

# Japan's Global Claim to Asia and the World of Islam: Transnational Nationalism and World Power, 1900–1945



Most people at the turn of the twenty-first century have forgotten that there was a time in Japan before the Second World War when Japanese nationalists showed an Asianist face to the world's Muslims, whom they wanted to befriend as allies in the construction of a new Asia under Japanese domination. The rise of Japan was a destabilizing factor that attracted Muslim activists who wanted to cooperate with the 'Rising Star of the East' against the Western empires, accelerating contacts between Japan and the world of Islam from vast regions of Eurasia and North Africa. When Muslim newspapers celebrated Japan's defeat of Russia in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War as the victory of the downtrodden Eastern peoples over the invincible West, a Turkish nationalist feminist, Halide Edip, like many other women, named her son Togo. Egyptian, Turkish, and Persian poets wrote odes to the Japanese nation and the emperor.<sup>1</sup> In the Islamic movement of Aceh, the staunch Muslim area of Sumatra that was forcibly brought under control through a Dutch pacification campaign in 1903, the Japanese example of 'the Awakening of the East' in 1905 engendered the topic of eager conversation to be the 'speedy expulsion of the Dutch'.<sup>2</sup>

During the years 1900–45, the question that motivated Muslims and some Japanese was whether Japan could be the 'Saviour of Islam' against Western imperialism and colonialism if this meant collaboration with Japanese imperialism. Even during the 1930s, when there was little hope left for prospects of democracy and liberalism in Japan (for that matter in Europe as well), the vision of a 'Muslim Japan' was so compelling to many Muslims in Asia and beyond, even among black Muslims of Harlem, as a means for emancipation from Western hegemony/colonial reality that it justified cooperation with Japanese intelligence overseas. Ōkawa Shūmei, the major intellectual figure of Pan-Asianism, the 'mastermind of Japanese fascism' in the Tokyo trials, who justified Japan's mission to liberate Asia from Western colonialism by war if necessary, saw Islam as the means. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the relationship transformed into a major Japanese military strategy

as the Japanese government began to implement its Islamic policy by mobilizing Muslim forces against the United Kingdom, Holland, China and Russia in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, therefore, I am particularly interested in exploring the role of Islam in Japan's global claim to Asia in order to shed light on a number of themes, personalities and events that connect Japanese history to that of the world of Islam. Despite the major role Islam came to play in Japan's Pan-Asianist international policy, especially during the Second World War, Japanese-Muslim relations have not been studied extensively because of the boundaries in the intellectual concerns of each field. Studies of Japan that remain focused on Japan's relations with the West and China have avoided the subject.<sup>4</sup> Japanese scholars of the Middle East are also ambivalent.<sup>5</sup> With some exceptions, most choose to concentrate on the study of the 'Orient in Western regions' and ignore Japan's historic connections to the world of Islam. Although I must admit there is a certain 'cloak and dagger' character to the narrative, the subject invites our attention, for it opens a window onto an alternative, ambivalent arena of international relations between these so-called 'Non-Western regions' in modern history, parallel to the interstate relations forged by the formal treaties and diplomacy dominated by the Western Powers. Yet these connections were significant in the formulation of ideas and policies throughout the twentieth century, especially as the colonized sought to emancipate themselves from Western imperialist domination with Japan's help as a world power. Japan's relations with Muslims unfold as an enigmatic history of mostly informal contacts, transnational alliances between Japanese Pan-Asianist agents, intellectuals, diplomats and military officers, and their Muslim counterparts on a global platform: a transnational history of nationalisms that connected Japanese Pan-Asianism with Pan-Islamic currents and Muslim nationalisms.<sup>6</sup>

The central argument of this essay is that some figures in the Japanese military and civilian elite with an Asianist agenda and their Muslim friends formed an 'Islam circle' in Japan in the late Meiji period and had long years of interaction through personal contacts, advocating closer relations between Japan and the peoples of the Islamic world who were suffering under the yoke of Western hegemony. In favour of an 'Islam policy', or *kaikyō seisaku*, they argued for the need to gain a better understanding of Islam as a civilization belittled by Western opinion, which view had also been adopted by the new, Western-oriented Japanese government. This article argues that this long-term interaction bore fruit in the end as the Japanese government, using the informal contacts and know-how of previous years, adopted Islam-oriented policies on the eve of the Second World War.

Japan's pattern of involvement with the political activities of Muslim groups in Asia reflects twentieth-century world power behaviour that ultimately may have been party to the emergence of political Islam, possibly even in its militant forms in some areas. It has global implications that are relevant for us today. In the post-war era, the United States as a new world power had also formed close relations with Islamic currents through a global strategy of 'Islam as a green belt against communism,' which is seen today as having led to a 'blowback' in Chalmers Johnson's terms: the ominous consequences of the 11 September 2001, attack by Al Qaeda, which led to the battle between United States-led coalition forces and the global terrorism of radical Islamic organizations.<sup>7</sup> Yet the phenomenon of radical Islam is frequently reduced to an issue simply of cultural incompatibility with the West, as