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Rival Allies: The Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE in Hadhramaut

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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

In recent years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have increasingly clashed in various regions and about various issues. Despite often appearing as close allies amid regional crises, their expanding influence and geopolitical ambitions have led them to adopt competitive strategies. According to experts from Chatham House in London, Yemen has become a key battleground in this rivalry¹. The competition is particularly intense in Hadhramaut Governorate, which plays a central role due to its vast oil reserves, significant ports along the Arabian Sea and a lengthy border shared with Saudi Arabia.

This analytical paper aims to explore the primary motivations behind this competition, its manifestations and its impact on the governorate's situation, as well as to project its potential future developments.

Motives Behind Saudi and Emirati Interests in Hadhramaut

Saudi Arabia's interest in Hadhramaut Governorate is deeply rooted and complex. The governorate shares a long border with Saudi Arabia — over 700 kilometers (435 mi), roughly half of the Saudi-Yemeni border. The Kingdom has established strong, historical ties with the major tribes of Hadhramaut. Many Hadhramaut residents have emigrated to Saudi Arabia since the mid-20th century due to the establishment of a socialist regime in South Yemen.

1. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates: What is Behind the Disagreement? Muhammad Alloush, Gulf House for Studies and Publishing, on: 10/18/2023, available at the following link: <https://gulfhouse.org/posts/6099/>

These expatriates, who obtained Saudi citizenship, maintain close connections with their homeland and have made substantial investments in Saudi Arabia, including prominent families and businesses, such as the Bin Laden, Ibn Mahfouz, Bugshan and Al-Amoudi families.

Geopolitically, Saudi Arabia is drawn to Hadhramaut for its strategic maritime location on the Arabian Sea, which provides access to vital global shipping routes. This location offers Saudi Arabia the potential to secure consistent maritime access to key commercial centers while avoiding the risks associated with navigating critical straits, like Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, which are vulnerable to closure during regional crises.

In contrast, the UAE's connection to Hadhramaut² began only with its involvement in the Arab Coalition in 2015. This intervention was part of the UAE's broader strategy to extend its political and military influence beyond its borders. The UAE's foreign policy merges military and commercial interests, focusing on southern Yemen's coasts, ports and strategic islands. The UAE aims to leverage these assets to boost its influence across the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean, and to establish a foothold in the Gulf, Africa and Asia.

The UAE has been actively working to control key Yemeni ports and islands, from Hadhramaut in the east to beyond Bab al-Mandab in the west. This control allows the UAE to enhance its maritime trade strategy, particularly if Dubai Ports (DP) World develops these ports and opens new shipping routes.

2. Saudi Arabia and Hadhramaut: Safe Borders Documented by a Historical Relationship, Aref Ba Mumin, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, on: 5/2/2015, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/HkP44sju>

Since early 2018, the UAE has focused on securing and managing Yemen's critical infrastructure, including ports, oil fields and refineries.

This includes creating a security and administrative network that connects major cities and ports, including Aden, Mukalla, Mokha, Bir Ali and the Balhaf LNG Total Export Terminal/Port in Hadhramaut.

According to Eleonora Ardemagni, a strategic analyst at the NATO Defense College, southern Yemen has become a crucial platform for the UAE's "pivot to the East" strategy. This is evident from its partnership with India, which began in January 2017 to enhance financial and energy cooperation. Before 2015, the Balhaf LNG Terminal/Port primarily exported gas to Asia, with China being a major importer of Yemeni oil.³

Establishing Emirati Influence in Hadhramaut

Despite Hadhramaut's distance from the main conflict zones involving the Houthi rebels, the UAE has been strategically working to establish a foothold in the governorate since the early days of its intervention in Yemen. The UAE's initial focus was on controlling key areas, like ports and oil and gas production sites, using the fight against Al-Qaeda as a cover. Al-Qaeda seized control of Mukalla, the governorate's capital, in April 2015.

According to the Associated Press, about a year after Al-Qaeda took over Mukalla, a tribal mediation facilitated negotiations between the group's leaders and Emirati officials in Aden.

