

Japan's Policy on Islam: Rethinking the Dialogue Approach

Katakura Kunio

The policy proposals formulated by the Japanese foreign ministry's Study Group on Islam in 2000 are based on a framework that, leaving behind the Huntington theory of a "clash of civilizations," posits a "dialogue between civilizations." Is that framework overly optimistic? Since the 11 September terrorist attacks, both Japan's policy on Islam and its underlying premises appear to be more and more tenuous and possibly unrealistic. It may be time now for a thorough reexamination of its framework, goals, and practical possibilities. A specialist in Islamic affairs offers a five-point proposal for revamping Japan's Islam policy.

"The world changed on 11 September 2001." Who among us has not heard that phrase? Following the horrifying terrorist attacks in the United States that day, Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and other Muslim and Arab names began appearing frequently in the news, which, soon enough, was news of war. The United States and its allies launched military strikes in Afghanistan to root out, capture, and eradicate the individuals and organizations suspected to be behind the attacks. Buttressed by the watertight unity of the Anglo-American Atlantic alliance, this relentless campaign against "evildoers" is still unfolding.

In many quarters the issue is depicted as terrorism versus anti-terrorism, which is a serious oversimplification, but others go further, characterizing it as a fight of good against evil, or in an even bigger leap of logic, as "civilization against anti-civilization." The 11 September attacks took

place in broad daylight in the heart of the United States, the sole superpower since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Outrage and fear, America's need to recover its wounded pride, and its newly-activated instinct for self-defense have combined to produce an international dragnet involving the United States as well as its allies and friends. This international effort has pursued Osama bin Laden, his followers, and the Taliban government that protected them to the brink of annihilation.

Dialogue with Which Islam?

Despite President George W. Bush's reference to the international response as a "crusade"—a comment that alarmed sensible people the world over and was later retracted—for the most part the United States has stressed that the retaliation does not represent a struggle against Islam or

Arab peoples. So far Washington has more or less succeeded in winning public support for its actions. However, considering that the chief "evildoers" are identified as "Afghan Arabs" and that the last, fight-to-the-death Taliban forces are Arab volunteer troops (while Pashtun soldiers in the Taliban army surrendered to the Northern Alliance at an earlier stage), some insist that it is Arab Muslims who are to blame. Others hold that the Pashtun, who are the majority in the Taliban, are being made to pay for what Islamic-fundamentalist Arab "outsiders" have done, and that a distinction should be made between them, the "ordinary" villains, and the "arch-villains."

Surveying the situation with bold determination, the United States, like Wyatt Earp, sets out to rid the town of bad guys, aided by its faithful sidekicks and seconds. From the standpoint of national interest, how far should Japan go along with this effort? Even at this juncture it is critical to calculate exactly what the wages of such support will be in terms of the safety and interests of the Japanese people.

Due partly to Harvard University professor Samuel Huntington's thesis on the "clash of civilizations," the perception has emerged in recent years that Western civilization is headed for collapse in the twenty-first century unless its people gain a better understanding of Islamic civilization. (This view was expressed by Britain's Prince Charles in a keynote speech at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies at Oxford University in 1996.) In Japan, increased dialogue with Islamic cultures has been given much greater priority recently as part of the country's foreign policy agenda. Many people believe that, as a country with a "clean record" in West Asia and the Muslim countries, Japan can play a mediating role between the Islamic and Western-Christian worlds and turn the potential for a "clash" into an opportunity for dialogue and cooperation.

Since 2000, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been at the center of planning for "dialogue," especially multilateral dialogues, with Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and they are gradually putting those plans into practice. I want to examine that effort by considering how Japan's



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dialogue with Islam should play out from here—specifically, whether changes in Japan's approach are merited or demanded by the new circumstances since 11 September, and if so, what kind.

By falling in line behind the banner of America in its righteous mission, doesn't Japan need to revise both the basic premises and substance of its "Islam dialogue" policy? Doesn't its involvement with American goals necessitate a general check and overhaul of this policy area? And after the "evildoers" have been removed, can Japan look upon the Muslim world as unsuspect, untainted, and continue to develop the dialogue with Islam?

