“Understanding between Peoples” of China and the Middle East Countries

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Abstract: The Middle East is a natural ally of China in the “One Belt and One Road” construction. The “understanding between the peoples” of China and the Middle East countries not only has the profound historical basis, but also has strong realistic motives. The great blueprint of the “One Belt and One Road” will link the pursuit of the Middle East people in peaceful development with Chinese people’s dream in national rejuvenation, bringing new opportunities and endowing new connotation for mutual “understanding between peoples” on both sides. However, there is a large gap between the actual demand of the “One Belt and One Road” construction and the existing state of affairs in the understanding between the Chinese and Middle Eastern people. There are not only a lot of problems, but also many interferences and blocking factors. In the context of the “One Belt and One Road”, to further promote the “understanding between peoples” of China and the Middle East countries is a huge and systematic civilizational project, which needs in-depth research and understanding.

Key Words: “Understanding between Peoples”; China; Middle East; “One Belt and One Road Initiative”

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Introduction

Amity between the people holds the key to good relations between nations. The “understanding between peoples” of China and the Middle East is one of the five priorities of the “One Belt and One Road” construction that China strives to achieve. Its goal is to strengthen friendly exchanges among the people of all countries along the Road, deepen mutual understanding, enhance traditional friendship, promote dialogue among civilizations, exchange with and learn from each other, and reinforce the social basis and public opinion for the construction of the “One Belt and One Road”, through non-governmental exchanges and cultural exchanges. The “understanding between peoples” of the two sides is not only the proper meaning of the great project of the “One Belt and One Road” today, but also can be said as its essence The success of the “understanding between peoples” of the two sides is a major issue related to whether the “One Belt and One Road” construction can proceed smoothly. On June 5, 2014, President Xi Jinping pointed out in his speech during the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, “collaboration of China and the Arab in the construction of ‘the Belt and Road’ should rely on and further improve the traditional friendship of the two sides. The “understanding between peoples” is an important content as well as a key foundation of ‘the Belt and Road’ construction” (Xi, J., 2014: June 6).

I. The “Understanding between Peoples” of China and the Middle East: Profound Historical Foundation

“Search for knowledge, even as far away as in China!” For more than one thousand years, this famous maxim which
reputedly was said by Prophet Muhammad, has been well-known by all in the Middle East and the Islamic world. And it was even written with beautiful Arabic calligraphy on the dome of the Royal Mosque of Bursa in Turkey, the Ottoman Empire’s first capital. For a long time, this old Arab proverb has made China a symbol of the source of knowledge and a state of ceremonies in the Arab Muslims’ mind, making them praise and yearn for the Chinese civilization. In the long history, the old proverb has inspired countless Middle Eastern Muslims to travel along a long and difficult trip and through the land and maritime Silk Road to visit China; many even settled in China. The old proverb is a true and vivid reflection of the historical process of China’s civilizational exchanges with the countries in the Middle East, which has become legend in the history of civilization exchanges. After Zhang Qian opened up the road leading to the Western Regions (Xiyu), the Silk Road gradually became a prosperous and free path. The Chinese historical records marked the amazing pictures along the Silk Road, where personnel exchanges and trade circulation were solid, as, “The messengers come every month; there are various merchants and foreign (Hu) businessmen stayed here at the frontier every day.”

During the Tang Dynasty, there was even closer interaction between China and countries in the Middle East. At that time, official and non-governmental exchanges were in an endless stream; trade and cultural exchange continued to be deepened; Islam was also introduced into China. The Tang Dynasty and the Tazi (the Arab) are two strong powers with highly developed civilizations in the world at that time. “Tazi is a strong power in Western Regions (Xiyu); its land covers from the Cong Ling

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Ridges (the Pamirs) to the West Sea (Xihai)\(^1\), an area of almost half of the world.’\(^2\) There were frequent exchanges between the two sides. According to Chinese historical records, during the over a hundred years from AD 651 to AD 798, Tazi (the Arab) sent envoys to Tang up to 39 times. In the middle to late Tang Dynasty, a large number of Arab and Persian businessmen, diplomats, soldiers, and artisans came to China. Many of them settled down in China with the identity of the “foreign visitors (Fanke)”; they established the “reservation/settlement for foreigners (Fanfang)” in cities like Guangzhou and Quanzhou, and then began to study Chinese culture as well as adapt to Chinese society. In AD 848, Li Yansheng from the Arab also successfully obtained the degree of Jinshi in China, which became headline news at that time. Arab traveler Sulayma who came to China during the Tang Dynasty stated in his book \textit{Akhbār al-Sīn wa’l-Hind}, the number of foreigners in Guangzhou, including Arabs, had reached up to over 100,000 (Sulayma, 2011: 96).

