

The Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council:

Between Broadening Representation and the Challenge of Representative Legitimacy

Prepared by: **Naima Abdulrahman Al-Amoudi**
Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Hadhramout University



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Prepared by:

Naima Abdulrahman Al-Amoudi

Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Hadhramout University

Researcher specializing in international and regional relations — August 2026

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The formation of the Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council for Hadramout's political and societal forces and constituencies represents an attempt to reorganise the governorate's political landscape by bringing its diverse existing forces within a common coordination framework. This initiative comes amid growing fragmentation in Hadramout's political representation, despite the governorate's considerable geographical, economic, and geopolitical weight, which gives it an influential role in shaping the contours of Yemen's forthcoming political settlement.

Hadramout is Yemen's largest governorate by area, accounting for approximately 36% of the country's territory. It extends along about 620 kilometres of Arabian Sea coastline, borders Saudi Arabia, and has significant oil resources and strategically important ports, most notably Mukalla and Ash Shihr (Al-Dhabba), the latter serving as a crude oil export terminal.⁽¹⁾

Yet Hadramout's political landscape remains considerably more fragmented at the level of representation. Multiple actors claim to speak on the governorate's behalf, while advancing divergent positions and visions concerning its priorities and place within the emerging political order. This problem is reflected in the findings of a survey conducted by the Midad Hadhramout Centre on the state of Hadramout's political and social components.

The survey found that 82.1% of respondents across Hadramout's various social groups believe that the proliferation of political and social components has fragmented the governorate's voice. A further 44.7% believe that these components have only a limited capacity to defend Hadramout's interests and rights, while 41% consider their influence over local and central political decision-making concerning the governorate to be limited or non-existent.⁽²⁾

Against this backdrop, the challenge of representing Hadramout lies less in the plurality of its political and social components

than in their capacity to forge a common political position and translate it into meaningful influence over the political process. This challenge is particularly evident in the experience of the Hadhramout National Council (HNC). Since its establishment in 2023, the HNC has received Saudi support and generated considerable public enthusiasm within the governorate, yet it has not developed into a unifying political point of reference accepted by Hadramout's various political forces.

The formation of the Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council, established by a decision of the Governor of Hadramout on 2 July 2026, represents a further attempt to address this representational deficit. Its establishment raises a question that extends beyond the breadth of participation to the nature of the role it can play: to what extent can the Council translate broad-based representation into representative legitimacy and meaningful negotiating leverage in the forthcoming political settlement?

First: Why Did the Council Emerged at This Particular Moment?

The establishment of the Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council at this juncture cannot be understood apart from the political and security crisis that engulfed Hadramout in December 2025 and peaked towards the end of the month. The confrontation between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the internationally recognised government unfolded across Hadramout and Al-Mahrah. In Hadramout, it manifested in political and security divisions among forces operating along the coast and across the Wadi and desert areas. Some actors supported the STC's actions, while others opposed what they viewed as unilateral measures taken outside the framework of the internationally

recognised government and without local consensus.

The balance on the ground began to shift when STC-affiliated forces took control of Seiyun and the headquarters of the First Military Region, then extended their operations into oil-producing areas and the Masila Basin. This brought them into confrontation with the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance (HTA), which opposed the imposition of military arrangements by forces from outside the governorate and the seizure of its oil facilities without the consent of Hadramout's political forces. These developments transformed the dispute from a contest between military formations into a broader question of Hadhrami control over the governorate's security and resources.⁽³⁾

These developments led the internationally recognised government to seek Saudi Arabia's assistance in containing the STC's actions in Hadramout and Al-Mahrah, after political efforts to secure the Council's withdrawal from the two governorates had failed. Riyadh subsequently resorted to direct military force. On 30 December 2025, it carried out an airstrike on Mukalla Port, targeting what Saudi Arabia described as a shipment of weapons and military vehicles sent by the UAE to support STC forces. Abu Dhabi, however, denied that the shipment contained weapons.

The strike came amid escalating tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the STC's activities in eastern Yemen, giving the Saudi intervention significance beyond the immediate developments on the ground. It signalled that Riyadh viewed the STC's expansion into Hadramout and Al-Mahrah not merely as a shift in Yemen's internal balance of power, but as a development with implications for its own security and border interests.⁽⁴⁾

These developments reshaped Hadramout's internal political balance. Although the STC failed to consolidate its control over the governorate, support for the Southern Cause and for forces advo-

cating southern rights remained significant. At the same time, the self-rule vision advanced by the HTA and the Hadramout Inclusive Conference, under the leadership of Amr bin Habrish, gained greater prominence. This vision rejects subordinating Hadramout to either the southern project or Yemen's central government without adequate guarantees. Instead, it calls for the governorate's administration, resources, and political decision-making to rest with its own people, whether through self-rule or arrangements that guarantee an equitable share of power and wealth.

