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Saudi-Emirati Divergences Lead Hadhramawt to a Crossroad

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The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the Yemeni governorate of Hadhramawt is having an impact on the territory's internal borders. It is reinforcing divisions between the Saudi and Emirati spheres of influence there—the Saudis over the interior and the Emiratis over the coast. Most recently, in October 2024, Saudi Arabia hosted talks to [revive the Hadhramawt National Council \(HNC\)](#), a body that includes political and tribal figures from the governorate, as part of their joint effort to contain the influence of the UAE and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) it backs, which seeks full secession for southern Yemen. The Saudis do not want to see their influence diminished by the Emiratis, but as the struggle for power continues between the two countries, it could lead to conflict that weakens Hadhramawt's stability, which in turn could provoke greater fragmentation and challenge Saudi Arabia's historical influence.

The Emerging Saudi-Emirati Rivalry Over Hadhramawt

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia has had a significant [impact](#) in oil-rich Hadhramawt, Yemen's largest governorate. This has been shaped by religious and cultural ties, a common border stretching for over 600 kilometers, the cross-border mobility of populations, trade, and national security considerations. The Saudis have maintained strong relationships with local elites and tribes, and deepened their security footprint after the merger in 2009 of the Saudi and Yemeni al-Qaeda branches to form al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which [seized](#) Mukalla, Hadhramawt's main coastal city, in April 2015.

Riyadh has historically regarded Hadhramawt as an access point to the Arabian Sea that potentially allows it to diversify its trade and energy export routes. The governorate could provide the kingdom with strategic



depth by reducing its dependency on the Strait of Hormuz maritime chokepoint, while also allowing it to project power in the Indian Ocean to complement its ambitions for regional influence. That said, the late Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who otherwise resolved border disagreements with Saudi Arabia in 2000, [resisted](#) Saudi desires to build a pipeline to the Arabian Sea for the purpose of circumventing the strait.

In 2016, however, the UAE began challenging Saudi influence when it took on counterterrorism, security, and stabilization roles in Mukalla. Within a year of AQAP's takeover of the city, the UAE [established](#) the Hadhrami Elite Forces (HEF) to help [end AQAP's presence there](#). Ever since, the Emiratis have expanded their sway along the Arabian Sea coast, which the Saudis consider part of their national security sphere. The UAE controls the ports of Al-Dhaba and Al-Shihr, as well as Rayyan Airport northwest of Mukalla (which, for now, only offers a limited number of domestic flights), where it maintains a presence in a counterterrorism cooperation framework with the United States and the Saudi-led coalition.

The UAE's approach to Hadhramawt is integral to its policies in southern Yemen and its broader regional priorities. These rely, partly, on shaping and leveraging fragmentation in conflict zones through partnerships and patronage networks, such as those with the STC, which was [created](#) in May 2017. Among the Emiratis' goals are securing energy and maritime trade routes along the Arabian Sea, as well as projecting maritime power to complement their presence in Aden, Hodeida, Ta'iz, Shabwa, and Socotra. Such objectives help protect the UAE's interests in the Indian Ocean and [allow for the control of Yemen's ports](#), allowing it to reinforce the leading position of the UAE's Jebel Ali Port. An additional ambition is building up greater influence in Yemen along the Saudi border and across the Gulf of Aden, so as to secure leverage allowing for tradeoffs in other regional contexts.

In fulfilling these aims, the UAE has engaged in seemingly contradictory activities. They include backing secessionist entities such as the STC and non-secessionist ones such as the HEF, which seeks autonomy for Hadhramawt within a Yemeni state. In April 2020, the STC [vowed to install its own administration](#) in southern Yemen, however it did not receive much support from Hadhramis or their governor. The Emiratis have also sought to counter the influence of extremist groups such as AQAP, but also the Islah Party, which enjoys Saudi support and whose ideology is related to that of the Muslim Brotherhood. One scholar, Abdullah Baabood, summarized Emirati thinking [in this way](#), “[The UAE's] backing of secessionist factions . . . reinforce[s] its sway over other ports and allow[s] it to deal with Islah.”

