



Can China and Israel reconcile their interests in Syria?

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Abstract

Thousands of anti-Chinese Uyghur militants are tacitly supported by the West and fighting alongside western-backed rebel jihadists to topple the Syrian government. Following the U.S. airstrikes on Syrian government forces that are followed by Israel and likely other allies, this will provoke China to correspondingly support the Assad government to neutralize the Uyghur militants. Given foreign intervention prolong civil conflicts, this risks escalation of the Syrian war into a more violent, bloodier, and wider campaign. With the Mideast region in tatters from decades of misguided U.S. policy of violent regime change and democracy-promoting bombing campaigns, China's "Belt and Road" vision of building economic connectivity across Eurasia to reduce ungoverned space for terrorist actors to thrive, may be an alternative path to break this vicious cycle.

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Analysis

Sino-Israel relations have been warming up the past years, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wrapping up a recent warm¹ visit to Beijing in late March, timed to mark the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations. During the visit the relationship was upgraded to “innovative comprehensive partnership,” with the inking of various economic deals and Netanyahu lauding “[...] I believe this is a marriage² made in heaven.”

However, like any marriage, there are disagreements. And one thorny issue is over the future of Syria – Israel wants the Assad government to go, and China prefers the secular government stays.

Syrian government helps China fight anti-Chinese militants

According to a new Israeli intelligence report³, there are thousands of Chinese Uyghurs fighting in the ranks of al-Qaeda affiliates and ISIS in Syria, namely in the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) based in Idlib – an al-Qaeda stronghold. As such, China is stepping up its military and intelligence cooperation with the Syrian government to ensure their elimination.

The August 30, 2016 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan⁴, planned by TIP in Syria and financed by Al Nusra, signals increasing threats to Chinese citizens and interests overseas if Syria becomes a terrorist safe haven.

Because of “inter-mingling” with Ahrar al Sham and other so called “moderate” jihadists, TIP and Nusra enjoy U.S. and its allies’ protection even though they are designated as terrorist organizations. They have procured advanced Western weapons such as U.S.-supplied anti-tank TOW⁵ missiles, Grad missiles, and likely anti-aircraft MANPADS, and drones⁶ that they used to record their recent suicide campaigns against the Syrian army. These Western weapons and tacit Western support enhance their war fighting capabilities to launch future attacks on China and Chinese interests.

As such, this will provoke Beijing to increase its military support to the Syrian army, risking escalation and continuation of the civil conflict.

External intervention prolongs civil conflicts

According to political scientists, civil conflicts are prolonged when foreign powers intervene. A 2008 study by James Fearon and David Laitin⁷ at Stanford University affirm that civil wars tend to be significantly longer when

¹ Raphael Ahren and Yifeng Zhou, “Netanyahu to Time of Israel Chinese: I hope Beijing’s ‘superb’ relations with Israel will affect its UN votes, *Times of Israel*, March 23, 2017, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-to-tois-chinese-site-i-hope-beijings-superb-relations-with-israel-will-affect-its-un-votes/>

² Shannon Tiezzi, “Israel and China a ‘Marriage made in Heaven,’ says Netanyahu,” *The Diplomat*, March 22, 2017, , <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/israel-and-china-a-marriage-made-in-heaven-says-netanyahu/>

³ Itamar Eichner, “Israeli report: Thousands of Chinese jihadists are fighting in Syria”, *Ynet*, March 27, 2017, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4941411,00.html>

⁴ Olga Dzyubenko, “Kyrgyzstan says Uighur militant groups behind attack on China’s embassy”, *Reuters*, September 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-blast-china-idUSKCN11C1DK>

⁵ Caleb Weiss, “Turkistan Islamic Party claims using US-made anti-tank missile in northwest Syria”, *The Long War Journal*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/turkistan-islamic-party-claims-using-us-made-anti-tank-missile-in-northwest-syria.php>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/thomasjoscelyn/status/793061372753948672>

