

# Saudi Arabia's Eastward Turn: Shifting Relations with Yemeni Tribes

---



# Saudi Arabia's Eastward Turn:

## Shifting Relations with Yemeni Tribes

---

By :Adel Dashela

April 14, 2024

**Cover photo:** Wasitia University in Wadi Hadramawt, situated between Seyoun city and the historic town of Tarim, on January 26, 2023 // Photo by Awfa Alnaami



Kingdom of the Netherlands

The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

---

Saudi Arabia's relationship with Yemeni tribes has undergone many changes over recent decades, focused mainly on cultivating direct ties with Yemeni tribal sheikhs. With a shared 1,800 km-long border, the Kingdom has closely monitored developments inside Yemen, placing significant importance on its relationship with tribal leaders as a means of "influenc[ing] internal political decision-making in Yemen in line with its interests."<sup>[1]</sup> Such ties, however, are neither fixed nor homogeneous and have evolved based on the mutual interests of both parties.

Saudi Arabia's involvement in successive Yemen conflicts, particularly since 2004, has increased the complexity of these dynamics. The relationship is also an unequal one; Saudi Arabia is an affluent country – the world's top oil exporter and a member of the G20. By contrast, Yemen is the poorest country in the Middle East and has a history of political and military conflicts, which, coupled with scarce resources, have made it economically vulnerable. This has long given Saudi Arabia sway over Yemen's tribes, sometimes at the expense of the central government.

Under King Abdullah, Riyadh's strategy in Yemen focused on building stronger formal relations with the Yemeni government, aimed primarily at combating terrorism. This policy change gradually undermined direct dealings with tribal sheikhs. With King Salman's rise to power, however, and after the Saudi-led intervention against the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) began in March 2015, engagement between Saudi Arabia and Yemeni tribal sheikhs has resurfaced – albeit with a difference. The conflict has led Riyadh to shift its longstanding focus on cultivating ties with sheikhs from northern tribal regions toward the eastern regions of Marib, Al-Jawf, Shabwa, Al-Mahra, and Hadramawt. In light of the above, and considering the ongoing competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over influence in Hadramawt – Yemen's largest governorate – this analysis seeks to examine the reasons behind Saudi Arabia's efforts to engage with eastern tribes in Yemen.

## Waxing and Waning Saudi Influence

Throughout much of Yemen's modern political history, Saudi Arabia has focused on establishing influence among the tribes in the northern regions of Yemen given their involvement in political affairs and proximity to the center of power in Sana'a. This policy was mainly carried out by Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, who first worked on strengthening the relationship with northern tribal sheikhs following a famous meeting with Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, head of the Hashid tribal confederation, in Jeddah in 1970.<sup>[2]</sup> The Hashid tribe's large presence in areas around Sana'a, and their backing of republicans during Yemen's 1962 revolution, gave them unparalleled political privileges in the following decades.<sup>[3]</sup> Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar represented

<sup>[1]</sup> Ziyad Al-Kourani, *A Geostategic Vision of the Future of Regional Conflicts in a Region of Conflicting Strategies*, (Amman: Dar al-Majd, 2018), p. 75.

<sup>[2]</sup> Abdullah bin Hussein Al-Ahmar, *The Memoirs of Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein Al Ahmar: Issues and Positions* (Sana'a: Afaq Publishing, 2008), p. 194.

<sup>[3]</sup> Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, "What Remains of the Hashid's Power? The Rise and Fall of Yemen's Most Powerful Tribe," *The Yemen Review*, Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, September 14, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/august-2023/20837>

the tribe's political wing, while Sheikh Mujahid Abu Shawarib led military efforts alongside republican forces against the Imamate (1962 -1968). Amran's Khamer district, also known as the "City of Peace," holds significant political importance as the capital of the Hashid tribe. The political influence of the Hashid tribe was further strengthened by a peace conference held there in 1965.<sup>[4]</sup> Prince Sultan became known for holding direct meetings and cultivating personal relationships with tribal sheikhs, which helped bolster Saudi influence.

