

EMPOWERING DA'WAH IN JAPAN: THE ROLE OF MALAYSIANS

Abdul Ghafar Don¹ & Zulkarnain Hassan Basri²

Research Centre for Da'wah & Leadership, Faculty of Islamic Studies,

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia¹

Japan Da'wah Centre, Osaka, Japan²

a.g.don@ukm.edu.my¹

ABSTRACT

Malaysia and Japan have established a long-standing, special, and close relationship in various fields: politics, economics, culture, education, and other sectors. This relationship was established even before independence, when Japan occupied Malaya from 1941 to 1945. The Malaysia-Japan relationship improved significantly, particularly after the introduction of the Look East Policy (Dasar Pandang Ke Timur) by the Malaysian government in 1982 during the reign of Tun Mahathir Mohamed. The Look East Policy became the foundation for national progress through trade relations with Japan. It then expanded into other areas including education, social, cultural, and religious fields. The Malaysia-Japan da'wah relationship further developed with the migration of Malaysians to Japan for work or study purposes. The increase in the number of Malaysians in Japan encouraged them to take the initiative to practice Islam in their daily lives, thereby playing a role in spreading Islamic da'wah to the Japanese community in later time. This article seeks to examine how a synergy between Malaysia and Japan in da'wah can be built in the context of empowering and strengthening da'wah, especially for the benefit of da'wah in Japan. The methodology used in addressing this research subject is based on written materials and field studies at Japan Da'wah Centre, a Malaysian Islamic base organisation. The study found that Malaysians have played a significant role in empowering the da'wah movement in Japan through material and moral support.

Keywords: *Empowering, da'wah, Japan, Malaysian, synergy*

INTRODUCTION

*Dakwah*¹ (Arabic term for missionary works) is an effort to spread Islam as a mercy religion to all of humanity. As a religion of mercy, the message of Islam is for all people regardless of race and geographical boundaries. This universal nature of Islam makes it a dynamic, growing religion that is accepted by many people, including in Japan. The improving development of Islam in Japan makes it a very potential country in the context of Islamic outreach. The good relationship between Malaysia and Japan, the warm acceptance of the Japanese people towards Malaysians, and the role of Malaysians in Islamic da'wah in Japan make the prospects for the growth of Islam in Japan is promising in nature. However, carrying out the da'wah agenda in Japan is not an easy task. It requires coordinated, systematic, and continuous efforts. In this regard, the initial entry of Malaysians into Japan was primarily for the purpose of studying and earning a living. A paradigm shift has now occurred, where da'wah efforts have begun to be carried out by Malaysians, whether among students, workers, or tourists. This new trend is a positive development for da'wah. Therefore, the objective of this study is to discuss and analyze the role of Malaysians in strengthening da'wah in Japan

¹ Da'wah in an Arabic terminology which means invitation or call. In the context of Islam, da'wah may refers to disseminating the Islamic teachings to people.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study based on literature related to the subject of the study and an interview. Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems. One of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to explain processes and patterns of human behavior that can be difficult to quantify (Foley & Timonen 2015). For the purpose of data collection, the document analysis method was used by referring to journals, books, and pamphlets related to da'wah movements in Japan. Interviews were also conducted as a supporting method whereby Zulkarnain Hassan Basri, President of the Japan Da'wah Centre, to strengthen the research data on the role of Malaysians in Japan. The selection of Zulkarnain as an informant based on his significant role and impact in da'wah activities in Japan. The research data was then analyzed thematically by identifying specific themes to highlight the role of Malaysians in empowering the da'wah movement in Japan.

UNDERTAKING DA'WAH TASK

Carrying out da'wah or preaching Islam is the duty of every Muslim. *Dakwah* is a noble task and is even considered an act of worship in Islamic point of view. Those who take the initiative to deliver da'wah actually inherit the duty of the Prophets. The obligation to deliver da'wah is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). There are several Quranic verses about the obligation of da'wah. Among them are:

"Let there arise from you a group of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong. Those are the successful."

