

Reflection of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan on Yemen's War



Geopolitics

Strategy Analysis Unit

September 2021

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Preface:

In a chaotic scene described as a historical defeat, the United States of America withdrew from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021 after 20 years of occupation. The central Asian country was handed over to the Islamic Taliban movement,^[1] which Washington and its allies intervened in Afghanistan to eliminate.

US President Joe Biden provided many justifications for this withdrawal - which was expected according to an agreement between his predecessor Donald Trump and the Taliban movement in Doha in 2020. One of those justifications was that the withdrawal was a must so that the American administration can focus on more important challenges imposed by competing international powers, specifically China, the first economic competitor to America in the world, and then Russia, the military competitor.

The Arab world, the Gulf in particular, dealt with the Taliban's control of Afghanistan with caution, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The two countries - along with Pakistan - are the only ones that recognized the Taliban government (1996-2001). Saudi Arabia called on the Taliban movement to adopt a political system that includes all segments of the Afghan society. Similarly, the UAE has expressed security concerns and called on Taliban to focus on peace and stability.

Through its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US administration set its priorities, and it seems that the Middle East is not among those priorities. The Arab Gulf states understood the message and took it seriously, but what happened in Afghanistan is reflected in one way and another on the Arabian Peninsula and the war in Yemen.^[2] The Biden administration has appointed a special envoy to the country in February 2021.

Inside Yemen, after the seven years of war, international peace efforts failed to reach a solution that would end the war.

During August and September 2021, popular anger escalated over the expansion of poverty, the high cost of living, and the absence of services, while the Houthis, who controlled Sana'a and the northern governorates in September 2014 by force, prevent any demonstrations or criticism against their rule. Demonstrations took place in Aden, which is ruled by the Southern Transitional Council, backed by the UAE, since the council's rebellion against the legitimate government in August 2019.

The demonstrations prompted the council to declare a state of emergency against the most prominent threat the council has faced since its establishment in 2017. On the other hand, the Houthis escalated their attack on Marib governorate, in the east of the country, in an attempt to control it. Despite their failure to achieve any progress - despite the huge human and material cost, the group compensated with progress in the province of Al-Bayda by controlling the center of the al-Soma'a district as a strategic area linked to a mountain range belonging to the Mukayras district, which may enable the Houthis to advance south towards Lauder district of Abyan governorate and move east to the Bayhan district of Shabwa governorate. This comes as the UN and US envoys are trying to achieve a breakthrough in the current stalemate through a new visit to the region in mid-September 2021.

This report discusses the horizons to end the Yemeni war and the change or fading of external alliances with local parties in two axes:

1. The impact of the current Afghan situation on the US politics and its Cold War with China and Russia, as well as with Turkey and Iran as influential powers in the region, and the reflection of such war on the Arab Gulf states and the Yemen war.
2. The prospects to end the war according to the situation of forces on the ground and the proposed international initiatives, according to the new developments.

First: Reasons of Collapse of the Western-backed Kabul Government

The fall of Kabul government, and the escape of former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to the United Arab Emirates might be faster than expected, and questions raised about how Taliban will rule the country and whether it will repeat the same negative way of governing during the period 1996-2001. But it seems that the Taliban movement, during the past 20 years and its negotiations with tribes and nationalities throughout that period, in addition to negotiations with the United States and Western powers through its office in Qatar to reach the 2020 agreement, has become more mature than before - at least in theory. The world's countries will have to wait to see the nature of Taliban's new ruling to evaluate.

What matters the monitors of the war in Yemen, in light of the Afghan experience, is the reasons behind the failure of the Western-backed Afghan government?

The failure was not only because of the Taliban movement, which has been fighting for twenty years with light and medium weapons (and car bombs) against Afghan and foreign forces, but there were other reasons:

- **Afghanistan has been bogged down since the beginning due to blind spots in the US biased vision.** Washington believed that a strong central authority was the solution to Afghanistan's problems, and supported a constitution that would grant the president broad powers. This, along with the confusing electoral system, has undermined the development of political parties and Parliament. A strong state requires legal institutions - though the United States has loyally supported courts, judges, and other such forms.^[3]

The United States spent about \$900 million to help Afghans develop a formal legal system.^[4] Afghans, who were enamored of the Taliban's Islamic rulings,^[5] did not like this. At the same time, the United States' programs that aimed at re-engineering the Afghani culture and gender norms have resulted in resentment among the population. These choices reflected the arrogance of the Western powers and their attempt to change the national identity in Afghanistan and erase the Afghani culture and traditions. This was done in light of the Taliban movement's activity in tribes for twenty years, so the movement received a popular welcome coinciding with the American withdrawal.

- **The collapse of the Afghan army:** In fact, the entire blame cannot be on the Afghan army, but it is shared with the United States, which left it and presented negative messages politically and militarily. It is a direct reason for the failure of the central political government in Kabul, which deepened its corruption even inside the military institutions.