The accession of King Abdullah to the throne in early 2005 saw relations with tribes cool as direct relations between Riyadh and Sana'a improved. After the outbreak of military conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement in 2004, Saudi Arabia agreed to support the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh militarily. Saudi Arabia's decision to deal with the government rather than the tribes was compounded by the Yemeni state's own efforts to militarize the tribes to confront the Houthis, rather than using its own army and security forces. The Yemeni state has often mobilized tribal fighters to support a weak army in local conflict, but the Sa'ada wars served to weaken the power of northern tribes.<sup>[5]</sup>

After Prince Sultan's death in 2011, Saudi Arabia's relations with tribal sheikhs deteriorated further. Without him acting as a conduit to the tribes, Riyadh shifted toward forming short-term tactical alliances.<sup>[6]</sup> However, after Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen in March 2015 with the aim of restoring the internationally recognized government to power in Sana'a following the Houthi takeover of the capital, Riyadh realized it was critical to restore its relationship with the tribes. But now the focus would be sheikhs from eastern Yemeni regions largely outside Houthi control.<sup>[7]</sup>

There were a number of reasons for this. Saudi Arabia faced challenges in building relations with tribes in Houthi-controlled northern regions, as the defeat and destruction of tribal allies weakened their influence. Houthi control and restrictions on political activities also diminished the power of previously engaged tribal leaders. Many prominent tribal figures left their native areas after the Houthis bombed their homes; targets included, Sheikh Saghir bin Aziz, Sheikh Hussein al-Ahmar, and Sheikh Abdelwahhab Moawadah,<sup>[8]</sup> who relocated abroad or to regions controlled by the internationally recognized government. Additionally, the Houthi group replaced many sheikhs with ideologically aligned young leaders who shared their view of Saudi Arabia as an opponent.

<sup>[4]</sup> Adel Dashela, *The Houthi Movement and Yemeni Tribes* (2011-2020), (Istanbul: Arap Aile Kütüphanes, 2021), p. 104.

<sup>[5]</sup> Adel Dashela, "Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16670>

<sup>[6]</sup> Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia's Yemen Gambit," Sada, October 1, 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/61475>

<sup>[7]</sup> "The Silent Struggle for Influence: The Future of Saudi-UAE coalition in Yemen," Abaad Studies and Research Center, September 22, 2019, <https://abaadstudies.org/news/topic/59819>

<sup>[8]</sup> Adel Dashela, *The Houthi Movement and Yemens Tribe* (2011-2020), (Istanbul: Arap Aile Kütüphanes, 2021), p. 92

In early 2017, Mohammed bin Salman – then defense minister – brought several sheikhs to Riyadh in an effort to revamp Saudi relations with Yemeni tribes, and with the sheikhs of eastern tribes specifically. Reassuring them, he said, “We are always with you, every step, until the last day of our lives, as we have been in the past and will be in the future.”<sup>[9]</sup> The eastern regions of Yemen are fertile ground for Saudi Arabia because many local tribes oppose the Houthis. Some of the tribes of the Madhaj and Bakeel tribal confederations in Al-Jawf and Marib established traditional tribal alliances, known as *matarih*, to mobilize military resistance against the Houthis in the early years of the conflict.<sup>[10]</sup> They also issued a formal tribal document, the “Covenant and Charter,” demanding the Houthis leave their tribal lands. This alliance mobilized 12,000 fighters from the region to confront the Houthis.<sup>[11]</sup> Marib in particular became a major destination for Yemenis who opposed the Houthis and who had to flee northern regions around Sana’a. It was in Saudi Arabia’s interest to strengthen tribal sheikhs and integrate them into the Saudi-led coalition’s efforts to keep the Houthis from expanding further into Al-Jawf, Shabwa, and eastern Marib.

Relations with tribes in these governorates, however, were not without complications. Some Hashemite classes, who like the Houthis claim descent from the Prophet Mohammed, have aligned with the group. Known as the *sayyid* or *ashraf*, these classes generally hold limited political significance in tribal politics. The complexities of tribal society in these regions, where vendettas are common, have made it difficult for Saudi Arabia to unify them under a single umbrella working toward achieving its interests.

Saudi Arabia’s tendency to abandon certain sheikhs does not help. Shabwa Governor Mohammed bin Adio, a tribal sheikh and member of the Islah party, was removed from his post in December 2022, in part because of his demand that Emirati forces depart the Balhaf LNG facility. Another prominent sheikh, Amin al-Ukaimi, fell out of favor with the Saudis after the Houthis began taking over the populated western districts of Al-Jawf in March 2020. He was later placed under house arrest in Saudi Arabia and removed as Al-Jawf Governor.<sup>[12]</sup> Further east, Saudi Arabia has tried to cultivate ties with tribes in Al-Mahra governorate, on the border with Oman. The historically strong ties between Al-Mahra’s tribes and Muscat, however, have prevented Riyadh from gaining much influence. Mahri tribes are essentially divided into three camps: one close to Oman, led by Sheikh Ali Al-Huraizi; a second close to Saudi Arabia, led by Al-Mahra Governor Mohammed Ali Yasser; and a third close

