

Protecting Japanese Nationals Overseas: Learning from Lessons Past

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Protection of Japanese nationals overseas is one of the important duties of diplomats. The lessons learned during the Gulf War of 1991 made thorough preparations possible for dealing with the events at the time of the Iraq War of 2003. In an era marked by the emergence of the new "human shield" phenomenon, this essay examines the iron rules of dealing with crises: individuals have to help themselves first, then help each other, and finally seek government assistance.

When it came to protection of Japanese citizens overseas and crisis management, the Gulf War in 1991 became the occasion for many painful lessons learned the hard way. The government, for example, considered chartering a private airplane to evacuate Japanese nationals, but disagreement broke out over whether the cost should be borne by the beneficiaries (the Japanese nationals) or by the government, and it proved difficult even to get the charter flight off the ground.

Reflecting on these experiences after the Gulf War ended, efforts were made both in the public and private sectors to discuss the nature of crisis management and make improvements in the way situations would be handled. Many corporations that had expanded overseas began to set up independent divisions to take charge of crisis management, training specialists specifically in this field of expertise. In recognition of the necessity for close cooperation between the government and the private sector in order to respond effectively at a time of national crisis like the Gulf War, the Council for Public-Private Cooperation for the Promotion of Overseas Safety (Kaigai Anzen Suishin Kanmin Kyoryoku Kaigi) was set up to discuss how the government and private sector could work together in management of crises involving Japanese nationals overseas.

Numerous trial-and-error efforts have also been made within various agencies of the government. For instance, it was decided that, based on the experiences of the Gulf War and the 1998 riots in Jakarta, the cost of government airline charter flights would be split between the passengers and the government. The basic rule, it was decided, would be that the government would bear the chartering charges while the passengers—the Japanese nationals—would pay a fixed fee (cost of a regular economy fare).

Twelve years have passed since the Gulf War. At the time of the recent crisis beginning in March 2003, what could be called the Second Gulf War, the past lessons learned proved eminently useful in dealing with unfolding events. At the same time, new problems emerged that had not even been conceived at

the time of the First Gulf War. This article is an attempt to assess, as a contribution to Japan's future crisis-management in this regard, the response to the recent crisis from the viewpoint of the Japanese government in protecting Japanese nationals.

Foresight and Preparation

Operating on the assumption that a war might be waged against Iraq, the Consular and Migration Affairs Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began to prepare for security of Japanese nationals in the region as early as the end of September 2002. Although, it was not clear at the time that war would in fact be declared on Iraq, it was certain that if war did break out it would affect many Japanese nationals over quite a wide area of the Middle East. Behind the decision to pursue preparations at such an early stage was the recognition that the operation would be large-scale and that thorough preparations would therefore be needed to coordinate the involvement of a number of Japanese consulates and embassies in the region. It also reflected the strong desire of those concerned to take advantage of the lessons learned in the 1991 Gulf War.

As a first step, a list was drawn up of eleven countries, Iraq and peripheral states that might be militarily affected, directly or indirectly, in the case of an outbreak of hostilities against Iraq (see map). A series of instructions went out to the consulates and embassies in those countries to review their manuals on measures for dealing with emergencies, update their information on Japanese nationals under their jurisdiction, establish a system for emergency communications between Japanese nationals and the consular office, hold meetings with Japanese nationals to explain the current situation, and draw up a plan for evacuation should it become necessary.

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself, we drew up scenarios anticipating the need to alert citizens in general about the increasingly critical situation in Iraq and, as events unfolded, release appropriate and up-to-date information about the dangers. Also, in order to make sure that the mechanisms set up to respond to emergency situations would work smoothly, we carried out simulation exercises several times using direct lines between the ministry and related overseas offices. We also took various measures to deal with terrorism or the use of biological and chemical weapons, to evacuate Japanese citizens via government-use