By negative messages, we mean those conveyed through the peace agreement between the Taliban and the United States in February 2020, which set a date for the exit of the US forces, which inflicted the Afghan army (officially estimated at more than 300,000) losses of logistical support and maintenance, which is crucial to face the Taliban movement, and the secret of the Afghan army's supremacy over the past two decades. When the 17,000 US military contractors left Afghanistan, the Afghan combat aircrafts like the Black Hawk did not receive any maintenance, and the Afghan military had not received any drone.^[6]

After the peace agreement, the United States and Western forces reduced their air operations against the Taliban, so Taliban intensified its attacks against the Afghan army, and when the Afghan security forces and army felt disappointed while the American forces were leaving, as they no longer received air coverage in light of the daily killing of dozens of soldiers by "Taliban" bullets and their explosive cars, the Taliban movement achieved successive victories, so the soldiers began to surrender and leave their positions.

The most prominent reason for the collapse of the Afghan army is the rampant corruption in the government of Ashraf Ghani. The corruption reached the highest military command and paralyzed the Afghani forces on the ground in an irreparable way,^[7] including the reduction of meals and ammunition for soldiers ...etc.

- **Corruption in the state's civil institutions:** Pervasive corruption within the state's institutions has undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government, including the judiciary system, where residents were forced to bribe and practice nepotism to pass their cases in the state's courts. They also had to go to Taliban's courts, or tribal norms, which bolstered the popular support for the Taliban movement. The huge amounts of American money found its way to Taliban because of the government's corruption that also undermined confidence in international reconstruction efforts and in the credibility of the Western countries.^[8]

The experience of the Yemeni government is similar to the Afghani one in terms of rampant corruption that is unofficially sponsored by the leadership of the Arab coalition in order to be able to obtain the loyalties of influential military and tribal leaders. The UAE's support for the Southern Transitional Council's rebellion against the government in Aden destabilized the situation and made the government fail in providing a good example of governance, authority and accountability in the liberated areas.

Moreover, the national army affiliated with the legitimate government, which suffers from multiple loyalties, also suffers from multiple problems related to "corruption", "fake names of soldiers", "weak armament", "lack of ammunition", and "cutting off daily nutrition and allowances".

Most of soldiers who fight against Houthi militia in the east of the country receive a salary every few months.^[9] In the event that Saudi Arabia decides to stop air support for the army, the government forces will suffer greatly, as they have already been subjected to great pressure due to the lack of ammunition and other forms of support, so the battle with the Houthis will be more difficult.

Second: The impact of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula

The Arabian Peninsula falls within the regional and international variables related to Afghanistan events and the US withdrawal after 20 years. Yemen has been experiencing a brutal war since the Iran-backed Houthis took control of Sana'a in 2014, and an Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened in March 2015 to support the legitimate government.

Before we know the impact of developments in Afghanistan on the Yemeni war, it is necessary to understand the current situation in Yemen:

- **No local party is victorious in the war**, neither the Houthi group nor the Yemeni government. The latter suffers from multiple problems, and its army suffers internally from some problems similar to those suffered by the Afghan army. Unlike the United States, which built, trained, and armed the Afghan army, Saudi Arabia did not do the same. For example, the army and tribesmen in Marib - the most important stronghold of the legitimate government and the last of one in the north - depend in their fight against the Houthis on medium and light weapons. The Saudi support with qualitative weapons is absent, except for air raids.^[10]

There is an important point we should know about differences between the Afghani army and the Yemeni army. The first was prepared as employees, so as soon as Washington's support stopped, they decided to surrender and withdraw from the battles. But the Yemeni army, despite the lack of logistical support from Riyadh for years, they continue to confront the Houthis and obstruct their progress. And even in Marib, the army managed to open fronts of attrition for the Houthis due to the fact that the formation of a national army and popular resistance comes from the depth of the Yemeni society, which is hostile to the Houthis.

- **Saudi Arabia's intention to get out of the Yemeni war:** Saudi Arabia promised at the beginning of the war (2015) that it would end the war within a few weeks, and that its goal was to force the Houthis to sit on negotiations table. However, the war is going on and it is approaching its seventh year. It seems that Saudi Arabia wants to withdraw without achieving any victory for several reasons, including its international reputation that has been greatly affected, the war is no longer supported by the Saudi popular as it was in the beginning, in addition to the political problems related to the transfer of power to the next generation.

The second reason is within the Saudi ruling family. From an economic point of view, Saudi Arabia loses 200 million dollars daily in the war, in addition to the suspension of most of the economic facilities in the south of the Kingdom and the state of economic instability due to the continued strikes on the Houthis.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman presented an ambitious vision for the year 2030, focusing on the economy and the transition from dependence on oil to dependence on the non-oil economy. This ambitious project is threatened by war, as it drains the country's budget, which is already affected by COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, most of the countries that were involved in the Arab Coalition have left, including the UAE, the second country that was an essential part of the coalition,^[11] and the US cover for this war has become absent. All factors may force Saudi Arabia to give up.

