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The Implications of the 2025 Hadramout Events...

Reshaping Security and
Political Dynamics in
South Yemen

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Cover image: Smoke rises following Saudi airstrikes on the Port of Mukalla on 30 December 2025. (Image source: Still frame from a video circulated by local activists. Cover design created with the assistance of AI.)

South24 Center for News and Studies



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Introduction

In December 2025, South Yemen witnessed a pivotal geopolitical shift that fundamentally reshaped its security and political landscape. The Hadramout events marked a decisive turning point in the conflict, when the Southern Armed Forces, backed by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), secured control over the Hadramout Wadi and Desert before pushing military operations into Al Mahra Governorate under the banner of “Operation Promising Future”. Far from representing a fleeting tactical success, the offensive reflected a profound realignment of regional power dynamics by dismantling decades of control exercised by the First Military Region, a force closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen.

Within South Yemen, the campaign was hailed as a historic milestone toward reclaiming territories that comprised the former South Yemeni state prior to the 1990 unification. The swift advance injected powerful political and symbolic momentum to the Southern cause, bringing it closer to its central objective: establishing ground realities necessary to leverage independence from the North. However, this strategic advance was abruptly halted by Saudi Arabian military intervention. When the Southern forces refused Riyadh’s ultimatum to withdraw from the newly-secured governorates, Saudi forces launched a wave of intensive airstrikes against their positions. The bombardment inflicted hundreds of casualties, including fighters killed, wounded, or captured, alongside civilian losses. Confronted by overwhelming firepower, the Southern forces ultimately withdrew, choosing to protect local populations and prevent further escalation across the region.

As 2026 began, these military developments rapidly escalated into a profound political crisis. In an effort to regain the political initiative, STC President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi announced from Aden a two-year transitional period, anchored by a new Constitutional Declaration. The move was rejected or disregarded by both Saudi Arabia and the internationally recognized Yemeni government. The depth of the rift became clear when the STC leadership was summoned to Riyadh, setting the stage for a dramatic political unravelling. Under controversial circumstances and in the absence of Al-Zubaidi, several key members of the delegation announced the dissolution of the STC and its

affiliated bodies. Simultaneously, Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad Al-Alimi issued a decree stripping Al-Zubaidi of his Council seat and referring him to the judiciary on charges of what he described as “high treason.”

This political fracturing enabled Saudi Arabia to aggressively expand its direct oversight of the Southern file across political, military, and security dimensions. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates unexpectedly scaled back its involvement at the height of the crisis before withdrawing from the scene entirely. This realignment triggered a massive reconfiguration of the regional security architecture across South Yemen’s eastern governorates. Notably, northern Salafi forces were deployed to areas along the Hadramout Coast, a region traditionally considered a stronghold of Southern influence. These developments fueled widespread local dissatisfaction and severely heightened tensions among communities in the region.

The escalating situation triggered an unprecedented wave of public mobilization across South Yemen, manifesting as widespread demonstrations against the political and security restructuring. These popular movements renewed powerful calls for the restoration of the State of South Yemen, reflecting a collective rejection of attempts to reintroduce governance frameworks that marginalize Southern aspirations.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines a pivotal question: how did the Hadramout events of late 2025 reshape the security and political balance of power in South Yemen? This question is vital because the events represent a defining moment in the evolution of the Southern issue, revealing critical shifts in the roles and influence of both local and regional actors. This paper analyzes these transformations within the increasingly complex arena of Hadramout and evaluates the extent of regional involvement in shaping the conflict’s trajectory.

Using an analytical framework, the paper maps out the sequence of these developments, examines the positions of key local and regional actors, and explores the implications of the shifting balance of power within its broader political context. It also provides an evidence-based assessment of potential future trajectories, aiming to support local, regional, and international policymakers in developing responses that are better aligned with the realities

on the ground in South Yemen, thereby mitigating the risks of further escalation and instability.

I. Background to the Hadramout Events – What Happened?

Throughout 2025, Hadramout witnessed significant escalation in tensions as the Saudi-backed Hadramout Tribal Alliance, led by tribal Sheikh Amr bin Habrish, intensified mobilization across the Hadramout Wadi and Desert. One of the alliance's notable initiatives was the creation of local armed groups, later known as the Hadramout Protection Forces. This mobilization aimed to assert local control over strategic areas containing major oil fields, following the alliance's [calls](#) for the Hadrami citizens to manage the governorate's security and public services.

At the time, the Hadramout Wadi and Desert remained under the control of the First Military Region, a force associated with the Islah Party (Muslim Brotherhood) in Yemen¹, while some areas were under the control of the Saudi-backed Salafi Nation's Shield Forces. In contrast, the Hadramout Coast was held by the Hadrami Elite Forces, under the Second Military Region, which are closely aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC)².

Despite extending its military and political influence across the plateau and Wadi regions, the Tribal Alliance maintained cooperative relations with the First Military Region. In contrast, it directed a hostile media campaign at the forces controlling the Coast. This growing friction also isolated then governor Mabkhout bin Madi; his policies failed to satisfy either the Tribal Alliance or the First Military Region, as he was perceived to be deepening ties with the UAE-aligned Hadrami Elite Forces of the Second Military Region.

¹ **The Hadramout Wadi**, comprising the governorate's northern, central, and inland areas bordering Saudi Arabia, contains the Masila Basin oil fields and strategic cities including Seiyun and Tarim. For over three decades, it has been controlled by the First Military Region, a force associated with the Islah Party, which is ideologically aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia considers the area vital to the security of its 700-kilometre border, and it is home to the Al-Wadiah border crossing, the only continuously operating land crossing between the two countries.

²

The Hadramout Coast, overlooking the Arabian Sea, includes the Port of Mukalla, the Al-Shihr oil export terminal, and the governorate's main energy infrastructure. It is controlled by the Hadrami Elite Forces, established in 2016 to drive Al-Qaeda from Mukalla. Officially affiliated with the Second Military Region under the internationally recognized Yemeni government, the force is closely aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and was trained and equipped by the United Arab Emirates.

Tensions peaked as [armed attacks](#) on fuel tankers supplying power stations in Hadramout and other South Yemen cities grew more frequent, with local authorities accusing fighters affiliated with Sheikh Amr bin Habrish of the disruptions. While these incidents initially appeared to be a local struggle for influence, subsequent events in December 2025 and January 2026 framed them as early indicators of a broader, Saudi-backed effort to reshape Hadramout's security and political landscape.

These deep divisions led Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad Al-Alimi to replace Governor Mabkhout bin Madi with [Salem Al-Khanbashi](#), in an attempt to tip the local balance of power in favor of forces aligned with Riyadh.

Simultaneously, the Hadramout Tribal Alliance, led by Amr bin Habrish, held a meeting in the Al-Aleeb area of Dhabah, Hadramout, and [announced](#) the formation of the so-called "Hadrami Resistance"-- on 27 November 2025, the exact day that Riyadh pushed for Al-Khanbashi's appointment as governor. The alliance openly called for confronting the Southern forces within the Hadrami Elite Forces, which are stationed in Mukalla and across the Hadramout Coast.



Figure 1: The meeting between Amr bin Habrish and Hadrami tribal figures in the Al-Aleeb area of the Hadramout Plateau, 27 November 2025 (Alliance Media).

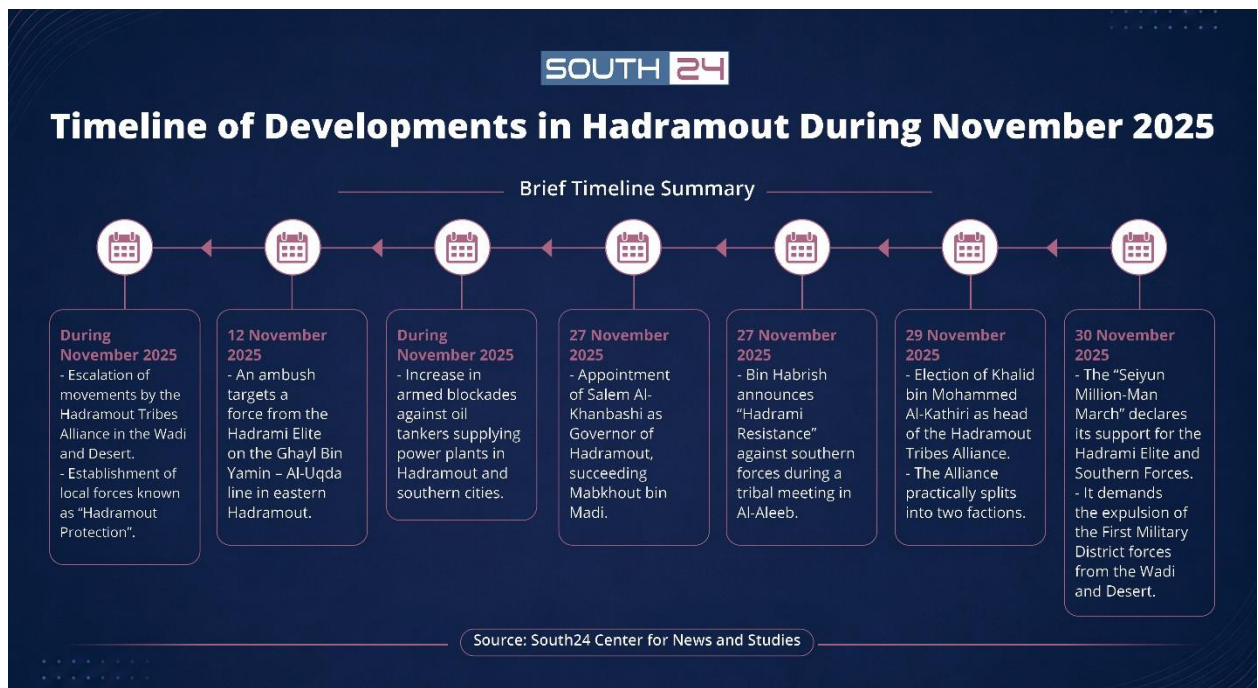


Figure 2: Timeline of developments in Hadramout during November 2025 — Figure designed using artificial intelligence.

Two days later, on 29 November, tensions in Hadramout escalated when tribal figures within the Hadramout Tribal Alliance announced the [election](#) of Khalid bin Mohammed Al Kathiri as alliance president, effectively splitting the organization into two competing factions.

