



ASIA-JAPAN  
RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
RITSUMEIKAN UNIVERSITY

# Asia and Japan Today 1

Researchers' Essays at  
the Arrival of a New COVID Era

Editors

Ammar KHASHAN and Ayaka KURODA



Asia-Japan Research Institute  
Ritsumeikan University

**AJI BOOKS**

**ASIA AND JAPAN TODAY**

**(1)**

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(1)

## Researchers' Essays at the Arrival of a New COVID Era

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Note:

Authors' names in this publication are ordered according to their preference and their surnames are capitalized.

# Contents

## Editors' Preface

**Ammar KHASHAN, Ayaka KURODA**..... v

## Researchers' Essays

1. Asia-Japan Research at this Juncture of History: Facing the  
Coronavirus (COVID-19) Crisis in a Research Institution

**Yasushi KOSUGI**..... 1

2. Even Globalized, the World is Uneven: The Pandemic and  
Area Studies

**Kota SUECHIKA** .....6

3. Field Science in the Corona Era: Through Intimate Ties  
with Farmers in Indonesia

**Fitrio ASHARDIONO** ..... 10

4. In Order to Stay Connected to the World: As a Korean  
Diaspora Researcher

**LEE Jinhye**..... 15

5. Living between Pakistan and Japan: The Struggles of an  
Area Studies Researcher and a Working Mother

**Emiko SUNAGA** ..... 23

6. A New Mode of Jihad and Martyrdom in Iran: The Battle  
against COVID-19

**Kenji KURODA**..... 28

## Contents

7. What Does COVID-19 Imply for Nuclear-Armed North Korea?	
<b>CHOI Jung Hoon</b> .....	41
8. The Joy of Reading Personal Histories from the Primary Sources: Encounters during My Research on Islamic Thinkers in Egypt	
<b>Ayaka KURODA</b> .....	46
9. Reformulating Religious Tourism after COVID-19: Reflections on Area Studies from the Perspective of Mobility	
<b>Shin YASUDA</b> .....	54
10. Contemporary Middle East Studies under the COVID-19 Crisis: Countermeasures to the “Field Survey”	
<b>Shun WATANABE</b> .....	62
11. Life between Searching for the Classic in the Cyberspace and Going to the Field: My Studies on Islamic Economics in the Middle East and Southeast Asia	
<b>Ammar KHASHAN</b> .....	67

## Editors' Preface

In April of 2020 we experienced the beginning of what was to be a paradigm shift in research institutions' operation strategies in Japan, as elsewhere in the world. The new coronavirus COVID-19 epidemic brought nationwide lockdowns, shut down campuses and invoked travel restrictions that severely limited researchers' academic activities, especially if these involved cross-border air travel. Confined to working at home, locked out of the university library, and unable to physically attend international conferences, our researchers have faced challenging obstacles and barriers on an unanticipated and unprecedented scale.

In the search for solutions Prof. Yasushi Kosugi, Director of the Asia-Japan Research Institute, opened an online forum entitled "Asia-Japan Today: Researcher's Essays", inviting researchers of Asia-Japan Research within and outside Ritsumeikan to share their personal experiences and strategies for coping with the ongoing crisis.

We were delighted to receive contributions from young researchers in a wide range of specialties living in a variety of circumstances, some alone, others in crowded rooms, yet others co-parenting small children, all of them trying to carry on with life while sharing the extra burden of protecting themselves and those around them from the ubiquitous virus.

Needless to say, as time passes we are all to varying degrees adjusting to what is called the "new normal", but we may be far from satisfied with the results. Teaching online has its limitations, our students are suffering, and designing effective online teaching strategies is time-consuming. And how can we complete our research projects? The toll on our physical and mental reserves is incremental as the weeks draw into months and the end seems very far away.

## Editors' Preface

By reading these researchers' essays, we can learn how others are coping with living and working under such conditions, how they are communicating with counterparts in their fields as well as colleagues in other countries, and how they are overcoming their fieldwork limitations. Importantly, we see how the opportunity to share with our fellows relieves us of this stress. We have learned that there are positives too. Chatting with friends around the globe has become as simple as chatting with our parents and siblings; we can fit a variety of activities into our more flexible daily routine; and getting dressed for work and hurrying to catch the train is definitely not something that we miss.

To preserve this unique moment in time we decided to make a booklet of these personal narratives, both to provide something tangible that others can access and benefit from, and to serve as a reminder of the early part of an era opened by the COVID-19, though we are not sure of what follows. Many of the essays were written nearer to the beginning of the COVID era, and the decision to publish came several months later, so we requested the authors to provide updates in the form of postscripts to relate their recent experiences and the latest news from their counterparts overseas. Their postscripts provide this small booklet with a more comprehensive picture of the ongoing global attempt to keep academic research alive and well in the COVID era.

Our hope is that we can convey real voices from the field of research on Asia and Japan and connect with our fellow researchers around the world, while sharing strategies for coping with the ongoing circumstances, with the intention of offering encouragement and support to those forced to share similarly challenging working conditions.

Asia-Japan Today (1): Researchers' Essays

We are very grateful to Prof. Anthony Brewer for his valuable support in the process of editing the essays in this volume.

November, 2020

Ammar KHASHAN

Ayaka KURODA



1

**Asia-Japan Research at this Juncture of  
History: Facing the Coronavirus (COVID-19)  
Crisis in a Research Institution**



**Yasushi KOSUGI**

Director  
Asia-Japan Research Institute  
Ritsumeikan University  
(May 10, 2020)

The health and social issues caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) have grown into a world pandemic, and a great number of countries are struggling to maintain their societies while facing this unprecedented crisis. The mass media, the

internet, and SNS are overflowing with so much information and so many opinions.

In Japan, the government declared a national emergency on April 7, 2020, followed by various measures to curb the spread of the virus, resulting in the temporary closure of educational institutions, from kindergartens and elementary schools up to universities and graduate schools for an indefinite period. We in academia are also facing something we have never experienced before, staying in the dark. The crisis which started at the end of 2019 in China, spread to immediately neighboring countries, including Japan, and to other parts of the world in a very short time. While the prevention of further transmission and the curing of patients are the first priorities, I would like to talk about the dilemma which the crisis has brought to research institutions. The first problem appeared to us as the cancellation of trips by overseas guests to our international symposiums in February. Soon after, universities and schools in Japan decided to cancel graduation and entrance ceremonies in March and April, in order to prevent massive transmission of the disease. In this country where these ceremonies under cherry blossoms are much celebrated, this decision was taken only after serious hesitation.

In our institute, Asia-Japan Research Institute at Ritsumeikan University, many of us are engaged in research about various regions of Asia. We are accustomed to visit the countries which are the subject of our research every year. We are actively inviting and being invited to conferences by academics and specialists from these regions, as well as researchers studying these regions in Europe and America. However, in February, we started to receive emails apologizing for cancelling their trips, based on instructions by their

employers or governments. The same conditions soon applied to us in Japan. We were told not to go abroad. Then, the countries around the world started to close their airports and ports to foreign visitors, reducing passenger flights to a minimum. We had to either postpone or cancel all overseas trips and international conferences.

Although I have been engaged with Arab and Islamic Studies for nearly a half century, I have never encountered an experience of this gravity. In the Middle East, certainly wars (both international and civil wars) have prevented us from going into some countries from time to time. I have first-hand or almost first-hand experiences of the fourth Middle East War in 1973 with the subsequent First World Oil Crisis, the Islamic Revolution in Iran with the subsequent Second World Oil Crisis, and the Gulf Crisis and Gulf War in 1990-91. However, never have I met a situation where human traffic has almost ceased as we are witnessing at this time.

Historians and the media inform us that this crisis has a precedent as a world pandemic, like the so-called “Spanish Flue” in 1918-20, and as an economic crisis like the Great Depression from 1929. However, the present calamity has proved to be more serious than the global financial crisis triggered by the failure of Lehman Brothers in 2008, and is said to be similar or more serious than the Great Depression. Even if they are comparable however, those among us who had lived through these crises are extremely few, and therefore, this crisis is something unknown to all of us. For specialists of Area Studies, which developed after the middle of the 20th century, it is a crisis we have never encountered.

After listening to the explanations and analyses of experts and specialists in various fields of sciences, it seems that the

expectation of containing the infection by short-term decisive acts is overly optimistic. Moreover, if such a pandemic is one of the consequences of modernization, urbanization and globalization worldwide, it is likely that similar problems will recur even if the present virus ceases to be a major threat. As long as there is such a possibility, we must change our lifestyle to one that can adapt to and cope with these conditions.

I think that the way research should be conducted will have to change greatly, both for the “Corona era” and the subsequent “Post-Corona era”. Or, at least, we should be prepared for it. I would like to begin this essay series with the aim of continuing to write about how researchers in Asia and Japan have been responding to the challenges of today. It may be considered as a primary record of contemporary Asia-Japan research.

