

Section 7

The Middle East and North Africa

1 Overview

The Middle East and North Africa (hereinafter, “the Middle East”) is located in a geopolitically important area: the crossroads of Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia and South Asia. The region is a vital supplier of energy, representing approximately 50% of the world’s oil reserves and 40% of the world’s natural gas reserves and also a market with high potential, pursuing the diversification of economy especially in the Gulf countries, against a backdrop of a high population growth rate in recent years.

Meanwhile, the region has gone through various conflicts and disputes along its history, and still faces a number of destabilizing factors and challenges. Regional tension is growing over Iran, and political turmoil continues in various regions since the “Arab Spring” in 2011. Fighting continues in Syria, resulting in a large number of refugees and internally displaced persons, and it has made a great impact on the stability of the entire region, including its neighboring countries. In Yemen, severe security and humanitarian conditions continue as the Houthis clash with the Yemeni Government and the Arab Coalition (led by Saudi Arabia, etc., at the request of the Yemeni Government). The risk of the spread of violent extremism such as the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)” also remains in some

areas. On the other hand, some changes from the current situation were seen in 2020. In the context of the Middle East Peace, which has been a historical issue since the founding of Israel in 1948, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have agreed to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel. Regarding Afghanistan, the U.S. and the Taliban reached an agreement in February, and the Afghan government has been engaged with the peace negotiation with the Taliban since September.

The Biden administration of the U.S., inaugurated in January 2021, has announced that it will hold talks with Iran to return to the Iran nuclear deal, from which former President Donald Trump had withdrawn. Regarding the Middle East Peace, the Biden administration is also making efforts to improve relations with Palestine, and these policies are worth noting in terms of the impact over the region.

Japan imports approximately 90% of its crude oil from the Middle East, and it is extremely important for Japan’s peace and prosperity to promote peace and stability in the Middle East and to maintain and develop good relations with countries in the region. From this point of view, Japan in recent years has been striving to strengthen relations with Middle Eastern countries in a wide range of fields, not just the economy, but also politics, security, culture and people-to-people



Prime Minister Abe meeting with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (January 12, Ulah, Saudi Arabia; Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office)

exchanges, among others. In January, as tensions increased in the Middle East against the backdrop of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, Prime Minister Abe visited the three countries of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman as part of diplomatic efforts to avoid further worsening of situations.

In addition, while diplomatic activities have been restricted due to the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), Japan is providing assistance to the Middle East with approximately 122 million US dollars in ODA to counter COVID-19. Japan has been introducing such assistance and stressing the importance of addressing the issue based on the concept of human security especially in vulnerable regions, at international conferences by ministers.

2 Situation in the Middle East

(1) Middle East Peace Process

A Developments in the Middle East Peace Process

The Middle East Peace Process has stagnated since negotiations between Israel and Palestine faltered in April 2014. While Israeli settlement activities in the West Bank of the Jordan River continue, periodic rocket attacks continue from the Gaza Strip, and resumption of dialogue has not yet been realized.

Since its inauguration, the U.S. Trump administration implemented a series of pro-Israel

policies, including relocating the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and announcing its Vision for Peace in January. In May, the coalition agreement between the Likud Party and the Blue and White Party, which formed the basis for the inauguration of a new Israeli administration, mentioned the process of Israel's "application of sovereignty" after July 1 in accordance with the description of the vision. This has provoked a backlash from Palestine, and raised tension in the region.

In August, there was a historic move such as the suspension of "application of sovereignty" by Israel over the West Bank and the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Following the United Arab Emirates having become the third Arab country to have diplomatic relations with Israel after Egypt and Jordan, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco also agreed to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel. With an expectation that these agreements would ease and stabilize regional tensions, Japan supports a "two-state solution" based on dialogues between Israel and Palestine on the issue of the Middle East Peace and will continue to make progress through the efforts described below.

