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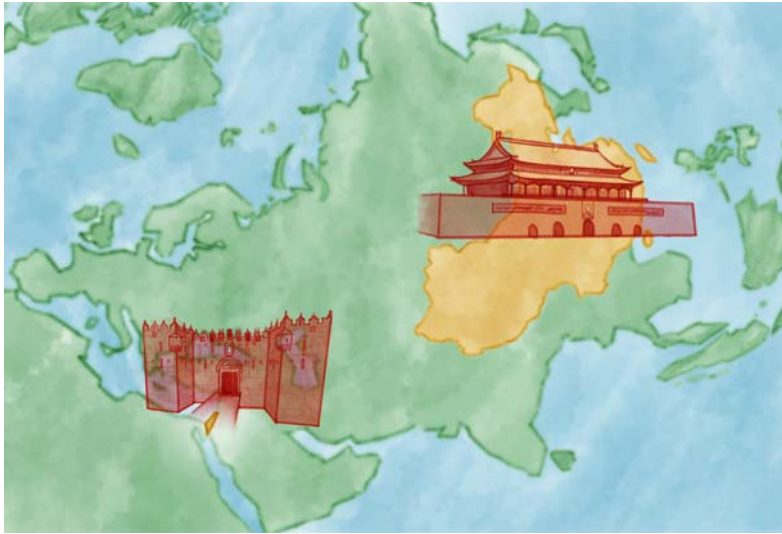
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The Gates of the Great Continent: Palestine, China, and the War for Humanity's Future (1)



As Israel's genocidal war on Gaza enters its sixth month, Qiao Collective presents an urgent intervention from Charles Xu on the Palestinian resistance and the place of China, its people, and their revolutionary legacy in the global solidarity movement.

This essay details China's near-unconditional support for Palestinian armed struggle in its early phase, and the enduring bonds forged between both peoples even through the Oslo Accords and the resistance's turn toward political Islam. It then analyzes the balance of forces since October 7 through the lens of Mao's writings on guerrilla war, and also draws parallels between the mutually-reinforcing sovereign technological projects of China and the

Axis of Resistance. Through the interlocking stories of former Red Guard Zhang Chengzhi and the Japanese Red Army, it argues that Palestine must be the fulcrum for any pan-Asian liberation struggle.

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Part I: Palestine and China at the High Tide of National Liberation [arrow_upward](#)

Imperialism is afraid of China and of the Arabs. Israel and Formosa are bases of imperialism in Asia. You are the gate of the great continent and we are the rear. They created Israel for you, and Formosa for us. Their goal is the same.

— Mao Zedong to visiting Palestine Liberation Organization delegates, Beijing, 1965

Imperialism has laid its body over the world, the head in Eastern Asia, the heart in the Middle East, its arteries reaching Africa and Latin America. Wherever you strike it, you damage it, and you serve the World Revolution.

— Ghassan Kanafani, quoted in *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine* (1972)

Between these two striking images of imperialism – drawn by perhaps the most iconic Chinese and Palestinian revolutionaries of the twentieth century, both literary giants in their own right – we can discern a common thread. Mao and Kanafani each envisioned their enemy as an active, intentional, even organic force, concentrating its energies on the eastern and western extremes of Asia. Both identified Israel as the “heart” of the Empire, its battering ram against the “gate” of the Orient. The corollary to their insight is that Palestine’s century-long struggle against Zionist colonialism is the fulcrum of pan-Asian revolution, and its liberation would be an event of equal if not greater world-historic importance than China’s own.

In their respective national historiographies the State of Israel and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) were born just one year apart, in 1948 and 1949 respectively. Legally speaking the former was midwived by both sides of the nascent Cold War with United Nations blessing; in actual fact it was born in blood, through the originary genocide of the Palestinian Nakba. The latter emerged through equally violent struggle *against* the colonial yoke, and within a year would find itself at war with imperialist armies flying that same UN banner.

From today's vantage point it is a fact rich with historical irony that at the time, much of the global left viewed both developments as historically progressive.

