

Atıf/ Citation

YeniAcun, Selim Han. "Israel's Challenge of Stability in the Context of BRI's East Mediterranean Policies." *İsrailiyat: Journal of Israeli and Judaic Studies*, no. 7 (Winter 2020): 75- 89.

ISRAEL 'S CHALLENGE OF STABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BRI'S EAST MEDITERRANEAN POLICIES *

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Article Type: Research Article

Received Date: 03.12.2020, Accepted Date: 30.04.2021

Abstract: Middle Eastern countries are predisposed to forging new partnerships to survive the slippery slope for balance of power in the region. In terms of this international balance of power and cross-regional cooperation between any Middle Eastern country and another non-regional partner, China-Israeli relations provide a good example of this unusual type of new governance and partnership. This article aims to describe the relationship between one Middle Eastern and one Far Eastern country while considering recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Although many scholars argue that China's grand foreign affairs strategy, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is at the focal point of the two nations' new understanding of convergence, the sustainability of the relations is worth of inquiry from an academic perspective.

Keywords: BRI, Israel, China, East Mediterranean, US

* This article is an expanded and revised version of an oral presentation of the same title presented at the *Fourth International Conference on Israel and Judaism* (7-10 December 2020) and whose abstract published in the *Proceeding and Abstract Book*.

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BRI'NİN DOĞU AKDENİZ POLİTİKALARI BAĞLAMINDA İSRAİL'İN İSTİKRAR SINAMASI

Öz: Günümüzde Ortadoğu ülkeleri bölgedeki güç dengesinin kaygan zemininde ayakta kalabilmek için yeni ortaklıklara yatkındır. Uluslararası güç dengesinin değişimi ve herhangi bir Ortadoğu ülkesi ile bölge dışı bir aktörünün bölgeler arası iş birliğinden bahsederken Çin-İsrail ilişkileri yeni küresel yönetişime ve alışılmadık bir ortaklığa uygun bir örnek olacaktır. Bu makale bir Ortadoğu ülkesi ile bir Uzak Doğu ülkesi arasındaki ilişkileri Doğu Akdeniz'deki son gelişmeler ışığında tasvir etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda pek çok akademisyen, Çin'in Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi (BRI, Tek Kuşak ve Tek Yol Girişimi) adlı büyük dış ilişkiler stratejisinin, iki ülkenin yeni yaklaşma anlayışının odak noktasında olduğunu iddia etseler de ilişkilerin sürdürülebilirliği ve istikrar problemi akademik bir bakış açısıyla araştırmaya değerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: BRI, İsrail, Çin, Doğu Akdeniz, ABD

Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean region has been a hot-spot in terms of its geostrategic position for centuries. It has also served unique commercial opportunities for coastal countries to enhance their national wealth for centuries. During and after periods of colonization, the Mediterranean Sea lost its historical popularity as alternative maritime routes began to be explored. The 19th and 20th centuries offered little hope for the return of the East Mediterranean's commerce base to prosperous times due to the many brutal military campaigns in the region; however, long-term political instability of this coastal region, the Suez Canal, and improved international trade law regulations have breathed new life into the area.

The mid-20th century was a milestone for the East Mediterranean region in terms of shaping a new political order, one which is still maintained today. Other historical events such as the formation of the State of Israel and the Cold War's proxy confrontations in the Middle East have not only changed the status quo but also turned the geography into a figurative chess field. Wars, alliances, negotiations, and occupations have been frequent occurrences for more than half a century in the region. Moreover, while the dynamics of the international world order have been changing, the Middle East, and particularly the East Mediterranean region, have become the most effective territories because of the primary interests of greater powers.

The major players of global politics have always pursued their own agendas and have attempted to shape the world order according to their own priorities. Despite this hegemonic competition, the first decade of the 21st

century was a historical turning point. Regional and global powers have diversified thanks to new understandings of global governance and the rapid economic growth of developing countries. Due to this alternation, regional actors can quickly contact inventive global powers.

