



## Bridging culture and building a career in Japan - The Case of Ahmed Ibraheem

### Study points

Students are expected to experience the journey of a JICA scholarship student who studied in Japan. He was doing his Master of Business Administration (MBA) course and learnt business management skills during his study period. After choosing to continue living and to obtain a job in Japan, he has been making steps to establish his career. Through this case discussion, students will reflect on their study experience in Japan. They will also discuss the possible challenges and/or obstacles that they may face when working in another country and trying to utilize gained knowledge and expertise. In addition, they will discuss the possible hurdles that they may face when pursuing a career in another country.

### Basic information

- Region: Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and East Asia
- Issue: Building a career in Japan
- Key words: JICA scholarship, Japanese business management, career development
- Country: Japan, Lebanon, and Syria
- Year: 2011-present

### Characters

Characters	Description
Ahmed Ibraheem (Main character)	Former JICA scholarship student in the 3 <sup>rd</sup> batch of the Japanese Initiative for the future of Syrian Refugees (JISR) program
Prof. Wenkai Li	Professor, Graduate School of International Management, International University of Japan (IUJ)
Senior colleague	Senior colleague in current work

### Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
IUJ	International University of Japan
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
JISR	Japanese Initiative for the future of Syrian Refugees
MBA	Master of Business Administration
TPS	Toyota Production Systems
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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## **Summary**

On March 15, 2011 the Syrian civil war broke out and changed the life of Ahmed Ibraheem. After graduating from the national University in Syria, he had continued with his Master's course while working in a well-known oil company. He was pursuing his Master's degree but the outbreak of the civil war hindered his study.

Ahmed Ibraheem, a former JICA scholarship student, completed his MBA at the International University of Japan in June 2022. During his study period, he learned business marketing, finance, and project management topics. Also, he had the opportunity to do an internship at Toyota Motor Corporation for about a month to learn more in depth about the Toyota Production Systems (TPS) and its business principles on the ground and experience firsthand Japanese business knowledge on site.

Although his past working experience was mainly in Petroleum Engineering, he has been employed as a Data Analyst in a logistics company in Japan to help him establish a new career. It has not been easy to adjust to a domestic Japanese working environment and also establish a career in Japan in a different field from his past working experience.

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

### **Chronology of events**

March 15, 2011	Outbreak of the Syrian civil war
July 2011-April 2018	Worked at a joint venture oil company
December 2011	Suspension of the foreign oil company's operations in Syria
October 2018	Moved to Lebanon and started working for a construction company
August 30, 2019	Arrival in Japan
September 2019	Start of Ahmed Ibraheem's study at the International University of Japan as a JICA scholarship student
June 2021	Conducted an internship at Toyota Motor Corporation
June 2022	Completion of Ahmed Ibraheem's MBA program at the International University of Japan
September 2022	Completion of the JICA Development Studies Program for Ahmed Ibraheem
February 2023 -current	Working in a Japanese logistics company as a Data Analyst

## **Key questions**

Students are required to discuss the following:

1. What are the external environmental challenges that Ahmed Ibraheem had to face? How did those challenges affect his life? Also, how do various external threats affect peoples' survival, livelihood, human rights, and dignity?
2. What kind of impact did the JICA scholarship program have on Ahmed Ibraheem's career?
3. How did Ahmed Ibraheem perceive the cultural differences between his home country and Japan and how did he adapt and overcome some of these differences in his current work? What are the possible solutions to overcome some of the cultural differences in your workplace?
4. If you will study or you have already studied in Japan under a JICA scholarship, how would you maximize the advantage of your study experience in Japan to be able to develop a new career in the future?

### **1. Prologue**

It was on March 15, 2011 when the Syrian civil war broke out. The Arab Spring which was a series of anti-government protests spreading across the Arab world in the early 2010's had triggered large-scale protests in Syria and there were many pro-democracy rallies across the country. The Syrian government used violence to suppress these protests, and opposition militias began to form in 2011. By 2012, the conflict had expanded into a full-fledged civil war.

The Syrian civil war is said to be one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes of recent times. The human rights of the citizens have been violated and their precarious livelihoods threatened, creating drastic regional disparities and many population groups have been facing the violation of their economic and social rights since then. More than five million people have been forced to leave their home country and flee to neighboring countries.

