



## Bridging culture and building a career in Japan - The case of Mohannad AL Yakoub

### Study points

Students are expected to experience the journey of a JICA scholarship student who studied in Japan. He acquired knowledge of Japanese business models and business management skills during his study period. He is now utilizing his gained knowledge and expertise in his current work, having adopted a system learned in Japan that generates effective ways of doing business. Through this case discussion, students will reflect on their study experience in Japan. Also, they will discuss the possible challenges and/or obstacles that they may face when trying to utilize gained knowledge and expertise. In addition, they will discuss what may hinder them in the process of trying to contribute to their countries' development.

### Basic information

- Region: Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and East Asia
- Issue: Adopting Japanese style of business model in a developing country
- Key words: JICA scholarship, Japanese business model, Japanese business management, education, career development
- Country: Iraq, Japan, Jordan and Syria
- Year: 2017-present

### Characters

Characters	Description
Mohannad AL Yakoub (Main character)	Former JICA scholarship student, 1 <sup>st</sup> batch of the Japanese Initiative for the future of Syrian Refugees (JISR) program
Airi Nakazawa	JICA staff in the University Partnership Division, Domestic Strategy and Partnership Department, in charge of the JISR program
Prof. Hyunkoo Lee	Professor, Graduate School of International Management, International University of Japan (IUJ)
Associate Professor Sayaka Kurashina	Associate Professor, Center for Language Education and Research, International University of Japan (IUJ)
Prof. Tsutomu Yokose	Professor, Graduate School of International Management, International University of Japan (IUJ)
Prof. Wenkai Li	Professor, Graduate School of International Management, International University of Japan (IUJ)
Local staff in Iraq	Counterparts in Iraq involved in current work

## Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
Ho-ren-so	Business mantra in Japanese business culture, abbreviation of "Hōkoku", "Renraku" and "Sōdan" that represents report, to inform and to consult
IUJ	International University of Japan
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
JICA DSP	JICA Development Studies Program
JISR	Japanese Initiative for the future of Syrian Refugees
MBA	Master of Business Administration
ODA	Official Development Assistance
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
5S	Workplace organization method developed in Japan that represents 'sort', 'set in order', 'shine', 'standardize', and 'sustain'

## Summary

Mohannad AL Yakoub, a former JICA scholarship student, completed his MBA at the International University of Japan in June 2019. During his study period, he learned about Japanese business culture, model, and business management skills. Japanese business philosophy includes '5S', 'Ho-ren-so', 'Kaizen' and 'poka-yoke,' which are workplace organization methods developed and commonly practiced in the Japanese workplace. These business philosophies are intended to improve work efficiency and create a work environment to improve the quality, productivity, and employees' well-being.

Having studied Japanese business models and business management styles, he has been adopting and implementing these in his current workplace. However, it is not an easy task to fully implement the Japanese business model in a developing country.

The chronology of events in this case study is as follows.

## Chronology of events

August 2017	Arrival in Japan
September 2017	Start of Mohannad AL Yakoub's study at the International University of Japan as a JICA scholarship student
June 2019	Completion of Mohannad AL Yakoub's MBA program at the International University of Japan
September 2021 -current	Starts work as an International Project Manager at a Japanese IT company

## **Key questions**

Students are required to discuss the following:

1. What kind of impact did the JICA scholarship program have on AL Yakoub's career?
2. How did AL Yakoub engage in university study and find an occupation that maximized his study experience?
3. Through analyzing AL Yakoub's case, how can you apply the acquired knowledge and expertise you obtained in Japan in your work?
4. What are the challenges you will face when you adopt Japanese business models and/or management systems in your country or other developing country, as seen in AL Yakoub's case?
5. How would you develop your career in the future by utilizing your current work experience, including your scholarship study period in Japan?

## **1. Mohannad AL Yakoub's life in Japan**

### **1) Prologue**

In September 2017, Mohannad AL Yakoub, who currently works as a Project Manager in the Overseas Operation Team at an IT company in Tokyo, began his study at the International University of Japan (IUJ), Graduate School of International Management in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) Program, under the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) scholarship program "Japanese Initiative for the future of Syrian Refugees" (JISR).

