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Two men from St. Petersburg mosque accused of kidnapping former member

By Jamal Thalji and Curtis Krueger, Times Staff Writers

They tell police a former member stole from their mosque.

ST. PETERSBURG - Two men were arrested Monday on charges that they kidnapped and pistol-whipped another man.

But the two men denied the allegations, telling St. Petersburg police that they were just trying to recover what they said the man took from their mosque.

Halem Ibrahim Jaber, 35, and Mhamed Bennoua, 31, face armed kidnapping charges.

They are members of the Islamic Society of St. Petersburg, which worships at 2400 Sixth St. S.

The man police say is the victim, 25-year-old Rishard J. Ealy, is a former member of the mosque. In June, the mosque reported the theft of three air-conditioning units and a computer, police said. Board members told officers they suspected Ealy, who they said had the entry code to the building. Police said there was no evidence linking him to the theft.

Then on July 9, an attempted theft was reported by the mosque: Members told police Ealy tried to take money from a donation box, then fled in a car. Prosecutors interviewed witnesses on July 18 but haven't yet decided whether to file charges.

Early Sunday morning, police said, two men from the mosque went looking for Ealy. They found him just after 3:30 a.m. near the Mosely Motel at 401 34th Street N, according to police.

Ealy told police that the men beat him up, threw him into the van, beat him again with a gun, then released him later that morning with this demand: come up with \$2,000 and the mosque computer or a replacement. There were witnesses to the incident, police said.

But the attorney for the two men, Lucas Fleming, said his clients had set up a meeting with Ealy to persuade him to return the cash and property they said he had stolen. They denied doing anything illegal.

"It's hard to believe that if there were witnesses there that this guy would actually be abducted," Fleming said. "I think the allegations that there was a gun and a kidnapping are unfounded."

Jaber and Bennoua were freed from jail Tuesday after \$50,000 bond was posted for each.

But Ealy was still in jail on Wednesday, held on \$4,026 bail. After he went to the police on Sunday, they

arrested him on an outstanding warrant: two counts of failing to appear in court.

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