The growing divisions were further highlighted during the annual Independence Day celebrations on 30 November, an occasion marked by large public gatherings across South Yemen. In the Hadramout Wadi, a massive demonstration known as “the Seiyun Million Man March” drew crowds [declaring](#) strong support for the Hadrami Elite Forces and the Southern Armed Forces, demanding the total withdrawal of northern forces, specifically the First Military Region, from the Wadi and Desert. Protesters demanded that the local Hadrami citizens be empowered to manage their own security and military decisions.

These demands spotlight longstanding security instability in the Hadramout Wadi. Following the expulsion of extremist groups from the Hadramout Coast in 2016, the Wadi (valley) had deteriorated into a security vacuum and served as a secure Houthi smuggling route and a safe haven for ISIS and Al-Qaeda cells.

The Hadramout events coincided with a major [military parade](#) by the Southern Transitional Council in Aden’s Al-Ard Square, attended by the STC president and Southern ministers.

As security tensions escalated, armed tribal groups led by Amr bin Habrish seized vital economic facilities, disrupting their operations, amidst growing local demands to secure the Hadramout Wadi. In response to the disruptions, the Southern Armed Forces, affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council, [launched](#) a large-scale deployment on 2 December 2025, entering multiple towns and areas across the Hadramout Wadi and Desert. They launched a major [military operation](#) the next day titled “Promising Future,” aimed at securing Hadrami cities and areas from terrorist organizations, and disrupting arms-smuggling routes linked to networks supporting the Houthi movement.

Following clashes with the armed formations loyal to Sheikh Amr bin Habrish, the Southern Armed Forces successfully expanded their territorial control and secured the economic facilities. This advance led to the withdrawal of the First

Military Region forces from these areas, ending their more than three decades of military control.

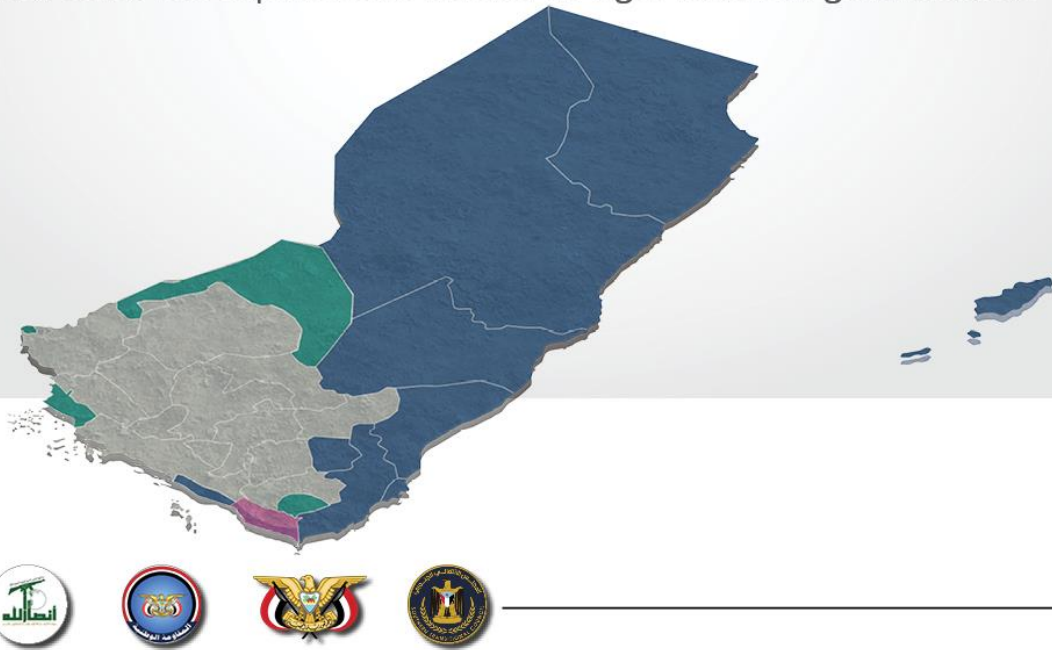
The intervention received widespread [public support](#) across most of the Hadramout Wadi and Desert. Southern flags were raised over the presidential palace, government facilities, Seiyun Airport, and a number of schools and public institutions. Coinciding with the events in Hadramout, Al Mahra Governorate [witnessed](#) similar developments, enabling Southern forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council to establish control over key security checkpoints, government facilities, and border crossings.

During the initial stages, these developments enabled Southern forces to establish field control across the entirety of South Yemen's territory, effectively restoring the borders that existed prior to the 1990 unification. Following this decisive shift, leaders of several government ministries, state authorities, and institutions in Aden publicly [announced](#) their full support for the steps taken by the Southern Transitional Council. Reaffirming their commitment to the Southern national project, these institutional leaders called on the political leadership to take the necessary steps toward declaring the State of South Yemen.

2025

Map of Control and Influence in Yemen

Following the recent movements by the Southern Transitional Council in eastern South Yemen, the map of influence in the country has undergone significant changes, as the control of southern forces and their allies has expanded to include all eight southern governorates.



Areas of Control

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| ■ Southern Armed Forces | ■ Pro-government forces (Islah, "Happy Yemen" Brigades, National Army) |
| ■ National Resistance Forces | ■ Houthi militias |

[in](#) [whatsapp](#) [youtube](#) [facebook](#) [twitter](#) [globe](#) South24.org

SOUTH 24

Figure 3: Illustrating the control of the Southern Armed Forces during December 2025 over the entire territory of South Yemen within the borders that existed prior to Yemeni unification in 1990. Source: South24 Center.

Escalation of the Crisis: Political, Media, and Military Dimensions

Saudi Arabia's growing concern regarding the security and military changes in Hadramout became evident on 3 December 2025 with the arrival in Mukalla of a Saudi military and security delegation, led by Major General Mohammed Al-Qahtani, Chairman of the Special Committee. Arriving the same day that Southern forces launched 'Operation Promising Future', [the Saudi delegation](#) stated that Hadramout's security remains a critical priority for Saudi Arabia due to its strategic location and deep historical and social ties.

To counter the escalating situation on the ground, Saudi Arabia demanded that the Southern Transitional Council (STC) withdraw from its newly-seized positions in Hadramout and hand them over to the Nation's Shield Forces. Concurrently, Riyadh launched a hostile counter-media campaign through its satellite networks, utilizing a highly confrontational information campaign aimed at politically isolating the STC and its forces, while mobilizing regional and international opposition against the council's actions.

The Southern Transitional Council leadership's stance is that its military operations in Hadramout and Al Mahra can be seen as an expression of the Southern people's right to manage their own security and political affairs. The STC maintained that it did not seek to forcibly impose control over Hadramout's territories, but rather aimed to secure the Southern region against Houthi smuggling networks and extremist cells, while empowering local residents to govern free from northern military influence.

While the STC demonstrated political flexibility during the early stages of the crisis, Saudi Arabia's categorical insistence on an unconditional withdrawal of Southern forces, despite the [arrival](#) of a joint Saudi-Emirati delegation in Aden to mediate, caused positions to harden. STC president Aidarous Al-Zubaidi rejected a pullback without prior political guarantees, viewing an unconditional withdrawal as a step that would undermine the council's future negotiating position.

Notwithstanding the strains, the STC presented several proposals for [redeployment](#), which included inclusion of the Saudi-backed Nation's Shield Forces in key security sectors in Hadramout and Al Mahra, while signaling its

readiness for direct dialogue with Riyadh. However, Saudi Arabia rejected these proposals, opting instead for mobilization of military forces, pushing the region toward escalation rather than containing it.

As a result, the first Saudi response came in the form of [airstrikes](#) on the Port of Mukalla in the early hours of 30 December 2025. The unexpected bombardment carried significant humanitarian and economic implications as the port serves as a vital lifeline for the civilian populations of Hadramout, Al Mahra, and Shabwa. Notably, the port infrastructure had been largely spared even during the intense 2016 campaign to liberate it from Al-Qaeda.

The initial Saudi justification stated that the [strike](#) was executed because two vessels from Fujairah Port in the UAE had arrived at Mukalla Port carrying weapons and military vehicles, without obtaining mandatory clearance from the Coalition's Joint Forces Command.

The Yemeni political landscape shifted dramatically when Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad Al-Alimi terminated the defense cooperation agreement between Yemen and the UAE, and declared a 90-day nationwide state of emergency. Four members of the Presidential Leadership Council challenged the decision, labelling it [a clear violation](#) of the power transfer declaration which mandates consensus and prohibits unilateral decisions on major sovereign, military, or political matters, particularly those affecting regional allies.

The geopolitical landscape fractured further, when hours after Al-Alimi's announcement the [UAE Ministry of Defense](#) stated that it had ended the mission of its counterterrorism units in Yemen "of its own accord." This effectively ended the UAE's remaining military footprint in the country following its broader 2019 withdrawal. This dynamic clearly signaled an indirect escalation between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, highlighting their fundamentally divergent priorities regarding the management of the crisis in South Yemen. The UAE's withdrawal also isolated the Southern Transitional Council, stripping it of its most important regional backer and forcing it to navigate its military calculations independently.

Against this increasingly tense backdrop, the Southern forces raised their readiness to the highest alert level to counter a Saudi-backed military buildup in the Hadramout Wadi and Desert. In response, Saudi Arabia withdrew northern

units with Salafi and Islah affiliations from the anti-Houthi frontlines, redirecting them to the Hadramout theater under heavy air cover. However, internal divisions quickly stalled the mobilization. Fractures emerged within the Southern formations operating under the Saudi-led Nation's Shield Forces, as several units openly refused to [participate](#) in military operations against fellow Southern forces or take actions that could destabilize Hadramout.

The confrontation entered a significantly more volatile phase in the early hours of 2 January 2026, when Saudi warplanes launched a sustained, multi-day campaign of intensive [airstrikes](#) targeting Southern military positions in Al-Khasha'a, Seiyun, and Barshid Camp, while also striking military and civilian vehicles in Al-Qatn and along the strategic corridor leading to Mukalla. Accompanied by fierce ground clashes, the onslaught resulted in more than 100 fatalities, including civilians, alongside 152 injuries and the capture of more than 130 individuals.

This aggressive escalation marked an unexpected shift in Riyadh's strategy, severely fracturing the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the Southern forces and upending years of close battlefield cooperation built during their shared fight against the Houthis.

Against this highly charged backdrop, the political landscape reached a critical turning point when Southern Transitional Council President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi [announced](#) the commencement of a two-year transitional phase, followed by a [constitutional declaration](#) outlining the legal and institutional framework for the interim period. The declaration called for the establishment of an independent, sovereign state based on the pre-1990 borders of South Yemen, with Aden as its capital.

