

Will Yemen be a containment zone of the Saudi-Iranian conflict?

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Introduction

When the Houthi rebels took control of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, in September 2014, Iranian officials stated that the fourth Arab capital fell under their control, the first three were Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus. GCC state officials and Western analysts stated that Iran exported its revolutionary ideology in order to create an empire in the Middle East and that the Houthis might become their principal puppet in the Arabian Peninsula. At the time, Iran was in the midst of talks on its nuclear program. An agreement on Iran's nuclear program was reached the following year (2015), after Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies had launched attacks on the Houthis in support of the overthrown government in September 2014.

The nuclear deal provided Iran with the opportunity to reintegrate Tehran into the international community after easing sanctions and removing some barriers. Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries considered that deal the end of "Iranian isolation" as Tehran improved relations with Western countries and reasserted its position as a major regional power.

Disputes have escalated since then until Saudi Arabia severed relations with Iran and closed the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the consulate in Mashhad after they were stormed by militants who protested against the execution of Shiite cleric, Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia in January 2016. By then, the Houthis had absorbed the shock of the sudden attack of the Arab coalition, and continued to maintain their control over most of the densely populated Yemeni governorates. The power of the Houthis increased as a result of the Iranian military support that included qualitative weapons such as drones, ballistic missiles, and explosive drone boats. Soon, Houthi attacks of Saudi oil facilities and, at a later stage, UAE territory augmented the concerns of most GCC countries over several issues, including imagined conceptualization of the resurgence of the Persian Empire from the course of events in Yemen and the inspiration drawn by Shiite movements in the Gulf states of Houthi capabilities to target stability and security there.

Many experts portray Iran's role in Yemen as a major/leading role to strategically besiege the GCC states and pose an existential threat to them.

Disagreements between Saudi Arabia and Iran date back to the Khomeinist revolution of 1979. Tehran has come to present itself, according to the instructions of the leader of the revolution, "Ruhollah Khomeini," as a force that brings about revolutionary change in the world as a whole and in the region in particular, and as the leader who leads the oppressed against their oppressors to achieve "freedom and justice". Tehran also dubs the United States the "Great Satan" and classifies the GCC states as "puppets" of US imperialism. The speeches of Khomeini and other Iranian leaders regarding "exporting the revolution" and "protecting Shiite minorities" caused Saudi Arabia to feel threatened by Iranian intentions, and this constitutes the major security dilemma. ¹ The same applies to the Iranian interpretation of the actions of Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries regarding the presence of Western troops on their national territory and accumulating huge arsenals of weapons. John Herz (1950) asserts that the security dilemma arises from states taking measures to protect their national security due to concerns over and uncertainty about the intentions of other states in light of an international system of chaos. Each country interprets its own actions as defensive and those of others as potential threats. ²

In April 2021, the Financial Times³ published a report indicating that the two old rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran, had opened a direct line of dialogue, mediated by Iraq, in an attempt to reduce tensions between the two countries. Since that time, five rounds of consultations have taken place, with the Sultanate of Oman, which has always been a back-door consultation mediator between Iran and the world, participating in the last round. The Yemeni war was the major issue raised during consultations between the two countries. Considerable progress was achieved to the extent that the two countries decided to hold public consultations at the political and diplomatic levels.

This paper raises a question on the possibility of the situation in Yemen as the locus of talks that will facilitate progress in the Saudi-Iran consultations, as Yemen is of great importance to Saudi Arabia and of hardly any significance to Iran. It also assumes that the Coronavirus pandemic crisis, the economic visions of both countries, international transformations, and the American vision for the region,

reordered the scale of priorities regarding national security in both of them. Priorities were rearranged to focus on local needs, in particular the economic ones, in addition to new international concerns of involvement in a cold war between the new global conflict axes represented by Russia and China on the one hand and the United States on the other.

The paper also assumes that the negotiations between Tehran and Riyadh regarding Yemen focus on the broad issues, while details are left to their Yemeni allies. The UN-sponsored armistice that began in April and recent developments supported by the Saudi-led coalition, such as the declaration of the Presidential Leadership Council and Saudi-Houthi negotiations under Omani sponsorship, constitute the ground for achieving progress in the Yemeni question.