The UAE has managed to focus Saudi attention on tactical issues, while it has shaped the bigger picture. When the STC announced self-administration in southern Yemen, for example, Saudi Arabia was focused on developing an acceleration mechanism to implement the Riyadh Agreement between the Yemeni government and STC to contain friction within the coalition-backed camp. However, Saudi engagement changed after the STC attempted to mobilize support for its expansion. The desire to demonstrate growing influence in Hadhramawt was evident in the STC's decision to convene its sixth [National Assembly](#) in Mukalla in May 2023, and apparent in the symbolism of STC chief and Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) member Aidarous al-Zubaidi's entry into the city [with a heavily-armed military convoy](#). Moreover, [increased military redeployments](#) by the STC, as seen in Jathmah, which overlooks Seiyoun city, and in Banin, have underscored the group's attempts to [widen](#) its territorial control over the governorate, despite the inhabitants' reservations about its secessionist project.

The Saudi approach to containing Emirati influence has involved several steps. These include supporting the HNC's formation in 2023; counterbalancing UAE-backed tribal arrangements or officials perceived as supportive of the UAE; and bolstering the buildup of the Nation Shield Forces (NSF), formed by the chair of the Presidential Council, Rashad al-Alimi, and that is led by Brigadier General Bashir al-Subayhi. The general is a Salafi, underlining how Saudi Arabia's partnerships with Salafi groups have been central to its border security approach from the governorates of Mahra to Hajjah.

By establishing the HNC, the Saudis and Hadhramis sought to prioritize local Hadhrami preferences and push back against the STC and UAE. Although the STC includes Hadhrami figures, many Hadhrami organizations, including the [Inclusive Hadhramawt Conference](#), established by the Hadhramawt Tribes Confederacy, and the HNC do not [perceive](#) it as [embodying](#) Hadhrami aspirations.¹ While flags of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) can be seen in the streets of Mukalla due to STC mobilization, suggesting support for a previous period of southern independence, the flags of the unified Yemeni Republic are visible in Seiyoun, reflecting disapproval of the secessionist project. Many Hadhramis are wary of the STC's [secessionist](#) model due to mistrust shaped by the violence, marginalization, and asset nationalization during PDRY rule, as they are of Yemen's unitary order that failed to address the governorate's and country's grievances. Instead, many of Hadhramawt's representatives either favor a political structure guaranteeing greater empowerment and a [share of wealth and power](#) within a federal Yemeni structure, or autonomy.

Saudi containment efforts have also extended to cooperation with influential sheikhs to counter mid-level tribal figures supported by the UAE. In the Kathir tribe, for example, the UAE, through the STC,

has supported figures such as Sheikh Ali al-Katheri, the head of the STC's National Assembly. Riyadh, in turn, has backed the chief of the Kathir tribe, Sheikh Abdullah Saleh al-Kathir, the head of the Reference for the Hadhramawt Tribes Confederacy for the Valley and Desert, who holds a HNC leadership position.² Riyadh supported the HNC's revival to incorporate more social and tribal figures, though it's unclear whether this will unify Hadhrami movements, and [allocated](#) \$320 million in development aid for Hadhramawt to expand its economic footprint and boost public support.

Riyadh has also supported the PLC's [replacement](#) of officials viewed as too close to the Emiratis in Hadhramawt. This was the case, for example, of Brigadier General Fayeز Mansour al-Tamimi, the head of the Second Military Region, encompassing southern Hadhramawt, Mahra, and Socotra, following his [visit to Abu Dhabi](#) in June 2023, around the time the STC was seen to be consolidating its control in Hadhramawt. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has backed the gradual deployment of the NSF in Hadhramawt, while enhancing its military clout there. Last August, NSF forces took control of the [Abr](#) and [Wadiaa](#) border crossings with Saudi Arabia, and in October of the Abr-Shabwa road, replacing the 23rd and 27th brigades of the First Military Region, based in Seiyoun city. However, the STC has repeatedly opposed the [deployment](#) of units of the NSF or "[any force other than the \[Hadhrami Elite Forces\]](#)" to the coast and valley of Hadhramawt, viewing them as a threat to its power. It has also called for the [expulsion](#) from Hadhramawt Valley of the armed forces from the First Military Region, and has threatened to expand its control there. Saudi Arabia, in turn, has warned the STC against any attempt to move into the valley.³ Saudi support for the deployment of the NSF is designed to resist the STC's provocations, safeguard the HNC, which does not have a military wing, and reshape power relationships in its favor.⁴



Saudi efforts, like those of the UAE, have reinforced the status quo in Hadhramawt—with the coast a stronghold for the Emiratis and to a lesser extent the STC, and the valley a stronghold for Saudi Arabia, Yemen’s government, and the Islah Party. The internal valley and desert areas, including the Abr road (the only active land border connecting the Wadiaa area with Saudi Arabia), Seiyoun, and the eastern road to the Yemen-Oman border point of Shehn, are currently in the Saudi sphere of influence. Meanwhile, the coastal road from Musaynaa, near Mahra, to Sufal, near Shabwa, falls within the Emirati sphere, and complements the Emirati presence along the coast from Shabwa to Hodeida.

