

Between Scylla and Charybdis

Japan's Response to the October 7 Hamas Attack and Its Aftermath

DR. ROTEM KOWNER

DR. YORAM EVRON

Abstract

This article examines Japan's response to the 7 October 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israel and the ensuing conflict. By analyzing Japan's historical engagement with the Middle East and its evolving relationships with Israel and Palestine, the article argues that Japan faces competing priorities in its Middle East diplomacy. These include aligning with the US, maintaining positive Arab relations to ensure a stable oil supply, and potentially enhancing its global stature through mediation efforts. This article provides the first comprehensive analysis of Japan's challenges in navigating the Israel–Hamas war, situating these within the broader framework of its Middle East and global policies. It explores Japan's approach to global conflicts beyond its immediate security environment, shedding light on the intricate interplay of economic, diplomatic, and strategic factors shaping Japan's foreign policy decisions in this volatile region.

Japan's relations with the Middle East rest neither on historical affinity nor formal alliances. They are, at their core, a function of economic necessity—above all, Tokyo's reliance on Middle Eastern oil. For decades, this dependency, along with US geopolitical imperatives, shaped Japan's cautious diplomacy in the region, including its delicate balancing act between Israel and the Arab world.¹ In the 1970s, Washington actively pressed Tokyo to maintain ties with Jerusalem, underscoring Israel's status as a key US ally in the region.² Yet, in the three decades preceding the Israel–Hamas war of October 2023, this calculus shifted. A confluence of factors—the ascent of Israel as a technological and military powerhouse, the fragmentation of Arab unity, and the growing specter of Iranian aggression—has recast Japan's regional outlook. No longer can Arab states wield the oil weapon as they did in 1973. No longer is engagement with Israel a diplomatic liability.

Instead, Japan has sought to capitalize on Israel's cutting-edge technological and defense sectors while recalibrating its approach to a Middle East in flux.

¹ Satoru Nakamura and Steven Wright, eds., *Japan and the Middle East: Foreign Policies and Interdependence* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), vii–ix.

² Jacob Abadi, *Israel's Quest for Recognition and Acceptance in Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 106.

Simultaneously, Japan's global aspirations and its strategic competition with China have injected new urgency into its Middle Eastern engagements. With Beijing expanding its economic and political footprint in the region, Tokyo can ill afford passivity. Japan's strategy now blends independent initiatives with Indo-Pacific partnerships, positioning it as a more assertive—if still cautious—player in Middle Eastern affairs. The upshot: While Tokyo remains tethered to US security guarantees and dependent on Middle Eastern hydrocarbons, its fears of economic retaliation for ties with Israel have markedly diminished.

Then came 7 October 2023. Hamas's massacre and the ensuing war have thrown Japan's Middle East diplomacy into sharp relief. Forced to navigate between US strategic priorities and its own economic stakes in the Arab world, Japan faces a defining moment. Will it seize the opportunity to assert a diplomatic role commensurate with its global stature? Or will it revert to its traditional posture—risk-averse, deferential, and ultimately marginal in the region's grand chessboard? More fundamentally, will Tokyo's response be guided by strategic calculus or swayed by the tides of domestic public opinion? This article dissects Japan's handling of these dilemmas, shedding light on its evolving approach to conflicts beyond its immediate security sphere.

Japan's Approach to the Middle East

Since the mid-twentieth century, Japan's engagement with the Middle East has evolved through three distinct phases. For the first four decades—most notably through the oil crises of the 1970s and 1980s—securing stable access to Persian Gulf energy resources dominated Tokyo's regional priorities. By the early 1990s, as the Cold War's end redefined global geopolitics, Japan's alignment with US regional policies became increasingly central. Washington's demands for greater burden-sharing in the Middle East compelled Tokyo to recalibrate its approach, albeit within the strict confines of its pacifist constitution. Since the early 2000s, Japan has cautiously expanded its footprint beyond economic interests, seeking to bolster its global political standing while navigating the region's shifting power dynamics.³ The post-9/11 era saw Japan intensify security cooperation with the United States, including in the Middle East. Under Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō (in office from 2001 to 2006), Tokyo dispatched the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to Iraq, marking a rare deployment to a conflict zone. However, these missions remained heavily circumscribed—focused on logistics, reconstruction, and humanitarian aid rather than

³ Yukiko Miyagi, *Japan's Middle East Security Policy: Theory and Cases* (London: Routledge, 2008), 35.

direct combat. Even as Japan nominally contributed to US-led stabilization efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, its broader strategic focus remained closer to home. China's growing assertiveness and the growing North Korean missile threat compelled Tokyo to redirect resources to regional security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

