

Inaugural Introduction

A new project entitled *Islamic Area Studies* has begun in Japan. It was inaugurated in 2006, as a five-year research project, with the prospect of a second five-year term, putting length of the entire project at ten years, if not more, as we hope this project will establish a permanent network of research centers for *Islamic Area Studies (IAS)*.

Some of our readers may be reminded by the title '*Islamic Area Studies*', of a large scale research project which was executed between 1997 and 2002 in Japan. It could be called the first stage of *Islamic Area Studies*, while this new project is the second stage. There is, however, a substantial difference between the two. The first was a research project funded with a grant-in-aid, and ended when its five year plan was accomplished. Since it created a large network of researchers with a central coordinating organization, its secession disrupted that coordination to a serious degree. The second stage, backed by NIHU, or The National Institutes for the Humanities, one of the Inter-University Research Institute Corporations in Japan, is designed not only to promote research but also to foster an institutional basis for the research. Thus, it is hoped to establish long term bases for the promotion of *Islamic Area Studies*.

The *Islamic Area Studies* network has five core centers. The Institute of Islamic Area Studies at Waseda University serves as the General Office for IAS, while the other four centers cooperate with one another to constitute one network. Our Center for Islamic Area Studies at Kyoto University (KIAS), standing as the sole center for western Japan, works together with the General Office, the Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology of the University of Tokyo, the Institute of Asian Cultures at Sophia University, and The Toyo Bunko (Oriental Library), supported by the NIHU Center for Area Studies.

Islamic studies and also Area Studies on Asia and Africa are among the sciences that Japan has developed in the post-war era.. The scope of Area Studies was even expanded to include North America and Western Europe, in an attempt to relativize the "West". Japan used to stand as a unique nation, having succeeded in combining its non-Western culture with modernity, but today many other nations have succeeded in following its example. Japan's studies on other cultures, including Islamic ones, have the unique nature of being Japanese, that is, combining the two dimensions, learning well and absorbing Western achievements, while having the ability to look into the inner dynamics of the non-Western cultures without the kind of bias of which Western scholars have often been accused. In a sense, Japan has been able to utilize its unique position between the West and the East.

After the end of the cold war, some in the international society turned to universalism, dismissing the importance of Area Studies, a science which fosters mutual understanding among

different cultures. While Japan opts for globalization in many areas, it is determined to maintain a more objective and fair understanding of the different cultures of the world, and therefore, to continue promoting Area Studies. At least, this is apparent when we see public interest given to Area Studies, as well as governmental decisions to strengthen Area Studies in particular fields, including Islamic ones.

Having mentioned Japan's merits we must however turn to its fatal weakness. Japan has been a recipient, rather than a donor, of knowledge in academic relations with other nations. Japan has studied the world seriously, and it has accumulated a great deal of knowledge without giving much in return. Islamic Studies have developed fairly well in Japan in the last four or five decades. We have read books and academic papers from the Islamic world and from the West. We have studied in universities in Islamic countries and in Western countries. In some areas, we have really excelled, but this has not been noticed abroad. We have not hidden anything intentionally, but the Japanese language itself is a natural barrier to access from the outside.

The first stage of *Islamic Area Studies* broke this barrier to a certain extent, the sending of research results off to the rest of the world being one of its major objectives. Many colleagues and friends in research and educational institutions in the West as well as in Islamic countries have appreciated our efforts in this respect but much still needs to be done. So, once again, we have made this task of international communication one of our prime objectives.

The style of this new journal, *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, published by our Center for Islamic Area Studies at Kyoto University (KIAS), partly reflects our regard for this particular task. Among other tasks we have in mind are: The encouragement of pioneering works in Islamic Area Studies and contributions toward building "communal facilities" for research, that is toward building intellectual infrastructures to coordinate research from which other researchers can get benefit.

While all of the five core centers have particular research objectives, KIAS in particular aims to achieve essential academic research on international organizations/institutions in the Islamic world. Everyone is welcome to contribute towards developing our understanding of this subject.

We would like to ask all of our kind readers to lend us a helping hand with our new project, so that together we can move toward a better world united by mutual understanding.

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