3. The UAE's Security and Economic Nexus in Yemen, Eleonora Ardemani, Carnegie Endowment, 19 July 2018, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2018/07/the-uaes-security-economic-nexus-in-yemen?lang=ar>

The aim was to broker a deal that would prevent the city's destruction during military operations. Both the UAE and Al-Qaeda preferred a safe withdrawal, allowing Al-Qaeda fighters to leave Mukalla unharmed with their weapons and assets. The fighters departed in vehicles heading west, retracing their route into the city.⁴

Following this, the UAE established a significant military presence in Hadhramaut by forming the "Hadhrami Elite Forces," who took control of Mukalla on April 24, 2016⁵. These forces are now aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which has also taken over the Second Military Region in the governorate's coastal areas.

On the security front, the UAE undertook the task of rehabilitating the local security services. This included providing training and equipping security personnel, covering their salaries and supporting them in security operations. The UAE also furnished and maintained 22 police stations and 8 specialized departments, provided 157 vehicles, including 4 for civil defense and 60 motorcycles, along with essential military equipment for securing Hadhramaut's coastal cities and regions.⁶

The UAE has made significant moves to bolster its influence. In February 2019, the UAE arranged for leaders of the Southern Transitional Council to travel to Mukalla on a special plane. This was followed by the arrival of numerous military vehicles from Aden to support their activities in the city.

4. How Al-Qaeda Took Over, Controlled, and Eventually Lost a Yemeni City, Tawfiq Al-Jund et al., Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 5 January 2021, available at: <https://sanaacenter.org/ar/publications-all/main-publications-ar/12606>

5. Stability of Mukalla is the fruit of the UAE's efforts, Al-Ittihad News Center, on: 6/10/2018, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/wmiLHxqh>

6. Graduation of the Public Security Batch in Hadhramaut with Emirati Funding, Emirates News Agency, on: 9/8/2018, available at the following link: <https://www.wam.ae/pt/details/1395302702953>

In May 2023, the head of the STC, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, visited Mukalla in a high-profile parade⁷, during which he announced the beginning of the process to secede from the Republic of Yemen and reestablish what is referred to as the Southern State.⁸

Matrix of Competing Saudi Policies and Initiatives

After years of extensive Emirati influence in Hadhramaut, Saudi Arabia has recognized the urgent need to curb this growing presence, especially as the UAE's ambitions to dominate the governorate have gone beyond deploying military forces associated with the STC. These forces include recruits and combatants from other southern governorates, who are not under the control of the legitimate Yemeni government.

Furthermore, the UAE has sought to strengthen the Southern Transitional Council's influence by forming Hadhrami social groups and incorporating prominent Hadhrami figures into the leadership of the STC. This is evident in the inclusion of former Hadhramaut Governor, Major General Ahmed Saeed bin Brik, who now heads the National Assembly of the Southern Transitional Council, and Major General Faraj Salmeen Al-Bahsani, who is the current vice president of the Southern Transitional Council, former Hadhramaut governor and current Presidential Leadership Council member. In response, Saudi Arabia has implemented a series of policies and initiatives aimed at reducing the Emirati influence in Hadhramaut, while bolstering the authority of the legitimate Yemeni government and Hadhrami community elements loyal to it. The Kingdom had summoned influential Hadhrami figures

7. A show visit by the Southern Transitional Council to Hadhramaut.. What are the implications?, Al Jazeera Net, on: 2/15/2019, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/ra74qrLK>

8. Popular celebration of Al-Zubaidi's visit to Hadhramaut overshadows attempts at disruption, Al-Arab newspaper, on: 5/20/2023, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/1jWeACDe>

and organized comprehensive consultations for a month to develop a unified vision regarding the governorate's future within the broader framework of a final solution to the ongoing conflict in Yemen. These consultations led to the announcement of the formation of the "Hadhramaut National Council" in June 2023 as a political body representing the aspirations of the Hadhrami community.

According to the political and legal documents of the Hadhramaut National Council, its establishment was a response to the Saudi government's call and its sincere efforts to support the Presidential Leadership Council, the legitimate government and the Yemeni people. The council aims to unify ranks, prioritize dialogue to resolve disputes, focus on economic and service reforms, mobilize efforts to restore state institutions, end the coup of the Iranian-backed Houthi militia and restore peace and stability in Yemen. The Hadhrami forces and components are committed to keeping Hadhramaut free from tensions or internal conflicts that could turn the region into a battleground, affecting public tranquility, social peace and the interests of its citizens, as well as the security and stability of liberated areas, neighboring countries and global shipping lines.⁹

The council's plans emphasize strengthening the armed forces and security with new recruits from Hadhramaut, enhancing their operational capabilities and armament, as well as preventing the creation of any military formations outside of state institutions.