(The Qur'an, Surah Ali 'Imran, verse 104)

The Qur'an further states:

"Invite 'all' to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice, and only debate with them in the best manner. Surely your Lord 'alone' knows best who has strayed from His Way and who is 'rightly' guided."

(The Qur'an, Surah al-Nahl, verse 125)

The Prophet in one of his hadith is reported to have said:

"Convey from me even if it is one verse"

(Narrated by al-Bukhari (3461) and al-Tirmidhi (2669))

The evidences from the Qur'an and hadith explain that every Muslim has the responsibility to convey Islamic teachings so that people may submit and surrender to Allah. This responsibility can be equated with the obligatory nature of prayer and other acts of worship. The Qur'an testifies this fact as the following:

"They are' those who, if established in the land by Us, would perform prayer, pay alms-tax, encourage what is good, and forbid what is evil. And with Allah rests the outcome of all affairs"

(The Qur'an, Surah al-Hajj, 22:41)

Life in society is likened to a ship in a hadith of Rasulullah SAW. Among the passengers on that ship, there are some who try to damage it. If no one stops them from damaging the ship, then all the passengers on that ship will perish (drown), including the perpetrator. If someone stops him, then all the passengers on that ship will be saved. Similarly, in society, there must be preachers

who prevent damage from occurring within the community by undertaking da'wah efforts. The Prophet saying concerning this are as below:

"The parable of those who reject wrongdoing and those who fall into it is like a group on a ship. Some are on the upper deck, while others are below. Those below, needing water, must pass by those above. They suggest making a hole in their part to avoid disturbing others. If those above allow this, all will perish. However, if they stop them, all will be saved."

(HR. Bukhari no. 2493)

A BRIEF SKETCH OF MALAYSIA-JAPAN RELATIONS

Malaysia and Japan have a long and unique history of relations. Malaysia-Japan contacts began before the period of independence when Malaysia was occupied by Japan from 1941-1945. After the independence of Malaya in 1957, the previously strained relations transformed into good and positive ones. In anticipation of the Independence Day celebrations on August 31, 1957, Japan sent a delegation of five representatives to Malaya on behalf of the government. These representatives were senior members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Their visit was well received, and they were welcomed as state guests. In September, Japan established its embassy in Kuala Lumpur (Abu Talib 1999).

Japan made efforts to restore relations with Asian countries, including Malaysia, after the war. Japan was among the first countries to take steps to establish diplomatic relations with Malaya. Despite being aware that their image had not fully recovered due to the experience of the Japanese occupation (1941-1945), Tokyo recognized the importance of establishing diplomatic ties with Kuala Lumpur in terms of politics and economics. Even before Malaya gained independence, Japan had started a program of war reparations payments to the Asian countries it had previously occupied. These reparations payments were hoped to restore the damaged relations between Japan and the affected countries.

This bilateral relationship benefits both countries in terms of development and progress. Additionally, Japan attempted to play a role in finding a resolution to the confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia in 1963. This was related to protecting Japan's economic and trade interests with Asian countries. In the context of examining Malaysia-Japan relations, several scholars have written from their respective perspectives, among them Lim Hua Sing, a professor at the Institute of Asia Pacific Studies, Waseda University, Japan, who wrote "The Japan-Malaysia Economic Relationship Towards the Twenty-First Century"; Paridah Abdul Samad, "Malaysian-Japan Relations: Economic and Political Dimensions"; Anuwar Ali, "Japanese Industrial Investment"; and Zakaria Hj. Ahmad and K.C. Cheong, "Malaysia-Japan Trade: Issues and Prospects for the 1980s," and Chee Peng Lim and Lee Poh Ping, who wrote "The Role of Japanese Direct Investment in Malaysia."

This relationship later extended beyond the economic and trade aspects. The Look East Policy introduced in 1982 during the tenure of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed as the Prime Minister of Malaysia, which looked to Japan and Korea as models for developed Asian countries, opened a new chapter in Malaysia-Japan relations. In line with this policy, the Malaysian government sent Malaysian students to continue their studies at colleges and universities in Japan to develop Malaysia into a progressive and advanced nation on par with Japan. The migration of Malaysian students and citizens to Japan then paved the way for missionary efforts towards the Japanese

community. The missionary efforts by Malaysians in Japan are part of the missionary chain by Muslims from other countries in Japan with the same goal, which is to bring all people to the oneness of Allah and to distance themselves from polytheism.

