

REPORT

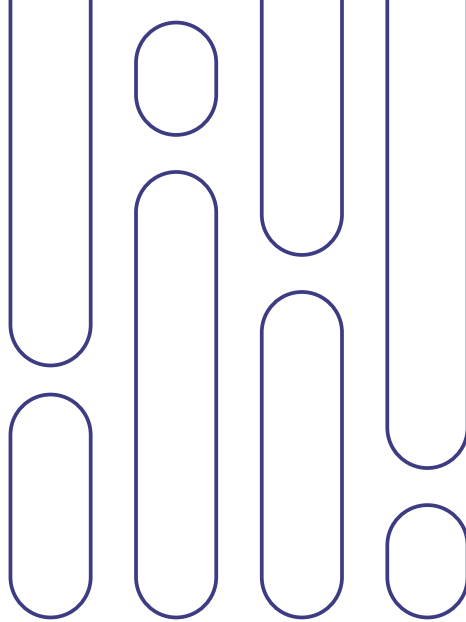
# Chinese Efforts to Heal the Fatah-Hamas Rift: Possibilities and Challenges

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**RASANAHA**  
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
International Institute for Iranian Studies



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Amid heightened tensions and turmoil in the Middle East, the People's Republic of China has embarked on a diplomatic mediation effort. On April 27, 2024, China initiated talks between the Fatah and Hamas movements to resolve their differences and strengthen the Palestinian stance within the UN Security Council. According to experts, this mediation represents China's second major involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, a task fraught with complexities. The negotiations are set against the backdrop of longstanding contentious issues that have eluded resolution by previous Arab and international initiatives. Additionally, the recent escalation of conflict in the Gaza Strip has influenced the positions of both Fatah and Hamas, intensifying the challenge of bridging their fundamental divide. The crucial question now arises: can China successfully reconcile the deep-seated differences between these two Palestinian factions? Understanding the objectives and implications of China's intervention is paramount as it seeks to address the rift within the Palestinian community. The success or failure of China's efforts hinges on navigating significant opportunities and challenges inherent in this delicate diplomatic mission.

## **Chinese Mediation: Significations and Objectives**

China's mediation efforts between the two Palestinian factions are not just about achieving reconciliation and ending nearly two decades of division. They also serve as a powerful statement about China's growing diplomatic influence in the Middle East. China's involvement underscores its emergence as a significant international player, capable of effectively resolving complex conflicts. This perception of China as a reliable mediator has been further solidified by its successful facilitation

of talks between major regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Moreover, China's role starkly contrasts with the United States' approach, particularly its military support for Israel and repeated use of veto power to hinder the establishment of a Palestinian state. Over a year ago, China positioned itself as a peacemaker in the Middle East, presenting a clear alternative to the United States' approach to regional conflicts.

China's leadership recognizes the significant importance of the Palestinian cause within the Arab and Islamic spheres. Thus, its mediation efforts aim to resolve Hamas-Fatah disputes and fortify the Palestinian stance within the UN Security Council. This effort not only enhances China's reputation among Arab and Islamic nations but also resonates with populations disillusioned with the current international order and the West's perceived silence on Israel's actions in Gaza. Concurrently, China seeks to convey positive messages to Chinese Muslims.

China's mediation efforts underscore the depth of its interconnected interests and relationships in the Middle East, a region crucial to its strategic objectives. The Middle East offers vital land and sea corridors for China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative, making available lucrative markets for Chinese goods and investments. Moreover, it represents a key arena for managing competition with the United States. Consequently, instability in the region runs counter to China's interests and its ambitious global projects. Therefore, China adopts a nuanced approach in its Middle East engagements. This is characterized by two fundamental principles: maintaining balanced positions to support regional stability and playing influential roles in resolving inter- and intra-country crises and disputes.

