

China's Position on the Palestine-Israel Issue: A Historical Perspective

Abstract

The Question of Palestine is the core of Middle East issues and the one of the root factors of peace in the Middle East. From the historical perspective, China's position on this issue has always been clear, consistent and convergent with the international community, which is supporting the Palestinian just cause. But there are also some twists and turns between China on the one hand and Palestine and Israel on the other hand. It can be divided into the following periods: Friendly historical relations between China and the Jewish nation; Pro-Arab and Anti-Israel (1949-1979); Keep Balance between Arab and Israel (1979-2013); Active Participation of Palestine-Israel Issue under Belt & Road Initiative. Although China's position and recommendations on the Palestine-Israel issue are more easily accepted by both sides, the current Chinese Middle East policy is still trapped in the predicament of "morality" and "interest". On the one hand, China has to support Arab countries' just cause, but it is impossible to give up its friendly relations with Israel on the other hand. The Belt & Road Initiative will provide a great opportunity for China to actively engage in the hot issues in the Middle East.

Keywords: Palestine-Israel Issue; China; BRI; Middle East

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Çin'in Filistin-İsrail Meselesine Bakışı: Tarihsel Perspektif

Öz

Filistin Sorunu, Ortadoğu meselelerinin özü ve Ortadoğu'da barışın ana vesilelerinden biridir. Tarihsel açıdan bakıldığında, Çin'in bu konuda karşı-sındaki duruşu her zaman açık, tutarlı ve Filistin'in haklı davasını destekleyen uluslararası topluma yakın olmuştur. Ancak bir tarafta Çin diğer tarafta ise Filistin ile İsrail arasında bazı detaylar bulunmaktadır. Bunlar şu şekilde dönemlere ayrılabilir: Çin ile Yahudi milleti arasında dostane tarihsel ilişkiler; Arap yanlısı ve İsrail karşıtı (1949-1979); Araplar ile İsrail Arasındaki Dengeyi Korumak (1979-2013); Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi kapsamında Filistin-İsrail Sorununun Aktif Katılımı. Her ne kadar Çin'in Filistin-İsrail konusundaki konumu ve önerileri her iki tarafça da daha kolay kabul görse de, Çin'in şu anki Ortadoğu politikası halen "ahlak" ve "çıkar" çıkmazında sıkışmış durumda. Bir yandan Çin, Arap ülkelerinin haklı davasını desteklemek zorunda, ancak diğer taraftan İsrail ile dostane ilişkilerinden vazgeçmesi de imkansız. Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Çin'in Ortadoğu'daki sıcak sorunlara aktif olarak katılması için harika bir fırsat sağlayacak.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Filistin-İsrail meselesi, Çin, Kuşak ve Yol girişimi, Ortadoğu

موقف الصين تجاه المسألة الفلسطينية – الإسرائيلية: نظرة تاريخية

ملخص: الأزمة الفلسطينية، هي لب الأزمات في الشرق الأوسط و إحدى الطرق الأساسية للسلام في الشرق الأوسط. و عند النظر من الناحية التاريخية يتبين لنا أن موقف الصين حيال الأزمة الفلسطينية كان واضحا و ثابتا و داعما للقضية الفلسطينية المحقة و أقرب الى موقف المجتمع الدولي.

و لكن يوجد بعض التفاصيل بين الصين من جهة و فلسطين و إسرائيل من جهة أخرى. و يمكننا أن نفضلها الى فترات على الشكل التالي؛ العلاقات التاريخية الصديقة بين الصين و الأمة اليهودية؛ دعم العرب و الوقوف في وجه إسرائيل (1979 – 1979)؛ الموازنة بين العرب و إسرائيل (1979 – 2013)؛ المشاركة الفعالة للأزمة الفلسطينية الإسرائيلية في نطاق الحزام و الطريق. و مهما كانت الاقتراحات و المواقف الصينية في موضوع فلسطين – إسرائيل تلقى قبولا من كلا الطرفين بشكل أسهل الا أن سياسة الصين الحالية تجاه الشرق الأوسط مازالت منحصرة في مآزق «المصالح» و «الأخلاق». و من هذه الناحية فان الصين مجبرة على دعم قضية الدول العربية المحقة، و لكن من ناحية أخرى من المستحيل أن تتخلى عن العلاقات الصديقة مع إسرائيل. ستؤمن مبادرة الحزام و الطريق فرصة رائعة لمشاركة الصين بشكل فعال في الأزمات الحادة في

Introduction

The Question of Palestine is the core of Middle East issues and the one of the root causes of peace in the Middle East. However, with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the never-ending civil war in Syria attracted the whole world's attention, making the once hot Palestinian-Israeli conflict to some extent "marginalized" in global politics, especially under the background of the stagnant of Palestinian-Israeli peace talks since 2014. For a long time, the United States wished to be the mediator in the Palestinian- Israeli conflict but in vain. However, US President Donald Trump's Pro-Israel and Anti-Palestine approach put the Question of Palestine into more dangerous situation and meanwhile bring complicated impacts to the regional reconfiguration. Ironically, Donald Trump's new policy brings the Palestine-Israel issue back into the center of Middle East politics.

