



HADHRAMAUT'S AUTONOMY STRUGGLE: POWER, RESOURCES, AND RIVALRIES

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Key Takeaways

- The Hadhramout Tribal Alliance (HTA) is leveraging oil blockades and territorial control to push for greater self-governance.
- Failure to reach a revenue-sharing deal could trigger further tribal blockades, disrupt exports, and deepen Yemen's economic crisis.
- Rival factions, shifting alliances, and militarized checkpoints are creating a volatile security environment, threatening humanitarian and commercial access.
- Hadhramaut faces a path toward either negotiated stabilization, open conflict over resources, or a prolonged stalemate fostering smuggling and ungoverned spaces.



Introduction

Hadhramaut stands as Yemen's largest and highly strategic governorate, owing to its vast oil reserves, lengthy coastline along the Arabian Sea, and influential tribal networks. Since 2015, the region's political and security landscape has evolved under the pressures of Yemen's civil war and competing regional interventions by Saudi Arabia and other regional actors. Over the past few months, a combination of tribal mobilization, strategic blockades, government troop movements, and the deployment of rival groups has created an increasingly fragmented environment.

The Hadhramout Tribal Alliance (HTA) has played a pivotal role in shaping current events. Formed initially to defend local resources and address historical grievances about marginalization, the HTA has since evolved into a broad confederation capable of halting shipments, negotiating with national authorities, and cultivating alliances with powerful actors inside and outside Yemen. This alliance's continued leverage over roadways and oil export corridors has thrust Hadhramaut into the center of complex negotiations, often involving the government's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and other local paramilitary forces that dispute tribal control.

Security Overview and Notable Incidents

Rival groups intensifying their positions along the coast have repeatedly clashed with local tribes loyal to the HTA. Early in January, a series of missile strikes and shelling incidents west of Mukalla significantly heightened tensions, such as attacks on positions west of Mukalla and near Rujeima-Ambah that were hit by shelling and missile fire, attributed to local rival factions.

Although details remain murky, local observers attributed the attacks to forces seeking to weaken tribal influence near strategic coastal routes. Tribal fighters responded by reinforcing checkpoints, deploying additional personnel, and threatening broader economic retaliation if the government did not address their demands.

Throughout January, the PLC deployed new troops to Hadhramaut under the command of senior officers aiming to maintain governmental authority and avert a total tribal blockade. Reports from local media indicate that on January 6, these forces established forward posts in areas historically controlled by tribes aligned with the HTA. This heightened presence provoked concern among tribal leaders, who interpreted the move as a precursor to a crackdown. Against this backdrop, the HTA escalated its use of road closures, halting the flow of essential commodities bound for Aden and, at times, restricting crucial fuel shipments.

Off the increase in local tensions, additional security contractors reportedly arrived in the Masila Basin's Sector 14. Though details are sparse, local sources suggest these contractors will enhance perimeter defense and support infrastructure management rather than be involved in any local armed. Their arrival underscores the high value that external actors and industries place on Hadhramaut's oilfields, particularly against a backdrop of threatened tribal blockades and shifting security loyalties.

Political Dynamics and Tribal Agency

Hadhramaut's tribes have long demanded equitable revenue-sharing from the oil produced in their territory. These claims are rooted in a history of perceived neglect by central authorities, which many Hadhramis believe have prioritized extracting oil profits over investing in local development. The HTA mobilizes such sentiments in its negotiations with the government. By mid-January, the alliance had temporarily suspended several fuel convoys heading southward, an action timed to coincide with public frustration over electricity cuts and currency depreciation in Aden and surrounding areas.