Let us assume for now that an international network of terrorists, united in Islamic extremism, has gone way underground to infiltrate certain Muslim countries and is threatening their security and stability, particularly the most ultraconservative, despotic governments. If this is the case, the first question we must ask is which aspect of Islam do we address in our dialogue: ordinary, everyday Islam or this extraordinary, exceptional Islam?

Events in the world have brought Japan to a crucial turning point in its Islam policy. Now it must rethink its approach to dialogue and exchange, carefully considering several very

important factors: the nature of ordinary Islam; the views and extraordinarily violent acts of extremists; the energy of Islam, where its magma is channeled and by what means, and the various actors involved.

Islam and Muslim Terrorists

Reacting to the 11 September attacks, people in the West and Japan also have tended to overlook the fact that the vast majority of Muslims are peace-loving, ordinary members of society and to lump them together with radical terrorists. Individuals and organizations in the Islamic world both draw strength from the same core source. That energy is channeled in different ways according to the circumstances, giving rise to two types of jihad, one meaning a daily, personal

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spiritual struggle and the other meaning collective holy war. The latter type is considered to be a response to extremely critical situations and is aimed at repelling aggression or oppression.

Although modernization in Islamic regions has generally been modeled on Western patterns, many Muslim people fear the loss of their traditional social values in the modernizing process. They are also very sensitive to socioeconomic inconsistencies that accompany modernization and to the lingering, deep-seated “negative legacies” of the age of imperialism and colonialism. A prime example is Palestine, where the peace process has entered a hopeless stalemate, and which now poses a serious threat to peace and stability not only in West Asia but the world.

Radical followers of Islam tend to be young, educated people often in such fields as science, engineering, and medicine. By participating in social welfare projects such as school and hospi-

tal administration, and disaster and poverty relief activities, they work to spread their ideology at the grassroots level.

The United States is the prime mover behind the powerful spread of the market economy all over the world. On many levels, it is resisted by Islamic societies. At the same time, another quiet, deep-coursing phenomenon is taking place in the form of conversion to Islam. It began in West Asia, spread from Africa to Southeast Asia, and is now reaching even into European and American society, particularly among African-Americans.

In the lead article of the November-December 2001 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, titled “The Sentry’s Solitude,” Professor Fouad Ajami of Johns Hopkins University (referring to the eruption of anti-Americanism in the fall of 2001) writes that “the American imperium in the Arab-Muslim world hatched a monster,” and that the United States’ “primacy begot its nemesis.” He added: “A broad coalition may give America the comfort that it is not alone in the Muslim world. A strike against Afghanistan is the easiest of things—far away from the troubles in the Persian Gulf and Egypt, from the head of the trail in Arab lands. The Taliban are the Khmer Rouge of this era and thus easy to deal with. The frustrations to come lie in the more ambiguous and impenetrable realms of the Arab world. Those were not Afghans who flew into those towers of glass and steel and crashed into the Pentagon. They were from the Arab world, where anti-Americanism is fierce, where terror works with the hidden winks that men and women make at the perpetrators of the grimmest deeds.”

Even Saudi Arabia, which had appeared on the surface to be stable and free of the anti-colonial sentiment seen in Egypt, Algeria, Syria and Iraq, is developing complex cracks in the political status quo. In June 1996, a truck bomb detonated in a U.S. military housing complex in Al Khobar killed nineteen people. Sheikh Abdelaziz ibn Baz, head of the influential *ulama*—a body of Islamic theologians that serves as a kitchen cabinet behind the Saudi royal family—issued a *fatwa* (Islamic ruling) on the incident. By branding the bomb attack a “transgression against the teachings of Islam” and declaring that non-Muslims would be granted a pledge of

safety, the *fatwa* in effect sanctioned the stationing of U.S. military forces in the country.

In February 1998, Osama bin Laden created around himself the world’s first international Islamic fundamentalist alliance, the World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders. With bin Laden’s own *fatwa* (notwithstanding his dubious competence to issue *fatwa*), this organization challenged the United States for having defiled Arab lands containing the two Islamic holy sites (Medina and Mecca), and called on Muslims to kill all Americans, military and civilian alike. The fact that serious discord over the two *fatwa* has arisen in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is a patent reality that must be recognized.

