



# The Exchange of Visits Between Saudi Arabia And The Houthis:

## Situational Response Or Strategic Shift?



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**Position Evaluation**

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We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

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Saudi Arabia and the Houthis exchanged delegations in light of the anticipation of war erupting on the fronts again and after the failure of the efforts to renew the armistice. The purpose of the visit was said to discuss the war prisoners' file. On October 12, the official spokesman for the Arab Coalition forces stated, "Two delegations, from the coalition and the Houthis, exchanged visits to detainees of both sides as a goodwill initiative under confidence-building and truce extension efforts in Yemen." He explained that the visit comes in addition to what was previously announced by the leadership of the coalition regarding the prisoners' negotiations in Amman<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, on October 12, the official in charge of the prisoner's file in the Houthis, Abdul Qadir Al-Murtada, confirmed, through a tweet, that the meetings come "within the mechanism of verifying the lists of the first stage of the release of prisoners, which was agreed upon in Oman. This is "to verify the name lists of the prisoners in both sides and has nothing to do with any other political negotiations".

These mutual visits have raised a lot of controversy about Riyadh's goal, among those who see it as a strategic Saudi move toward improving the relations with the Houthis, regardless of the interests of other Yemeni parties, and between those who see it as a tactical measure through which Saudi Arabia seeks to absorb international and American pressures regarding stopping the war and extending the armistice, especially since the Saudi Cabinet called for classifying the Houthis on the international terrorist list, during its last meeting on October 18. This paper attempts to study the nature of these visits and predict their future paths.

## The situational contexts:

The mutual visits between the Saudi and the Houthi delegation coincided with several related events, which are expected to have an impact on the future of understanding between the two parties:



## The suspended truce:

The humanitarian truce, announced in April, under the auspices of the United Nations, expired on October 2. According to the statements of the chairman of the PLC, Rashad Al-Alimi, during his meeting with the American envoy, Tim Lenderking, on October 13, Al-Alimi explained what he called “the commitment of the PLC and the government to a comprehensive peace approach based on the agreed references”. On the other hand, the Houthis still refuse to accept the extension of the truce and present new conditions and demands. The Supreme Political Council, affiliated with the Houthis, announced its rejection of the UN proposal to extend the armistice as it “does not live up to the demands of the Yemenis”, as he described it.

On October 5, the Security Council held the Houthis accountable for obstructing the United Nations’ efforts to extend the current truce, describing its terms as strict demands that could lead to negative consequences. However, the next day the Houthis assured their refusal to extend the truce and its adherence to its terms to paying the salaries of civil and military employees in their areas from the treasury of the “legitimate” government, despite the Houthis’ control over

state resources and its previous pledges to disburse the revenues of the Hodeidah port resources for salaries in exchange for allowing ships to enter the port. The Houthis did not fulfill their pledge, as they monopolized the state's revenues in financing their military activities and war fronts.

The Saudi position was expressed by King Salman bin Abdulaziz, during his speech on inaugurating the work of the third year of the Eighth session of the Consultative Assembly (Shura Council). In his speech, he expressed his hope that the armistice, sponsored by the United Nations, in line with the Kingdom's initiative, would lead to ending the crisis in Yemen by reaching a comprehensive political solution and achieving sustainable peace between what he described as "brothers" in Yemen, stressing the Kingdom's firm and supportive position on contributing to a permanent ceasefire and its intentions to start a political process between the Yemeni government and the Houthis.<sup>2</sup>



Furthermore, the United Nations, United States and other Western countries are pushing to end the war in Yemen and start a political process aimed at achieving peace. Recently, in the framework of discussing efforts to extend the armistice, the UN envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, visited the United Arab Emirates and met with the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed Al Jaber.

In addition, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, discussed with the Iranian Foreign Minister, Amir Abdollahian, efforts to extend the armistice in Yemen, and it seems that Tehran is trying to take advantage of the armistice card, whether in the context of achieving its terms in the nuclear negotiations or by pressuring Saudi Arabia regarding the negotiations between the two sides.

The talks about extending the armistice, the Western efforts to reach a political settlement, then the mutual visits between the Saudi and Houthi delegations — even if they came in the context of the prisoners — could pave the way for an understanding between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, as the Houthis frequently refuse to reach an understanding with the Yemeni government and insist they negotiate with Riyadh directly.

### **Changes of leadership in the contact zones:**

The chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council made changes in the leadership of the Al-Jawf Governorate, coinciding with the expiry of the armistice. However, the PLC issued a decree to remove Sheikh Amin Al-Akimi<sup>3</sup> from the position of governor and commander of the military axis in the governorate and appointed Brigadier General Hussein Al-Aji Al-Awadi<sup>4</sup> as the governor. Furthermore, Colonel Muhammad Abdo Al-Ashwal was appointed to be the head of Axis Command.



Various media sources have reported that Saudi Arabia has put Al-Okaimi under house arrest — inside its territory for several months now — without knowing the reasons. This method is known to be used by Saudi Arabia against past tribal, military and political leaders.

