

Japan – Bahrain Relations through the Eyes of Japanese Ambassador

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to join you today.

Ambassador's most important job is to meet and talk to as many people of the accredited country as possible, both inside and outside the government. However, because of the Coronavirus pandemic, we cannot meet each other. And these days, I was wondering what I, as Japanese Ambassador to Bahrain, can do in this kind of circumstances. Therefore, I am very pleased today to talk to you, even virtually, about my thoughts on Japan – Bahrain relations. I would like to thank the Rotary Club of Manama for giving me this occasion. As this is my first

experience to use virtual way of speaking, I ask your indulgence with regard to some technical hitches.

Before going into the substance, please let me talk a little bit about myself. I have been working as Japanese Ambassador to Bahrain for more than two years since March of 2018. And also this is not my first time to work in Bahrain. I had worked at the Japanese Embassy as Deputy Chief of Mission for two years between 2007 and 2009. Before coming to Bahrain as Ambassador, I was Japanese Ambassador to Sudan. One day, I received a call in Khartoum from my headquarters in Tokyo and was told that my next assignment would be in Bahrain. I was pleasantly surprised, because it does not happen often that one works in the same country twice. Bahrain is a rather small community. And my old friends welcomed me when I came back to the Kingdom as Ambassador. I was very happy to see them again, although, naturally, everybody was ten years older. Surrounded by many good friends, I feel very at home in the Kingdom and enjoy my stay here.

1- History of the relations between Japan and Bahrain

Now I would like to turn to our subject. Whenever I meet Bahraini dignitaries, I start with saying that Japan is not a new comer to Bahrain and that our relations go back to 1934 when the first oil export from Bahrain went to Japan.

The tanker El Segundo left Bahrain and arrived in Yokohama, Japan on July 9, 1934. Bahraini oil export to Japan in 1934 was the first instance of Japan's importing of oil from Arab Gulf countries and it was the first export of oil abroad by any Arab Gulf country. As such, it was the beginning of the relations through oil not only between Japan and Bahrain but also between Japan and GCC countries.

In addition, when I visited Banagas, I learned that the first shipment of Bahraini LPG, that was 5,000 tons of butane, also went to Japan on the Japanese tanker YUYO MARU in March 1980. Furthermore, during my visit to GPIC, I was told that its first shipment of methanol, once again, went to Japan in 1985.

In this way, the relations between Japan and Bahrain in oil related industries are long-standing and historic.

These traditional relations between the two countries were translated into the world of diplomacy. After the independence of Bahrain in 1971, Japan established diplomatic relations with Bahrain in 1972. At first, the Japanese Embassy in Kuwait was covering Bahrain as well. But in 1983, Charge d' affaires opened an office in Bahrain, and in 1988, the Japanese Embassy was established and the first resident Ambassador of Japan to Bahrain, Mr. Ogushi, arrived in Manama in March that year.

Since then, I am the eleventh Japanese Ambassador to Bahrain.

Regarding the Bahraini side, it opened its Embassy in 2005. And now we have the second Ambassador, His Excellency Mr. Ahmed Al- Dosary following the long Ambassadorship of HE Dr. Khalil Hassan.

2- Current Bilateral Relations

Now I would like to turn to the current bilateral relations between Japan and Bahrain.

At the government level, there were exchange of visits at the highest level.

In April 2012, His Majesty King Hamad made a historic visit to Japan. In the following year 2013, in March, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Salman visited Japan, and in August, Prime Minister Abe made the first visit of Japanese Prime Minister to Bahrain.

Last year 2019 was a fruitful year for the bilateral relations between Japan and Bahrain in terms of exchanges of visits. The highlight was the participation of HRH Crown Prince Salman in the Enthronement Ceremony of the new Japanese Emperor in October. Apart from that, in March, HH Shaikh Khalifa, Southern Governor visited Japan officially. In June, HE Ms. Fawzia Zainal, Speaker of the Council of Representatives, together with delegations both from the Council of Representatives and the Shura Council, visited Japan to attend Women Political Leader Summit held in Tokyo. In November,

Defense Minister HE Taro Kono came to Bahrain to participate in the Manama Dialogue following his consecutive attendances to the Dialogue as Minister for Foreign Affairs in the previous two years. This time, HE Keisuke Suzuki, State Minister for Foreign Affairs also took part in the Manama Dialogue.

If I may add, the new Japanese Emperor and Empress together visited Bahrain in 1994 as Crown Prince and Crown Princess after they got married. That was, so to speak, their honeymoon. Definitely, they have fond memories of Bahrain.

Regarding trade relations between Japan and Bahrain, Japan has been a long – standing major trade partner of Bahrain. Its trade volume with Bahrain has been steady at around one billion US dollars. However, the latest statistics shows that there was a huge increase of export from Bahrain to Japan in 2018 and that the total trade volume reached around two billion dollars.