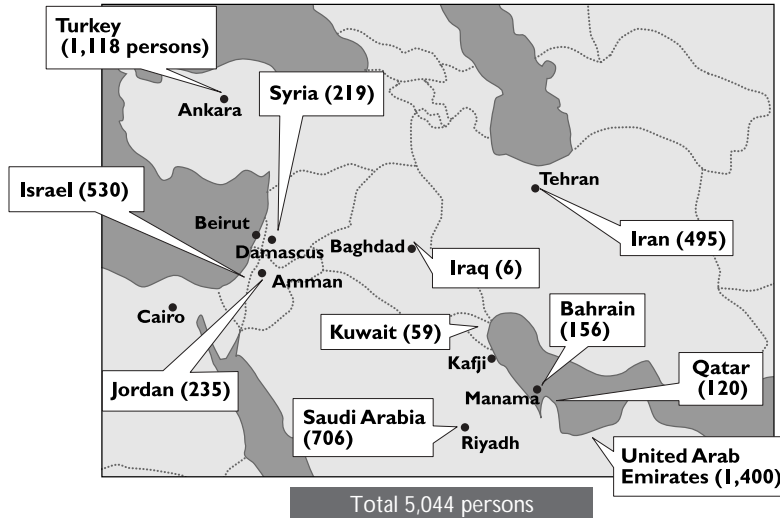


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Distribution of Japanese Nationals in the Mideast Region

(Figures as of the outbreak of the war in Iraq on 19 March 2003.)



aircraft and Self-Defense Force aircraft, to augment the staff of related consulates, and to improve communications equipment and other infrastructure.

With regard to developments in Iraq, we emphasized in particular the need to foresee events before they happened and to prepare for them in advance. Fortunately our predictions proved correct this time, but it is no easy task to be constantly correct in anticipating developments in international affairs and grasping with relative certainty how things will proceed. What we keenly realized from this experience is that those in charge of crisis management have to constantly polish their ability to understand and anticipate how situations can develop.

The fact that no Japanese citizens were injured or killed while the war was under way in Iraq is certainly fortuitous, but as one of those on the crisis management team, I can only express my relief that we were able to fulfill our responsibilities without mishap.

Preparing for the Worst

The basic policy of the Consular and Migration Affairs Department in preparations for protection of Japanese citizens has been two-pronged: to prepare for the worst-case scenario and to take one-step-ahead action at every stage. Unfortunately we human beings are not endowed with the capacity to accurately foresee what will happen in the future. In many cases it is difficult to tell with absolute certainty whether a serious situation will occur or not and whether it will occur tomorrow or ten days hence.

We made it our rule, following a fundamental principle in crisis management, to prepare for the worst possible situation. It turned out to be easier said than done. For example, whenever we prepare to issue an advisory on

evacuation from a certain country, our advice is almost invariably countered with arguments like “Isn’t it too early?” or “The United States and Britain haven’t taken their people out yet, so why should we?” or “We should very carefully consider our relationship with that country.” We in crisis management have no choice—convinced as we are that “too late” means failure but that “too early” is not failure—but to do our best to persuade others of the appropriateness of this policy. Of course, it is difficult to justify initiating measures when there is only about 1 percent probability that a crisis may occur. However, if a situation can be anticipated with some degree of evidence and certainty, we believe that crisis management officers can proceed with confidence even if it seems somewhat heavy handed.

In the situation involving Iraq this year, too, the Consular and Migration Affairs Department more than once issued travel advisories and warnings and took other necessary measures at an early stage, overcoming opposition from various quarters based on our two-pronged policy of preparing for the worst and our one-step-ahead response. Some of the measures we instituted turned out not to have been necessary, and others could have been launched somewhat later on, but I nevertheless believe that they were appropriate policies for crisis management.

Particular Responses for Particular Countries

We also made it a basic policy in protection of Japanese nationals in the Middle East in 2003 to work out country-specific measures for response. In considering the measures to be taken for Iraq and each of the countries in its periphery, the foreseeable impact of the outbreak of war in Iraq was likely to be different for each country, and we made it our policy to work out different measures taking into account the nature and degree of the impact in each case.

