

Japan's Roles for Peace in the Middle East – A European Perspective

Lord Nazir Ahmed, Member of the House of Lords, UK

Although this is my first actual visit to Japan, while I travelled around the world; Africa, Asia or elsewhere, I saw numerous Japanese products such as deluxe cars, superb televisions and excellent electronics. As I am now in your beautiful country, sometimes I found even trains stations cleaner than some hospitals or schools I had visited. The virtues of cleanliness and order are essential in my religion of Islam, too.

In the name of Allah, the most compassionate and merciful! I could come to Japan at the invitation of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF). Its Chairman of Japanese Chapter, Dr.

Song has already briefed about their great works for peace, most notably in the Middle East. I should start my lecture by speaking about the Palestinian issue and the conflicts in the Middle East.

Japan's peace efforts in the Middle East

I had the honor of meeting with late Chairman Yasser Arafat together with Dr. Song. We had the pleasure of visiting the Israeli Knesset (national parliament) and talking with its Speaker. We also spent time in Gaza and at the refugee centers there.

On this issue, first of all, let me begin with thanking the Japanese government for its efforts. Japan has granted the Palestinian people with about 1.4 billion dollars over many years in accordance with its three-pronged

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Lord Ahmed was born in Pakistan-administered Kashmir in 1957. His parents moved the family to the UK when he was 11. He studied Public Administration at Sheffield Polytechnic. In 1990 he began his political career as a local Labour Party councillor, becoming the chair of the South Yorkshire Labour Party in 1993 and holding both positions until 2000. He founded the British Muslim Councillors' Forum and was a Justice of the Peace between 1992 and 2000. In 1998 he was appointed to the House of Lords as Baron Ahmed, of Rotherham in the County of South Yorkshire, as the first Muslim life peer. He led the first delegation on behalf of the British Government on the Muslim pilgrimage of the Hajj. He speaks on wider equality issues, and has spoken several times on issues of race, religion and gender; he has advocated legislation against religious discrimination and forced marriages.



policy: political dialogue, confidence-building and economic assistance to the Palestinians.

Japan recognizes that a solution can be achieved through the two-state solution with neither side imposing its will upon the other. It also recognizes the rights of refugees to return, declaring the Jewish settlements as illegal on the basis of the 1967 borders. It supports the Arab Peace Initiative.

These initiatives are supported internationally, by the masses and by our parliament, which has passed a resolution with a huge majority, as well as by many European countries through resolutions for the Palestinian State.

Current Middle East complexities

Sadly, however, while we tried to find a solution for the Palestinian issue, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia on 18th December 2010, then in Libya, Egypt and Yemen. Furthermore, we have seen chaos out of the civil strife in Syria, Bahrain and Iraq.

There are numerous issues to be discussed. Everybody wants to find out what is the ISIS. Where did they come? How do they recruit young people? Where are they getting financial and logistic supports? Who is providing arms and ammunitions? Whether has the ISIS the ability to get chemical, biological or nuclear weapons?

Internationally, the expectation from the United Nation's Security Council was much higher than what they had actually delivered on Afghanistan and Iraq. To be honest, the UN has not delivered much for Afghanistan and Iraq. The most powerful military might of the ISAF consisting of 42 countries of the world could not really defeat the Taliban, which still operates in the area. Even the most sophisticated arms of the United States and the NATO could not finish off the problems!

And, that was more or less similar in Iraq. In the

case of Afghanistan, you have at least a working government, enjoying popular supports from all sides. Though external politics affected the presidential elections, an agreement has been reached between President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah.

Iraq's sectarian politics

On the other hand, Iraq is much more complicated. You have the Kurdish region in the north, whose interest is represented by the president of the republic. The majority of the population belongs to Shia sect of Islam and is represented by the Prime Minister, formerly Mr. Al-Maliki, recently replaced by a new prime minister. The Sunni Muslims are represented by the Speaker of the Parliament.

Such a breakdown of leadership between the Sunnis, the Shias and the Kurds is responsible for what is happening today in Iraq. Of course, in Syria you have the similar problem.

So, there are three things that I will be touching upon. One is the overall divide in the Muslim world between Shia and Sunni sects of Islam, right from Afghanistan, Pakistan to Lebanon through Syria, Iraq, Iran and Yemen.

There is a real issue of poverty and youth unemployment, which is over 50% under the age of 30. That is one of the core issues motivating the uprising with the cry for change owing to the failures of dictatorship, the sheikdom or the kingdom in solving those problems. You see the acute divide between the super-rich and the poor in these countries.

