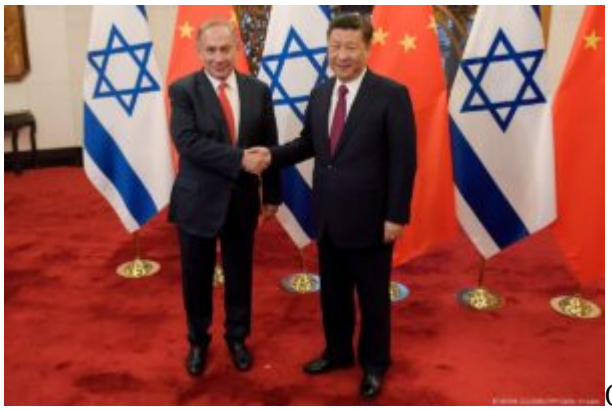
China’s Ties With Israel Are Hindering the Palestinian Struggle for Freedom

written by Shireen Akram-Boshar | December 10, 2024

 Over the past year, analysts and writers in the mainstream press as well as in some left-wing media have argued that China has upended its relationship with Israel in its defense of Palestine in the wake of October 7. But China’s relationship with Palestine is not so clear-cut: While it has offered moderate rhetorical criticism of Israel’s genocide in Gaza, China has maintained investments in Israel and cooperation with Israeli companies, and has attempted to increase its influence as a world power in the Middle East region at the expense of Palestinians.

Throughout the past year of Israel’s war on Gaza, China has repeatedly called for a return to the peace process and the implementation of the long-discussed two-state solution. But this rhetoric is far from signaling opposition to and defiance of Israel. Such calls are hardly very radical: They seek a return to a U.S.-led peace process and a two-state solution traditionally championed by the U.S. Both the peace process and the two-state solution have been sharply criticized by Palestinians and the Palestine solidarity movement globally as mechanisms that preclude the Palestinian right to return and take as their starting point the theft of the majority of Palestinian land. Nonetheless, China’s moderated criticism of Israel has not been matched by any efforts to advance such a flawed process.

Eli Friedman, a Cornell University professor who focuses on labor and development in China, explained some of the dynamics between China and Palestine in a recent webinar. It must be understood, he said, that “China is not responsible for the genocide” in Gaza; responsibility lies with Israel and the U.S., followed by other European powers. “The idea, though, that China is interested in the liberation of Palestine is also extremely problematic,” he added. “China is Israel’s second biggest trading partner after the United States, and actually not too far behind.” In particular, Israel and China cooperate extensively in technology and military sectors. “When the U.S. after 1989 in Tiananmen Square was saying, we can’t sell military equipment to China, Israel kept selling [them] military equipment — Israel is kind of a back door, and they’ve had a lot of cooperation in that respect.”

“China wants economic influence in the region,” he continued. “They want the system to continue to function smoothly.” Israel is a key player in the region that China wants to be able to relate to, therefore China “want[s] Israel to be able to continue to persist more or less as it is. Now, they also want an end to the occupation. China’s official stated position on Israel is a two-state solution … but

they’re not going to do anything to fundamentally disrupt” economic relations with Israel.

Friedman explained that this is because China has much to lose economically if it does so.

“Chinese state-owned companies operate the port of Haifa, and they’re leading a big expansion of the port in Ashdod, which is just to the north of Gaza. They’re building an expansion of the Tel Aviv light rail system. So Chinese state capital is heavily invested in the literal infrastructure of genocide. If tomorrow, the Chinese companies said, ‘We’re going to shut down the port of Haifa and we’re not going to allow any weapons or materials to support the genocide,’ that would have an enormous impact on the development of things in Gaza. And they are not doing that. I think it’s important to note that, because there’s not a genuine, solidaristic interest in the liberation of Palestine.”

Indeed, the Chinese state has prohibited basic demonstrations of solidarity with Palestine, confiscating Palestinian flags displayed publicly and preventing mobilizations in support of Gaza.

Some have pointed to a decline in trade between China and Israel in 2023 as evidence that the relationship between the two has hit a turning point, if not a breaking point. But while the dip in 2023 was real, and likely due to a variety of factors, it is unlikely to mark a rupture in the relationship, which has been steadily growing. China’s collaboration with Israel in fields like technology, AI and energy have drastically expanded in recent decades. In 2020, China became Israel’s second largest trading partner globally, and its largest in Asia. Recently, Chinese-Israeli trade hit a record of $20 billion dollars per year. Chinese and Indian companies have privatized Israel’s Haifa port — which Netanyahu allowed against the wishes of the U.S. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), begun in 2013, encouraged more Chinese companies to invest in Israel or set up research and development centers in Israel. In 2014, Tel Aviv University and Tsinghua University of Beijing set up a $300 million-dollar research center. In 2015, Peking University and Tel Aviv University signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a joint research institute. That same year, Shantou University and Israel’s Technion Institute of Technology established the Guangdong-Technion Institute of Technology. As Chinese activists in solidarity with Palestine explained, “These collaborations are some examples of Chinese university students engaging with Israeli institutions as if they were neutral, without recognizing that Israeli universities are complicit in the ongoing genocide, occupation, and oppression of the Palestinian people.”

