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# The Power of Geography

## HOW THE EASTERN GOVERNORATES RESHAPED THE RULES OF THE GAME IN YEMEN

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**A research institution dedicated to studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international dynamics that shape them — by examining the past, analyzing the present, and anticipating the future — with the aim of contributing constructively to shaping Yemen’s future.**

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# **The Power of Geography**

## **How the Eastern Governorates Reshaped the Rules of the Game in Yemen**

**RESEARCH PAPER**

The views expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the orientations of the center.

**2026 / January**

## Introduction

The geopolitical dimension remains one of the most decisive factors shaping power dynamics and the convergence of interests. Resources, borders, and strategic locations constitute a central source of conflict and a key driver of political and military priorities. Yemen's eastern governorates represent an exceptional case in the national equation due to



their strategic location, abundant natural resources, and extensive coastline. These factors have enabled the eastern governorates to play a pivotal role in reshaping both local and regional balances of power, contributing to a reconfiguration of the Yemeni landscape that departs significantly from previous patterns—ranging from transformations in the military reality on the ground to the dismantling of parallel state structures. These developments may not mark an endpoint, but rather an ongoing process that underscores the need to examine the geostrategic centrality of the eastern governorates, their direct influence on the Yemeni crisis, and their significance in safeguarding Yemen's unity.

Yemen has witnessed a dramatic and rapid escalation since early December 2025, following the completion of the takeover of the Hadramawt and al-Mahra governorates by forces affiliated with the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC). This move triggered wide-ranging reactions at the local, regional, and international levels. On December 30, 2025, Rashad al-Alimi, Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), issued a decree canceling the joint defense agreement with the United Arab Emirates and formally demanding its withdrawal from Yemen within 24 hours. Al-Alimi accused the UAE of directly supporting STC forces in their seizure of the eastern governorates. This decision coincided with Saudi airstrikes targeting Emirati weapons shipments at the port of Mukalla in Hadramawt, followed by official statements from both the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Saudi Council of Ministers endorsing the call for the UAE's withdrawal.

In response, the UAE complied with the withdrawal deadline. President al-Alimi subsequently announced the launch of a military operation, backed by Saudi air power, which succeeded in expelling STC forces from Hadramawt and al-Mahra. The situation further escalated following the stance of STC President and PLC member Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, who had ordered the military incursion into Hadramawt. His actions, coupled with statements perceived as undermining the legal status of the Republic of Yemen and his refusal to participate in the planned Southern Dialogue Conference, heightened political tensions. His summons to Riyadh and the ensuing accusations of high treason provided the grounds for his removal from the Presidential Leadership Council, followed by the dismissal of Faraj al-Bahsani for related reasons. These measures were accompanied by the dismissal of several civilian and military officials implicated in the rebellion, the Southern Transitional Council's declaration of its self-dissolution as a prelude to participating in the Riyadh consultations, and a series of presidential decrees aimed at addressing the evolving political and military landscape.

These developments occurred against the backdrop of a gradual expansion of STC influence across Yemen's eastern and southern regions. The Council seized control of the Socotra Archipelago in 2020 and Shabwa Governorate in 2022, before attempting to consolidate its control over Hadramawt and al-Mahra. The latest escalation marked a profound shift in both local and regional balances of power, the repercussions of which continue to unfold and may intensify in the period ahead.

This paper examines the strategic importance of the eastern governorates within Yemen's political equation, analyzes the motivations of the primary domestic actors involved, and explores the positions of regional and international stakeholders. It does so within an analytical framework aimed at assessing the anticipated implications of these developments for Yemen's future, particularly with regard to state unity, regional stability, and the evolving configuration of power.

## First: The Strategic Importance of the Eastern Governorates

The eastern governorates of Yemen—Hadramawt, Shabwa, al-Mahra, and Socotra—constitute a central strategic depth for the Republic of Yemen. Together, they form a vast geographical expanse, accounting for nearly half of the country's total landmass. These governorates control Yemen's coastline along the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean and serve as key points of connection with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Sultanate of Oman.

This geographical positioning grants them exceptional strategic and economic significance, placing them at the heart of local power balances and regional security considerations.

At the forefront of the eastern governorates stands Hadramawt, the largest Yemeni governorate in terms of both area and resources. Covering approximately 193,000 square kilometers—nearly one-third of Yemen's total landmass—Hadramawt occupies a uniquely strategic location. It extends southward along a 350-kilometer coastline on the Arabian Sea and hosts vital commercial and oil ports that position it as a key maritime corridor linking the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and East Africa. To the north, Hadramawt shares a long border with Saudi Arabia, extending approximately 700 kilometers. Since 2015, the al-Wadi'ah border crossing in Hadramawt has served as the sole land crossing between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, underscoring its political and logistical importance as a critical conduit for movement and trade. Hadramawt's geographical diversity—encompassing coastline, valleys, and desert—combined with its historical depth and cultural openness, has further reinforced its role as one of Yemen's most outward-facing regions.