Second, resources in this region are another issue. Of course, I am talking about oil. Those countries who have oil have billions or trillions of dollars in cash, which could not provide jobs, though. In Libya, whilst late Colonel Gaddafi spent 20 billion dollars 15 years ago in the biggest man-made river project, bringing water through deserts

into Tripoli, Misurata and other areas, he could not provide jobs nor prosperity for his people. Thus, resentment and frustration prevailed within his country.

Third point is the regional conflict over borders. No matter whether they are natural frontiers or the legacy from the Othman rule or demarcations made by the western colonial powers; whether it was right or not, fabricating some of these areas and putting them together by force, these borders are not working effectively today.

If you look into some of the supports for the ISIS stemming from the region, there is inconsistency among its supporters. Of course, I supported democracy in Syria, playing no politics. I did not support President Assad but supported the people, as I did for the people of Bahrain against the ruler who happens to be Sunni, even though I am a Sunni Muslim.

You have to be consistent. There are some Muslims who support democracy in Bahrain but do not support democracy in Syria. There are others who support democracy in Syria, but do not support democracy in Bahrain. That is because of their prejudice built on the basis of their sectarian divide between Shia and Sunni.

So, you should have this consistency, whether you are genuinely supporting the change, or whether you are actually doing it because of the first point I mentioned about the Shia-Sunni breakdown.

Syria's case

I think one of the major issues lies right at the beginning. When the uprising started, a lot of people in the west very simplistically thought that, by supporting Al-Nusra Front or the Syrian Resistance Army or other opposition groups, you can overthrow the Assad regime fairly easily.

Unfortunately, it did not happen, because the international players themselves played politics.

Russia has a vital military base in this region. Their naval fleet would not be able to operate if the current Syrian regime falls. China had played politics, too.

Had you seen some measure of unity at the UN Security Council, things would have been different. But, it was too weak to be effective. Since the problems of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Security Council became weak because the real decisions were taken outside this international body.

UN reform a must

In any case, the so-called P5, namely; the five permanent members of the Security Council including my country of UK, needs to be reformed. I think the basis of just having nuclear weapons back from 60 years before should not be the basis of the Security Council today. Otherwise, the nuclear club should include India and Pakistan as these two nations have nuclear weapons. Also, it could include Iran and South Africa.

Japan does not possess a nuclear weapon but retains the nuclear technology. Why not Japan, which is the third strongest economy in the world? Why cannot Japan have a permanent seat at the Security Council?

Likewise, there are many arguments you can adopt to reform the Security Council. More importantly, even the UN's General Assembly and the role of the UN itself, in terms of policing some of these horrible conflicts, need to be reformed.

In connection with my country of birth, the issue of Kashmir needs to be resolved. While the UN maintains the oldest observers along the separation between India and Pakistan, it has not been able to resolve the issue.

There are many other disputes on which the UN could facilitate dialogues and discussions between countries concerned. I have been involved in such discussions at the highest level. Even the UN's

Deputy Secretary General visited the parliament very recently, and I discussed in a very open forum. He said that, in order to bring two sides to a table, you need two sides to agree on something.

In case we have a powerful Security Council which would not veto on the Palestinian issue, or would not veto because of their own interests, even on Syria, then you could have a better outcome through a fair and equitable way of dealing with these problems. The failure at the Security Council in finding solutions for some of these problems, as well as disintegration of the states concerned, are very big factors.

Genesis of ISIS

As I said, in Iraq there were thousands of soldiers who used to belong to Saddam Hussein's regime, trained and armed but pushed into their villages. They were alienated from the main stream of the state with no wealth nor power.

Here they found an opportunity where Sunnis were disgruntled and their tribes felt isolated or alienated, while the parliament was dysfunctional owing to Prime Minister Maliki's one-sided leadership. I was in Iraq two years ago, and I remember the meeting with the Speaker of the Parliament, who said that the PM Maliki had refused to come to the parliament to answer questions. In fact, whenever he wanted to make announcements, he would do so through media, rather than going to the parliament.

So, when you have such a situation and when your inspiration comes from Najaf (NB. an Iraqi city with important historic significance for Shia Muslims), rather than from your parliament, then obviously people will harbor suspicions. And sadly, all this built up to support for something much more violent and radical.

You have the ISIS that had actually started in Syria, gaining small victories and taking over

certain areas and tribes. These ruthless people have nothing to do with Islam nor Muslims. I can tell you that the overwhelming majority of one and a half billion Muslims do not endorse the ISIS.

Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, set out rules of engagement in a war. The warriors cannot touch women or children nor can they kill innocent persons. You cannot even cut trees!

