

Atiyeh Mideast journey designed to spur trade

SALEM (AP) — Gov. Vic Atiyeh will begin the first leg of his journey to the Middle East on Tuesday. The four-country tour will take him to his ancestral homeland of Syria and one that he hopes will expand Oregon's trade dealings with the countries in that region.

It will be the first time a trade delegation from Oregon has gone to the Middle East, and the governor says the fact he's of Arabic descent may help him score points with his hosts.

"I'm sure that since it's being led by a governor with Arabic background, it's going to get a lot more attention," Atiyeh said of the monthlong sojourn through the region.

The governor's itinerary calls for him to fly to Washington, D.C., Tuesday and to depart from there Thursday for Saudi Arabia. He also is to visit Egypt, Israel and Syria before his scheduled April 17 return to Oregon.

Atiyeh said he's hoping to meet with the top government leaders in the four countries he'll be visiting and is taking along gifts such as Oregon hunting knives to present to them.

The governor said even though he has relatives in Beirut, Lebanon, he

doesn't plan to visit that country, which has been torn by sectarian warfare.

Even so, the governor will have a chance to take part in a family reunion of sorts when he visits his cousins in the tiny Syrian village of Amar. It will be his first trip to Syria since he was 6 years old, the governor said.

Atiyeh again defended the trips he has been taking, saying that Oregonians would benefit in terms of new business opportunities, even if the results aren't immediate.

Atiyeh's trans-Atlantic fare and expenses in Israel will be paid by the Jewish National Fund, which financed similar trips for former Oregon Govs. Bob Straub and Tom McCall.

Denny Miles, Atiyeh's press aide, said the remaining costs of the trip will be paid both by the state and by the businesses that are sending representatives to the Mideast with Atiyeh. Miles said he did not know how much the state's share would be.

The governor also plans to travel to the Far East this year, probably sometime in September, but few details of that trip have been worked out.