

Hadramout:

Intersecting Interests and Conflicting Agendas



Case Assessment

Political Analysis Unit

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Table of Contents

Summary	3
Introduction	3
Location and Significance	4
Political Conflict Reaches Hadramout	5
Hadramout Agenda and its Components	6
Seiyoun Meeting and Riyadh Meetings	12
Conflicting Agendas	13
The Future of Hadramout	14
Conclusion	16
Margins	17

Summary

The study deals with the status quo in Hadramout, focusing on the strategic and geopolitical significance of the governorate. Hadramout is the largest governorate in Yemen in terms of area. It is also the top oil-producing governorate and the top contributor to state revenues.

In recent years, it has come to the fore of the Yemeni political scene due to its significance and the developments it witnesses in relation to political agendas that compete for influence at times and struggle over the governorate at others. Consequently, it has been affected by the repercussions of the political conflict, which is a hallmark of the political scene in Yemen.

The study discusses the most important entities that champion the "Hadramout cause," strive to end the marginalization of the governorate and improve economic conditions and standards of living to a level parallel to the geographical and economic status of the province. It sheds light on the rising demands that Hadramout should enjoy a position comparable to its strategic importance, geographical area, political role and economic resources. In other words, the governorate has the potential of becoming a state in the future, according to some visions and perceptions that have crystallized in recent years.

The study also sheds light on the main conflicting agendas in Hadramout, while at the same time evoking the factors of internal conflict and its regional instigators, and the role of external factors in fueling or mitigating the conflict and minimizing its effects and repercussions.

Introduction

The consultations that comprised Hadhrami political and social leaders and figures resulted in the formation of the Hadramout National Council (HNC), as a political platform to forward the aspirations of the Hadhrami community, as stated in the declaration statement.

The consultations, which were held in Riyadh and enjoyed Saudi support and sponsorship, went on for a month. Hadhrami personalities representing the various political currents, districts and tribes participated in the event. Social figures, businessmen and Hadhrami personalities in the diaspora were also represented. The all-inclusive event makes the new entity widely representative of the Hadhrami community. Hadramout governorate has recently assumed a leading position in the political scene due to several strategic, economic and geographical factors. It is the top oil-producing Yemeni governorate and the largest province in terms of area. In addition, it enjoys a strategic location, bordered by the Arabian Sea to the south,

and stretching along the Saudi border on the north. The governorate has been the scene of several conflicting political agendas that struggle over the future of Hadramout.

A number of Hadhrami organizations and bodies have emerged during the last ten years. All of these entities uphold the cause of Hadramout and call for its independence, viewing it as an independent political, economic and geographical unit. Some of the key entities that have emerged in this regard are the Hadhrami League, Hadhrami Uprising, the Inclusive Hadramout Conference, Hadramout Tribes Confederacy, and the more recent Hadramout National Council (HNC), in addition to branches of the main political parties, the Southern Movement, and other political bodies that were established recently, including the Southern Transitional Council (STC) which champions the demand for secession of southern Yemen.

The study attempts to shed light on the governorate of Hadramout in terms of its location, importance, and place in Yemeni politics. It also reviews the most important active political and social organizations, and their political agendas and visions for Hadramout in its current reality and perceptions of its future.

Location and Significance

Hadramout governorate is located in the southeast of the Republic of Yemen, bounded by the Arabian Sea on the south, Al-Mahra governorate on the east, Saudi Arabia on the north and the governorates of Shabwa, Marib and Al-Jawf on the west.

Hadramout occupies 36% of the total 555,000 square km area of Yemen. It consists of 28 districts, distributed between the coastal and valley regions. Mukalla—the main city in the governorate, is the most important city in the coastal strip, while Tarim and Seyoun are the main cities of the Hadramout Valley.

During the era of the British colonization of southern Yemen, Hadramout governorate was a British colony annexed to the colony of Aden, after Britain succeeded in concluding protection agreements with the leaders of the various regions in southern Yemen. After independence in 1967, Hadramout became one of the governorates of the new state.

Hadramout governorate is located on a coastal strip, 620 km long, extending along the shore of the Arabian Sea. Several ports, are located along this strip, most notably the port of Mukalla, and the port of Al-Shihr (Al-Dhaba). The latter is one of the three main Yemeni loading terminals of crude oil besides the port of Belhaf on the Arabian Sea, and the port of Ras Isa on the Red Sea in western Yemen. The port of Al-Shihr (Al-Dhaba) was established in 1993.