After AL Yakoub had graduated from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering at the University of Damascus, a well-known top ranked university in his home country of Syria, he worked in Damascus as an IT Project Engineer for two and a half years. While working, he studied management at the same university in the MBA course. Just as he finished his first year and was starting his second, the Syrian civil war broke out on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

This conflict and the difficult situation it caused made it impossible for him to continue with his studies and he moved to Jordan in the following year with his family. In Jordan, he worked as a Production Control Engineer in a well-known Jordanian company from February 2013 till July 2017, almost four and a half

years.

One of AL Yakoub's life changing moments was when he received an email from the Jordan United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) about an application for JICA's JISR program. After he had moved to Jordan, he had been seeking opportunities to continue his study in an MBA program. Upon receiving information about JICA's scholarship program, he decided to apply.

JISR is a scholarship program, one of JICA's Knowledge Co-Creation Programs (Long-Term), and is implemented as part of the Official Development Assistance of the Government of Japan in cooperation with UNHCR. This program provides higher education opportunities at Master's degree level in Japanese universities to Syrian refugees who are staying in neighboring countries.

AL Yakoub and his wife have always had a good impression of Japan as a safe and stable country where people were kind. He had dreamed about living in Japan for a long term so that he could establish a good quality of life. Also, he envisioned that the scholarship in Japan would enable him to continue his study in a university and improve his skills. In addition, the scholarship allowed him to move together with his family and this was also appealing.

After successfully being accepted into the JISR program, AL Yakoub arrived in Japan in August 2017 with his family as a 1<sup>st</sup> batch under the JISR program.

## **2) Study in Japan at IUJ**

IUJ is a university located about 230km northwest of Tokyo in Urasa town, Niigata prefecture. The MBA program was established in 1988 as the first US-style business school in Japan to offer a US curriculum in English.

The university has many international students from all over the world, and provides a multicultural and multiethnic environment for a diverse range of students from various academic and professional backgrounds.

One the unique characteristics of the MBA program is that it offers elective courses that focus on Japanese corporate finance and business models, and Japanese style management.

During AL Yakoub's two years at IUJ, he took several elective courses that focused on Japanese business systems. These courses are offered under the Japan-Global Development Program (JGDP) in IUJ jointly implemented and managed by JICA and IUJ as part of the JICA Development Studies Program (JICA-DSP). The JICA-DSP program aims to provide an opportunity for students to learn universal development and growth logic in the fields of politics, economy and management, using Japan's modernization and development experiences as basic case materials.

"Japanese Corporate Systems and Japanese Style Management and Their Impact on Development" was a course taught by Prof. Prof. Hyunkoo Lee that

introduced him to Japanese style management. It also showed him how Japanese style management was established after World War II, and how this eventually enabled Japanese companies to enjoy rapid growth and worldwide success. The “Japanese Employment Practices and Human Capital Accumulation” course, which is currently offered as “Japan’s Major Industries and Human Resource Practices” taught by Prof. Tsutomu Yokose, focuses on several practices and cases in Japan and these enabled him to understand how industry knowledge in human capital areas enhanced each stage of Japan’s development so that these practices could be applied in developing regions.

The core courses such as “Operation Management” taught by his supervisor Prof. Wenkai Li and “Managerial Accounting” taught by Prof. Hyunkoo Lee were vital to acquire knowledge and skills to become a business leader in the future. In addition, the “Cross-Cultural Communication” and “Business Presentation” courses contained many group discussions and presentations and were beneficial to enhance and acquire the communication and business skills in a multicultural learning environment.

For AL Yakoub, taking the Japanese language program taught by Associate Professor Sayaka Kurashina (a total of six courses, one in each of three semesters for two years) to enhance his Japanese language skills was also beneficial. His future plan is to continue living and working in Japan, therefore, the acquiring of Japanese language skills was important to enhance his employability and ability to blend into Japanese corporate culture.