One of the East Mediterranean region's most idiosyncratic figures is Israel, a country that has tried to build new bridges for decades both within the region and with the world at large. Like other nations in the area, the concepts of security and safety are primary issues placed on politics in Israel¹. As a developing country that has a population of almost 8.8 million (with 1.7 million of those being Arab citizens)², it has a considerable market capacity for common and special products. Furthermore, thanks to its enhanced technological skills in agriculture, water, and solar systems, as well as being one of the leading countries for military, space, and software industries worldwide, Israel seems to be an essential factor for regional calculations and cooperation. Moreover, Israel has a powerful diaspora at its disposal³, offering a significant governance capability beyond its national capacity.

Furthermore, due to the desire for global partnerships,, Israel has taken greater interest in China's foreign policy and international investments thanks to recent economically profitable developments such as Maritime Silk Road routes such as the Red Sea-Mediterranean Sea Railway Connection (Red-Med Project), the reconstruction and administration of the Haifa and Ashdod ports, the Red Sea and Dead Sea water purification and transportation project, and the tentative Tel Aviv-Abu Dhabi Railway project⁴. These projects are directly related to Israel and indirectly related to the permanent political and economic stability in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea and may provide Israel with the opportunity to connect with some of its historical rivals such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait to utilize the Maritime Silk Road⁵.

China is on the other extreme. It has been a rising economic star in global governance and has been a critical player in several confrontations in world politics. China's well-known 1978 "Open Door Policy"⁶ has succeeded in becoming a financial whip hand that has spread throughout the world. Due in

¹ Kimmerling 1993.

² CBSSSI 2018.

³ OECD 2018.

⁴ Xiao 2016, 1-10.

⁵ Sanam 2018.

⁶ Guocang 1986.

part to prioritizing economic superiority rather than interventionist attitudes on world politics, China has actualized diversity of its market capacity and its energy supply sources/transportation routes⁷. Thank to this success, a brand-new political-economic vision means that the Silk-Road's resurrection has triggered rapid interactions among China and its target destinations after 2013⁸.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as the One Belt One Road Project (OBOR) or New Silk Road Project, was announced by the People's Republic of China's President Xi Jinping during an official visit to Kazakhstan related to international economic cooperation and multilateral development projects. The BRI has been at the top of the world's economic agenda for the last six years. While world politics have faced many local and global confrontations for decades, economic-based win-win policies have received massive interest from many countries as a new approach to prosperity. Simply, the project aims to establish three land routes and one sea route that will connect Asia, Europe, and Africa⁹ through six main corridors planned to pass through more than 60 countries as well as to strengthen old world infrastructure via high-speed train lines and large port cities. This infrastructure reconditioning will require billions of dollars of investment and has encouraged many governments to reconsider traditional world governance¹⁰. However, the BRI became controversial after the US's withdrawal over questions of whether the project has geostrategic goals. Despite President Jinping stating that the BRI is not a Chinese version of the Marshall Plan and that China has no secret geopolitical agenda¹¹, as an economic innovation abroad, the medium and long-term political consequences of the BRI has created fierce debate among both scholars and politicians.

While these debates continue, the facts brought about by real politics reveal a more essential and tangible picture. The BRI stands out as the only project that promises stability within this crises-ridden region and dynamic political changes such as US-China relations, which have been strained by trade wars¹²; explanations about the need to develop independent non-US

⁷ Mikael 2015, 151-152.

⁸ SCPRC 2016.

⁹ SCPRC 2016

¹⁰ Nguyen 2017, 55-60.

¹¹ Reuters.com 2018.

¹² Tao and Wing 2018; Dorcas and Alexander 2019.

security understanding and economic strategies from the European Union and Turkish-Russian-Iranian trilateral joint efforts on Syria and Iraq that were mostly independent of U.S. foreign policy vision¹³; and a new mid-zone alliance from North Africa through the Gulf which was established by the US, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia¹⁴. Whether or not it imposes a political agenda through these means, the BRI is being perceived as an opportunity for the East to overcome global pressures it has for centuries.

The most minimal calculations show that the total cost of the BRI network covering Asia, Africa, and Europe will be at least 4 trillion US dollars, and this can possibly extend to 8 trillion¹⁵. Such large investments will inevitably turn many countries of the old world against China. Furthermore, financing of this project is also related to the safety of the transitions between the production band and the final market; China's dominant financier and producer position at the head of this route required balancing. Therefore, the BRI still needs multilateral investment sources.