In this port, tankers are loaded with crude oil from Al-Messila, eastern Shabwa, Hawarim and other nearby fields. In October 2022, the port was targeted by drone attacks. The Yemeni government stated at the time that the armed forces intercepted armed Houthi drones, which targeted at Al-Dhaba oil-loading port when the Greek oil tanker, Nissos, was preparing for loading two million barrels of crude oil from the port. ¹

There are several oil fields in Hadramout, which yield the largest sum of state revenues. The oil fields in Hadramout account for more than 80% of Yemeni oil exports. ² The most important of these fields is the Messila field, which was inaugurated in 1993 and is the top oil field in Yemen.

Clearly, several factors contribute to the important position of Hadramout in the Yemeni political and economic scene, as well as to neighboring countries and many regional and international parties, especially in recent years when internal and external polarization has intensified due to political strife, armed conflict and fragile state institutions in Yemen that has been plunged into an all-out war since the Houthi coup in September 2014. Just as the Yemeni forces are cognizant of the importance of Hadramout, external actors— especially Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries— cannot ignore it. Therefore, they deal with issues relating to the governorate in a special way, benefiting from the presence of a large Hadhrami population that migrated to these countries in the past. Many of the Hadhrami migrants settled in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf, and became part of the demographic composition of those countries.

Political Conflict Reaches Hadramout

Like other Yemeni governorates, Hadramout was at the heart of the political conflict that dominated Yemeni politics, especially over the last decade. Although the peaceful engagement characterized events and developments in the governorate, some people from Hadramout were active in the protests that broke out in various parts of the southern part of the country in early 2007, which came to be known as the "Southern Movement". Hadramout also participated in the popular revolution against the regime of former President Ali Saleh in 2011. Moreover, representatives of Hadramout participated in the National Dialogue Conference, which was held in March 2013-January 2014. In this conference, Hadhrami voices upheld the Hadramout cause, and demanded that Hadramout shall be a region in the proposed federal system, under the name of Hadramout Region or the Eastern Region, which includes, in addition to the Hadramout governorate, the three neighboring governorates of Shabwa, Al-Mahra and Socotra.

In late 2013, the Hadhrami Uprising started initially as a reaction by the Hadramout tribes to some government practices, and later developed into an umbrella organization that covered many political and social activities in Hadramout, and comprised personalities, leaders, and government and local authority officials.

During the same period, Hadramout was shaken by several al-Qaeda attacks, targeting foreign tourists, as well as economic facilities, government officials, and members of the security and military establishment. The situation deteriorated rapidly, and culminated in 2015 by al-Qaeda takeover of several towns and districts in Hadramout, including the main city, Mukalla, and the headquarters of the Command of the Second Military Zone, state institutions, the port, banks and official facilities, after a sudden withdrawal of military units, which facilitated al-Qaeda takeover. Al-Qaeda control lasted for about a year, after which it was forced out by government forces backed by the Saudi-led Arab coalition, in April 2016.³

During the war, Hadramout was a safe haven for the citizens displaced from the governorates that were swept by the Houthis and turned into battlegrounds. Hadramout was not targeted by any Houthi attacks, and thus the infrastructure and security were not affected. Therefore, it fared better than other governorates in which conditions deteriorated significantly during the seven-year war.

Hadramout Agenda and its Components

In recent years, several organizations that advocate the rights of Hadramout have emerged. Some of these entities call for improvement of human rights and services, while others focus on political demands oriented towards the future of Hadramout. The following sections will review the most important entities that appeared during the last decade, highlighting the key ideas and visions about the reality of Hadramout and its future of each of them.ش

The Hadhrami League

In 2003, the National Organization for the Liberation of Hadramout (Hatoum) was founded by Abdullah Saeed Bahaj. The organization called for "self-determination for the people of Hadramout, and restoration of their independent state."⁴ Later, several movements and bodies that adopted the Hadramout cause were formed, including Hadramout Salvation Front, Hadramout National Gathering, Hadramout Youth Awakening Bloc, University Youth Bloc, the Free Hadramout Youth Coalition and the Hadhrami Gathering for the South. These groups merged in the Hadramout Forces League in May 2012.⁵ The league is based on the idea that Hadramout is an independent state that was occupied twice,

the first time in 1967 by South Yemen, and the second in 1990 by the State of Yemen, which resulted from the merger of the two states of North and South Yemen into one state: the Republic of Yemen.⁶

