

## JAPANESE STUDIES IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES: A Preliminary Bibliography

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Japan remained almost unknown to the Arab public, except for a very small number of cognoscenti who were affiliated with the Ottoman Empire or familiar with European writings about Japan. The belatedness of recognition of Japan or writing about it in the Arab world is due to several reasons. Perhaps the most significant of them is the marginalization of the countries in the region and throughout most of the Islamic World in the area of international trade after the discovery of alternative sea routes following the major geographical discoveries made between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was only after the success of the Meiji Restoration that Japan began to attract attention both in the Arab world and elsewhere. However, what changed the course of interest in Japan in a more drastic way was its resounding victory over Russia on the eve of twentieth century, which could not but turn the attention and draw the fascination of Arab intellectuals and politicians. Then during the twentieth century, the association of Japan with the national experience of modernization became a recurrent theme throughout the Arab world. Though it remained enigmatic, Japan became a model for achieving a rapid transition from “backwardness” to modernization. For some countries, like Egypt, this transition was thought feasible enough to engage in reforms as early

as the first decades of the nineteenth century.

## HISTORICAL REVIEW

Interest in Japan within the Arab world went through three major stages: a stage of admiration and fascination, one of mutual neglect and another of renewal of common interest.

In the early twentieth century Japan was still a country enveloped in mystery. For most knowledgeable intellectuals, comprehension about Japan went no further than the fact that it was a country located in the Far East which had achieved rapid socioeconomic development and had produced a miracle by its military defeat of a major European power. But the most significant aspect was that it was a country belonging to the same "Orient" that included the Muslim and Arab worlds. It became a symbol of an Oriental nation that had awoken from its long slumber to shake off the dust of its backwardness, join the circle of powerful nations and even defeated one of its cohorts, while the bulk of the Arab countries were subjected to Western conquerors discharging nothing but colonization and national humiliation.

In comparison to the alarming situation faced by the Arab countries, Japan seemed to their intellectuals as a shining star bearing hope for the Oriental nations. It looked like a lifesaving model that could actually be emulated. It was perhaps Egypt, which had been enduring British colonial rule since 1882, that was the most forward-looking country regarding the Japanese model. Moreover, Egypt had been witnessing a political dynamic in which ideas of the Salafi Movement was interacting with national aspirations. Thus, it is not surprising that the first Arab to show respect for the Japanese political model would be the well-known Egyptian politician and militant Muṣṭafā Kāmil (1874–1908). In 1904, Kāmil published the first Arabic language book on Japanese history under the title *al-Shams al-mushriqa* (The shining sun). The choice of the title seems to be a deliberate reference to the sun both as the symbol of Japan and the radiance which represented that country's renaissance. More romantic than the title itself was the poetry composed on the occasion of its publication. Ḥāfiz Ibrāhīm, the well-known Egyptian poet, wrote a long piece praising Japan and urging his fellow Egyptians and Arabs to draw a lesson from this fellow Oriental nation.

Arab intellectuals and politicians evoked the example of Japan for many reasons. In addition to the success of the Meiji era reforms and the end of despotism, Japan also represented to them a perfect example

in which traditions and modernity had been combined in outstanding harmony. The adoption of modern Western values is even today still an acute and sensitive issue in the Arab world where Islam is dominant in both politics and ethics.

However, the outbreak of the Second World War and its consequences, especially the defeat of Japanese imperialism, cast a definite shadow on the shining Japanese model, while the successes of the Soviet Union and China provided Arab and third world intellectuals with another model for rapid development. For a while the name Japan all but disappeared from Arabic writing, especially in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution, where the ideals of pan-Arabism and socialism came to prevail.

Then, when the 1973 oil crisis attracted the Japanese government and academic circles to the importance of the Middle East; a new era of mutual interest began. It is worth mentioning here that it was Japanese scholars who were the first to initiate and develop academic courses for Islamic and Arab studies at various Japanese universities and research institutes and thus were the ones who made the first move to develop exchange with their counterparts in the Arab world. For example, the bilateral conferences that were held at that time were mostly organized and financed by Japanese government and non-government organizations. Due to this renewal of mutual intellectual interest, most of what has been written about Japan in the Arab world was accomplished during the last three decades of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Although the title of this paper is "Japanese Studies in the Arab Countries," one should perhaps raise the question, Is there really a field of Japanese studies in the Arab world? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Despite the marked admiration for Emperor Meiji and his reforms since the eve of the twentieth century and the return of Japan to the writing of Arab politicians and intellectuals since the 1970s, Arab academic circles have not followed their example, as no department or institute dealing with Japanese studies has been organized in any Arab university. While it is also true that with the exception of Egypt, most Arab universities are newcomers to academia and are controlled by governments with very limited budgets, such facts do not provide any excuse for the failure of Arab academicians to study such an inspiring model or at least attempt to demystify the enigma of Japan and explain the reasons behind the model's success. A few Arab universities can barely manage to offer Japanese language courses as electives. Perhaps the only exceptions are the Japanese language departments at the University of Cairo and Ain

Shams University in Egypt, which grant degrees in Japanese. The reasons for the existence of these departments is an attempt comply with the demands of the tourist industry and financial assistance granted by the Japan Foundation. Thus, it may have been more appropriate to entitle this paper “Japan as Seen in Arabic Publications.”

During my research in the field of Japanese history, I developed the hobby of collecting all books and articles written in Arabic dealing with Japan. Recently, I have been regularly perusing Arabic internet websites and book fair catalogs looking for any Japan-related title; but alas, the results have been meager and rather insignificant. There have been no more than one hundred and fifty titles dealing with Japan published throughout the whole Arab world during the twentieth century. Moreover, the number of serious scholarly studies does not exceed ten. Most of this literature focuses on modern and contemporary Japan, so much so that early modern Japan—that is, the Edo period—has been neglected, despite the fact that it provided the foundations for the rapid modernization that followed the Meiji Restoration.

What follows is a bibliographical overview of what has been written about Japan in Arabic. The available work is classified into the following distinct categories reflecting the major domains of Arab interest in Japan:

- Academic studies and books written by academicians
- General works
- Translations of non-Arabic Western language works
- Translations of Japanese works
- Periodical articles
- Travel accounts
- Proceedings of conferences and forums
- Japanese language manuals

**Table 1: Arabic Works on Japan According to the Main Domains of Interest**

Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Academic works	11	7.6
General works	40	27
Translations	73	50.7
Travel accounts	9	6
Language manuals	6	4
Conference proceedings	5	3.5
Total	144	

## Notes:

- Most of the books have been published in Beirut and Cairo.
- Most of the translations are mainly from English works.

## Authors of Note

- Ra'ūf 'Abbās, an Egyptian historian and a pioneer in the field of Japanese studies in the Arab world.
- Mas'ūd Ḍāhir, a Lebanese scholar who has written several books and articles about Japan.
- Bassām al-Ṭayyāra, a Syrian scholar and a pioneer in writing Japanese language manuals in Arabic.
- Muḥammed 'Uḍayma, a Syrian poet who has translated the *Kojiki* and Japanese poetry into Arabic.
- 'Iṣām Ḥamza, an Egyptian scholar who has mastered the Japanese language and written several articles on Japanese culture and literature.

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