The HTA's influence depends on a combination of tribal legitimacy and careful coalitions with other power centers. Although the alliance has occasionally cooperated with government figures, it insists on ring-fencing Hadhramaut's autonomy. When rival groups in coastal zones began expanding their sphere of influence inland, tensions grew. The tribes interpret any encroachment on their territory as a direct threat to their economic lifeblood — namely the control of roads, infrastructure, and oil shipments. An especially significant move came in late February, when the HTA announced a ban on supplying Aden's main electricity grid with crude oil. This was widely seen as a step that could exacerbate Aden's energy crisis, raising the stakes for both the government and local power brokers.

Zones of Control within Hadhramaut Governorate



Presence of Different Armed Groups and Tribal Alliances

Hadhramaut's current security environment is shaped by a wide range of armed factions. A neural network analysis of stakeholder interactions—complemented by an attached map of territorial control—shows a patchwork of alliances that is constantly shifting. The HTA often coordinates with local tribes, particularly along routes used to transport oil, to maintain leverage in negotiations with the central government. Rival groups, some of which receive support from external patrons, hold substantial sway in coastal districts, imposing their own checkpoints and striking deals with local tribal elements seeking financial or security guarantees.

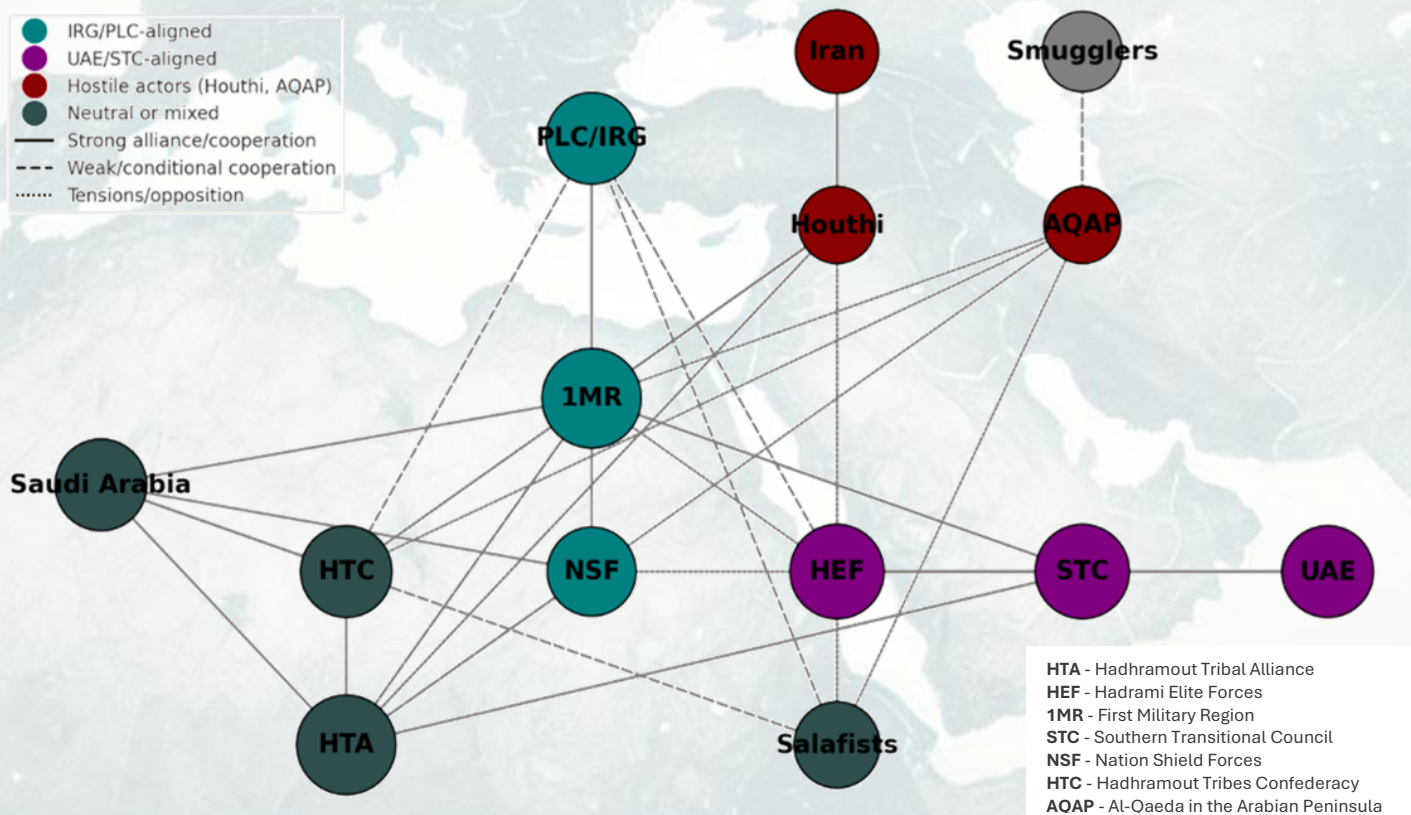
Within Wadi Hadhramaut, government-loyal forces under the PLC claim a nominal presence. Certain tribes in the region maintain working relationships with these forces, provided they respect local autonomy and avoid heavy-handed tactics. However, friction arises when government units expand



