China and the Palestinian Organizations

1964–1971

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I dedicate this book
to my beloved wife, Rosie, of blessed memory,
the central figure in my life over 50 years.

Prologue

In examining Sino-Palestinian relations, one must bear in mind that the People's Republic of China is the last great power to become involved in the Middle East. Its presence in the region may be described as a continuing struggle for its existence and recognition—a struggle which overall has remained marginal and symbolic. The only protagonist, however, in the region with whom the Chinese had, for a long period, steady and close relations is the Palestinian organizations, or "fidā'iyyūn" ("self-sacrificers" in Arabic) as they have come to be known and been referred to in this book. Of this, however, very little has been published.

This study had therefore been undertaken with the purpose of providing a clearer understanding of the relations between China and the Palestinian organizations and their development during the period 1964–1971, beginning with the first contacts between China and the Palestinians and ending with China's disenchantment with them. The author hopes that this study will also serve both as a treatise for the understanding of China's relations with the Arab world, and as a case study of the crypto relations between China and any "revolutionary" group.

After introducing the two major protagonists involved in this study, i.e., China and the Palestinian organizations, and presenting the pre-1964 Chinese stand *vis-à-vis* the Palestine question, this study falls into three parts: The first describes China's relations with the PLO under Aḥmad Shuqayī in the period 1964–1967; the second describes China's relations with the fidā'iyyūn movement during the period 1967–1971; the third examines an important aspect in Sino-Palestinian relations: Chinese military assistance in arms supplies and training. The study ends with some

general conclusions on the nature of the Sino-Palestinian relations. In referring to the Palestinian organizations in this period, the author has preferred the term "fidā'iyyūn" used among the Palestinians themselves, rather than "resistance," "commandos," "guerrillas," etc.

The main purpose of this study is to examine two hypotheses: First, that the development in China's relations with the Palestinian organizations were mainly a function of the twofold policy of China on the Middle East in particular and the Third World in general; and second, that it was the reserved attitude of the Soviet Union toward the Palestinian organizations that ultimately provided the opportunity for China and the Palestinians to consolidate their relations with each other.

As to the nature and extent of available information, it should be noted that because of the characteristic reticence on the part of both protagonists—the Chinese and the Palestinians—regarding their own affairs, and the covert nature of the relations between them, very little information is available from either side. This, of course, had set limits on this study. Another obstacle is the bias and tendency toward exaggeration, which characterizes most of the sources describing Sino-Palestinian relations.

Keep in mind this study examines a specific period in history, and China's role in the Middle East is now fundamentally different from what it was in the 1970s. There has been more scholarship written about subject ever since.[1]

This book is based on my MA thesis, under the same title, I submitted to the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University in Spring 1977, under the generous direction of Professor Shimon Shamir and supervision of DR. Aaron Klieman. The intellectual foundation of the book derived from many years of study and research at the Shiloah Center at Tel Aviv University (the precursor of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies), where I served

[1] For more recent studies, see, e.g., Rafael Israeli, "The People's Republic of China and the PLO: From Honeymoon to Conjugal Routine," *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, Augustus Richard Norton and Martin Greenberg, eds. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern University Press, 1989), pp. 138–165; Roie Yellinek, "Chinese-Palestinian Relations: What's Really Going On?" *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, February 6, 2018 (No. 733); Guy Burton, "China and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," *Dans Confluences Méditerranée*, 2019/2 (No. 109), pp. 147–160; Guy Burton, *China and Middle East Conflicts: Responding to War and Rivalry from the Cold War to the Present* (Routledge, 2022).

during the 1970s as a research fellow, ran its Palestinian Desk, and contributed to its Middle East Record publication.[2]

I later attended the University of Chicago (PhD, Department of History, 1993), and my doctoral dissertation was published shortly after, and its Turkish translation just recently.[3]

I am now an associate member of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, at the University of Chicago.[4] Over the last 33 years, I have been active in building bridges of understanding and reconciliation across the Arab-Israeli and Jewish-Muslim conflict divides. I founded and have been running the Illinois-based Middle East Peace Network (MEPN), a non-profit, ambitious, global private diplomacy organization,[5] and publishing books and articles on peace-making and reconciliation in the Middle East.[6]

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my beloved wife, Rosie, of blessed memory, the central figure in my life over 50 years. Without her constant help and support, it would have been impossible for me to complete this challenging study.

