

John McCain denies he knowingly posed with with 'rebel kidnapers' in Syria

John McCain has denied that he knowingly posed in a photograph this week with Syrian rebels who kidnapped 11 Lebanese Shi'ite Muslims.



Sen John McCain, center, accompanied by Mouaz Moustafa, right, visits rebels in Syri Photo: Mouaz Moustafa/AP

By Sarah Titterton, agencies

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The photograph, released by Mr McCain's office, shows the US senator standing with a group of rebels during his highly-publicised trip to Syria this week.

Two of the men in the image are Mohamed Nour and Abu Ibrahim, claimed Lebanese newspaper The Daily Star. The men are described as being part of a group who kidnapped 11 Shias last year.

They were identified by one of the kidnap victims, Anwar Ibrahim, who along with one other hostage has since been freed, the Star said. Negotiations over the freedom of the other nine are still ongoing.

"I recognised him (Nour) immediately. He was the photographer who was brought in to take our photos [during captivity]. He works with the kidnapers. He knows them very well," Mr Ibrahim told the Star.

The Star claimed it had independently confirmed the identity of Nour, who reportedly acted as the spokesman for the kidnapers. *The Telegraph* has not confirmed the men's identities.

Today, Mr McCain's office said that no one who met with the senator identified themselves by those names. "None of the individuals the senator planned to meet with was named Mohamad Nour or Abu Ibrahim," a spokesman said. "A number of other Syrian commanders joined the meeting, but none of them identified himself as Mohamad Nour or Abu Ibrahim."

The spokesman said that if the man in the photograph turned out to be Nour it would be "regrettable": "If the individual photographed with Senator McCain is in fact Mohamed Nour, that is regrettable. But it would be ludicrous to suggest that the senator in any way condones the kidnapping of Lebanese Shia pilgrims or has any communication with those responsible. Senator McCain condemns such heinous actions in the strongest possible terms."

The controversy came one day after Mr McCain said that officials can tell the difference between rebels and extremists are in Syria.

Speaking on CNN, the Arizona senator said that he is confident the United States can send weapons to fighters in Syria without the risk they will fall into the wrong hands.

"We can identify who these people are. We can help the right people," he said.

Mr McCain, a Republican, is an outspoken advocate for US military aid to the rebels fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and has angrily denounced Democratic President Barack Obama for shying away from deeper US involvement in the conflict, which has claimed 80,000 lives.

Critics of some lawmakers' push to arm the rebels have expressed concerns that weapons could end up in the hands of militants who might eventually end up using them against the United States or its allies.

Mr McCain said such radical fighters make up only a small part of the rebels forces.

He said he was escorted during his visit on Monday by General Salem Idris, leader of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, and that he had a long meeting with Gen Idris and a group of his battalion commanders.

"They're very disturbed about the dramatic influx of Hizbollah fighters, more Iranians and of course stepped up activities of Bashar Assad," Mr McCain said.

US public opinion is strongly against direct military involvement in Syria, but Mr McCain said no one, including Gen Idris and his commanders, wants American "boots on the ground".

However, he said the rebel forces made clear they want US weapons. "Their message was ... They do not understand. They do not understand why we won't help them," Mr McCain said.

Edited at telegraph.co.uk by Sarah Titterton



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