Why do Saudi Arabia and Iran go to negotiations?

The consultations are an attempt to reduce conflict in the Arabian Gulf region and end tensions between countries on both shores of the Gulf. The basis of much of this geopolitical tension arises from inconsistent visions of managing security in the Arab Gulf (i.e., the GCC countries, Iran and Iraq). For Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, security in the Arab Gulf is maintained through a long-standing network of relations with the United States. From Iran's point of view, security should only be maintained by the countries in the region. These opposing positions exacerbated in the years following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, as Saudi officials urged their American counterparts to curtail Iran's growing influence in Iraq and take a solid stance towards Iran's nuclear program. At the height of the sectarian violence in Iraq in 2008, the late King Abdullah urged the United States to "cut off the head of the snake."⁴ in reference to Iran.

While GCC states officials view Iran's statements and interventions in the Arabian Peninsula, including support for the Houthis, as a confirmation of their concerns about the possibility of an Iranian attack on them, the presence of Western troops in the Gulf region raises Iran's concerns about using the airspace of the GCC countries in the event of a Western attack of Iranian territory. Iranian officials usually express these concerns in their meetings, statements, and threats against the GCC states.

The recent Israeli presence in the UAE and Bahrain augments Iranian concerns, especially as Iran accuses the Israeli occupation of making preparations to lead a Western offensive against the regime in Tehran. For the decision-makers in Saudi Arabia, Iran is the source of the threat, and it is not possible to trust its proposals. Moreover, for the Saudis, the current political system in Iran is the source of endless concerns. The Houthi group's attacks on Saudi oil facilities, and later on of UAE facilities, reinforce these concerns among the GCC countries.

During the last two years, concerns in the two countries increased as a result of what appears to be a change in national security priorities based on current circumstances and the need to ease tensions. Such concerns usually emanate from more serious, possibly internal, concerns and new considerations in the arenas of regional and international politics. The Coronavirus pandemic, the economic visions of the two countries, and the sense of the need to move towards diversifying the economy away from oil motivated the two countries to pursue ambitious visions as their top priorities. In addition, projected changes in the international system prompted both countries to reduce tension and search for some form of understanding which may not amount to a regional security system, but may help avoid "cold war" behavior within a region already witnessing a cold war for more than two decades.

Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, will have to achieve his Vision 2030 to move from the oil-based to the non-oil-based economy era. Therefore, he needs to end the Yemeni war, which consumes the kingdom's resources and reputation, while at the same time, removing the Iranian threat to the north and south of the kingdom. He also needs foreign investment which shall be secure from any Houthi threat. Similarly, Iran has a 20-year vision (2025), with economic and political goals⁵. International sanctions and regional isolation greatly affect the Iranian economy. Iranian decision-makers know that they urgently need Saudi Arabia's approval of the nuclear agreement with the West to improve the Iranian economy. They also need Saudi Arabia's positive discourse on Iran that could induce other Islamic countries to cooperate with the Iran.⁶

The Saudis and Iranians also agree that their foreign policy during the past years has not been successful, in spite of being costly. Riyadh began to reconsider its foreign policy during the past two years.

The Turkish president visited Saudi Arabia for the first time in five years after Ankara stood by Qatar in the Gulf crisis, 2017 and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. Saudi Arabia also ended the boycott of Qatar and resumed relations with Pakistan after ties between the countries were affected by the Pakistani government's refusal to send troops to protect the Saudi borders. On the other hand, Tehran realized that the language of "military resolution" of regional conflicts and proxy wars are no longer viable options at this time and in the near future as Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon or Syria will be a quagmire for Iran. Proxy wars emerge during periods of instability, a situation that does last for long. Iranian proxies in these countries will learn that their interests are embedded in the national interests, so they will change their direction inward instead of serving Iran, and they will not be content to remain an arena of exclusive or dominant influence for Iran and its Revolutionary Guards. In other words, Iran may remain a significant player in this crescent of crises, but it will not enjoy hegemonic or exclusive leadership of any regional system⁷ in the presence of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey.

