

FRS – Japan Program

The Situation in the Middle East: Challenges for Japan and Europe

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His books were widely acclaimed and circulated in Japan, among them: *Islam Koku no Shogeki* (The Shock of the Islamic State), which was published in January 2015 and became one of the nation-wide best-selling books of the year. He was awarded Mainichi Publishing Culture Prize in 2015 and Nakasone Yasuhiro Prize in 2016.

Question 1: What is the situation in the Middle East after the Arab Spring?

Fragile. After the Arab Spring, there was a proliferation of actors and entities: states, full or semi autocracies with questions regarding their sustainability, failed states and non-state entities. Some states kept a large measure of stateness, like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia as well as Egypt. To various extents, their borders have been preserved as well as internal unity. Among these “solid states”, however, Turkey and Iran do not belong to the Arab world and their role as strong states also demonstrate the lack of an “Arab leadership” in the region, as Egypt’s role as a regional leader is declining.

Alongside these states, there are failed “stateless” states. Among the “stateless” states, one can range Libya, Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Their common characteristics are civil war and territorial divides along tribal, sectarian or regional fault lines, with a weak or absent central power.

Taking advantage of these failed states, non-state actors and entities do play a major role. They are not recognized as states, but as entities providing some services, such as maintaining a kind of order, by the people on the ground. Their legitimacy is based on sectarian, regional, tribal, etc. identities. Among these “identities”, one can cite the Kurds in Syria,

Iraq and Turkey, the Shiites and the Sunnis in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, the regional division between North and South Yemen as well as tribal divides in Lebanon.

The Islamic State (IS) is a case apart, swinging like a pendulum from an ideological movement based on radical Islamic ideas and sharia, very decentralized, taking advantage of local opportunities, and navigating from true believers to opportunists both in the region and in western countries; to a quasi-state status when the regional situation allows it, as in Iraq and Syria before it was defeated.

Question 2: What is the situation of emerging regional powers?

With the retreat of the United States after the Arab Spring, one could see the emergence of regional powers to a certain extent. The two most important are Iran and Turkey, followed by Saudi Arabia and Israel. Qatar and the UAE may be counted as part this group of influential states even though they are small in their size and population numbers.

Each of these emerging regional powers, however, has its own problems and its own agenda.

Iran has been engrossed in proxy or direct confrontation with the United States since 1979 but cannot afford the cost of an all-out war with the US. In addition, Iran faces hostility in its own region. Turkey is playing the card of “selective Ottomanism”, which puts a limit to its regional ambitions. Confrontation with Russia is a result of these regional ambitions. Saudi Arabia can be qualified as an “infantile” regional power, whose long-term sustainability can be questioned, limiting its role as a leading regional power.

Some states in the region are trying to impose themselves as “sharp powers”. First among these states is Israel, fully established and embedded in the region for the past ten years, where it has been playing an increasing role as a “software power”, providing intelligence and security to neighboring Egypt and Jordan and the Gulf countries as well. Israel has established its position as the most influential power among these states in the region with support from the United States but also from the Gulf countries in spite of the absence of diplomatic relations.

At the other end of this line, the UAE and Qatar are two small states trying to play their own cards with different means. The UAE, in spite of its limits, tries to play an effective role in some situations like Yemen. Qatar is using the media, sports and its financial support to the Muslim Brotherhood to set its own agenda of influence.

Question 3: What is the role of external powers like Russia and the United States?

Alongside this web of regional states and non-state actors with different agendas, level of influence and strength, two major external actors, Russia and the United States, also play a role as balancers.

Russia can be qualified as a semi-regional power. The Middle East is considered as its near abroad and Syria is a major element of the Soviet Union’s foothold in the Middle East and today’s Russia’s policy in the region. However, Russia’s capabilities and intentions in the Middle East are limited. The priority for Russia is to help the Assad regime maintain its hold on the country for the sake of stability and keep Turkey at bay. After the Idlib crisis, Turkey will have to make a deal with Russia, while

at the same time increasing its pressure on Europe with a potential refugees crisis. In addition, Russia also needs to reconcile with Turkey to avoid a full destabilization of the region.

As for the United States, as the first superpower in the world, it still has a final say in all crises in the Middle East but in recent years they have been largely absent from the region, refocusing on “America First” after the election of President Donald Trump. Moreover, President Trump considers that economic statecraft and sanctions are the most effective tools against countries like Iran. This mixture of disengagement and excessive focus on economic pressure also increases the feeling, including on the part of the US’ closest allies, that the US policy in the region can be qualified as racketeering for protection.

Question 4: Will there be a generational transition in the Middle East?

The question of generational change in the region is important. In Saudi Arabia, there is a generational transition in the leadership. Some ideological evolutions might be possible, as well as the realization that there is a necessity to accelerate the transition from a strictly patrimonial state based on oil. Moreover, the emergence of a new generation did change relations with Israel. For this new generation, the Palestinian issue is not a priority and the anti-Israel sentiment is less pronounced than in the older generation.

In Iran, 40 years after the Islamic Revolution, the leadership is also aging. However, this has not led yet to a generational change and power is still in the hands of septuagenarian/octogenarian former revolutionary leaders.

This lack of transition for the time being can only increase the divide with a young society, with risks of instability as was demonstrated on numerous occasions in recent years. Ominously, this aged revolutionary old guard is most vulnerable to the threat of the novel coronavirus COVID-19.

Question 5: Is there a role for Europe and Japan?

Whereas, at least until the coronavirus crisis, all eyes were turned towards China and its grandiose BRI projects, the role of China in the region is still very limited. China does not play any role on the ground even though its military presence, with a new base in Djibouti, has been increasing.

Japan also keeps a low profile in security matters and is severely limited in its actions by the Constitution and the public opinion. Japan also has a small base or so-called “facility” in Djibouti, to demonstrate its direct interest in the stability of the region. Japan has also participated in regular antipiracy operations off the coast of Somalia in the past decade, including ones with the European Union. In 2019, Japan also sent a naval mission to the Middle East in response to the request of the United States. However, Tokyo remains extremely cautious not to take any risk of engagement in the Persian Gulf or the Strait of Hormuz.

Japan’s role in Palestine is a proof of Japan’s special interest in the Middle East from which 80 % of the country’s energy is imported. Since the first oil crisis, Japan has maintained a sort of diplomatic autonomy regarding the Middle East. An example of this autonomy has been the long-term support of the Palestinian cause and efforts to maintain the economy of the Palestinian territories. In spite of

increasing economic relations with Israel, this characteristic is still a factor of Japan's Middle East policy.

Confronted with China's offensive with the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), Japan has also presented its own vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Japan's vision is more inclusive and focused more on development, compared with the US vision that is limited to the Pacific region and India, excluding Afghanistan-Pakistan and the entire Middle East according to the division of the US military command structure. The US vision is first and foremost focused on security and the containment of China.

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For Japan, in the Middle East, priorities remain the security and safety of sea lanes of communication as well as facilities along these sea lanes of communication. In addition, for Japan, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea are integral part of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision but Japan's vision should not be exclusive of China, focusing on complementarity. That vision is closer to the value-based and development-based European vision of its own interests in the Middle East. Here again, complementarity is the key word. However, beyond these “soft power” characteristics, Japan's strategic partnership with the EU, signed in 2019, as well as Japan's ongoing cooperation with the EU Atalanta operations against piracy off the coast of Somalia demonstrate that hard security issues are not absent from Japan's preoccupations in the region.

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