Syria still faces ongoing conflict, and the security situation remains extremely volatile. The country's economy has been witnessing hyperinflation in prices and the elevated price pressures have been constraining and devastating the lives of many. It is not easy to imagine what would happen when our country faces conflict and this starts to threaten human security, and affect people's survival, livelihood, and dignity. However, this was the difficult reality that Ahmed Ibraheem had to face.

Ahmed Ibraheem graduated from a well-known national university in Syria, majoring in Petroleum Engineering. Soon after graduating, he started working at an oil company that was a venture between a national and a well-known foreign

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company. It was his dream to work in such a well-known company and he was highly motivated to work there. While working, he continued with his Master's program in Petroleum Engineering. His study mainly focused on the oil field, and he conducted experimental work in the oil fields owned by the company that he was working for. However, after the outbreak of the civil war, he was not able to reach the oil field due to security reasons. He wanted to continue with his experiments but due to the fact that he was not able to gain access to the oil field and get results for his research, he was not able to continue with his Master's program.

At work, he was managing and supervising drilling operations and worked on-site in the oil field. However, due to the civil war outbreak, in December 2011, the foreign company that had ventured with the national petroleum company that he was working for had suspended all of its activities in Syria, including exploration and production. Therefore, it became impossible for him to continue his work in this company.

A while after the foreign company's suspension of its activities in Syria, he managed to find a working opportunity with another national oil company. He worked there from 2012 until 2018. He worked in an oil field which was far from the capital, and many times it was attacked and he was endangered. From 2014 to 2018, he stopped working in the oil field and started working in the office in Damascus, the capital city. Although it was not fully safe in the capital, it was much safer than the open desert where the oil field was. However, the conflict in his country intensified.

During those days, he had to face mortar bombing almost every day. It became life threatening as he experienced shelling in front of his home causing severe devastation around the area. His neighborhood was completely destroyed and he has lost many friends and relatives from these attacks. His future seemed hopeless as there was no sign of a good outcome and the situation seemed to get worse and worse every day.

It was then that he decided to move to the neighboring country, Lebanon, and went to the UNHCR there to register himself as a refugee.

As Lebanon is not an oil producing country, he could not find a job related to his past working experience. However, he managed to find a job in an Operations Team of a construction company in Lebanon from October 2018. As he had to discontinue with his Master's course in Syria during this move he had also been seeking opportunities to continue his study. It was on Facebook that he saw information about the Japan International Cooperation Agency's (JICA) scholarship program, the Japanese Initiative for the future of Syrian Refugees (JISR). The photo of the beautiful Mount Fuji and the cherry blossom which accompanied the JISR program information caught his attention.

Many people in the Middle East choose to study in the US or Europe. Europe is

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only a few hours away by air and due to their historical background, people were more familiar with Europe. For Ahmed Ibraheem though, while he had considered scholarship opportunities in the UK, he knew that study in Japan would be a great opportunity for him. After seeing the information about the JISR program, he searched for possible courses to apply for and decided to apply.

His specialization is petroleum engineering and lies between Mechanical Engineering and Geology. When he searched for universities to apply, there were none that offered courses in Mechanical Engineering or Geology. The only field that he could apply for was an MBA. When he made the decision to apply for an MBA, he thought that it was time for him to change his career and open himself for another career in the future.

JISR is a scholarship program, one of JICA's Knowledge Co-Creation Programs (Long-Term), and is implemented as part of Official Development Assistance of the Government of Japan in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This program provides higher education opportunities at Master's degree level in Japanese universities to Syrian refugees who are staying in neighboring countries. This program's goal is to 'build a bridge between Syria and Japan' and is intended to foster capable Syrian individuals to lead Syria's reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts at an appropriate time in the future, while enhancing their understanding of Japanese people, society, and systems so as to strengthen the mutual friendship between Syria and Japan.

After successfully getting accepted for the JICA scholarship, Ahmed Ibraheem arrived in Japan on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019, as part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> batch of JISR program.

## **2. University life in Japan**

The JISR program has progressed over the years. The program received its 1<sup>st</sup> batch of students in 2017, and up until the 2<sup>nd</sup> batch, the scholarship duration of the JICA scholars had varied depending on the accepting university. For those scholars who started their study at the respective university as a regular graduate school student and found a job after graduating, the duration was two years.

