



مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث
Abaad Studies & Research Center

Will Gulf Concerns over the Yemeni Dossier

Push for a Second Gulf Initiative?

Situation Assessment

Political Analysis Unit

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Summary

The Gulf Cooperation Council's invitation of more than 500 Yemenis to attend consultations in Riyadh is informed by the GCC need to regain the initiative in Yemen in the midst of the GCC countries' growing sense that the Yemeni file is going out of their hands. There is a growing sense in the Gulf States that the international community has not taken Gulf security concerns into account, in the context of international categorization as a result of the Russian war in Ukraine, and the GCC countries' neutrality. The neutral position of the GCC states has led to tension with the United States and other European countries. The GCC countries seek to formulate a Gulf vision on Yemen that ensures their interests and alleviates the concerns, which have been long voiced in closed meetings among GCC members, in addition to restoring mutual confidence among the Yemeni parties.

The consultations will reveal the extent of a united position of the GCC countries on crucial issues that affect them, including their steadfastness in the face of the challenges posed by the return to the Iranian nuclear agreement and the Russian war in Ukraine. The success of this effort hinges upon the presence of all Yemeni parties, and their agreement on the points of reference that will constitute the basis for consultations and the ensuing outcomes, in addition to success in bringing together the parties loyal to the internationally recognized government. The absence of the Houthis from these consultations may only lead to further isolation of the group, but at the same time, a peace compromise in Yemen is unlikely without their participation. The outcomes of the consultations and the tangible Gulf development measures in the areas controlled by the Yemeni government and uniting Yemeni security services may motivate public pressure on the Houthis to accept the outcomes of the consultations. There might be also a new phase of consultations of all Yemeni parties and the Houthi group, which suffers more isolation than ever before, let alone the catastrophic economic and humanitarian situation in their areas of control.

Foreword

The GCC invitation of Yemeni parties to dialogue in Riyadh heralds a new phase in the war, which enters its eighth year in the midst of international and regional transformations. The Houthis immediately rejected the GCC initiative, and demanded "a dialogue with the Arab coalition states in a neutral country, provided that consultations shall focus on the humanitarian aspect." The Houthis basically reject dialogue with the Yemeni government and other Yemeni parties, and view them as "rogues and agents of Saudi Arabia and the UAE." Therefore, their rejection of the GCC initiative is not surprising, despite the extent of isolation that the group will suffer locally, regionally, and internationally before and after this event.

The GCC initiative comes a year after an initiative launched by Saudi Arabia on March 22, 2021. That initiative proposed a universal ceasefire under UN supervision, opening Sana'a International Airport to flights from specific regional and international destinations, allowing foodstuff and fuel imports, opening Hodeidah port in return for allocating proceeds as salaries to Yemeni public servants, and commencing consultations among Yemeni parties towards reaching a political settlement. The Houthis completely rejected this initiative.

Based on available information on the recent GCC invitation, the following points may be noted:

- It focuses on the political process, strengthening state institutions and administrative reforms, the humanitarian intervention and relief operations, economic stability, and social recovery. Military and security issues might also be raised.
- Consultations will be held at the GCC General Secretariat headquarters in Riyadh.
- Consultations will be held over a ten-day period, from 29, 2022 to April 7, 2022. Approximately 500 Yemenis representing the various local parties will participate.
- Consultations will be held by those present.

Why put forward the invitation when the Houthi response is predictable?

The Houthis raise concerns for the GCC countries. In response to this issue, the Gulf States seek to come up with a unified vision towards developments in Yemen, especially after divisions over Yemen multiplied among GCC member states during the past seven years. This is due to two important reasons:

1. The Houthis targeted Abu Dhabi last January. The attacks sounded the alarm in Gulf capitals that the Houthis had become a real threat to national security in the Arabian Peninsula. The Houthis' possession of such technology makes them a real threat to the Gulf states' oil and commercial institutions, even if a peaceful settlement is reached in Yemen under the auspices of the United Nations and the United States.
2. The Houthis seized a UAE-flagged vessel in international waters in early 2022, dragging it to the port of Hodeidah. The Houthi threat to international shipping passing through Bab al-Mandeb has increased, including seizure of mercantile vessels and dragging them to Yemeni waters.

Other factors have induced the GCC member states to seek a unified stance towards the threats facing them. The Yemeni issue is a litmus test to the ability of the GCC states' success in adopting a unified policy towards other issues, including:

1. The Iranian nuclear agreement especially as an imminent return to the deal is on the horizon, according to American and European sources. The Gulf States need to adopt a unified policy to deal with the consequences of a return to the agreement on the national security of the Arabian Peninsula, especially in light of the fact that each country pursues a distinct policy towards Iran.
2. The GCC countries' neutral policy towards the Russian war on Ukraine and the possibility of coordinating policies to resist western pressures to pump more oil and gas, and prompt the West to address the concerns of the countries in the region.

