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Ahmed A. Khalifa and Rokaya M. Selim

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# **Sino-Arab Cooperation and Its Impact on Human Rights in the Arab Region**

Ahmed A. Khalifa and Rokaya M. Selim

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to map the effects of current Sino-Arab cooperation on human rights in the Arab region. It starts by looking at Chinese perspectives on human rights, which prioritise economic and collective rights over individualist politics and emphasise local specificities. The paper then examines the development of the cooperation agenda before analysing the impacts of this cooperation in light of the humanitarian crises witnessed in the region over the last two decades. The paper follows a multi-tiered methodological approach, combining survey and inductive approaches with comparative case studies. Given the Chinese view of human rights, which Arab authoritarian regimes have taken as an inspirational model, the paper concludes that this cooperation has an array of implications for human rights in the region. Chinese investments in oil and coal-producing electricity projects have also caused damage to the environment. At the level of military cooperation, the use of Chinese weapons in conflicts throughout the region has numerous negative repercussions. Nevertheless, the impact of China's policies on the Arab crises under consideration in Sudan, Libya, Yemen, and Syria has varied depending on the nature of the crisis, China's interests, and the parties involved.

**Keywords:** Sino-Arab Cooperation; Independence; Humanitarian Crises; Belt and Road, Environment

## **Introduction**

Human rights issues as a factor in Sino-Arab relations have evolved over the decades based on several considerations, the most important of which are the nature of the current stage of each of the two parties and the prevailing system of government in each. At the time of the 1955 Bandung Conference, independence, national liberation, and anti-imperialism were part of the core vocabulary of cooperation between the Arabs and China. These concepts, however, took a new turn with China's economic reform in the late 1970s; with the adoption of a pragmatic foreign

policy, commercial considerations began to outweigh humanitarian ones for China, seen in its investments in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). China’s stance on the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 coupled humanitarian concerns with economic interests; it thus rejected Western intervention and welcomed the oil-for-food policy. After the war, due to the growth of Chinese power and China’s increasing need for Arab countries and specifically oil producers, China convened many forums in an attempt to make its policies more comprehensive. Sino-Arab cooperation forums for women, youth, and the environment demonstrated the growing interest in human rights issues. The humanitarian crises in the region, from the 2003 Darfur crisis to the 2010–2011 Arab revolutions, underscored the importance of human rights issues in the cooperation agenda. As Arab countries joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) starting in 2016, environmental and social standards were added to the list of human rights issues of import to Arab-Chinese relations.

Human rights issues as a dimension in Arab-Chinese relations has not been subject to systematic study, which prompted us to adopt a multi-tiered methodological approach to the topic. The first level of this approach entails a preliminary survey of the Arabic and English literature on various dimensions of Sino-Arab relations and the environmental and social impacts of the BRI, with an eye to assessing the status of human rights issues in Arab-Chinese relations. The second tier of the approach is inductive, which enables us to track developments in Arab-Chinese relations on the ground and examine the position of human rights issues in these relations. Here we attempt to assess how perceptions and perspectives on human rights align with the actions and speeches of Arab leaders. The third level is a case-study approach, in which we examine the dimensions of China’s human rights policies in several humanitarian crises that have had long-lasting impacts. The four cases (Darfur, Libya, Yemen, Syria) were chosen because their diverse temporal and geographic scope, the divergent humanitarian situations and Chinese interests in each case, the different levels of relations with the countries in which the crises occurred, and the various other stakeholders involved. We then compare these cases in search of common features in China’s approach in an attempt to answer a major question: How has the Chinese perspective on human rights impacted China’s economic and military relations with Arab countries and human rights in the region?

### **The Chinese Perspective on Human Rights and its Implications for Arab Countries**

China holds several distinct perspectives on international relations, the international order, global governance, and democracy, advocating the construction of new international regimes in these areas.<sup>1</sup> We can identify nine key features of China’s human rights perspective:<sup>2</sup>

1. Human rights are not ‘natural’ rights, but rather are granted by the state. In other words, the state is the dominant actor in defining human rights and the issues most deserving of attention.
2. Human rights are defined and limited by law.
3. Constitutional rights are not ‘restrictions’ on the law, but rather goals that laws seek to achieve.
4. Human rights are primarily a domestic rather than international issue.