Al-Mahra Governorate, the second largest in Yemen after Hadramawt, covers approximately 67,000 square kilometers and functions as the country's eastern gateway. It shares a 294-kilometer border with Oman and features a diverse natural landscape that includes fertile mountains, expansive deserts, and rich marine environments. Al-Mahra also possesses distinct social and historical characteristics, as well as a 560-kilometer coastline along the Arabian Sea, enhancing its strategic and economic value. Shabwa Governorate, the third largest in terms of area, spans approximately 42,000 square kilometers and occupies a pivotal position linking eastern, southern, and central Yemen. It includes a 300-kilometer coastline along the Arabian Sea, further integrating it into Yemen's maritime and economic networks. Socotra, meanwhile, represents a unique strategic and ecological asset.

It is the largest island in the Arab world and ranks among the world's most significant islands in terms of biodiversity. Comprising six islands in the Indian Ocean and covering an area of approximately 3,700 square kilometers, Socotra's geostrategic importance extends beyond Yemen to the wider region. Its location places it within the sphere of influence of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, enabling oversight of major international trade and energy shipping routes.

Economically, the eastern governorates—particularly Hadramawt and Shabwa—contain Yemen's most significant hydrocarbon resources. Hadramawt holds substantial oil reserves, with production reaching approximately 355,000 barrels per day prior to the outbreak of the war, most notably from the Masila sector.

Shabwa also hosts several productive oil fields, including the Jannah (5) and al-Aqlah sectors, which rank among Yemen's most important sources of oil after Hadramawt and Marib. In addition, Shabwa is home to the Balhaf facility, Yemen's most critical liquefied natural gas export terminal. Beyond hydrocarbons, the eastern governorates possess a network of key commercial and oil ports, including Mukalla, Socotra, Nishtun, Balhaf, and Qana. They are also rich in fisheries, agricultural lands, mineral resources, and livestock, reinforcing their central role in Yemen's economic sustainability and strategic resilience.<sup>1</sup>

This central importance has turned these governorates into an arena of local and regional competition. As a result, a large segment of their population calls for a federal state in which these governorates would enjoy distinct weight and in which their people would have the right to self-administration. This idea is not a recent development; rather, it is rooted in a historical legacy dating back to the 1960s, during Britain's attempt to unify southern and eastern Yemen under the name of the "Federation of South Arabia." At that time, the sultans and tribal leaders of Hadramawt, Al-Mahra, and parts of Shabwa refused to join the federation.

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1- Berghof Foundation & Yemeni Political Development Forum. Local Governance Platform in Yemen. Accessed July 5, 2026. <https://2u.pw/KN0UI>

Subsequently, there were calls to unite the Kathiri and Qu'aiti sultanates and establish a State of Hadramawt. However, this project also failed to materialize, despite the drafting of a specific constitution for the proposed state, entitled the "Proposed National



Constitution of the State of Hadramawt," in 1965. Hadramawt and the other eastern governorates were later incorporated into the nascent state based in Aden.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of establishing a Hadramawt state remained present, and integration with Aden continued to face opposition from segments of society in the eastern governorates more broadly. Accordingly, the outcomes of the National Comprehensive Dialogue Conference (2013–2014) recognized the eastern governorates as an independent region within the framework of a federal state.

In the period that followed, several local entities emerged calling for an autonomous eastern presence independent of the traditional north–south power-sharing formula. Among these was the Hadramawt Tribes Alliance, established in 2013, which since July 2024 has led a tribal protest movement demanding that Hadramawt become an independent region within a federal Yemen, or an independent state in the event of secession. This position was reiterated by Hadramawt Governor Salem Al-Khanbashi in an interview on Yemen's official Yemen TV channel.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the Tribes Alliance, there are other components whose demands largely converge with those of the alliance, including the Hadramawt National Council, the Unified Council of the Eastern Governorates, the General National Council of Shabwa, and the General Council of the People of Al-Mahra and Socotra, among others.

1- Bamatrix, Ibrahim. Political Project Competition in the Eastern Governorates and Its Potential Impact on Peace Negotiations. Mokha Center for Strategic Studies. Accessed January 15, 2026. <https://2u.pw/7hQrZ>

2- Al-Khanbashi, Salem. Special Coverage: An Interview with Hadramawt Governor Salem Al-Khanbashi on Recent Developments in the Governorate. Yemen TV. Accessed January 8, 2026. <https://2u.pw/thtQv>

## Strategic Ports in Yemen's Eastern Governorates

**Table (1): Ports in Yemen's Eastern Governorates**

No	Port	Governorate	Status / Function
1	Mukalla Port	Hadramawt	Main commercial port serving central and eastern governorates
2	Al-Dhabba Port	Hadramawt	Strategic oil port dedicated to crude oil exports
3	Nastoon Port	Al-Mahra	Vital commercial port for receiving goods and petroleum derivatives
4	Balhaf Port	Shabwa	Yemen's most important LNG export facility, converted into a military base by the UAE
5	Qana (Bir Ali) Port	Shabwa	Port dedicated to receiving petroleum derivatives
6	Al-Nashimah Port	Shabwa	Port dedicated to crude oil exports
7	Socotra Port	Socotra	Main maritime port supplying the entire archipelago

