

The War in Gaza has Damaged China's Standing in the Middle East

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China's initial view of the current war between Israel and Hamas was that it was no different from past hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians. However, Beijing was wrong and now finds itself in an uncomfortable position. The United States has strengthened its reputation as the provider of defense protection in the region, while China is positioned as a member of the opposite axis – contrary to its desire to be seen as “peace-loving” – and Beijing realizes that it must minimize the damage and repair its image. In order to downplay its support for Iran and improve its ties with Arab countries, China sent its special envoy for a round of talks in the Middle East. However, as the war continues, particularly if it spreads to other arenas and Middle East countries align either with the Iranian axis and its proxies or with the Israeli-American alliance, then China's standing in the region will be undermined further.

After the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, official China issued the usual messages reserved for outbreaks of hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians: calls for calm “on both sides,” general condemnation of harm to civilians, and a return to negotiations based on the two-state solution. As Beijing saw it, the current fighting was no different from past conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians. Therefore, it would use it to display its support for the Palestinians and smile at the Muslim countries in the Middle East, while taunting the United States and presenting itself as a peace-seeking alternative to US hegemony, which fomented strife and quarrels.

But Beijing made three mistakes. First, it did not expect such a determined US response, including clear declarations of support for Israel, criticisms of Hamas terror, the dispatch of two aircraft carriers to the region, the airlift of military equipment, and no less important – a blitz of visits by senior US officials to countries of the region, bringing the message that the United States is present in the area with all its power and will defend its allies, actively if necessary. Second, China failed to understand the scope and nature of the Hamas massacre in the western Negev and its significance – not just for Israel, but also for the Muslim world, which was quick to clarify that such criminal actions were not permitted according to Islam. Third, China was unable to distinguish between the Palestinian people and the Hamas terror organization. To its chagrin, other countries in the region were eminently able to make the distinction and [criticized Hamas](#) even before October 7. In recent weeks, leaders of countries in the region have also [condemned](#) the attacks and kidnapping of civilians. In the UN, the United Arab Emirates stated that the Hamas actions were “[barbaric and heinous](#),” and called for the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages.

Thus, China found itself in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, the events of October 7 shattered the concept that China has vigorously promoted in recent years, whereby the United States has withdrawn from the Middle East and China has increased its presence there. Much has been written about the Gulf states responding to this change and moving closer to China, particularly with numerous economic agreements and military cooperations. A new peak of Chinese involvement in the region was recorded in March 2023, when a treaty, apparently brokered by Beijing, was signed between Saudi Arabia and Iran – a treaty that gave China the sense that it could lead “[a wave of reconciliation](#)” that would sweep the Middle East. But if countries of the region had any doubts about the readiness of Washington to stand by them in a security crisis, the Swords of Iron war has removed all such doubts. On the other hand, the anti-Hamas position of countries in the Middle East has highlighted China’s support for Syria, Iran, and Russia – countries that help China create an axis of opposition to the United States, and in the current situation are also seen as supporters of terror. The combination of these two factors – strengthening the position of the United States as the provider of defense protection in the region, while branding China as a member of the opposition, contrary to its self-declared image as “peace-loving” – made Beijing understand that it had to minimize the damage.

The Foreign Ministry announcements started to show a change in China’s approach, when beginning two weeks after the Hamas attack, the usual messages incorporated sentences presenting China’s position as aligning with that of Arab countries. The general message was later expanded to include a [declaration](#) that “the international community, especially the many Arab countries, commends China’s just position and the role it has played as a responsible major country.” The vague message claims that “the vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind advocated by President Xi Jinping helps identify the direction for resolving the Palestinian-Israeli issue.” These messages were repeated in several statements from Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespeople, while between the lines it is almost possible to hear Beijing’s plea for re-inclusion in the picture. At the UN as well, China joined the declaration by Jordan calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, and when a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman was asked about this, he referred to it as “an Arab country.” The choice of the term “Arab country” is not accidental, and Beijing is probably using it to distance itself from Iran and stress its closeness to the Arab countries of the Middle East.

It is not by chance that China’s Special Envoy Zhai Jun was sent for a round of visits in the Middle East, to restore his country’s damaged image. His first stop was the Cairo summit in Egypt, attended mainly by representatives of many Arab countries and the Arab League, together with a minority of delegates from Europe and elsewhere. At this summit, Zhai Jun [repeated](#) China’s position that the Palestinian issue must not be sidelined and that it was important to reach a “comprehensive, just and long-lasting” solution based on the idea of two states – Israel and an independent Palestinian state. He added that “China will continue to work with all relevant parties of the international community to make unremitting efforts to end the war in Gaza.” From Cairo, the Special Envoy traveled to Qatar and [repeated](#) his statements before the Qatari Foreign Minister. His mission continued to Saudi Arabia and the United Emirates, adding

further meetings and telephone calls to those from Beijing before setting out for the region. The senior Arab officials who met and talked with Zhai Jun also maintained that their countries attach great importance to the role and influence of China and were ready to strengthen their communication with Beijing and make efforts to solve the Palestinian issue. However, the use of formulations that resembled China's own declarations indicate that both sides are using the same empty rhetoric.

The longer the war lasts, particularly if it spreads to other arenas, and the sharper the division between the Irania-led axis, with all its proxies, and the Israeli-US alliance, the more China's position in the Middle East will be undermined. Unlike China, for Israel this division into blocs can be an opportunity for a broad move under US auspices, taking into account the moderate Arab countries – those that are already included in the Abraham Accords and those that would like to join them – to build a new regional architecture, including a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen