



Interview with Tunisian Ambassador N. B. F. Hached

Japan, Tunisia Need More Meaningful Ties



Dr. Nouredine Ben Farhat Hached

Dr. Nouredine Ben Farhat Hached, the multicultural, multilingual ambassador to Japan of the Republic of Tunisia, strongly believes in the need for a deeper, more meaningful relationship between the two countries.

Interviewer: Jillian YORKE

This is your first posting in Asia. How do you feel about your experience in Japan so far?

Hached: After 30 years of experience as an ambassador, I consider myself very lucky to be in Japan at this time in my life. Every day I find myself fascinated! The first month here was hard. I arrived quite ignorant of Japan, with only five months to TICAD (Tokyo International Conference on African Development).

But then, as an anthropologist and historian, I immediately discovered three keys to enjoying my life here and fulfilling my role as ambassador:

1. Meet many different people to understand different ways of thinking.
2. Think like an islander. I come from a small island in Tunisia. So some things in Japan are not so strange to me. The most important thing for an islander is how to survive.
3. Conduct "people-to-people diplomacy." I made my journeys to "deep Japan" by car, and I have been honored to visit the homes of many Japanese people.

This is the story of how my love for Japan began. You cannot do your job as ambassador unless you love where you are.

How do you see the hopes and challenges in our future bilateral relations?

Hached: Fifty-four years have passed since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Tunisia and Japan. We have built up an excellent, unblemished diplomatic relationship.

We are working to establish more developed relations of friendship and cooperation between Tunisia and Japan. In particular, we have achieved several milestones towards establishing a Tokyo-Tunis-Tokyo direct charter flight.

Another aim is to multiply the exchanges between our two peoples, especially in science and technology. We are happy that our scientific cooperation has reached a satisfactory level, but we still need more structure. One project is to establish in Tunisia a Japanese university open to African students. At the same time, we want to enhance the cooperation between our prefectures and regions.

What are the priorities in your action agenda concerning trade and investment?

Hached: In 2008, Tunisia entered a free trade zone with the European Union, after having succeeded in leading a 12-year transitory period of tariff dismantling.

In macroeconomic performance, Tunisia ranks top in its regional environment (Maghreb, Africa), according to the world report on competitiveness of the Davos Forum (2009-2010), and 40th on the world level out of 133 listed countries. Moreover, Tunisia is ranked fifth globally in sound public expenditure management, seventh in the quality of scientific higher education, eighth in the cost of agricultural policy, and ninth in the availability of scientists and engineers. These high rankings reflect the ability of the Tunisian economy to withstand and overcome exogenous shocks.

Tunisia's partnerships continue to grow, with the ongoing support of friendly countries – in particular, Japan. Tunisia welcomes Japanese companies and businesspeople who take the initiative to strengthen foreign investment under these new circumstances.

Now is the time for Japan to benefit from the advantages offered by an emergent economy with numerous incentives to invest, a highly skilled staff at competitive prices, the most qualified and educated manpower in Africa and access to several markets for developing companies.

What about a possible FTA between Arab-Maghreb countries and Japan?

Hached: An FTA is a certain necessity in the context of current globalization. We have, on the one hand, Japan, an economic power and major player on both the Asian and world economic scenes, and, on the other, the five countries under the umbrella of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), with internal agreements between them facilitating free exchange zones. I believe that we are now very close to starting a deep discussion to establish a Japan-UMA FTA. The huge Maghreb area has all kinds of richness and resources, offering unlimited potential for Japan.

Tunisia was the first Arab country to establish an FTA with Europe. Japan should take advantage of this excellent opportunity to enter Europe, through Tunisia.

Are TICAD IV and other international cooperation attempts useful in alleviating poverty?

Hached: The TICAD process is very original. Japan initiated it 17 years ago; it has already reached several impressive objectives such as putting Africa on the agenda of the international community and helping the continent's development. TICAD deserves our real respect and satisfaction. It is an integrated process that takes into account all the stakeholders who contribute to the development of Africa.

Positive trends have emerged throughout Africa recently. Increasing political stability and improved governance, buttressed by strong economic growth and rising levels of foreign direct investment, have created a new awareness of trade, investment and tourism opportunities across the continent.