**Table (2): Airports in Yemen's Eastern Governorates**

No	Airport	Governorate	Status / Function
1	Riyan International Airport	Hadramawt	International airport converted by the UAE into a military base; resumed operations after the UAE's withdrawal
2	Seiyun Airport	Hadramawt	Primary air gateway for eastern and central Yemen; suspended during the STC takeover of Hadramawt
3	Al-Ghaydah Airport	Al-Mahra	Partially controlled by the UAE
4	Ataq Airport	Shabwa	Partially controlled by the UAE
5	Socotra Airport	Socotra	Fully controlled by the UAE

**Table (3): Land Border Crossings in Yemen's Eastern Governorates**

No	Border Crossing	Governorate	Status / Function
1	Al-Wadiah Border Crossing	Hadramawt	The only currently active land border crossing with Saudi Arabia
2	Shahan Border Crossing	Al-Mahra	Largest commercial land crossing with the Sultanate of Oman
3	Sarfait Border Crossing	Al-Mahra	Border crossing with Oman, primarily used for passenger movement and tourism

## Second: Motivations and Strategic Aspirations of Key Actors in Eastern Yemen

Local and regional motivations in eastern Yemen are diverse, intersecting across political, security, and economic dimensions. Together, they reveal a deep competition among various actors over the eastern governorates, where the government's calculations for political survival intersect with the expansionist ambitions of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), alongside the security concerns and leadership rivalries of regional powers backing local actors. These motivations are manifested as follows:

### 1. The Legitimate Government: The Battle for Sovereignty and the Preservation of State Unity

The internationally recognized government seeks to restore sovereignty over all Yemeni territory and to reinforce its legitimacy in the face of both internal and external challenges. It also aims to secure control over central resources, particularly in Hadramawt, which constitutes Yemen's primary source of oil production. Moreover, the government recognizes that the fall of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra into the hands of the STC would mean the loss of more than one-third of Yemen's territory to non-state armed formations. Such a development would further weaken central authority in favor of these forces and enable the STC to advance its secessionist agenda at the expense of the aspirations of the eastern governorates' population, who reject the north-south binary.

For this reason, the concerns of the people of the eastern governorates have converged with those of the legitimate government in opposing STC control over these regions. Accordingly, the government adopted a firm stance against the STC's takeover of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra and coordinated with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to restore control over the two governorates. At present, it is expected to work toward strengthening the state's political and military presence across the remaining liberated governorates, restructuring armed formations under the Ministries of Defense and Interior, filling security vacuums, safeguarding natural resources, and addressing both the southern and eastern issues.

In this context, the dismissal of leaders involved in the incursion into Hadramawt and Al-Mahra may contribute to reorganizing state institutions and unifying political and military discourse—provided that new leadership appointments are made judiciously and the current moment is effectively leveraged in favor of a unified Yemeni state.

## **2. The Southern Transitional Council: Between the Aspirations of the Past and the Challenges of the Present**

The Southern Transitional Council (STC) was established in 2017 with the objective of separating the south from the north. Over recent years, it has built a range of affiliated armed formations, including the Security Belt forces, the Support and Reinforcement Brigades, the Hadrami Elite Forces, and the Shabwani Elite Forces (Shabwa Defense Forces). Through these formations, the STC succeeded in taking control of several Yemeni governorates, most notably Aden, Al-Dhalea, Lahj, Abyan, Socotra, and Shabwa.

More recently, the STC sought to impose a new military reality in the remaining eastern governorates—Hadramawt and Al-Mahra—in order to complete its control over the territories of southern Yemen as they existed prior to unification. This expansion would have granted it access to vital oil resources and strategically significant maritime outlets, enabling the financing of its political project and advancing its long-standing aspiration for secession. At the very least, such control would have strengthened the STC's bargaining position in any future political settlement. In pursuing this strategy, the STC capitalized on the weakness of the legitimate government and on earlier regional and international acquiescence to its political and military moves, while disregarding local opposition, Saudi and Omani reservations regarding these governorates, and broader regional and international geopolitical shifts.

This course of action ultimately led to the STC's expulsion from the eastern governorates and the erosion of its standing as a cohesive political entity. At present, arrangements are underway for a new phase aimed at accommodating the visions of all southern and eastern components and leaderships through the Southern Dialogue Conference.

