Northeast Asia’s links with the Middle East can be traced back to ancient times, when the two regions were connected via trade routes. The material remains of these trade relations, housed in the museums of Japan, South Korea, and China, are a vivid reminder of the active movement of Arab merchants and goods. In the modern period, engagements between the two regions have extended to the political, as well as economic realms. In this issue of News from Northeast Asia, we examine the reality of modern interactions between the Middle Eastern region and the countries of Northeast Asia, focusing on issues such as energy, diplomacy, investment, and military relations.

On the energy security front, the national oil stockpile, which did not exist in 1973, is now secured for more than 100 days, and energy-saving measures have become prevalent in Japanese society. The Japanese government also increased the use of nuclear energy and natural gas in an attempt to shrink its primary energy supply. Therefore, the share of oil among primary energy sources decreased significantly from 75.5% in 1973 to 11.1% in 2015. However, in terms of dependence on Middle Eastern oil, not much has changed; the current share of the oil supply coming from the Middle East is more than 80%, higher than the 77.5% in 1973 — although it did temporarily decrease to 69.7% in 2013. In the Middle Eastern nations — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar — oil provided as much as 75.9% of their gross domestic product (GDP). Since 1975, although Saudi Arabia or the UAE have been top oil exporters to Japan; meanwhile, UAE, Qatar, and Oman provided a greater share of Japan’s natural gas supply. In 2011 Qatar doubled its gas export to Japan following the suspension of nuclear power plants caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake, and became Japan’s third gas provider besides Australia and Malaysia. Since the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) has predicted that oil and natural gas will continue to make up about half of Japan’s primary energy in 2030, relations with the Middle East shall remain the most important for Japan’s energy security. Relations between Japan and the Middle East have grown outside the realm of energy in past decades. The Middle East is an important market for the automobiles and machinery export, as well as for infrastructure development for Japanese companies, who have also worked on enhancing human resources and technical cooperation in various fields through government support. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been engaged in several reconstruction projects after the Iraq War in 2003, such as power plants, water-supply systems, communication networks, oil refineries, and fertilizer factories. At the beginning of the 21st century, some Gulf airlines introduced direct flights to Japan and contributed to raising the profile of Arab Gulf countries among the Japanese. Dubai has now become a well-known tourist destination among the Japanese, in addition to the historic cities of Istanbul and Cairo.

Beyond these economic aspects, the Middle East has also been the center stage of national security discussions, especially since the end of the Cold War. During the Gulf Crisis and the Gulf War in 1990–1991, the Japanese government maintained a rather tentative approach to the hostage situation in Iraq, where hundreds of Japanese were used as human shields; at the same time they were asked by the United States to contribute any personnel to the UN peacekeeping mission. hopes were not answered as the Japanese government maintained a rather tentative approach to the hostage situation in Iraq, where hundreds of Japanese were used as human shields; at the same time they were asked by the United States to contribute any personnel to the UN peacekeeping mission. Despite falling in Saudi Arabia and Iraq in the 1970s due to insufficient development funds and technical capacities, Japan’s endeavor to secure crude oil by developing oil wells eventually succeeded in 1973, when the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) implemented an oil embargo after the fourth Arab-Israeli war. Japan had failed to be categorized as an Arab-friendly nation and was informed of an export reduction. The news caused a so-called ‘toli-papper panic’ among the Japanese who believed paper production would soon stop, leading to massive purchases. The oil crisis accelerated inflation, which led the government to introduce a legal framework to prevent the hoarding of goods and the arbitrary hiking of prices. This event inspired some serious rethinking with regard to Japan’s energy security and its relations with the Middle East. As a new initiative to understand Middle East geopolitics and to strengthen ties, the Japanese Institute of Middle Eastern Economies (JIME), the predecessor of JIME Center-IEEJ, was established in 1974. Pursuing an active political and economic engagement with the Middle East, at both government and private levels, Japan has strived to achieve peace and stability in these countries. For this purpose, Japan has been deeply involved in the Middle East peace process since the 1990s. However, Japan lacks the political leverage to be an influential mediator between parties in conflict because of stringent constitutional limitations on the military sphere, despite the historical role of Japanese troops, who have enjoyed in the Middle East compared to European countries. Therefore, Japan’s approach for fostering security and strengthening relations with the Middle East has been and will be mainly to focus on the economic field, including a steady and long-term commitment to human and social development.

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Notes
4. Ibid., pp.192-193.