The changes that took place in Jawf Governorate, concurrently with the visit of the Houthi delegation to Saudi Arabia, carry several connotations, as it may be understood that it is a Saudi message, suggesting a willingness to take over the governorate, which is under the control of Houthis, if it does not abide by the armistice, and it may be understood as endeavors related to the situation in Ma'rib.

### **U.S.-Saudi tension:**

Saudi-U.S. relations are going through a state of unprecedented tension as a result of the OPEC decision to cut oil production by 2 million barrels per day, where the U.S. administration objected to the decision threatening its economy, which suffers from a decrease in strategic stocks and an increase in the inflation rate.



Furthermore, the U.S. viewed the decision as a Saudi rebellion, undermining its efforts to raise production and seeking to isolate and blockade Russia politically and economically. On one hand, the U.S. administration has sought to increase production to reduce oil prices



to face economic challenges but hit the Russian market, while the OPEC countries see the importance of maintaining the stability of the oil market, and that economic data is what makes the decisions, not political considerations.

The oil dispute between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. overlaps the common files between the two countries, especially after the victory of the Democrats, as their orientation in the region intervenes with the Saudi vision, due to the reduction of the American military presence to a level at which Riyadh felt an American desire to abandon its security pledges to its strategic allies.

Moreover, the Biden administration retracted its position in supporting the Saudi position in Yemen, excluded the Houthis from the terrorist list, called for a return to the nuclear agreement and threatened to open an accountability investigation toward several human rights files and to impose diplomatic isolation on the Saudi crown prince.

Therefore, it seems that the level of trust between Saudi Arabia and the United States is continuously declining. Moreover, Riyadh believes that it is one of Washington's biggest allies in the region, and preserving the security of the region is preserving international peace and security. Due to this tension, Riyadh is trying to secure its regional environment, stop the threats against it and directly communicate with Iran and its entities, especially the Houthis, rather than being used by the Biden administration as a pressure card against Riyadh.

## **The determining factors:**

Future scenarios for the outcomes of mutual visits between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis depend on several central determinants:

### **1. American pressures and the midterm elections:**

The U.S. is exerting multiple pressures on Saudi Arabia, related to the repercussions of the war in Yemen, and President Biden is seeking to reach a new truce in Yemen, even if it's nominal, to add to his foreign achievements, especially with the U.S. midterm elections approaching, and the increased pressure on the Democratic Party, which is facing major files that may affect its percentage in the elections, most importantly the rise in energy prices and economic inflation. Therefore, Biden insists on achieving a new foreign achievement that may help him in the upcoming election, where these pressures lead Saudi Arabia to negotiate directly with the Houthis.

### **2. The energy crisis and its repercussions:**

The current energy crisis is strongly present in Western politics, in light of the repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, especially after OPEC announced a reduction in its oil production and the rise in oil and gas prices in the United States and other European countries. This requires finding multiple energy resources, as well as securing maritime navigation routes for energy transportation supplies, in which Yemen's location is of vital importance.

Therefore, it will be necessary to stop the war in Yemen, resume the local production of oil and gas, preserve the security of international navigation and spare any threats or risks that may arise from international tension.

In addition, recent events have proven that Saudi Arabia has winning cards in the region, especially the oil card, which the Saudis were able to play and exert political pressure. Also, the balance in the relationship between international axes may consider an element of strength in favor of Saudi Arabia and may contribute to an approach to the Yemeni file, away from American pressure.

### 3. The tension in Iran and the surrounding region:

The tension in Iran (mainly), Lebanon and Iraq, due to the deterioration of economic and living conditions, the suppression of freedoms, the violation of rights and the blockage of ways of reform and political change, in light of the dominance of armed sectarian forces on the scene, paves the way for the launch of popular revolutions similar to what the Arab region witnessed in 2011.



This situation may push Iran to ease the tension and create various breakthroughs while neutralizing the parties to the conflict from any investment in the escalating popular protests in Iran, whether by Saudi Arabia or Israel. This seemed to be in the acceptance of the demarcation of the borders in Lebanon and the Houthis' meetings with the Saudi side.

## Position of the Presidential Leadership Council:

It appears that the transfer of power from President Hadi to the Presidential Leadership Council has weakened the front of the legitimate authority, as the council suffers from a lack of incompatibility due to existing disputes among its members and to the deterioration of the security in Aden, which is under the authority of the PLC (loyal to the Emirates). This caused a number of its members to leave Aden, and the council was unable to hold its meetings.

The absence of the presence of PLC from the Yemeni scene, with its inability to address the urgent economic, security and military files, seems to be an additional push for Saudi Arabia to marginalize it from participating in the talks with the Houthis. Although the chairman of the PLC stayed in Riyadh for a period of three months (July 14 to October 18), he was unable to meet the Saudi leadership, except for a meeting he had with the Saudi Minister of Defense, Prince Khalid bin Salman, on October 10, i.e., only two days before the exchange of visits between the Saudi Arabian and Houthi delegations.