<sup>[9]</sup> Yasser Najdi, “Crown Prince in previous meeting with Yemeni tribes: We are with you until the last day of our lives [AR],” Sabaq, December 2, 2017, <https://cutt.ly/ZCFuAPs>

<sup>[10]</sup> Ahmed al-Tars al-Arami, “Tribes and the State in Marib,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, May 4, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/13901>

<sup>[11]</sup> “Tribe and Oil in Yemen’s War: The Battle of Marib,” Abaad Research Center, 2020, <https://abaadstudies.org/en/policy-analysis/topic/59855>

<sup>[12]</sup> “Houthi Strikes Prompt Government Terrorism Designation, The Yemen Review – October 2022,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, November 14, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/october-2022/19003>

to the UAE and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), led by Ragih Bakrit, an ex-governor and former Saudi ally. The open competition among regional actors in Al-Mahra makes it difficult for Saudi Arabia to impose itself as the chief patron of the governorate's tribes.<sup>[13]</sup> However, it is in Hadramawt where regional competition to win over tribes can be witnessed most acutely.

## Competition for Hadrami Tribal Loyalties

Tribes in Hadramawt have always played an important political and social role in Yemen. Before the formation of the independent state of South Yemen in 1967, Hadrami tribes formed the leadership of various sultanates, and they have played a prominent role in Yemen's modern political history through their support or opposition to ruling authorities.<sup>[14]</sup> These tribes can be thought of as a network of social, economic, and political alliances tying smaller groups within larger confederations, with the overriding principle that an attack on one tribe is considered an attack on the whole. They have a presence throughout the vast governorate, as well as links with tribes to the north in Saudi Arabia, and in the neighboring Yemeni governorates of Al-Mahra and Shabwa.

Among the most influential Hadrami tribes is the Nahd, led by Sheikh Saleh bin Ali bin Thabet al-Nahdi, who also serves as hakam, or tribal arbiter, for all tribes in the governorate. The second most prominent tribal leader in the Nahd clan is Sheikh Abdullah bin Saleh bin Ujaj. The Al-Kathir tribe, which previously ruled a sultanate in the governorate, has a presence in the Hadramawt Valley extending into Al-Mahra. It is led by Sheikh Abdullah bin Saleh al-Kathiri, who also heads a body called the Arbitration of Hadramawt Tribes for the Hadramawt Valley and Desert. The Al-Hamoum tribe has a presence in Qusayar, Al-Shihr, Al-Masilah, and other districts, and is led by tribal sheikh Amr bin Habraish, who heads the Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy. The Bani Murrah is based in the Hadramawt Valley, led by Omar bin Muslim bin Halabi.<sup>[15]</sup> Another clan, the Bani Dhanna, is part of the Tamim tribes that are spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula and is headed by Anwar bin Yamani al-Tamimi, deputy head of the Arbitration of Hadramawt Tribes for the Hadramawt Valley and Desert. Other influential tribes include the Al-Manaheel, Al-Awamer, Al-Say'ar, Dawaan, Bawazeer, Nawh, and Sayban.

Historically, the tribes of Hadramawt have maintained good relations with Saudi Arabia, largely due to a long tradition of trade and other economic interactions. Many Hadrami businessmen and their families live in Saudi cities such as Taif,<sup>[16]</sup> and some have become prominent there, such as Salim Ahmed Ben Mahfouz and Abdullah

<sup>[13]</sup> Amer al-Dumaini, "Get to know the groups and figures at the forefront of the scene in Al-Mahra [AR]," Al-Mawqea Post, March 28, 2019; <https://almawqea.net/reports/39333>

<sup>[14]</sup> Ahmad Baharithah, "The Political Role of Tribes in Hadramawt [AR]," Al-Madayin Post, <https://almdayinpost.com/7800.html>

<sup>[15]</sup> Interview with a tribal figure from the Bani Murrah tribes in the Hadramawt Valley, July 2, 2023.

