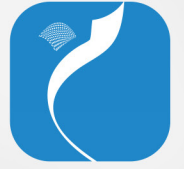


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The Tension Between Political Projects in The Eastern Provinces and Their Impact on Peace Negotiations

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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

The eastern governorates have long been a battleground for various political movements, often marked by both rivalry and conflict. Many of these movements began around the time of the 2006 presidential elections, which were notably tense, and the ensuing events led to their further proliferation and fragmentation. This splintering has been driven by both internal dynamics and external influences, including regional and international factors.

The eastern region holds significant importance for different powers, largely due to its oil wealth and strategic position, making it a focal point for competition. Various factions advocate for different visions of the state's future — whether through unity, separation or federalism — adding layers of complexity to the region's political landscape.

This paper aims to explore the dynamics of competition and alignment between these political projects in the eastern governorates as well as to consider how they might influence upcoming peace negotiations.

The First Spark: The Evolution of Political Movements

The origins of political movements in the eastern regions can be traced back to the 1960s, when Britain attempted to consolidate its southern Yemeni allies under the Federation of South Arabia in April 1962. However, leaders in the eastern regions — Hadhramaut, Al-Mahra and parts of Shabwa — rejected this union, opting instead for self-rule¹. This marked the first instance of the eastern governorates expressing a desire to remain independent from the broader southern region.

1. The Political Ambitions of Southern Yemen and Its Internal Obstacles, Ahmed Naji, Carnegie Middle East Center, on 5/24/2022, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/MIRr>

A similar movement emerged five years later in Hadhramaut, when calls for the unification of the Kathiri and Qu'aiti Sultanates and the creation of a Hadhramaut State gained momentum. One of the most notable visions for this state came from Sheikh Omar Salem Ba'abbad, head of the General People's Congress, who, in March 1965, introduced a plan, called "The Proposed National Constitution for the Hadhramaut State." This document laid out a democratic constitutional framework for a proposed "United Republic of Hadhramaut" and consisted of five chapters and 79 articles. Article 13 of the project outlined the borders and population of the Republic, describing it as extending from the outskirts of Aden in the west to Al-Mahra in the east, from the Arabian Sea in the south to the border of Saudi Arabia in the north.

The Hadhrami aspirations for the unity or creation of their own state were never fully realized. This was largely due to the lack of a clear, cohesive vision for a Hadhrami state and the absence of substantial support for the idea. Instead, Hadhramaut was incorporated into the newly established state in southern Yemen, with Aden as its capital, and became known as the "Fifth Governorate"².

While the 1960s marked the first emergence of political movements in the eastern governorates, the 1994 civil war represented a pivotal moment in shaping modern political projects. During this period, many began to raise concerns about the marginalization of the eastern and southern governorates, including Hadhramaut. The first organized protest of these "marginalization policies" occurred in 1997 in Mukalla, the capital of Hadhramaut.

2. The General People's Congress in Hadhramaut and the Constitution of the Republic of Hadhramaut, Shabwa Press, on 2/15/2021, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/FXlFFCyp>

The movement accused the central government in Sana'a of sidelining southern political and military leaders. Over time, this resistance evolved into what became known as the "Southern Movement," which opposed the "unjust policies" of the Sana'a regime, particularly in the aftermath of the 1994 war³, with a focus on defending the rights of the people of Hadhramaut and the eastern governorates.

Alongside the growing opposition to the regime in Sana'a, another movement emerged, which was focused on advocating for Hadhrami independence. In 2003, Abdullah Saeed Bahaj founded the "National Organization for the Liberation of Hadhramaut (Hatoum)," which called for self-determination for the people of Hadhramaut and the restoration of their independent state. Over time, several other movements aligned with the Hadhrami cause were established, including the "Hadhramaut Salvation Front," the "Hadhrami National Gathering" and the "Hadhramaut Youth Awakening Bloc." From these, the "Hadhrami Forces League" was formed in May 2012⁴, based on the belief that Hadhramaut is an independent state that was twice occupied — first in 1967 by South Yemen, and again in 1990 when North and South Yemen unified to form the Republic of Yemen.⁵

Meanwhile, the Southern Movement continued to develop, a key turning point came in mid-2009 when tribal leader Tariq al-Fadhli, once a prominent ally of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, joined the "Supreme Council for the Peaceful Revolution."

