

# Research related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone: A Critical Review

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**Abstracts:** Aqaba, a major city in the southern part of Jordan and the only coastal city in the country, has received extensive research due to its historical, geographical, political, tourism and economic importance both at the local and international levels. This study aims to review the corpus of research accomplished over the past five decades and directed to certain aspects of the city. The importance of this study stems from the fact that the major bulk of research either in English or in Arabic has been solely directed to specific parts while neglecting others of no less importance. The qualitative study uses a comparative analytical approach to explore the nature of researching Aqaba including the nature of the topics covered, the aims and the methods used in the corpus of research. The importance of this study is perceived as it provides a database that enables researchers and policy-makers and private and public institution to use while planning major projects in the city of Aqaba. In result, this study will contribute to advancing and enriching the library of research about Aqaba with the appropriate references for strategic planning and promoting a bright future for the bride of the Red Sea, in line with the efforts of His Majesty King Abdullah II bin Al Hussein in reform and development.

**Keywords:** Science of Research, Aqaba, Strategic Planning, the University of Jordan/ Aqaba, ASEZA.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As long as man fulfills the mission of the caliphate on the land that God intended for him, he strives to uncover the hidden of the laws of the universe and the secrets of life in search of knowledge (Al-Taweel, 2003). Scientific research and the pursuit of knowledge are among the greatest means of intellectual and material advancement, as it confirms the dignity and virtue that God Almighty has given to man among his creatures. In order to achieve this goal, God Almighty has harnessed to man all that exists: he seeks in the earth's paths, swims in the atmosphere of space, and dives into the depths of the sea (Al-Taweel, 2003). The Lord of the world said in the Holy Qur'an: "Say, is it equal to those who know and those who do not know?"(39:9). God says: "May Allah raise those of you who believe and those who have attained knowledge."(58:11). Stressing the value of searching knowledge, God also says: "Indeed only those of God's servants who have knowledge fear Him." (35:28).

This mission of searching knowledge has also been a major concern of prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). He articulates this vision as: "Whoever follows a path in pursuit of knowledge, Allah will facilitate for him a path to Paradise. Indeed, the angels lower their wings for the seeker of knowledge, out of pleasure at what he does. Verily, the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth, even the fish in the water, ask forgiveness from Allah for the knowledgeable. The superiority of a scholar over a devout worshiper is like the superiority of the moon over the rest of the stars. Indeed, the scholars are the inheritors of the prophets, who bequeath neither dinar nor dirham, only knowledge. So whoever acquires it has actually taken abundant wealth" (Tirmidhi, Ibn-Maajah, and Abu-Dawood).

From this standpoint, the importance of the present study stems from its all-encompassing aim to offer a critical evaluation of the corpus of research done with regard to various aspects of the city of Aqaba. It aims to respond to the following research questions:

- What is the nature of research topics related to the city of Aqaba?
- Is research sufficient and comprehensive to cover all sectors in the Aqaba region, and consistent with the comprehensive plan of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority?

- Is there a difference in content between studies in Arabic and studies in English in their treatment of the subject of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone?
- What is the role of higher education institutions in Aqaba in general, and the University of Jordan, Aqaba branch in particular, in supporting scientific research related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone?

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study follows a qualitative descriptive approach in its reviews of scientific research related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone. It reviews research in terms of the topic of its coverage, aims, methods and findings. The study mainly fosters close reading and cross-comparisons of research papers both written in Arabic and English highlighting the overall aim of these studies. The present study follows the theoretical tenets of case study methodology since it focuses on a closed context of research. Although the methodology and research structure used here can be applied to further contexts, the present study limits itself with the context-bounded aims and findings. The data used in this study is a corpus of research papers that address the city of Aqaba over the last five decades. Therefore, another importance of this study stems from the fact that it could be considered as the first of its type offering a database of all research done about the city of Aqaba.