- **Multilateralism in the government / Coalition Camp:** The war (2015-2021) created many local parties, including the Southern Transitional Council, forces affiliated with Tariq Saleh, the nephew of former Yemeni president Ali Saleh, the Giants Forces, and Brigades affiliated with Salafi Abu al-Abbas in Taiz.^[12] All these new formations are supported by the UAE, which trained, financed and armed them with American weapons. These forces are not subject to the legitimate government.

While Saudi Arabia supports the Yemeni government forces and tribesmen, the Houthi militia receives support in qualitative weapons such as ballistic missiles, drones, and smart naval missiles, in addition to qualitative training, from Iran and its militias in the region in what is known as the "Axis of Resistance."

- **Differences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE:** Disagreements escalated between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh over Yemen in 2019, when the UAE announced the withdraw of its forces from the Saudi-led Coalition. This step contributed to emerging disagreements and mistrust between the two countries.^[13] The goals of the two countries in Yemen stem from two aspects. The first one is political, as the UAE wants to show itself as an influential power in the region and to use Yemeni lands to impose hegemony on the vital maritime lane "Bab al-Mandab strait," based on its regional war against the "political Islam" in countries known as the Arab Spring countries.

As for Saudi Arabia, it is rooted in the Yemeni politics due to the geographic neighborhood between Yemen and the Kingdom, and Saudi fears of the emergence of a state or party in Yemen that affects its influence and interests, as well as its national security. This is one of Riyadh's fears, as it sees that the Emirati influence in Yemen represents a threat against it, given the recent history of the two countries' relations.

The second one is economic, as the UAE wants to control and disable the Yemeni ports so that they cannot compete the Dubai ports. It also wants to turn Yemen into a market for its products, even if it is by force. For its part, Saudi Arabia wants to establish an oil port on the coast of Ghayda, the center of Mahra Governorate (near the Omani border) and to extend oil pipelines from the southeast of the Kingdom to the new port on the Arabian Sea. The economic challenges that Saudi Arabia is facing due to the low oil price and the outbreak of the Corona virus (COVID-19) prompted the Saudi vision to consider Yemen as an emerging market with a population of more than 30 million.

Disagreements between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh escalated this year 2021 for economic reasons, and the latest dispute over oil production quotas drew attention to a crack in their relationship and an economic competitiveness. Saudi Arabia has decided to prevent multinational companies from obtaining contracts with the Yemeni government unless they move their main regional headquarters to Riyadh,

which will pose a challenge to Dubai, which is the center of regional headquarters. The other challenge is that Saudi Arabia imposed customs duties on imports from Gulf countries at a rate of 3 to 15 percent, on products manufactured by any company based in the Gulf. In the UAE, where original citizens represent only almost 10 percent of the population estimated at 9 to 10 million, companies say they are facing a major blow. ^[14] As it is well-known in the Gulf regimes, differences in any field turn into conflict in other areas. The Saudi-Emirati differences in Yemen may be the reason behind Saudi actions against Abu Dhabi.

- **The complexity of the Yemeni conflict:** The conflict in Yemen is complicated and linked to a group of conflicting local parties, which depend on external forces that prolong the conflict and fuel the war. The external forces are not able to stop the war alone, but rather it depends on local parties to reach an agreement. However, the intervention of external parties in a multi-faceted cold war complicates the situation, and reaching a peace agreement becomes more complicated.

- **Popularity of the parties:** Most of Yemenis no longer trust the parties to the conflict, but they still hope to restore the state that protects their rights and organizes their lives. The Houthi group does not have popularity in its areas of control, which are managed by a tight security grip, as thousands of people are detained either for criticizing the armed group, or relatives of fighters in the ranks of the legitimate government, who are being swapped with war prisoners. Corona is also spreading in the Houthis-controlled areas, but the Houthis continue to deny the virus spread. The Houthis have been refusing to hand over salaries to the public sector employees since 2016, even though the group obtains at least US\$2 billion in revenues from taxes and customs each year, in addition to illegal levies.

In the south, political and economic problems have multiplied, as the government was expelled from the interim capital, Aden,^[15] after the Southern Transitional Council controlled it and some neighboring provinces. The Saudi-Emirati differences and conflict of interests raise more tension between the government and the Southern Transitional Council. The government accuses Abu Dhabi of thwarting the implementation of the “Riyadh Agreement”^[16] and using the Southern Transitional Council as a tool to serve Abu Dhabi's interests.

As a result, the public services were neglected and salaries were suspended in most government's institutions, and the government failed to find a solution to the continued deterioration of the economy. Hundreds of people have demonstrated since mid-September 2021 in most districts of Aden, and the protests spread to the city of Mukalla, the center of Hadhramaut (the oil-rich province in the southeast of the country) due to the expansion of poverty and the high cost of living conditions in light of low salaries and the collapse of the national currency, in addition to the absence of services, including electricity and water.

Aden is under the control of the Southern Transitional Council, which deployed its forces to the streets and declared a state of emergency. At least one civilian was killed and dozens were injured and detained. The demonstrators denounced the Southern Transitional Council, the legitimate government, and the Arab Coalition, and considered them the reason behind the deterioration of their living conditions.