3. The Eastern Regional Council, Opportunities and Challenges, Madad Hadhramaut Center for Research and Strategic Studies, on 1/23/2024, available at the following link: <https://midad-had.org/post11/>

4. with the north and south, Ma'rib Press, on 1/19/2013, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/ws-3BvQ8U>

5. Hadhramaut: Intersection of Interests and Conflict of Projects, Abaad Center for Studies and Research, on 6/22/2023, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/nEfK>

This group later grew in influence, especially after receiving support from Ali Salem al-Beidh, the last president of South Yemen before unification.⁶

By this stage, three distinct political projects had emerged. The first, focused on the southern issue, began in 2007 with demonstrations and protests under the banner of the “Southern Movement,” which was later joined by various political forces. The second centered around the Hadhrami cause, which was rooted in the 1960s but had not gained as much traction on the ground as compared to the southern issue. The third project supported the idea of a unified Yemeni state.

The Explosion (Transitional Phase: 2011–2013)

The youth revolution of February 11, 2011, and the resulting political vacuum and newfound freedoms, created a fertile environment for the rise of various political movements. This included the Southern Movement, the Hadhramaut cause and the Al-Mahra issue. The National Dialogue Conference, held from March 2013 to January 2014, became a key platform for these movements to gain visibility, drawing significant international and regional attention.⁷

Representatives from the eastern governorates participated in the conference, and voices from Hadhramaut advocated for the creation of a Hadhramaut region, or an eastern region, that would encompass the neighboring governorates of Shabwa, Al-Mahra and Socotra.

6. Between its Regional Conflicts and the Region’s Competition Over Aden, What is the Future of the Southern Transitional Council? Abaad Center for Studies and Research, on 10/3/2021, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/pGhc>

7. The People of Mahra Declare Their Rejection of the Eastern Region and Consider it a Consecration of the Hadhrami League’s Policy, Akhbar Al-Youm, on 8/27/2013, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/zuxMepV1>

However, many in Al-Mahra opposed this idea, fearing marginalization under Hadhramaut's dominant presence. The people of Al-Mahra, with their unique culture and history, were concerned about losing their identity and instead proposed incorporating Socotra into their own governorate, as it was under the Sultanate, to form an independent region under a new federal system.

This Mahri political project differed significantly from the two dominant southern movements, with the Hadhramaut independence movement and the South Arabian secessionist movement. The Al-Mahra project received limited regional support and was largely sidelined, especially compared to the stronger backing for the Hadhramaut project from Saudi Arabia and the secessionist movement from the UAE.

It is important to note that, before the 2011 revolution and the subsequent crisis and decline of the situation in Yemen toward the chaos of armed conflict, the Al-Mahra did not witness any of the forms of political or intellectual polarization witnessed in other regions of Yemen, due to the great influence of the tribe.⁸

Before the 2011 revolution and the subsequent crisis that led Yemen into armed conflict, the Al-Mahra had not experienced the same political or intellectual polarization seen in other parts of the country, largely due to the strong influence of tribal structures.

The revolutionary wave following Yemen's youth uprising triggered the rise of more political movements and exposed deeper grievances, particularly in the eastern regions.

