

THE MIDDLE EAST ON HOLD

BY ROBERT E. SEGAL

When State Secretary Alexander Haig conducted his first press conference, he described a question on the Middle East directed to him as "a mind-boggling, extensive sermon." This offers one hint as to why the new Administration has put on hold its approach to the political, economic, and military challenges in the Middle East.

There are many good reasons for the delay. One is rooted in the expected departure of Prime Minister Menachem Begin from his seat of power. Washington undoubtedly believes that Shimon Peres, Begin's likely successor, will be more flexible on some of the thorny issues. Perhaps when President Reagan meets with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt this spring, he may receive a valuable Egyptian opinion on chances for building on the Camp David agreements after the transition in Jerusalem. Moreover, with budgetary and other economic problems holding top priority on the Reagan agenda while Secretary Haig is preoccupied with clipping the claws of the Russian bear, the Arab - Israeli issue will have to wait for attention.

This may prove a boon to Jerusalem. The Carter regime, which rightfully cited the Camp David coup as one of its top successes, has been reported to have been ready in its closing days to give Israel new cause for disquiet. Insiders claim the Carter high command was flirting with a return to the Rogers plan. This 1969 scheme projected by State Secretary William Rogers would have forced Israel to give the Sinai, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip back to the Arabs in return for binding Arab commitments to peace, free rights of Israeli passage through the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aqaba and special demilitarized zones. It blew up a hurricane of protest in the world Jewish community.

Meanwhile, the people of Israel and all hopeful for her future are counting on President Reagan and Secretary Haig to stand firm on the numerous Reagan election campaign promises to protect and advance Israel's call for peace and guarantee of security. Spurred by the U.S. hostages' return from Teheran, Reagan has articulated a commitment to make life hell for terrorists. He is on record as regarding the Palestine Liberation Organization as a thoroughly terroristic band. Secretary Haig does not go that far; he regards the PLO as an umbrella organization embracing El Fatah as a terrorist unit.

All who have Israel's interests at heart will hope that the Reagan view will prevail despite the distinction Secretary Haig makes and despite the efforts of England's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and other European Common Market leaders to convince Washington that the PLO must be included in Middle East peace negotiations.

Meanwhile also wide attention has focused

on Islam's three - day, billion dollar summit conference in Taif, Saudi Arabia. Designed as a sequel to the Arab League's disappointing confab of last November, the show at Taif rang with war whoops in Israel's direction. Claiming to represent 800 million Moslems, the Islamic sheiks, kings, and presidents, representing the PLO and 37 nations produced a bellicose prayer and a warmed - over declaration. The prayer was for a Jihad, a holy war to "cleanse Jerusalem of the Jews" and thus to "rescue the Islamic homeland (Palestine);" the declaration largely Yasir Arafat's brainchild, was a threat to cut off the Arab supply of oil and other goodies to any nation continuing to maintain an embassy in Jerusalem.

Let those who pray constantly for peace take cognizance of these bellicose stirrings. And let those who continue to accept Arab propaganda as solid truth take note of the following experience of Michael J. Metrinko, American political officer held captive 444 days in Iran: Visited along with other hostages by Archbishop Hilarian Capucci of the Melkite Church of the Eastern Rite, Metrinko recalls that this man of God spent part of the time enjoying himself with the terrorist guards, adding: "I tried to tell him what things were like, and he just went into a diatribe about how bad things were in Israeli prisons." This is the same Archbishop Capucci who delights in mouthing slander about "Zionist Racism," the same prelate who was caught in 1974 smuggling arms to the PLO, convicted, sentenced to prison and released by Israel after intercession by the Vatican.

Having obtained the Archbishop's release, Pope Paul VI wrote then Israeli President Ephraim Katzir, pleading that Archbishop Capucci's future activities would not be detrimental to Israel.

To return to Secretary Haig's apt observation, questions about the Middle East can be mind - boggling. And constant vigilance is a must if brain - washing is to be avoided.

TEL AVIV (WNS) -- The committee of Shalom Aleichem House here has named Jewish Agency chairman Leon Dulzin as its honorary president. There are plans to publish Shalom Aleichem's works in Yiddish, Hebrew and English.

JERUSALEM (WNS) -- Israel will appoint a new Ambassador to Egypt soon when incumbent Eliahu Ben - Elissar resigns to run for a Knesset seat. The new envoy to Cairo is expected to be Moshe Sasson, a 55 - year - old veteran diplomat who has served in previous Labor governments as well as the present Likud government.

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