

## Audited

### Understanding the Evolution of the Sino-Israeli relations and the claim of China's "non-interventionism" Policy

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"The ties between our two countries are very important. Normally the Israeli prime minister goes to the national day of one country: United States, great friend to Israel. I hope that we establish now a tradition where we go the National Day of two countries -China and the United States-. I think we've begun this tradition. It reflects our friendship and the commitment that we have to expand the connection between us" Netanyahu, 2012.

For the past two decades, the Sino-Israeli relations have witnessed a gradual, significant increase. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement above marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Sino-Israeli diplomatic relations, indicating that China has become an important strategic ally of Israel, following the example of its first ally, the United States.

Professor of Political Science Xiaoxing Han divides the Sino-Israeli relations into four main stages: the first stage lasted five years, from the Israeli recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950 till the Bandung Conference in 1955. The second stage lasted for 25 years, from mid 1950s until the late 1970s when China clearly cut its ties to Israel. This stage was characterized by alienation and hostility between the two countries. After that, a gradual change occurred in their relationship, a breakthrough happened in late 1979 which ended with China's diplomatic recognition of Israel in 1992. This stage was marked by secret military deals and the break of the previous state of alienation due to a combination of domestic and international factors that will be discussed later in this paper. The fourth stage is the current bilateral relations starting from 1992 and extending to the present day.

Following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) over the KMT and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950, the newly born Israeli colonial state took a quick initiative in recognizing the new Chinese government under the leadership of Mao Zedong. In fact, Israel was the first country in the Middle East and the seventh internationally to recognize the PRC. This quick recognition by Israel could be seen as preemptive tactic to win the new Chinese regime to their side. Despite Israel's quick recognition, the Chinese leadership merely welcomed the Israeli move without reciprocating. The People's Republic of China was keen at the beginning not to rush into uncalculated relations with Israel, especially that prior to the establishment of the communist China the former Chinese regime led by the anti-communist Chinese National Party (Kuanadiong) had good relationship with the Zionist movement. In fact, nationalist China played vital role in supporting the Zionist movement in the international community. For example, in 1947 China abstained from the UN Partition plan of Palestine, and in 1949, nationalist China recognized the colonial State of Israel.

During the first stage, both China and Israel were uncertain of the nature of their relations within the global context during early fifties. Israel as a colonial power leaned toward the US-led Western imperialist powers, while the PRC was aligned with the Soviet block as an anti-Western and anti-Imperialist power. The anxiety in this relationship was expressed by Isador Magid, the Israeli consul who served in Shanghai from 1949 to 1951, and believed that the Chinese leadership thought of Israel as a dependent upon and influenced by the US. Israel had also helped China strengthen this perspective by supporting a UN resolution drafted by Western countries condemning China in its 1950 war with Korea, and then sending humanitarian and medical aid to Korea as a form of support and sympathy. Compared to the ensuing break in relations, the Sino-Israeli relations in their first stage remained warm, but with limited progress diplomatically.

In the second stage, Egypt, under the leadership of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, played an important role in winning China to the Arab alliance side and keeping it away from the Israel. In 1955 China participated in Bandung Conference-- the conference of non-aligned Asian and African nations which sought to challenge the Western imperial power. In the conference the Chinese delegation was introduced to the Arab-Israeli conflict by the Arab delegations and met with. Ahmed Al-Shuqairi who provided them with a full explanation of the Palestinian cause and Israel's colonial role in the Middle East. After the conference it was clear that china foreign policy in the Middle East was shaped by the "spirit of the Bandung". In 1956, China took a clear stand against the British-French-Israeli trilateral aggression against Egypt. Since that time and until late 1970s, China supported Arab liberation movements in the Middle East. China realized the strategic importance of the Middle East as a battle ground to limit western imperial influence during the Cold War.

As the Chinese position has become more mature and clearly formulated. Not only did continue to refuse establishing official diplomatic relations with Israel, but also clearly considered Israel as a tool of Western Imperialism in the Middle East, labeling them as described by Mao as the China "puppet of Imperialism." During this period, it is worth mentioning that China's foreign policy operated within Mao's strategy of "leaning to one side" against the west and its allies.