The forces affiliated with Tariq Saleh, the nephew of the former Yemeni president, stationed on the Western coast front, failed to carve out a geographical area that includes areas of Taiz and Hodeidah to rule, although these forces recently announced the formation of a political office to negotiate on behalf of those forces on any negotiations on the future of Yemen. Dozens demonstrate periodically in areas under the control of Tariq's forces due to violations they commit against civilians, including killing, detention, and torture.

- **Combating terrorism:** Washington believes that the next terrorist threat to its national security after Afghanistan is coming from countries experiencing conflicts, including Yemen.

Although the control of the Iran-backed Houthis has inspired other armed groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the two organizations were greatly dismantled and lost their contacts, as a result of military operations by the Arab Coalition and the Yemeni government. But this did not prevent some parties to the war from taking advantage of these terrorist groups to achieve some of their own interests.

The US Department of State warns that instability in Yemen has undermined long-term counterterrorism efforts, which rely heavily on air strikes. The Barack Obama administration has conducted an estimated 185 strikes over eight years, while the Trump administration has launched nearly 200 strikes during his term. While the strikes killed several high-ranking AQAP members including former leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi and senior official Jamal al-Badawi, who was allegedly involved in the bombing of the USS Cole, monitors say that the US strikes have also killed more than 100 civilians.^[17]

While the Houthis present themselves as a force capable of defeating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, they had truce agreements with the two organizations, but they even used them every time they were under military pressure from the government forces.

Field experiences have proven that the most decisive war against terrorist groups was that carried out by organized armies and security services under the government's control. But reducing the influence of an armed group through other armed groups is practically indirect sharing of influence between armed groups and terrorist ones at the expense of the state and society.

- **International Efforts:** The United Nations and international parties are leading efforts to end the war by reaching a peace agreement, but since 2016 they have failed to bring the parties together to discuss such an agreement. In 2018, the two parties (the Yemeni government and the Houthis) agreed on the so-called “Stockholm Agreement” regarding a ceasefire in Hodeidah, understandings regarding Taiz, and the release of detainees and political prisoners, but they failed to implement most of the terms of the agreement, which only halted a successful military advance by the pro-government forces to seize the vital port of Hodeidah, which is still under the Houthis' control.

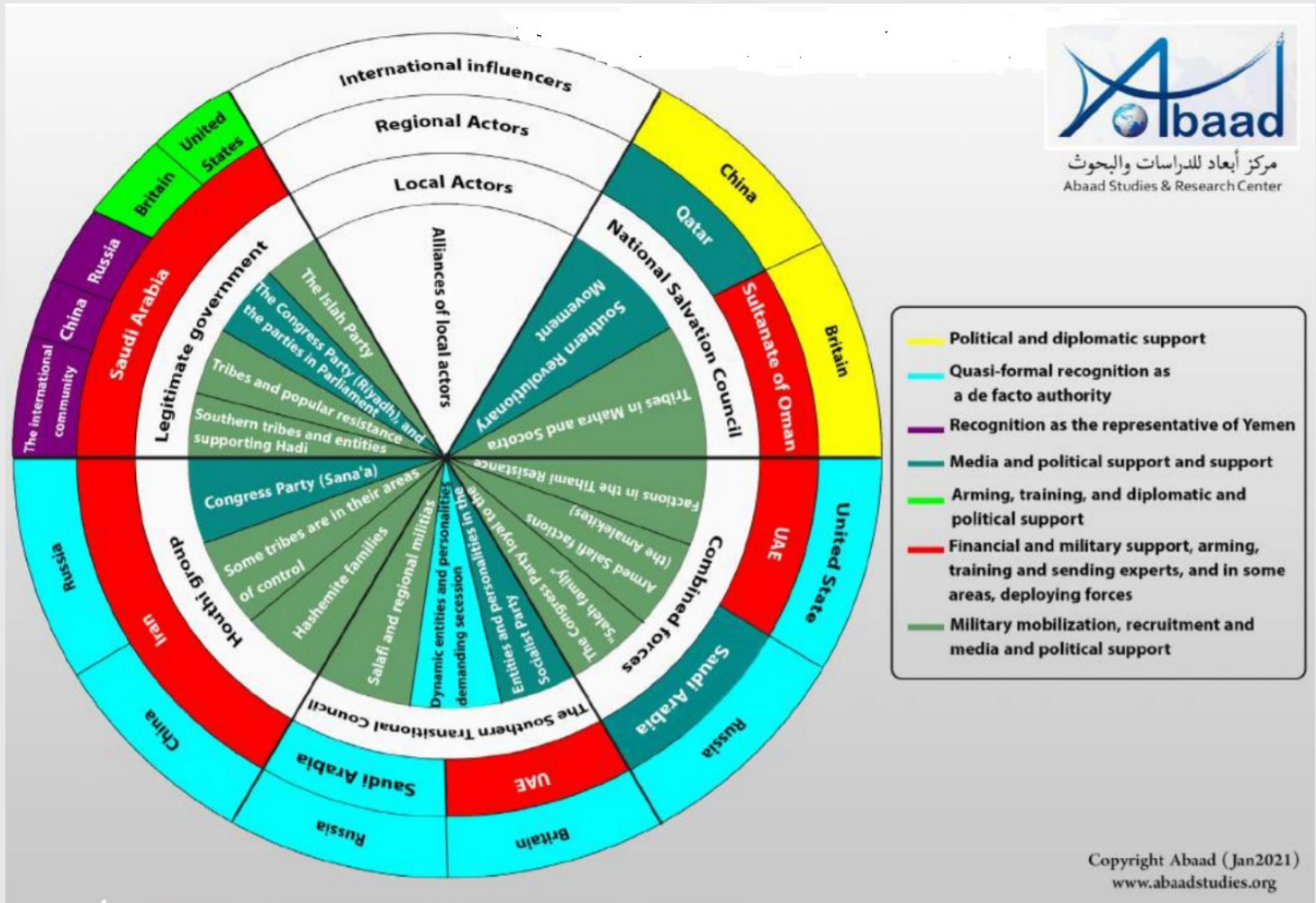
The United Nations has appointed a new envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg - who began his duties on September 5, 2021 carrying with him hopes for a solution to the Yemeni crisis, relying on his experience as a former ambassador of the European Union to Yemen, and as a responsible for the file of the Arabian Peninsula (Gulf States). But he may need a real miracle in implementing the initiative set by his predecessor, Martin Griffiths, which consists of four elements: a comprehensive cease-fire, the opening of Sana'a airport, facilitating the accessing of oil derivatives through the port of Hodeidah, and a call for a return to consultations on the future of Yemen. The Houthis reject that and demand another order that begins with the cessation of air raids, opening the airports, stopping operations on the Saudi-Yemeni border, and then a cease-fire inside Yemen. It is a plan that aims to stop the Coalition's air cover that supports the government forces in Marib to enable the Houthis to take control of the oil-rich province.