5. Human rights are governed by cultural and political relativism. That is, they may vary depending on where the state is on the ladder of social and economic development (incremental application of human rights).
6. The state is the principal party in international law and so human rights cannot be used as a justification for interfering in individual states' affairs. China therefore does not recognise non-governmental international human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch (HRW), considering its reports irrelevant.
7. Achieving an adequate standard of living for human beings and socio-economic development takes priority over political and civil rights. For example, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, speaking at the United Nations in September 2016, said that 'development underpins every human achievement. Without development, nothing can be sustainable'.
8. Collective rights take precedence over individual rights. In emphasising the importance of cooperation in confronting the Covid-19 pandemic, the principle 'people first, life first' was expressed by Chinese President Xi Jinping.
9. Human rights in other countries must be evaluated in a comprehensive, fair, and objective manner. The Chinese president has thus asserted, 'There is no need to politicise or exploit human rights issues or engage in double standards. Each country is different, and progress in the field of human rights must be in line with its national conditions. There is no ideal country in the field of human rights'.<sup>3</sup> This belief was demonstrated when China's acting delegate to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) refused to vote to condemn the human rights situation in Syria.<sup>4</sup>

China has attempted to create an Arab consensus around its own human rights perspective, most importantly by propagating a discourse that opposes (Western) interference in the affairs of Arab countries on the pretext of human rights and democracy. It has made speeches and statements to this effect on several occasions in meetings with Mauritania (2020),<sup>5</sup> Egypt (2021),<sup>6</sup> Algeria (2019),<sup>7</sup> Tunisia (2022),<sup>8</sup> and Saudi Arabia (2021).<sup>9</sup>

In turn, Arab countries have supported China at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). In the last four years, eighteen Arab countries have supported China's position on Uyghur issues. In 2019, a letter signed by thirty-seven countries, including seven Arab states, was sent in support of China's policies in the Xinjiang region.<sup>10</sup> Sixty-two states, including fourteen Arab states, also signed a statement in opposition to a statement submitted by several states to the HRC in 2021 condemning China for its human rights violations against Uyghurs.<sup>11</sup> In October 2022, member states of the HRC rejected a resolution to discuss violations in the Xinjiang region by a vote of nineteen, including four Arab states; eleven states, including Libya, abstained, and seventeen member states, including Somalia, voted for the resolution.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, statements made by several state leaders have shown their agreement with the Chinese model, first and foremost statements by presidents Abdel Fattah El-Sisi<sup>13</sup> and Kais Saied,<sup>14</sup> and the ministerial delegation tasked with monitoring the human rights situation in Morocco,<sup>15</sup> demonstrating 'that China is an inspiration for developing countries as they face

challenges in the development of human rights'.<sup>16</sup> Somalia's positions, however, appear to fluctuate, while there are no speeches or statements that show the degree to which Jordan, the Comoros, and Djibouti agree with China's perspective on human rights.

Among the most significant repercussions of the Chinese perspective in Arab countries was that it created a space for debate between the countries of the region and the prevailing human rights system, which gives a privileged position to political and civil rights. It also provided a justification for authoritarian regimes in the region to respond to criticism of their human rights violations while guaranteeing Chinese support. Indeed, China equipped several such states with arguments to enable them to evade their international human rights obligations, most importantly discussing context, cultural and political relativism, and opposition to Western-centric views of human rights and development.

### **The Evolution of Human Rights Issues in Sino-Arab Relations**

The emergence of human rights issues can be divided into four basic phases. The first phase began with Egypt's recognition of China in May 1956—the first Arab state to do so—followed by Syria, North Yemen, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, and Sudan in 1958. This was followed by diplomatic recognition, with Saudi Arabia being the last Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1990.

During this phase, roughly 1956 to 1978, the human rights issues that dominated relations were universal issues such as national liberation, independence, development, anti-imperialism, and resistance to Israeli aggression in the Arab world. For example, China announced its support for Egypt's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal and it condemned the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt. It also supported the national liberation movement in Algeria against France and threw its support behind Abd al-Karim Qasim's revolution in Iraq. It was the first non-Arab country to recognise Algerian independence and the first non-Arab country to establish official relations with the Palestine Liberation Organisation after its founding in 1974, also providing financial and military support to the organisation. At the same time, many Arab states co-sponsored a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on China's admission to the UN, which was adopted in 1971.<sup>17</sup>

Yet with the launch of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform in 1978, China's interest in relations with developing countries declined, as it began to seek out Western support and technology for manufacturing and development. It played a dual role in the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), selling arms to both sides.<sup>18</sup> After the events in Tiananmen Square, where hundreds of Chinese people were killed in 1989, massive Western sanctions were imposed on China, and China's need for diplomatic backing from developing countries became clear.

