

Position Evaluation
August 2024

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Escalation of Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance Against Rashad al-Alimi's Visit to Mukalla: Reasons and Scenarios

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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

Abstract

Tensions have been increasing in Hadhramaut Governorate due to various factors, particularly the ongoing discussions around a political settlement that involves sharing oil and gas revenues between the legitimate government and the Houthis group, alongside the looming resumption of oil exports. This situation has exacerbated existing tensions in the region.

When Dr. Rashad al-Alimi, chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), along with council members Abdullah Al-Alimi and Othman Majali, recently visited Mukalla, the administrative capital of Hadhramaut, on Saturday, July 27¹, that further inflamed the situation. The visit was met with strong opposition from the Hadhramaut General Conference, led by Omar bin Habrish Al-Ali, the first deputy governor, who criticized the visit as “dangerous” and occurring “amid the dire living and service conditions faced by Hadrami citizens, due to the governorate not receiving the attention it deserves from these parties.”²

In response, bin Habrish convened a meeting of the “Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance”, which he also leads, on August 3. The alliance issued a statement asserting Hadhramaut’s right to an active and meaningful partnership, represented by the “Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference”, like other parties involved in the broader national settlement.

1. Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council and members of the council, Abdullah Al-Alimi and Othman Majali, arrive in Mukalla, Yemeni News Agency (Saba), on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://www.sabanew.net/story/ar/114739>

2. Yemen: Hadhramaut and Shabwa tribes escalate against the government to prevent oil exports, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/wmz2x>

They also warned against any actions related to Hadhramaut's oil, including its export or marketing, unless the governorate's status is established and its rights secured to the satisfaction of its people.

The alliance gave the PLC and the local authorities 48 hours to meet their demands, threatening to “seize land and wealth” if their demands were not met. Following the expiration of this deadline, tribal fighters were deployed in the Hadhramaut and Al-Khasha'a Plateau, setting up new checkpoints in some parts of the governorate, signaling their intent to advance toward government institutions.³

Although Dr. al-Alimi's visit lasted for approximately two weeks, it failed to resolve the crisis or ease tensions. What are the underlying causes of this escalation in Hadhramaut Governorate, and what are the potential scenarios for how this situation could unfold?

General Background

Hadhramaut Governorate is located in the southeastern part of Yemen, approximately 794 kilometers east of the capital, Sana'a. It shares borders with Al Mahrah Governorate to the east, as well as with Al Jawf, Ma'rib, and Shabwa governorates to the west. To the north, it borders Saudi Arabia. Hadhramaut is the largest governorate in Yemen in terms of area.⁴

3. Tribal gunmen spread in Hadhramaut after the end of the government's alliance deadline, Al-Masdar Online, on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/299493>

4. Studies and References Platform, Local Governance in Yemen, Hadhramaut, on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/qdem27>

Throughout the years of conflict in Yemen, Hadhramaut has managed to stay largely out of the direct line of fire, though it has not been immune to the war's repercussions. State institutions continued to function within the governorate, and the local authority in Hadhramaut was able to maintain control over its local resources, largely because the area was removed from active military confrontations. This allowed the local authority to regularly pay civil employees' salaries, cover operational costs and fund its investment budget, which supports the provision of local services⁵, infrastructure development and maintenance, electricity, water, sewage treatment and other public services.

In response to growing demands from the people of Hadhramaut for a share of the oil sales revenues, the former president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who later transferred his powers, decided in 2018 to allocate 20% of the revenues from oil exports to the governorate. In 2020, this percentage was increased to 25%.

On June 24, 2023, the PLC and Dr. al-Alimi, along with a delegation from the "Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY)", visited the city of Mukalla. This visit occurred amidst significant changes in Hadhramaut, particularly following the announcement of the formation of the "Hadhramaut National Council" after a month of consultations among Hadrami factions, facilitated by Saudi Arabia in Riyadh. During his visit, Dr. al-Alimi reaffirmed the commitment of the PLC and the government to bolster the role of local authorities in Hadhramaut, supporting their efforts to enhance security and stability, and improving services, in recognition of Hadhramaut's leading role in embodying the values of the state and fostering creative

5. Same as previous reference.

coexistence across various fields. He also laid the foundation stone for and launched 20 key development projects, totaling over \$266.6 million (1.2 billion Saudi riyals), funded and supervised by the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program of Yemen.⁶

However, a year later, there has been little progress in advancing these projects. Instead, the governorate has experienced a sharp decline in public services and an unprecedented deterioration in living standards, like other areas under legitimate authority. This decline has been accompanied by accusations against the governorate's leadership of inexperience, mismanagement, corruption and monopolization of decision-making. Additionally, there has been a conflict of interest between the governor, Mabkhout bin Madi, supported by the PLC chairman, and Ibn Habrish, who leads both the Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference and Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance. It was in this tense and charged atmosphere that Dr. al-Alimi decided to visit Mukalla on July 27.