While the announcements triggered widespread [public celebrations](#) in Aden and several major Southern cities, Saudi Arabia dismissed them. Instead, Riyadh demanded that an STC delegation led by Al-Zubaidi travel to the Saudi capital. However, sources speaking to South24 Center indicated that Al-Zubaidi grew increasingly cautious following alleged threats from Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman and new [Saudi measures](#) requiring all foreign flights travelling to and from Aden, including those from the UAE, to undergo mandatory inspection at Jeddah Airport. These developments, and other undisclosed

factors, led Al-Zubaidi to prevent a Saudi aircraft from landing in Aden that had been dispatched to transport him to Riyadh.

Following several days of intense military confrontations in Hadramout, the remaining Southern forces withdrew from multiple positions. As chaos and widespread [looting](#) swept through both Hadramout and Al Mahra, military headquarters and facilities were rapidly handed over to Saudi-backed Salafi forces. Hadramout Governor Salem Al-Khanbashi subsequently [dismissed](#) several military and security leaders affiliated with the Southern forces and referred them to military prosecution over allegations of facilitating the entry of STC forces into areas of the Hadramout Wadi.

To contain the military tensions, Saudi Arabia welcomed the organization of an [inclusive conference](#) in Riyadh, bringing various Southern components together for a dialogue process on what it described as “fair solutions” to the Southern issue. This initiative followed a [request](#) that Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad Al-Alimi said he had received from several Southern political components and figures. The STC subsequently welcomed the proposal, reiterating that dialogue is a principle it has embraced since its establishment.

Events took a decisive turn on 7 January 2026 when a high-level STC delegation travelled to Riyadh without its president, Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, who Saudi Arabia stated had travelled to the UAE. On the same day, [Saudi warplanes carried](#) out approximately 50 airstrikes targeting the Zubaid area, Al-Zubaidi’s birthplace, in Al-Dhalea Governorate. The bombardment resulted in the deaths of five civilians and injuries to multiple people, including women and children, and destroyed several homes.

Two days after the delegation’s arrival in Riyadh, [the dissolution](#) of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), including all its bodies, institutions, and offices inside and outside Yemen, was announced. The move occurred under obscure circumstances linked to direct Saudi pressure. This opened the door to significant shifts in the council’s position and representation, particularly following [the removal](#) of Presidential Leadership Council member Faraj Al-Bahsani from his position as Deputy President of the STC. In contrast, Southern Giants Forces

leader Abdulrahman Al-Muharrami³ retained his position within the Presidential Leadership Council, a move linked to Saudi considerations regarding security balances in South Yemen.

Some observers argue that the STC's attempt to establish a new political reality through military force, and its declaration of a transitional phase without adequate regional backing, and an overly optimistic reading of Riyadh's stance, led to a rapid decline in its political standing despite its significant popular support. According to this view, the STC could have avoided these consequences by showing greater flexibility in negotiations with Riyadh and establishing preliminary understandings to reassure Saudi Arabia while maintaining the balance in relations.

Another perspective argues that the STC's decision was taken under pressure, driven by several factors. The most significant was that the council had reached a critical juncture in fulfilling its political and national commitments to the people of South Yemen, particularly those demanding independence. In addition, its continued partnership with the internationally recognized Yemeni government, amid deteriorating public services, worsening humanitarian conditions, and increasing economic hardship, threatened to erode its domestic political support.

One important factor in this perspective is Saudi Arabia's September 2023 decision to independently conduct negotiations with the Houthis, -- in effect mapping out Yemen's political future without consulting or involving its key allies, particularly the STC. In response, the council had repeatedly [rejected](#) what was later known as the "Roadmap," which was backed by the United Nations, [warning](#) against the exclusion of South Yemeni representation from any comprehensive peace process.

³ Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) members Abdulrahman Al-Muharrami and Faraj Al-Bahsani joined the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in 2023, where they were appointed as deputy presidents under STC President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi following the Southern Consultative Conference held in Aden in May of that year. This strengthened the STC's influence within the structure of the Presidential Leadership Council. However, the Hadramout events altered this balance, resulting in the removal of Al-Zubaidi and Al-Bahsani from the PLC and their replacement by other Southern figures perceived as being closer to Saudi Arabia, including Major General Mahmoud Al-Subaihi and Hadramout Governor Salem Al-Khanbashi.

The first perspective faces two fundamental counterarguments. The first is Saudi Arabia's strategic objective in maintaining control over Hadramout and Al Mahra through non-local Yemeni forces that remain dependent on Riyadh. Second, is the growing competition for influence between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the region, as well as the degree of Emirati leverage over the Southern Transitional Council.

In contrast, the events demonstrated that Saudi Arabia is capable of abruptly ending a decade-long security partnership in a single day if it perceives a threat to its strategic influence. This highlights that the survival of any alliance in Yemen since 2015 has remained entirely contingent upon its alignment with the priorities of the region's most powerful actor. Consequently, this dynamic has reinforced the perception of external tutelage over Yemen, and in many instances, has gone beyond that.



Figure 4: Saudi airstrikes targeting military vehicles that arrived at the Port of Mukalla aboard two vessels from the UAE, 30 December 2025. Source: Russia Today.

II. Security Implications: Between Transformation and a Security Vacuum

Following the withdrawal of Southern forces from Hadramout in January and February 2026, a comprehensive restructuring of the governorate's military landscape was undertaken under direct Saudi supervision. These changes extended even to the Hadramout coast, a region traditionally considered a stronghold of Southern forces that had received substantial support from the UAE.

Rather than replacing the departing Southern forces with alternative Southern units or the Nation's Shield Forces, the restructuring focused on expanding the presence of northern formations, through the deployment of units from the Third Division of the "Yemeni Emergency Forces"⁴ to Seiyun and several areas across the Hadramout Wadi and Desert. The measures also included reorganizing northern forces previously affiliated with the First Military Region and [appointing](#) new commanders. Simultaneously, a new Saudi-trained counterterrorism force — [announced](#) by the Yemeni Minister of Information -- was deployed in Mukalla, taking up positions at Al-Rayyan Airport and the Central Prison.

Concurrently, Hadramout Governor Salem Al-Khanbashi and the newly-appointed Defense Minister Taher Al-Aqili [targeted](#) the Barshid Brigade in Mukalla, a prominent Hadrami Elite Forces formation central to defeating the Al-Qaeda in 2016 and securing the Hadramout Coast. Their joint measures resulted in the forced dismissal of approximately 1,500 officers and soldiers hailing from the governorates of South Yemen.

Although positioned far from the active frontlines during the Hadramout Wadi escalation, the Barshid Brigade was still [subjected](#) to intensive Saudi airstrikes along the Hadramout Coast. This bombardment was widely seen as a move to

⁴ The Yemeni Emergency Forces comprise a mix of Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated formations. They consist of six divisions and 22 brigades, with an estimated strength of approximately 35,000 fighters, the majority of whom are from northern Yemen. The forces operate under the command of the Saudi-led Joint Forces Command and are deployed along the border strip extending from Saada to northern Al Jawf. They were previously known as the *Happy Yemen Forces* (Quwat Al-Yaman Al-Saeed) before being restructured and renamed following the establishment of the Presidential Leadership Council in 2022.

neutralize the brigade, given its close ties to the Southern Transitional Council and its strategic role as a primary deterrent against attempts to seize the Coast.

Beyond military restructuring and the purge of Southern personnel, the situation led to severe field incidents, raising legal and human rights concerns. According to [human rights](#) actors and field sources, Southern soldiers were promised safety and protection if they surrendered their heavy weapons and evacuated Hadramout.

However, according to field reports, the guarantees were not honored. Once disarmed and vulnerable, the withdrawing soldiers were ambushed and attacked, leaving multiple personnel dead or wounded.

Additional [field testimonies](#) documented allegations that Southern prisoners faced degrading treatment and sectarian abuse from members of the Saudi-backed Yemeni Emergency Forces. If confirmed, these actions directly violate international humanitarian and human rights laws, which strictly mandate the humane treatment of detainees and prohibit discrimination based on identity or affiliation.

Importantly, this behavior stands in stark contrast to the treatment of prisoners and wounded personnel by STC-aligned forces, which Yemen's newly-appointed Defense Minister, Taher Al-Aqili, [described](#) as "humane".

The security landscape across Al-Mahra, Shabwa and Aden underwent sweeping structural realignments following the military shifts in Hadramout.

In Al Mahra Governorate, the command of military camps and headquarters [shifted](#) from the STC to the Nation's Shield Forces, which assumed control of border crossings and security checkpoints. While these forces are predominantly composed of Southern Yemenis, exceptions include the 123rd Infantry Brigade in Hat District, and a small number of northern personnel within Al Mahra's public security apparatus.

Shabwa Governorate remains heavily garrisoned by ten Shabwa Defense Forces brigades and three Southern Giants units, positioned strategically between Al-Shabika village and Hareeb District along the border with Ma'rib Governorate. The geopolitical shift here was cemented by Saudi forces [occupying](#) the Murrah military base after UAE forces withdrew at the beginning of the year.

Shabwa Governor Awad bin Al-Wazir sought to insulate the governorate from the fallout of the Hadramout events, despite his close relations with the Southern Transitional Council in recent years. In return, Saudi Arabia [committed](#) to fund and protect local stability in Shabwa, and guaranteed that no external troops would be deployed in Shabwa without prior coordination with the governor.

In Aden, the security framework was restructured by replacing local forces with the Special Security Forces under with the Yemeni Ministry of Interior. Checkpoints run by the National Security Forces (formerly the Security Belt Forces) [were removed](#). This restructuring marks a calculated effort to merge these independent units into a centralized command alongside the Aden Security Emergency Forces and the Aden Security Belt Forces, under Saudi oversight.

Saudi-led initiatives systematically altered the military and security landscape in Lahj and Abyan governorates too. Local military formations underwent a gradual reclassification and renumbering process. Saudi committees oversaw the implementation of biometric identification systems to [register](#) personnel and manage salary payments.

Parallel to this, through January and February the Saudi-funded Nation's Shield Forces carried out a [phased deployment](#) at Aden's northern entry points. They set up their own checkpoints and outposts at strategic locations, including the Al-Ribat area, the vicinity of the Al-Anad Base in Lahj Governorate, and key highways linking Aden to surrounding governorates.