8. Yemeni Mahra: From Isolation to the Heart of a Geopolitical Storm, Yahya Al-Sawari, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, on 6/15/2019, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/TwBA>

On July 7, 2013⁹, delegations from Hadhramaut gathered in Wadi Nahab at the invitation of the Hamum Tribe. The meeting's purpose was to demand long-denied rights for the people of Hadhramaut, who, despite possessing much of Yemen's oil wealth¹⁰, felt marginalized for decades. During this gathering, the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance was established, and Lieutenant Colonel Saad bin Hamad bin Habrish was elected as its leader.¹¹

A few months later, Sheikh Saad bin Habrish, the head of the alliance and leader of the Hamum Tribe, was assassinated. This event triggered a significant escalation among the Hadhramis. In December 2013, following Bin Habrish's death at the hands of army soldiers near a security checkpoint, the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance declared a popular uprising. The uprising's leaders put forth several demands:

- The perpetrators who murdered Bin Habrish's must be handed over.
- Security and army forces must withdraw from checkpoints and be replaced by Hadhrami tribes.
- Improvements must be made in local services.
- The local population must be given the authority to manage their own areas, and handle security and protection for foreign companies.

These demands were revolutionary at the time, advocating for Hadhramaut Governorate's administration to be controlled primarily by its

9. The 1994 Secession War ended on July 7, which the southerners call the Nakba Day, or the day the occupation of the South was completed.

10. How Does Oil Affect the Present and Future of Politics in Yemen?, Munir Bin Waber, Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute, on 8/9/2019, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/yKNb>

11. Yemen: Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance and Paths of Disintegration, Dimensions for Strategic Studies, on 1/21/2023, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/deSA>

people rather than the central government¹². Although not explicitly stated, the demand for local management of security implied a call for the withdrawal of government forces, especially from the First Military Region. This set of demands resurfaced strongly nearly a decade later, a topic that will be explored in more detail later in the paper.

The formation of the Hadhramaut Sons and Tribes Alliance was a pivotal moment, marking the first real manifestation of the long-standing aspiration for Hadhramaut's independence.

This desire had been evolving since the 1960s, supported by the Hadhrami League in Riyadh and discussed in the National Dialogue Conference. It eventually led to the creation of the Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference in 2016, which advocated Hadhramaut to be a region within a federal state with the right of self-determination. This made the alliance and the conference particularly significant.¹³

The first Hadhrami uprising serves as a key reference point for many political initiatives advocating for the rights of Hadhramaut and the eastern governorates, whether directly or indirectly. While it's true that the uprising concluded with Sheikh Amr bin Habrish being appeased through financial incentives and vehicles — which later drew criticism — this does not diminish its significance or lasting impact.

12. Hadhramaut Intersection of Interests and Conflict of Projects, previous reference. See footnote 5.

13. Hadhramaut National Council Between the Political Game and the Trap of Partisan Conflicts, Ahlam Al-Kathiri, Hadhramaut Voice, on 10/30/2023, available at the following link: <https://www.hdrvoice.com/24406/>

Fragmentation (The Houthi Coup & Operation Decisive Storm: 2014-2024)

The Houthi coup against the Yemeni state was a crucial turning point, and its effects continue to shape the country's political landscape today. During the Houthis' control of Sana'a, there was little room for new political forces to emerge, as Yemeni groups focused primarily on combating the Houthis. This concern was heightened by fears that conflict would spread to the eastern regions, especially with Al-Qaeda seizing control of Mukalla, the capital of Hadhramaut Governorate, in April 2015¹⁴.

Al-Qaeda established a civil council, which was led by Omar Al-Jaidi and Abdul Hakim Mahfouz, made up of 501 local members, and it was aimed at maintaining unity and preventing foreign intervention and civil unrest. The situation changed significantly when the Southern Resistance liberated Aden in July 2015. This victory opened the political space in Yemen, allowing southern leaders and organizations to rise to prominence, particularly in local governance and the political, military and security arenas surrounding Aden.

One of the most significant developments during this time was the formation of the "Southern Transitional Council" in Aden, led by Aidarous Qassem al-Zubaidi, who had served as Aden's governor after its liberation. This marked a major shift in the southern political landscape.