During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, a large number of Muslims have immigrated to China from Middle East and Central Asia. Ibn Battuta, a famous Arab traveler has visited China and narrated many beautiful stories about Chinese people in his travelogue. Slightly late to Ibn Battuta, Wang Dayuan, a Chinese traveler has visited many Middle East countries, including Somalia and Morocco. During the Ming Dynasty, Zheng He, a famous Chinese Muslim navigator has visited almost all over the countries along the maritime Silk Road in his seven voyages. During the late Ming and Qing Dynasty, some Chinese Muslim scholars such as Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi, have written many books and tried to explain Islam in Chinese language and

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\(^1\) Today’s Mediterranean and Black Sea.
\(^2\) Sima Qian, “Chronicle of Tang Volume 49,” in Sima Qian, \textit{Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government}. 

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Confucianism terms, to promote better understanding between both of Chinese and Islamic civilization. During the reign of the Republic of China, China experienced large social upheavals. The country widely opened its door, and a lot of students traveled overseas to learn and study. Cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries came into fashion. Cultural exchanges between China and the Middle East countries also gradually recovered. Many Chinese Muslim scholars repeatedly went to the Middle East to visit the school, study, introduce Chinese culture to the Middle East countries, and to denounce Japanese War on China. For example, after the fall of Shanghai in 1937, Mr. Da Pusheng, using his own resources, went to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East to pursue the Anti-Japanese War and expose the crimes of the Japanese invasion of China; his trip lasted for eight months. *Xinhua Daily* in Chongqing once published a special report about Mr. Da’s patriotic action. Chinese Muslim scholars also had formed a “Chinese Islamic Mission to the Near East” and traveled to several countries in the Middle East in January 1938 to rally against the-Japanese war, achieving remarkable results. Those messengers said, “the mission of this delegation is to state the meaning of our Anti-Japanese war in the way of people’s diplomacy, to liaise with Muslims in Islamic countries in the Near East; at each place we went, we received warm and deep sympathy from the Muslim people. This great achievement is far beyond our expectations” (Wang, Z., 1997: 9).

During this period, numerous students, like Ma Jian, who studied in Egypt, actively introduced Chinese culture to the Middle East countries and advocated China’s Anti-Japanese war. Mr. Pang Shiqian, then Minister of Chinese students in Egypt, recalled, “The Muslim world used to disconnect with China. However, since our students studied in Egypt, their publicity
never fell behind others, especially in the period of the Anti-Japanese war. In this way, they have knowledge of our country” (Pang, S., 1988: 68). Mr. Pang Shiqian was also hired at invitation as a lecturer of Chinese culture at the Egyptian al Azhar university, this is the first thing in Muslim world about Chinese culture” (Pang, S., 1988: 72). Mr. Ma Jian translated *The Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu*) into Arabic and published it in Egypt, so that the Chinese masterpiece was known for the first time by Arab readers. In terms of efforts of Chinese students overseas in connecting Chinese and Arab culture, the well-known scholars Mr. Sun Shengwu commented that, “our students in Egypt...when they arrive in Egypt and other places, on the one hand, they strive to absorb the new culture of Arab, on the other hand, they try very hard to introduce our culture to the local people. They often deliver speeches and write about Chinese culture which the newspapers are competing to reprint, and therefore Chinese culture is very widespread. In Egypt not only Muslim scholars are very interested in Chinese culture because it plays a reference role for Islam philosophy in many cases, ordinary people also have strong interests in it because the peace loving tendencies in the national psychology is always similar” (Li, X., 1985: 1774).