Riyadh also purged field commanders who refused to participate in the military operations against fellow Southern forces. Bashir Al-Subaih, the then commander of the Nation's Shield Forces, was ousted after refusing to engage in operations against Southern forces during the Hadramout escalation in early January. He was replaced by Bassam Al-Mahdhar. Similarly, Southern Giants Brigades commander Raed Al-Habhi was [removed](#) from the Sixth Infantry Brigade and replaced by Akram Fouad. While these formations have retained their Southern composition, these command changes reflect a clear trajectory towards restructuring the military and security landscape to align with Riyadh's

strategic priorities while systematically curbing the influence of institutions affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council across South Yemen.

At its core, these sweeping changes across Hadramout, Al Mahra, and Aden were not merely about military redeployment. Rather, they represented a systematic dismantling of the Southern Transitional Council's military influence and a transition from a decentralized "partnership of actors" model towards centralized security management under Saudi oversight. In Hadramout, the restructuring was executed while ignoring the sensitivities and positions of local communities, notably their fierce opposition to the deployment of forces perceived as external actors and their demands to manage their own security and administration.

The replacement of some Southern forces with northern formations sent a clear message: that no actor, including former allies, would be permitted to independently control decision-making. Security in South Yemen has transitioned into a centralized system directed by Riyadh, operating independently of local consensus or consideration for potential consequences. Local anxieties regarding these structural shifts have intensified following recent security operations in the Hadramout Wadi, where the Yemeni Emergency Forces reportedly conducted a series of home [raids and arrests](#) targeting Hadrami youth outside established legal frameworks.

The Security Vacuum and Opportunities for Extremist Group Expansion

The first signs of a security vacuum emerged almost immediately. On 4 January 2026, widespread looting and [disorder](#) affected military camps, weapons depots, and sensitive security sites in Mukalla and around Al-Rayyan International Airport. [Local reports](#) indicated the involvement of armed groups arriving from Ma'rib, alongside tribal groups and civilians, in the seizure of weapons and military equipment.

Amidst this instability, extremist organizations attempted to reactivate their operations following the shifting control in the Hadramout Wadi. An [audio recording](#) attributed to Al-Qaeda figure "Abu Al-Bara'a Al-San'ani" called for

targeting the newly-deployed forces, describing the development as part of an ongoing conflict. [This message echoed](#) the rhetoric of the organization's leader, Saad Atef Al-Awlaki, who described the withdrawal of Southern and Emirati forces from Hadramout as the "breaking of idols."

Similar security developments were witnessed in Al-Mahra. In January 2026, a drone strike targeted a Somali national suspected of affiliation with the Al-Qaeda-linked group Al-Shabaab. This incident revived a familiar security scenario through the use of more advanced technology, illustrating how South Yemen's open borders, expansive coastlines, and vast deserts offer transnational networks the sanctuary needed to move personnel, reorganize, and operate undetected.

In Aden, the security situation has been marked by targeted attacks against both military and civil society figures. One of the most serious manifestations of extremist activity occurred with the [targeting](#) of the convoy of Brigadier General Hamdi Shukri, commander of the Second Brigade of the Southern Giants Forces on 21 January 2026. The attack injured Shukri, killed four of his escorts, and wounded five others. The incident drew widespread official condemnation from the Southern Transitional Council, Aden's local authorities, the Yemeni government, and international actors, who termed it a "terrorist act" aimed at disrupting stability.

This pattern highlights ongoing challenges in investigating the assassination cases targeting Southern leaders, characterized by the absence of public accountability and the failure to identify the actual perpetrators, whether extremist cells or other actors benefiting from these operations. Furthermore, the repeated use of similar media narratives following these incidents has also raised questions regarding possible coordination or complicity in shaping public perceptions.

This is particularly significant given the removal of the Southern actor, led by the Southern Transitional Council, from its previous central role in countering extremist networks. This security vacuum allows the landscape to be reshaped through new mechanisms and managed by actors whose strategic interests align more closely with the current phase and its changing dynamics.

The assassination campaign expanded to civil society figures, as seen in the killing of Wessam Qaed, Acting Executive Director of the Social Fund for Development, in Aden, on 3 May 2026. The incident drew widespread local and international condemnation. The case carries added sensitivity due to the victim's role in a development institution responsible for managing international funding amid competing spheres of influence.

[Confessions](#) reportedly made by one of the suspects indicated the involvement of the Houthi movement, as well as individuals linked to past assassination operations linked to the Amjad Khalid cell or the "Al-Turbah cell". This case is tied to the transfer of the Fund's administration to Aden and the reduction of influence by Sana'a-based officials. This has heightened concerns regarding increased cell activity linked to ideological movements using targeted killings to settle disputes and restore influence.

The [assassination](#) of journalist Mohammed Al-Aidah on 24 June 2026, via an explosive device in Mukalla, Hadramout, underscores the region's fragile security landscape, despite six months of Saudi-backed administrative control. Additionally, in early June 2026, field developments triggered concerns regarding a potential resurgence of Al-Qaeda operational activity in Hadramout following years of decline.

These concerns were reinforced by [video](#) footage showing masked, armed individuals, believed to be affiliated with the organization, removing advertising boards for the "Shelter for Abused Women" project in Mukalla. This action followed a coordinated social media campaign by extremist accounts labelling the shelter as a Western-backed ideological infiltration.

This development indicates attempts by extremist organizations to leverage social issues to re-establish influence and impose ideological and security control, reversing a period of relative decline previously maintained through counterterrorism measures implemented by the Hadrami Elite Forces.

III. Political Implications: Reshaping the Balance of Power in South Yemen

The military operations against Southern forces during the early 2026 Hadramout events fundamentally altered the regional balance of power, reversing the political and military influence that the South, led by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), enjoyed prior to late 2025. Southern political discourse reflects a profound sense of shock over these developments, with many viewing them as a defining moment carrying long-lasting consequences. For many South Yemenis, the developments evoke memories of the 1994 war, an event that continues to shape the South's collective memory. The impact has been particularly significant because the military intervention was carried out by Saudi Arabia, disrupting more than a decade of alliance with Southern forces.

Conversely, alternative Southern perspectives argue that the STC's efforts to monopolize representation of the Southern cause initially enabled it to secure prominent positions within the internationally recognized government, including seats on the Presidential Leadership Council and multiple ministerial portfolios following the 2019 Riyadh Agreement and the 2022 Riyadh Consultations. Critics suggest that these gains could have been capitalized on with greater strategic proficiency by effectively leveraging the council's organizational cohesion and its domestic and international presence. From this viewpoint, its handling of the politically sensitive Hadramout file revealed critical shortcomings and leadership miscalculations that ultimately eroded its broader political standing.

Consequently, various rival Yemeni political actors viewed the early 2026 developments as an opportunity to curtail the STC's role in the government. While the STC remained a prominent actor in South Yemen's security architecture, the partnership with the Yemeni government was increasingly seen as imbalanced, as the council disproportionately absorbed the political liabilities and fallout of governance failures, despite public messaging portraying the STC as an equal stakeholder.

The announcement of the STC's dissolution under Saudi pressure in Riyadh significantly transformed the political landscape. In the immediate aftermath,

members of the STC delegation displayed visible confusion, and their media appearances remained highly cautious as they struggled to provide the Southern public with a clear rationale for the decision. While some delegation members defended the move, framing it as an internal conviction that dissolving the council was the most appropriate step to [restore](#) the Southern cause to its proper trajectory, former STC Vice President Hani bin Breik offered a markedly different [account](#). He stated that "the delegation was forcibly compelled to make the decision" and characterized the proceedings as "a farcical and deeply disgraceful spectacle."

The dissolution triggered widespread public rejection and open opposition from STC leaders and members located outside Riyadh. They demanded the release of what they described as the "detained delegation" in Riyadh, maintaining that its members were prohibited from leaving Saudi Arabia. Concurrently, STC headquarters and administrative offices in Aden were repeatedly [closed](#), sparking extensive public protests, with demonstrators condemning the measures as politically motivated restrictions on organizational activity and peaceful political expression. Sustained public pressure eventually forced the [reopening](#) of these offices.

In the ensuing months, the STC's Foreign Affairs Department [organized](#) a series of meetings to rebuild the council's international presence and leverage its domestic political base. However, these diplomatic efforts and the overall level of engagement they received, remained limited compared to the political influence the council previously commanded. This decline in leverage was further underscored by the continued public absence of STC President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, who has refrained from public appearances, restricting his communication to occasional written statements on his personal social media accounts and intermittent audio recordings broadcast by the council's Aden Independent Channel.

Administrative measures adopted by the Yemeni authorities under Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad Al-Alimi effectively dismantled the governing framework established by the 2019 Riyadh Agreement and the 2022 Gulf Cooperation Council consultations. This has led to the exclusion of South Yemen's primary political representation from national decision-making, repeating patterns of political marginalization that followed the 1994 war. While

several Southern figures continue to hold positions within the government and the Presidential Leadership Council, their participation is limited to individual roles rather than institutional political representation capable of directing national decision-making.

Following the decline of the STC's role within the formal political structure, numerous Southern political groups moved to revive older Southern political organizations, including factions led by former high-ranking STC figures who had benefited from its substantial financial resources. Simultaneously, new political entities emerged to navigate the changing political landscape in South Yemen. Arguably, this fragmentation of political activity across competing groups could have been avoided had these political forces been incorporated into a broader national framework capable of unifying Southern actors, as a more cohesive coalition could have strengthened collective representation. This dynamic raises the question of whether maintaining the council as a unified institution, with leadership adjustments if required, would have been a more effective option than its complete dissolution.

These structural changes were closely linked to the Saudi pressure exerted on the STC. According to an anonymous source in Riyadh who spoke to the South24 Center, the STC delegation was presented with three specific demands upon arrival in Riyadh: clarifying the whereabouts of STC President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, providing a detailed account of the events following the entry of Southern forces into Hadramout, and dissolving the STC without delay. The source also stated that Defense Minister Mohsen Al-Daeri was detained for more than two weeks before being dismissed from office due to his support for the STC during the Hadramout events.

A more complex reality remains difficult to overlook: excluding the Southern Transitional Council from the political equation does not automatically guarantee a more stable or moderate South, even if the council did not [fully align](#) with Saudi Arabia's long-term strategic vision for Yemen. On the contrary, such an outcome could produce the opposite effect. Political and security vacuums in South Yemen are rarely left unfilled. Instead, they tend to be occupied by alternative factions possessing stronger ideological organization, deeper networks of influence, and greater political discipline. Historically, these environments have created opportunities for the rise of highly organized

ideological movements, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen. These domestic developments are unfolding at a time when policy [discussions](#) in the United States have considered the possibility of designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group, a measure already adopted by several states in the region.