9. Political components and figures in Hadhramaut, Yemen, announce the establishment of a national council, Asharq Al-Awsat, on: 6/20/2023, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/z5bJ7Df>

Additionally, Saudi Arabia facilitated Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council Dr. Rashad Al-Alimi's successful visit to Hadhramaut Governorate in June 2023, accompanied by Saudi officials. During this visit, Dr. Al-Alimi promised to grant the people of Hadhramaut self-administration over the financial, administrative and security affairs of the governorate. He also inaugurated 20 vital development projects worth over \$266.6 million that the Saudi Program for the Development and Reconstruction of Yemen (SPDRY) will fund and supervise.

According to SPDRY Assistant Supervisor General Hassan Al-Attas, Saudi Arabia is launching a series of vital projects and initiatives worth over 1.2 billion Saudi riyals, aiming to provide Hadhramaut with a robust development experience and a direct investment in various developmental fields. Al-Attas emphasized that Saudi Arabia will continue to offer support to boost economic recovery in Hadhramaut Governorate.¹⁰

Provocative responses threaten peace and social harmony

In response to Saudi initiatives and policies, the UAE has encouraged the Southern Transitional Council to voice its opposition to the Hadhramaut National Council. During a meeting in Mukalla, which PLC council member and STC President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi attended, the Hadhramaut leadership condemned what it called the creation of new factions.

10. Al-Alimi inaugurates development projects in Hadhramaut worth more than (266) million dollars, Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, on: 6/25/2023, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/uv9mtmNr>

A warning was issued to the local authorities in Hadhramaut to avoid aligning with agendas allegedly aimed at undermining the south¹¹.

Similarly, Major General Faraj Salmeen Al-Bahsani — current vice president of the Southern Transitional Council, former Hadhramaut governor and current Presidential Leadership Council member — expressed strong criticism of this initiative, indicating the level of frustration. He stated, “Those who lack understanding will remain unchanged and contribute nothing to Hadhramaut except further division. Multiple projects, differing visions, exclusion and other initiatives will only lead to more dissent in Hadhramaut, which doesn’t need that.”¹²

Al-Bahsani viewed the establishment of the Hadhramaut National Council as an effort to isolate the governorate from the southern state that the Southern Transitional Council seeks to restore, based on the previous borders of unity.¹³ The STC also escalated the situation by organizing several provocative events, demonstrations and parades, some of which resulted in clashes with locals, leading to several fatalities.¹⁴

11. Warning messages from the Transitional Council to the Hadramout National Council, the local authority and the forces of the First Military Region, Al-Mashad Al-Yemeni, on: 7/15/2023, available at the following link: <https://www.almashhadnews.com/258993>

12. Hadramout National Council: A third southern current or a competitor to the Transitional Council, Al-Arab Newspaper, on: 6/22/2023, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/pzhLyAQP>

13. The Yemeni Transitional Council organizes demonstrations in Hadramout, Sputnik Agency, on: 7/8/2023, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/qKGyBlf>

14. An independent committee to investigate the attack on the «Earth Day» festival square, Al-Ayyam Newspaper, on: 7/9/2023, available at the following link: <https://www.alayyam.info/news/9GZGONVP-PNC-QJI-64BE>

Competition over Force Deployment

The deployment of various forces in Hadhramaut Governorate highlights the UAE's control — via the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and its allied forces — over Al-Mukalla, the capital of the governorate, and the Second Military Region. Despite the “Riyadh Agreement,” signed in November 2019 — which aimed to unify military formations under the legitimate government's Ministry of Defense and reorganize security forces under the Ministry of Interior — the reality on the ground in Hadhramaut remains unchanged.

Instead, the STC and its affiliated forces have been harassing the First Military Region forces, which are aligned with the legitimate government and have operated as an independent military region since 2013. These forces, deployed in the Hadhramaut Valley and Desert and along the Yemeni-Saudi border, are headquartered in Seiyun and consist of seven main formations: the Military Region Command, the Thamud and Al-Khasha'a Axes and five additional military brigades.

