

# Gauging Japan's Role in the Middle East

John de Boer

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By John de Boer

*[What is the driving force behind Japan's policy in the Middle East? Can it be summed up in one word, oil? Is Japan essentially the lapdog of the United States, or has it established an independent position on contentious issues in the region such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Iraq War, and Iran's nuclear development? Raquel Shaoul and John de Boer take up these questions in two articles as they evaluate Japan's impact on the Middle East.]*

Dr. Raquel Shaoul argues that Japan's policy toward the Middle East over the past thirty years has been characterized by: (1) a low political profile; and (2) a tendency to align with US policy in the region. She also suggests that Japan's lack of political influence in the Middle East is a policy choice and not a "direct output of historical/political/strategic limitations."

Dr. Shaoul's characterization of Japan's involvement in the Middle East is conventional, but her explanation of Japan's lack of political influence represents a novel approach. Unfortunately, Dr. Shaoul, however, fails to fully develop her argument regarding Japan's preference to minimize political influence and instead falls back on the well-entrenched perspective put forth by many political scientists who understand Japan's presence in

the Middle East in terms of its dual dependency, on the United States and on oil.

In this article, I would like to suggest that a comprehensive understanding of Japan's historical and contemporary involvement in the region points toward a larger multi-dimensional Japanese presence. Dr. Shaoul's classification of "Middle East Talks" elides the fact that Japan has participated in a broad range of negotiation processes addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, wars between Israel and Egypt, the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi "reconstruction", Iranian nuclear development, Syrian influence in Lebanon, nation-building in Afghanistan, democracy in Egypt, terrorism in Saudi Arabia, and of course multiple negotiations pertaining to oil, to mention but a few examples.

If we shift perspectives and take a wider view of Japan's involvement in the region, Japan's presence becomes evident as the following examples illustrate:

1) At various points in time, Japan has had a relatively high political profile in the region and its people/institutions have demonstrated an active commitment to a variety of important causes in the Middle East.

Russo-Japanese War 1904-05: Japan's triumph over Russia raised its political profile significantly throughout Asia and the Middle East. Many celebrated it as a victory for the downtrodden Eastern people over the West. This gave rise to a debate among colonized peoples in the Middle East and elsewhere over whether Japan could save the East from Western imperialism and colonialism. Certain

Muslim scholars and organizations even went so far as to consider whether Japan would “save Islam.” [1] Dr. Shaoul suggests that Japan’s “lack of colonial history [in the Middle East] could be regarded as politically advantageous.” More precisely, Japan’s image, however fictitious, as a liberator of Eastern peoples from Western colonialism, has left a powerful imprint on the minds of many intellectuals and government officials in the Middle East. [2]

### 1. Japanese and Russian

Japan as a model for modernization: Following Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905, tremendous interest was expressed in Japan’s “modernization” project by several national movements in the Middle East, most prominently in Egypt and Turkey. [3]

Significantly, people in the Middle East and beyond continue to express interest in learning from Japan’s modernization and post-war reconstruction experiences as models for development. In short, Japan’s political profile is not necessarily low. The continuous stream of studies that look to the Japanese experience for reconstruction and development in the Middle East testifies to this reality. Although the popularity of Japan’s economic model has faded since the burst of the bubble in 1989, countries in the Middle East have continued to look to Japan for guidance and inspiration. [4]

On the Israel-Palestinian front, Japan has repeatedly engaged the major issues, at times playing a relatively high profile role. Japanese authorities sanctioned the idea of establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine shortly after the British announced the Balfour Declaration in 1917. The Japanese government also endorsed the British mandate at the League of Nations, which opened the way for Jewish emigration and settlement. In addition, prominent Japanese intellectuals such as Yanaihara Tadao were active supporters of Zionism. In the post-war period, Japanese