[2] See, e.g., Y. Har-El, "The Palestinian Organizations, 1969–1970," "The United States and the Middle East, 1969–1970," and "The Arab-Israeli Conflict in World Affairs, 1969–1970," *Middle East Record*, Vol. 5 (1969–1970), the Shiloah Center of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1977).

[3] See Shai Har-El, *Struggle for Domination in the Middle East: The Ottoman-Mamluk War, 1485–1491* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995); Shai Har-El, *Ortadoğu'da Hakimiyet Mücadelesi: Osmanlı Memlük Savaşı, 1485–1491* (Istanbul: Alfa, 2019).

[4] See https://cmes.uchicago.edu/content/associate-members.

[5] Visit www.MEPNetwork.org.

[6] See, e.g., Shai Y. Har-El, *Where Islam and Judaism Join Together: A Perspective on Reconciliation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Shai Y. Har-El, *In Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace: An Urgent Call for a New Approach to Middle East Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); "A Quest for Peace," and "An Open Letter to My Muslim Friends," in http://www.mepnetwork.org/online-resources/publications; "From Peace Process to Actual Peace," *World Policy*, April 3, 2012, *in* https://worldpolicy.org/2012/04/03/from-peace-process-to-actual-peace; "Sharing Land for Peace: Revisiting Israel-Palestine's Confederate Future," *World Policy*, February 5, 2013, in http://worldpolicy.org/2013/02/05/sharing-land-for-peace-revisiting-israel-palestine-confederate-future; "Diagnosing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *World Policy*, February 20, 2014, in http://worldpolicy.org/2014/02/20/diagnosing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict.

Transliteration

For the transliteration of Arabic words and names, with the exceptions of a few personal and geographical names, the system set forth below will be followed:

b	stands for	ب	q	stands for	ق
d	stands for	د	r	stands for	ر
ḍ	stands for	ض	s	stands for	س
dh	stands for	ذ	ṣ	stands for	ص
f	stands for	ف	sh	stands for	ش
gh	stands for	غ	t	stands for	ت
h	stands for	ه	ṭ	stands for	ط
ḥ	stands for	ح	th	stands for	ث
j	stands for	ج	w (or ū)	stands for	و
k	stands for	ك	y (or ī)	stands for	ى
kh	stands for	خ	z	stands for	ز
l	stands for	ل	ẓ	stands for	ظ
m	stands for	م	’	stands for	ء
n	stands for	ن	‘	stands for	ع

Long vowels have been marked by a superscribed line: ā, ē, ī, ō, ū. The *hamza* has not been marked, if it occurs at the beginning of a word. The *tā’ marbūta* that occurs at the end of certain nouns and adjectives is not shown. The geminated consonant *shadda* is indicated by a double letter.

For the transcription of Chinese words and names, the author has followed the spelling most often found English publications.

Contents

Part I China's Relations with Shuqayrī's PLO, 1964–1967 1

1 China Becomes Committed to The Palestine Question 3
1.1 Expressions of Support for Arab Cause in Palestine 4
1.2 Chinese Reaction to Creation of the PLO 8

2 Establishment of Ties Between China and the PLO 11
2.1 Shuqayrī's Visit to Peking 13
2.2 PLO Mission Established in Peking 17
2.3 Shuqayrī Creates a Commotion About Chinese-PLO Links 19
2.4 Discord with the UAR 21
2.5 Chinese Links with Fatḥ 22

3 China's Influence over the PLO 25
3.1 Chinese Military Assistance to PLO Begins 26
3.2 PLO Sides with China in the Sino-Soviet Conflict 28
3.3 Arab Criticism of PLO's Communist Links 33
3.4 Shuqayrī Continues Collaboration with China 35

4 China, the PLO, and the Six Day War 39
4.1 China Promises "Support" 39
4.2 China Uses the War to Discredit the Soviet Union 41
4.3 Shaqayrī Expects China to Rebuild PLA 43

Part II China's Relations with the Fidā'iyyūn Movement, 1967–1971 45

5 China Forges Links with Fatḥ 47
5.1 Dual Linkage with Fatḥ and PLO 49
5.2 China's Attention to Fatḥ Deepens 51

6 China's Turning to Overt Ties with Fatḥ-PLO (Summer 1969) 57
6.1 Reactivation of Ties with PLO 58
6.2 Fatḥ Receives Chinese Recognition 60

7 China's Counteraction Against Soviet Move Toward the Fidā'iyyūn: (Fall 1969–Spring 1970) 63
7.1 Soviet Moves Annoy China 63
7.2 ʿArafāt's Visit to Peking 68