The STC's actions indicate an intent to escalate tensions, create instability and provoke government forces in the First Military Region by labeling them as northern forces and accusing them of collaborating with Al-Qaeda. In July 2023, Hadhramaut's STC President Saeed Ahmed Al-Muhammadi called for the withdrawal of the First Military Region forces from the Hadhramaut Valley and the removal of government forces from the presidential palace in Al-Mukalla. He also declared that the STC remains committed to its goal of liberating Hadhramaut's interior districts, expelling the First Military Region forces, and establishing a fully sovereign southern state.¹⁵

15. Emirati-Saudi conflict. What is happening in Hadhramaut? Khaled Abdul Wahid, Noon Post, on: 7/11/2023, available at the following link: <https://www.noonpost.com/47481/>

In response, the legitimate government, supported by Saudi Arabia, bolstered the Hadhramaut National Council and deployed the Nation's Shield Forces (NSF), composed mostly of personnel from Hadhramaut. These forces adhere to Yemeni armed forces service laws and follow directives from the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, receiving Saudi support in terms of equipment, salaries, training and qualification.

This support appears to counter the UAE-backed STC forces' moves toward the Saudi border. According to the Saudi Press Agency, Lieutenant General Mutlaq bin Salem Al-Azima, commander of the Saudi Joint Forces, recently inspected one of the Nation's Shield Forces' brigades in Al-Wadiah, Hadhramaut, reviewing their training progress and combat readiness.¹⁶

The Nation's Shield Forces are primarily stationed in the Hadhramaut Valley, but their formation, size and objectives suggest they intend to expand throughout the governorate, including to Al-Mukalla on the Arabian Sea coast. The conflicting missions of the Nation's Shield Forces, which adhere to a military doctrine supporting Yemeni unity, and the STC forces, which follow a separatist military doctrine, could turn Hadhramaut into a battleground.¹⁷

16. The Commander of the Joint Forces visits one of the brigades of the First Division of the Homeland Shield Forces in the Al-Wadiah region, Saudi Press Agency (SPA), on: 5/9/2023, available at the following link: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/ja/d958e0f49cq>

17. Hadrami Elite Prevents Forces of the «Homeland Shield» from Entering Mukalla and the Transitional Council Threatens to Escalate, Yemen Shabab, on: 1/18/2024, available at the following link: <https://yemenshabab.net/news/90716>

In January 2024, the Hadhrami Elite Forces, affiliated with the STC and stationed in Al-Mukalla, blocked dozens of Nation's Shield Forces military vehicles from entering the city, defying Governor Mabkhout Mubarak bin Madi's orders to facilitate their passage.

Reflecting Emirati dissatisfaction, the UAE-affiliated Al-Arab newspaper reported that the STC's local leadership in the Seiyun Directorate issued a statement warning against the deployment of the Nation's Shield Forces and rejecting any forces that challenge the Hadhrami Elite Forces' authority. The statement warned that such actions could lead to chaos and conflict in the Hadhramaut Coast and Plateau Directorates.

The newspaper noted that the renewed attempt to deploy the Nation's Shield Forces —established with Saudi efforts to prevent STC forces from fully controlling the governorate, particularly its vital coastal area — has heightened tensions. The Yemeni government's insistence on maintaining a security and military presence, backed by Saudi Arabia, is seen as part of its ambition to consolidate influence in the strategically significant governorate, which has access to the Arabian Sea.

Preferences for Unity and Secession Options

The debate over maintaining Yemeni unity versus pursuing secession has become increasingly significant after years of intervention by the Arab Coalition in Yemen, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The UAE appears to align itself with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which advocates for establishing an independent state based on the pre-1990 borders.

This stance aligns with the UAE's agenda to maintain control and influence over the coastal region from Hadhramaut in the east over to beyond Bab al-Mandab in the west, which is seen as crucial for enhancing its position in international trade and maritime security. This context explains the UAE's strong political support for the STC and its efforts to build the council's separatist military capabilities.