Reflecting on his study experience at IUJ, learning in a multicultural environment where students come from various regions in the world with various academic and professional backgrounds, and building connections with Professors and students, became a stimulating experience and a valuable addition to his skills for AL Yakoub. The total study experience was helpful for him in adapting to a Japanese company.

### **3) Seeking occupation and working in a Japanese company**

Looking for a job in Japan is not easy for foreigners like AL Yakoub. Although he acquired Japanese language skills and Japanese business management knowledge during his study period, the advanced Japanese language skills required from many of the Japanese companies became an obstacle in finding job opportunities.

Thus, at the time when he graduated in June 2019, he struggled to get an offer from a Japanese company. Also, the outbreak of COVID-19 in the early 2020s aggravated the situation, as many of the expected interviews were cancelled. To offset this, AL Yakoub studied the Japanese language and worked closely and intensively with Airi Nakazawa, a JICA staff member, to brush up his CV and continuously practiced for interviews. He worked hard and applied to several companies and sat for numerous interviews with strong support from JICA.

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The support that JICA provides to its scholarship students, including Mohannad AL Yakoub, is extensive and wide ranging. As many JISR program students including AL Yakoub wish to obtain job and continue living in Japan after completion of their studies, JICA provides support with Japanese language learning opportunities.

In addition, JICA conducts business networking events a few times a year, provides information about internships, and supports scholars in individual career counselling by brushing up their CVs, application forms, and helping them practice for job interviews. Information about job fairs is also offered and scholars are encouraged to attend. Additionally, business manner seminars are conducted twice a year, where business manners concerning job hunting and necessary information such as how to apply to Japanese companies and Japanese business language learning opportunities are offered for JISR program scholars.

Mohannad AL Yakoub, after number of attempts at applying for job opportunities, finally succeeded in gaining employment in a Japanese IT company, where he is currently working. At that time, the company was looking into expanding its IT education business in the Middle East. AL Yakoub, being fluent in Arabic and English, with working experience as an Engineer and having an MBA degree, was a perfect match for the position of Project Manager in the Overseas Operation Team of his company.

## **2. The new journey, starting a career in Japan**

### **1) The start of the Iraq project in his company**

His IT company has developed a mobile-focused e-learning system, an educational application learning tool which enhances learning continuity in developing countries. They have already implemented projects in Africa, in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, and in Asian countries such as Bangladesh.

The project in Iraq started when a Japanese engineering company decided to conduct a programming education project in Basra province as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. The company had been working in Iraq and they were aware that after the Iraq War from 2003 to 2011 there was a significant academic decline and educational investment was lacking despite the growing young population. The company that AL Yakoub is working for was adopted as the project partner to conduct their CSR activities, and the project was launched in March 2022 for two years. The project included offering code education to more than 200 elementary schools with total of more than 20,000 students in Basra Province. The project provides IT education and training in Iraq with support from the Japanese engineering company.

This project has been extended for two years starting from April 2024. It will now finish in March 2026. During this period, it will offer digital math education using tablets to the Basra area.

## **2) Implementing Japanese business model in Iraq**

With the launch of the Iraq project in his company, AL Yakoub's role as a Project Manager included the recruitment and training of local Iraq staff and adopting Japanese business management styles. He became the person responsible in Japan for managing this Iraq project and works as a bridge between Japan and Iraq.

Five fresh university graduates were recruited to be part of this project to work as counterparts to implement the project in Iraq. One of their expected roles is to train approximately 400 teachers programming education using the robot "Ozobot." After recruitment, the new staff participated in training conducted by AL Yakoub. The training program consisted of two weeks of Face-to-Face on the job training and two weeks of online training conducted remotely from Japan.

The training materials used for the program have two main parts. The first focuses on the company's core service, teaching programming education. The second part mainly provides lectures about how to deal with a Japanese company and work as local staff, and how they can improve their skills and train every day. Subsequently, lectures about the Official Development Assistance (ODA) project and its importance to their country Iraq and the sponsored company were conducted. In addition, basic knowledge of how to conduct a zoom online meeting and how to report to AL Yakoub was also taught as local staff were all fresh graduates who had no working experience and did not know how to deal and behave as a company employee.