AN OVERVIEW OF DA'WAH DEVELOPMENT IN JAPAN

Islam reached Japan only towards the end of the nineteenth century. Islam was firstly known to Japanese people in 1877 as a part of Western religious thought. Around the same time the life of prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was translated into Japanese (Salih Mahdi S. Al Samarrai (2002). This helped Islam to find a place in the intellectual image of the Japanese people, but only as a knowledge and a part of the history of cultures.

It is believed that the early history of the introduction of Islam to Japan is related to the role of Turkey. The Ottoman Empire very much concerned to ensure that Islam was spread to the Japanese people. This is evidenced by the dispatched of a naval vessel to Japan in 1890 for the purpose of bridging diplomatic relations between the two countries as well introducing Muslims and Japanese people to each other. This naval vessel called "Ertugrul" was capsized and sank with 609 people aboard drowning 540 of them, on its way returning to home.

The first Muslim Japanese ever known are Mitsutaro Takaoka who converted to Islam in 1909 and took the name Omar Yamaoka after making the pilgrimage to Makkah and Bumpachiro Ariga, who about the same time went to India for trading purposes and converted to Islam under the influence of local Muslims there and subsequently took the name Ahmad Ariga. However, recent studies have revealed that another Japanese known as Torajiro Yamada was probably the first Japanese Muslim who visited Turkey out of sympathy for those who died in the aftermath of the shipwreck of the "Ertugrul". He converted to Islam there and took the name Abdul Khalil and probably made pilgrimage to Makkah.

The real Muslim community life however did not start until the arrival of several hundred Turkoman, Uzbek, Tadjik, Kirghiz, Kazakh and other Turko-Tatar Muslim refugees from central Asia and Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution during World War I. These Muslims who were given asylum in Japan settled in several main cities around Japan and formed small Muslim communities. A number of Japanese converted to Islam through the contact with these Muslims. (cited from History of Islam in Japan, this article was published in the 8th issue of Nida'ul Islam magazine (<http://www.islam.org.au>), May - June 1995).

After the war, there was an influx of Muslim immigrants from countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries. These immigrants came for various reasons, such as work or study, and their arrival subsequently increased the Muslim population in Japan². Initially, the presence of Muslim immigrants was primarily within the context of survival and maintaining life as Muslims. This involved performing prayers and finding halal food. The need for prayer and halal food led the Muslim community in Japan to establish prayer spaces, Islamic Centers, or mosques, as well as open shops selling halal food/products. The existence of mosques made the Japanese society aware of the presence of Islam and

² According to research by Komura (2015), In late 1980, reasons to visit Japan shifted from religious reasons to economic reasons. The Japanese booming economy and exemption of visas started to encourage Muslims mainly from Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh to travel to Japan. In the meantime, as more opportunities to meet Muslims in Japan are provided, more Japanese women were converted and had families with foreign Muslim husbands.

Muslims in Japan. Today, the Muslim community and Islamic missionary work are growing in Japan. There are Islamic organizations in Japan managed, for example, by people from Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Turkey, which play a role in spreading Islamic teachings to the Japanese. For instance, the Istiqlal Mosque, Osaka Islamic Centre, and Japan Da'wah Centre are managed by people from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, respectively.

This da'wah role is also carried out by Japanese Muslims. There are books explaining Islam written by Japanese Muslim scholars. For example, "Considering the Richness of Islam" by Okuda and Nakata, "Religion Time: The Islamic Way of Life" by Kosugi Na and Kosugi Ma Liche and "Islamic Faith and Allah" by Mizutani Zhou. In addition to spreading Islam through writing, field preaching efforts are also carried out by Japanese Muslims. Example to this is "My Muslim Neighbors" invitation program – a program designed by Hajj Kyoichiro Sugimoto, a Japanese Muslim revert. This program is implemented to allow Islam to be understood by non-Muslims through their interactions with foreign Muslims who have migrated to Japan. Hajj believes that many mosques do not plan da'wah programs for Japanese non-Muslims. That is why he has developed a method and event that allows the Japanese non-Muslims to get to know Islam in a casual and natural way. Furthermore, he believes that his efforts are magnet to bridge the gap between Japanese non-Muslims and Islam, the Qur'an, and Muslims (Hajj Kyoichiro Sugimoto).