Back in the realm of everyday life, meanwhile, the vast majority of Muslims pursue quiet, peaceful lives devoted to observance of the Six Beliefs and Five Duties of their faith.* The essential nature of Islam, which traditionally has co-existed with the other major monotheistic faiths—Judaism and Christianity—has not changed in any way. Nonetheless, some of the outward forms in which its principles are applied are bewildering to people from non-Muslim cultures.

An extreme example was provided by Iraq’s president Saddam Hussein, instigator of the Gulf Crisis. Saddam Hussein is the leader of the Ba’ath party, which advocates separation of religion and politics, and he is known to be a politician with a strong secularist leaning. But as the U.S.-led multinational force gradually closed in on Iraq, Hussein denounced the “infidel” troops for defiling the sacred land of Saudi Arabia and, in a gesture asserting his country’s identification with the cradle of Islam, hastily printed the words “Allah Akbar (God is great)” on the national flag. Despite this conceited stunt, however, none of the Muslim-Arab countries withdrew from alignment with the forces

* The fundamental articles and duties of the Islamic faith are contained in the Six Beliefs (in God, the angels, the prophets, the holy books, the day of judgment, and the decree of God) and the Five Duties (testimony/affirmation of God and Muhammad, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage) which every Muslim must uphold or perform.

ranged against Iraq, and under the military sanctions that began on January 17, 1991, the Iraqi forces were quickly driven out of areas of Kuwait that had been occupied and annexed.

As in the case of some leading Gulf Cooperation Council members mentioned above, powerful spiritual leaders (*ulama*) run cloister governments behind the administration, from where they control activities in every arena of political, economic, cultural, and social life. It is essential, therefore, to carefully ascertain where the source of true Islamic authority lies in each particular case.

Record of Trial and Error

Let us briefly review the history of Japanese efforts to develop contacts, negotiations, and

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dialogue with the nations and peoples of the Islamic cultural sphere during the twentieth century. It is a process achieved only through trial and error.

In the 1930s and around the time of the outbreak of the Pacific War, Imperial Japan expanded its sphere of influence from Manchuria and Mongolia into China, thereby provoking British and American embargoes of oil and other crucial resources. At that time, key figures in Japan’s foreign ministry and Army/Navy General Staff Office established a study group on Islam and led a government campaign to increase knowledge of and affinity with Islam. Prime Minister Hayashi Senjuro’s close involvement earned him the sobriquet, “father of Japanese Muslims.” Ostensibly, this effort was aimed at “promoting respect for the beliefs of Muslims in Asian regions (then under British and American imperial and colonial rule) and a sincere com-

mitment to recognition of the rightful status of Islamic countries" (as Foreign Minister Tani Masayuki said in reply to Diet interpellations concerning Islam in February 1943). In reality, however, the objectives for the most part were related to gathering intelligence to use in developing Japan's military strategy and assisting its pacification operations in Japanese-occupied territories. One official in the wartime Japanese military government in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) records that, when the government tried to force the local people to bow toward the Imperial Palace in far-off Tokyo, they met with staunch resistance from Muslims, who refused to worship in any direction other than toward Mecca. (Saito Shizuo, *Watashi no gunseiki* [Private Record of the Military Administration], 1977)

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In the 1950s and '60s, businessmen from Japanese trading companies traveled around Persian Gulf countries selling textiles, rubber sandals, tires, and other products from Japan. The Arabian Oil Co., Ltd., the first Japanese company to engage in full-scale development of oil fields in the region, encountered considerable difficulties in gaining those oil concessions. The stories coming out of this venture, of attempting to out-negotiate Arab businessmen and toiling in the scorching desert sand, are part of the lore of Japanese commercial history.