6. Dr. al-Alimi launches development projects in Hadhramaut worth more than \$266 million, Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/8xzau>

Escalation factors

Several factors stand behind the escalation adopted by the Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference and the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance, headed by Amr bin Habrish, against the local authority and the visit of the chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council to Hadhramaut.

1. Deterioration of Economic and Living Conditions

Areas under the legitimate government's control have experienced a severe deterioration in living conditions, largely due to the suspension of oil exports since October 2022 and the reduced financial support previously provided by the "Arab Coalition" countries, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This situation has been compounded by a sharp collapse in the value of the national currency, which reached record lows on August 3, 2024, with the exchange rate of 1,917 Yemeni riyals per dollar and 500 Yemeni riyals per Saudi riyal. The impact of this economic decline has been particularly severe in Hadhramaut, as the ban on oil exports has deprived the governorate of significant financial resources, given that it used to receive 25% of the revenue from the oil extracted there.

Overall, the reduction in financial resources for the legitimate authority, coupled with the devaluation of the national currency, has led to a significant decline in living conditions in Hadhramaut. This has fueled widespread public discontent and contributed to the support of tribesmen for the demands raised by the Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference and the mobilization efforts of the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance. The movements of the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance have also garnered some degree of popular sympathy.

2. Poor Management of the Governorate

Over the past decade, Hadhramaut Governorate has struggled to find a governor who is both efficient and effective, as well as one who can garner consensus among the political and social factions. This has caused the governorate to miss out on real opportunities for development and stability, in contrast to the progress seen in Ma'rib Governorate under its current governor, Sultan Al-Arada, a member of the PLC, and in Shabwa Governorate, when Mohammed bin Adio was the governor (Nov. 26, 2018, to Dec. 25, 2022).

However, those who have held the position of governor during this period have often been involved in corruption and monopolization. This pattern applies to current Governor Mabkhout bin Madi, whose leadership — characterized by inexperience, mismanagement, corruption and a tendency toward monopoly — has become a source of tension and unrest. The situation is exacerbated by the ongoing polarization and competition within the governorate, driven by the behind-the-scenes rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In this context, the Hadhramaut General Conference has accused Mabkhout bin Madi of mismanaging resources, failing to disclose the extent of local revenues, monopolizing decision-making, plus implementing non-transparent projects that do not align with the governorate's actual needs. Among these resources are the quantities of subsidized diesel provided by the PetroMasila Company, which the local authority is supposed to sell, generating significant daily revenue⁷.

7. Official silence and parties moving to exploit the situation. Where is Hadhramaut heading with the escalation of the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance, Al-Masdar Online, on: 8/7/2024 AD, available at the following link: <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/299567>

During a July 13 meeting, the Hadhramaut General Conference demanded that the governor “transparently disclose Hadhramaut’s revenues and expenditures, form a joint committee with authorities that includes community representation as a key partner in managing Hadhramaut’s financial resources and spending priorities, and end the monopolization of power, ensuring consensus in all decision-making processes.”⁸

3. Conflict of Interests

While the decline in public services and living conditions has certainly created a tense atmosphere in Hadhramaut, particularly given its reputation as Yemen’s most economically resource-rich governorate, part of the tension stems from a conflict over the division of interests between Mabkhout bin Madi and Ibn Habrish, who previously received financial allocations from higher authorities, saw these payments halted. He also used to receive a daily share of oil from the PetroMasila Company, but this quantity was subsequently reduced.

The conflict between the two figures now has escalated about the distribution of qat taxes, from which Ibn Habrish previously received a percentage, and the control of the crude oil transportation to Aden for the operation of the “President’s Power Station,” as well as the associated revenues.⁹

8. Hadhramaut General Conference gives the authorities 30 days to implement a number of demands, Al-Mahra Net, on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://almahriah.net/local/39527>

9. The above information is from two sources who were interviewed.

4. Leaks Regarding the Potential Resumption of Oil Exports

Recently, there has been growing speculation about the possible resumption of oil exports, which may be part of negotiations that Saudi Arabia is conducting with the Houthis. According to some leaks, these negotiations might include an agreement to share export revenues between the legitimate government and the Houthi group, a prospect that has angered the people of Hadhramaut and provoked further unrest.

