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Two Accused of Illegal Export Attempt : Crime: The men, one an Iranian, allegedly tried to ship the most powerful IBM computer to Iran.

January 05, 1993 | MICHAEL FLAGG | TIMES STAFF WRITER

COSTA MESA — Federal agents arrested an Orange County man and an Iranian citizen late Monday and charged them with trying to illegally export a sophisticated computer to Iran.

The two are Reza Zandian, 41, who gave his address to federal agents as Paris, France, and Tehran, Iran; and Charles Reeger, 57, of Huntington Beach. They were arrested by agents on a Costa Mesa side street just off the San Diego Freeway after returning from an air-freight terminal at Los Angeles International Airport.

The \$2-million computer--an IBM ES 9000, the most powerful computer IBM makes--was seized by agents of the Commerce Department's Office of Export Enforcement at the freight terminal Monday afternoon, moments before it was to leave the country. Selling such computers--which can be used for military purposes--to Iran or other countries unfriendly to the United States is against federal law.

It was the second arrest in less than two years of Iranians here for illegally exporting high-technology equipment to Iran.

Two men were arrested in Newport Beach in 1991 for selling Iran an oscilloscope--used to measure electrical waves--and other high-tech electronic gear that can be used to develop missile guidance systems and nuclear weapons.

One of the men in that case, a U.S. citizen of Iranian descent, was sentenced to a year in prison. The other, an Iranian citizen and permanent resident of the United States, returned to Iran while out on bail and did not return for sentencing. A federal judge issued a warrant for his arrest.

Southern California may appeal to Iranians trying to ship high-tech equipment to Iran, said Brooks D. Ohlson, special agent in charge of the Export Enforcement Office for Southern California, because of the large Iranian population here and the profusion of high-tech companies.

Zandian allegedly operated through two relatively new, small companies managed by Reeger. The names of the companies--one in Irvine and one in Costa Mesa--were not available Monday night because federal agents were still searching them.

Export Enforcement agents had been following Zandian--who they said lived in hotels and stayed with relatives--for five months.

It is possible, Ohlson said, that Zandian shipped other high-tech equipment to Iran.

"We presume they've been exporting for a while," he said.

As federal agents watched, Zandian and Reeger--driving a white Jaguar--drove to LAX and made arrangements to ship the computer by air, probably through France to Iran, Ohlson said.

"It became obvious we had to stop this," Ohlson said. "That computer was out of here."

Federal agents need to investigate further to determine if Zandian was acting in an official capacity on behalf of Iran. Agents were tipped off to Zandian by an executive in a high-tech business, he said, which is also from where every other tip leading to an arrest in such cases has come.

The two were held in the federal detention center in downtown Los Angeles Monday night.