In those early years China itself was by no means free of such analytical limitations when it came to Zionism and the Palestinian national question, as Johns Hopkins scholar Zhang Sheng points out. Though never as effusive about Israel's potential as the Soviets initially were, PRC leaders at first broadly [shared](#) their view that it was "a progressive, left-leaning state that could potentially become an ally in the struggle against Western hegemony." Zhang notes that deeply contradictory positions could be found within the same officially-sanctioned publications. For instance, *The Truth of the Palestinian Issue* (1950) condemned Zionism as the "vanguard of the imperialist conspiracy to enslave Palestine," while simultaneously decrying the "aggressive invasion" of Israel by Arab monarchies helmed by Jordan, a "running dog of British imperialism."

For its part, Israel unilaterally extended diplomatic recognition to the PRC as early as 1950, well before any other country in the Middle East. *The People's Daily*, official organ of the Communist Party of China (CPC), welcomed this gesture but state leaders wisely opted not to reciprocate. Unofficial relations would almost immediately sour over Israel's backing for the US-led intervention in the Korean War. They would further deteriorate as China made diplomatic and cultural overtures to Arab and other Islamic countries, in a process often [mediated](#) by Hui and Uyghur dignitaries who advanced a vision of pan-Islamic resistance to Western imperialism. By the time of the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, hosted by the fiercely anti-Zionist Indonesian leader Sukarno, China was unequivocally backing the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

Shortly thereafter came the joint Israeli, British, and French invasion of Nasser's Egypt in October 1956, just months after the latter had become the first Arab country to establish relations with the PRC. Iraq would follow suit in 1958 when the 14 July Revolution overthrew the Hashemite monarchy; almost simultaneously, US Marines invaded Lebanon to violently put down a revolutionary challenge to its comprador regime. Amid these clarifying developments, China came increasingly to envision itself as a "home front of the Arab people's struggle against imperialism" and to mobilize its people accordingly, as [noted](#) by Fudan University historian Yin Zhiguang. The battle lines were at last being firmly drawn, just in time for the Palestinian national movement to erupt emphatically onto the world-historical stage.

This new phase of struggle began in 1964 with the founding of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a political organ not subordinate to any other Arab state. A year later

China became the first non-Arab country to extend formal diplomatic recognition to the PLO, which moved quickly to open an embassy in Beijing. Its support for the Palestinian armed struggle extended well beyond the rhetorical: Lillian Craig Harris [notes](#) that “between 1964 and 1970 the Palestinians fought with Chinese-made weapons, implying that the PRC was [their] exclusive supplier among the big powers.” This aid reportedly included AK-47s and other Soviet-model light arms, anti-tank artillery, US-model rocket launchers, and radio equipment, predominantly delivered through Syria and Jordan. Starting in 1967, the PLO also [sent](#) multiple contingents of a dozen or so fighters each (mostly drawn from the leading faction Fatah) to China for months-long training regimens in the theory and practice of guerrilla warfare.

Across factional divides, Palestinian revolutionaries were almost unanimously effusive in their gratitude for China’s moral and material solidarity. Ahmed Shuqairy, the first chairman of the PLO, went so far as to [claim](#) that “Palestinians should feel grateful not to other Arabs but to the gallant and generous Chinese people, who helped our revolution movement long before the Arab heads recognized the PLO. It is not, as some seem to think, propped up by Nasser or any other Arab leader.” His successor Yasser Arafat, who would visit China fourteen times during his 35 years at the helm of the movement, credited the PRC as “the biggest influence in supporting our revolution and strengthening its perseverance.” George Habash, founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), insisted that “our best friend is China. China wants Israel erased from the map because as long as Israel exists, there will remain an aggressive imperialist outpost on Arab soil.”



Palestine solidarity demonstration in Beijing, 1969. The banner reads “Resolutely support the struggle of the Palestinian and Arab peoples against Zionism and US imperialism!”

