



مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث
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The Race of War and Peace in Yemen: Opportunities and Projected Scenarios

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Introduction

Although the political and security scene in Yemen is generally stagnant, tension and alertness are characteristic of several issues. Primary among these is the question of Saudi-Houthi relations which will have repercussions on other files. Other tense issues include the current tension in Hadramout governorate as a result of the attempts of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) to impose military control over the governorate, the existing divisions among the members of the Presidential Leadership Council, rumors of discussions about cabinet reshuffle, and perhaps changes in the Presidential Council itself, the outcomes of the successful Houthi attempt to hinder oil exports, and critical economic decisions taken by the legitimate government. These issues can have many negative repercussions on the status of the legitimate authority and the living conditions of citizens. They may pose serious threats to the local authority in Marib and its tribal and geographical surroundings.

This paper seeks to diagnose the current status quo by monitoring and analyzing the key shifts in the positions of the main forces that affect the military and political reality in Yemen during the current phase; i.e., since the beginning of the humanitarian truce, the attempts to crystallize the ensuing rapprochement during the forthcoming stage, and formulating scenarios in light of the possible orientations of the main forces affecting the situation.

I. Diagnosing the current situation

The diagnosis of the current situation is based on identifying the fundamental developments of the main players in Yemeni affairs at the current stage of the conflict; namely, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Houthi group, the Presidential Leadership Council, the United States, and the European Union. It will seek to point out their most important orientations in the near future since it helps us draw and describe possible scenarios.

Saudi Arabia

Holding the Inter-Yemeni Consultations Conference, the formation of the Presidential Leadership Council, and the transfer of power necessitated the approval of a renewable two-month humanitarian truce. The truce entered into effect in April 1, 2022,

and was renewed twice, but efforts to renew it for the third time failed in October 2022. At any rate, articles of the truce continued to be implemented informally. Oil tankers continued to enter the port of Hodeida regularly and flights from Sana'a Airport to the Jordanian capital, Amman did not stop. Military operations continued to decline in a way comparable to their decrease when the truce was officially valid.

As opposed to the Houthi threat-laden discourse, Saudi Arabia opened channels of dialogue with the Houthis, sometimes under a humanitarian banner (exchanging lists of prisoners and missing persons, and verifying their existence), and at other times through mediation. In this latter respect, Omani mediators were actively involved in coordinating indirect negotiations with the Houthis, without granting the Houthis their demands, especially their demands of payment of salaries.

On another trajectory, Riyadh exerted various forms of pressure on the STC aimed at restraining the behavior of the latter within the framework of the Presidential Leadership Council. It prevented Aidarous Al-Zubaidi from returning to the interim capital, Aden, and rejected his efforts to impose STC military control over Hadramout, etc.

The Houthis

The truce provided the Houthi group with better conditions to catch breath and shuffle their cards. It also provided the Houthis with the opportunity to impose their intellectual agenda, as reflected by the "Code of Professional Conduct". They also organized a conference to prepare for changing school curricula. However, the truce made the Houthis vulnerable to widespread popular and media pressure, due to their failure to pay public sector employees, despite the availability of resources and the cessation of the war. The truce also prompted inter-group conflict between the competing wings and personalities and caused internal group conflicts to surface.

The Houthi approach during the next stage will be based on exerting pressure through military tools to persistently hinder oil exports by the internationally recognized government and to send threatening messages to the countries participating in the Saudi-led Coalition; namely, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

It is by no means unlikely that the Houthis might strike strategic targets in those countries. The Houthis will also capitalize on adopting inflexible attitudes towards issues raised by international parties, with minor exceptions, and are likely to ensure maintaining a security grip in the areas under their control.

The Presidential Leadership Council

The truce presented the Presidential Leadership Council to the international community as the party concerned with ending the war and reaching a political settlement with the Houthis. It also presented an opportunity for the internationally recognized authority to rearrange its ranks. However, the asymmetrical constituents of the council coupled with the cessation of military operations against the Houthis gave rise to conflict and competition among its main constituents, especially after the STC managed to control some areas in Shabwa governorate, after battles that raged for several days, its expansion in Abyan governorate, and its move to control Hadramout and Al-Mahra governorates.

Moreover, two additional factors contributed to the further deterioration of the status of the Presidential Leadership Council: the refusal of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to fulfil their obligation of delivering the deposit to the Central Bank of Yemen, and more importantly the Houthi's ability to stop oil exports, estimated at 60,000 barrels per day, after launching attacks on oil exporting ports.

