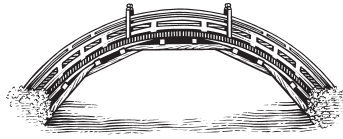


ROUNDTABLE

Islam in Japan: A Cause for Concern?



Emile A. Nakhleh

Keiko Sakurai

Michael Penn

Introduction

Emile A. Nakhleh

In the last two decades “Islamization” has grown by leaps and bounds throughout the world. Islamization is characterized by increased piety, expanding education, growing proselytization (or *da’wa*), deepening awareness by Muslims of their Islamic identity, spreading linkages (both electronic and face-to-face) among Muslims, and more active involvement in the societies where Muslims reside. For the most part this phenomenal growth has occurred equally in Muslim majority and Muslim minority countries and has been lawful and non-violent. A small segment of Islamic activists, however, espouse extremist and radical ideologies and have resorted to violence and terrorism against both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Factors that have been driving the Islamization process and the radicalization of segments of Islamic activists include a sense of defeat, a “culture of humiliation,” a search for identity, and the psychological need among many Muslims to view their faith as their enduring identity anchor. Other socio-political drivers include the rapid expansion of Islamic media via the Internet and satellite television stations; economic policies and the remarkable growth of global Islamic business (banking, finance, investment, insurance, etc.); regional conflicts in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, Indonesia, and the Philippines; perceived anti-Islamic policies by the Christian West; and recruiting efforts by Islamic radicals. Some of these factors, especially proselytization, have forged a universal sense of Islamization among mainstream Muslims through the use of Arabic, the language of the Quran. Financial support from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states and the active role of international Islamic NGOs and charitable foundations—such as the Muslim World League, the International Islamic Relief Organization, al Haramayn, and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth—have contributed greatly to the growth of Islamization globally.

Vast majorities of newly “Islamized” Muslims have concentrated their activism on increased piety at the personal, familial, and immediate society levels, viewing Islam principally as the moral compass of daily life. To many of these Muslims, faith underpins family values (including family

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Muslims in Contemporary Japan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay provides a demographic analysis of Muslims living in Japan with special emphasis on Muslim communities and community-building activities.

MAIN FINDINGS

Foreign-born Muslims, representing 80% to 90% of the Muslim population in Japan, immigrated in the mid-1980s and early 1990s mainly for economic reasons. Many came on short-term visas and worked illegally until acquiring legal resident status through marriage. The Muslim minority in Japan is divided by national and ethnic origin, language, sectarian tendency, socio-economic background, and location. As a result of having few commonalities, Muslims in Japan have failed to build large communities and lack representation by a single unifying organization or mosque. Although facing shared problems, Muslims are separated both from the larger Japanese society and from other Muslims and thus often struggle to meet these challenges individually or in small groups.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Muslims in Japan are small in number and diverse in ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds, and geographic location. These characteristics render their relationship with the host society unique and make comparisons with Muslim immigrants in the West difficult.
- In Japan the new challenges of post-September 11 suspicion that Muslims face have increased the frustration of some members of this group, but so far there is no indication that this population is radicalizing or could conceivably constitute a threat to Japanese society.
- At present, predictions on the extent to which the next generation of Muslims in Japan will acculturate to Japanese society are difficult to make, since most members of this second-generation are not yet even teenagers. Because the children of the next generation are ethnically and geographically divided, however, this group is also likely to be too diverse to take collective action.
- As a host society Japan will need to become more open toward and accepting of Islamic ways and to accommodate the country's Muslims—both foreign and Japanese—as a religious minority.

The Muslim population in Japan was an inconspicuous presence until the mid-1980s, when the influx of Muslim foreign workers migrating to the country for economic reasons began to attract attention. No official statistics exist, but by most estimates over seventy thousand Muslims of various origins presently live in Japan, with Indonesians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Iranians constituting the largest subgroups of this population.