China’s affinity for the cause of Palestinian liberation in fact had deeper roots than this simple convergence of strategic interests. As Harris points out, “despite great differences, the Palestinian arena is the Arab world situation which comes closest to fitting the Chinese experience of revolution against an imperialist invader.” Allusions to the 1937-45 War of Resistance against Japan, which elevated the CPC’s capacity for “protracted people’s war” to new heights, abounded in Chinese statements of solidarity with Palestinian guerrillas. In Mao’s aforementioned 1965 address to visiting PLO delegates, for example, he [mused](#) that *You are not only two million Palestinians facing Israel, but one hundred 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 ... peoples must not be afraid if their numbers are reduced in liberation wars, for they shall have peaceful times during which they may multiply. China lost twenty million people in the struggle for liberation.*

Chinese leaders also took their historical cues from the anti-Japanese struggle, where the Communists formed a United Front with their bitter ideological enemies in the Kuomintang, when judging how to allocate support between different factions of the PLO. Far more than strict theoretical alignment they prioritized political and military unity, displaying a marked preference for Fatah’s cross-class nationalism over the avowedly Marxist-Leninist PFLP (particularly during the latter’s campaign of airline hijackings). In his 1965 speech, for instance, Mao cautioned his audience: “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 make the principles and ideology on which your war stands. Books obstruct the view if piled up in front of the eye.” And during another visit in 1971, premier Zhou Enlai recommended “that Palestinian organizations merge in one genuine unity that will have only two organs: one for leading the armed struggle, and the other political, and that the PLO will become the main nucleus of the Palestinian people.”

Throughout this period, China’s rhetorical militancy in defense of the Palestinian armed struggle – and to some extent the volume of its material support – also admittedly waxed and waned in accordance with political exigencies. It peaked in the aftermath of Israel’s disastrous defeat of multiple Arab armies and subsequent occupation of Gaza, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai in the Six-Day War of 1967. This of course only amplified the prestige that accrued to the Palestinian *fedayeen* when they defeated an Israeli invasion of Jordan at the 1968 Battle of Karamah. Suitably emboldened,

they went on to launch a full-scale revolt against the Jordanian monarchy in 1970 – with China’s full-throated endorsement, as Radio Peking [exhorted](#) them to “fight on against the Jordanian military clique and their American militarist masters until final victory.”

This “Black September” uprising ended in catastrophe, with PLO forces thoroughly routed and expelled from all their territorial bases in Jordan. Afterwards, China markedly dialed down its sponsorship for such insurrectionary activity and turned towards rebuilding state-to-state relationships with Arab governments. This proceeded in tandem with its budding rapprochement with the United States and its 1971 entry into the UN, carried atop a wave of support from African and Arab states (and, interestingly, Israel). Nonetheless, China remained Palestine’s most steadfast ally among the great powers. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War it stood alone in refusing to endorse UN Security Council Resolution 338 on the grounds that it [failed](#) to “explicitly provide for the restoration of the national rights of the Palestinian people,” and later boycotted the Geneva peace conference for excluding Palestinian representatives. In keeping with its ideological polemics against Soviet “revisionism,” China denounced the USSR’s support for negotiated Arab-Israeli peace settlements in both 1967 and 1973 as a great-power betrayal of the Palestinian cause.

Throughout all these twists and turns, popular manifestations of Chinese solidarity with the Palestinian liberation struggle continued unabated. Beginning in 1965 with the first PLO visit to Beijing, Nakba Day (May 15) was officially designated as “Palestine Solidarity Day” and commemorated annually with mass public rallies of 100,000 or more in Tiananmen Square. The short propaganda documentary “[巴勒斯坦人民必胜](#)” (“The Palestinian people must win,” 1971) features newsreel footage of enormous demonstrations against the 1956 Suez Crisis and the 1967 Six-Day War, including people’s delegations to the embassies of Palestine, Egypt, and Syria. Similarly large crowds are shown greeting Yasser Arafat on his 1970 visit to Beijing.