In recent years, China has maintained a neutral stance towards all Palestinian factions, refraining from labeling Hamas or oth-

er movements as terrorist groups. Notably, it abstained from condemning Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, instead criticizing what it perceived as an exaggerated response from Israel in the aftermath of Operation Al-Aqsa Storm. China's use of its veto against a Security Council resolution condemning Hamas' attack on Israel, along with its repeated support for Palestine's full UN membership bid, reflects its alignment with Hamas and the broader Palestinian cause. China perceives these positions as strategic leverage to encourage dialogue between Hamas and other Palestinian factions, aiming to facilitate reconciliation and end the prolonged division that has hindered the Palestinian cause's progress. If China is successful in its efforts, it would solidify its position as a prominent global diplomatic player, particularly in the Middle East. This success would establish China as a significant mediator and guarantor in resolving disputes on the world stage. Notably, China's previous successful mediation in restoring diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023 underscores its potential to navigate complex regional dynamics and broker significant agreements.

## **Chinese Mediation and Opportunities**

Both Fatah and Hamas welcomed China's invitation. Azzam al-Ahmad led Fatah's delegation, while Musa Abu Marzouk headed the Hamas delegation. China stated that both sides [expressed a shared desire](#) for political consensus through consultation and dialogue, emphasizing the need for reconciliation. This indicates significant opportunities for China to facilitate reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas.

## Timing

The timing of China's mediation holds significant weight in its efforts to reconcile the divide between Fatah and Hamas. This mediation comes shortly after a tense period marked by fears of a potential regional conflict fueled by international interests amidst escalating tensions between Iran and Israel. Simultaneously, global discontent with repeated US vetoes in the UN Security Council regarding the establishment of an independent Palestinian state has intensified. Against this backdrop, there is a growing international call for a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the attainment of a just and comprehensive peace. Additionally, internal crises within Israel, including heightened opposition, widespread demonstrations demanding the release of detainees, and the resignation of some security officials under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have compounded the urgency for diplomatic efforts to address the situation.

As China steps in to mend the divide between Fatah and Hamas, the Biden administration grapples with a significant student movement in major American universities. These students are demanding an end to the devastating Israeli conflict in Gaza. International outrage is increasing against Israel's stubbornness in continuing its aggression in Gaza. There is heightened apprehension among Palestinians about the potential risks of Israel's looming invasion of Palestinian Rafah. There is heightened apprehension about the potential risks, including a possible Israeli invasion of Palestinian Rafah. Additionally, the statements of Khalil al-Hayya, a member of Hamas' top leadership body, about the prospect of transforming the group into a political party if an independent Palestinian state is established along the borders of June 1967 further underscore the evolving dynamics in the region.

## **The Success of China's Mediation Between Tehran and Riyadh**

China's success in resolving differences between major regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran serves as a precedent for its potential to facilitate a similar resolution between Fatah and Hamas or to bridge the divide between the two main Palestinian factions. The resilience of the rapprochement agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, despite numerous challenges amid escalating conflicts in Palestine, the broader Middle East and the Red Sea region, further incentivizes Beijing to bolster its political footprint in the Middle East. This reinforces China's image as a global player committed to fostering peace in the Middle East. By leveraging the growing international momentum against Israeli and US policies regarding the Palestinian cause, China distances itself from the US stance of overlooking events in Palestine and backing Israel.

## **China's Amicable Ties With the Actors Close to Hamas and Fatah**

China maintains strong relationships with key regional players who wield significant influence over regional and even global affairs, closely tied to both the Fatah and Hamas movements. It enjoys positive ties with Arab nations such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, all of which hold sway over Fatah and possess various means to influence and pressure the group. Additionally, China maintains relations with Iran, a supporter of Hamas and armed groups across the Middle East. Iran's support provides it with leverage and influence, enabling China to potentially bridge the gap between Fatah and Hamas and even pressure them to move towards a desired settlement. These relationships ease Beijing's efforts in fostering closer dialogue be-



tween the two Palestinian factions and potentially influencing their actions to achieve a mutually acceptable resolution.

### **A Profitable Peace Rather Than Exhausting Divisions**

The Fatah and Hamas movements may have reached a shared realization that their ongoing division serves no one and undermines the Palestinian cause as a whole, particularly in light of Israel's aggressive policies in the West Bank and the devastating conflict in Gaza. Both parties may now see the value in coming to the negotiating table, aided by friendly and influential countries with shared interests. The increasing recognition that further division risks the demise of the Palestinian cause has prompted a reconsideration of priorities. Pursuing a mutually beneficial peace agreement, prioritizing the establishment of a Palestinian state, appears to be a preferred option for both factions, given the high costs and negative repercussions of continued division on the Palestinian people's aspirations and the integrity of their cause.

