

IRAN'S DESCRIPTION OF INCIDENT AT SAUDI AIRPORT CHANGES

I've been following the recent PR battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran as they square off over Yemen and their other proxy battles across the greater Middle East. Of particular interest has been the accusation by Iran that two Iranian teenage boys were sexually assaulted at an airport as they returned from visiting holy sites in Saudi Arabia. The incident apparently took place in March but took a while to achieve the level of attention it is now commanding. Although Iran now has actually cancelled Umrah trips to Mecca and Medina (these are the lesser trips to the holy sites; Hajj this year will be in September), Iran's description of the incident has evolved away from certainty that sexual assault took place down to stating that sexual assault was only attempted.

For example, here is the Mehr News announcement of cancellation of Umrah linked above:

In an order to Iran's Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization, Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ali Jannati suspended Umrah to Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia in protest to sexual assault attempt against two teenage Iranian boys by Jeddah airport security forces.

"I have ordered the Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization to suspend the Umrah pilgrimage until the criminals are sentenced and punished," Ali Jannati asserted.

The airport security agents harassing two Iranian young Hajj pilgrims are kept in custody, Jannati said, adding that Saudi officials had promised to exert maximum punishment on the perpetrators behind the assault at Jeddah airport.

Contrast that description of “sexual assault attempt” with this language from a PressTV article dated April 8:

Iran has submitted a note of complaint to the Saudi government over sexual abuse of two teenage Iranian pilgrims by Saudi officers at the King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah.

/snip/

While performing body search on passengers, Saudi officers allegedly took the 14- and 15-year-old teenagers away citing suspicion, sounded off the alarm at the gate, and subjected them to the immorality.

Afkham said Saudi authorities had voiced disgust at the abuse and said its culprits would face religious and legal punishment upon establishment of their crime.

On April 8, then, we have frank “sexual abuse”, but only three days later it went down to the point that PressTV said the boys were “sexually harrassed” rather than abused:

Saudi officers sexually harassed two Iranian teenage boys at the King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah two weeks ago, prompting Tehran to submit a note of complaint to the Saudi government, according to Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Marzieh Afkham.

We then go from the April 11 “sexually harrassed” to today’s downgrade to attempted sexual assault. AP’s report on the situation yesterday afternoon noted that just what actually took place is unclear:

The alleged abuse, the details of which have not been publicly disclosed, sparked unauthorized protests at the

Saudi Embassy in Tehran on Saturday. Public anger has grown over the incident, with President Hassan Rouhani ordering an investigation and Iran's Foreign Ministry summoning a Saudi diplomat for an explanation.

But what actually happened remains unclear. On Monday, a representative of Iran's top leader on hajj affairs downplayed the case, saying the pilgrims weren't abused, the semi-official Fars news agency reported.

"In the incident, no abuse has happened and the two policemen who attempted abuse were identified and detained by Saudi police," Ali Ghaziasgar was quoted as saying.

Isn't it interesting that Iran's description of the incident didn't soften until the very day that the "unauthorized" protests took place? Although described as unauthorized, the protests were mentioned by the major Iranian news outlets I scan, so Iran clearly intended to use them to portray Iran as victimized by the Saudis in the incident. But now that the protests have taken place and gotten their attention, we are finding out that no sexual assault likely even took place and the Saudis have placed the two policemen under arrest for attempted assault. It will be very interesting to see what happens at any trial these policemen might face and how each side will portray the outcome.