs over the illusion of the economic need, because the stability of the latter depends on the former one.

## Conclusion:

The international community is aware of the Houthi group's desire to impose its control all over Yemen after its invasion of the city of Marib, but there are doubts about the effectiveness of the international pressures on the Houthi group. There have been many channels of communication and regional and international negotiations with the aim of resolving the Yemeni file and reaching a ceasefire, including the Baghdad meetings between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia seems to be keen on an honorable exit from the Yemeni war.

The repercussions of the foreign transformations and consultations on Yemen, foremost of which are the efforts of the US administration, which are free of any pressure on Iran and the Houthi group, will weaken the Yemeni government and the role of Saudi Arabia and reinforce the Houthi group's belief that expanding its control on more areas will push Saudi Arabia to give up the war, end the coalition and exit without any "negotiations", as happened to the United States in Vietnam. At that time, talk of a "peace agreement" will disappear, and the influence of Abu Dhabi and Iran will increase while the Saudi influence will decline - and perhaps there will be a Russian-Chinese presence as potential actors with a possible decline of the US influence.

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