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Jimmy Carter Flies to Damascus Amid Efforts to Free Hostages

Knight-Ridder

DAMASCUS, Syria, March 14— Jimmy Carter, whose presidency was bedeviled by the Iran hostage crisis, arrived here today amid efforts to free Westerners being held captive in Lebanon.

In arrival remarks, Carter said that Syria, which maintains 40,000 troops in Lebanon, is "eager" to gain the release of the hostages, and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Charaa, who received Carter, confirmed that his government is working toward such a goal.

As Charaa greeted the former U.S. president, Syrian troops tightened their control around suburbs of the Moslem sector of the Lebanese capital, where Iranian-backed militias are believed to be holding the hostages.

Syrian troops moved after the Iranian-supported militia Hezbollah, the group reportedly responsible for some of the abductions, skirmished with the pro-Syrian Amal force near where the hostages are said to be held.

The fighting, combined with the Syrian military move and Carter's arrival, increased speculation about a possible hostage release.

Optimistic statements in recent weeks by Syria, Iran and the leader of Hezbollah also have created a climate of expectation. Friday will mark the fifth anniversary in captivity of American journalist Terry Anderson, the longest-held hostage.

However, Syrian and Western sources on Tuesday cast doubt on an imminent hostage release in light of renewed infighting in Iran between moderates and militants precisely over the hostages.

While Carter said Syria was serious in its efforts to release the hostages, he was less sanguine about Iran.

"Those statements from Tehran are equivocal, you know, one day it's a positive statement and the next day it's a rejection of the positive statement," Carter said in remarks reminiscent of the 1979-81 hostage crisis in which Iran frequently confounded his administration with contradictory actions.