

Syrians doubt U.S. policy goals

By ALAN K. OTA
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DAMASCUS, Syria — The United States would have to make the first move in any effort to improve relations with Syria, Syria's President Hafez Assad told Oregon Gov. Vic Atiyeh in a two-hour meeting in the presidential office complex here Saturday.

During the session, Atiyeh said that he and the Reagan administration share a desire to "improve communications" between the two nations. He said Assad replied that "there was a possibility" for better relations, but that Syria was waiting for a "signal" from the administration or Congress that the United States would "treat Middle Eastern nations equally."

That was a reference to Assad's belief that Israel receives too much U.S. military aid, according to Atiyeh.

Atiyeh said he had expressed his own "deep feelings" of opposition to terrorist acts such as the Jan. 18 assassination of Malcolm H. Kerr, president of the American University in Beirut. He said the Syrian leader had agreed with him, calling terrorism "wrong and harmful."

"Syria is not going around turning terrorists loose," Atiyeh said afterward. "The president (Assad) does not agree with terrorism."

Asked about the Reagan administration's assertion that Syria may have been involved in or had prior knowledge of the terrorist bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine headquarters in Beirut, Atiyeh replied, "I don't think that's the case."

One administration official, Lawrence S. Eagleburger, undersecretary of state for political affairs, has described Syria as part of a "terrorist axis" with Iran and Libya.

Atiyeh described his talk with Assad as relaxed and wide-ranging. He said Assad was "warm personally and a very gentle person." He



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CONGENIAL MEETING — Syrian President Hafez Assad Saturday told visiting Oregon Gov. Vic Atiyeh that Syria's confidence in U.S.

credibility is nil. Atiyeh travels Sunday to Israel as he continues his tour of the Middle East.

discounted reports that Assad and his regime have been brutally repressive.

"The people of Syria have great affection for the president," Atiyeh said. "If he's bad and oppressive, then people wouldn't have this affection for him."

William A. Rugh, charge d'affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, and Atiyeh's cousin, Sam J. "Sammy" Kahl, sat in on Saturday's meeting. It was held in a large hall in the presidential office complex, a converted apartment building in a quiet residential section of the capital.

Atiyeh waited most of the morning to be summoned from his hotel by Assad. When the time came, he was whisked through the heavy security at presidential offices and into the meeting hall. Assad strode into the room seconds later and the men began talking about Atiyeh's and Kahl's Syrian background. No reporters

were allowed to attend.

The session was the culmination of a series of meetings that Atiyeh had with top-level Syrian officials, including Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam and Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa during his six-day stay here. He said that his goal was to improve communications between the United States and Syria and that he did not have specific points to make beyond an expression of his opposition to terrorism.

Rugh said that the meeting, with Atiyeh acting as a private U.S. citizen, was "useful" and "added a dimension" to the dialogue between the two countries.

"It's important he's not a government type," Rugh said. "When (an American diplomat) talks to the Syrians, they think he's not telling them what Americans think (and that) he's saying what he has to say."

He said many of Atiyeh's views conform to

those of the Reagan administration and may have added weight to them. Atiyeh stressed during his visit that he represented no one but himself.

Atiyeh said Assad had asked for U.S. citizens to "understand us and what our hopes are for the future."

In response to a question from a Syrian television reporter, Atiyeh said Assad had expressed "no anger at the United States and a real puzzlement" about the United States' lack of understanding of Syria. Atiyeh said he hoped his visit would help to improve Americans' understanding.

The governor left Damascus for Larnaca, Cyprus, Saturday afternoon with his wife, Doiores, and two aides, Dennis G. Miles and Oregon State Police Lt. Lon E. Holbrook. He was scheduled to arrive in Tel Aviv Sunday to begin a stay in Israel as a guest of the Jewish National Fund.

Talks show Atiyeh gulf between U.S., Syrian views

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DAMASCUS, Syria — William A. Rugh, a career diplomat who is the U.S. State Department's point man in most of the daily contact with Syrian leaders, describes diplomacy as a "very long process."

In that view, the recent visit here by Gov. Vic Atiyeh occupies a very small spot in the history of Syrian-American diplomatic relations. Rugh said the six-day visit that ended Saturday might have long-range results, but only time would tell.

Atiyeh began his journey back to his "hometown" shakily, uncertain of what he would encounter in Syria and unsure for a time whether he would be allowed into the country at all.

As Atiyeh prepared for the trip, the Syrian government opposed his plans to go to Israel during the same trip. But once the governor arrived in Syria, he and his hosts quickly warmed to each other. He was virtually given carte blanche to go anywhere and see anyone he wished, all with a string of nine limousines and a dozen pistol-packing security guards.

In the process, he may have become a minor media star.

His two-hour meeting with Syrian President Hafez Assad and his departure from Damascus topped the Syrian television news Saturday night.

The broadcast tactfully did not mention that Atiyeh would arrive in Tel Aviv on Sunday. Atiyeh said the Syrians had apparently decided during his visit to ignore his planned trip to Israel and no one brought it up.

A half-hour special on Atiyeh's visit and the wild celebration that surrounded his return to Amar, the home village of his father, will be aired next week in Syria.

Rugh said the Syrians had given Atiyeh "a very warm welcome" and that he came across to them as a "very sincere, genuine and concerned person."

"The Arabs are very sensitive. They have very good antennae. They can size people up very well," he said.

Atiyeh's talks with the Syrians were cordial, but they seldom got into specifics, following Atiyeh's own stated goal of trying to improve communications and "not to hurt things."

Atiyeh said Saturday that the main thing he learned from his trip was how greatly misunder-

stood the Syrians feel.

"I came here thinking we just had a difference of opinion," Atiyeh said. What he learned was that Syria and the United States differ greatly in how they view each other and each other's credibility. These issues came up time and again.

Atiyeh asked Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa three times Wednesday what he would do to bring peace and improve credibility "if you were the United States." After a long account of what he called Israeli aggression and American dishonesty, Sharaa offered brief advice.

"The first thing is that the administration has to draw a line between its policy and Israeli policy," he said. "The Arabs should know and should feel and should touch that there is an independent U.S. policy in the region."

In almost the same breath, Sharaa said Syria believed it would be politically impossible for any U.S. president to cut military aid to Israel. Rugh, who attended all of Atiyeh's top-level meetings, told Sharaa that the United States had not been dishonest or broken any commitments to Syria.

Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam offered an even gloomier assessment. According to

Atiyeh, Khaddam said he was "not optimistic" that there was any role for the United States in the Mideast peace negotiations because of the nation's lack of credibility. The Reagan administration must restore credibility, Atiyeh said afterward.

For his part, Atiyeh said he agreed that Syria was misunderstood in the United States. He said that would be part of the message that he would carry to President Reagan after returning to the United States.

Atiyeh said he believed he had achieved his goals for the trip to Syria. Two of the four businessmen who accompanied him to Syria had made business contacts, he noted. In one case, he said, he planned to look further into the possibility of exporting Oregon wheat to Syria. He said Robert C. Buchanan, vice president of the Oregon Wheat Growers League, had discussed this with the Syrians, but restrictions on U.S. grain-buying credits might prevent future sales to Syria.

As for the question of improving communications, Atiyeh told a Syrian television reporter, "Oregonians are going to understand. Whether they understand in Georgia or North Carolina, I don't know."