- **The United States logistically supported the operations of the Arab coalition in Yemen during the era of Barack Obama.** His administration partially retracted that support at the end of his term. During the era of Donald Trump, his administration turned a blind eye to the Arab coalition - it did not support or discourage the Arab coalition, and its positions were closer to supporting Abu Dhabi than to Riyadh, which felt let down when Aramco was bombed in 2019. Then the administration of President Joe Biden, the democratic administration, announced the stopping of support and arming of Saudi Arabia due to the Yemen war, and announced the appointment of its first envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking in order to end the war.

It seems that the United States still looks at Yemen as a source of al-Qaeda threat, or from the point of view of its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, with the beginning of the Biden's administration, it dealt with the Yemeni file without understanding the roots of the conflict, and it did not make any progress in its promises regarding stopping the Yemeni war. The lack of an international understanding, especially the West, of the nature of the Houthis and their desire to control and monopolize power, and seeing Yemen from the angle of its relationship with Saudi Arabia - which is not loved by Western civil society organizations - helps the Houthis propaganda to present themselves as "oppressed" and exposed to war.

Third: Regional and International Changes Related to Yemen:

As mentioned so far, the war in Yemen is a multifaceted struggle for influence regionally and internationally.^[18] The Gulf countries are very sensitive to changes in international relations that may affect their national security, especially relations with the United States, their main ally.



Infographic highlights relationship between international influencers and the local and regional actors.

It is too early to judge the Taliban's international relationship, and whether it will run Afghanistan pragmatically or as an Islamic state, like Iran, as this will take on different dimensions related to Yemen in many respects closely related to the conflict and influence in the region:

- **The Impact of the American Withdrawal from Afghanistan:** The American withdrawal and the victory of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan means a strategic defeat for the United States. The fall of Kabul reminds us of the fall of Saigon in Vietnam in 1975. It reveals the failure of the Pax Americana peace strategy in the Middle East. The region has gradually become more turbulent and violent under the American military hegemony since 1998, as five regions have been experiencing some armed conflict, and now the region is engulfed by 22 violent conflicts.^[19]

• **The message of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan quickly reached the Gulf region**, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which Riyadh considers - at least – a clear message presented by three US administrations (Obama - Trump - Biden) that the US withdrawal from the Middle East and confronting the Russian and Chinese influence is at the top of its agenda in the Middle East in the next phase. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington showed its seriousness to withdraw from the Middle East and betray its allies.

This US betrayal was permanently reinforced by the Gulf States, as the Obama administration signed the “Iran nuclear agreement,” and Trump let down the Gulf in taking a direct position against the targeting of oil facilities in 2019, in which Iran was accused despite the Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Biden's administration removed the Houthis from the lists of terrorism, which encouraged them to launch intensive attacks on Yemeni cities, in particular the Marib governorate. Washington halted arms sales to Saudi Arabia and announced that it would not provide logistical support to the coalition's operations in Yemen. The Patriot batteries and the advanced air defense system "THAAD" were withdrawn from the Kingdom in August 2021, despite the Houthi escalation against the Kingdom with ballistic missiles and explosive drones.^[20]

With the Vienna negotiations on returning to the Iranian nuclear agreement, the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, feel that America, in order to reach a nuclear agreement with Tehran, is ignoring the continued Iranian interference in the security and stability of the region. These messages, along with the continued American statements that it will focus on confronting the Russian and Chinese influence, reveal that the United States is abandoning the Arab Gulf states, which depend, in part, on the US security protection.