## **3. RESEARCH STRUCTURE**

The study is structured as follows: firstly, it discusses the significance of researching the city of Aqaba especially its importance to the country as the sole coastal city, its location as well as its historical value. Secondly, it reviews studies accomplished and whose topic is the city of Aqaba in terms of their subject matter, value, aim, methodology and importance. In this section, the paper will adopt a comparative approach to analyze, critique and evaluate those studies in light of their importance to the city and country. Thirdly, based on the discussions and findings in the previous section, the paper will provide specific conclusions and recommendations for further research and policymakers in Jordan.

### **3.1. The importance of researching the city of Aqaba**

The need for scholarly research nowadays has become more demanded than ever, as the world is in a frantic race to reach the largest possible amount of accurate and fruitful knowledge that ensures the comfort and well-being of human beings and guarantees them superiority over others (Al-Nuaimi, 1997; Odeh and Malkawi, 1992). When the developed countries, especially the western countries, have realized the importance of scientific research and the great role it plays in progress and development, many countries in the Third World paid attention to research and provided it with all the requirements it needs, whether material or moral (Abu-Orabi, 2010). Since scientific research is considered the main pillar of the economy and development, it has become an essential pillar of human knowledge in all its fields. Additionally, it has become the most prominent feature of the modern era throughout the entire history of human civilization. The importance of scholarly research is further due to the fact that nations have realized that their welfare and superiority are bounded to their scientific advancement, intellectual and behavioral abilities of their citizens (Al-Khateeb, 2020; Al-Kharabsheh, 2007; Al-Tal and Qahel, 2007).

Although research requires many complex procedures that quite often cover more than one aspect field and requires large funds, countries have become aware of its value therefore securing large budgets for research projects and facilitating all obstacles and overcome all difficulties (Hamdan, 2015). This emerges from the fact that research is essential for their growth and development of many countries in all sectors. The importance of scientific research increases with the increasing dependence of countries, especially developed ones, for the extent to which they realize its importance in their continued progress and development, thus achieving the welfare of their peoples and maintaining their status (Abdel-Malik and Abradsha, 2019). Scientific research is useful in providing trustworthy and valuable knowledge about the universe in which we live, about the phenomena we encounter, and about important places, personalities, etc., It is also useful in overcoming the difficulties that we may face, whether political, environmental, economic, social and others (Abdullah, 2013; Jibreen and Al-Ghadeer, 2001).

Scientific research also benefits human beings in investigating the facts that they benefit from them in overcoming some of their problems, such as diseases and epidemics, or in knowing archaeological sites, or historical figures, or in the critical interpretation of opinions, doctrines and ideas, and in solving economic, health, educational, political and other problems, and is useful in interpreting and predicting natural phenomena by reaching generalizations and general laws (Al-Najjar and Al-Zoubi, 2013; Gharaibeh, 2008; Mahjoob, 2005).

In short, it can be said that nowadays scientific research has become one of the important fields that make countries develop at a tremendous speed and overcome all the problems they face in scientific ways.

### **3.2. Why Aqaba?**

Aqaba is strategically located at local, regional and global levels. It is considered a meeting point between land and sea routes that connect the three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. Aqaba also has sites that prove the existence of humans at least 5,500 years ago. Perhaps one of the most important archaeological sites in Aqaba, which dates back to the Middle Ages, the newly discovered site, which is believed to be the oldest church in the world to date. In addition to this, it has many Islamic historical places and monuments such as the Islamic city of Ayla, a castle dating back to the Mamluk era, a museum, and the house of Sharif Hussein bin Ali, may God rest his soul, great-grandfather of His Majesty King Abdullah II, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace. (ASEZA website; ADC website).

