

## *Special Report*

### **Our Man in Jeddah**

**By Margie Burns**

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July 31, 2004—J. Michael Springmann, Esq., was Our Man in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in the Reagan and former Bush administrations, September 1987 through March 1989. In the American consulate in Jeddah, Springmann was chief of the Visa Section.

Twenty-twenty hindsight has revealed to Springmann that he himself was, involuntarily, one of the no-name functionaries admitting terrorists into the United States. He talks colorfully about his Graham Greene-like experience as a consular official in Saudi Arabia.

The situation was dominated by the CIA. Springmann's key allegation is that he often refused to issue visas to foreign nationals, mostly Saudis, whom he wanted to keep out of the United States—and was frequently overruled by superiors, State Department personnel connected with the CIA, who ordered the visas issued anyway. He has aired this central allegation in several open forums and in private interviews.

Some of the back story is matter of record. During Springmann's two years in Jeddah, Springmann must have processed "forty to forty-five thousand visas," deciding which to issue or deny. Jeddah was then the fifth largest visa issuing post in the Middle East, behind Cairo, Riyadh, and a few other cities.

Under Section 214(b) of the Immigration and Naturalization Act, anyone displaying the characteristics of an 'intending immigrant' is supposed to be turned down. Springmann turned down people who had no jobs or only menial jobs; had no ties to Saudi Arabia but applied for visas from there; did not speak English; etc. Sometimes a self-declared "university student" would have no record of having applied to any American university. The Consular Section is open for "Nonimmigrant Visa Services" from Saturday through Wednesday 8:00 to 11:00, closed on American and Saudi holidays. Requirements for a visa are clearly listed on its web site.

Rejected applicants were transparently dubious prospects: "they had menial jobs but could afford their tickets"; or they gave ridiculous or unconvincing reasons for wanting to go to the US; or they had forged documents or inadequate paperwork. Some presented a combination of negatives.

The magic attribute here is temporariness. Visas are issued only for a temporary stay. Most Americans thinking about foreigners applying for admission to this country probably think first of some kind of individual merit, or of humanitarian relief. But in a consulate, the Tinker-Bell fairy dust that gets an applicant into the US is some assurance that he won't stay. Like grandchildren, or hookers depending on your point of view, they show up with the assurance that touches the heart of a minor consular official, namely that they will also be going home. Tenderness is not a desideratum for visa issuers: Springmann comments that some applicants—Ethiopians, for instance—were clearly aiming for some kind of asylum; "hey, you want asylum, talk to the UN."

Springmann appeared on a panel at the June 10, 2002, press conference launching UnansweredQuestions.org, a 9-11 research group.

As one anecdote runs, “It wasn’t one of these things where they wanted to visit their father in America and there was a question of where they worked, that sort of thing. It was basically two Pakistanis came to me one day and said, ‘We want to go to a trade show in America.’ And I asked, ‘What’s the trade show?’ They didn’t know. ‘What city is it going to be held in?’ They didn’t know. And I asked a few more questions and I said, ‘No. Visa denied. You haven’t proved to me that you’re going to come to the United States, accomplish your business and then return home.’

“Well, a few minutes later I had a phone call from a CIA case officer assigned to the commercial section. ‘Issue the visas.’ I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Well, it’s important they get a visa.’ And I said, ‘No.’ And a few minutes later he was over talking to the chief of the consular section, reversed me, issued the visas, and these guys took off. And this was typical.”

Springmann’s guess at the time was that “it was basically visa fraud.” He thought that “somebody was paying \$2,500 bribes to State Department officials. I was ordered by these same high State Department officials to issue the visas, to shut up, to do my job and ask no questions.”

“And this wasn’t simply a difference of opinion as was alleged later on,” after Springmann was fired and tried unsuccessfully to get his complete personnel file through FOIA requests. If you ask Springmann, it was conspiracy: “I issued visas to terrorists recruited by the CIA and its asset, Osama bin Laden.” The period overlapped with the CIA’s ongoing strategy of supporting bin Laden’s mujaheddin, to inconvenience foreign powers including the Soviet Union.

“I had a Sudanese who was unemployed in Saudi Arabia. He was a refugee from the Sudan and I said, ‘You don’t get a visa.’ And he kept coming back and coming back and coming back. And after a bit I started getting calls from a woman I believe was a case officer who was in the political section. ‘We need this guy.’ And I said, ‘No. He hasn’t proved to me that he’s going to America and he’s going to come back, as the Immigration and Nationality Act says and that the State Department’s Foreign Affairs Manual says.’ Well, in short order I got reversed again and he got his visa for national security reasons. And this went on for a year and a half. I had people, not every day perhaps, but every week.”

