

## Legitimizing Hamas:

### Carter's Visit Sends the Wrong Message

Apr 16, 2008



Articles & Testimony

Imagine the Alice in Wonderland scene that will take place later this week, when U.S. Secret Service agents entrusted with protecting former president Jimmy Carter stand guard over a meeting with the head of a designated terrorist group responsible for near daily attacks targeting civilians, including numerous attacks in which American citizens have been injured and killed. The former president may have altruistic motives, but his meeting with Hamas leader Khaled Mishal is both imprudent and dangerous.

Last week, Hamas confirmed press reports that Mishal will host Carter in Damascus for a meeting on April 18. Hamas must have taken special pleasure announcing the presidential meeting the same week the State Department issued the latest version of its annual Foreign Terrorist Organizations list. Fifth from the top is Hamas, a charter member of this select group, reinstated every year since the list's inception in 1995. Carter's visit sends the message that Hamas need not fret over the designation -- he is willing to accept the group as it is, terrorism notwithstanding, and others may well follow.

The former president is not alone in his call for engaging Hamas; his former national security adviser is among the prominent voices advocating the idea. Since Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, the theory goes, it must be brought into the political process, not isolated, or else there is no hope for peace. But Hamas is dead set against a two-state solution, as its refusal to disavow the use of violence makes clear. Whenever negotiators have come close to some type of Israeli-Palestinian agreement Hamas has carried out attacks specifically aimed at derailing progress toward peace. According to declassified U.S. intelligence, cells under Mishal's supervision "have been implicated in efforts by Hamas to plan large attacks that would undermine the road map peace plan." Engaging Hamas will not help the peace process; it will legitimize the group most violently opposed to such progress.

Because of its commitment to violence targeting civilians, engaging Hamas in overt diplomacy when the group remains dedicated to the use of violence is unwise, even if well-intentioned. Hamas rains rockets and mortars on Israeli civilians living near the border with Gaza on a daily basis, the group recently carried out a suicide bombing in the Israeli city of Dimona, it continues to hold an Israeli soldier captive and recently threatened to kill him, and it lauds the attacks other groups carry out from the Gaza Strip it controls. According to an Israeli report released this week, Hamas is engaged in its most significant arms buildup to date, including some 80 tons of explosives, roadside bombs, and longer range rockets capable of targeting Israeli communities deeper in Israel. Hamas stockpiles most of its weapons in the Gaza Strip, but maintains weapons caches in the West Bank as well, such as the stockpile of 200 kilograms of fertilizer and gunpowder seized in Qalqilya this week.

Indeed, directly engaging Hamas would not only empower a terrorist group designated by the United States and the European Union, it would pull the carpet out from under Palestinian moderates who are truly interested in pursuing peace and are trying to contest support for Hamas through non-violent means. American and European officials alike have shunned Hamas over the group's continued use of terrorism and political violence, despite the group's electoral victory in January 2006, united in their shared position that politics and terrorism cannot go hand in hand -- elections notwithstanding.

The theory that Hamas is not going to go away and must therefore be directly engaged is similarly flawed. Engaging Hamas without the group having to first commit to non-violence would signal Hamas and likeminded groups from Lebanon to Iraq that they need not moderate their tactics to be recognized by the international community. Last June, Hamas militants aimed their weapons not at Israel but at fellow Palestinians and took over the Gaza Strip by force. The message Carter's visit sends to violent Islamist groups throughout the region is clear: Terrorism and politics truly go hand in hand; there is no need to forfeit the former to engage in the latter.

Mishal, himself a U.S. designated terrorist, embodies this message, publicly playing the role of Hamas political leader while privately playing a hands-on role in Hamas terrorism. Announcing the August 2003 designation, the Treasury Department noted that some cells in the Hamas military wing based in the West Bank are under Mishal's control. Mishal, Treasury found, "has been responsible for supervising assassination operations, bombings and the killing of Israeli settlers." He "maintains a direct link" to Hamas in the Gaza Strip "to execute Hamas military activities."

This is not to say we can close our eyes and imagine Hamas away. The fact is that communication is not the same as engagement. There are plenty of ways for the United States to communicate with Hamas without openly engaging the group as a legitimate actor. Whether through Egyptian, Palestinian, or other interlocutors, there are multiple ways the U.S. could -- and surely does -- communicate with Hamas. Bestowing on Hamas in general, and Khaled Mishal in particular, the legitimacy of an audience with a former president of the United States suggests something much more than just a desire to communicate or even engage with Hamas -- it suggests a level of acceptance for the organization and its tactic of targeting civilians. No good will come of it.

Matthew Levitt directs the [Stein program on counterterrorism and intelligence \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr) at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and is an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. He is the author of [Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265) (Yale 2006) and the forthcoming *Negotiating Under Fire: Preserving Peace Talks in the Face of Terror Attacks* (Rowman & Littlefield, August 2008). ❖

Weekly Standard

---

## RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

•  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

**[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)**

Feb 15, 2022

•  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

**[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)**

Feb 14, 2022

•  
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)