II. “Understanding between Peoples” of China and the Middle East: Powerful Realistic Motivations

Given that the long tradition of friendly exchanges between the people of China and Middle East countries has laid a profound historical foundation for today’s “understanding between peoples”, China’s initiative to build the grand cause of the “One Belt and One Road” will closely link the common dream and the pursuit of national rejuvenation between Chinese people and the
peoples of the Middle East together, bring new opportunities to the interaction between ordinary people of China and the Middle East countries, open up a new path, grant a new connotation, and inject a strong realistic power into “understanding between peoples”.

President Xi Jinping said in his speech in the opening ceremony of the sixth ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum that, “when we meet with Arab friends, we always have a feeling for old friends. This closeness results from that we treat each other with enthusiasm and sincerity, as well as the long-term relationship between the two ethnic groups. Reviewing the history of exchanges between Chinese and Arab people, we will think of the land Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road... For thousands of years, the Silk Road has carried the spirit of peaceful cooperation, openness and tolerance, mutual learning, mutual benefit and win-win, which has lasted from generation to generation. China and Arab people have supported each other in the struggle of maintaining national dignity and defending national sovereignty, and helped each other explore the road of development and realizing the great rejuvenation of the nation, and advance cultural exchanges and enrich the national culture by learning from each other” (Xi, J., 2014: June 6).

First of all, the political trust and friendly relations between China and Middle East countries represent the political foundation for mutual “understanding between peoples”. From the perspective of Chinese diplomacy, since the founding of the People’s Republic China, it has established diplomatic relations with Middle East countries one by one. For a long time, China has pursued an independent and peaceful foreign policy, adhere to the five principles of peaceful coexistence, and oppose to hegemony and power politics. In a series of complicated affairs in the Middle
East, China has consistently upheld an objective and fair position, supported for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to establish an independent state, called for solving the disputes through political dialogue, and actively promoted peace and negotiations. In the Middle East affairs, “China’s role is to show the power of justice” (Wu, S., 2015: 388). At the same time, the Chinese government has supported the development of economic construction in the Middle East countries, and actively carried out humanitarian relief for a long time. Therefore, in the eyes of the people of the Middle East, China is a reliable friend. Multi-level exchanges between the Chinese government and governments in the Middle East have become more and more frequent, deepening mutual trust; all parties actively advocate and promote bilateral and multilateral exchanges, and establish various bilateral and multilateral exchange mechanism and platforms, such as the “China-Arab States Cooperation Forum”, “China–GCC Strategic Dialogue”, and “China-Arab States Expos” and so on. China has established a comprehensive strategic partnership with eight Arabia countries. China advocates to build the magnificent cause of the “One Belt and One Road” initiative, to work together with countries along the Silk Road to build a “community of interests” and “community of destiny”, stressing on the “Silk Road spirit” that promotes the development of “mutual learning”, “respect on choice of development path”, “adherence to the win-win cooperation, and promotion of dialogue and peace” (Xi, J., 2014: June 6).

From the perspective of diplomacy in the Middle East, over the long term, the Middle East countries generally pursue friendly policy towards China. Particularly, in recent years, they collectively prefer the “Look East” policy; they are optimistic about the development of China and the hope that China will play
a positive role in international affairs, especially in Middle East affairs; many Middle East countries look forward to further developing friendly relations with China as well as expanding cooperation with China. Arab scholars believe that China has unique moral advantage and diplomatic advantages in interactions with foreign countries in the Middle East, and the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative by both Middle East countries and China can “offer opportunity to reshape the Middle East peace”, because “to promote ‘the spirit of the Silk Road’ is in line with the context of the era and the wishes of the people in the Middle East. China can be said as the only permanent member of the Security Council that maintains good relations with all countries in the Middle East and its diplomatic neutrality is well recognized by Middle East countries. In addition, the Middle East countries have collectively implemented the “Look East” strategic layout, and they all welcome the “One Belt and One Road” Initiative. As an open and free trade and economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges and multilateral strategy, the “One Belt and One Road” is not only completely opposite in essence to the colonial control and the intervention policies that Western powers have been implementing in the middle East for more than one century, but also can potentially balance against these policies through its open nature and spiritual heritage of ancient Silk Road--common development and prosperity under the multicultural environment in the Middle East, enhancing social cohesion, making peace for nations and states of different cultural backgrounds, and laying foundation for peaceful development of “the Belt and Road Initiative” (Walid, 2015: April 3).

