# The Muslim Perspective
# on Western Attitudes to Islamic Unity

The unity of the Muslim World has remained a prominent issue in Islamic thought and of great concern to Muslims since the first split at the end of the Righteous Caliphs. Despite the agreement among Muslims on the need for unity, it has faced serious challenges since Muslims divided into factions and groups within different political entities, the most important of which was the Ottoman Empire. Attempts to restore the caliphate, or to gather Muslim countries into one international organization, or even to hold a meeting between the leaders of Islamic countries to discuss issues of Islamic unity, had not succeeded until the fire of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 1969. Given the importance of Islamic unity, which has become an ideology advocated by many Muslim intellectuals today, Muslim views of foreign powers' attitudes toward this sensitive issue have been an important factor in shaping Islamic opinion. This is particularly so with regard to the West, which exceeded other foreign powers in its depth of interaction with the Muslim World, whether such interactions were ones of cooperation or conflict.

This paper discusses the impact of Muslim views on Western attitudes to Islamic unity by analyzing four perceptions of the West in the minds of many Muslims. These perceptions are linked to specific important stages in the historical interaction between Muslims and the West. The first stage was the exploitation by Western powers of trading capitulations granted by the Ottoman Empire to nationals of certain European countries; the second stage was the Western colonization of Muslim countries and the rise of the Islamic League in response to the challenge of colonialism and the disunity of Muslims; the third stage was the accusation that Western colonial powers were trying to prevent the restoration of the Caliphate after the fall of the Ottoman Empire; and the fourth stage was the accusation that those powers were obstructing the territorial integrity of Islamic countries under colonial rule and that the West during the Cold War prevented the convergence of Islamic countries unless it served Western objectives. Thus, this paper presents additional research on Muslims' general perspective of the West and its attitudes to Islamic unity in particular, Islamic relations with the West and Islamic political unity.[1]

The focus on these stages and the resulting negative perceptions of the West in the minds of many Muslims does not mean that Muslims have no positive opinions of the West. Even before the first stage, many Muslims saw the West as an example of renaissance and progress. This is evident in the writings of early students who were sent on scholarships to study in the West in the 19th century, such as Rafa'ah Al-

Tahtawi and Ali Mubarak. Tahtawi found that, "Western countries reached the highest standards of skill in mathematical, natural and metaphysical sciences, their origins and branches," and that they "abounded in various types of knowledge and literature which no-one denies that they bring about affability and adorn architecture."[2] After his return to Egypt he was keen to translate this knowledge into Arabic through the School of Languages, which played a prominent role in the evolution of the translation and Arabization movement.[3] Ali Al-Mubarak contended that the city of Paris in particular "was characterized by progress and the great number of authors. It was the destination of many people from Europe ... It had thinkers whose books spread into other countries and rid themselves of the darkness of ignorance and were distinguished from others by reason."[4] This positive outlook continued with many students on scholarships even after the crystallization of critical opinion of the West in the minds of many Muslims, as shown for example in *The Book of Days (Ayyam)*, by Taha Hussein. However, the focus on negative images of the West is the start of a corrective reassessment by both Muslims and the West, as shown in the conclusion. This study does not suggest an inevitable contradiction between the unity of Muslims and a positive relationship with the West, but adds a new dimension to the interpretation of the attitudes – negative or positive – of Muslims toward the West today. This helps those advocates of cultural dialogue between Muslims and the West to pay attention to the sensitivity of the issue of unity among Muslims and help such a dialogue succeed.

## *First Stage: Western Trade*
## *Capitulations Dismantle the Ottoman Empire*

Towards the end of the 15th century the Ottoman Sultans began to grant certain European countries trade capitulations which were originally only granted to citizens of Italian cities – such as the city of Venice – who traded with the cities of the Ottoman Empire. Naples obtained these capitulations in 1498, France in 1535 (and again in 1569), Poland in 1553, England in 1580, and the Netherlands in 1612. In the 18th century, additional European countries also received such privileges, including the Holy Roman Empire (1718), Sweden (1736), the Kingdom of Two Sicilies (1740), Tuscany, Hamburg and Lubeck (1747), Denmark (1756), Prussia (1761), and Spain (1780). However, after several centuries of this practice a number of Ottoman religious scholars opposed the extensive granting of trade capitulations to Western traders. This was due not only to the result of these capitulations becoming a heavy burden on the deteriorating Ottoman economy and a tool to protect illegal practices such as the white slave trade, but also to an increase in the use of these capitulations as a justification for foreign intervention in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire that

negatively impacted territorial unity and populations. After being granted capitulations, Western countries established diplomatic missions and commercial agencies throughout the Ottoman Empire. The function of these missions and agencies at a time of weakness in the Ottoman Empire included the protection of certain religious minorities. An example of this took place in the 19th century around Mount Lebanon when France protected the Maronite Catholics, Britain the Druze, and Russia the Orthodox Christians, even though all were Ottoman nationals.

