

# Transcending Romantic Misconceptions

## – The History and Future of Japan-Middle East Relations –

By *Ikeuchi Satoshi*

### Romantic Misconceptions

The economic ties between Japan and the Middle East run deep. Japan relies on the crude oil produced by Persian Gulf countries for the bulk of the petroleum it consumes, and provides extensive official development assistance (ODA) and technical cooperation to Middle Eastern countries. Although the modesty inherent in the Japanese character and the corresponding lack of publicity means that this aid has been underappreciated, Japanese ODA and cooperation has played an undeniable behind-the-scenes role in the development of infrastructure and improvement of people's lives in the countries in this region.

Cultural ties forged between the two, however, have yet to achieve the same depth. The fact that neither Japan nor the Middle East has much direct influence over the other is, in and of itself, neither good nor bad. While superficial interaction clearly does not foster genuine understanding or trust, separation across a vast distance can create a situation in which we see only the good in the other, leading to firmly established idealized perceptions. Neither does true understanding necessarily lead to friendship. If anything, the ongoing relationship between Japan and the Middle East seems to be based, in part, on "romantic misconceptions."

Rather than a direct relationship, the ties between Japan and the Middle East would appear to indirectly reflect the regions' hopes and desires in the form of a strategic "alternate plan" set against the presence of the "West." The concepts "romantic misconception" and the "desire for a strategic alternative" are key to defining the perceptions Japan and the Middle East have of each other.

How does the general public in these

two areas of the world view the other? Perceptions of the Middle East in Japan, and of Japan in the Middle East, are generally positive. For most Japanese, their perception of the Middle East is a vague image focusing on material wealth from oil and the Muslim religion. While undeniably stereotypical, this stereotype is one with positive connotations.

The Japanese envy the oil-producing nations in the Persian Gulf for their infinite abundance, riches and luxury, seen to contrast starkly with Japan's wealth, which can only be sustained through constant hard work and persistence in the face of ceaseless competition.

As the "Land of the Pyramids," Egypt has also captivated throngs of tourists and is a regular subject of variety shows on Japanese television. The ability to speak on the refined art films coming from Iran is requisite if one is to belong in snobbish intellectual circles, and the Turkish soccer player Ilhan Mansiz elicits the same wild and ecstatic cheers from young girls as does England's David Beckham.

### Wealth and Devotion

Japanese people are generally aware that religious faith is practiced with great devotion in the Middle East through worship, pilgrimage and charity. Rather than eliciting a negative reaction in the sense of "fanaticism," this devotion has been interpreted in a positive light, with Middle Easterners seen as loyal to traditional values. When asked about their own religious



*The Turkish soccer player Ilhan Mansiz is very popular among young Japanese girls*

affiliation, the majority of Japanese respond to the effect that they are "irreligious" or "nominally/formally Buddhist," a tendency which grows out of a cultural climate that deems faith something to be kept to oneself and not expressed publicly. In reality, however, there are a large number of religious groups active in Japan, and books that address the subject of religion and spiritual salvation frequently climb the best-seller lists. Thus, the Japanese have a mentality that holds in high regard those with a religion that enables them to believe with absolute faith. Moreover, Japanese views on religion often make it difficult to reconcile religious faith and wealth, which is the reason Japanese people are impressed by the compatibility of material wealth from oil and a devoted faith in Islam present in the Middle East.

In somewhat of a contradiction to the view described above, coverage of the Palestinian issue has fostered a general impression that Middle Easterners are a



Photo: Wakayama Prefecture



A memorial in Kushimoto town, Wakayama Prefecture, commemorating the Japanese rescue efforts when the Ottoman battleship *Ertuğrul* was shipwrecked in 1891

people who have endured great suffering. There is a great deal of interest in the plight of the Palestinian people among the general public, and the prevailing sentiment is one of sympathy. Newspaper and television coverage also focuses on the persecution of the Palestinians, with the media most often advocating their position. In debating the issue of suicide bombings carried out by Palestinian groups, Japanese commentators do not summarily condemn this action as terrorism; rather, the overarching tone of the debate on this subject is a call for solutions that address the root of the problem.

