

# Between Escalation and Containment : The Future of Hadramout and Al-Mahra after Southern Transitional Council Control

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## Executive Summary

Saudi Arabia continues its efforts to contain the escalating situation in the governorates of Hadramout and Al-Mahra following the takeover of Wadi Hadramout and Al-Mahra by forces affiliated with the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC). Both areas lie directly along the Kingdom's southern border with Yemen, heightening Saudi security concerns.

In response, Riyadh sent a high-level delegation headed by Major General Mohammed Al-Qahtani. Upon his arrival in Mukalla, the capital of Hadramout, Al-Qahtani met with Governor Salem Al-Khunaishi, as well as senior officials, political and military leaders, and local social figures. One of the most significant meetings took place in the Al-Abr area, where Al-Qahtani explicitly called for the withdrawal of STC forces from Hadramout and Al-Mahra.

More recently, a joint Saudi–Emirati military delegation held several meetings in the interim capital, Aden. Saudi media reported that these talks aimed to reach an agreement on a mechanism for the withdrawal of STC forces from Hadramout and Al-Mahra. However, STC leaders denied these claims, stating that the meetings discussed general conditions and that withdrawal was not on the table.

This analysis seeks to answer a central question: What lies ahead for Hadramout—given its strategic importance to Saudi Arabia—after STC forces seized control of Wadi Hadramout, an area that had long remained insulated from conflict? This question gains urgency amid growing rejection and condemnation by Yemen's internationally recognized government—represented by the Presidency and both chambers of Parliament (the House of Representatives and the Shura Council)—as well as by political parties and local actors nationwide, particularly in Hadramout itself, in addition to Saudi Arabia's opposition as a key player in the Yemeni scene.

## The UAE Challenges Saudi Influence

In early December ,forces affiliated with the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council) STC (seized control of Wadi Hadramout ,an area previously under the jurisdiction of the First Military Region loyal to the internationally recognized government. This was followed by the STC's takeover of additional areas along the Hadramout coast that had been controlled by the Hadramout Tribal Alliance ,founded in2013 and led by Sheikh Amr bin Habrish.

Observers describe this escalation as a major strategic shift with significant regional implications .The United Arab Emirates appears to be the main beneficiary ,having significantly expanded its influence in Yemen in a manner that alters the existing balance of power .This development raises a central question :how Saudi will Arabia respond ,given the direct implications for its national security.<sup>1</sup>

Through this development ,Abu Dhabi's local proxy has effectively consolidated control over Yemen's southern flank bordering Saudi Arabia ,including Hadramout and Al-Mahra .The latter also borders the Sultanate of Oman. UAE-backed forces now control nearly all of southern Yemen, including key coastal areas, the strategically vital Mayyun (Perim) Island in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the volcanic island of Socotra in the Indian Ocean .<sup>2</sup>The British newspaper The Guardian described the UAE's takeover of Hadramout and Al-Mahra as a "major setback for Saudi Arabia."<sup>3</sup>According to a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published in April ,the UAE began openly challenging Saudi influence as early as,2016 when it established the Hadrami Elite Forces and asserted control over the Arabian Sea coast—an area Riyadh considers integral to its national security.<sup>4</sup>

The report notes that the UAE's approach to Hadramout is inseparable from its broader southern Yemen strategy and wider regional priorities .These policies are built on fostering fragmentation in conflict zones through patronage networks and local partnerships .Among Abu Dhabi's objectives are securing maritime trade and energy routes along the Arabian Sea ,expanding naval reach to complement its presence in Aden ,Hodeida ,Taiz ,Shabwa ,and Socotra .These efforts serve to protect UAE interests in the Indian Ocean, exerting control over Yemeni ports, and reinforcing the regional primacy of Jebel Ali Port. The UAE also seeks to expand its influence along Saudi Arabia's southern border and across the Gulf of Aden, thereby creating leverage for broader regional bargaining.<sup>5</sup>

## Yemeni Rejection and Saudi Containment Efforts

Opposition to the STC's takeover of Wadi Hadramout has expanded ,with Saudi Arabia emerging as the most prominent opponent .Major General Mohammed Al-Qahtani reaffirmed the Kingdom's firm position on Yemen and Hadramout ,emphasizing“ the enforcement of de-escalation ,support for security and stability ,and the rejection of any attempt to impose faits accomplis by force or drag the governorate into renewed conflicts ”.

In meetings with Hadrami tribal leaders ,Al-Qahtani reiterated Saudi Arabia's demand for“ the withdrawal of all STC-affiliated forces from Hadramout and Al-Mahra and the restoration of the previous status quo ,”stressing rejection of any actions that undermine de-escalation efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise ,Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council condemned the STC's moves in Hadramout and Al-Mahra. According to the official news agency, Council President Dr. Rashad Al-Alimi expressed “absolute rejection of any unilateral measures that undermine the legal standing of the state, harm the public interest, or create parallel realities outside national frameworks”. Al-Alimi reaffirmed the commitment to the Declaration of the Transfer of Power and the Riyadh Agreement, and called for forces deployed from outside the eastern governorates to return to their original bases.<sup>8</sup>

In separate meetings with the ambassadors of France and the United Kingdom as well as the U.S .Chargé d'Affaires ,President Al-Alimi warned that “ the unilateral military actions in the eastern governorates pose a direct challenge to de-escalation efforts and threaten economic reforms ,currency stability ,salary payments ,and the delivery of basic service—at a time when the government is working with international partners to build donor confidence and alleviate civilian suffering<sup>9</sup> ”.

