

China and the Middle East

The Quest for Influence

Edited by
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Sage Publications
New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London

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First published in 1999 by

Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd
M-32 Market, Greater Kailash-I
New Delhi-110 048

Sage Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320



Sage Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

Published by Tejeshwar Singh for Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, typeset by Siva Math Setters, Chennai and printed at Print Perfect, Mayapuri-II, Delhi.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

China and the Middle East: the quest for influence/edited by P R Kumaraswamy.

p. cm. (cl.)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. China—Relations—Middle East. 2. Middle East—Relations—China.
 3. China—Foreign relations—1976–I. Kumaraswamy, P R
- DS779.27.C4872 303.48'251056—dc21 1999 99-37977

ISBN : 0-7619-9361-4 (US-HB)
81-7036-847-2 (India-HB)

Sage Production Team: Payal Mehra and Santosh Rawat

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Chinese–Palestinian Relations

William W Haddad and Mary Foeldi-Hardy

Historically, China has wielded little political influence in the Middle East. Whereas other nations that aspire to be world powers have traditionally been involved in Middle East affairs, China's role has been peripheral. One can, without much effort, identify a place for Britain, France and the US, however, the same cannot be said for Beijing. As will be seen, China has had little impact on the Arab world or the Palestinian struggle. Though Chinese influence in the Middle East has been minimal, this should not be interpreted as a lack of Chinese interest in the region. As early as 1941, a leading member of the CPC, Li Wei-han, addressed the issue of Palestine. In his remarks, Li attributed the instability there to British imperialism.¹ By extension, if that imperial power could be removed, the issue of Palestine could be resolved peacefully between the Arabs and Jews. Since 1949 and the triumph of the communist revolution, successive governments in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have evinced a keen interest in the events occurring far from their borders in the Middle East. Expanding on Li's earlier position, China ordinarily interpreted these episodes in three ways: as a struggle for the natural resources of the area, as the last battleground for influence by western imperialists, and finally as the likely location of any war that might occur between the two super powers, the US and the Soviet Union. Each of these scenarios caused great concern to Beijing because of its fear of being outmanoeuvred on the world's stage and even worse—a victory in the Middle East by one of its enemies could result in a threat to the existence of communist China. Thus, though rhetorically the PRC supported one or more Arab nations in the Middle East, China's primary foreign policy goal in the area was to minimise the influence of its adversaries, the Soviet Union and the US.

In the Chinese view, the US was a relative newcomer to imperialism. Traditionally, England had been the dominant imperial power in the Middle East and since the Second World War, America had begun to replace Britain in this oil rich region. In the fifties, the PRC writers warned that though the Americans might appear more appealing in the Arab world than the British, the colonised people should be under no illusions about America's will to dominate.²

¹ Yitzhak Shichor, 'Early Chinese Attitudes towards the Arab–Israeli Conflict', *Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, November 1981, pp. 344–45.

² *Ren Min Ri Bao* (Beijing), 22 October 1951, quoted in *Summary of World Broadcast, The Far East* (London: BBC), 30 October 1951.

This perception of the Middle East, that it was a place where powers hostile to China engaged in questionable tactics, carried over to their interpretation of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Chinese writings on the Arab–Israeli conflict in the fifties attributed its prolongation to outside interference, mainly by Britain and to a lesser extent by America. The Chinese writers asserted that the roots of the Arab–Israeli conflict could be found in the contradictory promises made by Great Britain to the various sides during the First World War. They argued that if only the belligerents were left alone, they would be able to find a common ground and end their animosity. This relative even handedness in approaching the Arab–Israeli conflict reflected Chinese attitudes from the founding of the Republic until the mid-fifties. Some fifty years after the fact, we may be forgiven for forgetting that the west dominated the entire Middle East, from Turkey to Yemen. Also, except for Lebanon, Israel was the only Middle Eastern country with a legal communist party. The PRC found it difficult to befriend any Arab government, preferring to support the two communist parties that were permitted to be active in the Arab world and Israel.

