



The Reflection of the Iranian Election Results on the Yemeni Crisis’ “Regional Solution”

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On December 13st 2018, the Yemeni government and the Iran-backed Houthis signed an agreement, sponsored by the UN, which provides for a cease- fire, and the redeployment in the ports and the city of Al Hudaydah within 21 days of activating the cease- fire. However, all these items have been stumbled so far due to the Houthi reluctance to implement them two years and 6 months after signing it.

Despite the presence of the international forces, they have failed till the moment, as they lack the ability to enter areas of clashes or prevent the Houthis from making ongoing violations. This raises a question about the expected developments of the “regional solution in Yemen” considering the new international circumstances represented in the new US Biden Administration, as well as regional developments including the outcome of the Iranian Elections and the Conservatives’ ascent to power, headed by the Hardliner Ibrahim Raisi. We should not ignore appointing the Swedish diplomat, Hans Grundberg, to succeed the British Martin Griffith, who left his job as the UN Special Envoy to Yemen at the end of June 2021, without achieving any tangible results regarding ending the Yemeni War or convincing the Houthis to implement the international references for the country which has been torn daily.

The Iranian election argument

On June 18th, 2021, the presidential election was held in Iran amid internal and external pressure on the Iranian Regime. The hardliner Ibrahim Raisi won the almost- uncompetitive election, as it was pre-engineered by the authority. He won 17.9 million votes (61.95%), far ahead of all his rivals. This outcome was largely expected. The table below shows the number of votes each candidate received, as well as the number of “white” and “void” cards.

Table¹: The number of votes obtained by the Iranian presidential candidates, the white cards and the cancelled

Number of votes	Candidate's name	Percentage
1 17926345	Ibrahim Alraiisy	61.95%
2 3412712	Muhsen Ridhay	11.79 %
3 2427201	Abd Alnasr Hamti	8.38%
4 999718	Amit Hussein Khadi Zade Hashmi	3.45%
5 3726870	White and invalid votes	12.88%

¹ Tasnim | نتایج آرای انتخابات 1400 | «رئیس» هشتمین رئیس جمهور ایران شد- اخبار سیاست ایران - اخبار سیاسی تسنیم (tasnimnews.com)

It is worth mentioning that holding the Local Governments Election simultaneously with the presidential one aimed at boosting the competitiveness, especially in the rural areas, and those with overlapping ethnic and sectarian composition. This was supposed to increase the participation rate, but the low turnout reveals a significant decline in the legitimacy of the regime and people's indifference or may be frustration because of the economic and political situation, especially that the regime considered this election as a referendum on his popularity.

Accordingly, the Iranian election is a referendum on the whole regime, and not a real competitive process, and the parliament is not sufficiently active in politics. Therefore, the turnout percentage- the lowest since the Revolution- indicates that the regime's support base is eroding and relates to the prior social mobilization and widespread protests, such as the November 2019 fuel protests, and those which erupted after the downfall of the Ukrainian Plane in January 2020.

Consequently, we will look into the foreign policy, the regional one in particular, of the new Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi, especially that his position is similar to "the Prime Minister ". However, constitutionally, the foreign policy decision making lies in the hands of "the Supreme National Security Council " which reflects the Supreme National Defence Council in the 1979 constitution. Article 176² in the 1989 constitutional amendments gives more powers for the Supreme National Security Council³, especially determining the defence and security policies for the state, considering the leader's general policies.

Therefore, it is possible to see essential changes regarding the Iranian policies in dealing with the regional files, or the relationship with the United States, as the general policies are drawn by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which should be implemented by the president (Reformist or Conservative). The core of those policies serves the aspirations of the Revolutionary Guard Corps for implementing the project of imposing the Iranian influence on neighbouring countries such as Yemen and in the whole Middle East.

² [\[anonymous\] \(constituteproject.org\)](https://www.constituteproject.org)

³ The membership of the Supreme National Security Council consists of the following: the heads of the three authorities, the chief of staff of the General Command of the Armed Forces, the planning and budget affairs official, two representatives of the Supreme Leader, the ministers of foreign affairs, security and the interior, the minister specialized in the issue under discussion, and the highest officials in the army and the Revolutionary Guards.

