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# Assad offered France raid to free hostages

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PARIS — In a secret gesture of goodwill to France, Syria recently offered to try to free four French hostages held by Shi'ite fundamentalists by launching a helicopter commando raid in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, where the hostages are thought to be held.

The offer, according to French intelligence sources, was made by Syrian leader Hafez Assad to President Francois Mitterrand shortly after behind-the-scenes negotiations for freeing the hostages collapsed Jan. 5. The French were offered a choice between a purely Syrian commando operation or a joint Franco-Syrian military venture.

The offer was reluctantly turned down by Mr. Mitterrand and his advisers as too risky. It was feared that if the slightest thing went wrong, it could result in a blood bath similar to the one last November when Egyptian commandos stormed the hijacked Boeing 737 jetliner at Valetta airport in Malta.

A botched operation would have led to the immediate execution of all four French hostages by their captors — a fiasco that would have boomeranged on Mr. Mitterrand's hard-pressed Socialist Party at the start of a decisive parliamentary election campaign.

Enormously complicating — for negotiators as well as for potential rescuers — was the fact that the four hostages were abducted at different times by two different Shi'ite clans.

Kidnapped on March 22, 1985, were diplomats Marcel Fontaine, a 45-year-old vice consul, and Marcel Carton, 62-year-old protocol chief of the French Embassy in Beirut.

On May 22, 1985, two other Frenchmen were kidnapped by another Shi'ite group. They were Jean-Paul Kauffmann, a journalist working for the Paris weekly L'Evenement du Jeudi, and Michel Seurat, a 38-year-old, Tunisian-born sociologist and Islamic scholar who had spent the previous nine years in Lebanon, where he had met and married his wife, Mary, a Christian Lebanese born in the

Syrian town of Aleppo.

The claim was made last week that Mr. Seurat has been executed, and photos purporting to show him dead were released to the press.

The two Shi'ite factions, according to the same French intelligence sources, are influenced by Ayatollah Khomeini and his Iranian fundamentalists but are not directly controlled by Tehran. Indeed, the sources suspect that the original aim of the kidnappers was to make a name for themselves as "warriors of Islam" in the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists, and that for a long time they were unclear about the exact demands they should make to the French government.

When negotiations broke down in January, the chief stumbling block was the kidnappers' demand that Paris free all five members of a Khomeini-inspired death squad that tried in July 1980 to assassinate the former Iranian premier Shapour Bakhtiar, in exchange for the liberation of the four French hostages.

In assaulting Mr. Bakhtiar's apartment in the Paris suburb of Neuilly,

the hired assassins killed a French woman, shot a French policeman to death and maimed another policeman for life.

The French government feared that if it gave in, hundreds of outraged policemen would demonstrate in front of the Foreign Ministry, as they did several years ago in front of the Ministry of Justice to protest the "scandalous laxity" of Minister of Justice Robert Badinter, author of the bill banning the death penalty.

Mr. Assad's offer of help to the French does not depart from the habitual subtlety of the "Machiavelli of the Middle East," as he has been called. Basically secular, he has no use for religious zealots of the Khomeini type.

Syria depends on free Iranian oil and other Iranian financial help. But Mr. Assad detests and fears the kind of Islamic fundamentalism that the Iranian leader represents — as he made clear in 1981 when he ordered Syrian army units to slaughter thousands of Moslem Brotherhood adherents in the cities of Homs and Hama.