The crisis therefore exposed clear differences in the calculations of the various actors shaping Hadramout's political landscape. The internationally recognised government's approach can be understood as primarily aimed at keeping the military and political tracks aligned in the confrontation with the Houthis and the effort to retake territory under their control. It has consequently exercised greater caution toward internal demands that could reshape the state's structure or weaken the cohesion of the political and security framework within which it operates, whether through calls for southern secession or demands for self-rule in Hadramout.

Hadramout's political and social components, by contrast, are driven by priorities centred on strengthening their role in governing the governorate, securing their share of its resources, and expanding their local powers. Supporters of the Southern Cause, meanwhile, continue to pursue their broader southern political project. These divergences are not confined to the local level, but are also shaped by regional calculations, foremost among them Saudi-Emirati competition. This rivalry has influenced, in varying ways, the positions, political and media messaging, and activities on the ground of Hadramout's various political actors and components.

Amid this shifting landscape, Salem Ahmed Al-Khanbashi, a member of the Presidential Leadership Council and Gov-

ernor of Hadramout, issued Regulation No. 100 of 2026 on 2 July 2026, establishing the Preparatory Committee for the Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council. The 36-member committee brought together figures from diverse political, social, tribal, religious, and professional backgrounds. Its formation came amid a proliferation of political and social components advancing divergent visions for Hadramout's future, encompassing demands for self-rule and an equitable share of power and wealth, support for the Southern Cause, and differing conceptions of the governorate's relationship with the Yemeni state.

The committee's formation is further underscored by preparations for the South-South Dialogue Conference, scheduled to be held in Riyadh under Saudi sponsorship.⁽⁵⁾ Its stated mandate extends beyond establishing a local coordination framework to formulating a unified vision for Hadramout ahead of the conference and the political processes that follow. The Council is therefore intended to consolidate Hadramout's positions and translate them into a more coherent negotiating stance within the dialogue, preventing the governorate from entering the process with fragmented voices and uncoordinated demands. Whether it can fulfil this role, however, remains uncertain. The plurality of forces within Hadramout makes the Council itself a test of both representative legitimacy and its limits.

Its success in presenting Hadramout's vision in Riyadh will depend on its ability to accommodate the governorate's existing political and social components and forge common ground among them, without obscuring political differences or excluding forces with divergent views. The Council therefore faces a dual task: to unify Hadramout's position internally and secure political representation that reflects the governorate's distinct interests in any arrangements concerning the Southern Cause and Yemen's future.

Second: From a Plurality of Components to the Test of a Unified Position

The HNC's experience shows that establishing a political entity, regardless of the official sponsorship and support it receives, does not automatically produce inclusive representation. Announced in Riyadh under Saudi sponsorship in 2023, the HNC was presented as a framework to advance Hadramout's demands through the political process. Yet it has not become a political point of reference accepted by the governorate's various local forces. Its formation in Riyadh preceded any local understanding among Hadramout's political actors, while influential forces continued to operate through independent frameworks. This constrained the HNC's ability to serve as a unifying framework for Hadramout's political plurality.

The HNC's failure to move beyond general demands and develop a political programme that addresses the practical questions of resource management, local governance, and political representation has further weakened its ability to translate organisational presence into tangible influence over the governorate's political landscape. Its experience therefore presents the Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council with a critical test: whether it can turn the plurality of political and social components from a source of competition over representation into a foundation for forging a common position.

The first dimension of this test concerns participation itself. The Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council did not command full consensus at the outset: some political and social components declined to join, while others expressed reservations about its formation process and mandate. Most prominent among these were the Hadramout Inclusive Conference and the

HTA, whose leader, Amr bin Habrish, declined to join the Preparatory Committee.

This does not mean that the Council is destined to fail from the outset, but it does expose a gap between the breadth of its stated ambitions and the limits of actual participation. That gap matters because the legitimacy of any framework claiming to represent Hadramout will ultimately depend on its capacity to accommodate the governorate's various centres of influence, rather than simply on the number or apparent diversity of the figures it brings together.

