

Analysis

China's Palestinian moment is about global standing rather than peace

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Experts quash claims by Beijing that the Palestinian Authority president's visit will facilitate new Israeli-Palestinian peace talks

The Palestinian Authority president's imminent state visit to [China](#) is believed even by senior Palestinian officials to be aimed at bolstering Beijing's credentials on the world stage, rather than a serious attempt to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Mahmoud Abbas's four-day visit, which is scheduled to begin on Tuesday, has been described by Chinese state media as aimed at facilitating new talks predicated on a two-state solution to the decades-old conflict. It also comes on the heels of [Beijing's recent success](#) in brokering a detente between the Middle East's two major religious and geopolitical poles, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

But Palestinian and Israeli sources told the Guardian that Abbas' high-profile trip was more about burnishing the standing of China's president, Xi Jinping, as a global statesman, and diplomatic breakthroughs are not expected.

The last direct peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian officials, brokered by Washington, were held in 2014. Since then, the massive [growth of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank](#) has rendered a two-state solution all but impossible. Israeli politics has also continued a steady march rightwards, and Abbas's [corrupt and repressive Palestinian Authority](#) (PA) now has little legitimacy either at home or abroad.

Yet, in December, on the sidelines of a summit between China and Arab nations held in Saudi Arabia, Xi met Abbas and publicly pledged to "work for an early, just and durable solution to the Palestinian issue". The message was reiterated in April, when Chinese state media reported that the country's foreign minister, Qin Gang, had told his Israeli and Palestinian counterparts by phone that Beijing was willing to aid peace negotiations.

"This invite is ostensibly timed to coincide with the 35th anniversary of Palestinian-Chinese relations, which is a strange thing to mark, given China's longstanding support for the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) before that. This is about China showing its power and making the US look weak," said a senior PA source, who asked not to be named so that they could speak freely.

"Xi is meeting with lots of Arab leaders because he knows they are not happy with the US taking a back seat in the region ... Abbas has not been invited to see [US President Joe] Biden yet," they said.

Relations between China and Israel are currently cool : the latter is wary of China's economic ties to Iran, and Israeli officials have been increasingly frank with Beijing that the country remains closely aligned to the US on foreign policy.

That no Chinese invite has been extended to an Israeli delegation also suggests major diplomatic accomplishments will not be forthcoming from the trip ; at most, expectations include more Chinese sponsorship of the Palestinian fight for statehood in international forums, and modest increases in humanitarian funding pledges.

“Israel is in this strange Jekyll-and-Hyde scenario where we have divorced geopolitical considerations from economic relationships with many countries, including China. And honestly, when I asked senior officials what they make of this development, they don’t know the Chinese foreign minister’s name, or anything about the Global Security Initiative,” said Tuvia Gering, a researcher with the Guilford Glazer centre at Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies, referring to Beijing’s ambitious new foreign policy.

Despite seeming parallels, there is no official Palestinian position on the plight of [China’s persecuted Uyghur people](#). A delegation of Arab League diplomats visited Xinjiang province last week, a move widely criticised by rights groups as whitewashing Beijing’s human rights abuses against the Muslim minority.

In the last year or so, Israel, reportedly at the behest of the US, has denounced Beijing’s policies in Xinjiang at the UN. China has repeatedly criticised Israel’s occupation of the [Palestinian territories](#) in recent years and, in particular, military operations in the blockaded Gaza Strip.

“There are no conditions or foundations that make peace talks feasible at any time in the near future,” Gering said. “Beijing knows that. But it’s easy virtue signalling, positioning China as the global saviour of Islam despite what is happening to the Uyghurs.”

Bethan McKernan, in Jerusalem

P.-S.

- The Guardian. Sun 11 Jun 2023 18.27 BST : <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/11/chinas-palestinian-moment-is-about-global-standing-rather-than-peace>
- Bethan McKernan’s articles in The Guardian : <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/bethan-mckernan>
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