1. Belt and Road Initiative and Israel

It is undeniable that the development of transportation networks including railways and canals and cross-border communication networks such as the telegraph since the mid-1800s have provided a great opportunity for the reformatting of interstate order in Europe¹⁶. In the new global system, it seems that international integration will be achieved through cooperation over these potential land and sea routes as the safety of a single main route will be under the responsibility of many states¹⁷ who all have a common geographic destination, commercial revenue, or energy shipment from the route. The BRI will undoubtedly help the international order to become more stable and intractable.

The BRI seems positioned to reshape China's new Middle East policies as well as how it affects many destinations. Concurrently, China is portraying an image that is ready to be fully integrated into the region in terms of security issues by the military base established in Djibouti¹⁸, trade fleets and military ships from the Strait of Hormuz to the seas of China¹⁹, the troops deployed in

¹³ Sena 2019.

¹⁴ Wroughton and Pawlak 2019.

¹⁵ David 2017.

¹⁶ Stefan 2008, 323.

¹⁷ Friedman 2013.

¹⁸ Mordechai 2018, 9-11.

¹⁹ Chinapower.csis.org and; Lirong 2015.

Syria²⁰, the political documents outlining policies of the Arab states published in 2016, and the One Belt One Road Initiative loans planned to be distributed to 21 Arab countries²¹. China's cooperation with Iran over the years in all energy and industry fields is a well-established fact; however, China has not hesitated from its Saudi Arabia and Gulf policies. China, which receives most of its energy needs from Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, and Iran, is looking for ways to diversify energy imports due to the Iran-Saudi Arabia confrontation within the scope of the Belt and Road Project. At this point, Israel, one of the key actors in the Middle East, and Israeli-Chinese relations need to be studied in-depth, both in terms of the plans to diversify China's energy imports and understand BRI's Eastern Mediterranean branch.

China is a growing high-tech and environmental technologies market for Israel. At the same time, the Southern Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel trio, led by Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean basin, can be seen as a significant block to diversify China's natural gas imports²². Chinese-Israeli diplomatic relations, which have a nearly 30-year history, are carried out meticulously due to Chinese beliefs on the Palestinian issue and US intervention in Israel's public opinion as a third party. However, it is undeniable that economic and technological factors are still essential dynamics that help develop the relations between these two states. Israel is a high-tech co-operative actor, both within the framework of the BRI policy as well as independently²³. For instance, the Chinese government has allocated 2.3 billion dollars to projects dedicated to preventing air and water pollution in the country until 2030, with several Israeli companies as partners²⁴. Also, much economic cooperation can be stated for supporting developing relations.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, these two countries, which have a rapidly developing trade volume in the fields of defense industry, agriculture, advanced technology, biotechnology, water, and air purification²⁵, have gained the opportunity to attain a geostrategic partnership with the transportation of Israeli natural gas to the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea through the Maritime Silk Road. Moreover, the Red-Med²⁶ (the railway project to link the

²⁰ Logan and Jesse 2018.

²¹ SCPRC 2016.

²² David 2013.

²³ Yoram 2013, 520-523.

²⁴ Hou 2017.

²⁵ Efron, Shira, Howard J. Shatz, Arthur Chan, Emily Haskel, Lyle J. Morris, and Andrew Scobell, 2019

²⁶ Mordechai 2016.

Red Sea and the Mediterranean) will play a vital role in diversifying energy transportation and the Chinese-Mediterranean trade route as well as breaking the unilateral dependencies of many countries both economically and geo-strategically. In addition to the natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, Israel has natural boundaries that can serve as essential pit stops for Eastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Red Sea. The BRI will force Israel to more closely consider how it can sustain this advantage most sufficiently. The high-speed railway project, which is being built between the port of Ashdod and the city of Eilat, will create an alternative route for the Suez Canal²⁷ and lead to the opening of China to the Mediterranean over the Negev Desert.

However, the United States of America strongly suspects China's position of seeking cooperation with Israel. Despite the economic dimension of China-Israel relations, which have existed for nearly three decades, and which are generally removed from any US influence, the transfer of strategic military technologies and China's recent long-term investments have been some of the primary intervention areas of American foreign politics²⁸. China's investments in Africa and Central Asia are unlikely to be reversed or blocked by other states. Nevertheless, Mediterranean-Red Sea shareholders could re-establish different blocks as the convergence of their regional interests have the potential to cause confrontations in the coming years. That is why China will need to carefully choose their BRI partners. Chinese investments at the Red-Med axis have also been highly criticized by US foreign policy. Beyond the criticisms raised against China, the United States could try to develop concrete political moves against allied states in the region, increasing the level of partnership with China. In this respect, Israel is one of the states with which the US has the most significant fight against Chinese investments.

