

Can the Belt & Road Initiative Help Ameliorate the Arab-Israel Conflict?

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Executive Summary

One of the main purposes of China's Belt and Road Initiative is to enhance trade between countries, increase mutual learning between civilizations and promote greater people-to-people exchanges. Furthermore, this unprecedented project is also designed to promote dialogues and exchanges among civilizations and to enhance friendly interactions between countries. Could these lofty ideas be applied also to the resolution of the century old Arab-Israel conflict? This paper argues that the Belt and Road Initiative can play an important role in promoting greater dialogue and understanding between Israel and some Arab countries in Asia thus lessening tensions in the Middle East and also helping China to play a growing role in that region as well as enhancing China's vital interest in that area.

Keywords

Belt Road Initiative, Israel, Palestinians, Arab states, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, China, The Middle East.

Introduction

China's grandiose Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is probably one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken by the People's Republic of China or by any major power. It was first announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, it proposed the construction of a series of pipelines, railroads, highways and even broadband communications. The basic idea was to emulate the ancient Silk Road and link China with Central and Western Europe. (Xi Jinping, 2014). The Belt Road Initiative, that comprises the ancient Silk Economic Belt and the new Maritime Silk Road, aimed at achieving a number of goals. Among them was the linking of China to the West; creating a new political and economic system along the Belt route and leading to greater integration among the countries that lie along the route. In addition to focusing on trade, there would also be an integration and greater understanding in such areas as politics, economics, culture, religion and perhaps even military and diplomacy. The project would also promote mutual understanding and learning between countries and regions along the route, in which not only governments but also people play a key role in enhancing greater understanding, cooperation and peaceful relations. It would also overcome hostility and enmity by people who live along the route that have been separated by generations of hostility and on occasion warfare. Once completed, this project would involve some 60 countries whose combined population is

around 4.4. billion inhabitants. Together they account for some 30% of the gross global product estimated at 21 \$US trillion.

This paper will deal with the possibility that the adherence to the principles underlying this project by Israel and a number of Arab states lying along the route could create the foundation for better understanding leading to mutual cooperation and finally even to open ties between them. It will also deal with the role China can play in this process, and ask what could be some of the benefits that would accrue to China and what could be some of the pitfalls that could delay or even prevent such a possibility.

Ancient Contacts

The ancient Silk Road whose starting point was in Western China, continued through Central Asia and eventually ended in the Middle East, thus coming into contact with Islamic civilization. Thousands of books and articles in many languages have amply documented and detailed how Chinese traders came into contact with their Arab counterparts and this inevitably led to contacts on the cultural level. Being inquisitive by nature, a number of Chinese travelers and scholars came to study the culture, civilization and above all the religion of the people who dwelled along the land and sea routes. That brought them into contact with the Arabs and above all with Islam. An outstanding example of a traveler was the fifteenth century

ethnically Chinese Muslim, navigator Zheng He who made seven voyages from 1405 to 1433 and reached some 30 countries along the routes in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. He brought back to China a wealth of information that attracted additional interest in these regions and their civilizations. Unlike other major powers, and even though China has a relatively small Moslem population, China probably has a long and solid history of cultural and economic interaction with Islam.

Less known but never to be ignored is the fact that China came into contact with Jews who began to settle in Kaifeng (Henan Province) in the ninth century. This was probably the first time in history that the Jewish civilization encountered Confucianism. It became clear that both ancient civilizations had a lot in common: family ethics and education came first. There was also the respect for learning, for tradition, for the elders, for the written word. A number of Chinese thinkers also appreciated the Jewish talent in trade and commerce and the creation of wealth. There has never been anti-Semitism in China as the Confucian culture created a very favourable climate for Jews either to settle in China, trade along the Silk Road and even seek and find shelter in Shanghai during the dark days of the Holocaust. Israel was among the first nations who granted recognition to the People's Republic as early as January 1950. In recent years there has been a growing interest in Confucianism in Israel

where two Confucius Institutes now attract much interest on the part of students and laymen alike. (Shai, 2016).

Can China be good friends with Israel and the Arab world at the same time?

Before discussing the question of what role China can play in alleviating the Arab-Israel conflict and under which umbrella it can do so, we have to ask whether China can be good friends with both parties in the Middle East so that it can exert influence to contribute to a resolution of this conflict. China has a long-standing friendship with the Palestinians, being among the first to grant recognition to the newly established Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964. It also granted the PLO mission in Beijing an embassy status. After many years of open hostility towards Israel, China and Israel finally established full diplomatic relations in January 1992. Although relations were slow to develop, since 2010 all levels of interaction have been flourishing with trade reaching over 11 billion US\$ in 2017. (Goldstein et al, 2016). However, it must be noted that on certain key issues that Israel holds dear, China's policy has been to support the Palestinian side. Recently it opposed the American act of moving its embassy to Jerusalem and recognizing it as the capital of Israel. It clearly supports the two-state solution with the Palestinian state existing side by side with Israel along the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem the capital of Palestine. It calls Abbas the President of Palestine and not

merely of the Palestinian Authority. It supports the resolution of the Palestinian refugees' problem according to the United Nations resolutions. China does not share Israel's policy towards Iran. For China, that country is a major source of investment opportunity, energy, it represents a key point on China's BRI land route and is the only Middle Eastern country that considers the US an enemy. Given the multi-faceted value Iran offers to China, it is no surprise that Beijing belittles the threats emanating from Tehran calling for the destruction of the Jewish state. (Shichor, 2018).