### **Author's Profile**

Yasushi KOSUGI: Professor and Director at Asia-Japan Research Institute of Ritsumeikan University. Doctor of Laws (Kyoto University). Specialties: Islamic Studies, Middle East Area Studies, History of Political Thought, International Relations, and Comparative Civilization. Among his recent works: *The Sayings of Muhammad: Hadith* (Japanese translation with his own selection and notes), Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 2019; *An Introduction to Islam for Students and Working Adults* (co-editor), Kyoto: Nakanishiya, 2018; *Jihad of the Islamic Empires*, Tokyo: Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 2018. Among his research articles, “An Inquiry into the Legal Concept of Halal under Islamic Law: With Special Reference to the Correlation between the Halal/Haram Dichotomy and the Five Categories of Judicial Rules”, *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, Vol.12, 2019: <http://hdl.handle.net/2433/240734>.

2

**Even Globalized, the World is Uneven:  
The Pandemic and Area Studies**



**Kota SUECHIKA**

Professor, College of International Relations  
Ritsumeikan University  
(May 15, 2020)

Every time we have faced an “unknown” situation, mankind has developed new academic sciences. It is well known that the 17<sup>th</sup>-century British plague epidemic contributed to the development of statistics. The pandemic of the new Coronavirus occurring in 2020 may also trigger a

review of existing academic knowledge, leading to the birth of new academic sciences.

In the current coronal crisis, we are witnessing the power of numbers and figures to command our minds. Various kinds of numbers are lined up daily on TV and online news. Since the new coronavirus is an infectious disease, it is natural that various numbers based on “scientific grounds” should be emphasized, and even the most profound words may appear hazy in front of these numbers. In addition, the latest technology using big data and AI has emerged to predict the probability and spread of infection and propose “optimized” human behavior based on these numbers.

Under these circumstances, what role does the field that I am specialized in and teaching, the so-called Area Studies, have? Some students may feel anxious or even confused. Actually, even before the Coronavirus crisis, students sometimes asked similar questions. If so, such anxiety and confusion may be increasing.

However, we should not worry, because the world is full of “unknown” phenomena, for better or worse, which cannot be reduced to clear numbers. There are abundant things that we still have to research and learn.

The pandemic is apparently a characteristic of the globalized world we live in. No wonder it has become a universal phenomenon, attracting our serious attention. If we look at it closely, however, we find that, while the current pandemic crisis is covering the entire world, it has brought different consequences in different parts of the world, as shown by the fact that the number of people infected and the number of deaths is higher in Europe, though the timing of the spread was later there than in Asia.

In other words, this fact reminds us that the globalized world is not a level playing field, and uneven local realities endow each region with its own inherent nature. While anyone in any region has an equal chance of being infected by the virus and the basic condition is that the epidemic spreads indiscriminately throughout the world, contrary to the equality of these universal facts, each part of the world has a different reality.

Area studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that seeks to comprehensively understand the actual conditions of various regions of the world, which we call "Areas". There is also a method of statistically analyzing the unevenness of the world, where demographics, climate conditions, medical systems, governmental measures, and other variables are calculated and analyzed, and the analysts will tell us tendencies and probabilities. However, this method measures differences with "known" variables, and does not offer a grasp of the deeper realities, inherent but often not apparent, of each region.

In order to understand the region, it is indispensable to approach the actual conditions of ecology, history, culture, society, politics, economy, and the like, in order to find out something that is unknown or untranslatable into numbers. For example, internal logics inherent in language and history specific to the region may dictate human behavior even during the Coronavirus crisis. If that was the real factor creating differences in the consequences of Coronavirus pandemic situations, the measures taken up to that point must be reviewed. It will contribute to our imagining not only the pictures of the region in the "post-Corona" era, which will come soon, but also how our world should be through new transformations.



### **Author's Profile**

Kota SUECHIKA: Professor at College of International Relations, and Director, Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies, Ritsumeikan University. Ph.D. (Area Studies). Specialties: Middle Eastern Studies, International Relations, and Comparative Politics. Among his works: *Islamism: Search for an Alternative Modernity*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 2018; *Islamism and Politics in the Middle East: Resistance and Revolution of Lebanon's Hizb Allah*, Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 2013; *State Transformation and Islam in Contemporary Syria*, Kyoto: Nakanishiya, 2005. Among his research articles: "Sectarian Fault Lines in the Middle East: Sources of Conflicts or Communal Bonds?" *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics*, London: Routledge, 2020 (co-author with Dr. Keiko SAKAI) .

3

**Field Science in the Corona Era: Through  
Intimate Ties with Farmers in Indonesia**



Fitrio ASHARDIONO

Assistant Professor,  
College of Policy Science, Ritsumeikan University  
(May 27, 2020)

There is a term “field science”, and a related term “field scientists” for those who are engaged in conducting scientific research in the field. It refers to research areas where it is essential to reach the actual field to conduct research. In that sense, this term refers to various scientific areas, rather than a specific expertise, with the common denominator, that is, engagement with fields. My specialty is policy science, but I

conduct research related to agricultural products such as tea and coffee, so working in the field is essential for my research.

The pandemic caused by the new Coronavirus has had a tremendous impact on such field sciences. The reason is simply because its resultant restrictions to prevent the spread of the disease cover refraining from going out of one's own home, moving across prefectures, and moving across national and international borders. If we cannot get to the field, our research can easily stop.

My original focus was on how climate change affects agriculture and how farmers can survive and maintain their livelihoods beyond the impacts of climate change. Recently, I have been working with coffee farmers in West Sumatra, Indonesia.

Climate change has had, and continues to have, a major impact on agriculture. Increases and decreases in temperature and changes in humidity threaten traditional agricultural areas. However, while the impacts of climate change will gradually emerge over a relatively long period of time (though steadily), the new Coronavirus has spread worldwide in just a few months, killing many people and damaging various industries, including agriculture.

At present, the new coronavirus infection is still spreading in Indonesia, with the second-highest number of cases in Southeast Asia after Singapore. In order to continue our research during this time, we have to consider taking new and different approaches.

It goes without saying that the Internet is essential for us to obtain information on Indonesia from our homes in the Kansai region in Japan, or from wherever we are. I check the current state of Indonesia every day through various media on the

Internet. However, it conveys mainly news on urban areas, especially the capital Jakarta, and there is not enough information about the current situation of the rural areas, which is where my field lies. For this reason, we have to exchange information on SNS with the local “friends” whom we have been in contact with through our research, and thus obtain the latest information on the ground.

A farmer in West Sumatra, whom I work with, says that while in Indonesia's restrictions on travel are tight, mainly in urban and residential areas, they are easing in suburban and agricultural areas. Fortunately, none of the farmers I know are infected with the virus, and since they are always careful about their own safety, they are still able to continue growing coffee and other crops.

However, the situation surrounding them is not bright. It is certain that the prices of vegetables have already dropped in the wholesale market and their lives will be seriously affected. Compared to vegetables, the impact on coffee, which is a luxury item, has barely been apparent, but a significant decline is expected in the coming months.

In Indonesia, the situation among coffee roasters and the cafe industry is serious. Due to restrictions on outings, cafes and coffee shops are required to close, and sales are almost in the red. Even after switching to online sales, I hear that fewer people are buying than expected and the stocks of unsold coffee beans are increasing rapidly.

While we have been exploring the gradual impact of climate change on agriculture and people for a long time, these short-term shocks to farmers seem unprecedented and devastating. I can feel it very keenly, even though they are very far from my life in Japan.

Although information and communications technology has developed and we can avail ourselves of a variety of media, we will never be able to understand the real situation through just using such media. After all, we need the most analog person-to-person connections to find out the truth. In the field survey, I realized anew that it is more important to build a network with many “friends” in the field than just to gather information. Through these experiences, I feel the importance of getting out into the field more and more, and of connecting with the local people. While I am in a place far away from Indonesia right now, I will continue to communicate with them and discuss with them about the way we should explore our field in the future.

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**In Order to Stay Connected to the World:  
As a Korean Diaspora Researcher**



LEE Jinhye

Special Foreign Researcher  
Japan Society for the Promotion of Science/  
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Ritsumeikan Asia-Japan Research Organization,  
Ritsumeikan University  
(June 3, 2020)

It has been seven years since I came to Japan from Korea. I lived in Kyoto until I got my Ph.D. last fall, then this spring I moved to Ibaraki City in Osaka, where OIC (Osaka Ibaraki Campus of Ritsumeikan University) is located. I was employed as a special researcher by the Japan Society for the Promotion

of Science and became a project researcher at Ritsumeikan University.

However, soon after the move, the situation caused by the new Coronavirus became serious, and in April, we were asked to not even go to university. I had just moved to a new place, so I was perplexed for a while. However, when I thought about it, I realized it was quite normal to be perplexed in a new place. I have been living in various places other than my own country, so wherever I am, I must feel a gap between my own identity and the environments surrounding me.

