

Iran accuses U.S. and Saudis of kidnapping a nuclear scientist

Contributed by Borzou Daragahi, The Los Angeles Times
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Iran has also alleged that the U.S. and Israel abducted a Defense Ministry official who disappeared in 2006. In both incidents, there are suspicions that the missing men defected to the West.

Reporting from Beirut - Iran's top diplomat accused the United States and Saudi Arabia on Tuesday of kidnapping one of its nuclear scientists.

Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki told reporters that Shahram Amiri, who worked for Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, disappeared during a summer religious pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. He said Tehran had evidence that the U.S. was involved in the disappearance.

"The U.S. should give back our compatriots based on the call of their family and people," Mottaki told reporters during an appearance with his United Arab Emirates counterpart, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency.

The Foreign Ministry's spokesman acknowledged earlier in the day that Amiri was a nuclear scientist.

Iran also recently accused the United States and Israel of abducting a top Ministry of Defense official, Ali Reza Asgari, who disappeared in 2006 while on a trip to Syria. Several Iranians and security officials abroad say that he defected to the West.

One former Western intelligence official said it was also likely that Amiri had defected because he visited Saudi Arabia during the minor hajj holiday when any Iranian official would come under intense surveillance.

"A Shiite Iranian that comes to Mecca in Saudi beyond the formal period of hajj will alert Saudi services, even at the visa application stage," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"This suggests to me that the guy had prepared his trip and he was invited," she said.

Mottaki also criticized the U.S. for the trial of Amir Hossein Ardebili, who Iran claims was captured in the nation of Georgia and secretly extradited to Delaware, where he pleaded guilty last year to charges of trying to illegally purchase weapons, U.S. officials revealed last week. He is scheduled to be sentenced next week.

"We urgently call on the U.S. administration to put an end to such illogical behaviors and immediately and unconditionally release Ardebili along with other Iranian inmates in order to alleviate concerns of their families," Mottaki said.

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