



From Curiosity to Skepticism: Israeli Public Opinion on China

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Israeli public opinion on China shows a dynamic and complex picture of relations between the two countries that varies according to local and global political and economic contexts. Support for China among the Israeli public has changed dramatically over recent years. The Israeli Chinese rapprochement that began in 2013 induced most Israelis to adopt a positive attitude towards China. Starting in 2020, and especially after October 7, 2023, support for China has fallen steeply. Israelis' perception of China is affected by factors such as the policy pursued by Israeli governments, people-to-people ties, the extent and character of media coverage of China, and Israel's relations with the US and China. At the same time, over the years, Israeli public opinion on China has differed from that of other developed and democratic countries—the decline in support for China in Israel began several years later than in those countries. This article reviews the figures for public opinion in Israel on China. It examines the changes that have occurred, the factors that brought about these changes, and how these changes may be expected to indicate a deterioration in Israel's future relations with China.

Keywords: public opinion, Israel-Chinese relations, the Israeli public, public opinion surveys, international image, superpower competition, global trends

Introduction

After Deng Xiaoping, the preeminent leader of the People's Republic of China, initiated the era of reforms and the opening of China to the West in 1978, the establishment of a positive global image became an important element in China's strategy as a foundation for promoting its worldwide interests. China aimed to become a strong economic power that was not politically identified with other countries and did not interfere in their internal affairs. In recent decades, the Chinese government has focused its efforts on "soft diplomacy," designed to achieve its objectives through

attraction and persuasion, rather than through the exercise of force. This effort developed into a formal doctrine of influence mechanisms operated by the Chinese Communist Party throughout the world, through the formation of a network of connections and the development of frameworks for cooperation, while applying economic, political, and military means of pressure.

The results of China's public relations efforts can be seen in surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, which has been surveying global public opinion on China for the past two

decades. Pew has reported dramatic changes in recent years in China's international image—a major drop in sympathetic public opinion towards China. However, the perceptions of China vary between regions, and are shaped by economic ties, diplomatic relations, and regional security anxieties. A positive view of China has been maintained in both many of the developing countries and countries enjoying friendly relations with China, such as Indonesia (49% support in 2023) and Mexico (56% support in 2024). In contrast, positive views of China in Western democracies such as the US, European countries, Canada, and Australia have diminished sharply. The proportion of Americans holding a positive view of China shrank from 52% in 2006 to only 16% in 2024. Positive attitudes towards China also dropped acutely in European countries, e.g. from 56% in 2006 to 20% in 2024 in Germany. In the democracies located near China, such as Japan, rates of support remained low in all the surveys, reaching as low as 12% in 2024.

Starting in 2013, when Chinese President Xi Jinping took office, regional tension mounted as a result of China's growing aggressiveness and territorial demands in the South China Sea, coupled with continual modernization of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. In the global sphere, China expanded its involvement in cyberattacks, thefts of intellectual property, espionage, and interference efforts in media, higher education, and other sectors. These efforts, together with China's lack of transparency, generated increased suspicion and uncertainty about its intentions, and aggravated political tension between China and many countries.

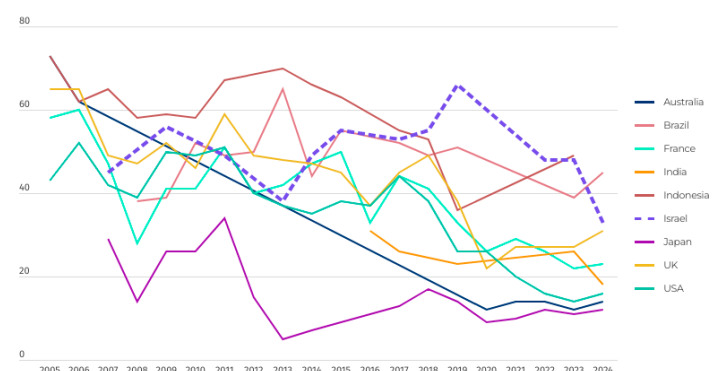
Chinese activity in Israel

China has consistently made an effort to acquire a favorable image in Israel. Its primary interests are Israel's advanced capabilities in science, technology, and arms. Its main targets are Israeli government figures and wealthy people in various industrial sectors. The

Chinese Communist Party operates channels of influence, primarily in the Hebrew language media. For example, the Chinese Ambassador to Israel frequently publishes articles in Hebrew in the local Israeli media, and the Chinese Embassy conducts tours in China for media figures (Karash-Hazon, 2020; Linn and Yaish, 2023; Cai, 2022, 2024). In addition to “soft” propaganda, the Chinese Embassy in Israel has sent a number of letters in recent years to Israeli media outlets, criticizing them for publishing reports it regarded as damaging to Chinese interests. For example, in 2022, following the publication of an interview with the Taiwanese foreign minister, *The Jerusalem Post* received a [request to delete](#) the article because it allegedly distorted the situation.