I am doing research on Korean diaspora communities scattered around the world. To be more specific, I have been engaged with a study of those who are usually called “Koryo Saram” in Kazakhstan, a Central Asian country. By the description “Korean diaspora researcher” in the title, I mean “a person who studies the Korean diasporas”. However, after I wrote it, I realized that it could also mean “a researcher who belongs to Korean diaspora”, because I myself have been living in Japan and I am planning to stay in Japan in the future.

It is natural for both diaspora persons and foreign students to wish to keep in touch with people who are like themselves. Perhaps, all people like to be in contact with people like themselves in the first place. I am also in contact on a daily basis with Koreans in Kazakhstan, the United States, and other countries. I often exchange information and opinions with them about the situation caused by the new Corona pandemic. I want to know how they are living under the present Corona crisis.

At the time of the temporary collapse of Korea's collective immune system, Koreans around the world felt their lives were in danger just because they were Korean. The members of the ethnic Korean community of Kazakhstan realized that when



walking down the street, passers-by would notice that they were Korean and would stare at them as they passed. American Koreans have stopped going out for fear of being targets of violence. A Korean in Chile, South America, told me that the psychological pressures were so tense, even when there was no actual damage, that occasional outings to buy groceries made them nervous, and they paid careful attention to the atmosphere around them. I heard that Koreans in Japan also became nervous about being noticed so they would hide the masks and tissues they bought on their way home. A Korean in Taiwan told me that the Taiwanese government's initial measures were very effective and allowed him to lead a normal life just like he used to, and yet he never can reveal that he is a Korean.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of problems for diaspora Koreans around the world. When news of the Corona outbreak spread in South Korea, after China, they all became very concerned, and they were finally able to feel relieved when the outbreak in South Korea had subsided to a great extent. It was the same for me.

However, all of my Korean diaspora friends are researchers and experts in their fields of specialties. That means, no matter where we live or what we do, we have to continue with our daily work. Our responsibility to our research was not changed by Coronavirus and will not change even after it ends. Whether we are Koreans or other diasporas, researchers, or other experts, we must continue to live our lives and fulfill our responsibilities.

In this Corona situation, my Korean Diaspora friends did their best in their own ways in each place to adapt to a completely different and unfamiliar situation. My friend in Kazakhstan has reported that he prepares online classes, unfamiliar to him until now, and continues to correct

assignments by e-mailing to students who cannot attend classes online because of poor online access (Kazakhstan doesn't have as good internet facilities as Japan). My friend in the United States said that a shift to telecommuting could effectively mean 24 hours of work, and while she suffered from fatigue, she was more engaged than anyone else in her assigned job. A friend of mine in Japan says this is a good opportunity for her to work on her thesis. My friend in Chile said that administrative processing, which is difficult to deal with because of cultural differences, is more efficient when conducted online because it allows people to prioritize work without cultural friction, although it takes more time than face to face dealings.

Their daily lives had changed so much, and yet they were doing their best in their place every day. Listening to them, I felt that their power to adapt to their new daily lives had empowered me before I knew it, and I suddenly realized that this power could be a source that helps me to stay connected with Koreans, Korean diasporas, and the world..

As a member of the Korean diaspora living in today's Japan, I want to establish myself as a Korean diaspora researcher who continues to be connected with you, my colleagues, and the world.

**Postscript** (Added November 19, 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began earlier this year, and the consequent changes in the living conditions of my fellow researchers and contacts in the field are already becoming prolonged. Now that November is passing, what changes will there be for them? I asked them again.

My Korean friend in Chile told me that the number of confirmed cases had dropped somewhat since June, and more people are now said to be moving around. Concerns about the re-proliferation still linger, but the overall atmosphere is said to be regaining vitality. Universities are gradually resuming face-to-face classes, focusing on departments that require practical skills, experiments, and practice. However, other classes are encouraged online, and sometimes large-scale events are held on Zoom. He stressed there were problems with remote teaching, ties between students and professors could weaken, students' concentration and participation in classes were poor, and they could suddenly be cut off due to network instability.

My contacts in the United States tell me that lectures have mostly returned face-to-face style. However, if there is a personal situation, for example, if the student is a corona patient or a contact person, the student is allowed to take the course online. Everyone must pass through a screening checkpoint and obtain permission before entering the campus. Also, the basic rules are to wear masks, disinfect hands, measure body temperature, and maintain social distancing. In addition, classrooms cannot be more than 40% occupied, and in principle, there is a one-way traffic rule on campus, and only the designated entrance and exit can be used. Also, it is a rule to strictly observe the hours of campus use. The administration of

universities is mainly based on home-based working, but optionally face-to-face meetings are also held. There have also been changes in the academic system, such as eliminating spring vacation, fearing that the number of confirmed students will increase if they meet again after being dispersed. Events such as graduation ceremonies are being conducted online.

In Kazakhstan, according to my Korean colleagues there, the main framework of online lectures has not changed, but methods and systems are becoming increasingly organized. It is also said that programs to evaluate the quality of the instructor's classes are evolving. However, the quality of classes is lower than face-to-face, and students' participation and understanding are also cited as problems. In particular, the foreign language department said that the system of allowing third-year students to go to the country of their major languages was completely suspended, putting a brake on the improvement of students' skills.

In Korea, their problems and demands for improvement were similar to those of other countries. In summary, the lack of communication between students and professors, the students' lack of concentration in classes, the inconvenience of sudden disconnection in the unstable network environment, and students' low satisfaction and learning problems were not much different from anywhere else.

As the COVID-19 has been prolonged and social contact reduced, all my Korean friends remarked that problems such as Asian discrimination, which have been heard everywhere, are no longer special or increasing. However, they said in unison that they seem to have become more conscious of working together to overcome the situation they are in right now rather than the challenges of nationality or ethnicity. Now that this is

not just a matter of one place, there seems to be a sense of solidarity to overcome it together by thoroughly abiding by personal rules.

In my case of living in Japan, I am freer to go to university than before, but most of my activities still have to be done online. Until now, it has been most important to be fully familiar with the online environment when “no one” knows when face-to-face contact will be possible again. It is also important to study ways to compensate for the shortcomings that arise in the online environment. From next year I will start teaching at the university. In a situation when I’m not sure whether I’ll be able to face the students directly or online I think the best approach is to be fully prepared in any given environment. Also, I think continuous interaction with other Koreans in the world who are doing their best in their respective positions and are working hard every day is one way to connect with the world as a Korean diaspora researcher.

### **Author's Profile**

LEE Jinhye: Special Foreign Researcher, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science / Project Researcher, Ritsumeikan Asia-Japan Research Organization, Ritsumeikan University. Ph.D. (Area Studies, Kyoto University). Specialties: Central Asian Area Studies, Kazakhstan Studies, Korean Diaspora Studies, and Koryo Saram Studies. Among her recent publications: "Identity Formation of the Korean Diaspora in USSR, Koryo-saram, in Perestroika Period: An Analysis Based upon Articles of Lenin Gichi, 1986 to 1991", *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, Vol.10, 2017; 고려일보를 통해 본 현대 카자흐스탄 고려인 사회의 변용, *재외한인연구*, 49, 2019; "Identity Formation of the Korean Diaspora (Koryo saram) in Contemporary Kazakhstan: An Analysis Based upon Articles of *Koryo Ilbo*", *Korean Diaspora across the World: Homeland in History, Memory, Imagination, Media and Reality*, Lexington Books, 2019.

**Living between Pakistan and Japan:  
The Struggles of an Area Studies Researcher  
and a Working Mother**



Emiko SUNAGA

Research Fellow  
Japan Society for the Promotion of Science,  
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies  
(Originally written June 3,  
and updated November 27, 2020)

From the beginning of June, nurseries and schools have been re-opened in our town. Our kids can enjoy meeting with their friends at playgroups again, and I have been released from taking care of two kids in our tiny home for a while.

My husband and I are both researchers of area studies, both working in the Islamic world. We have a four-year-old and a one-year-old. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, we were often fighting for the chance to go on a field research trip while the other remained home to look after the children. It was one of our biggest problems.

I conduct research on the relationship between religion and nationality in Pakistan. Speaking of religious matters, in the Islamic world, the Juma (Friday's gathering) prayer is recommended for connecting with the community and meeting people. This year, in May, most Islamic countries celebrated the religious festival of Eid al-Fitr by staying home to curb the spread of COVID-19. The Hajj / Pilgrimage was cancelled. Muslims can pray at home by themselves without any incurring any penalty. However, Pakistanis overruled the lockdown and defied mosque restrictions. It is the mosque, not disinfection, that offers Pakistani people greater peace of mind.