Japan's main export items are vehicles and machinery, while Japan's main import items from Bahrain are oil, petrochemical products and aluminum. Japan is the sixth largest exporter to

Bahrain. There are many Bahraini business people who have long history of dealing with Japanese companies.

Also Japanese companies have contributed to the nation building efforts of Bahrain through their participation in various development projects. Japanese companies contributed to infrastructure construction in such important fields as gas, oil and aluminum. Japanese companies are also a part of IWPP projects, and taking part in supplying stable water and electricity.

In the cultural field, the Embassy of Japan worked hard in recent years to offer people in Bahrain as many chances as possible to appreciate Japanese culture. In December 2018, we invited a Japanese traditional folk song singer and a Shamisen player. In February 2019, on the occasion of Bahrain International Garden Show, we invited a professor of Japanese flower arrangement, IKEBANA. Also in the framework of Spring of Culture in March, a Japanese drum group visited the Kingdom and made performances. In June, we invited a Japanese candy artist to take part in Bahrain Summer Festival. And from October to

November, we held an exhibition entitled The Dolls of Japan at the National Museum introducing Japanese traditional dolls.

This year, too, we continued our efforts in the cultural field. In February, we invited a distinguished player of a Japanese traditional musical instrument, Koto, something similar to Arabic Kanoon. She had a concert at Shaikh Ibrahim Center.

She played with a Bahraini Oud player as well during the concert. I hope that some of you watched the performance.

However, it was regrettable that we were obliged to cancel other events because of Coronavirus threat. We planned to have a demonstration of Japanese Tea Ceremony at Bahrain Fort in March given by Deputy Tea Master of Urasenke School which is one of the largest tea school in Japan. Furthermore, also in March, within the framework of Spring of Culture, we intended to invite two Japanese Vaudeville performers and they were to present their performances at the Cultural Hall. One performer was to give a Japanese traditional comic storytelling, Rakugo. And the other was to present Daikagura, a popular art which was used to be performed on various auspicious occasions such as New Year's Day going around the houses in the village.

Showing of two Japanese animation films were also cancelled unfortunately. But We intend to come back with those events after the Coronavirus pandemic comes to an end.

In the academic field, every year, Japan has been offering two scholarship seats to Bahraini students for their post – graduate studies in Japanese universities. In this way, more than thirty Bahrainis have studied in Japan.

Also we have been offering Ship for World Youth program. I am very pleased that a new batch of Bahraini youths consisting of twelve participants were invited to take part in this year's program after the interruption for three years. Their participation brought the total number of Bahraini members to 150, which is among the highest all over the world. The participants came back to Bahrain just before the Coronavirus threat became serious, after having a fruitful and enjoyable time.

Fortunately, in Bahrain, we have a very strong alumni association for the participants of the Program. This group is very active in organizing various events related to Japan.

Those scholarship students as well as Ship for World Youth program alumni are Japanese ambassadors in their respective work places or towns.

When we talk about bilateral relations between Japan and Bahrain, there is another special field of cooperation that is security. Japan has been sending its Maritime Self – Defense Force vessels and aircrafts to contribute to counter – piracy operations since 2009. And from 2013 on, Japan has been working in the framework of Combined Task Force 151 with other like - minded countries. Japanese Rear Admirals commanded the Task Force three times in 2015, 2017 and 2018. And now a Japanese Rear Admiral, Mr. Ishimaki, is leaving Bahrain in a few days after commanding the Task Force for the fourth time from 20th February. As the headquarters of those activities are located in Bahrain, we have very close cooperation with Bahrain Defense Force as well as US Navy. In addition, in

December last year, Japan decided to dispatch an additional destroyer and also utilize the patrol aircrafts engaging in counter-piracy operations, for information gathering activities. That is to ensure the safety of navigation in this region on which Japan depends 90% of its oil import. This decision is also accompanied by Japan's determination to undertake further diplomatic efforts towards easing tensions and stabilizing the situation in the Middle East.

Prime Minister Abe himself visited several countries in this region as part of those efforts.

3- Prospects for the future

Now we would like to talk about the prospects for the future.

Fortunately, as I described above, our bilateral relations are excellent. I would say we don't have any serious problems. But we should always try to move forward.

As the representative of the Japanese government, I hope that more exchange of visits will be made among Japanese

dignitaries and Bahraini dignitaries. From the Japanese side, Manama Dialogue will continue to be an occasion for such visits. I hope from Bahraini side as well, more Ministers will visit Japan. I hope that the Coronavirus pandemic will come to an end as soon as possible and create an environment for such visits.

