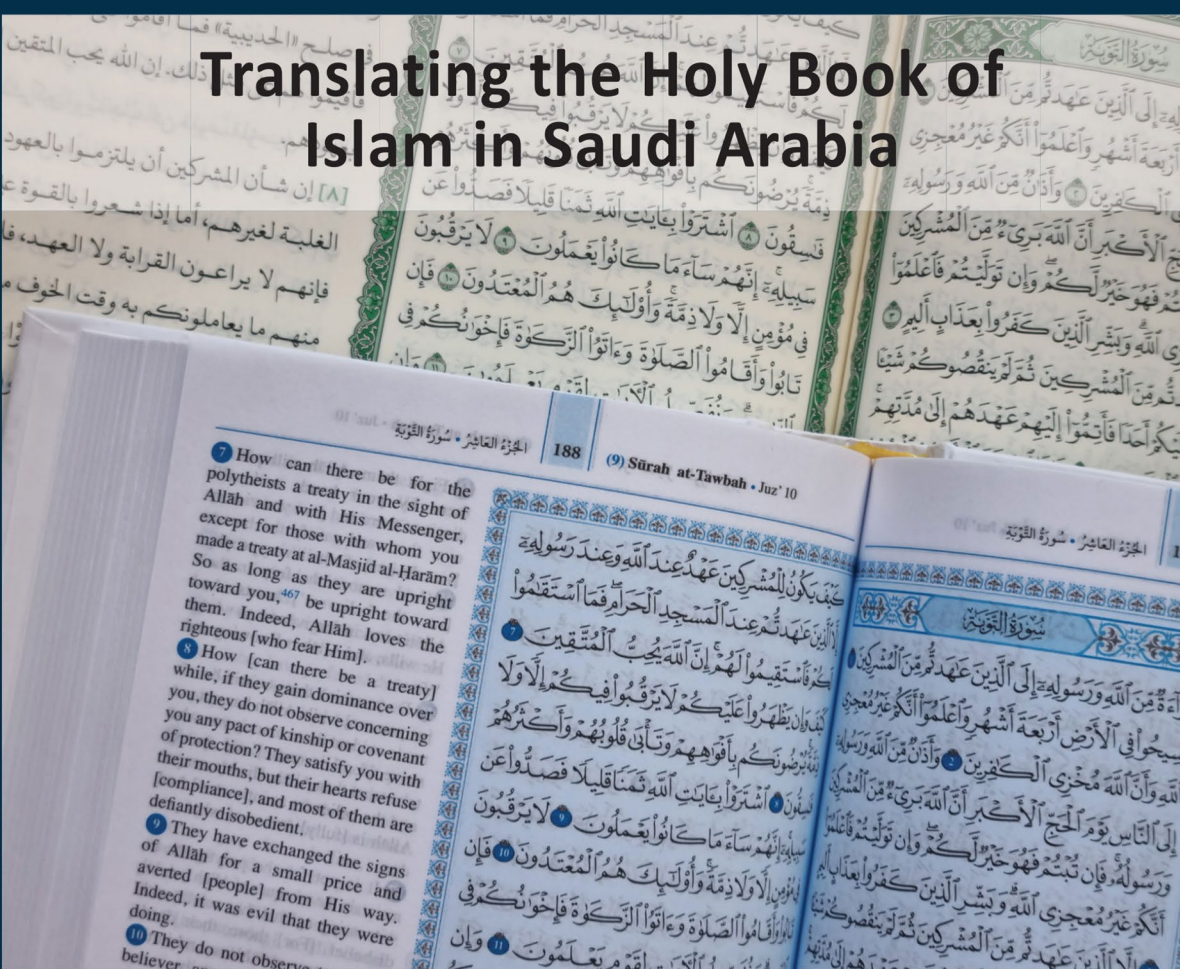


The Kingdom and the Qur'an

Translating the Holy Book of Islam in Saudi Arabia





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Introduction

What makes the governments and peoples of Arabic-speaking countries interested in the translation of the Qur'an? One might expect there to be a long tradition of interpreting the Qur'an in foreign languages, especially in non-Arabic speaking areas of the Muslim world (as well as a history of polemical or scholarly interest in interpreting the Qur'an from the West). However, one might reasonably *not* expect to see any significant developments in this field from Saudi Arabia, since the country is part of a region known not only for its cultivation of Arabic identity (so-called *ʿurūba*) but also as a centre of the kind of religious fundamentalism usually associated with the Wahhabi/Salafi movement in Sunni Islam. Yet, nowadays, Saudi Arabia is the most important global actor in the production and distribution of Qur'an translations. The fact that the present-day approach to translation of the Qur'an involves something more than merely transcribing the Arabic text into another language might lead one to enquire how significant the contribution of these translations is to the modern intellectual history of Islam. The process of *translating* the Holy Book of Islam, which is sometimes and somehow equated to *interpreting* it, raises some important questions: Who reconstructs the meaning of the Qur'an for non-Arabic speakers and how? Why is this so important for modern Muslims? And, finally, who are the readers of these translations? The Qur'an, as the primary living textual source of Islam (which is recited, commented on, and, of course, translated), is one of the most important bases for contemporary Muslim religiosity, and around eighty percent of Muslims are not native speakers of Arabic and, thus, can access its meaning only through their own languages. The significance of such translations is heightened even more in situations where the state is directly involved in the process, becomes visible as both sponsor and interpreter of the text,

and sanctions its publication and distribution via a state-approved or supported network of religious scholars or even institutions created specifically for this purpose.

Saudi Arabia provides perhaps the best example of how a Muslim-majority, Arab country has developed a Qur'an translation publishing industry. By studying the history and evolution of this industry, one can trace how Sunni Muslim perspectives on 'foreignisation' of the Qur'an changed during the twentieth century, including the establishment of specialised institutions to create and authorise Qur'an translations, the building of distribution networks, and the wider development of what could be rightly called a 'translation movement'. Since premodern Islamic scholarship in the Arabian Peninsula had no interest in translating the Qur'an for an internal readership (in contrast to non-Arabic-speaking areas like India, Central Asia, Persia, or Anatolia, with their long history of interlinear interpretations), this 'movement' is a twentieth-century phenomena—one which has become a major point of connection between modern print culture and contemporary Islamic theology.