IV. Saudi Arabia's Role in Managing the Crisis and Reshaping the Landscape

The Nature of Saudi Intervention (Security and Political)

Saudi Arabia's approach toward South Yemen, exemplified by the January 2026 Hadramout intervention, is rooted in its historical management of the Yemen file as a direct extension of its national security priority rather than a standard foreign policy issue. Prior to the 1990 unification, Saudi Arabia's strategic calculations regarding both South Yemen and North Yemen focused on two main objectives: preventing the rise of a [neighbor strong](#) enough to challenge its regional influence or threaten its southern borders, while avoiding a complete state collapse that could invite instability or external regional penetration.

Within this framework, the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), represented a highly sensitive zone for Riyadh. This was driven by two factors: its strategic maritime position along the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, and also from the political system governing Aden at the time, its ideological orientation, and its external alliances, that ran counter to Saudi strategic security calculations.

This approach was evident in Riyadh's positions during the 1990 unification and the subsequent 1994 civil war. Rather than operating from a rigid ideological perspective, Saudi Arabia approached the South as part of a broader strategy to manage the balance of power within Yemen. Consequently, Riyadh opposed the consolidation of a strong, unified Yemeni state on its border, while simultaneously supporting Southern actors – regardless of ideological differences -- whenever it served Saudi strategic interests.

Following the 1994 war, South Yemen remained a focus Saudi attention. However, it transitioned from being an independent political entity into an issue managed within the broader Yemeni equation, through which Riyadh balanced its relations with Sana'a, local and tribal actors, and Southern political figures.

From this perspective, the January 2026 intervention in Hadramout serves as a continuation of this [historical approach](#), driven by specific regional factors. Due to its direct access to the Arabian Sea, its proximity to the Saudi border, and its

vital economic and energy assets, Hadramout remains a critical focus in Saudi strategic calculations. The implementation of more decisive measures in Hadramout represents an effort to recalibrate the balance of power in eastern South Yemen and block the emergence of a political or military reality that runs counter to Saudi strategic and economic goals in the region.

Saudi involvement in the Hadramout file did not begin with the events of December 2025; rather it built upon earlier efforts to [consolidate](#) Hadrami actors under a single political framework, through the establishment of the Hadramout National Council in June 2023. This move coincided with parallel efforts by the Southern Transitional Council leadership, which held extensive consultations in Mukalla and Seiyun to implement the outcomes of the May 2023 Aden Southern [Consultative Meeting](#), which had successfully brought together a wide array of Southern political forces under a shared political framework to strengthen Southern cohesion.

The Saudi-backed Hadrami political entity operated as a counterweight designed to rebalance regional influence and reduce the presence of UAE-aligned political forces in South Yemen. From its inception, however, the Hadramout National Council generated [mixed reactions](#) among local Hadrami actors. Some criticized it due to its links with Yemeni political parties that in their view did not align with Hadramout's unique regional identity and interests, while others questioned its effectiveness and ability to genuinely represent the governorate's aspirations.

Another important factor is the repositioning of forces in Hadramout between 2023 and 2026, resulting in a phased transition of key security hubs and border crossings to Saudi-backed control. In May 2023, Hadramout's local authorities announced they had [assumed control](#) of Al-Rayyan International Airport in Mukalla under Saudi supervision. The facility had hosted an Emirati military presence since the launch of counterterrorism operations in 2016. Nevertheless, Emirati personnel remained stationed at Al-Rayyan Airport and its adjacent military base that served as an operational command center for managing security along the Hadramout Coast and as a strategic hub for Emirati-led counterterrorism operations until the formal withdrawal of Emirati forces in January 2026.

Taken together, these steps formed part of an early Saudi effort to reshape the balance of influence in Hadramout, and gradually reduce the Emirati footprint in the governorate. This trajectory led to the transfer [of control over](#) the Al-Wadiah land border crossing – a vital transit corridor between South Yemen and Saudi Arabia -- to the Nation's Shield Forces in August 2024. Later, the [killing of two Saudi](#) soldiers in the Hadramout Wadi in November 2024 prompted the deployment of these Riyadh-backed forces across other areas of the Hadramout Wadi and Desert to reinforce Saudi security influence.

The events of January 2026 demonstrated that Hadramout represents a red line for Riyadh, an issue on which it is unwilling to compromise, prompting a more decisive shift once diplomatic channels with the Southern Transitional Council were exhausted. Saudi strategic assessment extended beyond viewing the STC as an independent actor, instead regarding it as closely linked to the UAE's regional role within a territory considered vital to Saudi national security.

In theory, an alternative security arrangement could have been reached through tripartite coordination among Southern forces, the Nation's Shield Forces and Saudi Arabia, following the removal of the First Military Region. However, Riyadh rejected this collaborative model and instead insisted on the total withdrawal of Southern forces from both Hadramout and Al Mahra. The STC rejected this demand, complicating the diplomatic track, and escalating the political stand-off into an overt military confrontation.

Available evidence indicates that Saudi-backed forces are positioned across most governorates of South Yemen, including Hadramout, Aden, Al Mahra, Shabwa, Abyan, and Lahj. This extensive deployment forms part of an effort to reshape the balance of power under Saudi influence. The composition of these forces, including their brigades and personnel, has also been documented through biometric registration systems implemented by Saudi oversight committees. This serves to reshape the security architecture and redraw the map of control away from the STC's established sphere of influence.

This consolidation may point toward preparations for future integration strategies. These measures could lay the groundwork for the eventual restructuring or integration of various military formations with army units based

in northern areas under the internationally recognized government, such as Ma'rib, Taiz, and the Western coast. These moves come amid the continued absence of a unified framework to integrate Yemen's diverse military forces.

The Call for South–South Dialogue: Objectives and Implications

Following Saudi Arabia's announcement that it would sponsor a South-South dialogue, delegations representing various Southern political forces arrived in Riyadh to initiate preliminary talks. Several participants emphasized that the Saudi reception reflected an effort by Riyadh to signal openness toward broader Southern representation.

This included allocating a hall for a consultative meeting of political forces advocating for the independence of South Yemen, where the Southern flag and anthem were [displayed](#) on electronic screens inside the venue. Some participants viewed these measures as a major pivot in Saudi policy toward the Southern file.

Conversely, others characterized these steps as a tactical effort to contain tensions and mitigate growing public anger in South Yemen, particularly following the military strikes against Southern forces that resulted in over 300 casualties, including civilian deaths and injuries, across Hadramout and Al-Dhalea.



Figure 5: Southern leaders and activists attending the consultative meeting in Riyadh as part of the South–South dialogue process, 18 January 2026. (Southern activists on X)

The debate surrounding the Saudi-sponsored South-South dialogue highlights two contrasting viewpoints among Southern political actors. Certain Southern actors aligned with Riyadh contend that Saudi Arabia's regional leverage, geopolitical proximity with South Yemen, and its position as the most influential actor managing the Yemeni file necessitate supporting a transparent, Saudi-sponsored South-South dialogue involving all political forces. According to this perspective, such dialogue must remain anchored in the political realities of South Yemen and the core issues of the Southern cause, translating public aspirations into functional mechanisms of representation and sustainable outcomes.

Conversely, other Southern groups express concern that Saudi management could steer the final outcomes toward alternative political pathways that diverge from popular demands. To mitigate this risk, other voices advocate for the dialogue to be facilitated by independent international actors and be conducted inside South Yemen rather than abroad, arguing that a domestic venue would strengthen the process's credibility and align it closer with the local context.

So far, Riyadh has refrained from positioning itself as a direct party to the current crisis or as a mediator seeking to impose pre-determined solutions on Southern actors regarding the South Yemen issue. Saudi Arabia has also avoided any overt

public role that would suggest it is attempting to impose a specific agenda on the South-South dialogue. Instead, the Kingdom has framed its involvement as a facilitator, hosting the discussions in Riyadh to distance the talks from the tensions in South Yemen.

This approach reflects an attempt to provide Southern actors with the political space necessary to formulate shared frameworks and mitigate internal polarization through voluntary consensus. Such a process could contribute to managing existing differences temporarily until a comprehensive, nationwide political settlement is achieved for all of Yemen, rather than South Yemen alone.

Saudi Arabia's Strategic Interests in Hadramout

Saudi Arabia's strategic interest in Hadramout is fundamentally driven by the governorate's geographic location and direct access to the Arabian Sea. By securing alternative maritime access routes to open oceans, the Kingdom seeks to bypass vulnerable shipping corridors, primarily the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, during periods of regional crisis.

Recent discussions have focused on a [strategic maritime project](#) linking the Arabian Gulf to the Arabian Sea through a 950-kilometers waterway, spanning 630 kilometers within Saudi territory and 320 kilometers through South Yemen. Saudi interest in Hadramout can therefore be understood within a broader vision focused on diversifying its export routes and strengthening energy security by securing influence in this strategically important area.

This maritime alternative has gained traction among Saudi academic and economic [circles](#) following the ongoing disruptions to navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, linked to the Israeli–American conflict with Iran. These disruptions have negatively affected Gulf economies, with international financial institutions [estimating](#) that daily oil revenue losses reached approximately \$700 million during periods of transit interruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, securing an eastern Yemeni route is viewed as a vital buffer.

Following the developments in Hadramout in early 2026, Saudi policy reflected a clear emphasis on the eastern governorates of South Yemen. A primary example is the initiative to activate an [electricity interconnection project](#)

targeting Hadramout, Al Mahra, and Shabwa, aimed at delivering a stable power supply with a capacity ranging between 500 and 1,000 megawatts.

Although the project remains theoretical and comes amid heightened public dissatisfaction in Hadramout over the collapse of electricity services, the decision to treat the eastern governorates as a distinct zone separate from the rest of South Yemen has raised concerns among many Southern political actors that it could, in the long term, contribute to reinforcing divisions between the eastern and western governorates, and systematically widen the political and geographic fragmentation of South Yemen.

These regional dynamics intersect directly with ongoing debates surrounding the anticipated South–South dialogue in Riyadh and its potential impact on future political and administrative frameworks.

Riyadh’s focused interest in eastern South Yemen, particularly Hadramout, appears closely tied to the governorate’s distinct geographic, economic, and security importance. Within Hadramout, tribal factions aligned with Saudi Arabia have previously articulated various aspirations regarding their relationship with the Kingdom.