Notwithstanding these very encouraging trends, some African countries continue to face serious challenges. The most immediate is widespread poverty and unemployment in rural and urban areas coupled with rapid population growth. Others are low agricultural productivity and the increasingly severe effects of climate change. I believe that Japan has a crucial role to play in supporting Africa's own efforts to address and overcome these significant challenges.

In 2010, the world is changing dramatically. As an African ambassador in Tokyo, I recommend that preparations begin now for the next TICAD of 2013, based on a totally new approach that takes into account the new realities. Our wish is that Japan's leadership and its own level of commitment under TICAD IV become clearer.

A Japan-Africa summit would not only be a step toward poverty reduction in Africa, but would also increase the level of direct investment from Japan to benefit from the natural resources and tourism opportunities on the continent.

What are the most effective policies in regard to other urgent global issues?

Hached: It is clear that the globalized multipolar world, which is developing for the first time in the history of humanity, brings global challenges. The answers to these challenges can be found only through a system of solidarity.

His Excellency Zine ElAbidine Ben Ali, president of the Republic of Tunisia, has initiated a project for the creation of a World Solidarity Fund, a mechanism to help the international community fight poverty and promote human development in least-favored regions worldwide.

The global crisis we are now facing is clearly not only financial or economic. It is a much larger crisis that touches our future as human beings. Finances and economics may assure prosperity and the fair distribution of revenue for all. But we also need values, peace, and respect of identity and culture. Unfortunately, we are not following the right path. Loss of individual and collective values, the temptation to commit violence, no respect for identity or difference...these all indicate that merchants of fear and tension exist in our world.



The second session of the Japan-Arab Economic Forum is to be held in Tunisia later this year.

I think that the next five years will be decisive for humanity to choose its future direction and develop a more peaceful outlook.

“The Legacy of Carthage” exhibition has been very popular in Japan.

Hached: Yes, I am very happy that Japanese of all ages know Carthage and Hannibal, the “Samurai of Tunisia.” He is very close in spirit to the hearts of Japanese people. The exhibition, which is a gift from Tunisia to Japan, visited several Japanese cities. In each, a large number of Japanese visitors confirmed the cultural proximity of Tunisia and Japan, something we can be proud of. I sincerely hope that the pleasure of discovering the Carthage civilization through this exhibition will stimulate more Japanese to come to Tunisia and discover other facets of its rich culture.

How can we promote mutual cultural understanding between Africa and Japan?

Hached: Culture is a wide field which includes arts, music, painting, cinema, etc. It encompasses people's views on society, roots and ways of life. The rich history of both Japanese and Tunisian cultures explains the two countries' economic, social and educational success.

Exchanges between Tunisia and Japan are multiple and in many fields. We are building a basis for permanent exchanges to mutually promote our countries further, and are organizing a festival of *manga*, pop culture and *anime* in Tunisia so our people can discover this new, modern Japanese culture.

In truth, the path is so long. There is a mutual lack of knowledge, for different reasons linked with history, geography and distance. But, very positively, no conflict, tension, or historical problems exist between your great country Japan and the African continent.

Throughout history, the African continent has been ceaselessly exploited by numerous peoples and countries. Japan encourages African nations to help themselves and not seek direct rewards.

However, there needs to be more logic behind the assistance provided by great powers to smaller countries. Japan has long supported our economy through financial and technical cooperation. This assistance, along with Tunisia's good governance, has contributed greatly to our development. But, what comes next? New, more flexible ways of cooperation must be implemented. It is essential for Japan and Tunisia to develop a real partnership, for both our interests. The Tunisia-Japan relationship is already a high-level success story, a fine example for other African countries, and we should build on it.

Tunisia's geographical destiny – on the cross of Africa, the Mediterranean, the Arab countries, and Europe – is not always easy. Our area, the center of several major civilizations, was once the heart of the world. But now this heart is moving to the Asia-Pacific area. Japan needs not only to welcome people in, but also to physically move out, and Tunisia provides the perfect base to do so. Japan needs Tunisia; the time to move is now! **US**

Jillian Yorke is a freelance translator, writer and editor who has lived in Japan for over 30 years. She also works part-time for METI.