Since most of the issues are complex and rooted in internal disputes, the two countries need to build trust that enables them to move towards discussing other issues. Therefore, Yemen is a test of the possibility of creating a new regional order and a basis for building trust between the two countries.

Here comes the question: How do Saudi Arabia and Iran view the Republic of Yemen, in terms of their historical relationship and strategic influence, and in the national security literature of the two countries?

Yemen: Saudi and Iranian Perspective

The Saudi view of Yemen

Relations between Riyadh and Sana'a are complex. They reflect the complexities of history, demography, and geopolitics in Yemen. The Saudis view Yemen as a problem due to poverty, conflict and overpopulation which have to be dealt with cautiously. In its relations with Yemen, Saudi Arabia has adopted a "containment and preservation" policy to contain the country and maintain its level in all political, economic and social aspects. Saudi Arabia usually provided support to the regime in Sana'a to prevent its collapse.

Riyadh is worried about the impact of the collapse of the state in Yemen on the kingdom. It is also worried about the expansion of armed groups into its territory, especially the spread of the Houthi ideology among Shiite Saudi citizens. At the same time, since the declaration of the establishment of the Republic of Yemen, Saudi decision-makers have felt that the economic crisis in the poorest country in the region and one of the largest countries in the Arabian Peninsula in terms of population would lead to an influx of displaced people into Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom imposes strict labor restrictions on Yemenis. Yemeni labor is usually used as a means of pressure on the authorities in Yemen, such as the situation in the 1990s after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, in 2013 due to the Arab Spring revolutions, and more recently in order to introduce reforms in the legitimate government.

Since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has continued to pay money to tribal sheikhs to ensure their loyalty, in what was known as the Special Committee, which was temporarily suspended in 2007 and resumed activity in 2015. It also supported Salafist currents in the Yemeni governorates to establish ideological balance and create an incubator for their tendencies in Yemen. Since 2001, Saudi Arabia has focused on confronting Al-Qaeda, especially after 2009, when the organization merged in Yemen and Saudi Arabia under Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with Yemen as its headquarters.

Riyadh considers its presence in Yemen as a major and vital interest, and no one dares challenge or get out of this interest easily, to the extent that even Americans and Europeans view politics in Yemen through Saudi lenses. There is also the security variable because of the threat posed by Al-Qaeda to international peace and security. The Houthi seizure of power in Yemen and the coup against the Gulf Initiative and its Executive Mechanism with the help of late President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, posed a challenge to Saudi Arabia, especially with Houthi officials raising the issue of canceling border demarcation agreements and carrying out border maneuvers that Saudi Arabia considered an "Iranian agenda" given that the Houthis receive support from Tehran and present themselves as "Zaidis," a Shiite sect that Iran considers a national identity.

Iranian Views of Yemen

Compared to Saudi Arabia, Iran seems less involved in Yemen due to lack of geographical borders and national commonalities. During the pre-Islamic era, Yemen was subject to Persian influence, a point that raises Gulf concerns over Iran's intentions to restore the glory of the Persian Empire. Iran's relations with Yemen were volatile. For example, in the 1960s, like Saudi Arabia, the regime of the Pehlevi dynasty (the Shah regime) supported the Imamis against the Republic. Saudi and Iranian concerns met with regard to the Arab nationalist front that was led by Egypt at that time, in addition to confronting Russian influence, standing with the American-Western axis, and building common policies. However, things changed after the Khomeinist revolution, and tension replaced consorted efforts. During the 1986 civil war in former Southern Yemen, Iran also supported the victorious party in the war.⁸