Most people may think that evacuation of nationals is conducted by government-use aircraft or Self-Defense Force aircraft, but in the case of Israel, for example, we negotiated with a local airline and secured an arrangement whereby the airline would set aside an airplane for charter to the Japanese government in the case it was needed. If a Self-Defense Force aircraft were to be used, it would have to fly from Japan, which would take time. In addition, difficulties with Arab-Israel relations could make it hard to secure use of airports in Arab states. It was finally decided that chartering Israeli flights would be the fastest and most reliable.

For Kuwait, since the overland route to Saudi Arabia was judged the safest and most secure, we prepared for evacuation by that route as the first option. At the same time, based on the information that, at the time of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, the escape of many Kuwaitis had been delayed because of the congestion on the roads, we made contingency arrangements for evacuation by Japanese government plane.

For countries in the periphery of Iraq other than these two, the probability of a situation requiring the emergency evacuation of Japanese was judged to be relatively low. For example, concerning Saudi Arabia, for Riyadh, Jeddah and other

areas except Kafji in the east near the border with Kuwait, the probability of attacks from the Iraqi military was considered to be very small, and even if they occurred, we concluded that regular commercial and other flights could be used as the means for evacuation.

In neighboring Jordan, which traditionally had close ties with Iraq, there was considerable possibility of a massive influx of refugees and anti-American demonstrations that might mean poorer security in the country, but the situation was not thought likely to involve a danger to the Japanese there. It was decided that the possibility of a situation that might develop to the degree that Japanese would have to be evacuated was very slim.

We also followed the principle of specific responses for specific countries with regard to the issuing of travel advisories and warnings. In consultation with the consulates concerned and taking into full consideration the military situation in each country and its relations with Iraq, as well as geographical conditions, we determined the content and timing of travel advisories and warnings.

First, for Iraq, in order to forestall the kind of hostage crisis that occurred in 1990, about which I shall write in more detail below, we issued the evacuation advisory quite early, and we were thus able to reduce the number of Japanese remaining in the country to nearly zero well ahead of the outbreak of hostilities. For Kuwait, Israel, and the Kafji region of Saudi Arabia, where the possibility of reprisal attacks from Iraq could not be ruled out, we made it our goal to have completed evacuation of Japanese at whatever point the United States began military action. We set the evacuation advisory timing in such a way that Japanese would be able to leave voluntarily using regular commercial flights.

For Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates, where the probability of receiving retaliatory strikes from Iraq was virtually nil, considering their relations with Iraq, location vis-à-vis missiles possessed by Iraq, presence/absence of U.S. military bases, and other factors—although keeping in mind the possibility of terrorist acts and anti-U.S. demonstrations—the travel advisories and warnings we issued were at a generally low level. I believe that this prevented unnecessary damage to tourist-related industries and the economies of the local countries that higher level travel advisories and warnings might have caused.

Active Supply of Information

Another dimension of the government response to the recent crisis was the special attention given to actively making information on the changing situation available to Japanese citizens. Securing the safety of Japanese in an emergency situation should be a joint effort by the government along with the private sector and the people. Only if the government makes known what its safety policies are can individuals and private corporations decide what safety measures they should take themselves.

In accordance with this principle, an active program was set up to inform citizens about protection of citizens overseas in time of crisis. The first feature

of this program consisted of meetings on the Iraq situation held frequently in Tokyo from 2002 onward with Japanese citizens and executives of corporations engaged in business in Iraq, presenting the foreign ministry's views concerning the status quo and prospects of the Iraq situation, and explaining government measures to protect Japanese citizens.

Meetings of this nature were held, in fact, at the time of the heightened tensions between India and Pakistan in June 2002. It was found that explanations, not only by the embassies in both India and Pakistan for local Japanese residents and companies, but in Tokyo by the ministry for executives on the head office side and others concerned, were extremely effective in promoting understanding of the situation and measures at hand to deal with it. For businesses—indeed, for all international organizations—there is always a discrepancy between the way a situation appears to the head office and the concerns of those working on-site overseas, so the gatherings were well received on the private-sector side as helping to fill perception gaps.