AL Yakoub has translated the existing training materials content from Japanese into Arabic and from English to Arabic. These are the student's textbook and the teacher's guidebook, and the training is mainly about how the local staff should conduct classes and teach children in elementary schools using the teaching programming education robot.

One of the Japanese business concepts that AL Yakoub taught them during this training was *Kaizen*. *Kaizen* is a Japanese business philosophy meaning "change for the better," which concerns the processes required to improve operations continuously. It aims to improve productivity, which involves all concerned staff boosting productivity, encouraging workers' accountability, and promoting spontaneous innovation. AL Yakoub emphasized the importance of improving the quality of teaching and conducting classes which can be learnt from daily visits to schools, creating teaching materials, and effective time management when explaining the class topics. *Kaizen* became the key concept to motivate them every day to grow and improve their services, especially when the daily meetings with the five new staff took place.

Another Japanese business concept that AL Yakoub tried to adopt was "Ho-Ren-So," which is a mantra in Japanese business culture that is the abbreviation of "Hōkoku", "Renraku" and "Sōdan" and represents 'report', 'to inform', and 'to

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consult'. He taught them Ho-Ren-So to ensure good reporting and consultation from the local staff. Having to manage the project remotely from Tokyo, the concept of 'Ho-Ren-So' was an important factor for him to follow up the daily operation and to ensure the quality of the project.

Another important business concept was 5S, which is a workplace organization method developed in Japan that uses the "sort," "set in order," "shine," "standardize," and "sustain" approach to business management. All of these business management concepts were learned during his study period at IUJ when he was inspired by observing effective business implementation.

For the five staff in Iraq, all of these Japanese business concepts were new and they were happy to learn about them. However, when it came to implementation, this was not an easy task due to cultural differences.

There were some cultural differences in: 1) working hours; 2) working ethic; 3) work responsibility; and 4) risk management between Iraqi and Japan businesses.

In Iraq, working hours are generally 7 hours per day, the same as Japan. However, in Japan, working hours may be extended depending on the work situation. Of course, there is a Japanese labor standard law which protects employees from overwork, but Japanese employees are accustomed to overtime work beyond normal working hours as a usual practice. In Iraq, regardless of urgency, employees work for 7 hours and are strict in sticking to their working hours. Due to the nature of their culture, they at first rejected working overtime even in urgent matters.

Iraq has been facing high population growth and it is said that 46% of the population are children. Due to the lack of school capacity, many of the schools are sharing facilities and have multiple shifts. Morning school is usually from 8:00-12:00, and afternoon school starts from 12:30-16:30, both in one school building. Taking into consideration this situation, adjustment of business day hours for teachers was sometimes needed to meet the demand which required overtime work. The mentality of "Our work is our first priority" was difficult for the Iraq local staff to adopt at first. It was only gradually that they started to understand and were convinced by these Japanese business customs and the necessity to be flexible in order for them to fully maximize their operation.

Another cultural difference is the work ethic. For example, 5S includes keeping the workplace clean, which makes it easier for people to engage in their jobs without wasting time or risking injury. However, in Iraq, if staff are requested to clean their working environment for the purpose of work efficiency, they are hesitant as cleaning is considered to be the role of a cleaner. The alternative is gradually being accepted by the Iraq local staff though, as they now understand that the 5S concept will lead them to effective productivity.

How staff perceive their work responsibility thus differs by culture. For example, if staff receive critical comments from teachers or principals, they do not necessarily know how to deal with complaints or handle any requests which are



not directly related to their work role.

Also, the concept of risk management is different in Iraq culture. In Iraq, if any problem or risky situation occurs, their immediate reaction is to say that it is not their responsibility. The Japanese risk management style however is deeply influenced by and embedded in its cultural values of consensus, meticulousness, and long-term orientation. By focusing on continuous improvement with the concept of kaizen, Japanese companies have strived to manage risks effectively while maintaining stability and sustainability over time.