Israel does not object to the Chinese attempts to maintain close ties with the Arab world including the Palestinians. It fully understands the pragmatic nature of China's Middle Eastern policy. Israel's relations with China are not based on sentimentality, but on clear and visible mutual interests. (Medzini, 2015). One of these interests is to have China help Israel find ways to closer dealings with non-Arab Moslem states in the Middle East such as Iran and Turkey and help Israel cement its growing covert ties with a number of Arab states in the Middle East, chief among them Saudi Arabia and a number of Gulf states. Furthermore, Israel has maintained close ties with a number of Central Asian republics that began soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. All of them are Moslem nations that belong to the 57 strong Islamic Bloc nations in the United Nations. Their flourishing ties with

Israel have demonstrated that they have learned how to balance their identities as Moslem nations while maintaining close cultural and even military ties with Israel. When China considers how Israel is perceived in the Muslim world, it might remember that Azerbaijan, for example, has managed to reach out to Israel while retaining its commitment to Islam and even to the Palestinian cause. Israel's ties with the Caucasus and Central Asian countries and the peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt show that countries can have relations with Israel and the Muslims without negative repercussions.

Why Should Israel and the Arabs turn to China for mediation?

There are a number of reasons why China could act as a mediator between Israel and a number of Arab countries, chiefly those who lie along the Silk Road, specifically Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and perhaps even Iran. Unlike the United States, Britain, France and even the Russian Federation, China has no colonial or imperial historic experience in the Middle East and therefore there are no bitter memories going back to European colonial and imperial times that are felt to this very day by the Arab states. America, Russia and the European Union have all tried their hands at seeking an Arab-Israel peace one way or another, and so far they have failed to achieve this lofty goal. China has wisely stayed away from proposing any peace plan of its own and has in fact kept away from Middle East

diplomatic efforts to diffuse the Arab-Israel conflict. A Chinese saying argues that the Middle East had become a graveyard of the super powers and China does not want to be part of this situation. It has too much to lose if it becomes involved in these efforts. Therefore, China can be seen by Israel and some Arab states as an impartial entity that will not tilt towards one side in the conflict, as the United States under the Trump Administration seems to be doing. (Medzini, 2015).

The Benefits for China

There is no doubt that a greater understanding between Israel and some Arab states and even the Palestinians under the umbrella of the Belt Road could provide China with a number of benefits. (Levkowitz, 2016). Chief among them is the protection of oil supply to China. Reduced tensions in the Middle East, and the lessening of the possibility of another Arab-Israel war would create greater stability in the region – one of the most important aspirations of China. (Selmier, 2018). The second benefit is the protection of Chinese investments in the Middle East. If we look only at the Chinese investments in Israel, that amount to billions of US dollars, we can see that China has an enormous need to protect its investments that include infrastructure, hi-tech companies and even consumer goods firms. If we take Israel as an example, Chinese companies are building new sections of two of Israel's major ports in Haifa and Ashdod. A Chinese company

has acquired Israel's largest food company called Tnuvah. Chinese firms are also building part of Tel Aviv's new subway and have dug a tunnel under Mount Carmel linking a major route from the south to northern Israel. Another benefit would be to expand China's trade in the region: a full or even partial resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict could free money from military spending to civilian needs thus more funds would be available for infrastructure in the region as well as increased FDI in China.

If China can succeed in even lessening tensions between Israel and some Arab states, it would achieve something that other powers, mainly the United States and the European Union have failed to achieve after decades of trying. This would enhance China's reputation as a global player and would increase its potential for international influence. It may also reduce the influence of the United States and the Russian Federation in the Middle East. China's ability to mediate between sworn enemies would enhance its diplomacy and it could be asked to play a role in other international conflicts.

The Risks for China

Some of China's perceived risks in entering the political fray of the Middle East derive from the belief that the conflict between the Jews and the Arabs is for the time being insoluble and investing a considerable effort in solving it could create problems for China. China worries that

important oil sources and access to the oil fields would become off-limits to China if some Arab countries would feel that China is tilting towards Israel. China is concerned that entering this complex region could endanger Chinese investments in the Arab states as well as in Israel that have grown considerably in recent years. Perhaps it could endanger tens of thousands of Chinese workers employed in Arab countries as well as in Israel (as we have seen in Libya and other Arab countries during the so-called Arab Spring). It could also run counter to the interests and desires of the United States, Russia and the European Union without providing China with any tangible achievement. Failure in resolving the Arab-Israel conflict could have some effect on the two new and highly strategic Chinese presence in the region – the ports of Djibouti and Piraeus in Greece.