A prominent example includes a [document](#) reportedly signed by 95 Hadrami tribal sheikhs in 2015 explicitly calling for the governorate’s incorporation into Saudi Arabia, a move that triggered intense public and political debate between proponents and critics. As current political transformations unfold, the resurgence of such integration proposals remains possible especially if the final terms of the Riyadh-led dialogue accord Hadramout a special political status or greater autonomy in determining its political future.

V. The Balance of Influence Between Saudi Arabia and the UAE

The Nature of Riyadh–Abu Dhabi Relations Following the Hadramout Events

The transformation in the nature of the Saudi-Emirati relationship within the Yemen file resulted from a divergence of strategic priorities rather than a sudden development. Although both entered the war in 2015 under a coalition framework to counter the Houthi movement and restore the Yemeni state, the centrality of this shared mission diminished over time as each actor prioritized distinct security and political objectives.

For Saudi Arabia, the Houthis remained a direct threat to its national security and southern borders, although the immediacy of this threat decreased following bilateral understandings established with the group in 2023. In contrast, the UAE strategy concentrated on countering Islamist and extremist groups in South Yemen and supporting local Southern actors, particularly the Southern Transitional Council, to consolidate regional stability. These differing priorities created gradual tensions that shaped the roles and alliances of both countries.

Friction became more visible following Abu Dhabi's 2019 decision to reduce its military presence and withdraw a portion of its forces. Saudi Arabia appears to have viewed the UAE as having secured many of its primary objectives in Yemen during the early years of the war by establishing influence over strategic Southern cities and ports, including Aden, Mukalla, and Shabwa. Meanwhile, Riyadh found itself engaged in a prolonged, complex, and costly conflict against the Houthis along its southern border.

This reality later contributed to a shift in Saudi Arabia's approach toward the Houthi movement, leading to direct bilateral understandings with the group aimed at reducing the military and political costs of the conflict, particularly after Riyadh signed the [Beijing Agreement](#) with Tehran in March 2023.

Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE interacted across other regional files, such as Libya and Sudan, those arenas carried lower priority for Riyadh due to their limited direct relevance to its geographical security concerns. However, subsequent developments in South Yemen, specifically the expansion of the Southern Transitional Council's influence and its control over Hadramout and Al Mahra, led Saudi Arabia to classify the situation as a potential "national security threat." Riyadh also incorporated ideological narratives regarding relations with Israel into its media discourse to mobilize domestic, Yemeni, and military audiences against the STC's advances.

Ultimately, Saudi Arabia reconfigured the balance of influence in South Yemen in its favor by securing Hadramout and Al Mahra and expanding into Southern governorates previously aligned with the Southern Transitional Council, effectively displacing the UAE from direct leverage over the Southern landscape.

While Saudi-Emirati tensions appear unlikely to escalate into a severe rupture akin to the 2017 Qatar crisis, the trajectory of relations between the two Gulf allies is no longer as stable as previously assumed. Accumulated differences over Yemen, the Red Sea, and regional security arrangements have exposed underlying strains within the Gulf alliance structure.

This instability has been particularly evident [amid criticism](#) of Saudi Arabia's response to the intensified Iranian attacks against Gulf states, which some observers viewed as relying largely on diplomatic condemnation and crisis management rather than concrete deterrent action toward Tehran. This perception has contributed to [broader concerns](#) within the Gulf regarding the reliability of the collective deterrence framework when confronted with direct threats to regional security and state sovereignty.

The underlying differences also contributed to the UAE's decision to [withdraw](#) from the Saudi- and Russian- led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and OPEC+ frameworks. The withdrawal followed Emirati [criticism](#) of the responses of Arab states, including Gulf countries, to sustained Iranian aggression. This is highlighted by the fact that the UAE was the Gulf state most impacted by these attacks, being targeted by over 2,800 Iranian missiles and drones, exceeding the attacks directed at other regional actors, including Israel. In addition, [international reports](#) indicated that Saudi Arabia, with its long

Red Sea coastline, and Oman, with direct access to the Arabian Sea, enjoy advantages in oil revenues compared to many of their Gulf neighbors. Riyadh has the capacity to reroute a significant portion of its crude oil exports through the Red Sea. Nevertheless, the UAE justified its withdrawal as a sovereign and strategic decision driven by its long-term economic vision.

The Impact of Bilateral Relations on South Yemen's Political Future

Throughout the years of conflict in Yemen, the UAE developed extensive partnerships with Southern forces and provided the political and military assistance that strengthened the Southern Transitional Council's position. Concurrently, Abu Dhabi maintained a clear policy aimed at containing Islamist movements, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islah Party, a policy it sustained even after reducing its direct military presence in 2019.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia's approach towards Southern actors has been characterized by frequent shifts driven by evolving political, military, and strategic conditions. This divergence fostered a perception among many Southerners that the partnership with Abu Dhabi was more consistent and predictable, especially when contrasted with Saudi Arabia's policies toward other Yemeni actors, such as the Houthis and Islamist groups, which were seen as more flexible and accommodating.

The reduction of the UAE's direct presence does not appear to have fundamentally altered the underlying nature of its relationship with Southern actors. Abu Dhabi continues to host several key Southern Transitional Council leadership figures, whereas Southern representatives based in Riyadh have not succeeded in producing significant changes in Saudi Arabia's restrictive policy towards the Council.

Riyadh continues to maintain its policy of limiting the STC's political role, despite concessions and efforts by Southern leaders to adapt to the changing political environment. Furthermore, the anticipated South–South dialogue process remains clouded by deep uncertainty regarding its timing, structure, participating actors, and potential outcomes.

The long-term stability of South Yemen remains vulnerable to the ongoing policy differences between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, particularly as Saudi Arabia seeks to expand its regional influence without providing clear guarantees regarding the future trajectory of Southern political governance.

These bilateral frictions may also affect local dynamics, particularly as Saudi Arabia continues channeling substantial financial backing to political and economic factions aligned with its goals. While this funding may temporarily alleviate immediate socioeconomic pressures, it is unlikely, on its own, to resolve the primary drivers of political and public instability in South Yemen.

VI. Societal Implications: Between Public Rejection and the Fragility of Stability

Public Reactions

Alongside the military and political developments that followed the Hadramout events, widespread public mobilization across the governorates of Aden and Hadramout reflected broad popular support for the South's political leadership. A turning point came on 10 January 2026 when a massive [demonstration](#) was held in Aden to express solidarity with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Southern Armed Forces in response to measures viewed by the Southern popular base as exclusionary and hostile. This momentum was later reinforced through an even [larger demonstration](#) in Aden, organized in response to a call by STC President Aidarous Al-Zubaidi. This rally signaled a broader political shift, conveying direct messages of support for the Constitutional Declaration announced by Al-Zubaidi and demanding the immediate release of the Southern delegation detained in Riyadh, while also setting off a wave of coordinated protests across the other South Yemen governorates.

While the overall protest movement remained peaceful, security forces in several governorates resorted to the use of excessive force and live ammunition. This pattern became evident during successive confrontations in Ataq, Aden, and Mukalla. During a 10 February 2026 [protest](#) in Ataq, Shabwa Governorate, security forces opened fire on protesters, killing six people and injuring more than 30 others – an action for which the STC held the governorate's Security Committee and all military and security agencies fully liable. Later that month, on 19 February 2026, security forces stationed in the Maashiq area of Aden's Crater District, used live fire to disperse hundreds of demonstrators protesting the arrival of northern ministers tied to the newly-formed government, killing one person and wounding 19. A similar pattern of excessive force occurred on 4 April 2026 in Mukalla, Hadramout Governorate, where Saudi-backed forces confronted demonstrators protesting alleged abuses by local authorities led by the governor, who was supported by military units from outside the governorate. The intervention resulted in two deaths and injuries to at least four others.

Large-scale demonstrations continued across the governorates of South Yemen, centered on the demand to “restore the State of South Yemen”. A significant trend during this period was the manifestation of explicit public opposition to Saudi Arabia’s role. Public anger and defiance were illustrated by incidents in Seiyun and Aden, where [protestors](#) removed and destroyed images of the Saudi leadership, including the King and Crown Prince.

While such actions could be viewed as isolated incidents carried out by individuals, they reflect a significant shift in popular sentiment that had previously been defined by years of military cooperation, partnership, and respect towards Riyadh. This breakdown in the relationship stems directly from the recent Saudi air campaign against Southern forces, which resulted in a major military setback, undermined strategic ties, and fueled widespread local anger.

This anti-Saudi sentiment peaked during the [STC-organized](#) mass rallies on 20 June 2026, under the slogan “Million March Rejecting Saudi Guardianship and Opposing Occupation,” which were held simultaneously in Aden, Mukalla, and Seiyun, drawing tens of thousands of participants despite security restrictions and a campaign of arrests targeting demonstrators.

Local Communities and Externally Backed Forces: Challenges of Acceptance and Risks of Tension

The experiences of popular mobilization underscore the need for establishing a political and organizational framework rooted in genuine societal aspirations, rather than being used as leverage in regional influence struggles or in political and economic bargaining linked to regional interests. To achieve this, the Southern movement must establish grassroots social accountability systems to monitor leadership actions. It also necessitates fostering an institutional culture based on the rotation of responsibilities, limiting personalized leadership, alongside adopting open internal practices that contribute to building political actors better able to represent and respond to society.

The fallout from the Hadramout crisis has brought longstanding institutional bottlenecks within the Southern Transitional Council to the forefront. Alongside the pressures of external regional intervention on decision-making, issues

related to limited institutional capacity and leadership selection mechanisms have become increasingly evident. In some cases, regional considerations and loyalty networks have taken precedence over merit, competence and experience, undermining the efficacy of several civilian and military institutions, leading to administrative inefficiency. Furthermore, the expansion of structures and positions within the STC has created an oversized organizational apparatus that exceeds actual operational needs. This has resulted in overlapping jurisdictions, compromised accountability, and diminished operational efficiency across multiple organizational tiers, hampering the Council's capacity to navigate political and administrative challenges.

These systemic shortcomings, coupled with targeted Saudi financial incentives, have prompted some political figures to defect from the STC and reactivate older factional components that had been marginalized during the Council's period of political dominance. Concurrently, the emergence of new, Saudi-backed political groupings has fragmented the Southern political landscape, mirroring the deep divisions that existed before the establishment of the STC in 2017. The primary danger of this fragmentation is that it reinforces perceptions among regional and international actors that the South lacks a unified entity that possesses the exclusive legitimacy to negotiate. This is the same argument that diplomatic circles have repeatedly raised in their engagements with Southern actors, potentially reversing previous political gains and returning Southern representation to its earlier fragmented state.