In early 1970s China underwent difficult times following the failure of the second Chinese cultural revolution and the increased internal pressure in the communist party demanding reforms. On the international level the schism with the Soviet Union widened and China sought to strengthen its international status. Therefore, a Sino-US rapprochement occurred leading in 1971 to the People's Republic of China (PRC) to guarantee a seat at the United Nations and Security Council, replacing the National Republic of China (Taiwan). The most notable event of the period was the death of China's historic leader Mao Zedong in 1976, leading to the rise of a new leadership of the ruling Communist Party led by another historic leader, Deng Zhaoping. Subsequently, China adopted a comprehensive set of economic, political and cultural reforms based on openness to the West, known as the "open door" policy. In result, the revolutionary ideological rhetoric had declined and military support to liberation movements, including Palestinian organizations, stopped, with China taking more moderate positions according to its new international status and vision. Domestically, the new Chinese leadership has pursued a "cleansing" policy involving Mao's followers and supporters within the Communist Party, to the point of prosecuting his wife and three prominent party leaders, known as the case of the "Gang of Four". Although China's policy toward the Middle East in general and Israel in particular did not undergo notable change on the level of official diplomacy at the beginning, a gradual improvement on the Sino-Israeli relations on different levels has occurred later. In 1979, significant secret military relations began to take hold between Israel and China at that time.

In 1979, a short-lived war broke out between Vietnam and China that lasted several months, therefore, China was in need of advanced military technology to combat the Vietnamese harsh attacks. Ironically, Israel agreed to meet those needs with the approval of the United States. . The Israeli academic Yoram Evron argues that from the first arm deal in 1979 up until 2000, sixty major arms deals were conducted between both countries. Apparently, the Sino-Israeli relations, since late 1970s, have entered a new stage driven by a different Chinese foreign policy. Several reasons lead to the Sino-Israeli rapprochement which this paper cannot discuss deeply discussed in this paper but one can hardly refer to this period without noting that the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979 encouraged China to approach Israel. Camp David agreement has, in one way or another, contributed to the Sino-Israeli rapprochement.

In the 1980s, the Sino-Israeli relations began to progress significantly, albeit slowly and cautiously. The relations have developed in a limited manner in various fields, including military, agricultural and academic, as well as scientific, technical and commercial, resulting in the opening of the door for mutual visits of businessmen, followed by the establishment in late 1980s of an office of the Israeli Academy of Sciences in Beijing and a tourist office for the Chinese tourism company in Tel Aviv. For the first time ever, political meetings between diplomats from the two countries were held in the headquarters of the United Nations, the most important of which was an official meeting in 1987 between the Chinese Foreign Minister and the Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. However, despite this Sino-Israeli rapprochement at that time China was cautious not to deepen its ties with Israel to a point where it threatens its strategic long lasting ties with the Arab world. In fact, it was not until the Palestinian themselves engaged in direct peace negotiations with Israel at Madrid conference in 1991 that China established official diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992. It is noted that within all the stages the Sino-Israeli relations have passed through China has always declared its support to the Palestinian rights under the international law and condemned the Israeli aggression wars and occupation.

### **Current Chinese-Israeli relations – opportunities and determinants**

In recent years, the Sino-Israeli relations, as we have previously pointed out, has expanded steadily in various fields. The bilateral trade between both countries Moreover, according to published statistics China became Israel's second largest export market after the United States. Today China is Israel's third largest economic partner after the European Union and the United States. During an official visit by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to China in 2017, coinciding with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of official relations between the two countries, Netanyahu described the relations as "marriage in Heaven." Netanyahu's tactical overstatement of the escalating Chinese-Israeli relations is interpreted as an attempt to embed the notion that such relations have reached a point of no return. As indicated, Israeli officials are aware of the rise of China and the expectation of China becoming the strongest economy in the world by 2030. Going through statements of Israeli officials and diplomates on China and analyzing it, one can conclude that they keep on repeating two main arguments: First, that Israel and China share positive history based on cooperation, respect and gratitude as an attempt to replace the factual historical memory of long hostility between the two countries.

Israeli officials keep on thanking China for welcoming Jewish refugees escaping the Holocaust and persecution from Europe in 1930s. In a reiterated example, receiving the Chinese parliament speaker in Jerusalem in 2016, the Israeli President Rivlin said: "Everyone remembers the long connection between the Chinese and the Jewish peoples. The people of Israel and the Jewish people admire the traditions of the Chinese people, and we know very well the appreciation of the Chinese people toward our country, state, and people. He also expressed his gratitude to China and its people for providing shelter to Jews escaping the Holocaust. In a related context, Israel also draws a disparate comparison of the rise of China and the Chinese people from difficult times to reach today's growth and prosperity to the Israeli one. For example, in a statement issued by Netanyahu addressing the Chinese people on New Year, he said: We are two ancient peoples, whose values and traditions have left an indelible mark on humanity. But we are also two peoples embracing modernity - two dynamic civilizations transforming the world.