With the da'wah efforts of both migrant Muslims and local Japanese Muslims, the number of Muslims in Japan is steadily increasing. Mosques and Islamic centers in Japan are also growing in number. According to Tanada (2015) research as of 2012, the number of the entire Muslim population in Japan is estimated approximately 101,375 people. 88,937 of them are expected to be non-Japanese, 7,622 are Japanese converts to Islam (mostly women) who married Muslims spouses (mostly non-Japanese), 2,566 are illegal migrants, and 2,250 are other Japanese. Research by Professor Tanada later revealed that it is estimated that in 2019 there were around 230,000 Muslims in Japan, a big leap from 100,000 in 2009. Meanwhile, the number of native Japanese Muslims is estimated at 50,000 people, owing to marriages, conversions, and births. As a matter of fact, the number of Mosques in Japan has quadrupled since the early 2000s, from 20 to 113 in 2019, indicating the government's approval of Muslim activities.

SYNERGISING DA'WAH MALAYSIA-JAPAN

The work of da'wah cannot be carried out effectively without the support of cooperation and collective efforts. The need for cooperation in the work of da'wah has been emphasized in Islam based on evidence from the Qur'an and hadith. For example, the Qur'an indicates that da'wah should be carried out by creating synergy between various parties collectively. Allah says:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِهِ صَفًّا كَأَنَّهُمْ بُنْيَانٌ مَرْصُورٌ

Verily, Allah loves those who fight in His cause in rows

(Surah al-Saff:4)

Ibnu Abbas while commenting this verse said that they are like a firm structure that does not move, because its parts are cemented to each other. This means that if we unite and build good cooperation networks, the message of Islam will be conveyed more effectively to the community.

In the context of da'wah to the Japanese community where Muslims are a minority, all da'wah organizations need to cooperate by creating a good synergy. Preachers should not work alone because this will weaken the da'wah movement. Without good cooperation and synergy,

da'wah will not thrive in the Land of the Rising Sun. Therefore, a synergy that combines all capabilities, potentials, expertise, and financial strength must be mobilized towards achieving better da'wah outcomes in Japan.

The development of da'wah in Japan is getting better today. Various parties have cooperated and contributed to the rise of da'wah and Islam in Japan. The role of the Japan Da'wah Centre, for example, in spreading da'wah in Japan has been supported by partners in Malaysia, both in the form of organizations and individuals. The Fajar Matahari Terbit Association is just one example of the contributions of Malaysians to da'wah in Japan. Higher learning institutions are also involved in supporting missionary work in Japan by sending students either through mobility programs or internships at the Japan Da'wah Centre. For example, initiatives have been undertaken by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA). The development of the Professional Da'wah Module, for instance, is an initiative by a research group from the Da'wah and Leadership Studies Centre, Faculty of Islamic Studies, UKM, aimed at supporting the missionary efforts of the Japan Da'wah Centre (JDC) in Japan.

Synergising Islamic outreach requires the unity of all parties. This matter was emphasized by the President of the Japan Da'wah Centre, Zulkarnain Hassan Basri, in an interview (8 November 2024):

"To bring Islam to Japan, we need the collective effort of all Malaysians. Please do not see this as a burden. Instead, consider it an honor that Allah has given us to bring Islam to Japan."

The words of Zulkarnain should serve as a source of inspiration and strong motivation that drives every Muslim to support and contribute da'wah works in Japan. Everyone needs to unite. Whether they are preachers, businessmen, politicians, students, NGOs, government employees, or those in the private sector, all must create a synergy towards strengthening the da'wah movement in the Land of the Rising Sun. Everyone can play a role within their respective capacities and abilities.