GCC Needs

Unsurprisingly, the GCC put forward an initiative towards the settlement of the Yemeni crisis. It had previously presented the 2011 Gulf Initiative that forced former President Ali Abdullah Saleh to hand over power after 33 years of rule to his Vice-President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. The 2011 initiative came at a time when the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ constituted a serious challenge to Gulf national security. Therefore, Gulf initiatives are proposed in response to serious threats to Gulf regimes and the security of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Yemeni government considers the Gulf Initiative and Implementation Mechanism, and the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference (2013-2014) as two of the three references for peace in Yemen, along with Security Council Resolution 2216, which affirms the legitimacy of the current president, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

The Houthis have steadfastly rejected the Gulf Initiative, but they participated in the National Dialogue Conference, which lasted 10 months under the auspices of the United Nations and reached agreements on the constitution and form of the state. They garnered a large number of seats close to those allocated to the largest opposition parties. Consultations will take place regardless of Houthi participation.

It has been suggested earlier that the GCC countries put forward initiatives when they sense threats to their national security and to the security of the Arabian Peninsula as a whole, in an effort to take a unified policy towards these threats. This leads us to the question: what are the goals of the GCC behind this call for a Yemeni dialogue?



1.Unification of the parties: If the GCC countries fail to end the war in Yemen with a Houthi participation in talks, they have to revamp the Yemeni parties again after seven years of war during which the map of local actors has changed. The Yemeni political scene has witnessed the emergence of new actors who influenced the GCC vision towards Yemen, especially that of the key players (the UAE and Saudi Arabia). This united stance can be a catalyst for isolating the Houthis further and viewing them as a dissident group. This is a principal goal of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which strive for designating the Houthis as a terrorist group.

Moreover, GCC countries need to identify the key influential Yemeni parties at present and to determine the scope of their influence, so as to build a vision to end the crisis. The GCC can benefit from the Omani-Saudi rapprochement that has significantly emerged over the past months and the Gulf States' rapprochement after the 2021 Al-Ula Agreement. Following this agreement, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have resumed relations with Qatar. The agreement gives rise to a growing openness among GCC countries.

The General People's Congress (GPC) faction in Sana'a, led by Sadiq Amin Abu Ras, who remained loyal to the Houthis, may delegate representatives to the conference. Relations between this faction of the PGC and the Houthis have been marked by tension and even discords over the past two years. Hundreds of party members have been arrested and their property confiscated by Houthi authorities. The Houthi statement rejecting the meetings in Riyadh remained silent about the position of the PGC faction in Sana'a.

2.Keeping the Yemeni issue in the region: The GCC states feel that the Yemen dossier is slipping away into the hands of the United Nations, the United States, and European actors. Therefore, they are trying to restore their grip over the Yemeni crisis to avoid the uncomfortable bargaining over the Yemeni dossier and its manipulation to pressure them regarding other issues such as the Russian war in Ukraine, and the Iranian nuclear agreement.

UN envoy, Hans Grundberg and American envoy, Timothy Linderking, and European ambassadors and envoys exert efforts to put forward visions for a comprehensive solution to the war in Yemen. However, the GCC countries apparently feel that the proposed solutions do not adequately address their national security concerns, or the withdrawal of Houthi heavy and sophisticated weapons, and dismantling the hierarchy from being an "armed militia" to viewing it as a political constituent like any other. In other words, there is a feeling in the GCC that Western diplomats fail to address the concerns of the Gulf States that the Houthis will turn into a new 'Hezbollah' in the southern corner of the Arabian Peninsula. They think that those diplomats merely seek to reach a settlement of the conflict in Yemen with little regard for the specificity of the situation or potential future consequences.

Gulf states officials believe that it is possible to deal with the weapons of other pro-coalition parties (the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the forces led by Tariq Saleh which are backed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia), as opposed to the Houthis, of whom there is no guarantor or a state capable of dismantling their weapons. In their meetings with the Saudis and foreigners, the Iranians insist that they are unable to shoulder this burden, claiming that they do not have much leverage over the Houthis. Saudi Arabia and other international actors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United Nations, were convinced that the Sultanate of Oman was able to pressure the Houthis to accept a peace agreement.^[1] However, in 2021 when Oman directly intervened as a mediator, it was unable to pressure the Houthis and Omani officials failed to use their relations with the Houthis to pressure the armed group to return to negotiations. The Omanis themselves did not anticipate the Houthi reaction to their efforts and to their delegation's visit to Sana'a and meeting with the group leaders. The UN-sponsored meetings in Amman, in preparation for a broader conference of stakeholders and civil society, sends a chill down the GCC States' spine regarding the UN and US perceptions of a comprehensive settlement in Yemen. The GCC invitation comes in anticipation of any unwelcome and unanticipated outcomes of the UN-sponsored conference to be held in Amman as such outcomes might pull the rug from under GCC countries' feet.^[2]