After the press conference, Springmann agreed to be interviewed. We met at a little raw bar, the Dancing Crab, “just a cut above a dive,” a block from the Tenleytown Metro, easy for him to walk to, except for the heat index of about 110 degrees, from his home-office in Northwest DC. Not dealing with James Bond here, but then a consular officer wouldn’t be, which seems to be part of the picture behind Springmann’s distinctive on-the-job experience as a Rosenkrantz or Guildenstern to the State Department’s Hamlet and the CIA’s Claudius, caught between the pass and fell incensed points of mighty opposites.

Springmann held several positions in the State Department for about nine years, 1982 to 1991. His first station was New Delhi for two years; then Stuttgart for three years; then Jeddah. After a home leave of two to three months back in DC in spring 1989, he returned to Stuttgart as a political and economics officer for two years.

From there he was assigned to Washington, DC, in the Bureau of Intelligence & Research (INR), an entity probably not a household name, even now—“one of the oldest intelligence organizations going,” but dependent on CIA and NSA intelligence. Springmann’s description of what they do there, largely, is “take spook stuff and put a State spin on it.”

In the more formal language of State, “The Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), drawing on all-source intelligence, provides value-added independent analysis of events to Department policymakers, ensures that intelligence activities support foreign policy and national security purposes; and serves as the focal point in the Department for ensuring policy review of sensitive counterintelligence and law enforcement activities. INR’s primary mission is to harness intelligence to serve U.S. diplomacy. The bureau also analyzes geographical and international boundary issues.”

In Springmann’s plainer language, INR has an office that coordinates CIA covert activities; in other words, State looks at an operation proposed by CIA, supposedly from a foreign policy angle, and either endorses

it or not, depending—according to theory—on whether it's a good idea from a policy perspective. Evidently a position in the INR is no sinecure. The body of one INR veteran, John J. Kokal, was found recently near "the Building," with no shoes or coat on. Murky and underreported accounts attribute the death to suicide and suggest a jump either from State's windows, which do not open, or the roof, which is inaccessible. Kokal, whom Springmann did not know, also worked in Near East affairs.

The CIA is the dominant partner. A Foreign Service career has something rather like tenure for a college professor: up or out, after a certain number of years, except for contract workers. Springmann got fired, after being generically assured with others that he would get tenure; as he said, "pretty much all those who could do their job at all, except for the awfulest of the awfulest," stayed on.

People who had come into their jobs after him got tenure; Springmann was terminated within a few months of his posting to the INR; the thumbs-down decision was not preceded by any official warning letter or reprimand; he was fired with maximum abruptness, in effect leaving him no time to respond through bureaucratic channels. Springmann says frankly that he was fired because he talked and asked about those visas issued in Jeddah to CIA-sponsored terrorists, over his objections.

The exact degree of disappointment involved here, for a man who had planned to be career Foreign Service, can be gauged only somewhat subjectively. Springmann sounds more philosophical than bitter, does little or no name-calling and discusses the situation with more humor than anxiety. He had to interrupt a long interview for an hour, to go home to interview a prospective tenant for a room in his house.

Probably many people fired from their jobs, especially in DC, would like to believe that their firing was engineered by the CIA. Springmann has more grounds than most.

Asked how many or what proportion of applicants he refused, Springmann says that depended on the nationality of the applicant. Almost all Europeans received visas when they applied for them, because "no European in his right mind wants to live in the US"—"they always want to go home." Conversely, he refused nearly all Ethiopians, because they almost always wanted to stay in the US. He would get so tired of turning people down, some mornings began with an inward prayer, intense though non-ecumenical—"Please God, send me a European." He says, "I could look at people in a line, after I'd been there a while," and tell by looking whom he would have to reject. Not only Europeans were admitted, of course. With respect to the Gulf countries, "If somebody came in with a good passport and a good cover story"—like, say, the owner of a rug shop in the region who had frequent business in New York—he was generally issued a visa. Papers of the sort known as 'multiple indefinite visas,' on the other hand, allowing frequent re-entry into the US without going through the approval process each time, went "almost always to Europeans."

This policy might be considered racist, and on some level it is, but it is a function of race privilege going much deeper than simple bigotry. Once again, the Europeans' talisman was . . . they went home. Visa applicants from home countries in better condition as living places tend to get preferential treatment, because they can be counted on to return to their home countries. This longstanding policy raises emphatic questions about how 9/11 suspects got multiple-entry visas to enter the US.