To be sure, the Middle East remains economically vital to Japan—primarily as an energy supplier, and to a lesser extent as a market for Japanese manufactured products (notably automobiles) and infrastructure projects. However, the region is not viewed as a strategic investment destination or a principal trade partner. Crude oil from the region still accounts for over 90 percent of Japan's imports, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates being the primary suppliers. Together with liquefied natural gas (LNG), it constitutes about half the country's overall hydrocarbon imports, but broader economic engagement has remained limited.⁴ Japan's exports to the Middle East, which peaked at USD 31.9 billion (4.5 percent of total exports) in 2012, declined to USD 20.5 billion (2.6 percent) by 2021.⁵ Likewise, Japan's outward direct investment (ODI) in the region has remained marginal—less than 1.5 percent of its total ODI from 1996 to 2022. Even at its high point in 2017 (USD 2.1 billion), Japanese ODI in the Middle East was modest, and by 2022, net flows had plummeted to a mere USD 225 million.⁶

Yet, Japan's diplomatic engagement with the Middle East has grown, partly in response to US expectations. Washington has long pressed Tokyo to assume a more active role in supporting American partners and stabilizing the region, occasionally while forcing Japan to adjust its constitutional constraints on military force.⁷ This pressure has intensified amid Japan's deepening security ties with the United States, particularly as Tokyo seeks to counterbalance China's global ambitions. In December 2022, after decades of strategic restraint, Japan announced plans to double its defense

⁴ "International Overview," *U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)*, data released 31 January 2024, <https://www.eia.gov/>.

⁵ "Japan Exports, Imports and Trade Balance By Country 2022," *World Integrated Trade Solution*, 2024, <https://wits.worldbank.org/>.

⁶ Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), "Japanese Trade and Investment Statistics," JETRO website, 2024, <https://www.jetro.go.jp/>.

⁷ Christopher K. Lamont, "Japan in the Middle East: A Complex Web of Partnerships and Shifting Priorities," in *East-West Asia Relations in the 21st Century: From Bilateral to Interregional Relationships*, ed. Rotem Kowner, Yoram Evron, and P.R. Kumaraswamy (London: Routledge, 2024), 120–30; and Yoram Evron, "China–Japan Interaction in the Middle East: A Battleground of Japan's Remilitarization," *Pacific Review* 30, no. 2 (2017): 188–204.

budget within five years—a decisive break from its postwar military posture.⁸ However, Japan's willingness to align with US Middle East policy has its limits. Nowhere is this more evident than in its dealings with Iran. Despite sustained American pressure, Tokyo has maintained an independent course, investing in Iran's energy sector and preserving diplomatic channels with Tehran. This delicate balancing act underscores Japan's broader foreign policy challenge: reconciling its strategic dependence on the United States with its need for economic and geopolitical flexibility in an increasingly multipolar world.⁹

Beyond economic imperatives, Japan's growing engagement in the Middle East reflects two overarching strategic goals: bolstering its stature in global politics and countering China's expanding influence in the region. Since 2013, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (in office from 2006 to 2007, from 2012 to 2020), pursued an ambitious diplomatic outreach to Middle Eastern and North African states, seeking to reduce Japan's reliance on US policy—a marked departure from the approach of his predecessor, Koizumi Junichirō, whose foreign policy closely aligned with Washington's post-9/11 military campaigns. When President Donald Trump signaled a shift toward retrenchment in US security commitments, Abe capitalized on Japan's longstanding ties with Tehran to mediate between the United States and Iran, reinforcing Tokyo's diplomatic credibility in the region.¹⁰ His successors—Suga Yoshihide (in office from 2020 to 2021), Kishida Fumio (in office from 2021 to 2024), and more recently Ishiba Shigeru (in office since 2024)—have sustained this trajectory, advancing Japan's economic and security interests while maintaining its delicate regional balancing act. This strategy aligns with Tokyo's broader objective of preserving regional stability and reinforcing a rules-based international order—particularly as US–China tensions continue to shape global power dynamics.

Diplomatic and Economic Instruments

Lacking hard power projection capabilities in the Middle East, Japan has relied on a sophisticated mix of diplomatic, economic, and technological instruments to advance its interests. Development aid, humanitarian assistance, and high-level

⁸ For an outline of Japan's revised national defense strategy, see *National Defense Strategy* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 16 December 2022), <https://www.mod.go.jp/>. See also "US, Japan Military-to-Military Relationship Reaches 'New Heights,'" *DOD News*, 11 April 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/>; and Takuya Matsuda, "Japan's Emerging Security Strategy," *Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 85–102.

⁹ Mitsugu Saito, "US-Japan Relations and the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Institute*, 25 April 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/>.