China subsequently condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and approved UNSC resolutions calling for Iraqi withdrawal and disarmament and an end to Iraq's violation of Kuwaiti sovereignty. At the same time, it abstained on resolutions for the use of military force against Iraq, rejected the embargo on Iraq, and engaged in some commercial exchange

with Iraq (mainly for oil, food, and commodities), while stressing the illegality of the American ‘occupation’ of Iraq and demanding the withdrawal of US troops. China also pledged to help Iraq and participate in reconstruction. During this period (1990–2004), the most prominent issues were Gulf issues, and China engaged pro-actively in dealing with them, in both word and deed, starting with condemnation and including the use of its vote in the UNSC and finally its backing of the oil-for-food program in support of the Iraqi people.<sup>19</sup>

After 2004, Sino-Arab relations entered a new phase, with two main tracks. The first began with the announcement of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2004 while a second track emerged with the Arab revolutions starting in 2010. Both tracks were supported with the issuance of China’s policy document towards Arab states.<sup>20</sup> The CASCF focused on strengthening economic, political, and then cultural and environmental relations, through mechanisms based largely on periodic meetings in China and Arab countries.

Since its inauguration, the CASCF has been held every two years, culminating in an executive programme that includes the most significant outcomes and recommendations of the sub-forums. Most human rights recommendations are in the areas of environmental protection, party and media outreach, and the empowerment of women and civil society. In general, these issues have been incorporated into the executive programmes of various forums in similarly worded forms. For example, the forum has encouraged Sino-Arab dialogue on environmental protection, clean energy, combating desertification, the empowerment of women and youth, media and cultural exchange, the production of Chinese film materials in Arabic, the translation of Chinese books into Arabic, and taking advantage of the successes of the Chinese model of management and development.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, these forums are primarily governmental in nature, although they use terms like ‘civil society’ and ‘youth’. Civil society as represented in these forums is the elite media, politicians, and organisations affiliated with the governments of the concerned countries. Even so, the launch of the Arab-Chinese Women Forum was delayed until 2015. The forums have been dominated by propagandistic debates and speeches. For example, most of the discussions in the Women’s Forum have focused on economic development, the role of women, and the civilisational aspects of Arab-Chinese relations, and thus ‘collective’ socio-economic issues instead of political and civil ‘individuality’. The Women’s Forum conference was devoid of any criticism of the status of women in China and the Arab world, or the difficulty faced by some women in exercising their rights, instead merely celebrating the feminist examples of attendees. In the China-Arab Forum for Reform and Development, China has established its own research centre with the goal of ‘promoting the exchange of experiences on governance, political affairs administration, reform, and development between China and the Arab countries’.<sup>22</sup>

Several conclusions can be drawn from these observations. Most importantly, the interest in women, the environment, media, and youth exists only to strengthen government exchange on various levels between community and political elites. The focus is on agendas that correspond to the Arab states’ and China’s vision of human rights, which holds that the state and

government play the most important role in determining rights and freedoms and prioritises socio-economic issues over the political, and the collective over the individual, while invalidating any voices critical of governments and regimes.

In all these forums, China insists on presenting its own models to Arab states as the means to achieve development and prosperity. Meanwhile, Arab states have not hesitated to express their admiration for the Chinese model, indicating the diffusion—or acceptance—of Chinese human rights concepts among the government-adjacent Arab elite and thus an awareness that they can be applied or strengthened in the Arab world. In short, this model entails the continued silencing of ‘opposition’ voices in light of the need for economic and social development.

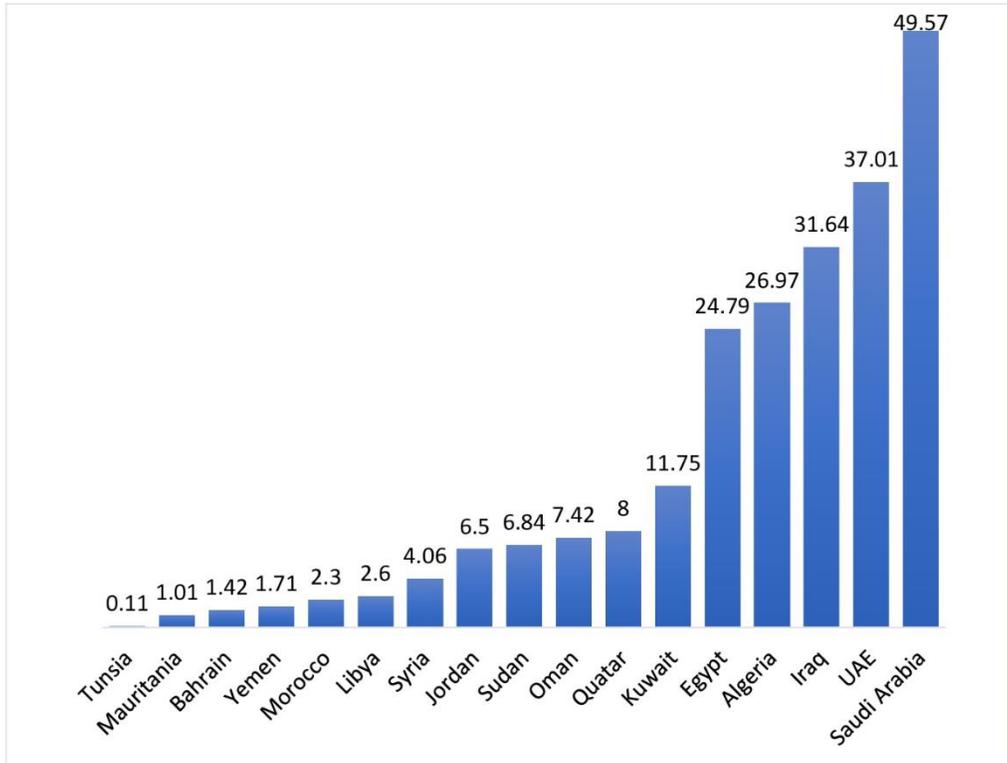
The impact of these forums on civil and political human rights in the Arab region depends on how closely Chinese and Arab ideas of governance, administration, and media correspond; the greater the extent to which they correspond, the greater the negative impact of cooperation. These forums help China repeat its story again and again, thus contributing to the formulation of Arab human rights policies inspired by the Chinese model, which has a poor human rights record to begin with. The impact of this cooperation on economic and social rights cannot be determined based on this narrow formulation, and that is what we turn to in coming section.

