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ABC Report

Iran Nuclear Scientist Defects to U.S. In CIA 'Intelligence Coup'

**Shahram Amiri Disappeared Last June in Saudi Arabia, Reportedly Now Resettled
in the United States**

3/30/2010

An award-winning Iranian nuclear scientist, who disappeared last year under mysterious circumstances, has defected to the CIA and been resettled in the United States, according to people briefed on the operation by intelligence officials.



The officials were said to have termed the defection of the scientist, Shahram Amiri, "an intelligence coup" in the continuing CIA operation to spy on and undermine Iran's nuclear program.

A spokesperson for the CIA declined to comment. In its declassified annual report to Congress, the CIA said, "Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons though we do not know whether Tehran eventually will decide to produce nuclear weapons."

Amiri, a nuclear physicist in his early 30s, went missing last June three days after arriving in Saudi Arabia on a pilgrimage, according to the Iranian government. He worked at Tehran's Malek Ashtar University, which is closely connected to Iran's Revolutionary Guard, according to the Associated Press.

"The significance of the coup will depend on how much the scientist knew in the compartmentalized Iranian nuclear program," said former White House counter-terrorism official Richard Clarke, an ABC News consultant. "Just taking one scientist out of the program will not really disrupt it."

Iran's Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, and other Iranian officials last year blamed the U.S. for "kidnapping" Amiri, but his whereabouts had remained a mystery until now.

According to the people briefed on the intelligence operation, Amiri's disappearance was part of a long-planned CIA operation to get him to defect. The CIA reportedly approached the scientist in Iran through an intermediary who made an offer of resettlement on behalf of the United States.

Since the late 1990s, the CIA has attempted to recruit Iranian scientists and officials through contacts made with relatives living in the United States, according to former U.S. intelligence officials. Case officers have been assigned to conduct hundreds of interviews with Iranian-Americans in the Los Angeles area in particular, the former officials said.

Amiri has been extensively debriefed since his defection by the CIA, according to the people briefed on the situation. They say Amiri helped to confirm U.S. intelligence assessments about the Iranian nuclear program.

In September, President Barack Obama announced the U.S., the United Kingdom and France had evidence that Iran "has been building a covert uranium enrichment facility near Qom for several years."

One Iranian web site reported that Amiri had worked at the Qom facility prior to his defection.

The New York Times reported Saturday that international inspectors and Western intelligence agencies suspect "Tehran is preparing to build more sites in defiance of United Nations demands."

Officials at Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately return calls seeking comment.

"The Americans are definitely letting the Iranians know that they are active in going after Iran's nuclear program," said Hooman Majd, an Iranian-American journalist.

A colleague of Amiri's at Tehran University called the disappearance "a disturbing sign" and blamed the Saudis for helping the U.S., according government-approved English-language web site Press TV.

"The Saudi regime has effectively discredited itself and will be seen by those who know what has gone on in the region as being confined to American demands and effectively abiding by American wishes," said Mohammad Marandi, a Tehran University professor, according to the Iranian web site.