Of course, Japan has learned of the outbreak of international terrorism emerging in the Arab world in recent years, as well as of the uneven distribution of wealth and the existence of an impoverished class in Arab nations, all of which are sources of concern. As far back as the 1970s, the Japan Red Army and other left-wing extremists allied themselves with groups involved in the Palestinian movement, and more recently, right-wing extreme nationalists have made overtures to the Saddam Hussein administration and extolled the virtues of Osama bin Laden. These developments have shaken the Japanese perception not only of Arabs, but also of the Middle East in general. While there is fear and anxiety, these sentiments are predated by a more long-

standing and general backdrop of positive impressions, feelings of friendship and admiration.

The view of Japanese among the general public of Middle Eastern countries also appears to be a positive one. The vast majority sees Japan as a “pioneer of modernization in the non-Western world.” Most Middle Easterners also express a great deal of trust in the “advanced technology” of Japanese industrial brand names such as Toyota, Honda, Nissan and Sony. The selfless rescue efforts by nearby residents and the outpouring of support from Japanese throughout the country when the Ottoman Empire battleship *Ertuğrul* was shipwrecked off the Japanese coast in 1891 is still greatly appreciated in Turkey and seen as evidence of a national Japanese character that is extremely warmhearted.

The events that have shaped the modern Middle Eastern perception of Japan are the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Propelling the country to the ranks of the major players on the world stage and ensuring its place as the first non-Western country to modernize and emerge as a world power, Japan’s victories in these wars were applauded in the Middle East as decisively shattering the belief of not only people in the West, but non-Westerners as well, of the superiority of the white Christian

civilization. In 1904, shortly after the Russo-Japanese War began, an Egyptian nationalist, Muṣṭafā Kāmil (1874-1908), published *al-Shams al-Mushtariqa* (The Rising Sun), describing Japan as the “star” that would lead in awakening the “Asian race,” while Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (1872-1932), an Egyptian populist poet, praised the virtues of a Japanese military nurse in his 1904 poem *Ghāda al-Yābān* (Japanese Maiden). In the 1905 poem *al-Ḥarb al-Yābānīya al-Rūsīya* (The Russo-Japanese War), written after the end of the war, Ibrāhīm depicted this war as a battle between the yellow and white races, in which the former gained a historic victory. He insisted that Egypt should follow in Japan’s footsteps, strengthening itself to become a world power.

This view of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars diverges widely from the way in which the Japanese people themselves understand these conflicts. With colonization under the banner “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” resulting in definitive setbacks and massive human losses in World War II, and ultimately devastating the country itself, Japan’s choice to launch into this war has been roundly censured in post-World War II classrooms in Japan. Educators have not only stressed the evils of colonialism, but have also reached further into the past to question and renounce all modern Japanese foreign policy and participation in wars, which began with the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. The word “nationalism” itself is generally understood to have a negative connotation.

In recent years, Japan has seen a certain amount of backlash against mainstream postwar ideas that reject in its entirety the way in which Japan developed into a modern nation and renounce all elements of colonialism. This backlash has been set in motion by ill will and interference – at times legitimate, at others excessive – from China, South Korea, North Korea and others. Ill will from these quarters has fostered ill will within Japan. Postwar Japan’s denouncement of colonialism and mili-



tary activity in no uncertain terms remains a relatively little known fact among its neighbors and has therefore gone unappreciated. It is in this context that the process of modernization by which Japan has emerged as a world power and a major player on the world stage elicits an extremely complicated response from the majority of Japanese. Most Japanese have difficulty giving an unambiguous response in support or opposition to the position their country held in the past. Japan is openly admired in Middle Eastern countries, particularly for the pressure the country brought to bear on Russia. This admiration surprises most Japanese, and can at times even leave them embarrassed.

#### Land of Unseen Possibilities

In addition to an admiration of Japan's material modernization and world power status, there is general recognition in Middle Eastern countries that Japan is a "land of possibilities" that has much to learn from the Middle East in the areas of spirituality and religion. While the polytheistic and pantheistic elements that form the Japanese religious faith would likely seem offensive to the tenets of Islam, there is a strong tendency to find promise in the good intentions of the Japanese belief in "spiritual reform." Efforts have also been made to uncover elements comparable to the essential qualities of Islamic teaching from among the hidden qualities of Japanese religion, the properties of which Japanese people themselves are as yet unaware.