### 3. Saudi Arabia: From National Security Concerns to the Recalibration of Power Balances

Saudi Arabia's perspective on the eastern governorates—particularly Hadramawt—is shaped primarily by stringent national security considerations. A secure neighborhood constitutes a foundational pillar of Saudi national security, and Hadramawt represents a strategic depth that underpins Riyadh's policy equilibrium toward Yemen. The Kingdom seeks to safeguard the security of its southern borders, especially given that Hadramawt alone accounts for roughly half of Yemen's land border with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, long-standing historical ties link Saudi tribes with Hadrami tribes, alongside the presence of a prominent Hadrami diaspora in Saudi Arabia that plays a significant social, economic, and cultural role. For these reasons, Saudi Arabia views Hadramawt as a vital strategic depth.

In addition, Riyadh is acutely aware that any rebellion or instability in Yemen could generate negative spillover effects on Saudi domestic security. This concern is compounded by Hadramawt's economic and oil interests<sup>1</sup>, as STC control over the governorate would grant it a degree of self-sufficiency should it gain access to these resources.

Within Saudi strategic thinking, Hadramawt also constitutes the Kingdom's primary southern buffer zone—a natural barrier capable of absorbing Yemeni instability before it reaches Saudi territory. Furthermore, from Riyadh's perspective, Hadramawt offers a potential alternative export corridor that could reduce reliance on the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint vulnerable to disruption amid escalating regional tensions and unforeseen developments. Consequently, Hadramawt is regarded as a critical alternative maritime outlet and a strategic asset of considerable importance.<sup>2</sup>

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1- Ratney, Michael. Understanding the Saudi Reaction to the Escalation in Yemen. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Accessed [add date if available]. <https://2u.pw/pNCZB>

2- Al-Ghanam, Hisham. What Lies Behind the Developments in Yemen. Thmanyah Platform. Accessed January 15, 2026. <https://2u.pw/dqbaiN>

Saudi Arabia also views Yemen's unity as a strategic necessity. Any move toward secession would likely trigger new waves of instability, risk fragmenting southern Yemen into rival and competing entities, and undermine regional stability. Such a scenario could also tilt the military and strategic balance in favor of the Houthis, posing a direct threat to Saudi national security. Moreover, secession runs counter to a longstanding principle of Saudi foreign policy that emphasizes respect for the unity and territorial integrity of states.<sup>-1</sup>

Accordingly, Saudi Arabia has sought to recalibrate its interests in Yemen and regain the initiative after nearly losing influence over the southern and eastern governorates due to the UAE's dominance over large parts of the liberated areas. To this end, Riyadh has worked to prepare and support Yemeni military forces under its direct supervision, aiming to empower them in the southern and eastern governorates as an alternative to STC forces. Chief among these formations are the "Nation's Shield" (Dir' al-Watan) forces, which function as a strategic reserve for the Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council and number approximately 45,000 fighters, with a predominantly Salafi composition.<sup>-2</sup>

With regard to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia perceives Abu Dhabi as the main driver behind the escalation in eastern Yemen, a view shaped by the intersection of their rivalry across several other files. These include Saudi-Emirati economic competition, Saudi Arabia's opposition to insurgent movements in Sudan and Somalia, and differing approaches to normalization with Israel. Together, these factors have contributed to a deterioration in Saudi-Emirati relations. As a result, Saudi concerns converged with the interests of the legitimate government in confronting the STC's escalation in the eastern governorates.

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1- Al-Suhaili, Ismail. The End of Gray Balances: Eastern Yemen, Saudi Security Imperatives, and Yemen's Unity. Mokha Center for Strategic Studies. Accessed January 18, 2026. <https://2u.pw/NABgg>

2- Defense Line. The Yemeni Nation Shield Forces: Capabilities, Conditions of Formation, and Organizational Structure. Accessed January 3, 2026. <https://2u.pw/Fmlyc>

## 4. The UAE's Questionable Ambitions#

The United Arab Emirates has sought to expand its influence in Yemen by backing affiliated armed formations to seize control of ports, coastlines, airports, islands, and other strategic sites. These efforts are driven by economic and maritime objectives that go beyond the stated conflict with the Houthis, aiming instead to consolidate the UAE's military and economic presence in Yemen and across East Africa. To this end, Abu Dhabi has worked to establish and support non-state military formations through which it can secure its interests in Yemen and the wider region, most notably the forces of the Southern Transitional Council and the National Resistance Forces led by Presidential Leadership Council member Tareq Saleh.-1



In addition, the UAE has exercised direct control over the islands of Mayyun (Perim) and Socotra, treating them as separate sectors removed from the authority of the Yemeni state. There has been recurrent discussion of an Israeli military presence on both islands, alongside the UAE's control over Riyan Airport in Hadramawt and the Balhaf oil and gas port in Shabwa, which were converted into military bases to manage activities directed against the legitimate government.