¹⁰ Lamont, "Japan in the Middle East," 121.

diplomatic engagement have reinforced Japan's presence in the region. High-profile visits by Abe and his successors have solidified key partnerships, particularly with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Flagship initiatives such as the Saudi-Japan Vision 2030 and the UAE's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative underscore Tokyo's efforts to support Gulf states' economic diversification and technological advancement. Japan has also sought to counter Beijing's growing regional footprint, primarily through economic and infrastructure diplomacy. The India-Japan Asia-Africa Growth Corridor represents a direct challenge to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), positioning Tokyo as an alternative economic partner in a region increasingly courted by Beijing. At the multilateral level, Japan has pursued engagement through the Japan-Arab Political Dialogue and trilateral cooperation with Israel and the UAE, reinforcing its diplomatic versatility. Since 2012, Tokyo has also provided USD 3.1 billion in humanitarian aid, further cementing its regional goodwill.¹¹

In addition, Japan has skillfully maintained diplomatic equilibrium among rival regional players—preserving ties with both Israel and Iran, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Israel and the Palestinian Authority.¹² This calibrated approach mirrors the balancing strategies of China and India, both of which have engaged competing Middle Eastern actors without provoking entanglement. However, Japan's political and strategic involvement remains more constrained than that of its Asian peers. Over the past two decades, China has entrenched itself in the region through large-scale infrastructure investments, the creation of multilateral frameworks, and joint military exercises. India, leveraging its historical commercial, cultural, and religious ties to the Persian Gulf, has deepened its defense partnerships with Israel, strengthened trade links with Gulf states, and expanded its diplomatic footprint through regional forums.¹³

Strategic Shifts and Persistent Caution

Japan's Middle East policy has evolved considerably in the post-Cold War era, expanding beyond economic pragmatism to incorporate broader political and strategic considerations. To a large extent, the Middle East has become an extension

¹¹ Lamont, "Japan in the Middle East," 121; and Rotem Kowner, "Israel-Japan Relations: A Recent Promise That Has Yet to Materialize," in *Israel-Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Yoram Evron and Rotem Kowner (London: Routledge, 2023), 105–28.

¹² Lamont, "Japan in the Middle East," 121; and Kowner, "Israel-Japan Relations," 105–28.

¹³ On Japan's, China's, and India's engagement with the Middle East, see Rotem Kowner, Yoram Evron, and P.R. Kumaraswamy, eds., *East-West Asia Relations in the 21st Century: From Bilateral to Interregional Relationships* (London: Routledge, 2024), 120–30.

of Japan's strategic competition with China—largely as a spillover of US–China tensions in the Indo-Pacific, where Tokyo remains firmly aligned with Washington. Consequently, Japan's traditionally limited and transactional relationship with the region has given way to a more proactive, multidimensional approach, shaped by the intricate interplay of domestic priorities, regional imperatives, and global power shifts. Even so, Tokyo's engagement in the region remains measured and its enduring caution remains a defining feature of its Middle East strategy. While it has broadened its regional engagement, Tokyo remains steadfast in avoiding deep entanglement in the region's political and security quagmires. Its approach—greater yet restrained involvement—continues to be dictated by a fundamental imperative: safeguarding national interests without inviting strategic overextension.

Japan and the Israel–Palestine Conflict

Japan's earliest substantive engagement with the Palestinian issue stemmed from the 1973 Arab oil embargo. Confronted with the dual pressures of securing vital energy supplies and maintaining ties with Israel under US expectations, Tokyo prioritized economic pragmatism. In a clear signal to Arab oil producers, Japan issued a pro-Palestinian statement, indicating that it “may have to reconsider its policy towards Israel.”¹⁴ This move underscored Tokyo's fundamental approach to the Middle East—balancing diplomatic flexibility with economic imperatives. Throughout the subsequent decade, Japan incrementally acknowledged the Palestinian cause, carefully calibrating its stance to accommodate Arab sensitivities while keeping its distance from deeper engagement with Jerusalem. By the late 1980s, however, the weakening of the unified Arab front against Israel provided Tokyo with greater diplomatic maneuverability. This shift, coupled with Israel's growing integration into the global economy, laid the groundwork for a cautious improvement in Japan–Israel relations.