Nowadays, Aqaba attracts tens of thousands and possibly millions of migratory birds during their journey between Europe and Africa during the spring and autumn migration seasons. This massive migration of birds has called the authorities to establish a special center for bird watching in Aqaba. This bird watching station has become an important landmark in ecotourism (Aqaba Bird Observatory website). Thanks to its pure water in the gulf of Aqaba, the city has become one of the major attractive places for marine tourism. With more than 140 species of coral reefs and countless colorful and rare fish species, it has become a destination for not only tourists, but also for researchers interested in marine life from countries around the world. For this reason, the government has established The Marine Science Station, located on the southern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba, which hosts a marine biology exhibition and supervised by the University of Jordan Aqaba branch.

According to the latest statistics of the Department of Statistics in Jordan (2020), and with reference to the General Population Census, Aqaba covers an area of 6,905 square kilometers and has an estimated population of 213,000 people. The city includes many important industrial facilities, free trade zones, in addition to King Hussein International Airport. Aqaba is also known as source of phosphates and some types of shells. It is therefore, the main economic city in Jordan and one of the major economic recourses for the country.

Aqaba received direct attention from His Majesty King Abdullah Ibn Al-Hussien the II as it contains Jordan's only seaport. Following the insights of His majesty, establishment of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority has become the main resource of the country's income. It marks a clear expression of this privileged position. The Aqaba Special Economic Zone (ASEZ) was launched in 2001 as duty-free, a multi-sectoral development zone with reduced taxes. By 2008, the Aqaba Special Economic Zone had attracted \$18 billion in investment, and by this, Aqaba has surpassed the \$6 billion figure it aspired to reach by 2020 by 300 percent and more in less than a decade. The Aqaba Special Economic Zone Commission has revised its target of bringing in another \$12 billion by 2020, with deals signed in 2009 alone amounting to \$14 billion (Oxford Business Group, 2018).

Aqaba has attracted international logistics companies, which has strengthened the city's position as a transport and logistics center, in addition to many distinguished projects, the most important of which are: Marsa Zayed, Saraya Aqaba, Ayla Oasis, Tala Bay, and the port transfer project through the crossing company.

In 2002, the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) adopted a comprehensive organizational plan covering development activities in the zone at the level of tourism, commercial, industrial and logistics, as well as other investment sectors. The extensive planning currently includes five areas: Aqaba City, Aqaba Port Area, Southern Coastal Region, Southern Heavy Industries Zone, and Airport North Area (The Worldfolio, 2015).

For its historical and economic value, in addition to its remote location, Aqaba has also been the concern of the Ministry of Higher Education. Nowadays, Aqaba has three universities including: Aqaba University College of Al-Balqa Applied University, the newly established Aqaba University of Technology, and the University of Jordan, Aqaba Branch. Since its inception, the University of Jordan in Aqaba has realized the importance of scientific research and its role in the progress and prosperity of the city. Therefore, it has given an immense priority to research, establishing research centers and emphasizing the importance of research among its faculty members and students. The overall aim was to establish a culture of research and exploration of the diverse aspects of the city including its cultural, economic and historical values. Therefore, research has received the first priority of the presidents of the University of Jordan since its establishment (The University of Jordan website). Stating research as one of its main statements of mission, the University of Jordan looks forward to explore all the potentials of the city through ascending the highest runways of excellence, creativity and progress of the local community of the city. Among these initiatives, the university has established a deanship specialized in scientific research on its campus in Amman in 1973, which is responsible for providing research funds for research projects throughout the entire country including Aqaba.

Today, The University of Jordan comes to fruition from sober research and studies. Thanks to this vision, the research papers which has been published by faculty members and researchers at the university reaches more than 17,000. These research papers have been published in local and international refereed and reputable journals. On the other hand, the number of academic contributions and achievements of the members of the University of Jordan is about 200 books, and more than 110 patents (Deanship of Scientific Affairs website).

After we realized the importance of scientific research and the specificity of the Aqaba region, perhaps the question that arises here is: How much research in general and the research of the University of Jordan in particular is related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone? Is the scientific research associated with Aqaba sufficient and comprehensive? Has the research taken into account the comprehensive plan that the Authority seeks to achieve so that the efforts of researchers are integrated with the aspirations of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority? The next section will critically respond to these questions for the aim of refining this huge amount of research that concerns itself with the city of Aqaba.