Several suggestions can be considered to enhance synergy for empowering da'wah works in Japan. These include:

1. Building smart networks between da'wah organizations in Malaysia and the JDC.
2. Identifying Malaysian entrepreneurs or philanthropists who can provide continuous funding for da'wah movements in Japan.
3. Encouraging Malaysian Muslim businesses to contribute to missionary efforts in Japan.
4. Collaborating with government da'wah institutions³ and organisations⁴.
5. Raising awareness among Malaysian Muslim immigrants in Japan to engage in missionary work, along with providing training for them.
6. Partnering with higher education institutions in Malaysia to conduct research on the needs of da'wah work in the Japanese context.

³ Da'wah institutions in Malaysia refer to Islamic religious agencies either at the Federal or state level owned by the Government.

⁴ Da'wah organisations in the context of Malaysia refer to non-governmental da'wah bodies. Sometimes, the government provides financial assistance to these da'wah organisations.

Collaboration and synergy in da'wah between the Japan Da'wah Centre and other da'wah organisations in Japan with institutions, organisations, and individuals in Malaysia, in various forms of support and assistance, will be able to boost the development of da'wah in Japan. At the same time, it will ensure that the da'wah movement in Japan will continue to persist in the long term basis.

CONCLUSION

The spread of Islam through the da'wah movement needs to be collectively mobilised. Da'wah cannot be carried out individually or in isolation. This has been proven in the prophetic missions, where they sought influence to ensure that the da'wah could be more widely embraced. The evidences from the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet also emphasise the importance of a collective and synergistic da'wah movement. In this regard, the strength of manpower and expertise in various fields needs to be synergised to ensure that da'wah in Japan has the strength to reach more of the Japanese population. The more Japanese people embrace Islam, the better the prospects for da'wah development in Japan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for approving the Attachment Program in Osaka, Japan (21 July - 21 November 2024). I would also like to extend my appreciation to the Japan Da'wah Centre, Osaka, for providing the necessary facilities throughout the four-month Attachment Program.

REFERENCES

- Abu Bakar Morimoto. (1980). *Islam In Japan: Its Past, Present and Future*. Tokyo: Islamic Center Japan.
- Abu Talib Ahmad. (1999). Changing Perceptions of Malaysians Toward Japan Since World War Two. *Kajian Malaysia*, 17(1): 83.
- Ahmad Sohaimi Lazim. (1985). Hubungan Diplomatik Malaysia-Jepun, 1957-1970-an: Satu Analisis. *Jurnal Perspektif* 2(1): 1-27.
- Awang Hasmadi Awang Mois. (2002). Some Issues Affecting Muslims in Japan. *Area Studies Tsukuba*, (20): 213-240.
- Hadith al-Bukhari, no. 3461.
- Hadith al-Tirmidhi, no. 2669.
- Hajj K Kyoichiro Sugimoto. (2024). https://www.launchgood.com/v4/campaign/dawah_to-Japanese_non-muslims. retrieve on 10/8/2024.
- Komura Akiko. (2015). Japanese Spirituality Seen from the History of Islam in Japan. Language, Culture, and Communication: *Journal of the College of Intercultural Communication*.
- Salih Mahdi S. Al Samarrai. (2003). *Islam In Japan History, Spread, And Institutions In The Country*. Tokyo: Islamic Center Japan.
- Takuma Sugibayashi & Samsoo Sa-u. (2024). *Living in Japan as a Muslim: Current Situations and Problems*. file:///D:/Downloads/admin_jois,+Journal+manager,+P93-102_Living+in+Japan+as+a+Muslim+Current+Situations+and+Problems%20(1).pdf.
- Tanada, Hirofuni. (2015). Muslim Population in the World and Japan, 2013. *Muslims in Japan No.14*. Institute for Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Generational Societies, Waseda University.

- Foley G, Timonen V. 2015. Using Grounded Theory Method to Capture and Analyze Health Care Experiences. *Health Serv Res*, 50(4):1195-210.
- Zulkarnain Hassan Basri, *An Interview*, 28 November 2024.