How Can the Belt Road play a role in the amelioration of the Arab-Israel conflict? The Belt Road could provide a practical umbrella under which the parties could meet, be part of a major international project, share their experiences and above all get to better know each other under Chinese sponsorship. This is where the Belt Road Initiative, once it creates a working structure, institutions and organizations, could play an important role in bringing Israel and these Arab states together. Part of the problem facing the Arabs since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 is how to deal with Israel in such a way

that would never be made public and could be denied at any time. This is necessary because the Arab street has been taught to fear and hate Israel in their schools and in the media since the Jewish State was founded. No room was given for Israel to exist within any borders. However, since the “Arab Spring”, it is no secret that the violent developments throughout the region, and the rise of Iran from the bloody civil war in Syria as well as steps toward a US withdrawal from the region has led Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf States to seek out Israel. In some cases, Israel is building on relations that developed shortly after the signing of the Oslo Agreements in the mid 1990’s when Israel maintained diplomatic presence in several Gulf States and even in Tunisia and Morocco. But these were shut down due to the collapse of the Oslo system and the second Gulf War, as well as the second Israeli war in Lebanon in 2006.

Thus, the ties exist at the top. These channels are working. But nothing has been done to redress the misconceptions of Israel among the general populations of the Arab states. Because the leaders fear the reaction of their people, they are reluctant to openly admit these or any ties with Israel. A similar situation exists between Israel and the Moslem nations of Asia – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. What is missing is a venue, an umbrella or a roof that can provide the right place and the right atmosphere for Israelis and Arabs to meet and get to know

each other better. This is where China can make an important contribution. This could occur under a proper Confucian ideological roof. Peace and harmony have always been a central doctrine in Confucianism as well as conflict resolution. But meetings by themselves are not enough. More is required, chiefly a common project under the overall umbrella of the Belt Road Initiative.

A Proposed Project – The Med-Persian Gulf Railway

For a number of years, Israeli planners have been examining the possibility of creating a land link from the Mediterranean Sea from the Israeli port of Haifa to the Persian Gulf. This can be achieved by constructing a railway from the Israel-Jordan border south of the Sea of Galilee going east through Jordan and Saudi Arabia to the Persian Gulf. The section linking Haifa with Jordan is already in existence and is playing a growing role in the economy of Jordan. In fact, Haifa has become Jordan's second sea port after Aqaba. Virtually all cargo destined to Jordan from Turkey and other eastern Mediterranean countries arrives in Haifa, where it is off loaded on trucks and then trucked to Jordan. The newly opened Valley of Jezreel Railway also links Haifa with the Jordanian border, some 60 kilometres to the east. The railway going through Jordan could link with a line going north to Damascus and south to Mecca and Medina. In fact, such a railway existed prior to and during the First World war, known as the Hejaz Railway linking

Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Ottoman and later Mandatory Palestine. This railway was made famous by Lawrence of Arabia who blew up bridges along the route in 1916 and 1917.

The benefits accruing to the Belt Road Initiative are not difficult to discern. They include another route from the Indian Ocean through the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea and Europe, entirely bypassing the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. It could even reduce the costs of shipping. China is now the foremost world leader when it comes to the construction of railways and speed trains, thus this project could be built relatively quickly. The costs have not yet been estimated but the project is feasible. It could also link Iran with the Mediterranean Sea by land through Saudi Arabia by passing Iraq and Syria. This rail link could also be of interest to Japan, South Korea and even India, offering them alternative routes to the Mediterranean Sea. Another possible project is to construct a railway line from Aqaba on the Red Sea linking this port city with Amman, and then hooking up with the Israeli line from the Jordanian border south of the Sea of Galilee to the port of Haifa or continuing north to Syria. This could complement another project that has been under discussion for many years: building a railway from the Israeli port city of Eilat on the Red Sea to the port of Ashdod on the Mediterranean Sea.

There could also be many objections on the part of many interested parties. Egypt would be very

unhappy to see the construction of a parallel link that could bypass the Suez Canal. The United States would be unhappy fearing that by this project China could increase its influence in the Middle East. The Arab countries along this route could also fear growing Chinese economic presence and influence in their midst. It is not hard to imagine that the Russian Federation will not be too happy to see the world's second largest economy embedding itself in the Middle East given Russia's rejuvenated presence in the Middle East with a strong military presence in Syria.

It appears that the benefits far outweigh the risks. One of the outcomes could be in the involvement of Israelis and Arabs in an unprecedented project that could help strengthen their economies. Since it is unlikely that there will be an Arab-Israel settlement in the near future, let alone an Israeli-Palestinian arrangement, one of the main outcomes could well be a rapprochement between Israel and a number of its Arab neighbours under Chinese aegis. This project could also by pass the intractable Palestinian issue and allow Israel and interested Arab countries to move ahead and build and strengthen their economies. This project could also open the Arab states to benefit from the so-called Israeli start-up nation, as China has been doing in the past quarter of a century.

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