The Hadhrami League played an active role in 2012 and 2013 in defining the issue and the demands of Hadramout and its components, especially during the period of convening the National Dialogue Conference. The League then presented a comprehensive political vision on what it called "the legitimate rights of the Hadhrami people under international law, foremost of which is their right to self-determination and restoration of their independent state."⁷

The Hadhrami League states in its vision that "Hadramout has the full right to go back to its former independent status and normal character without annexation to the North or the South, through legislations and constitutions that preserve and guarantee the establishment and implementation of its right to self-determination, which will result from any forthcoming political settlement. This right is inalienable and authentic, even if it is not recognized by any settlement in the near future. This right is not confined to a specific time, nor to a specific group or denomination that does not represent the people of Hadramout as a whole."⁸

Hadramout Tribes Confederacy and Hadhrami Uprising

In December 2013, the Hadramout Tribes Confederacy announced launching the "popular uprising" following the murder of Sheikh Saad bin Habrish, the leader of the Hamoum tribe of Hadramout, by national army soldiers, near a security checkpoint. The Hadhrami Uprising demanded handing over the murderers of ibn Habrish and the withdrawal of the security forces and military troops from the security checkpoints and giving all control points over to Hadramout tribesmen. Protesters also demanded improvement of services in Hadramout, and empowering Hadhramis to run the affairs in their areas and assigning them the tasks of maintaining security and protecting foreign companies.

Although the uprising was linked to a specific incident, it later grew and was supported by Hadhrami forces, groups and personalities from various political backgrounds. The Hadramout Tribes Confederacy continued to lead the scene politically, socially and in the media, by releasing statements and taking positions on the various issues from time to time.

Since the start of the uprising, known as the first uprising, demands for greater political and human rights for the people of Hadramout have escalated. Hadramout Tribes Confederacy and the Inclusive Hadramout Conference, which was formed in April 2017, have come to the forefront of the Hadhrami forces that champion the Hadramout cause and demands. These groupings and the demands they espouse enjoy broad popular support.

Moreover, local authorities at the district and governorate levels seem to be in harmony with these groups, especially since some of their leaders are members of the local authorities, as is the case of Sheikh Amr bin Habrish, who is the head of both the Hadramout Tribes Confederacy and the Inclusive Hadramout Conference, and serves as First Deputy Governor of Hadramout. In December 2021, the second uprising was launched, in protest against the deteriorating living and economic conditions as a result of the devaluation of the Yemeni national currency. Popular agitation had started at the Harw conference in the Hadramout Valley, and intensified with the Al-Ayoun sit-in in Hadramout Plateau, which is administratively part of the Coast of Hadramout. Escalation continued until protesters agreed to initiate new escalatory steps, including stopping oil exports, setting up popular checkpoints at entrances to the governorate, and suspension of fisheries, livestock and agricultural exports until the local market needs are met.⁹ Protesters carried out these escalatory measures, but dropped them later.

Hadramout National Council (HNC)

On June 20, 2023, the formation of the Hadramout National Council was announced, after a series of Saudi-sponsored consultations in Riyadh. Hadhrami political and social leaders and figures participated in the consultations that lasted for a month. The level of representation of the various factions and groups in the council surpassed representation of the movements and currents formed in the past years. The council is described in the publicity statement as "the political platform to forward the aspirations of the Hadhrami community." The closing session of the consultations, in which the formation of the new council was announced, was attended by the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Muhammad Al Jaber, and the governor of Hadramout, Mabkhout bin Madi. During this session the "Hadhrami Political and Legal Memorandum," which details the outcomes of the comprehensive consultations, was released. The document also included "major articles that meet the aspirations of the people of Hadramout and their right to manage their political, economic, security, social and cultural affairs, with the aim of alleviating human suffering and enhancing development in Hadramout so that it becomes a model and a first step of restoring peace and stability in the homeland."¹⁰