The features of Iranian positioning in Yemen

The Iranian strategy in Yemen differs from its strategies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as it is characterized by ambiguity and secrecy for two reasons:

- **The first one - the weakness of the Shia popular base** (Ja'fariyyah), who are rejected by the Yemeni community. This has been obviously reflected by the Sociological moves of the Houthis who didn't show a lot of their beliefs during the public mobilization period, due to their fear of the popular rejection, as well as the authority's official denouncement of the Iranian interference in Yemen.
- **The second one - the Iranian-Saudi rivalry:** This is relevant to Tehran's strategy to extend its influence inside Yemen through the "soft penetration" mechanism and avoiding any practices that could push Riyadh towards confrontation in the Yemeni areas of influence. For instance, the Houthi movements led them to control Yemeni governorates since September 2014, and the implementation of a number of military manoeuvres on the Saudi-Yemeni borders, leading to Saudi intervention and launching the "Operation Decisive Storm" (Asifit Al Hazm). If the KSA failed to undermine the "Iranian project" in Yemen, this would give it more influence than before, especially after the Houthi control of the Yemeni military arsenal, as well as the cultural and intellectual penetration attempt, represented in changing the school curricula in the Houthi militia's areas of control, and the special courses for community leaders and citizens, not to mention dominating religious discourse and guidance tools.

By analysing the cases of Iranian interference in regional Neighbouring Countries, it is notable that Iran relies upon three basic considerations, which act as a work plan to achieve the goals relevant to the infiltration, extending influence and domination as follows:

- **The First consideration:** seeking to take advantage of the division, chaos, instability, and the fragility of the central authority to penetrate the state. Consequently, it exploits the rifts among different political elites through backing factions which are ideologically close to Iran, or they share the same approaches. Thus, it seeks establishing partnerships with active parties not states, especially those who reject the existing conditions, whether at the local level, as a result of their own perceptions that they are politically, economically and socially marginalized, or that their share of influence and power does not meet their political ambitions, or at the regional level, as a result of their dissatisfaction with the existing regional

balances, for their perception that these balances are strongly in favour of those whom it considers its opponents, namely the US regional allies.

- **The second consideration:** Iran's reliance on long-term political investment to support its partners or those loyal parties(not states), by selecting and attracting groups or factions with better capabilities, or having greater future chances of success, and by strengthening their relations with them, and encouraging and supporting them politically, financially and militarily, as well as boosting their capability through long-term basic building, which ultimately enable those groups or factions to hold power, or access vital and effective locations in their states. Those who currently rule Iraq are the outcome of the Iranian investment in supporting many Iraqi Shiite factions and organizations since the Iranian revolution. Iran has also invested in supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon, and in the Houthis in Yemen, for more than three decades.
- **The third consideration:** encouraging the groups or factions, affiliated with Iran to work on two levels: The first level: within the framework of the official *political structure of states, through participation in the political process within the framework of official governance institutions, so that these groups have a decisive role in the main decisions of their states. The second level is out of the official political framework for those states or in parallel with it, as those groups have organizational structures, independent financial resources, and military arms. This makes them not completely subject to the authority of the state and allows them to undermine the existing political system when things go against the interests and preferences of these groups, or with Iranian interests and preferences, as in the case of the Houthis in Yemen.

For backing the three considerations, Iran relied on a number of tools to enhance its positioning, and to boost its penetration inside Yemen, as well as to expand its qualitative influence using the Houthi card through the following:

- **The political support tools:** the "diplomatic tangle" is one of the most important among these tools, by opening an official Office for the Houthis in Tehran and exchanging ambassadors between them, in addition to support the political and economical costs by using the Iranian embassies around the world to introduce the "AbdulMalik AlHouthi"'s group, and to back the Houthi front politically in regional and international forums, especially in the Security Council and the United Nations within the so-called "Resistance Front", as well as supporting the "political legitimacy of the resistance movements, by

supporting the relations between Ansar Allah group and each of Russia, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq and China, and to help open Houthi offices in these countries as a step towards breaking regional and international isolation, in addition to neutralizing the Chinese and Russian position in the Security Council in favour of the Houthis.

- **The human rights backing tools:** by highlighting the Yemeni and the Houthis issue on the human rights level through communicating with human right organizations to show that Yemeni people are violated by the KSA and the Arab Coalition, and provide legal consultations to the active human rights organizations in Yemen, as well as sending Iranian humanitarian aid to Sanaa, and establishing a headquarters for popular assistance to help the Iranian non-governmental organizations to focus on supporting Yemen, as being the most important humanitarian work of Iran in Yemen.
- **The media backing tools:** by promoting the so-called the "Houthi rights" in different media outlets using living languages around the world, and through highlighting the Houthi grievance, and focusing on the humanitarian situation, as well as well as implementing various popular social media campaigns to support the Houthis, portraying the crisis as a crackdown against the Yemeni people by the KSA and the USA, and by using amplification approach and portraying the dynamics of the conflict as victories for the Houthis, as if the group is able to achieve field victories against Saudi Arabia and its allies. This includes also changing the stereotype by producing movies and documents about "resistance" broadcasting them in the Yemeni Media outlets controlled by the Houthis.
- **The Cultural backing tools:** by activating the scientific and cultural role of Iranian "leaders", and attracting the Yemeni people through increasing the scholarships for the Yemeni students, and backing the scientific research which strengthens the Iranian positioning in Yemen. For example, specialized events have been held in Yemen, including important conferences such as the Islamic Awakening, the International Conference to Combat the Extremist Groups. This includes backing organizing pro-Houthi rallies and gatherings, and to increase the activities of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, as well as to globally held "Al AL Bayt" forums to support the Houthis. Iran resorts also to "the religious mobilization" through fatwas issued by Major Shiite references to allow allocating legal money for supporting the Houthis.