2. Israel's Position at the BRI under the Haze

Israel, which has strategic importance for connecting China's Red Sea-Mediterranean route, has become a market where many Chinese companies invest. The investments of these companies are mainly in the fields of rail and sea transportation on a global scale. For instance, one of the largest projects of the Maritime Silk Route is the Port of Haifa project, making Israel a significant partner of the Belt and Road Initiative. In this port project, the Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) will manage the Port of Haifa's commercial activities for the next 25 years from 2021²⁹. It is one of the most

²⁷ Dan. 2012.

²⁸ Yasmin and Uri 2019; Yoram 2013; Yitzhak 2005.

²⁹ Roie 2018.

valuable achievements in the East Mediterranean Basin for China. The company will take over the port's operation for 25 years in exchange for a two-billion dollar investment. SIPG has been converting the entire Gulf of Haifa into a gigantic port. This investment symbolizes China's most concrete steps in the Belt and Road Initiative in Israel.

With the start of Haifa's port operations by the SIPG, the port of Piraeus in Greece will enable the transfer of Eastern Mediterranean trade to the Red Sea more quickly than the Suez, thanks to the railway that will extend to Eilat from Haifa and Ashdod³⁰. This project could also help China diversify its energy demand while enabling the supply of products to be more dynamic. Furthermore, providing infrastructure support for prestigious projects such as the Tel Aviv light rail system³¹, Tel Aviv-Jerusalem high-speed railway line³², and the Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Project (Red-Dead)³³ are key steps for China to sustain long-term dependency in the region. These kinds of actions have already challenged the United States' position for protecting its regional interests.

Under the light of these developments, the Haifa Port project was the breaking point for America. The US intervened in the Phalcon airborne early warning system trade from Israel to China at the beginning of the 2000s because the Pentagon was uneasy regarding China's control of the commercial section of Haifa's port. Within the Port of Haifa, the US's 6th Fleet is anchored next to the Israeli army's submarine troops. According to the Israeli newspaper, the Jerusalem Post³⁴, 6th Fleet Commander Kyle Raines announced that he did not want to make speculative commentary on the issue in the post-2021 period. Also, according to some unnamed in-house sources, the US Navy will not revisit Haifa's port if this agreement enters into force. In addition to the Israeli public opinion debates, from the end of 2018 to the end of January 2019, news outlets such as Ynet, the Times of Israel, and the Jerusalem Post were full of statements by unnamed state officials confessing that the Haifa port tender was a mistake³⁵. The timing of Donald Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton's speech and speculative news related

³⁰ PortSEurope 2018.

³¹ Laura 2017.

³² Sputniknews 2017.

³³ Eytan. 2018.

³⁴ Michael 2018.

³⁵ Raphael 2018.

to China in Israeli media are also meaningful. Bolton stated that the Haifa Port could be used to provide intelligence from China during his Israel visit³⁶.

At the beginning of February 2019, another influential voice emerged, stating concerns about China's growing investment in Israel. The Head of Israel's interior intelligence service, Shabak (Shin-Bet), Nadav Argaman, made two statements in sequence. These statements were recorded as criticism from the highest authority of the State of Israel about Chinese investments³⁷. Although his first statement was related to a cyber-attack possibility through Israel's upcoming general elections, it would not be evaluated against China. But Argaman has put many questions in mind through his second speech, which was made directly after the first. He mentioned that foreign investments should be taken under control, and that any counter-intelligence related to these investments should be prevented. These statements have attracted the Israeli public's attention to China. While allegations of Russia's involvement in the US elections remain fresh³⁸, Argaman's statement could cause the question of whether Russia is preparing the ground for possible government intervention against China's investments to be raised. The first step towards the control of foreign investments in Israel has also recently been laid. The prevention of Chinese and Turkish participation in the new airport infrastructure tender of 40 million dollars is the most essential proof that Israel will have a new protective attitude for political reasons. Also, the success of these developments after Bolton's visit will be worth considering³⁹. Although their economic relationship capacity reached almost 10 billion dollars in 2018⁴⁰, the Israeli public has started in-depth debate related to Chinese investment and US reflections over Israel⁴¹.

