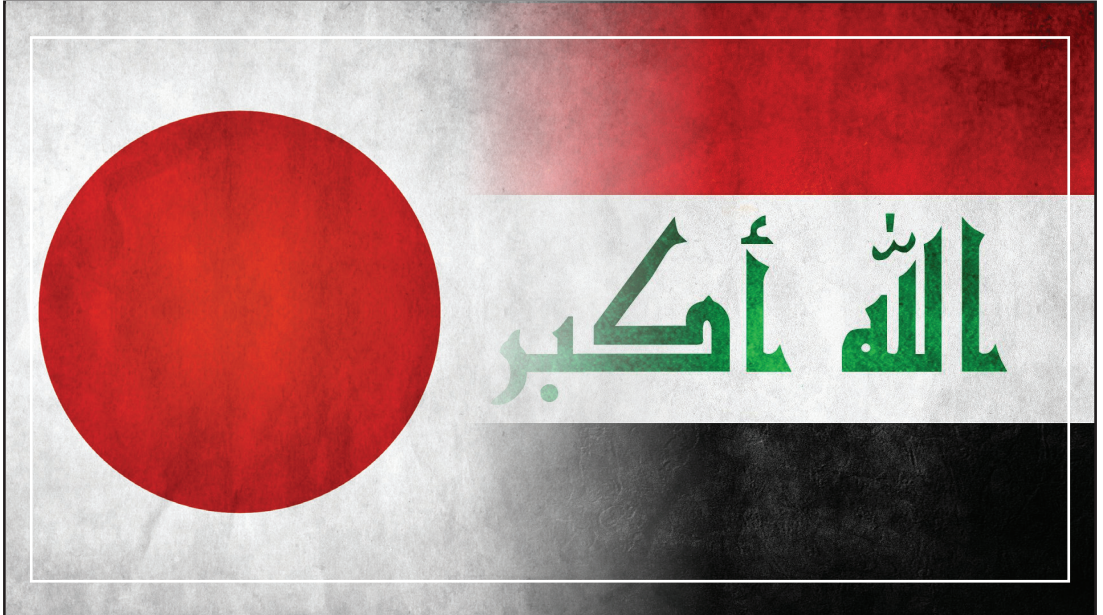




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Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

Japan's foreign policy approach to Iraq

Farzad Ramezani Bonesh



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History of the relationship

Japan soon turned its attention to the Middle East. The first Japanese official probably visited Iraq in 1880.¹ But diplomatic relations between the two countries began in 1939², and in 1939 Japan opened its embassy in Baghdad. Exchange of Ambassadors between the two countries in January 1960, the boom in economic relations between the two countries in the seventies decade of the last century, Japan's position as the second largest exporter to Iraq were part of the past relations.

During the 1991–1991 war, political relations between Tokyo and Baghdad deteriorated dramatically. 213 Japanese hostages were released through various channels following Japan's efforts for their freedom.³ In August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and the Japanese government provided \$ 13 billion⁴ in aid to confront Baghdad.

Then, while Japan called Saddam a “violator of international order,” and Iraq claimed that Japan was “hostile to Iraq.” In March 1998, Japan⁵ became the first country to support Operation Desert Fox.

In fact, the level of political and economic relations between Tokyo

1. <https://www.newsweekjapan.jp/hosaka/2019/09/post-31.php>

2. <https://tinyurl.com/yy28uhkg>

3. <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/feature/74285.html>

4. <https://www.nippon.com/ja/features/c00202/>

5. <http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/Iraq-Japan-United-States-Other/Azad-Shirzad-2/Japans-Gulf-Policy-and-Response-to-the-Iraq-War>

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and Baghdad declined from the end of the 1991–91 war to the Iraq war in 2003, and with variables such as Japan’s cooperation with the plan to put Iraq under sanctions, and its share in the 2003 Iraq war, the two side’s relations got worse. On March 20, 2003, the United States, which launched the Iraq war, announced its support for Japan.