Post–Cold War Adjustments and Strategic Realignments

A more pronounced recalibration occurred in the 1990s, driven by the geopolitical transformations following the Cold War's end. Japan, long accused of being a passive player in international security affairs, came under mounting US pressure to align with Washington's strategic initiatives in the Middle East. This pressure intensified after Tokyo's widely criticized financial-only contribution to the 1991 Gulf War coalition. Seeking to demonstrate diplomatic engagement beyond economic

¹⁴ Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), *Chūtō funsō kankei shiryōshū* [Collections of Sources on the Middle East Conflict and Relations] (Tokyo: Gaimushō, 1975).

interests, Japan actively participated in international efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, notably the 1991 Madrid Conference and the 1993 Oslo Accords. During this period, Tokyo took steps to enhance its relationship with Israel, reflecting both an evolving regional landscape and a pragmatic reassessment of its diplomatic approach. However, its policy remained dictated by the delicate balancing act between energy security and alliance commitments. Japan continued to tread cautiously, mindful of its economic reliance on Arab oil exporters and wary of jeopardizing its broader Middle Eastern ties.

However, this momentum proved short-lived. By the 2000s, as the peace process faltered and the utopian “end of history” outlook of the 1990s gave way to a more fractured and volatile international order, Japan’s engagement with Israel stagnated.¹⁵ While economic ties continued to grow incrementally, Tokyo remained hesitant to embrace a more overt strategic partnership, constrained by its traditional diplomatic caution and enduring reliance on Arab energy exports. A renewed shift in Japan’s Middle East policy emerged with the return of Prime Minister Abe in 2012, marking a recalibrated approach to both Israel and the Palestinian issue. Seeking to enhance Japan’s international profile, Abe—who had already identified the Palestinian question as a diplomatic priority during his first term (2006–2007)—viewed engagement in the peace process as an opportunity to underscore Japan’s commitment to stability, development, and humanitarian initiatives.

Building on his predecessor Prime Minister Koizumi’s 2006 launch of the Corridor for Peace and Prosperity initiative, Abe committed an initial USD 100 million investment to a joint agricultural-industrial complex spanning both sides of the Jordan River, primarily in the Jericho area within Palestinian Authority territory. The Jericho Agricultural Industrial Park became a flagship project, symbolizing Tokyo’s emphasis on economic development as a pathway to regional stability. By May 2022, around a dozen factories were operational in the park, and Japan’s total aid to the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian welfare initiatives had exceeded USD 2.3 billion.¹⁶ This made Japan the largest donor to the Palestinians among Asian nations—an often-overlooked fact due to China’s higher-profile diplomatic engagement in Palestinian affairs.

¹⁵ Matthew Brummer and Eitan Oren, “Beyond Power, Before Interdependence: Complex Synergy and Japan–Israel Relations,” in *Japan and the Middle East: Foreign Policies and Interdependence*, ed. Satoru Nakamura and Steven Wright (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 165–67.

¹⁶ Abe Toshiya, “History of JICA’s Development Assistance to Palestine—Jericho Agro-Industrial Park,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2024): 144–64; and Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), “Japan-Palestine Relations (Basic Data),” MOFA website, 4 September 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

Strengthening Japan–Israel Relations

By the early 2020s, after years of sustained involvement in regional development and peacebuilding, Japan faced fewer domestic constraints in expanding its ties with Israel. This period saw notable advances in bilateral relations. High-level diplomatic exchanges accelerated, and amid ongoing negotiations for a free trade agreement, Japanese ODI in Israel surged. Between the first and second decades of the twenty-first century, Japanese ODI in Israel grew more than sevenfold, rising from USD 1.5 billion to USD 11.3 billion.¹⁷ Japan, traditionally cautious about engaging with Israel's defense sector, also began relaxing its stance—particularly in nonlethal domains such as cybersecurity. As a result, collaboration between Japanese and Israeli companies and government agencies expanded in strategic sectors, including artificial intelligence, medical technology, and autonomous systems.

Despite these advancements, Japan's historical alignment with the Arab world continues to shape its diplomatic posture. Institutional preferences for the Palestinian cause remain deeply ingrained within Japan's media, academia, government agencies, and political establishment. While the Israel–Palestine conflict occupies a relatively minor role in Japan's public discourse and ranks low among its foreign policy priorities, any explicit show of support for Israel—particularly during military confrontations with Palestinian factions—has consistently faced significant domestic resistance.¹⁸ The 7 October 2023 Hamas-led attack on Israel and the subsequent war have put Japan's balancing act to the test once again. While economic and strategic considerations have driven a closer relationship with Israel, Japan remains cautious in its diplomatic rhetoric, wary of disrupting its historically stable ties with Arab partners. This enduring tension underscores the fundamental challenge in Japan's Middle East diplomacy—advancing economic and security interests with Israel while maintaining regional credibility among Arab states.