It also appears that the UAE settled early on in favor of southern secession as the most suitable option from its perspective, as this would allow Abu Dhabi to place a region governed by a separatist movement under its effective control. The underlying assumption shaping Emirati thinking is that separatist forces are adversaries of political Islam, and therefore aligned with UAE interests. The secession of the south—and potentially the east—would thus enable the establishment of an Emirati sphere of influence free of Islamist actors. On this basis, the UAE pushed STC forces to seize control of the remaining eastern governorates and showed little willingness to engage constructively with the legitimate government or with its regional ally, Saudi Arabia, to de-escalate the situation.-2

Furthermore, Saudi–Emirati competition across other regional arenas, particularly in Sudan and Somalia, appears to have cast its shadow over the Yemeni file as well.

1- Al-Dhahab, Ali. Mapping UAE-Affiliated Armed Formations in Yemen and Their Military and Political Impact. Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. Accessed January 1, 2026. <https://2u.pw/XslShuGG>

2- Lacroix, Stéphane. The United Arab Emirates: A Low-Profile Player. Orient Website. Accessed January 15, 2026. <https://2u.pw/4KITn>

Consequently, the legitimate government, in coordination with Saudi Arabia, moved to remove the UAE from the Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy. Nonetheless, indications suggest that the UAE is unlikely to halt its involvement at this point and may seek to reassert its influence through similar methods or by developing alternative means, consistent with its pattern of regional interventions.

### **Third: The Eastern Governorates in Regional and International Positions**

Regional and international positions toward the current crisis vary, though most emphasize the importance of preserving stability and Yemen's unity while avoiding escalation. At the same time, broader strategic considerations reveal regional and international rivalries that extend beyond Yemen itself to encompass maritime security and energy routes. Among the most prominent of these positions are the following:

#### **1. The Gulf Position and Concerns over Border Penetration**

The Gulf states rank among the most influential actors in the Yemeni file, given the interlinked considerations of borders, maritime corridors, and energy security, as well as Yemen's oversight of extensive coastlines along the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Any collapse in Yemen's security would have a direct impact on Gulf security. For this reason, Gulf understandings on Yemen have generally been closely aligned, and any deviation by individual Gulf states from these shared understandings risks undermining existing balances.

Within this context, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have played central roles in the Yemeni file, as previously discussed, as the most directly involved actors. Following them, Oman occupies a particularly significant position among Gulf states. Oman shares a direct border with Yemen and maintains demographic and economic ties with Al-Mahra governorate. Muscat is especially sensitive to any non-state military presence along its southwestern border with Yemen—particularly when such presence involves the UAE. Moreover, Oman's historical experience with armed insurgencies in Dhofar during the 1960s and 1970s—movements that were supported at the time by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which the Southern Transitional Council seeks to revive—has shaped its security outlook. As a result, Oman favors the establishment of a stable security environment along its border with Yemen.

While Oman has sought to maintain a diplomatic role that preserves balance in its relations with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Tehran, its position regarding the STC's expansion toward Hadramawt and Al-Mahra has been notably firmer. This was reflected in Oman's military deployment along its southern border and its provision of intelligence support to Saudi Arabia during operations against STC forces.<sup>1</sup>

Qatar's position, by contrast, has been clear and consistent in supporting Yemen's unity since 1994. Doha remains committed to the principle of Yemeni sovereignty and to supporting the legitimate authorities represented by the Presidential Leadership Council. It rejects any unilateral moves aimed at imposing a new political or military reality outside the framework of official state institutions. In its official discourse, Qatar emphasizes consensus-building while underscoring the importance of consultation among all Yemeni parties. Closely aligned with this stance is Kuwait's position, which has likewise reaffirmed the importance of Yemen's unity and territorial integrity, alongside a shared emphasis on preventing escalation and preserving Gulf cohesion in general, and with regard to the Yemeni file in particular.

## **2. Regional Positions: Between Competing Agendas and Shared Security Concerns**

The field control exercised by STC forces over the eastern governorates triggered a wave of regional diplomatic reactions that, on the surface, converged around support for Yemen's unity, while concealing divergent fears and ambitions. Beyond the Gulf states, the most prominent regional positions have been those of Iran, Egypt, and Turkey.

Iran has adopted a position formally supportive of Yemen's unity, conveyed through a series of contacts conducted by Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi with regional officials following the STC's incursion into the eastern governorates. In these communications, he emphasized the "importance of preserving Yemen's unity and territorial integrity."

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1- Sean Mathews, How Oman went from mediator to silent Saudi partner in Yemen fight, Middle East Eye, <https://2u.pw/LIzrl>

Control over the eastern governorates thus represented a red line that galvanized these regional positions, all converging on the importance of Yemen's unity. The primary driver behind this convergence appears to be concern over the emergence of a new entity that could alter the geopolitical rules of the game and open the door to expanded Israeli influence in the region.