Secondly, the increasingly close economic and trade exchanges between China and Middle East countries have
provided a strong impetus for the “understanding between peoples” of two sides. According to China’s Ministry of commerce, in 2014, the trade volume between China and Arab countries reached $251.2 billion (Li, P., 2015: August 17), while ten years ago, in 2004, the trade volume between China and the Arab was only $36.7 billion. President Xi Jinping said, “In the next 5 years, China will import more than $10 trillion of goods, and foreign direct investment will be more than $500 billion. In 2013, China’s importing goods of $140 billion from the Arab countries accounted for only 7% of the $2 trillion imports every year in the future; direct investment to the Arab countries was $2.2 billion, accounted for 2.2% of the $100 billion of annual foreign direct investment in the future” (Xi, J., 2014: June 6). President Xi also proposed to focus on energy cooperation as the main body, to develop infrastructure and trade and investment facilitation as the two wings, to treat the three high-tech fields of nuclear energy, aerospace and satellite, and new energy as breakthrough points, and to work together with Arab countries to build a new pattern of mutual cooperation. There is no doubt that the “One Belt and One Road” construction provides historical opportunities, and powerful development impetus to economic and trade exchanges, personnel exchanges and heat-to-heart relationship between China and the Middle East countries, opening up broad prospects for development.

Stability and development are the most basic and the most urgent wishes of most people in Middle East countries. In the hearts of Middle East people, China has become a paradigm of successfully processing stability and development issues; they aspire to understand China and learn from it. Many countries in the Middle East are active to dock their top-level design of economic development and a lot of project planning with “the Belt
and Road Initiative”, and look forward to cooperating with China and jointly promoting the construction of the “One Belt and One Road”. Among founding members of the Asian Infrastructure investment bank, there are 10 Middle East countries: Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Israel. Almost all GCC countries, which have the strongest financial power in the Middle East, join the Asian Infrastructure investment bank. Following that China established the first RMB settlement center of the Middle East in Qatar in April 2015, in December of the same year, the United Arab Emirates reached agreement with China to create another RMB settlement center. In the construction of the “One Belt and One Road”, financial cooperation between China and countries of the Middle East is rapidly developing; “the RMB is having higher and higher recognition in the Middle East” (Liu, S., 2016: January 2).

The increasingly close economic exchanges between China and Middle East countries have linked the fate of tens of thousands of Chinese to people in the Middle East. Thousands of Chinese and the Middle East people are working together on the “One Belt and One Road”, creating their own wonderful lives with entrepreneurship; from Yiwu of China to Dubai of the Middle East, unlimited business opportunities along the new Silk Road have spawned numerous “Silk Road legends of the entrepreneurs”. As in the story told by Chinese President Xi Jinping, “the rapid development of China-Arab relations also closely linked the fates of ordinary people of both side together. I once worked in Zhejiang Province, there is such a story. In Yiwu City, where Arab businessmen gathered, a Jordanian businessman named Muhanmed opened an authentic Arab restaurant. He brought the original Arab food culture to Yiwu, and harvested success in the prosper Yiwu. He eventually married with a Chinese girl and
settled down in China. An ordinary Arab young man accommodated his own life dream into the China dream in which Chinese people pursue their happiness. With persistent hard-working, he harvested a colorful life and also illustrated the perfect combination of the China and Arabian dream” (Xi, J., 2014: June 6). the “One Belt and One Road” are connecting more and more Chinese people and the people in the Middle East closely together; their sincere cooperation, solidarity, and common pursuit of a beautiful dream, are writing a new chapter for the peaceful exchanges along the Silk Road.