Israel had an active communist party in the fifties, interestingly, in the pre-state days called the Palestine Communist Party. And Israel was the first, before any other Middle Eastern country, to recognise the new communist regime in Beijing.

On January 6, 1950... Israel became the first Middle Eastern government to announce formal recognition of Peking. At the time, non-alignment was still official Israeli policy and Washington itself was still hesitating between recognition of Peking and trying to overthrow the new Communist regime. But Peking did not respond to the Israeli overture.³

Adding to this complicated mix, most of the Arab world followed the lead of Britain and the US by continuing to recognise the nationalist government on Taiwan, and refusing to legitimate the communists on the mainland. That there were no really good choices for the PRC in the Middle East became more apparent to Beijing when Israel sided with the US in the Korean War. Though the USSR had voted for partition, and the creation of a Jewish state, because of a belief that it would be socialist, Israel's increasing identification with the capitalist democracies had, by 1952, led the USSR to cease supporting Israel. Beijing followed that lead. What had been a somewhat even-handed policy toward the Middle East conflict, became increasingly hostile toward Israel in the mid-fifties.

THE PRC TURNS TOWARD THE PALESTINIANS

Communist China's turn toward the Arab world, and eventually the Palestinians, came five years later than the Soviet move in the same direction. Historians generally agreed that the event that precipitated China's tilt toward the Arab world occurred at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955. It was the PRC's official position

³ John Cooley, 'China and the Palestinians', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 1972, p. 21.

that if outside interference was eliminated from the Arab–Israeli conflict, and if the two sides negotiated instead of fighting, then a settlement could be reached along the lines envisioned in the various UN resolutions of 1947 and 1948. Though the common interpretations of the events that occurred at the first Afro–Asian conference are certainly overstated, they do need to be mentioned. The common interpretation is that Gamal Abdul Nasser and Zhou Enlai became especially enamoured of each other at the conference. It is further asserted that as a result of their mutual bonding Zhou Enlai intervened on behalf of the Egyptians with the Soviets, and this led to the first sale of Soviet arms (the Czech arms deal) in the Arab world. Whatever their initial reaction to each other was, there is no doubt that it led very rapidly to an opening for the PRC in the Middle East. Within a year, Beijing had established diplomatic relations with Cairo and Damascus. This was followed shortly by the opening of two other embassies, one in Yemen and the other in Morocco. The 1956 Israeli invasion of Egypt accelerated the pace at which the PRC supported Arab causes.⁴ Initially, the PRC was not noticeably interested in the Palestinian cause and even at the Bandung Conference, Zhou Enlai had mentioned the Palestinian issue only in passing, and had addressed it solely as a refugee issue. Furthermore, the Chinese did not preclude having diplomatic relations with Israel. Even with Israel's invasion of Egypt in 1956, the PRC was more interested in the activity of the great powers than it was in Israel's attack. However, perhaps for the first time during this war, Israel was called a 'tool' of the west.

This attitude toward the Palestinian cause changed in the sixties. From the Chinese point of view, the Soviet Union, Britain and France were consistently hobbling communist China in its dealings with the Arabs. Especially galling were Egypt's turn toward Moscow, and the imperialists' continued penetration into the Middle East; this time West Germany's opening to Israel in the form of diplomatic relations and military aid. Ever on the outlook for new allies to counter these setbacks, the PRC evinced an increasing interest in the Palestinians during the sixties. The founding of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1964 considerably heightened China's curiosity in the Middle East. The possibility that the founding of the PLO might actually lead to a genuine war of national liberation in the Middle East was seductive for the survivors of the Long March. When the first president of the PLO, Ahmed Shuqeiri, arrived in Beijing in March 1965, he and his delegation were given a reception usually reserved for heads of state. The Palestinians were accorded audiences with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaochi. At one meeting, Mao told the visiting delegation:

You are not only two million Palestinians facing Israel, but 100 million Arabs. You must act and think along this basis. When you discuss Israel keep the map of the entire Arab world before your eyes. . . . [Do not be afraid if your people are killed] in liberation wars, for they shall have peaceful times during which they may

⁴ For a discussion of Chinese–Israeli relations, and the role of the 1956 war in turning China toward the Palestinians, see Mordehai Nahumi's 'China and Israel', *New Outlook*, Vol. 9, No. 6, August 1966, pp. 40–48.

multiply. China lost 20 million people in the struggle for liberation. Today, China is tackling the problem of an increase in population. . . .

