



The “China Model” Comes To The Middle East

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For Middle Eastern nations, China's expanding stake in the region ranks as one of the most consequential, albeit underreported, trends of recent years. Already, Beijing's growing foothold is beginning to reshape regional markets, as local governments reorient their economies to take advantage of Chinese investment. But the PRC's presence might end up coming at a high political price, because the proliferation of Chinese influence – and the spread of its model of technologically-empowered censorship – could reinforce some of the worst political impulses of the region's autocrats.

Less than a decade ago, Chinese engagement with the Middle East was confined to just two priorities: the sale of arms to weapons-hungry regional clients and the acquisition of Gulf energy to fuel its ongoing economic expansion. But the last several years have witnessed an explosion of China's interest in, and involvement with, the region.

Politically, this has been reflected in a flurry of high-level contacts between Chinese leaders and regional heads of state. During his high-profile 2017 visit to Beijing, Saudi monarch Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud signed a memorandum of understanding with Chinese President Xi Jinping to explore a staggering \$65 billion in joint ventures. Likewise, President's Xi's 2016 visit to Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt, and his subsequent trip to the UAE last year, were intended to reinforce the idea that the Middle East is increasingly important in the calculus of China's leaders.

Economically, too, China's regional presence is growing by leaps and bounds. A decade ago, the Middle East as a whole drew just \$1 billion annually in Chinese investment. Today, that figure is exponentially higher. At last summer's meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in Beijing, Chinese officials pledged \$23 billion in loans and development aid to the region. China is now deeply involved in numerous construction and infrastructure projects around the region, from Kuwait's planned "Silk City" to Oman's port of Duqm.

Militarily, meanwhile, China has become an increasingly important participant in regional security. Since 2015, when it opened its first regional base in Djibouti, Beijing has worked diligently to expand its military posture throughout the Middle East and North Africa. This has included frequent port visits by its navy to the Southern Gulf, and an extended deployment of Chinese military vessels in the Gulf of Aden. China has also significantly broadened its peacekeeping presence in the region. In its latest annual report to Congress on China's military power, the Pentagon warned that the PRC could soon parlay these overtures into the creation of military bases throughout the region.

Officials in Beijing have taken pains to stress that their country's involvement is focused solely on "development," rather than on reshaping regional politics. In his 2016 address to the Arab League, President Xi emphasized that his government wasn't trying to carve out a "sphere of influence" in the Middle East. Indeed, at first blush, China's regional involvement does indeed seem to be nothing more than, as some observers have put it, to "speak softly and carry a large purse."

But upon closer examination, it is abundantly clear that despite these assurances, Beijing's regional involvement does in fact come with strings attached. This is because there are unmistakable signs that the digitally enabled authoritarianism of China's government has begun to proliferate to the countries of the Middle East.

Chinese companies have for years helped Iran's clerical regime to repress its own people. Following 2009's "Green Revolution," for example, Tehran turned to Chinese telecom giant ZTE to provide sophisticated surveillance technology for domestic applications – assistance that has greatly aided the Iranian regime in censoring and monitoring the communications of the country's captive population in the years since. Another Chinese tech conglomerate, Huawei, has also been implicated in this sort of questionable commerce with Tehran.

Nor is Iran an isolated incident. Egypt has similarly allowed the PRC to obtain a major stake in its communications sector – and to disseminate technologies that have strengthened President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's grip on power at the expense of freedom of expression among ordinary Egyptians. And other regional states could soon head in the same direction. Officials in Lebanon, where China has been entrenched for half-a-decade developing the national telecom sector, are today actively courting greater Chinese investment and involvement, with all that this portends. Simultaneously, Chinese firms like Huawei and Hikvision are actively marketing biometric surveillance systems throughout the Persian Gulf, where they are meeting tremendous commercial success.

These trends should heighten fears that China's tech giants will help empower and strengthen the region's autocrats. For, as its engagement with the region expands, so too will the availability of the means by which Beijing has managed to so successfully control and manipulate its own population.

The "China model" of social control could thus easily become an export commodity in Beijing's dealings with the Middle East – much to the detriment of prospects for pluralism and democracy in the region.