Although no official Emirati source has explicitly supported secession, prominent Emirati figures close to decision-making, as well as some holding official positions, openly express support for the idea. For instance, former political advisor Dr. Abdulkhaleq Abdullah stated that "maintaining Yemen's unity was never a priority for the Arab coalition backing legitimacy in Yemen."¹⁸

He later shared a map titled "Map of the Governorates and Directorates of South Arabia," which displayed the flag and banner of the former "People's Democratic Republic of Yemen," and included political borders dividing North and South Yemen. Commenting on the map, he questioned, "Why do some insist on handing over South Arabia to the Iranian-backed Houthi coup in Sana'a? The issue is not about secession, but national liberation.

The people of the South aim to build their free homeland and independent state, and they deserve the backing of global and regional nations, especially those of the Arabian Gulf. A state with a clear identity."¹⁹

18. See: His account on the (X) platform, on the following link: https://x.com/Abdulkhaleq_UAE

19. See: Dr. Abdulkhaleq Abdullah's account on the (X) platform, on: 9/17/2023, on the following link: <https://2u.pw/GOPFq0uk>

Similarly, Lieutenant General Dhahi Khalfan, Deputy Chief of Police and Public Security in Dubai, frequently calls for the independence of South Yemen as a sovereign republic, urging its separation from the north and international recognition.²⁰

On April 25, 2020, from Abu Dhabi, UAE, Southern Transitional Council Chairman Aidarous Al-Zubaidi announced the self-administration of southern Yemen, declaring a state of general emergency in Aden and all southern governorates²¹.

He tasked southern military and security forces with implementing these measures, which sparked anger from Yemen's legitimate government. Under pressure from Saudi Arabia on both the UAE and the STC, this declaration was eventually withdrawn. An official statement from the Arab Coalition emphasized the necessity of canceling any steps that violated the Riyadh Agreement²² and urged the swift implementation of the agreement to unify the Yemeni ranks. The Coalition also called for an immediate halt to any escalatory actions and urged a return to completing the agreement's implementation, prioritizing the interests of the Yemeni people, restoring the state and ending the coup.²³

20. See: His account on the (X) platform, at the following link: https://x.com/Dhahi_Khalfan

21. Yemen: The Southern Transitional Council announces from Abu Dhabi self-rule for the south under Emirati sponsorship, putting Riyadh in a political predicament, Khaled Al-Hammadi, Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, on: 4/26/2020, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/nfY4T8wD>

22. The agreement signed between the legitimate government and the Southern Transitional Council, under Saudi auspices in the capital, Riyadh, on November 5, 2019.

23. The Saudi coalition rejects the separatists' declaration of «self-administration» in southern Yemen, Alhurra Channel website, on: 4/27/2020, available at the following link: <https://www.alwatan.com.sa/article/1044336>

While the UAE has supported the Southern Transitional Council's secessionist agenda, Saudi Arabia appears to oppose the secession of southern Yemen, viewing a unified Yemeni state as essential for regional stability and in line with Saudi national interests. Despite maintaining political relations with the STC, Saudi Arabia has pursued a long-term strategy to prevent the secession.

This includes avoiding direct confrontation with the UAE, while simultaneously creating local conditions to undermine the secessionist movement, such as supporting the formation of military and security forces and regional political bodies in southern governorates that oppose the STC's agenda.

Yemen, whose legitimate government — the Presidential Leadership Council, the Parliament and the cabinet — suffers from evident weakness, benefits from Saudi Arabia's opposition to secession, which is driven by Saudi national security interests. Saudi Arabia perceives Yemeni unity as a stabilizing factor, while secession is seen as a path to chaos, conflict and long-term instability, which would pose significant security and political risks to the region. A divided southern Yemen could lead to the emergence of multiple warring states, further destabilizing the region.

The secession could trigger northern governorates, still outside Houthi control, to declare their independence to escape the sectarian and exclusionary policies enforced by the Houthis through power and dominance. This scenario would likely result in continuous conflict and warfare across Yemen. Saudi Arabia also fears that the secession could shift the military, political and strategic balance in favor of the Iran-linked Houthi group, thereby threatening Saudi national security.

Additionally, secession contradicts a fundamental principle of Saudi foreign policy, which is to uphold the territorial integrity of recognized states. Saudi Arabia is wary of plans to fragment regional countries, as evidenced by historical American proposals. For instance, three decades ago, there were American suggestions to divide Saudi Arabia into several states, with such plans appearing in publications, like the American Army Magazine in 2007 and The New York Times in 2013. These proposals included not only Saudi Arabia but also other countries, like Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt, suggesting a regional division into multiple states to benefit American security interests.²⁴

Scenarios of the Paths of Competition

The scenarios concerning the Saudi-Emirati competition in Hadhramaut are closely linked to the broader regional rivalry between the two countries, particularly in terms of “geo-economic” issues and their aspirations to lead the Arab world. Three possible scenarios can be anticipated, with one potentially leading to a competitive path.