- **The economic backing tools:** as Tehran has linked the Yemeni economy of the Houthi group to the Iranian economy, by supporting trade relations between Iranian and Yemeni businessmen, especially those close to Abdul Malik AlHouthi, and providing advisory services to Yemeni businessmen.

Accordingly, the Iranian strategy, whether Reformist or Conservative, with its various movements seeks to strengthen the positioning by intensifying its activities in the Yemeni field through winning more influence in Yemen using the Houthi card, given its privileged strategic location, and influential geopolitical weight it has in the region. Iran believes that to ally with the Houthis providing them with political and military support for strengthening their top power position in Yemen would largely increase Iranian influence in the region, by finding a foothold nearby the extremely important international strategic lane, enabling it to control in the navigation traffic in the Gulf of Aden and Bab Al Mandab Strait, the main connection point that links the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea and the Suez Channel, which is the main international lane for fuel shipping.⁴

The American motifs for "the regional solution" in Yemen

The flexible directions of the administration of US President "Joe Biden" came in conjunction with the success of Ibrahim Raisi in the Iranian elections, to push for the activation of its new strategies to reduce regional tension. The first of which was the call to start negotiations with Tehran, paving the way for implementing what the US President called to "stop the war in Yemen," as part of his steps to play a more balanced role in managing regional conflicts in the region. Appointing Tim Lenderking as the US Special Envoy to Yemen was one of the most prominent steps to discuss prospects for a solution, as well as the nullification of the classification of the "Houthis" as a terrorist group, and reconsidering the Iranian nuclear file talks, as well as pushing regional parties to reshape the paths of a peaceful settlement, such as the KSA and Oman.

In this context, it is likely that Washington will be pushed towards adopting an imminent "regional solution", especially with the change in the Iranian equation with the Conservative Ibrahim Raisi's rise to power to succeed the Reformist Hassan Rouhani based on several motives and foundations within its assessment of the Yemeni situation in general, including, for example:

⁴ [The Iranian Sphere of Influence Expands Into Yemen – Foreign Policy](#)

- **Ending the "indecisiveness" of the Yemeni issue:** as the Yemeni crisis has spanned around a circle of "indecisiveness" since it began, especially with its parties ability to continue endless wars, in addition to the constant escalation of the battle curve, reflecting the ability of the parties to develop their offensive capabilities from one stage to another, as well as the failure of all attempts to "qualitative penetration" of the parties to the Yemeni equation, which heralds a state of "indecisiveness" between the parties to this issue. In particular, the dominant context of this crisis doesn't differ from what has been structured for settlement equations. For example, the various tours in different capitals such as Geneva, Kuwait and Stockholm didn't add any political penetration which can be reflected on the ground. Therefore, there is symmetry in the political and field" paths, which could obstruct the "regional solutions" tracks for the crisis and making adopting one of them against the other a difficult and indecisive task.
- **Undermining the "regional involvement" in the Yemeni issue:** this was reflexed in Biden's call for Tehran to resume talks on the Iranian nuclear file and solve the sanctions crisis in return for halting its military support for the Houthis, as it constitutes a threat to its interests and the interests of its allies in the Gulf. This is shown also in curbing the activity of the "Arab coalition" in Yemen by ending the logistical support for the coalition, freezing US arms deals, and pushing the European allies to follow the same path.
On the other hand, Washington is pushing messages of conciliation with the Coalition forces, most notably: encircling the Iranian activities that are hostile and threatening to the coalition forces, as well as providing technical incentives to the Saudi military defences affected by the Houthi attacks, although this step clearly contributes to the "indecisive" situation in the field in the Yemeni crisis.
- **Managing the "peaceful settlement" of the Yemeni issue:** It is likely that the US administration, would seek, in the short and medium terms, To manage the "Yemeni issue" politically, through Special Envoy Lenderking, and the outcome of his various moves in the prospects of reaching a "settlement process" in partnership with the efforts of the United Nations, and through mediation with regional powers, as well as prompting them to divert surplus military engagement on the Yemeni arena, to the mediation efforts for calming down the situation and then reaching the political settlement.