The government may be compelled to resume oil exports for technical reasons, regardless of whether an agreement with the Houthis is reached, as the overflowing oil tanks at the ports require swift action to avoid significant technical issues that could be costly.

The fear of oil being re-exported without securing a share for Hadhramaut is one of the main concerns raised by the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance in its opposition to the visit of the PLC chairman. The alliance has warned against “taking any action with Hadhramaut’s oil, or exporting or marketing it, without first securing Hadhramaut’s rights in a manner that satisfies its people,” and has emphasized the need to implement decisions made by the Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference, particularly those issued on July 13, 2024.

The alliance has also declared that “the current stock of oil in the tanks at the Dabbah and Masila ports is the rightful property of Hadhramaut, and we will not relinquish it. The entire value must be used to purchase electricity for Hadhramaut.”¹⁰

10. Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance gives the Presidential Leadership Council 48 hours to respond to its demands, threatening to seize “land and wealth”, Al-Masdar Online, on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/299348>

After the deadline set by the alliance expired, they mobilized the tribes, gathered them around the oil-extraction areas and threatened to seize control of these assets.

5. Government Corruption

Citizens have been outraged by reports of the extravagant spending by the PLC and other leaders of the legitimate authority. This includes the large budgets allocated to members of the PLC and other governmental institutions, as well as the recent budget for the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission. Particularly infuriating is the “subsistence statement,” which lists large monthly payments in U.S. dollars or Saudi riyals to thousands of individuals, including ministers, members of Parliament and members of the Shura Council. Many of these individuals live outside of Yemen and don't perform any significant duties, while some within Yemen receive salaries in hard currency.

These expenses are costing the state treasury tens of millions of dollars every month. Plus, there are daily expenses for ministers, their deputies and assistant ministers while they are in Yemen, which are seen as excessive and highly prohibitive, given the severe hardship and suffering of the population. The reality is that corruption now poses a significant threat to the legitimate authority. The combination of blatant corruption and the deteriorating living conditions of most citizens is like “dynamite” that could destroy the legitimate authority, destabilize political life and lead to fragmentation, chaos and violence.

6. Exploitation by Certain Parties

Certain parties had sought to disrupt Dr. al-Alimi's visit to Hadhramaut and exacerbate the tensions surrounding it. Members of the PLC, affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), were notably absent, including Faraj Al-Bahsani, a former governor and council member from the governorate. The media, in connection with the STC, has also been inciting and provoking the residents of Hadhramaut. Ahmed Saeed bin Braik, a leader in the STC, publicly expressed his full support and solidarity with the demands of Hadhramaut, as championed by the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance¹¹, and Al-Bahsani echoed this stance.

The Announced Demands of the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance

The Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance has called for the formal recognition of Hadhramaut's rights and for the Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference to be acknowledged as the legitimate representative of the governorate, as well as an active and genuine partner in the comprehensive national settlement process, akin to other participating entities, such as the STC and others.

The alliance has issued a warning, as previously noted, against any actions involving Hadhramaut's oil, including its export or marketing, unless Hadhramaut's status is secured, and its rights are guaranteed in a way that satisfies its people.

They emphasized the importance of implementing the decisions the Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference made, particularly those issued on July 13, 2024.

11. Major General Ibn Brik expresses his support for Hadhramaut's demands, Qana24 website, on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://qana24.com/news/local-news/archives/59044>

The alliance declared that “the current oil reserves in the tanks at the Dabbah and Masila ports are the rightful property of Hadhramaut, and we will not relinquish them.

The entire value must be used to purchase electricity for Hadhramaut.”¹² These demands have resonated in Shabwa Governorate as well, where the Sons and Tribes of Shabwa Alliance has rejected any agreements concerning the governorate’s oil wealth without ensuring its fair share through equitable partnership and representation. Led by Sheikh Ali bin Dushal Al-Nasi, the alliance issued a statement addressing recent national developments, particularly regarding the peace process and ongoing negotiations on unresolved issues, especially the economic file.

