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Japan's Iraq Conundrum

Sakai Keiko interviewed by Eric Prideaux

One year ago this month, an advance team from Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) arrived in Iraq on a mission -- so the Japanese public was told -- to help rebuild the wartorn country. The rest of the main contingent of 600 troops soon followed.

Then, on Dec. 9, 2004, amid simmering debate over whether the dispatch fell foul of Japan's war-renouncing Constitution -- and after an Asahi Shimbun poll registered over 60 percent opposition to it -- the Cabinet of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro extended the Self-Defense Forces' stay by another 12 months.

Whether the troop deployment to Samawah, in southern Iraq, has been effective or not -- and there are many who doubt it has -- it marks Japan's first military mission to a conflict zone since World War II. The extension of the SDF's deployment also came just the day before an overhaul of the nation's defense policy was announced, effectively expanding the global role of Japan's armed forces.

Sakai Keiko is one of Japan's top authorities on the Middle East. Known for her frequent -- and frequently blunt -- television talk-show contributions, and her incisive newspaper commentaries, Sakai has devoted more than two decades to studying the Arabic-speaking world.

Currently the director of area studies at the government-affiliated Institute of Developing Economies, which she joined in 1982 after graduating from the University of Tokyo, Sakai first visited Iraq in 1986 when the institute sent her there on a three-year stint as a researcher. She took up her current post in 2002 and most recently revisited Iraq in July 2003.

In books and articles in scholarly journals, Sakai, 45, has written extensively about nationalism in the Middle East, trends in Islamic belief, the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, sanctions against Saddam's Iraq and the U.S.-led occupation since May 1, 2003, when President George W. Bush declared an end to "major combat operations." She is the author of four books on Iraq.

Sakai shed light on why, though less than 1 percent of Japan's total oil imports are now from Iraq, Koizumi has firmly linked Japan's membership in Bush's "coalition of the willing" to Japan's energy security.

She acknowledges that the GSDF was welcomed at first in relatively peaceful Samawah -- where the Japanese presence has so far provided 44,000 tons of clean water and ensures jobs for 300 to 500 Iraqis each day -- but she worries that events could easily take a turn for the worse before or after national elections scheduled for Jan. 30.

What was life in Iraq like during your stay?

I lived there in the late 1980s, before the 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent economic sanctions, so the economic situation was good.

In the sense that it was a totalitarian state in which you were always watched, yes, there was a distinct lack of psychological freedom -- but there was more economic freedom than now.

During the three years I was there, it was a very easy place to live. In the wake of Saddam Hussein's removal, the psychological oppression has completely disappeared. In that sense it's more free, but the economic and social restrictions have become extremely severe.

How was it to be a foreign woman in Saddam's Iraq?

It was a breeze. Iraq was making sincere efforts toward the advancement of women and many women in Iraq were rising to ministerial and parliamentary ranks. And the men were very kind to me -- kinder than Japanese men (laughter). It was a very easy place to be.

Nonetheless, surely life for Iraqis under Saddam was a terrible strain?

Yes, it was. On the one hand, if you stayed within the rules, you could lead a relatively stable life, economically and socially. If you absolutely insisted on resisting, however, then everybody knew you were in a whole heap of trouble.

Sending Japanese Forces to a "Non-Combat Zone"

Turning to more recent times, Japan's July 2003 Special Measures Law for Iraq precludes the SDF from being deployed in "areas experiencing combat." Do you believe that Samawah was a non-combat area when Japan dispatched the SDF there?

Bush declared that the war ended on May 1, 2003, but the anti-U.S. forces in Iraq didn't necessarily agree. You'd be hard pressed to say that combat has ceased across the entire country.

Of course, during the (official) war, Samawah didn't see that much combat. But considering the state of the country, there was absolutely no guarantee from the outset that combat could be prevented as time passed.

In other words, in my view, more than asking whether Samawah itself is or isn't a combat area, the point is that when the SDF was dispatched there, Iraq, as a whole, remained in the throes of war.