The document underscored "the unity of Hadramout and the right of its people to manage their economic, political and security affairs, while recognizing political and social pluralism in Hadramout and the southern governorates, and emphasizing commitment to common goals with the Saudi-led Coalition to Support Legitimacy." The document also affirmed "the right of the people of Hadramout, through the various representative entities, to fair participation in sovereign decision-making and representation in parliamentary chambers and governmental,

advisory and negotiating bodies in a way that guarantees the protection of the vital interests of the people of Hadramout independently." It also emphasizes "the pledge to neutralize service, security and military institutions from any inter-party disputes, and drafting a broad declaration of principles that guarantees the cohesion of the home front and deters any threats targeting Hadramout, the liberated areas, neighboring countries, and international peace and security."¹¹ The Hadhrami Political and Legal Memo supports "any gradual measures that seek to address grievances and find agreed-upon mechanisms of a transition to a final political settlement."¹²

The Council comprises a number of Hadhrami groups, foremost among which are Inclusive Hadramout Conference, the Arbitration of Valley of Hadramout Tribes, the Coast and Plateau of Hadramout Pact, the Hadhrami League, the Hadhrami Uprising (Al-Ayoun Camp), and the Hadhrami Charter of Honor. It also includes dozens of Hadhrami political leaders and figures, including ministers, MPs, deputy ministers, academics, military and security officers, and businessmen.

Although it is difficult to assess the role, size, and influence of the council, at least at present, as it is still in the process of formation, one may venture to say that it has many strengths, the most important of which is that it enjoyed the consensus of the largest number of entities, blocs, and personalities that participated in the Riyadh consultations. It also enjoyed clear Saudi support. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia invited prominent Hadhrami figures to participate in these consultations. The outcomes of the consultations are consistent with the Saudi desire to create a secure zone in Hadramout and its geographical surroundings, and to prevent the governorate from slipping into a downward spiral of conflict with which many governorates are afflicted. This position reflects the strategic, political and economic significance that Hadramout represents at the national and regional levels, especially for Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states.

Apart from the Hadhrami consensus and Saudi support, the HNC will face many difficulties and challenges once it moves to the next stage of practical action, especially in interacting with the STC, which views itself the exclusive representative of the whole population of the southern governorates, including Hadramout. In other words, the STC may see this newly founded body as a threat, especially as the HNC is strongly opposed to the separatist tendencies which are characteristic of the STC. The powerful initiation of the HNC will undoubtedly pull the rug out from under the STC, causing it to lose many of the strengths it gained during the past years, especially in Hadramout governorate.

The STC in Hadramout

The STC, which was established in May 2017 with Emirati support, had won a number of Hadhrami figures into its ranks. It had tried hard, through its members, to influence the rising Hadhrami movement, with the aim of containing it, monopolizing it and pushing it to partake to the demands for the secession of southern Yemen from the north, which comes at the heart of the STC discourse. While the STC succeeded in enlisting many people from Hadramout, it has failed to penetrate the major Hadhrami blocs, particularly the Hadramout Tribes Confederacy and the Inclusive Hadramout Conference. So, the STC resorted to pushing its members to found new dissenting factions, including the Hadramout Alliance and Bloc for Hadramout and the South, an entity led by dissenters from the Inclusive Hadramout Conference and Hadramout Tribes Confederacy, with STC support. ¹³This dissenting faction is headed by Lieutenant Colonel Salem bin Sumaidi' and Sheikh Hasan Al-Jabiri. The latter led the escalation in the second uprising known as the Harw Committee.

Through this bloc, the STC began to escalate its hostile rhetoric against Hadramout, especially with regard to its top priority; i.e., attacking the First Military Zone and demanding its departure from Hadramout Valley on the pretext that it "belongs to the Yemeni occupation forces," in the cliché phrase of STC statements. In fact, the STC has vowed more than once to liberate Hadramout Valley from those troops which are, in fact, recruited from several Yemeni governorates.

The STC continued to exercise pressure through its representatives in Hadramout and through its top leaders in Aden in order to expand its presence in the Hadhrami political scene, especially in early 2023, in the context of STC preparations for the meeting it convened in early May. The STC tried hard to absorb the various Hadhrami factions in that meeting, which was preceded by long and careful preparations. However, Hadhrami rejection was outspoken, especially in the statements of the major entities and blocs, such as the Hadramout Tribes Confederacy, the Inclusive Hadramout Conference, the Hadhrami League, the Hadhrami Uprising and the parliamentary bloc.

