

How China is quietly aiding Israel's settlement enterprise

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Away from Beijing's lofty rhetoric about defending Palestinians, Chinese firms are helping to sustain illegal settlements

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Construction cranes are pictured at Ramat Shlomo, an Israeli settlement in occupied East Jerusalem, on 7 February 2025 (Ahmad Gharabli/AFP)

"No need, Razan, for you to go to China - come to Huwara, China is here." Though said jokingly by my friend Ahmad, who asked his full name be withheld for security reasons, these words carried a heavy truth.

Huwara is a small [Palestinian village](#) near Nablus, surrounded by some of the most violent and ideologically extreme Zionist settlements in the country, including [Yitzhar](#).

When I asked what he meant, he told me: "Chinese workers are living and working in nearby settlements. I see them regularly in the village streets, shopping at local [Palestinian](#) stores."

That offhand remark a couple of months ago pushed me to investigate further. I spoke with Palestinians across the occupied West Bank and collected their testimonies. Ali, who lives in Ramallah near the Beit El settlement, told me: "I've seen dozens of Chinese workers building homes and infrastructure in Beit El."

Saeed, from Hebron, recalled that "during the [Covid-19](#) pandemic, settlers even quarantined the Chinese workers separately from others".

Such testimonies reveal an uncomfortable truth: Chinese labour is actively and visibly contributing to the construction of [Israeli](#) settlements on occupied Palestinian land.

Ironically, this reality stands in direct contradiction to China's own stated policy; a decade ago, [it forbade](#) Chinese construction crews from working in Israeli settlements.

Back to 2015, China signed a [bilateral](#) labour agreement with Israel that included a stipulation preventing Chinese workers from being employed in the Occupied West Bank. Notably, this [condition](#) was motivated by safety concerns rather than by a principled stance against the illegality or immorality of settlement construction. However, in 2016, these safety concerns appeared to have diminished when China acquired [Ahava](#), a settlement-based company located in Mitzpe Shalem.

One year later, both countries signed another labour agreement to bring in [6000](#) Chinese

construction workers to Israel under the same conditions. Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nahshon confirmed the deal was “based on the concern for the safety and security of the workers”. However, Chinese officials responded by stating that “the real issue was not safety, but China’s objection to construction in the settlements.”

Yet my interviews with residents - from Nablus to Ramallah to Hebron - made clear that Chinese workers remain present and involved in settlement expansion. This raises serious questions about the sincerity of China’s supposed opposition to Israeli settlement activity.

‘Pioneers of our days’

Amid the ongoing [genocide in Gaza](#), Chinese officials have publicly expressed concerns over increased [settler violence](#) in the occupied West Bank. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian [stated](#) in September last year that Israel must “stop the illegal settlement activities in the West Bank”.

But while Beijing speaks of restraint, Chinese companies act in support of [occupation](#) and the settler-colonial project in Palestine.

One of the most striking examples is Adama Agricultural Solutions, a former Israeli company now [fully owned](#) by the Chinese state-run firm China National Chemical Corporation (ChemChina). Amid the Gaza war, Adama mobilised its workers “to support farmers who have been suffering from a shortage of workers ... [including] farmers in the south, in the surrounding residents of the Gaza Envelope and in the northern settlements”, according to a [report](#) in the Jerusalem Post.

While Beijing voices opposition to settlement activity, its economic ties with Israel strengthen the foundations of Zionist colonialism

Quoted in the same report, a representative of Adama said: “The farmers of the country, and the farmers of the settlements around Gaza in particular, are the pioneers of our days and their continued work is necessary to maintain the security of the country.

“These days they return to cultivate their lands alongside enormous pain and a lack of working hands. At Adama we have the right to help them in times of routine, and to stand by them also in times of crisis.”

In January 2024, Adama went further, [launching](#) a scholarship fund of around one million shekels (\$275,000) to support academic degrees in agriculture for residents of the Gaza Envelope and northern settlements.

Adama has a long history of collaborating with settler institutions. Its products [have been used](#) in agricultural trials conducted in Israeli settlements in the Jordan Valley, and even more troubling, one of its [herbicides](#) has been used by a contractor of the Israeli military in aerial spraying that has destroyed vegetation along the Gaza border.

While China presents itself as a neutral or sympathetic actor in the conflict, its ownership of Adama links it directly to the militarised destruction of Palestinian livelihoods.

Supporting colonial entrenchment

This is not an isolated case. In recent years, several state-owned Chinese companies, along with other private Chinese firms, have invested directly or indirectly in Israeli settlements or companies operating within them.

Take the case of Tnuva, a major Israeli food producer that operates in illegal settlements. Despite international calls to boycott the company, China's state-owned conglomerate Bright Food acquired a [56 percent stake](#) in Tnuva in 2014.

In 2021, [Tnuva won a tender](#) to operate 22 public transportation lines that serve 16 settlements in Mateh Yehuda - all built on occupied land in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. These aren't just buses; they're infrastructure supporting colonial entrenchment, making settler life easier and more permanent.

Another example is the 2016 [acquisition](#) by China's Fosun Group of Ahava, a cosmetics brand whose manufacturing is based in the Mitzpe Shalem settlement. Ahava, the target of a global boycott [campaign](#), was previously identified by the UN General Assembly [as part](#) of the illegal settlement enterprise.

All the while, Chinese diplomats continue to issue calls for Israel to halt its settlement expansion. Former ambassador Zhang Jun [told](#) the UN Security Council in late 2023: "We urge Israel to curb the intensifying settler violence in the West Bank, so as to avoid the concurring hotspot and the spread of conflict." His successor, Fu Cong, echoed that message, [urging](#) Israel to "stop its illegal settlement activities in the West Bank".

But what about China's own involvement in these very activities? The UN's human rights agency regularly [reports](#) on businesses involved in settlement-related activities, and yet Chinese companies continue such collaborations.

According to numerous UN resolutions, Israeli settlements constitute a flagrant violation of [international law](#). China's actions directly contradict the legal principles it claims to uphold.

While Beijing voices opposition to settlement activity, its economic ties with Israel strengthen the foundations of Zionist colonialism, at the expense of Palestinian rights. What's more disturbing is how effectively these investments have remained under the radar - quietly sustaining apartheid, while Beijing speaks of an independent Palestinian state.

Razan Shawamreh

P.S.

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- Razan Shawamreh is a Palestinian researcher whose research interests include: Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East; and China's Grand Strategy at the international level. She is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) in North Cyprus.