

Love letter to Hamas - Paul McGeough's front-page profiles of Khaled Meshal

March 11, 2013

By Sharyn Mittleman

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The *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* on Saturday dedicated their front pages to a profile of Hamas leader Khaled Meshal - interviewed in Qatar by Fairfax senior journalist Paul McGeough. There were also a number of subsequent articles on Meshal by McGeough over the weekend in those papers.

The main 'scoop' is that Meshal may seek the leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. However, this is not news at all to anyone who has been following Palestinian politics - it has been discussed for more than a year. McGeough writes in "Hamas chief evokes Arab Spring to lead all Palestinians":

"In the wake of the Arab Spring, Hamas is banking on a surge of regional support for Islamism to move, Mr Mishal to the top of the Palestinian pile, possibly as leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation... At 78, Mahmoud Abbas, who heads the Palestinian Authority, the PLO and the secular Fatah, has said he wants to quit public life. At the same time, Mr Mishal says he wants to quit as the leader of Hamas, but has no intention of leaving public life."

McGeough has long been fascinated with Hamas and Meshal in particular, writing a book in 2009 *Kill Khalid: The failed Mossad assassination of Khalid Mishal and the rise of Hamas*, and joining the 2010 flotilla that attempted to break Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip.

McGeough's articles over the weekend with photos to match, provided a glorified picture of Meshal - painting him as a resistance leader capable of moderating but also an 'every man' - a grandfather who plays with his grandchildren, a man who plays table-tennis and goes to the gym. McGeough does not detail Meshal's reported funding and organising of terrorist attacks on innocent Israelis.

This continued a pattern first noted by counter-terrorism expert Matthew Levitt in his book review of 'Kill Khalid':

"The author's firsthand access to Khalid Mishal in his Damascus head-quarters makes for strong narrative, to be sure. But in his captivation with the subject of his study,

McGeough glosses over Meshal's lesser virtues. According to declassified U.S. intelligence, made public when the U.S. Treasury designated Meshal as a terrorist, there are 'cells in the military wing based in the West Bank that are under Mishaal's [sic] control.' More-over, the U.S. information revealed, 'Mishaal [sic] has been responsible for supervising assassination operations, bombings and the killing of Israeli settlers' and provides instructions to elements of the Hamas Qassam Brigades terrorist wing." In the weekend articles, McGeough portrays Meshal as a possible moderate, despite Meshal's repeatedly stated belief in violent resistance and the fact the he is quoted by McGeough in his article "Hamas chief opens up but stays defiant" as stating:

"This is why I say publicly ... that I reject the [West's] conditions - we will not recognise Israel. We will not renounce violence. We will not agree to all previous agreements entered into by the PLO."

However, McGeough is sure that Meshal and Hamas are moderating despite what Meshal himself says, as he writes in another article 'Khalid Mishal: terrorist or rebel with a cause?':

"Beyond the rhetoric, however, there are signs of a move to a middle ground. To meet the challenge of convincing the West, the contours are emerging for two lines of argument in favour of engaging Hamas. First, Hamas deserves to be 'rewarded' for coming to the right side in the conflict with Tehran, Damascus and the rest. More importantly, Mishal has steadily steered his movement towards an acceptable middle ground: Hamas' embrace of a two-state solution is qualified, but it implicitly recognises Israel and it shrinks the movement's "river to the sea" territorial claims to the West Bank and Gaza; despite rejecting the Oslo Accords, Hamas contested and fairly won, the elections demanded by the international community; the movement has backed away from suicide bombing as its discourse shifts from jihad to hudna [truce]; and its target has become the Israeli occupation - not Judaism."

There are number of problems with McGeough's above characterisation:

Firstly, Hamas has not shrunk its claims to the West Bank and Gaza. McGeough is clearly ignoring key parts of Meshal's recent speech on 7 December 2012 when he returned to the Gaza Strip to mark Hamas' 25th anniversary and reportedly stated:

"First of all, Palestine - from the [Jordan] River to the [Mediterranean] Sea, from its north to its south - is our land, our right, and our homeland. There will be no relinquishing or forsaking even an inch or small part of it. Second, Palestine was, continues to be, and will remain Arab and Islamic. It belongs to the Arab and the Islamic world. Palestine belongs to us and to nobody else. This is the Palestine which we know and in which we believe. Third, since Palestine belongs to us, and is the land of Arabism and Islam, we must never

recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation of it. The occupation is illegitimate, and therefore, Israel is illegitimate, and will remain so throughout the passage of time..." Secondly, Hamas has not moved from "jihad to hudna". Hamas is clear that any 'truce' would only be temporary to facilitate Israel's destruction, and Hamas also continues to believe in armed resistance, as evidenced by Meshal's speech on December 7:

"... Jihad and armed resistance are the proper and true path to liberation and to the restoration of our rights, along with all other forms of struggle - through politics, through diplomacy, through the masses, and through legal channels. All these forms of struggle, however, are worthless without resistance... Politics are born from the womb of resistance. The true statesman is born from the womb of the rifle and the missile." Thirdly, McGeough claims that "Hamas deserves to be 'rewarded' for coming to the right side in the conflict with Tehran, Damascus". Yet Hamas maintains its close relationship with Iran despite its stance opposing the Iranian client regime in Damascus. Furthermore, McGeough does not contemplate that Hamas' position on Syria may have been based on strategic rather than moral considerations. Many analysts believe that Hamas did not back the Assad regime because it decided to align itself with the Muslim Brotherhood and Sunni Islamist forces in general - which is the dominant position of the Syrian opposition, as well as their new state backers, Egypt and Qatar.