⁷ Max Fisher, “Political science says Syria’s civil war will probably last at least another decade”, *Washington Post*, October 23, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/10/23/political-science-says-syrias-civil-war-will-probably-last-at-least-another-decade/?utm_term=.594c9402289b



foreign countries intervene decisively on one side. This applies to Syria, where the Syrian government is supported by Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia while the Syrian opposition is supported by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

In a 2017 working paper⁸ by Nicholas Sambanis (University of Pennsylvania), Stergios Skaperdas (University of California, Irvine) and William Wohlforth (Dartmouth College), the authors further argue that if one side's patrons increase material support for its proxy, this risks escalation by the other side's patrons. That is, if actor A=Syrian government and A* is its sponsor (Iran, Hezbollah, Russia) while actor B= rebel opposition and B* is its sponsor (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia), then any escalation of B* may risk escalation of A* to further prolong the conflict.

For example, with the recent U.S. airstrikes⁹ directly on Syrian government forces on behalf of the opposition, Washington may be signaling an escalation of resource commitments to topple the Assad regime. This is corresponded by increasing Israeli¹⁰ airstrikes on Syrian military assets as well as military threats by Britain¹¹.

As recently outlined in *The Diplomat*¹², U.S. military action risks opening the door for other direct foreign military attacks on the Syrian government by the opposition sponsors (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar), with additional backing from Israel, other Arab Gulf states and NATO.

In this case, the balance shifts in favor of the rebel opposition so that $A+A^* < B+B^*$.

However, it would likely provoke A* to escalate to rebalance $A+A^* \geq B+B^*$.

Thus A* would now include Iran, Hezbollah, Russia plus China and other Asian states, while B* may now include Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia plus U.S., Israel, other Gulf states and NATO.

As such this risk escalating the Syrian conflict into a regional and international war between the great nuclear powers of U.S., Russia, and China, with al-Qaeda, ISIS and their patrons benefiting from the additional chaos. Indeed, a recent report¹³ by IHS Markit warned that "The Syrian government is essentially the anvil to the U.S.-led coalition's hammer" against ISIS, and its downfall would empower ISIS to the detriment of the international community.

It would also invariably spill over into Israel as Iran, Russia, and China are provoked to increase military support to the Syrian army, and perhaps draw in other states in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that are concerned with Salafi jihadists from their region setting up a safe haven in Syria. Thousands¹⁴ of Central Asian

⁸ Nicholas Sambanis, Stergios Skaperdas, William Wohlforth, "External Intervention, Identity, and Civil War", January 2017, http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~sskaperd/SSW_Intervention_013117.pdf; <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~sskaperd/>

⁹ http://www.nj.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2017/04/brian_williams_calls_missile_beautiful_syria_msnbc.html

¹⁰ "Russia condemns alleged Israeli strikes in Syria", *Times of Israel*, April 27, 2017, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-condemns-alleged-israeli-missile-strike-in-syria/>; Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Angus McDowall, "Israel strikes arms depot near Damascus airport: sources" *Reuters*, April 27, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-air-strike-idUSKBN17T0GU>

¹¹ "Boris Johnson says UK likely to strike Syria if asked by US", *Fox News*, April 27, 2017,

<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/04/27/boris-johnson-says-uk-likely-to-strike-syria-if-asked-by-us.html>

¹² Mercy A. Kuo, "US Airstrikes in Syria: Impact on China, Israel and the Middle East—Insights from Christina Lin", *The Diplomat*, April 11, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/us-airstrikes-in-syria-impact-on-china-israel-and-the-middle-east/>

¹³ Tom O'Connor, "Report sees ISIS benefiting from Assad Downfall", *Newsweek*, April 20, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/us-overthrow-assad-syria-isis-wins-587037>

¹⁴ Noan Tucker, "Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses", United States Agency for International Development, May 4, 2015, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_CentralAsiansSyriaIraq.pdf; <http://registan.net/2015/10/14/new-report-for-usaid-central-asian-involvement-in-the-conflict-in-syria-and-iraq-drivers-and-responses/>



militants mainly based in Idlib and Aleppo have been training and fighting alongside U.S./Western-backed groups to try to overthrow the Syrian government.