Belying the Western image of China during the Cultural Revolution as a closed and xenophobic society, people-to-people connections were also forged at a more profoundly intimate level. The aforementioned Ghassan Kanafani, for example, traveled to China and India in 1965 and documented his experiences in a little-known revolutionary [travelog](#) entitled «ثم أشرفت آسيا», or “Then Asia Shone.” During the Chinese leg of his journey he visited Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou, [meeting](#) with Marshal Chen Yi and recording his observations not just of landmarks like Tiananmen Square and the Great Wall but also of mosques and agricultural collectives. Pondering the preserved monuments of the imperial

past, he saluted the country's long tradition of rebellion: "If I were Chinese, my admiration for what the emperors did for themselves would be exceeded only by what the people did to the emperors!" His comments on poverty were equally moving and prophetic:

Poverty, if we want to use a more brutal word, is that ogre which has ravaged China throughout its long history and which the revolution has not yet been able, due to its age and China's many problems, to turn into a servant, but has successfully put in a cage ... It seems that the vitality of the revolution and its desire to mobilize human energy runs ahead of its financial capacity, and the Chinese are proud of what their bare hands can do while awaiting the future, when they are confident they will be able to finance their well-being. They have put to work the 1,300 million arms they have to build the road to the future without a moment of waiting.

Kanafani's literary compatriot Abu Salma, a poet who went on to chair the General Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists, was similarly moved while visiting China to write the following [lines](#) (as quoted by Yin Zhiguang):

We have fought the same fight.

We have endured the same suffering.

Now we're in Beijing.

We can spread our wings and fly.

The strong people here

all have sprouted wings.

We are united in our struggle,

The glory will be ours!

We shall wear laurels on our heads,

And smiles on our faces.

When dark clouds cover the firmament,

A wild wind sweeps through the universe.

When Mao's smile appears on the horizon,

Earth's skies become clear for miles and miles!



Ghassan Kanafani on the Great Wall, 1965

Beyond such temporary visits of a personal or diplomatic nature, a small but enduring Palestinian expatriate community also [formed](#) in China, mostly comprising dissident journalists and intellectuals exiled by hostile Arab host governments. The PRC also offered scholarships to several dozen Palestinian students per year, creating a community sufficiently robust to form the General Palestinian Students' Union in 1981. As recounted by Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi, these students remained politically active even after the Cultural Revolution's high tide of mass mobilization ebbed: "major protests and rallies were held throughout 1979, 1980, 1982, and 1983 in connection with such regional events as the signing of the Camp David Accords by Egypt, the American bombing of Libya, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and turning points in the Lebanese civil war such as the Sabra and Shatila massacres."

These events charted an inexorable direction of travel for China in its relations with the PLO, which since the 1974 Arab League Summit had been [designated](#) the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." It was a path prophetically laid out by Lillian Craig Harris as early as 1977, when she [wrote](#): "Whether China would consider the Palestinians to have 'sold out' if they accepted a West Bank state with agreement against attacks on Israel to secure more territory is another question. Yet indications are that Chinese pragmatism could stretch to swallow even a non-revolutionary Palestine if the benefit for China were a state with which it entertained good relations."

That is indeed exactly what happened with the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence, which implicitly acknowledged the 1947 UN Partition Plan and retreated from the PLO's express commitment to a one-state solution. As in 1965, but with considerably less fanfare,

China was one of the first non-Muslim-majority countries to recognize the newly declared State of Palestine. By the time Arafat signed the Oslo Accords in September 1993, extending unreciprocated recognition to Israel and abandoning all claim to 78% of historic Palestine, China had already had diplomatic relations with the Zionist state for over a year. It was just one of around 25 predominantly socialist, ex-Soviet, and/or former Eastern Bloc countries that had done so since the fall of the USSR and the nearly simultaneous initiation of the “peace process.” The PLO’s capitulation at Oslo simply provided *ex post facto* cover for the vast majority of Palestine’s non-Arab allies to follow it into normalization.

China’s role in this process, while hardly atypical, did involve a number of ironic historical peculiarities. One was that it had initiated informal economic ties with Israel years prior to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations, largely as a means to evade Western arms embargoes imposed after the [1989 Tiananmen protests](#). (Israeli-sourced military technology had the [added benefit](#) of being extensively battle-tested against Soviet weapons systems in the course of numerous wars against Arab states.) For Israel’s part, then-Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was [reported](#) in November 1989 to have said, “Israel should have taken advantage of the suppression of the demonstrations in China, while the world’s attention was focused on these events, and should have carried out mass deportations of Arabs from the territories. Unfortunately, this plan I proposed did not gain support.” Needless to say, it would not be his last chance.