### **BRI: The Environmental and Political Impacts on Human Rights in the Region**

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa, at both the intellectual and policy level (the coordination of various monetary and fiscal government policies, the removal of trade barriers, and the promotion of popular exchange between participating countries) and the physical level (the creation of a massive network of sea, land, and digital roads, and gas and oil pipelines).<sup>23</sup> Since its announcement, the initiative has received increasing attention from all countries. As of March 2022, 146 states had joined the initiative,<sup>24</sup> including all Arab states, which began joining in 2016. Although researchers have studied the implications of the BRI inside and outside China, the environmental and social dimensions, and human rights aspects have received the least attention.<sup>25</sup>

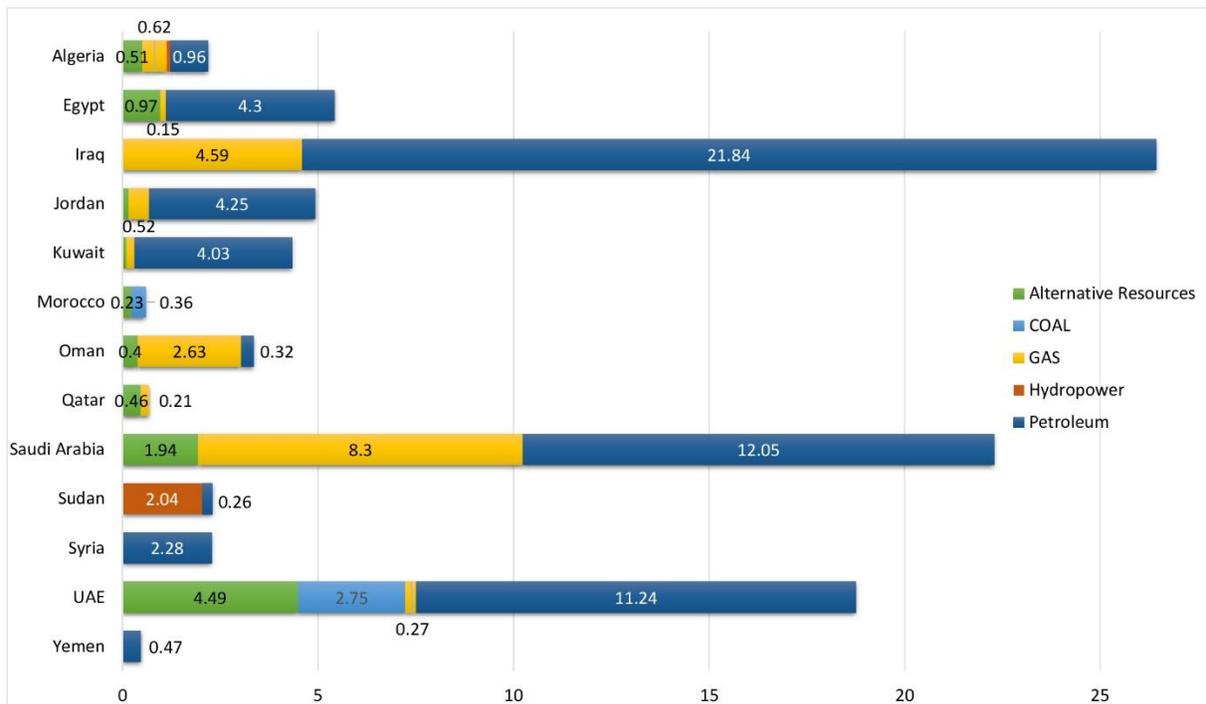
Sino-Arab relations have been strengthened, and trade between the two parties has increased. China is currently the leading trade partner of all Arab countries, with the volume of trade reaching \$330 billion by the end of 2021. China also maintains investments in various fields throughout all Arab countries.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 1: Total Chinese Investments in Arab Countries in US\$ Billions**



Source: China Global Investment Tracker, The American Enterprise Institute.

What concerns us here are the trends in these investments and their impacts. We will take energy investments as an example because, firstly, they best show the environmental and social dimensions of Chinese investments and, secondly, they are bigger than investments in other fields. Figure 1 shows that most Chinese investments go to oil- and gas-rich countries: Saudi Arabia, UAE, Algeria, Iraq, and finally Egypt. They are concentrated in oil and gas-fuelled electricity generation, with a few investments in renewable energy.

**Figure 2: Total Chinese Investments in Arab Countries in the Energy Sector in US\$ Billions**

Source: China Global Investment Tracker, The American Enterprise Institute.

Figure 2 shows that there are a number of coal-based projects, including the Hassyan clean coal electricity project in the UAE; although scheduled to begin operations incrementally from 2020 to 2023, operations have not yet begun. On 2 February 2022, it was announced that that the project would shift from coal to natural gas.<sup>27</sup> The Safi coal-fired plant, which generates 318 megawatts of electricity, was completed in 2018.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, China has not avoided coal-fired electricity projects. In fact, it has helped finance and build them, and when such projects are cancelled, it has been done at the behest of the Arab partners, as was the case with the Hassyan complex in Dubai and the Hamrawein power plant in Egypt. Although China, through its president, has declared a commitment to green investment and clean renewable energy, starting with the Green BRI in 2020,<sup>29</sup> the expansion of investments in fossil fuel and gas-fired power plants, which damage the environment, suggests this commitment is not strong. These projects may have a number of negative impacts, especially in Iraq and Algeria.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, Chinese investment in infrastructure projects and new cities can be read as backing for authoritarian regimes in the region. One expert notes that China's participation in the construction of the new administrative capital in Egypt, to which all the levers of government will be moved, will help to isolate the political leadership from any protests in the 'old' capital.<sup>31</sup>

There is also the potential for corruption in some of the deals concluded. For example, the company carrying out some infrastructure projects in Algeria, the China Railway Construction Corporation, has been criticised for non-payment of wages of more than \$4 million and for delays in completion.<sup>32</sup>

The way China does business has been the object of harsh criticism by most countries around the world, led by the European Union,<sup>33</sup> which adopts its own environmental and social standards when implementing BRI projects in its territory, according to China. In contrast, countries that are unconcerned with the environment and human rights will find in China a ready financier for the implementation of any investment projects, regardless of their impact on the environment and human rights. It should nevertheless be noted that China has implemented a number of renewable energy projects in the Arab region, though they are relatively scale in scale compared to other polluting activities. Overall, Sino-Arab cooperation within the BRI will adversely impact human rights in the Arab region, either because they will harm the environment due to the lack of transparency in their operation or because they provide support to political systems that have no real plans for human rights development.

### **The Sale of Weapons and Instruments of Repression and Surveillance**

Between 2000 and 2019, China was the sixth largest arms exporter in the Middle East, supplying 2.5 per cent of total arms. The United States was at the top of the list at 44 per cent, followed by Russia at 19.3 per cent, France at 11.4 per cent, Britain at 5.8 per cent, and Germany at 3.7 per cent.<sup>34</sup>

**Table 1: Sales of Chinese Arms to Arab Countries**

<b>Country</b>	<b>% of Total Arms Imports</b>
Saudi Arabia	8%
Emirates	8%
Egypt	2.7%
Qatar	2%
Iraq	8%

Source: Clayton Thomas et al., (2020).

While China's weapons sales to Arab countries are relatively meagre, it imposes no restrictions on arms deals, unlike Western countries, which link weapons sales to the commitment to human rights. For example, since 2018, the German government has prohibited the sale of arms to all countries directly involved in the Yemen war, especially Saudi Arabia.<sup>35</sup> US administrations also

use military aid as a means to pressure governments, which they recently did with Egypt by withholding \$130 million in aid.<sup>36</sup>

China is also exploiting two advantages to maintain brisk weapons sales in the Arab region: firstly, the US refusal to sell drones to countries in the region<sup>37</sup> and secondly, the Ukrainian-Russian war, which has cut into Russian arms sales in the region.<sup>38</sup> These Chinese weapons have had a number of impacts on human rights in the region.

The UAE has used Chinese Wing Loong-1 aircraft in both Yemen and Libya, where it launched a strike on the Mazraq municipal building in Libya while it was hosting a meeting of a tribe allied with the Government of National Accord; it then fired a second strike that killed wedding guests who tried to help survivors of the first strike.<sup>39</sup> Saudi Arabia has purchased the Pterosaur-1 drone and DF-21 missiles for use in Yemen.<sup>40</sup> As for Egypt, it bought Wing Loong-2 aircraft to fight terrorism in Sinai,<sup>41</sup> amid claims by human rights groups that Egyptian army strikes have killed civilians in Sinai and the military has displaced civilians and used their homes for military purposes.<sup>42</sup>

Chinese companies are also active in surveillance technology used by security services in Arab states against dissidents. It was reported that the Chinese firm Semptian has provided Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Morocco, the UAE, Oman, Sudan, and Egypt with surveillance equipment, helping them to digitally track and monitor their citizens using Aegis, a mass surveillance system,<sup>43</sup> which some authoritarian governments have installed on telephone operating systems and Internet service providers.<sup>44</sup>

Arab governments, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have invested millions of dollars in technologies to spy on opponents of the regime and monitor the population, particularly in 'smart cities'. The planned Saudi city Neom will use advanced facial recognition and smart video surveillance systems made by Huawei,<sup>45</sup> while in Dubai, as part of the Oyoon ('eyes') project, thousands of Chinese CCTV cameras equipped with automatic facial recognition technology use artificial intelligence to monitor and track individuals throughout the city.

Such agreements with large tech companies allow authoritarian regimes to access international technology services and exploit them for the purpose of digital repression, using spyware and tracking applications.<sup>46</sup> These tools of repression have been used not only against those who oppose regimes in the Arab region, but have also been deployed to persecute Uyghurs outside China, in Egypt,<sup>47</sup> Morocco,<sup>48</sup> Saudi Arabia,<sup>49</sup> and the UAE.<sup>50</sup>

All of this shows the extent of violations against both Arab and Chinese citizens. Chinese weapons have helped to kill thousands of people and displace millions of Arab women, children, and elderly people. Modern Chinese surveillance tools have also been used to violate citizens' privacy, assist enforced disappearances and displacement in these countries, and tighten the grip of authoritarian governments. All of these weapons have been used not only against Arabs, but expatriate Uyghurs as well.

## **China and Arab Humanitarian Crises**

Over the last two decades, the Arab region has seen multiple humanitarian crises including in Darfur and Sudan, and in Libya, Yemen, and Syria after the Arab revolutions. China played a role in all these crises. We will attempt to examine the human rights implications of the Chinese role by looking at its actions in the UNSC and then reviewing the scale of Chinese humanitarian assistance and China's role in the reconstruction process in these countries.

### ***Darfur***

The crisis in Darfur assumed an international dimension due to the dire humanitarian situation in the province, which prompted the UNGA and the UNSC to enact several resolutions referring the perpetrators of crimes in Darfur to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and isolating the Sudanese government diplomatically.<sup>51</sup>

China, however, established extensive economic and military relations with Sudan,<sup>52</sup> in a cooperative framework governed by the principle of 'weapons for oil'. China provided up to ninety per cent of the country's imports of ammunition and light weapons between 2004 and 2006, many of which found their way to the Janjaweed militias responsible for killing so many people in Darfur. Chinese firms also helped build more than three weapons factories outside Khartoum. A UN team of experts found that 'most ammunition currently used by parties to the conflict in Darfur is manufactured in either Sudan or China'.<sup>53</sup> The UNSC issued a resolution banning weapons exports to Darfur in March 2005; China abstained from the vote,<sup>54</sup> prompting allegations that it was violating international sanctions on Sudan.

In early 2007, China provided \$5 million in humanitarian assistance, including ambulances and medical equipment, to help improve the living conditions of the displaced,<sup>55</sup> while in May 2007, it gave another \$10 million for the provision of water pumps, electrical equipment, school equipment, medical equipment, tents, and transportation in the Darfur region.<sup>56</sup> In 2008, the Chinese envoy for peace in Sudan announced that his country had decided to build 120 schools in Darfur.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, China exploited the situation in the Sudan during the Darfur crisis to advance its interests, with its relationship to the government of Omar Bashir taking precedence over the protection of human rights. It turned a blind eye to the regime's war crimes, including the killing of civilians, attacks on women, and the destruction of hospitals and schools, and it accepted the government's claim that its brutal intervention was aimed at suppressing rebel movements in the region with the help of armed militias. China was the regime's major supplier of arms in exchange for oil, and defied the UN arms embargo on the territory.