In general, the US policy tends to be the “policy of incomplete functions.” The past twenty years indicate that US begins with intervention and then fails to achieve objectives and quickly leaves the scene, leaving behind chaos for the peoples of the Middle East so they have to flounder or coexist with worse conditions than before. The withdrawal from Afghanistan is an example. Afghans, including those who sided with the United States, were left to live under Taliban's rule.^[21] The same happened in Iraq, Syria, and other countries.

At the same time, the Gulf states do not have much influence on the United States, as influence has gradually diminished since the beginning of this century. The US withdrawal from the Middle East is driven by another factor: growing energy independence. The US net energy imports peaked in 2005 at about 30% of total consumption. But thanks to the development of hydraulic drilling technologies, which has increased the capacity to extract gas and oil, America became a source of energy in 2019. The United States still imports some crude oil, but its imports from OPEC (which is dominated by the Gulf states) decreased from 85% to 14%. So America freed itself from the need to secure and protect supplies from producers in the Gulf States.^[22] Admittedly, most of the Gulf States still depend on the US security,^[23] even in a world moving away from fossil fuels, so the previous pressure paper has steadily declined in effectiveness.

The plans of the United States to withdraw from the region, and its mistakes during the past 20 years, along with the Gulf disappointment with the American policy - which has grown with the withdrawal from Afghanistan - other countries are rushing to fill the void, and they come to the fore: Russia, China, Iran and Turkey. This confirms the Russian intervention in Syria after the red lines announced by Barack Obama in 2015 were broken, and Moscow is seeking to obtain military bases in the Red Sea and Yemen in the foreground, and it seems that Gulf countries such as the UAE are helping for this^[24]

Iran controls - to varying degrees - three Arab capitals, Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad, in addition to the fourth capital, "Sana'a",^[25] where the Houthis control. Turkey also intervened in Syria for its national security after the United States refused. It also went to Libya, it was present in Somalia and expanded in Central Asia. China also offered funds and investment plans to the Gulf / Arab countries without preconditions.

- **Expansion of the Cold War from Central Asia:** If the Taliban decides to adopt an international hostile policy - this includes Central Asia - within an American vision to occupy China, Russia and Iran - as analysts point out - this will push those three (ostensibly allied) countries to work towards expanding the Cold War to include Yemen, which overlooks the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait, as the European Union countries - allies of the United States - still depend on fossil fuels, a large part of which comes from the Arab Gulf states. This will make the Yemeni conflict more complicated. As a precaution step, Saudi Arabia may rush to a peace agreement with the Houthis that will legitimize Houthis' de facto authority driven by Saudi desire to get out of the war, as the Kingdom's economy has been affected by the Corona pandemic and the seven-year war.

- **Iranian-Saudi Consultations:** The consultations between Tehran and Riyadh are based on the needs of the two countries. Iran wants influence in the Arabian Peninsula and a reduction in escalation with America and the international community through an agreement that does not impede its ambitions in the region, and Saudi Arabia wants an end to the war in Yemen and a safe exit for it. The rapprochement is mainly driven by the economies of the two countries that have been affected by Corona, in addition to the policy of the new US administration, as well as fears that the increasing influence of international actors in the region may affect the influence and security of the two countries. The consultations, sponsored by Baghdad during 2021, are considered the most prominent new developments in the region, and according to what was published, war in Yemen is one of the most important topics in the Saudi-Iranian discussions.

Diplomats point out that these consultations may establish - if succeed - a new comprehensive security system in the region that includes (the Gulf, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, etc.), based on the sharing of influence between the two countries and the start of economic cooperation. According to a Gulf diplomat who is familiar with the consultations, Riyadh presented a proposal that Iran abandons its support for the Houthis in Yemen, in exchange for Riyadh support the return of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria to the Arab League, the recognition of its legitimacy, and the reopening of the Saudi Embassy in Damascus.^[26] Iran rejected this offer, as supporting the Houthis is a lucrative deal for it, while the Syrian regime actually controls most of the Syrian territory, and Tehran hopes that the Houthis will control Marib governorate so that its allies in Yemen will gain international recognition.

One of the most prominent concerns about Saudi Arabia's rush to negotiate with Tehran is its fears of a US intention to restore the nuclear agreement without any regard to regional concerns. As for Iran, it is concerned about future developments in Afghanistan and the nature of its relationship with the Taliban - despite the fact that the Quds Force commander, Esmail Qani, has been responsible for the Afghan file for many years, in addition to agreements between Tehran and the movement during the past decade that ensured the maintenance of good relations between them - as it fears that Saudi Arabia's use of the Taliban movement or other groups against it for sectarian dimensions. The collapse of the Iranian economy and the need for Ebrahim Raisi, the new Iranian president, to implement his economic program may push Tehran towards an agreement with Riyadh.

