

China and Israel and the 'Period of Silence,' 1955-1978

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ABSTRACT

In the history of Sino-Israeli relations, this period (from 1955 to 1978) is often treated by scholars as a kind of “period of silence,” when China and Israel had no contact with one another. The lack of contact between the two countries during this period has translated into a lack of research about this period. My research, in contrast, digs deep into the history of this period, exploring the little contact that did occur and the positions of the two countries toward each other. Besides exploring unexplored history, this paper challenges the claim that this “period of silence” in Sino-Israeli relations (1955-1978) was as uneventful as has been suggested. I have two objectives. First, I intend to show that there was indeed some contact after the Bandung Conference. The Chinese government and the Israeli Communist Party, which was represented in Israel’s parliament but not in its government, maintained contact throughout the late 1950s. It was only when China and the Soviet Union broke with one another that this contact came to an end. Yet even after this contact ceased, there was an exchange of letters between the two countries’ governments in the early 1960s. My second objective is to show that while all Sino-Israeli contact ended after this anticlimactic correspondence, the two countries may have been silent with each other but they were not silent about each other. Accordingly, from the mid-1960s, China’s actions in the Middle East affected Israel directly, as China became the principal non-Arab supporter of Israel’s main non-state enemy, the PLO, and Israel, in response, ended its longstanding support for Chinese membership in the United Nations (UN) and began supporting Taiwan’s claim to be China’s official representative. The purpose of this paper is to correct the neglect of Sino-Israeli relations in academia from the mid-1950s to the end of 1970s, and to make a description of a more complicated and eventful Sino-Israeli relationship than people generally know.

Keywords: *China, Diplomacy, History, Israel, Middle East, Sino-Israeli Relations*

1. INTRODUCTION

Before 1955, the relationship between China and Israel was promising: it seemed the two countries had established comprehensive diplomatic relations. Chinese and Jews both had a common heritage of suffering at the hands of the West and no tradition of mutual hostility. Although they had rarely encountered one another in their histories, when they did, as in Shanghai in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their interactions were usually positive. It was against this background that, in the early 1950s, Israeli and Chinese diplomats held friendly discussions in Burma, culminating in the visit of an Israeli goodwill delegation to China in 1955[1]. But after this initial period of promising relations, the Bandung Conference—at which the Third World formed its own bloc in the Cold War—and the Suez Crisis—in which China sided with Egypt—brought about a turning point in their relationship. Whereas China had originally seen Israel as a victim of Western imperialism, from the mid-1950s, China saw Israel as an accomplice of Western imperialism. For more than two decades afterwards, Beijing’s opposition prevented a Chinese relationship with Israel and attempts at contact between the two countries

were one-sided, initiated by Israel but not reciprocated by China.

2. BACKGROUND: CHINA AND ISRAEL BEFORE THEIR ESTRANGEMENT, 1947-1955

The history between Israel and China prior to the “period of silence” was, for the most part, one of friendly gestures on the Israeli side and a receptive but not enthusiastic response on the Chinese side. In 1947, before the People’s Republic of China was established, the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek abstained from the UN’s vote on Resolution 181, neither supporting nor rejecting this measure to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state[2]. After the Jews of Palestine declared statehood and successfully defended it against several invading Arab armies, the Republic of China, in March 1949, recognized Israel and supported its admission to the UN[3]. But this government would soon be overthrown. Within a year and a half of Israel’s founding in May 1948, the People’s Republic of China, in October 1949, also entered history as a new country. Just months later, in January 1950, Israel

became the first country in the Middle East to recognize the People's Republic of China[4].

The Israeli government was not communist, but, unlike the American government, it was not fundamentally hostile to Communists. Communists serving in the Israeli parliament openly celebrated the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power[5]. The Israeli Communist Party even invited a member from the Chinese Communist Party to attend its eleventh congress[5]. Even though Mao declined on the grounds that it was too early to send a delegate, the atmosphere at the Israeli communists' conference was, as Aron Shai described it, "imbued with the spirit of the Chinese success story[5]." Shmuel Mikunis, who represented the Israel Communist Party in the Knesset, took the occasion to applaud the Chinese Revolution as a victory over the imperialist conspiracy in East Asia[5]. The Israeli communists made clear that they considered China a model to follow to break the rule of Western imperialism[5].