Iraq is thus considered to have a challenging and high-risk business environment, and the business culture is different from Japan's as a result. Doing business for a Japanese company in Iraq is not easy. Therefore, finding out and estimating the risk, analyzing it, and planning on how to overcome it were the key factors to the success of the project. For example, the majority of the people in Basra prefecture in Iraq are Shia Muslims and are very conservative religious people.

During the religious season such as 'Ashura,' it is important to avoid unnecessary travel as there are no students going to the summer boot camp schools in Basra during this religious season. In addition, taking into consideration security issues is also important. Iraq is still not a stable and safe country, thus, the security of local staff is essential. Especially during the religious season, checking the transportation routes to avoid heavy congested traffic also leads to avoiding security risks.

Another risk that the local staff needed to be aware of was the unplanned holidays. There are many unplanned holidays announced by the Basra prefectural government which are not listed in the Ministry of Education's calendar. This factor was a risk which affected the execution of the project. Nevertheless, by teaching staff how to estimate and how to report risk, they gradually understood the concept of risk management. Learning the risk management plan has been a great lesson to the local staff in helping them to mitigate the possible risks and to run the project smoothly.

Another concept that they have applied is "Poka-Yoke." Poka-Yoke is a Japanese term that means "mistake-proofing" or "error prevention." This concept was formalized as part of the Toyota Production System, and it refers to any mechanism in a process that helps an equipment operator avoid (yokeru in Japanese) mistakes (poka in Japanese) and prevent human errors. For AL Yakoub's team in Iraq, some of the actions taken as part of Poka-Yoke was to not forget to recharge the robots or leave equipment behind when moving schools. Also, checking the status of transportation between Basra city and the suburban area to avoid any problems was done every morning. In addition, they have a board ("Kanban") in their office where they have a list of what to do next to read before leaving the office every day.

Ever since the launch of the project, AL Yakoub has been continuously conducting hourly daily meetings. Continuation of this daily routine is an important part of the project management. Since AL Yakoub is able to speak Arabic, the spoken language in Iraq, and comes from a similar cultural background that means that he understands the culture in Iraq, he makes an effort to explain the business concepts and train staff on how to effectively use Japanese concepts to lead to good results.

### **3) How AL Yakoub filled the gap and bridged the cultural difference in daily business operations**

What is required to fill the gap and bridge the cultural difference? Adopting another culture and implementing the Japanese style of business management in another country is challenging. Adaptation to the local culture is required to some extent. For example, in Iraq, the mobile application WhatsApp is commonly used, and the WhatsApp group is more active than official business emails. Many people in Iraq also engage SNS in business as it is easy to use among the majority. At the beginning, AL Yakoub used official email as a communication tool, however, he changed when he realized that was easier and much faster for staff to use the WhatsApp channel to share important information or request faster reporting.

As such, although there may be challenges in implementing the Japanese style of business in another country, by continuous teaching, learning, and trying to understand at both ends, it may be possible to reach a compromise and produce good results.

### **3. Hopes for the future**

What is AL Yakoub's hope for his future? He strongly believes that the COVID-19 pandemic paradoxically became a positive milestone in the global implementation of digital education. However, there are still challenges in implementing this form of education in developing countries. He wants to continue to contribute to digital education, especially in developing countries in Middle East and North Africa and other African countries, and hopefully in Syria in the future.

This is a continuous journey and how the Japanese business model will be perceived in other countries, and whether it can expand, and impact other developing countries is as yet unknown.

[END]

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### Attachments

1. AL Yakoub and his family at the JICA Tokyo International Center entrance during the JICA training program, August 2018.
2. AL Yakoub at IUJ graduation in Urasa campus in June 2019.
3. AL Yakoub in the Iraq office conducting a training session with his team in Basra city, March 2022.



Source: Yakoub, Mohannad AL. 2018. [Photograph of AL Yakoub and his family at the JICA Tokyo International Center entrance during the JICA training program].



Source: Yakoub, Mohannad AL, 2019. [Photograph of AL Yakoub and his family at the graduation of International University of Japan].

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Source: Yakoub, Mohannad AL, 2022. [Photograph of AL Yakoub in the Iraq office conducting a training session with his team in Basra city].

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