This essay provides baseline demographic information and analysis on Japan's migrant Muslim population—a community largely overlooked in academic literature to date. This essay examines the typical socio-economic background of these Muslims and issues related to living in a non-Islamic society, identity, and community-building. By doing so, the essay portrays the basic characteristics of Muslims in Japan and investigates the challenges facing this population in the host society. This essay is divided into five sections:

- ≈ pp. 71–77 provide demographic information on Muslims in Japan
- ≈ pp. 77–82 examine the role of mosques in Japan, suggesting that mosques are a multi-purpose space
- ≈ pp. 82–85 assess community-building activities and posit that, because of differences in background and current position, Muslims in Japan are isolated from the larger Japanese society and are not united by any single identity
- ≈ pp. 85–86 examine special challenges that Muslims living in Japan face
- ≈ pp. 86–87 propose that Muslims are unlikely to form large communities and argue that comparison of Japan's Muslim population to similar immigrant groups in the West is difficult

MUSLIMS IN JAPAN: DEMOGRAPHICS

Estimating the Size of the Muslim Population

Estimates of the non-Japanese Muslim population residing in Japan in 2004 range from sixty to seventy thousand people, of which the majority are men.¹ One calculation starts with the total number of registered foreign residents from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) member countries (67,746), subtracts foreigners with temporary visitor visas (11,525),

¹ For details, see Keiko Sakurai, *Nihon no Muslim shakai* [Muslim Society in Japan] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2003), 29–39. According to Hiroshi Kojima, the total Muslim population as of the end of each year is estimated to be approximately 5,300 in 1984; 12,300 in 1990; 30,000 in 1995; 47,600 in 2000; and 56,300 in 2003. See Hiroshi Kojima, "Variations in Demographic Characteristics of Foreign 'Muslim' Population in Japan: A Preliminary Estimation," *Japanese Journal of Population* 4, no. 1 (March 2006): 117–19.

and adds the number of overstayers from Indonesia (7,246 in 2004) to arrive at a foreign Muslim population of 63,467.² This method of calculation is imperfect in that it both overlooks the fact that several member countries of the OIC (such as Malaysia and Lebanon) have large non-Muslim populations, and fails to include Muslims from non-member countries such as India and Sri Lanka. Despite these defects, however, this method remains the most reliable way available for estimating the number of foreign Muslims in Japan.

Foreign Muslims

Foreign Muslims constitute approximately 80% to 90% of the entire Muslim population in Japan. The largest share of this population consists of Indonesian, followed in number by Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Iranians. In 2004 Indonesians living legally in Japan numbered 23,890. The number of legal immigrants from Pakistan (8,610), Bangladesh (10,724), and Iran (5,403) totaled slightly fewer than 25,000. Taken together, Indonesian, Iranian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrants (48,627) represent 70% of this group.³ Although a considerable number of Malaysians live in Japan, the majority of these residents are of ethnic Chinese decent and are not Muslim.⁴

Muslim immigrants in Japan can be divided into five categories based on the legal category of their residence in Japan, as outlined in **Table 1**.

Enrollments of foreign Muslim students in Japanese colleges and universities increased in the 1990s, with some students finding jobs in Japan and staying in the country after graduation. According to official data, the number of students from OIC member countries enrolled in Japanese universities and institutes of higher education increased from 1,957 in 1986 to 6,758 in 2004.⁵

The majority of expatriate Muslims entered Japan in the mid-1980s and early 1990s in search of employment. Although most came to the country sharing this common objective, these immigrants' social backgrounds and

² No 2004 data is available for other Islamic countries, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran. This is due to the fact that the Ministry of Justice, Office of Immigration, publicized only the data of the ten countries with the highest number of overstayers in Japan. All figures are taken from *Zairyu gaikokujin tokei* [Statistics on the Foreigners Registered in Japan] (Tokyo: Nyukan kyokai, 2005).

³ Temporary visitor visas (6,709) are included in this figure.

⁴ According to a study by Ishii Yuka, Chinese Malaysians constitute the Malaysian majority in Japan. See Ishii Yuka, *Esunikku kankei no kokusai ido* [Ethnic Relations and International Migration] (Tokyo: Kokusai Shoin, 1999).

⁵ The figures are taken from *Zairyu gaikokujin tokei* [Statistics on the Foreigners Registered in Japan] (Tokyo: Homusho nyukoku kanri kyoku, 1987); and *Zairyu gaikokujin tokei* (2005).

Public Faces and Private Spaces: Islam in the Japanese Context

Michael Penn

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines Japanese views and attitudes toward Muslims living in Japan and the implications of Japanese perspectives for U.S. policy and other matters.