Prospects for a "regional solution"

There are indicators which reflect varying possibilities of "flexible breakthrough «in the political process of the Yemeni issue. they based upon several points, the most important of which are as follow:

1. The American-Iranian rapprochement:

There are prospects that indicate a possible close rapprochement in the visions between the US and Iran, which are being reflected in backing the political path of the Yemeni issue. These indicators include the following:

- The Biden administration announced removing the Houthis from the terror list in February 2021, after less than one month of their classification by the Trump administration. Additionally, the new American administration declared ending its involvement in the Yemeni War, while stressing defending the interests of Saudi Arabia, which has led a coalition to support "legitimacy" in Yemen since 2015, after the Houthis took control of the capital, Sana'a, and large areas of the country in 2014.
- The Iranian-American talks kicked off in Vienna in April 2021 as an attempt to return the parties to the agreement, in exchange for Tehran's commitment to reducing uranium enrichment to a minimum and restricting nuclear activities, at a time when Washington is lifting sanctions Iran, which is rife with crises especially after the negative repercussions of the Corona pandemic.
- Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi confirmed his commitment to adhere to the nuclear agreement, especially since Iran's foreign policy towards returning to the nuclear agreement with world powers will not change after Hassan Rouhani. The political Iranian regime does not rely on Reformists or Conservatives. The Iranian foreign policy is in the hands of Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, the Revolutionary Guards, and the intelligence services. The politicians of different leanings cannot transcend those limits.

- The new Iranian President attempts to gain legitimacy and the internal trust through seeking success in the "interconnection" process between the return to the nuclear deal and putting an end to the economic sanctions that paralyzed the Iranian economy, and created improbable internal crises, whose consequences increased with the negative repercussions of the Corona pandemic.

2. Iranian-Saudi coordination

That qualitative coordination has its reflection on the whole scenes that guide the restoration of Saudi-Iranian relations. This can be deduced through the following points:

- The flexible statements of President Ibrahim Raisi after winning the elections, especially when he said: "for our part, there are no obstacles to reopen the embassies with the Saudi Arabia". This comes in light of his regional pragmatic policies seeking to heal the Irania-Arab rift.
- The prior Saudi declaration about its readiness to engage in dialogue with Iran to reduce tension in the region. This came after Joe Biden took office and his announcement that he seeks to end the Yemeni War.

3. Appointing US Special Envoy to Yemen

This came in light of applying the Biden administration's call to end the Yemeni conflict. The appointment of Timothy Lenderking as the US Special Envoy to Yemen last February was promoted by the media as part of mutual coordination and cooperation with the UN Envoy Martin Griffith. However, from the organizational and methodological part. There have been different approaches and moves between the two envoys, that have their direct reflection on the solution mechanism of the Yemeni affair as follows:

- The US Envoy adopts an approach to begin with reducing restrictions, allowing goods and fuel to enter through Al Hudaydah, and to reopen the Sanaa International Airport, as a prelude for a cease-fire, before completely lifting all restrictions after ending all military operations around the country.

- The Outgoing UN Envoy “Griffiths” adopted a different approach which is based upon ending the military operations first, especially in Marib, and then reducing restrictions on humanitarian and trade movement through Al Hudaydah Port. It also includes reopening the Sanaa Airport for certain regional and international destinations. This puts more challenges in the way of the Fourth UN Envoy to Yemen, the Swedish Hans Grundberg, especially which are relevant to develop “negotiable approaches” towards finding common spaces among the disputing parties, and the possibility to issue different international references, in the shape of decisions that take into consideration the current field developments, and the need to involve other parties in the negotiation process. The international resolutions on which the UN efforts have been based, especially Security Council Resolution No. 2216, have not been helpful in providing the appropriate negotiating framework for the work of the UN mission. For example, a report, issued by the International Crisis Group on June 18th 2021 said that the interpretation of the decision 2216 represented an obstacle to advance political settlement, and that is why many observers and politicians demanded its replacement.⁵

Finally, it seems that the Yemeni issue will constitute one of the most important direct reflections of the foreign move’s dynamics “regionally and internationally” of the elected Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi. If his own agenda, regarding the coordination with the Americans, and restoring the relations between Tehran and the Gulf is achieved, it is likely that the tracks of a regional solution to the Yemeni crisis will be reconsidered, especially those related to the "Saudi initiative to end the Yemeni crisis and reach a comprehensive political solution", and the possibilities of building on the conclusions of the "Omani mediation".

⁵ [A New UN Envoy is an Opportunity for a New Approach in Yemen | Crisis Group](#)

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Main photo: Ebrahim Raisi sits to the right of Ali Khamenei in Tehran © AFP

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