

The Revival of Japan in the Meiji Period from an Arab-Islamic Perspective

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The Restoration of Japan in the Meiji Period from an Arab-Islamic Perspective by Ahmed Al-Makkawi explores Arab-Islamic scholarship of the Meiji Restoration. The Restoration era contributed greatly to the development of modern Japan and the establishment of the modern Japanese state, many years before the military victory over Russia. Ahmed Al-Makkawi's book covers critical events and issues of interest to many researchers from an Arab-Islamic civilizational perspective, which deal with Japan's economic, social, and cultural restoration.

Among the scholars examined in the book is Muhammad Bayram V (d. 1889), the first Arab author to look to Japan as a country taking steps towards progress and power. Writing in Rashid Rida's journal "*al-Manar*," Muhammad Bayram V tried to pay homage to, and win praise from, the Japanese emperor, for his role in the Japanese Restoration and confronting Western powers. The author sees the subject of Islam in Japan as a fantasy. Ideas of mutual eastern affiliation put too much credence into the potential advantages of relations between the Islamic

world and Japan. The journey of Ali ibn Ahmed al-Jarjawi, for example, did not achieve its objective of promoting Islamic proselytization in Japan, nor was that of the Tatar renovator and reformer Abdul Rashid Ibrahim, who made his first mission to the country between 1908 and 1910.

The author underscores a cumulative and chronological disparity between the Arab Mashreq and Maghreb in their approach to understanding the Meiji Restoration, with the Maghreb generally slow to develop interest in the Japanese experience, with a few exceptions. The Japan renaissance era during the Meiji Restoration shaped modern Japanese history with political, administrative and economic reforms. These were manifest in commercial treaties with foreigners and focused on building a modern central state along the lines of Western governments, thereby creating a climate conducive to the development of political parties.

Nevertheless, the Japanese renaissance that came with the Meiji Restoration was the subject of Arab-

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Islamic wonderment, with many Arab thinkers and intellectuals envisioning it as a modern model to confront a West that was stronger and more advanced on many levels. Japan's ability to triumph over Czarist Russia in the 1904 - 1905 war marked a milestone in the modern history of the region, and oversaw the emergence of many interpretations and analyses of the dazzling speed of progress by Japan during this time. The post-World War II period, in particular, evidenced the remarkable will of the people of Japan to rise from crushing defeat and destruction,

overcome crisis and continuing dangers, and achieve stability, prosperity, and renaissance in a short time.

Moroccan scholar Ahmed Al-Makkawi's book "*The Renaissance of Japan in the Meiji Era from an Arab-Islamic Perspective*" published in 2013, advances many questions related to this context: How was admiration for Japan manifested before its victory over Russia? How did the Arab-Islamic writings during the Meiji era interact with the Japanese victory? Did Arab and Muslim writers and thinkers who were contemporaneous with the Meiji Restoration manage to understand its circumstances?

Interaction with Meiji Restoration

Author Al-Makkawi notes that in the nineteenth chapter of the first volume of his book "*ṣafwat al-ʿitibār bi mustawdaʿ al-amṣār wa-l aqṭār*", Muhammad Bayram V (d 1889) stressed that change in Japan came from within the ruling family, without mentioning the Meiji revolution. He attributed the emulation of the West that the Japanese ruler called for to his awareness of Japan's weak and underdeveloped status and his admiration for Europe and its achievements. The first measure taken by the ruler was "to test the extent to which the Japanese might react positively to a change in uniform: staff and men in government authority were instructed to dress in the European style, and since there was no objection to this, but rather appreciation, the Mikado changed his attire as well, to signal the success of this first experiment in breaking through the psychological barrier" (p. 10).

After succeeding in this first simple step, the Japanese ruler followed through with a series of measures affecting various public sectors such as education, military conscription, economy, equipment and infrastructure. He oversaw the introduction of foreign structures, dispatched diplomatic missions, and other modernizing measures. Al-Makkawi notes that Muhammad Bayram V established a vision that saw the Japanese renaissance as miraculous. This view prevailed in Arab-Islamic writings on the Meiji Restoration, and prevails even today in other Arab literature and academic studies.

This discourse established three constants in the Arab-Islamic literature on Meiji Era Japan. These included a response of wonder and excitement; a period of boom and rapid progress; and top-down change.