Regarding the Saudi–Emirati rift, Iran appears to be maintaining a measured and cautious stance, seeking to capitalize on tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as it recalibrates its regional posture following the blows sustained by its allied networks across the region. This approach is further shaped by Iran's preoccupation with internal escalation and its heightened tensions with the United States and Israel. Tehran also appears to be betting on prolonging the conflict in order to exhaust its rivals.<sup>1</sup>

Egypt's position, for its part, supports Yemen's unity and the legitimate government. Cairo views the escalation as an opportunity to reinforce its role as an Arab mediator, while harboring concerns over Emirati expansion that could enhance Israeli presence in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and East Africa—developments that would pose risks to Egypt's national security and the Suez Canal. Egypt has repeatedly affirmed its support for Yemen's unity, particularly following the STC's takeover of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra. In this regard, Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigration, Dr. Badr Abdel Aaty, reiterated his country's firm stance "in support of the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Yemen, and the importance of preserving national state institutions."<sup>2</sup>

Turkey, meanwhile, views the escalation as a threat to Middle Eastern stability, with a political dimension centered on countering Israeli expansion—especially in light of Israel's recognition of the separatist "Somaliland" region, which broke away from the Somali state, a key Turkish ally in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden. Ankara currently calls for comprehensive dialogue among all parties and has expressed readiness to cooperate in facilitating such efforts. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underscored this position in a phone call with his Emirati counterpart, Mohammed bin Zayed, affirming "Ankara's support for the territorial unity of Yemen and Somalia."<sup>3</sup>

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1- Sputnik. Iranian and Qatari Foreign Ministers Affirm the Importance of Preserving Yemen's Territorial Unity amid Recent Developments. Accessed January 15, 2026. <https://2u.pw/LxBAG>

2- Cairo News. Egypt Renews Its Support for Yemen's Unity and Calls for Comprehensive Dialogue to End the Crisis. Accessed January 15, 2026. <https://2u.pw/dmKLR>

3- Anadolu Agency. Erdogan: Turkey Supports the Territorial Unity of Yemen and Somalia. Accessed January 16, 2026. <https://2u.pw/38zOy>

Control over the eastern governorates thus represented a red line that galvanized these regional positions, all converging on the importance of Yemen's unity. The primary driver behind this convergence appears to be concern over the emergence of a new entity that could alter the geopolitical rules of the game and open the door to expanded Israeli influence in the region.

### 3. The International Position: Oil, Terrorism, and the Blue Economy

International competition in Yemen's eastern governorates is manifested across a range of political and economic files, most notably oil and the blue economy. Nevertheless, many states continue to view Yemen as a strategic depth for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states more broadly—foremost among them the United States. Accordingly, Washington has sought to maintain a careful balance between its Saudi and Emirati allies, while expressing concern that escalation could hinder counterterrorism efforts in Yemen. The United States also fears that conflict in the southern and eastern governorates could create opportunities for adversarial states and actors—such as Russia, China, the Houthis, or al-Qaeda—to reorganize and expand their influence. At the same time, Washington views Yemen's Arabian Sea coastline, particularly Hadramawt, as a potential alternative corridor for energy exports and trade should major maritime routes be disrupted. These considerations underpin U.S. calls for dialogue and its rejection of escalation.

The British position closely mirrors that of the United States. The United Kingdom has economic interests along Yemen's coasts and in East Africa related to energy investment and the blue economy. This has translated into a military presence in the eastern governorates, notably at Al-Ghaydah Airport in Al-Mahra in August 2021, under the pretext of tracking Iran-linked terrorists involved in the attack on the Mercer Street tanker in the Gulf of Oman<sup>1</sup>. The British stance also reflects deep concern over the impact of escalation on maritime security, viewing any military escalation as detrimental to international interests and counterterrorism efforts.

France, which maintains significant economic interests in Yemen through TotalEnergies—formerly the main operator of the Balhaf LNG terminal in Shabwa—has likewise reaffirmed its support for Yemen's unity and sovereignty. Paris has emphasized its commitment to the authority of the legitimate government and the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council in the aftermath of the recent crisis in the southern and eastern parts of the country.

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1- Chris Hughes, Daily Express, Special forces to target Iran militia after tanker attack, <https://2u.pw/OrMBw>

Russia and China, for their part, have maintained official diplomatic positions supporting Yemen's unity and the legitimate government, while seeking to enhance their roles within political settlement efforts and adopting a pragmatic approach toward realities on the ground. Russia appears interested in securing a political foothold in Yemen by engaging with all parties, including the Southern Transitional Council, while China looks toward a more active role in oil investment in Hadramawt and Shabwa.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, most international positions emphasize the importance of Yemen's unity and the cohesion of the Presidential Leadership Council, alongside concerns over maritime security and energy supply, and fears that security vacuums could enable the resurgence of terrorist organizations. The prevailing rejection of military escalation in the southern and eastern governorates further indicates Riyadh's ability to mobilize diplomatic support for Yemen's unity and to neutralize international positions amid its dispute with the UAE.

#### **Fourth: Local and Regional Repercussions of the Conflict in the Eastern Governorates**

The eastern governorates constitute Yemen's strategic depth and economic reservoir, upon whose stability the balance of local power and influence largely depends. Any disturbance in this region does not remain confined to the local geographic sphere but extends beyond Yemen's borders, given the area's position as a land and maritime link among several states. Consequently, the conflict in the eastern governorates has generated significant local and regional repercussions.