At the time of the oil crisis of November 1973, the Japanese government, having been classified as an "unfriendly nation" under the Arab oil-producers' petro-strategy, was thrown into consternation by the threat of cumulative monthly cutbacks of five percent in the volume of crude from Arab countries. Miki Takeo (later prime minister, 1974-76), who was sent to Saudi Arabia as a special envoy to deal with the

problem, tried to break the ice with King Faisal by discussing Islam. The king responded by passionately expressing his wish to pray at the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem as soon as the Palestine situation was resolved.

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 sent out a tsunami of such tremendous energy that it was felt in faraway Japan. The Japan Foundation, which two years earlier had held a regional symposium on "Japan and the Middle East," was prompted by the Iranian revolution to address the theme again, and organized a groundbreaking symposium in 1980 on the theme of "Japan and Islamic civilization."

Amid the turmoil of the Iranian revolution, Iraq reignited its border dispute with Iran over territory in the basin of the Shatt al-Arab river. It invaded Iran and plunged the two countries into an eight-year war. In successive visits to Iraq and Iran in 1983, Japanese foreign minister Abe Shintaro urged the two, as Islamic countries, to exercise a "spirit of tolerance," and expressed Japan's intention to play an active mediating role to achieve peace.

In the Gulf crisis of 1990, Iraq, reacting to international criticism for its invasion and annexation of Kuwait, placed restraints on Japanese and other foreign nationals residing in Iraq, effectively using them as a human shield. Japan urged Iraq to release these hostages as soon as possible before any harm came to them, citing the example of the famous Islamic hero Saladin (Salahuddin), known to history for his humane treatment of POWs, women, and children during his war against the Crusaders. Saddam Hussein and Saladin are both natives of the city of Tikrit. The release of all the hostages before the armed sanctions began remains fresh in our memory.

In more recent years, a series of terrorist incidents perpetrated by Islamic extremists that involved Japanese victims has spotlighted the hidden threat of evildoers. The attack on foreign tourists at the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut in Luxor, Egypt in November 1997 is thought to have been an attempt to rock the current Egyptian government by shutting off the flow of income from tourism, the government's main source of revenue. It was an utterly barbaric act perpetrated by an insurgent group in total disre-

gard for the restraint of the mainstream of the Jihad. Eleven Japanese tourists were killed in the attack.

In 2000, four Japan International Cooperation Agency experts were abducted in the Kyrgyz Republic by Uzbek Islamic extremists who crossed over from Uzbekistan. The abduction is thought to have been the work of a radical terrorist faction linked to the Taliban.

The Study Group on Islam

In his discussion of the "clash of civilizations," Huntington suggests that conflict between

Western civilization and other different civilizations is a serious problem that surfaced in the late-twentieth century and will worsen in the twenty-first. In particular, he discerns grave signs of a pending clash between Western and Islamic civilizations, or perhaps between Western civilization and an alliance of Islamic and Confucian civilizations.

A mood of change is arising, however. It is felt even in Iran. Regarded by the West since the 1979 revolution as the most dogmatic and uncompromising country in the Islamic world, Iran has been watched warily. Yet since the election of President Mohammad Khatami, it has

Foreign Ministry Study Group on Islam Main Points of the 2000 Report

1. Viewpoint

The Study Group highlighted the need to improve understanding of Islam within Japan and promote adequate consideration of Islam in Japan's external relations.

2. Activities of the Study Group on Islam

The group met seven times to discuss such issues as (i) the position of Islam in world history, (ii) Islam in the international community today, (iii) legal frameworks, (iv) the Islamic nation-state (ummah), (v) Islam and economics (efforts toward interest-free finance, etc.), and (vi) Japan's relations with Islam.

3. Policy recommendations

- (i) To increase study of Islam within the foreign ministry and strive to incorporate the findings in official policy.
- (ii) To conduct academic, youth, and other people-to-people exchanges with Islamic countries.
- (iii) To incorporate studies of Islam into school education.
- (iv) To establish a website on Islamic affairs.
- (v) To promote dialogue with Islam as part of a broad effort toward multilateral dialogue, in conjunction with the designation of 2001 as the "United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations."

shifted its stance and has added its voice to calls in the United Nations General Assembly for “dialogue among civilizations.”