Al-Makkawi challenges Bayram V's assertions that Japan was rich in minerals. On the contrary, it was continuously suffering from terrible shortages of energy and primary materials. Al-Makkawi points out that the author also refers to "the King" of Japan, using terminology from the Arab-Islamic field of knowledge, when the correct Japanese term would be "Emperor" or "Mikado." Finally, in his coverage of foreign intervention in Japan, he did not mention the United States of America, which successfully invaded Japan.

Al-Makkawi also looks at newspapers and magazines that promoted news on Japan, such as Mohammad Rashid Rida's magazine *al-Manar*, which praised the Japanese Emperor and his role in the Japanese Renaissance and for standing up to the Western powers. Arab-Islamic writing celebrated the Japanese defeat of Russia in the 1904 - 1905 war. Al-Makawi observes that this can be explained by virtue of it constituting the first Eastern defeat of a strong Western nation, as well as a tool for mobilization and motivation in following Japan's footsteps in confronting the West. Resentment of Tsarist Russia, at the time the enemy of the largest Islamic state, the Ottoman Caliphate could also be expressed through this celebration.

Emir Muhammad Ali Pasha's journey to Japan in 1909 - which occasioned a book full of observations, impressions, and attitudes concerning Japanese progress - delivered, in his view, a message in the service of humanity to Arabs and Muslims. Al-Makkawi notes that the trip yielded a great variety of details about Japan, ranging from historical information on the cities of Japan to the everyday life

of the Japanese person, and ending with economic, political and cultural affairs in the country. The Emir concludes his book by identifying the underlying factors of the Japanese Restoration. These included: the government; an attachment to patriotism and service of the nation; accuracy and speed in

accomplishing work; a strong work ethic nurtured from childhood; the Japanese people's love for and learning of crafts and craftsmanship; receptivity to learning from others without being intimidated; an ability to transform pressure into incentive; and the central role of the ruler in the process of change.

The Illusion of Islam in Japan

Al-Makkawi affirms that the Islam of Japan was not the only concern of the researchers, but that a new illusion of Japanese Islam was manifested in the belief that both the Islamic world and Japan belong to the East, and that there were possible advantages which could accrue from these bilateral relations. Al-Makkawi mentions the journey of Ali bin Ahmad al-Jarjawi, a participant in a conference of religions held in Japan in 1906. In his presentation at the conference, Jarjawi deprecated Japanese beliefs and disavowed their rational character, identifying religion as the biggest fissure in Japanese civilization. He intensified his denigration of Japanese beliefs during the conference, by classifying them in the category of falsehood and misrepresentation, calling on the Japanese to renounce their beliefs and convert to Islam. Jarjawi wrote in a celebratory and arrogant manner of his "success in introducing the Japanese into Islam in a short period compared with failure on the part of other Muslim preachers, as well as of missionaries in other doctrines, tracing a clear picture of the future of Islam in this Asian country." (p. 60).

According to Al-Makkawi, the Emir Muhammad Ali Pasha was one of those who believed in gaining a profit, if not only a protocol, from a shared eastern affiliation with Japan. But, his illusions were soon ruptured. The Emir thought that being from Egypt, an eastern country, would allow him to meet the Japanese emperor unhindered; he rapidly found this belief to be false. In his travelogue, written after 1909, he did not mention the size of the Islamic presence in Japan, however much it may have numbered on the religious map of Japan. This is unlike Jarjawi, who claimed the Islamic population to number a few thousand Japanese stemming from his own efforts, just three years before Emir Muhammad Ali's trip.

Referencing the efforts made to correct the image of Islam and Muslims in Japanese circles, Al-Makkawi mentions the Tatar reformer and renovator Abdul Rashid Ibrahim. Ibrahim made his first journey to Japan between 1908 and 1910 and then settled there permanently from 1933 until his death in 1944. He translated the Quran into Japanese, and published articles in columns of the Japanese press to introduce Islam, in addition to delivering speeches on various occasions and in various forums, all aimed at highlighting elements of Japanese - Islamic accord. Abdul-Rashid Ibrahim was well aware of the importance of religion in Japan. This was for objective reasons, Al-Makkawi observes, including "the competition of proselytizing missionaries to attract the Japanese, during the Meiji era of openness in their country to ideas and knowledge. It irked Abdul-Rashid that Arabic literature was not available to explain the Islamic faith, while other missionary delegations were active in drawing and presenting a bleak and distorted picture of Islam; he therefore urged rulers in Islamic countries to send missions to Japan" (p. 67).