Third, China and the Middle East countries have many similarities and share the same value, which provides a rich spiritual nutrition for the understanding between peoples. China and the Middle East countries both have a long and shining history of civilization, advocating tolerance, fairness and justice; they share many values. The Middle East is one of the regions where diverse civilizations most closely integrate, exchange and communicate with each other. Islamic civilization, as the integration of the achievements of both Eastern and Western civilizations, has far-reaching impact in the Middle East region. Chinese scholars hold the view that, “Chinese civilization and Islamic civilization are both the treasure of human civilization; they not only have strong compatibility and absorbability, but also have broad minds in absorbing cultures, positive attitude towards cultural interaction and excellent ability of cultural fusion in their formation and development of the process, and have made great contribution to the development and progress of human history” (Yang, F., 2014: 7). In history, in the civilization intercourse of Silk Road, the Islamic civilization “on one hand, provided a considerable amount of public goods to the international community at that time, and on the other hand, made a great
contribution to cultural interaction and communication between the East and West” (Zhu, W., 2007: July). Arab scholars also believe that, “the Islamic civilization and the Chinese civilization are the two great civilizations of dialogue and wisdom; they are the civilizations of mutual learning and co-existence, rather than conflict and confrontation. The two great civilizations share many common values. For instance, both have offered rich public goods for human society. And they aim at benefiting people and healing the world, promoting human harmony, balance and mutual assistance, and promoting the development and innovation, rather than selfish ambition based on utilitarianism, conspiracy of hegemony, or imposing unipolar culture to others” (Najdi, H., 2007: 85). Many scholars in China and in the Middle East countries do not agree with the theory of “the clash of Civilizations”, and actively advocate dialogue among civilizations. They believe that exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese civilization and the Islamic civilization can make an important contribution to the cause of world peace.

In recent years, civilization dialogue between China and the Middle East countries are increasingly deepened. Cultural and people to people exchanges cover wider and wider areas; multilateral and bilateral exchanges as well as multilateral cooperation mechanism and platform in many areas such as academia, culture, education, and the media are in continuous development and improvement, with their operations becoming smoother and smoother. For example, civilizations’ dialogue workshops under the framework of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum have been successfully held for six times since 2005, respectively in China, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, China, and Qatar. The Seventh Seminar will be held in China in 2017. Many Chinese universities and research

With the increasingly close exchanges between China and the Middle East countries, learning Mandarin is becoming more and more popular in the Middle East countries. Accordingly, China has established several Confucius Institutes or workshops in Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Israel and many other countries in the Middle East, paving the way for the Chinese language and Chinese culture to spread to the Middle East. More and more people in the Middle East also have generated strong interest in Chinese culture. The CCTV Arabic Channel is having more and more audience in Arab countries. TV media in the Middle East, including Al Jazeera, are increasingly paying attention to and increasing coverage about China. Chinese TV shows have also begun to enter the Middle
East countries and in vision of tens of thousands of ordinary people. Since the first aired Chinese TV in the Arab world “Jin Tailang’s Happy Life” (translated as “Happy Life”), which was launched in the Egyptian state television in December 2013, Chinese TV shows such as “The Good Times of Daughter-in-law”, “Let’s Get Married”, “Hey, Old Man!”, and “Wang Zhaojun” were aired in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman and other Arab countries, welcomed by local people. The Arab audience knows and understands Chinese people’s real life from these shows, which has changed the simple screen image of the Chinese shaped by martial arts films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chen. They let the Middle East people know that, Chinese people not only know martial arts, but also love peace, cherish life, and are full of warmth and kindness. In a nutshell, increasingly close and extensive cultural exchanges between China and the Middle East countries have already become a strong driving force to boost heat-to-heat relationship.

III. The “Understanding between Peoples” of China and the Middle East: Problems and Challenges

China is a country with vast territory and large population, while the Middle East not only has vast territory, but has complex national conditions and customs with many states, ethnics, tribes, and religions. There is a big gap between the status quo of the “understanding between peoples” of China and the Middle East countries, as well as the positive expectation of the “One Belt and One Road”; there are still many problems and challenges and relevant works are far from good and ready.

First, the public in China and the Middle East countries has very limited understanding of each other, and there is even a
misunderstanding of cognition or bias between them. Many Chinese hold negative impression about Middle East countries, except the flow of oil, they only see wars, conflicts and terrorist attacks. And they perceive the Arabs as aggressive and violent. For many people in the Middle East, China is quite strange to them. There is saying that, “China is famous but is mysterious in terms of its internal situation”. Not only that, many people even have various prejudices and misunderstandings, which China is a godless Communist autarchy in their eyes, and people have no faith and freedom of speech, and religious and ethnic groups suffer from discrimination and oppression, and so on. And their knowledge of the current domestic and foreign policy of China or “the Belt and Road Initiative” is even more limited. In short, knowledge about each other, that is, between people in China and people of the Middle East countries, is filled with considerable vague impression based on rumors. The images of both sides are distorted by the many outdated, negative and false stereotypes, which is not in line with the reality.