roadblocks or push for control of strategic junctions. Likewise, paramilitary units stationed in and around Mukalla navigate delicate understandings with sub-tribal alliances that trade local intelligence or temporary access rights in exchange for a share of tax revenues or other concessions.

This overlapping mesh of tribal groups, government-aligned units, and outside-sponsored militias contributes to the fragmentation that characterizes today's security landscape. Allegiances can be fluid, flipping rapidly if new financial promises, resource deals, or political developments arise. These dynamics create significant operational hurdles for humanitarian agencies, commercial shipping companies, and even government entities seeking to move through different zones of influence.

Neural Network Analysis of Regional, National, and Domestic Actors in Hadhramaut



Economic Factors and Oil Sector Pressures

Hadhramaut's oil production centers around the Masila Basin, which once yielded more than 100,000 barrels per day. Current output hovers around 70,000–80,000 barrels per day, reflecting the precarious security environment and sporadic disruptions. Revenue estimates vary, but if full production and export were sustained, yearly income from Hadhramaut's oil could easily exceed a billion dollars. Such figures underscore why so many factions, from desert-based tribes to paramilitaries along the coast, view control of the region's infrastructure as critical to their political and financial objectives.

Road closures imposed by tribal forces have occasionally ground the transport sector to a halt. Foodstuffs, medical aid, and commercial goods all face delays, generating localized shortages that ripple throughout southern Yemen's marketplaces. Commercial trucking companies and relief organizations



alike must negotiate safe passage through checkpoints, a process complicated by overlapping jurisdictions, unofficial fees, and shifting alliances.

Hadhramaut's Push for Autonomy

A defining feature of Hadhramaut's political landscape is the enduring aspiration for autonomy. Deep historical grievances against central administrations in Sana'a and Aden have convinced many Hadhramis that local governance—underpinned by direct access to oil revenues—would better serve the governorate's developmental needs. The HTA has championed these demands, insisting that no solution can be sustainable unless Hadhramaut retains real authority over its resources.

External actors also shape the autonomy debate. In addition to Saudi Arabia's well-known engagement, Oman exerts a subtler influence on tribal politics. Cross-border tribal ties link parts of eastern Hadhramaut with territories near the Omani frontier, where families move back and forth for trade, employment, and social relations. Observers suggest that Oman's focus on stabilizing its own borders—while maintaining a neutral stance in Yemen's conflict—may encourage conditions that favor local self-governance in Hadhramaut. Tribal elders with cross-border connections sometimes seek Omani mediation or financial support, hoping to reinforce Hadhramaut's capacity for autonomous administration without overtly antagonizing major regional powers.

This interplay highlights both the vulnerability and potential strength of Hadhramaut's autonomy drive. On one hand, multiple foreign interests complicate the region's internal politics, and any push for self-rule risks drawing the ire of factions worried about losing oil income.