Notably, these newly-emerging political components face a significant challenge regarding public legitimacy. The Southern public continues to regard the STC as the primary unifying political entity despite its structural shortcomings, particularly given that it was founded during a critical geopolitical and military phase by prominent leaders of the Southern movement. Consequently, attempts to impose political alternatives that diverge from the core aspirations articulated by the Southern movement since 2007 risks sparking severe social unrest. Any political pathway that bypasses these public demands is likely to undermine local stability and cause further escalation. Therefore, lasting stabilization requires accommodating the Southern popular base and formulating a sustainable political settlement that addresses its aspirations, rather than attempting to

circumvent these demands by engineering parallel entities or enforcing dialogue outcomes that lack broad public acceptance.

In addition, the post-Hadramout political developments have altered social cohesion across South Yemen, contributing to regional divisions and internal disagreements within the social fabric at an unprecedented level. These polarizing dynamics have penetrated historically cohesive communities with strong tribal structures, most notably Yafa. For instance, Yafa's annual heritage festival on 4 June, -- traditionally a cultural and social occasion celebrating local heritage --, transformed into a platform for political debate due to disagreements surrounding the messages conveyed through the event. During the event, Sheikh Abdulrab Al-Naqib, a member of the STC Presidency, delivered a [speech](#) sharply criticizing Saudi Arabia's role and the internationally recognized government, labeling it a "failed northern legitimacy", while denouncing the deteriorating local conditions and what he described as deliberate efforts to stoke internal Southern divisions. This event was preceded by a wave of external funding targeted at shifting the allegiances of key tribal and local figures toward regional powers, specifically Saudi Arabia, presenting a direct challenge to social cohesion and local stability in these areas.

Local media outlets, journalists, and social media activists, some of whom were hosted on official visits to Saudi Arabia, have contributed to deepening polarization within South Yemen by raising divisive regional and political issues. These coordinated campaigns appear directed at eroding popular cohesion in areas of traditional strategic importance to the Southern movement. This media offensive was matched by official [Saudi press outlets](#). Notably, the prominent Saudi newspaper *Al-Watan*, which is considered close to Riyadh's decision-making circles, published a series of reports accusing Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, the STC, and the UAE, of involvement in the past assassinations of prominent Southern figures, including Major General Thabet Jawas and former Aden Governor Jaafar Saad. These allegations directly contradicted previous findings by Aden's security and judicial institutions, which had already investigated the cases and linked the killings to ISIS or Houthi cells.

Compounding these political and social developments, the chronic deterioration of public services has increased public discontent and severely strained local stability, amid worsening living conditions and declining state capacity to

respond to citizens' demands. Urban centers including Aden and Mukalla face a severe utility crisis, particularly in the energy sector, marked by repeated electricity blackouts that routinely exceed 12 hours per day. This systemic failure has triggered public protests over the electricity cuts and fuel shortages, while the skyrocketing prices of basic commodities and fuel have added to the economic burden on the people.

VII. Potential Scenarios

The overall developments following the Hadramout events indicate that the political landscape in South Yemen is no longer stable or predictable. Instead, the region has entered an open-ended phase of realignment driven by competing foreign agendas, and a deepening crisis of Southern representation. As security, political, and social vacuums continue to grow across the territory, local dynamics grow increasingly unpredictable. Based on these intersecting factors, three primary scenarios can be anticipated for the next phase.

Scenario One: Containing the Crisis Through a Saudi-Sponsored Southern Settlement

This scenario is based on the assumption that Saudi Arabia effectively channels the aftermath of the recent military and political escalations into a managed negotiating process by sponsoring a South-South dialogue in Riyadh. The talks would involve multiple political forces, including figures close to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), alongside newly-emerged or repositioned Southern actors post the Hadramout events. Under this scenario, Riyadh would shift away from treating the STC as the sole interlocutor for the Southern cause, but stop short of its total exclusion to prevent severe public backlash and regional instability.

This strategy stems from a presumed Saudi assessment that direct security control -- no matter how military decisive --, cannot yield sustainable political stability in South Yemen. This is particularly true, given the mounting public opposition to the post-Hadramout measures and an erosion of trust between Riyadh and a broad segment of the Southern populace. Consequently, Saudi Arabia may seek to leverage the dialogue as a mechanism to restructure the Southern political landscape, diffuse public anger, and allow regulated internal competition among Southern actors, within a political framework that preserves its overarching strategic interests in Hadramout, Al-Mahra, and the Arabian Sea.

The viability of this scenario would hinge on several factors, most notably on Riyadh's willingness to offer genuine political and security guarantees to all Southern participants, and ensuring the dialogue does not devolve into a

mechanism for creating superficial entities or imposing predetermined outcomes. The success would also require tangible de-escalation measures: easing local security restrictions, releasing detained leaders and delegations, halting adversarial media campaigns, and implementing immediate economic and service-related interventions. Prioritizing critical public services – specifically stabilizing the electricity grid, securing fuel supplies, and ensuring salary disbursements – is essential. Without these foundational steps, the dialogue risks transitioning from a crisis-management opportunity into an additional catalyst for division and further erosion of trust.

If this scenario materializes, it will likely yield relative, short-term stability rather than a definitive resolution of the Southern cause. Its most probable outcomes point toward a middle-ground political formula: granting Hadramout and Al-Mahra special administrative or security status while redistributing political influence within South Yemen in a more pluralistic manner. However, this Saudi intervention could also raise concerns over the gradual, structural separation between eastern and western South Yemen, or reshaping South Yemen based on external regional influence calculations, rather than a unified popular will.

Scenario Two: Fragmentation of Southern Representation and Continued Fragile Stability

This scenario assumes the long-term continuation of the current status quo. It is characterized by Saudi Arabia's inability to broker a viable political settlement, the STC's failure to restore its previous position amid the emergence of rival Southern factions, and the deepening regional and political polarization within Southern society. Under this scenario, South Yemen would transform into a fractured sphere of influence managed externally through loose security arrangements but completely lacking a centralized political core capable of unified representation, negotiation, or maintaining public order.

This trajectory appears increasingly probable if the current policies persist, specifically those aimed at dismantling the STC's military and political influence while propping up alternative actors that lack broad popular legitimacy. Weakening the South's most dominant political player will not automatically produce a more moderate or widely acceptable substitute. Instead, it is more

likely to create a broad political vacuum, vulnerable to exploitation by competing local factions driven by external, regional or ideological agendas.

Rather than causing an immediate, comprehensive collapse, this scenario threatens a gradual erosion of the region's foundational stability. While Saudi-backed forces would maintain tactical control over major cities, border crossings, and military bases, they would face a deepening rift with the local populace. Public resentment remains particularly acute in Hadramout and Aden, where recent memories of bombardment, political repression, and arbitrary arrests run deep. Persistent economic decay and public service collapse would inevitably shift public anger from organized political protests into a broad societal rebellion that cannot be contained by security measures alone.

This environment would allow extremist groups and transnational cells to gradually re-emerge, particularly across the vulnerable open terrain of coastal and desert regions, amid the decline of local counterterrorism forces – that previously held vital operational experience. Rather than seeking overt territorial control as seen in previous years, these extremist networks are more likely to employ destabilizing tactics. These include targeted assassinations, inciting social unrest, attacks on security and civilian leaders, and the reactivation of dormant urban and peripheral networks.

This scenario would result in a South Yemen that is politically fractured and artificially contained by security measures, yet deeply fragile and highly susceptible to recurring escalations. While this environment may provide external regional actors temporary leverage over the landscape, it would completely fail to establish durable legitimacy or address the underlying root causes of the Southern movement. Instead, it would return the political landscape to the fragmented state that existed before the formation of a unified Southern political bloc.

Scenario Three: Renewed Southern Cohesion and the Imposition of a More Balanced Settlement

This scenario hinges on Southern forces -- particularly the broad popular base of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) -- successfully channeling public

discontent into an organized political process that rebuilds a unified Southern bloc. This effort would aim to address past shortcomings and integrate diverse Southern actors within a more institutionalized framework of representation. Under this scenario, while a return to the status quo preceding the Hadramout events remains unlikely, a more mature Southern formula could emerge, combining popular legitimacy, organizational capacity, and an openness to negotiation.

This trajectory is grounded in the reality that degrading the STC's formal structure does not automatically dismantle the political movement it represents. The core Southern demands, articulated by the Southern Movement since 2007 and subsequently organized under the STC's political and military framework, remain embedded within the local populace. In fact, rather than suppressing these aspirations, the post-Hadramout interventions, strikes, and protests have only reinforced them with a heightened sense of marginalization. Consequently, attempts by external powers to bypass this popular sentiment or impose alternative political proxies could likely backfire, providing Southern forces with a powerful catalyst to regroup around a more resilient political vision.

However, realizing this scenario depends on deep internal reform within the Southern political structure. Revitalizing cohesion cannot be accomplished through emotional rhetoric alone or a reliance on the historical symbolism of the STC and its leadership. Instead, it requires genuine organizational reform to address administrative inefficiencies, overlapping jurisdictions, enforce merit-based appointment standards, and eliminate personal and regional biases within existing political structures. Furthermore, it requires establishing a more collective political leadership capable of engaging local communities and rebuilding deep trust with Hadramout, Al-Mahra, and Shabwa, -- ensuring that the Southern cause is never perceived as dominated by a single geographic or political center.

Should Southern forces succeed in achieving this internal consolidation, Saudi Arabia may face an entirely new strategic equation. Instead of easily managing a fractured landscape of competing factions, Riyadh would have to engage with a broad, cohesive Southern bloc that cannot be sidelined in any future Yemeni or regional settlement. While this may not translate into immediate recognition of independence, it could force the reintegration of the Southern issue as a distinct

negotiating file, preventing external actors from imposing political or administrative arrangements over South Yemen's territory, resources, and geographic position without the approval of its recognized representatives.

Although this scenario appears more difficult to implement in practical terms, it presents the most viable pathway to sustainable regional stability, provided its internal and external conditions are met. A politically unified South Yemen,-- even one navigating internal disagreements --, would be less vulnerable to external interference, more capable of negotiation, and better positioned to navigate complex relationships with regional and international powers. Conversely, a fragmented South Yemen governed through temporary security arrangements would remain vulnerable to repeated cycles of escalation, regardless of how calm the situation may appear on the surface.