These terrorists kill people. In Peshawar of Pakistan, for example, 143 children without any weapons in their hands were attacked by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. Some said they had come from the Tribal Area near the border. Wherever they came from, these people killed the innocent children.

Radicalism in religions

Just this Friday in Peshawar, they went into a mosque and killed Shia Muslims who were praying. Who on earth could think, even if they claim they are Muslims, that they would go into a mosque where people were praying, cold-bloodedly murdering or shooting or blowing them up?

Likewise, who would even think of killing these innocent Coptic Christians, who had come from Egypt for jobs in Libya? The ISIS does not yet control Libya, but this shows a sort of mental condition of these twisted people, who use religion as a pretext of their oppression and domination.

They capture these minorities, these poor people from Egypt. The cold-blooded murder took place yesterday and they played its video on internet of slaughtering them and cutting their throats!

These are evil people. I want great Japanese people to understand that Islam does not condone this type of horrific, or any type of terrorist attacks, for that matter. The Koran is very clear on this. A Koranic verse says: "There is no compulsion in religion." Another verse says: "You are to your religion, I am to mine", meaning I have to respect

you, whether you are a Buddhist, a Christian, a Jewish or a Hindu. Whatever religion you have, I have to respect you.

You see, because of the lack of knowledge, when two innocent Japanese men were slaughtered by the evil ISIS, Japanese people may think whether this religion of Islam had motivated the evil people to kill.

Let me remind you of another truth. Generally, Buddhism is deemed as a peaceful religions, while the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam or Judaism are blamed on fighting for centuries. Yet, please go to Myanmar, and you will see evidences that hundreds of thousands of Muslims, known as the Rohingya community, have been driven out of their homes. Thousands of its Muslims were slaughtered with their houses burnt down.

Similarly, I travelled to Sri Lanka, where Buddhist monks actually led sort of the crusade against Muslims, burning down their shops and businesses, driving them out of their homes. If you look at the Central African Republic, the French troops are standing idle, while Muslim residents are taken out of their homes by local Christian people.

I do not blame the religion of Christianity, which is a great, beautiful religion. Nor do I blame Judaism, Buddhism or Islam. It is the perverted minds of certain individuals who want to control people by force and violence.

Whether it is Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban, Al-Qaeda, ISIS or the Lord's Army in Africa, they are not Muslims in truth. Some people say this is a new challenge of terrorism. Well, ask the Ukraine Prime Minister, and he will tell you that those who are fighting in the eastern region of Ukraine are 'terrorists'. Are they Christian terrorists? Are these people politically motivated?

My sympathy, thoughts and prayers are with

the families of the two victims of the ISIS. But I do not think a nation should change its policy just because of the murder incidents. Those evil people responsible for doing that should be punished and, I am sure, they will be punished.

Japan's roles in peace-building

Having said this, I think, Japan has a very important role in building peace around the world, playing an important role in peace-building in the Middle East, just like the UPF doing an important work at the United Nations in bringing interfaith communities together, whether it is in London or New York.

I guess Japan is trusted around the world. I believe the main ingredient for any peace-making efforts is trust. People trust those who are doing something to build peace. I love American people, but I have to say that I do not think many people could actually trust the US administration in peace-building.

A proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

I believe the most important ingredient right now for building peace in the Middle East and even in the Muslim world is: a really greater and more active roles from both Saudi Arabia and from Iran. Frankly speaking, there are proxy wars going on behalf of these regional powers. Unless Teheran and Riyadh manage to tone down their political rhetoric, the problem cannot be solved. Only with the greater influence of Saudi Arabia and Iran, you can bring peace in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain or in other parts of the region.

I fear a lot of differences would emerge. As a European, I am reminded of the Thirty Year's War in Europe from 1618 to 1648; the war between the Catholics and the Protestants. My worry is, knowing my Muslim brothers, this strife can continue for decades. I hope that does not happen,

but I honestly do not see how we can deal with the ISIS in the next ten or twelve years.

First, it was Al-Qaeda that drew young people as jihadists from around the world to fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Afterwards, Al-Qaeda members stayed on, marrying with locals and becoming like the indigenous. Then, they shifted to Tribal Areas of Pakistan, while their ideological focus shifted from Al Qaeda to Tehrik-i-Taliban or

Taliban or other newly-emerging groups.

Likewise, the ISIS will not easily fade away ideologically and physically. Some may insist on 'Boots on the ground!' to defeat the ISIS. This might attract more idiots to join this super jihad for which they have waited. This might create more groups in other destabilized regions of the Middle East, too.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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