MAIN FINDINGS

- Muslims in Japan face many challenges in Japanese society due to the negative image of Islam that has arisen primarily from the media.
- These challenges—mostly involving a lack of sensitivity toward Muslim religious needs—stem more from ignorance on the part of the Japanese than from any specific hostility toward Islam.
- The attacks of September 11 and policies related to the war on terrorism have exacerbated these negative attitudes directed toward Muslims in Japan.
- Despite the challenges they face, members of the Muslim community in Japan are not particularly bitter toward their Japanese hosts.
- The Japanese government or society itself will not likely undertake any dramatically restrictive initiatives toward this religious minority.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- From the perspective of the U.S., there is little need to formulate specific policies toward these Muslim communities in Japan given that the Muslim population in Japan is very small and has little political influence.
- Rather than framing this minority's presence as a security issue, the U.S. could assume a general approach that encourages Japan to adopt anti-discrimination laws and to create a more open society toward foreigners. Such an approach would help ensure Japan's future as a stable, liberal democracy and position the country as a role model for other Asian nations.
- Such policies would also serve to prevent negative developments within the local Muslim communities themselves, thus avoiding the development of new problems in the future.

Muslims living in Japan comprise a small community of foreigners of many nationalities as well as some ethnic Japanese. Japanese society presents unique challenges for resident Muslims, and concern over the activities of Muslim minorities in many countries—for example, terrorist activities involving a handful of Muslims residing in Britain and other parts of Europe—has been high in the U.S. policy community. Does a potential for radicalization also exist in Japan? In addressing this question, this essay examines Japanese views and attitudes toward Muslims living in Japan and the possible implications for U.S. policy.

Although Muslim residents in Japan face many social difficulties, this essay concludes the risk of radicalization is very small. That said, policies encouraging the Japanese to adopt anti-discrimination laws (as UN representatives have encouraged) and to create a more open society toward foreigners in general would, in the long term, help ensure Japan's future as a stable, liberal democracy and would position the country as a role model for other Asian nations.

This essay is divided into five sections:

- ≈ pp. 91–94 provide an overview of religion in contemporary Japanese society and a basis for analyzing Japanese views toward Muslims
- ≈ pp. 94–99 examine the challenges faced by Muslims in Japan and their reactions to these challenges
- ≈ pp. 99–100 discuss the unique challenges that ethnic Japanese Muslims face
- ≈ pp. 100–102 examine the impact of the events of September 11 on Muslims in Japan
- ≈ pp. 102–4 consider the future development of Islam in Japan and the proper role of U.S. policy in shaping the outcome

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE SOCIETY

Many facets of the challenges and conditions of Muslim life in Japan are consequences of the role religion plays in Japanese society. An understanding of this broader context can provide a basis for analyzing Japanese perspectives of contemporary Islam and the country's Muslim minority.

Japanese Religions

Shinto and Buddhism dominate the religious landscape of Japan. Shinto is a native Japanese religion focusing on spirits of nature and human ancestors;

evidence of the practice of Shinto by the Yamato people dates back to the dawn of their recorded history.¹ The introduction of Buddhism from China in the sixth century, together with the earlier adoption of Chinese writing, marked the beginning of a period of significant cultural development on the Japanese islands. Both religions have deep and venerable roots in Japanese culture.

Of the many “new religions” appearing in Japan in modern times the oldest is Tenrikyo, established in 1838 by Miki Nakayama, a Japanese woman who claimed to have experienced divine revelations. Other noted new religions include Oomoto, Soka Gakkai, Mahikari, and Makuya. Although most of these belief systems are related to Shinto and Buddhism, some contain Jewish and Christian elements. An estimated 1.4 million Japanese practice Christianity, which has been present in the country in some form since 1549. Estimates place the number of Japanese Muslims at approximately 6,000; assuming this number is correct, Japanese Christians outnumber Japanese Muslims by nearly 233 to 1.

Japanese Approaches toward Religion

Although in some ways appearing to exhibit a profusion of religious sentiment, Japan is in other ways one of the most secular major societies in the world. Much depends on how religiosity is defined. With the exception of the more devoted followers of the new religions, most Japanese do not engage in daily religious practices or seem to concern themselves with broad philosophical questions regarding the meaning of life or the nature of existence. Studies of Japanese religion tend to agree that this-worldliness and lack of concern for abstract concepts characterize most Japanese religious attitudes.

The Japanese approach to religion is also notable for its syncretism. An individual's religious beliefs will often incorporate elements of Shinto, Buddhism, and sometimes Christianity, making few distinctions among them. Most Japanese will offer prayers at a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple without concern over which god is enshrined there or to which denomination the temple may belong. One prominent scholar aptly characterizes the Japanese as not living “in a system that demands full-blooded, belief-oriented and exclusive commitment that precludes any other” and suggests that as a

¹ “Yamato people” refers to ethnic Japanese in distinction to various ethnic minorities.