One familiar prominent example in Israel is “Chinese Itzik” (Chinese name Xi Xiaoqi), who broadcasts on China Radio International (CRI)—as a Chinese citizen who speaks fluent Hebrew, talks about China “from the inside,” and portrays it to the Israeli public in a positive light. He entered the consciousness of the Israeli public in 2012 when he began appearing in media channels in Israel, in advertisements, and on social media. However, an attempt at cooperation with “Kan” public broadcasting corporation in 2017 revealed the challenges involved in joint ventures with Chinese government affiliated media. An [investigation](#) by *The Seventh Eye* magazine revealed that

Figure 1. Percentages of support for China in selected countries (2005-2024), Pew Research Center Survey



editors of the “Kan” digital division had signed a contract committing to avoid offending “cultural sensitivities,” which was liable to be interpreted as the exercise of self-censorship. Moreover, Chinese Itzik and CRI are affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party and its influence campaigns. A 2017 article by the deputy head of CRI discussing the use of “foreign mouths and eyes” in advertising the Belt and Road Initiative and the approach of President Xi Jinping, [singled out Chinese Itzik for great praise](#). Also in 2017, Chinese Itzik was invited as a keynote speaker to an event staged by the central propaganda department for journalists [who “fulfill” Xi Jinping’s instructions](#) to the media and who “are winning the confidence of the Party and the people.” Although changes in Israeli public opinion obviously cannot be attributed with certainty and exclusively to Chinese Itzik, improved public opinion figures in Israel do correspond to the years of his activity.

Public Opinion on China in Israel

The Pew Research Center has been surveying public opinion in Israel since 2007. According to its findings, Israeli public opinion in the first decade of the twenty-first century was mostly neutral towards China, and half of Israelis held positive views about China. China’s public standing in Israel took a turn for the worse in 2013, with the proportion of Israeli’s holding positive views about China declining to 38%.

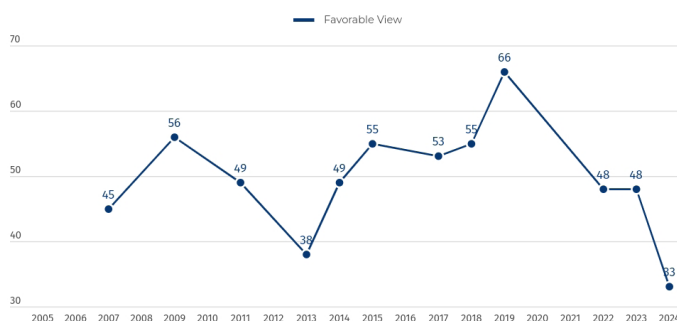
The trend in Israeli public opinion reversed in 2013-2019, with favorable attitudes towards China reaching a peak of 66% at the end of this period—making Israel one of the five countries in the world with the highest proportion of public support for China. This support has since waned, however, and plummeted drastically this year to only 33% support—half of the 2019 level.

The fluctuations in Israeli public opinion can be linked, inter alia, to the policies pursued by governments in Israel and the character of its diplomatic relations with China. Official relations with China were established in 1992, but underwent a crisis early in the first decade of the twenty-first century after Israel canceled the sale of Phalcon aircraft to China and its upgrade of China’s Israeli-manufactured Harpy drones, under pressure from Washington, as the tension between the two superpowers intensified. An upward trend in support for China among Israelis began to manifest beginning in 2007, possibly because of increased participation by Chinese companies in huge projects in Israel, such as the digging of the Carmel Tunnels by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) and the acquisition of Israeli company Makhteshim Agan by Chinese corporation ChemChina. Other possible reasons for this increase in support were China’s positive global image resulting from the hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and its effective handling of the global economic crisis that year.