Japan's Response to the October 7 Hamas-Led Attack and the Ensuing Conflict

The Hamas-led attack on Israel and the subsequent multifront war provide a revealing lens through which to assess Japan's evolving approach to Middle Eastern conflicts in the early twenty-first century. The assault, unprecedented in scale and brutality, saw Hamas militants infiltrate Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, killing 1,139 Israelis and foreign nationals—including 766 civilians—and abducting 253 others. Nearly 200,000 Israeli civilians were evacuated from conflict zones, including

¹⁷ Kowner, "Israel-Japan Relations," 116–17.

¹⁸ Kowner, "Israel-Japan Relations," 119–20.

areas near the Lebanese border. Israel's response was swift and overwhelming: after regaining control of its territory, it launched a relentless counteroffensive, beginning with aerial bombardments and culminating in a large-scale ground invasion of Gaza on 27 October. By the time a prisoner exchange and armistice were reached on 15 January 2025, more than 45,000 Palestinians had been killed in Gaza, roughly two-thirds of whom were civilians. Meanwhile, Israel found itself engaged on six additional fronts, battling Hezbollah in Lebanon, pro-Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq, Iran itself, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants in the West Bank.

Against this backdrop, Japan's response—like that of other leading Asian powers—was marked by a blend of heightened engagement and careful diplomacy.¹⁹ The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) reacted swiftly, issuing a statement on the very day of the attack. “Japan strongly condemns,” it declared, “the launch of a number of rockets as well as infiltration into Israeli territories from the Gaza Strip by Hamas and other Palestinian militants.”²⁰ However, the statement conspicuously avoided referring to the assault as a terrorist attack and made no mention of the hostages. The following day, Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yōko issued a more detailed response, explicitly condemning the kidnappings and addressing the situation with greater specificity.²¹

On 9 October, Japan chose not to endorse a joint statement issued by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, which unequivocally condemned Hamas and reaffirmed support for Israel. Instead, Tokyo sought to carve out a diplomatic role by engaging regional actors, including key Arab states and, eventually, Iran.²² Notably, it was not until 12 October—following diplomatic pressure from Israel and a meeting with its ambassador in Tokyo, Gilad Cohen—that Foreign Minister Kamikawa initiated direct contact with her Israeli counterpart.²³ To maintain diplomatic balance, the next day she reached out to the Palestinian

¹⁹ For a comprehensive survey of the response to the Israel-Hamas War in major Asian countries, see Yoram Evron, Rotem Kowner, and Oshrit Birvadker, “East-West Asia Relations and the Power Transition Dynamics: Insights from the Israel-Hamas War,” *Asia Policy* (in press).

²⁰ “Attack on Israel by the Palestinian Militants Including Hamas” (press release, MOFA, 7 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²¹ “The Clashes Between Israel and the Palestinian Militants” (press release, MOFA, 8 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²² See, e.g., “Japan-Jordan Foreign Ministers’ Telephone Talk” (press release, MOFA, 9 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²³ “Japan-Israel Foreign Minister’s Telephone Talk” (press release, MOFA, 12 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

Authority's foreign minister, reiterating Japan's condemnation of the Hamas attack while signaling Tokyo's commitment to de-escalation efforts.²⁴

Japan's response to the war reflects its broader strategic posture in the Middle East—cautiously proactive yet constrained by a longstanding commitment to neutrality. While Japan has deepened economic and security ties with Israel in recent years, it remains keenly aware of its energy dependence on Arab states and its historical positioning as a mediator rather than a partisan actor. The October 7 conflict reinforced this delicate balancing act, underscoring Japan's preference for diplomatic engagement over direct involvement in the region's shifting geopolitical currents. Within ten days of the 7 October attack, Japan shifted toward a more traditionally neutral stance, exhibiting a measured tilt toward the Palestinian side. Expressing concern over the deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Tokyo announced an initial emergency aid package of USD 10 million.²⁵ On 18 October, it condemned Israel's airstrikes in Gaza, extending "heartfelt sympathy to the victims" on both sides and dispatching a special envoy to the region.²⁶ That same day, Prime Minister Kishida led a second round of diplomatic engagements with counterparts in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Jordan—but conspicuously not with Israel.