In all cases, Iran is the only beneficiary from any negotiations with Saudi Arabia. If there is indeed agreement on the comprehensive security system; Riyadh will make more concessions in the Yemeni file to strike a balance, because Saudi Arabia, with the new facts, sees itself in an obligatory path in those negotiations, unlike Iran, which sees itself in a position of strength, as the West is negotiating with it and its allies in the region are capable and anger Riyadh.

It is too early to judge the end of negotiations between the two countries, as they began in June 2021 and stopped until Ebrahim Raisi appointed officials to deal with the Gulf file, including intelligence officials.

- **Europe inherits the American role:** With the American withdrawal from the region, the European Union is trying to inherit the role of the United States due to several reasons: NATO and its image were damaged with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, fears of continuing flow of refugees, attempts to raise the economic growth that was affected by the outbreak of Corona (Covid-19), and looking at the Gulf countries/Middle East as emerging markets.

In Yemen, the European Union is leading efforts of the United Nations through the Swedish Hans Grundberg after the British Martin Griffiths. The EU sees the possibility of achieving progress in the Yemeni file, assuming that Lenderking's efforts will be affected by the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, and that dealing with American efforts in Yemen and the Gulf will be worse than before.

Scenarios:

The events in Afghanistan have pushed the region countries to rethinking of their future security away from the US protection. If they do not decide to agree on one strategy to face the Iranian influence, the Gulf countries may go to other Arab countries to build defense alliances. The Baghdad conference^[27] may refer to the nature of the coming phase: The Arab countries' attempts to stop the fragmentation and the size of Iranian and Turkish presence in the region in the near future. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan sent a message which the Arab Coalition understood that Americans are giving up their allies who must be prepared to deal with this change, and the enemies and competitors of America (Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran) understood that there is a vacuum after the US withdrawal must be exploited.

This vacuum will also throw heavy burden on the European Union and Britain to take the initiative to fill in the gap.^[28]

It also represents a motivation for each of the Yemeni and regional parties to accept the European initiatives. After years of the United Nations failure to mediate to end of the war, now the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, needs for a radical change in international approach to end the conflict and a wider understanding of the Yemeni file. So he needs for more support from the European Union, particularly Britain. But all that requires deeper understanding of the Yemeni problem and the extent of the influence of the local communities before understanding the interests and desires of local war parties and their regional supporters. Accordingly, we can imagine the paths of the war in Yemen after the earthquake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

. The rampant corruption in the legitimate government and its failure to provide services, corruption within the national army, and Saudi dependence on political components leaving the tribal depth and its impact on society and war are very similar to those that led to the handover of Afghanistan to the Taliban movement. If Saudi Arabia decides to withdraw from Yemen before setting a new plan to face the Houthis and Iran's influence, the Houthis movement will impose its influence on most the areas, and the local parties and their regional sponsors, such as the UAE, will seek early agreement with the Houthis to ensure their survival.^[29]

The variables in Yemen, the popular congestion, the lack of security, and the collapse of the economy in the southern governorates, will make the people accept to be ruled by any power, even if they don't like it, to impose security and recover the economy, rather than current local parties. If the war, insecurity, and the economic collapse continue for a long time, this will cause Yemenis to lose their hope in the ability of the current authorities to manage their areas and tackle their demands, so they may escalate protests or accept any other party from outside the current authorities to administer their affairs, even if it is an extremist group.

The United States, after its withdrawal from Afghanistan, will try to achieve new victories over Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and it seems that Yemen or Somalia will witness an intensified fighting against the two organizations to keep the US reputation that was harmed following the American withdrawal from Kabul. The latest US statement said “the terrorist danger comes from Yemen, Somalia, and Syria not from Afghanistan.”^[30] The Houthis present themselves as the only power that is capable to fight Al-Qaeda. This pushes United States and Western countries to seek cooperation with the Houthis to fight the two organizations and what will increase this possibility is the absence of Western intelligence in Yemen and reaching agreement in Vienna about the Iranian nuclear program.

First Scenario: The Saudi withdrawal from Yemen and handing it over Iran:

Saudi Arabia may withdraw from Yemen, even if it does not save its face water, if the Houthis guarantee to protect the Saudi boards, to stop the targeting of its Saudi oil and industrial facilities, to protect Saudi interests in southern Yemen including the acceptance of expanding an oil pipeline oil through Mahrah (east), and to allow Saudi Arabia to build a Saudi military base in the Socotra archipelago, despite Riyadh signed huge economic agreement with Muscat that will enable to achieve their ambition of obtaining a water outlet in the south.

The Houthis can ensure that, as the United States did in Afghanistan, but the two parts cannot guarantee the official and popular position towards such agreements that cannot pass without price. Expectations may go to huge protests among Yemenis that may turn into a popular movement against all local and regional parties to the conflict and all forces on the ground that receive support from regional parties. The protests already began in the southern governorates, in addition to the popular congestion and anger in governorates under the Houthis control due to the corruption of the group's leaders and its targeting of the tribal community and Houthi attempts to demolish it to establish a parallel compatible sectarian loyalty.