8 Heightened Chinese Interest in the Fidā'iyyūn (Summer–Fall 1970) 73
8.1 Chinese Support to Counter American Peace Initiative 74
8.2 Chinese Nominal Involvement in Civil War 81
8.3 PFLP-PDFLP Wing Receives Chinese Attention 82
8.4 Chinese Assistance to aṣ-Ṣāʿiqa 86

9 China's Disenchantment with the Fidā'iyyūn 89
9.1 Moral Support Against Jordanian "Reactionaries" 89
9.2 China's Criticism of the Fidā'iyyūn 91
9.3 China's Support in Decline 94
9.4 China's Relative Moderation at the UN 99

Part III The Nature and Extent of Chinese Military Support 101

10 Arms and Material Assistance 103
10.1 Types of Supplies 105
10.2 Local Logistical Problems of Delivery 106
10.3 China's Internal Limitations and Considerations 108
10.4 Other Negative Aspects of Chinese Aid 111

11 Military and "Political" Training 115
11.1 Training in China 116
11.2 Chinese Training in Arab Countries 118
11.3 Effects of Chinese Training 121
11.4 Chinese "Volunteers" 121

Epilogue 123

Appendix A 125

Appendix B 127

Appendix C 133

Appendix D 135

Appendix E 137

Appendix F 139

Appendix G 141

Appendix H 145

Appendix I 147

Appendix J 149

Appendix K 151

Appendix L 153

Bibliography 159

Index 167

About the Author

Shai Har-El is a scholar, historian, educator, writer, poet, activist, humanitarian, and businessman. He is the founder/president of the Middle East Peace Network (MEPN), and a fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies (CMES) at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Struggle for Domination in the Middle East: The Ottoman-Mamluk War, 1485–1491* (Brill Leiden, 1995), and its Turkish translation, Ortadoğu'da Hakimiyet Mücadelesi: Osmanlı Memlük Savaşı 1485–1491 (Alpha Yayınları, 2019); *Where Islam and Judaism Join Together: A Perspective on Reconciliation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); *In Search of Israeli-Palestinian Peace: An Urgent Call for a New Approach to Middle East Peace* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and many articles and essays on the Arab-Israeli conflict and a proactive non-governmental approach to Middle East peace. Shai Har-El is also the author of several poetry books.

Abbreviations

Abbreviation of Terms

AAJA	Afro-Asian Journalists' Association
AAPSO	Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization
AAWB	Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau
ALF	Arab Liberation Front
ANM	Arab Nationalist Movement
CCAAS	Chinese Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
CPIFA	Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs
FLN	(Algerian) Front de Libération Nationale
FLOSY	Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen
NCNA	New China News Agency ("Hsinhua")
NFLSV	National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam
PDFLP	Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PFLOAG	Popular Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLA	Palestine Liberation Army
PLO	Pales tine Liberation Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China (This abbreviation is used only when it appears originally in a quotation)
SCAAS	Soviet Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity
UAR	United Arab Republic

Abbreviation of Sources

AP	Associated Press
BBC/EE	Summary of World Broadcasts—Monitoring reports of East European broadcasts, published in English and translated by the British Broadcasting Corporation
BBC/FE	As above for broadcasts from the Far East
BBC/ME	As above for broadcasts from the Middle East and Africa
BBC/SU	As above for broadcasts from the Soviet Union
DPA	West German Press Agency
DR	Daily Report—Monitoring reports of broadcasts from the Middle East and Africa, published in English and translated by the United States Foreign Broadcast Information Service
IBA	Israel Broadcasting Association ("Kol Yisrael")
IMB	Itim Mizrah News Agency—Tamtzit Shidurim; Israeli monitoring service of Middle East broadcasts; published in Hebrew translation (until 1970)
IMO	Itim Mizrah News Agency—Selections from Arab broadcasts and press on the fidā'iyyūn activities; published in Hebrew translation (in 1969–1970)
IMQY	Itim Mizrah News Agency—Qitzur Yediot; Selections from the Arab press, published in Hebrew translation (since 1971)
IMTP	Itim Mizrah News Agency—Teleprinters; Israeli monitoring reports of Arab broadcasts; published in Hebrew translation.
INA	Iraqi News Agency
KCNA	(North) Korean Central News Agency
LNA	Libyan News Agency
MENA	(Egyptian) Middle East News Agency
NCNA	New China News Agency
R.	Radio
RAW	Record of the Arab World,—Monthly, English version, published by the Research and Publication House, Beirut (since 1969)
SANA	Syrian Arab News Agency
SCMP	Survey of China Mainland Press—Selections from Chinese press; published in English and translated by the American Consulate General in Hong Kong
UPI	United Press International

