

The Japanese Foreign Ministry Advocates for a Stronger “Pro-Arab” Stance (1973)

Source reference:

Middle East Division, “Our position regarding the Middle East conflict,” October 24, 1973, Historical Document File Control Number 2014-3282, Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo, Japan.

Source:

Our position regarding the Middle East conflict

October 24, 1973
Middle East Division

1. Our nation has long upheld a position of impartiality and neutrality in the Middle East conflict. Our involvement has been minimal, limited to provide basic explanations of our actions to the concerned countries and the international community, without engaging in practical conflict resolution efforts.

Our basic position regarding the Middle East conflict is to strongly oppose territorial expansion by force and to support a resolution based on the Security Council Resolution 242. While we have been able to make a small, indirect contribution to the effective resolution of the conflict, we have not played a proactive or substantial role.

2. It was a result of the fact that our nation was at equal distances from both sides. On one hand, we valued maintaining strong ties with Middle Eastern countries, from which we imported over 80% of our oil. On the other hand, we also needed to consider preserving our relationship with Israel and, ultimately, the United States.

However, with the resurgence of the Middle East conflict, the Middle Eastern countries began to leverage oil as a political weapon. It is increasingly likely that the conflict will be used to determine alliances based on oil supply. Arab nations are likely to pressure our country to abandon its neutral position and adopt a more explicitly stated pro-Arab stance in the conflict. (Some Arab nations have already began criticizing our silence regarding the Middle East conflict.)

3. West European countries, which, like us, depend heavily on Middle Eastern oil, are generally pro-Arab in the Middle East conflict, though there are some differences among them. Their approach to a

practical resolution of the conflict is clear and proactive, particularly regarding territorial issues.

Our nation opposes territorial expansion by force and strongly condemns Israel's permanent occupation. Given that all our future actions regarding the Middle East will inevitably be assessed in the context of Arab-Israel confrontation, it is essential that our stance on the conflict, including substantive issues such as territorial questions, aligns closely with that of the European Community countries (particularly the UK and France).

Blurb:

For Japan, the issue of securing energy and resources did not start in October 1973. Partly because of the rapid economic growth in the 1950s-60s, Japan's energy self-sufficiency rate had fallen to the lowest level among major economies at the beginning of the 1970s. As Iokibe Makoto's edited volume *The diplomatic history of postwar Japan* (2011) shows, the Six-Day War in 1967, triggered a growing interest in energy issues and relations with the Middle East in the Japanese government. The Tanaka Kakuei Administration, which took office in 1972, sent Nakasone Yasuhiro, the Minister of International Trade and Industry (MITI), to Middle Eastern countries in April 1973. In July, the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy was established as a new government body.

Despite these initiatives, the 1973 oil crisis is remembered as one of the most shocking international incidents in postwar Japanese history, primarily because the energy resource issue proved to be a far more significant geopolitical concern than anticipated in Japan. Two days after the *Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries* (OAPEC) on October 17 agreed on the oil production cut and embargo against "unfriendly" countries. Further, Arab ambassadors met with Foreign Minister Ohira Masayoshi, one of Japan's most pro-US leaders, and demanded support for the Arab position against Israel. On November 14, Henry Kissinger visited Tokyo and urged the Japanese government not to yield to Arab pressures. Four days later, OAPEC granted "friendly" status to all European Community countries except the Netherlands, but Japan's status remained undecided. While Ohira sought to maintain Japan's neutral position in Arab-Israel conflict, Tanaka's Cabinet Secretary, Nikaido Susumu, issued an official statement on November 22 demanding "the withdrawal of Israeli forces from all the territories occupied in the 1967 war." The statement also indicated that the Japanese government, "depending on future developments, may have to reconsider its policy towards Israel." In December, Tanaka dispatched Vice-Prime Minister Miki Takeo to the Middle East, promising economic assistance. On December 25, OAPEC granted Japan "friendly" status.

Leaders and officials in the Japanese government were divided on whether Japan should adopt a more pro-Arab stance or maintain its neutrality, as Shiratori Junichiro's *Keizai Taikoku Nihon no Gaiko* [Japanese Diplomacy as an Economic Power] (2015) highlights. Prime Minister Tanaka and MITI Minister Nakasone advocated for a pro-Arab position, while Foreign Minister Ohira urged to maintain neutrality, seeking to preserve strong US-Japan relations. Ministry officials were also

similarly divided on the matter. Generally, MITI supported a pro-Arab stance, whereas the Foreign Ministry tended to favor neutrality. However, some officials in the Foreign Ministry, particularly Yamamoto Manabu, a well-known “Arabist” and head of the Middle East Division, argued that the 1973 crisis was a prime opportunity for Japan to “clarify” its Middle East policy by shifting to a pro-Arab position. Nevertheless, the choice between a pro-Arab stance or neutrality definitely was not necessarily a matter of “autonomy from the United States” or “maintaining US-Japan ties.” According to declassified Japanese government records such as this document, even the pro-Arab arguments within the Foreign Ministry did not, at least explicitly, advocate for an “independent foreign policy” in response to the oil crisis. Although there might be underlying interests in autonomy, pro-Arab positions were largely driven by Japan’s economic need for oil.

This source, discussing Japan’s position toward the Middle East crisis, was drafted by Yamamoto’s Middle East Division and circulated within the Foreign Ministry following the meeting between Arab ambassadors and Foreign Minister Ohira, urging Japan to adopt a pro-Arab position. The document reveals that Japanese officials recognized that a passive attitude toward Middle East was no longer possible. It then argued for adopting a position “close to the UK and France,” who were important US allies but had taken pro-Arab stances. The document shows that even the most pro-Arab faction within the Japanese government cautiously advocated maintaining a balance between shifting towards a pro-Arab stance and preserving friendship with the United States.

Source selected, translated, and annotated by Yutaka Kanda.