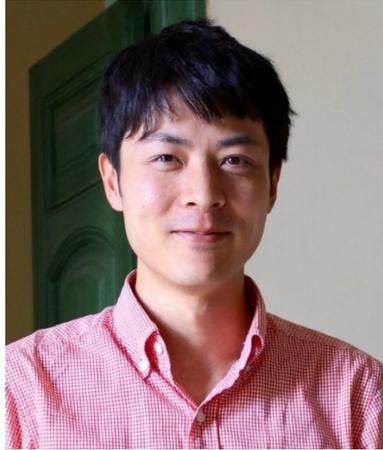


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Contemporary Middle East Studies under the COVID-19 Crisis: Countermeasures to the “Field Survey”



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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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