In Pakistan, the COVID-19 infection spread rapidly from the end of April, and now the number of infected people in the country has reached 113,702 (June 10). The infection subsided during the summer season, but it is on the rise again in November. There are thousands of people who cannot buy bread for the day if they take leave from work for a day. Many of the poorer workers do not even have a bank account for saving money. Prime Minister Imran Khan said the implications of a strict lockdown were different for those living in slums and the people living in affluent areas. The mosques and the community itself sometimes help to save these poor people in Pakistan where the economic and social welfare system are weak.



My friends living in Pakistan tell me about the ongoing situation in the country through SNS. I met most of them during my time studying in Karachi, or in my field research in Lahore. Like me, they have also graduated from university, got a job, got married, and are busy raising their children now. "...There is not enough food stuff in the market because of the lockdown, schools are closed, we cannot take the children outside, there is no more cooking for the Iftar dinner, our husbands cannot afford shopping for our family...". Yet these are scholars who usually discuss academic issues with me.

In our family in Japan, the situation during the lockdown was almost the same. There is a small reading room for research in our house, with only computers and bookshelves. When the playgroups were closed out of self-restraint, and the university campus was off-limits at the same time, all the family were shut in the house the entire day. This is how the fight for the reading room began between I and my husband.

If you lose the reading room competition, you have to look after the children while going through the valuable treatises in the living room. By tacit agreement, one can occupy the reading room when one has an online class or a web conference, or a deadline for finishing papers. In our case, my husband won frequently since he has more meetings and classes, and so today I am writing this essay on the dining table.

As at other universities, I have started giving lectures online due to the Coronavirus, but it is as clear as day that you cannot do your academic work while caring for two infants indoors. One of my friends who is also a researcher at the university, hires a babysitter during her online class at her own expense. I decided to do my own work at midnight after putting my children to bed.

I would like to show the result of these two months; I might have read more illustrated dinosaur encyclopedias than academic papers. There is a Spinosaurus doll on the study book I was thinking of reading if my children took a nap. No longer does anyone keep it in mind that it is forbidden for kids to enter the reading room, and there is Origami confetti thrown all over the floor. The search history of Google on my laptop is filled with the Triceratops variants. Yes, I really learned how to tell the Chasmosaurus from the Styracosaurus.

Now the government has lifted the state of emergency, and I have been released from learning about dinosaurs. Our next concern is when we can travel to do our research in the field. For researchers who are raising children, the fear of the constraints of schools is especially keen because they said, "if a parent goes abroad on a business trip, their child is prohibited from going to school for two weeks" as a measure to prevent COVID-19 infection.

On the other hand, some good systems have been introduced during this stay-at-home period. Many workshops and seminars have switched to web meetings. I can play with kids till just before launching the video conference app Zoom. I mute my microphone during the meeting, so that voice of a child will not disturb other participants. This is an epoch-making method for researchers with children to take part in seminars. The human species, at least some researchers in Japan, ache for this system to take root even in a post-corona era.

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6

**A New Mode of Jihad and Martyrdom in  
Iran: The Battle against COVID-19**



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(June 10, 2020)

**Introduction**

Half of the year 2020 has already passed, and two major topics on Iran have attracted attention in the world. The first was the turmoil following the assassination of Qasem Soleymani, commander of the Revolutionary Guard Corps and others by the United States in the beginning of this year. The assassination caused Iran's retaliatory attack against a U.S. military base in Iraq and the tragic missile attack against Ukraine airline passenger plane. The second was the first

pandemic case of COVID-19 in the Middle East, which became a hot topic in late February and early March.

This essay explores the development of COVID-19, describing the general situation in the country up to the time of writing and the relevance of my recent research.

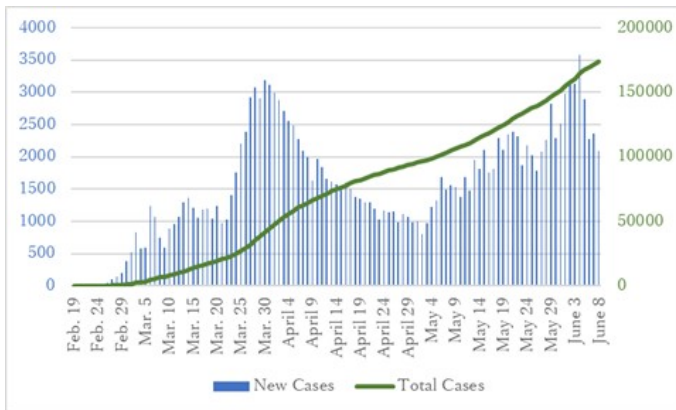
### **Jihad Against COVID-19 in Iran**

With the spread of COVID-19 in China, the WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30. Iran also took measures to prevent the spread of the infection on the next day by temporarily suspending flights from China<sup>1</sup> and initiating a rescue plan for Iranian nationals in Wuhan. However, these only registered as foreign events for the Iranian electorate and the government proceeded with legislative elections for the 11th term of the Islamic Council. Although the government announced on February 19, just two days before the vote, that two elderly patients had passed away from COVID-19 in the religious city of Qom, located about 150 kilometers south of the capital city Tehran, the parliamentary elections went ahead as planned.

Four days after the first confirmed case, the total number of positive cases had reached 43 and deaths had reached to 8.<sup>11</sup> Officials concerned at the spread of the disease and the “Ministry of Health, Medical Treatment and Education” (hereinafter referred to as the “Ministry of Health”) announced plans to close schools, universities, cinemas and theatres, and initiated a disinfection plan for public transportation in 14 cities including Tehran (Aoki 2020). Despite this attempt, the spread of the infection continued and reached 3,186 newly infected cases on March 30. By March 5, infected cases were confirmed

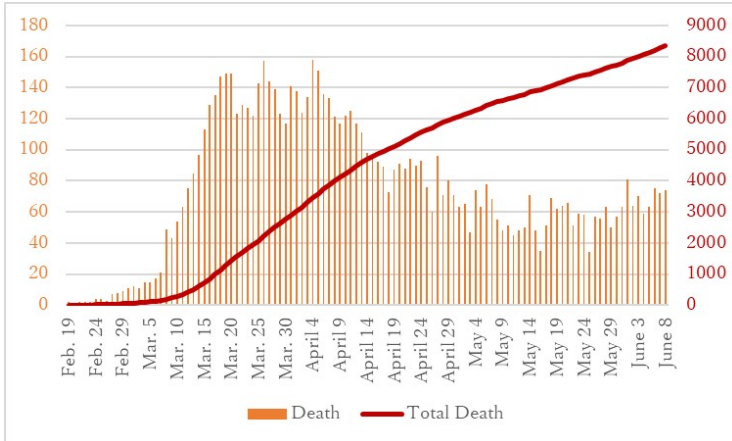
in all Iranian provinces and the number of new positives exceeded 1,234. In short, the daily number of positives exceeded 1,000 cases on March 6 (see Figures 1 and 2)<sup>iii</sup>. Eventually from the 22nd to the 30th of March around Nowrouz (March 21), the beginning of the New Year in the Iranian calendar, there was an explosion in the number of new positive cases and the death toll rose sharply between March 7 and April 4.

The spread of the disease reached to the political core, exemplified by the positive case of Iraj Harirchi-Tabrizi, deputy minister of Health, who sweated and coughed at a press conference on February 24, and positive cases emerged among bureaucrats, ministers, and members of the Islamic Council. Even a number of senior officials passed away from COVID-19 including newly elected legislators such as Mohammad-Ali Ramezani and Mohammad Mohammadi, advisor of the Supreme Leader.



**Figure 1 . Positive Cases of SARS-CoV-2 in Iran  
(From February 19 to June 8, 2020)**

In Fig. 1, the blue bars graph and the blue numbers in the left column show the number of positive cases per day, and the green line graph and the green numbers in the right column show the cumulative number of positive cases.



**Figure 2. Deaths from COVID-19 in Iran  
(From February 19 to June 8, 2020)**

In Fig. 2, the orange bars graph and the numbers in the left column show the number of deaths per day, and the red line graph and the numbers in the right column show the cumulative death number.

Despite the explosive spread of the infection, the government seemingly hesitated to take steps to close the city. The city authorities of Tehran, where the spread of the disease was continuing, revealed a plan to set up a control center on the main road in and out of the city on March 14. In addition, the city authorities forced the closure of commercial facilities including traditional bazars except for daily necessities from

March 22. Prior to this closure plan, General Mohammad Baqeri, Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces, announced and warned of a lockdown of cities including surveillance within 24 hours (*Taşnīm* March 13, 2020).

However, President Rowhani denied the government's plan to implement a whole-scale lockdown on March 11. On March 19, a volunteer group of experts and five former ministers of Health issued an open letter demanding travel restrictions and other measures, but the government remained hesitant (*Hamshahrī online* March 19, 2020). In the meantime, a partial increase in inter-city travel in the forthcoming Nowruz and further expansion were expected. The government still continued to take a negative view on the complete closure of the city (*IRNA* March 22, 2020). Finally, a government spokesman announced an inter-city travel ban on March 25 and the Ministry of Health announced travel restrictions and city closures on the next day.

