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A Study of Pro-Japanese Sentiment in the Middle East: From the Results of the Middle East Public Opinion Survey (Syria)

There is a perception in Japan that the people of the Middle East are “pro-Japanese.” However, the basis for this assumption is weak, and there appear to be many aspects that require further examination to capitalize on positive feelings toward Japanese people as an asset in future relations between Japan and the Middle East.

Many Japanese have a perception that people in Middle Eastern countries are, by and large, pro-Japanese, and the relationship between these countries and Japan is friendly at various levels, including national, social, and individual. There are many reasons given for this belief in pro-Japanese sentiments among the people of the Middle East, including the following: “Japan has not been involved in war against the people of the Middle East or subjected them to colonial rule;” “the quality of Japanese products and products produced by Japanese companies;” and “the popularity of games, animation, and manga of Japanese origin.” Each of these may be a reasonable basis for this belief.

However, these types of feelings are similar to our preferences that we express in relation to everyday situations such as meals and shopping; that is, they do not seem to influence our choices about more serious issues at a national, social or individual level. Moreover, if left as it is, mere goodwill—being simply a feeling—will not necessarily remain unchanged forever. In this paper, on the basis of several public opinion surveys of Syrians, we discuss the evaluations of Japan given by survey respondents.

Being pro-Japanese Does Not Mean Everything is Fine

We cannot assume that because Arabs and Muslims are “pro-Japanese,” relations with them will always be maintained or that their support can be expected regardless of the circumstances. In particular, to deal with Islamic extremists and their followers who perceives the dichotomy of “honest Muslims” and “the others,” it would literally be a fatal error. Because they believe that abusing “the others” actively is right behavior.

Also, from the Japanese perspective, the Middle East is still a distant entity and not a high priority in terms of politics and diplomacy, economics or academic and cultural exchanges. The decline in Japan’s presence in the Middle East is a concern that predates the Arab Spring. Even through my own personal experiences, with the advance of South Korea, and more recently China, and with Russian trends in politics and military aspects taking center stage, I realized that Japan has devoted little effort and resources to building and maintaining relationships with the people of the Middle East. When I visited the Middle East for the first time, the local people assumed that the East Asian people they saw walking in the street were Japanese people, but this is no longer the case. In other words, it appears

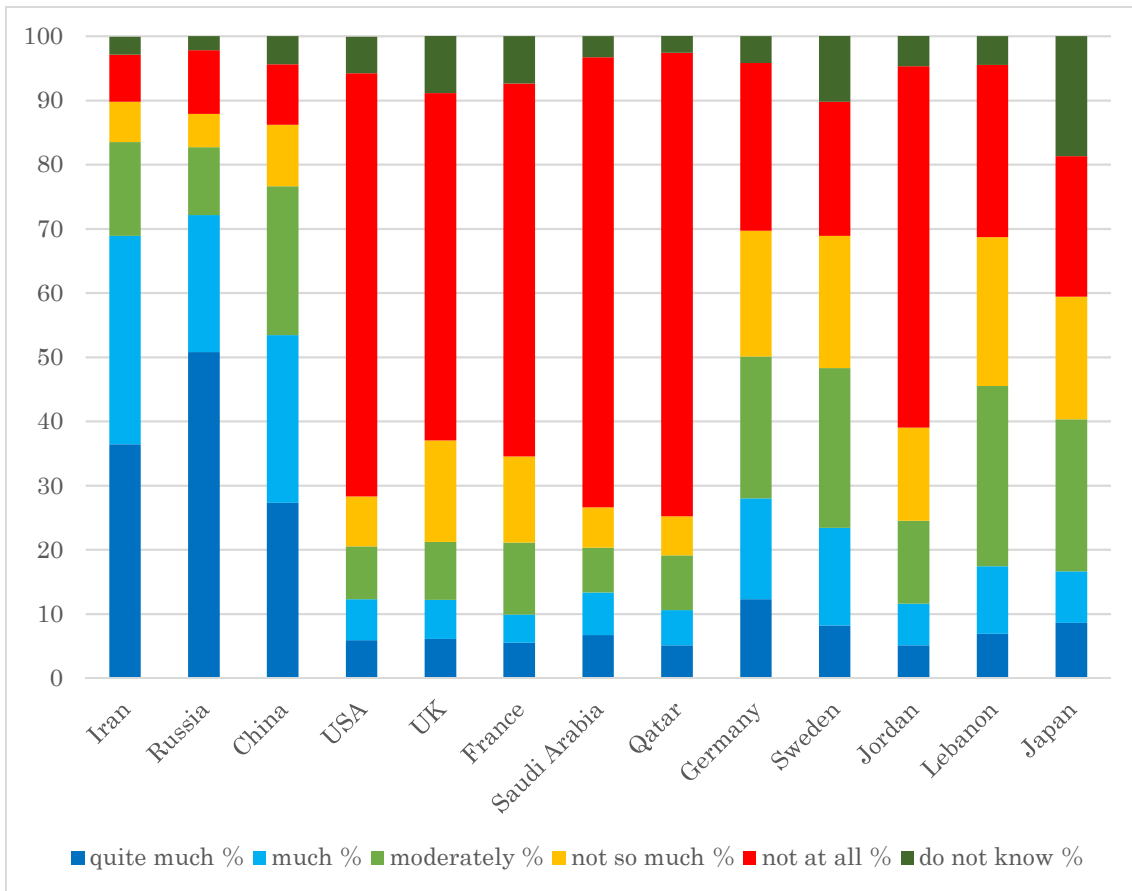
that the longstanding hope that the people of the Middle East will continue to feel favorably toward Japan, come what may, is no more.