The alliance emphasized that any negotiations or solutions that disregard Shabwa’s right to fair representation, its rightful share of wealth and exclude the governorate from genuine partnership will not lead to sustainable solutions or a just peace. They firmly rejected any attempts to make Shabwa and its wealth a bargaining chip in ongoing negotiations or settlements without securing a fair share for the governorate, proportional to its contribution to the state treasury.¹³

12. Ibid

13. Yemen: Hadhramaut and Shabwa tribes escalate against the government to prevent oil exports, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/wmz2x>

Scenarios

The escalating crisis in Hadhramaut Governorate remains fluid and could unfold in several possible directions. The most likely scenarios include:

First Scenario: Armed Clash

In this scenario, there is a possibility of a limited military confrontation between the army and the tribal forces, driven by the current state of mobilization, heightened tension and the growing influence of tribal elements over civilian components in Hadhramaut. The Southern Transitional Council may also play a role in inciting such a clash, as it seeks to weaken the legitimate authority's presence in Hadhramaut, which is a key stronghold in the eastern governorates.

Additionally, the council might be aiming to divert attention away from the ongoing conflict in Aden, particularly the unrest following the enforced disappearance of Ali Ashal Al-Jaadani. Should this scenario unfold, it is expected that Saudi Arabia would intervene directly to contain the conflict and restructure the situation in Hadhramaut according to new rules and arrangements.

Second Scenario: Maintaining the Status Quo

This scenario envisions the continuation of the current stalemate, where prominent Hadhrami figures and factions remain steadfast in their opposition to the status quo, while the Presidential Leadership Council remains either unable or unwilling to make significant concessions. This deadlock is likely to persist, especially given the ongoing difficulties in exporting oil due to the lack of an agreement with the Houthi group.

This scenario is further supported by the return of the president, Dr. al-Alimi, and two members of the PLC to Riyadh, coupled with the president's announcement of plans to form a committee composed of various stakeholders to address Hadhramaut's service and development priorities¹⁴. This approach suggests that the situation will remain unchanged, with the potential for a resolution emerging over time as patience endures and solutions gradually take shape.

Third Scenario: Partial Solutions

In this scenario, there is the potential for implementing partial solutions that could help alleviate the crisis and ease the current tension. These solutions might involve prioritizing urgent services, particularly addressing the electricity issue. For instance, on Sunday, August 4, PLC chairman Dr. al-Alimi announced the initiation of procedures to establish two power stations in Hadhramaut Governorate with a combined capacity of 100 megawatts. The funding for these stations would be shared between the government and the local authority, with one 50-megawatt station planned for the Hadhramaut Coast and another for the Hadhramaut Valley.¹⁵

This scenario includes recognizing the legitimate demands of the Hadhramaut residents, engaging with them constructively and working to implement these demands in partnership with all state institutions.¹⁶

14. Ibid.

15. The chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council announces the start of procedures to establish two power stations in Hadhramaut with a capacity of 100 megawatts, Yemeni News Agency (Saba), on: 8/7/2024, available at the following link: <https://www.sabanew.net/story/ar/115118>

16. Ibid.

PLC's Dr. al-Alimi might succeed in garnering the support of influential figures within the Hadhramaut General Conference and the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance, including Ibn Habrish, who has been a central figure in driving the current escalation. Previous crises suggest that such an outcome is possible.

However, this scenario faces challenges due to the erosion of trust in Dr. al-Alimi. During his visit last year, he made numerous promises, but the lack of substantial progress has disappointed many in Hadhramaut. Additionally, there is widespread concern that the true aim of the visit might be to resume oil exports and share the revenues with the Houthis – a prospect that has angered the people of Hadhramaut and may drive them to escalate their demands further.

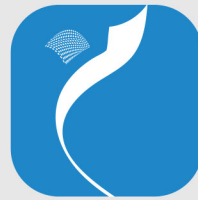
Scenario Four: Changing the Governorate Leadership

This scenario presents the least cost and is anticipated to have a significant impact on reducing tensions in the governorate. As previously mentioned, much of the unrest stems from the way Ibn Madi has managed the governorate, marked by corruption, inexperience and poor governance. With widespread frustration over the governor's performance and the monopolization of the governorate's administration, replacing the governor could greatly alleviate tensions, especially if a competent and widely accepted successor is chosen.

The return of the Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) without achieving the goals of his visit, combined with the Hadrami factions' insistence in rejecting the visit, may compel him to continue pursuing this course of action.

However, a significant obstacle is the strong and longstanding personal and partisan relationship between Dr. al-Alimi and Ibn Madi. Dr. al-Alimi swiftly appointed Ibn Madi as governor of Hadhramaut shortly after joining the PLC, viewing him as his right-hand man in the governorate. It's likely that one of the motives behind the visit was to support Ibn Madi amid the tensions and conflicts the governorate is experiencing, particularly with Ibn Habrish.

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