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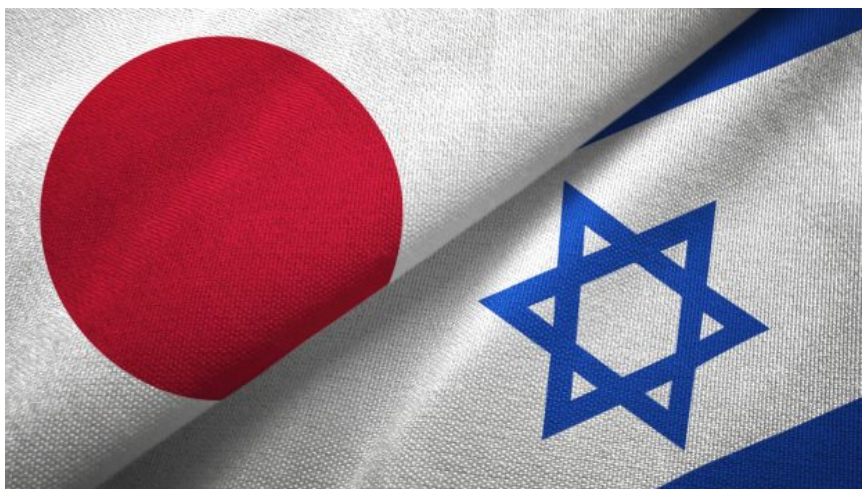
Israel-Japan Relations and the Middle East

Insights from Rotem Kowner.



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The Diplomat author Mercy Kuo regularly engages subject-matter experts, policy practitioners, and strategic thinkers across the globe for their diverse insights into U.S. Asia policy. This conversation with Dr. Rotem

Kowner – professor of history and Japanese studies at the University of Haifa, Israel, and co-editor with Yoram Evron of “Israel-Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century: The Search for Partners in a Changing World” (Routledge, 2023) and “East-West Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century: From Bilateral to Interregional Relationships” (Routledge, 2024) – is the 430th in “The Trans-Pacific View Insight Series.”

Identify the strategic objectives that Israel and Japan share.

Both Japan and Israel are committed to a democratic, liberal, and free-trade worldview, and both are part of a U.S.-led bloc, sharing the responsibility of maintaining and supporting U.S. grand policy.

Additionally, they both seek a stable Middle East, though for somewhat different reasons. For Japan, stability is crucial to ensuring the uninterrupted flow of energy supplies it heavily depends on from the region and to maintaining its export markets there. For Israel, a stable region is essential for national security, further economic development, and securing foreign investment. However, in cases of national security threats, Israel does

not hesitate to use force, even at the risk of contributing to regional instability.

What are the determinants that govern Israel-Japan relations?

Israel initially sought to establish diplomatic relations with Japan to break its isolation in Asia and secure economic and political partners. At the same time, having regained its sovereignty in 1952, Japan was eager to reestablish its international standing and sought both old and new partners. However, it wasn't long before Japan's interests began to dominate the relationship.

Within a few years of establishing diplomatic ties, Japan began to see Israel as a liability to its international efforts for recognition and its desire to expand industrial exports, especially in Asia and Africa. Simultaneously, Japan remained under the U.S. umbrella, both in terms of security and international trade, and was largely dependent on Washington's support. To safeguard its interests, Japan had to strike a delicate balance between its precarious energy needs – supplied by Middle Eastern countries opposed to Israel – and the pressure from the United States to support Israel. Japanese efforts to maintain this balance amidst

shifting circumstances have shaped Japan-Israel relations to this day.

For decades, Tokyo maintained this balance by keeping its relations with Israel low-profile, minimizing trade and avoiding visits by dignitaries. This balance was tested shortly after the Yom Kippur War broke out in October 1973. Imposing a partial oil embargo on the United States, the Netherlands, and Japan, the members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries demanded that Japan sever its diplomatic relations with Israel. Caught between Arab pressures and American warnings, the Japanese government acted quickly, releasing a pro-Palestinian statement and offering substantial loans to Arab states. Soon after, its oil supply was renewed, but during the ensuing decade, the Japanese government strove to appease the Arab world, making clear where it stood in the Middle Eastern conflict.

It was only around the Gulf War of 1990-91 that this balance began to shift back. Tokyo's stance on Israel changed slightly. Shortly before, a glut in global oil production, a subsequent decrease in energy prices, and the rising exchange rate of the yen reduced Japanese fears of another Arab or OPEC

embargo. The Gulf War brought American power to a new zenith and increased pressure on Japan. Consequently, despite some initial hysterical reactions in Tokyo, the mild rapprochement with Israel accelerated.