Do not tell me that you have read this or that opinion in my books. You have your war, and we have ours. You must create the principles and ideology on which your war stands. Books obstruct the view if piled up before the eyes. What is important is to begin action with faith. Faith in victory is the first element of victory—in fact, it may mean victory itself.

We were only 70 persons when we started the [Chinese] Communist Party. Only I and another person [*sic*] are now left. . . . Just the same, we achieved victory. And we are confident that we shall achieve victory in all the battles we are now fighting, especially in Vietnam.⁵

With the founding of the PLO, and the possibility of future guerrilla warfare in the Middle East, something with which the Chinese communists could identify, relations between the two grew closer. Since 1965 the PRC began to annually celebrate 'Palestine Solidarity Day'. When the Arab states were routed in the June 1967 war, Mao and the Chinese leadership became even more convinced that only guerrilla warfare could carry the day in the Arab–Israeli conflict. The Chinese, who ranked the possibilities of popular uprisings throughout the world, considered Palestine to be an 'excellent' prospect for a successful revolution.

In the aftermath of the 1967 war, virtually all Arab governments lost legitimacy. As a result, even in the Arab world, it was widely believed that only sustained guerrilla warfare could reverse the losses of the Six-Day War. Literally thousands of young men flocked to the ranks of the guerrilla groups associated with the PLO. The guerrillas were reported to have received from China anti-tank rockets and launchers and anti-vehicle artillery. The rise in popularity of the guerrilla movement corresponded in time to the Cultural Revolution in China. Perhaps, it was only natural that the PRC and the Palestinians would grow closer and in 1968, the PRC encouraged Fatah to take over the PLO, and a western journalist disclosed that crucial meetings, in which Fatah plotted to take over the PLO, were held in the home of the Chinese ambassador in Cairo.⁶ At the PNC session held in July 1968, representatives of the PRC were the only non-Arab delegates invited. At this same meeting, the Palestine national charter was amended and armed struggle was declared to be the only way to liberate Palestine and not surprisingly, the Chinese began to refer to the Palestinians not as refugees but as members of a national liberation movement.

FAILURE OF CHINESE–PALESTINIAN RAPPROCHEMENT

The period during which the Chinese tried to ally themselves with the Palestinians, ending about 1970, led to a bitter failure. There were simply too many impediments

⁵ *Al-Anwar* (Beirut), 6 April 1965 as quoted in John Cooley, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁶ Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organization: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 218.

to any successful relationship. The Chinese were envious of Soviet penetration into the Middle East and their envy turned into anger when Moscow and Washington attempted to repair their relationship in the seventies. Beijing blamed the US and the USSR for the Arab defeat in 1967. Communist solidarity was broken as the relationship between Moscow and Beijing became acrimonious. Furthermore, no Arab government appreciated Chinese support that was stronger for the PLO than it was for national governments. Egyptian President Nasser, especially, was critical of China's approach to the Middle East. He and his spokesman, Mohammed Heikal, engaged in loud debates with the Chinese and other Arabs about the efficacy of guerrilla warfare in a desert region. Heikal argued in a number of articles in the newspaper that he edited, *al-Ahram* (the Pyramids), that those who supported guerrilla warfare in the Sinai, did not know what they were advocating:

[Guerrilla warfare] achieved miracles in its place, but is not, by nature, particularly applicable to the Egyptian front.

This is because the land occupied by the enemy in Sinai has a population of not more than 20,000, most of whom are nomadic tribes in the desert. The largest concentration of population in all of Sinai is in the city of *al-'Arish* where the population is not more than 5,000.