al-Manar is considered to be the first Arab and Islamic media organization concerned with the Islam of Japan. The general orientation of this magazine called for reform from a perspective adhering to the renaissance school of Salafism. It envisioned an Islamic conversion of Japan, investing great optimism, but *al-Manar* was alert to the fact that the motivation to engage in the Islamic conversion of Japan was in general political, and not purely religious. Louis Sheikho's book "*Arabic Literature in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century*" explains the purely political motivation for Islam in Japan, noting, "What you are seeking in calling this nation to Islam is the political pride of the nation (*al-'ummah*) in the converts and the speedy enjoyment of their protection".⁽²⁾ (p. 74).

2 Louis Sheikho, *Arabic literature in the first quarter of the 20th century* (Beirut: The Catholic Press, 1926), 94.

An Academic Perspective on the Meiji Restoration

The constant foundation of all approaches of Arab scholars and researchers to the Restoration of Japan in the Meiji era is the conscious and unconscious evocation of a reality of the Arab-Islamic world. An explicit or implicit comparison is thus a common denominator and real preoccupation. In the author's view, impressionism remained dominant in many of these approaches to the Meiji Restoration. Hence, there was no complete break in the Arab Islamic intellectual vision of this renaissance. Al-Makkawi finds that there was a cumulative and chronological disparity between the Arab Mashreq and the Maghreb in their approaches to the Meiji Restoration, with the Maghreb generally slow to develop interest in the Japanese experience, discussing the dynamics of the Japanese Renaissance in an intermittent or haphazard manner with very few exceptions.

In this context, Al-Makkawi cites the Egyptian writer Raouf Abbas (d. 2008), who was one of the most prominent modern scholars to approach the Japanese renaissance from a purely historical perspective. In the mid-1970s, Abbas published two studies in the Egyptian Historical Journal, which then formed the basis for his book "*Japanese Society in the Meiji Era, 1868-1912*". In this book, according to Al-Makkawi's, Abbas described "in a detailed historical and profoundly analytical study, the mechanisms of modernization in Japan, the political and intellectual currents that defined the course of modern and contemporary Japanese history, and the consequent changes in social structures, customs, traditions, and values, and, in general, everything that contributed to or helped create the climate of appropriate change in Japanese society."

While the Palestinian thinker Hisham Sharabi (d.2005) did not author a book on the Japanese experience, he drew attention to it in many books, articles, and discussions. Sharabi cited the example of Japan and its intellectuals in explicit comparison in his book *Arab intellectuals and the West*. He stressed the similarities between Japanese and Arab circumstances and attitudes, including common intellectual animosity towards the West at a particular stage. He also took note also of the extremely positive Arab reactions towards the Japanese victory over Russia.

In his book "*Traditionalism and Modernity in the Japanese Experience*," the Egyptian scholar, political scientist Abdul Ghaffar Rashad, Al-Makkawi notes,

examined the dynamics of traditionalism, modernity, authenticity and contemporaneity in the Japanese model. Rashad emphasized the diversity of elements of modernity in Japan and differences in how these are conveyed to the society. He kept in mind factors such as geographical limitation, isolation and immunity to foreign invasion, the rush to economic achievement, increasing modernity under the influence of the psychology of deprivation, aversion to financial dependence on the West, and the establishment of a solid educational base. Al-Makkawi also mentions Tunisian thinker Hisham Jouait, who included a chapter on Japanese progress versus Arab missteps in his book *The Crisis of Islamic Culture*. He contrasted the failure of the Arab renaissance project with Japan's success in development, civilian governance, and as a power. He also emphasized the exceptionality of the Japanese renaissance, drawing many comparisons in economic, social, and political fields between Japan and the Arab world, and between Japan and European countries.

