The Arab Discovery of Japan: Charting the Encounter

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Japan as a country was largely unknown to the Arab public until the beginning of the twentieth century. A scattering of ancient but unreliable reports mentioned the inhabitants of the East China Sea as powerful warriors and pirates but offered little of substance beyond that. Mystery and charm but scant information thus characterized Arab understanding of Japanese culture and civilization.

Absolute geographic distance from the North Atlantic world of the great powers of the Early Modern Era reinforced by purposeful isolation on the part of the Tokugawa Shogunate barred effective interaction between the Arabs and the Japanese just as it did between the Western Europeans and the Japanese. The isolation that protected Japan from European imperialisms that conquered insular Southeast Asia and threatened Chinese sovereignty was shattered by the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry’s American Kurofune or black ship squadron in June 1853. As a consequence of such brute force tactics by the United States and the other major powers, what little the information about Japan that made its way to the Arabs before the twentieth century was filtered through the Orientalizing lens of the West. The same was largely true of immediate Japanese perceptions of the Arabs. Distorting exoticizations were the unfortunate and perhaps inevitable result.

The Scientific Revolution in the ‘European Renaissance’ and the Industrial Revolution that followed it gave the Western European powers and the most successful Western European settler state – the United States of America – an unmistakable upper hand in the East-West interaction. Advances in the natural sciences and engineering offered Western navies and armies decisive advantages in the encounters with their Asian, Middle Eastern and African counterparts. Military modernization programs saved a handful of Asian and Middle Eastern states, including China, Japan, Thailand and Egypt, from complete colonial subjugation.
Of the four cases, Japan undertook the most thoroughgoing and effective military reforms because they were part of an extraordinarily rapid process of political regime renovation. In little more than a generation a group of reformers recruited mostly from the lower ranks of the samurai transformed Japan from a closed society and economy ruled as a collection of feudal satrapies into a modern industrialized nation-state. Devouring everything that had been dome or thought in the rest of the planet the Japanese erupted from isolation to become a great power.

1. Historical Review of the Arab-Japanese Relations

Before embarking on my analysis, it is critical to provide a brief overview of the history of Arab-Japanese relations. Contextually speaking, the mutual interest between Japan and the Arab world went through three major stages. The first stage can be referred to as the “Arab fascination” with the Orient Japanese Empire (1904-1945). Around that time, the Islamic world suffered a series of military defeats against the European empires (England, France, Spain, Portugal and Russia) causing losses of land, natural resources and statehood. Meanwhile, Japan, which adopted the nationalist slogan: "Rich country, strong army" (Fukoku Kyohe) managed to defeat Tsarist Russia in the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905). The Asian triumph of the most modernized nation in the orient against the less developed polity in Europe spread emotions of happiness and joy in the Third world – including the Middle East, where Arabs found themselves in the face of western colonization. Political leaders, intellectuals and even the masses praised what they regarded as this new eastern hope. There were cheerful marches in the streets of Beirut, Damascus, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Cairo. Distinguished political figures and academics made use of what they had learned of the Japanese victory. Indeed, one example of such a figure is Mustapha Kamel, a notable politician and talented author, published his famous book entitled “Rising Sun", which demanded Arab pacemakers to benefit from the Japanese restoration to start the down of the Arab renaissance. On the other hand, Hafez Ibrahim, an iconic poet released two famous poems based on Japanese influences. In the first one published April 6th 1904, he imagined a beautiful Japanese girl responding to her national call of duty to defend her motherland. In the lyrics, she was raising the morals of the courageous officers and brave soldiers by saying: “That is how the Mikado taught us, to lookout for our homeland as our mothers and fathers. In the second poem, which was entitled "The Russo – Japanese
War", he celebrated and magnified the Asian victory, stating: "Was it a battle field or doomsday? Death salvo or Al Kawthar?"

Since the Arab territories were considered part of the Ottoman Sultanate, which represented the Islamic caliphate, Ottoman official records note that the Japanese authorities responded to the Muslim admiration and jubilation for them. The Japanese knew that their progress and prosperity represented the alternative example of success to the non-European world. For the first time in the East, Japan had combined traditions and modernity in outstanding harmony in the quest of building the desired modern state.

During the Second World War, one question occupied the minds of Muslims worldwide: "Would Japan be the savior of Islam?" That question represented the feelings and sentiments Arabs held, which were clearly against western colonialism. Islam needed a savior – even if that meant collaborating with Japanese imperialism. That can be recognized clearly in India, Indonesia and Eastern Turkmenistan (which is now Xinjiang, which in Chinese means "the new colony"). Also, there was a noted alliance in the dissolved Manchukuo Empire.

The second stage of Arab-Japanese relations can be regarded as "mutual neglect" (1945 – 1973). The outbreak of the Second World War and its harsh consequence by the defeat of the Japanese model and end of Pan-Asianism dream destroyed the utopian vision of the Japanese venture. An era of Arab disregard towards Japan began, even though Japan started its second awakening depending on the "economical miracle", highly based on industrial development abandoning any kind of militarization. In that relatively frozen period, the only active communication between those two Eastern nations came through exporting oil and importing technology, especially electronics.