Secondly, mutual studies between China and the Middle East countries have significant deficiencies at both the macro and micro levels, failing to provide sufficient nourishment for the understanding between peoples. Their own research teams are weak, and the research achievements are scarce, especially lack of deep research and systematic review of each other’s culture. China and Middle East countries are close neighbors, but their researches and studies tend to use the Western routes, which is a detour. With regard to the Middle East Studies in China, for decades, China’s researchers in Middle East study have overcome difficulties with hard work, and have made remarkable achievements. However, due to the immensity and complexity of the research object, the existing results are far from sufficient to
show the whole picture of the object in terms of breadth and depth of the studies, and there even exist a lot of blind spots and blind areas. There are also problems in the research process, in particular, there is a tendency of imitation and reliance on the Western Middle East studies, especially in data sources, research theories and methods, and even view and perspectives. These studies lack the actual investigation and the first-hand data of Middle East countries by Chinese people themselves, and Chinese perspective as well as China’s stance is not clear. We name so many “West neighbors” as the “Middle East”, although as a term, it has already been established by usage, this also reflects the long-existing problem in Middle East studies from a small side. The current situation does not correspond to the rapid rise of China’s great power status. Anyway, Middle East Studies in China still have a large area of virgin land waiting for development. There is a long way to establish the Middle East Studies with Chinese characteristics and Chinese style, and highlight the position of China and Chinese discourse system. The China study in Middle East countries is weaker with only few achievements; the existing researches all have some dependence on Western literature as well as Western perspectives in different degrees.

Thirdly, media reports about each other are not only scant, but also lack systematic reporting, coherence and independence, in particular in guiding public opinion to achieve understanding between peoples. For a long time, reports from Chinese press on the Middle East lacked balance and comprehensiveness. They always focused on superficial hot issues, ignoring the deep context, and therefore there is more negative news but less positive news, even in the absence of independent discourse system that can fully demonstrate the Chinese position, which brings negative effect on the “understanding between peoples”. For example, since the rise
of the Islamic extremist organization, “ISIS” (self-proclaimed the Islamic State) in 2013, many Middle East and international media avoided directly using the terms “Islamic State”, replacing it with the abbreviation “ISIS”, or “Daesh”, while Chinese media directly copy and frequently used this term of “Islamic State” (although the print press adds quote marks to the term), not fully aware that this may incorrectly lead to the negative impression among the public audience, because those Chinese audiences who do not understand the terrorist organization or Islam are prone to link terrorism with Islam. Such misleading representation will result in adverse effects to understanding between Chinese people and Muslims in Arab countries and even to domestic ethnic relations in China. This has exposed the shortcomings of the Chinese media, which is in lack of its own discourse system, “and reflects that the level of China’s news management policies and professional ability of Chinese news media is not high” (Liu, Z., 2013: 602). The news reports about China by the Middle Eastern media also spread false information, bias, and copying and pasting the Western coverage in different degrees, which does not convey the true image of China.

Fourthly, the “understanding between peoples” of China and the Middle East countries is also affected by interfering many factors, creating many difficulties and challenges in mutual exchanges. 1) The War, unrest and terrorism in Middle East directly affect the normal communication between China and many countries in the Middle East, resulting in direct harms to the understanding between peoples between China and the Middle East countries in the “One Belt and One Road”. In recent years, civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and other volatile countries which suffered from war and turmoil were almost at a standstill; some Chinese enterprises which invested in the Middle East were
facing a lot of security risks; 2) Western hegemony in discourse has misled public opinion and cast a huge obstacle for the “understanding between peoples” of China and the Middle East countries. For a long time, with its powerful propaganda tool, and with pride and prejudice, the Western world has spread false and negative propaganda against China and Middle East countries, especially the “China Treat Theory”, “Islamic threat” and “clash of civilizations” in recent years; they widely spread “Islamophobia”, and described the rise of China and Chinese development as a threat to the world, treating China’s overseas investment as the economic exploitation of “new Oriental colonialism” interpreted the “One Belt and One Road” as the “new Marshall plan”, and regarded the Islamic civilization as the root of unrest and terrorism in the Middle East. This misleading characterization usually creates mutual misunderstandings between China and Middle East countries. 3) There are a lot of problems in countries of the Middle East in the field of “understanding between peoples”. There are many countries, multi-ethnics, multi-religions, tribes, clans, and sects in the Middle East, facing intricate and complex contradictions in political, economic, ethnic, religious, and many other aspects. For some countries, deep grievances between nations, ethnics, religions, and sects have existed for a long time; it is not only difficult to achieve “understanding between peoples”, but in contrast, they are opposite and hostile to each other. This complex situation brings some challenges and difficulties for “understanding between peoples” of China and the Middle East countries. 4) Some Chinese companies and enterprises, especially some small and medium enterprises, still have many problems in product quality, operation mode, business reputation and understanding and respect of the local customs. Some of their short-sighted mercenary behavior is not conducive to the
long-term development, which also brings negative effect on the image of China and “understanding between peoples”. Chinese companies and enterprises still have ample space to improve their practice by further establishing righteousness and profit view, establishing a good corporate culture, enhancing the sense of brand, better maintaining the image of Chinese enterprises.