This year, in 2020, Tokyo intended to host Olympic and Paralympic games in July and August. Although they were postponed by one year, many Bahraini athletes are putting in excellent performances in various international competitions. I look forward to seeing many Bahraini athletes competing in Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Also I understand that Kikukawa City in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan, has volunteered to welcome Bahrain as the host city of Bahrain for Olympic Games. I hope fruitful exchange will be made between Bahraini athletes and people, and people in Kikukawa City.

Here, I would like to touch upon our relations between Japan and Bahrain in the field of tourism. This field is an important one both for Japan and Bahrain. Unfortunately, we don't have

appropriate statistics in this field. Therefore, it is difficult to grasp the picture clearly. However, for example, the number of visa we issued in our Embassy doubled between 2009 and 2018. I know many Bahrainis visited Japan as their honeymoon destination, particularly during cherry blossom season. Also I know a couple of Japanese travel agencies are handling tours to Bahrain. I hope more and more Bahraini people will visit Japan and more and more Japanese people will visit Bahrain in the future, after Coronavirus.

In the end, exchange of visits both at government level and people's level is the basis of mutual understanding even in this age of virtual technology.

In this regard, I would like to mention that Japan and Bahrain exchanged note verbals in February to waive visa requirement for diplomatic and official passport holders. Because of the Coronavirus issue, we are unable to enact the agreement. But once coming into force, this measure will contribute to promoting mutual visits between our two countries.

In the business and economic field, I sincerely hope that Japanese companies will have new chances to contribute to the

nation – building efforts of the Kingdom of Bahrain in various fields for the benefit of both Japan and Bahrain.

At the governmental level, Japan and Bahrain are now discussing an agreement for the protection of investment. I hope we can reach an agreement soon. I would not say that the agreement will increase investment in each other's countries automatically. But it is the duty of governments to create an environment in which entrepreneurs can make business with more confidence.

One particular area in which the Japanese Embassy is working hard in the business field is the promotion of Japanese foods.

After the great earthquake in Japan in March 2011, because of the FUKUSHIMA nuclear power plants accident, many countries in the world, including Bahrain, restricted the import of Japanese foods out of concern for radioactive contamination. But in March last year, these restrictions were lifted by the Bahraini government, as the safety of Japanese foods has been accepted by the international community. The Embassy held events to promote Japanese foods in Bahrain. We will continue

to do so, so that the Bahraini people can enjoy good quality Japanese foods, as Japanese foods are gaining more and more popularity in Bahrain and all over the world.

As I mentioned, I am focusing cultural exchanges between our two countries.

I am very pleased that everybody I talk to in Bahrain has good image of Japan. Indeed, everywhere, I can see many Toyota, Nissan and other Japanese cars. Also there are a lot of Panasonic and Sony products. Bahraini people talk about Japan as a technologically advanced country. For some other Bahrainis, Japan is a country of animation, “Manga” or games. All those are not wrong, but those are only a part of Japan.

It is really important to cultivate deeper understanding on each other. I am determined to increase occasions to present Japanese culture in Bahrain as much as possible so that the Bahraini people understand the thoughts and everyday lives of the Japanese people who are behind various Japanese products.

I will come back with those cultural events cancelled because of Coronavirus threat. And I am determined to do more. I understand that this year, Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities intends to hold annual Bahrain Summer Festival on-line. We are now considering in what way Japan can participate in the Festival.

After spending some time in Bahrain previously and this time, it seems to me that there are many similarities between the Japanese society and the Bahraini society. As Japan is in East Asia, Bahrain is in West Asia and both as Asians, and also both as island countries, we share common values. For example, both the Japanese people and the Bahraini people respect the elders. Also Japan and Bahrain both attach importance to harmony of its society. Bahrain is famous for being a tolerant society. That may be a heritage from the ancient times as an island country located in the crossroad of civilizations. On the other hand, Japan was an agricultural country based on the cultivation of rice. Growing rice requires cooperation of all villagers. When Prince Shotoku promulgated the first Japanese constitution consisting of 17 articles more than one thousand and four

hundred years ago, the first article went that harmony is precious. Furthermore, because Japan and Bahrain lack natural resources, we regard human resource development and education as important. Last year, Bahrain celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first public school. In Japan, too, literacy of the Japanese people was high even before we opened up our country to the world in the nineteenth century. That was the reason why Japan was able to develop its economy quickly to compete with European countries. In this way, in fact, there is a solid basis to have mutual understanding between the Japanese people and the Bahraini people.

Fortunately, there are many generous Bahrainis who understand the importance of people to people relations and are prepared to sponsor cultural events. In this endeavor, we also have a strong support from the Bahrain – Japan Business & Friendship Society. In cooperation with them I would like to further increase occasions to present Japanese culture to the people in Bahrain.

As Japanese Ambassador to Bahrain, I would like to continue to do my best to further strengthen our bilateral relations not only at a governmental level but also at a people to people level in cooperation with all Bahraini friends including those who are here today.

Thank you very much for your listening.