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MURCIR Analiz

The Symbolic Significance of the Japan's Crown Prince's Visit to Türkiye in the 100 Years of Turkish-Japanese Relations

“As Japan's Crown Prince visits Türkiye to commemorate a century of diplomatic relations, the two geographically distant nations find themselves at a crucial juncture. Despite their shared need to maintain balance between the Atlantic and Pacific worlds, their political, cultural, and economic collaboration remains underdeveloped, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity for deeper engagement.”

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1.What is the symbolic significance of the visit by Japan's Crown Prince and Princess to Türkiye on the 100th anniversary of Turkish-Japanese relations and, how have Turkish-Japanese relations evolved and been shaped over the past century?

The recent visit of Japan's Crown Prince Fumihito and Crown Princess Kiko to Türkiye, commemorating the 100th anniversary of bilateral relations, highlights the lasting and evolving partnership between the two nations. While no Japanese emperor has officially visited Türkiye, Prince Mikasa, a Middle East expert, and his family members have made over 10 official visits since 1990. At a higher level, Emperor Naruhito, who ascended the throne in 2019, visited Türkiye as crown prince in 2009. This visit in 2024 marks the first crown prince-level visit to Türkiye after 15 years.

The origins of Turkish-Japanese relations date back to the late 19th century, marked by the tragic sinking of the Ottoman frigate Ertuğrul off the coast of Japan in 1890. The frigate had been sent on a goodwill mission by Sultan Abdulhamid II to strengthen diplomatic ties and symbolize the friendship between the Ottoman Empire and Japan, as both nations sought allies amidst rising Western imperialism. Although the disaster claimed many lives, the Japanese people's compassionate efforts in rescuing and repatriating the survivors left a profound impression on the Ottoman Empire. This act of kindness established a foundation of mutual respect and goodwill, which has been cherished and remembered as a cornerstone of Turkish-Japanese relations.

After the Ertuğrul tragedy in 1890, Japan did not immediately establish formal diplomatic missions or economic ties with the Ottoman Empire. At the time, Japan's foreign policy prioritized East Asia and alliances with Western powers, leaving little room for formal engagement with the Ottomans. However, interactions gradually increased in the early 20th century, notably through individuals like Japanese merchant Yamada Torajirō, who lived in Istanbul and fostered cultural exchanges. Japan's modernization achievements, especially its victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), also inspired reformist movements within the Ottoman Empire. While the Ertuğrul incident served as a symbolic starting point, formal relations developed more gradually over time.

After the Republic of Türkiye was established in 1923, Türkiye and Japan formally began diplomatic relations in 1924. Initially, interactions were limited as both nations focused on domestic priorities—Türkiye's modernization under Atatürk and Japan's efforts to solidify its global power status. World War II further restricted direct engagement, with Türkiye maintaining neutrality and Japan engaged in the Pacific War.

In the post-war period, relations grew stronger as Japan rebuilt its economy and Türkiye joined Western alliances like NATO. From the 1950s onward, trade and cultural exchanges flourished, with Japan playing a key role in Türkiye's industrial development through investments and technology transfers. Additionally, Japanese tourists increasingly visited Türkiye's iconic destinations, such as Pamukkale and Cappadocia. Relations deepened through mutual support during crises, such as Japan's assistance following the 1999 Marmara earthquakes and Türkiye's role in evacuating Japanese citizens during the 1985 Iran-Iraq War.

Until the recent official visit of Japanese Crown Prince Fumihito, various significant events, both positive and negative, have shaped the mutual perceptions between Japanese and Turkish societies. What factors have contributed to these images? What is the current status of their bilateral relations? And what areas of cooperation should be prioritized to strengthen their partnership in the future? These critical questions will be analyzed in detail in the next section.

2.How is Japan's socio-political "image" perceived by the Turkish public after 100 years of Turkish-Japanese relations?

In Turkish public opinion, Japan have often been referred to as "friendly country," despite the vast geographical distance and relatively limited historical ties between them. This perception mainly stems from Japan's unique path of "modernization" as an Asian state that successfully preserved its cultural identity, as well as its remarkable economic growth, famously known as the "Japanese Miracle." For Türkiye, Japan has served as an inspiring role model since the late and post-Ottoman era, demonstrating that a non-Western nation can achieve significant socio-economic progress and modernization on its own terms.

The historical and cultural image of Japan in Türkiye remains somewhat outdated and is often influenced by romanticized pan-Turanist ideologies rather than grounded in contemporary scientific understanding. For instance, some popular Turkish historians – prominent figures in the media – continue to perpetuate the misconception that Japanese belongs to the Ural-Altai language family, a classification that has never been fully accepted in linguistic circles. Modern research increasingly views Japanese, along with Korean, as part of isolated language families. This notion of Japan as an “Altaic race” may provide a psychological boost to the Turkish public, fostering the belief that “if they achieved it, so can we.” However, such a departure from scientific accuracy risks creating barriers to healthy and informed communication between the two nations. A more science-based understanding is crucial for fostering genuine and productive engagement.