The Risk of Instability and Fragmentation

The increasingly sharp differences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and among the local actors they are backing, endanger Hadhramawt’s stability, exacerbate local fragmentation, and reinforce the de facto split between the Saudi and Emirati zones of influence in the governorate. Under these circumstances, the HEF and STC-aligned forces, such as the Barasheed Brigade, which draws many recruits from the southern governorate of Dhaleh, will likely continue to act as security providers, strengthen their existing positions, and establish new military bases near Seiyoun city. This will draw rival forces in the governorate closer to a military confrontation.

The forces deployed in the First Military Region, which includes the valley and desert of Hadhramawt, will likely continue to face rising hostility from the STC and the UAE. The STC’s rhetoric that these forces are “northern” and aligned with the Islah Party (thereby emphasizing the need for them to be replaced by southern, including Hadhrami, forces) will not soon end. On the other side, the deployment of the NSF will continue in Hadhramawt Valley, from [Khashaa](#) toward Seiyoun, to slowly replace brigades of the First Military

Region and expand its influence. Major Hadhrami groups may welcome such steps, which will ultimately satisfy neither the STC or UAE, leaving Hadhramawt’s internal borders contested. The governorate’s valley and desert areas appear to be a Saudi red line against both the STC and the UAE, given their proximity to the Saudi border and the kingdom’s national security considerations.⁵

At the political level, transforming the HNC into an active actor on the ground will be essential for the Saudis and Hadhramis. However, if the body does not deepen its engagement, earn public trust, and improve its overall performance and liaison with Hadhrami groups, such as the Inclusive Hadhramawt Conference, this will reduce its credibility, and by extension that of Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, if there are attempts to redeploy NSF units to the Hadhramawt coast, it is likely the STC will continue mobilizing opposition in Mukalla to resist such deployments and protect its sphere of influence. Saudi Arabia does not want to have another heated border in Hadhramawt, as it does in Saadah and Hajjah, and has included Hadhramis in the NSF to appeal to locals while weakening the STC.

The UAE’s and STC’s choices are limited compared to Saudi Arabia’s, which has been cautious and conflict-prone thus far. With the UAE-backed STC and HEF deployments near Seiyoun, the UAE will attempt to retain its sphere of influence, especially under the guise of counterterrorism and stabilization operations. The UAE, through the STC, could use any incidents that jeopardize order to push back against Saudi-supported NSF deployments. This could lead to a rise in civil unrest. Fragmentation will not allow any party to dominate Hadhramawt, however, which would require a full-scale confrontation. That is why deconfliction mechanisms and open communication channels are needed to avert conflict.

If a direct clash between the Saudi-backed NSF and STC-aligned forces were to occur in the Hadhramawt Valley, Saudi Arabia “could interpret this as a direct attack against the kingdom,” as one Yemeni researcher described it.⁶ Indeed, the kingdom has signaled it would launch airstrikes against STC positions in Hadhramawt were it to attempt to expand into the valley.⁷ These would be on par with the UAE’s [airstrikes](#) against government forces at the Alam checkpoint east of Aden in August 2019, or its [targeting](#) of forces aligned with the government in Shabwa in August 2022. This would force the HEF and, more broadly, Hadhramawt’s pro-UAE elite to reconsider their alignments, and could compel the STC to reassess its expansionist plans for the governorate. Over time, the STC has understood that it should avoid greatly damaging its relationship with Saudi Arabia, because it is a bordering country with considerable geopolitical influence. Moreover, military conflict in Hadhramawt would probably not improve the STC’s image in the eyes of the Hadhramis. Therefore, it would be prudent for the STC to instead work on deepening its engagement with the Saudis and Hadhrami groups that oppose it, and revising its approach to a dialogue among groups in the south.