In the 1990s, Sana'a's relations with Tehran were good. The Saleh regime was trying to benefit from foreign relations to break the GCC attempt to isolate the Sana'a regime. In 1997, Hussein Al-Houthi visited Iran, studied there, and was indoctrinated with the Khomeinist ideology which he admired. Upon returning to Yemen, he championed this ideology in Saada governorate, the stronghold of the Hadawi/Zaidi sect" in Yemen. After that, six wars broke out between 2004 and 2009, during which Yemen's relations with Iran were strained. The Houthis' relationship with the Iran was strengthened, albeit within a narrow framework. After the 2011 revolution and the overthrow of the Saleh regime, Iran took advantage of the state of democratic openness to boost its presence in Yemen. It supported and trained separatist movements, sent weapons to the Houthis and trained them, established media and political parties, and attracted local sheikhs, political leaders and members of Parliament. Iran viewed the fall of the capital, Sana'a, to the Houthis as the fall of the fourth capital in its hands and began using the Yemen file to put pressure on Saudi Arabia. With the outbreak of the war against the Houthis in 2015, Iran gradually provided the Houthis with weapon technology, including drones, ballistic missiles, smart missiles, and naval missiles. It also provided the Houthis with training, arming and military plan development experts and field commanders.

Iran views Yemen as an inexpensive opportunity to intervene, as Yemen's strategic location on Bab Al-Mandab Strait is a security capability for Iran to influence and pressure the Arab Gulf states and the West regarding the possibility of choking off oil from the Gulf to the West. Iran threatens the vital Strait of Hormuz, which it oversees, but the decision to close it or influence it angers everyone against Iran. On the contrary, Bab al-Mandab Strait provides Iran with that advantage without receiving blame, as the Houthis will take the blame instead. After Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2022, the Houthis said that they had the upper hand on Bab Al-Mandab, and the Iranian press celebrated the statement.⁹

Despite this, Tehran's continued involvement in the Yemeni conflict is not a priority for Iran. Contrary to its strategy in other countries, Tehran's policy towards Yemen will not reach the point of deploying elite troops as it did in Iraq and Syria, as Tehran considers the presence in its immediate milieu of Iraq first and then Syria as an issue of Iranian national security. The Iranian role in Yemen, by contrast, is an affirmation of its position as a regional power rivaling Saudi Arabia, especially as Riyadh asserts its role as the leading regional power that confronts the "malicious role of Iran". This role was affirmed by former Saudi foreign minister, Adel Al-Jubeir.¹⁰ As for Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, he stated that "the [Iranian] Supreme Leader is a new Hitler in the Middle East."¹¹

Yemen as a prelude to managing and containing the Saudi-Iranian conflict

Since 2016, Iran has been using the Yemeni file as a bargaining chip against Saudi Arabia to have the latter discuss other regional issues. Given its costly war and inconclusive victory,¹² Riyadh had no choice but to swallow the bait. Therefore, Yemen represents a good entry point to containing the Saudi-Iranian conflict. This is due to a number of reasons: First: Iran's machinations in Yemen and its support for the Houthis in their conflict with the Saudi-led coalition are completely different from other interventions in the region. This means that the Houthi movement, which is the reason of the war in Yemen, is less important to Tehran's leaders, and the cost of the intervention is far less than the interventions in Iraq and Syria.

Therefore, there the loss for Iran in Yemen will be less than the loss it will cause in the other files, while the opposite holds true for Riyadh, which sees the Yemeni conflict as part of its national security and hence is difficult to abandon. So, the Yemeni issue is of crucial importance to Saudi Arabia, while Iran considers it "of lesser importance to it."

The Iranian presence in the Yemeni war gives Tehran great leverage in any negotiations, whether for a new regional security regime, or in the Iranian nuclear negotiations. Background discussions between Saudi Arabia and Iran suggest that Riyadh uses whatever leverage it has to stop the flow of money or weapons to the groups in Khuzestan while Saudi Arabia insists that Iran similarly stop the flow of money and military equipment to the Houthis. This is one of the available options.¹³