Contrary to the hesitation on the city closures, the government proceeded with preparations for the resumption of economic activities relatively quickly. On 6 April, President Rowhani revealed plans to implement the gradual resumption of economic activities and revealed a resumption plan for economic activities with a low risk of spreading the infection from April 11 in cities except for Tehran, and then on April 18 even in Tehran. As the President requested, the range of economic activities and activities in civilian life were gradually expanded. The situation seemed to be under control, with a return to normalcy and even a decrease in the number of people wearing masks. In addition, the bustle of people in the bazaars and other places was also revived. On May 25, the religious



facilities including Holy shrines that had been closed since mid-March were reopened.

While civilian life was returning to normal, the number of new positive cases began to rise again after May. Towards the end of May, an upward trend was noted in certain provinces, and by June, the number of new positive cases again increased to the same level as the peak in March. On June 4, 3,574 positive cases were confirmed and the new highest figure on record. The situation was once again unpredictable. The Department of Health's Bureau of Infectious Disease Treatment argued that this was not just a second wave, but a continuation of the first wave [ISNA 6 June 2020]. Iran has been the fastest case in lifting city closures among the countries where COVID-19 was spreading with the exception of China and it can be seen as a model case for other countries to predict what will happen after the lifting of the restrictions. The fact that the number of positive cases in Iran is increasing again should make other countries including Japan, more cautious.

By the way, when the countermeasures against the SARS-CoV-2 began to be taken in earnest in Iran, the countermeasure actions were regarded as jihad. *Basij* or martyrdom discourse was "mobilized". Jihad is often translated as Holy War, a term known to refer to the fight against the infidels, but originally it also means "effort". The late Imam Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, also referred to the "Great Jihad Theory" as the outward jihad as a holy war and advocated inner jihad as a form of spiritual self-cultivation. This internal and external Jihad discourse emerged in the countermeasures against the expansion of COVID-19, even to the manufacture of masks (ISNA March 17, 2020). Being an external jihad, the Revolutionary Guards have joined in the prevention of

infection and the *Basij*<sup>IV</sup>, a para-military organization of the Revolutionary Guards, was mobilized. They disinfected all the cities in Iran at breakneck speed. The government was also proactive from the beginning in mobilizing the *Basijis* such as the announcement by the Minister of Health on March 4 (*Tābnak* March 5, 2020).

In addition to mobilization of the para-military group, “Martyr” discourse was also mobilized. Those who died while tackling COVID-19 as jihadis were treated as *Shahīd* (martyrs). Martyrdom, where people lose their lives for their faith, has a special religious significance in general in Islam<sup>V</sup>. Among the Shia, the majority religious group in Iran, Martyrdom has a more important position in shaping the religious worldview. Among them, successive leaders known as Imams fought against enemy for the sake of justice. They have risen up against injustice and achieved martyrdom. In Iranian society, the concept of martyrdom is associated with the fight against injustice and revered along with righteousness. Through religious rituals and other means, the idea and notion are broadly shared.

Under the post-revolutionary Islamic regime, the religious concept of martyrdom has been expanded and gradually meant sacrifice to a consequence of faith, in other words, the Islamic regime itself. In the case of the new corona, the martyrs have included those who lost their lives in responding against it. It was not only the *Basijis* who went around disinfecting all the part of the country, but also ordinary medical workers such as doctors, nurses and so on (*IRNA* March 20, 2020; *ISNA* March 30, 2020; *Khabargozārī Dāneshjū* April 29, 2020)

## **For My Research Activities**

At the time of writing, the number of deaths since the closure was lifted has not yet reached the number of deaths in late March and early April. This may be due in part to the progress made in securing the number of hospital beds and other measures for the treatment of patients. Of course, there is no doubt that the situation remains unpredictable.

The development of these new coronas has had no small effect on the research I have been conducting in recent years. In recent years, I have researched on the preservation of the memory of the Iran-Iraq War heroes (1980-1988). These war dead make up the majority of what we call martyrs in Iran today. Forty years have passed since the outbreak of the war and more than 30 years have passed since the ceasefire. Bereaved families and the returning soldiers have gotten older. It is not uncommon for the parents of the war martyrs to have already passed away. In the course of my research over the past five years, several bereaved family members have also passed away. In other words, it is gradually becoming more and more difficult for Iranian society to talk directly about the martyrs. The COVID-19 pushed back the situation and it is not uncommon for the affected families to disappear. (*Taşnīm* April 29, 2020)

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>In spite of this suspension plan, flights continued, and they had 53 flights until February 23 (Aoki 2020).

- <sup>II</sup> The Number of new infection cases and death cases is based on official press release by the Ministry of Health.
- <sup>III</sup> There was clear number of positive cases in each province until March 22 but since that day it became unclear in the official release.
- <sup>IV</sup> Basij is normally translated “para militia organization of IRGC”. As the term originally means “mobilization”, they tend to be pro-state voluntary association in various professions such as civil servants, peer guilds, college students, athletes, etc. It has a strong aspect as a service group to the state formed within an organization. About the development of the Basij, see Golkar (2016).
- <sup>V</sup> About development of concept of martyr in the early Islam, See Cook (2007). About contemporary development especially Muslim political activities, see Hatina and Litvak (2017).

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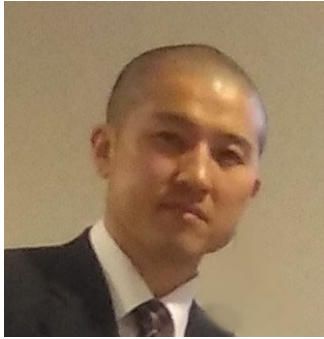
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## What Does COVID-19 Imply for Nuclear-Armed North Korea?



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I would like to relate my thoughts on “COVID-19 in relation to nuclear-armed DPRK (North Korea)”. Thirty years have passed since the end of the Cold War, and a kind of paradigm shift or backlash from globalism to internationalism seems to have begun. Now, in 2020 we are in a different kind of war; COVID-19 has overwhelmed the world in 2020.

First of all, Coronavirus is similar to North Korea, hiding in the dark. An alleged report that Kim Jong Un had fallen into

a coma or even died was prevalent in western mass and social media in the first half of 2020. For example, during an interview on May 1, a South Korean politician reported that he had confirmed Kim Jong Un was dead. However, this turned out to be fake news because a subsequent broadcast from North Korea showed that Kim Jong Un was alive and well. Like COVID-19, the DPRK has been a “black box” and we can only collect small pieces of information about it nowadays by peeping at its surface from the eyes of satellites, or snooping into its domestic politics by hearing the testimonies of defectors, who are regarded as reliable inside informers.

Any scientific research including area studies on North Korea has to exclude subjectivity, and we are often misled by false information, as shown above, so we have to make efforts to remain scientifically objective. Otherwise, we will suffer from what is called “confirmation bias”; that is, we are all programmed to see what we want to.

Fighting against a coronavirus that we remain uncertain how to deal with should also be based on science. If other more subjective factors such as politics and the economy outweigh the scientific approach, which should play the leading role, human beings' efforts to survive it will suffer a disastrous failure.

Officially, the death toll from COVID-19 in North Korea is “zero”. The Russian Ambassador to DPRK recently stated that DPRK had succeeded in blocking the wave of coronavirus infections, but it is uncertain whether this is true. However, the North Korean preventive measures against the COVID-19 were rigorously harsh as all the borders were locked down and all of those seen as potentially infected with the virus, including diplomats from foreign countries were quarantined, even

## What Does COVID-19 Imply for Nuclear-Armed North Korea?

though this would have been viewed as a violation of Vienna Treaty.

While the North Korean blockade and quarantine must have gone too far from the view of democratic countries, it has been proved effective in preventing the occurrence of Coronavirus. Moreover, no one was wearing a face mask in the Fourth Enlarged Meeting of the Seventh Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) held in May. Considering these facts, it may be possible that the DPRK quarantine measures have been as successful as those of Vietnam and Taiwan have been, whereas some of the watchers carefully observing North Korean events expected that COVID-19 would have devastated North Korea.

Meanwhile at the end of May in the US total deaths exceeded 100,000. This is equivalent to the combined total of all the fatalities in the Korean War (about 36,500), the Vietnam War (about 58,000), the Iraq War (about 4,500), and the Afghanistan War (about 2,000). In its wake, the warped social and economic disparity in the US has finally imploded.

It is interesting to note that the death toll and social impact on America in the case of nuclear bombs being detonated in US metropolitan cities would be much greater than the number of COVID-19 cases. The number killed by the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima reached about 140,000 by the end of 1945, and about 300,000 as of now. In addition, Nukemap estimates "only one" 250kt nuclear bomb detonated on New York City would create fierce heatwaves and a blast that could take at least 950,000 precious lives. Under the same scenario in Tokyo and Seoul, the estimated death tolls could be 630,000 and 620,000 respectively. Either of these figures surpasses the approximately 420,000 lives the Coronavirus had taken

worldwide by June 12, 2020.

