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Saudis Plan to End U.S. Presence

By PATRICK E. TYLER

WASHINGTON, Feb. 8 — Saudi Arabia's leaders have made far-reaching decisions to prepare for an era of military disengagement from the United States, to enact what Saudi officials call the first significant democratic reforms at home, and to rein in the conservative clergy that has shared power in the kingdom.

Senior members of the royal family say the decisions, reached in the last month, are a result of a continuing debate over Saudi Arabia's future and have not yet been publicly announced. But these princes say Crown Prince Abdullah will ask President Bush to withdraw all American armed forces from the kingdom as soon as the campaign to disarm Iraq has concluded. A spokesman for the royal family said he could not comment.

Pentagon officials asked about the Saudi decisions said they had not heard of any plan so specific as a complete American withdrawal. Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, in which 15 of the 19 hijackers involved were Saudis, members of both parties in Congress have urged broad reform in the conservative kingdom.

Until Abdullah actually issues the decrees, it remains to be seen whether he will be the first son of Saudi Arabia's modern unifier, King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, to undertake significant political change.

The presence of foreign — especially American — forces since the Persian Gulf war of 1991 has been a contentious issue in Saudi Arabia and has spurred the terrorism of Osama bin Laden, the now disowned scion of one of the kingdom's wealthiest families, and his followers in Al Qaeda.

Saudi officials said the departure of American soldiers would set the stage for an announcement that Saudis — but probably not women, at least initially — would begin electing representatives to provincial assemblies and then to a national assembly, Saudi officials said.

The goal would be the gradual expansion, over six years, of democratic writ until a fully democratic national assembly emerged, a senior official said.

The debate over the need for reform is described by Saudi royal family members as part of the post-Sept. 11 reckoning to head off foreign and domestic pressures that threaten the royal family and its dominion over the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula.

As the United States prepares for what could be a long military occupation of Iraq, the Saudi royal family does not want to appear as if it was pressured into reform, according to Saudis familiar with the debate. To be seen as acting under American sway might undermine the monarchy's credibility before a population that is increasingly young, unemployed, pious and anti-American.

Still, the departure of all American military forces from Saudi Arabia would be a potentially troubling milestone in the history of the relationship that dates to World War II.

Since the Persian Gulf war, when the United States sent 500,000 troops to the Saudi desert, a security pact has endured to confront and contain Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Thousands of American engineers have built supply depots, air bases and a state-of-the-art air operations headquarters south of Riyadh that were intended to join the two countries in long-lasting military collaboration.

Even if American troops did leave, Saudi and American officials said, security cooperation would probably continue, and they noted that the soldiers could return if the Saudi rulers faced a new threat.

The Saudi reform debate, according to one participant, has taken place in an atmosphere of opposition from senior princes, including Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, the minister of interior, and to a lesser extent, Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, the minister of defense.

Prince Sultan, who family members say has been privately designated as the next crown prince by Abdullah, was described by a family member as "moderately against it or, stating it another way, very reluctantly for it."

One royal family member said that despite opposing views, senior princes "will support the decisions of Prince Abdullah when he makes them" because "the royal family will always stick together, especially in times of crisis."

The reported decisions have enthusiastic support from Saudi Arabia's influential business sector and from the second tier of senior princes in their 50's and 60's who have had the most contact with the West. Among those family members are Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Princeton-educated foreign minister, and Prince Bandar bin Sultan, son of the defense minister and a former F-15 fighter pilot who has been ambassador to the United States since 1983.

For now, a senior prince said, Crown Prince Abdullah, the day-to-day ruler since King Fahd fell ill in 1995, has overcome resistance with the admonition, "Isn't it better if I do this now before I have to do it later?"

The senior prince added, "After the last shot is fired in Iraq, it will be a good time to say that we have won, and that we both agree there is no longer any need for American forces." But he said that "the real politics of this is to win the hearts and minds of a majority of the people" in Saudi Arabia, adding, "That is the way to really fight terrorism and the bad guys."

Another senior prince said, "The fact is, reform is imperative and not a choice, so is participatory government." There will always be opponents to reform, this prince said, though the family is capable of facing opposition "with resolve, but with understanding for the other view."

If he issues the decrees, Abdullah will have to contend with those religious authorities who will resist reforms and a change in the fundamentalist contract that has empowered a clergy who practice one of Islam's most conservative interpretations. It is based on the teachings of Sheik Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab and sometimes referred to as Wahhabism.

American specialists on Saudi Arabia said it appeared that Abdullah was seeking a national consensus to maneuver around the most conservative elements of the clergy by appealing to the influential Saudi business establishment, the military and tribal leaders. The aim, Saudi officials said, is to create an Islamic parliament that would be able to wrest some control over social policy — even basic questions like whether women can drive — away from the puritanical religious establishment.

Richard N. Murphy, a leading Arabist who served as President Reagan's assistant secretary of state for the Middle East, said that "if this turns out to be solid, it is a dramatic demonstration of leadership, which people have been worried about" since Abdullah took over day-to-day rule from King Fahd. "It also shows that they are capable of generating movement from within, which is where it had to come from if they are going to survive as a ruling family," he added.

One royal family member said there was a great deal of frustration among younger princes who feel that the older generation, most in their 70's and 80's, have been unwilling to take on the religious establishment.

"There is nothing in the Koran that says that women cannot drive," one prince said. "But we never tested the theory that women could drive," he added, explaining that the royal family simply subordinated itself to clerical rulings because that was the historical bargain under which the House of Saud came to power.

"As it stands now, one religious leader can veto anything that you want to do," one prince said. "Eventually, we became the culprits under this system," he added. "And now, we have exhausted every inch of that coalition. It is time to move on to the next generation."

The last time Saudi Arabia purged itself of foreign military forces was 1963, when King Faisal ordered the Strategic Air Command squadron of nuclear-armed bombers to evacuate the base they had maintained at Dhahran since the 1950's.

The reason at that time was a streak of Arab nationalism coursing through the region with the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, said David E. Long, a longtime State Department specialist on the Saudis. He said that "our presence in a military base became a liability" for the Saudis, "and we were asked to leave."

Saudi Arabia's dalliance with democratic process also dates to the early 1960's. King Faisal told President John F. Kennedy that he would create an assembly whose appointed deputies would advise the throne, but not make laws. But nothing came of the proposal until 1992, when King Fahd finally carried it out after the Persian Gulf war.

Whether Abdullah can push through the deeper change now apparently envisioned is unclear. The decision by some family members to air the debate seemed in part intended to nudge the Saudi leader forward.

"Doing political reform in Saudi Arabia is like publishing the Kama Sutra in the Victorian Age," said a royal family member, referring to the Hindu encyclopedia of erotica. But, he added, "the chances that Abdullah is doing show that he is willing to proceed with only a slim majority of religious support" and a significant amount of opposition.

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In doing so, Abdullah has apparently concluded that he will need to put distance between himself and the United States.

"I think they will step away from us, and I think it is healthy for both sides," Mr. Long said. "The median age in Saudi Arabia is now 15, and within this demography, there is an ideological justification for getting mad at American troops on your soil."

"But over and over again, we have given them the umbrella of our security, and our interest in them is that they own one quarter of the world's oil and can export a higher percentage of it than anyone else," Mr. Long said. "That has created a very strong relationship that is under a lot of strain, but I think it will survive."