



Why Japanese Efforts to Facilitate Middle East Talks Have Failed

By Raquel Shaoul

[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.]

The nature of Japan's Middle East policy vis-a-vis Middle East regional issues during the past 30 years can be summarized by the following two main characteristics: First, a low political profile, which has meant a policy of little involvement and non-commitment. Although Japan's political involvement has been increasing since the first oil shock in the early 1970s, and there was incremental movement towards greater economic involvement in the region during the 1980s, a low political commitment remained till the early 1990s.

Second, Japanese foreign policy in the Middle East has been characterized by its tendency to align with America's policy in the region; even though this alignment has been far from absolute or static. Japan's readiness to align with U.S. policies in the region has made it possible for Japan to remain politically uncommitted to the Middle East. By not taking concrete political actions towards conflicting and unresolved regional issues Japan has been free from risking or jeopardizing its national interests in the region. At the same time, the U.S. has taken care of the Middle East conflicts and safeguarded regional stability. Though under certain circumstances alignment and identification with US Middle Eastern policies has been perceived to be harmful to Japanese interests in the region, as it reflected negatively on Japan during the first oil crisis, in general, adoption of U.S. policy was advantageous from the Japanese perspective.

When analyzing Japan's limited political commitment to the Middle East from the 1970s to the early 1990s, one must also consider the extent of her ability to influence the region -- and perhaps Japan's low political profile has been the result of her inability to influence the region, rather than any unilateral political decision to stay out of regional events?

Two main factors are usually presented as being responsible for Japan's limited political influence in the Middle East during that period: First, Japan's absence of any strategic-military influence in the Middle East; and second, the lack of common historical background with the countries of the region, due to the fact that Japan has never been a colonial power in that part of the world. However, I suggest that Japan's lack of political influence in the Middle East at that time had been mainly a matter of policy choice, rather than a direct output of historical/political/strategic limitations.

As for the absence of strategic-military influence, Japan's well established economic position in the Middle East from the mid- and late-1970s onwards has given her political leverage, if desired, and through tools such as Official Development Assistance (ODA), which have proved to be effective diplomatic instruments, especially in developing regions. As for the historical limitations of Japan being a 'latecomer' to the Middle East, her lack of colonial history here could be regarded as politically advantageous in that there is no colonial 'baggage' to deal with. In this regard, Japan has had several opportunities to play a mediating role in regional conflicts -- such as in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). But despite this, Japan opted for a low political profile.

Notwithstanding the Middle East's political, strategic and economic instability from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, Japan has succeeded remarkably well in securing a stable oil supply from the region, as well as becoming one of the leading exporters of goods to some Middle East nations since the early 1980s. Therefore, seeking political influence in the Middle East was not imperative at that time.

Since the early 1990s Japan has followed a 'new approach' towards the region, with the most significant political shift taking place after Operation Desert Storm in 1991. This new political activism toward the Middle East is embodied in Japan's participation in the Middle East peace process since its inauguration in Madrid in October 1991. Within a short time, Japan's attitude and policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian parties conflict came to be more balanced. That is, in the form of the recent openness towards Israel, Japan's denunciation and refusal to comply with the Arab economic boycott against Israel, the increased political commitment to the Palestinian Authority; and an understanding that the Arab-Israeli conflict is by no means the exclusive source of instability in the region.

Japan's efforts to consolidate peace in the Middle East is illustrated by the provision of Japanese economic assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and to the Arab countries involved in the peace process; by playing a major role (along with the United States and the European Union) in creating the framework for regional co-operation on the multilateral tracks and working groups of the peace process; and through participation in and contribution to the United Nations Peace-keeping Operations (PKO) in the Golan Heights (since 1996). All these activities retained their viability until the final stages of the collapsing Oslo Peace Accord in late 2000. Moreover, the one-sided dependency which prevailed between Japan and the U.S. in the region is no longer present. From the American point of view, 'sharing the burden' with countries such as Japan in the Middle East has become indispensable for the promotion of the peace process.

The perceived wisdom should conclude therefore that Japan's ability to expand its political leadership role in the conflict, and consequently influence the conflict parties' behavior, has never been better than at the present. So, why, to date, has Japan failed to coordinate Israeli-PA talks that could help the peace process out of its deadlock?

Despite the dynamism of history and the changing circumstances of the past thirty years, it appears that Japan's national interests in the Middle East today remain quite stable. These interests can be summed up as the securing of a stable, cheap and uninterrupted flow of oil, together with the expansion of Japan's bilateral trade relations, especially with the oil-producing countries, in order to overcome her trade deficits. To these interests another major interest has been added as a result of the emerging new international system at the end of the Cold War: Japan's recognition of her need to enlarge its political profile and international responsibilities in the international arena to a level which befits that of a superpower. This interest is reflected in Japan's vigorous participation in the peace process and political activities after the process collapsed. The Arab-Israeli peace process in general and the Israeli-Palestinian in particular are perceived as effective tools for gaining international recognition and prestige necessary for the promotion, among other objectives, of Japan's efforts to gain permanent membership of the U.N. Security Council.

It is in this connection that Japan's inability to translate its political power into political influence in the region lies: though Japan's current policy vis-a-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be dangling the carrot, it is perceived by regional players as lacking the stick. Unless Japan can rid herself of the image of a 'business partner' in the eyes of the Middle East countries, which has accompanied her for almost 30 years to date, any translation of her potential power into

a real influence on the region will be very limited. Moreover, regional players still largely perceive Japan to be politically dependent on American policy in the region, and in some cases even contained by U.S. policy.

America refused to include Japan in the so called 'Quartet Framework' (US, the European Union, the UN and Russia), but instead Japan became part of a task force under the auspices of the Quartet. This further damaged its emerging image as a leading political power in the region. The American attitude in that matter was summarized in Secretary of State, Colin Powell's comment that "Japan made it clear to me that they wanted to play a more active role because they believed they had something to bring to the table -- not only money, but capacity and ideas... And so, one way to bring in that Japanese perspective and that Japanese capacity was through the creation of the task force" (U.S. Department of State, Washington DC, 25 July 2002). To a large extent Colin Powell's statement reflects the United States' desire to maintain Japan's secondary role within the peace process. As a matter of fact, it was Japan who announced its 'Road Map' during Foreign Minister Kawaguchi's visit to Israel and the PA in June 2002. Japan's 'Road Map' initiative can be perceived as a political initiative from Japan's perspective. Thus the question is whether Japan will offer its own political solution to the ongoing conflict, or will it need to retain its inferior political role within the Quartet Framework?

In conclusion, the fact that Japan is facing difficulties vis-a-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be seen as the result of its deep-rooted foreign policy legacy perceptions in the eyes of regional players. Nevertheless, an additional disturbing fact obscuring Japan's potential for achieving a leadership role in the region is the attitude of its main bilateral ally, the United States.

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