Popular war is not possible without people in addition to the fact that [where it would be fought] is open desert.⁷

On another occasion, Mao sent Nasser a military plan of action which called for breaking up the Egyptian army into small units that would meld with the population and conduct a guerrilla war. Nasser was forced to reply that the Sinai was completely 'arid and you can see for thirty and forty miles. The independent brigades would stand no chance'.⁸ Their relations became so acrimonious, that at one point, Cairo refused to extradite a Chinese defector to Beijing.

When a popular guerrilla movement could not score military successes in the late sixties, the traditional Arab governments were overjoyed. Though pro-Palestinian journalists were fond of citing the Chinese example of successive setbacks before final victory, the analogy did not elicit much sympathy.⁹ Furthermore, when the Palestinian movement turned increasingly to hijacking aeroplanes, the Chinese found their position untenable, unable to support the Palestinians. Unchecked Chinese support of national liberation movements often had unforeseen results. If a guerrilla group grew in size and support as a result of Chinese backing, the Soviets would often increase their support of, and influence over, the same group which they may have neglected earlier. Also, the backing of guerrilla warfare or insurgent groups often meant attacking governments that were impeding the penetration of American and Soviet influence into the Middle East and hence according

⁷ Mohammed H. Heikal, *The Cairo Documents: The Inside Story of Nasser and His Relationship with World Leaders, Rebels and Statesmen* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), p. 283.

⁸ *Al-Ahram* (Cairo), 10 November 1967.

⁹ See, for example, *al-Anwar* (Beirut), 9 July 1967 and *al-Muharrir* (Beirut), 10 July 1967.

to some Chinese Middle Eastern specialists, the PRC's policy was counterproductive. The relative success that the traditional Arab governments and their armies enjoyed in the 1973 war allowed Beijing to revert to supporting the traditional Arab governments.

In deciding to revert to its traditional approach to the Middle East, the PRC was admitting failure in its attempt to penetrate the Arab world. Confining its activities to the traditional diplomatic channels meant that others, especially Moscow, would dominate the Middle Eastern agenda. As a result, since 1973 the People's Republic of China has not been a major player in the Middle East.

FOREIGN POLICY BY SPEECH, NOT ACTION

Between 1973 and 1981, China's foreign policy towards the Arab–Israeli conflict was virtually confined to oral support. This may have been in part a result of domestic turbulence and struggles within the CPC between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng. As a result China consciously withdrew from active support of the Palestinians and limited itself to expressions of support for the Palestinian cause. For example, Hua Guofeng as premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China sent the following message on the occasion of the convocation of the thirteenth Palestine National Council:

On the occasion of the convocation of the 13th conference of the Palestine National Council, I wish to extend, on behalf of the Chinese government and people, our warm congratulations and five militant salute to the conference and the heroic people and armed forces of Palestine.

The Palestinian people are a great and dauntless people with an anti-imperialists revolutionary tradition. Since they fired their first shot in their armed struggle on 1 January 1965, the Palestinian people have, upon the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, upheld unity, persisted in struggle, defied brute force, and advanced wave upon wave. . . .

Your struggle is a just one; it is not only bound up with the cause of liberation of the entire Arab people, but also closely linked with the struggle of the people of the Third World against imperialism and hegemonism. . . .

Determined to follow the behest of their great leader and teacher, Chairman Mao, the Chinese government and people will unswervingly implement his revolutionary line in foreign affairs and firmly support, as they have always done, the just struggle of the Palestinian and other Arab peoples. . . .¹⁰

Likewise, a few years later when the *Knesset*, Israel's parliament, passed a bill in July 1980 proclaiming Jerusalem to be the 'eternal and indivisible capital' the Chinese responded:

¹⁰ Xinhua Overseas News Service (Beijing), 13 March 1977.

This unbridled move by the Israeli authorities, so soon after the UN general assembly adopted... its emergency resolutions on the Palestine question, is an extreme instance of contempt for the international community and a gross violation of the UN charter and the relevant UN resolutions. . . .

We fully understand the feelings of the Arab and Islamic countries and peoples toward Jerusalem and sympathise with them on this point. We are firmly opposed to the Israeli authorities' illegal act to change the city's status. . . .