The economic image of Japan in Türkiye is shaped largely by its significant presence through Japanese corporations, such as Toyota’s production facilities in Sakarya, as well as its involvement in various sectors, including automotive, electronics, and infrastructure. High-profile collaborative projects, such as the Marmaray Tunnel in Istanbul, highlight the synergy between Japan’s technological expertise and Türkiye’s development ambitions. Additionally, for many Turkish people, “Japanese products” are synonymous with innovation, durability, and reliability, reinforcing Japan’s reputation as a trusted economic and industrial partner.

Japan’s cultural diplomacy has recently gained significant traction in Türkiye, particularly through the global popularity of manga and anime. These art forms have deeply resonated with Turkish audiences, influencing local art, fashion, and entertainment. Popular series such as *Naruto* and *One Piece* have fostered a vibrant fan community, with conventions and cosplay events like Comicon Istanbul becoming regular fixtures. This cultural exchange has further solidified Japan’s “Cool Japan” image in Türkiye, enhancing its soft power and deepening cultural connections between the two nations.

Lastly, Japan and Türkiye, both earthquake-prone nations, demonstrate stark contrasts in preparedness. Japan is viewed in Türkiye as a nation that has “learned to live with earthquakes,” thanks to its advanced infrastructure, strict regulations, and strong public awareness, which minimize casualties even in large-scale disasters. In contrast, Türkiye, despite devastating earthquakes in 1999, 2011, and 2023, has struggled to implement sustainable long-term measures. Japan has consistently provided immediate aid and offered its expertise in earthquake preparedness, yet Türkiye’s adoption of this knowledge remains limited. Strengthening collaboration with Japan could enhance Türkiye’s infrastructure and disaster management, improving its resilience and safety.

3.How is Türkiye’s socio-political “image” perceived by the Japanese public after 100 years of Turkish-Japanese relations?

Japanese society holds a “friendly country” (*yūkōkoku*) image of Türkiye, albeit to a lesser extent than Türkiye’s view of Japan.

Historically, one of the most notable examples is the 1985 Iran-Iraq War rescue operation, where Turkish Airlines evacuated 215 Japanese citizens stranded in Tehran. This act of heroism, often compared to the Ertuğrul Incident, left a lasting impression in Japan as a symbol of Türkiye's friendship and solidarity. The bond deepened further during the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, when Turkish rescue teams provided essential aid in disaster-stricken areas, earning widespread gratitude. These humanitarian acts have solidified Türkiye's image as a dependable partner in Japan's collective memory.

The cultural perception of Türkiye in Japanese society remains relatively weak, shaped by four key factors. First, the Turkish diaspora in Japan is minimal, with fewer than a thousand individuals, and the number of Turkish foreign students is surprisingly low due to the lack of educational partnership programs, limiting opportunities for cultural exchange. Second, Türkiye has struggled to effectively promote its cultural heritage as soft power in Japan. Despite this, Japanese people often associate Türkiye with "ice cream" and "kebab," thanks to kebab shops operated by the diaspora in major cities like Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka.

Third, the Kurdish population in Japan, estimated at 2,000 to 3,000, mainly resides in areas such as Kawaguchi and Warabi in Saitama Prefecture. Many arrived in the 1990s, citing persecution, though a significant portion entered illegally or overstayed their visas, living under "provisional release" without legal work permits. Concerns about ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization, have intensified, particularly after Turkish authorities reported fundraising activities at the Japan Kurdish Cultural Association, including the display of PKK flags and the alleged transfer of 40 million yen for terrorist financing. Public criticism, fueled by rule violations, protests, and altercations, has further complicated their integration and legal status in Japan. This situation has contributed to the perception that Turkey is "exporting terrorism and extremism," harming its national image.

Finally, Türkiye, once regarded as a tourism paradise, has increasingly been associated with terrorism in recent years due to incidents such as the 2016 Sultanahmet suicide bombing. These attacks have significantly diminished Japanese interest in Türkiye as a travel destination, leading to its perception as an "unsafe" country. However, individuals aged 40 or 50 and above, who visited Cappadocia—a particularly popular destination among Japanese tourists—several decades ago, tend to have a more positive and vivid memory of Türkiye.

4. What are the prospects in Turkish-Japanese Relations?

The future of Turkish-Japanese relations depends on their ability to explore new areas of political, cultural, and scientific cooperation. Crown Prince Fumihito's symbolic visit, alongside the centennial celebration of their bilateral ties, should serve as a fresh starting point to overcome existing challenges and unlock opportunities for deeper collaboration.