Faced with a military escalation that would be bloodier, more violent, and involve even more great powers but still likely end in a stalemate, is there an alternative path?

Belt and Road Initiative as model for conflict management?

Perhaps China, the new rising power and wild card¹⁵ in the Middle East, can play a role to diffuse the tension. Indeed, regional states are already exploring what role the Middle Kingdom can play to help resolve regional quagmires. One of them is the UAE that has become a key trading hub supporting China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI), convening a recent peace game¹⁶ in Abu Dhabi to examine potential Chinese contribution on the Syrian crisis, Arab-Israeli conflict, and Iran nuclear issue.

Another Arab country with close ties is Lebanon¹⁷, which on 21 April signed a series of MOU with Beijing to boost the BRI. Likewise, Egypt, wary of Salafi extremism, is also drawing closer to China and Syria¹⁸ to address this shared threat, so that Riyadh's argument that this is a sectarian conflict is no longer valid.

There is also a split within the Gulf Cooperation Council and regional rivalry between Wahhabi actors that support the spread of Salafism/Muslim Brotherhood (Saudi Arabia, Qatar) and others who see them as a threat to traditional states in the Middle East. In fact, without informing Washington, in 2014 UAE joined Egypt in Libya to bomb the Muslim Brotherhood-led Libya Dawn militias backed by Qatar¹⁹, Turkey and Sudan.

In this regard, UAE is finding sympathetic ears with Egypt's President Sisi and seems slowly aligning with Cairo, Moscow and Beijing in the emerging Mideast security arc²⁰ to combat Takfiri terrorism. Israel is currently aligned with the Saudis to combat Iran and outside this arc, but it may behoove Jerusalem to explore what role Beijing can play as a new external regional power broker to constrain Iran and Hezbollah's hostilities towards the Jewish state.

Given both China and Russia's massive injection of military and economic investments to stabilize the Middle East, they clearly have no interest in having Iran attack Israel to further destabilize the Levant. Nor would Beijing want Israel to attack Iran, a strategic hub on the BRI linking the Middle East, Central and South Asia.

Thus, Beijing and Moscow can exert influence over Tehran and help mitigate tensions with Jerusalem.

¹⁵ NG Weng Hoong, "China, the wild card in the Israel-Palestine peace process", *Asia Times*, March 4, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/china-wild-card-israel-palestine-peace-process/>

¹⁶ <http://peace-game.foreignpolicy.com/>

¹⁷ Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat, "China's Expanding Lebanon Ties", *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/chinas-expanding-lebanon-ties/>

¹⁸ Oren Kessler, "Egypt picks Sides in the Syrian War—How Sisi Learned to Love Assad", *Foreign Affairs*, February 12, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-02-12/egypt-picks-sides-syrian-war>

¹⁹ Jeremy Bender, "Egypt and the United Arab Emirates Bombed Libya, and Qatar could be a Big Part of the Reason Why", *Business Insider*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/egypt-and-the-united-arab-emirates-bombed-libya-2014-8?IR=T>

²⁰ Christina Lin, "New Security Arc in Mideast", *ISPSW/CSS ETH Zurich*, January 3, 2017, <https://www.ethz.ch/content/specialinterest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/f7005915-d8c1-41ba-aa3b-ab9ea61233d4>



Furthermore, China can improve Israel's ties with Egypt and Jordan by investing in Jerusalem as an essential part of the global trading ecosystem, as outlined in a BESA Center report²¹.

With the Mideast region in tatters from decades of misguided U.S. policy of violent regime change and democracy-promoting bombing campaigns, it is time for a new vision. China has offered an alternative BRI view of building connectivity across Eurasia to reduce ungoverned space for terrorist actors to thrive and promoting economic development and regional stability. Now it is up to the countries in the Middle East to choose which vision they wish to pursue.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

²¹ Mordechai Chaziza, "The Red Med Railway: New Opportunities for China and Israel in the Middle East", *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 385*, December 11, 2016, <http://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/385-chaziza-the-red-med-railway-new-opportunities-for-china-israel-and-the-middle-east/>