As the situation in Iraq began to grow tense, we held frequent meetings of this kind, and attendance by representatives of corporations with involvement in the region was high, demonstrating that interest in the kind of information provided by the foreign ministry in such cases is considerable. We hope to be able to implement similar information meetings in future for tense situations of this kind.

The second feature of the ministry's information promotion program was the active provision of information to the mass media about the situation involving Japanese citizens in

the Middle East and government measures for their protection. Particularly regarding the “human shields”—a subject given much attention in the media—we presented explanations of the policies and measures that the government was taking to protect these Japanese citizens. This position was reported in the media and appears to have been widely understood as a result.

A third feature of the program is the foreign ministry's website on safety overseas (<http://www.pubanzen.mofa.go.jp/>) on which the ministry posts information about crises and dangers overseas available to all citizens, wherever they are. This site was accessed between 500,000 to 800,000 times per month for the first half of 2002, and much to our surprise this number rose beyond one million in the latter half of 2002 and reached 5 million by the time war broke out in Iraq in March 2003. These figures not only indicated the high level of people's concern about security issues overseas, but the high expectations they obviously have of the ministry as a source of reliable infor-

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mation. We were deeply impressed with the need to develop even further the quantity and quality of information the ministry provides.

The Human Shields

The issue that concerned us most in the effort to protect Japanese citizens overseas at the time of the 2003 war in Iraq was the possibility of hostage-taking. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, it placed 213 Japanese in custody, moving them later to Iraq where they were held by the Iraqi authorities. Of these, 141 were kept as hostages at strategic locations within Iraq and used as pawns in its diplomacy with other nations.

With the emergence of the possibility that a new war would break out with Iraq, our greatest concern in the Consular and Migration Affairs Department was to do everything possible to assure that Japanese would not again be used as hostages in Iraq. For that reason, we issued the evacuation advisory to Japanese nationals in Iraq at an extremely early stage, seeking to reduce the number in the country to nearly zero well ahead of any crisis.

As it turned out, however, a number of Japanese citizens sought voluntarily to act as “human shields,” a phenomenon we had not even imagined at the time of the 1991 Gulf War. We had been much concerned about preventing the taking of Japanese hostages, but here were people offering themselves up to Iraq in an attempt to stay the violence. The staff of the Japanese embassy in Baghdad tried fervently to dissuade them from their course, and while they

did manage to persuade a few to leave Iraq, others kept arriving, as one after the other sought entrance for this purpose.

In handling this problem, our reasoning was that the protection of nationals is directed at people who need and seek such protection; it is not a task that is performed for people, Japanese citizens though they may be, who reject such protection. Those who have decided to serve as human shields believe in the idea that the pursuit of peace is more important than their own personal safety, so it could be argued that the government has neither the responsibility nor the right to try to stop them from being in places designated as dangerous. In fact, we wondered, wouldn't extending official protection to such people actually be an affront to their ideals—it could even be called a waste of the taxpayer's money.

Actually, however, the problem was even more complex. Was the individual in question really ready to sacrifice his or her life for an idea he or she embraced? Had the individual considered realistically the level of danger in setting out to a country where armed conflict was imminent? In the contacts between embassy personnel and these people, such questions seemed to merit

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serious consideration time and again. And even if the individual might be completely committed to the cause of being a human shield, family members back in Japan, often grievously worried, would press the government to try to dissuade their loved ones from such a dangerous course and return to Japan.

In the face of these realities, we realized, given the individual circumstances involved, that there were in fact cases when it was inappropriate to simply abdicate responsibility and consign the individual to his or her own fate. In those cases, inasmuch as it is the government's important responsibility to safeguard the lives of its citizens, at the very least, it had to fully explain the dangers of entering Iraq and assure that the individuals in question understood the situation as well as try to persuade them to carefully consider the wisdom of their actions. Even among those who refused to be persuaded, there were some who later, after seeing the reality firsthand, asked for help, indicating that they wanted to leave Iraq. They were given whatever help was possible. (There were, in fact, at least two such individuals.)