Ahmed Saeed Bin Burik's suspension of his membership further demonstrated that the challenge concerns not only who joins the Council, but also how relations among its members are managed. According to his statement, his objections centred on the committee's management, the distribution of powers, the criteria governing representation, and the limits of the local authority's role. He subsequently resumed his participation after Governor Salem Ahmed Al-Khanbashi assured him that his concerns would be addressed and the process realigned.

The episode demonstrates that a unified organisational framework does not necessarily produce a unified political position. Even within a single entity, disagreements may resurface without clear decision-making rules, meaningful partnership guarantees, and sufficient scope for constituent components to shape the Council's outcomes rather than merely enjoy nominal representation.

The effectiveness of the Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council should therefore be assessed against specific indicators, rather than solely by the breadth of its representative base. These indicators include:

1- Breadth of Representation: The composition of the Council's leadership and founding conference should reflect Hadramout's geographical and social diver-

sity. This encompasses the coast, the Wadi, and the desert, as well as tribal groups, political parties, civil society and professional organisations, young people, and women.

2- Political Acceptance: The Council's founding documents and key decisions should receive explicit endorsement from influential political and social components, while reservations and withdrawals should diminish over time. Participation should not be confined to individual figures who do not represent established political or social constituencies.

3- Sound Decision-Making Mechanisms: The criteria for selecting members and delegates should be transparent, with clear rules governing the distribution of powers, decision-making procedures, and the handling of objections.

4- Clarity of the Political Project: The Council should articulate a clear vision of Hadramout's demands concerning resource management, local government powers, and political representation, while distinguishing between issues on which agreement has been reached and those that remain under discussion.

5- Capacity to Generate Political and Negotiating Impact: The Council should translate its vision into unified positions or joint initiatives on tangible local issues and sustain this role when disagreements or crises arise, rather than confining itself to issuing statements.

These indicators do not suggest that the Council will achieve absolute representation of all Hadramis, an elusive standard in any pluralistic political landscape. Rather, they offer a basis for assessing whether it commands broad representative legitimacy and has a genuine capacity to advance the governorate's interests. Conversely, signs of potential failure would include widening boycotts, excessive reliance on individuals rather than institutional representation, the persistence of broad gen-

eralities in the Council's documents, and an inability to manage differences among its members. The Council's independence from the local authority will also be critical to the validity of this assessment and the credibility of its findings.

Third: The Founding Conference as a Test of Legitimacy

The founding conference scheduled for 31 August is not merely a procedural step towards formally announcing the Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council; it is a foundational moment that will determine the nature of the Council's relationship with the forces it is intended to represent. The Preparatory Committee derives its legitimacy from the decision establishing it, whereas the permanent Council cannot derive its representative legitimacy from its founding decision alone. That legitimacy will instead depend on how the Council is established and on the extent to which Hadramout's political and social forces and components accept its rules and outcomes.

The question, therefore, is not simply how broad participation will be, but who has the authority to select the delegates, set the agenda, and determine the political document that emerges from the conference.

Representative legitimacy here rests on two interrelated dimensions. The first is consensus-based legitimacy: the conference's ability to forge agreement among the components with political and social standing. The second is social legitimacy: the extent to which Hadramout's society feels that the Council's composition does not merely redistribute influence among elites, but reflects the governorate's diversity and interests. Neither form of legitimacy is sufficient on its own. Elite consensus without broader societal support

would leave the Council with limited acceptance, while broad participation would not amount to effective representation if decision-making remained concentrated within a narrow circle.

The true test, therefore, lies in the conference's procedural framework. This begins with publishing clear, reviewable criteria for selecting delegates. It also requires safeguards to prevent any single actor or geographical area from dominating either the proceedings or the drafting of documents. Finally, the conference must adopt clear decision-making rules that facilitate consensus wherever possible while protecting the principal constituencies from exclusion when consensus cannot be reached.

The political document will also derive its value from the process through which it is prepared. The critical question is whether it will be presented for discussion and amendment before adoption, or submitted as a predetermined text for approval?

Accordingly, the conference's value will be measured neither by the fact that it is successfully convened nor by the number of seats allocated, but by its ability to produce a sustainable political compact for Hadramout. If it establishes transparent rules of representation, mechanisms for decision-making and managing objections, and a document that clearly defines the Council's political mandate and its limits, it will lay the foundations for broad representative legitimacy, even if differences among the various forces persist. If, however, predetermined arrangements dominate the proceedings and leave little scope for review, the conference may be perceived as a ceremonial launch rather than a foundational moment in creating a representative institution.