So are you suggesting that, in interpreting the law, it would be more appropriate to define the "non-combat area" as the entire country of Iraq, rather than solely the area of Samawah?

Yes. For example, if Osaka were to some day erupt into combat while Kyoto happened to remain calm, there's absolutely no way anyone could guarantee it would remain that way. It's the same thing. I feel the Japanese government's categorization of Samawah as a non-combat area was an extremely subjective call.

Put a different way, if you think that a location ceased to be a combat area because the war officially ended, then consider Fallujah or other areas where insurgency continued. At the time of the purported end of the war, they, too, were not combat areas.

How do you see the situation for the GSDF now?

Samawah, compared to other areas, is still relatively calm. But conditions have undeniably deteriorated. Attacks on Dutch forces and Japan's SDF have increased since they were stationed there at the beginning of the year. Several times in April and August, mortar shells landed outside the SDF base. More seriously, in late October there were two attacks inside the base -- this time not from mortars but from rocket launchers.

Mortars are comparatively weak; they're simply lobbed up and come down. Compared to the attacks in April and August, those in late October were clearly driven by stronger intention to hurt the target.

Is it known who launched the attacks?

It is likely that there was some connection between the April and August attacks and fierce assaults on U.S. and British troops during the period by supporters of [militant Shiite cleric] Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf, Nasiriyah and Basra.

Sadr had few supporters in Samawah, but those who were there probably thought they had to pitch in somehow.

According to the Asahi Shimbun, the October attacks were carried out by members of the local Shia tribes that account for 90-95 percent of Samawah's population. Samawah is somewhat laid back, politically speaking. Still, resistance to the SDF is on the rise.

Japan's Economic Stake in Iraq

Iraq is said to have the world's second-largest oil reserves, yet Japan -- which gets 87 percent of its oil from the Middle East -- imports only a tiny portion from Iraq. So what is the connection between stability in Iraq and the supply of oil to Japan?

Japan does want oil from Iraq. Japan's oil imports from Iraq were once larger, and the reason they declined was due to the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, when supply became unfeasible.

Iraq's oil is particularly suitable for Japanese refineries -- especially the varieties of light petroleum, Kirkuk Light Crude and Basra Light Crude. Japan has been buying lots of oil from the United Arab Emirates because it is similar to Iraqi oil, but ideally it wants the Iraqi variety.

Is that because Iraqi oil is cheap to produce, at about \$1 a barrel?

Though it is often said Iraqi oil is cheap, because of pressure from OPEC, the country probably wouldn't be able to sell it so inexpensively in the future.

There is another important factor to consider: Iraq is a major Mideast customer of Japanese construction projects. The populations of other Persian Gulf oil producers -- such as Kuwait and Qatar -- are small, and it follows that demand for Japanese construction projects is limited there.

In the 1970s or '80s, Iraq placed large orders with foreign construction bidders for petrochemical-industry infrastructure, roads, residential blocks, lodging houses for civil servants, hospitals and so on. And Japan accounted for most of them. France and Japan were the biggest players.

So, yes, Japan does place emphasis on buying Iraqi oil, which is of high quality, but it mustn't be forgotten that Japanese construction corporations also do good business there. Whether you look at it from the perspective of import or export, Iraq is a highly valued customer.

But due to the war, much of the payment for those construction projects remains unpaid to either Japan or France. So many Japanese companies hope that in lieu of repayment, they can secure cheap oil or lucrative contracts.

Let's factor in other oil producers in the region. The U.S. has expressed reservations about Japan strengthening oil ties with Iran, reportedly suggesting that Japan should buy from Libya instead. Considering such problems over Iranian oil, will Japan increase its reliance on Iraqi oil?

That is a very sensitive issue. Saudi Arabian supplies are dominated completely by the U.S. Once upon a time, Japan had a drilling concession with Saudi Arabia through the Arabian Oil Co. -- then a de facto nationally owned Japanese enterprise -- but the contract was ended.