continued to take a political stand on the question of Israel/Palestine and their approach was by no means uniform. The Japanese government shocked the region in 1952 when it established relations with Israel before it (re)established relations with any Arab states. The Socialist Party of Japan initially cultivated a friendly and cooperative relationship with Israel’s socialist party Mapai and Japanese unions also established ties with Israel’s general workers union, Histadrut. Japanese and Israeli representatives envisioned the socialist parties of Japan and Israel as taking a leadership role to foster socialism in Asia. Toward that end they worked closely at the Asian Socialist Conference in the early 1950s. Yet, these close relationships soured as Israel continued to ignore the plight of Palestinian refugees, expand its territorial claims and failed to support anti-colonial independence movements in places such as Malaya, Morocco and Tunisia. [5]

In terms of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Japan has been present at key moments. Japan acted an important diplomatic conduit between the PLO and the industrialized world in 1988, at a time when the United States was considering recognizing the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In fact, the first PLO office established in the industrialized world was in Japan. From there many important declarations were made and negotiations were held. Japan has also been engaged in southern Lebanon. In 1998 for instance, the then Japanese Foreign Minister, Mr. Komura, proposed a plan of withdrawal for Israeli forces that had occupied this area since 1982, one year later Israel withdrew its forces from most of the area. Within the Oslo framework (1993-2000), Japan committed approximately \$700 million dollars in grant aid to projects earmarked for the Palestinian Territories, accounting for more than 20% of all international contributions. In addition to this, Japan has provided hundreds of millions of

dollars to United Nations Relief Works Association (UNRWA) projects to assist Palestinian refugees. A large number of Japanese non-governmental organizations are also active on the ground in Palestine and have been for decades. Those with a long history include the Japan Volunteer Center, the Japan Palestinian Medical Association and the Japanese YWCA.

Although by no means an exhaustive treatment of Japan's involvement in the Middle East, the above certainly demonstrates that Japan has maintained an active commitment to a variety of important causes in the region.

Oil continues to play a major part in Japan's decision making toward the Middle East. In fact, over the past decade, competition with China over oil contracts in the region has forced Japan to heighten its presence and take political risks that it otherwise would not have chosen. Examples of this can be seen in Japan's courting of Iran despite the nuclear crisis; its participation in the occupation/reconstruction of Iraq and its sending of troops to the Golan Heights as part of a Peace-Keeping Force back in 1995. Contrary to what many politicians warned against in the aftermath of the "oil shock" of 1973, Japan's dependence on Middle Eastern oil has increased over the past decade. Unlike the United States and Europe, which have chosen to decrease their reliance on oil from the region due to mounting political instability, Japan has staked its national security and huge sums of money to help cultivate enduring ties with oil producing countries in the Middle East. This has made the internal, political stability of countries in the region vitally important to Japan and has pushed Japan to get involved to change realities on the ground in the region through a wide array of projects. In many ways, oil has forced Japan to heighten its presence in the region.

2) Japan's "tendency to align with US policy in

the region" does not capture Japan's presence in the Middle East, as indicated by the following facts, which differentiate Japanese policy from that of the US.

Japan's voting pattern in the UN has consistently gone against the US and Israel. According to Yasumasa Kuroda, between 1957 and 1973, Japan voted in favor of forty-nine UN resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, abstained on nine and voted against two. [6] Israel and the US opposed the majority of these UN resolutions and rejected them as a precondition for peace in the region. Japan also abstained in the UN resolution that defined Zionism as racism, a resolution that was widely condemned by Western powers, notably the US. Japan did abstain with the US on the UNSC resolution calling for investigations into the Jenin massacre by Israeli forces in 2002, yet such instances are few and far between.