Beyond this, the Middle East has been greatly affected by the chaos accompanying the Arab Spring. When countries in the Middle East are selecting partners for international co-operation or when people who live in the region are evaluating the behavior of foreign countries—including Japan—in a situation of life or death, how much does a simple sense of being “pro-Japanese” count for? The Syrian people who are living in a conflict that has been called “the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century” would be hard pressed to pass a realistic judgment and evaluation regardless of their political position.

The Syrian People’s Evaluation of Japan

The public opinion surveys that this paper examines were conducted at different times, places, and with different participants, and did not investigate changes in perceptions before and after the conflict or chronological changes in perceptions. However, some of the findings were severe and contrary to my expectations, and therefore, worth considering.

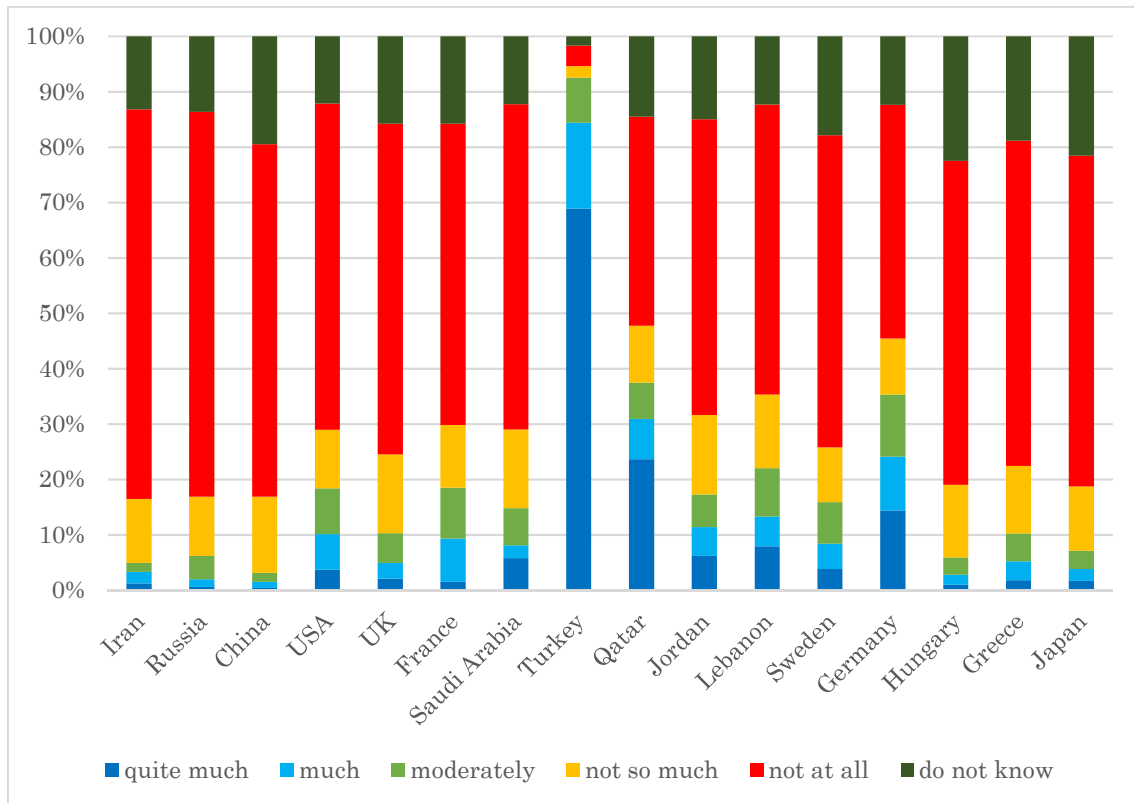
In a survey of Syrians who were not refugees or internally displaced persons conducted in Syria in 2017, responses evaluating the “support” received from different countries were tabulated as shown in Table 1. Various parties have intervened in the Syrian conflict for a variety of reasons, so we allowed respondents to interpret the meaning of the term “support.”



