

Syrians cite mix-up when Atiyeh arrives at deserted airport

Alan K. Ota is traveling with Gov. Vic Atiyeh in the Middle East.

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DAMASCUS, Syria — Gov. Vic Atiyeh returned to his "home" for the first time in 55 years Monday, bringing what he called a message of peace.

Smiling broadly and expecting a red carpet welcome, Atiyeh stepped out of a Cyprus Airlines jet and was greeted by two apologetic Syrian foreign ministry officials who stood on a nearly deserted runway at the Damascus International Airport.

Atiyeh, 61, had anxiously awaited the trip to Syria after completing a 10-day trade mission in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Born in Portland to a Syrian father and a Lebanese mother, Atiyeh last visited here as a child in 1929.

At breakfast in Cairo Monday morning, the governor looked at his son, Thomas, who accompanied him on the trip, and said simply, "Now we go home."

Sami Glall, director of the foreign ministry's American section and Khalil Abou Hadd, a deputy chief of protocol, explained that they had been given incorrect times for the plane's arrival.

For that reason, they said the red carpet welcome Atiyeh had been told to expect was not there.

For his part, Atiyeh said he was not disappointed. He said he felt "wonderful and very excited." He patted the cheeks of his Syrian cousin, Aziz, who met him at the airport but who speaks no English.

"I felt welcome just being here," he said. "I didn't need a lot of people."

He repeated his call to meet with Syrian President Hafez Assad to discuss the war in the Middle East.

That meeting has not been scheduled, but Atiyeh said he was confident it would be.

Until early February, Syrian government officials had stressed through intermediaries that a warm welcome for Atiyeh could embarrass them if the governor went on to Israel. He plans to go there next week.

The foul-up may have solved the dilemma.

It prevented a big welcome, and it meant no television or print pictures of his arrival in the Syrian press.

Atiyeh blamed it all on a simple mistake. Among the confused well-wishers were Atiyeh's wife, Dolores, and a Portland friend, Nabeeha Z. Kalhl, who both had been in Damascus since Wednesday.

They said they and a large crowd, including newsmen, were told the plane would arrive at 11 a.m. When it didn't, they were told the plane would arrive at 4 p.m., and they left the airport. The plane arrived at 1 p.m. (3 a.m. PST.)

Gov. Atiyeh's planned visit to Israel stirred some objections from his other Mideast hosts. Page B4.

After a scramble at the airport, Atiyeh was treated royally. In a richly furnished airport room, he was greeted by Adnan Kauli, governor of the city of Damascus.

Atiyeh wondered aloud whether all the changes in modern Damascus were Kauli's doing. The Syrian laughed and grabbed hold of Atiyeh's hand as if he were an old friend.

A caravan of limousines whisked the Atiyeh group into the capital city, led by a police car and a van loaded with security men who gestured traffic to pull aside.

Traffic slammed to a halt as the caravan passed large tenements and brick huts housing the large Palestinian population on the city's outskirts.

Atiyeh was to see several top Syrian officials during his stay, including Vice President Abdul Haleem Khaddam. On Tuesday, Atiyeh planned to tour the city of Qunaitra near the Golan Heights.

The destroyed town has become a symbol of Israeli aggression to the Syrians since it was leveled in 1973.

Atiyeh said the Syrians wanted to make a political point with that visit, but that he also expected similar efforts in Israel next week.

Four Oregon businessmen went with Atiyeh into Syria, including his cousin, Sam Joseph "Sami" Kahl, a Syrian-born carpet-company owner who acted as interpreter. They said they were exploring business prospects during the governor's mainly personal visit to Syria and his father's village, Amar.