At the domestic political level, these developments have contributed to restoring the authority of the state, unifying official discourse, and dismantling entities hostile to the state in the southern and eastern governorates. They have also facilitated the reorganization of formal institutions. However, the state has yet to fully consolidate control over all liberated areas, and any hesitation or retreat in this regard could create security vacuums that hostile groups might exploit.

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<sup>1</sup>- Asharq. France Reaffirms Its Commitment to Yemen's Unity and Welcomes the Initiative to Convene a Conference for Southern Components. Accessed January 6, 2026. <https://2u.pw/PFLza>

With respect to the now-dissolved Southern Transitional Council, the current moment reflects an effort to re-engineer the southern file through the dialogue initiative called for by the Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council.

Many southern and eastern leaders quickly welcomed this initiative, and STC figures who rejected dialogue were removed from their government positions. Nonetheless, several factors could complicate the scene, foremost among them the continued adherence of some STC leaders—most notably Aidarous Al-Zubaidi—to the council. This persistence may prompt such figures to contemplate alternative military options.

At the Gulf level, the Gulf states appear thus far to have succeeded in containing the Saudi–Emirati rift and mitigating its internal repercussions. However, the external implications of this rift may not end there, given the interconnection of regional files and shifting power balances—particularly if the UAE continues to pursue regional roles that diverge from broader Gulf interests and, more specifically, from Saudi interests.

In addition, the current crisis may lead to a tactical rapprochement between Iran and the United Arab Emirates, as Abu Dhabi may seek to leverage the Iranian role in Yemen. Any such convergence could strengthen the Houthis, who view the escalation as an opportunity to distract and fragment the coalition opposing them, consolidate their control over the north, and potentially intensify their actions against the legitimate government.

At the broader regional level, the region is experiencing a clear political vacuum, stemming from the absence of an active Egyptian role, Iran's preoccupation with internal challenges and the weakening it has recently endured, as well as Saudi Arabia's cautious calculations. This is compounded by the prioritization by the United States and Russia of other military and strategic files. In contrast, Israel has demonstrated increasing assertiveness in repositioning itself in the region—directly or indirectly—often in close alignment with the UAE regarding separatist movements. This dynamic has raised concerns in both Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Within this equation, the situation risks undermining Gulf and regional security, with likely spillover effects including the expansion of transnational security threats such as smuggling and terrorism. These developments may, in turn, push toward the emergence of a new Saudi–Turkish understanding on regional issues in general, with the Yemeni file at the forefront.

From another perspective, any escalation in Yemen could threaten maritime security in the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean, driving up global energy prices and obstructing UN-led peace efforts.

As a result, international pressure for de-escalation—particularly from the United States and Europe—appears likely, especially given the advanced strategic relationship that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE maintain with Washington. It is therefore not in the interest of the United States to side with the UAE against Saudi Arabia, or vice versa. Instead, Washington may seek to impose a form of fragile stability, even if this does not necessarily translate into the success or sustainability of an internal political settlement.

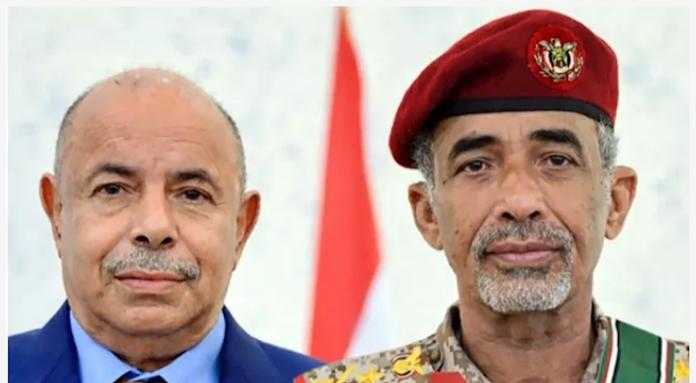
## **Fifth: Yemen's Future amid the Rising Role of the Eastern Governorates**

The events in the eastern governorates have reshaped the political and military equation, as the legitimate government and Saudi Arabia have shifted from cautious calculations to a more decisive phase. These developments have also pushed regional and international actors to reaffirm their rejection of separatist entities, recognizing that fragmentation in the eastern governorates would pose a direct threat to broader regional security. Consequently, these shifts have been swiftly and clearly reflected in the local political and military landscape.

### **1. Political and Military Shifts and Their Future Impact**

The developments in the eastern governorates resulted in a series of far-reaching political and military shifts, most notably the UAE's exit from Yemen, the dissolution of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and the dismissal of two members of the Presidential Leadership Council—Aidarous al-Zubaidi and Faraj al-Bahsani. They were replaced by Salem al-Khanbashi and Mahmoud al-Subhi. These changes were accompanied by a cabinet reshuffle and the removal of several military and civilian officials implicated in the incursion into the eastern governorates. In parallel, political and military installations linked to the UAE were dismantled, and Yemeni sovereignty was restored over a number of airports and ports that had previously been under the control of the UAE and its affiliated forces.