The term 'translation movement' is used here to describe the complex and persistent efforts of individuals and institutions inside Saudi Arabia to produce translations of the Qur'an and to develop a more or less fixed 'hermeneutical standard' for those translations. That is, it refers to both the initial translation process and the secondary process of revising both new and pre-existing translations to conform to an approved set of standards. Some of the roots of this movement were closely tied to basic features of Salafi theology that generally treated non-Arabic renderings of the Qur'an as the 'translation of the meanings' [*tarjamat al-ma'ānī*]—a concept discussed in Chapter One. Some of the main underlying ideas held in Salafi Islam, such as the focus on returning to the sources, the Qur'an and Sunna and the concept of the re-orientation of Islam in accordance with the supposed righteous creed of the first Muslims who witnessed the revelation, have opened up a big window of opportunities for Saudi translators. Another opportunity came with the expansion of Islamic missionary activity, as this led to the political involvement of the Saudi state in religion, both of which were inextricably intertwined with the development of the Qur'an translation movement. The proactive, positive stance on Qur'an translation that was adopted by the state as

part of its political effort to establish religious leadership in the Muslim world effectively closed off any avenue for opposition. In contrast to Egypt, where a powerful anti-translationist movement criticised anything labelled a 'translation' of the Qur'an, religious circles in Saudi Arabia very quickly recognised how useful translation could be as a tool for the promotion of Islam (or, rather, their specific 'Salafi' version of Islam) around the world. A complete understanding of this powerful trend in modern Muslim intellectual history, namely, an analysis of who publishes Qur'an translations in Saudi Arabia and why and how they do so will lead to a better understanding of how the Qur'an figures in the modern Muslim imagination as both a source of belief and a book of guidance for everyday life. On another level, it will also cast light on the role and use of religion as soft power in foreign relations and on how Saudi Arabia has tried, and continues to try, to position itself as the leading power in the Muslim world.

The complexity of the issues involved requires a specific kind of approach, not least due to the number of actors involved (translators, editors, publishers, the government, and non-government institutions). In this context, relevant studies on the bibliography of Qur'an translation include Muhammad Hamidullah's list of Qur'an translations published in European languages,¹ the IRCICA's *World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Quran*,² and, among the more recent studies that relate to translations into individual languages, Kidwai's *Bibliography of the Translations of the Meanings of the Glorious Quran into English*.³ However, more important to the analysis undertaken in this volume are a number of foundational works that treat the history and theoretical aspects of Qur'an translation, such as the problem of translatability, the visibility of the translator, and related discourses.⁴ It is critical to look at

1 See the 'Liste des traductions du Coran en langues européennes', in Muhammad Hamidullah, *Le Saint Coran* (Paris: Club Français du Livre, 1959), pp. xliii–lxvii.

