

13 March 1981 – Middle East International

### Haig Chooses Zionist As Middle East Assistant

*While much attention has been focused on Nicholas Veliotis' replacement of Harold Saunders as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, other key positions in the State Department have been overlooked by many followers of American Middle East policies. Mark Bruzonsky reports from Washington.*

While Veliotis is said to represent continuity with longstanding American attitudes, as well as with the general approach taken by the Carter administration to Arab-Israeli affairs, nearly all the newcomers in both the State Department and the National Security Council are closely associated with pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian outlooks. This reality is so predominant here that Veliotis, according to one highly respected academic expert on US Middle East policies, is really "the ham in the Zionist sandwich".

In short, while the Veliotis appointment may have been designed to give pro-American Arab regimes reason to hope, most other key positions dealing with Middle East problems within the new administration are being assigned to people whose views and backgrounds argue for a much greater focus on geopolitical interests in the region at the expense of the comprehensive approach

to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian aspect of the Arab-Israeli quagmire.

Probably the most important State Department appointee, apart from Veliotis, is the relatively unknown academic, Harvey Sicherman. Sicherman is being appointed Secretary Haig's Special Assistant to deal with Middle East affairs. He will have a crucial "gate-keeper" role in determining what papers, ideas and personalities reach the Secretary of State on all matters relating to the area; and in this role Sicherman may be even more crucial than Veliotis to the development and carrying out of US Middle East policies in the next few years.

Sicherman has been described most favourably in the Jewish lobby's newsletter *Near East Report* as "a Middle East expert who has written extensively on the Arab-Israeli conflict". Sicherman was critical of what he described as the failure of the Carter administration to realise the strategic advantages of a strong US-Israel relationship. To confirm Sicherman's Israeli orientation, *Near East Report* printed this quotation from an article he wrote last year:

Israel is not only a test of American fidelity to moral commitment but also a powerful pro-American ally, her strength and policy not dependent on the fate of a single ruler or family. Israel's geographic location, along with its military facilities, offers the US a good base should intervention in the Arabian peninsula become

necessary.

Before accepting his key assignment Sicherman is expected to finish his current book on US-Israel relations since the Yom Kippur War.

Another important insight into Sicherman's basic approach to US-Israeli affairs may be the concluding paragraph from an article he wrote last summer in *Orbis*, a quarterly on world affairs published by the Philadelphia-based Foreign Policy Research Institute with which he has been associated and where former General Haig met him. Sicherman rounded off a general assault on Carter administration attempts to balance US relations with Israel and the important Arab American allies with the words:

A serious attempt to reconcile US-Israeli differences at this point will require both sides to consider the virtues of short-term gains against long-term risks. Israel must put forward the case that the Arab-Israeli conflict, if only partially settled, can be 'managed' against an explosion of the October War variety without entire reliance on a strictly military deterrence. The US must establish that its Middle East policy is more than just a devious effort to substitute a solution to the Palestine issue for a more vigorous protection of its interests elsewhere in the region. This can be done only if both the United States and Israel are convinced that the lack of co-ordination will damage them more in the end than the joint pursuit of their common interests.