Another irony which has acquired supreme importance since October 7, 2023 is that a broad and ideologically diverse coalition of Palestinian resistance forces has at long last achieved the kind of operational unity that Mao-era China had always dreamed of. Gaza’s [Joint Operations Room](#) spans an ideological range much broader than that represented at any time in the PLO, running from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to the Marxist-Leninist PFLP and DFLP. Yet this united front formed in explicit opposition to the Fatah-led PLO, and its main external sponsor is not China but the Islamic Republic of Iran – also heir to an anti-imperialist revolution but of markedly different character.

All this said, China maintains warm symbolic ties to a number of these formations, as does the CPC with the Marxist ones on a party-to-party basis. The latter in turn have reciprocated, for example by publicly endorsing China’s policy in Hong Kong (see statements by the [PFLP](#) and [DFLP](#)) and more recently [hailing](#) its diplomatic efforts to secure a ceasefire in Gaza. Despite intra-Palestinian tensions over normalization and security cooperation with Israel, these positions are broadly in line with the State of Palestine’s official [opposition](#) to “interference in China’s internal affairs under the pretext of Xinjiang-related issues.” As the

world watches in horror the incontrovertible scenes of genocide relayed in real time from Gaza, this stance on Xinjiang – while [hardly atypical](#) for the Global South – stands in stark contrast with the small but vocal minority of diaspora Uyghur separatists who expressed [admiration](#) for Zionist ethnonationalism and voiced [solidarity](#) with Israel after October 7.

With the genocide entering its sixth month, official rhetoric from China has also recently taken a harder and more overtly pro-resistance edge. Most notably, at a February 2024 International Court of Justice hearing on the legality of the Israeli occupation, PRC Foreign Ministry legal advisor Ma Xinmin made waves by [affirming](#) that the “Palestinian people’s use of force to resist foreign oppression and complete the establishment of an independent state is an inalienable right.” Citing [UN General Assembly Resolution 3070](#) of 1973 – inscribed into international law at the high tide of anticolonial struggle – he reiterated the legitimacy of Palestinian resistance “by all means, including armed struggle,” which is categorically “distinguished from acts of terrorism.” For its part, Hamas quickly [responded](#) by expressing its appreciation for this uncharacteristically bold intervention.

There is also a strong case to be made that China’s more methodical diplomatic approach in the post-Mao era – coupled with its growing challenge to US hegemony under Xi Jinping – has helped shape a more propitious regional environment for the Palestinian resistance. Helena Cobban, for instance, [asserts](#) that “the Beijing-aided reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran transformed the politics of the entire Gulf/West Asia region, and in some ways made the October 7 action more feasible for Hamas’s leaders. The reconciliation reestablished China as a power with major influence within West Asia after an absence of more than five hundred years ... the crisscrossing relationships that had been built up among BRICS members old and new provided a rich network of ‘postcolonial’ solidarity for the anticolonial national liberation struggle Hamas’s leaders and supporters saw themselves as fighting.”

All this said, it remains a common sentiment within China’s anti-imperialist left that, in the words of [Yin Zhiguang](#), “with the demise of ideological politics within China, the discursive influence once achieved by New China's diplomacy is also fading.” In a message to the author, Zhang Sheng reiterated this point even more forcefully: “Mao era China's support for Palestinian people's righteous struggle for liberation is one of the most glorious pages of the PRC's history of internationalism, and I still feel proud and inspired today reading about this period of history. Until today, China is still a true friend of Palestine, and we will always stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people's struggle for liberation and self-determination. Unfortunately, I have to painfully admit that some of these glorious traditions have faded

away after the Reform, and I truly wish that China could have done more to speak out against Israeli invasions and against the ongoing genocide in Gaza.”

In other words, we must look beyond the staid realm of official statements and state-to-state relations in order to truly understand the significance of China and the rise of multipolarity for the Palestinian resistance after October 7. In the remainder of this essay we will turn towards other, deeper manifestations of the indissoluble bond between both peoples and their respective revolutionary processes.