The trend in Israeli public opinion towards China did not remain positive, however, and began moving in the other direction starting in 2009. A renewed rise in support began in 2013, corresponding to the warming of relations under the Netanyahu governments and the stepped-up cooperation between Jerusalem and Beijing. This began with government decisions on increased cooperation and the Prime Minister’s visit to China, portraying China as a country with enormous potential for cooperation with the “Startup Nation.” In tandem with these closer ties, the proportion of positive views towards

Figure 2. Israeli public support for China 2007-2024

Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of China - **Israel**



Source: [Pew Research Center](#)

regime, and another 22% to China’s violations of human and civil rights.

The 2023 survey also examined the Israeli view of the Israel-China-US triangular relationship. Most of the Israelis questioned said that Israel should take US needs and interests into account in setting its policy in order to preserve the special relationship. At the same time, it was revealed that the Israeli public was aware of the growing tension between the US and China, but did not regard this as a direct and substantial threat to Israel’s national security. 44.4% of those questioned gave a medium response (3 on a scale of 1 to 5) when asked

to what degree the competition between the US and China was affecting Israel’s national security. 40% of those questioned believed that Israel should trade with China with no restrictions except for defense and advanced technology, while 23.3% believed that Israel should make it clear to the US that Israel was an independent country acting according to its interests. Together with its identification with the US, when it came to tension between the two superpowers, the Israeli public exhibited a pragmatic approach to foreign relations that sought an equilibrium between economic interests in cooperation with China and the strategic importance of the US. This reflects a wish to maintain room for independent action vis-à-vis the great powers, while realizing the importance of the balance between the economy and security.

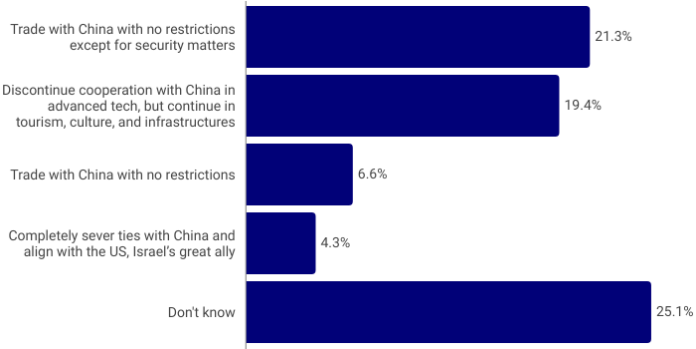
The steepest decline in Israeli support for China was observed after the massacre on October 7, 2023, following which China consistently expressed criticism of Israel and unequivocal support for the Palestinians and indirect support for Hamas. A survey conducted by INSS in May 2024 showed that 35% of those questioned said that their opinion of China had changed for the worse since October 7, 2023, while only 1.3% said that their opinion had changed for the better. A Pew Research Center survey in July 2024 reported that only 33% of those questioned had expressed a positive opinion of China, 15% less than in the preceding year (before October 7). A *Swords of Iron* survey conducted by the INSS Data Analytics Center in September 2024 indicated that 10% of the Israeli public regarded China as a hostile country, 40% as an unfriendly country, 15% as a friendly country, and only 1% as an ally. The remaining 34% said that they did not know enough to answer the question. China, which has traditionally supported the Palestinians, has not condemned the Hamas massacre to this day. It has also called for an investigation of Israel’s “crimes” and vetoed American proposals in the UN Security Council. Chinese rhetoric

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Figure 5.



Figure 6. Public opinion in Israel about the effect of China-US Relations on Israel



Source: INSS National Security Index – Public Opinion Survey 2022-2023

against Israel has been vitriolic throughout the war, with an emphasis on the Palestinian right to “armed struggle.” China also cites the right of return as a fundamental Palestinian right.

Surveys continue to show significant differences of opinion between Jewish and Arab populations in Israel on China. According to Pew Research Center figures, only 25% of Jews held positive views about China in 2024, while the corresponding figure among Israeli Arabs was 61%. As noted, the percentage of support for China among Jews was 18% lower than in the preceding year, while the decline in positive views among Arabs was smaller—only 7%. The gap between Jewish and Arab public opinion in Israel with respect to China is probably due to the differences between the two communities in political, cultural, and ideological identity—the Arab public in Israel is likely to be more tolerant of China’s views, mostly because of China’s traditional support for the Palestinians. The negative effect of China’s recent stance on Israel in the wake of the Swords of Iron war is therefore less pronounced among the Arab public.