It wasn't until 1988 that a Japanese foreign minister visited Israel, and it took another seven years before the first Japanese prime minister made an official visit. During the second tenure of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, starting in 2012, Israel's rising position, its growing international acceptance, and the success of its high-tech industry suddenly made it seem like a modest asset to Japan. In the subsequent decades, Japanese investment in Israel hit new records, and new avenues of collaboration developed.

Examine Israel-Japan relations vis-à-vis Japan's dependence on Middle East oil.

Japan's reliance on Middle Eastern oil has long been the most significant factor shaping Israel-Japan relations. However, over the past three decades leading up to October 2023, particularly during the 2010s, several factors have gradually shifted this dynamic.

One of the key changes was the growing economic and political importance of Israel. As Israel emerged as a leader in technology,

innovation, and defense industries, it became an increasingly attractive partner for Japan, offering opportunities for collaboration that extended beyond the Middle East's traditional geopolitical concerns.

At the same time, the unity and influence of Arab states began to wane, especially as internal divisions grew and the rise of Iranian power shifted regional dynamics. These changes weakened the once-strong pressure on Tokyo to avoid close ties with Israel, allowing Japan greater flexibility in its foreign policy decisions.

Additionally, Japan's energy strategy evolved significantly. The diversification of its energy sources – including the expansion of nuclear energy, increased imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG), and investments in sustainable energy – reduced Japan's dependency on Middle Eastern oil. This diversification not only bolstered Japan's energy security but also lessened the potential impact of any future Arab-led embargoes. Collectively, these factors diminished Japan's fears of a recurring Arab embargo and ensured that relations with Israel were no longer seen as a major liability. Instead, Japan could pursue a more

balanced and multifaceted approach to its Middle Eastern policy, recognizing Israel as a valuable partner while maintaining its broader regional interests.

Analyze Japan’s position on the future of Palestine and Tokyo’s approach to Israel-Palestine relations.

Japan’s position on the future of Palestine envisions resolving the conflict through a two-state solution, which aims to establish peaceful and stable relations between Israel and Palestine. This stance reflects Tokyo’s longstanding commitment to peaceful conflict resolution and broader humanitarian principles that emphasize dialogue, diplomacy, and the protection of human rights. Japan’s advocacy for a two-state solution is also shaped by domestic public opinion, which largely views Palestinians as victims of a colonial legacy – a perspective informed by historical narratives and Japan’s own experiences in modern times.

From a geostrategic perspective, Japan’s support for a two-state solution is driven by practical considerations as well. The Middle East is a critical region for Japan’s energy security, given its heavy reliance on oil

imports from the region. By promoting a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Japan seeks to ensure a stable environment that guarantees the uninterrupted flow of energy supplies.

Moreover, this stance allows Japan to carefully navigate the complex dynamics of its relationship with the United States. While maintaining close ties with Washington, Japan can pursue a policy that aligns with its own strategic interests in the region, thereby avoiding any potential friction with its key ally over Middle Eastern affairs.

Assess the impact of the war in Gaza on Israel-Japan relations.

I believe the war has somewhat negatively impacted Israel-Japan relations, though this effect might be short-term. During the conflict, Tokyo's policy toward the region largely aligned with that of the United States, striving to maintain a balanced approach while supporting humanitarian efforts and seeking to resolve the conflict. Domestically, however, Israel's image has significantly deteriorated. Negative coverage of Israel's actions in both domestic and international media has reached new heights, with protests and denunciations becoming

widespread in Japan as well. Consequently, collaboration with Israel has once again become a liability for Japan, particularly in defense projects and cultural exchanges.

Two cases illustrate this subtle shift. In February 2024, Japan's Itochu Corporation announced that its aviation unit would end its nascent cooperation with the Israeli defense company Elbit Systems, citing the International Court of Justice's order on January 26 and Japan's support for the Court's role. In August 2024, the mayor of Nagasaki decided not to invite the Israeli ambassador to the annual ceremony marking the U.S. atomic bombing of the city, expressing his desire to "hold the ceremony smoothly to mourn the atomic-bomb victims in a calm and solemn atmosphere."

As the dominant partner in the relationship, Tokyo has the ability to control the level of engagement, adjusting it according to its interests. Consequently, in the wake of the current war, any further improvements or breakthroughs in the bilateral relationship have been put on hold. By the end of 2024, it will be possible to better assess the impact of the war on trade, investments, and tourism with Israel, but it is already evident that the current situation is marked by decline.