

It took plenty of political grease, clout to open Syria's door for Atiyeh visit

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The arrival of Gov. Vic Atiyeh in Syria Monday was preceded by weeks of negotiations involving American and Syrian diplomats over his planned visit to Israel.

Atiyeh had been told privately through intermediaries since 1982 that the Syrians would welcome his visit. But the warmth cooled to a chill in February, when the Syrians made an issue of Atiyeh's insistence on going to Israel after leaving Syria.

Both Syria and Saudi Arabia, two of the three Arab countries on Atiyeh's itinerary, profess to maintain a boycott of commerce against Israel. So, for example, they refuse to honor passports carrying Israeli visa stamps.

According to friends of the governor, the governments of both Syria and Saudi Arabia

asked Atiyeh to cancel the Israel trip, which he had planned since last year.

The Syrians were most insistent, and their lobbying became intense when the governor's first cousin, Sam Joseph "Sami" Kahl, paid a visit to the Syrian Embassy in early February with Douglas V. Frengle, the manager of the international trade division of the state Department of Economic Development.

Kahl, a Syrian-born naturalized American citizen who retains strong Arab loyalties and anti-Zionist feelings, had advised Atiyeh against the Israel trip earlier. But he found himself in the position of trying to explain why Atiyeh, "the president of Oregon," could not show bias against the Jews.

According to Kahl, Syrian officials, including Ambassador Rafic Jouejati, told him that Atiyeh would "stab them in the back" by going to Israel because the Syrians planned a "red carpet wel-

come" for the governor.

"I tried to explained to them," Kahl said, "that Atiyeh is not one of you. He is an American. I told them he would be willing to come in as a plain tourist. But they said that would embarrass them."

Back in Oregon, Kahl, a Portland resident, met with Atiyeh and urged him to forget the trip to Israel. Atiyeh refused. "Let them call me a 'salub,'" Atiyeh said, using the Arabic term for being mule-headed.

Atiyeh tried to settle matters in a telephone conversation with Jouejati. "He finally said, 'Look let's meet face to face rather than on the telephone,'" Atiyeh recalled.

Atiyeh said his position was that he "would be really disappointed that I could go to all these countries and not my own."

The two made plans to meet during the National Governors' Conference in Washington,

D.C., in late February.

But when he returned to Oregon, Atiyeh glumly told members of his Middle East trade mission during a March 2 briefing that Jouejati had not returned any of his calls in Washington.

A governor's aide said the trip had only a "20 percent chance of survival."

Atiyeh had first announced the trip to Syria on Jan. 5, apparently with Syrian blessings, two days after the release of captured U.S. pilot Robert O. Goodman in Damascus. The release was requested by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Democratic presidential candidate.

It was, Atiyeh explained, a necessary addition to an earlier trip he had agreed to make to Israel. The governor said he would lead a trade mission to Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The Israeli trip was arranged last year at the invitation of Hershal Tanzer, a local organizer for the Jewish National Fund, a group that backs

conservation projects in Israel. Atiyeh had rejected earlier invitations and recalled telling the Jewish group, "You understand that if I go there, I must go to Syria."

What happened after the March 2 briefing is not entirely clear. But at Atiyeh's request State Department officials began negotiating with the Syrians about the visit.

Three days later, Atiyeh's office reported the problems had suddenly cleared up and that the Syrians had sent by mail a written invitation to the governor to come to Syria.

Atiyeh said Jouejati had apparently been occupied with Syrian-Lebanese negotiations during the governors' conference but had eventually relented because "they're still proud of me."

For his part, Tanzer said he was not entirely pleased with the governor for "lending credence" to the Syrian government, but added, "I feel very good that he stood his ground."