### ***Libya***

Libya is where China most deviated from its typical approach to Arab crises. It did not object to NATO's imposition of a no-fly zone, and it condemned the violation of the rights of civilians, demanded an immediate cessation of hostilities, and adhered to the arms embargo of parties to the

conflict. Unlike Sudan, there has been no evidence that China has violated UNSC resolutions on weapons sales. It also stressed the importance of resolving the crisis through political and peaceful means.<sup>58</sup> Chinese humanitarian support for Libya is summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: The Types of Chinese Aid to Syria since 2020**

Year	Type	Available Information	Status
2010-2012	Relief	US\$ 1.2 billion to countries in humanitarian crises, including Libya and Syria	Libya's share unknown
2014	Reconstruction	The Chinese State Construction Engineering Corporation resumed the work in constructing 20,000 housing units in Benghazi	Not executed, company withdrew
2016	Humanitarian	Announcing an aid package worth US\$ 35 million to Libya, Syria, and Yemen	Shares of countries unknown
2016	Infrastructure	A programme worth US\$ 36 to build a port, railways, housing, hospitals, and universities in the east of Libya.	Unclear
2017	Oil	NOC awarded several contracts to Chinese companies to develop the sector in the east of the country	On hold
2018	Oil	PetroChina signed a major contract with NOC with the objective of helping Libya increase its oil production	On hold
<i>July 2018</i>	<i>Syria joins the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)</i>		
June 2020	Medical	US\$ 6 million aid to the health sector in Libya, including training Libyan medical personnel in China	Delivered
July 2020	Medical	The Chinese Embassy in Libya delivered to the Libyan Embassy in Tunisia medical aid to combat Covid-19	Delivered

Source: The Council of State for the People's Republic, and The Libya Observer.

In summary, although China took a positive position on human rights issues in Libya in the UN and the UNSC, its stance was weak when it came to the provision of relief and humanitarian assistance, and weaker still in terms of investments in infrastructure and reconstruction. Whenever the two sides agreed on the return of Chinese companies to Libya, circumstances on the ground intervened to prevent partnerships with China.

### ***Yemen***

In 2015, a UN resolution called for a cessation of violence in Yemen and demanded that the Houthis release the president and his aides.<sup>59</sup> Another resolution was adopted that legalised the intervention of the Arab coalition with the aim of protecting the legitimate Yemeni government by any necessary means, with due regard for the civilian population. Showing its backing of Riyadh, China supported the resolution.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, China has offered support to both the coalition states and the legitimate Yemeni government, and Iran, which backs the Houthis. Chinese weapons have played a prominent role in the conflict, and coalition forces have reportedly used Chinese weapons to kill civilians in Yemen. From March 2015 to the end of August 2017, at least 5,144 people were killed and more than 8,749 injured; over half of those killed were killed by China-backed coalition forces.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, China recently established relations with the Houthis. The American fleet in Bahrain reported ships coming from Iran and heading for the Houthis carrying 3,000 Chinese Kalashnikov assault rifles, hundreds of heavy automatic rifles and sniper rifles, and dozens of anti-tank missiles.<sup>62</sup>

There was another facet to Chinese policy as well. In 2017, China sent an estimated at \$22.5 million in humanitarian assistance to Yemen through the Aden port, followed by another \$5 million to provide necessary food aid to more than 930,000 people for one month, sent to the aid distribution depot in Hodeida.<sup>63</sup> It also supported the World Health Organisation in its fight against the cholera epidemic in Yemen.<sup>64</sup>

This shows that China's position on the Yemeni war has been linked entirely to its own interests, especially its economic interests, while it ignores the gross violations of human rights that result from its position. China imposes no restrictions on the use of its weapons as long as it is profitable. Its acceptance of military intervention in Yemen, and its indirect arms support for the Houthis, is part and parcel of the same approach, which has served to exacerbate the plight of Yemeni civilians, increase the death toll, and contribute to rising poverty and hunger and the collapse of infrastructure in Yemen.

### *Syria*

Since the beginning of the crisis, China has supported the Syrian regime and coordinated policies with Russia, demonstrated by its repeated veto in the UNSC of any resolutions condemning the Assad regime and human rights violations in Syria, prohibiting the export of weapons to the Syrian regime, or referring the case to the ICC; it has also vetoed some resolutions calling for a ceasefire.<sup>65</sup> However, in April 2012, it approved the UNSC resolution urging the Syrian government to refrain from air strikes against the opposition, and it backed the formation of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria. Beijing issued a joint statement with Moscow on 26 September 2013 welcoming Damascus's decision to join the Chemical Weapons Convention, which was followed by a unanimous vote in the UNSC on a resolution calling for the destruction of Syria's remaining chemical weapons.<sup>66</sup>

