

Secretary of State Haig's fiasco in the Middle East

by Nancy Coker

Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig's just-completed Middle East trip is being assessed both here and abroad as an unmitigated disaster that could cost him his job. What may do Haig in, according to reliable Washington sources, is the Arab world's public across-the-board rejection of his call for an anti-Soviet "strategic consensus" centered around a NATO-linked military buildup in the region.

Already a political cripple before his arrival in the Middle East as a result of his clumsy bids for power both before and immediately after last month's attempted assassination of President Reagan, Haig staked his hopes on pulling off a Middle East miracle: convincing the Arabs to go along with his cold-war strategy and anti-Soviet crusade.

By all accounts Haig failed. Both Saudi Arabia and Jordan completely rejected Haig's "strategic consensus" designs. Even Egypt, long known for its willingness to accommodate U.S. strategy in the region, balked at Haig's policies and even managed to deal him some unexpected tactical blows by forcing the secretary of state to drop, at least for the moment, a number of key demands for base rights and the stationing of U.S. troops in Egypt.

A humiliated and desperate Haig is now setting his sights on Lebanon to further his strategic goals. Working in close coordination with the Begin government in Israel, Haig is deliberately inflaming the crisis in Lebanon to create a climate for, and to break Arab resistance to, a regional anti-Soviet military buildup.

While the rest of the world—France, the Vatican, Saudi Arabia, and the Soviet Union—is trying to prevent Israel and Syria from escalating the crisis in Lebanon, Haig is doing his utmost to egg the adversaries on into a full-scale regional war. While in Israel, the second stop of his four-country Middle East tour, Haig immediately took sides in the conflict by provocatively denouncing as "unacceptable" Syria's "brutality" against the Christians in Lebanon and charging the Soviet Union with backing Syria's actions in Lebanon. When asked to clarify his anti-Soviet charges, Haig discredited himself by admitting, "I have no concrete information to support this theory." He added, "By nature I suspect the Soviet Union."

Haig went on to praise Israel as a "strategic asset," "an ally of the United States whose essential role is in protecting our mutual strategic concerns against threats from the Soviet Union and from its surrogates"—i.e., Syria. This line was enthusiastically echoed by several Israeli political leaders, including Moshe Dayan. Haig met privately with Dayan to discuss, among other things, Dayan's efforts to prevent a more moderate government under Labour Party leader Shimon Peres from coming to power in the June elections.

Cold shoulder from the Arabs

Wherever Haig went in the Arab world, he was given a hard time—even from Egypt's Anwar Sadat, known as the most pliable of the Arab leaders. Sadat's resistance to Haig's politically costly demands for base

and U.S. troop rights in the Sinai was such that Haig, in his meetings with Sadat and other Egyptian officials, backed off from even raising these demands. Much to Haig's chagrin, it was decided that the U.S. military role in Egypt "should be limited to logistics," and should not operate per Israel's request and Haig's plan as a "spearhead" for a "disguised" equivalent of the controversial Rapid Deployment Force.

"The Americans know we cannot give them a base or a base disguised as facilities," Egyptian sources said in reference to Haig's desire to have the United States use Egypt's Ras Banas base on the Red Sea and the two Israeli-built bases in Sinai, scheduled to be turned over to Egypt in 1982. Haig's intended use of Egypt as a staging ground for military operations in the Persian Gulf is a politically touchy issue for Sadat, who was reportedly "delighted" by Haig's backing down.

In Jordan, and later in Saudi Arabia, Haig was rebuffed outright. King Hussein, after meeting with Haig for two hours, pointedly stated that Jordan rejects efforts to "polarize" the Middle East. Hussein effectively charged Haig with responsibility for the problems in the area by saying that Israel was causing "turbulence, instability, and other problems," including the crisis in Lebanon.

Speaking even more bluntly, Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Kassem stated, with Haig at his side, that Jordan will have nothing to do with the Camp David peace process because it is "incapable of achieving a peace." In a toughly worded statement, he denounced Israel for its "intransigent policies and daily aggression against the Palestinian people and systematic confiscation of Arab land."

Haig received the same treatment in Saudi Arabia, where he was granted a mere five minutes alone with his counterpart, Foreign Minister Prince Saud.

The purpose of Haig's Saudi trip was to attempt to bully the Saudis into breaking their longstanding opposition to the Camp David accords and to the militarization of the Middle East. On April 7, the lead editorial of the *New York Times* bluntly spelled out Haig's policy to blackmail the Saudis into submission. "It is time to insist that the Saudis end their scornful treatment of Camp David as part of a wider diplomatic bargain that justifies their purchase of ever more sophisticated American weapons." At present, a major arms deal involving the sale of four AWAC planes to Saudi Arabia plus a number of F-15 fighter jets and other hardware is pending congressional approval before delivery.

The Saudis, it appears, were not cowed. Immediately after Haig left Saudi Arabia, an official Saudi statement was issued rejecting Haig's call for a strategic consensus, insisting that the Palestinian issue—not Haig's anti-Soviet crusade—is the key to securing the region. In addition, Saudi National Guard commander Prince

Abdullah, prior to Haig's arrival, stated that Saudi Arabia is prepared to seek weapons "away from any pressures of influence"—which means that Haig's efforts to blackmail Saudi Arabia with the weapons issue had effectively collapsed even before Haig arrived in the region.

Haig was also rebuffed by Iraq which he has been attempting to cajole into joining his anti-Soviet "strategic consensus." Although Haig was not scheduled to visit Iraq, Iraqi Foreign Minister Saadoun Hammadi pre-empted Haig by touring Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait just hours ahead of him, meeting with every leader who later met with Haig. Without referring to Haig's strategic consensus proposals, Hammadi responded coolly to Haig's offer of closer Iraqi-U.S. ties, stating that they should "remain at their present state" for the time being.

France pulls the rug out

Haig's isolation is increased by the fact that he is at odds with the majority of his fellow Anglo-American Middle East strategists. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, British Foreign Minister Lord Carrington, and even, reluctantly, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher oppose Haig's push for a U.S. military presence in the region as ultimately impractical. While agreeing with Haig's overall strategic goals, the British-Weinberger configuration believes that the path of least resistance to pulling the region beneath an Anglo-American strategic umbrella entails consolidating a strategic alliance between Egypt and a Peres-led Israel, and then breaking the region off from its growing financial-military alliance with Western Europe.

The French, however, do not intend to sit idly by. French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing sent the second special envoy in two days to the Lebanon-Syria war zone to calm the situation down and to undercut Haig's regional war scenario. In a speech before parliament, French Gaullist leader Michel Debré called on France to do whatever is in its power to prevent a Lebanon blowup.

At the same time, French Defense Minister Robert Galley arrived in Saudi Arabia while Haig was there, effectively pulling the rug out from under him.

In concert with France, the West German government has issued an appeal for the maintenance of Lebanon's "territorial integrity," while other mediation efforts are being made by the Vatican. According to Washington sources, it appears that attempts are being made in Washington to take the Lebanon issue out of Haig's hands and put it under the aegis of a special "crisis management" apparatus set up not by Haig's State Department but by the White House, now increasingly intent on curbing the power-hungry secretary of state.