Japanese Overtures to Iran

For the sake of Japanese energy security, Japan has to look elsewhere. Spurned by Saudi Arabia, it is now focusing its attention on Iran. Whether or not oilfields there produce any good oil, co-development with Iran would have symbolic value.

Hence Japan-Iran talks are progressing, and the U.S. is reluctantly resigning itself to the fact because it can't steer every aspect of Japanese policy.

Still, the U.S. won't allow Japan to get the upper hand in Iraq. It doesn't want Japan getting too warm and friendly with the governments of both countries. It's one thing if trade in Iraq is done under the control of U.S. and British companies, but Japan won't get the best petroleum or construction pickings.

Is it possible that the GSDF was dispatched in part to further opportunities for Japanese construction firms?

Japanese companies do want to be dealt in after peace is resumed. But the primary reason Japan dispatched its SDF to Iraq was to support the U.S.

Subordinate to that is the desire to secure room for Japanese business -- including construction projects. If Japan did nothing, all the projects would go to U.S. and British companies.

If an Iraqi government steered by the U.S. can be kept in power, that idea will pay off. But if an anti-American government should rise to the fore, there will be local resistance to not only U.S. and British corporate interests, but to Japanese ones too. That's the risk.

Who Will Protect the SDF in Samawah?

The Dutch troops providing security to the SDF contingent in Samawah are expected to leave Iraq in March. Who will protect the Japanese after that?

At this point, the British military is expected to replace the Dutch to protect the Japanese in Samawah. That's what the Japanese government has requested, and the decision has been all-but finalized.

Still, it would be naive to assume that just because the British are taking up after the Dutch that things will all go swimmingly. Dutch troops created little stir while keeping the peace in Samawah. That is because they haven't fought any significant battles with Iraqis anywhere else in the country. They're not hated by the populace.

The British are a different story. They've had several sizeable clashes with Iraqis in places like Basra and Nasiriyah. And they have cooperated with the U.S. in Fallujah. As a result, more than the Dutch, the British are now seen by Iraqis as occupiers, as enemies. So, the GSDF will not be able to comfortably insist that they are safe under the protection of another peace-keeping force.

Following the decision in December to extend the stay by Japanese troops for a year, GSDF Chief of Staff Mori Tsutomu hinted at installing a radar system at the Japanese camp capable of locating the launching and landing spots of mortar shells or rockets. Equipped with that capability, do you believe Japan would fire back?

Military strategy is not my field of expertise, so I don't know exactly to what degree they are allowed to engage the enemy. Whatever the case, considering the debate that is now going on in Japan, if the GSDF were to undertake an action that resulted in the loss of any Iraqi life, there is no doubt that it would provoke a hail of criticism here. People would wonder whether the Japanese action was not an act of self-defense but an attack -- and that would be criticized as unconstitutional.

Regarding the GSDF deployment, Japanese at home are concerned that their troops abroad may die in terrorist or guerilla attacks. They are also worried that Japanese might kill Iraqis, and whether cooperating with offensive actions against Iraqis is in obvious violation of the Constitution.

Naturally, the government would say an action involving force was taken in self-defense, but proving it would be difficult.

The Security Factor in the Dispatch of SDF to Iraq

Is the government trying to accomplish something with the deployment of the GSDF that hasn't been made clear to the public?

Yes, I believe so. Japan is protected by the U.S. military. If the U.S. military were to abandon the Japanese islands, and North Korea and Japan somehow collided militarily, the GSDF would not be up to the task of protecting this country. It needs America's cooperation.

Thus, Japan must cooperate with the U.S. abroad as well. That's the main reason for the GSDF's dispatch. All the same, it's not clear to the public what kind of promises these two governments have made to each other.

Do you see in any of this an attempt to return to militarism in the mold of pre-World War II Japan?

I believe some politicians do have that aim. Their camp supports the dispatch from the point of view that if the SDF isn't beefed up and made into a regular military, Japan will never be seen as a mature state.

In response to the many critics of Japan's so-called "checkbook diplomacy" surrounding the 1991 Gulf War, can you suggest any alternatives to Japan's sending troops?