He stated that the meeting discussed the developments on the Yemeni scene, in addition to “future steps to deal with potential changes”<sup>5</sup> which is what the Saudi defense minister said after he met with his Yemeni counterpart, Lieutenant General Mohsen Muhammad al-Daari, on October 13<sup>6</sup>.

However, the legitimate government wasn't present in the ongoing visits and meetings between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, especially since there are several prisoners affiliated with the Houthi legitimate government.

The Saudi Minister of Defense did not disclose the nature of future steps or potential variables, and neither the PLC nor the legitimate government had so far commented on this statement or the ongoing meetings between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.

### Scenarios:

In light of the data and determinants referred to above, the future course of the mutual visits between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis can be extrapolated into three possible scenarios:

#### **First: Discussions remain on the humanitarian approach:**

This scenario assumes that the visits between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis will be limited to the file of prisoners only, with the continuation of the current situation, which is stopping the war without terms or a truce, with the continuation of military skirmishes and political bickering.

This scenario is supported by the statements of the official spokesman for the coalition forces and the Houthis' official in charge of the prisoners' file, that the visit is of a humanitarian nature only and was limited to the presence of officials responsible for the prisoners' file from both sides in these meetings.

### **Second: Saudi openness to the Houthis:**

This scenario assumes that the visits came as a result of previous unannounced talks, in which a certain point was agreed upon, regarding the conflict course in Yemen. However, the visits are the beginning of upcoming arrangements by Riyadh, aiming to subject the PLC to a dialogue with the Houthis to ensure its interests and to achieve its goals from the war, especially since the Houthis have repeatedly expressed their desire to negotiate directly with Saudi Arabia, as the communication between the two sides – away from the media – was good throughout the past period.

### **This scenario is less likely to occur due to the following:**

1. Riyadh's fear of the repercussions of undertaking an agreement of this kind might empower the Houthis with the legal power that it suffers from losing.
2. A party within the Houthis refused to open up to Saudi Arabia at the expense of Iran, even as a political tactic.

### **Third: Saudi Arabia attempts to play a mediating role between Yemeni parties:**

This scenario assumes that the mutual visits aim to persuade the Houthis to extend the truce, and to accept a political process to find a settlement that is acceptable to all parties. It's a scenario supported by the statements of the aforementioned Saudi monarch and the statements of the official spokesperson for the coalition regarding the existence of efforts to extend the armistice and expand it, as well as the time context of the visit. This means Saudi Arabia's desire to

withdraw from the conflict and willingness to be a mediator between the Yemeni parties would ensure the management of the conflict and reconciliation processes in the Yemeni scene.

This seems to be the most likely scenario out of the rest mentioned above.

### **Conclusion:**

In light of the mutual calmness between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis during the last period, and with the existence of direct meetings and unannounced talks, things seem to be heading toward stopping military operations more than heading toward escalation, especially as the Western world is looking for more energy resources and securing its transmission lines. Here lies the importance of Yemen, which can contribute a certain amount of gas and oil, to mitigate the impact of the upcoming winter crisis, as well as securing the Bab al-Mandab Strait, through which most oil and gas tankers pass to get to European countries.

Furthermore, a government source confirmed that the PLC intends to announce a special team to negotiate with the Houthis, led by the Yemeni Minister of Foreign Affairs, which is likely to be the ongoing negotiations between the Yemeni parties under the auspices of the Gulf Nations; however, this matter remains linked to the position of the Houthis.



## References

A mutual visit of two delegations from the coalition and the Houthis regarding the prisoners' file as part of confidence-building efforts to extend the armistice in Yemen, Middle East, on 10/12/2022, available at the following link: <https://shortest.link/5Jkv>

See the full text... King Salman clarifies the Kingdom's policies internally and externally and sends messages to several countries in a speech to the Shura Council, on 10/17/2022, available at the following link: <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2022/10/17/saudi-king-speech-shoura-council>

Al-Okaimi is considered a prominent tribal sheikh, and he is a member of the Yemeni Parliament. He was appointed governor of Al-Jawf by a decree of President, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, on August 12, 2016, then he was appointed to lead the axis in July 2018. He fought several confrontations against the Houthi militia, since 2015, and lost some of his sons in his battles with them. he actively contributed to regaining control of the province.

He participated in the "war of secession" alongside the leadership of the "Yemeni Socialist Party", led by Ali Salem al-Beidh, and fled outside Yemen, to reside in Syria for about 20 years. He was appointed to the position of Governor of Al-Jawf, in December 2014, two years after his return to the homeland.

The Saudi Minister of Defense discusses with Al-Alimi efforts to extend the armistice in Yemen, Asharq Al-Awsat, on 10/10/2022, available at the following link: <https://shortest.link/5pBT>

The Saudi News Agency reported that the meeting between the two countries, in the military and defense field, and the efforts of the United Nations to extend the armistice, in addition to discussing "future steps to deal with potential changes." See: Khalid bin Salman affirms the continuation of the Saudi-led coalition to support the Yemeni government and people, Asharq Al-Awsat, on 10/12/2022, available at the following link: <https://shortest.link/5FOA>

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