Political and Geopolitical Dimensions of Japan’s foreign policy’s focus on Iraq

After the end of World War II and during the bipolar structure that governed the international system, Japan’s foreign policy was practically a mere follower of US foreign policy. In the 1980s, the Japanese government pursued the idea of internationalization as a fundamental principle of its foreign policy.⁶

The goals and priorities of such foreign policy in the Japanese Constitution⁷ are generally mentioned in the provisions of Articles 7, 9, 41, 72, 73 and 98. In the years following the US military invasion of Iraq, Japan’s foreign policy distanced itself somewhat from full compliance with US foreign policy⁸. Political and security issues also found a new place after the 1990s.

However, Japan’s security policy in the Middle East is largely influenced by variables such as its strategic alliance with the United States, the supply of fossil fuels, and its peace-seeking foreign policy and counter-terrorism policy.

In recent Japanese foreign policy documents, Tokyo promotes “Diplomacy with a Sense of Caring and Robustness”⁹ in order to create

6. Kawashima, Yutaka (2005), Japanese Foreign Policy at the Crossroads, Challenges and Options for the Twenty First Century, Brookings Institution Press. P 15

7. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html

8. Drifte, Reinhard (1996), Japan’s Foreign Policy in the 1990s, From Economic Superpower to What Power?, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. P. 87

9. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000550186.pdf>

a favorable international environment and to prevent the emergence of threats in advance.

In this regard, the following seven areas of Japanese foreign policy priority in order to maintain and promote Japan's national interests (including the Middle East and Iraq): (1) strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance, the cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy and security; (2) promoting a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)"; (3) diplomacy with neighboring countries, such as China, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Russia; (4) tackling outstanding issues of concern regarding North Korea; (5) addressing the situation in the Middle East; (6) leading international efforts to create new rules; and (7) addressing global challenges.¹⁰

Japan will also continue its efforts to promote national interests and contribute to the country's peace and prosperity, while strengthening its foreign policy enforcement apparatus, and strengthening its missions abroad, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In this regard, the current Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida also mentioned the fight against Corona, repairing and strengthening the damaged economy and trying to review the constitution¹¹ (especially Japan's self-defense forces and the desire to strengthen the military) as the most important priorities of his government. He also looks beyond borders. While protecting Japan's interests, it seeks to increase its global presence.

In fact, although the alliance between Japan and the United States is the cornerstone of Japanese diplomacy and security in the Middle East, Japan has continued its national and active efforts in the region. From 2020, data collection activities will be conducted by ships and aircraft of the Self-Defense Forces in Middle Eastern waters to ensure

10. https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2021/en_html/chapter1/c010002.html

11. <http://japanstudies.ir/post/5214/>

the safety of Japanese-linked ships.¹² In other words, the Middle East is geographically much closer than the West. Even as the US role in the region diminishes, the Middle East is now a very important region for Japan.

Japan is neither a member of NATO nor a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. But with the creation of the National Security Council (NSC), the adoption of the National Security Strategy (NSS), and the National Defense Program guidelines (NDPG)¹³ and Rising supporters of Japan's defense capabilities in opinion polls and ruling party supporters in Japan,¹⁴ the country seems to be working to and take on more responsibilities and roles in the Middle East.

In the field of diplomatic relations Recognition of the Iraqi Interim Government in 2004, Opening of the Embassy in 2004, Joint Statements in January 2009, (Comprehensive Partnership), November 2011, "Joint Statement of the Prime Minister (Comprehensive Partnership), January 2017," (Strengthening Bilateral Relations) and The opening of the consulate in Erbil in 2017¹⁵ has been an important part of Japan's focus on Iraq over the past two decades. The strengthening of bilateral relations between Iraq and Japan is while Iraq has an embassy in Tokyo and Japan has an embassy in Baghdad and a consulate in Erbil. Meanwhile, after the Japanese visa facilitation process for Iraqis without the need for neighboring countries¹⁶, it is facing Baghdad's request regarding the Iraqi-Japanese Joint Committee to meet and facilitate the issuance of visas for visiting Japan. In this regard, Tokyo intends to increase the visits of senior Japanese representatives to Iraq after 15 years¹⁷ and to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the establishment

12. https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2021/en_html/chapter1/c010002.html

13. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/security/index.html>

14. <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/column/opinionpoll/20220408-OYT8T50010/>

15. https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/iraq/data.html

16. <https://tinyurl.com/y57vhsnf>

17. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/08/21/national/politics-diplomacy/motegi-iraq-visit/>

of diplomatic relations between Japan and Iraq in 2019¹⁸.