VIII. Recommendations

First: Recommendations for the Southern Transitional Council

- **Strengthen Internal Cohesion and Restructure the Organizational Framework:** Conduct a comprehensive review of leadership and administrative structures to ensure greater efficiency, reduce overlapping authorities, and improve decision-making effectiveness.
- **Rebuild Political Presence on Institutional Foundations:** Enhance organizational discipline and develop more inclusive representation mechanisms that reflect the geographic and political diversity within South Yemen, contributing to restoring internal and external confidence.
- **Adopt Leadership Renewal and Rotation Strategies:** Implement a serious strategy for leadership renewal and rotation, giving priority to promoting qualified young men and women into decision-making positions. This will help maintain organizational cohesion in the face of parallel efforts to create competing structures.

Maintain Commitment to the Principle of "Independent Southern Decision-Making": Protect the decision-making process from external pressures or dictates that may conflict with the principles and aspirations of the Southern popular base. This requires balancing strategic partnerships with regional actors while preserving popular legitimacy as the primary source of authority for any political move or settlement.

- **Establish a Permanent Crisis Management Room:** Create a permanent political and strategic crisis-management room composed of political, legal, security, economic, and media figures. This body will assess developments on a daily basis and provide regular situation assessments to the leadership, reducing reactive or delayed decisions and enhancing the STC's flexibility toward local and regional changes.

- **Reformulate Political Discourse:** Adapt the STC's political discourse to combine a firm commitment to the right of South Yemenis to determine their political future with responsible communication toward regional and international actors. This will preserve the strength of the Southern position while avoiding confrontational rhetoric that could be used to isolate the STC or damage its external image.
- **Develop a Defined Negotiating Vision:** Establish a clear, publicly stated negotiating vision for any South-South dialogue or comprehensive Yemeni settlement. This framework should define core principles, minimum requirements, necessary guarantees, and representation mechanisms, to prevent engagement in vague, open-ended political processes that could marginalize the Southern cause or reproduce arrangements that diverge from popular aspirations.
- **Review the Hadramout and Al-Mahra Files:** Initiate a dedicated review process for the Hadramout and Al-Mahra files by adopting an approach that is sensitive to the local characteristics of both governorates. This involves engaging independent social, political, and tribal elites while providing clear assurances that the Southern Project preserves local identities and empowers the people to manage their affairs within an inclusive Southern framework.
- **Strengthen Human Rights and Legal Efforts:** Establish a specialized unit to systematically document violations affecting civilians, protesters, and members of the Southern forces. This unit should prepare comprehensive legal files for submission to international human rights organizations, legal bodies and diplomatic missions.
- **Launch an Internal Southern Reconciliation Initiative:** Implement an internal reconciliation initiative designed to address social tensions and counter regional polarization. This effort should target local, tribal, youth, and media figures, focusing on protecting social cohesion from attempts at fragmentation, and preventing political disagreements from escalating into regional or tribal divisions.
- **Reactivate the External Affairs Department:** Restructure the STC's external affairs department around a professional strategy focused on building regular communication channels with influential capitals, United Nations missions,

research centers, and Western parliaments. The department should frame the Southern issue as a matter directly connected to regional stability, counterterrorism, maritime security, and energy security.

- **Enhance Internal Transparency:** Improve internal transparency regarding the management of resources, external support, and foreign relations to mitigate rumors and internal divisions. Establishing clear oversight and accountability mechanisms within the STC's civilian and military institutions will prevent financial or organizational vulnerabilities from being exploited to induce defections or weaken the Council's structure.
- **Develop a Disciplined Media Policy:** Formulate a more disciplined media policy based on unified messaging to eliminate contradictions between leadership figures and activists associated with the STC. This strategy should shift from defensive reactions toward a proactive discourse that explains the Southern position in clear legal and political terms understandable to external audiences.
- **Build a Broad Southern Coalition:** Work toward establishing a broad Southern coalition that does not dissolve the STC or allow it to monopolize representation, but rather incorporates genuinely influential Southern forces and figures within a clear coordination framework. This approach would prevent further fragmentation of the political landscape and help rebuild a unified Southern bloc capable of negotiating from a stronger position.

Second: Recommendations for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

- **Provide Clear Political Guarantees for Dialogue:** Offer transparent political guarantees for any South-South dialogue sponsored by the Kingdom, including clarity regarding the agenda, ensuring participants' freedom of movement, and preventing the process from being used to impose predetermined arrangements or outcomes that lack broad public acceptance.
- **Engage with the Southern Transitional Council:** Recognize and engage with the STC as one of the most prominent political and social actors in South Yemen, regardless of existing disagreements with it. Fully excluding the council from the political equation would not eliminate its popular presence but could instead

increase local tensions and create space for actors that are less predictable or more difficult to manage.

- **Reassess the Deployment of Non-Local Northern Forces:** Re-evaluate the policy of deploying northern forces from outside local communities into sensitive governorates such as Hadramout and Al-Mahra. Instead, work toward empowering professional local forces that enjoy community acceptance, while subjecting them to clear training and oversight programs. This would reduce public resentment and strengthen confidence in security arrangements.
- **Initiate a Human Rights and Humanitarian De-escalation Process:** Launch a formal de-escalation process that includes investigating incidents involving civilian casualties, addressing the cases of the wounded, prisoners, and detainees, and compensating those affected by military operations or security measures. Such steps are necessary to restore public confidence and address the impact of trauma within Southern society.
- **Separate Strategic Interests from Political Management:** Separate Saudi Arabia's strategic interests in Hadramout and Al-Mahra from the management of South Yemen's political identity. Efforts to protect energy security and maritime access should not evolve into an approach perceived locally as guardianship or the forced restructuring of the political and social landscape.
- **Regulate Associated Media Discourse:** Regulate media discourse associated with Saudi institutions and platforms regarding Southern actors, avoiding inflammatory campaigns or unverified accusations. Escalatory media messaging deepens the trust gap and can transform political disagreements into lasting societal divisions that are difficult to repair.
- **Reopen Coordination Channels with the UAE:** Reopen coordination channels with the United Arab Emirates regarding South Yemen to limit the impact of Gulf competition on Southern stability and prevent local actors from becoming tools in broader regional influence struggles. Stability in South Yemen requires greater Gulf coordination rather than conflicting management of priorities and alliances.
- **Strengthen Counterterrorism Partnerships:** Strengthen counterterrorism efforts through partnerships with local forces that possess field experience and community acceptance, rather than relying on externally deployed or fragile

security arrangements. Countering the Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and networks linked to the Houthis requires a detailed understanding of local environments and their social and tribal networks.

- **Review Relations with the Internationally Recognized Government:** Review the relationship with the internationally recognized Yemeni government to ensure it is not used as a mechanism to exclude Southern actors or pass sovereign decisions affecting the future of South Yemen without genuine consensus.
- **Avoid Zero-Sum Approaches:** Avoid a zero-sum approach toward the Southern cause. Attempts to resolve the issue through security measures or by dismantling its political components may produce temporary calm, but they carry long-term risks to Saudi security, particularly if key Southern areas become defined by public anger or vulnerable to extremist and regional interference.
- **Calibrate Communication and Support Mechanisms:** Review communication and influence mechanisms across the governorates of South Yemen to ensure that political or financial support does not fuel local divisions or tribal and regional polarization. Priority should instead be given to initiatives that strengthen social consensus and local partnerships beyond narrow affiliations.
- **Evaluate Stances toward Islamist and Armed Actors:** Review approaches toward armed and political Islamist actors,-- including the Houthis, the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, and other extremist religious groups,-- to balance regional security requirements while preventing the re-emergence of environments vulnerable to extremism or unstable political exploitation.

Third: Recommendations for the United Arab Emirates

- **Strengthen Bilateral Coordination with Riyadh:** Enhance coordination mechanisms with Saudi Arabia regarding the South Yemen file to minimize strategic differences, and mitigate their destabilizing effects on local stability.
- **Preserve Institutional Stability for Local Partners:** Continue supporting the institutional stability of established local partners to safeguard the achievements of previous years. Maintaining this support is vital to prevent the fragmentation of existing administrative and security structures, particularly those central to counterterrorism operations.

- **Adopt an Inclusive Southern Engagement Strategy:** Broaden engagement parameters beyond the Southern Transitional Council to include influential local actors across Hadramout, Al-Mahra, Shabwa, and Aden, fostering a more united and resilient Southern front.
- **Deploy Diplomatic Leverage for Equitable Settlements:** Utilize the UAE's diplomatic leverage to advocate for a fair political settlement for the Southern cause, ensuring that genuine Southern actors are included in any peace track sponsored by the United Nations or regional brokers.
- **Prioritize Shared Gulf Strategic Interests:** Prevent tactical differences with Saudi Arabia from translating into an open competition for influence within South Yemen, focusing instead on joint Gulf frameworks that prioritize Southern stability, maritime security, and counterterrorism cooperation over political rivalry.
- **Expand Development and Humanitarian Support:** Explore mechanisms to expand development and humanitarian support in Southern areas, particularly in electricity, healthcare, and essential public services. This would solidify the UAE's image as a partner in long-term stability and development rather than solely as a military actor.

Fourth: Recommendations for Local Authorities in South Yemen

- **Improve Community Engagement:** Improve relations with local communities and strengthen direct communication channels to diffuse tensions and build a more stable environment.
- **Elevate Governance Standards and Public Accountability:** Rebuild public confidence in local government institutions by improving the efficiency of essential services and security delivery, while adopting objective, transparent standards in appointments and resource management.
- **Avoid Exclusionary Security Approaches:** Refrain from violent and exclusionary security measures that contribute to escalating public tensions and provoking

unrest. Instead, prioritize maintaining stability, protecting civilians, and safeguarding their right to peaceful political expression and protest.

Fifth: Recommendations for the International Community

- **Support Institutional Stability Efforts:** Focus international initiatives on building resilient, sustainable public institutions in South Yemen, rather than relying on short-term arrangements dictated by shifting local and regional power balances.
- **Acknowledge and Mitigate Emerging Security Vacuums:** The international community and relevant United Nations peace and security institutions must recognize the risks posed by the emerging vacuum in South Yemen, particularly in the east. Left unaddressed, this space will likely be exploited by terrorist organizations seeking to reposition and expand their presence. Donors and global partners should provide logistical support and capacity building to trusted local security units, enabling them to counter these groups effectively and preventing a security deterioration that could threaten vital maritime corridors and international security.



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Note: The study covers were designed using ai. The cover image shows the Saudi bombardment of Hadramout on December 30, 2025. (Local media)



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