Second Scenario: The defeat of Saudi Arabia and its allies in Yemen:

This scenario assumes full control of the Houthis, who are supported by Iran, on most of Yemen. This will not happen unless there is a convergence between Iran and the UAE that may lead to a coordination agreement between the UAE allies in the Southern Transitional Council and Tariq Saleh's forces, and the Houthis, the Iran's allies. This scenario grows up as the space between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi increases.

Abu Dhabi announced its withdrawal from Yemen in 2019, but in fact, it did not do that, as dozens of its soldiers are still in Yemen, in addition to more than 150,000 loyal fighters, who receive instructions from it. Thus, the UAE maintains its share of Yemen's cake in any expected agreement. The reduction of tensions between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in economy and politics is necessary, because both countries have economic and political influence to harm each other out of their borders. Yemen is the easiest and closest square for both to show the size of damage they can cause to each other by Yemeni hands. In this case, Iran and its allies will be the only beneficiaries.

Third Scenario: New additional allies to Saudi Arabia:

This scenario is strange for the Yemeni people, who lost confidence in Saudi Arabia as a main partner and important ally to the government and the Yemeni people. But if there is a serious review of the military situation on the ground, and if it is certain for Riyadh that any Iranian influence in Yemen represents a future threat against the national and regional security, especially the Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia may be pushed to rearrange its field partners under the cover of the legitimate government and to look for strong regional partners, who have the ability to fill in the gap left by the America decision to stop support to the coalition and pull its air defense systems.

In case Saudi Arabia fails to reach the looked-for agreement with Houthis or with Iran, in negotiations that pass in two parallel ways, or has to withdraw from Yemen through a disliked agreement under the Western pressure, it will have to go to Turkey because it is considered closer to Saudi Arabia than Iran due to the Qatari good and active relationship with Ankara.

This scenario can be also achieved after Saudi withdrawal from the Yemeni scene, because it may be a motive for the Yemeni legitimacy to look for new regional and international allies to management the battle of “reducing the Iranian influence in the region, especially as the Yemeni scene carries the signs of possible public explosion because of the deterioration of living conditions, sharp collapse of the national currency’s value, and the absence the State’s services of education, health, electricity, and water, as well as the increasing rates of poverty and hunger among the people in most of the government-held governorates.

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[2] The war in Yemen escalated with the Houthi group's takeover of Sana'a in September 2014, and the Yemeni president's departure the following year to the city of Aden in southern Yemen, as he declared Aden a temporary capital, and called on Saudi Arabia and other countries to support him to restore power. But the Houthis attacked Aden so that the president and his government moved to neighboring Saudi Arabia, after declaring on March 26, 2015 an Arab coalition of several countries to restore the authority of the legitimate government in Sana'a, but the coalition failed until now. According to unofficial statistics, 233,000 were killed, most of them due to indirect causes such as the spread of epidemics and diseases (according to the United Nations). The war pushed the country to be the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with 85% of Yemen's thirty million population in need of humanitarian assistance. The economy has suffered great damage, as the national currency is witnessing a steady decline. Instead of (215 riyals per dollar before the war, the real value of the dollar reaches 1100 riyals in government-controlled areas, in addition to a fake stability, as experts describe it, at 600 riyals in Houthi-controlled areas), which led to the division of the banking system. The exchange rate difference between the governorates went from huge transfers to the Houthi war budget, which helped them to continue their attacks on Yemeni cities outside the scope of their control, and to threaten neighboring countries with missiles and drones that targeted sensitive facilities such as oil and civilian objects such as airports and ports.

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[8] From the Inspector General's Report: Lessons from the United States' Experience with Corruption in Afghanistan.

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[10] The report and camera of the American CNN network talked about the bad situation of the weapons with which the government forces are fighting against the Houthis in the city of Marib. The report was published on

23/4/2021, link: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2021/04/23/yemen-marib-frontline-battle-robertson-pkg-intl-hnk-vpx.cnn>

[11] The UAE has announced its exit from Yemen, but some of its forces are still in at least three governorates (Shabwa, Hadramout, Socotra), and other allies have armed militias trained and armed by Abu Dhabi, and they pay their salaries and the number of their members is estimated at (150,000), along with political entities that support them.

[12] The United States placed the leader of the Abu al-Abbas Brigades, «Adel Farea», on the lists of terrorism because of supporting and financing al-Qaeda and the «Islamic State», Daesh, and using the brigades as a gateway for recruitment into the two extremist organizations.

[13] More information about the Saudi-Emirati disputes can be found in the book issued by the Abaad Center for Studies and Research and the Arab Foundation for Strategic Studies (The Emirates Game in Yemen - Adnan Hashem - Nasser Al-Taweel - Abdul Salam Mohamed) link: <https://abaadstudies.org/news-59880.html>

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