Beyond these obstacles, which are US-oriented counter-strategies, China's independent foreign policy could also cause problems for Israel's perception. China, which supports Iran's position in the Middle East politically and commercially, has a moral stance in Israel's Palestinian territories, especially in Jerusalem. It does not operate any commercial activity and also has an Israeli-Palestinian peace agenda close to the Palestinian's arguments⁴². It is

³⁶ Haaretz 2019.

³⁷ Toi(a) 2019.

³⁸ Nicholas and Adam 2019; Peter 2019.

³⁹ Toi(b) 2019.

⁴⁰ GlobalEdge 2018.

⁴¹ 2018. דודרון אלה, לביא, גליה (Doron Ella)

⁴² Liu 2017.

well-known that the Israel-Iran rivalry continues in the Middle East, and that cooperation with Iran is not tolerated well by Israel. However, China's activities are accepted due to its sizeable commercial capacity despite its close relations with Iran. Another example of this complex equation is the Tel Aviv light rail project, which is credited and maintained by China. Israel's intercity and urban railway systems have been diversified over the last decade, and many of these projects are still under construction. In Tel Aviv, Israel's capital and the heart of its economy, Chinese CRTG, CRC, and CCECC companies have carried great importance in constructing railway networks. The fact that these companies are concurrently involved in constructing the nuclear reactors in Iran and the railways in Israel also reveals the dimensions of Israel's tolerance towards China⁴³. Vis a versa, Israel has a significant volume of investment in China. Educational and cultural activities increase Israel's effectiveness in China and mobilize cultural interaction independent of its diaspora. Developments in student exchange programs, academic education programs, and touristic activities have positively affected the cooperation between the two countries. Having made many strides in education in China, Israel has encouraged many academic programs to introduce itself. Departments and centers on Israeli, Judaic, and Hebrew studies have been opened in prestigious academic institutions in China, such as Nanjing University, Henan University, and Shandong University. Furthermore, in addition to 100 post-doctoral fellowships per year at Israeli educational institutions, 350 undergraduate scholarships are allocated exclusively to Chinese and Indian students. According to numbers in 2017, there were 1,000 Chinese exchange students taking classes in Israel⁴⁴.

Israeli educational institutions are also expanding their campuses into China. In 2014, Tel Aviv University established an innovative research and education center with Tsinghua University. In 2015, Technion University, one of the leading universities in engineering in Israel and the world, became the second institution with an independent education program in China by establishing the Guangdong Technion-Israel Institute of Technology University, following Moscow State University. In 2016, Ben-Gurion University opened a joint entrepreneurship and innovation center with Jilin University, while Haifa University built a joint laboratory in the fields of ecology, big data, biomedicine, and neurobiology at East China Normal University.

⁴³ The Economist 2018.

⁴⁴ Efron, Shira, Howard J. Shatz, Arthur Chan, Emily Haskel, Lyle J. Morris, and Andrew Scobell, 2019, 60-71.

Conclusion

The spirit of the BRI is reliable, sustainable, and diversified partnership in many areas. Despite enormous investments, the suitability of Israel on this issue remains a mystery. According to many researchers working on Israeli-Chinese relations, Israel is defined as a "stable" country. However, its difficulties in both forming and maintaining a government and dependency on US foreign policy decision-makers has created questions regarding this definition. The point that needs to be addressed is whether partnerships can be established with countries which are alternatives to Israel. Yet, due to the Chinese foreign policy aims to develop close ties to every country with equal moralities and the US's ultra-interventionist warnings to Israel, diversification of cooperation in different fields could be restricted.

Moreover, China has essential beliefs about the Israel-Palestine crisis, perhaps the Middle East's most significant issue. Despite over twenty-seven years of diplomatic and economic relations with Israel, China has been greatly in favor of the Palestinians' homeland campaign since 1948 in terms of ideological and humanitarian perspectives. Additionally, Iran's position should also be underlined. Despite many sanctions and US-Israel oriented pressures over Iran, China has second to Russia as a significant trade partner of the Islamic Republic and also as a vital political ally.

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