The Hadhrami Uprising leadership stated that it was following "the stubborn insistence of the STC to drag Hadramout into subordination to the south, despite the STC leaders' deep awareness that the people of Hadramout have made their choices of rejecting subordination and adhered to the independence of Hadramout and its political decision and sovereignty over its land and wealth and managing its civil, military and security affairs independently, and that Hadramout enjoys an equal status to that of the south and the north." ¹⁴



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HNC Figures

- 1 Members of the Hadhrami Delegation to Riyadh Consultations 2023
- 2 Hadhrami Yemeni government ministers
- 3 Governor, Deputy Governors, and Assistant Deputy Governors of Hadramout
- 4 Hadhrami members of Parliament and Shura Council
- 5 Hadhrami Deputy Ministers
- 6 Hadhrami military and security commanders
- 7 Chairmen of Hadhrami entities and groupings
- 8 Hadhrami academics
- 9 Women, youth, diaspora, and CSO representatives



Seiyoun Meeting and Riyadh Meetings

No sooner had the extended meeting convened by the STC in Aden ended than the STC leadership announced that a meeting of the National Assembly (an appointed STC parliament) would be held in Mukalla, the main city in Hadramout. This move was an attempt to mitigate the impact of the Hadhrami statements of rejection of the STC meeting in Aden. Indeed, the assembly meeting was held in Mukalla, amidst a large crowd of STC supporters, but not without troubles that spoiled STC joy at the success of organizing the event.

Although the STC had previously organized events and meetings in Hadramout, this meeting was particularly significant due to several factors. Firstly, it took place only a few days after the meeting in Aden, which was rejected by most entities in Hadramout. Moreover, the meeting came after a qualitative STC victory; namely, containing former governor of Hadramout, Faraj al-Bahsani— a member of the Presidential Leadership Council who was appointed Vice-Chairman of the STC, a development viewed by observers as a new shift in the position of al-Bahsani, who previously preferred to adopt a balanced position, especially during his tenure as governor of Hadramout.

While the STC was preparing to hold the meeting in Mukalla, Hadhrami entities convened a consultative meeting in Seiyoun, stressing the status of Hadramout as a peer in any upcoming political settlement, and its non-affiliation with any party. Participants in the meeting rejected implicating Hadramout in conflicts and political disputes. This position serves as evidence of the independence of Hadramout and that it is not tied to any external agendas, including the STC agenda. In fact, the STC realizes that secession of the south without Hadramout will be confined to a limited geographical area limited to Aden and some of the neighboring areas.

The statement issued by the Seiyoun Meeting stressed that "Hadramout will be an independent region in any forthcoming settlement. Otherwise, it will opt for a state that is independent of the north and south." The statement explains that "the cause of Hadramout is a fundamental issue, and one of several Yemeni issues such as the issue of Tihama, the issue of Saada, etc. Hadhramis are striving to solve this issue at a round table of intra-Yemeni dialogue. In the event partners fail to reach an agreement, Hadramout will choose the course of an independent state." ¹⁵

The position of participants in the Seiyoun Meeting was not merely restricted to rejecting the STC agenda. Rather, participants in the meeting viewed "the entry of the STC into Hadramout governorate, escorted by convoys of [Emirati] armored vehicles, as a provocation to the people of Hadramout, and a message that the STC is ready to use force, whenever necessary, and that the sons of Hadramout have to surrender to that reality." ¹⁶

Some Hadhramis saw in this behavior “an effort by the STC government and their supporters in Abu Dhabi, to inflame the situation in a very fragile and sensitive area for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and to ignite a civil war after they failed to ignite it by other means. So, they sought to ignite it now in such provocative manner, and chose Hadramout as the launching pad of that war.”¹⁷

After the Seiyoun meeting, Hadhrami leaders and personalities received urgent invitations to go to Riyadh to discuss the political, economic, military, security and other issues and challenges of Hadramout. This means that Saudi Arabia supports the political and social entities and leaders of Hadramout and encourages their adoption adopting and defending Hadramout’s demands, away from the separatist rhetoric that seeks to stir up conflicts and broaden the theater of war. This development constituted an additional complication to the STC, which thought that containing al-Bahsani would tip the balance in Hadramout in its favor because of his military reputation as commander of the "elite forces," and political standing as the representative of Hadramout in the Presidential Leadership Council. The meetings and consultations hosted by Riyadh resulted in the formation of the aforementioned Hadramout National Council.