B Efforts by the Government of Japan

Toward the achievement of a "two-state solution" that would enable Israel and Palestine to coexist in peace, Japan, in cooperation with the international community, has actively contributed through the three pillars of political dialogue with stakeholders, confidence building among the concerned parties, and financial support for Palestinians. As Japan's unique initiative, the Jericho Agro-Industrial Park (JAIP) was launched as a flagship project of the "Corridor for Peace and Prosperity" initiative, aiming at facilitating economic self-reliance of Palestine over the mid- and long-term through regional cooperation among Japan, Palestine, Israel and Jordan. As of the end of 2020, 16 Palestinian private companies are operating in JAIP, creating approximately 200 jobs.

In addition, Japan is mobilizing the resources and economic development knowledge of East Asian countries to support Palestinian nation building through the Conference on the Cooperation among East Asian countries for Palestinian Development (CEAPAD).

(2) Israel

Israel excels in the development of advanced technology and innovation, and holds importance for the Japanese economy as well as for the stability of the Middle East.

In Israel, after three general elections in a year (April, September 2019, and March 2020), the coalition government (national unity government to deal with an emergency situation) was formed in May 2020, amid the urgent need for responding to COVID-19. However, since July, growing public disapproval of the government's COVID-19 response, its handling of the economic crisis, and corruption allegations against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (formally charged in January 2020 on three counts of alleged bribery, fraud, and breach of trust), resulted in demonstrations against the prime minister and the government in various parts of the country. Discussions on COVID-19 countermeasures that imposed socio-economic costs provoked disagreement within the Cabinet, resulting in no budget being approved in December, which forced the parliament to be dissolved and another election to be held in March 2021. It is expected that the situation will continue to be uncertain in terms of domestic affairs, including the response to COVID-19.

Regarding relations with Japan, while the impact of COVID-19 made severe restrictions on travels and led to postponement of launching of a direct flight service by El Al Airlines scheduled for 2020 to 2021, active exchanges continued at various levels even under the COVID-19 pandemic, such as summit telephone calls held in September and December and a foreign ministers' telephone call held in July.

(3) Palestine

Based on the Oslo Accords of 1993 and other agreements, the Palestinian Authority (PA) began self-government rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from 1995. Prime Minister Abbas assumed office as President after the presidential elections held in January 2005. After that, however, relations between the Fatah led by President Abbas and Hamas deteriorated, and Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip by military force. Through Egypt's mediation efforts, Fatah and Hamas reached an agreement in-principle in October 2017 toward the transfer of power in the Gaza Strip to the PA. However, the agreement has not been implemented and the division remains, with the West Bank of the Jordan River still held by Fatah and the Gaza Strip remaining under Hamas's de facto control.

Since May 2020, the Palestinian Authority has opposed Israel's "application of sovereignty" over the West Bank, and Palestine has announced that it would suspend various cooperation with Israel. Although it refused to receive taxes revenues collected by Israel on its behalf, consequently the Palestinian Authority struggled financially. In November, after receiving a letter from the Israeli government stating that it would comply with past agreements, the Palestinian Authority announced the resumption of cooperation with Israel.

Regarding relations with Japan, Dr. Ahmad Abu-Holi, Member of PLO Executive Committee and Director General for Refugee Affairs of Palestine visited Japan in January and exchanged views on support for Palestinian refugees with State Minister for Foreign Affairs Suzuki Keisuke. In addition, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Suzuki attended the "Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLIC) Ministerial Meeting" held online in May, where he announced Japan would continue to advance its own efforts, such as the "Corridor for Peace and Prosperity" initiative, to contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to the Middle East Peace, while emphasizing the importance of cooperating with the international community to support Palestine against the spread of COVID-19.

(4) Iran

Iran is a major Shiite regional power with land of approximately 4.4 times the size of Japan with a population of about 83 million and is blessed with abundant natural resources. Tensions heightened as January saw the killing of Qasem Soleimani, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force by the U.S., and Iranian attacks on U.S. military bases in Iraq. Subsequently, although both the U.S. and Iran announced their intention to ease tensions and managed to diffuse the extreme tension, the high tension continues against the background of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. In April, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard announced that it had successfully launched Iran's first rocket carrying a military satellite, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard vessels dangerously approached a U.S. Navy ship sailing in open waters in the Persian Gulf. In July, a fire broke out at a uranium enrichment facility in Iran. In November, a nuclear scientist was killed in Iran.

Regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, since July 2019, Iran has taken steps to suspend its obligations, claiming that it has not received the estimated economic benefits that would have been obtained by the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)), due to the U.S. withdrawal from the deal and the subsequent resumption of sanctions on Iran by the U.S. In January 2020, Iran announced that it would remove any restrictions on its uranium enrichment

activities. In response to these developments, the three JCPOA participant states of the UK, France and Germany, announced the same month that they would start a dispute resolution process based on the agreement to maintain the deal. The U.S. notified the UN Security Council in August of Iran's significant non-performance of commitments under the JCPOA, prior to the lifting of the Iranian arms embargo based on the JCPOA and the United Nations Security Council resolution in October 2020, which is five years after the "date of adoption" (October 2015) of the agreement. The U.S. asserted that the JCPOA had been effectively abolished by its notification since September 20 under the provisions of Security Council resolution 2231 and that the UN Security Council sanctions against Iran prior to the nuclear deal have been reapplied. However, the other states to the JCPOA have taken the position that the notification by the U.S., which had already withdrawn from the nuclear deal, has no effect and that the nuclear deal remains valid. In December, the Iranian parliament passed a bill requiring Iran to produce uranium enriched up to 20%. Iran subsequently began producing uranium enriched up to 20% in January 2021.

President-elect Joe Biden, who won the U.S. presidential election in November 2020, stated the possibility that the U.S. would rejoin the nuclear deal, subject to Iran's strict compliance with the deal. The situation surrounding Iran after the inauguration of the Biden administration is drawing attention.

From the perspective of having an alliance with the U.S. and maintaining its positive and long-standing relationship with Iran for many years, Japan has made diplomatic efforts to ease tensions and stabilize the situation in the Middle East, including Prime Minister Abe's visit to Iran in June 2019 and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Japan in December that year. In January 2020, as tensions heightened in the Middle East, Prime Minister Abe visited the three countries of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and



Japan-Iran Foreign Ministers' Meeting
(February 15, Munich, Germany)

Oman, which have great influence in the region, as part of diplomatic efforts to ease the situation. In February, Foreign Minister Motegi held a meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif. Even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan urged self-restraint to avoid actions that would heighten tensions in the region and called for Iran to comply with the nuclear agreement during the Japan-Iran Summit telephone call in May, and the Japan-Iran Foreign Ministers' telephone call in March and October.

(5) Turkey

Turkey is a geopolitically important regional power. As a member country of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey plays a significant role in regional security while proactively pursuing multifaceted diplomacy with Western countries, Russia, states in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Turkey has traditionally been one of the friendliest countries with Japan, as typified by episodes such as the Ertugrul Frigate¹ incident in 1890.

After the presidential election in June 2018, Turkey moved from a parliamentary cabinet system to an executive presidential system in which the entire executive authority belongs to the president. Although the president's approval rating is stable, there have been developments such as the formation of a new party by former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan and the former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who have left the ruling party. The spread of COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the economy, and the Minister of Finance and the governor of the central bank have been replaced.

With regard to diplomacy, tensions arose with Greece and the European Union (EU) over the deployment of Turkish research vessels to explore energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean.



Prime Minister Abe attends the opening ceremony for Başakşehir Çam and Sakura City Hospital (May 21) (Photo: Sojitz Corporation)

The U.S. has imposed sanctions on Turkey due to the introduction of a Russian-made missile defense system (S-400), which remains an issue of concern in Turkey-U.S. bilateral relations. On the other hand, Russia and Turkey have a close relationship in the energy field, such as with the construction of gas pipelines and nuclear power plants. Turkey was in close communication with Russia over the situation in Syria as well as the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. In November, Turkey decided to deploy personnel to the Turkish-Russian center to oversee a ceasefire in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.