On December 6, 2017, US President Trump announced that he would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and prepare to move the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. It is said that this plan was supported by Saudi Arabia. On December 21, the UN General Assembly convened an emergency special meeting and finally passed an overwhelming majority vote to determine that any decision and action that claimed to change the status of Jerusalem was "invalid". In January 2018, the US State Department announced to freeze the financial assistance to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), making the relationship between the United States and Palestine rapidly cold. On May 14, 2018, on the 70th anniversary of the founding of Israel State, the United States moved its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. For US's strong pressure, the reaction from Arab League was very restrained and now the fact is Turkey, as the rotating Organization of the Islamic Cooperation presidency, carrying the banner of opposing Israel.

For the Palestine-Israel issue, China's position has always been clear, consistent and convergent with international community. This can be seen from China's latest statements. On September 28, 2018, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke at the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly, "The question of Palestine must not be marginalized. For more than seven decades, peace and justice have remained elusive in that part of the world. On this issue, what the international community needs most is not proposal or initiative, but rather resolve and action. To implement the two-state solution, a new round of peace-promoting efforts need to be made to explore a new mediation mechanism. To that end, China will play

its part and Chinese humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people will continue".¹

However, although China's position and recommendations on the Palestine-Israel issue are more easily accepted by both sides, the current China's Middle East policy is still trapped in the predicament of "morality" and "interest". On the one hand, China has to support Arab countries' just cause, but it is impossible to give up its friendly relations with Israel on the other hand. Therefore, "all parties can accept China's Middle East policy, but they are not very satisfied"². With the Belt and Road Initiative, China has become more active and more proactive on the hot issues in the Middle East, which has apparent changes compared to the past. This article tries to analyse China's position on the Palestine-Israel issue from a historical perspective, so as to take a look at the changes of China's Middle East policy and China's foreign policy in general.

Five Major Problems of the Palestine-Israel Issue

On September 13, 1993, in the wake of Bill Clinton's testimony, the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel formally signed the *Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements*, which is the famous Oslo Accords. The first peace agreement between Palestine and Israel let the world see the hope of peace but lasted not too long. Two years later, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by Israeli extremists. Later, Palestinian extremist forces also launched attacks against Israel. The street conflict gradually escalated into armed confrontation between the two sides. Therefore, the implementation of the Oslo Accord was suspended indefinitely. Today, 25 years later, the peace between Palestine and Israel is still a dream. Issues such as the status of Jerusalem, the Palestine-Israel border, the return of Palestinian refugees, Jewish settlements and the allocation of water resources have become real obstacles in the Palestine-Israel peace process.

Problem 1: The Status of Jerusalem

The Jerusalem issue is one of the crux of the Palestine-Israel peace process. Israel occupied East Jerusalem in 1967 and unilaterally declared Jerusalem

¹ Wang Yi, "Multilateralism, Shared Peace and Development," The 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 28, 2018. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzd/t1600639.shtml>

² Mr. Sun Bigan, former China's Middle East envoy, former Chinese ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, expressed his views on China's position in the Middle East in an interview. <http://world.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-04/1654066.html>

as the permanent capital of Israel, while Palestine demanded to establish the State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as the capital. The US administration haven't accepted Israel's annexation until 1995 that it passed the "Jerusalem Embassy Act". According to this act, US government recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and allowed to establish US embassy in Jerusalem before May 31, 1999. But it allowed the president to postpone the deadline for national security interests and to inform US congress every six months.

After this act, many US presidents have continuously postponed the deadline for setting up an US embassy in Jerusalem. However, Trump's position seems to support Israel, but in fact, this move will trigger a strong opposition wave from the Arab countries and make Israel more isolated in the Middle East. Trump's decision is bound to undermine the Palestine-Israel peace process and increase the instability in the Middle East.

Problem 2: Border Division

According to Resolution 181 of the UN General Assembly, it was decided to establish a "Jewish State" and an "Arab State" in the 27,000-square-kilometer Palestinian area. Among them, the "Jewish State" accounted for approximately 14,900 square kilometers, and the "Arab States" accounted for approximately 11,500 square kilometers.

On May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was established. However, the "Arab State" was not born because the Arabs refused to accept the resolution. In the first and third Middle East wars that followed, Israel occupied all the territory of "Arab State" including the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. The Security Council of UN adopted resolutions 242 and 338 successively, requesting the Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories.

For a long time, the Palestinian side has persisted and determined to establish an independent Palestinian state within the border before the 1967 war, but Israel government insisted that the future Palestine-Israel border could not return to the state before the war of 1976.

