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THE YEMENS: THREATENING DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

SUMMARY

The movement toward unity between North and South Yemen is continuing. North Yemen President Salih reportedly is on the verge of agreeing to include representatives of the insurgent South Yemen-backed National Democratic Front (NDF) in the government of the North. Soviet military aid and influence in the North continues to grow. Salih seems to be moving toward a clear break with Saudi Arabia and the U.S., and there appears little prospect that he will reverse the course that seems headed toward bringing North Yemen under control of the Soviet-backed Marxist regime in Aden. Indeed, Salih may no longer have the power to halt the slide even if he were to become so inclined. Moreover, there have been numerous reports of increased shipments of Soviet military aid to South Yemen and the presence of Cuban combat troops there. These reports have not as yet been confirmed, but if they are true they suggest South Yemen may be preparing to attempt to influence North Yemeni political direction either through intimidation or small-scale military incursion along their common border.

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Salih's Slide Toward Moscow

Recent reports of impending governmental changes in Sana indicate a further purge of pro-Saudi elements. Salih apparently plans to relegate Prime Minister Abd Al Chani, a relative moderate, to the powerless vice presidency. Last month Interior Minister, Khamis, another moderate, was demoted, while the influence of Foreign Minister Makki--a pro-Soviet--apparently has increased of late. The removal and demotion of moderates has made Salih more responsive to the pressures from the left and the USSR. Reportedly Salih has been seeing the Soviet ambassador as often as twice a week. If access implies influence, Soviet influence in Sana is becoming considerable. Moscow has encouraged Salih to include NDF officials in his government and is reportedly pleased with the progress which has been made thus far.

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The growth of Soviet influence is further indicated by Sana's failure to support the U.N. General Assembly resolution condemning Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. This is particularly significant because of North Yemen's traditional tendency to go along with the mainstream of Arab opinion. We do not know the position taken by North Yemen at the Islamabad conference in late January. The fact that a relatively low-level delegation was sent, however, suggests an effort to avoid identification with the anticipated resolution condemning the Soviets. Salih's silence on Afghanistan can only add to the deterioration of relations with the Saudis.

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If these reports about the [Redacted] flight activity are true, the flights probably did not originate in the Soviet Union. The distance involved, the necessity to utilize overflight rights and comply with international flight rules would have resulted in detection by US intelligence assets. The most probable point of origin for this flight activity is Ethiopia. In the past, Cuban forces have been airlifted from there to South Yemen, first in 1978 at the time of Iemil's takeover and subsequently during the February/March 1979 South Yemen incursion into North Yemen. In each case the Cuban mission was to bolster security in the Aden area.

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*It is fairly
likely*

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Recent Cuban troop movements within Ethiopia, while attributed to requirements of the Ogaden situation and scheduled rotation back to Cuba, could well be connected with the numerous clandestine and press reports of increased Cuban presence in South Yemen.

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Covert Activities of NDF

Despite Salih's apparent willingness to give NDF a role in the Sana government, NDF is taking separate measures to improve its position in the North including: 1) increasing its arms stockpiles, 2) upgrading its capability for potential military operations, and 3) consolidating and expanding its political network in areas previously distant to NDF influence but where currently there is disaffection with Salih's regime.

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Moscow's View

In the environment created by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, with its increased potential for US-Soviet military confrontation in the Persian Gulf area the Soviets probably attach increased importance to their enterprise in the Yemens. They would be expected to exploit Sana's leftward shift and in the process to counter US basing initiatives in the region by increasing Soviet presence. Moscow's decision to step-up its activities is aimed at promoting the erosion of Western influence on the Arabian Peninsula. The evidence--albeit tenuous--of a covert step-up of military activity at the Aden airfield, together with the indications that the South Yemeni-backed National Democratic Front continues military preparations even though they may gain positions in the North Yemen government, suggest that if the present reunification negotiations fail to achieve the results sought by Aden and Moscow, (or do not move fast enough) the latter would be prepared to resort to a combination of subversion and military action.

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