The United Nations coldly welcomed the meeting for which the General Secretariat of the GCC is making preparations. The UN believes that this meeting affects its efforts represented by the meetings in Amman, which are supported by the international community.^[3]

3- US-Saudi relations: The GCC exerts efforts to forestall turning the Yemeni file into a bargaining card to be used by the western countries in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war. The US has tried to leverage Saudi Arabia to pump more oil. This move has aroused Saudi fears that the US might pressure it to increase oil production in return for American support of Saudi involvement in Yemen. Other GCC countries share Saudi concerns. Moreover, the GCC countries are trying to walk the tightrope to avoid inciting Moscow as that might end with the latter turning into a staunch supporter of the Houthis against the will of the West. They are trying to keep the Yemeni issue within regional boundaries and to forge a resolution of the conflict on this basis.

US Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, plans to visit Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in March 2022. This will be his first visit as Secretary of State to the two Gulf capitals. The US Department of State has repeatedly contacted the Saudi Foreign Ministry to set a date for the visit, but the visit was delayed due to developments in Ukraine, and the Gulf position towards the Biden administration policy.^[4] The Saudi Foreign Ministry declined to welcome Blinken's visit in light of the escalating tension between the two countries. GCC states officials strive to maintain the Yemeni issue within regional boundaries, so that internal GCC disputes may not be used as a tool of blackmail against them.

Some Yemeni and foreign commentators point out that the proposed meeting is very similar to the Riyadh meeting held at the onset of the military intervention in 2015. In fact, that meeting was an affirmation of the Yemenis' welcome of the Saudi-led coalition intervention. However, in the proposed meeting, matters appear much broader, as the meetings are oriented towards building a vision to end the crisis and to come up with a political settlement to the conflict within a regional framework. In this respect, the meeting is very similar to the Gulf Initiative.

This meeting is also significant when viewed from the perspective of its impact on future solutions of the Yemeni crisis, as its outcomes might constitute a basis of pushing for a UN Security Council resolution later.

It is noteworthy that the Security Council has labelled the Houthis on February 28, 2022 as a “terrorist group”. A concomitant implementation mechanism, like the one associated with the Gulf Initiative, might be issued. Moreover, if approved by the UN, the outcomes of the meeting will be binding to the UN and any other envoys active in the Yemeni issue.

The GCC countries benefit from the current international state of affairs in the UN Security Council. They manipulated the situation in pursuing Resolution 2624, which labelled the Houthis for the first time as a "terrorist group". The EU followed suit and placed the Houthis on its sanctions lists.

Effects and Concerns

A-New Principles for Peace: The GCC initiative is based on two main foundations. The first is recognition of the legitimacy of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and his internationally recognized government, (based on Security Council Resolution 2216 and the Gulf Initiative and Implementation Mechanism). The second principle is the recognition of local actors as equally weighty, regardless of the extent of their control and influence on the ground.

This may push the Houthis to change their behavior of seeking to control a large territory before entering into consultations. This can halt the UN principle for a comprehensive solution based on the scope of influence of the parties in the next phase, which has focused on the actual military control of the parties involved. If a Security Council resolution is issued, it will be binding, and it will create a new reality governed by new invariables in addition to the previous ones tenaciously upheld by the internationally recognized government.

These consultations may lead to attempts to reformulate the Yemeni stakeholders’ visions of a political settlement away from military realities, based on developments on the ground. Yet, it is unlikely that the initiative will lead to any solutions as long as the Houthi group resists negotiations with other Yemeni parties.

B-Addressing the GCC countries' concerns and lack of local confidence: Based on the GCC new initiative, the meeting will probably address the concerns of the GCC states about the possible control of a single Yemeni party during the country's transitional period. This matter has always been raised by the UAE, Qatar and Oman in internal consultations. It will also address the scope of the influence of these parties and its impact on the security of each GCC state.^[5] Moreover, the lack of confidence among Yemeni parties which feel that one party or another seek to completely exclude them from any future in the country's post-war transitional period. Therefore, the various parties tenaciously hold to their right to fight, and avoid confronting the Houthis in order to save their strength for the post-war phase state of exclusion. Sometimes, their approach is informed by 'elimination' conspiracies.

3- New legitimacy concerns: There are fears that the meeting will establish a new state of legitimacy in Yemen, to which new parties, such as the STC, the forces led by Tariq Saleh, and the factions of the GPC, will be added. These concerns are legitimate, but it is too early to talk about a new legitimacy in the country, especially as the need for the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition is still standing, and the battles against the Houthis are still going on. Battles may intensify after the meetings, if a new political alliance that is capable of confrontation is established, based on the legitimate government's and regional actors' recognition of those parties.

