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STRATEGIC ALLY

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

Faisal J. Abbas, Editor-in-Chief, Tokyo

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
Japanese Foreign Minister



Kono said that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is interested in keeping Saudi history and tradition but at the same time to develop Saudi economy. AN photo

As a major importer of oil and gas from the region, Japan had an economic interest in stability in the Middle East. "Our economy depends on the energy coming from the region, so I think we have to increase our role in the peace process as well," he said.

Kono spoke following last month's US-organized conference in Manama to outline a potential economic roadmap for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, in advance of White House proposals for a political solution to the conflict, expected this year.

"We have been communicating with Mr. Kushner and we are now

reviewing his economic plan," Kono said. "It looks nice, and we need to see what the political side might look like."

"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."

Asked if he would respond positively to an invitation to mediate, Kono said: "I'll be very glad to, yes."

In a wide-ranging interview at the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo, Kono also said Japan was keen to expand its already strong

ties with Saudi Arabia beyond industry and energy, and that the relationship had been discussed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe when Japan hosted the G20 summit in Osaka.

The Japan-Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 agreed in 2017 "includes cultural exchange, entertainment and many other aspects," Kono said. "I think we can go even deeper in our bilateral relationship."

Kono said the Japanese government and the country's private sector were determined to support the crown prince's reform

program for the Kingdom. There were many similarities between the two countries, he said.

The crown prince "is very much interested in keeping Saudi history

and tradition but at the same time to develop Saudi economy and society," Kono said.

"This is similar to what Japan has been doing. We introduced Western technology and the idea of democracy, but 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 putting importance on family. So, we would be very happy to share our experience and work with his vision."



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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

Fateh J. Abbas | Editor-in-Chief
 Tokyo

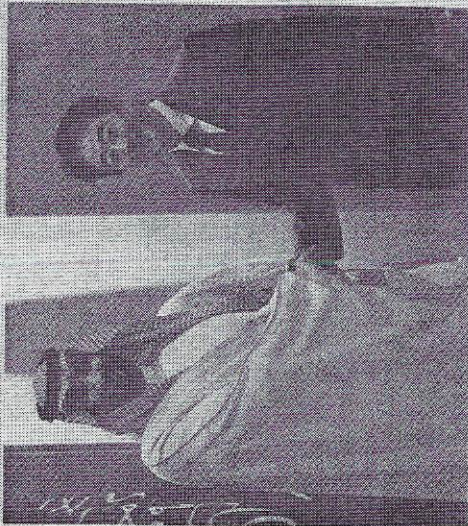
While most world powers either intervene reluctantly in Middle Eastern affairs or avoid the region altogether, Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Kono is actively advocating a bigger political role for his country in the Arab world.

"We can play an honest broker in the Middle East, as we have no colonial history or negative footprint in the region," he told Arab News in a wide-ranging interview at the Japanese Foreign Ministry in Tokyo.

Indeed, regional stability is actually in his country's national interest, Kono said. "Our energy depends on imports, mostly from the Gulf region. Forty percent of the crude oil we import comes from Saudi Arabia, 30 percent of the crude oil and 20 percent of the gas we import goes through the Strait of Hormuz. So, stability and peace in the Middle East is directly connected to our economy."

However, Japanese diplomacy recently experienced at first hand the hazards of dealing with some of the region's rogue players. A Japanese tanker was attacked in the Gulf of Oman last month during a mediation visit to Tehran by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the first visit to Iran by a Japanese leader in over 40 years.

While the US blamed Iran for the attack, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described it as an "insult to Japan," Tokyo's official stance has been calm and reserved, distancing itself from the American accusations for the time being.



Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe shake hands during their meeting in Osaka on June 30, AFP

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

Japan also seems interested in trying to resolve another Middle Eastern issue — the lengthy and complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Referring to the US-organized Peace to Prosperity workshop in Bahrain just before the G20 summit in Osaka, Kono praised senior White House adviser Jared Kushner's efforts and said Tokyo was wanting to see what the political side of his plan entailed.

"We have been communicating with Mr. Kushner and we are now reviewing his economic plan," 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 all play some role to get the peace process rolling forward, and we would be very happy to be involved in this process."

Of course, the Palestinians declined to attend the Manama 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 glad to."

Japan has already been investing heavily in the West Bank, he said. "We have worked with Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians to set up an industrial park near Jericho and it's been going very well. Also, Japan set up a framework called the CEAPAD (Conference in Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development) to bring Southeast Asia to this peace process. We wanted to share how we develop the Asian economy, and we want to share our experience with Palestinians and people in the region."

FASTFACTS

40%
 Forty percent of the crude oil Japan imports comes from Saudi Arabia.

80%
 80 percent of the crude oil and 20 percent of the gas Japan imports goes through the Strait of Hormuz.

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We strongly condemn Houthi attacks with missiles and drones on Saudi people and Saudi facilities.

Kono also spoke of the growing relationship his country enjoys with Saudi Arabia. At the G20 summit in Osaka, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was among the few world leaders granted an exceptional audience with the Japanese prime minister.

Kono said the talks confirmed the "progress of Japan and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.



A Japanese tanker was attacked in the Gulf of Oman last month, AFP

The Japanese government and the Japanese private sector are determined to support His Royal Highness's reform agenda in the Kingdom."

There is great potential for bilateral ties to go deeper, he said, with a diversified relationship which focused not only on the economy, but on cultural exchange and many other aspects too.

"We should have more exchange of people, and Japanese companies investing in Saudi Arabia," he said. "There are mega-projects that His Royal Highness is taking leadership on, and we hope many Japanese companies participate in these projects, as well as increase Saudi investment into Japan, and not limited to the economy."

We hope to receive more Saudi students coming to study in Japanese universities and we'll be happy to send Japanese students to Saudi Arabia."

Kono has met Crown Prince Mohammed on numerous occasions, and he sees many similarities between what Vision 2030 is trying to achieve in Saudi Arabia and what Japan has already achieved.

"His Royal Highness is very much interested in keeping Saudi history and tradition but at the same time to develop the Saudi economy and society. This is similar to what Japan has been doing. We introduced Western technology and the idea of democracy, but at the same time we have kept Japanese values, traditions and the Japanese way of life."

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