Israel must withdraw from all the Arab territories it has occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem.¹¹

By the end of 1981, Deng Xiaoping was firmly in control of the Communist apparatus in Beijing and this rehabilitation, his third, represented his final victory over Mao's chosen successors. Deng's climb back had begun in 1976 when the 'Gang of Four' was purged. In March 1981, a long-time Deng loyalist, Geng Biao, was appointed Defence Minister and Mao's chosen successor for the CPC chairman, Hua Guofeng, was supplanted by another Deng supporter, Hu Yaobang. Another Deng supporter, Zhao Ziyang, became premier of the State Council in the same year.

With his position assured, one might have expected some modification in the PRC's policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict but none was forthcoming. Beijing continued to extend only verbal support to the Palestinians and the Arabs. There were, however, small changes in nuance. Yasser Arafat became a regular visitor to the People's Republic of China in the eighties. On 31 December 1988, weeks after the Algiers Declaration where the Palestinians proclaimed statehood, the Chinese Foreign Ministry notified the political department of the Palestine Liberation Organisation that the PRC had agreed to allow the PLO office in Beijing to be renamed the embassy of the state of Palestine. Since then the PRC began to address Yasser Arafat as president, not as chairman.

In the last decade, however, there have been significant changes in China's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. As early as 1982, Zhao Ziyang tended to soften official policy when he recognised, in a speech in Cairo, Israel's right to exist. Even though the PRC continued to insist that there was no question of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, the recognition of the Jewish state's right to exist was seen as a major change in Beijing's approach to the Middle East.¹² Perhaps, the most important change in its attitude toward the Arab-Israeli conflict has been Beijing's economic glasnost. Eager for hard currency and influence, China began to export arms to the Middle East. A news story emanating from Pakistan estimated that China was exporting \$2 billion worth of weaponry every year to the Muslim world.¹³

¹¹ *Xinhua*, 6 August 1980.

¹² When Israeli Communist Party leader, Meir Wilner, visited Beijing in 1987, he was told that until Israel changed its aggressive and imperialist foreign policy, there was no chance of diplomatic relations with China.

¹³ Mushahid Hussain, 'China: Selling Arms, Winning Friends in the Moslem World', *Inter Press Service*, Islamabad, 28 March 1989.

Though it is unclear if any Chinese weaponry reached the Palestinians, Yasser Arafat and the Chinese leadership continued to support each other. In a state visit to Beijing in October 1989, Chinese president Yang Shangkun praised Arafat and congratulated him on the fact that the state of Palestine had gained diplomatic recognition from more than 100 countries. In response, Arafat expressed pride in Palestinian–Chinese relations and warming to the occasion, Arafat gave his interpretation of the government crackdown in Tiananmen Square in June 1989: 'We felt anxious when turmoil occurred in Beijing and were glad when China quelled the anti-government riot and controlled the situation.'¹⁴

Though Arafat was pleased with the PRC's actions against the democracy protesters, Washington was not as pleased. The US immediately stopped all military sales to China, and in a curious turn of events Israel became the PRC's 'most important foreign supplier of advanced military technology'.¹⁵ To facilitate the transfer of military technology to China, in 1990 Israel set up an office of the Israeli Academy of Sciences in Beijing. 'The Chinese probably see Israel as a back door to US technology that the US won't sell them.'¹⁶ Though China had historically portrayed itself as a firm supporter of the Palestinian cause, the advanced military technology that Israel could offer to the PRC was changing the latter's approach to the Arab–Israeli conflict. An inkling of this change was apparent in 1984 at a military parade in Beijing celebrating the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Communist victory over Chang Kai-shek's nationalists. 'Surprised foreign military attaches in Beijing spotted self-propelled 105-mm guns and cannons of Israeli design mounted on China's T-59 tanks.'¹⁷ A further indication of the warming of Sino–Israeli relations was the opening in 1988 of a Chinese travel office in Tel Aviv.