Problem 3: Jewish settlements

After the third Middle East war in 1967, Israel began building Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. In August 2005, Israel withdrew all 21 settlements in the Gaza Strip and 4 settlements in the northern West Bank after implementation of unilateral action plan.

But in the following years, Israel did not stop building settlements. For a long time, Palestine has insisted that all settlements must be dismantled, while Israel emphasizes that settlement construction is based on the need for “natural growth”.

Problem 4: the Return of Refugees

The Palestinian refugee issue is the product of Middle East wars, especially the first and third Middle East wars. The war has led to the displacement of more than 1 million Palestinians. According to statistics, there are more than 4.7 million Palestinian refugees. Apart from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, these refugees are mainly distributed in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

According to UN Resolution 194, Palestinian refugees have the right to return. However, the questions like whether the refugees can return or not, and how many refugees can return will have great impacts on the ethnic composition, population proportion and social security of the Middle East countries. Therefore, in Palestine-Israel peace talks, Israel insisted on the local resettlement of the Palestinian refugees and opposed their return.

Problem 5: Water Resources Allocation

More than 60% of the Palestinian area is in arid and semi-arid areas, and the total amount of renewable water resources is estimated at 2 billion cubic meters. Israel occupy and consume 80% of all water resources while Palestine can only enjoy the remaining 20%.

In addition, the Palestine-Israel issue on water resources also involves issues such as border demarcation and the future of Jewish settlements. Therefore, Israel opposes the complete redistribution of water resources with Palestinians and advocates joint management of water resources to ensure that Israel's water resources are not threatened. Palestine insisted on taking back ownership of all water facilities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and refused to manage water resources together with Israel.

Up to now, it is the 25th anniversary of the Oslo Accords on September 13, 2018, but the problems between the Palestine and Israel are still there. For the five major problems between Palestine and Israel, China's understanding and position have undergone a long process. For example, before the 1960s, China had always regarded the question of Palestine as a refugee issue and the legacy of the war between the Arab countries and Israel. Therefore, the support for the Palestinian issue has only remained moral and verbal for a

long time. Then China began to support the armed struggle of the Palestinians for ideological reasons. After the reform and opening up since 1978, China realized the importance of Israel in the field of science and technology and turned to keep balance between Palestine and Israel.

China's Changing Positions on the Palestine-Israel Issue

For the conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Jews, China has not always maintained the same views and will change according to the changing situation, be it ideological reason or self-interest considerations. In general, China's positions on the Palestine and Israel issue can be roughly divided into the following stages: before the founding of the People's Republic, China show sympathy towards the Arabs and the Jews equally; in 1949-1959, China-Israel relation changed from intimate contact to alienation; in 1959-1969, China's policy was pro-Arabs and anti-Israel, and give full support to the Palestine Liberation Organization; in 1969-1979, China reduced its support for the Palestine Liberation Organization and also its criticism towards Israel; in 1979-1989, China recognized Israel's "right of independence and survival" and persuade the two parties to negotiate and make peace; in 1989-1999, China actively promoted the Middle East peace process; in 1999-2013, China actively participated in the Middle East peace process; since 2013, China began to actively participate in the Middle East hot issues.³

There is another classification method according to the intensity of the Arab-Israeli conflict. As Prof. Wang Jinglie said, the Arab-Israeli conflict can basically be divided into three stages: (1) the comprehensive confrontation phase (from the late 1940s to the late 1970s); (2) strategic stalemate phase (from the late 1970s to the early 1990s); (3) the political settlement phase (from the early 1990s to the present).⁴This division roughly corresponds to China's Mao Zedong era, Deng Xiaoping era, and Jiang Zemin era. Therefore, this paper combines the above two methods to explain the transformation of China's positions on the Palestine and Israel issue.

First Phase: Historical exchanges between China and the Jewish nation

The good relationship between China and the Jewish people can date back to the millennium. In 1163, the Jews who moved from Central Asia to

³ This classification is proposed by Professor Xiao Xian in his book *Contemporary China-Middle East Relations*.

⁴ Wang Jinglie, "Palestine-Israel Conflict: Theory Construction and Prospect Analysis," *Arab World Studies*, No.1, 2016, p.9.

the hinterland of China established a synagogue in Kaifeng (now is He Nan province, China), marking the formation of Jewish communities in China. Since then, the Jews who settled in China have been treated equally in the four dynasties of the Jin, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties by Chinese officials and common people. However, due to the following reasons like the attraction of the imperial examination system, the restrictions on the foreign languages, the closure of the Jewish community, and the break up with the outside world and etc., the Kaifeng Jewish community, which once reached thousands of people, disintegrated in the mid-19th century. During the late Qing Dynasty, Jewish synagogues were also built in Shanghai and Harbin. The Harbin Jewish community had more than 12,000 people. During World War II, Nazi Germany's anti-Semitic movement forced about 30,000 Jewish refugees into Shanghai. Jewish people even began lobbying the National Government to accept 100,000 refugees and negotiated a plan to establish a "Jewish settlement" in Tengchong, Yunang Province, but in the end the plan was abandoned. Due to the lack of anti-Semitic consciousness of China and Jewish community leaders' active lobbying and funding, the leading figures of the Kuomintang like Sun Yat-sen and Sun Ke all have a sympathetic stance toward the Zionist Movement.⁵