Firstly, socio-cultural exchange is crucial for the future of Turkish-Japanese relations. Japan's global success in promoting its "soft power" through anime, manga, and food culture provides a model Türkiye can adapt to enhance its own cultural influence. As Türkiye aims to become a global actor, learning from Japan's expertise in cultural promotion offers a realistic pathway forward – similar to how New Zealand leverages its "Middle-earth" film locations for tourism.

To strengthen cultural ties, a dedicated exchange program should be established to increase the flow of students between the two countries, fostering cultural understanding and long-term connections. Additionally, Türkiye should create academic institutes focused on studying Japanese culture, modernization, and development with an objective, academic approach, avoiding romanticized interpretations. This would deepen mutual understanding and strengthen bilateral relations.

In terms of tourism, Türkiye should actively communicate its safety and attractiveness to Japan through well-designed market studies and targeted campaigns. Demonstrating improved security and modern infrastructure would help rebuild its image as a desirable destination. Additionally, increasing the number of flights and routes between Japan and Türkiye, both significant tourism hubs, would facilitate travel and boost the number of inbound and outbound tourists, strengthening ties and enhancing economic benefits for both nations.

However, addressing Japan's perception of Türkiye as a "terrorist-exporting" country – stemming in part from some Kurds of Turkish origin in Japan who seek asylum citing alleged "ethno-political oppression by the Turkish state" – is not solely Türkiye's responsibility. Many such individuals lack residence or work permits, complicating the situation. Japan must cooperate with Turkish law enforcement to thoroughly investigate the "terrorist and criminal" backgrounds of asylum applicants. When necessary, such individuals should be transferred to Turkish authorities through mechanisms like Interpol. This joint effort would enhance security, address misperceptions, and enable the Turko-Kurdish diaspora in Japan to foster a more lawful and constructive role in society.

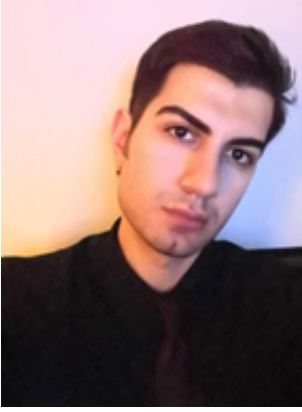
Secondly, economic collaboration remains a cornerstone of Turkish-Japanese relations. Japanese investments in Türkiye's automotive, electronics, and infrastructure sectors highlight their strong synergy. However, Türkiye's growing automotive industry continues to rely heavily on importing expertise from global leaders like Japan. To create a more balanced partnership, Türkiye should increase its investments in Japan, focusing on sectors such as clothing and food, as exemplified by its success in Europe with brands like Koton and Bursa Kebab Evi. Likewise, Japan holds untapped potential in Türkiye's consumer markets, particularly in clothing and food industries beyond high-tech sectors. Brands like Uniqlo and Kura Sushi could thrive with targeted strategies, fostering mutual economic growth and diversification while further strengthening their partnership.

Thirdly, as earthquake-prone nations, Türkiye and Japan can lead global disaster management efforts. This could be achieved through joint research on seismic technology and the establishment of a twin seismological research center with campuses in both countries. Such a center could include postgraduate-level programs focusing on urban planning, advanced early-warning systems, and disaster resilience. This collaboration would not only enhance both nations' preparedness but also strengthen their partnership while contributing to global advancements in disaster management.

Finally, politically, as two Asian nations navigating the balance between the Atlantic and Pacific worlds, Türkiye and Japan can establish a trilateral political forum with South Korea, which faces similar challenges. This forum could serve as a platform for collaboration and dialogue, enabling these nations to play a more proactive mediating role in addressing political tensions and fostering understanding between the Atlantic and Pacific regions. Such an initiative would enhance their diplomatic influence and contribute to global stability.

Thus, by fostering cultural understanding, strengthening economic ties, and tackling shared challenges, Türkiye and Japan can shape a partnership that enriches both societies and contributes to global stability.

About the Author



A. Can PIRTICI, is a PhD candidate in the Department of Global Studies at Ryukoku University. He completed his undergraduate studies at Marmara University and earned his master's degree at Ryukoku University (Kyoto) with a MEXT research scholarship awarded by the Japanese government in 2022. His master's thesis, titled "Regionalization Theory in the Context of Nishida's Global World Vision," was recognized as the Excellent Master's Thesis of the Year at the university and supervised by renowned political scientist Shimizu Kosuke. Due to his outstanding academic achievements, his MEXT fellowship was extended by the Japanese government to support his PhD studies in 2024. PIRTICI's research focuses on Nishida Kitaro's political and social philosophy, the Kyoto school, global IR theories, anti-essentialist political ontology, socio-political theories of evolution, and the translation of Japanese philosophical texts into English and Turkish. He is fluent in Japanese and English.

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