Following the inauguration of the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in October 1991, the PRC apparently no longer felt bound by its traditional pro-Arab stance. The Chinese expressed an interest in participating in the multilateral Arab–Israeli peace talks scheduled to be held in Moscow in late January 1992. However, Israel had categorically stated on numerous occasions that no nation could participate in any talks dealing with Israel if that country did not have diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. *The New York Times* noted that establishing diplomatic relations was not as problematic as it might have been ten years earlier, because of the decade-long history of Sino–Israeli arms and technology trading.¹⁸ Both countries had ample reason to want to open the diplomatic channels. Historically, Israel had been branded an outcast and establishing diplomatic relations with the world's most populous nation would advance Israel's sense of legitimacy. On the other hand, China could emerge from its international isolation after its violent suppression of the pro-democracy protesters at Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

¹⁴ *Xinhua*, 4 October 1989.

¹⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 1990.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *New York Times*, 9 January 1992.

The gradual warming of relations between China and Israel reached a climax in January 1992 when the PRC became the last of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council to recognise the Jewish state. The establishment of diplomatic relations apparently had the approval of Arafat. The previous December the head of the PLO had visited Beijing and had asked the Chinese to participate in the upcoming peace talks. Since Arafat was aware of Israel's position, that no country could participate in peace talks without recognising the Jewish state, one must assume that Arafat had tacitly endorsed the establishment of diplomatic relations. Within a year of establishing its embassy in Beijing, Israel received permission to open a consulate in Shanghai.

One Washington newspaper reported that the PRC had no choice but to recognise Israel:

In the view of many Chinese foreign policy experts, Beijing is worried that the collapse of the former Soviet Union will give too much influence to the United States. 'We admit that the United States should play an important role in international affairs as a big military, technological and economic power,' according to a recent analysis in an internally circulated Chinese publication. 'But the United States should not dominate everything.'¹⁹

A Hong Kong publication viewed these events in terms of economic interests:

[The Chinese] would happily supply either need—weapons of war or paraphernalia of peace—for Arafat and other Middle Eastern clients now that the PLO-Israel agreement has given Peking a new chance to raise its profile in the region.

When Middle East tensions were at their height in the 1970s and 1980s, Soviet, rather than Chinese, influence dominated the Arab camp. And during the long post-Cold War Middle East peace negotiations, it was the US that appeared to call the shots right up to the PLO-Israeli breakthrough and last month's signing ceremony in Washington.

If peace really does replace hostility in the Middle East, and confidence revives enough to spark a building and trade boom, Peking hopes to bid for a substantial share of the contracts. . . . China seems keen to emphasise commercial rather than military ties with the Middle East as a whole. . . . [In September 1992, an official Chinese journal published] a summary of China's rapidly expanding US \$2.3 billion trade with the Middle East and its ambitions to cash in on the lucrative construction markets there.

'It's no coincidence that Arafat chose China for his first visit outside the Arab world since signing the [Oslo] accord', a European diplomat said. 'Now that the PLO looks to be on its way to having an actual state to run, it will need a patron. China is well positioned for the role.'²⁰

¹⁹ *The Washington Post*, 25 January 1992.

²⁰ *Fat East Economic Review* (Hong Kong), 7 October 1993.

CONCLUSION

The Palestinians and the Chinese have nominally had a relationship that goes back fifty years. Though broad in time, it has never been deep. While paying lip service to the notion of a Palestinian revolution, the PRC extended little credible support to the guerrilla movements fighting Israeli occupation. The Palestinians, in their turn, have historically seemed unaware of the struggle between the Chinese communists and the Kuomintang. The Chinese support for the Palestinians, and vice versa, has been minimal and where existed it has been mutually supportive. After Beijing replaced Taipei in the United Nations, the Palestinians could count on the verbal support of the PRC. Likewise, the communists could rely on Arafat's support for communist domestic policy, for example, the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square demonstrators. In the nineties, with the signing of the Oslo peace accords between Israel and the PLO, relations between the Chinese and Palestinians took a new turn. No longer obliged to solely back the Palestinians politically, Beijing became interested in becoming a business partner to all of the parties in the Middle East.