VoCC	Voice of the Central Committee—A studio affiliated to Radio Baghdad; broadcasting on behalf of the Central Committee of the PLO
VoF	Voice of Fatḥ—A studio affiliated to Radio Cairo; broadcasting on behalf of Fatḥ
VoP	Voice of Palestine—A studio affiliated to Radio Cairo; broadcasting on behalf of the PLO

Introduction

China and the Middle East: Dual Approach

Chinese policy in the Middle East—or from the Chinese point of view, West Asia—during the years 1964–1971, was largely an application of "Mao Tse-tung Military Thought" combined with a reflection of Chinese policy in the Third World.

In its struggle against "US Imperialism"—Peking's "main enemy"—and also later, against "Social Imperialism" (a Chinese reference to the USSR), China used Maoist "united-front" tactics. One of the fundamental tenets of this technique was China's dual approach in its endeavors to unite under its own leadership every possible force in the Third World, in an "international united front" against the US and the Soviet Union. This involved conventional diplomatic and commercial relations with established governments, i.e., "united front from above," on the one hand, and crypto-diplomatic relations with revolutionary groups or so-called national liberation movements, i.e., "united front from below," on the other. These two approaches had been practiced simultaneously but, since the two have frequently been contradictory to each other, China had alternately shifted its emphasis from one approach to the other as is evident from the tactics it had followed in dealing with the Middle East.[1]

[1] This thesis is elaborated upon in the following excellent articles of W.A.C. Adie: "Peking's Revised Line," *Problems of Communism*, XXI, No. 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1972), pp. 54–68; "China's West Asian Strategy," paper presented at a conference on "China and the World Community" held at the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Melbourne, June 10–12, 1972.

In the years following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the new Communist leaders had no interest in the Middle East and almost no trade or other ties in the area, being then preoccupied with domestic consolidation of power, the Korean War, and other pressing problems.

In 1954–1955, China began courting the Third World nations with the intention of forming an "international united front from above," this reflecting a shift in China's foreign policy from a militant and uncompromising line—characterizing its isolation period—to a new, moderate, and conciliatory one. Thus, in April 1955, at the Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian states, China made its first diplomatic contact with the Arabs.[2] The promise of full support for the Arab stand against Israel, announced by the Chinese leaders at that conference, proved fruitful: The following year—1956—Egypt, Syria and Yemen established diplomatic relations with China while, at the same time, trade and cultural pacts were concluded between China and each of these countries.[3]

In late 1957, the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization (AAPSO)—one of the main channels of Chinese propaganda and influence—established its headquarters in Cairo. Recognizing Egypt as a meeting point of Abdel Nasser's noted "three circles" (Arab, African, and Muslim)[4] and Abdel Nasser as an important "national-bourgeois" leader in the Third World, China placed its Middle East center of activity in Cairo. Chinese positions and moves in the following years were primarily dictated by the state of its relations with Egypt.

While, however, conventional diplomatic activity and establishment of ties with Arab governments preoccupied the Chinese at this time, they did

[2] During the conference Pres. Abdel Nasser met with Chinese Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Chou En-lai, who promised to intercede with the Soviets to obtain Soviet arms for Egypt—a move which later that year led to Egypt's indirect acquisition of Soviet arms through Czechoslovakia and the consequent breakthrough of the Soviet union into the Middle East.

[3] For accounts on the development of Sino-Arab bilateral relations in the first phase, see Joseph E. Khalili, *Communist China's Interaction with the Arab Nationalists since the Bandung Conference* (New York: Exposition Papers, 1970), pp. 93–115; Joseph E. Khalili, "Sino-Arab Relations," *Asian Survey*, VIII, No. 8 (Aug. 1968), pp. 678–690; George S. Masannat, "Sino-Arab Relations," *Asian Survey*, VI, No, 4, (Apr. 1966), pp. 216–226; Meron Medzini, "Chinese Penetration in the Middle East," *New Outlook*, VI, No, 9 (1963), pp. 16–28; "China, the Arab World and Africa—A Factual Survey, 1954–1964," in *The Mizan Newsletter*, Special China Issue, VI, No. 5 (May 1964).

[4] This was referred to by Abdel Nasser in his *Philosophy of the Revolution*.