Second, Saudi Arabia's experience in Yemen is sure to temper its appetite for substantive engagement elsewhere in the region. Saudi confidence in Iran is at an all-time low. Likewise, there are powerful groups in Iran that have no incentive to pursue peaceful solutions to the conflicts in which Iran is involved throughout the region, and want the price to be paid in countries like Syria, Lebanon and in other countries. Therefore, it is necessary to resolve the Yemeni war in order to establish a regional security framework and ease tensions between the two countries,¹⁴ something that Iran has always demanded in return for the exit of foreign troops from the Arab region. However, it seems that this will be difficult to achieve, as the presence of foreign troops came out of fear of Iranian interventions. In light of the lack of confidence in Iran, the GCC countries will not abandon the presence of foreign troops so easily. Therefore, the agreement on Yemen represents a test of the reliability of the Iranian position in the Arabian Peninsula.

The agreement on the current armistice in Yemen, which began in April 2022, represents an auxiliary entry point for the consensus of the two countries, which agree that the cease-fire in Yemen is a decisive way to end the war and boost negotiations. In an indicative move, Saudi intelligence resorted to contacting the Iranian authorities to ensure that the Houthis would not violate the armistice and strike Saudi oil facilities.¹⁵ Then, negotiations were going well, so it is likely that there will be higher levels of representation in negotiations.

It seems that the Baghdad consultations led to an agreement that recognizes the right of the Houthis to stay in power in return for ending attacks on Saudi Arabia. Experts point out that a better chance of achieving this is to include the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Iran and even the Lebanese Hezbollah, which supports the Houthis, in the talks. While countries can be involved, it will be difficult for Hezbollah to join the negotiations on Yemen, but Iran's participation will help ensure that the Lebanese party is involved in political discussions.¹⁶ This means that Hezbollah's interests will be taken into consideration, and that its chances of spoiling a final agreement will be better managed through Iran. However, it seems that Hezbollah wants to indulge in direct negotiations with the Saudis. Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, confirmed that his organization is "a party to the Yemen war rather than a mediator."¹⁷ As for adding Doha and Muscat to these consultations, since they are likely mediators in any upcoming political process in Yemen, they will have the ability to bring together all parties, help implement agreements. They will also bear some of the economic burden of reconstruction.

Third, Appeasing Saudi concerns over the "nuclear agreement": The Saudi intelligence service believes that Yemen is "the weakest link in the security chain of the Arabian Peninsula, and is therefore an easy prey for Tehran to penetrate and manipulate."¹⁸ Therefore, Tehran's cessation of support for the Houthis and the realization of Saudi Arabia's national security partially reduces the tension of relations between the two countries, including Saudi concerns about the nuclear agreement with Iran.

Consequently, progress in a theater such as Yemen can help open up progress in another theater of conflict.¹⁹ Tehran is likely to participate in negotiations to help end the Yemeni conflict if Saudi Arabia is willing either to curb its support for groups opposed to Iranian influence in other theaters, withdraw its support of sanctions against Tehran or engage in positive diplomatic efforts in countries that Iran considers a higher priority. To this end, Yemen represents a crucial step to easing tensions.

Fourth, global transformations: Saudi Arabia and Iran adopt similar positions towards global transformations, including the Russia-Ukraine war, to the American intent to withdraw from the region, the impact of oil as a tool of pressure, and the necessity of creating a specific regional system that prevents the division of the region's policies in favor of the major powers to preclude eruption of a war in the region that the Saudis and Iranians are inclined to avoid. Moreover, drying up local conflicts in small countries endows Riyadh and Tehran with the advantage to be leaders in the region and to contain any escalation between global powers. This is something both countries welcome. Yemen represents a good meeting ground of the two countries, where regional problems are divided according to their rank in the scale of the national interest of the two countries which seek at least to neutralize those countries. This also stems from the economic and social need of the two countries to move to the post-oil economy era.