Efforts are currently underway to address the military and security situation through the formation of a Supreme Military Committee tasked with restructuring the armed forces, unifying salaries, and restoring state institutions—whether through negotiated arrangements or, if necessary, by force.



These core variables underscore the decisive role of geography in reshaping Yemen's political and military landscape. They have shifted the dynamics in the eastern and southern governorates from direct military confrontation to a contest of political will and competing visions regarding the future structure of the Yemeni state. As a result, Yemen appears poised to enter a new political phase, the contours of which can only be understood by examining the key determinants shaping the country's future. Chief among these determinants are:

- The commitment of the eastern governorates to the federal Yemen option, which guarantees fair power- and wealth-sharing and rejects forced integration under alternative political projects. This stance reflects a clear desire to safeguard local autonomy while remaining within a unified Yemeni state framework.

- The legitimate government's capacity to consolidate recent political and military gains, particularly through restructuring the armed forces, integrating all military formations under a unified national command, dismantling armed groups operating outside state authority, extending control over liberated areas, centralizing management of sovereign resources and ensuring their proper flow, and reactivating the legislative and oversight role of parliament. Any failure or reversal in these processes could trigger a renewed cycle of conflict.

- The sustainability of the Saudi response, as the Kingdom now faces a critical test in translating short-term gains into a durable stabilization model. This requires supporting Yemeni state institutions and sponsoring inclusive intra-Yemeni dialogue, positioning Saudi Arabia as a long-term stabilizing actor in Yemen and the wider region—an objective that has become a strategic imperative for Riyadh.

- The continuation of the United States' balanced approach to the conflict. A shift in the U.S. position in favor of the UAE cannot be ruled out, particularly given the growing influence of the Israeli lobby in Washington and its alignment with Emirati interests, as well as the UAE's ability to instrumentalize counterterrorism narratives to advance its agenda.

## Scenarios for the Next Phase

Based on the above dynamics, the secessionist project premised on a two-state solution faces significant obstacles, foremost among them the rejection of this option by the eastern governorates, alongside regional and international support for Yemen's unity. Accordingly, the short- and medium-term outlook points to one of the following scenarios:

### - **Expanded Local Governance within a Unified State**

This scenario envisions the establishment of a local authority with broad powers, granting Hadramawt—at minimum—substantial autonomy in managing its political, economic, and developmental affairs. It is reinforced by public support in Hadramawt, repeated commitments by the political leadership—particularly Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad al-Alimi—and Saudi Arabia's interest in testing partial but viable stability models. While this option requires a minimum threshold of political and economic stability to succeed, it remains the most acceptable pathway for both local and regional actors, as it balances the demands of the eastern and southern governorates with the preservation of national unity. It may also serve as a foundation for a future comprehensive settlement, potentially inclusive of the Houthi movement.

### - **A Descent into Chaos (Low-Probability but High-Impact)**

This scenario assumes the failure of military and security integration efforts, coupled with attempts by remaining STC military leaders to impose a new military reality in areas still under their control—particularly if they perceive future political settlements as a threat to their influence. Should this path materialize, it would likely have severe local repercussions, prolong the conflict, and exhaust all parties across multiple fronts, especially given the continued availability of weapons. Preventing this outcome hinges on the swift consolidation of government authority over all liberated areas, which in turn depends on the level of sustained regional support for stability.

### - **A Return to Stalemate (Neither War nor Peace)**

This intermediate scenario entails the persistence of the status quo, with competing actors unable to achieve meaningful progress on unresolved political and security issues. Such an outcome would likely entrench multiple de facto authorities, deepen institutional fragmentation, and exacerbate political and economic deterioration in the liberated areas.

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## Conclusion

The dramatic transformations witnessed in early 2026 in the eastern governorates clearly underscore the centrality of these regions within the Yemeni equation—particularly Hadramawt, given its intrinsic strategic importance and its pivotal role in shaping the identity and structure of the future Yemeni state. While the current reality appears complex due to overlapping and competing regional interests, one fundamental truth has thus far emerged from these developments: Yemen’s stability is closely tied to stability in the eastern governorates. This linkage exists alongside other internal and external factors that undeniably exert significant influence on the Yemeni political landscape, most notably regional competition and conflict, energy dynamics, international maritime security, terrorism, and Israeli interventions in the region.

Despite the positive progress achieved in the Yemeni file—which has contributed to breaking stagnation, recalibrating regional calculations, and reducing political and military fragmentation—the situation continues to raise critical questions. One such question is whether the legitimate government, backed by Saudi support, will succeed in capitalizing on these changes to shape Yemen’s future and restore state institutions in both the south and the north, whether through peaceful means or by force, or whether this trajectory will devolve into a new war of attrition, granting militias in southern and northern Yemen a renewed opportunity to exploit the power vacuum.

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