

Gate-crashers constituted serious security breach at White House

The gate-crashing by a couple at the White House state dinner in honour of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh Nov 24 is a more serious security breach than it might apparently seem.

Had something comparable happened in the vicinity of a visiting US president anywhere, particularly in South Asia, it would have triggered a drastic security response. Having been at the White House that very morning for a joint news conference by Singh and

President Barack Obama, I can testify that it would have taken a combination of utter gumption on the part of the couple and particular lapse on the part of the Secret Service for the embarrassing incident to have happened.

According to The Washington Post, which first broke the story: 'The Secret Service said Thursday that its procedures to ensure a tight bubble of security around the White House were not followed for the state dinner when the couple entered with other guests on the southeast side of the White House, but the agency did not provide details.'

'We're being intentionally vague on that,' said spokesman Ed Donovan. 'All we are saying is that procedures we have in place weren't followed.'

Donovan was quoted as saying by The New York Times: 'It is important to note that these individuals went through magnetometers and other levels of security, as did all guests attending the dinner.'

It is not clear whether the couple, Tareq and Michaela Salahi, had an invitation to attend the dinner. Considering how elaborate and meticulous such dinners are and the level of planning they require, it is inconceivable that anyone could have bluffed their way into perhaps the world's most guarded complex.

Michaela's red and gold sari and a matching blouse were a clever touch to the whole stunt that may have been part of the couple's efforts to secure a reality television show appearance. At first impression the Indian attire that the blonde woman wore appeared to have been bought from a cheap Indian store. It is entirely possible that her dress lent her credibility as a guest for the security staff.

One high profile Indian guest at the banquet told IANS: 'My office was called by the White House social secretary's office to ensure that everything was in order. It was also made sure that when we reached the White House all our information coincided with theirs.' He seemed surprised that the couple could have entered the premises without a specifically identifiable invitation.

This correspondent was cleared to attend the news conference after the White House press office ran his social security number in their system and conducted a thorough security frisking at the northwest gate that leads to the James Brady Briefing Room.

Notwithstanding that 320 carefully chosen guests were invited for the dinner, each one of them had to have been checked out and listed with the security staff. Their names would have been matched with the list and their identity, which could be either a passport or US driver's licence.

For Tareq and Michaela to not just cheerfully walk in front of the scores of still and television photographers, but manage to meet and hug Vice President Joseph Biden and White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel is extraordinary in terms of its security implications.

What is not yet explained is how the couple cleared the very first hurdle of matching their names with the guest list. They had to carry the invitation with them in order to gain entry.

The Washington Post said 'the Salahis' attorney, Paul W. Gardner, posted a statement on the couple's Facebook page: 'My clients were cleared, by the White House, to be there. More information is forthcoming.' The fact that the statement says 'cleared' and not invited is a distinction that the attorney appears to have deliberately made.

There is nothing to suggest yet that the Salahis posed any danger to either the Obamas or the Singhs or anyone else at the event. However, their success in reaching the number two man in the country is alarming by the standards of security cover the Secret Service maintains.

(Mayank Chhaya covered the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He is the editor of South Asia Daily in the US)

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