A Comparative Look at Public Opinion in Israel

The Pew Research Center figures show that Israeli public opinion differs from that of other developed countries around the world. It appears that support for China in Israel declined several years later than elsewhere: the downturn in support for China in democratic and Western countries began in 2017, at which time the trend in Israel was in the opposite direction, with sympathy for China reaching a peak and declining only in 2022. Trump’s entry into the White House in 2017, the escalating trade war, the campaign against the threat posed by transfers of technologies to China and Chinese thefts of intellectual property, aggravated the rivalry between the superpowers and cost China support in global opinion. The proportion of sympathy in the UK and the US, for example, was halved from 2017-2020 (45%

support in 2017 and 22% support in 2020 in the UK). Similar figures were reported in the European Union: a decline in support of 18% in France, 9% in Germany, and 6% in Greece.

In addition to reflecting the quality of diplomatic relations between Israel and China at the time, the Pew Research Center figures show a difference in the Israeli public’s moral priorities. While a majority of the public in European countries and North America regards the issue of human rights as more important than economic cooperation with China, 57% of Israelis exhibit a more utilitarian attitude, preferring advancement of economic ties with

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Figure 7.

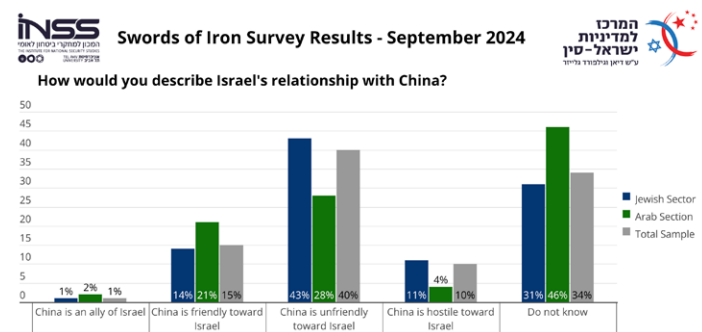
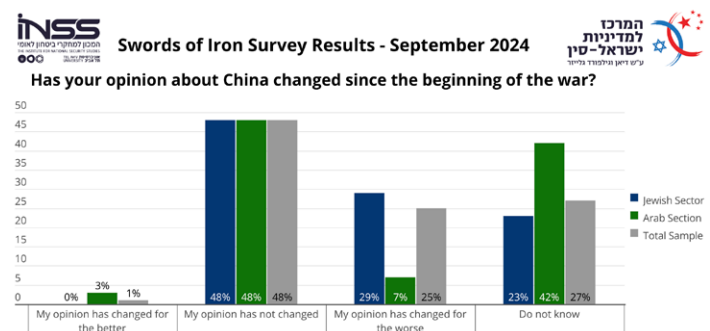


Figure 8.



China to the promotion of human rights in that country.

Summary and Conclusions

The figures presented in this article indicate that the policy pursued by Israeli governments and the quality of Israeli Chinese diplomatic and economic relations have had a major impact on fluctuations in Israeli public opinion towards China. When economic cooperation prospered, agreements were being signed, and tourism was increasing, sympathy for China rose; and fell in the absence of these factors. Another factor was the portrayal of China in popular media in Israel and how it was covered by those media.

The analysis also shows that China's direct actions and its policies, especially since October 2023 and during the Swords of Iron war, have had a major impact on Israeli public opinion. China's position during this period, which featured no condemnation of Hamas' attacks and a critical stance towards Israel in international forums, exacerbated the negative perceptions of China, in contrast to the previous positive or neutral opinions about China held by many Israelis.

Israeli public opinion on China reflects a limit interested in global affairs; the local public is preoccupied with urgent local concerns and is less worried about broader geopolitical changes. It is reasonable to assume that this disassociation delayed the Israeli public's response to significant global changes, such as China's growing international power and its strategic consequences. The competition between the US and China penetrated Israeli public consciousness at a relatively late stage, and it appears that the Israeli public is taking a pragmatic view of Israel's triangular relationship with the US and China. A degree of unfamiliarity with the geopolitical rivalry is discernable, due to different priorities in Israel and the media focus on other acute issues.

It is plausible to suggest that the feelings of the Israeli public will influence the future desire for collaborations with China and will be reflected in the ties between the two peoples as

well as the level of academic and commercial cooperation. China has enormous economic power and is an important geopolitical player whom Israel must not ignore or regard as its enemy. If the Israeli government wishes to continue enjoying positive relations with China after the war ends, it must promote understanding of the communist country among the public, the business sector, and in institutions of higher education, for the purposes of both advancing essential cooperation and instilling caution and skepticism in meeting the challenges to be faced.

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