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Hardliner takeover could draw S. Yemen into terrorist 'mafia'

By James Morrison
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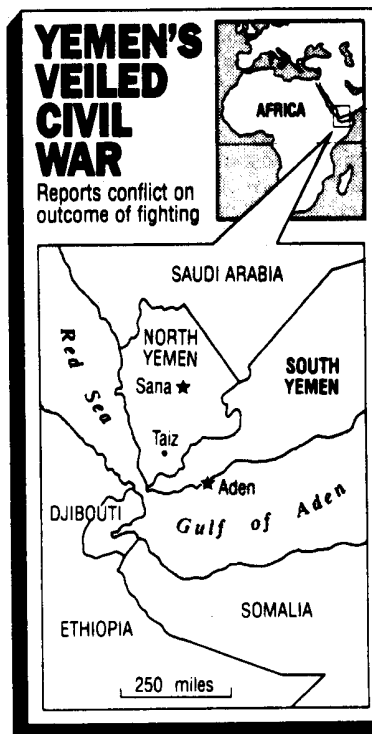
South Yemen will join the "Iran-Syria-Libya mafia" of international terrorism if hardline Marxist rebels take over the country from the existing pro-Soviet regime, an American expert on terrorism predicted yesterday.

Ray Cline, who recently coauthored a book on state-sponsored terrorism, also speculated that Libya's Col. Muammar Qaddafi or Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini are behind the South Yemen civil war to extend their influence to the strategic Bab el-Mandeb, the straits that lead to the Red Sea and on to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean.

Another terrorism expert, John Rees, pointed out that South Yemen has long been a strong supporter of terrorism and nothing much will change no matter which side wins.

As the experts debate the eventual outcome of the fighting, journalists and diplomats from listening posts on the Horn of Africa are trying to make sense of the events in the shadowy Arab country. Some news reports had the rebels in charge yesterday, and other reports said the government had regained control of the country where some 9,000 people have died in more than a week of fighting.

The State Department has said virtually nothing about the civil war that broke out Jan. 13. A spokesman declined yesterday to speculate on the effect a more radical regime would have on Middle East peace prospects or on shipping routes through the Red Sea. The United States has no diplomatic relations



Map by Paul Woodward The Washington Times

with South Yemen.

Mr. Cline, a terrorism analyst with Georgetown University's Center for Strategic International Studies, predicted that a rebel victory could further tilt the scales in favor of Libya, Iran and Syria.

Those countries, considered the world's leading proponents of terrorism, seek not only to expel Israel from the Middle East but also to terrorize any moderate Arab country cooperating with Israel in peace talks.

"If you get a more violent group

running the place," Mr. Cline said in an interview, "you will encourage the wilder cards in the terrorist camp."

A rebel victory "will tend to add South Yemen to the Iran, Syria, Libya mafia," Mr. Cline said. "I dare say that's what it was all about and I'll bet that Khomeini or Qaddafi were up to their necks in it."

The State Department says Iran, Syria and Libya sponsor, train and protect terrorists but lists South Yemen as a relatively minor player.

South Yemen has not "participated directly in international terrorist acts" but has "supported international terrorism since the late 1960s by providing camps and other facilities for a number of leftist terrorist groups," the State Department said in its 1984 report on "Global Terrorism," released last November.

South Yemen's latest "level of support was limited to the provision of safe haven for Palestinian groups," the report said.

But Mr. Rees said South Yemen has "always been in the forefront of terrorism. Every one's been in and out of South Yemen. But because of its isolation and miserable climate, it's a haven of last resort" for terrorists.

He said the civil war there is a power struggle between Arab tribes and compared the fighting to the coup in Afghanistan more than six years ago when the Soviet Union replaced one pro-Moscow regime with another.

"They are probably the most quarrelsome tribes in the Arab world," Mr. Rees said of some 85 tribes that in the country.