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China/Israel

China and Israel have a long history of cooperating in repression

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Overshadowed by its relationship with the US, Israel has also long enjoyed fruitful ties with China, now its second-largest trading partner — including a military-tech exchange that has helped the Chinese state repress its own population.

As Israel carries out a massacre of Palestinians in Gaza, many have rightly focused on the United States' support for the Israeli state's war crimes. But as Tariq Kenney-Shawa points out, "The case that Israel simply no longer needs US aid in order to sustain its healthy economy or its monstrous qualitative military edge over all regional threats is clear." While US military support to Israel remains decisive, the country receives plenty of support from other quarters — including the United States' main global rival, China.

Though China is sometimes portrayed as an "anti-imperialist" bulwark, it is no ally to Palestinians. It is true that Chinese state media, unlike its Western counterparts, has been more willing to criticize Israel's treatment of Palestinians. But the Chinese state has not offered meaningful support for the cause of Palestinian liberation: the significant economic links between China and Israel mean that China has a vested interest in defending Israel. China's long history of triangulating between Israel and Palestine has involved endorsing a strategy of "peacemaking" and "nonalignment" that allows it to maintain friendly relations with Arab countries while deepening ties with Israel. China has in turn drawn on Israeli technology and counterinsurgency methods to repress its own population.

Between Israel and Palestine

Israel was one of the first and only non-Communist states to officially recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC), doing so just a year after the latter's founding, in 1950. Prospects for diplomacy were cut short with the rise of the Cold War, as China strengthened political and military ties with Palestinian political leaders. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai promised to support the Palestinian cause to Arab delegates at the Bandung Conference in 1955. And in the mid-1960s, Fatah and leaders of the newly established Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) visited China, which even offered some military training to the Palestinians.

The end of the Cultural Revolution and the Sino-Soviet split led to the revival of informal relations between China and Israel. The Deng Xiaoping administration began steering China toward market-based development in the 1980s, while Israel had become eager to expand its trade into East Asia. Israel started exporting military technology to China throughout the 1980s, paving the way for formal diplomatic ties between the two countries by 1992, even as China recognized the State of Palestine in 1988.

These Israeli imports became crucial for China's military development during the 1990s, as Western sanctions on China after the 1989 Tiananmen movement and massacre threatened to limit the growth of the PRC's military capacity. But Israel was able to bypass these sanctions, becoming a key backdoor to Western military technology for China. The rise of China as a global power in the 2000s expanded the two countries' trade beyond arms and deepened their economic interdependence. In the years after China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), the PRC began heavily investing back into Israel, particularly in agriculture, technology, construction, and venture capital.

The growth of military and economic ties led China to pursue an increasingly moderate position on the Israeli occupation of Palestine: moving from supporting "people's war" by Palestinians against Israel to sponsoring and

defending the Israeli state. Xi Jinping's "four-point Israeli-Palestinian peace plan" emphasized China's adherence to the two-state solution, offering "sustainable security" for Israel, while calling for peace and development between Israel and Palestine.

The PRC's [defense](#) of "an independent State of Palestine" last week in response to Israel's attacks on Gaza, and its vague call for "relevant parties" to "immediately end the hostilities," should be seen in light of its commitment to the two-state solution. Mainstream commentators see this ambivalence as hesitation on China's part to firmly back Israel. But a two-state solution promises to continue the Israeli oppression of Palestinians in a different form.

"Two-state negotiations deny millions of Palestinians, one of the world's largest refugee populations, the internationally recognized right to return to land and homes from which they were forcibly expelled," Daphna Thier and Sumaya Awad [wrote](#) in *Jacobin* in 2021. "Any solution that maintains the state of Israel as a Jewish state violates the individual and collective democratic, civil, and human rights of Palestinians." A just alternative to the Israeli apartheid government will involve a single, democratic state with equal rights for all people.

Quiet Zionism

China's ambivalent attitude toward Israel and Palestine, beginning from its gradual rapprochement with Israel in the 1980s, obscures its quiet betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Its support of Palestinian statehood is a limited one, grounded on the preservation of Israel's military and economic power.

Since the 2000s, its investments in Israel have grown significantly. China has [become](#) Israel's second-largest trading partner, with a value of [trade](#) of over \$24 billion just last year. Though the United States continues to be the main direct provider for Israel's bloody military operations, Chinese investments are becoming increasingly crucial to Israel's economic, technological, and infrastructural development. In 2021–2022, [China](#) even replaced the United States as Israel's top source of imports.

Israel and China have also found a common cause in developing surveillance and policing apparatuses, by building on Western technologies and methods. The PRC's "People's War on Terror" against Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang did not only rhetorically invoke the United States' "war on terror" — it actively draws from its personnel and tactics.

Former Blackwater operatives, infamous for committing war crimes in Iraq, have been [hired](#) to improve security facilities in Xinjiang. Chinese elite police academy researchers have also [publicly](#) studied Israeli counterinsurgency measures against Palestine as an inspiration for Xinjiang's surveillance state. Each has strategically eliminated secular and nonviolent oppositions and weaponized the rise of Islamic militant groups to justify broad repression of Palestinians, Uyghurs, and other ethnic groups. In fact, Pan Yue, the current head of China's National Ethnic Affairs Commission, [said](#) that the PRC should learn from the United States', Russia's, and Israel's colonial methods to introduce Han settlers to its western frontier.

Rhetorically supporting Palestine while bolstering Israel's power and drawing inspiration from its warmaking methods has become a profitable strategy for the PRC. This approach has allowed it to reap the fruits of Israel's economic development, while maintaining good relations with Palestinian and other Arab leaders, as Chinese-led state-owned companies and public-private partnerships have deepened links with Israeli and other Arab governments and corporations across geopolitical blocs.

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The Chinese Foreign Ministry's tepid response to Israel's ongoing assault on Gaza shows that the PRC is uninterested in forcefully challenging Israeli policy. More generally, China's approach to Israel and Palestine shows that geopolitical rivals of the West are not necessarily allies of Palestinian liberation. Different imperial powers can converge, despite their conflicts, on support for Israeli apartheid and occupation.

China's trade with Israel offers an opportunity for solidarity between advocates of Palestinian liberation and opponents of repressive PRC policies. Targeting businesses and institutions that support the Chinese state from abroad has been a key strategy for overseas dissidents. Protesting and boycotting Chinese trade with Israel as part of the broader Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign — like DJI, formerly [DaJiang Innovation Science and Technology Company](#), a private Chinese company that receives PRC state funding and that has produced drones and other military equipment for the Israeli military — provides more avenues for this approach, while bridging the struggle for greater freedom in China with the Palestinian cause.

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[Source: Jacobin.](#)

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