As the respondents in this survey were domestic residents of Syria, states supporting the Syrian government such as Iran, Russia, and China were evaluated more positively while states supporting “dissidents,” such as the United States, the UK, France, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar were evaluated more negatively. Japan, along with Germany and Sweden, received an intermediate evaluation. The judgment and evaluation of countries as an “enemy” or an “ally” should be considered in light of the fact that respondents were not able to express their true thoughts on the matter openly to the Syrian authorities, and that this evaluation was based on the frequency of respondents’ subjective observations of support, and those providing it, in the Syrian media and in person. With this in mind, the evaluation of Japan seemed to indicate that it was not treated as an enemy. However, there were many who answered, “I do not know,” which also demonstrates Japan’s lack of presence. Nevertheless, the evaluation of Japan, which was diplomatically the “enemy” in the Syrian conflict, was positive to a certain extent. Reasons for this may include the fact that Japan has implemented a modicum of support for the maintenance of Syrian social capital through UN agencies and the like, for example, by contributing to the maintenance of power plants; and this may also be a simple reflection of the longstanding positive regard for Japan mentioned above.

Table 2 shows the results of answers to similar questions by Syrians living in Turkey (who do not

live in refugee camps) conducted in 2017. Around 90% of approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees residing in Turkey do not live in refugee camps.

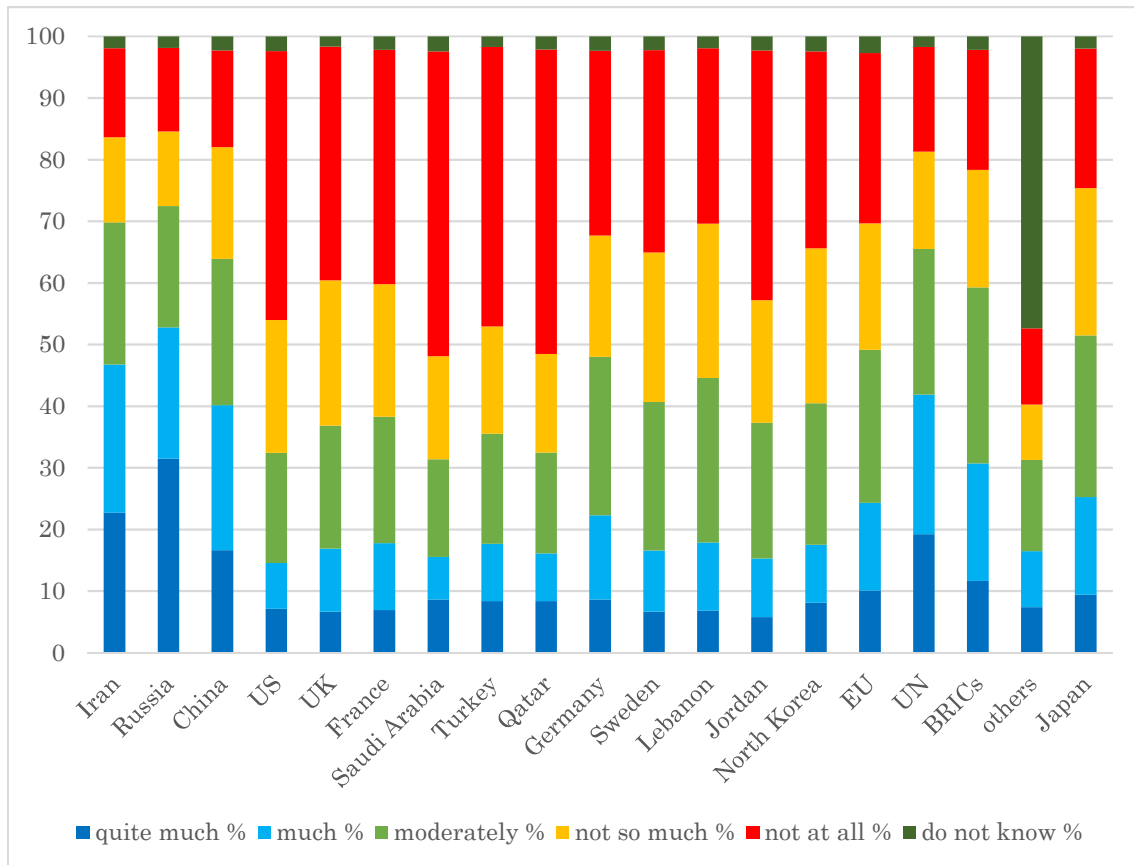


The answer to this question seems to be a clear reflection of respondents' political positions and views of the Syrian conflict. I left it to the respondents to interpret the word "support" for themselves but among the Syrians living in Turkey, the evaluation of Turkey was extremely positive, followed by Qatar. Meanwhile, the evaluation of Russia, Iran, and China, who are supporting the Syrian government, was extremely negative. Up to this point, the results were as expected but the evaluation of the United States, the UK, and France, who support the "dissidents," was also very negative. In other words, for Syrians living in Turkey, their evaluations of support were not simply positive toward those who sided with the dissidents; rather, respondents were aware of the differences in terms of the positions and behaviors of countries supporting the dissidents. In addition, it is perhaps unsurprising that respondents positively evaluated Turkey's support, due to the fact that they are residing in Turkey as recipients of temporary protection.