14. Yemen: Criticisms of the President's Resort to Tribal Arbitration, Al Jazeera Net, on 4/10/2014, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/CoQw2Ext>

The Southern Transitional Council (STC) was established on May 11, 2017, with the aim to unify southern political representation. Its leadership includes prominent figures from various southern governorates, including Ahmed bin Braik, the former governor of Hadhramaut, who hails from the east. A key factor that sets the council apart from other political groups is its strong backing from the UAE¹⁵, which helps it rally support among the southern population with the promise of restoring their pre-1990 state. Although the council initially focused on Aden and its surrounding areas, it quickly made clear its intentions to extend its influence into the eastern governorates as part of its broader political vision¹⁶. At the heart of the council's mission is the goal of reestablishing the southern state within its historical borders, firmly integrating the eastern governorates into its aspirations.

Some residents of Hadhramaut Valley and Desert accused those from the coast of monopolizing power within the alliance and union, leading to the formation of the Hadhramaut Valley and Desert Tribes Authority. This reflected the growing fragmentation in the region. In January 2018, the Southern Transitional Council displayed its strength by engaging in armed clashes with legitimate government forces in Aden, which lasted several days and saw its forces reach the presidential palace in Ma'ashiq.

15. Hadhrami National Council Strongly Supports the Military Operations of the Coalition Forces, Asharq Al-Awsat, on 5/28/2015, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/SKb1W24M>

16. Between its Regional Conflicts and the Region's Competition Over Aden, What is the Future of the Southern Transitional Council? Abaad Center for Studies and Research, previous reference. See footnote 6.

The council's approach to governance faced significant criticism, which raised doubts among many in the eastern governorates, particularly in Hadhramaut, about its project¹⁷.

In August 2019, fighting erupted again in Aden as the Southern Transitional Council sought to oust the legitimate government. These clashes eventually spread to the neighboring governorates of Shabwa and Abyan. As government forces attempted to regain control, Emirati forces intervened with air strikes, resulting in hundreds of soldier casualties, prompting the Yemeni presidency to accuse the UAE of wrongdoing. Although these conflicts didn't directly occur in the eastern governorates, their repercussions were felt there, as many anticipated that the STC would turn its attention to Hadhramaut once it secured its position in Aden.

The political divide between the Southern Transitional Council and the eastern governorates became evident when the latter rejected the self-administration declared by the council in April 2020. This rejection was a clear stance against the STC's ambitions to dominate all southern governorates.

Hadhramaut has been a key focus for the STC not just because it's the largest governorate in Yemen, but also due to its significant oil resources. These resources are vital for the southern project, providing both energy and financial support.

17. Hadhramaut Valley: The Expected Battle, Majed Al-Madhaji, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, on 2/21/2023, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/HhGo>

To assert its influence, the STC held its National Assembly in Hadhramaut from May 21, 2023, to May 22, 2023, and, before that, showcased its military strength when President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi entered Mukalla on May 18, accompanied by around 200 military vehicles from Aden. This display was intended as a warning to the STC's opponents, which angered the local Hadhrami forces.

In response, these forces convened a meeting in Seiyun, where they made decisive moves, including forming a delegation to engage with Saudi leadership. Saudi Arabia reacted by calling local authorities and representatives from the opposing Hadhrami forces for discussions on these developments. After a month of consultations in Saudi Arabia, the "Hadhramaut National Council" was established in June 2023 to represent the visions and demands of Hadhramaut's people. This event included Hadhramaut Governor Mabkhout bin Madi and Saudi Ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed Al Jaber, leading to the announcement of the "Hadhrami Political and Human Rights Document," which reflected the outcomes of these extensive discussions.

The document stated that the "Hadhramaut National Council" was a political body that represents the aspirations of the Hadhrami society, stressing the importance of unity within Hadhramaut and affirms the right of its people to manage its own economic, political and security affairs. While recognizing the value of political and social diversity in Hadhramaut and the southern governorates, it also underscores a commitment to shared goals with the Saudi-led coalition in support of the legitimate authority.

The document also highlighted the right of Hadhrami citizens, through their various groups, to engage fairly in decision-making processes and to have representation in parliament, government, advisory and negotiation bodies. This ensures that the vital interests of Hadhramaut's people are safeguarded independently.

