

The Prince of Fingerprints

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Some day soon -- if it hasn't happened already -- the first American male between the ages of 16 and 45 will be fingerprinted at the border as he enters Saudi Arabia. The measure is in retaliation for the discretionary fingerprinting of male visitors to the United States from a range of Muslim countries that as of October 1 includes Saudi Arabia. In practice, all Saudi males seeking to enter the United States are now being fingerprinted. As is well known, 15 of the 19 September 11 hijackers were Saudi men.

For any American contemplating the additional delay at the Saudi border, the man to curse is Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, a brother of King Fahd and the kingdom's powerful and long-serving interior minister. It's not that Prince Nayef is afraid an American will fly an aircraft into one of Saudi Arabia's new skyscrapers. "Our dealings will be reciprocal. We'll deal with every other country in the same way they deal with us," Nayef told the Saudi English-language daily Arab News last week.

The bluntness is typical of the man who is emerging as a key broker in the power games at the top of the House of Saud. Nayef and his allies aim to hobble the de facto ruler, Crown Prince Abdullah, and allow the so-called Sudairi princes to control Saudi affairs. The Sudairis (so named for their mother's tribe) are the largest group of full brothers from among the many sons of King Abdul-Aziz (also known as Ibn Saud), the founder of the modern Saudi state. Seven in number, they are effectively six because one lives permanently abroad. King Fahd himself is the senior brother, followed by Sultan, the minister of defense.

Two weeks ago King Fahd, who is 81, returned from a four-month sojourn in Switzerland and southern Spain. A prominent Western ambassador in the kingdom recently described the king as "very ill." Although Fahd has since presided over two of the weekly council of ministers meetings, photographs show him hunched in a wheelchair, staring myopically ahead. The official press agency reports Fahd being briefed on industrial developments and foreign cooperation agreements, but much of what is going on clearly passes him by.

Still, as long as Fahd is alive, Crown Prince Abdullah, now 79, is denied the throne. By promoting Fahd's public profile, the other Sudairis diminish Abdullah's ability to lead. Last week the crown prince opened some hospitals and a desalination plant.

To Saudis and Saudi-succession watchers, Fahd is number one, Abdullah is number two, and Sultan is number three

in proximity to the throne. (Succession goes from brother to brother among the sons of Ibn Saud.) All these men's advancing age forces the question: Who is number four? Increasingly, number four is assumed to be Nayef, whose age, a mere 69, is in his favor, although four less significant sons of Ibn Saud would need to be persuaded to stand aside.

Western chanceries view Nayef's emergence with dread. "A loose cannon" is one of the kinder epithets. Along with his brother Sultan, Nayef was accused in one of the multi-billion-dollar 9/11 lawsuits filed recently in the United States of having paid off Osama bin Laden so that al Qaeda would choose targets other than Saudi Arabia. Earlier this month Nayef spoke out against U.S. threats to strike Iraq -- because Iraq is an Arab country. The Saudi embassy in Washington quoted him as calling for an international consensus to prevent an invasion of Iraq since the problem can be dealt with by non-military means.

For anyone who detects a contradiction with Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal's careful formulation to CNN in September -- "If action is taken under a U.N. mandate, then all U.N. member states, including Saudi Arabia, would be obligated to support it" -- Nayef's brother Sultan laid to rest any doubt last week. "Saudi Arabia will not provide any assistance in any strikes against Iraq," he told the Saudi-owned pan-Arab Al-Hayat newspaper. From Algeria, Foreign Minister Saud, a mere nephew in the status-conscious House of Saud, meekly explained: "I never said that Saudi Arabia agrees to allow the use of its territory to strike Iraq."

Nayef is also blamed for the incarceration of five British expatriates, along with a Canadian and a Belgian, accused of causing bomb explosions in 2000 and 2001 that killed one Westerner and injured several others. In defiance of all evidence and logic, Nayef said those arrested as well as the victims belonged to illegal alcohol gangs fighting turf wars. Diplomats are certain that Islamic fundamentalists, perhaps linked to al Qaeda, are responsible -- as two further fatal bombings this past summer suggest.

What is the latest twist in the Shakespearean antics of the House of Saud? Crown Prince Abdullah has nominated the former intelligence chief, Prince Turki al-Faisal (a brother of Foreign Minister Saud), to be ambassador to London. If accepted, he will fill the slot vacated by the new water minister, Ghazi al-Gosaibi, the poet envoy whose writings earlier this year praised the Palestinian suicide bomber of an Israeli supermarket and last year reminded George W. Bush of his "past alcoholism."

Prince Turki was fired as head of foreign intelligence 12 days before September 11, the apparent victim of an early Saudi realization that support for the Taliban had been a disastrous policy. Since then Turki has been trying to clear his name, which suffered additional damage when the first American 9/11 lawsuit named him as responsible for transferring funds to bin Laden. It is debatable whether London will see Turki, who is perceived as anti-Nayef, as an effective person to secure the release of the imprisoned Brits. New Yorkers might be annoyed at the choice as well.

Incidentally, fingerprinted American visitors to the kingdom need not worry that their whorls and creases will be used to frame them on some spurious offense. The Saudis' forensic science is limited -- for them, nothing beats a confession. ❖

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