The second argument revolves around the future of the relations between both countries. Israel tries to picture that China and Israel share inevitable destiny based on common interests for the future of these bilateral ties. As argued, China is in need of the Israeli advanced technology, while Israel is in need of China's large investments in its companies and industries and by meeting those needs, the interests and aspiration of both countries will be achieved. For example, in a joint press conference with the Chinese vice president, Netanyahu said: "China is the second largest economy in the world, growing rapidly. Israel is among the leading innovation nations in the world. It's a global technological power. The sustained growth of both our countries and both our economies requires two things... It requires innovation and it requires scale. It's the combination of the two that gives you the greatest effect and the greatest effectiveness. The combination of Israeli technology and innovation with Chinese industry, expertise, innovation and markets is very powerful. He added: We have two ancient civilizations that seize the future.

According to a report issued by the Israeli Foreign Ministry in 2018, the relations between the two countries in agriculture, science, technology, academia and tourism have reached an unprecedented point. .

In tourism, in 2018 more than 100,000 Chinese tourists visited Israel. While in the first half of 2019, according to statistics from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism nearly 84,000 Chinese tourists have visited Israel, a 67% increase from the same period in 2018. One of the main reasons for the increase in Chinese tourism to Israel is due to the decision back in 2017 to launch direct flights between China and Israel.

While in the academic field the relations have witnessed a remarkable shift over the past six years. For example, in 2017, for the first time in history the Israeli university--Technion-Israel Institute of Technology--opened its campus in Guangdong Province in south-east China in partnership with Li Kashing Corporation who supported the project with \$130 million and the Guangdong provincial and Shantou municipal governments who supported the project with additional \$147 million dollars. At the opening ceremony, the president of Technion University commented "[W]e welcome in a new era of cooperative research between Israel and China in science, engineering and the life sciences,"

In another joint project between Haifa University and East China Normal University, a laboratory specializing in biological sciences has been established. Similarly, a \$300 million research center was established between Tel-Aviv University and Beijing's Tsinghua University for cooperation in nanotechnology. It is also noteworthy that two Confucius Institutes currently exist in Israel, one at the Hebrew University and the other at Tel Aviv University.

According to a study issued by Rand Research Center, between the years 2007 and 2018 Chinese construction companies implemented a number of strategic Israeli infrastructure projects worth more than 4 billion dollars. In the same period of time, the research concluded that the Chinese investment in Israel reached \$12.9 billion, 87% of these investments were in two main sectors: Agriculture and technology. In Agriculture the investments reached \$5.3 billion while in technology investments reached \$5.7 billion. In 2017 and during his visit to China, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said to an Israeli journalist that one-third of the foreign investments in Israel's Hi Tech sector comes from China. Moreover, during the first 9 months of 2018 the Chinese investments in Israeli technology start-ups has reached \$325 million.

In December 2016, the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei bought two Israeli technology companies for \$192 million. The first company, Toga Network, the deal was closed for \$150 million, while the other company, HexaTier, was sold for \$42 million. Moreover, earlier this year Huawei expressed its interest in bidding to build Israel's 5G service network. In response, the United States warned Israel to not allow Chinese companies to participate in the bidding as it would negatively impact the Israeli-US relations and their national security. Since the Israeli Ministry of Communications put forward the bid on 14 July 2019, until publishing this paper Huawei did not submitted a bid, as it seems that Israel has again yielded to U.S. pressure. Looking

back in history, this is not the first time the Israeli government yields to U.S. pressure over its relationship with China. In 2000 and 2004, the Israeli government, under intense U.S. pressure, cancelled two military deals with China. In 2000, Israel was forced by the United States to cancel what known as the "Phalcon airborne early warning and surveillance system" deal with China, following great pressure by the United States. The Chinese wanted the Israeli advanced airborne radar system to be installed on Russian military aircrafts, in order to obtain an Airborne Early Warning (AEW) system capable to track long-range air targets. The first deal, known as the 'Phalcon deal', was to provide China with a Falcon early warning and surveillance system to be installed on Russian-made aircrafts. In 2004, a similar incident took place when Israel had to yield again to the American pressure and refuse to upgrade the Israeli manufactured "Harpy Drones" which were sold to China in the 1990s as part of the signed agreement, the U.S also demanded not to send the drones back to China.