<sup>[16]</sup> Mishal Al-Harithi, "Some Hadrami Families in Taif [AR]," Al-Jazirah, June 12, 2023, <https://www.al-jazirah.com/2023/20230612/rj1.htm>

Ahmed Baqshan, and Bamawada, Bakhashab, and Bin Laden families.<sup>[17]</sup> Members of tribes based near the border with Saudi Arabia sometimes hold Saudi citizenship, while others have residence permits that they can use to enter the Kingdom.<sup>[18]</sup>

Saudi Arabia has sought to expand its network of relationships with tribal groups in Hadramawt for several reasons. First, it wants to compensate for the influence it has lost in northern Yemen at the expense of the Houthis. Second, Saudi investment in Hadrami tribes helps protect the large border it shares with the governorate. Third, the Kingdom is eager to amass influence in Hadramawt, which accounts for almost a third of Yemen's total land mass, as part of its rivalry with the UAE. Over the past year, Saudi Arabia has increased its political and financial support for Hadrami tribal figures to curb Emirati inroads in the governorate, manifested principally through the STC. Fourth, Saudi Arabia believes Hadramawt is promising ground for investment that can be integrated into its broader economic plans. This could even involve its long-standing ambition to extend Saudi oil pipelines through Yemen to the Arabian Sea, obviating the risks involved in exporting oil through the Strait of Hormuz, which can be threatened by Iran.<sup>[19]</sup>

In recent years the UAE has succeeded in winning over prominent social figures and second-tier tribal leaders in Hadramawt as a means of bolstering its influence and that of its Yemeni ally, the STC, which seeks to re-establish an independent state in the former South Yemen. This includes Fadi Baoum, head of the Revolutionary Hirak in Hadramawt, another southern secessionist group, as well as figures from the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference, a political bloc formed in 2017 comprising representatives of Hadrami tribes, politicians, academics, religious leaders, and activists. Among the other tribal sheikhs aligned with the STC are Sheikh Hasan al-Jabiri, the leader of the Hadrami Uprising and the Hadramawt General Meeting, two bodies established by the STC; Ali al-Kathiri from the Al-Kathir tribe; and Ahmad bin Breik, a senior official in the STC. These actors receive direct support from both the UAE and the Emirati-backed Hadrami Elite forces, established in the coastal capital of Mukalla in 2016. One of the primary demands of the UAE and the STC in Hadramawt in recent years has been the removal of forces from the 1st Military Region based in Seyoun, the last remnants of the regular Yemeni army left in the former South Yemen. The STC has also co-opted Hadrami demands for autonomy as a means of gaining popular support for its argument, arguing that Hadramawt could be "a federal territory as part of STC's agenda and its vision for the desired state."<sup>[20]</sup> This position has been a successful recruitment tool for the Hadrami Elite forces and for winning the loyalty of tribal leaders, who all favor the notion of Hadramis managing their own affairs.

<sup>[17]</sup> Nabil Sultan and David Weir, *Hadhramis: The Great Entrepreneurial Leaders of Arabia*, Conference: EURAM: Rome, Italy, 2010, p 6. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277311125\\_Hadhramis\\_The\\_Great\\_Entrepreneurial\\_Leaders\\_of\\_Arabia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277311125_Hadhramis_The_Great_Entrepreneurial_Leaders_of_Arabia)

<sup>[18]</sup> Interview with a tribal figure in the Hadramawt Valley, July 1, 2023.

<sup>[19]</sup> Yehya Abuzaid, "Has Riyadh Woken Up From Its Al-Mahra Pipe Dream?", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 19, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16042> Yehya Abuzaid, "Has Riyadh Woken Up From Its Al-Mahra Pipe Dream?", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 19, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16042>

<sup>[20]</sup> Wadhah al-Awbali, "The Dilemma of Concluding Agreements in Yemen," South 24 Center for News and Studies, October 1, 2024, <https://south24.net/news/newse.php?nid=3553>

Demonstrating the growing influence of its alliances in Hadramawt, the STC held the 6th session of its National Assembly in Mukalla in May, coinciding with the 29th anniversary of the southern call to split from the Republic of Yemen that sparked the 1994 civil war. During the event, the STC flexed its muscles with a show of UAE armored vehicles in the streets of Mukalla, to the alarm of some Hadrami tribal and societal figures.<sup>[21]</sup> During an angry speech, assembly chairman Ahmad bin Breik went so far as to describe those opposed to the STC's project as "cockroaches."<sup>[22]</sup> Faraj al-Bahsani, the former Hadramawt governor and Presidential Leadership Council member who had joined the STC leadership earlier that month, described the gathering as a "defining historical moment."<sup>[23]</sup> Winning over Al-Bahsani was a major victory for the STC, though Saudi Arabia still has on its side major businessmen and political figures with strong tribal backgrounds, such as Abdullah Buqshan, Badr Basalamah, and Khaled Bahah, a former prime minister who was recently appointed ambassador to Egypt.