IV. The “Understanding between Peoples” of China and the Middle East: Countermeasures and Suggestions

First, to further open up the space of cultural diplomacy, speak good Chinese story at all levels, and listen to the voice from the Middle East via multi-channels. 1) to further carry out high-level exchanges and close interaction, to promote non-governmental exchanges by high-level exchanges, enhance mutual trust, lead the public opinion, boost the confidence of private exchanges, and promote the “understanding between peoples”; 2) to use all kinds of media, especially give full play to the powerful communication function of the new Internet media, and to help with the “understanding between peoples” through the “Internet plus” innovation mode. 3) to actively promote more cultural and arts pieces, which reflect China’s current situation and show the image of China and the Middle East, to strengthen the translation work of the Chinese culture and the Middle Eastern Cultures. 4) To further strengthen education cooperation, well operate the Confucius Institutes in Middle East countries, help with the Chinese the teaching of the Chinese language in Middle East countries and China’s language teaching work in Middle East languages, to attract more middle school students in the Middle East to study in China. 5) To guide and promote exchanges among non-governmental organizations, businessmen, women and
young people of China and the Middle East countries. 6) To listen to the voice of people in the Middle East through multi-channels and multi-levels, pay attention to the realistic concerns of the masses in the Middle East and understand people’s demands, learn their expectations and ideas on the “One Belt and One Road”, and provide sincere and appropriate response. For example, Oman proposed to establish a “Zheng He Memorial Park” at the port of Salalah where Zheng He visited seven times during his trips, “This cultural symbol needs emphasis. This idea proposed by Oman is the understanding between peoples and it is worth our attention” (Wu, S., 2015: April 9).

Second, to further strengthen the in-depth and comprehensive study of the Middle East countries. The “One Belt and One Road” has brought new standards and new requirements to the Middle East Studies China. Middle East studies should provide more intellectual support to the construction of the “One Belt and One Road” and mutual connection including the understanding between peoples. 1) to promote the “understanding between peoples”, scholars must go ahead to explore and pave the way, do a good job in leading communication, promote more frequent exchanges and cooperation with think tanks and scholars of the Middle East countries. When learning from western research results, Chinese scholars should go to the Middle East countries, and carry out field study and investigation, get more first-hand information by ourselves, and try their best to get rid of heavy reliance on the secondary data from the West. 2) to further advance the establishment of think-tanks in Middle East studies, increase the input of country studies on the Middle East, try to combine macro and micro studies, coordinate based research and applied research with prospective studies, strive to achieve a group of research results that can provide correct guidance on
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public opinion, on the basis of the existing achievements. 3) To strengthen multidisciplinary and cross multidisciplinary research in political science, history, ethnology, religious science, communication science and other disciplines, establish “Middle East Studies” with Chinese characteristics to provide a better voice for China, highlight the position of China, and enhance the international influence of China in Middle Eastern Studies. 4) To attach importance to personnel training and team building, in particular talents cultivation in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hebrew languages which are relevant to countries in the Middle East, reserve talents for the long-term sustainable development of Middle East Studies.