In both incidents, the U.S Administration justified its position claiming that the deals were categorized as a threat to "American National Security" and would jeopardize the security of its Asian ally, Taiwan. Consequently, in 2005, the US and Israel signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) which gave the US some control over certain Israeli military exports to third party. In 2013, another incident took place when China indirectly obtained a developed Israeli-American cooling system technology used for infrared-guided missiles through a French company that had previously purchased it from Israel. In result, the general director of Export Control in the Israeli Defense Ministry, Meir Shalit, had to resign after being held responsible for violating the MOU by authorizing the deal. These incidents incited tensions in Sino-Israeli relations and hindered the military relations between both countries, however, it did not stop China from approaching Israel in other fields.

As mentioned earlier, Chinese state-owned companies have carried out important infrastructure projects in Israel. For example, two Chinese companies are working on the construction of the light rail project in Tel-Aviv, while in Haifa another Chinese company has won the bid of constructing the Carmel tunnel. Also, a Chinese state-owned company won the bid to operate Haifa Port for 25 years starting in 2021. Consequently, this move raised the concerns of the US administration. The American national security advisor, John Bolton warned Israel that the security relations between the US and Israel would face serious ramifications. In fact, the US senate drafted a bill that urge Israel to take in consideration the American security concerns as the US Navy's 6th Fleet often docks at Haifa port, therefore, if Israel did not yield the bill calls to prevent the fleet from docking.

The current US pressure will put Israel back at stake regarding its strategic relationship with China. As expected, Israel will try its best to reach a decision where it can satisfy all parties involved. Nevertheless, Israel's chance of success to keep the Chinese in hold of the port while also pleasing the US administration seems to be weak, especially in light of the current rising tension between China and the Trump administration.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations when the Israeli prime minister Rabin was in office until the present time of Netanyahu, nearly all Israeli prime ministers and presidents have visited China, even though only one Chinese president, Jiang Zemin in 2000, has ever visited Israel during a visit to the whole region. This shows that despite China's lack of diplomatic reciprocity, Israel still adamantly maintains its interest to fostering its diplomatic ties to China. It seems, therefore, that Chinese officials view the visits from a different angle; the Chinese ambassador to Israel Zhang Yongxin stated that mutual political visits have been occurring on all levels, noting that up to 2015, 40 Chinese vice ministers have visited Israel. As relations developed further, the frequency of mutual diplomatic visits for economic purposes increased. In 2018, the Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan visited Israel upon Netanyahu's invitation to attend the fourth Israel-China Innovation Conference. Commenting on this visit, Netanyahu said: "This the most important visit by a Chinese leader in the last 18 years. It's a sign of our growing friendship and is a tremendous compliment to Israel and a reflection of the growing ties between China and Israel." Wang Qishan has also visited the Palestinian leadership and met with the former Palestinian Prime minister Rami Al-Hamdallah. By visiting the Palestinian side as well, the Chinese leadership seems to be captious to maintain a balanced diplomatic ties between the Palestinians and Israelis. However, Israel believes that China do not mix politics with business. For example, during his visit to China in 2013, the former Israeli economic minister Naftali Bennett, stated that "In all the 20 meetings we held, not once were we asked about the Arabs, or about the Palestinians, or about any occupation or anything else... All they care about is Israeli Hi-Tech, Israeli innovations". In order to provide analytical understanding of the Sino-Israeli relations the following part will discuss the Chinese historical and current policy toward the Palestinian question.

#### **China's policy toward the Palestinian issue and the credibility of the claim of non-intervention in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict**

Operating within the current international system which is more likely heading toward a multipolar power system, China's foreign policy tends to avoid any direct involvement in regional or international conflicts that hinder its economic growth and undermine its declared non-interventionist policy. China since the 1980s, China presents itself as a neutral, non-interventionist and responsible power, seeking stability and economic cooperation. . Zhiguang Yin-- associate professor at University of Exeter-- argues that the basis of China's non-interventionism policy, which gained popularity in April 1955 emerged within the context of the Chinese Communist revolution back in the 1930s. Theoretically, the formation of this policy originated from the CCP United Front policy which calls on putting ideological and political confrontations between all parties and classes aside in order to fight the common enemy.