- First Scenario

This scenario is one that maintains the current situation in Hadhramaut Governorate as it stands. In this case, the Southern Transitional Council, backed by the UAE, would retain military, security and administrative control over the districts and areas of the Hadhramaut Coast, centered in the city of Mukalla. Meanwhile, the legitimate government, the Hadhramaut National Council and possibly other social groups supported by Saudi Arabia would maintain control over the districts of the Hadhramaut Valley and Desert, centered in the city of Seiyun.

24. Who wants to divide Saudi Arabia?, Hassan Abu Talib, Al-Watan Newspaper, on: 5/26/2015, available at the following link: <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/738074>

This scenario requires both competing countries to refrain from implementing any policies or actions that could encourage local parties to escalate tensions or attempt to shift the balance of political, military and security power in the governorate.

The political and administrative bodies, along with military and security formations, would maintain communication channels with the competing countries to defuse any potential conflicts that might arise in the governorate. This situation is likely to continue until local, regional or international conditions necessitate a comprehensive resolution to the Yemeni crisis, ultimately ending the decade-long conflict.

- Second Scenario

This potential situation involves the possibility of both countries agreeing to reduce the intensity of their competition in Hadhramaut and reaching agreements that are mutually acceptable to both, within a unified Yemeni state.

In this context, the UAE could leverage its influence over the Southern Transitional Council to moderate its rhetoric and policies toward Yemeni state institutions — political, military and security — in Hadhramaut. It could also support more pragmatic voices within the STC who can reach agreements with the legitimate government to expedite the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement.

This agreement calls for ending divisions among military factions, reorganizing military forces under the Yemeni Ministry of Defense, restructuring security forces under the Ministry of Interior, as well as fostering cohesion and integration within the Presidential Leadership Council.

In this scenario, it is expected that the competing countries would facilitate efforts to unify Yemeni political components under the legitimate government, encouraging all parties to formulate a shared national vision for resolving the southern issue within a federal Yemeni state.

This state would grant significant powers to regions and governorates, supported by both countries. Plus, they would adopt a unified approach in dealing with the Houthi group and initiate a political settlement process aimed at rebuilding the Yemeni state and its central and local constitutional institutions, ultimately achieving lasting peace and stability in Yemen.

- Third Scenario

This scenario suggests a potential escalation between the two coalition countries, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with each seeking to expand its influence at the other's expense and possibly even pushing the other out of the governorate. In this scenario, Saudi Arabia would likely work to support the legitimate government across all districts and areas of Hadhramaut. Evidence supporting this scenario includes the visit of Dr. Rashad Al-Alimi, the Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council, to Hadhramaut in July 2024.

During his visit, he held a meeting in Mukalla with the governor and local authority leaders to reinforce the presence of state institutions and express the government's support for the local authority's efforts to ensure security, stability and fulfill its obligations to the citizens.²⁵

25. The President of the Leadership Council holds a meeting with the leadership of the local authority and the executive office in Hadhramaut Governorate, the official website of the President of the Presidential Leadership Council, on: 7/29/2024, available at the following link: <https://presidentalalimi.net/news1335.html>

Under this scenario, it is expected that Saudi Arabia will encourage Saudi businessmen of Hadhrami descent to resume major development and investment projects in the governorate that were started before the Houthi coup. According to a previous statement by an engineer, Abdullah Bugshan, a Saudi businessman of Hadhrami origin, Saudi investments in Hadhramaut range from \$300 million to \$350 million. He also mentioned significant new projects in the fish, cement and real estate development sectors.²⁶

On the military and security front, Saudi Arabia is expected to enhance the capabilities of the Nation's Shield Forces to reduce the military imbalance between forces aligned with the Southern Transitional Council and those loyal to the legitimate government. In July 2024, Saudi military reinforcements, including around 100 military vehicles²⁷, crossed the Al-Wadiah crossing in Hadhramaut and reached a base associated with the Nation's Shield Forces in Aden.

