

# Missing physicist may have been jailed in Iran

Colleagues call for release of University of Texas graduate student.

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Omid Kokabee. Omid Kokabee

Concern is growing for a physics student who has been unjustly imprisoned in Iran since February, according to his colleagues.

Omid Kokabee, an Iranian graduate student at the University of Texas in Austin, failed to return from a visit to Iran during the winter break.

According to an [article](#) published in the Iranian online magazine Kaleme, affiliated to the Iranian political opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi, he has been in prison since then on charges of conspiracy.

"He returned home to visit his parents for Christmas break and was never able to return," adds John Keto, graduate adviser for physics at the University of Texas. "Many of our Iranian students are extremely nervous about what will happen if they try to return," he says.

The news has gained greater prominence in the past week thanks to an [online petition](#) promoted by the human-rights organization Human Chain Group, which aims to prevent executions in Iran.

"We assume he's been detained because he's an atomic molecular physicist and works with lasers, which are sometimes used in power generation and weapons research," says Matt Ervin, graduate coordinator for the physics department at the University of Texas. But "he has nothing to do with nuclear physics," points out Keto, explaining that Kokabee has previously worked in non-linear optics, researching the use of electric fields to manipulate light. Keto adds that since Kokabee had only just begun his PhD programme at the university, he had not yet become actively involved in research there.

Kokabee graduated in 2005 at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, and subsequently worked for several companies in Iran, including the National Iranian Oil Company. In 2007 he moved to the Institute of Photonic Sciences (ICFO) in Barcelona, Spain, to work as a research assistant. He moved to the University of Texas in August 2010 for his PhD studies. "Omid is a friendly and cheerful guy, very dedicated to physics as far as I could see," says a friend and former colleague at ICFO who requested anonymity.

According to Kaleme, Kokabee was arrested as he tried to catch his flight back to the United States from Imam Khomeini International Airport. He was brought to Evin prison in Tehran, where he has suffered solitary confinement and interrogations for the charges of "communicating with a hostile government" and "illegitimate earnings", the magazine claims. Nature has not been able to verify these claims.

According to Kaleme, Kokabee may have been jailed as part of a wider effort to eliminate the growth of ethnic and religious minorities within the ranks of the Iranian academic elite. Kokabee belongs to the

Turkmen and Sunni minorities. An Iranian friend of Kokabee's living in Spain, who spoke with Nature, speculates that his frequent trips to Iran — totalling four or five in 2010 — may have aroused the suspicions of the Iranian authorities.

"He never was involved in political issues," adds another Iranian former colleague in Spain. "I hope he gets free soon."