

On September 18th, 2018 (Tues.), a special lecture by Foreign Minister Kono, hosted by the Yomiuri Shimbun Company and the Middle East Institute of Japan, took place at the Nippon Press Center.

Lecturer: Taro Kono, Foreign Minister

Topic: “Japan’s Middle East Policy”



Foreign Minister Kono has developed active diplomatic relations with the Middle East since assuming his post in August 2017. He has visited Jordan three times, the UAE twice, and nine other countries, and has held both summit meetings and foreign ministerial conferences.

For Japan, the importance of Middle East diplomacy is primarily due to the dependence on the countries of the Middle East for the majority of its energy resources. Eighty-six percent of Japan’s oil is imported from the Middle East. While Japanese dependence on this region for natural gas has decreased, it still imports one-quarter of its natural gas from the Middle East. Furthermore, the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal are located in the conflict-stricken Middle East. These are important points for sea-lanes that allow for resource importation. These factors increase the importance of the Middle East further. The peace and stability of the Middle East are therefore directly connected to the peace and stability of Japan.

Foreign Minister Kono's Middle East diplomacy is based on being highly familiar with the human relationships of the Middle East, a region that emphasizes personal connections. An alumnus of Georgetown University who deepened his relationships with the Arab people during visits to the Middle East during his time as a member of the Diet, Kono still holds these relationships today, and they have served him well during his diplomatic activities.

Based on this understanding of the situation, Kono held "Japan/Arab Political Dialogues" in Cairo, Egypt directly after assuming the post of Foreign Minister in September 2017, to initiate new diplomatic relations between Japan and the Middle East. At this assembly, the "Four Kono Principles" were announced (1. Intellectual and human contributions, 2. investment in "people," 3. sustained effort, and 4. the reinforcement of political initiatives). Until this point, Japan's Middle East diplomacy had emphasized securing energy resources, but this new approach aims to build a long-term, cooperative relationship between Japan and the countries of the Middle East through initiatives to resolve the conflicts in the area and the development of human resources. The "Four Kono Principles" were also referenced during the "Manama Dialogues" (in Bahrain), which Kono participated in as the first Japanese Foreign Minister to do so in December 2017.

Japan is religiously neutral (it does not support any specific religion as national policy), has no experience or history of controlling the Middle East as a colony, and does not export weapons. Historically, Europe and the US have had a strong effect on the Middle East, but it is possible that Japan, due to its unique position, will be able to develop diplomatic relations with the Middle East differing from the West.



The Foreign Minister raised the following points as ones that Japan seeks to develop in terms of Middle East diplomacy.

(1) The Construction of a Multi-Layered Relationship with the Countries of the Middle East

The various oil-producing Gulf States, such as Saudi Arabia, have raised eliminating their dependence on oil as a national development policy, and are proceeding with the development and use of renewable energy. Israel's high-tech industry has also gained worldwide attention. Also, these states are dealing with problems caused by a population pyramid with a large base of young people and high rates of unemployed young people. The population sizes and GDPs of the countries of the Middle East are on par with those of the ASEAN countries, which is to say that the middle class in these countries have a strong desire to make purchases and that there is a strong need for infrastructure development. Up until now, Japan and the countries of the Middle East have had an economic relationship in which Japan buys oil and sells automobiles, but in the future, Japan would like to engage in other fields, such as renewable energy, high-tech industries, and infrastructure investment. Furthermore, before assuming the post as Foreign Minister, Kono attended the Middle Eastern Davos Conference (World Economic Forum) in Jordan three times.

(2) Extremism Countermeasures

The Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda, and other Islamic extremists represent a serious security problem for the countries of the Middle East. This is not unrelated to Asia, as there is also a problem in which Asian combatants who fought in Syria and Iraq return to the countries of Southeast Asia and commit acts of terror there. Japan would like to be involved in extremist countermeasures in the Middle East and Asia. In April 2018, "Aqaba Process" meetings related to counterterrorism measures in Southeast Asia were held in Jordan, where Japan and King Abdullah II of Jordan itself served as joint moderators.

(3) Intellectual and Human Contributions

As a security measure in Iraq, an initiative has been proposed to buy weapons distributed to civilians to support demilitarization.

In the realm of education, schools that incorporate Japanese-style education have been opened in Egypt (agreed to when President Sisi visited Japan), Abu Dhabi people have been admitted to Japanese schools in the Abu Dhabi emirate, and opportunities to receive a high school education in Japan have been provided. Furthermore, Japan

would like to conduct initiatives to promote the development of industrial and administrative personnel for the peoples of the Gulf States, the countries of the Maghreb, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

(4) Sustained Efforts

Japan wished to make Middle Eastern diplomacy into a long-term, sustained process. A prototypical example of this sustained effort is support for industrial development in the Palestinian National Authority. This operation, which has steadfastly continued for more than ten years based on the concept of “Corridors of Peace and Stability,” has supported the food industry, among others. Going forward, Japan hopes to invest in the development of an IT industry that would be able to overcome blockades that might be caused by tension in Palestine’s relations with Israel.

(5) The Reinforcement of Political Initiatives

Japan expects to be able to exhibit a stronger political presence in the Middle East. Japan, because it holds favorable relationships with parties on both sides of antagonistic relationships, such as between Iran and Saudi Arabia and between Israel and Palestine, may be able to build bridges between conflicting parties.

Like other challenges in the Middle East region, Kono discussed what kind of regime was created in countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya right before their collapse, as well as the need to stabilize the political situation in places such as Iraq, Tunisia, and Egypt. As context, Kono indicated that the presence of the US in the Middle East has decreased since the Obama era and that Iran, Turkey, and Russia are engaged in a struggle to fill this power vacuum.

During the question and answer period, in response to a question about what kind of strategy there is regarding the financial difficulties of the UNRWA, Kono responded that he would like to convey to the US, which has stopped providing funding, how support for UNRWA contributes to the national interests of the US and Israel. Regarding the deadlock of a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, Kono responded that he hopes to make it so that young Palestinians can see some prospect for the future by creating a territorial and governmental arrangement as soon as possible. In response to a question about whether space exists for China and Japan to cooperate in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” touted by Japan, Kono responded that, since there is a significant need for infrastructure in the Middle East, Japan and China should be able to cooperate on projects that are highly transparent

and open, and that will not have negative effects on the financial circumstances of the countries involved.



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