These same activists have outlined some of the collaborations between Israel and China on surveillance technology. In particular, the Chinese state-backed company, Hikvision, is complicit in policing and surveillance in Palestine, China and even the U.S. Israel uses Hikvision technology to surveil Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, logging the information in a database monitoring Palestinians in the West Bank specifically; Hikvision also provides technology to surveil and police the Uyghur Muslim population in the Xinjiang region of China; and Hikvision cameras are used in numerous other countries including the U.S. — by the NYPD, among others — despite federal bans of the technology in the U.S.

As Friedman pointed out, China is interested in playing a larger role in the Middle East region. It has been working to increasingly insert itself in the region following the Abraham Accords, and has maneuvered to take advantage of Israel’s genocide in Gaza to increase its influence.

China benefited from the normalization process that began in 2020, allowing it to further its influence and investments in the Middle East. With Israel integrated into economic cooperation more openly across the region, China became increasingly able to expand projects that encompassed both Israel and the Gulf region. The normalization process has opened up possibilities for the extension of China’s BRI project into the region, for example. And since the start of normalization,

China, the UAE and Israel have all increased their collaboration in tech sectors including in AI research — bringing together, for example, China's Beijing Genomics Institute and Abu Dhabi's G42, both of which are also building labs and offices in Israel — as well as in energy and development. The normalization process and the thawing of Israel's relationship with the UAE offers more economic openings for China, which has in recent years deepened its relationships with reactionary actors across the region including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and most recently Sudan's army general. Clearly, the priority is stability for business, rather than justice for Palestinians or any beleaguered group in the region.

But China is also cognizant that, across the Middle East region, general opinion of the U.S. is extremely poor since it is — rightly — understood as responsible for the continuance of the genocide in Gaza. China hopes to use this crisis as an opportunity to portray itself as an alternative to the U.S., one more trustworthy to the Arab states and to countries in the Global South more broadly. In July, China brought various Palestinian factions together in Beijing to move towards "national unity" and to hash out differences between Fatah and Hamas. While it may have been largely symbolic, the event was part of China's attempt to increase its status and role in the region. Many have praised China for facilitating this convening, but little has come as a result of it. Even before October 7, China established a "strategic partnership" with the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, with whom it had been nurturing a relationship for years. The Palestinian Authority is also widely criticized by the Palestinian left and others across Palestinian society for its security coordination and collaboration with the Israeli occupation. China's currying of favor with the PA also points to its goal of increasing its influence in the region rather than a sincere desire for justice for Palestinians.

In a similar vein, China mediated normalization between Saudi Arabia and Iran in early 2023, demonstrating its interest in both economic stability for its own gain across the region as well as an increased desire to hold the reigns in political negotiations — and perhaps to take the place of the U.S. in doing so. China clearly sees itself as a key player in a new, post-2011 status quo across the Middle East region, with more emboldened reactionary states looking to better interstate relationships for their economic benefit at the expense of the wider populations.

China's position on Palestine is, in many ways, representative of much of the BRICS+ organization member countries. BRICS+ — representing Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, the UAE, and other states — claims to represent an alternative possibility, a bulwark against the U.S., and a defense of countries throughout the Global South. However, as in the case of China, BRICS+ countries often rhetorically support Palestinians and champion the two-state solution, while simultaneously furthering their investments and collaborations with Israel. This is most obvious in the case of India, the fifth largest trading partner with Israel globally, and which has actively supported Israel in its genocide on Gaza with arms sales and increased its partnerships with Israeli universities complicit in the genocide, after decades of nurturing close ties with Israel — going back at least to the 1980s and '90s — and championing similarly right-wing, violent Islamophobia. Russia, too, has strong economic relations with Israel, and has continued to provide coal to Israel throughout the duration of the genocide. Brazil and even South Africa — the country that brought Israel to the International Court of Justice — have refused to stop their coal and oil sales to Israel. To be clear, this approach is contrary to that advocated by the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement. By cooperating with Israel rather than isolating it amid a genocide, these states — and their state-backed corporations and tech companies — are an obstacle to Palestinian liberation, rather than part of the solution.

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