Abdürreşid İbrahim (1857-1944), the Russian Tartar and Pan-Islamist known for his leadership in the nationalist movement formed by Muslims under Russian rule, visited Japan in 1909. During this trip, İbrahim visiting the national Diet, courts and universities, observed various elements of Japanese culture, including *kabuki* and life in farming villages, and met Okuma Shigenobu, Ito Hirobumi and a number of other political leaders. In *Älem-i İslâm ve Japonya'da İntişar-i İslâmiyet* (Islamic World and the Dissemination of Islam in Japan), a record of his expe-

riences on this trip published in Istanbul in 1910, he writes that the purpose of his visit to Japan was to "defend the East from invasion by foreign powers by doing my best to spread the teaching of Islam in Japan and bring about an awakening throughout the East." İbrahim believed that the Japanese people would readily accept the Islamic faith and that this would be rewarding for the Japanese, as well. Pointing out the many values the Japanese share with Islam, including cleanliness, courtesy, tolerance and courage, as well as the view of marriage, he argued that converting to Islam would further enhance these attributes among the Japanese people and allow them to escape from the corruptive effects of Western culture and the Christian religion. İbrahim concluded that Buddhism could not withstand the invasion of Christianity, and conversion to Islam was the "safest shortcut" for the Japanese, going so far as to say that, "there is no reason that the Japanese would hesitate to convert to Islam."

İbrahim visited Japan again in 1933 and stayed on as the Imam of the newly built Mosque in Tokyo until his death in 1944. Although his religious and political motives cannot be said to have had a direct effect on Japan, İbrahim did indirectly help to deepen understanding of the Middle East and promote scholarship in Middle East studies in Japan. The late philosopher and scholar of religious ideology Izutzu Toshihiko (1914-1993), having received an introduction to the Arabic language and Islamic studies from İbrahim, pioneered the academic study of Islam in Japan. Versed in Zen and other forms of Japanese Buddhism since childhood and having studied Chinese and Hellenist thought, Izutzu attempted to find possibilities for fusing Eastern and Western thought through an approach based on a comparative study of Islam and Islamic mysticism.<sup>1</sup>

For its part, Japan also embraced mutual exchanges, the desire for solidarity, and had a political agenda hidden behind religion. Shortly before World War II, right-wing nationalists began to develop political ideas and



The late Izutzu Toshihiko was a pioneer of the academic study of Islam in Japan

theories of strategy for an Asia-centric doctrine, a school of thought which had a strong influence over certain army officers. The idea behind this was that Japanese policy toward the Islamic world was the key to furthering Japanese colonialism. Okawa Shumei (1886-1957), a prominent right-wing thinker schooled in a wide range of religious ideology, authored the book *Kaikyo Gairon* (An Introduction to Islam), a first for his time. In *Fukko Ajia no Sho-Mondai* (Problems in Resurging Asia), Okawa laid out the situation in the Islamic world and searched for ways in which it was possible for Japan to contribute to the region.

Interest in the Islamic world, within the context of this Asia-centric doctrine, focused on the expectation that Muslims in China who had been oppressed by the Han Chinese would side with the Japanese as they set about invading mainland China. It was with this in mind that a number of Japanese converted to Islam and made the pilgrimage to Mecca during their travels around the world to gather information as part of fact-finding tours around the world in order to build relationships with the Islamic world in general, and specifically its center – the Middle East. The most well known of these converts were Yamaoka Kotaro (1880-1959) and Tanaka Ippei (1882-1934).



Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN



Okawa Shumei was a prominent right-wing thinker schooled in a wide range of religious ideology

Common to the Japanese Muslims who embraced these Asia-centric objectives was the belief that Japanese Shintoism and Islam shared the same essential qualities, on which basis the converts hoped that Japan and the Middle East would forge political ties. Although they argued the religious and political commonalities and professed their friendship for the Islamic world, they did so on the presumption that Japan would take the lead in the relationship and that Japan was further advanced than the Middle East. Under Ibrahim's guidance, Yamaoka became the first Japanese to make the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1909. Proposing in his record of his pilgrimage, *Sekai-no Shinpi-kyo: Arabiya Judan-ki* (Mysterious Area of the World: A Journey Through Arabian Peninsula), that a belief in Amaterasu Omikami, a goddess endowed with the virtue of the sun in Shintoism, Yamaoka tended not to see the "Islamification of Japan," but rather to imagine the "Shinto-fication of the Islamic world." In the record of his pilgrimage *Isuramu Junrei: Haku'un Yuki* (Pilgrimage of Islam: A Journey under the White Cloud), Tanaka extols the highest praise on the Muslim prophet Muhammad. While calling the "mission of the Emperor's Shinto on the continent," a "spiritual fusion with Muslims through a belief in Allah," he also noted that Muslims have not yet "recognized the spirit of the 'Kan-

*nagara-no Michi*' of Shinto as identical to" faith in Islam. Tanaka advocated the incorporation of Shinto to complete the Islamic faith. These concepts were naturally expressed in Japanese, though it is likely that a vast majority of Muslims would find them offensive to their faith and difficult to accept if they had been written in Arabic.<sup>2</sup>

The missionary activities of a Pan-Islamist like Ibrahim have much in common with the information-gathering activities of Yamaoka, Tanaka and the other Japanese Muslims who traveled to the Middle East. The similarities are, in fact, so striking that one could say they represent near mirror images. At once idealizing the other, manifesting great hope in the other, and perceiving the other as an extension of one's own political and religious attitudes, as well as a beneficiary of one's teachings through which one's influence could be expanded, the mutual perceptions between Japan and the Middle East internalized hopes of strategic opportunity.

### An Enemy's Enemy is a Friend

In the midst of grave concerns in both regions on the issue of maintaining friendly relations with the West, the existence of perceptions characterized by a lack of definition and a great deal of idealization can be regarded as the manifestation of the strong hopes held by Japan and the Middle East that somewhere far-away was a presence that was friendlier than the West. Japan and the Middle East projected onto each other the antithesis of the reality of international relations with which they were confronted and an alternative with which to break out of the situation. It was a case of an "enemy's enemy is a friend." The "West" was a constant shadow over Japan's consideration of the Middle East and the Middle East's

view of Japan. The two regions defined the other as a presence at once different from one's self, and also distinct from the West, projecting onto this presence their own hopes and desires. Despite the fears that surfaced at times, the lack of direct contact or ties prevented any deep-rooted hostility from developing between the two.

Even when projecting its own ideals or desires onto the Middle East, Japan's view of the region is strongly influenced by the West's perception of the Middle East and the Islamic world. This is not to say, however, that Japan simply accepts the West's view of the Middle East in its entirety. Rather, Japan has augmented the Western view with its own unique interpretation culled from its own context. Moreover, there are always strong moves to re-examine and critically evaluate the influence the West has had on the world view of the Japanese people. A number of publications, including the late Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, have enjoyed explosive popularity among the intellectual community in Japan. In nearly every field of the humanities and social sciences, investigations and denunciation of existing research findings and popular opinion that contain the vestiges of the distortion and prejudices like orientalism are prevailing. The problem is that these denunciations and "witch-hunts" have not necessarily led to a search for a more genuine understanding of the Middle East, which further testifies to the fact that the Japanese fundamentally view the "Middle East" in relation to the "West." Criticizing the Western view of the Middle East, rather than discussing the Middle East itself directly, is the simplest method by which to earn the respect of the intellectual community. This is a serious problem that will, over the long term, distort the Japanese understanding of the Middle East.