On the intergovernmental level, early Sino-Israeli relations were more complicated. Until it reached a dead end in the mid-1950s, the path early Sino-Israeli relations followed was generally smooth, tending in the direction of diplomatic relations, but there were still a few bumps along the way. One of them was an Israeli action in 1950, just months after Israel recognized the People's Republic of China. In June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, lighting the fuse that ignited the Korean War. The next month found Israel abandoning its previous position of non-interference, declaring its support for South Korea and the United States in the Korean War and siding against China as a result[6]. Yet later Israeli action seemed to remedy the strain caused by this measure. In December of 1950, Israeli foreign minister Moshe Sharrett met with a Chinese diplomat in the UN[7]. In the meetings that followed, Israel proposed a plan for greater Chinese involvement in the United Nations. China was pleased with this plan. Israeli support for China at the UN seemed to mend their relationship, proving that Israel's alignment with the United States in the Korean War did not reduce, much less end, Chinese openness to Israel.

The initial promise of Sino-Israeli relations was enhanced by regular and friendly meetings in Burma between the two countries' highest diplomats in Rangoon, David Hacoheh and Yao Zhongming. These meetings demonstrated both countries' desire for a closer relationship, with the result that an Israeli delegation even visited China in February of 1955 to discuss trade and diplomatic relations. On this occasion, the Chinese under-secretary of trade even said, "The Chinese people and their government are great friends of Israel and the Jewish people," which directly suggested a bright future relationship between the two countries[8].

3. THE PERIOD OF SILENCE BEGINS

But the friendly gestures and contacts that hinted at the establishment of full diplomatic relations between China and Israel were soon followed by a turning point in the

relationship: Israel's exclusion from the Bandung Conference of April 1955. This conference had been assembled by the countries of the Third World that shared both a position of non-alignment in the Cold War and a history of oppression at the hands of the West. Many of the participating countries and several of the conference's sponsors had welcomed Israel's inclusion, but the Arab League had made clear that either the Arabs or Israel would be at the conference, not both. This made compromise impossible, forcing China to choose between the Arab states or Israel[8]. Even though China was not active in making the decision to exclude Israel from the conference, it still stood on the side of the Arabs and of the Muslim countries that had joined in organizing the conference, who had all united against Israel. All things being equal, China may not have wanted to oppose Israel, but the Bandung Conference forced it to choose the Arabs in response to their ultimatum: Israel or us. China's choice of the Arab states over Israel was not limited to the Bandung Conference; it extended to Chinese policy toward Israel for decades afterwards. The Bandung Conference was only the beginning. The Arab world had more people, more influence, more resources, and, therefore, more to offer. China, like India, chose the Arab world, and removed the prospect of Sino-Israeli relations.

4. ALIENATION BEGINS

Following the Bandung Conference, the relationship between China and Israel further deteriorated, sinking to an even lower depth after China publicly and actively expressed hostility toward Israel[9]. China began drawing closer to the Arab states, especially Egypt, which officially recognized the People's Republic of China in May 1956.

Meanwhile, relations between the Chinese and Israeli governments worsened thanks to the Suez Crisis, the second war between Israel and an Arab state. In this conflict pitting Israel, France, and Britain against Egypt, China supported Egypt against the two European imperialist powers and their Israeli ally. The breach between Israel and China that opened at the Bandung Conference now widened into a gap that would not be bridged for decades. Israel's association with the imperialists in the Suez Crisis, even though its goals differed from theirs, changed the Chinese perception of Israel. China now saw and spoke of Israel as an outpost of Western imperialism[9].

Despite the break in intergovernmental Sino-Israeli interaction after Bandung and the worsening of Sino-Israeli relations after the Suez Crisis, contacts continued between the Israeli Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party[5]. One episode in 1957 illustrates the continued friendship between the ICP and China. That year, at an international communist conference in Moscow, Mao met with Mikunis to request his help[10]. At the time, the Soviet Union had imposed anti-Semitic policies, including the prohibition of Jewish and Hebrew publications[10]. Shmuel Mikunis spoke about the prohibition to Mao, who expressed his sympathy to for the

Soviet Jewish victims of these obvious anti-Semitic acts[10]. Mao also spoke with interest about the Jews who have lived in China over the ages[10]. According to Gang Lin, Mao then expressed his opposition to these policies to the leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Communism[10], and, the following year, Soviet censorship of Jewish publications was relaxed[10]. Furthermore, in 1959, Zvi Bernstein visited China officially for the tenth anniversary of the Communist Revolution[5].

After the numerous, friendly, interactions between the Chinese Communist Party and the Israeli Communist Party, their friendly relationship broke because of the Sino-Soviet split. The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev began to de-Stalinize the Soviet Union. This was a divergence between the Chinese communist ideals and the Soviet communist ideals. The Israeli Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party differed on which communist ideals to follow, and the ICP followed the Soviets; Mikunis came back from the congress of communist parties, where he publicly attacked the Chinese version of the interpretation of communist ideals[5]. The Israeli Communist Party soon viewed the Chinese interpretation as distortion of the actual communist ideals[5].