In recent years, in the field of security and counter-terrorism, in a joint press statement and official visits, Japanese officials emphasized concerns about terrorist groups and ISIS cells, efforts to fight terrorism, and stabilization¹⁹ in the liberated areas of Iraq. Tokyo also supports maximizing civilian engagement in coordination with Iraq, restoring peace and stability in Iraq, supporting Iraq's efforts to reduce arms, and security reforms and vocational training, and preventing the resurgence of violence in Iraq.²⁰ In addition, despite Tokyo's previous welcome²¹ for the formation of a cabinet by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to further strengthen bilateral relations, Japan hopes²² for a new Iraqi government.

On the other hand, Japan has tried to treat the actors in the Middle East in such a way that none of them consider Japan as their enemy; Therefore, maintaining a balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia; and Iran and the United States have also been considered in matters of relations with Iraq.

Economic and cultural dimensions of Japan's attention to Iraq

Japan's foreign policy has played an irreplaceable role in the country's economic development by prioritizing economic interests, helping to attract foreign investment, an export-oriented outlook, and relations with countries (as a complementary economy to the Japanese economy). Japan imports almost 90% of its crude oil from the Middle East and promoting peace and stability in the Middle East is critical to Japan's peace and prosperity, and for maintaining and developing good relations with countries in the region.

18. https://www.iraq.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/00_000179.html

19. https://www.iraq.emb-japan.go.jp/itprtop_en/index.html

20. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001991.html

21. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002805.html

22. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003048.html

In this regard, Japan has in recent years sought to strengthen its relations with Middle Eastern countries in a wide range of areas, such as the economy²³. Japan also pursues the following three aspects in promoting economic diplomacy with Iraq: (1) rule-making to bolster free and open global economic systems by promoting the various economic agreements; (2) supporting the overseas business expansion of Japanese companies through promotion of public-private partnerships; and (3) promoting resource diplomacy along with inbound tourism to Japan.²⁴

Although, in December 2003, Japan sent only 600²⁵ ground self-defense forces (GSDF) to the southern Iraqi city of Samawa. But in the economic field, it was the second²⁶ largest donor after the United States at the Madrid Conference in October 2003.

In fact, Japan's total aid to Iraq from 2003 to 2018 was more than \$ 15 billion. Also various grants 1.5 \$,²⁷ billion in grants to support infrastructure²⁸, help stabilize Iraq's economy, an agreement to cut about \$ 6.7 billion in Iraqi debt²⁹, billions of dollars in lending for dozens of projects in sectors such as foundation of the Iraqi economy³⁰, helping to rebuild areas liberated from ISIS and the return of refugees³¹, etc., has been part of Japan's economic approach to Iraq for nearly two decades. In addition to security, Japan considers it important to help Iraq achieve economic reform, eradicate corruption³², and attract private investment.

23. Diplomatic Blue Book, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Available: https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2021/en_html/chapter2/c020701.html

24. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/index.html>

25. https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/iraq/g_forum_0501.html

26. <https://www.iasj.net/iasj/download/0223f97f96133130>

27. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/data/chiiki/iraq/pdfs/tenbo.pdf>

28. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/iraq/saiken.html>

29. https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/iraq/data.html

30. <https://tinyurl.com/y6dxwyph>

31. https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2021/en_html/chapter2/c020702.html

32. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000334102.pdf>

In addition, the stability of the energy market, including the crude oil market, is very important for Japan. In this regard, Japanese government loans actually paid special attention to the Iraqi oil industry³³ and transportation infrastructure. The energy crisis arising from Ukraine war has also doubled the importance of diversifying energy resources³⁴ to ensure Japan's energy security. Therefore, Japan will continue to encourage the production of crude oil³⁵, and help provide sustainable energy sources by encouraging oil-producing countries such as Iraq.