Before the establishment of People's Republic of China, it has official diplomatic relations with only six Middle Eastern countries⁶ because the constant internal wars during this period and the limited connection with Middle East countries, but it has similar sympathy towards both Arab countries and Zionism. It is believed that Palestinian Arabs and Jews are two weak ethnic groups that are simultaneously oppressed, and also the victims of British and French colonialism and imperialism. Therefore, the Kuomintang government voted abstained on the No. 181 resolution of the partition of Palestine and Israel in November 1947. On May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was born. On March 1, 1949, the Kuomintang government recognized it and on May 11 voted in favor of Israel to be accepted as a member of UN. However, the two sides did not establish formal diplomatic relationship because China is in a civil war.

Phase 2: Pro-Arab and Anti-Israel (1949-1979)

People's Republic of China was established on October 1, 1949. Less than 100 days, the Israeli government officially recognized the People's Republic

⁵ Yin Gang, "Restraint and Regret, Sixty-Year Relationship between China and Israel," *Journal of West Asia and North Africa*, No. 4, 2010.

⁶ Including Turkey (1934), Persia (1942), Egypt (1942), Iraq (1942), Afghanistan (1944), Saudi Arabia (1946)

of China on January 9, 1950 and became the first country in the Middle East to recognize the new China. In June 1950, the representatives of China and Israel held their first meeting in Moscow to discuss the specific issues for the establishment of diplomatic relations. But at that time, the Korean War broke out. The pressure from the United States caused the Israeli government to hesitate to establish diplomatic relations with China. This led the two countries lost the first opportunity to establish a normal relationship. After the end of the Korean War, China and Israel once again tried to make contacts due to the release of China and the West.

On April 24, 1955, the Bandung Conference adopted a communiqué to support the rights of Palestinian Arabs and put Israel in an isolated situation in the Asian and African world. Under this circumstance, the Israeli government rushed to present a note to China at the end of April, hoping to establish diplomatic relations as soon as possible. However, it is too late. The Chinese government has decided to adjust the Middle East policy according to the international situation and side with a large part of the Arab countries. From May to September 1956, China established diplomatic relations with Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. In October 1956, Israel invaded Egypt with the collaboration of Britain and France, and the Chinese government severely condemned it. Since then, the relationship between China and Israel has entered a period of “freezing” for 20 years.⁷ Between Israel and the Arab countries, China finally chose the Arab countries.

In March 1965, the PLO delegation visited China and was warmly received by leaders such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi. China expressed its unreserved support for the struggle of the Palestinians, agreed to provide material assistance to the PLO including weapons, and announced the establishment of an office in Beijing which will enjoy the diplomatic treatment as an embassy. In this way, China became the first country outside the Arab world to give diplomatic recognition to the PLO.⁸ Subsequently, China not only provided weapons and various materials to the PLO, but also trained military personnel for it. According to relevant information, China provided about \$5 million worth of weapons to the Palestinian guerrillas during this period for free.⁹

⁷ Pan Guang, “On Historical Evolution of Sino-Israel Relations and Analysis on Present Situation,” *Social Sciences*, No. 12, 2009, pp. 156-157.

⁸ Yang Fuchang, “Retrospect and Prospect of Sino-Arab Relations,” *Arab World Studies*, No.2, 2006, pp. 6-7. Yang Fuchang, then president of the Chinese Association of Middle East Studies, former deputy minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, former ambassador to Kuwait and Egypt.

⁹ Lillian Craig Harris, *China Considers the Middle East*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1993, p.119. Xiao Xian, *Contemporary China-Middle East Relations*, Beijing: China Book Press, 2018, p. 94.

After the mid-1970s, China gradually reduced its support for the Palestinian armed struggle, and also decreased the material assistance to the PLO. This was mainly due to the following reasons. First, the differences and struggles between the various Palestinian forces. This makes China very difficult and disappointed and doubt which forces is worthy of supporting. Second, the complex relationship between the PLO and other Arab countries. Generally speaking, the Arab countries show sympathy and support for the PLO but this kind of support is conditional and limited. When the PLO threatens their own interests, the Arab countries will restrict, crack down or even eliminate the PLO. Therefore, China must constantly adjust its relationship with the PLO. Third, the PLO and the Soviet Union moved closer very quickly. After the October War of 1973, the Soviet Union began to give strong support to the PLO. In 1974, it agreed to establish an office in Moscow by the PLO. In 1976, the PLO was formally recognized as the sole legal representative of the Palestinians. The closer relationship between PLO and Soviet Union will inevitably mean the alienation of Palestine and China, but the relationship between China and the PLO has not been cut off, just reducing it from a special relationship to a general relationship.¹⁰

In short, China still criticizes Israel in this period, but in fact there is no direct conflict of interests between China and Israel. It is mainly because that China wishes to win over the Arab countries so as to deal with the overall situation of international struggle.

