

Japan, relations with the Islamic world

Japan's relations with parts of the Islamic world commenced mainly in the nineteenth century, after the 1868 Meiji Restoration initiated a programme of modernisation in Japan that included attempts to establish political and economic ties with Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Prior to the nineteenth century, Japan was barely known to the Islamic world, other than as a distant country in East Asia that sometimes engaged in trade with Muslim states in Southeast Asia, such as the Malacca Sultanate, in the ninth/fifteenth century. Japan was also sometimes associated with the legend of Gog and Magog. However, after the forced "opening" of Japan by Commodore Perry in 1853, followed by the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan embarked upon a path of rapid modernisation of state institutions and Japanese society, led by "enlightened" intellectuals and Westernised statesmen who anticipated the nation's acceptance as one of the Great Powers. Meiji Japan's successes in modernising inspired the enthusiasm of many in the Islamic world, who considered Japan a model for their own pursuits of modernity. As an "Eastern" nation, modern Japan was disproving social Darwinist racial hierarchies, which placed non-Western peoples below Europeans on the civilisational ladder. The Crimean Tatar journalist İsmail Gaspirali (also spelled Gasprinski, d. 1914) was among the early commentators on Japan's rise and achievements, writing in his newspaper *Tercümân* (*Terciman*, "The interpreter"), published in Bahçesaray, Crimea, in the 1890s.

The Ottoman sultan, too, took notice. Various exchanges of presents between the

sultan and the Japanese emperor culminated in the decision by the sultan to dispatch an Ottoman frigate, the *Ertuğrul*, to Japan in 1889. This mission was intended not only as a means of reciprocating presents and opening communications as to the possibility of an Ottoman-Japanese alliance, but also as a gesture by the Ottoman sultan to the Islamic world, in his role as the self-proclaimed caliph of all Muslims. The ship stopped along the way in many ports in Muslim territories ruled by Europeans, causing consternation among the colonial powers because of the popular support shown the Ottomans as champions of the colonised local Muslim populations. The frigate endured several crises on the way to Japan, delaying its arrival. Upon its departure from Yokohama in late 1890, although warned by the Japanese navy of impending storms and high seas, the *Ertuğrul* attempted to sail and was struck by a typhoon off the Japanese coast, sinking the ship and killing most of its 609-member crew, including the Ottoman emissary, Admiral Osman Pasha. The survivors (apparently numbering between 69 and 74; the sources vary) were rescued by Japanese locals and eventually transported back to Istanbul via Japanese warships. A monument to commemorate the drowned seamen was erected at Ōshima Island, Japan, and ceremonies have been held there on several occasions.

Japan's dramatic victory over the Russian Empire in 1905 was covered extensively by the press in many places in the Islamic world, including the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Qajar Iran, India, and Russia, in the Turkic Muslim press. It appeared to have had less effect upon Muslims in Southeast Asia. The war was observed directly by Colonel Pertev Bey

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

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