Regarding bilateral relations with Japan, close communications were maintained online, despite the fact that official travels and holdings of in-person meetings are restricted due to COVID-19. In April, Prime Minister Abe held a telephone call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and both leaders shared the view to maintain close collaboration in countering COVID-19. In May, Prime Minister Abe attended the opening ceremony of

¹ For details for the Ertugrul Frigate incident, please refer to https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/ms/da/page22_001052.html (Only in the Japanese language)



the Başakşehir Çam and Sakura City Hospital, built in the suburb of Istanbul, via teleconference, with President Erdogan. The large polyclinic hospital was built by a Japanese company and a major Turkish construction company through a public-private partnership (PPP). It also accepted COVID-19 patients. Furthermore, close exchanges were maintained when Prime Minister Abe resigned (in September) and when Prime Minister Suga took office (in October), through telephone calls with President Erdogan on both occasions. In Turkey, Prime Minister Suga and Foreign Minister Motegi expressed their sympathies and condolences over the earthquakes that struck Elazığ in February and Izmir in October which caused many casualties.

(6) The Gulf States and Yemen

The Gulf States² are important partners for Japan from the perspective of Japan's energy security. In recent years, the Gulf States have been working toward social and economic reforms, prioritizing issues such as industry diversification, human resources development and departure from dependence on oil, and Japan has been cooperating and supporting the realization of these reforms in order to contribute to the long-term stability and prosperity of the Middle East. Specifically, these efforts include cooperation based on the "Japan-Saudi Vision 2030," which was formulated by Japan and Saudi Arabia as a compass for bilateral cooperation modeled after the "Saudi Vision 2030," Saudi Arabia's initiative for industry diversification and departure from dependence on oil, and on the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative" between Japan and the United Arab Emirates.

In January, Prime Minister Abe visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman amid heightened tensions in the region, where he shared the view with each country that all parties concerned respond with self-restraint to prevent



Japan-Saudi Arabia Foreign Ministers' Meeting (October 3, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)



Japan-Kuwait Foreign Ministers' Meeting (October 3, Kuwait, Kuwait)

the situation from deteriorating. Prime Minister Abe also shared the view that every diplomatic effort should be made, and shared awareness of the importance to foster momentum for peaceful and dialogue-based solutions to various issues in the region. In addition, Prime Minister Abe sought to strengthen bilateral relations with each country, and made condolence calls to Oman on the demise of Sultan Qaboos.

In October, Foreign Minister Motegi visited Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. During the visit to Saudi Arabia, the Ministers of the two countries shared the view that the two countries will continue to further strengthen the strategic partnership

² Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain

in a wide range of areas. They affirmed the success of the G20 Riyadh Summit and cooperation for peace and stability in the Middle East. During the visit to Kuwait, Foreign Minister Motegi paid a condolence call following the demise of Amir Sheikh Sabah and shared the view to advance the development of a comprehensive partnership.

While official travel was reduced due to the effects of COVID-19, Prime Minister Suga held telephone talks with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia (November) and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (December). Japan also held foreign ministers' telephone calls with Qatar (April), Kuwait (April), Saudi Arabia (July and September) and the United Arab Emirates (July). During each call, the leaders and ministers affirmed to strengthen bilateral relations and work toward easing tensions and stabilizing the situation in the Middle East. In December, the "Saudi-Japan Vision 2030" ministerial meeting was held online to confirm the progress of cooperation and exchange opinions on future cooperation policies.

In Yemen, the Houthis have continued to fight against the Yemeni Government and the Arab Coalition despite the international mediation efforts led by Mr. Martin Griffiths, Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General. In addition, clashes continued between the central government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which aimed for autonomy in the southern part of the country, but in December, a new cabinet was formed based on the Riyadh Agreement which stipulated the establishment of a new government composed of the Yemeni Government and the STC. The severe humanitarian situation in Yemen has continued due to the impact of the prolonged conflict, and since January 2015, Japan has provided assistance of more than 300 million US dollars in total to Yemen through cooperation with UN agencies and others. At the High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen, which was held online in June, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Suzuki announced

that Japan would continue to contribute to improving the humanitarian situation and realizing a political solution in Yemen.