Fourth: The Regional Dimension of Hadramout's Political Calculations

Saudi-UAE competition has reshaped Hadramout's political landscape by altering the balance of power among local actors. In a study published by the Carnegie Middle East Centre, Ibrahim Jalal argues that divergence between Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's agendas in Hadramout has fuelled competition among local influence networks aligned with each side, increasing the risk that regional rivalry will deepen divisions within the governorate.⁽⁶⁾

Developments in late 2025 brought this dynamic into sharp relief. Competition for influence escalated into confrontation between local forces aligned with the two regional powers, followed by rapid shifts in territorial control. These developments showed that regional influence is no longer merely an external factor surrounding the political process, but a force actively shaping the distribution of power within it.

The political dilemma arises when external actors move beyond supporting local forces and begin to shape their capacity to make their own choices and negotiate their positions. A report by the Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies concluded that Saudi-UAE divergence has deepened divisions among local actors, while the rivalry between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi has become linked to objectives and interests beyond managing the Yemeni conflict itself.⁽⁷⁾

The presence of multiple external centres of influence therefore adds another layer to the fragmentation of Hadramout's political representation. Its various constituencies are not competing solely over local interests, but are also operating in an environment shaped by divergent sources of power and support. This further complicates efforts to rebuild a common Hadhrami position.

Against this backdrop, the current coordination process carries a distinct institutional significance. The Council was established by a decision of Hadramout's local authority, giving it a locally grounded institutional foundation. This does not, however, insulate its trajectory from the regional environment or the calculations surrounding Hadramout's political landscape.

This institutional foundation is consistent with Saudi Arabia's stated support for the Presidential Leadership Council and Yemen's state institutions. Riyadh has reaffirmed its backing for both the Yemeni government and the Presidential Leadership Council, while also supporting dialogue to address the southern issue. This does not demonstrate that Saudi Arabia specifically supports the Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council. It does, however, situate the Council's formation within an institutional political trajectory consistent with Riyadh's declared policy, in contrast to approaches that seek to impose unilateral representation or reshape the political landscape outside the framework of state institutions.

The significance of the Council's coordination process therefore lies not in positioning it as another participant in regional competition, but in its attempt to reshape the relationship between power, representation, and decision-making within Hadramout. If the Council succeeds in broadening representation and forging common positions, it could make the local political landscape less vulnerable to successive shifts in the regional balance of influence. If, however, its constituent forces reproduce the same external alignments, regional competition will continue to shape Hadramout's political trajectory, despite the establishment of a new coordination framework.

Fifth: Prospects for the Council's Emergence as a Hadhrami Political Centre

The Hadhrami Higher Coordination Council has an opportunity to evolve from a framework for coordinating political and social forces into an influential political centre. This potential, however, does not derive automatically from the breadth of its composition or the timing of its establishment. The Council's significance will ultimately depend on its ability to translate its representative weight and negotiating leverage into genuine decision-making power. Although broad participation gives it an initial advantage over frameworks centred on a single constituency, that advantage could become a liability if competing interests impede decision-making or prevent the formation of common positions.

The current political phase offers the Council a window of opportunity to influence any future arrangements concerning Yemen and the south. The value of that opportunity, however, will depend on its ability to act before those arrangements take shape outside Hadramout. Negotiations do not necessarily favour those with the most legitimate demands. They tend instead to accord greater weight to actors who can articulate their demands clearly, present them as a coherent negotiating position, and sustain a domestic mandate that enables them to speak for a clearly defined political and social constituency. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to secure Hadramout's inclusion in any forthcoming settlement, but to acquire the capacity to shape the terms of that inclusion.

Hadramout's economic and human resources, geographical position, and social weight constitute sources of strength that could be converted into bargaining leverage. Such leverage, however, depends on the political management of these assets,

not merely their possession. A resource acquires negotiating value only when it is linked to a specific demand, advanced by an actor capable of negotiating on its basis, and backed by a domestic constituency that authorises the Council to deploy it. The Council's future weight will therefore depend less on the scale of Hadramout's resources than on its ability to connect the governorate's economic and social interests to a coherent political project.

The post-conference phase will therefore test whether the Council can evolve into a political centre. What matters is not how many constituencies attended the conference, but what follows:

Will the leadership continue to operate cohesively? Will a stable decision-making mechanism emerge? Can the Council formulate unified positions on contentious issues? How will its relationship with the local authority be defined? Will the constituencies that remained outside the Council eventually join it, or will parallel centres of representation emerge?