The third stage comes as a result of Japanese Interest in the Arab world after the Global Oil Crisis of 1973. It needs no mention that the Middle East is one of the hotspots and conflict arenas in the modern world. By the dawn of the fourth Arab – Israeli War in 1973, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia decided to use the weapon of oil throughout this Arab struggle. As a result, members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) proclaimed an oil embargo immediately. This embargo caused economical turbulence worldwide, including Japan. The Japanese giant factories and vital installations depended on the Arab oil in their functions. For that, the Japanese government and private sector realized the importance of better understanding towards the critical situation in the Arab world.

1 "Al Kawthar" in the Islamic faith is a river in paradise.
2 Otherwise known as the Ramadan War or Yom Kippur War of 1973.
In a timid response to all of the above, since 1978, the Japanese academic circle, supported by the Japanese foreign ministry and funded by relevant business corporations, launched several conferences aiming for spreading awareness towards the Arabic culture and traditions. Confirming the importance of such dialogues should not drive us away from realizing their deficiencies. It is quite unfortunate that both sides do not conduct studies to examine the outcomes of such dialogues, in order to improve their efficiency.

2. Japanology (Japanese Studies) in the Arab World

Japanese Studies is an academic field which includes contemporary social sciences as well as classical humanistic areas. It is an aggregate of disciplines that study the history, economy, sociology, religion, politics, philosophy, language, literature, music and culture of Japan. There are distinguished centers for Japanese studies at all the elite universities of Europe, North America, Australia and Israel. Unfortunately, Japanology is considerably uncharted knowledge in the Arab world. Till the present day, in all Arab academic circles, there are no departments or institutions specialized in Japanese studies. A few Arab universities in Morocco, Syria and Lebanon managed to give Japanese language courses (specifically oriented for business terms and use) as electives. It is just a shy attempt towards a desired, aspirational and educational project to introduce the great Japanese experience to the Arab youth. In Egypt, there are more active programs in the governmental and private universities, but the main target is to comply the growing demand of the tourism sector.

3. Arabic Publications about Japan

The haunted comparison between the failure Arab renaissance and the success of the Japanese restoration was strongly noticed in the Arab world since the beginning of the twentieth century till this present day. Most of the early Arabic writings about Japan lacked for the minimum of scientific documentation. The first serious attempt was through the famous historian Charles Esawi article, which was published in English in 1983, entitled: "Why Japan?". This article was viewed as the inception of a new professional scientific educational era to study and research about how could the Arab world benefits from the Japanese unique experience in modernization.
If one were to conduct a bibliographical overview showing major publications in Arabic language about Japan, one may find around (146 references):

### Bibliography Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Publications</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Translated Books (mainly from English and French)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Books (without documentation)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Books</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Guides</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conferences Releases</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Manuals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
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From this table we can conclude that more than half of those publications are translated from a foreign language without any analytical or researching effort. Another quarter is not based on scientific documentation and excludes any clear citations. Only 13% of those publications could be characterized as reliable Arabic references that portray and study the Japanese outstanding method towards advancement and development.

### 4. Obstacles facing the Promotion of Japanology in the Arab World

There are three important obstacles that are significant to highlight which stand in the way of any attempts at promoting Japanology in the Arab world. First, there exists an impairment of governmental interest between Arab countries and Japan, particularly in showing the importance of introducing each native culture and distinctive civilization to the other. Second, the private sector in both nations is focusing simply on permanent trade and economical cooperation, despite using the plain logic of "better understanding = financial growth". Third, there is a large Chinese educational rivalry with Japan vis a vis the Middle East. For example, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China will establish Confucius Institution in

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3 I excluded magazine and newspapers articles due the difficulty of collecting the vast articles written about Japan in all Arab newspapers over the years.
Lebanon’s only public university, the Lebanese University, next year. They are recruiting most of the international history scholars and graduates to be a part of this newborn foundation. They are offering scholarships, funding and academic exchange with the Chinese universities. Moreover, In case of writing a simple term paper about China, they provide the student with all the references, documents, and maps to clarify their point of view. Another amazing aspect is that within the embassy personnel there are Chinese orientalists who can speak fluently traditional and colloquial Arabic. This simple fact harbors great efficiency in their approach towards the Arab academic society, and the Arab public as well.

5. Future Prospects for the Japanese Studies in the Arab world

Japan should, as a leading nation in the 21st century, promote its unique culture and civilization worldwide. Establishing Japanese studies institutions, centers/departments and specialist libraries – or at least a Japanese Studies Academic Chair in any one of the leading Arab universities – will not only introduce the Japanese great heritage and futuristic inspiration to 350 million Arabs but also to 1.4 billion Muslims. Such an edifice will serve as a focal point for interaction between Japan and the Arab-Muslim world. This desired institution will be a nationwide resource to assist all universities, scholars, companies, citizens, governmental agencies and private organizations in building an effective cooperation for the sake of human kind.