(7) Iraq

The situation in Iraq was heavily affected throughout 2020 by regional tensions against the backdrop of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. On January 3, the U.S. killed Qasem Soleimani, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Deputy Chairman of the Iraq Popular Mobilization Forces and others. On January 5, the Iraqi parliament passed a resolution to end the stationing of foreign troops in Iraq. On January 8, Iran launched ballistic missiles at bases in Iraq, where U.S. military troops were stationed, in a retaliatory attack. In March, an attack by rockets on a base, where U.S. troops were stationed, killed and injured U.S. and other soldiers, and the U.S. bombed Shi'a armed groups' sites. In addition, there were frequent attacks targeting the U.S. embassy and bases where U.S. troops are stationed.

In parallel with this, the Coalition forces led by U.S., that have supported the Iraqi armed forces and security agencies in operations to wipe out the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), have handed over its mission to the Iraqi armed forces since the end of March and have withdrawn from several bases due to the progress of the operations in Iraq and the spread of COVID-19. As a result, the U.S. has reduced its troops to 2,500 by January 15, 2021. However, sporadic terrorist attacks by ISIL are still continuing in central and northern Iraq, including Baghdad, and the focus of attention is on the response of the new Biden administration regarding the U.S. military stationed in Iraq. In northern Iraq, Turkish troops have been conducting military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since June, including ground fighting.

In domestic affairs, Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi resigned in the middle of his term in December 2019 while public demonstrations continued, and

in May 2020, a new cabinet was established with Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as the prime minister. Since taking office, Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi has been working on many issues, such as dealing with the financial difficulties caused by falling oil prices and the spread of COVID-19, improving the lives of citizens, and restoring the security situation.

Japan has continued to provide assistance to Iraq since 2003. In 2020, Japan provided assistance of approximately 40 million US dollars for reconstruction of areas liberated from ISIL and assistance for the return of refugees through international organizations.

(8) Afghanistan

In 2020, there were significant developments in the peace process in Afghanistan. The U.S. and the Taliban, who have been in direct talks for about a year and a half, signed an agreement on February 29 that included the conditions-based U.S. troop withdrawal in Afghanistan and the start of intra-Afghan negotiations (peace negotiations). The agreement came following a one-week “violence reduction” period that drastically reduced combat activities throughout Afghanistan. That same day, Afghanistan and the U.S. announced a joint declaration in Kabul confirming the content of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement.

Both the Afghan government and the Taliban began peace talks in Doha, Qatar on September 12, after the mutual release of prisoners as a confidence-building measure premised on peace talks under the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. State Minister for Foreign Affairs Suzuki attended the opening ceremony of the peace negotiations online, where he welcomed the start of the peace talks. He stated that Japan would support the Afghan-led peace process and expressed strong expectations that the peace negotiations would progress steadily.

Following the first ceasefire in June 2018, temporary ceasefires were established between Afghan security forces and the Taliban in line with Islamic holidays in May and July 2020, but fierce fighting continued even after the start of peace talks. In



Foreign Minister Motegi delivers a video message at the Afghanistan Conference in Geneva (November 24)
(Photo: UN Photo/Violaine Martin)

addition, the security situation remains unstable, with frequent terrorist attacks by ISIL-affiliated organizations. The policy moving forward for the NATO-led “Resolute Support Mission (RSM)” under the new Biden administration is the focus of attention as the U.S. is proceeding with its gradual withdrawal of troops stationed in Afghanistan, reducing the number of troops to 2,500 by January 15, 2021.

In domestic affairs, the final result of the September 2019 presidential election was announced in February 2020, confirming the re-election of President Ashraf Ghani. However, opposing candidate and former Chief Executive Abdullah claimed the election was fraudulent and declared himself president on the day of Ashraf Ghani's second inauguration, sparking a political crisis. There were appeals both domestically and in the U.S. in response, and both parties signed a political agreement to establish an inclusive government in May, and Dr. Abdullah became chair of the new High Council for National Reconciliation.

Japan has provided more than 6.8 billion US dollars in assistance to Afghanistan since 2001, and is a major donor contributing to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. At the Japan-Afghanistan Foreign Ministers' telephone call held in November, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Haneef Atmar expressed his deep appreciation for Japan's support. At the Afghanistan Conference in Geneva held online in November, Foreign Minister Motegi announced in a video message that Japan would

work on providing assistance from 2021 to 2024, which was 180 million US dollars per year, maintaining the amount comparable to the past four years, assuming Afghanistan's own reform efforts. In December, President Ghani released a video message on the one-year anniversary of the death of Dr. Nakamura Tetsu in a terrorist shooting. Dr. Nakamura was instrumental in supporting Afghanistan and the message honored his achievements.