### **China's Power and the Levers It Possesses as a Mediator**

The presence of a powerful international mediator like China presents a significant opportunity for both parties to consider a settlement. Given its economic, military, and political prowess, China's stature as a major global player grants it substantial leverage and influence — ranking second globally in each category and holding a permanent seat on the Security Council. Fatah and Hamas perceive China as a pivotal international force and a key balancer amidst US hegemony, which may incentivize them to pursue a settlement. China's involvement can foster trust between the parties and ensure the implementation of any agreement reached. However, China itself acknowledges



the complexity of its role in the Middle East, recognizing the need to navigate carefully amidst its ongoing struggle with the United States for global leadership and the reordering of power dynamics within the international system.

## **The Challenges Facing Chinese Mediation**

The Chinese endeavor to resolve the Palestinian division encounters numerous challenges that could hinder its success, akin to the obstacles faced during its sponsorship of the March 2023 agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Key difficulties include:

### **The Nature of the Parties to the Crisis**

Fatah and Hamas, while exercising authority in their respective territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, operate as non-state actors despite their governance experience. This distinction renders their behavior susceptible to considerations differing from those governing states in foreign relations. Moreover, their deep ideological disparities sometimes transform differences into zero-sum equations. Consequently, reaching a consensus and ensuring adherence to agreements becomes exceedingly challenging. Additionally, leadership instability within Hamas poses a significant hurdle, as decision-making powers primarily reside with officials in Gaza who face constant threats of assassination, thereby increasing the likelihood of fluctuating positions among leaders.

### **Failure of Past Reconciliation Endeavors**

Numerous Arab nations have intervened in attempts to mediate between Fatah and Hamas over the years. While some of

these efforts have shown promise in theory, these have often failed to materialize into tangible results due to a lack of implementation on the ground. Both parties have been reluctant to budge from their positions, leading to a cycle of accusations and stalled progress. Despite nearly two decades passing since the crisis began, time has only exacerbated the situation, with each side seeking to exploit moments of weakness in the other to secure maximum gains or concessions. Consequently, there is skepticism that the Chinese initiative will fare better than previous endeavors. Even if an agreement is reached, there is little indication of genuine conviction changes. Past experiences have demonstrated that any engagement with reconciliation has been largely tactical rather than strategic, with actions primarily driven by external pressures or the pursuit of regional or internal interests.

### **External Influence on the Disputing Parties**

Regional and international powers influence Fatah and Hamas when making political decisions. Hamas considers Tehran's financial and military support crucial, while Fatah is constrained by the terms of the Oslo Accords and the challenges of governing the West Bank under Israeli occupation. These external pressures may hinder either party, or both, from fully committing to agreed-upon terms, either directly or indirectly. It is noteworthy that Israel views the state of Palestinian division as advantageous, allowing it to evade obligations and justify policies, particularly its reluctance to accept a two-state solution. Consequently, Israel will likely oppose any agreement that could vigorously undermine this situation.

## **US Challenge**

If China successfully brokers a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, it would mark a significant blow to the United States and its international influence, much like its success in resolving tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Consequently, Washington may employ various strategies to derail the agreement, particularly given the internal criticism facing the Biden administration. This criticism stems from the US involvement in the Israeli-Gaza conflict and its reluctance to support the recognition of a Palestinian state in the Security Council.

## **Conclusion**

China aims to expand its presence in the Middle East by leveraging its support for the Palestinian cause, maintaining balanced relations with various Palestinian factions, and capitalizing on the diminishing trust in the United States among regional countries and populations. However, while Beijing has the potential to succeed in brokering a settlement between Fatah and Hamas, its ambition to increase influence in the Middle East through the Palestinian problem faces significant challenges. These challenges include the complexities surrounding the relationship between Hamas and Fatah and the potential for international and regional actors to interfere and obstruct Chinese efforts. As a result, achieving this goal may require additional rounds of discussions and negotiations.