For JICA scholars who started their study at the respective university as a graduate school research student, then became a regular student after 6 months and found a job after graduating, the scholarship period was two and half years. Also, there were those who had one year period as graduate school research student, then became a regular student and completed their degree within two years. For them, the scholarship period was 3 years. Thus, the duration of each scholar varied within the accepting university for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> batch.

From the 3<sup>rd</sup> batch, all scholars started their first year as a graduate school research student and focused on taking Japanese language classes in the first year and completed their study within two years, a total of three years. From the 4<sup>th</sup> batch, intensive Japanese courses have been conducted at the Morito Institute

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of Global Higher Education at Hiroshima University, where students take 8 months of a Japanese Language Intensive Course upon their arrival.

Ahmed Ibraheem, who was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> batch of the JISR program, took Japanese language courses at IUJ in his first year, which focused on Japanese reading, writing, and speaking.

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 that offered a US curriculum in English.

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

For Ahmed Ibraheem who came from a Petroleum Engineering background, the MBA course was a new study area for him. Although he was knowledgeable in operations management, the fields of marketing and finance were new to him, and it was good knowledge to gain. In IUJ, most of the courses included group work and this taught him how to listen to people from diverse cultural backgrounds and how to negotiate, persuade and convince other people. These techniques are very important when working in a company and they have become useful for him in his current workplace.

### **3. Internship at Toyota Motor Systems**

During his study period at IUJ, he applied for an internship at Toyota Motor Corporation. In Syria his father had driven a Toyota Corolla vehicle and in his previous workplace there were many Toyota Land Cruisers used; thus, Toyota was a company that he felt close to.

Toyota is a well-known global corporation that almost anyone in the world would know. When he applied for the internship, he strongly believed that an internship experience at Toyota would enable him to accelerate his knowledge and skills. His wish was to learn about the Toyota Production System (TPS) that eliminates waste and pursues the use of the most efficient methods, which as socio-technical systems can be applied to all industries.

When he was interviewed for the internship, he was questioned by the company about Toyota's business principles, vision, the use of Kaizen methods, and TPS. As Ahmed Ibraheem had learned about these principles during his study at IUJ, in his Operation Management class and Japanese Style Management class, he was able to convey what he learned in his school, which caught them by surprise as he was knowledgeable about the principles.

The internship took place for about a month in June 2021. His internship was joined by another JISR program scholar. However, due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, his internship had to be conducted mostly online. He learnt about philosophies and the concepts of TPS and Toyota Business Practice (TBP).

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Also, he had the opportunity to visit Toyota's vehicle sales outlets and factory. To see the concept on the ground was eye opening and a great learning curve for him.

At the end of his internship, he conducted a final presentation to the staff in the department he worked in. His presentation focused on awareness of the issues that he had been facing when he lived in Syria. In Syria, many people are still living in a severe environment where they face difficulties in earning income and are under difficult living conditions. For example, there are frequent power outages. There are times when a power outage lasts for most of the day. Also, the internet connection can be unstable. In such environment it is difficult to live, let alone to study.

As Toyota Motor Corporation values human resource development, he felt that it is important to have a learning environment for young people. Therefore, he proposed to provide a learning environment with the support from companies like Toyota Motor Corporation to establish a learning environment in a university where students can focus on their studies without worrying about problems like power outages and internet connectivity issues.

Ahmed Ibraheem who has experienced those issues in Syria, understands well what is required in his country.

### **4. Seeking an occupation in Japan**

Unlike other JICA scholarship programs where JICA scholars would study in Japan for several years to complete their Master or Doctorate degrees and go back to their respective countries after completion to resume their work, the JISR program is different. Syria is still experiencing conflict and in danger and facing severe living conditions, and this situation does not allow many of them to go back to their home country. Therefore, many JISR students choose to continue their life in Japan. Ahmed Ibraheem has also chosen to continue his living in Japan and establish a career there.

However, looking for a job in Japan was not easy. He started job hunting before graduating from the university in June 2022, but struggled to get an offer before graduation. He applied for more than 70 job opportunities and was introduced by JICA to various companies. However, the advanced Japanese language skills required by many of the Japanese companies became an obstacle.