In the Middle East, the perception of Japan is even more strongly influenced by the Western view of the country. The most widely held view of Japan in the Middle East is based on such trite stereotypes as samurai and *geisha*. An



extraordinarily large amount of media coverage on Japan is devoted to faddish, meaningless novelties and inventions that most Japanese themselves know nothing about. Though driven by a positive perception of Japan as a “technologically advanced country,” this slanted coverage inevitably gives Middle Easterners an unrealistic impression of a mysterious Japan. A staggeringly high proportion of the limited amount of coverage and publications on Japan deals with natural disasters, particularly earthquakes. Reports on the victims of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – coverage that paints a picture of Japan as the victim of U.S. world dominance – is a remarkably distinctive feature of the state-run media in Middle Eastern, particularly Arab, countries. When asked to name a city in Japan, people in the Middle East cite Tokyo, then Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after which they are at a loss. (Japanese people, when asked the same question, would likely respond in the following order: Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, Yokohama, Sapporo and finally Fukuoka.) In the face of the tragedy of the atomic bombs’ victims who suffered in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fundamental policy of post-World War II Japanese governments has been a non-nuclear, anti-war national stance of peace that avoids military action at all cost. This basic policy is also commonly understood among the vast majority of the general Japanese public, a situation that is not very well understood in the Middle East. If anything, a large segment of the population in the Middle East believes that Japan should escape from under the yoke of U.S. control, regain its position as a world power, including acquiring nuclear weapons, and take revenge for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These expectations would never occur if the people in the Middle East understood Japan’s postwar ideology. This view is also informed by the expectation that Japan represents a potential ally in opposing the West, which means that, in a certain sense, a basic goodwill toward Japan underlies this misconception.

### The Future of Japan-Middle East Relations

The relationship between Japan and the Middle East cannot rely interminably on the general and undefined positive impressions that form the basis of the views the general populations have of each other. As international politics evolve, national interests are likely to come into conflict in the future, and in this situation distrust and ill will could emerge on both sides.

Japan’s voiced support for the United States in the Iraq war has raised questions in Arab countries. Few in the Middle East know, however, of Japan’s vulnerability to the threat posed by the nuclear development program and ballistic missiles of North Korea, and that Japan is only able to confront this threat within the non-military, “few weapons” framework that the country has adopted since the end of World War II. On the other hand, Japan provides economic assistance and technical cooperation to the Middle East and has even continued to work on Palestinian issues by providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. Despite this, however, Arab countries maintain deep ties with North Korea, supporting the North Korean establishment by purchasing weapons, a situation which creates resentment among the Japanese people and threatens to strain diplomatic relations.

How are we to transcend these long-held “romantic misconceptions” to build friendships based on mutual understanding that is firmly rooted in reality? The perception of Japan as the “first country in Asia to modernize” is not, in and of itself, inaccurate. I believe, however, that a view of Japan based on a more concrete understanding of the modernization process would deepen the ties of friendship and, at the same time, open up possibilities for more appropriate and beneficial cooperation. An internalized understanding among people from Middle Eastern countries, for example, of how the Japanese people themselves understand Japan’s modernization process, and the significance they believe it has, would be a first step toward genuine under-

standing. The orthodox Japanese view of the modernization that led to the Russo-Japanese war is portrayed in Shiba Ryotaro’s novel *Saka no Ue no Kumo* (Clouds Over the Hill). This novel was avidly read by intellectuals and the general public alike. (Japan has long had a large literate, book-reading population, making it difficult to distinguish between “intellectuals” and the “general public.”) How would people in countries like Turkey and Egypt that initiated modernization at the same time or even earlier than Japan respond when reading this book? What reaction would it elicit in countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar or the United Arab Emirates, countries with little experience in the process of modernization that have hastily pursued development in the postmodern era? I believe that working toward a deeper level of cultural exchange will help bring about a more mature modernization and “post-modernization” in the non-Western world. **JTI**

#### Notes

1) Izutzu gained a large readership with his research papers on Islamic studies: *Isuramu Shiso-shi* (History of Islamic Thought), *Koran wo Yomu* (Reading the Qur’ān) and *Isuramu Bunka* (Islamic Culture), among other publications. His publications in English include Izutzu Toshihiko, *Sufism and Taoism*, University of California Press, 1984.

2) Sugita Hideaki’s *Nippon-jin no Chuto Hakken* (The Japanese Discovery of the Middle East), University of Tokyo Press, 1995, which takes a comparative literature approach to examining the mutual perceptions between Japan and the Middle East, offers a wealth of suggestions in this area and provides the most definitive research results in this field.

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