However, McGeough's piece does draw rightly attention to the foreign policy interests of Qatar and its new leadership role in the Middle East promoting Sunni Islamism:

"Mishal talks about Qatar only in superlatives: the emir's vision and daring; the kingdom's vast wealth; and the use of the al-Jazeera satellite news service as a tool of foreign and regional policy. He also identified the gas-rich emirate's ability to take advantage of the other Arab leaders' preoccupation with domestic affairs. 'Undoubtedly, the prominence of the Qatari role becomes more evident by the absence of the roles previously played by other Arab leaders.' The nub of his gamble on Qatar seems to lie in an emerging but unstated foreign policy under which Doha is investing big money and diplomatic resources in brotherhood-aligned governments and movements. Last year, Israel and Abbas' Palestinian Authority were furious when the Emir of Qatar became the first Arab leader in years to visit Gaza, delivering 90 tonnes of aid and pledging \$400 million for reconstruction.

Doha sent fighter jets to help NATO dislodge Gaddafi in Libya and it's a big supporter of the rebel forces trying to oust Assad in Syria. Qatar is a generous contributor to reconstruction in South Lebanon - after Israeli attacks in 2006; and it has promised an \$18 billion, five-year investment program for Dr Mursi's Egypt. With its strong relationships with the US and Europe and even low-key links with Israel, Doha seemingly is positioning itself as an emissary and advocate for the emerging governments

with brotherhood or Islamist elements. The opportunity in all of this for Hamas, which for many in the West is still a regional pariah, is that Doha can convince foreign capitals to deal with the Brotherhood on a one-in, all-in basis. That then could be Hamas' ticket to the big end of town."

Another point that McGeough did not discuss in his articles are reports that Meshal no longer commands real authority over Hamas and its future direction. Meshal arguably plans to quit his position as Hamas' political leader, not because he wants to become PLO head, but because he has largely been pushed aside within Hamas by other forces over the past couple of years. In 2012 there were a number of reports of a split within Hamas between its Gaza-based leadership, and its leadership formerly in Damascus and now in Qatar led by Meshal. According to the reports, the Gaza-based Hamas leadership rejected any form of moderation and also were keen to maintain strong ties with Iran who provides Hamas with weapons. As [Ehud Yaari](#) wrote in March last year:

"... Mashal sought to lead Hamas toward comprehensive reconciliation agreement with Fatah and was willing to sacrifice the movement's monopoly of power in Gaza to this end. His hope was to win future elections in the West Bank and take over the Palestine Liberation Organization. This policy was vehemently rejected and, in the end, foiled by his opponents in Gaza, who refused to dismantle the Hamas government there. They view the strip as a captured 'fortress' that should never be relinquished, and as "the shortest route to al-Aqsa Mosque," in Haniyeh's words.

Moreover, while Mashal aspires to reshape Hamas as a Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood in line with the Arab Spring trend in other countries, his adversaries want to maintain the movement's standing as an armed resistance. Like some Gaza members, Mashal also believes that Hamas should maintain its distance from Iran despite receiving some \$400 million annually from Tehran. Yet the military wing, and certainly Alami, see no alternative to close collaboration with the Islamic Republic as their main supplier. They also want to curb intensive Iranian support for Palestinian Islamic Jihad's military buildup in competition with the Qassam Brigades. Before deciding to leave Damascus, Mashal had an advantage over Hamas officials in Gaza, since he held the purse strings and supervised arms smuggling to the strip. The center of gravity has now shifted back to the Gaza leadership, which is capable of developing its own network of foreign support given the upheaval in neighboring Egypt. As a result, Mashal's capacity to lead the movement has been severely impaired. He is no longer first among equals, but more of a figurehead. Every move he makes from now on will need to be approved by his partners in Gaza beforehand, and military interests will likely trump political calculations in many situations."

Of course a lot can happen in a year and Meshal certainly seems to have created new friendships in Qatar. However, Meshal's influence within Hamas today is an important question - but one which McGeough largely ignores.

There is no question that McGeough has unusually good access to Meshal. But this is arguably because he is such an uncritical outlet for Hamas to get its message to the outside world. Even when Meshal says to McGeough "we will not recognise Israel. We will not renounce violence. We will not agree to all previous agreements entered into by the PLO" McGeough insists on suggesting to his readers that we should not believe this - it is mere "rhetoric." Readers are not even fully informed about other even more extreme and totally unambiguous statements made a mere three months ago. Meanwhile, McGeough lauds Meshal's wonderful qualities as a grandfather and ordinary guy who goes to the gym, and pushes Meshal's unlikely hope to be made head of the PLO - something the rival Fatah movement would fight tooth and nail against, even if Abbas says he "wants to quit public life" (which is something Palestinian leaders have often threatened as a way to strengthen their political position without any actual intention of following through.)

This looks far more like advocacy than journalism. In exchange for access, Mr. McGeough appears to be willing to act basically as Hamas' advocate and lobbyist in Australia. The obvious question is why his employers at Fairfax are so ready to help him do so.