Furthermore, a nuclear war would not only kill millions of people but also shut down medical facilities and services more severely than COVID-19. Moreover, the lifelines which didn't malfunction during the first and second virus waves, could be paralyzed since nuclear weapons cause blackouts, the fear of which Japan already experienced in 2018 Hokkaido Eastern Iburi earthquake. Without a doubt, the economic loss would be incomparable. In fact, these social and economic malfunctions during a nuclear war could contribute to raising the death toll even higher, and if North Korea possessed and used other WMDs such as bacteriological weapons, it could become far worse.

Since 1948, Japan has allowed US troops to be stationed on its soil and has yet to normalize its relationship with the DPRK. Therefore a nuclear war initiated by North Korea, with the potential to escalate into World War III, would almost certainly devastate Japan. As a Korean living in Japan, I hope that this will never happen.

To sum up, waging nuclear war is completely irrational from a scientific perspective. The wise position that a nuclear war should never be allowed to occur should be firmly held on to during the new COVID era. I will dedicate myself to security studies in Northeast Asia focusing on the DPRK in order to contribute to the prevention of such a catastrophic war.

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8

**The Joy of Reading Personal Histories  
from the Primary Sources:  
Encounters during My Research on  
Islamic Thinkers in Egypt**



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I would describe myself as an early career researcher in Middle Eastern studies. I've been engaging in the study of

contemporary Muslim intellectuals, their ideas, and their roles in the Arab-Islamic society. While secularization is widely recognized in Japan as the prerequisite of modern society, religion controls social life in Egypt, my research focus, to a greater extent than in Japan. As a result, religious and social problems often emerge as intertwined issues, and disputes arise over the relationship between religion, law, and politics.

Some Egyptian thinkers have been trying to solve these problems by renewing the interpretations of Islamic thought and pursuing the creation of the “Islamic modernity” as an alternative to the secular modernity. Their ideas evolve around the coexistence of different religions and civilizations, the refutation of radical thought, and the relationship of religion to democracy. Their ideas help us to understand the current standpoint of Islamic thought, which remains unknown in Japan as well as in the West.

Most works of these intellectuals are written in Arabic and not translated into English, to say nothing of Japanese. For this reason, starting with the Cairo International Book Fair held annually from January to February, I have found opportunities to travel to the region to collect literature and conduct interviews. It is an enjoyable experience to encounter new books, but not easy to bring them back to Japan safely.

In my last fieldwork in Egypt in February 2020, one of my informants generously offered me books related to my research. I decided to pack all the precious materials in a suitcase and take it back to Japan because of the postal situation in Egypt. However, the books weighed twenty kilograms, which meant that the suitcase I brought from Japan was far from sufficient. Mr. Mustafa, who was working in the hotel where I stayed and always offered me a cup of tea when I came back from my interview work, took me to a bag shop downtown. I was humbled when he yelled in front of the shop, “a *Doktoor*

(doctor) staying in my hotel is looking for a new suitcase!” After having a typical conversation with an old storeowner, I found a fine one (“This suitcase is a very good one and usually expensive, but I’ll offer you a special discount because you’re a friend of Mustafa...”). A few hours later, I had to go there again to ask the owner to exchange the suitcase for an even a bigger one.

Finally, I rushed to the airport with two brimming suitcases but encountered a new problem. Since there were so many books inside the suitcase, an airport security suspected during the X-ray examination that I intended to smuggle bills out of the country, and I had to open my suitcase in front of him.

During my last fieldwork trip, I found a sense of crisis about the COVID-19 virus that had silently spread in Cairo. We could easily point out many factors which might accelerate the spread of the virus: the crowded markets and trains in Cairo, the condition of public health in the overpopulated cities, and the food culture based on bread. After the first carrier of the virus was found in mid-February, the Egyptian government had to seek a balance between the economic stagnation and preventing the virus from spreading, as other countries around the world were doing.

As is widely acknowledged, researchers on humanities are facing unprecedented difficulties under the spread of COVID-19. The pandemic has made international travel difficult and many researchers are still unable to conduct fieldwork abroad. Libraries and archives were closed under the lockdowns. The sudden need for online teaching at universities also ate up the time of faculty members which should have been ordinarily dedicated to research activities.

In fact, researchers engaging in area studies often face difficulties according to the political and social situations in countries they focus on. Our fieldwork abroad becomes



impossible when wars break out or our research topics are frowned on by the government. However, the pandemic newly urges not only some researchers in area studies but all researchers to consider how to “survive” in the situation where international travel is impossible.

In my case, the books and documents which I have collected for years enable me to continue research even in the current different environment.

Fortunately, during my last fieldwork trip to Egypt, I found a book that is essential for my research. A compilation of the interviews with Tariq al-Bishry (1933-2021), one of the most renowned Islamic thinkers in modern Egypt had been published.

Al-Bishry has been interested in the way to achieve democracy and national unity in Egypt and the Arab countries, and has been searching for a way to build a civilized society independent from the West. Having left secularism in the early 1970s and started to reconsider the role of the Islamic civilization, he authored books on many significant topics, such as the tradition and modernity in the Islamic world, the unity of Muslims and Christians, and the reform of Islamic law. Besides his career as an intellectual, he served as a judge in the Egyptian administrative court and sometimes issued a decision against the autocratic regime’s will. Being a moderate Islamic thinker as well as the defender of the rule of law and democracy, he has gathered the respect of people with diverse political visions. In the transition process after the collapse of the Mubarak regime in 2011, he was inaugurated as the head of the committee responsible for the revision of the Egyptian constitution. In this sense, his life as an intellectual and a judge strongly reflects the political and social development in Egypt.

This book is based on interviews conducted during a two-year period and was compiled by some Egyptian academics in order to pass on his wisdom to the next generation. Not only

did it contain his thought-provoking views on various topics such as history, politics and Islamic thought, but it could also be read as an oral memoir of his life. He was born in the era of Egyptian nationalism in which the influence of Britain, the former colonizer, remained strong. Then, he was attracted to secularism in the period when the nationalist leaders were advocating independence. After that, he changed his direction and started to write in the field of Islamic thought. By tracing his personal history and his intellectual journey, the readers can understand the social and intellectual development of Egypt in the twentieth century.

The book also covers the episodes which have not been well described in his previous books, including his personal relationship with his family and friends, his familiarity with Sufism and Western literature, and the vivid psychological experiences he gained during his pilgrimage to Mecca.

While following his personal history through the book, the episode over “the appearance of Virgin Mary” attracted my attention. In April 1968, the rumor spread that the Virgin Mary appeared in the Church of Saint Mary in the Zaitoun district in Cairo. Even *al-Ahram*, the government-affiliated paper reported this event in the headline. The rumor continued to spread from 1968 to 1971 and it became a social phenomenon in Egypt.

Both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic religions in the Middle East and they sometimes share common religious narratives; The story of the virginal conception of Mary (Maryam in Arabic) is related in the Qur'an as well as in the Bible. Therefore, not only Christians but Muslims rushed to the Church of Saint Mary to witness the appearance of the Virgin Mary.

Al-Bishry, who was still a secularist at that time, took a typical attitude concerning this case. Having heard about the

rumor, he visited the church with friends at one time and with his family at another time. Unfortunately, he saw nothing but the light from inside the church. Instead, what attracted his attention was the gathering of Christians of all ages who visited the church to witness Mary. They seemed to have come from the various parts of the country. Among them were even elderly people in the wheelchairs. Despite different religious affiliations, both Muslims and Christians shared a belief in and deep attachment to the Virgin Mary. Al-Bishry recalls that this event caused him to pursue the theme of the relationship between Muslims and Christians over the years.

Recently, I found that Rev. Moritada Murayama, a Japanese clergyman dispatched to Egypt from 1964 to 1968, also mentioned this incident in his book, *Living in the Coptic Society*.

Rev. Murayama visited the Church of Saint Mary in the spring of 1968. Although he visited the church impelled by curiosity, he took a skeptical view of the appearance of the Virgin Mary. He visited the church in the daytime and did not see anything like that.

However, he was shocked to see the apparent sick people who were laying in the garden of the church. They seemed to have traveled from the rural areas and believed they would recover from their sickness if they could catch sight of Saint Mary. The scene he saw was similar to the one al-Bishry witnessed.

According to Rev. Murayama, he generally interpreted the episodes in the Bible where Jesus Christ cured the sick as just a miracle tale. However, seeing those who longed for a glance of Saint Mary to have their illness cured, he felt as if he had been transported to the world of 2000 years ago. He described, "I felt as if I had encountered the unswerving fact that could not be disregarded as a miracle tale in the Bible."