In an effort to counter growing Emirati influence and strengthen government authority, Saudi Arabia formed the Hadramawt National Council in June.<sup>[24]</sup> Among the figures that signed on were Governor Mabkhout bin Madi, Deputy Parliament Speaker Muhsin Basurah, and head of arbitration for the Hadramawt Tribes Abdullah, Saleh al-Kathiri. However, in a sign of the complex patchwork of alliances in the governorate, Hadramawt Inclusive Council head Amr bin Habraish refused to join the new body,<sup>[25]</sup> despite being involved in initial discussions. Bin Habraish now seeks to present the Hadramawt Inclusive Council as a more authentic reflection of Hadrami society and public opinion than the Hadramawt National Council, created according to Saudi needs as well as the interests of the Hadrami components participating in this council. In a sign of Saudi Arabia seeking to pair the political initiative with economic benefits, PLC head Rashad al-Alimi later announced a host of development projects in Hadramawt valued at US\$266 million during a visit to the governorate.<sup>[26]</sup> Saudi Arabia has also sought to influence events at the military level through the Nation's Shield forces, which were formed in early 2023 with personnel mostly from southern governorates and the 1st Military District, a move seen as a partial response to Hadrami demands for greater local autonomy.

<sup>[21]</sup> "The Formation of the Hadramawt National Council: Significance and Future Determinants [AR]," Midad Hadramawt Center for Strategic Studies and Research, July 2023, p. 5, <https://midad-had.org/post3/>

<sup>[22]</sup> "Speech of Maj. Gen. Ahmad Saeed bin Buraik at the Closing Session of the 6th Session of the National Assembly," Aden Al-Mustaqilla TV, May 22, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/mvzu4kkx>

<sup>[23]</sup> "Southern Transitional Council Resurgent, The Yemen Review – May 2023," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 22, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/may-2023/20386>

<sup>[24]</sup> "Yemen: Announcement of the Hadramawt National Council as a Political Carrier [AR]," Okaz, June 20, 2023, <https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/politics/2136595>

<sup>[25]</sup> Nayef al-Qadassi, "Hadramawt 2023... Saudi Arabia is actively working to reclaim a historically influential area that lost to the UAE, [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, January 5, 2024, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/288255>

<sup>[26]</sup> Abdulhadi Habtur, "Yemen Inaugurates Saudi-funded Development Projects in Hadramout Worth Over \$266 Mln," Asharq Al-Awsat, June 26, 2023, <https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/4402021-yemen-inaugurates-saudi-funded-development-projects-hadramout-worth-over-266-mln>

## Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's renewed focus on the sheikhs of Hadramawt as a means of countering Emirati influence risks reinforcing societal division and political fragmentation. A more effective policy would involve building long-term relationships with Yemeni officials based on common interests of achieving security and stability, rather than appearing to pursue self-serving, short-term benefits. Yemenis, both ordinary citizens and tribal leaders, need to regain confidence in the political system, and the external backers of factions, such as Saudi Arabia, can assist in this crucial task by helping put back together what was destroyed by the war and by supporting communities' efforts to rebuild. Ephemeral reliance on tribal groupings will likely lead to more division and political fragmentation among the tribes themselves, which neither serves peace in Yemen nor help Saudi Arabia's security.

**Adel Dashela** is a Yemeni researcher and lecturer who holds a Ph.D. in English Literature with a focus on political prison literature in the Arab World. Currently, he is a visiting researcher at Turku University in Finland. His expertise encompasses post-conflict transitional justice from a social perspective, conflict studies, and Yemeni affairs, including tribal dynamics and regional issues. He has authored numerous research papers, analytical articles, and a book titled "The Houthi Movement and Yemeni Tribes: 2011-2020." He is a frequent contributor to international and local research centers, where he comments on Yemeni affairs, particularly political and social dynamics, including tribal issues, and is a regular commentator on international and local media platforms.

This commentary is part of a series of publications produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the government of the Kingdom of The Netherlands. The series explores issues within economic, political, and environmental themes, aiming to inform discussion and policymaking related to Yemen that foster sustainable peace. Views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.



[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)