China's role in the Syrian crisis does not end here. There are indications that weapons have reached the Assad regime from China, and Beijing has been accused of supplying the regime with chlorine gas via Iran after gas cylinders made by the Chinese arms manufacturer Norinco were found in a neighbourhood of Syria in 2014. According to the database of the Stockholm Institute, in 2014, China delivered 500 Red Arrow-73D anti-tank missiles to Syria, while a Chinese official stated that several Chinese military experts are in Syria to train regime forces on a wide array of Chinese weapons.<sup>67</sup>

China has also provided support to Syrian refugees in countries neighbouring Syria. In early 2017, it pledged \$30 million in humanitarian assistance to refugees and displaced persons, and it provided \$1.5 million in funds to a World Food Programme initiative to provide food to refugees in Jordan; it has funded other relief agencies as well, such as the Red Cross, for the same purpose.<sup>68</sup>

At the same time, it has participated in reconstruction efforts in Syria. Chinese companies signed contracts worth \$10 million in Syria in 2017, while China hosted the First Trade Fair on Reconstruction Projects, during which it presented a plan involving 150 companies and pledged \$2 billion in support of the project. In 2018, the Chinese president announced a \$20-billion package of loans to Arab states, of which an estimated \$1–2 billion is earmarked for Syria.<sup>69</sup> Beijing also provided some medical aid to combat Covid, including preventive equipment and tests worth \$60 million, in addition to holding video conferences between Chinese doctors and their counterparts in Syria.<sup>70</sup>

In sum, China has played a fundamental role in the survival of the Syrian regime by providing support to the regime and its followers, in contravention of fundamental political, social, and economic human rights. It has also contributed directly to the ongoing killing and collective repression of protesters and regime opponents. In return, it has provided some meagre support to neighbouring countries and some international organisations to help Syrian refugees, instead of playing an effective political role to stop the bloodshed, condemn the regime, and support ceasefire resolutions.

## **Conclusion**

This study has stressed the importance of viewing human rights issues in the context of current Sino-Arab cooperation, although this cooperation has divergent impacts on the human rights situation in the region. China's human rights perspective provides a ready framework for a critique of the current international system of rights and freedoms and justifies violations of basic rights recognised in international declarations and covenants, even as it confirms its respect for the concept of human rights; this discourse is promoted in most Arab countries. BRI projects related to investments in oil and gas projects and fossil-fuel electricity production will also be detrimental to the environment. China's active involvement in infrastructure megaprojects and new cities in some countries of the Arab world (for example, Egypt and Saudi Arabia) also helps sustain authoritarian regimes and gives them an infrastructure that is resistant to protests. Sales of Chinese weapons and surveillance systems contribute to ongoing human rights violations in the region, especially weapons used to target civilians in Sudan, Yemen, and Syria.

As for the crises in four Arab states taken as case studies here—Sudan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen—China's policies and relations with these countries have had varying impacts on human rights. While it violated the arms embargo on Sudan and used its veto to stymie an arms embargo on the Syrian regime and to prevent condemnation of the regime's human rights record, in Libya it pursued a kind of non-aligned policy and its votes in the UNSC were positive.

It played a dual role in the Yemeni crisis, maintaining relations with both the Gulf states and Iran. Its relief and reconstruction assistance has been relatively weak and selective, not commensurate with China's size and the magnitude of the crises experienced by these countries.

The four case studies show that China's position on human rights issues differs according to two important factors. Firstly, it depends on the presence of one stable government in the country. When such a government exists, China's position is more coherent and balanced, as observed in the cases of Sudan and Syria. Conversely, if the state is divided or contested by two governments or several parties, absent a clear dominant party, China's position will be unclear or two-tiered, as the cases of Yemen and Libya show. Secondly, in its actions China attempts to maintain a balance in its regional ties in countries experiencing crisis. In Yemen, it sought to maintain a balanced relationship with both Iran and the Gulf states. In Syria, not only were its relations with Russia a key determinant of its actions, but it also took into account the evolving positions of Gulf states. The lack of a clear position in Darfur and Libya on the part of its Arab allies meant that China's own position was shaped more fully by its interests in oil and arms sales, though there is no denying that China's interests generally impact its positions on all the various crises.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasise that this research did not conduct an exhaustive inventory of the impact of Sino-Arab cooperation in the region on human rights, but rather sought to highlight examples and models of these impacts and draw links between them. This paper is an attempt to study the topic from different perspectives and should be followed by other studies that are more thoroughgoing and specific, and have a broader scope.

## About the Authors

**Ahmed A. Khalifa** is a researcher in political sciences and international relations, and a project coordinator at centre of Arkan for Studies, Research, and Publishing, Egypt.

**Rokaya M. Selim** is a researcher in political sciences, Egypt.

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