On 20 October, Foreign Minister Kamikawa arrived in Egypt for the Cairo Summit for Peace, holding high-level discussions, including with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. At the summit, she unequivocally condemned Hamas's attacks while outlining Japan's diplomatic priorities: securing the immediate release of hostages, ensuring adherence to international law, and facilitating de-escalation.²⁷ Notably, Kamikawa refrained from visiting Israel during this trip. On 22 October 22, Japan again distanced itself from Western allies by abstaining from a G7 statement that reaffirmed Israel's "right to self-defense against terrorism." Tokyo's calibrated neutrality was evident again on 27 October, when the United Nations General Assembly voted on a Jordanian resolution calling for a humanitarian truce in Gaza. Before the main vote, Canada introduced an amendment that explicitly condemned Hamas for the October 7 attack. Japan voted in favor of this amendment, aligning with 87 other member states in acknowledging Hamas's culpability. However, when the amendment failed to pass and the General

²⁴ "Japan-Palestine Foreign Ministers' Telephone Talk" (press release, MOFA, 13 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²⁵ "Japan-France Foreign Ministers' Telephone Talk" (press release, MOFA, 17 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²⁶ "Dispatch of Ambassador UEMURA Tsukasa, Special Envoy for the Middle East Peace to the Middle East Region" (press release, MOFA, 17 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

²⁷ "Attendance of Foreign Minister Kamikawa at the Cairo Summit for Peace" (press release, MOFA, 21 October 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

Assembly moved to vote on the unamended Jordanian resolution, Japan abstained, positioning itself alongside most European Union nations and diverging from the United States, which voted against the resolution.²⁸

On 2 November, Kamikawa embarked on her second Middle East tour, engaging directly with countries involved in the conflict. In Israel, she met with her counterpart but declined to visit communities affected by the Hamas assault, despite Israeli requests. She then met with Palestinian officials before traveling to Amman, Jordan, where she visited the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) headquarters. There, she reaffirmed Japan's commitment to humanitarian aid and its balanced diplomatic posture. Over the following year, Japan maintained steadfast support for UNRWA's activities, going so far as to voice "grave concern" in October 2024 over Israeli legislation aimed at restricting the agency's operations.²⁹

Exactly one month after the attack, Kamikawa participated in a G7 foreign ministers' meeting in New York, emphasizing Japan's twin priorities: securing the release of hostages and addressing Gaza's humanitarian crisis. During the meeting, she announced an additional USD 65 million in humanitarian assistance to Gaza.³⁰ This commitment was later expanded in February and August 2024, bringing Japan's total Gaza-related aid to USD 230 million—approximately half of what the European Union provided during the same period.³¹ Since 1993, Japan's financial support for Palestinian causes has surpassed USD 2.6 billion, underscoring its sustained regional engagement.³²

Throughout the conflict, Japanese officials engaged in frequent dialogue with Middle Eastern counterparts, including Israeli leaders. Notable interactions included a meeting in Dubai between Kishida and Israeli President Isaac Herzog and a phone call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in early December. During these discussions, Kishida voiced deep concern over mounting civilian casualties, reiterated Japan's insistence on adherence to international law, and reaffirmed Tokyo's longstanding commitment to a two-state solution as the basis for lasting

²⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution ES-10/21, "Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations," A/RES/ES-10/21, 1 adopted 27 October 2023, <https://www.un.org/>.

²⁹ "Legislation on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Adopted in the Israeli Parliament (Knesset)" (press release, MOFA, 29 October 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁰ "G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting" (press release, MOFA, 7 November 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³¹ European Commission, "EU Announces New €120 Million Humanitarian Aid Package for Gaza," 16 January 2025, <https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/>.

³² "Japan's Assistance to the Palestinians" (press release, MOFA, January 2025), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

peace.³³ In parallel, Japan pursued broader regional stability efforts. In Geneva, Kamikawa met with her Iranian counterpart to discuss escalating tensions. She also condemned the Houthis' seizure of a vessel operated by a Japanese company, characterizing the act as "unacceptable" and urging Iran to exert its influence over regional proxies to promote restraint. These engagements reflect Japan's delicate balancing act—prioritizing humanitarian concerns and diplomatic mediation while preserving key relationships on both sides of the conflict.³⁴

By early 2024, Japan had repeatedly voiced concerns over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza and Israel's prolonged military operations.³⁵ This approach gained traction as Washington itself became increasingly critical of Israel's handling of the conflict, allowing Tokyo to align more closely with its principal ally without drastically altering its traditional neutrality. However, in April, as discussions progressed over Japan's potential involvement in the AUKUS alliance—a strategic security partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia—Tokyo's stance on Israel became noticeably firmer. On 14 April, Iran launched an unprecedented missile and drone barrage at Israel, prompting US and UK military intervention to support Israeli defenses. In a departure from its previous caution, Japan strongly condemned Iran's escalation, aligning its position with the broader G7 consensus.³⁶ This marked a rare instance of Tokyo taking a more assertive stance on Middle Eastern security, highlighting the strategic undercurrents shaping its foreign policy.