In light of the current international situation and the Russia-Ukraine war, the Gulf States are in a stronger position than before regarding the war in Yemen and prompting the West to play its role of protecting the national security of GCC states, international navigation and oil security. The role of the US and other western countries is crucial in view of the Houthi targeting of Saudi oil facilities and Saudi warning that the attacks could halt oil production.

Finally, the GCC has no choice but to succeed in this task. Failure means a disturbing stage for regional security, and handing the Yemeni crisis over to international players to impose a compromise that may turn to be a deferred problem in the short term, a deepening crisis in the medium term, and perhaps a failure of the future Gulf strategy.

Chances of Success of Consultations

The Yemeni parties expressed conditional acceptance of the invitation to take part in the consultations. The legitimate government headed by Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi stipulated that consultations should be within the frame of the three references to the solution. Yet, such a condition has been stubbornly rejected by the Houthis who also decline to participate in inter-Yemeni consultations hosted by Riyadh, emphasizing the group's condition that such consultations shall be hosted by a neutral country that did not participate in the war. It is unlikely that the GCC countries would agree to this condition. The STC also rejects the three references.

Regarding the success or failure of the consultations, the following points may be made:

- The Yemeni parties - loyal to the government - do not have sizable assets, and cannot play vital roles without the support of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other GCC states in the post-war reconstruction phase. The vision that might be reached can constitute a reference for a united Yemeni vision towards adopting united action. Such an approach will be plausible only if it is approved and supervised by the Gulf States. This reference can be the basis of subsequent negotiations with the Houthis who will be pressured by the United Nations and international players to join the consensus.
- The outcomes of this initiative may push the Houthis to reconsider their position. They will also underscore the fact that Iran's investment in the disparate GCC policies to boost its presence in top Houthi circles may lead to an uncertain settlement of the conflict. However, in the medium term, outcome will indicate that the issue remains on the Arabian side of the Gulf rather than on both sides.
- The Houthis live in a state of double pressure locally, which is intensified by the appalling economic collapse, and shortage of basic commodities. When such necessities are available, they are unaffordable. The humanitarian situation in Houthi-controlled areas is the worst in years and will get worse in the forthcoming weeks.

Yemen is in dire need of GCC assistance that can save it from an imminent famine. The United Nations failed to obtain sufficient funding to save lives in Yemen at the recent donor conference, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE declined to donate any funds for the first time since the start of the 2015 Arab coalition operations. Therefore, the Houthis are aware that moving away from the GCC is betting on the losing horse and will lead to targeting the group locally and internationally. Yemeni citizens will also be severely affected by the international economic situation. The consultations will also help other Yemeni actors fighting the Iranian-backed armed group to realize their strengths and weaknesses, and to be aware of the political, military and social losses and failures during the war.

- The United Nations Mission in Yemen can invest its current efforts in Amman, which started in early March, to support the second Gulf initiative. The UN can share the visions of the stakeholders who had been interviewed with the GCC, to facilitate deliberation in those consultations. The United Nations initiative for a truce during Ramadan can be an impetus for the Houthis to engage in consultations with other Yemeni parties. The Houthi group has been making good contacts with Saudi officials for weeks, despite the armed group's attacks on oil facilities that could establish a new phase of Houthi participation during or after the meetings in Riyadh.^[6] The consultations may be partially successful. Focus will be placed on reaching a comprehensive national vision that unites the Yemeni stakeholders during a transitional period, while emphasizing that public office and the state shall not be viewed as spoils, containing crises and internal disputes, and providing an adequate vision for enhancing the Yemeni economy. If the Houthis will hold to their position of refusing to enter into the consultations or to catch up with the outcomes, the significant development in the areas under the control of the legitimate government, including support for the national currency and the economy, will represent an incentive to citizens to pressure the Houthis. In the current state of affairs, the Houthi ability to absorb this pressure is low in light of their behavior over the past years.



References

- [1] A western diplomat involved in the Yemeni issue talked on the phone to a researcher at Abaad Center on 15 March 2022. The diplomat requested anonymity.
- [2] A GCC General Secretariat diplomat, informed of the consultations about Yemen, talked to a researcher at Abaad Center on 16 March 2022, in a breakout session during a meeting of Yemeni journalists in Riyadh.
- [3] An informed Yemeni diplomat talked to a researcher at Abaad Center on 19 March 2022. The Yemeni government reassured the UN envoy to Yemen that the GCC meeting will support the UN envoy efforts.
- [4] A Saudi Foreign Ministry diplomat, informed of the American attempts to arrange a Blinken visit to Riyadh, talked to a researcher at Abaad Center on 18 March 2022.
- [5] A GCC diplomat, OP. Cit.
- [6] A top Houthi official talked to a researcher at Abaad Center in Sana'a on 23 March 2022.



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