Much has been written about "racial profiling" in connection with terrorism and 9-11. Most of the writing, however, has represented the policy questions as an Antigone's bind, the classical Hegelian dilemma of 'Shall we do the right thing and put ourselves in danger, or Shall we protect ourselves and do something wrong?' A similar debate surrounds efforts to extend the USA PATRIOT Act, using the plea of necessity. The bind is more apparent than real, as Springmann clarifies: existing policy would have been sufficient to keep out many of the September 11 hijackers, had it been applied. In simplest terms, most of the 19 hijackers should never have been allowed into the US to begin with, because they displayed the characteristics of "intending immigrants."

"It's very simple. If you're young, unmarried, don't have a job, you're not supposed to get a tourist visa because you're not likely to return. You're very likely to overstay that visa. Several of the terrorists who

supplied the muscle to overpower the flight crews . . . should not have been issued visas in the first place.”

Under straightforward regulations prohibiting entry by any “intending immigrant,” Springmann found himself reversed by his superiors with a surprising number of rejected applicants. He has mentioned the particular example of the Sudanese man more than once: the man was applying from Saudi Arabia but was unemployed there, and wanted to go to the US for unclear reasons. Springmann refused, but “the political officer”—Karen Sasahara, linked with some unspecified entity besides State—“wanted it done.” “So the Chief of the Consular Section at the time okayed it.”

Karen Hideko Sasahara is now in the State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. She has been linked with the political interests of the Saudis in other contexts. Patricia M. Roush, an American mother trying to get her abducted daughters back from the Saudis in an international custody case, testified to Congress on June 12, 2002, that Sasahara yelled at Roush when she tried to get State’s assistance in the case. (Current State Dept Phone Directory Sasahara, Karen H NEA/MAG 5250 202-647-3614)

Springmann was overruled often enough that he complained about it, sometimes informally, but also formally. He told the DC press conference, “I protested to the Counsel for Consular Affairs in Riyadh. I protested to the Bureau of Consular Affairs in Washington. I protested to the State Department’s Inspector General. I protested to the State Department’s Office of Diplomatic Security. I talked about this to the FBI, to the Justice Department’s Office of Professional Responsibility, and I went to a couple of congressional committees. And by and large I was told, ‘Shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about. This is a difference of opinion. You don’t know what you’re doing. You’re far too junior to question the Counsel General in Jeddah’s interest in doing this.’ He’s a guy that was seen sitting in his office filling out visa application forms for Pakistanis with forged passports. He wanted visas for Libyans who had no ties to our consular district whatsoever.”

While the number of refused visas is inexact and varies with the nationality of the applicants, Springmann estimates that he rejected “maybe 25 percent at least.” Of these, he was reversed on “maybe as many as 100.” The rejected applicants were all male; all Muslim; and almost all Arab, except for some Pakistanis and the Sudanese. Most were from other countries than Afghanistan, although “I did get the odd Afghani”—“generally refused”—like the guy who gave as his reason for wanting a visa that “he wanted to visit his money in New York.” Denied.

Some applicants were amusingly transparent, humanitarian concerns aside. “We had a picture of Detroit hanging on one wall—came from somewhere, some State Department official left it. Sometimes I’d get an applicant, ask him where he intended to go once he was in the United States. And you’d see his eyes go to the picture of Detroit, and he’d say ‘Detroit.’”

Regrettably, Springmann cannot now remember particular names of applicants he turned down. More regrettably, the folder he kept in Jeddah, paperwork on the applicants he turned down who were subsequently issued visas by his superiors, is in the government’s custody if it still exists. It has not been turned over to him in response to his FOIA requests.

The DOJ attorney handling Springmann’s FOIA matter was Kirsten Moncada, who made the motion to seal. In August 2001, Moncada received the Attorney General’s award for Distinguished Service, “for her exemplary and sustained role in providing legal advice and policy guidance, both within the Department and across the Executive Branch, on sensitive issues arising under the Privacy Act of 1974 . . . Her knowledge, dedication, and analytical skill have earned such respect throughout the Federal Government that she is widely regarded as the preeminent Privacy Act expert in the Executive Branch.”

“For whatever combination of reasons, Springmann comments matter-of-factly, “Saudis almost never were refused.” The extent of this open but quiet policy is suggested by some of the international custody disputes; allegedly Patricia Roush’s Saudi former husband, Khalid al-Gheshayan, was able repeatedly to obtain visas to enter the US in spite of an arrest record, diagnosed schizophrenia, and divorce by the US parent.

Evidently this policy was deemed not generous enough at the J. Michael Springmann level, however. By contrast, the independent film *Do Not Enter* shows some of the persons denied visas to the US during roughly the same period, under the McCarran-Walter Act: Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Hortensia Allende, Jan Myrdal, Oscar Niemeyer.

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