

Beijing Is Social Media Trolling Biden Over Gaza

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

May 26, 2021

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Also published in *Foreign Policy*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy has discovered the Middle East, catching Washington unprepared.

“The U.S. claims that it cares about the human rights of Muslims. But it turns a blind eye to the sufferings of Palestinian Muslims,” a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson [tweeted](https://twitter.com/MFA_China/status/1393413296825327617?s=20) (https://twitter.com/MFA_China/status/1393413296825327617?s=20) during the Israel-Gaza conflict. The tweet was in no small part spurred by schadenfreude—the United States, under pressure for declining to demand an immediate cease-fire in Gaza, had only days before it used a [United Nations event](https://www.reuters.com/world/us-vows-keep-speaking-out-until-china-stops-genocide-2021-05-12/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-vows-keep-speaking-out-until-china-stops-genocide-2021-05-12/>) to lambast China for its treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang.

Yet China's relentless promotion of this narrative—that Washington is indifferent to civilian suffering in Gaza and derelict in its duties as a global power—represents more than spite or defensiveness. It is a sign that great-power competition is being fought in more regions of the world and across multiple arenas, including the seamier cauldrons of social media.

At first blush, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would not seem to be an obvious point of friction between Beijing and Washington. In the 1960s and 1970s, Mao Zedong's China cultivated [close relations](https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-jerusalem-and-israeli-palestinian-conflict) (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-jerusalem-and-israeli-palestinian-conflict>) with the Palestine Liberation Organization and other guerrilla groups. With Mao's death, the onset of Israeli-Egyptian peace in the late 1970s, and China's need for Israeli arms, Sino-Israeli ties underwent a gradual thaw in the 1980s, paving the way for the establishment of [formal diplomatic](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2600/RR2641/RAND_RR2641.pdf) (https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2600/RR2641/RAND_RR2641.pdf)

relations in 1992. Those relations have since grown only deeper still. Beijing has assiduously courted Israel, viewing it as a prime destination for Belt and Road infrastructure investments, such as a [container port in Haifa \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/.premium-chinese-firm-to-build-ashdod-port-1.5253006\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/.premium-chinese-firm-to-build-ashdod-port-1.5253006) and a [proposed rail line \(https://besacenter.org/385-chaziza-the-red-med-railway-new-opportunities-for-china-israel-and-the-middle-east/\)](https://besacenter.org/385-chaziza-the-red-med-railway-new-opportunities-for-china-israel-and-the-middle-east/) linking the Red and Mediterranean Seas. More importantly, Beijing has targeted Israel as a source of [cutting-edge technologies \(https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/special-publication-010221.pdf\)](https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/special-publication-010221.pdf)—including robotics, biotech, and artificial intelligence—in which China aims to become a global leader, and which also happen to be ardently desired by the People’s Liberation Army.

In accord with this evolution, Beijing has adopted a conservative, almost anodyne approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. China has gone through the motions of issuing—and repeatedly reissuing—a four-point “[peace plan \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/china-pushes-four-point-israeli-palestinian-peace-plan/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/china-pushes-four-point-israeli-palestinian-peace-plan/)” that largely tracks the international consensus on the conflict. It calls for a two-state solution based on the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state and an end to violence and Israeli settlements, among other things. It is an approach that seems designed not to succeed but to avoid offense, which is entirely consistent with Beijing’s approach to other regional fissures: It seeks to balance relations with each side of any given conflict and avoid overly bold or partisan diplomatic steps. Even China’s much-ballyhooed Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement with Iran was preceded by [similar agreements \(https://theasiadialogue.com/2020/03/24/chinas-partnership-diplomacy-in-the-middle-east/\)](https://theasiadialogue.com/2020/03/24/chinas-partnership-diplomacy-in-the-middle-east/) with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and others. This balancing reflects a key pillar of China’s strategy in the Middle East—to be friends with everyone but allies with no one.

Increasingly, however, China’s cautious approach has come into tension with another pillar of its strategy in the Middle East: working to undermine U.S. influence and prestige in the region as it does elsewhere while its relations with Washington deteriorate. This tension, normally at a low simmer, has boiled over amid the current Gaza conflict. In stark contrast to its bland coverage of the last Israel-Gaza war in 2014, Chinese state-run media has run numerous articles accusing Washington of ignoring Palestinian rights and sharing blame for civilian suffering. The *Global Times*, for example, [editorialized \(https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1223731.shtml\)](https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1223731.shtml) that the United States “not just fanned the flames of conflict, but also displayed to the world how selfish and hypocritical it is in terms of respecting human rights and shouldering its responsibilities as a major power.” China’s CGTN state television station [suggested \(https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/chinese-media-us-supports-israel-because-of-wealthy-jews-668513\)](https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/chinese-media-us-supports-israel-because-of-wealthy-jews-668513) U.S. policy was being controlled by a “Jewish lobby,” prompting a furious response from the Israeli Embassy in Beijing.