The deployment of these forces within the governorate is also expanding. On August 22, 2024, the Nation's Shield Forces took over, from Brigade 141, most of the sites at the Al-Wadiah land port, which connects Yemen and Saudi Arabia, including the passport checkpoint, customs area, middle gate and the dividing point between the Yemeni and Saudi ports. This port has remained operational throughout the war years.²⁸

26. Pumping Saudi investment in Hadhramaut of (350) million riyals, Al-Riyadh newspaper, on: 4/3/2005, available at the following link: <https://www.alriyadh.com/53326>

27. After the arrival of reinforcements for the Homeland Shield forces. Watch: New Saudi military support for legitimacy in Aden, Al-Mashhad Net, on: 7/28/2024, available at the following link: <https://www.almashhadnews.com/287192>

28. Hadhramaut.. Homeland Shield Forces take over most of the sites of Al-Wadiah land port linking Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Al-Masdar Online, on: 8/22/2024, available at the following link: <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/300850>

In contrast, this scenario anticipates that the UAE will push the Southern Transitional Council to undermine the legitimate government's presence in Hadhramaut and intensify the secessionist rhetoric.

An indicator of this was the absence of Major General Al-Bahsani, vice president of the Southern Transitional Council and member of the Presidential Leadership Council, during PLC Chairman Rashad Al-Alimi's visit to Mukalla in July 2024. Al-Bahsani's office commented on the visit, saying, "The visit raises a lot of surprise due to the ambiguity of its goals, and it is not expected to achieve anything noteworthy for Hadhramaut."²⁹

Besides, the UAE is expected to establish a significant economic presence in Hadhramaut to counter Saudi economic dominance. One key indicator is the statement that the Yemeni Minister of Oil made in January 2024 about the completion of construction studies for two major projects, with final agreements to be signed involving Yemeni private sector investors in partnership with the UAE.

The first project is to build a refinery with an industrial zone in the Dhabba area, with an initial production capacity of about 25,000 barrels per day, and the second is a domestic gas project in the Masila sector.³⁰

The UAE is also likely to invest heavily in developing the Port of Mukalla, controlled by Southern Transitional Council forces, to transform it into a significant logistical and commercial hub as part of its strategy to control and operate key ports along major maritime trade routes,

29. Anger in Hadhramaut reflects negative mood towards Yemeni legitimacy, Al-Arab newspaper, on: 7/29/2024, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/F9oix5oQ>

30. Yemeni Oil Minister to Asharq Al-Awsat: We plan to establish refineries in Shabwa and Hadhramaut, Asharq Al-Awsat, on: 1/17/2024, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/6xvNY35j>

including those in the Red Sea, Arabian Sea and East Africa.

It is likely that, at an advanced stage of intense competition, the UAE will activate its military and security intervention tools in Hadhramaut.

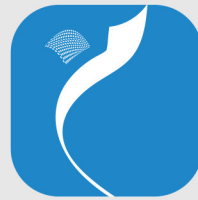
This could involve leveraging the “Military and Security Cooperation and Combating Terrorism” agreement signed by UAE Minister of Justice, Yemeni Minister of Defense in the legitimate government and Lieutenant General Mohsen Mohammed Al-Daari at the UAE Ministry of Defense headquarters in December 2022.³¹

Conclusion

In general, the growing analysis of the Saudi vs. Emirati rivalry in Hadhramaut is generating significant concern within the Hadhrami society. There is a fear that this competition could destabilize the region’s relatively stable and cohesive social fabric, potentially leading to an uncontrollable escalation of conflict between local social and political groups, as well as the military forces affiliated with both countries. This situation demands a more proactive approach from the Yemeni government in asserting its sovereign authority over the governorate in political, security, administrative and service matters. Also, it is imperative for the government, political and social entities, Hadhrami leaders and the competing nations to collaborate on formulating de-escalation strategies and making agreements that safeguard the legitimate interests of all parties within the framework of an independent, unified, secure and stable Yemen.

31. Yemeni Minister of Justice and Minister of Defense discuss cooperation and sign an agreement in the field of defense and combating terrorism, the official website of the UAE Ministry of Justice, on: 12/8/2022, available at the link Next: <https://2u.pw/INhKBZA4>

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