In another dimension, over the past 10 years, per capita national income and the number of Japanese have declined, but China is steadily moving toward "building the Chinese world."³⁶ Therefore, Tokyo seems to take under the consideration a multi-layered strategy by determining Japan's national interests to compete with actors such as China in the Middle East and Iraq. In this regard, China's billion-dollar project in Iraqi Kurdistan Region³⁷ and Baghdad's agreement with Beijing, double Japan's incentive to be more present in Iraq.

In fact, previous bilateral trade agreements, agreements to promote and support investment, loans and exchange of notes in various fields, in addition to bilateral visits by officials and ministers (Foreign Affairs, Economy, Trade and Minister of Petroleum, Special Adviser, Prime Minister and deputy Prime Minister) from another country has played a role in the development of economic relations.

However, the volume of bilateral economic relations is much smaller than the existing contexts and opportunities. In 2020, Iraq exported \$ 159 million to Japan. The main products that Iraq exported to Japan are crude oil, and refined oil. In 2020, on the other hand, Japan exported \$ 363 million of goods to Iraq. The main products that Japan exported

33. <https://apjjf.org/-Michael-Penn/2570/article.html>

34. https://www.mofa.go.jp/ecm/rs/page22e_000979.html

35. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000268.html

36. <https://webronza.asahi.com/politics/articles/2021092900003.html>

37. <https://www.newsweekjapan.jp/worldvoice/makino/2021/06/post-10.php>

to Iraq were cars, iron pipes and motorcycles. Over the past 23 years, Japanese exports to Iraq have increased.³⁸ Japan's exports to Iraq reached \$ 424 million in 2021.³⁹

On the other hand, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs attaches importance to activities to introduce Japanese culture, exchange and promote Japanese language education, interact with policy makers, thought leaders⁴⁰, related experts and local people, and strengthen its public diplomacy in Iraq.

Challenges and opportunities for expanding relationships

Iraq though is a well-known country and a market for Japanese companies. But it has not been Japan's major partner in the past few decades. The Iraq-Japan Strategic Partnership project has not been materialized in January 2009⁴¹ (during a meeting between the Japanese and Iraqi prime ministers).

Also despite the fact that Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi had previously confirmed that Iraq was open to Japanese investment.⁴² But Iraq's internal situation and high political tensions, the complexity of the security situation, Tokyo's lack of seriousness in expanding strategic relations, and Iraq's lack of a strong foreign policy vision for Japan are factors that have weakened bilateral political and strategic ties.

In addition, the Iraqi bureaucracy, poor coordination between Iraqi ministries, lack of transparency in various parts of Iraq, lack of a proper Iraqi private sector, lack of infrastructure to attract investors, etc. are obstacles to the expansion of economic and political relations between the two countries. Japan also restricts the travel of Japanese citizens to

38. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/iraq/partner/jpn?redirect=true>

39. <https://tradingeconomics.com/japan/exports/iraq>

40. https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/public_diplomacy.html

41. <https://apjjf.org/-Michael-Penn/2570/article.html>

42. <https://tinyurl.com/y4orc8g3>

the country, the possibility of an attack on Japanese interests in Iraq, such as the assassination of two Japanese diplomats in Iraq in 2004, the lack of transparency in the oil and foreign investment laws in Iraq, and the threat of some tribes, are among the obstacles to the development of economic and political relations between the two countries.

However, now, given the Ukraine crisis, new and important opportunities appear to be emerging for Japan–Iraq energy cooperation and ensuring a continuous and uninterrupted supply of oil. On the one hand, Japan has educated and advanced financial and human capabilities and advanced technology that enable it to establish a long-term strategic partnership with Iraq. Iraq can also benefit from Japan's support for its vital Interests in international and regional Structures, strengthen its regional and international balance, and establish strategic relations with major countries in the world.

In addition, variables such as the absence of historical differences or enmity, the absence of the colonial past, the absence of psychological barriers and political knots, Existence of the attractive market and large Iraqi energy reserves, Iraq's increased oil production program, numerous virgin oil wells and the activation of agreements can be important contexts to help expanding relations in the future.