Conflicting Agendas

Recent developments in Hadramout revealed a cut-throat competition between several political agendas, the most prominent of which is the Hadhrami agenda, which maintains that Hadramout has a special character that endows it with an independent status, and makes it a peer for the two capitals, Sana’a and Aden. This agenda is based on the vision that Hadramout constitutes a full-fledged political unit that is not tied to any externally imposed agenda and that it shall be an independent region in the event that Yemenis agree on the federal system solution. If such a solution is not reached and secession between the south and the north takes place instead, it will be an independent state. Several Hadhrami entities and blocs were formed in this regard, the latest of which was the HNC, which included several Hadhrami entities and personalities and was announced in Riyadh in late June 2023.

The second agenda which strives for influence in Hadramout is the secessionist agenda that is currently being led by the Emirati-backed STC. Despite its continuous containment and polarization campaigns, it failed to achieve its goal. This was evident in the rejection of its overtures during its meeting in Aden, as it was rejected by the political and social entities in Hadramout, including the major ones: the Hadhrami Uprising, the Hadramout Tribes Confederacy, and the Inclusive Hadramout Conference.

The Southern STC exerted substantial efforts to contain Hadramout, or at least part of it as STC leaders and activists, headed to Mukalla, escorted by a qualitative military force, with an accompanying media campaign. The meeting concluded by announcing that Hadramout would be one of the proposed names of the state of the south to be established after the secession. This proposition is not new, as it was put forward by the secessionist Southern Movement over ten years ago, in an attempt to contain Hadhrami escalation, which was led by the Hadhrami League at the time. This announcement was ignored by the Hadhramis. Some Hadhrami politicians and activists went a step further and met the STC flirtatious overture with ridicule, belittled it and described it as lacking in the element of surprise.

It is noteworthy that the conflict of agendas in and over Hadramout is not just an internal competition restricted to the conflicting parties themselves. Rather, another conflict on a regional and international level is involved, especially since the STC is supported and driven by the interests and agendas of the UAE and serves as one of its local agents. Therefore, STC moves towards Hadramout are mainly motivated by the agendas of Abu Dhabi and simply implement its orders. On the other hand, social components, tribal and political leaders in Hadramout make no secret of their association with Saudi Arabia and the special care they take to avoid a clash with the Saudis, especially in light of the state of harmony and understanding between the Kingdom and the Hadhramis that extends for decades. Consequently, it is unthinkable for Riyadh to give up its role and presence in the province which has a spacious geographical area and a strategic location that extends between the desert on the borders of Saudi Arabia and the ports of the Arabian Sea. In other words, Saudi-Hadhrami relations are also cemented by interests that will continue to be a dynamic motivation for good relations in the future.

The Future of Hadramout

Several impacting factors can be cited in assessing the status quo in Hadramout and the possible trajectories in the near future. The principal factor is the war and the current peace negotiations. The fate of Hadramout will be mainly linked to the outcome of the agreements to end the war. In this context, Hadramout has a privileged special status that has won internal and external consensus.

The influential Saudi role is another significant factor, especially at the current stage. This role is rooted in a number of factors, including the extended geography along the southern Saudi border, and the economic factors, given that Hadramout has great resources, and given its strategic location between Saudi Arabia on the north and the Arabian Sea on the south. In other words, Hadramout has strategic access to the sea, which can be exploited by Saudi Arabia.

In addition, for decades, Saudi Arabia remained an attractive place for Hadhrami migration, especially during the period of the socialist rule in the pre-1990 era. The strict socialist grip and repressive measures prompted many of the people in Hadramout to leave the country and go to Saudi Arabia and other countries. At the present time, a large part of the Hadhrami community in Saudi Arabia takes part in the making of the Hadhrami politics. Recent events have proven that they cannot be ignored. Of course, they agree with the Saudis that Hadramout shall be spared any potential political conflict, while taking its special status into account in any prospective political solution.

The aforementioned factors constitute major and important incentives that may lead to agreement on a special status for Hadramout in the post-war phase to prevent the conflict that some actors seek to plunge it into. Saudi Arabia has a vested interest in establishing security and stability in Hadramout. This was evident in Riyadh's efforts during the past period. It was especially evident in the Saudi absorption of the various Hadhrami leaders and personalities.