A noteworthy feature of this survey was that the evaluation of Japan was as negative as Iran, Russia, and China, who are treated as "enemy states." This was also the same for Greece and Hungary, who were negatively evaluated for their response to the mass movement of Syrians to EU countries from 2015 to 2016, known as the refugee crisis. This was an unexpected result from a survey carried out

under the influence of the Turkish authorities, who are viewed as pro-Japanese. It appears that support from Japan was either inadequate or not visible to the respondents in this survey. For whatever reason, when respondents evaluated the support offered by Japan, pro-Japanese sentiment was not in any way evident. It is a sad state of affairs indeed, if, when respondents are released from the constraints of living under a dictatorship, and become able to express their true feelings, the result is that Japan is viewed as an enemy.

Respondents who had been internally displaced within Syria were asked the following question: “To what extent do you think that the following countries or institutions that were active in Syria at the time of the crisis provided necessary items for citizens?” The aggregation of the answers to the questions is shown in Table 3.



In this survey, options such as the United Nations and the EU have been added, so it cannot be easily compared with other studies (especially surveys from Syria in 2017). Even so, the domestic evaluation of Japan in Syria seems to lie somewhere between Iran, Russia, and China, who are treated as allies, and the US, UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, who are treated as enemies. As the dictatorship in Syria manipulates and fabricates responses, hoping to urge Japan to improve bilateral

relations and increase its support, it should be no surprise if the evaluation becomes more extreme. In Table 3, Japan could even derive a sense of relief from being evaluated similarly to Germany and the EU. As already introduced in a separate paper, responses to the question about “expectations of contributions to future reconstruction,” indicated that expectations of Japan were somewhere in the middle. When asked about the future, due to Japan’s support before the conflict and the pro-Japanese sentiment, I expected responses to indicate greater expectations of Japan to make a positive contribution to the future than Iran and Russia, but this was not the case.

Pro-Japanese Sentiment: What will happen and what can be done?

In this paper, opinion polls conducted with Syrians who are not refugees (2017), Syrian refugees living in Turkey (2017), and those displaced within Syria (2018), were used to ascertain respondents’ view of Japan by evaluating the support given by different countries and the expectations of contributions to future reconstruction. Respondents had impressions or expectations that were not particularly favorable toward Japan. This may be due to the extreme circumstances surrounding the Syrian conflict, and the older pro-Japanese sentiments may have been retained by Middle Eastern populations in less harsh environments. However, the difficult reality is that Japan has not been able to establish reliable relationships in an environment of conflict and the associated circumstances, such as the dissolution of the state and society as well as the life and death of individuals.

Generally speaking, it is desirable to be viewed positively by others; so, whatever the reasons, if the people of the Middle East are pro-Japan, such feelings should be maintained and strengthened as an asset for Japan as a whole. In the present circumstances, should we take measures to improve the Syrian people’s appraisal and expectations of Japan? Again, Japan’s support of the people within Syria, especially in government-controlled areas, has been implemented through third parties right through to the lowest level. It may be useful to let the local people learn this fact widely, but that is not easy either. The reason is that even in relation to the level of support currently provided, Japan remains open to criticisms that it “should not provide support to improve the standard of living for people under the control of a dictatorship,” and such accusations have also been used in the anti-Japanese press propagated by Islamic extremists. There is a danger that attempts to maintain pro-Japanese sentiments in the Middle East will backfire, and be interpreted in a negative way, thus creating a difficult situation.

As mentioned above, various reasons have been provided to support the belief that Middle Eastern people are “pro-Japanese” or have a positive appraisal of Japan. However, this did not occur overnight nor did it occur because certain individuals and organizations acted with such a result in mind. It seems that it is time to rethink the relationship between Japan and the people of the Middle East without relying on vague images and instead focusing on what type of relationship should be developed (or not developed) based on empirical evidence.

Reference material

Middle East Public Opinion Survey (Syria 2017): simple totaling

https://cmeps-j.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/report_syria2017.pdf

Survey of Syrians Living in Turkey (2017): simple totaling

https://cmeps-j.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/report_turkey2017.pdf

Middle East Public Opinion Survey (Syrian Internally Displaced People 2018): simple totaling

(to be published)

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