On targeted assassinations, unlike the US, Japan has repeatedly condemned Israel for carrying them out. For example, on April 19, 2004 at the UNSC public meeting on the question of Palestine, Japan's UN Ambassador Haraguchi Koichi called the assassination of Hamas leader Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi "thoughtless and unjustifiable." Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko used the same words on April 18, 2004. When Sheik Ahmed Yassin was assassinated by the Israel Defense Force (IDF), MOFA's Director General for Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau Domichi Hideaki stated on 23 March, "we condemn the act of Israel." Japan's ambassador to the 60th Session of the Commission on Human Rights, Endo Shigeru, also said "we condemn this act of Israel." [7] Significantly, Japan has not designated Hamas as a terrorist organization (it uses the term extremists or armed organizations), despite being asked by Israel [and presumably the US?] to do so. [8]

Regarding Israel's weapons of mass destruction, Japan has consistently pressed

Israel to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the Conventions on Biological and Chemical Weapons and has done so publicly, for instance when Israeli FM Silvan Shalom was in Tokyo last year, as well as with its ambassador Eli Cohen. [9]

On settlements it has also been very clear and condemnatory of Israeli expansion into Palestinian territory. As far as Japan is concerned UNSC resolutions 224 and 338 are to serve as the basis of any agreement. [10]

We must also not forget that Japan enforced the economic embargo on Israel until 1991. According to the former Ambassador to Japan, Dr. Yaacov Cohen, "the Japanese were more Popish than the Pope in relation to the Arab boycott of Israel." [11]

There are also significant differences between Japanese and U.S. policies toward Iran. Japan has pursued close relations with Iran for over three decades despite the US economic embargo on Iran that has been in effect since 1995. Even now, as tension over Iran's nuclear capability mounts, Japan continues to cultivate ties with Iran. [12]

Admittedly, Japan has acquiesced to US demands in Iraq. It sent 550 SDF troops, despite widespread domestic opposition, to participate in the occupation of Iraq. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Japan is completely aligned with US policy in the region. In the face of a domestic population that opposed the US-led attack on Iraq, and which continues to oppose Japan's military presence there, the Japanese government has gone to great lengths to present its participation in the occupation-reconstruction of Iraq as distinct from that of the United States. The message is one of "Modernization without Westernization": a form of modernization that combines Western technology with the values of the East. Japanese governmental representatives are

emphasizing that Japan's contribution to Iraq are being recognized and in his Seiron article of May 18, 2004, the director of MOFA's Department of Public Diplomacy, Kondo Seichi, stated that "there is a reason why Japanese cooperation is reaching the hearts of Iraqis. It is because there is something [in our culture] that does not exist in the West." There are echoes of the ideology mobilized during Japan's continental expansion between 1931-45, one that justified colonialism in the name of protecting cultural and religious traditions in Japan and Asia against Western encroachment. Through public diplomacy, Japan is aiming to carve out an image that distinguishes itself from the US. It projects Japan as a model for a form of modernization that does not sacrifice identity, values and culture. [13]

Other examples of Japanese political activism in the Middle East include the Japanese Red Army's 1970-80s alliance with leftist factions in the PLO and its participation in terror campaigns. Numerous Japanese NGOs are working in the Palestinian Territories, Afghanistan, Iraq and other parts of the Middle East. In Japan, there exists a vibrant intellectual community focusing on Middle East issues that has not shied away from political controversy. One example, was the hosting of an International Peoples Tribunal on Israel's invasion of Lebanon held in Tokyo in 1983, which condemned Israel for crimes against humanity. [14]

An approach that seeks to measure Japan's political influence in the Middle East and its independence from US policy by examining its visibility in peace talks misses critical elements of Japan's historical and contemporary presence. Gauging Japan's overall involvement in the region makes clear that Japan and the Japanese did not simply become active in the Middle East with the Madrid Peace Process of 1991. Japan has contributed to the "peace process" on a variety of levels since the 1950s and its presence continues to be felt

throughout the Middle East.

## Notes

[1] See Selcuk Esenbel, "Japan's Global Claim to Asia and the World of Islam: Transnational Nationalism and World Power, 1900-1945," *American Historical Review*, vol. 109, no. 4, (October 2004), 1140).