As the intensity of the war subsided toward the summer of 2024, Japan's active involvement in the region waned, reverting to more symbolic diplomatic gestures. In July, Tokyo publicly expressed concern over Israel's expanding military activities in the West Bank, signaling continued diplomatic scrutiny. In a notable move, Japan joined the United States and European Union in imposing sanctions, freezing the assets of four Israeli settlers accused of violent acts against Palestinians. This decision reinforced Japan's adherence to international norms while preserving its carefully managed diplomatic balance in an increasingly polarized geopolitical

³³ "Japan-Israel Summit Telephone Talk" (press release, MOFA, 6 December 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁴ "Japan-Iran Foreign Ministers' Meeting" (press release, MOFA, 13 December 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁵ See, e.g., "Remarks Made by Israeli Ministers on the Resettlement of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and Settlements in the Gaza Strip" (press release, MOFA, 5 January 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁶ "Attacks by Iran Against Israel" (press release, MOFA, 14 April 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

landscape.³⁷ While the Japanese government maintained a largely measured and neutral stance, the domestic media adopted a far more critical posture toward Israel. Initial coverage of the October 7 attack included expressions of sympathy for Israel, but this tone shifted rapidly, reverting to the media's longstanding pro-Palestinian perspective.³⁸ As the war dragged on, Japanese media outlets intensified their criticism, with some commentators openly accusing Israel of committing genocide.³⁹

Despite Japan's historical distance from Middle Eastern conflicts, public engagement with the Israel– Hamas war was strikingly high. A large-scale poll conducted by *Asahi Shimbun* in autumn 2024 found that two-thirds of respondents had discussed the war, making it one of the most widely followed global crises in Japan. Notably, 62 percent of respondents identified the Israel– Hamas conflict as a major topic of conversation— ranking second only to the Russia– Ukraine war and surpassing interest in any previous Middle Eastern conflict, including discussions on Japan's wartime history in the Asia-Pacific.⁴⁰ Yet, this heightened awareness did not translate into mass protests. Unlike in Europe and the United States, Japan saw no large-scale demonstrations in response to the Gaza war. The most visible gatherings included two protests organized by Israeli expatriates and local supporters calling for the release of hostages held by Hamas. Meanwhile, smaller pro-Palestinian pickets and vigils took place across the country, with activists warning of potential genocide in Gaza and demanding increased humanitarian aid.

Public and media sentiment appeared to influence both corporate decisions and government actions. A notable example came in February 2024, when Japan's Itochu Corporation announced that its aviation division would terminate its emerging partnership with Israeli defense firm Elbit Systems. The decision followed the January 26 ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which ordered Israel to take measures to prevent acts of genocide. Citing Japan's recognition of the ICJ ruling as a key factor, Itochu's move underscored the growing intersection of legal rulings, public opinion, and business strategy in Japan's approach to the Middle East. Taken together, Japan's response to the Israel– Hamas war in 2024 reflected

³⁷ "Announcement by the Government of Israel Regarding Settlements" (press release, MOFA, 3 July 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>; and "Asset Freeze for Israeli Settlers Involved in Violent Acts" (press release, MOFA, 23 July 2024), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³⁸ Dylan O'Brien, "Shifting Sands of History Are Influencing Japanese Media Coverage of the Hamas-Israel War." *Number 1 Shimbun* (December 2023); and Nagao Satoru, "Nihon no Isuraeru hōdō ni taisuru 10 no gimon" [Ten Questions About Japan's Coverage of Israel], *Japanese Forum on International Relations (JFIR)*, 26 November 2024, <https://www.ifir.or.jp/>.

³⁹ "Isuraeru no 'genosaido' [Israel's 'Genocide']," *Shūkan Kiyōbi*, 5 April 2024, 18–22.

⁴⁰ "Be Between: sensō no hanashi o shiteimasuka?" [Be Between: Are You Talking About the War?], *Asahi Shimbun*, 9 November 2024.

the country's enduring diplomatic caution, balancing alliance commitments with Washington, economic and energy interests in the Arab world, and a domestic landscape increasingly shaped by media narratives and public sentiment.⁴¹

Japan's response to the war in Gaza followed a familiar script—only this time, with sharper inflection. From the outset, Tokyo sought to mitigate the crisis while steering clear of entanglement, adhering to its long-established posture on the Palestinian question. The government, maintaining the trajectory set by Abe and upheld by his successors, demonstrated strategic restraint. Yet this was not passivity; it was calibration. By subtly distancing itself from Israel—however temporarily—and crafting a posture distinct from Washington's, Tokyo deftly insulated its regional interests from unnecessary turbulence.⁴² This calculated diplomacy stood in stark contrast to Beijing's. While both Japan and China sidestepped deep involvement, issuing pro-Palestinian statements while preserving ties with Israel, Beijing's approach was far more aggressive. The war provided a convenient platform for China to undermine US regional influence and amplify its leadership credentials in the Global South. But opportunism has its limits. Confronted with the liabilities of overreach, China tempered its rhetoric, though its core position remained unchanged. Japan, by contrast, executed a steadier, more disciplined balancing act—reinforcing its US alliance while pursuing regional objectives designed, in part, to counter Beijing's encroachment.