Although foreign capitulations were a result of relaxed Ottoman–Western relations, they were not a manifestation of submission by the Ottoman Empire to Western nations. One cannot say that foreign capitulations from the beginning were meant to allow Western powers the opportunity to intervene in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire and historical linguistic analysis refutes this view. In terms of linguistics, the Arabic word *imtiyazat* is a translation of the English term 'capitulations' which assumes the existence of two parties between whom there is an unequal relationship exploited by the stronger party to achieve their interests at the expense of the weaker party. The English term suggests that European countries were exploiting the Ottoman State which granted these capitulations to them. However, the Turkish word synonymous with the English term is *Ahdname*, which is derived from the Persian language. This Turkish description does not carry any negative connotation for the party granting capitulations or pledges.

Historically, the European traders sought pledges of security or immunity from the Ottoman authorities when entering the country and allowed to stay for one year, although overstaying did not result in any negative consequences. Under the pledge of immunity, European traders would be exempt from all Ottoman taxes, including the poll tax on non-Muslims residing in the State, except for customs duties. While the duration of the covenant would end at the death of the Sultan who had granted it, traditionally it continued to be effective in the reign of his successors. Later sultans added privileges to pledges of immunity to include promises of protection. The pledge would grant trade capitulations to nationals of foreign countries that approach the Sultan in return for commitments by the rulers of those nations to friendship with the Ottoman Empire, and even sometimes loyalty and submission to it, as is clearly stated in the covenant which gave British traders capitulations in 1580. The covenant was not issued in the form of an agreement between the Ottoman state and the foreign state seeking to obtain capitulations; it was issued by the Ottoman Sultan (and the Persian Shah also later) in order to encourage and secure trade between the Ottoman Empire and the state concerned and to achieve political goals. Capitulations were acts of sovereignty, an initiative made by the Sultan to the rulers of Europe who had been courting the Ottoman seat of power in order to establish official relations with the Ottoman Empire and ensure the safety of trade with it. It is therefore not surprising

that the Sultans did not give any covenants or privileges to nationals of its arch-enemies, the Russian and Austrian empires, even after they inflicted on the Ottoman Empire several humiliating military defeats.

European countries were eager for such privileges because of the strong competition among them to monopolize trade in the ports of the eastern Mediterranean and the desire to get the support of the Ottoman Empire in their struggles against enemies. In the 16th and 17th centuries the pursuit by the rising European powers (especially France, England and the Netherlands) of such covenants intensified for economic and strategic reasons, including the desire for the friendship of the Sultan and his support against their common enemy, namely the Habsburg dynasty which ruled the Austrian Empire and several other countries in western Europe. These capitulations opened up for European traders the large and stable markets of the Ottoman Empire as well as the overland route to the East (especially Persia, India and China). This trade development was reflected in the prosperity of the European countries concerned and their increase in strength helped them to circumvent the Portuguese, who had closed the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf and monopolized trade with the countries of the Orient via the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope.[5] In summary, the negative image of the West in the minds of many Muslims was reinforced by the behavior of Western nations with regard to the Ottoman Empire, enabling those countries to achieve huge commercial gain by opening up the Ottoman markets to their advantage. However, these countries also sought to dismantle the Ottoman Empire by exploiting the foreign concessions conferred upon them.

The reaction of Muslims to this Western behavior can be understood in light of positive Muslim opinion of the Ottoman Empire, which united under its flag a large portion of the world's Muslims. For example, the followers of the Sufi Senussi order in North Africa remained loyal to the Ottoman Empire and collaborated with the representatives of its authority.[6] When France attacked Algeria in 1830, the Algerian ruler announced his loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan asking him for support.[7] During the following 80 years refugees from Algeria arrived in Ottoman territories to secure their protection.[8] The leaders of the Orabi Revolution in Egypt (1881–1882) declared their allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan despite their refusal of the Ottoman army's intervention in the struggle with the Khedive Tawfiq, backed by British troops.[9] Regardless of challenges by certain state governors to Ottoman authority politically and militarily – for example the governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805–1848), whose army defeated the Ottoman army in Asia Minor in 1839 – none of them had seceded from the Ottoman Empire or sought to overthrow it, but rather sought to maximize their control and governance within it.[10]

This positive view of the Ottoman Empire was reinforced when Sultan Abdul Hamid II adopted the idea of the Islamic University as a basis for state policy toward

Muslims.[11] He added to the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 his capacity as a Caliph of Muslims and used this title so frequently that he surpassed in stature most of his predecessors—the Sultans of Al-Othman. Sheikh Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani sought to bring the two sects Sunni and Shiite together and unify Muslims around the banner of the Ottoman Empire. He succeeded in reducing the hostility of the Qajar state in Persia to the Ottoman Empire enough so that Shah Muzaffar Al-Din and a number of Shiite clerics did not oppose the idea of an Islamic League under the Ottoman Sultan.[12] In light of this loyalty, any attack against the Ottoman Empire would entail a hostile aggressor. The West played this hostile role twice in that period, once when he sought to dismantle the Ottoman Empire by using the card of religious minorities taking advantage of foreign capitulations obtained by Western traders in the Ottoman Empire; and the second when it dismantled the Ottoman Empire through colonialism of many Muslim countries that were not subject to the rule of the Ottoman Empire.