The answers to these questions will determine whether the Council is building a new political centre in Hadramout or merely adding another coordination framework to a political landscape that remains fragmented among multiple centres of influence.

Sixth: Potential Risks to the Council's Effectiveness

The principal risk facing the Council lies not in whether it can be established, but in whether its organisational breadth proves largely formal, generating no commensurate political weight. Four main sources of this risk can be identified:

- Representation Overload at the Expense of Decision-Making: The number of constituencies represented

and the divergence of their interests may slow decision-making, particularly on contentious issues. This risk will become more acute if the rules governing consensus and voting, together with mechanisms for resolving disagreements, are not clearly established in advance. Without such rules, broad representation could become a source of paralysis rather than strength.

- Imbalance of Power within the Council: This risk arises when authority over agenda-setting or decision direction becomes concentrated in the chairmanship or a particular actor, turning the Council from a forum for managing plurality into a vehicle for unilateral decision-making. Excessive influence by the local authority over the Council's internal mechanisms could also cast doubt on its independence and its ability to articulate its members' positions.

- Ambiguity in the Political Project: Agreement on broad principles concerning the Hadramout issue is not sufficient. The Council must define the interests, priorities, and positions that can be translated into concrete policies and negotiating demands. Without such clarity, it may remain confined to a coordination role, lacking the capacity to influence power-sharing or representational arrangements concerning Hadramout.

- Persistence of Parallel Centres of Representation: The continued presence of influential Hadhrami political and social constituencies outside the Council may limit its ability to evolve into a broadly representative reference point, leaving Hadramout's political landscape divided among multiple centres of representation. This risk depends not only on the breadth of participation within the Council, but also on its ability to expand the scope of consensus, accommodate forces that remain outside it, or establish stable forms of coordination with them.

The true test of the Council's effective-

ness, therefore, will be its ability to turn plurality into collective decisions, those decisions into a coherent political position, and that position into negotiating leverage.

Expected Scenarios:

Likely Scenario: Flexible Consensus

The Council maintains cohesion among its constituent forces by avoiding definitive decisions on the most contentious issues, thereby preventing the framework from fragmenting. Under this scenario, it would continue to function as a coordination platform with considerable social and political weight, without fully evolving into a political vehicle commanding broad representative and negotiating legitimacy for Hadramout. This is the most likely outcome because the indicators available thus far point more to a capacity to bring constituencies together than to producing common political decisions on contentious issues.

Optimistic Scenario: Political Consolidation

The Council succeeds in translating the breadth of its representation into an institution governed by clear decision-making rules. It emerges from the conference with a clearly defined political document and a leadership accepted by its various constituencies. If these conditions are met, the Council would have the foundations necessary to evolve from a coordination framework into a political centre with representative legitimacy.

Stagnation Scenario: Competition within the Council's Framework

Existing differences among the constituent forces carry over into the Council itself, particularly over leadership, representation, decision-making authority, and the political project. This would weaken its capacity to formulate common positions,

even if its organisational structure remained intact.

In the short term, the Council is therefore likely to operate through flexible consensus. Whether this consensus subsequently develops towards political consolidation or internal stagnation will depend on the Council's performance after the conference.

Security and political developments will test the Council's cohesion. An escalation of the Houthi threat, for example, could lead constituencies to align their priorities if they agree on the nature of the threat and how to address it. It could equally deepen divisions if they disagree over the priority accorded to the security response, the role of the local authority, or the place of the Hadramout issue within the broader response to the conflict.

Recommendations

1- Articulate the Hadramout vision in a clearly defined political document that sets out the governorate's priorities, political position, and economic and human resources in the context of forthcoming political settlements, rather than confining it to broad principles.

2- Adopt clear rules governing representation and decision-making before the founding conference to prevent disputes over representational quotas from developing into a crisis of legitimacy for the Council.

3- Safeguard the independence of the Council's institutional decision-making from the local authority while maintaining cooperation with it, ensuring that the latter acts as a political and institutional partner rather than a substitute for the Council.

4- Treat plurality as a source of legitimacy rather than seeking to eliminate political differences within the Council. The objective should be to manage those differences, not conceal them.

5- Establish a permanent mechanism for engaging forces that have not joined the Council or continue to harbour reservations. The project's sustainability will be measured by its ability to broaden consensus, not merely by participation in the founding conference.

6- Link the Council's political position to the governorate's material interests, particularly those relating to resources, energy, services, and security, so that its political project remains grounded in the priorities of Hadhrami society.

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