### **3.3. Research related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone**

When tracking the information network of Jordanian official university libraries (Unified Index - Horizon System), we find that the number of research related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone is 144 researches. The research in question here includes master's and doctoral theses, where the number of master's theses associated with the Aqaba Special Economic Zone is 127, while the number of doctoral theses associated with the Aqaba Special Economic Zone is only 17.

The oldest thesis related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone and found in the index for the unified year dates back to 1973 entitled "The City of Aqaba and its Port / Prepared by Musa Abouda Samha: Supervised by Mohamed Sobhi Abdel Hakim", a master's thesis in geography from Cairo University. It is also followed by a master's thesis in geography from the University of Jordan in 1985 entitled "The Geography of Tourism in the City of Aqaba / prepared by Mustafa Muhammad Ahmed Musa: supervised by Nassim Fares Barham". After that, we find 9 theses from the nineties of the last century, and the vast majority of these were written after 2000.

The most recent thesis (2023), which reached the unified index in June 2023, is prepared by a student of Master Business Management at Jerash University, Moatasem Al-Hiyari, and supervised by Prof. Ahmad Malkawi, entitled "The Impact of Using Information and Communication Technology on the Services Quality, the Modified role of E-marketing: A case study of Kempinski Hotel Aqaba".

With regard to the distribution of universities supervising these theses associated with the Aqaba Special Economic Zone, we find the following:

- University of Jordan: 64 Theses (51 Master's Theses and 13 Doctoral Theses)
- Yarmouk University: 25 Master's Theses
- Mutah University: 24 Master's Theses
- University of Science and Technology: 5 Master's Theses
- Al al-Bayt University: 5 Master's Theses
- Hashemite University: 4 Master's Theses
- Al-Balqa Applied University: 2 Master's Theses
- Amman Arab University: 5 Theses (4 Master's Theses and 1 Doctoral Thesis)
- Jerash University: 2 Master's Theses
- Israa' University: 1 Master's Thesis
- Al-Hussain bin Talal University: 1 Master's Thesis
- Middle East University: 1 Master's Thesis
- Cairo University: 1 Master's Thesis
- Bremen University: 1 Doctoral Thesis
- University of York: 1 Doctoral Thesis
- University of Aix-Marseille: 1 Doctoral Thesis
- University of the West of England (Bristol): 1 Master's Thesis

As for the topics of university theses related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone, the researcher tried hard to classify them, noting that many of the topics of the theses belong to overlapping fields of study (multidisciplinary) such as tourism economics and technology in management. They are however classified according to the closest field of study to which they belong, so the numbers were as follows:

- Marine Sciences / Biology / Chemistry / Physics / Earth and Environmental Sciences / Health: 71 Theses
- Economics and Business Administration: 20 Theses
- Geography: 12 Theses
- Architecture and Civil Engineering: 11 Theses
- Educational Sciences: 15 Theses
- History and Archaeology: 8 Theses
- Technology: 6 Theses
- Law: 1 Thesis

It is worth mentioning that the topics of university theses related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone issued by the University of Jordan include environment, geography, architecture, business administration and history. Mutah University has distinguished its theses in the topics of educational sciences, in addition to management and history, and with regard to Yarmouk University, most of the research is in marine sciences for supervisors who are now working at the University of Jordan in Aqaba.

Looking at the numbers above, it becomes clear that marine science is the most related subject to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone that was discussed in university theses, followed by business administration, knowing that I did not find a single doctoral thesis in the field of economics and business administration, as the theses are all master's.

With regard to theses written in English, we find that most of the theses of marine sciences are in English.

### **3.4. Scholarly research papers addressing Aqaba:**

The researcher has tracked nearly 1,400 titles in English whose titles involve the name of Aqaba city. It has been found that the majority of those research papers are mostly about marine sciences including algae, corals, marine organisms and stratigraphy, and found very few papers published in refereed scientific journals on other scientific topics.

