

The Middle East as a Global Strategic Challenge – Outlook in 2030 and Responses

This research project maps out the possible courses the Middle East may take in the next 15 years (scenario planning targeted at the year 2030) with the intent of crafting policy recommendations that best put Japan's strength to use in bringing stability to the Middle East. In doing so, three critical elements relevant to the present Middle East will be analyzed: (1) the political changes that have swept the region, (2) the current energy situation and policies concerning nuclear energy, and (3) interactions between regional powers outside the Middle East (in particular, the U.S., Europe, and China).

Stability in the Middle East is a global issue beyond the bounds of the region, and is also a crucial foreign policy challenge for Japan. First, as the world's largest oil producing region, the Middle East is a global economic lifeline. With shale gas, renewable energy, and petroleum production outside the Middle East on the rise, the region is supplying a smaller share of energy to the rest of the world, although its presence as a major energy supplier is likely to remain unchanged. Japan, in particular, imports almost 80 percent of its oil from the Middle East, and the possible effects of affairs in the region on the international economy and community cannot easily be dismissed. Second, the region is home to security issues stemming from various conflicts, whose resolution could stabilize the region and have a global impact. The deceleration of the Middle East peace process and Iran's nuclear program that surfaced in 2002 have both threatened the region's security and, as a result, posed not only a risk to energy supply but also a threat to global efforts toward nuclear non-proliferation.

Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing movement in the Middle East to ground the restructuring of the international order, as well as sociopolitical change, in Islamic ideals (the Iranian Revolution of 1979 being an example). However, movements with ties to Islam span a wide range and are not all militant in nature; in fact, violent groups, such as Al-Qaeda, represent the minority. To effectively tackle the global challenge of preventing terrorism, a close analysis of various philosophies/movements falling under the umbrella of "Islam" must be conducted. Much thought, therefore, ought to be given to appropriately tying Islam – a religion with a significant number of followers in the Middle East – to the challenge of bringing stability to the region and preventing terrorism.

Furthermore, the issues facing the Middle East hold a global significance, for the region influences both the domestic and international policies of dominant international players

such as the U.S. and Europe. The Middle East has traditionally had deep historic ties with Europe, with the U.S. in the late 20th century, and now with remarkably fast-growing China. Analyses of the past interactions and future prospects of the Middle East and the international community mainly the U.S. and Europe, are of paramount importance in grasping the foreign policy issues of the Middle East.

This project, with such a thought in mind, seeks to analyze the driving factors behind the political changes in the Middle East, and conducts scenario planning (with a time frame of 2030) to consider policy recommendations that highlight Japan's strengths (e.g., economic prowess and soft power).

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