The Hadhrami National Council brings together a wide range of Hadhrami groups, including the Hadhrami Comprehensive Conference, the Hadhrami Valley Authority, the Hadhrami Coastal Alliance, the Hadhrami Plateau and League, the Hadhrami Uprising (Al-'Uyun Camp) and the Hadhrami Honor Charter. It also features numerous prominent Hadhrami figures — ministers, representatives, undersecretaries, academics, military and security personnel, as well as business leaders — reflecting the diverse interests and expertise of the community.

Political dynamics in Yemen's eastern governorates have been significantly shaped by the actions and policies of neighboring countries. In November 2017, in Al-Mahra Governorate, led by Sheikh Ali Salem Al-Harizi, local leaders, opposed the deployment of Saudi forces in Al Ghaydah District and the establishment of a military base at the port of Nishtun. Tensions heightened in early 2018 when a Saudi warship arrived at the port with troops and heavy weapons. Reports estimated the number of Saudi soldiers stationed in Al-Mahra to be between 1,500 and 2,000¹⁸.

18. Text of the decisions of the Hadhramaut Comprehensive Conference Document: An Independent Region, Neither South nor North, Nashwan News, on 4/22/2017, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/KECUKwuR>

To solidify their military presence, Riyadh enlisted the support of Yemeni security forces, including the “Rapid Response Forces,” a unit largely composed of locals from Lahj, Al-Dhale’e and Radfan governorates. In response, the protest-organizing committee in Al-Mahra issued a statement in September that urged residents in those governorates to discourage their young men from serving Saudi interests in the region.

The protests against Saudi forces began after Sultan Abdullah bin Issa Al-Afrar¹⁹ returned from Muscat in May 2018, where he had been residing since leaving Saudi Arabia in 2017. This indicates a potential Omani role in the protests, especially since Oman saw the Saudi military presence in the governorate and the seizure of border crossings as a challenge to its historical influence.

On March 11, 2019, near the Shahn border crossing to Oman, clashes erupted between local tribesmen and Saudi-backed government forces, leaving two tribesmen injured, along with an unspecified number of Arab Coalition soldiers. Later that year, in September 2019, the leaders of the Al-Mahra protests, with support from Oman, formed the “Southern National Salvation Council.”

This group aimed to counter the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council and push the Saudi-led Arab Coalition’s military forces out of both Al-Mahra and the eastern governorates. However, despite these ambitions, the SNSC struggled to establish itself as a significant political force in either the eastern or southern regions.²⁰

19. Al Mahra, Yemen: From Isolation to the Heart of a Geopolitical Storm, Yahya Al Sawari, Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, previous reference. See footnote 8.

20. He belongs to the Al-Afrar family, one of the last sultans of Al-Mahra and Socotra before they were annexed to the southern state during independence.

Tensions in Al-Mahra escalated further in 2020. On February 17, 2020, a convoy of Saudi forces, accompanied by Yemeni soldiers from the Special Tasks Battalion, was ambushed by tribal gunmen on a road leading to the Shahn border crossing. The convoy was conducting routine inspections at Al-Mahra's ports to prevent the smuggling of military technology from Iran to Houthi rebels, highlighting the ongoing friction in the area.²¹

The ongoing Saudi military presence in Al-Mahra has sparked significant controversy. Some believe that Saudi Arabia's goal is to curb arms smuggling to the Houthis, while others argue that the primary motive is to establish an oil pipeline through the governorate, connecting to the Arabian Sea and bypassing the Strait of Hormuz, which is seen as vulnerable due to Iranian threats.

Al-Mahra Governorate's unique history, which has largely shielded it from political conflicts in Yemen, plays a crucial role in shaping local sentiments. Many of its residents view the presence of foreign forces as an occupation, strongly rejecting any non-Yemeni military involvement in their territory.²²

21. Yemen: Violent Clashes Between Saudi-Yemeni Forces and Armed Men in Mahra, Anadolu Agency, on 2/17/2020, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/VXZZ>

22. Ali Al-Harizi: The Saudi Presence in Mahra is an Occupation, Al-Jazeera Net, on 10/18/2018, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/eH7XRI5M>

Competition and tension

Competition and rising tensions shaped the political landscape of Yemen's eastern governorates, particularly between two major projects: the Southern State Project and the Hadhramaut State Project. Both agreed that the people of Hadhramaut should manage their own affairs, including taking responsibility for security. However, until 2019, there was no clear move to create Hadhrami forces to replace the First Military Region, which remained loyal to the legitimate government.