(9) Lebanon

Large-scale anti-government demonstrations, triggered such as by the opposition to the introduction of tax increases, have taken place across Lebanon since October 2019, forcing Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign. Although the Diab Cabinet was formed in January 2020, the infection of COVID-19 has spread in Lebanon since February, and the economy has become further deteriorated due to the stagnation of economic activity with the pandemic. In March, the government announced that it would postpone repayment of foreign currency-denominated government bonds.

Under these circumstances, a massive explosion at the port of Beirut occurred in August, which killed 190 people, injured more than 6,500 and left about 300,000 homeless. The total damage is estimated to be about 15 billion US dollars. There was also a large-scale anti-government demonstration blaming the government for its long-standing negligence and corruption as the cause of the explosion, and Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned in the same month. Since then, formation of a cabinet in the new administration has been at a standstill, and there are no prospects of stabilizing internal affairs or implementation of the administrative and financial reforms. Under these circumstances, the international community is urging the Lebanese government to promptly implement administrative and financial reforms and anti-corruption measures, while providing the necessary humanitarian assistance to Lebanon.

Since 2012, Japan has provided more than 220 million US dollars in assistance for the refugee and host communities to help the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Lebanon.

Japan also provided emergency relief supplies in response to the explosion at the port of Beirut in August, and emergency grant assistance of 5 million US dollars through international organizations in September. Moreover, Japanese NGOs are conducting grassroots humanitarian assistance programs of approximately 1.2 million US dollars with financial support from Japan. Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Nakayama Norihiro at the International Conference on Assistance and Support for Beirut and the Lebanese People held online in August, as well as State Minister for Foreign Affairs Washio Eiichiro, who attended the International Conference in Support of the Lebanese People held online in December, delivered their statements introducing the support and assistance.

(10) Syria

A Changes in the situation

The Syrian crisis, which began in 2011, has spanned a decade, sees neither prospects of stabilization nor political resolution, and is still considered to be the century's worst humanitarian crisis.

In the Idlib region, fighting has intensified from April 2019, between the dissidents and the Syrian government forces, which receives support from Russia, causing a deterioration of humanitarian conditions and forcing more than 960,000 persons internally displaced. In February 2020, Syrian government forces took over the Damascus-Aleppo highway (M5) for the first time since 2012. As the fighting in the Idlib region continued, Turkey started Operation "Spring Shield" in March, while the Russia-Turkey summit meeting was held in the same month, and the two countries agreed to an additional protocol centered on a ceasefire, the establishment of a "secure corridor," and performing joint patrols in the Idlib region. Since the agreement, the ceasefire in the Idlib region has

been largely maintained, but sporadic fighting and air strikes have continued, and the situation in Idlib remains in the balance.

While the Syrian economy has deteriorated due to the devastation of social and industrial infrastructure from the prolonged conflict, in 2020 in particular, the economic deterioration has been further accelerated due to the economic crisis in Lebanon and the spread of COVID-19 in Syria, and caused the fall of the value of the Syrian currency sharply. Given these circumstances, the Syrian people are facing a sharp rise in prices, a decline in purchasing power due to lower income and unemployment, and a shortage of food and daily necessities. As effective measures have not been taken by the Syrian government to stabilize prices, there are concerns that the humanitarian situation in Syria will become even severer.

B Political Process

As for the political process, Syrian dialogue has been suspended since 2018, but in October 2019 a constitutional committee started operating through the mediation of the UN. The committee aims to discuss reforms to the Syrian Constitution through discussions among Syrians themselves, but although several meetings have been held, no concrete progress has been made in the discussion. In this regard, with the Syrian People's Assembly election to be held in July 2020, and the Syrian presidential election expected to be held in 2021 based on the current constitution, the international community continues to call on the Syrian government to be constructively involved in advancing the political process in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254, which calls for a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

C The Japanese Government's Efforts

Japan has consistently maintained its position that the crisis in Syria cannot be resolved by any military means, and a political solution is indispensable. At the same time, Japan also attaches importance to providing continuous support for

improving humanitarian conditions. From this standpoint, since the aggravation of the situation in Syria, Japan has provided total assistance worth more than 2.9 billion US dollars to Syria and neighboring countries from 2012 for humanitarian assistance.