While the UAE-backed military formations in Hadramout constitute supportive elements for the STC and its secessionist agenda, other entities— which are opposed to the STC and its agenda— still possess many elements of strength, but they lack an armed force capable of deployment, controlling areas, and protecting facilities in the event of any political or security development. The STC is betting on its military force, whether the troops already deployed in Hadramout or those that can be deployed from outside the governorate, especially in light of the continuous campaign waged by the STC against the leadership of the First Military Zone, the local authorities, and the Hadhrami entities opposed to its agenda, most of which are concentrated in Hadramout Valley.

In this respect, Saudi support for the newly-founded force, the National Shield Forces, may be viewed as a step in the direction of filling this gap. This new military formation is led by Salafis and military figures loyal to Saudi Arabia, the legitimate government, and the PLC. In January 2023, President Rashad Al-Alimi issued a decision to form these troops, as "a reserve force under the command of the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces."¹⁸ According to that decision, the force becomes one of the official formations of the Yemeni Armed Forces. This force is expected to provide military support for the local authority in Hadramout because some of its units are deployed in the governorate. It may also support the HNC, which has become the political platform espousing Hadhrami demands, as stated in the declaration statement of the council.

Conclusion

In light of the accelerating developments in Yemen in general and in Hadramout in particular, a sharp competition and polarization of major agendas vying for the control of southern Yemen dominates the scene. Whereas the STC has controlled Aden, Lahj, Abyan and Al-Dhali', Hadramout and other governorates are still out of the scope of STC control. Instead, these latter are controlled by entities whose agendas are diametrically opposed to the STC secessionist agenda.

Some Years before founding of the STC, Hadhrami entities that championed the demands and cause of Hadramout emerged. They viewed Hadramout as an integrated political unit, which suffered the scourge of exclusion and marginalization in the past. Therefore, according to those entities, demands for its independence became a top priority. The STC, on the other hand, seeks to contain these components and demands, but without much success so far, except for containing a segment of Hadramout population.

In a nutshell, a cut-throat competition between the "Hadramout" and "secessionist" agendas is unfolding in the fast-paced developments. At the heart of this competition lies a Hadhrami will that crystallized along the way. This Hadhrami resolve is conveyed in the strong message conveyed in the statements of Hadhrami entities that Hadramout is a peer to be north and south, and will not be a passive agent in any externally imposed agenda. These components managed to benefit from Hadramout's uniqueness to create a public base at home and obtain external support, especially from Saudi Arabia, which has recently shown its support in the creation of a new "semi-inclusive" entity, which adopts the Hadhrami cause and champions its demands for the time being.

Margins:

- 1 Mohammed Al-Ghobary, "Yemeni Government Forces Intercept Houthi Drones Attacking Southern Oil Terminal," Oct. 21 2022. <https://cutt.us/CJcIV>
- 2 Mohammed Abd al-Malik, "Oil Exports Suspended in Hadramout," Al Jazeera Net, September 26, 2019. <https://cutt.us/GVf9c>
- 3 "Al-Qaeda in Yemen: Its Military Capabilities and Zones of Influence," Abaad Studies and Research Center, August 17, 2017. <https://abaadstudies.org/print.php?id=59672>
- 4 "The Hadhrami League," Areeq Encyclopedia, <https://2u.pw/hQveqD3>
- 5 Nasser Al-Mashjari, "(Interview with) the Chairman of the Hadramout Salvation Front: "We have nothing to do with the north and the south,"". Marib Press, January 19, 2013, <https://marebpress.net/articles.php?id=18886>
- 6 Radi Sobeih, "(Interview with) A Leader of the Hadhrami League: "Hadramout region is the starting point for self-determination,"" Lahj Press, July 13, 2014. <http://www.lahjnews.net/ar/news-28975.htm>
- 7 "The Hadhrami League Calls for Secession from the North and South Alike," Al-Khaleej newspaper, November 24, 2012. <https://2u.pw/sHhf7W5>
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Amin Barvid, "The Truth About the Ongoing Political Agitations in Hadramout," Al-Masdar Online, January 9, 2022. <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/244151>
- 10 "The Political and Legal Memorandum Released by the Hadhrami Consultations in Riyadh," June 20, 2023. Hadramout Voice, <https://www.hdrvoice.com/23885/>
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