Biden's visit to Riyadh in mid-July 2022 strengthened the position of Saudi negotiators with Iran, as it implies that the US protection of the region continues and that their alliance with the US is alive after it was subjected to erosion in recent years. Yet, both Riyadh and Tehran know that this visit will not be a substitute for finding a formula between them for a new regional security system in light of the new global transformations, as Saudi Arabia denied talking about a new "Arab NATO" in the region with the Israeli occupation, while the suggestion was welcomed by Iran. Riyadh and Tehran also announced their intention to launch public talks at the political level, which is a very significant development that reveals the extent of progress.²⁰ Riyadh, like Abu Dhabi and other GCC capitals, felt abandoned by the United States since Barack Obama's second term. In 2019. Consultations began between Saudi Arabia and Iran following the targeting of Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais. The cold reaction of the Trump administration was one of the reasons of rapprochement. The American position was repeated in January 2022, when the Houthis declared targeting of Abu Dhabi oil facilities, including the US military base in Al-Dhafra Air Force. Again, the US slow reaction contributed to the anger of the GCC countries.

Limits of the Iranian-Saudi negotiation on Yemen

The Iranian-Saudi negotiations on the Yemen have raised the concerns of the media and political analysts. Many analysts and observers of Yemeni affairs believe that the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia controls their local tools in the conflict. Yet, this is not the whole story, as the foundations of the conflict were local. External interference exacerbated, especially the Iranian intervention in support of the Houthi group, which owns superior qualitative weapons. Even if a Saudi-Iranian or Saudi-Houthi agreements take place, many local factions and parties will fight against the Houthis even without the support of the Saudi-led coalition. Therefore, local factions and parties must be involved in these dialogues and consultations in order to reach an agreement with the Houthis as a local issue and not as an external tool.

Therefore, what is the proper ceiling of consultations on Yemen?

In April 2022 the armistice in Yemen was announced²¹ along with the declaration of the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council chaired by Dr. Rashad Al-Alimi, and consisting of seven members representing several parties, all of which are anti-Houthi, including the Emirati-backed Southern Transitional Council, which aims for the secession of southern Yemen. Thus, ending the era of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who was elected in February 2012 following the ousting of Saleh from power. Legitimacy of former president Hadi was considered the most important factor of tension that contributed to the failure of previous consultations between the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthis, such as the Kuwait consultations 2016. Saudi Arabia also removed influential personalities in the war against the Houthis, such as Vice-President, General Ali Mohsen Saleh, and the military leaders partly loyal to him. This indicates Saudi Arabia's intention to end the war. The steadfastness and unity of the Presidential Council, which is composed of various parties, is one of the most important challenges facing the council itself and the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia.²²

Saudi Arabia and the UAE seek to stop Houthi attacks on oil facilities and secure the border with Yemen. Iran is a major actor in these attacks, as it provides the Houthis with drones, ballistic missiles and military technology. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's ceiling in negotiating with the Iranians focuses on preventing Iranian weapons from reaching the Houthis. It is assumed that the Iranian commitment does not mean allowing any of its militias in the region to provide support to the Houthis. On the other hand, Iran believes that its ceiling in Yemen is reduced to maintaining a hand in Yemeni politics and for the Houthis to be an influential force in the future of power in Yemen. In other words, maintaining a foothold in Yemen underscores the importance of their asymmetric capabilities as part of their military strategy to remain a regional power. The Iran's presence in Yemen has allowed it to expand influence at a low cost despite the sanctions and has given it an advantage over competitors who have a clear advantage when it comes to conventional weapons.²³

Similarly, Saudi Arabia holds negotiations with the Houthis with a more open ceiling of securing the border areas, including a buffer border area and securing the oil installations in the Kingdom, not only until a solution is reached in Yemen, but to a later stage of ending the war. There are serious negotiations between the Houthis and the Saudis under Omani auspices of which the United States and the European Union are cognizant.²⁴

Saudi intelligence may go to further negotiations with the Lebanese Hezbollah. Focus may be placed on Hezbollah's withdrawal of its experts and curtailing cooperation with the Houthis in return for Saudi concessions to the party in Lebanon. The substantial influence of Hezbollah in Sana'a and within the Houthi group is seldom discussed. Hezbollah is the Iranian tool for intervention in Yemen. Saudi intelligence feels that the party is more intrusive and influential within the Houthi group and its role cannot be ignored. Some believe that Saudi Arabia's consultations with Iran necessarily mean that Tehran will compel Hezbollah to abide by the results, but Saudi intelligence believes that this is not enough, as Hezbollah still believes it is necessary to include its local considerations in return for stopping its support of the Houthis in Yemen.