Considering China's growing influence internationally and as a UN power, China has attempted to present itself in a more balanced and neutral position towards the conflicts in the Middle East in general and to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in alignment with the international community's position and UN resolutions.

In 2017, and during the visit of the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to China, the Chinese president Xi Jinping announced China's new initiative to solve the "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" based on China's previous four point peace initiative in 2013 and the Arab policy paper issued by the Chinese leadership in 2016. The plan calls on establishing a Palestinian state on 1967 borders with East Jerusalem the Capital through pursuing peace talks whilst also affording due attention to Israel's security concerns pertaining to the establishment of any future Palestinian state. The new in this plan is China's proposal to promote peace through economic development and cooperation between the Palestinians and Israelis and their willingness to facilitate it. With China's growing cooperation in the region in general and with Israel in particular it's aware of the effect of the political and security concerns derived from the conflict on their economic interests in the region. In fact, China sees that Israel is an important partner in the ambitious One Belt One Road initiative, which aims to connect China with the world by building maritime and land routes passes 65 countries and three continents, Asia, Africa and Europe. However, China sees that it needs to balance between the Israelis and Palestinians to avoid any implications for not doing so.

By scrutinizing China's position in the proposed peace initiatives, it can be argued that China is advocating what is already being publicly supported by the international community, an approach to conflict resolution which adheres to UN resolutions and relevant solutions to the conflict.

Some Israeli

### **Chinese investments in Israeli companies**

Within the current neoliberal capitalist global order driven to a large extent by economic interdependence, economic intervention by states is considered to be a soft power prominent tool to directly and indirectly intervene in other states and communities affairs. In the context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, China's economic intervention with Israel and whether it is described to be "neutral" do harm the Palestinian cause and serves in lasting the unjust status quo as will be proven in this section. Chinese State owned and private companies have been heavily investing in Israeli complicit companies as the following two examples illustrates. , .

In 2016, the Chinese investment company "FOSUN" signed an agreement to acquire the private Israeli cosmetics company "AHAVA" for \$77 million. AHAVA products are manufactured through benefiting from the Israeli settler colonial system in Occupied Palestine, the company uses stolen minerals from the Dead Sea in their products. Since 2009, AHAVA has been under pressure from international boycott campaigns demanding AHAVA to end its complicity with the occupation and close its branch in a settlement in the Occupied West Bank. In this context, a 2012 report by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Palestinian territories, Richard Falk, called for a boycott of AHAVA as one of the companies profiting from the occupation and Zionist settlements in Palestine. Although the company announced in 2016 its intention to close its branch in the settlement of Mitzpe Shalem, it continued to practice its theft of Dead Sea wealth used in its industries.

In another example, the Chinese state-owned company, Bright Food Group bought 76.8% of shares in one of Israel's largest milk and dairy companies, "TNUVA". Since it was founded in 1926 until today from the company has played major role in building the economy of the Israeli colonial state. A report issued by "WhoProfits", which examines the involvement of international and Israeli companies that profit from the occupation, demonstrates that Tnuva "uses raw material for its dairy products from Beit Yatir, Carmel, Migdal Oz, and Rosh Tzurim which are all settlements in the West Bank." In addition, as illustrated by "Globes" the Israel business news website, Bright Food Cooperation has recently agreed to invest half a billion dollars in Tnuva in which "substantial proportion of this investment will be allocated to building a logistics center in Modi'in",

a settlement in the occupied West Bank.

Consequently, Tnuva has been a vulnerable target of official public boycott campaigns, most recently in 2015, when the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) forced a temporary decision to boycott Tnuva among four other Israeli companies in response to the Israeli government decision to halt sending tax revenues that belong to the Palestinian Authority. Although the ban was not effectively implemented on the ground and was left once Israel transferred the tax revenues, the decision itself is an indication that the Palestinians are aware that preventing Israeli products to enter Palestinian markets is an important tool of pressure that can be used to reduce the exploitation of the Palestinian market by these companies.

Accordingly, one can say that China's non-interventionist policy toward the Palestinian Israeli conflict is largely manufactured in and of itself. By economically investing in Israeli firms that are complicit in the ongoing appropriation of Palestinian land and natural resources, China is effectively taking a political stance by default, as it effectively choosing to support and reinforce the Israeli unjust occupation system in the Occupied Palestinian Lands and consequently, undermining its projected image of a responsible rising power as well as its declared "non-interventionist" policy which they have internationally endorsed.

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