Operational Risks Due to Fragmentation and Possible Loss of Access

As different factions consolidate territorial control or forge short-term alliances, the risk of losing access to key roads, ports, or oil facilities remains high. Fragmentation in Hadhramaut's security environment can lead to unpredictable closures and armed standoffs that disrupt normal commerce and humanitarian relief efforts. A single tribal dispute or rivalry among local commanders may spark a blockade capable of halting the movement of essential resources.

For external stakeholders—such as NGOs, commercial operators, and diplomatic missions—this volatility necessitates robust contingency planning. Risk mitigation measures include:

- Continuous Monitoring of tribal alliances and command structures, updated daily or weekly.
- Negotiated Safe-Path Agreements with local leaders who control critical choke points, ensuring unimpeded passage for relief convoys.
- Decentralized Warehousing so that temporary blockades do not cut off all supplies to vulnerable populations.
- Dedicated Security Liaisons embedded within local networks for real-time conflict updates.

Organizations that lack in-depth, real-time intelligence on shifting alliances risk sudden and potentially dangerous encounters at checkpoints run by unfamiliar or hostile factions. Similarly, short-notice changes in the stance of a single local sheikh can reverberate throughout the region, closing previously open routes.



Humanitarian and Social Dimensions

Protest movements in Mukalla and Seiyoun have drawn attention to widespread socioeconomic distress. Demonstrators decry unemployment, deteriorating public services, and currency inflation. Several local journalists who reported on these protests have been detained or threatened, pointing to a clampdown on dissent that cuts across factional lines. Economic hardships, compounded by the blockade strategy, have made it difficult for lower-income households to secure stable power, clean water, and basic healthcare.

In rural stretches beyond the main towns, tribes often operate their own security arrangements, settling local disputes through customary mechanisms. While these decentralized structures can fill governance gaps, they also leave room for illicit activities, such as fuel smuggling and arms trafficking. Extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), though largely pushed out of Mukalla in 2016, still exploit desert corridors and the general absence of unified policing. Reports indicate they remain capable of hit-and-run attacks, kidnappings, and propaganda efforts to recruit frustrated youth.

Looking Ahead: Scenario Planning and Forecasting

Scenario 1: Negotiated Revenue-Sharing Accord and Partial Stabilization

The Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and the Hadhramout Tribal Alliance (HTA) reach an agreement ensuring equitable distribution of oil revenues. In exchange, the HTA lifts its ban on supplying Aden's power grid, resumes full road access for commodities, and scales down its armed checkpoints while halting the push for autonomous rule.

Trigger Points:

- Formal Dialogue Initiative: Announcement of a structured negotiation process between the PLC and the HTA, potentially involving neutral facilitators or local mediation forums.
- External Pressure or Incentives: Concrete offers from regional powers—e.g., pledges of development aid, infrastructure projects, or security guarantees—that persuade both sides to compromise on revenue shares.
- De-escalation of Coastal Tensions: Rival groups in coastal areas commit to refraining from further inland expansion, lowering tribal fears of annexation.

Early Warning Indicators:

- Public Statements of Convergence: HTA spokespeople and PLC officials using cooperative language in media interviews.
- Partial Road Reopenings: Gradual easing of checkpoint controls, with reports of fuel and essential goods moving freely toward southern cities.
- Oil Sector Stabilization: News of steady output levels from Masila Basin and fewer disruptions at export terminals.

Likely Outcomes:

- Improved humanitarian conditions as goods flow more reliably across Hadhramaut.
- Enhanced local confidence in the PLC if it demonstrates fairness in resource allocation.
- Potential short-term alliances forming between tribes and government-aligned forces to maintain new agreements.