In addition to research produced by Jordanians, there have been several other studies done by Western researchers. Those studies focused on topics related to history and archaeology. Despite the fact that those studies are far fewer than those done by local Jordanians, the research accomplished by Westerners addressed underreached areas. At this point of the present study, it is worth comparing Western research (if it is possible to call it as such) to those studies produced by Jordanians.

Firstly, and most importantly, it is noticed that the majority of research done by Jordanian focused on topics such as tourism, marine life, economic financial growth. On the other hand, those studies done by Westerners mainly focus on human aspects including the history and the archeology of the city. They traced the ancient civilizations lived in the city. They also have provided evidence-based findings of those civilizations thanks to their archeological studies (Aqaba Project 1986-2002). Additionally, they used qualitatively oriented methods such as case study methodology, longitudinal and ethnographic research. Such type of research has enabled shedding the light on a largely neglected field of research in Aqaba. Whilst research done by Jordanians utilized quantitative methods such as questionnaires and surveys, research done by Westerners seems to focus on specific aspects of the city of Aqaba. In short, it could be concluded that the main focus of local research was purely economic while other international research has highlighted the historical value of the city.

Secondly, the findings of local research have created an image of Aqaba as only a destination for economic investment as well as a tourism destination. Those findings have shaped an image of Aqaba as a modern industrial city, which is far different from its reality. For example, when browsing the Wikipedia or any other encyclopedia websites or even when surfing Aqaba page in the Arabic version one finds that all of these resources clearly focus on attracting tourists to visit the city searching for food and drink recreation and investment. As for the economic side, these websites underscore the fact that Aqaba is exempt from taxes to attract investors. Ironically on the other hand, the English version of the free encyclopedia one can find accurate and extensive details about Aqaba including its rich history and the ancient civilizations that used to prosper in the city.

Such inconsistency mainly results from the findings and recommendations of research and studies done by Jordanians, which mainly highlight the economic and tourism aspects while neglecting others. Additionally, it could be concluded that local research including research projects has focused on the materialistic (or hardware) of the city while the international studies have included the cultural and historical value of the city. In short, the researcher deems these findings worthy of publishing since research culture about Aqaba has for long given priority of extensively researched areas while overlooking others.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Probably, the principle finding of the present research is that the Aqaba Special Economic Zone is still in dire need of extensive studies on population, social sciences and humanities in all fields commensurate with the future of Aqaba and its comprehensive plan. Areas such as security aspect, smuggling, customs, youth needs, women's productive projects, childhood are missing in the corpus of studies done on Aqaba both international and local ones. It is also found that no studies have been done on city twinning: Aqaba and Varna (Bulgaria)/Aqaba and Malaga (Spain)/Aqaba and St. Petersburg (Russia)/Aqaba and Basra (Iraq)/Aqaba and Alcamo (Italy).

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher provides the following recommendations for both the future researchers and policymakers:

1. Establishing a specialized study center to promote scientific research related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone.
2. Issuing a refereed scientific journal specialized in the Aqaba Special Economic Zone.
3. Directing faculty members in the Aqaba Special Economic Zone to the need to link their various research topics to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone.
4. Encouraging and urging faculty members to publish their scientific research related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone in international journals.

5. Cooperating with the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority in conducting academic research that is commensurate with the comprehensive plan of the city of Aqaba.
6. Establishing a competition for scientific research related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone and allocating valuable prizes and rewards for the best research.
7. Establishing a special corner in the University of Jordan Library, Aqaba branch, specialized in all references, documents and university theses related to the Aqaba Special Economic Zone, to be a reference for all researchers and those interested.
8. Allocating a university course (credit hour) for students of the University of Jordan, Aqaba branch, under the name (Aqaba History and Development) or (Aqaba Renaissance and Development) so that the subject includes historical, geographical and economic topics and a youth leadership project to advance Aqaba and be proud of its achievements.

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