In March 2020, Japan provided 4.7 million US dollars in emergency humanitarian assistance to the northwest region, where the humanitarian situation has been deteriorating since 2019. In December, Japan decided on the provision of new support of 6 million US dollars for establishing sustained health care services at Qamishli National Hospital, the main hospital in northeastern Qamishli province, through the restoration of the hospital and the provision of medical equipment. In addition, Japan also decided to provide 7.2 million US dollars in new emergency humanitarian assistance for food and preparations for winter.

(11) Jordan

The situation in Jordan remains relatively stable compared to other parts of the continuously turbulent Middle East region, despite the spread of COVID-19. Jordan has, under the leadership of His Majesty King Abdullah II, played an important role in promoting the peace and stability of the region, such as with countermeasures against extremists, its acceptance of a large number of Syrian refugees, and active involvement in the Middle East Peace. The country's role is highly regarded by the international community.

With regard to Jordan's relations with Japan, a foreign minister's telephone call and a summit telephone call were held in April, and the two countries shared the recognition that close cooperation is important so as not to destabilize the Middle East amid the spread of COVID-19. In addition, Japan and Jordan held active dialogues at the leader and ministerial levels, such as another summit telephone call in September upon the resignation of Prime Minister Abe. The two countries have been working on further developing bilateral relations under a strategic partnership in a wide

range of fields such as diplomacy, security and the economy, to promote cooperation for the stability of the Middle East. With regard to COVID-19, in June, Jordan provided medical supplies such as medical masks to Japan, while Japan provided Jordan with grant assistance in the field of health and medical care.

Japan attaches importance to its relations with Jordan, a cornerstone of regional stability. Security cooperation is ongoing as the Second Politico-Military dialogue was held in October. In August, the Japan-Jordan Investment Agreement came into effect, and economic cooperation is also developing. In addition, Japan continuously supports the Jordanian economy and administration via disbursement of 100 million US dollars in March and another 100 million US dollars in December out of the 300 million US dollars of development policy loans signed during King Abdullah II's visit to Japan in November 2018.

3 The Situation in North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria)

(1) Egypt

Egypt is a major power in the region, playing a significant role in the stability of the Middle East and North Africa, and President El-Sisi maintains stable administration. On the economic front, whereas COVID-19 had a negative impact (tourism decrease, fewer remittances from overseas workers, etc.), the impact on the economy was limited compared with neighboring countries, and maintained positive GDP growth, due in part to the fact that the economy was originally robust after recent macroeconomic reforms.

Steady progress has been seen in Japan-Egypt relations since President El-Sisi's visit to Japan in February 2016. Cooperation covers various areas such as strengthening support for the Egypt-Japan University of Science and Technology (E-JUST), and the construction program of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM). In addition, at the Japan-Egypt Foreign Ministers' telephone call in

December, Foreign Minister Motegi stated that preparations were underway for a development policy loan to support the energy sector as a contribution to the revitalization of socio-economic activities affected by the spread of COVID-19. The Notes concerning this project were signed and exchanged in February 2021.

Regarding the two SDF personnel of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) stationed in the Sinai Peninsula who have been dispatched since April 2019, a second rotation of personnel was conducted in July to continue to contribute to regional peace and stability.

(2) Libya

In Libya, following the collapse of the Qadhafi administration in 2011, the parliament and the government have split apart in the east and west of the country, and the situation remains unstable. In April 2019, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, powerful commander of the "Libyan National Army" (LNA) in the east, ordered an advance on Tripoli, which developed into an armed conflict including air strikes against forces under the Government of National Accord (GNA). Since May 2020, the GNA, with the support of Turkey, has launched counterattacks, and the LNA has withdrawn from the suburbs of Tripoli, resulting in a standoff along a line connecting the central coastal city of Sirte and the inland city of Jufra. However, there were some positive developments, such as the signing of the permanent ceasefire agreement between the GNA and the LNA in October, and no major fighting has occurred since then.