Scenario 2: Escalation and Deepening Conflict

Rival factions, emboldened by external backing or seeking to secure strategic roads and oil infrastructure, push further inland. The HTA responds by intensifying its blockade, expanding its checkpoints, and possibly cutting off vital fuel or power to southern areas. This escalation disrupts oil production, heightens local grievances, and risks violent confrontations and further pushes calls for autonomy.



Trigger Points:

- Rival Group Advancement: Any surge of armed forces beyond their existing footholds, particularly toward Wadi Hadhramaut or key oil facilities.
- Breakdown in Existing Negotiations: A failure or abrupt halt in any ongoing talks between the PLC and the HTA, triggering a “no more dialogue” stance on either side.
- Security Incidents Involving Tribal Elders: An assassination or abduction of a prominent HTA leader, prompting calls for retaliation and collective tribal mobilization.

Early Warning Indicators:

- Increased Military Buildup: Reports of reinforcement convoys heading toward Seiyoun, Mukalla, or major highway junctions.
- Sharp Spike in Road Closures: Fresh barricades or checkpoints appearing on previously open routes, accompanied by threats to commercial or humanitarian convoys.
- Public Rhetoric of Revenge: Local radio broadcasts or social media posts from tribal factions calling for “defense of Hadhramaut” or urging total expulsion of external militias.

Likely Outcomes:

- Significantly reduced oil output and escalating fuel prices, intensifying Yemen's economic downturn.
- Heightened risk of civilian displacement, particularly near contested roads and oilfields.
- Greater opportunities for smuggling and extremist groups to exploit the chaos.

Scenario 3: Protracted Stalemate and Fragmentation

The PLC fails to broker a durable settlement with the HTA, and no faction achieves decisive control. Multiple checkpoints, partial roadblocks, and sporadic clashes become a “new normal.” Smuggling networks flourish in the security vacuum, while extremist cells find safe havens in remote desert stretches.

Trigger Points:

- Stalled Negotiations with No Exit Strategy: Repeated inconclusive meetings between the PLC, tribes, and local actors with no mechanism to push talks forward.
- Entrenched Interests: Local militias setting up semi-permanent checkpoints, collecting tolls, and becoming financially invested in the status quo.
- International Distractions: Reduced diplomatic engagement if external actors shift focus to other crises, leaving Hadhramaut's fragmentation unchecked.

Early Warning Indicators:

- Steady Rise in Smuggling Arrests or Incidents: A proliferation of contraband routes, indicating waning regulatory power by any single authority.
- Localized Ceasefires Without Central Coordination: Tribes and smaller militia commanders making ad hoc, short-term truces for mutual gain—none of which address core governance or revenue issues.
- Chronic Fuel and Goods Shortages: Persistent reports of shortages in local markets, with little sign of improvement.

Likely Outcomes:

- Persistent insecurity that hinders both humanitarian operations and commercial activities.
- Fragmented authorities in Hadhramaut, each imposing its own rules and taxes, perpetuating economic distress.
- Greater difficulty for any future negotiators to unify the region, as local powerbrokers grow accustomed to a patchwork system of control.



How SARI Can Support

SARI (Strategic Assessment, Response, and Integration) has specialized expertise in stakeholder analysis, conflict mediation, and operational risk mitigation. By drawing on data from the **neural network analysis** and the **attached map** of Hadhramaut's control zones, SARI can:

- **Provide Detailed Conflict Mapping:** Offering real-time insights into the alliances among tribes, paramilitary forces, and local powerbrokers. Such granularity allows agencies to plan safe routes and anticipate potential flashpoints. Subscribers can access our real-time updates and near-real-time dashboard, populated by verified data and updated on daily basis.
- **Produce Holistic Security Assessments:** Including Area Assessments, Journey Management Plans, and tailored SOPs that capture local nuances into operational decision-making.
- **Offer Crisis Management Support:** Through its experienced personnel, SARI advises on contingency planning, asset dispersal, and post-incident coordination minimize disruption and ensure business continuity.



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