

## **Comment: Japan is Welcome Here**

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Iraqis felt a surge of happiness at seeing Japanese troops bowing to the citizens of Samawa.

Japan's numerical contribution to the coalition military forces is small at just 1,000 troops, but its input has huge symbolic significance.

We Iraqis felt a surge of happiness last week when we saw televised footage of a Japanese soldier bowing in greeting to residents of Samawa.

Thanks to Saddam, we haven't had much direct contact with the Japanese for many years.

But Iraqis have had a soft spot for Japan ever since the two countries' teams played each other in Doha, in the 1993 qualifying round of the World Cup. The game was a 2-2 tie, which lost Japan its chance to qualify. Despite their obvious disappointment with the defeat, though, the Japanese fans went around the stands afterwards, picking up their trash.

That display of civic spirit – together with the high quality of Japanese electronic goods – made a big impression on us.

We were also impressed last December, when the government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said it would write off the "vast majority" of the 7.76 billion US dollars that Iraq currently owes it. In addition, Japan has pledged five billion dollars for the reconstruction of Iraq.

We have been struck by the political risks that Koizumi has taken to ensure Japan's military contribution. There was huge opposition to that contribution in the Diet, Japan's parliament. There even were demonstrations in the street. And what would happen if Japanese troops were attacked?

It is a beautiful thing to see someone risk his political career for another country.

Japan's history in the Middle East is also impressive. It has never entered into a war with an Arab country. It has no colonial history in the region. It has taken a principled stand on the Palestinian issue.

By contrast, the Americans came here with baggage. They have a long history of intervention in the Middle East. The British have an even longer one.

We also remember the Americans' behaviour in 1991, when they failed to support the uprising in southern Iraq, and President George W. Bush's unfortunate reference to an international "crusade" against terrorism in 2001.

Combine these episodes with the long history of conflict between the Christian and Muslim worlds, and it becomes impossible for many Iraqis to feel truly at ease with these troops in their country – no matter how glad they are to be rid of Saddam.

We believe that their governments have sent them here to pursue their own interests, and we fear that they might not leave.

But we are particularly glad that the Japanese are coming to Samawa - one of the most impoverished parts of our country. Their presence will remind the town's residents that they still matter to the rest of the world.

"Good for the people of Samawa," said a friend of mine from the Shia holy city of Najaf. He said he wished the Japanese could be stationed in his city, even though they do not share our religious traditions and would not be allowed to approach the Muslim holy places in the city.

The more countries like Japan that join the coalition, the more comfortable the Iraqis will be with occupation. And the fewer conflicts there are between occupiers and the occupied, the quicker the foreign troop presence will end.

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