On the political front, a UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum was held in Tunis in November with 75 Libyan representatives, and a basic agreement was reached to hold a series of elections on Libya's Independence Day on December 24, 2021. Following the agreement, in February 2021, a unified interim executive authority responsible for conducting a series of elections was elected at the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and is scheduled to be approved by the House of Representatives

by mid-March. Japan has supported such UN-led political dialogue.

(3) Maghreb Countries

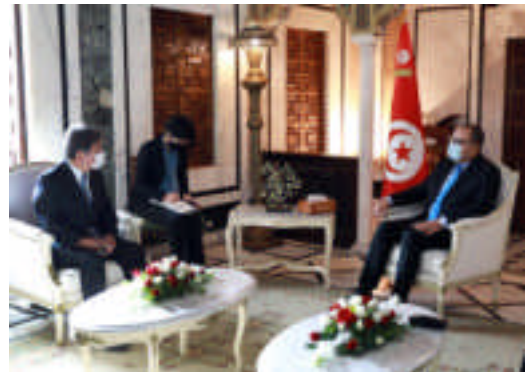
The Maghreb is of great economic importance in the African continent, due to its geographical advantage of being the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and its high potential based on a cheap abundant young labor force. In addition, each country has overcome the “Arab Spring” and maintained political stability in its own way. On the other hand, due to the impact of COVID-19, the decline in energy revenue that supports state finances is becoming more serious in Algeria, and regional disparities and high unemployment rates are challenges to overcome in Morocco and Tunisia. In addition, there are concerns about the security implications of the flow of weapons and illegal immigrants from Libya and the Sahel region.

In the Republic of Tunisia, following the results of the election for the Assembly of the Representatives of the People in October 2019, the new Elyes Fakhfakh Cabinet was established in February 2020, but later resigned in July as disagreements between political parties could not be resolved. The Hichem Mechichi Cabinet was later established in September, and attention is focused on whether economic and social policies will be implemented in a stable manner. Regarding relations with Japan, Foreign Minister Motegi visited the Republic of Tunisia in December, and in meetings with President Saïde, Prime Minister Mechichi, and Secretary of State Ali Nafti, both sides confirmed the close cooperation for the 8th Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD8) to be held in Tunisia in 2022 and reaffirmed the two countries would work to further develop bilateral relations, including the economic relationship and the peace and stability in the region.

In Algeria, the protests against the long-standing administration of President Bouteflika since February 2019 turned into prolonged



Foreign Minister Motegi pays a courtesy call to Tunisian President Saïde (December 9, Tunisia)



Foreign Minister Motegi pays a courtesy call to Tunisian Head of Government Mechichi (December 9, Tunisia)

demonstrations that resulted in the administration resigning in April. The presidential election was held in December 2019, and former Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune was elected. President Tebboune proceeded with a constitutional amendment to realize a “new Algeria,” and held a referendum on the amendment on November 1, 2020, the day Algeria’s war of independence began. The constitutional amendment was adopted, although the voter turnout was extremely low at 23.7% due to the impact of COVID-19 and low public interest, among others.

In relations with Morocco, Japan has developed friendly relations for many years based on the relationship between the Imperial Family of Japan and the Royal Family of Morocco. Under these circumstances, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Suzuki visited Morocco in January 2020 to attend the Japan-Morocco Joint Committee to discuss the concrete implementation of various types of cooperation including in the economic field. Both



Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Nakatani visits Morocco as part of the Public and Private Sector Joint Mission for Promoting Trade and Investment in Africa (February, Morocco)

countries also signed the Tax Convention between Japan and Morocco and the Investment Agreement. In February, Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Nakatani Shinichi visited Morocco as the head of the Public and Private Sector Joint Mission for Promoting Trade and Investment in Africa. These official visits steadily developed friendly bilateral relations. Through such official visits and cooperation, it is hoped the economic relationship between the two countries will be strengthened through the greater entry of Japanese companies into Morocco.