In addition, in the Sino-Indian War in October-November 1962 where Britain and the US sided with India against China, Israel took the same stand as the two countries and supported India as well by arming India, which further indicated Israel's westernization stance[11]. Arabs also stood on the Indian side, but Arabs' action helped China to recognize the need to deepen the Sino-Arabic relations because China wanted to cooperate with the Arabs for their resources[12].

The two nations drifted further, but ambiguities exist in the relationship. In August of 1963, Chou-En-Lai sent all heads of government, including Israel's, a letter concerning nuclear disarmament[13]. In turn, Israel's prime minister, Levi Eshkol, not only responded eagerly to the Chinese letter, but also expressed, to the Chinese embassy in Stockholm, Israel's desire for friendly relations with the People's Republic of China[9]. Eshkol did not get a reply, so he sent another letter to Chou-En-Lai on 16 July 1965[9]. The second letter invited Beijing to send a trade delegation to Israel as a preparation for normalised relations[9]. However, the second letter went unanswered as well. In conclusion, whether China sent the letter by accident or on intention remained a mystery.

What made the relationship worse was China's active actions to support Palestine. After the Sino-Israeli relationship deteriorated, China now empathizes with Palestine as victims of the Western Imperialism. In March 1964, there was a mass rally held at Beijing, protesting the United States because the promised return of the Palestinian refugees to their home could not be achieved[14]. China also first aided the al-Fateh, then after the Palestinian Liberation Organization has been established, China became the first non-Arab state to acknowledge the Palestine Liberation Organization and thus the Chinese support for Palestine has just become public[15]. It is worth noting that, although Israel was the

first country in the Middle East to recognize the People's Republic of China, the acknowledgement was not mutual. When China recognized the PLO in 1964, it still had not recognized Israel, and indeed, would not do so until 1992.

In fact, not only did China never acknowledge Israel as an official state, it also spoke of wiping Israel off the map[16]. Lin Biao, a leader of the Chinese Communist Party, declared Chinese determination to help the Palestinians to reconquer their homeland to the Lebanese newspaper Al-Nahar[5]. China attempted to make Palestine more integral to the Arab world, just as Zhou Enlai stated[5].

The relationship between PLO and China was enhanced when a PLO delegation led by its chairman Ahmad al-Shukeiri visited China on March 22, 1965[5]. They were being welcomed by enthusiastic crowds, waving flags and beating drums and gongs[17]. The delegation was being welcomed by the Chinese political leaders: Mao Tse-tung, Chou-En-Lai, and Liu Shao Chi[17]. The delegation attended a mass public rally of 100,000 people or more[17]. Mao also greeted the delegation with an earnest speech. Mao related the current situation of the Palestinians with the Chinese communists, suggesting that the Palestinians should have a greater sense of ethnic pride among themselves[17]. Mao also stated that although the Chinese do support Palestine, ultimately, Palestinians should depend upon themselves for success in warfares[17]. Shukeiri also signed a pact which would last until 1971, indicating that China will support the PLO economically, diplomatically, and militarily[17]. Shukeiri also expressed gratitude toward China, claiming that "the Palestinians should feel grateful not to other Arabs but to the gallant and generous Chinese people, who helped our revolution movement long before the Arabs recognized the PLO[18]."

Then in 1965, Israel retaliated against the People's Republic of China at the UN because of the Chinese support for the PLO. Whereas before Israel had voted against granting Taiwan's seat in the UN to the People's Republic of China, now Israel voted in favor of Taiwan. The change in Israel's actions definitely demonstrated the deterioration of the relationship. Taiwan and Israel got closer. After Israel voted in favor of Taiwan, the Taiwanese representative stood up and said to Mordechai Arbel, "you saved us.[18]"

On May 20, 1966, Shukeiri confirmed publicly in Gaza that Peking continually supported arms and training[19]. In 1967, an Israeli military commander also stated that at Gaza and el-Arish, "a large quantity of Chinese arms and including anti-tank and anti-vehicle artillery, decontamination chemicals, carloads of poison gas" have been found[19]. In fact, by 1967, the Palestinians were almost using Chinese weapons exclusively[20].