Phase 3: Keep Balance between Arab and Israel (1979-2013)

After 1979, a significant change in China's Middle East policy was that China was no longer "one-sided" on the Arab-Israeli conflict and began to conditionally support the related parties to resolve the conflict through political negotiations. This is closely related to the situation in the Middle East. In November 1977, Egypt President Anwar Sadat made a historic visit to Jerusalem. In September 1978, under the mediation of President Jimmy Carter, Egypt and Israel, which had been in a state of war for a long time, reached the *David Camp Agreement*, signed a peace treaty in March 1979 and established diplomatic relations in February 1980. Thus, Egypt regained the Sinai Peninsula and the Arab-Israeli conflict entered into a phase of political settlement, marking the beginning of a long and difficult Middle East peace process.

¹⁰Xiao Xian, *Contemporary China-Middle East Relations*, Beijing: China Book Press, 2018, pp. 135-139.

China showed understanding towards the transformation of Egypt's foreign policy but has been criticized by other Arab countries. In September 1982, the 12th Arab League Summit proposed a common solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict (the famous "Fez Plan"), which for the first time implicitly recognized Israel's right to exist. China supports this proposal. In November 1988, the PLO issued a political statement and announced the establishment of the State of Palestine. In December of the same year, the PLO proposed three peace initiatives, recognized Israel's right to exist and promised to abandon all forms of terrorist activities.

China was fully supportive of this announcement.¹¹ In September 1989, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen made a five-point proposal for China to resolve the Middle East issue when he visited Egypt: 1. The Middle East issue should be resolved through political means; 2. The occupied Arab territories should be returned, the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people should be restored, and Israel's security should also be guaranteed; 3. Support the convening of the Middle East International Peace Conference with the participation of the five permanent members of the Security Council; 4. Support the various parties in the Middle East to conduct various forms of dialogue; 5. Mutual recognition between Palestine and Israel.

The "five-point proposal" is China's first Middle East peace plan and also China's efforts to promote Arab-Israeli reconciliation. At the same time, the Israeli government used various channels to contact China, hoping to end the stalemate between the two countries and establish diplomatic relations as soon as possible. Moreover, Israel's policy to engage China was supported by the two major political parties, the Likud Group and the Labor Party and also welcomed by people from all walks of life in Israel.¹²

With the end of the Gulf War and the convening of the Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid, China and Israel have accelerated the pace of normalization of relations. This is mainly due to the easing of Arab-Israeli conflict and the internal division of Arab countries. Now the main obstacle to the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Israel, the Arab factor, has gone. In December 1991, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Yang Fuchang visited Israel and completed the diplomatic procedure for normalizing relations between the two countries. In January 1992, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister

¹¹ Zhang Shiliang, "A Review of the Middle East," *Journal of Foreign Affairs College*, No. 1, 2003, pp. 24-25.

¹² Pan Guang, "On Historical Evolution of Sino-Israel Relations and Analysis on Present Situation," *Social Sciences*, No. 12, 2009, p. 158.

and Minister of Foreign Affairs David Levy visited China and signed a joint communique with China's Foreign Minister Qian Qichen. In March and June of the same year, Israel's first ambassador to China and China's first ambassador to Israel assume office.¹³ Establishing diplomatic relations with Israel is a major change in China's Middle East policy, marking that China will hold a more balanced stance between Arabs and Israelites.

In December 1997, Chinese Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen proposed five points of the Chinese government's Middle East peace process in Cairo.¹⁴ These five points are broader than eight years ago and show China's more willing to participate in the Middle East peace process. On April 12-18, 2000, Chinese President Jiang Zemin was invited to visit Israel and Palestine simultaneously, which is the first time in China's history of foreign policy. This represented that China treats Palestine and Israel as equals, which has symbolic significance and diplomatic influence.

On December 2004, Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan visited Palestine and Israel and proposed four points on the Middle East issue.¹⁵ In November 2007, the International Conference on the Middle East Issue was held in Maryland, USA. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi attended the meeting and proposed China's five-point proposal to push the Middle East peace process out of the de-

¹³ She Gangzheng, "Historical Analysis of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Israel and China: An Interpretation of the Declassified Documents in the Israel State Archives," *West Asia and North Africa*, No. 3, 2017, pp. 116-119.