The appearance of Virgin Mary in Cairo in the late-1960s and the people's gathering as a result had a different influence on the Egyptian Muslim thinker and the Japanese clergyman. The former, al-Bishry began to tackle the problem of the unity of Muslims and Christians. It also gave Rev. Murayama an important opportunity to reconsider the interpretation of the Bible and the meaning of faith for both ancient and modern humans.

Though we, researchers, do not necessarily write about such discoveries in our papers, it brings great joy to us. Borrowing from Rev. Murayama's words, I felt as if I too had stood in the Cairo of around fifty years ago and witnessed the intersection of the different personal histories.

Under the continuing spread of COVID-19, I feel some anxiety and exhaustion. In order to cope with these difficulties, it is important to find and collect such small joys in our daily lives. I wish I could delve into the mountainous pile of Arabic books and documents, which I have been collecting dust for years.

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## **Reformulating Religious Tourism after COVID-19: Reflections on Area Studies from the Perspective of Mobility**



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(July 15, 2020)

On the 21st of June 2020, while I was checking the news on my PC screen, I was surprised to see the Saudi government's announcement that Masjid Haram in Makkah would be reopened for visitors after the three months of closure. This announcement indicated the temporal end of the turmoil of COVID-19 in the MENA region and the Islamic world.

Due to the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, the religious landscape in the Islamic world was completely transformed. During my research of religious tourism in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, I have observed that religious journeys such as pilgrimages and religious visits to holy places have a strong linkage with the tourism industry and the market economy. In this environment, utilizing religious tours and tour operators has gained popularity among religious followers, and religious travel has been popularized. In this situation, overcrowded scenes in Makkah and other religious places have become quite familiar to me and to others watching the unfolding events.

However, as most of the OIC (Organization for Islamic Cooperation) countries have enforced border closures and strictly restricted human mobility, the livestreaming of a religious landscape devoid of people has become common. As this unusual situation in the religious places has become the norm, I really got bewildered by what I was seeing on my PC screen. Moreover, as the closure of mosques and religious facilities has become a regular occurrence in every country, Muslim societies are now recommending prayer at home or virtual prayer as the ‘new normal’. Even though some mosques are going to reopen, most of them are introducing social distancing or the “new normal” protocol at Friday prayers, which I still feel is rather strange. As I continue to see these radical changes in the social scenes in the Islamic world, I remain perplexed about how to understand this emerging world after the COVID-19 epidemic.

Needless to say, the ongoing situation of COVID-19 is strongly influencing religious mobility in the MENA region. As religious visitors who have visited religious sites in Saudi

Arabia, Iraq, and Iran have caused the spread of COVID-19 in various countries in the world, it has become clear that religious mobility and epidemics are strongly connected. In the recent epidemics of SARS in 2002 and 2003, or H1N1 influenza in 2009, the Saudi government and other OIC countries requested every religious visitor to carry a health certificate and enforced quarantine regulations. This situation shows the relationship between religious mobility and epidemics is like two sides of a coin.

The emerging situation is not only limited to religious mobility, as our social lives have also been deeply influenced by the COVID-19 epidemic. As I have been experiencing life during the State of Emergency in Japan, I have keenly sensed that our social lives have become dependent on physical mobilities like tourism, leisure, communication, and commuting to our workplaces. No matter how much our contemporary society has developed information technology and communication devices to alter physical contact into digital spaces, and how much our social life has become less dependent on physical interactions, we are still dependent on physical encounters and interplays in every aspect of our social lives. In this sense, we will face questions on reconsidering our contemporary situation from the perspective of our accumulated knowledge. How can we explain the premature lifting of borders and the suspension of human mobilities in MENA region countries like Egypt, Dubai and Turkey, despite the ongoing spread of COVID-19 in those countries? Or how is it that we are suffering from severe difficulties in the tourism industry today, when various environmental figures were complaining about over-tourism in the world last year?



Whenever suspension of human mobility is going to be systematically relaxed, social anxiety and uncertainty still remains. Even though epidemic prevention measures are put in place, our underlying social anxiety and uncertainty about whether somebody nearby has COVID-19 or not flags any stranger as a “potential risk”. This potentially threatening social environment drives us to construct new social barriers and boundaries to avoid or diminish this ‘potential risk’. In fact, with this in mind, Japan and other parts of the world are presently discussing the avoidance of long-distance journeys, and instead promoting short-distance travel or what are known as “travel bubbles” or “micro tourism” in the field of tourism. This kind of discussion shows that social barriers and boundaries to prevent mobility have already been constructed in our societies, in order to avoid and diminish “potential risk”.

The effects from the emergence of this new “potential risk” will remain with us in the post-COVID-19 era. No matter how far vaccine and quarantine systems develop, and how much people are able to enjoy their vacations anywhere in the world, these social barriers and boundaries will not be diminished. In our ongoing arguments, we tend not to discuss the proper ways of coexisting with this “potential risk” in the coming future, but are rather avoiding or diminishing the risk by isolating ourselves from the surrounding environment. In this sense, the coming post-COVID-19 era is going to bring social pressures to erect severalfold social boundaries among people to avert “potential risk” in our societies. I am wondering whether this kind of discussion will lead to the abandonment of our accepted way of social life, or even our way of thinking itself, which would completely destroy human beings’ social existence.

However, I am not yet despairing about our coming future. History teaches us that we have struggled to construct various social practices to avoid this “potential risk” in our social livelihood before. Various religions and cultures have kept their social values while encompassing this potential risk and continued to develop their environments as human beings as well. In the case of Islam, hospitality, manners, and etiquette called “*diyafa*” in Arabic, have promoted the welcoming of strangers in any Muslim society, and travelers can enjoy hospitality in peace, which has strongly contributed to the enhancement of the Islamic community as a social hub in the world. These kinds of interactions and communications have contributed to the development of human societies in various areas in the world.

In the post-COVID-19 era, therefore, we should reconsider the social meaning of this hospitality which we have developed. I strongly believe that area studies, which considers the actual situation of societies based on an interdisciplinary approach, has the potential to contribute to the coming future by reconstructing new societies and new human lifestyles. As I am presently restricted to this small part of the world in Gunma Prefecture, Japan, I continue to read books and articles, thinking of future possibilities for area studies.

Note: The idea for this essay is based on the symposium “Tourism Study after COVID-19” held by the Institute of Humanities, Human and Social Science at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan on 5th July 2020.

**Postscript** (Added November 30, 2020)

In the end of July, Saudi government held hajj rituals with about 1,000 pilgrims with strict health protocols. Pilgrims who lived in Saudi Arabia and submitted negative records after two weeks isolation had the right to perform the rituals. The scene of pilgrims social distancing as they circled Kaaba indicated a significant change in our coming world.

After the success of hajj rituals in July, the Saudi government has gradually resumed its restrictions for pilgrims by constructing health protocols for them. Despite the ongoing epidemic of COVID-19 in the country, the Saudi government began to accept umrah pilgrims inside Saudi Arabia from October 4, and it opened a door for international pilgrims from November 1. In the resumption of the pilgrimage to Makkah in the COVID-19 era, the Islamic world has gradually accepted a new way of religious mobilities based on public health and scientific evidence.

In the ongoing situation of COVID-19 in Japan, this author's surrounding environment has also changed, which is working as a positive reinforcement. With the development of digital interactions in our social lives, our connectedness with other people and society is also going through the digital spaces like Zoom, SNS (social networking services) and other digital applications, and the digital divide between our society and other societies has been radically eliminated. In this changing environment, through the worldwide development of the digital sphere, we can easily connect with fellow researchers in our academic fields, check research data and enjoy various kinds of academic communication.

However, I am also reacknowledging the importance of "local sensibility" which is strongly embedded in physical interactions and communication in a certain social environment.

As one of the significances of area study is to clarify the “local sensibility” in a certain society, I am still struggling to clarify this “local sensibility” in the Islamic world through the digital sphere. In this situation, we are now considering our “new sense of area study” with physical disconnectedness in the era of COVID-19.

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10

**Contemporary Middle East Studies  
under the COVID-19 Crisis:  
Countermeasures to the “Field Survey”**



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(July 24, 2020)

In July, when classes are over, we have more freedom in our research activities in a normal year. This year, however, I have been analyzing data and writing papers in my own room,

without going to the field or to academic conferences. In this essay, I would like to review the current situation and provide a perspective on future research activities.

I have been doing my research at Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford, since November 2018 under the fellowship of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. As a Japanese person who had been engaged in research activities in Japan until completing my doctoral course, the sudden expansion of opportunities to interact with people from all over the world at the University of Oxford, a node of the global network, was dramatic, and offered me a golden opportunity to expand my research network apace while receiving a lot of intellectual stimulation. As a researcher in the field of contemporary Jordanian politics where there are few researchers, it was an irreplaceable pleasure for me to get to know other researchers who had the same research interest or who worked in the same region.

