

# **POINT OF VIEW/ Walid M. Abdelnasser: Arab-Japanese ties only becoming stronger**

SPECIAL TO THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

The Alexandria Library, based in the city of Alexandria, Egypt, hosted the first Arab-Japanese Conference, attended by over 250 participants from Japan and 16 Arab countries, from Nov. 20 to 21. The conference also had sponsorship from Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the League of Arab States.

The objective of the conference was to consider, in a rather informal but still serious manner, means of deepening and broadening Arab-Japanese cooperation in all domains: political and diplomatic, economic, trade and investment, cultural, and scientific and technological, with the latter including the sectors of environment and medicine.

Participants covered a broad spectrum comprising politicians, officials, parliamentarians, academics, artists, media specialists, researchers, businessmen, scientists and medical doctors.

There is no doubt that the cultural aspect has been present either directly or in the background when discussing different aspects of the Arab-Japanese relationship. Many Arab participants expressed their view that Japanese belong to an "Eastern civilization" that has maintained its specificity despite changes in the post-World War II era, particularly under the impact of the Western civilization.

Watching presentations of ikebana flower arranging, traditional Japanese dance and the contemporary Japanese movie "The Twilight Samurai" directed by Yoji Yamada, Arab participants felt that Japanese people not only managed to retain their cultural peculiarity, but even utilized globalization to promote their traditional arts worldwide. The need for more translations of original works between the Arabic and Japanese languages was perceived as a prerequisite for achieving a breakthrough in both enhancing and improving mutual understanding, perception and image.

As expected, the economic dimension of the relationship acquired a lot of attention, as the shared economic interests have multiplied

particularly since the 1970s, partly due to Japan's predominant dependence on oil and gas imported from the Arab world and partly due to the geometrical increase in the volume of mutual trade.

Views were expressed that there is room for increasing and diversifying investment in both directions, particularly as the majority of Japanese investment in the Arab world is currently centered around the energy sector. Even trade, it was argued, could be increased, new items added and more balance introduced by encouraging more Japanese imports from the Arab world.

Strategies for enhancing tourism flow in both directions were proposed and seriously debated. Furthermore, Japan's role in Arab human resources development was appreciated and a demand for its increase was echoed among Arab participants.

The strong bilateral political relations between Japan and Arab countries were highlighted and appreciated, and many Arab participants looked forward to a more active political role for Japan in the areas of conflict of the region to complement Japan's economic and humanitarian assistance and projects.

However, most Arab participants showed understanding for the impact of the historical memory, particularly the pre-World War II period, the war period and the directly post-war period, on Japan's stands on the conflicts of the region, as well as the implications of Japan's global calculations and alliances.

The conference showed that Japan retains a "clean record" in the eyes of Arabs because it has never been a colonial power in the Arab world. In fact, this could be a reason that many Arab participants aspired for a more active political role by Japan in trying to resolve the conflicts of the region. Both Arab and Japanese participants agreed on the need to implement the initiative of President Mubarak of Egypt to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, including a nuclear weapons free zone, in the Middle East.

The scientific and technological cooperation between Japan and the Arab world has continued to be seen as a success story, and an ever-growing dimension of the relationship. All of the components of such cooperation were endorsed and their expansion was encouraged. These include scholarships and training programs offered by Japan, Japanese experts sent to provide technical cooperation with Arab countries, and trilateral cooperation between Japan and an Arab

country in a third Arab country, as is the case with the Japanese/Egyptian technical cooperation with Iraq and Palestine.

Discussions during the conference on enhancing scientific and technological cooperation focused on the relevance of Japanese environmentally friendly technology, Japanese progress in water desalination, and exploring areas of cooperation in medicine. The significance of the proposed Egyptian Japanese University for Science and Technology for Egyptian, Arab and African students was underlined. Also, the recent declaration of 2008 as the year of cooperation between Egypt and Japan in science and technology was perceived as a cornerstone in the cooperation between Japan and the Arab world in these aspects.

There is still a lot to be proposed, discussed and implemented to enhance Arab-Japanese cooperation. This might require convening future sessions of Arab-Japanese dialogue. Yet, the Alexandria Library Conference was both a remarkable and credible starting point.

\* \* \*

The author is Egypt's ambassador to Japan.(IHT/Asahi: December 7,2007)