The ‘honest broker’: Japan offers to play a role in Mideast peace

Tokyo also pledges support for Saudi reform drive, strengthening ties beyond industry and energy

STRATEGIC ALLY

Japan has offered to play a role in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process in the wake of White House adviser Jared Kushner’s Peace to Prosperity workshop last month in Bahrain.

“We can play an honest broker in the Middle East, as we have no colonial history or negative footprint in the region,” Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono told Arab News.

“I think we should all play some role to get the peace process rolling forward and we would be very happy to be involved in this process.”

We hope the Palestinians look at the plan and are ready to negotiate. We need to give hope and dreams to the younger generation in Palestine, so we would be happy to work with any concerned parties.

Taro Kono

As a major importer of oil and gas and one of Asia’s economic powers, Japan has an economic interest in stability in the Middle East. Our economy depends on the region, coming from there, so I think we have to increase our role in the peace process as well,” he said.

Kono spoke following an invitation to attend this month’s World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, to address the global economy as well.

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Asked if he would respond positively to an invitation to mediate, Kono said: “It’ll be very glad to you.”

In a wide-ranging interview at the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo, Kono also told Japan was keen to expand its already strong ties with Saudi Arabia beyond industry and energy, and that the relationship had been cemented by talks between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The Japan-Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 agreed in 2017 “includes cultural exchange, entertainment and many other aspects,” Kono said.

“Japan and Saudi Arabia have close ties, and we are determined to support the crown prince’s return policy to Saudi Arabia. We would be happy to work with any concerned parties.”

Kono said that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is interested in investing in Japan and the region at the same time to develop Saudi Arabia’s economy and society, Kono said.

“This is similar to what Japan has been doing. We introduced Western technology and the idea of democracy, and at the same time, we have kept Japanese values, traditions and the Japanese way of life. There is a lot in common between Arab culture and our culture, like respecting elders or placing importance on family. So, we would be very happy to share our experiences and work with his vision.”
Japan offers to be ‘honest broker’ for Palestinian Israeli peace

- Kushner economic plan is good start and Tokyo keen to get involved, foreign minister tells Arab News
- Japan also wants to expand ties with Saudi Arabia beyond existing agreements on industry and energy

“Japan strongly condemns any attack on ships going through the Strait of Hormuz and we already condemn Houthi attacks with missiles and drones on Saudi people and Saudi facilities,” Kono said.

When further pressed on what Japan’s reaction would be if such an incident were to occur again, he told Ariru: "We hope there would be no further attacks on ships belonging to any countries." As for the outcome of the peace minister’s mediation visit, which aimed to persuade Tehran to negotiate a new nuclear deal with the US, Kono told Japan’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani that he had been reassured that Tehran had "no intention to develop nuclear weapons, and that "nuclear weapons are against the teachings of Islam."

"So, if that is true, we have nothing to worry about," the minister said.

Japan also seems interested in trying to resolve Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

Referring to the US-organized Peace to Prosperity workshop in Bahrain just before the US summit in Osaka, Kono praised it as "a major step in renewable energy projects," he said. "It looks nice, and we need to see what the political side might look like. If the political side is good, I think we should play some role to get the peace process rolling forward, and we would be very glad to be involved in this process."

Of course, the Palestinians declined to attend the workshop, citing mistrust in the US agenda. When asked whether Japan, if invited, would be ready to play the role of a political mediator, Kono replied: "Yes, we will be ready to play the role." Kono explained that Japan has already been involved in mediating in the past. Japan has been in contact with the Western powers, he said.

"We have worked with Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians to set up a new nuclear deal with the US, Kono told the Sankei Shimbun. "We are now working on a new approach called the CIPAD (Conference for International Peace and Development) to bring together Arab and Israeli peace groups. We want to share our experience with the Palestinians and the international community."