One of the lessons of the war in Iraq, however, was whether our response in this case was really appropriate. Most of the major countries of the world apparently did not consider persons declaring themselves as human shields to be targets of any sort of protection by the parent country. In future cases, when Japanese announce themselves "human shields," should the principle be established that as long as they confirm responsibility for their own actions they will not be the targets of government protection? This question, it seems to me, is one that should be very seriously reconsidered in the case of Japan.

The question requires careful thought, I believe, because Japanese awareness of what it really means to be responsible for one's own safety seems to be poor compared to people of other countries. It is this often-cited naiveté that makes Japanese overseas easy targets for pickpockets, robbery, murder, and other crimes. The government should take this opportunity to explain and make widely known the principle of self-responsibility, as this could be a valuable shortcut to further securing the safety of Japanese overseas.

Another issue that merits attention is the difficulty of accurately identifying the number of Japanese citizens and their locations in a crisis situation. When a crisis arises, the consular office first needs to know as accurately as possible where the people who need its protection are located and how many there are. Even these bare facts, however, are not easy to find out. Those who have registered their residence with the local consulate and those who are members of a local Japanese Chamber of Commerce or other recognized group, and their families, are easy to account for. For these people, channels of communication with the Japanese embassy or consulate in an emergency are well established. In recent years, however, Japanese traveling and living overseas have greatly diversified, and an increasing number visit or reside in other countries independently, rather than on assignment from a company or under the supervision of university or international exchange programs of study. Some may be married to citizens of the country where they reside. These people tend

to be quite independent and more closely adapted to the local culture and society; they are unlikely to be members of local groups of Japanese citizens and often do not register their residence with the local Japanese consulate. Keeping track of such people, therefore, can be difficult.

When a crisis emerges, the government must grasp the number and whereabouts not only of the Japanese who are settled in the country in question more or less long-term, but also of short-term visitors or travelers. Information on the latter can usually be obtained from the itineraries drawn up for such travelers by Japanese travel agents. Recently, however, an increasing number of people are likely to contact a travel agent only to purchase their international airline tickets and then travel freely without prior planning, making reservations for hotels and other local arrangements on their own after reaching their destination. These people are extremely hard to locate.

When a crisis breaks out in a country, however, the Japanese government assumes responsibility for the safety of all of these citizens. It provides them information about the emergency and tells them where to gather should evacuation from the country become necessary. In order to locate such people, consulate or embassy staff contact travel agents, telephone every hotel at which Japanese are likely to stay, and in some cases, even search the local streets. At the time of the 2003 war in Iraq and the bombing of a resort facility on the Indonesian island of Bali in 2002, a tremendous amount of time and energy was expended by the local consulates in identifying and locating all the Japanese nationals who might have been involved. It turned out to be practically impossible to do so for all of them.

In an effort to overcome this problem, and have more citizens overseas register their whereabouts, the foreign ministry set up a website to enable people to submit information about their overseas travel plans. With the introduction of this system, it became possible to send messages with emergency information and requests to confirm safety status to the e-mail address submitted upon registration. In countries where there are numerous Japanese residents and short-term travelers, consulates are also making efforts to build systems to contact expatriate Japanese by opening websites and creating e-mail magazines.

Even such initiatives, however, can have little effect without the conscious and active cooperation of Japanese citizens abroad. One expert on crisis management emphasized “self-help, mutual help, and official help.” In emergencies, an individual’s first priority is to protect himself or herself (self-help). When the danger is greater than one individual’s capacity for self-protection, those who find themselves in like circumstances should band together and help each other (mutual help).

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When even mutual help is inadequate to cope with the crisis, they should call on their government (official help).

While citizens abroad should be aware of the importance of bearing responsibility for protecting themselves, when a crisis occurs, they should be aware that there may be cases when they will need support from the Japanese consular authorities and therefore make it a regular practice to keep the local consulate informed about how they can be contacted. The government, too, must establish even more effective systems for responding to such situations. Only when this kind of cooperation between citizens and government is achieved, will it be possible to effectively safeguard the lives and property of Japanese overseas.

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