¹⁴ Five points are as follows: 1. Based on the UN resolutions on the Middle East issue and the principle of "land for peace" as determined by the Madrid Peace Conference, Middle East peace talks should be continued; 2. Seriously implement the agreements and avoid all actions that hinder the Middle East peace process; 3. Abandon any form of terrorism and violence, the security of all countries and the normal life of the people should be fully guaranteed; 4. With the development of the peace process, regional economic cooperation should be strengthened. The Middle East countries, including the Arab countries and Israel, should gradually establish mutual trust, eliminate hostility and achieve common development and prosperity. 5. The international community has the responsibility to work with all parties in the Middle East to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. China is willing to make its own efforts to this end. See Xiao Xian, *Contemporary China's Relations with the Middle East*, Beijing: China Book Press, 2018, p.224.

¹⁵ Namely: 1. Israel and Palestine should stop violent conflicts, build mutual trust and resume peace talks; 2. Restart the "road map" plan to establish an independent Palestinian state as soon as possible while fully guarantee Israel's security; 3. Actively seek to achieve a comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East, strengthen regional economic cooperation and promote peace and stability in the region; 4. The international community should increase its efforts to promote peace and the United Nations should play a greater role. China will, as always, actively participate in the efforts of the international community to promote peace and play a constructive role. See Xiao Xian, *Contemporary China's Relations with the Middle East*, Beijing: China Book Press, 2018, p.284.

adlock.¹⁶ This is also the fourth time that China has systematically put forward its own ideas and views on the Middle East peace talks. In November 2012, in retaliation for armed groups such as Hamas, Israel launched a large-scale military operation in Gaza Strip, causing a large number of Palestinian casualties. However, China has not severely condemned Israel as it has in the past, on the contrary it has shown a more impartial and neutral attitude.

During the first 10 years of the new millennium, China-Israel economic and trade relations have developed rapidly, but it has also caused collective anxiety in the Arab countries that they feared China will abandon the Arab brothers. In addition, the Arab countries hold that China's Middle East diplomatic strategy is too ambiguous. China is balancing on both sides, but in the end the two sides are not satisfied. Therefore, China must come up with a set of new methods to actively participate in the peace process, either by "creative intervention" or "constructive participation". In the changing global context, it will not keep up with the times if China continue to shout "non-intervention".

Phase 4: Active Participation of Palestine-Israel Issue under BRI Initiative

Since President Xi Jinping took office, China has become more involved in the Palestine-Israel issue. On May 5-10, 2013, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu were invited to visit China. The leaders of the two rivals rarely visited the same country at the same time, thus placing China, the host country, to be the focus of the world. This also showed that China attaches great importance to the Palestine-Israel conflict and is willing to promote the Middle East peace process with a more positive attitude. In his talks with President Abbas, President Xi Jinping proposed four points on promoting the settlement of the Palestinian issue.¹⁷ President

¹⁶Namely: : 1. Respect history, accommodate the interests of all parties, and grasp the direction of peace talks; 2. Abandon violence, eliminate interference, and hold firm belief in peace talks; 3. Promote comprehensive and balance development, and create good atmosphere for peace talks; 4. Attach importance to development, strengthen cooperation, and solidify the foundation of peace talks; 5. Consolidate consensus, increase investment, and strengthen peace talks. The international community should work closely to establish a broad-based, balanced and effective multilateral facilitation mechanism, monitoring mechanism and enforcement mechanism to provide security for peace. See Xiao Xian, *Contemporary China's Relations with the Middle East*, Beijing: China Book Press, 2018, p.284.

¹⁷First, we should adhere to the correct direction of Palestinian independence and the peaceful coexistence of Palestine and Israel. Second, negotiations should be the only way to achieve peace between Palestine and Israel. Third, we should adhere to the principle of "land for peace". Fourth, the international community should provide important guarantees for advancing the peace process. During the talks with Prime Minister Netanyahu, China stressed that Israel should release goodwill in stopping the construction of settlements and improving humanitarianism in Gaza. See Xiao Xian, *Contemporary China's Relations with the Middle East*, Beijing: China Book Press, 2018, p.286.

Xi Jinping's four-point proposal shows that the new leadership has dared to face hot issues and actively promote the peaceful settlement of disputes.¹⁸