China also supported Palestine verbally. On May 25, 1967, the Peking People's Daily further reported that over ten thousand people attended a rally in Peking "to voice their resolute support for the struggle of the Palestinians and other Arab people against US imperialism and its tool of aggression, Israel.[21]" After the Arab defeat of the Six-Day War, China backed up the Arabs in the radio by

stating that the Arab community has the support of the “700 million Chinese and the revolutionary peoples of the entire world.[21]” Chou wrote to Shukeiri later and even urged him to not surrender, but to act like the Vietnamese who fought “on unflinchingly to final victory.[21]”

In addition to supplying Palestine militarily and verbally, China also provided military training to Palestinian military officials. A letter that was being discovered by Haaretz, dated March 26th but with no year shown, documented that four units of Palestinian Liberation Organization were being urged to send military officials to a Nanking military school to receive an intensive summer commander’s training.

In the early 1970s, Sino-Israeli hostility relationship began to cool very slightly. Chinese supported the PLO less than before while Israel supported China’s admission to the United Nations in 1971[22]. Also, the United States, Israel’s main ally and China’s main enemy, recognized China in 1971 and Washington and Beijing opened a new chapter in their relationship.

While the Sino-Soviet split had ended the Israeli Communist Party’s relations with China, it also, almost decades later, renewed Sino-Israeli relations. As a result of the Sino-Soviet split, China lost its main weapons supplier. China now needed a new source for military supplies. No one else could supply China with the advanced weapons it needed. The only option left for China was to turn to Israel and to make the most of a contact with Shaul Eisenberg, who would be the man who brought about the renewal of Sino-Israeli contacts[23].

5. THE MAN WHO WAS THE BRIDGE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND CHINA

Shaul Eisenburg was an Austrian-Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who settled in Israel in the late 1960s. An entrepreneur who started his business in Vietnam, he later founded Israel’s largest holding company, Israel Corporations.

After the death of Mao in 1976 and the changes in the Chinese economy that followed, Eisenburg was eager to enter the Chinese market in the post-Mao era. For this reason, he met with China’s ambassador in Austria[24] to whom he made clear that he was willing to act as the connection between China and Israel[24]. When he visited China at the invitation of the Chinese Council of the International Trade, further opportunities arose for him to spread this message[24]. On his trip, he repeated his message that he could serve as a connection between Israel and China while speaking to several senior officials, among them the ministers of industry and finance and the deputy prime minister[24].

One of these was Jiang Zeming, the later president and a deputy minister in charge of the military trade at that time. Jiang Zeming and Eisenburg became friends amid China’s need for weapons in its conflict with Vietnam in 1979, so Jiang and Eisenburg arranged for Israel to sell weapons to China[24].

Thanks to Eisenburg’s efforts, an Israeli Military of Defense delegate visited China, taking Eisenburg’s private plane[24]. Sino-Israeli contact was further encouraged by Egyptian-Israeli peace. If the largest Arab country could make peace with Israel, then secret Sino-Israeli relations would not be so scandalous in the Arab world, if discovered. To preserve this secrecy, Israeli visitors to China used fake identities. Soon, China became Israeli’s largest arms market, following the downfall of the Shah of Iran in 1979[25]. Weapons sales and contacts continued in secret into the 1980s and paved the way to the full diplomatic relations China and Israel established in 1992.

6. CONCLUSION

The “period of silence” is often neglected by the historians investigating the development of diplomatic ties between China and Israel. Despite the silence of historians and scholars, some communication did happen during this period. But more significantly, as we have learned, the actions taken by China and Israel have a direct impact on each other. This period, therefore, is more complex than it has generally been considered. For example, the contacts between the Israeli and Chinese Communist Party proved that there were still contacts between the two countries. They also demonstrated that the Israeli Communist Party did not play a major role in the Israeli politics to influence the Israeli diplomatic direction. The letter incident proved the complexity of this period. Whether the letter was sent by mistake or on purpose remained a mystery. If the letter was sent on purpose, the motivation behind China’s action to send the letter regarding nuclear disarmament remained unclear. China was still on the Arabs’ side but it would be a serious diplomatic mistake if Chou En Lai accidentally sent the letter to Israel’s prime minister, Levi Eshkol. As of now, Sino-Israeli relationship is optimistic, as can be seen in Figure 1 by the increasing number of Chinese tourists visiting Israel each year[26]. Looking back, it is amazing how the “period of silence” and the isolated contact contrast to the present day situation.

Chinese Tourists to Israel, 2014–2017

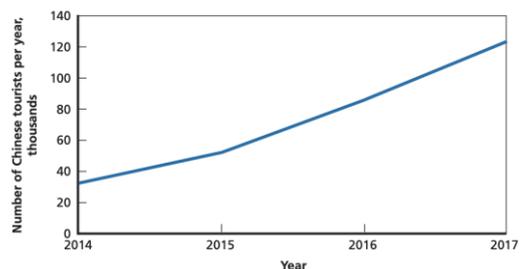


Figure 1 Chinese Tourists to Israel, 2014-2017

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