Professor of history at the Lebanese University, Massoud Daher, a specialist in Japanese affairs, participated in many research projects, seminars and academic missions during his ten-month stay in Japan. He also published a book entitled *The Arabs and Japan: Light on the Japanese Experience of Modernization*. This book presents many references and ideas related to his perspective on the Meiji Restoration and the Shinto creed, regarding the central issue of "religion and state in the Meiji restoration". He focuses on the close relationship between religion and state since 1600 and until after the Second World War.

Finally, Egyptian author Anwar Abdul Malik studied the Japanese renaissance closely as a visiting professor at Japanese universities. He explored the Japanese Meiji modernization experience in his book "*Wind of the East*", as a revolutionary movement that strengthened the dynamism of society and encouraged the expansion of national capacities. It was thus a veritable cultural revolution for the establishment of a modern state. Abdul Malik attempted to study "the accumulated quantity and quality of Arab studies on the Japanese renaissance". His most important finding is of the limited role of religion in the Japanese Restoration, which "sets it a significance distance apart from the experience of Arab renaissance, preoccupied as the latter was by concern with religion" (p127).

The Arab Maghreb and the Rise of Meiji

Al-Makkawi believes that approaches linking Japan with the Maghreb have remained confined to Maghrebi interest in benefiting from Japanese educational missions to Europe, whether in conjunction with the Meiji Restoration or among the current generation of scholars, in particular. The contribution of the Maghreb to the accumulation of Arab-Islamic studies on the Japanese renaissance in the Meiji era is limited, in comparison with other Arab countries. In this regard, however, it is worth citing the project of Ali Zeneber Salawi, the first among the Moroccan elite to cite the lessons of the Japanese renaissance in an attempt to convince the Moroccan state (the *Makhzen*) of the need for political and constitutional reforms. Then came Abdul Karim Trabulsi's project

to prepare people to accept the idea of emulating a pagan state (Japan). He evoked all the different elements that enabled Japan to advance rapidly, such as openness to Europe for positive benefits.

Al-Makkawi also mentions the newspaper "*Lisan al-Maghrib*", which called for the adoption of a constitution and parliament in Morocco, based on the Japanese model. Furthermore, he cites the figures of Mohammed al-Sulaimani, known as Ibn al-A'raj, historian Abderrahmane ibn Zaidan, Abdul Hadi Boutaleb, and Dr. Mahdi al-Munjara, who advocated for translations and eradication of illiteracy, following Japan's example in this regard, as well as academic thinkers such as Germain Ayyash, Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri and Abdul Salam Al-Mouden.

Conclusion

In his book, Dr. al-Makawi succeeds in highlighting the various interpretations of Japan's remarkable progress. These interpretations attempted to make a case that the Japanese approach merited adoption. He concludes that most of these interpretations were not devoid of impressionism and emotion. Most Arab and Islamic literature and studies on the renaissance of Meiji were preoccupied with the comparison between Japan and the Arab-Islamic world. Apart from the disparities between them, the author eventually concludes that various elements led to the interpretation of the Meiji renaissance as the successful combination of local and expatriate, ethnic cohesion, and the national fusion of the Japanese people.

The universalized and compulsory education contributed greatly to the total eradication of illiteracy. The immediate elimination and control of foreign debts, Japan's geographical isolation and its late entry into confrontation with the West contributed to a pathway towards Japanese self-realization and the strengthening of Japan's global presence. At the same time, the presence of one or more classes with an interest in changing the situation, the absence or limitation of a religious dimension in learning from and dealing with the West, and the

closing of the industrial and technological gap that separated Japan from the West in a short period of time were all essential elements in moving the cultural and economic wheels in modern Japan. The importance of the Mikado and his entourage were fundamental to democratic construction in Japan and the establishment of a new political system capable of competing with the world's powerful democratic systems, as well as in adopting political reform and modernization and pushing them forward, along with adoption of the Constitution.

Ultimately, the Meiji Restoration represented the path to economic and social progress for Japan, as a nation and as a society, enabling Japan to compete with many of the world's most economically powerful democratic countries. The great role of this renaissance was undeniably critical in the establishment of a new and sustained political and social power, sufficient to render the Japanese people globally respected, offering what some saw as the best model for the rest of the world. Perhaps especially so for the Arab peoples, in need of a cultural and social revolution that would not attack cultural behavioral patterns associated with backwardness, illiteracy and bottom-ranking positions.