Except for the National Defense Council's decision designating the Houthis as a "terrorist" group, the Presidential Council did not undertake any military action to stop the Houthis from striking oil export ports, nor did it show any effort - at least publicly - to pressure Saudi Arabia and the UAE to deliver their promised deposit to the Central Bank of Yemen. Similarly, it did not take any tangible measures to rationalize extravagant government spending. Instead, it resorted to imposing additional burdens on citizens through the so-called "Supreme Economic Council" decisions to raise prices of domestic gas and oil, electricity and the customs dollar price. This measure will place an additional burden on citizens,

and may push the areas under the control of the Presidential Leadership Council towards a scenario of chaos and unrest. Moreover, it will reduce popular pressure on the Houthis, and turn pressure towards the legitimate government.

The United States

The United States is aware of the complexities of the conflict in Yemen. Clearly, the Biden administration is disappointed. The faltering of the humanitarian truce in Yemen prevented it from employing this file in its political propaganda within the United States and at the international level. More importantly, the US cannot express its anger in the form of hostile rhetoric and policies towards Saudi Arabia because the Houthis, rather than Riyadh or even the Presidential Leadership Council, are the ones who hindered renewal of the truce, and even demonstrated policies that embarrassed the Biden administration, including their arrest of US embassy staffers in Sana'a.

The American administration was forced to hold the Houthis responsible for failure to renew the truce and criticized their behavior towards lifting the siege on Taiz and other issues. Yet, it directed its practical pressures towards Saudi Arabia, the Presidential Leadership Council, and even towards the UAE. It seeks to put pressure on the Houthis, as much as it wants to stop Saudi Arabia and the Presidential Leadership Council from relying on military action. On December 10, 2022, in an interview with Al-Araby Al-Jadeed TV, the US special envoy to Yemen - in reference to some escalatory statements by a number of Yemeni and Saudi officials - stated that the US would not allow any party to believe that there was a military solution in Yemen. He explained that the US had informed the UAE of the American concern regarding the latter's handling of a number of issues in Yemen.

The most important features of the American approach to dealing with the war in Yemen is working with the governments in the region. The US declares that it cannot resolve the crisis in Yemen on its own, and that it is working with Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman and the UAE to secure the truce in Yemen

and to put pressure on the various parties to induce them to accept the renewal of the truce and to move towards a settlement through a sequential track that aims to secure the humanitarian truce, leading to a cease-fire, and ultimately engaging the parties in political negotiations that eventually lead to a comprehensive agreement.

The European Union

In contrast to the position of the European Union, which has been constantly sympathetic to the Houthis, presenting them as an oppressed minority, European Union countries have recently adopted a firmer stance towards the Houthis. Following a visit by an EU delegation and ambassadors of several EU countries to Aden and Taiz governorates, a statement was issued by the EU criticizing the Houthi position as well as the position of the STC on peace, which it described as threatening the unity of the Presidential Leadership Council and contradicting the international position supporting Yemeni unity. Several European ambassadors also refused to take commemorative photos featuring the secessionist flag in Aden.

In parallel with the statement of the European Union, the French ambassador made statements to Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat newspaper, in which he attacked the positions of the Houthis and Iran, and stated that the motif of victimhood repeatedly cited by the Houthis is no longer sufficient to convince anyone, and that the world has begun to open its eyes to the reality of the Houthi group, explaining that it established a regime of terror and destruction of all segments of the Yemeni society. He stressed the negative role played by Iran in supporting the Houthis, and its failure to put pressure on them in favor of peace, even as it possessed the leverage to do so.

II. Possible scenarios:

Yemeni conflict files overlap greatly, a situation that further complicates the Yemeni issue and contributes to a high level of uncertainty. Therefore, it may be appropriate to grasp the key variable, which is, I think,

the Saudi policy towards the conflict in general and its position vis-à-vis the Houthis in particular. The Saudi position towards settlement and war can be decisive, so it can be adopted as a reference point of analysis and the attempt to anticipate developments in the near future.

Although Saudi Arabia initiated the military intervention on March 26, 2015, which lasted until April 2022, and became a major party to the ongoing war, this is no longer the case, at least during the past eight months after the announcement of the truce. The real Saudi position on the conflict in Yemen is no longer clear. Equally unclear is whether Saudi Arabia still favors war or not. If it still prefers war, what form of war does it opt for, direct or indirect? At what level? To what extent is it ready to go? If it favors putting an end to the war, what is the Saudi vision and scope of the solution?

