San Diego Man is Detained in Iran; 'He Just Disappeared,' Friend Says

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<http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-san-diego-detained-iran-20160721-snap-story.html?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2AMideast%20Brief>

A San Diego man has been detained by Iranian authorities, according to friends and family members who have not heard from him in more than one week.

The man, Gholamrez “Reza” Shahini, who goes by “Robin,” traveled to Iran to visit family this month. He had been staying at his mother’s house in his native Gorgan, a city about 250 miles northeast of Tehran and near the Caspian Sea, according to Mohammad Shahini, a second cousin.

Robin Shahini, a U.S. citizen and a May graduate of San Diego State, might have been detained because of his online comments criticizing Iran's human rights record, said Denera Ragoonanan, a friend of Robin Shahini.

“Robin has been known for his advocacy of human rights on social media. This advocacy, unfortunately, has not sat well with the Iranian government,” Ragoonanan wrote on her Facebook page, accompanied by a photo of Shahini and other friends.

Ragoonanan said Shahini isn’t a mainstream activist or an extremist but is vocal on human rights issues in conversations with friends and on social media. She believes it was enough to get him noticed by the Iranian government.

“He just disappeared off the face of the planet. No one knows if he’s alive or dead,” she said in a phone interview from New York. “Iran does not recognize Iranian-Americans. They believe they’re Iranians and are subject to Iranian law.”

The U.S. State Department said Thursday it is looking into the reports, but spokesman John Kirby declined further comment. At a news conference Thursday, Secretary of State John Kerry declined to comment on the detention.

Ragoonanan said Shahini was visited by Iranian intelligence July 11 and taken from his mother’s home. The family remains under surveillance by the government, she said. She said she lost contact with Shahini’s sister, who notified her of his detainment a few days ago.

Mohammad Shahini, who lives in the Bay Area, said Iranian authorities warned Robin Shahini’s mother and other relatives not to speak to the media.

“When he went to Iran, everything was fine until the time they came to Robin’s mother’s house and captured him,” he said.

Public records show that Shahini, 46, owned a couple of businesses in San Diego, Arya Food and Pappa Cheese Pizza, but declared bankruptcy in 2008.

His Facebook page, which became inaccessible Thursday evening, had pictures of Shahini in a cap and gown, and said he studied international security and conflict resolution at San Diego State. Shahini maintained a second Facebook account in Farsi, which remains accessible.

Ragoonanan said she met Shahini while the two were taking courses at a university in Istanbul, where Shahini was participating in an exchange program with San Diego State. He left Iran as a refugee and lived in Germany before moving to the United States in the early 2000s, according to Ragoonanan.

Though he loves living in America, Shahini has hopes of bettering his native country, Ragoonanan said.

“He would always tell us that he wanted to get his PhD and wanted to work with the Iranian government to bring peace to that country,” she said.

He was set to start a master’s program in homeland security at San Diego State this fall.