In July 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented a new four-point proposal on promoting the Palestinian issue during his talks with President Abbas. First, we must firmly advance the political settlement based on the "two-state solution." China firmly supports the "two-state solution" and the establishment of a fully sovereign, independent State of Palestine based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. It will, as always, play a constructive role in resolving the Palestinian issue. Second, adhere to a common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security concept. China calls for the effective implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2334, ceases all settlement activities in the occupied territories immediately, and takes measures to prevent violence against civilians immediately. Resume peace talks as soon as possible, speed up the political settlement of the Palestinian issue, and fundamentally achieve common and lasting security. Third, further coordinate the efforts of the international community to strengthen and promote synergy. The international community should enhance coordination and launch joint participation initiatives as soon as possible. China is willing to join and support all efforts that are conducive to the political settlement of the Palestinian issue. It is planned to hold a Palestine-Israel peace symposium so as to provide new ideas for solving the Palestinian issue. Fourth, adopt a comprehensive policy to promote peace through development. While advancing political negotiations, we should attach great importance to development issues and promote Palestine-Israel cooperation. China regards Palestine and Israel as important partners in the "Belt and Road Initiative" and is willing to carry out mutually beneficial cooperation in the spirit of "peace through development" to support the accelerated development of Palestine continually. China proposes to launch a tripartite dialogue mechanism with Palestine and Israel to coordinate and promote key projects for aiding the Palestine.¹⁹

The "four-point proposal" put forward by President Xi Jinping is China's new efforts to resolve the Palestinian issue based on the current situation and the international environment. It is also the general guide for China's subsequent efforts to promote political solution to the Palestinian issue in the next stage. China hopes to receive positive response from all parties and jointly make a breakthrough in the settlement of the Palestinian issue.

¹⁸ Wu Sike, "Experience the Adjustment of China's Middle East Diplomacy," *Contemporary World*, No. 10, 2015, p. 65.

¹⁹ "China Presents Four-Point Proposal to Solve the Palestine Issue", *The People's Daily*, July 2017. <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0726/c1002-29428930.html>

Reasons for China's Changing of Positions on Palestine-Israel Issue

For a long time, the overall layout of China's diplomacy has been "the major country is the key, the neighborhood is the primary, the developing countries are the foundation, and the multilateral is an important stage". In the Middle East, there is neither a great power nor a Chinese neighborhood, which can only be regarded as "developing country". Therefore, China's policy objectives toward the Middle East have changed several times in the past 60 years.

In the early days of People's Republic of China, the main goal was to oppose Western imperialism and promote the national liberation movement of Asian and African countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, the main task was to counter the influence of the United States and the Soviet Union and strive for the support from the third world. After the reform and opening up, the focus of China was shifted from ideology to economy. Therefore, the economic relationships between China and the Middle East have developed rapidly on commodity trade, project contracting and mutual investment. When entering the new century, it has become an important consideration for China's Middle East diplomacy to ensure energy security supply.²⁰

Regarding the Palestine-Israel issue, China forms its own unique position, which is "Moral Supremacy with Palestine, Cooperation Supremacy with Israel". China will support the just cause of Palestinians while at the same time attach importance to the economic and trade relations with Israel. This is because China has no historical disputes and no real conflicts with the two sides.²¹

On the one hand, China has always supported the just cause of the Palestinian people from the moral perspectives. First, supporting Palestine is an international political correctness. There is only one country in the world that supports Israel which is the United States and the rest of the world supports Palestine including France, Germany, Britain, Japan, and sometimes even US. For example, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2334 with 14 votes in favor and 1 abstention from the United States, demanding that Israel has to immediately stop all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem.²²

²⁰ Xiao Xian, *Contemporary China's Relations with the Middle East*, Beijing: China Book Press, 2018, p.365.

²¹ Sun Degang, "On the Dynamics of China's Mediation Diplomacy in the Middle East," *Global Review*, No. 6, 2012.

²² "The United States finally abstained, and the Security Council passed a resolution urging Israel to stop building settlements," *The Observer*, December 24, 2016. https://www.guancha.cn/global-news/2016_12_24_385854.shtml

Second, from the founding of China to the present, it has always supported Arabs. China and Israel did not establish diplomatic relations until 1992. In contrast, China and the United States established diplomatic relations in 1979, China and France established diplomatic relations in 1964, and China and Germany established diplomatic relations in 1972. Although China and Israel do not have direct conflicts of interest, there are no religious and ethnic conflicts between Chinese and Jewish nation, but the development of bilateral relations has always been hampered by external factors.

Third, China needs Arab countries' support for the solidarity of Asia and Africa. Although Israel won five wars in the Middle East, it is still a single country which can not compare with the Arab countries in number. For example, the member states of the "Islamic Cooperation Organization" are as high as 56, accounting for one fourth in UN. It is because of the strong support of these Arab countries that China can regain its seat in the United Nations. Today, China's "Belt and Road Initiative" is mainly related to and more dependent on the support of these Middle Eastern countries.

On the other hand, China and Israel do not have historical and practical contradictions and China relies on Israeli cooperation in science, innovation, economy, and even military technology. First, it took 42 years for China and Israel to finally establish diplomatic relations. Israel is the first country in the Middle East to recognize the People's Republic of China, but it is the last country in the region to establish diplomatic relations with China, which is a very rare and special case in the history of international relations. The external factors like US and Arab countries are the main reasons to hinder the establishment of diplomatic relations. Only when these two factors' influence become less can China-Israel's relations develop very fast, which is the main purpose of China to promote the peaceful settlement of the Palestine-Israel issue.