Any direct confrontation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and their local partners would have a major impact on the south’s stability. The fragmentation of the governorate’s internal borders could deepen social divisions amid polarization, adding to the problems resulting from a multiplicity of social movements, inadequate service delivery, and deteriorating economic and humanitarian conditions, partly due to a decline in oil revenues because Ansar Allah’s economic warfare has [prevented](#) oil exports. In such an environment, the Yemeni government is unlikely to meet public expectations in Hadhramawt without a resumption of oil exports, strong accountability and governance, and regional support, especially from Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

At the regional level, if Saudi Arabia doubles down to achieve its objectives in Hadhramawt, the space for the UAE and the STC to resist Saudi actions may shrink given the potential political cost. While the UAE has benefited from Riyadh’s need to keep the Saudi-led coalition intact, it knows that if the kingdom puts its geopolitical weight behind reshaping the power imbalance in Hadhramawt to its advantage, the UAE will have to make tangible concessions. The two countries should pursue diplomatic conversations over Yemen to bridge their divergent policies, with a focus on enhancing security and averting a volatile situation in Hadhramawt, which could play to the advantage of AQAP, much as it did in 2015.

However, given the two countries’ different roles in Yemen, limiting their discussions to the disagreements over Hadhramawt would be insufficient. Saudi Arabia might understand that the UAE’s presence in Hadhramawt, beyond its counterterrorism role, is driven by a desire to protect its allies in southern Yemen, as well as its trade interests in the Indian Ocean.⁸ But rather than contesting each other’s tools of influence, the two countries should expand cooperation with the Yemeni government to improve stability in areas not under Ansar Allah’s control. They should help enhance the government’s authority, especially by helping secure oil facilities in Hadhramawt’s Dhaba terminal to support the resumption of oil exports. Until October 2022, the governorate’s oil fields [contributed](#) more than half of the Yemeni government’s production of 50,000–60,000 bpd of exportable crude oil, shouldering much of its budget. Such a move, in turn, would calm tensions in Hadhramawt, allowing the government to improve public goods and the governorate to overcome its present divisions. Not doing so would suggest that the Saudis and Emiratis, despite their disagreements, tacitly agree on maintaining a weak Yemeni government.⁹

Conclusion

Hadhramawt isn't just caught between local fights, it is also entangled in a regional rivalry in which Saudi Arabia's national security motives outweigh the UAE's strategic objectives, because of the kingdom's border with the governorate. This rivalry has reshaped internal borders in Hadhramawt, isolating the governorate's eastern districts along the coast and causing political fragmentation, which is likely to continue if key Hadhrami actors do not proactively prioritize local aspirations and work on building bridges among each other.

The potential for instability in Hadhramawt should not be underestimated, especially amid increasingly divergent Saudi and Emirati policies, as well as escalatory signals conveyed by the STC. Saudi Arabia's containment efforts show Riyadh's tacit disapproval of secession, which is consistent with the position of major Hadhrami movements. Meanwhile, the gradual deployment of the Nation Shield Forces seeks to reshape the map of territorial control and influence within Hadhramawt to allow Saudi Arabia to revive its clout, strengthen the HNC, and curtail the UAE's influence in the coastal areas of the governorate.

About the Author

Ibrahim Jalal is a nonresident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center. His research explores third-party-led peace processes; maritime security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden; the proliferation of non-state actors and its implications on the implementation of peace agreements, post-war security orders, and stabilization efforts; the politics of social assistance in fragile and conflict-affected states; violent extremism; the foreign and defense policies of the Gulf and Western states in Yemen; and the evolving regional security architecture in the Middle East and North Africa. He has worked with the United Nations, the Middle East Institute, the Yemen Policy Center, the Overseas Development Institute, and Sussex University's Institute of Development Studies.

Notes

- 1 Interview with a tribal leader, identity withheld at request, Geneva, November 27, 2024.
- 2 Interview with a Hadramawt expert, identity and location withheld at request, November 29, 2024.
- 3 Online interview with a Yemeni researcher working at a Yemeni think tank, November 14, 2024.
- 4 In-person interview with a local public figure, identity withheld at request, Geneva, November 28, 2024.
- 5 In-person interview with a Yemeni academic, identity withheld at request, Geneva, November 28, 2024.
- 6 Interview with a Yemeni researcher working at a Yemeni think tank, November 14, 2024.
- 7 Online interview with a tribal Sheikh, identity withheld at request, November 26, 2024.
- 8 In-person interview with a Yemeni security expert, identity withheld at request, Geneva, November 28, 2024.
- 9 Ibid.



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