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The separatist movement complains of economic, political and cultural oppression by the north. Much of the south and east are beyond government control.

By Haley Sweetland Edwards, Special to The Times

May 18, 2010

Reporting from Aden, Yemen

There is war talk along the southern Yemen coast and the flag of rebellion is painted on the stocks of guns. The separatists call this land South Arabia, and villagers say it's only a matter of time before insurgency erupts.

"We are ready to fight. All of us. Men, women and children," said Zahra Saleh Abdullah, a separatist leader, sitting in a living room with a dozen would-be rebels in Yafa, a restive tribal territory in the south. "Yemen is not our country. South Arabia is our country."

Much of southern and eastern Yemen are almost entirely beyond the central government's control. Many Yemeni soldiers say they won't wear their uniforms outside the southern port city of Aden for fear of being killed. In recent months, officials have been attacked after trying to raise the Yemeni flag over government offices in the south.

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President Ali Abdullah Saleh crushed an uprising by the socialist-controlled south in 1994, four years after North and South Yemen were uneasily joined. Tensions have since steadily increased in this country at the intersection of the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.

The possibility of renewed conflict comes as the government is contending with a shaky peace with a different rebel group in the north and security threats from an Al Qaeda branch whose attacks have included the suspected attempt to bomb a Detroit-bound U.S. airliner on Christmas Day.

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The southern separatist movement complains of economic, political and cultural oppression by the north. The movement's leaders say the Yemeni government has extracted oil and gas from the south, confiscated southerners' land and systematically discriminated against southerners when it comes to government and military jobs. It also contends that the national government in Sana has starved southern towns of public money for schools, hospitals and road maintenance.

"The north doesn't think of us as citizens. To them, we are slaves. They take our resources and give us nothing. They took my family's farm — it had been my grandfather's grandfather's — and gave me nothing in return," said Fahmi Shabe, a young man living in Aden. "What am I supposed to do?"

Hundreds of separatists were arrested this spring during widespread demonstrations, and a series of government crackdowns left half a dozen separatists and soldiers dead. The government has also periodically stopped cellphone service, restricted road transportation and declared a state of emergency in southern regions.

For the last three years, the separatist movement has been torn by internal differences and conflicting goals. But leaders from Aden and other southern provinces say the movement is beginning to coalesce as already-scarce resources decrease further amid dwindling oil revenue, lack of foreign investment and widespread corruption in Sana. A poll in January by the Yemen Center for Civil Rights found that 70% of southern Yemenis were in favor of secession.

"I think violence is coming," said Mohamed Tamah, a separatist leader who is wanted by Yemeni authorities. "Too many things have happened. Too many arrests, too many deaths, too much injustice. We are in a state of emergency."

Analysts say the separatist movement is not yet strong or unified enough to fight Yemen's central government. That doesn't mean violence is out of the question. Some say the government will start a war against the separatists, but only when a show of force is politically beneficial for Saleh and his regime.

Saleh has repeatedly lumped his internal enemies into one category, labeling them all Al Qaeda, or simply enemies of the state. In some cases, that has led separatists to publicly distance themselves from the militant group.

Tariq Fadhli, an Islamist fighter in the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s and a onetime confidant of Osama bin Laden, defected from the Yemeni government last year and became a prominent separatist leader. In February, he published on YouTube a video of himself saluting an American flag and playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in his backyard to demonstrate that his loyalties were not with Al Qaeda.

"Saleh wants to scare the West into supporting a war against a freedom- and peace-loving people," said Sheik Abdu Alribh Naqib, one of the main separatist leaders in the Yafa region. "We do not agree with Al Qaeda. They are not welcome in our land."

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In Aden, many say they long for the days of British rule, which lasted from 1839 to 1967, or for the socialist government, which ruled South Yemen during the 1970s and left a legacy of education, secularism and relative gender equality.

In the last two decades, literacy rates and women's rights in southern Yemen have slipped, while unemployment and poverty levels have risen. Tribal law and once-banned, conservative traditions — such as child marriage — have also made a resurgence.

"Look around. We have oil and gas and fertile lands and ports. We are educated. We have a history of culture. And look what we have become: poor, oppressed, backwards," said Wajdi Shabe, a journalist and activist in Aden. "We want our freedom."

Edwards is a special correspondent.

Times staff writer Jeffrey Fleishman in Cairo contributed to this report.

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Taareq at 12:24 PM May 18, 2010

Apparently verballistic is illiterate as well, because the Southern Secession movement is socialist and their rebellion in 1994 was crushed by the Islamists who allied Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Verballistic at 12:13 AM May 17, 2010

The declines in literacy rates and women's rights are DIRECTLY proportional to the rise of fundamentalist Islam, which despises both secular education AND women. Since Predator drones have been so successful in taking out Islamic terrorists in Pakistan who target America, they need to be likewise used in Yemen, which is RAPIDLY becoming one of the hotbeds of Islamic terrorism.

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