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Iran diplomats halted at tunnel

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Authorities briefly detained five Iranians in a van who were suspected of videotaping the Midtown Tunnel on Monday, the Daily News has learned.

After cops discovered the men also were carrying some 50 passports, agents from the FBI, CIA and Secret Service were summoned, sources said. The men were questioned, found to be part of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's UN delegation and released.

"The FBI did respond to the Midtown Tunnel. We did talk to these men, and we're satisfied there was no security concern," said FBI spokesman Joseph Valiquette. "They were allowed to go on their way."

Another source familiar with the incident said agents determined that the men had diplomatic immunity and had to be released in any case.

The city's bridges and tunnels were locked down briefly on Monday morning after an American Airlines plane crashed in Belle Harbor, Queens. The city has been on its highest state of alert since Islamic terrorists attacked the World Trade Center on Sept. 11.

Against that backdrop, a sharp-eyed cop at the tunnel noticed a passenger in a Queens-bound vehicle holding a video camera about 5 p.m. The vehicle, laden with luggage, was stopped at the toll booths and the men held for questioning.

Hossein Nosrat, press secretary to the Iranian Mission, said the men were carrying 50 to 60 passports belonging to the members of the delegation here for Khatami's visit to the United Nations General Assembly.

The delegation was heading home, and the men were the president's advance team, transporting the delegation's luggage to Kennedy Airport, he said. "It is very understandable that they were stopped, especially after the plane crash and the 11th of September," Nosrat said. "The police and other agencies behaved in a very professional manner."

Nosrat confirmed that one of the men had a video camera but said there was no taping inside the tunnel.

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