That is a difficult question. Checkbook diplomacy is criticized as a practice of just dumping money without following up. However, if through economic assistance Japan were to actively help rebuild the economic workings of Iraq, I would see that as a form of diplomatic success.

It is often said that because instability prevents private companies from going to Iraq to rebuild the economy, the only other choice is to send the SDF. That's seen as the alternative to checkbook diplomacy.

Seen the other way around, however, it can be argued that the instability is caused by the ruined economy. Inside Iraq today, soldiers are carrying out economic development. It's no surprise that there hasn't been a respectable recovery.

There are lots of economic development specialists at Japan's METI (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) and Finance Ministry. Their cooperation is required more than that of the SDF.

The Rule of Law?

America has tried, at least to a certain degree, to institute the rule of law.

Unfortunately, it hasn't worked. The Iraqi people yearn for the rule of law from the bottom of their hearts. Previously, Saddam Hussein himself was the law. Now there is no law -- it's lawless. There's no constitution. There's no strict policy on how to change the law.

America has abolished some laws from Saddam's regime but still depends on others that have been allowed to stand. It's been carried out in a fragmented manner.

The problem is how to establish a new kind of rule of law before the old-fashioned kind, in other words Islamic rule of law, emerges. In Iraq people tend to depend on Islamic law in a bid to escape the lawlessness.

Why else do you think Muqtada al-Sadr is so popular among the poorest? It is because he has fashioned his own kind of Sharia law and has solidified support in certain cities like Saddam City, Najaf and other places. For example, in Fallujah there is a small pocket of autonomy controlled by very strict Islamists. They have backing, to some extent, because the people need law -- somebody to judge what is good and what is bad.

Many Iraqis insist that the worst thing America did after the war was to allow criminals to run free.

Supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr have reportedly said recently that they regard the Japanese as helping to occupy Iraq. How pervasive do you believe that view is in Iraq?

Foreign Troops as Occupiers

Frankly, most Iraqis believe any foreign troops bearing arms are occupiers, and they don't want occupiers to remain on their soil. But there are two main strands of thinking on this.

Most Sunni Iraqis want to get occupiers out by force now. Shiites, meanwhile, want to engage in a political process first and establish a government. Then they'll have a good excuse to ask the occupiers to go home.

Some people think that even if the Japanese are occupiers, a Japanese presence is needed for now -- particularly the private construction companies -- and that some months down the line maybe private companies will come and construct big projects. The problem is that if the SDF turns out to be more occupier than contributor to economic development, then the people will attack them.

Iraqis can remember seeing Japanese corporations -- Mitsubishi, Marubeni, Taisei Corp. and so on -- so when they think about Japan, they tend to think about construction.

For them, Japan equals construction companies.

Thus, people think the SDF can build factories, schools, roads -- many things. But after one year, people have started to understand that the SDF is not a construction company.

This is a pity for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Whenever local criticism against the SDF surfaces, it promises official development aid to the people of Samawah. Actually, the ministry contributes more to the Iraqi people than the SDF.

Muqtada al-Sadr has a branch in Samawah, but it is not so strong. But you can't assume it will remain weak. Samawah has a strongly tribal society. Arab tribes are famous for their militancy.

If some kind of anti-occupation movement spreads in Iraq, tribes will be the main actors. Tribes in Samawah once played a very big role in anti-colonialism (against the British) in the 1920s. If they again feel that this is their historical role, they will join that anti-occupation movement.

What do you see as the SDF's biggest challenge over the next year?

The understanding that the SDF is not that effective in economic development will spread. So, a major challenge will be how to cover up the fiction that the SDF was sent to Samawah for the purpose of humanitarian aid.

The main reason for sending them was actually to contribute to American policy.

That fiction will become obvious to the people of Samawah, so Japan will have to figure out how to keep the story going. We have to prove we are really cooperating with postwar construction in Iraq. This is the most serious challenge for Japan.

Eric Prideaux is a staff writer for The Japan Times.

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