In fact, trying to fully answer these questions is very difficult, as Saudi politics is often beset by a cloud of ambiguity, due to heavy reliance on maneuvering, and the Saudi preference of working through mostly undisclosed channels. During the past eight months, intentionally or unintentionally, the Saudis have simultaneously sent many unclear, even perhaps contradictory, messages.

Since this is the case, it is crucial to pinpoint the potential trajectories of the Saudi role during the forthcoming stage, since this role is the most influential in the conflict and in determining its trajectories, as stated above. It shall be pointed out that the Saudi role does not operate in a vacuum. It is determined by several determinants and controlling factors, both internal; i.e., related to the internal Saudi situation, and external; i.e., related to the nature and complexities of the situation in Yemen, the positions of the Yemeni parties to the conflict, as well as the powerful influence of regional and international players. In light of available indicators, projected trajectories are as follows:

Scenario 1: Continuity of the current status quo

This scenario is an attitudinal trajectory, in the sense that the basic factors that produce the general political scene in Yemen will remain the same, and therefore the main trends in this scene will generally persist.

This means that the war will not be resolved through a political settlement or military action within a foreseeable period (three to four months as a maximum). It is likely that Saudi Arabia will seek to maintain the current status quo (an informal truce), and a renewal of the truce may be reached, but without pushing the effort further to the level of serious negotiations that result in a settlement. The Houthi behavior will serve this trend, even though it is inspired by different motives. Even if the salaries of public servants in Houthi-controlled areas are paid, payment will not be regular.

In another dimension, the level of support provided by Riyadh to the Presidential Leadership Council will continue within the current limits, especially in the economic aspect. It is unlikely that the deposit funds will be transferred to the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden unless the areas controlled by the legitimate government are exposed to a high state of chaos as a result of the recent decisions of the Supreme Economic Council.

Riyadh will likely continue to pressurize the STC to ensure it acts within the framework of the Presidential Leadership Council. Thus, it might prevent it from creating chaos in Hadramout governorate and from hindering the work of the military committee tasked with integrating military formations.

This scenario is supported by the international community preoccupation with the Russia-Ukraine war, the current estrangement between the Saudi leadership and the US administration and the lack of factors conducive to a military resolution or the acceptance of the Presidential Leadership Council of a political settlement.

Scenario 2: Imposing an end to the war

This scenario is contingent upon the availability of a number of factors that contribute to putting an end to the war, at least in its comprehensive form. Such factors include the undeclared Saudi position to end the war and get out of the Yemeni quagmire because Saudi Arabia has suffered a number of painful and embarrassing blows by the Houthis.

This matter has not been reflected in its military readiness to deal with this threat. In fact, Saudi Arabia seems to take the power of the Houthis for granted and seeks to avoid suffering such blows again. Another factor is the limited political, economic and military Saudi support for the Presidential Leadership Council. Saudi support does not amount to a willingness to engage in a military battle with the Houthis, as much as it weakens the constituents of the legitimate government and plunges it into chaos to force it to ultimately accept a political settlement with the Houthis.

The main line of argument in this scenario is consistent with the American position, which publicly rejects a return to military action, even if it is led by the UAE and not by Saudi Arabia. Moreover, this is the essence of the position of the European Union, regardless of its humanitarian and political rationales and pretexts.

Scenario 3: Resuming hostilities

This scenario stems from reverse hypotheses. In their current status, the Houthis pose a strategic threat that cannot be tolerated by Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the actions of Riyadh over the past months were a maneuver to win time and create conditions for breaking the Houthi project militarily after isolating it socially and disturbing it internally. However, the margin for maneuvering is very narrow. Developments will either force Saudi Arabia to accept Houthi demands, which is unlikely. Alternatively, Saudi Arabia will be targeted by painful Houthi military strikes, which will trigger a Saudi large-scale military response.

This scenario suggests that a persistent Saudi maneuvering will prompt the Houthi group to launch attacks on various targets in Saudi Arabia, and perhaps in the UAE. These strikes will be painful, which may push Riyadh to push the national army and other formations to engage in large-scale battles with the Houthis.

This scenario is supported by the varying international desire for a partial defeat that will bring the Houthis back to the negotiating table and provide better conditions - from their point of view - for renewing the truce and resuming negotiations.

The Race of War and Peace in Yemen

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Scenario 2: Imposing an end to the war



Saudi Arabia might have adopted an undeclared position to end the war and get out of the Yemeni quagmire because it has suffered a number of painful Houthi blows that made it take the power of the Houthis for granted and avoid suffering such blows again.

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