This does not mean ending the war in Yemen. Rather, it means suspending the war between the two countries, which is also an American position. Such an outcome will not serve the interests of the Yemenis and the restoration of state institutions. On the contrary, external negotiations on Yemen can rarely result in maintaining the strategic interests of Yemen without engaging the Yemeni people in negotiations. Moreover, Riyadh and Tehran negotiations will have nothing to do with discussing the Yemeni transitional period. Rather, those details will be an inter-Yemeni issue. If the two countries decide to interfere in those details, they will slip into an abyss of loss of trust that is difficult to come out from. It also augments concerns of evil intentions of the Saudi and Iranian decision makers, which makes war between them closer than ever, a war that the two countries have avoided for a long time, especially in light of the current global transformations. This increases chances of continuation of the war in Yemen and its entry into a new cycle of small-scale wars.

Scenarios for resolving the Yemeni crisis in the light of the Iranian-Saudi consultations, and factors of success and failure

The First Scenario: reaching consensus: In the event of reaching consensus in those negotiations, the outcomes will be reflected in relations between the two countries, but the effect on Yemen will be limited to ending attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Houthis will have a difficult choice of agreeing to Iran's request or continuing their attacks if they do not agree with the Saudis through the back-to-back consultations in Muscat. In the event of a Houthi rejection, Iran may push intelligence information to Saudi Arabia to respond to the Houthis in a way that ensures validity of the agreement between the two countries and persistence of the Houthis as an influential party in Yemen's future. Recent contacts between Saudi intelligence and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards point to the possibility of coordination. Yemeni parties need to negotiate in parallel to achieve progress in local talks.

Ending the war through an Iranian-Saudi declaration is unlikely. Most of the parties fighting against the Houthis affirm that they will continue to fight even if Saudi support is stopped.

If things go well in Yemen, a remarkable change in the tone of the discourse of the two countries will be noticeable. In fact, the media discourse has changed since 2019, from using the language of threats to a more conciliatory language. This ameliorated tone increased after the official announcement of negotiations in early 2021. A further outcome could be the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries in the near future. Other countries in the region may intervene to boost consensus. The fifth round of Omani mediation helps bring together several files, including the "Yemeni file," especially as Muscat has always been a silent mediator of negotiations between Iran and other countries. This role grew after Sultan Haitham came to power and his seemingly good relationship with the Saudi crown prince.

Progress in this direction is also contingent on the success of Iranian nuclear negotiations, which is crucial for Iran's economic growth. Failure to reach an agreement will also be reflected in the situation in Yemen, which Iran may use to send messages to threaten the GCC countries and the West. In the event of reaching consensus on the Iranian nuclear agreement, it is advisable to state the need for consultations to defuse tension in the region, in which Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region participate, in addition to western countries since oil is an international interest.

The Second Scenario: failure to reach consensus: In light of current data, the possibility of failure is weak. However, even if this happens, it will come only after a temporary consensus in the Yemeni file and will be reflected in the Houthi behavior towards Saudi Arabia and the UAE. We might witness escalation in the war in the GCC states and a Houthi consolidation of power at the domestic level. At the same time, Saudi Arabia will push its weight in support of anti-Houthi forces, even if it announces ending air strikes against the Houthis. It might take this course in an effort to announce its exit from the war based on the desire to revive the economy and improve its international image, as the UAE had done.

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- 21 The Houthis refused to extend the armistice on October 2, 2022. It is either considered a result of complicating the Saudi/Iranian consultations if we consider the Houthis a tool entirely belonging to the regime in Tehran, or it complicates the consultations, if we assume that the Houthis did not respond to Iranian pressure.

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- 24 An official in the Yemeni presidency spoke to a researcher at the Abaad Center over the phone on 6/22/2022.

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