Third, to establish relevant mechanisms and platforms, to further promote the dialogue between Chinese and Islamic civilizations. “Deepen the understanding of the Islamic civilization in international relations, analyze the relation between Islamic civilization system and the current world, and grasp the main trend of the development of the Islamic world from the complicated situation in the Middle East; these should be the important issues that need long-term attention and tracking from the Eastern and Western academia” (Zhu, W., 2007: July). Japan, our neighbor in the East, has been holding the “Japan–Islamic Civilization Dialogue” activities almost every year with the Middle East countries since 2002 (Selim, M. & Mohammad, A., 2015: 282-300). As the mainstream of East Asia culture and the mainstream of Middle East civilization, Chinese civilization and the Islamic civilization, although they have a long history of exchanges, the dialogues between the two great civilizations are still very limited today, with laggard mechanism and platform. “Civilization dialogue workshop under the framework of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum has been successfully held
for 6 times, but this platform excludes Middle East Islamic power such as Turkey and Iran. In October 2015, former deputy director of Chinese National People’s Congress, Chairman of the “World Civilization Forum”, Mr. Xu Jialu delivered a speech entitled “It is time to focus on dialogue with Islamic civilization” during the Islam and the Chinese Society Seminar. He emphasized that under the context of “the Belt and Road”, to strengthen the dialogue between the two civilizations is of great practical significance. Mr. Xu also said, for such a dialogue, China is not yet fully prepared. He proposed to set “the dialogue between Confucian civilization and Islamic civilization” as the theme of the fourth session of the “World Civilization Forum” (to be held in Shandong in May 2016) to promote the dialogue between two civilizations (Xu, J., 2015: October 27-29). Similar forums may open up a new path and build up a new platform to promote the dialogue between Chinese civilization and the Islamic civilization.

Fourth, to lead the active participation of civil forces in the Middle East humanitarian relief. The Middle East has been in turmoil and chaos for many years and an area with the most serious humanitarian disasters in the world. In recent years, millions of people have been displaced from their home, which has caught by the whole world. For a long time, the Chinese government and people have been actively engaged in humanitarian relief work in the Middle East, and continue to provide assistance to the relevant countries and regions with its power. As early as the World War II, when Chinese people were still in difficulties and hardships, they accepted tens of thousands of Jewish refugees in Shanghai rescue shelter. Today, in the construction of the “One Belt and One Road” and in the process of building the community with a shared future, China should guide private forces to actively participate in international rescue,
especially private relief for the Middle East countries in humanitarian disaster. President Xi Jinping said in his 2016 New Year greeting on December 31, 2015, “the world is so big, and there are so many problems, the international community look forward to hearing the voice of China and seeing the plan of China, China cannot be absent. In the face of people trapped in misery and war, we should have compassion and sympathy, and also have the responsibility and action. China will always open arms to the world, and will also try our best to help people in difficulties; let our circle of friends grow bigger and bigger” (People’s Daily, 2016: January 1).

Fifth, to effectively play the role of religious exchanges in cultural diplomacy, and guide the religious community to actively carry out exchanges with the Middle East countries in the religious community. Islam has always been an important link between China and the Middle East, and Islam in China has a good tradition in active international exchanges. “During the Anti-Japan war, the Islamic community in China exposed the harm of Japan’s militarism on Chinese Muslims and the Muslim world, through the forms of religious exchanges with Islamic community in the Middle East, North Africa and Southeast Asia. They fought against the deceptive propaganda by Japan in the Arab world, and promoted the formation of the Anti-Japanese Alliance in the Islamic World. This experience is worthy of our reference and inheritance under the new historical condition at present” (Zhu, W., 2015: August 31). President Xi Jinping pointed out in his speech in the opening of the sixth ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, “We should work together to advocate for civilization and tolerance, preventing extremism and ideas to manufacture fault lines between different civilizations.” In the new situation of the “One Belt and One
Road”, to actively lead the benign interaction and the religious exchanges between Chinese Islamic community and the Islamic groups in Middle East countries will not only contribute to the understanding of the Middle East countries on China’s ethnic and religious policies and Chinese Muslims’ real life, but also conducive to prevent and resist the penetration and dissemination of the extremist ideology, and promote religious dialogue and cultural exchanges, enhance mutual trust, and deepen friendship.

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