

Japan Is a News-Making Hub for Arab & Middle East Media

By Khaldon Azhari



Author Khaldon Azhari

As a journalist from Syria who has lived in Japan for many years, I think it a great pity that many Japanese deplore Japan's decreasing presence in the world media, in particular in their important partner countries' media. There are two reasons for this. One is that my Japanese friends are not aware of the fact that certain countries' loss of interest in Japan does not necessarily mean every nation is losing interest. The other is that a decreasing presence in the media does not necessarily mean a decline in importance as a nation in the global geopolitical or economic context.

The importance of Japan as a news-making hub has never been greater than now for Arabic and Middle East media.

Despite some reports that "Western media" are leaving Japan as a base for their news operations, and re-stationing their bureaus in neighboring Asian countries, especially in China, the Arabic and Iranian media have boosted their presence in Japan.

More and more TV channels and other media outlets, including newspapers, are seeking direct reports from Japan-based reporters and correspondents.

Why Japan Is Important for Us

There are many reasons for Japan's importance from a news-making viewpoint for Arab and Middle East editors. First, the Japanese economy is the world's third in terms of size, and Japan is

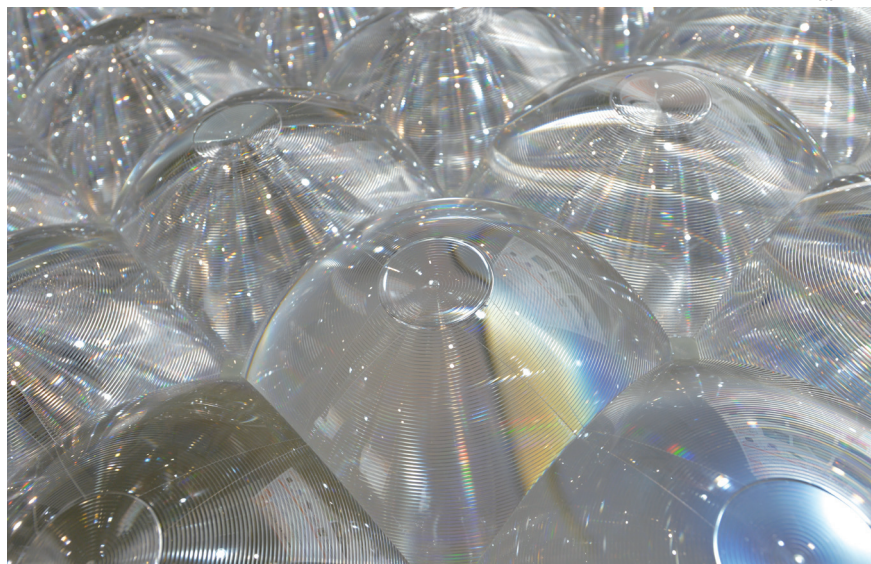
an economic giant that has significant economic relations and partnerships with Arabic countries, according to the editor of a Qatari newspaper.

Additionally, Japan is the most important ally of the United States and this relationship has a significant influence on Arabic affairs, given the role Washington is playing in that region. Any development in this relationship, including bilateral VIP visits, gets prime attention in the Arab media. Usually when an American president visits Tokyo, I have to cancel any appointments I may have to cover the visit.

The issue of American bases in Japan is also an important topic for Arabic and Middle East media. Since these bases lend support to American ships and forces dispatched to the Middle East, it is natural that such news items should be closely followed. The bases also provide a hot topic for the media in that region when the situation in North-East Asia becomes tense. The American military strategy and the Japanese role in it is a topic of prime interest for the media in the Middle East.

On issues relating to technology, it is hard to cover any news or developments without the name of Japan and its innovations cropping up. Every day there is some news story about Japanese technology being a world leader. In particular, alternative energy is catching the attention of editors in the Gulf Cooperation Council nations, five of whose six members provide about 70% of Japan's total crude oil imports.

Photo: PANA



Concentrator solar cells by Daido Steel Co. Ltd on display at an international exhibition 'FPD International 2012' in Yokohama.

As much as these countries are considered by Japan as being the source of its energy security, so Japan also represents "market security" for these countries. Articles and news stories about Japanese oil and energy policies are always important for energy analysis and decision-makers there.

Nuclear energy in Japan is another reason for reporting extensively on the country. The tragic Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami in March 2011 that crippled the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant was covered extensively by the Arabic and Middle Eastern media. The way in which Japan eventually managed to deal with the impact of the quake and the tsunami, and the continuing concerns about how the Fukushima nuclear crisis can be solved, are a daily topic in the media.

In certain Arab countries that suffer heavily

from pollution, news of Japanese clean energy products is very important, and reporters are asked to cover all such news in detail.

Politically, Japan's relations with Arabic countries have been stable and immune from crises similar to those Tokyo has with China and both South and North Korea. Reports in Arabic about Arab dignitaries' visits, events, and conferences in Japan have occupied front pages and prime time news bulletins. Japan has hosted many conferences for the Middle East peace process, bilateral business councils, and seminars and forums involving Arab-Japanese economic leaders. All such events keep editors busy covering the results.

Japan is also a main contributor of ODA to Palestinians and for rebuilding projects in Iraq and other development projects in Arab countries. News about such things is regularly reported, as are many other topics relating to bilateral relations between Japan and Arab countries, such as the LNG and LPG business, and Islamic finance.

Geopolitical developments in East Asia, especially the tensions between Japan and China, North and South Korea, and Russia over territorial and historical disputes, are also reported on the front pages in the Arab media.

It is often the case that in Tokyo it is very easy to report about any major issue on the planet. World leaders often visit Tokyo either for bilateral meetings or to participate in major conferences such as TICAD, the G8, and APEC, to name a few, attracting thousands of reporters in the process. Hardly a week passes without a minister-level VIP visiting Japan.

Among other news-making topics for the world media from Japan is anything related to earthquakes - not merely when tragedy strikes but also how Japan tries to combat the tremors with minimum damage. I have often been asked by people in the Arabic media after a relatively strong quake has occurred what the reason is for the low damage or loss of human life. I always reply that Japan's building technology has strict earthquake-resistance standards.

Democracy & Freedom of Media

One other important aspect that makes Japan a major center for news is the freedom of news-gathering and a democratic political

Photo: JUI PRESS



An LNG tanker owned by Qatar Gas Transport Co. arrives at Sakaisenboku port in Osaka.

system that allows reporters to dispatch news about any subject without fear of censorship. I have attended numerous news conferences and briefings and asked all kinds of probing questions to officials, and I have never been bothered by any authority here in Tokyo.

Such freedom here in Japan is very important, especially compared to some neighboring countries that are claimed to be the new hubs for news-making and reporting.

With its rich culture and distinctive social trends, Japan also constantly provides an unlimited source of news items and features to fill the pages and the broadcasting hours. In short, whether covering international or bilateral meetings, trade fairs and exhibitions, political summits, technology shows or cultural events, Japan remains one of the leading centers of news in the world, and for the Arab world in particular.

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Khaldon Azhari has been East Asia bureau chief for various Arab media in Japan, including UAE News Agency (WAM) and PanOrient News, since 1995. He has a degree in chemical engineering and specializes in covering energy and market news.