As a political scientist on the Middle East, it is essential for me to conduct on-the-spot investigations, even though I am based in an international research center. In the summer of 2019 last year, I conducted fieldwork in Jordan for four months, and this time I conducted a special survey on decentralization reforms that have been promoted in Jordan in recent years. The experience of visiting various local governments in different regions in order to delve into the reality of local politics and administration, where the scenes of reform evolve, has brought me an invaluable harvest of information. I will never forget the conversations I had with people from various backgrounds, how the scenery and atmosphere changed according to the areas I visited, and the specific ambience to each town.

However, this lifestyle was changed drastically by the worldwide spread of COVID-19. Workshops and daily study meetings, as well as academic conferences, were canceled or

postponed one after another, and university offices, libraries, and other related facilities were closed. I was supposed to be at the world's hub of academic exchange, but I found myself alone in my room. Unlike in the United Kingdom, the spread of infection is fairly limited in Jordan, but it has strict policies to prevent the spread of infection, and all regular flights have been suspended. It is no longer easy to cross borders and there is no prospect of going for fieldwork so far.

This change in circumstances was a huge blow to me as I was eager to present the results of last year's fieldwork from this spring to summer. Through research presentations, I wanted to improve the compilation of research results, to gain new knowledge, and to expand research networks, but the opportunities became quite limited. In addition, I have started a new research project for a comparison between Jordan and Morocco this year by developing the accumulated research up to now, but the prospects of the next fieldwork are not clear, which worries me. I base my analysis on published materials and public information from governments, local governments, political organizations, and civil society organizations, but access to data and the direction of information interpretation require interviews with various people on the ground, visits to institutions, casual conversations with people on the street, and unexpected encounters.

Under such a situation, the study of modern Middle Eastern politics by a foreign researcher is in an extremely difficult task. It does not mean, however, that we are just sitting here waiting for the death of our research. Even if we can't replicate perfectly our ideal research environments, we can try to approximate them. In particular, I believe that the following two points will be a key to future research activities.



The first is research exchange activities online. Online research has emerged as a new standard as a result of the global COVID-19 crisis. Although adjusting the time difference is troublesome, there is a growing recognition that research exchanges can be conducted anywhere in the world as long as there is an Internet environment. This means that any institution in the world can be at the center of a research network like the University of Oxford and can network with researchers from all over the world, no matter where they are physically. Although my term of overseas research at Oxford will end in September, I would like to maintain and expand my research network with the world even after I return to Japan under this new standard.

The second is online information gathering. While limited in comparison to the developed democratic countries, the Middle East is also making progress in online access. We hope that we will be able to gather information on public documents and newspaper media online to get a little closer to the reality of the region. Moreover, as highlighted in the 2011 series of political upheavals in the Arab States, or the so-called “Arab Spring”, the development and penetration of social media is also progressing in the Middle East, with social media becoming a source of new information. On social media, it is becoming possible to use not only the content of speech but also location information. Geospatial analysis could be also used, although its availability is still limited. Social media analysis has the potential to approach topics that are only accessible through public government information, viewpoints that are overlooked in traditional media coverage, and fieldwork. We will prepare for the future of being able to conduct field research while pushing forward with research in the new field online. These are my plans for the current situation.

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## 11

# **Life between Searching for the Classic in Cyberspace and Going to the Field: My Studies on Islamic Economics in the Middle East and Southeast Asia**



**Ammar KHASHAN**

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(July 10, 2020)

More than 12 million people have been infected with COVID-19, a global pandemic, and more than 540,000 have been killed so far. The United States, Brazil and India are among the countries most affected by the disease, but the

infection is also spreading to the Middle East, including Arab countries, and to the Islamic countries. Even in Syria, where I am from, information is limited due to the civil war, but according to reports from acquaintances, the number of people infected has increased considerably.

I myself live in Japan, where the number of infected people is relatively small, but it has had a significant impact on my work, and I am worried about what will happen in the future. In this series of essays, other researchers have written about their worries that field-based researchers were not able to go to their fields and that their research had been hampered.

In that respect, my situation is the same. Recently, I have been doing field research in the Muslim countries of Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia), but from around March of this year (2020), we have not been able to travel from Japan to their countries and they have not been able to come to Japan, so I feel stressed by this difficulty.

My research approach, however, is to connect classics with modern studies, so things may be a little better for me than those who focus exclusively on research in the field. Classics here refers to Islamic literature written in classical Arabic.

I was born in Aleppo (Halab in Arabic), an ancient city in northern Syria, and attended Damascus University in the capital, for both my undergraduate and graduate studies. The university's Faculty of Islamic Law is considered one of the prestigious academic centers in Syria and throughout the Arab world.

It seems to me that countries of the world vary widely in respect to their historical depth. Some of them have a long history, and even in the present day, their society is rooted in a deep, multi-layered history, while there are others like America which seem young and energetic (though I've never been there), but where history does not seem to carry much weight. It has

been nine years since I first came to Japan. By living in Osaka and Kyoto, I often feel that Japan is a country with a long history and I sense its gravity. Kyoto especially seems to me to be a similar city to Aleppo and Damascus in that regard.

At the University of Damascus, I studied Islamic law, Hadith studies, and Tafsir studies (the study of the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an). The academic tradition of these classical knowledges continues to this day. However, the major works in these sciences date from the 9th century to the 18th century. This means in Japanese historical terms that many of them were written from the Heian period to the Edo period.

After starting my study in Japan, I began to do my research on modern Islamic economics at Kyoto University. I studied in a graduate school for Area Studies, so my focus was changed to contemporary studies. It is a field-based research where we conduct field surveys of modern societies.

Nevertheless, the Islamic economy is inseparable from the provisions of the Islamic Law. The most crucial event in modern Islamic economics was the creation of an interest-free bank based on the Islamic ban on *riba* (interest), which is also called Bank La Ribawi (non-*riba* banking). This new brand of modern finance would not be possible unless the prohibition of *riba* was clearly declared in the sacred book of Islam, which was born in the seventh century. In other words, Islamic economics exists because the legal provisions established in the seventh century still matter today.

Therefore, the Islamic studies that I have specialized in for a long time can be quite helpful for my study of modern Islamic economics. I have been combining the classical and the modern in my research. Not all studies related to Islam can do this. I think this is a peculiarity of the field of Islamic economics.

Of course, Arabic classics are not freely available in Japan. When I first came to Japan, there weren't many of what can be

called “online libraries”. Over the years, however, a plethora of Arabic classics has been converted into PDFs, making them quite freely available online.

Some argue, on this phenomenon of free libraries, that the Arab world is less sensitive to copyright and intellectual property rights. This argument has a valid point. On the other hand, there is a deep-rooted belief that classics are intellectual common properties. Those who are engaged in the dissemination of classics online believe in this idea.

Today, famous classics can be found on any site, but there are important books that are not very popular. Hunting around the cyberspace for rare books is both my job and my hobby (When I was writing this, I came across the Japanese expression “game walk”, which means to enjoy going around seeking books or other precious materials).

Even though the ease of finding classics helps me greatly, my current specialty is field-based Area Studies, so it is painful that I cannot visit my field. Until a while ago, I was able to combine taking classics out of cyberspace and going to Southeast Asia, but right now I'm stuck in Japan worrying about how long the “with-corona” situation will last. We researchers want to revisit the field as soon as possible, but the reality is that we can't.

I realize through my communication with acquaintances and information from cyberspace that COVID-19 has brought some major problems to the Islamic world. The pandemic has created the same medical problems everywhere, but in the Islamic world there are also religious and cultural issues.

It is known that Muslims pray to God five times a day. One can pray alone at home, but it is recommended to pray together in groups (Jama'ah), so everyone goes to the mosque and offers prayers together. However, under the present COVID-19 conditions, people are unable to gather. In other words,

everyone is required to avoid the “Three Cs”, the same as in Japan.

It is also common in the Arab world to shake hands and give hugs when greeting. However, it was said that this should be avoided as a corona countermeasure. In Islam, when such problems occur, we listen to the views of Islamic jurists. There was a debate going on for a while about whether we didn’t have to pray together at the mosque or shake hands when we meet.

The experience of the plague was not new. It was documented in the early days of Islam. The “Black Death” in the medieval period is also well-known. A major difference between these instances and what we face today is that in the past there was less medical knowledge about the causes and transmission of diseases. In modern times, arguments by legal scholars are also based on medical knowledge, so avoiding praying in a group is not considered unethical in religious terms, when the preservation of life has a priority. On the other hand, there is a strong belief that Divine Decree determines the life and death of human beings, and some argue that it is not ethically good to restrict religious activities too much. One issue is how much priority should be given to the prevention of infection, since preventive measures are not necessarily almighty.

In Japan, infectious disease prevention and economic measures sometimes conflict. It’s easy to see that both dying from a disease or from an economic failure are matters of life and death. In the Islamic world, there is a conflict between the medical and social issues of infection prevention and religious ethics. I feel that this is one example of the cultural differences that make us work harder so that we can have a better understanding of each other.

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