In contrast, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) took a more direct and aggressive stance. In May 2019, STC Leader Major General Aidarous al-Zubaidi announced a general mobilization and the formation of combat fronts aimed at reclaiming the Hadhramaut Valley and expelling the First Military Region forces. Although these threats were never carried out, they signaled a readiness to open a new war front in areas under government control, potentially dragging Hadhramaut into conflict. This was significant, as the governorate had previously managed to avoid major combat, even during the Houthi coup and Al-Qaeda's incursions. In December 2021, a significant meeting took place between the STC-backed bloc and several tribal leaders from Hadhramaut Valley, known as the "Haru Meeting." The result of that gathering was the "Escalation Committee for the Outcomes" of the "General Hadhramaut Meeting," which aimed to address the region's pressing issues. The focus was on securing rights and finding solutions to the worsening economic conditions, particularly the soaring cost of living caused by the collapse of the local currency²³.

23. The polarizations in Hadhramaut coincided with thousands of people demonstrating in the city of Seiyun, the second largest city in Hadhramaut Governorate, in October 2022, raising the flags of the "State of Hadhramaut," in a rare and bold move.

The uprising primarily targeted stopping oil exports in protest against government corruption and preventing the export of fish, livestock and agricultural products until local markets were adequately supplied. This escalation occurred without the involvement of two of the most influential Hadhrami tribal groups – the “Hadhramaut General Conference” and the “Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance”²⁴.

One of the key groups leading this second Hadhrami uprising was the “Hadramout Alliance and Gathering Bloc for Hadramout and the South”²⁵. This group had broken away from both the “Hadramout Gathering Conference” and the “Hadramout Alliance” and received backing from the Southern Transitional Council. Lieutenant Colonel Salem bin Samida led the bloc, standing in for Sheikh Hassan Al-Jabri, who had been appointed head of the escalation committee for the second uprising.²⁶

The second Hadhrami uprising quickly became divided, with the split emerging after a shift in the movement’s key demands. Initially, protesters called for the relocation of major oil company offices from Sana’a to Hadhramaut, but this demand was altered to propose moving the offices to Aden, instead. Governor Faraj Salmeen Al-Bahsani influenced this change due to the pressure he put on the escalation committee’s leaders, triggering the division within the uprising.

24. Learn about the results of the second Hadhrami uprising, Sama Al-Watan News, on 12/18/2021, available at the following link: <https://2h.ae/Ctdc>

25. Has the activity of the Second Hadhrami Uprising declined?, South24 Center for News and Studies, on 8/18/2022, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/2dzmeC5H>

26. Hadhramaut is a Pivotal Point of Separation Between Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni Brotherhood, Al-Arab Newspaper, on 10/10/2022, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/t2yUDpR> (Click the purple bar to continue to the content.)

Led by Hassan Al-Jabri, one faction, aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), left their protest camps and traveled to Riyadh to present their demands directly to then-President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. Meanwhile, the second faction, led by Saleh bin Harez Al-Marri, remained at the “Al-Uyun Camp” and continued the uprising.

This group received support from various forces and components, most notably from the revolutionary movement headed by Hassan Baoum, the former governor of Shabwa before South Yemen’s unification.

The Hadhrami uprising, which initially sparked great hope and was seen as a pivotal moment in the political movement in Hadhramaut and the eastern governorates, ultimately failed to achieve any significant impact. Although some argue that it brought about certain gains — such as halting the smuggling of raw gold to Ma’rib and uncovering hundreds of unregistered oil fields — these claims have not been confirmed by official sources.