These themes are amplified by China’s official and state-affiliated social media accounts, which devote their time not to explaining Chinese policy—the typical mode of operation for the United States and other Western powers—but more often to haranguing the United States. A [tweet \(https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1395038357130907652?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1395038357130907652?s=20) by Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, typifies the approach: It shows a bald eagle representing the United States dropping a missile on Gaza with the caption “See what ‘#HumanRights defender’ has brought to #Gaza people.”

According to the [Alliance for Securing Democracy’s Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard \(https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/\)](https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/), which tracks Russian, Chinese, and Iranian social media, “Palestine” was the fourth most common key word and hashtag for Chinese government social media accounts last week, just after “COVID-19.” China’s Middle East-focused media does not confine its criticism to U.S. policy in the region; last year, for example, Chinese state television produced an [Arabic-language video \(https://twitter.com/MEMRIReports/status/1251249087741124609?s=20\)](https://twitter.com/MEMRIReports/status/1251249087741124609?s=20) alleging the COVID-19 virus originated

in the United States. Nor does Beijing act alone: Chinese, Russian, and Iranian media **often push the same themes** (<https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-china-iran-propaganda-us-disinformation-narratives-echo-each-other-2020-4>) or even retweet or otherwise repeat one another's messages.

Just as notable as what Beijing is saying, however, is what it is not saying. Although Beijing is energetic in its criticism of the United States, it is not quite as keen on promoting itself; Chinese media does not, for example, propose the conflict's parties look to China for answers. Thus, although state media touts China as a more neutral and fairer mediator than Washington, the *Global Times* explicitly tamped down expectations of the burdens Beijing is prepared to shoulder, **quoting a scholar** (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1223731.shtml>) stressing "China's role in helping resolve the hostilities is limited" and the outcome will depend on the parties themselves. Beijing may aim to dethrone the United States in the Middle East, but it is not necessarily eager to take up the burdens Washington has shouldered.

How should the United States respond? For several years, Washington has been cautioning partners in the Middle East—**Israel first and foremost** (<https://www.axios.com/chinese-investment-israeli-tech-1c9dad9e-bbe2-456e-8651-ff7e08bd3f66.html>)—against growing too close to Beijing. China's public diplomacy on Gaza offers an opportunity for U.S. President Joe Biden to reinforce that message. Many of China's economic partners—**Australia most prominently** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-57004797>) but also the Philippines, South Korea, Japan, and others—have found to their chagrin that Beijing will readily employ seemingly beneficial economic relations as leverage when geopolitical disputes arise. In the same vein, Israel is finding all its efforts to seek closer political and economic relations with Beijing offer little protection when China sees an opportunity to score points against Washington. Although China has not targeted criticism directly at Israel, attacks on Washington for neglecting Palestinian suffering are de-facto broadsides against Jerusalem, regardless of how they are couched. Other U.S. partners in the region that are cultivating close ties with China, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, should take heed.

For Washington, China's use of the Gaza conflict to wage a public diplomacy campaign against the United States raises the question of how strategic competition with China will affect the Middle East and, in turn, how U.S. policy in the region will have to change to account for it. The recent episode underscores how competition with China will not be confined to the regions and issues the United States prefers. When and where competition plays out will depend less on where Beijing is engaged than where it perceives the United States is isolated or vulnerable. Washington should not be easily drawn in and should avoid framing every conflict as a contest with Beijing; however, it should ensure U.S. messaging in the region and beyond effectively counters the caricature proffered by China, Russia, and Iran.

Furthermore, Washington should take a page from Beijing's playbook, expanding its messaging in the Middle East and other regions to ensure its policies toward China and other major powers are understood. In particular, the Biden administration should use diplomatic and intelligence channels to ensure the United States' closest partners in the region, which have been increasingly courted by Beijing, have a better understanding of Chinese objectives and strategy and of Washington's concerns. And in their public communications, including via social media, U.S. diplomats should focus their messaging not only on bilateral issues but on a broad explanation of U.S. strategy and priorities, including with respect to China.

As great-power competition heats up—and grand diplomacy falters—there are few issues or regions not at risk of being drawn into the fray. In the Middle East, undermining the United States is an increasingly important component of Chinese policy, contributing to Beijing's evolution from a quiet regional actor to a more vocal and confrontational one. This trend has been evident in China's liberal use of its U.N. Security Council veto on matters related to Syria and became even more evident during the recent conflict in Gaza. Washington's real concern should

be if Beijing's newfound aggression will eventually leave the confines of social media trolling and move on to more dangerous battlefields.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Foreign Policy website (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/26/china-trolling-biden-gaza-palestinians-israel-middle-east-social-media-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>). ❖

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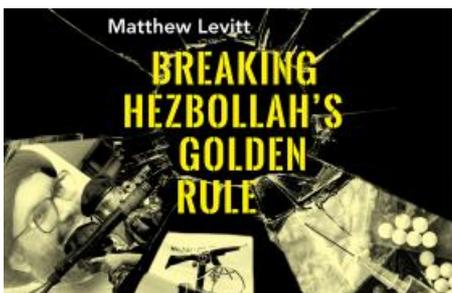
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