Yemen's House of Representatives issued a statement rejecting all unilateral actions and military movements carried out outside the framework of national consensus and political agreements .It described recent developments in the eastern governorates as“ a clear violation of constitutional legitimacy and an infringement on the authority of the Presidential Leadership Council<sup>10</sup> ”.

The Shura Council) the second chamber of parliament ,(echoed this position ,declaring its rejection of what it described as“ unilateral measures that threaten social cohesion ,undermine state institutions ,and risk pushing the country toward dangerous paths that serve only chaos and the erosion of constitutional legitimacy<sup>11</sup> ”



A number of political parties likewise voiced their“ complete rejection of the unilateral measures taken by the Southern Transitional Council ”,including the deployment of forces from outside their home regions ,the creation of parallel power structures on the ground ,and encroachments on the government’s exclusive executive authority. In a joint statement ,the parties warned that“ attempts to impose control over governorates by force threaten unified security and military decision-making ,and could trigger internal conflict that would ultimately benefit only the Iran-backed Houthi movement”.

For its part ,the Unified Council of the Eastern Governorates—representing Hadramout ,Al-Mahra ,Shabwa ,and Socotra—rejected any“ military interventions or parallel formations aimed at circumventing the will of the people of Hadramout”. The council emphasized that the people of the eastern governorates“ adhere to their right to manage their own affairs free from external domination ”,and cautioned against what it described as“ hegemonic projects<sup>12</sup> “.

Rejection of the recent developments was not limited to Yemeni and Saudi actors. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres described the situation in Hadramout as“ a serious development and a dangerous escalation<sup>13</sup>“.

## Future Scenarios

The outlook for Hadramout and Al-Mahra remains highly uncertain as Saudi Arabia continues its efforts to contain the STC’s expanding military footprint .This uncertainty raises critical questions about Riyadh’s potential course of action should the STC persist in rejecting the demands of both Saudi Arabia and Yemen’s internationally recognized government—of which the STC is formally a constituent part.

Analysts remain divided over Saudi Arabia’s likely response to the STC’s recent advances .Some argue that Riyadh will not tolerate a direct and sustained security threat along its southern flank .Others contend that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates may ultimately reach a compromise that largely preserves STC control on the ground ,while allowing Saudi-backed formations—most notably the Nation’s Shield Forces—to assume responsibility for specific areas ,particularly those adjacent to the Saudi border.

Despite rejecting any discussion of withdrawal ,the STC holds considerable leverage .It benefits from strong Emirati backing ,a sizable and well-trained military force, and advanced weaponry—advantages that have consistently tipped the balance in its favor during successive confrontations with government forces in Aden ,Abyan, and Shabwa since .2018 The STC now controls major urban centers ,most notably Aden and Mukalla ,in addition to extensive coastlines ,ports ,airports ,critical infrastructure ,and key oil fields.

Saudi Arabia ,however ,retains significant countervailing options .These include politically and financially isolating the STC by withdrawing support and compelling it to bear the full burdens of governance .Riyadh can also intensify diplomatic pressure through regional and local actors ,or strengthen its engagement with STC rivals in Hadramout and Al-Mahra in order to impose at least a minimum level of compliance.

## Key Scenarios

The following outlines the most likely scenarios emerging from the current dynamics:

### Scenario One :STC Consolidates Control and Imposes a De Facto Authority

This scenario is reflected in recent STC statements rejecting withdrawal demands from both the Presidential Leadership Council and Saudi Arabia, while framing the takeover as a legitimate entitlement exercised on behalf of the southern governors. The STC has reinforced this narrative through mass rallies advocating the declaration of southern independence.

### Scenario Two: Saudi–Emirati Agreed Withdrawal

Indicators of this scenario include coordination and understandings between Saudi and Emirati military officials. At the same time, the Emirati side has continued to shift responsibility to the STC, urging Saudi Arabia to negotiate directly with the STC leadership. Nevertheless, under this scenario, it is expected that the two leading powers in the coalition backing Yemen's internationally recognized government would reach a mutually acceptable formula requiring the STC to withdraw from newly seized areas in Al-Mahra and Wadi Hadramout, in exchange for guarantees and political assurances that preserve the STC's core privileges.

## Scenario Three :

### Saudi Strategic Retrenchment to Border Areas

This scenario entails a Saudi pullback from areas under STC control in Aden and Lahj, with a strategic refocus on border zones and key crossings. Signs pointing in this direction include the redeployment of Saudi-backed Nation's Shield Forces from Aden, Lahj, Abyan, and Al-Dhalea to border areas in northern Hadramout. While such a shift would create space for the STC to expand its authority and impose governance arrangements aligned with its secessionist agenda, it would also expose the STC to mounting administrative and financial pressures—particularly if Riyadh opts to impose political isolation that the UAE may be unable or unwilling to fully offset.

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