The most noticeable outcome of the uprising was the change in leadership of the First Military Region. Major General Yahya Muhammad Abu Awja was dismissed, and Hadhrami Colonel Amer bin Hatyan was appointed Chief of Staff of the First Military Region. However, this decision fell short of the aspirations of the people of Hadhramaut, who sought the removal of the First Military Region’s forces, which they view as occupiers in the valley and desert, and the right to manage their own security and military affairs. This position aligns with the stance of the Southern Transitional Council.

The uprising also led to the recruitment of Hadhramis, with a goal to enlist 25,000 locals to defend the governorate's rights. However, this initiative was later canceled due to pressure from the Arab Coalition. A significant political development was the formation of the Hadramout National Council (HNC), which gained wide support within Hadhramaut and had clear backing from Saudi Arabia, a major power in Yemen. This move aimed to revitalize the region's political scene, which had been divided for years between Hadhramaut's local interests and the broader southern project²⁷.

The Southern Transitional Council heavily criticized the Hadramout National Council, with some speculating that the council was linked to the Nations Shield forces. These forces, which recruited only Hadhramis, were seen as part of Saudi Arabia's strategy to maintain influence over the region both politically and militarily. Others viewed the Hadramout National Council as a last-ditch effort by the Yemeni Congregation for Reform ("Islah") to regain relevance in the eastern governorates after losing ground in its conflict against both the Houthis in the north and the Southern Transitional Council in Aden.

On January 9, 2024, the "Unified Council of the Eastern Provinces" was officially announced, marking an extension of the regional governance concept introduced during the Comprehensive National Dialogue Conference of 2013-2014. The founding statement of the unified council emphasized that it would serve as a dynamic political and societal initiative, acting as a driving force for the region's promising future.²⁸

27. Yemen: Hadhramaut and Shabwa Tribes Escalate Against the Government Over Oil Exports, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, on 8/3/2024, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/R4TVi6EG>

28. The Southern Transitional Council forces had previously engaged in armed confrontations with the legitimate government forces in October 2022.

The creation of this new body poses a significant challenge to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which advocates for full separation between the north and south and claims to represent the entire southern region.

However, this emerging council represents approximately 80% of the southern territory and 65% of Yemen's overall land area, including most of the country's vital oil fields located in the Hadhramaut and Shabwa governorates. Its formation could reshape the political landscape and weaken the STC's position as the sole voice for the south.

The Unified Council of the Eastern Provinces brings several key strengths to the table:

1. Its foundation is rooted in legitimate national consensus, reflecting the outcomes of the Comprehensive National Dialogue, which has become essential for stability in Yemen. This aligns with the direction of the Presidential Leadership Council, which seeks to empower regions to manage their own affairs.
2. The unified council's commitment to its three guiding principles, outlined in its formation, offers reassurance to the broader Yemeni population. It signals that the Eastern Provinces project is not seeking fragmentation or the dismantling of agreements reached during the Comprehensive National Dialogue Conference.

However, the main challenge facing the Eastern Provinces project is its lack of military power to protect itself from the ambitions of other parties with their own armed forces. Should tensions escalate into armed conflict, this absence could hinder the project's success.

Despite the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance having faded from prominence in recent years, with the rise of other groups, like the Hadhramaut National Council and the Unified Council of the Eastern Provinces, it has recently re-emerged.

On August 3, 2024, following a high-level visit from the Presidential Leadership Council, led by Chairman Rashad Al-Alimi, the Tribal Alliance held a meeting, further intensifying polarization in Hadhramaut. During this meeting, the alliance issued a warning, threatening to take action to safeguard Hadhramaut's oil unless there was a real and active partnership with the region.

The movements led by Sheikh Amr bin Habrish, while impactful in the short term, are unlikely to bring about lasting change, as they are primarily tied to oil-export revenues — particularly when discussions of resuming oil exports intensify.