[2] For Arab testimonies asserting that "Japan had led the liberation of Asia" see Gaimusho Archives, "H. Tamura [Damascus] K. Okazaki [Tokyo]", 31 July 1954, File: A'0126, 691/26/0044. and "H. Tamura [Damascus] Shigemitsu [Tokyo]", 12 March 1955, File: A'0126, 706/26/0062.

[3] See Cemil Aydin, *International Politics of Anti-Westernism: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, Columbia University Press; Forthcoming in 2006 and his "Overcoming Eurocentrism? Japanese Orientalism on the Muslim World (1913-1945)" forthcoming in *Princeton Papers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2005.

[4] Yishay Yafeh, Ehud Harari and Eyal Ben-Ari (eds.), *Lessons from East Asia for the Development of the Middle East in the Era of Peace*, Jerusalem: Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University, 1998; and a host of IDE (Institute for Developing Economies, Japan) on the lessons of Japanese modernization HAMED, Raouf Abbas (Egypt), "The Rural Gentry in the Nineteenth Century Japan and Egypt" IDE Report, No. 031, (Tokyo, Japan); FAROUK, Abdullah (Bangladesh), "Economic Development of Bangladesh" IDE Report No. 032, (Tokyo, Japan); AL-SAQQAF, Abdulaziz Yassin (North Yemen), IDE Report No. 153, (Tokyo, Japan); DJEFLAT, Abdelkader (Algeria) "Technology Policy in Japan and Possible Lessons for LDCs: The Case of Algeria," IDE Report No. 223, (Tokyo, Japan); and Massoud A. Daher, "Modernization in Egypt and Japan in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparative Study," IDE Report No. 236, (Tokyo, Japan).

[5] For more on this see John C. de Boer, "Before Oil: Japan and the Question of Israel/Palestine, 1917-1956," *Japan Focus*, 10 March 2005 .

[6] See Yasumasa Kuroda, "Japan and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", in Edward J. Lincoln (ed.), *Japan and the Middle East*, Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 1990, pp. 43-44).

[7] [Remarks](#) by Director-General for the Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau Domichi Hideaki of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Ambassador of the State of Israel to Japan Eli Cohen.

For [statement](#) by Haraguchi Koichi Ambassador at the Public Meeting of the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East Including the Palestinian Question. For Endo Shigeru's statement at the 60th Session of the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, 24 March 2004 [see](#). For Kawaguchi Yoriko's statement on the killing of Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi [refer to](#).

[8] In response to Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom's request that "Japan designate Hamas a terrorist organization, Japan's Foreign Minister Kawaguchi only gave assurances that Japan would "carefully examine whether to recognize entire Hamas as a terrorist organization including [the] political wing." See summary report "Visit to Japan of His Excellency Mr. Silvan Zion Shalom, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel," August 2003 [available](#).

[9] See summary report "Visit to Japan of His Excellency Mr. Silvan Zion Shalom, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel," August 2003. [Available](#).

[10] For Japan's commitment to UN Resolutions 224 and 338 see point 4 on Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [link](#) below.

[11] Personal interview with Cohen in Jerusalem, 18 March 2001.

[12] For a more detailed treatment of Japan's recent relations with Iran see Michael Penn's, "The Battle of Azagedan: Japan, Oil and Independence," *Japan Focus Newsletter*,



September 1, 2005.

[13] John C. de Boer, “[Japan and the Occupation-Reconstruction of Iraq](#): The Re-emergence of an Ideological Agenda?”; “The Dangers of Japan's Modernization Discourse in Iraq” [see](#); “The Dangers of Japan's Modernization Discourse in Asia” [here](#). It is not only the Japanese government that is putting forward this message, academics are promoting this image, albeit from a distinct motivation: “[Japan and the Muslim World](#): The Dangers of Japan's Civilizational Model”.

[14] Itagaki Yuzo, Oda Makoto and Mitsukazu Shiboh (eds.), *The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon*:

*inquiry by the International People's Tribunal*, Tokyo, (Sanyusha, 1983).

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