This was the context in which Japanese foreign minister Kono Yohei established the Study Group on Islam in March 2000. Premised on the crucial importance of dialogue among civilizations in the effort to resolve racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts, the Study Group stated its aims as promoting understanding of Islam and, through free discussion among Islam experts in many fields, shaping and informing Japan's foreign policy in the Islamic world.

In December 2000, the Study Group published its policy recommendations in a report, with a proviso stating that the report did not represent the official view of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The report drew on the Japanese experi-

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ence of contact, friction, and dialogue with Islamic countries since the early twentieth century. While the Huntington thesis warned that relations between countries and cultures in the future could be marked by a clash, not between disparate ideologies in the post-Cold War era, but between civilizations, the Study Group report went beyond that to posit dialogue. Titled *Niju-isseiki no Nihon to Isuramu no kankei kyoka ni muketa seisaku mokuhyo* [Policy Objectives for Strengthening Relations between Japan and Islam in the Twenty-first Century], the report reflected what then seemed to be a prevailing international leaning toward dialogue between civilizations. Since the 11 September attacks, however, the momentum toward this extremely optimistic framework for dialogue has been lost.

Five Proposals for Islam Policy Today

In my view, the Japanese government and peo-

ple must bear the following points in mind as they develop policies toward Islam from now on.

First, because Islam is not represented by any single nation or government, it is important to develop contacts and exchange with borderless NGOs and similar networks. What is needed, in other words, is “asymmetrical” interaction and exchange.

Second, dialogue must be developed with a highly diverse and multi-layered range of interlocutors, including not only states and government agencies but also private companies, academic and research institutions, the media, women's groups, and volunteer organizations. On the Japan side, the appropriate interface for such activities would be nongovernment bodies and public corporations such as the Japan Foundation.

Third, Japan's strong ties with countries in the Islamic cultural sphere have so far been forged not only through trade but also through the development of energy supply systems and long-term nationally initiated oilfield development projects. In light of current expectations that the Japan National Oil Corporation will be disbanded and virtually privatized in the near future, special consideration must be given to ensure that this does not weaken or reduce the bridgehead of exchange that has been established with Islamic oil-producers in the Persian Gulf region.

Fourth, as part of its internal efforts to internationalize, Japan should give due consideration to the religious beliefs of Muslim residents and travelers in Japan. This should include establishing, at airports and other public facilities, meditation rooms available to followers of various religious faiths, a courtesy that is gradually becoming standard practice in other leading countries (including, among Japan's Asian neighbors, South Korea).

Finally, we must promote area studies and expertise in relevant regional languages. This effort should include the cultivation of scholars and experts not only in established language subjects, such as Arabic (an official U.N. language widely used in Islamic countries), Persian, and Turkish, but also in Pashto, Uzbek, Tajiki, and other regional languages of Eurasia.

As long as the essential nature of Islam

remains unchanged, it is appropriate for Japan to continue to follow the recommendations of the Study Group on Islam. However, amid the repercussions of 11 September, and in light of the latest policy shifts taking place within Japan, careful attention to these five points is also crucial to developing positive interaction and dialogue with the Islamic world and Muslim people. (*Translated by Dean Robson*)



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Translated from the original Japanese, “Nippon no Isuramu seisaku: ‘Taiwa’ seisaku minaoshi e no teigen,” published in the February 2002 issue of *Gaiko Forum*. Various efforts were launched since the events of 11 September to learn more about Islam. Contributors to this issue, featuring “Understanding Islam,” included many of Japan's leading specialists on Islam. A former ambassador who has served in countries of the Arab world, Katakura critically reviews the Japanese government's policy of “dialogue” with Islam.

The government is right to be rethinking its approach to political Islam in Egypt by considering a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood (UK to build ties with banned Islamist group, February 17). But the issues go wider than relations with Egypt. In many other countries in the Middle East, political Islamists are now the largest and best-organised source of opposition to existing regimes. Over the last few years, some political Islamist groups have also moderated their positions. In Morocco, Jordan and Egypt, for example, the main Islamist groups have rejected violence and publicly endorsed th