Second, Israel has never given up its contacts with China. In the first few years of the People's Republic of China, Israel has showed hesitation and missed the perfect opportunity to establish diplomatic relations with China. When China looks to the Arab countries, Israel still did not give up hope of establishing diplomatic relations with China. What needs to be affirmed is that Israel has consistently recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China for decades. It has never had official contacts with Taiwan and supported the People's Republic of China to resume its legitimate seat in the United Nations despite the pressure from the United States. This also shows that Israel always attaches importance to establishing good relations with major powers and strives to get rid of its diplomatic isolation in Asia and hopes to gain recognition from the third world countries.

Third, China and Israel have close cooperation in many fields, such as security, anti-terrorism cooperation, economy, trade, science, technology and etc. The 9/11 attacks, the Iraq war, and the Syrian war have led extremism and terrorism to spread across the globe. Both China and Israel face serious threats. Therefore, Israel's anti-terrorism experience is valued by China.²³

After the establishment of diplomatic relations, bilateral relations have developed smoothly. In November 2005, Israel officially recognized China's full market economy status. In 2017, bilateral trade volume was 13.121 billion US dollars, up 15.6% year-on-year, of which China exported 8.919 billion US dollars, up 9% year-on-year, and imported 4.202 billion US dollars, up 32.4% year-on-year.

The two countries have two cooperation platforms: the China-Israel Joint Commission on Innovation and Cooperation and the China-Israel Intergovernmental Economic and Technical Cooperation Mechanism.²⁴ Especially in the "high" field of military trade, Israel has carried out extensive and in-depth cooperation with China even under the pressure of the United States, and so far has become the second largest military cooperation partners (Russia No. 1) with China.²⁵

Conclusion

During the Cold War, the Middle East had a strategic significance to the two superpowers. Therefore, the Chinese government, in the absence of political, economic and military means to win Arab friendship, tried to establish close cooperation with Arab-Palestinians to fight against Israel so as to gain an advantage in the face of two superpowers. Since the 1980s, with the easing of the Palestine-Israeli conflict and the progress of the Middle East peace process, China has gradually shifted to a more neutral and balanced position on the Palestinian issue.

The international community has never lacked plans and programs to solve the Palestine-Israel issue. The problem is that many United Nations resolutions on the question of Palestine have been shelved. The "two-state solution" formulated by the four parties of the Middle East issue has a time limit

²³ Pan Guang, "On Historical Evolution of Sino-Israel Relations and Analysis on Present Situation," *Social Sciences*, No. 12, 2009, p. 162.

²⁴ "Relations between China and Israel," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, August 2018. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_677196/sbgx_677200/t312274.shtml

²⁵ Hou Yuxiang, "China's Role Adjustments on the Palestine-Israel Issue," *Arab World Studies*, No. 1, 2014, p. 44.

and the Arab Peace Initiative has also been silent for many years. Although regional countries have occasionally raised the voices of the “one country program”, the “federation of Jordan and Palestine”, the “regional solution” and the “three states solution”, these voices lack a realistic basis and reflect more about the disappearance of patience and confidence of the Palestinian state-building demands.

Objectively speaking, China is not a member of the “quartet mechanism” in the Middle East issue. It lacks strategic influence on solving the Palestine-Israel issue, let alone to play a decisive role, but it also has its own advantages and can play a unique role. First, the impartiality of China’s position. China has maintained good relations with Palestine, Israel and the Arab world. Second, the stability of China’s policies. Even if the government changes will not lead to drastic transformations in its basic diplomatic principles. Third, the balance of China’s role. United States is still the biggest external factor of the Palestine-Israel conflict, but China has always held a balanced and neutral relation with the related parties and in this way can China play a greater political role.

The Middle East is an important location in the strategic road map of “Belt and Road Initiative”. It is in line with China’s overseas strategic interests to achieve regional stability. At present, the Palestinian issue still exists as a “storm eye” in the Middle East. Therefore, China’s more and deeper involvement in the Palestinian issue is a necessity. ²⁶For China, you can never learn to drive without getting on the train. By participating in the practical process of dealing with this problem, China can better learn the experience of governance and control of international conflicts and improve the ability to deal with various complex international disputes.

Of course, China should also seriously study the difficulty of solving this cross-century problem and fully understand the irreplaceable status and role of the United States on this issue. In fact, China and the United States share common interests on the Palestinian issue, namely, controlling, suppressing conflicts and maintaining stability in the region. While doing its best, China must do its utmost to coordinate and cooperate with all parties concerned to avoid the whirlpool of contradictions and conflicts between Palestine and Israel.

²⁶ Chen Shuangqing, “Palestine Issue: China can play bigger role,” *Contemporary International Relations*, No. 12, 2015, p. 8.

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