

Islamist militants expand role in southern Yemen

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The New York Times

ADEN, Yemen — The ancient port city of Aden is now virtually surrounded by roving gangs of Islamist militia fighters — some linked to al-Qaida — who have captured at least two towns, stormed prisons and looted banks and



military depots in southern Yemen. Yet the government, still busy fighting unarmed protesters farther north, has done little to stop these militia. Members of the militia, the police and local officials have fled their posts across much of southern Yemen. The country's U.S.-trained counterterrorism unit has not been deployed. It is no surprise that many Yemenis believe the president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, intended it all to happen. Asked whether the jihadists soon could attack or even overwhelm this strategic coastal city of 800,000, Gen. Muhammad al-Somali — the one commander who has made any serious effort to fight them — said, "I cannot rule anything out."

The governor of neighboring Abyan province, Saleh al-Zawari, who fled almost a month ago after extremists captured the provincial capital, said the area would turn into "another Taliban state like Afghanistan" if something were not done soon. Yemeni government officials blame the rising chaos on the political crisis, which has kept Saleh's forces in



ABDELHAK SENNA / AFP/GTTY IMAGES

Thousands rally Sunday in Casablanca, Morocco, both for and against an upcoming referendum on the constitution.

Developments

Morocco: Tens of thousands of people demonstrated around the country both for and against a proposed new constitution Sunday, a week before it is to be voted on in a referendum. In Morocco's largest city, Casablanca, government supporters first blocked then attacked with rocks a march by thousands of activists, wounding many.

Libya: Rebels in the western mountains said they have advanced and are battling Moammar Gadhafi's forces in a strategic town of Bair al-Ghanam, some 50 miles southwest of Tripoli, ramping up pressure against government troops on a second front. The move comes after weeks of intense fighting in the Nafusa mountains in which opposition forces have slowly pushed Gadhafi troops back toward the capital. Libya's rebels control the eastern third of the country and pockets, including a number of Nafusa mountain towns, in the west.

Egypt: A senior member of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood says he is forming a new political party as the Islamic fundamentalist group rapidly splinters. Last week, several young members broke off and launched a rival to the Brotherhood's main Freedom and Justice Party. **Syria:** Security forces opened fire at funerals for slain political protesters, a human-rights activist said, leaving two more people dead as Syria tries to subdue weeks of demonstrations against President Bashar Assad.

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recent weeks, telling shocking stories of the heavily armed jihadists who in late May captured the city of Zinjibar, a provincial capital less than an hour's drive from here.

The jihadists have delivered speeches calling for Islamic rule from mosque loudspeakers, the refugees say. Their members include men speaking in Saudi, Iraqi, and Sudanese accents. They carry white banners with the words "Ansar al-Shariah," a name that al-Qaida leaders identified this year as an alternate name for their own organization in Yemen.

Zinjibar is now an eerie and silent wasteland, the refugees say, its houses shatter by artillery, its streets full of the dead. Only a few young men stayed on, guarding their family houses against theft. Some residents said they had initially been frightened by the gunmen, many of whom wore their hair long like northern tribesmen. But they added that the fighters treated them more respectfully than the local security and police officials, who are widely viewed here as corrupters, or worse.

"These al-Qaida people didn't steal our houses, they protected them," said Ali Muhammad Hassan, a 31-year-old government clerk. "If they saw people carrying furniture or other things, looters, they would tell them to return it."

Hassan and others also said the extremists seemed highly disciplined and had put local Yemenis in charge rather than northerners or foreign jihadists, in an apparent bid for grass-roots support. "They seemed to have a clear military plan," he said. "They moved in cells, they were highly organized." Zinjibar was not the first town captured by extremists. A smaller town about 12 miles away, was captured in March. The rebels overran several smaller villages in the area as well, forcing out the local of-