Ahmed Ibraheem worked closely and intensively with JICA staff and the staff at the Japan Association for Refugees (JAR), a supporting organization of JICA, to brush up his CV, and continuously practiced for interviews. With strong support from JICA, he tirelessly worked during this job application period.

The support that JICA provides to its scholarship students, including Ahmed Ibraheem is extensive and wide ranging. As many JISR program students

including Ahmed Ibraheem wish to obtain a job and continue living in Japan after completion of their studies, JICA provides support in 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 with practicing for job interviews.

Information about job fairs is offered and scholars are encouraged to attend. Additionally, business manner seminars are conducted twice a year, where the business manners concerning job hunting and necessary information such as how to apply to Japanese companies and the business language learning opportunities that are offered to JISR program scholars. After number of attempts, Ahmed Ibraheem finally succeeded in being employed by a Japanese logistics company where he is currently working.

He currently works in the Corporate Information Technology Department, which focuses on the IT field.

## **5. Starting to work in a Japanese company**

After starting to work in the Japanese company in February 2023, he has been encountering several cultural differences.

Firstly, the working hours are different to the Syrian one. Usually in Syria, the typical working day is from 8:30-15:00, which is 6.5 hours. People may do overtime depending on their work assignment but the maximum overtime may only be for an hour, up till 16:00 at most. However, in Japan, the normal working hour is usually between 9:00-18:00 for 8 hours. Depending on the work assignment and situation, staff are also required to conduct overtime work to meet their assignments.

Secondly, there is a difference in the working environment. In Syria or Lebanon, the working environment is usually lively and can be noisy at times. However, at his office in Japan, it is a quiet working environment and not many conversations take place in the office. This working environment, which is completely different from Syria, is what he has adapted to now.

Thirdly, there is a difference in the language. This may depend on the nature of the working environment and the spoken language in the company that you are employed for. However, for Ahmed Ibraheem who is working in a Japanese domestic company, the spoken and written languages are only in Japanese. Internal and external email communications are also done in Japanese, which is quite challenging for him to manage.

In the company, Ahmed Ibraheem is the only foreign staff in the company aside from one Asian employee. Although he had acquired Japanese language skills during his study period at IUJ, he did not have much opportunity to speak or use

the Japanese language as his university environment was international and he mainly used English. Therefore, working in a company with limited number of staffs that are fluent in English, pushes him to be fully engaged in the Japanese language while working. This is the first time for him to be fully exposed to the Japanese culture and Japanese language environment, which can be challenging at times.

Luckily, when he started working, his senior colleague in charge of his job training was fluent in English. Therefore, learning his workflow tasks became much easier to understand. However, it is still challenging to engage in work that is conducted fully in a language that is not his mother tongue. In addition, coming from an Engineering background, IT is a completely new field for Ahmed Ibraheem. Thus, engaging in a new field and conducting work in Japanese language, he has found some challenges in his current work at times.

Although he has been encountering cultural differences, he has learned to adapt his learning from his studies to the new working environment.

## **6. Sharing his working experience at IUJ**

During his study period, Prof. Wenkai Li was his supervisor and worked very closely with him. Even after graduating from IUJ, Ahmed Ibraheem has been keeping in touch with Prof. Wenkai Li and has maintained close communication with him.

Prof. Wenkai Li manages the 'Digital Supply Chain Management' course for the Digital Transformation Program and has invited Ahmed Ibraheem as a guest speaker in his course two years in a row to give a lecture titled 'Digitalized Supply Chain: Case of International Freight Forwarding'. This presentation provides real-business information to encourage the current students' career development and help them prepare to join the workforce with the skills and awareness that are required.

Ahmed Ibraheem was happy to have the opportunity to return to IUJ as an alumnus to share his knowledge and experience with the current students.

## **6. Goal for the future**

What is Ahmed Ibraheem's goal for his future?

He hopes to gain working experience in Japan, and one day in the future hopes to go back to his home country of Syria. As the JISR program aims, he hopes that his understanding of Japanese people, society and business system will someday help Syria's reconstruction and peacebuilding effort. How he will become a bridge between Japan and Syria is a continuous journey.

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