These councils and political forces have faced significant criticism. Some argue they are disconnected from the country's main conflict against the Houthi coup militia. Others fear they may inadvertently fuel secessionist sentiments, despite their outward commitment to unity, the outcomes of the National Dialogue, the Gulf Initiative and international resolutions. Their actions, however, have been seen as contributing to regional tensions. As a result, the eastern governorates have become a battleground for competing political projects, backed both internally and externally²⁹.

29. Al-Mahra TV reported some evidence of the UAE's support for the Southern Transitional Council. See the following link: <https://2u.pw/TRaVfUkt>

In Shabwa, similar developments have mirrored those in Hadhramaut. On July 11, 2023, the “Shabwa Sons and Tribes Alliance” was established. However, the strong influence of the STC in Shabwa led to the creation of two parallel entities with the same name — one aligned with the STC and the other recognizing the legitimate government. The “Shabwa National Council,” announced in January 2024, echoed the demands of the “Hadhramaut National Council,” calling for local self-governance and greater political representation for the people of the governorate.

Shabwa, however, faces deeper tribal and political divisions than Hadhramaut. While the STC has strong support in Shabwa, it has struggled to maintain the same level of cohesion among tribes as can be seen in Hadhramaut. Despite the presence of STC supporters in Hadhramaut, the tribes there have remained more unified than those in Shabwa.

The Impact of the Eastern Provinces on the Peace Process

When we examine the political landscape of the eastern governorates and the impact of regional influences, particularly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, a key question arises: What role can these political forces play in peace negotiations and ending the war?

It’s clear that these forces are more likely to influence local dynamics rather than national affairs. Over recent years, many new political entities have emerged, each shaping the political scene in their own way. These new groups often have resulted from splits and resignations within existing forces. The rise and fall of these entities — like the Hadhramaut National Council’s emergence and decline or the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance’s return after a period of absence — have contributed to their marginalization or reduced influence.

The increasing fragmentation and division among these groups have further diminished their impact. Recognizing this, many of these forces convened in Aden last May (2023) for a significant meeting, aiming to unify their efforts and strengthen their collective stance against the Houthi group.

Four main forces will likely shape peace negotiations and efforts to end the war:

1. The Southern Transitional Council.
2. The Hadhramaut National Council.
3. The Unified Council of the Eastern Governorates, and the Al-Mahra Sit-In.

Their influence will depend on several factors, including their popular support, regional backing and military presence.

The Southern Transitional Council has struggled to gain traction in some eastern governorates. While Al-Mahra remains opposed and many Hadhrami groups continue to reject it, the STC has made notable progress in Shabwa. Its popular base in the eastern governorates is significant, and its success owes much to substantial regional support, particularly from the UAE. The Southern Transitional Council's achievements over the years would not have been possible without this crucial Emirati support, which has provided both armament and financial resources.

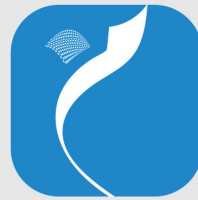
The STC faces significant obstacles in influencing Hadhramaut and Al-Mahra, as these regions are seen as crucial to the national security of Saudi Arabia and Oman, respectively.

Saudi Arabia has deep historical ties with Hadhramaut and has been a major backer of the Hadhramaut National Council, though its influence has diminished in recent months. Saudi Arabia has also created the “Nations Shield” forces to act alongside the STC’s own forces.

In Al-Mahra, Omani influence has been strong for years, making it difficult for the STC to gain traction there. The idea of integrating these eastern governorates into a potential southern state faces major hurdles. Saudi Arabia, the most influential player in Yemen, has opposed this idea, and international actors remain wary of secession. Meanwhile, peace negotiations are primarily focused on addressing the Houthis, who are against the idea of secession.

The Hadhramaut National Council is a key political force today, largely because it continues the Hadhrami project that originated in the 1960s. Its supporters have rallied around the council, which enjoys significant Saudi backing. Despite a recent decline in influence, the council still can affect a broad segment of the public in Hadhramaut. The trend in Yemen is moving away from centralization, even though the Houthis resist this change. Decentralization has been a reality in the liberated governorates since 2015, reflecting a shift away from the centralized governance model.

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