



Japan's Recent Initiatives and Evolving Role in The Palestine

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ABSTRACT *Palestine peace process is a core issue in contemporary Middle East region. Japan imports more than 80 percent of its crude oil from the Gulf Cooperation Council and stability in the Middle East is of great interest and concern to Japan.*

Due to the instability of neighboring countries like Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon etc. and stagnation of the peace process between Israel and Palestine have resulted in serious economic situations in Palestine like rising inflation and unemployment rate of the youth.

In the global dynamics of Middle East, Japan is the major economic power that has started peace building in the Palestine through promoting economic and social self-reliance. Japan has successfully taken unique initiatives with the Palestine like Corridor for Peace and Prosperity Initiative and Conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development. This paper makes an attempt to better understand Japan's Palestinian engagement and evolving role in the Palestine.

Japan's Evolving Role in the Palestine: Official Development Assistance

There are around 5.1 million registered refugees in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Japan has been providing development assistance to the Palestinian since 1993. In the global dynamics of Middle East, Japan is the major economic power that has started peace building in the Palestine through promoting economic and social self-reliance. The objectives of Japan's aid policy towards Palestine are stability and betterment of vulnerable people's livelihood especially women, children and refugees. In 2015, the Government of Japan contributed a total of US\$ 39.20 million to United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Of the total contribution, US\$ 19.75 million was given to the Agency's core programs and services and US\$ 14.20 million was given to support the Agency's emergency programs in Syria and the occupied Palestinian territory, and US\$ 5.25 million for food assistance for abject-poor Palestine refugees.

Recently on 29 February 2016, Japan has signed a joint agreement with UNRWA at the Agency's Kalandia training center in Ramallah. Japanese Ambassador Takeshi Okubo from the Representative Office of Japan to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and UNRWA Deputy Commissioner-General Sandra Mitchell exchanged files where Japan has confirmed to contribute US\$ 38.21 million to the UNRWA for Palestine Refugees. [1]

To provide assistance to Palestinian refugees in West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria has always been one of the pillars of the Japan's peace efforts in the Middle East region.

Another feature of Japan's basic aid policy towards the Palestine is reinforcement of governmental administrative capacity. Japan is supporting the Palestine for improving its fiscal situation and also helping them out in public services. In light of the severe fiscal condition of the PA, Japan has been extending annually non-project grant assistance ranging from 1.1 billion yen to 1.5 billion yen since 2007. The purpose is to enhance PA's economic and social development efforts. In 2010, Japan extends 1.5 billion

yen of this type of grant assistance to the PA. On 24 July 2013, Foreign Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida visited Ramallah and met his counterpart Shukri Bishara, Minister of Finance, PA. Japanese grant aid, 800 million yen aimed to promote efforts which were taken by the PA for economic and social development. [2]

In July 2014, Japan extended emergency grant aid amounting to US\$ 5.5 million through UNRWA and UNICEF. Other assistance includes US\$ 2.2 million assistance through Japanese NGOs and US\$ 0.8 mil assistance through Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) alumni society in Palestine.

On 30 October 2015 Japan extended 6.30 million yen grant aid for food assistance to the Palestinian refugees through UNRWA. Japan also extended a total of US\$90 million financial assistance through the World Bank trust fund for Palestinian development in FY2012 – FY2015.

Recently on 15 February 2016, President of Palestine Dr. Mahmoud Abbas with his team paid an official visit to Japan and met with Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan. Takeshi Okubo, Ambassador for the Palestinian Affairs and Representative of Japan to the PA, and Abeer Odeh, Minister of National Economy, signed and exchanged notes in Tokyo, regarding General Cultural Grant Assistance of up to 74 million yen related to the Project for the Construction of the Protective Shelter and the Presentation of the Great Bath at Hisham's Palace. The aim of the grant is to assist tourism development in Palestine. [3]

Japan's Unique Initiatives in the Palestine

Japan is making efforts towards co-prosperity among Israel and Palestine. In his statement on the occasion of open debate on the situation in the Middle East on 26 July 2011, Tsuneo Nishida, Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations strongly supported two-state solution. Under this solution both Israel and Palestine live in peace, security and mutual recognition. He also made it clear to both the parties that peaceful co-existence is only possible through resuming direct negotiations. [4]

I. Corridor for "Peace and Prosperity" Initiative

This initiative supports peace and prosperity of the Israelis, Palestinians and the Jordanians. The idea behind the initiative was to work collaboratively with the countries to materialize projects that promote regional cooperation such as agro-industrial park, building of distribution center, facilitating transportation of goods etc. Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Japan are working towards the establishment of the Jericho Agricultural Industrial Park (JAIP). Palestinian private sector is encouraged to participate in this project. Not only this, public private partnership (PPP) is crucial in achieving sustainable economic development. Since June 2012 and, as of January 2016, 33 tenants signed the agreement to operate in the industrial park. Two factories are in operation as of February 2016. Japan International Cooperation Agency has been supporting tourism industry through sending experts, offering training and supporting MICE activities in the Palestine. The long term aim of Japanese foreign policy is to build confidence building between Israelis and Arabs and to promote economic development. Hence, regional cooperation between Palestine, Israel, Jordan will lead to economic cooperation which ultimately satisfies the idea behind the corridor for peace and prosperity initiative.

II. Conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development (CEAPAD)

CEAPAD is an international conference for East Asian countries to discuss ways of new assistance for and cooperation with Palestine for its development of institutions and human resources. Japan has started cooperation with other East Asian like Brunei, Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam and collaborating with countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia in this regard since 2009. JICA has cooperated with Indonesia and Malaysia since 2010 and some 130 Palestinians undertook training programs in agriculture, finance and small and medium-sized enterprises promotion in those two countries in 2009.

The outcome of the training programs was worth appreciating and useful for the Palestinians. In Indonesia they have learnt new technologies for guava cultivation and introduced the technology in Palestine. This contributed to increasing the income of the local farmers.

JICA Senior Vice-President Hideaki Domichi said in CEAPAD meeting which was held in Tokyo in February 2013 that "These projects are thought to be very good practices which transferred technique and know-how from the similar climate and business practices." [5]

To give it further impetus the second ministerial-level Conference was held in March 2014 in Jakarta, Indonesia. A new mechanism in cooperation among Asian countries to support Palestinians' human resources development (CEAFAM) was launched. CEAFAM was funded by the Japanese Government, Islamic Development Bank, and East Asian countries to support development of agriculture, tourism, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and light manufacturing, with technical assistance being provided by JICA.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan hosted the Senior Officials Meeting of the CEAPAD in Hakone on February 2 and 3, 2016. Mr. Masaharu Kohno, Representative of the Government of Japan and Special Envoy for the Middle East peace, attended from Japan, and Mr. Shukri Bishara, Minister of Finance and Minister of Planning and Administrative Development, attended from Palestine.

During the first session of the meeting the reports were given on the implementation of projects after the Second Ministerial Meeting of CEAPAD. The detailed reports were provided by JICA, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) and Indonesia.

In the second session, South Korea and Singapore shared challenges related to the implementation of assistance on the ground, and participants discussed ways to overcome them. In the third session, Thailand and the UNRWA delivered comments on promoting cooperation among CEAPAD participants.

Japan's Relationship with the International Community

Like Japan, European Union (EU) is also engaged in the development of Industrial Parks as part of its support to Palestinian private sector competitiveness. In the words of Ralph Tarraf who is an EU Representative "the support for Jericho Agro-Industrial Park demonstrates successful joint efforts between the EU, Japan and the Palestinian Authority".

In coordination with the EU, Japan supports to enhance business activities and expand job opportunities in the West Bank and Gaza. Japan contributes US\$ 10.6 million to fund investments on equipment and facilities of private business including US\$ 4 million which is earmarked for support towards Jericho Agricultural Industrial Park tenants.

The Japanese Government has provided over €267,000 to support FMH (Foam machine horizontal) industry and Trade Company operating in the Jericho Agro Industrial Park (JAIP) and was founded in 2014. Japanese Ambassador for the Palestinian Affairs Mr. Takeshi Okubo appreciated the fund given by the EU and said "We are pleased that two companies are now operational in JAIP with the assistance of PRIDE. We would like to reiterate our commitment to JAIP that aims at developing sustainable national economy with focus on small and medium enterprises (SMEs)." [6]

Rising Inflation and Increasing Unemployment Rate of the Youth in the Palestine

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) announced that the inflation rate in Palestine increased by 1.43 percent in 2015 in comparison with 2014. Moreover, Gaza Strip, West Bank and Jerusalem also experienced the similar increase like 1.77 percent, 1.29 percent and 0.33 percent. Above all there is a considerable increase of unemployment rate for young Palestinians. The total number of unemployed Palestinians soared by more than 25 per cent in 2014 compared to the previous year to reach 338,300. There have been repeated destructions of various social and economic infrastructures in the Palestinian since September 2000. According to the PCBS, the unemployment rate among Palestinians in the labour force aged 15 years-old and above in Palestine was 26 percent in 2015.

On 25 February 2016, UNRWA held a ceremony at the Sibli Training Centre South Campus in Lebanon. Japan has funded several projects for Palestine refugees in Lebanon. Seiichi Otsuka, Ambassador of Japan to Lebanon visited Lebanon for the ceremony to congratulate and honor the students. In return students thanked him especially students from Beirut Arab University for the significant Japanese government contribution to the Scholarship Fund. Baqa'a is one of emergency camp in Jordan which was set up in 1968. Baqa refugee camp provides shelter to the

Palestinians who left the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the 1967 Arab Israeli war. Official development assistance had been given by Japan to fund schools, the women programme Center, a refugee shelter and the Health Center in Baqa. On 27 May 2009 the Japanese Ambassador to Jordan, Tetsuo Shioguchi, visited UNRWA's Amman Training Center, including the nursing section which was funded by a Japanese contribution of about US\$250,000. [7] Every year numerous nurses graduate from the center.

Some Valuable Suggestions:

Japan can do the following in the Palestine:

- Japan's strengths to best use in bringing stability to the Middle East, an issue of increasing global concern.
- Supporting Palestinian reform efforts to achieve fiscal sustainability and improve public financial management
- For instance, West Bank where agriculture and agro-industry could be a driving force for sustainable economic development.
- More scholarship funds should be created for the refugees and especially for females.
- More debate clubs should be opened so that students, experts, professors, business community can exchange and discuss views.
- Efforts should be made to provide more formal education to the refugees.
- Direct experience is necessary for the students and more internship and apprenticeship programmes should be arranged on regular basis.
- Efforts should be made to develop tourism sector of the Palestine. 'Tourism Corridor' can be one option.

There is an absence of dedicated academic institutions in the Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Israel etc. There is a need to enhance strategic and economic dialogue among Middle East study intellectuals in the Palestine. Japan through cultural diplomacy can work on this especially in arranging international conferences or seminars.

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