At home, Japanese media struck a markedly different chord, aligning with the Palestinian cause and lambasting Israel's military actions. This schism between government policy and media sentiment is nothing new. Since the Gulf War, Tokyo has approached the Middle East with a cool pragmatism, weighing geopolitical imperatives against economic priorities. The media, however, has charted a more ideological course, often amplifying public sentiment at the expense of strategic calculus. This divergence, while hardly unique to Japan, presented an additional challenge for policymakers navigating the crisis. By contrast, Beijing's state-controlled press served as a blunt instrument of policy—hammering home unwavering support for the Palestinians to mask the limited substance behind China's rhetoric.⁴³

⁴¹ "Japan's Itochu to End Cooperation with Israel's Elbit Amid Gaza War," *Reuters*, 5 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁴² Mercy A. Kuo, "Israel-Japan Relations and the Middle East: Insights from Rotem Kowner," *The Diplomat*, 5 September 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁴³ Evron, Kowner, and Birvadker, "East-West Asia Relations."

Conclusion

The Israel– Hamas war has once again exposed Japan’s enduring diplomatic quandary in the Middle East—how to reconcile its strategic alliance with Washington, its economic reliance on the region’s energy resources, and the competition with China over regional influence, without entanglement in its conflicts. Since the 1950s, Tokyo has mastered the art of geopolitical tightrope walking, navigating between its diplomatic and strategic commitments and its dependence on Middle Eastern oil. Its response to the war that erupted on 7 October 2023, was no exception, exemplifying the caution, pragmatism, and adaptability that define its regional policy. Compared to other Asian powers—most notably China—Japan’s approach revealed key insights into its evolving strategic calculus.

First, Japan adhered to its longstanding principle of neutrality, condemning violence on both sides while emphasizing humanitarian concerns and the sanctity of international institutions. Its initial denunciation of Hamas’s attack was swiftly followed by calls for de-escalation and humanitarian aid for Gaza, reinforcing its well-established preference for diplomatic engagement over ideological posturing. Tokyo moved quickly to commit substantial humanitarian assistance, leveraging its soft-power influence. High-level engagement—including participation in the Cairo Peace Summit and sustained diplomatic outreach to both Israeli and Palestinian officials—further underscored its methodical, measured approach. Yet, while Japan demonstrated solidarity with the United States by condemning terrorism, it carefully avoided full alignment with Washington’s pro-Israel posture in global forums. Tokyo’s abstention from UN resolutions that promoted a humanitarian truce without condemning Hamas reflected a deliberate assertion of its independent diplomatic stance. Domestically, a familiar dynamic played out: the Japanese media adopted a highly critical view of Israel’s military actions, and sporadic pro-Palestinian demonstrations signaled a degree of public discontent. This divergence between government policy and public sentiment exerted subtle but tangible pressure, reflected in corporate decisions such as Itochu Corporation’s withdrawal from a defense partnership with an Israeli firm.

However, Japan’s calculus was not dictated by domestic sentiment alone. As in previous conflicts, Washington’s expectations weighed heavily on Tokyo’s decision-making. While Japan seeks deeper integration into Western security frameworks like AUKUS and remains committed to countering China’s regional ambitions, it has carefully calibrated its Middle East policy to safeguard its broader geopolitical and economic interests. The war tested Japan’s ability to navigate these complexities, and it responded with characteristic discipline—preserving relations with both Israel and Arab states while maintaining its humanitarian credibility.

By executing a restrained yet engaged diplomatic strategy, Japan reaffirmed its role as an advocate for peace in the region, without compromising its extensive regional interests, humanitarian principles, or public support from both sides of the conflict. ✪

Dr. Rotem Kowner

Dr. Kowner is a Professor of History and Japanese Studies at the University of Haifa. He specializes in the history of modern Japan and its relations with Israel and Jews. His recent publications include the co-edited volume (with Yoram Evron and P.R. Kumaraswamy) *East-West Asia Relations in the 21st Century: From Bilateral to Interregional Relationships* (Routledge, 2024). kowner@research.haifa.ac.il

Dr. Yoram Evron

Dr. Evron is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Chinese Studies at the University of Haifa. His current research focuses on China–Middle East relations and civil-military technology cooperation. His recent publications include the co-edited volume (with Rotem Kowner) *Israel-Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2023). yevron@research.haifa.ac.il

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