2 İsmet Binark, Halit Eren, and Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an: Printed Translations, 1515–1980* (Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art, and Culture, 1986).

3 Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Bibliography of The Translations of The Meanings of The Glorious Quran into English: 1649–2002* (Medina: King Fahd Glorious Qur'an Printing Complex, 2007).

4 See, for example, the following studies on approaches to Qur'an translation: Bruce B. Lawrence, *The Koran in English: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc773k4>; Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Qur'an*

the translation from this perspective and go beyond simply examining how a given work interprets the Qur'an, to analyse why it was actually produced, why it favours one exegetical choice over another, and, finally, how the readership responds to the exegetical choices within the text. My approach is, thus, not confined to analysis of the linguistic features of the text (although this angle is also important) or the primary historical impetus behind the translation but also includes research into the translator as an agent who determines meaning, not to mention the influence of their sponsor(s), publisher(s), and editor(s). It is also worth mentioning at this point that sometimes Islamic publishers appear to want to render the translator ultimately invisible (often by overriding his or her personal authority by appointing someone else to 'approve' the translator-produced text. As we will see, this kind of subversion is common with translations produced in Saudi Arabia). Such internal discourses and tensions would remain completely opaque if one does not look beyond the surface to explore the driving forces that motivate and shape the translation in a formative way. At the time of writing, Saudi Arabia has produced Qur'an translations and interpretations in over one hundred languages. This fact alone makes it important to seek answers to the question: who translates the Qur'an in Saudi Arabia (or with Saudi support), how, and why? Moreover, what distinguishes these works from translations produced elsewhere, and how influential and extensive has been their impact on modern Islamic thought?

This study takes a three-pronged approach. It addresses the basic literary sources (that is, the translations themselves), explores the broad context of their production by undertaking historical research on specific developments in the field, and, finally, investigates the lives and biographies of some of the translators who have worked within the Saudi framework. This entailed a number of field studies, which I undertook during various research trips to Saudi Arabia between 2010

Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203036990>; Johanna Pink, 'Translation', in *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. by George Archer, Maria Dakake, and Daniel Madigan (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 364–76, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315885360-36>; M. Brett Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Stefan Wild, 'Muslim Translators and Translations of the Qur'an into English', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 17.3 (2015), 158–82, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2015.0215>

and 2012, primarily to the King Fahd Glorious Qur'an Printing Complex (KFGQPC) and the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM), which are the main think tanks that produce the translations. Other research has been conducted during visits to Turkey (to the libraries of various religious foundations in Istanbul), Azerbaijan, and the UK. This field work has been extremely helpful in arriving at an understanding of the revision and publishing processes involved in the production of Qur'an translations. In addition, it has allowed me to forge contacts with a wide number of private publishers and religious networks in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran whose work and output is also relevant to the research presented in the following pages.

Chapter One, 'Twentieth-Century Debates on the Translatability of the Qur'an in the Middle East', covers not only the period of the first debates over the translatability of the Qur'an in the Muslim world (primarily Egypt, Syria, and Iraq) during the early- and mid-twentieth century but also the local development of the 'translation movement' in the Saudi context. It discusses the significance to these debates of a corpus of religious texts by authors ranging from the twelfth-century thinker Ibn Taymiyya to later scholars from the eighteenth-century family of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb and how these came to form a kind of exegetical canon, both in essential terms (that is, what exactly should be interpreted) and textually (which sources are 'suitable' to do that with). This hermeneutics also incorporates the problem of translation [*tarjama*] and the limits of interpretation, for example, ideas about which meanings can be explained in Arabic and explicitly transferred to other languages. The chapter also briefly addresses foreign language learning in Saudi Arabia and modern developments in higher education there.

The second chapter, 'The Muslim World League: A Forerunner to International Translational *da'wa* Networks', outlines the history and impact of one of the earliest Saudi Muslim organisations dedicated to translation, The Muslim World League (MWL), which was established in 1962. It traces the emergence of the idea of 'approved' or 'authorised' Muslim-authored translations of the Qur'an, originally in terms of the adoption and production of pre-existing translations, and later moving on to the commissioning of projects that led to new, bespoke translations. Although the Muslim World League only produced four completely new translations (if one does not count the translations produced as a result

of some of its later collaborative projects), its activities represented the first instance of Saudi state intervention in Qur'an translation, motivated by both political and religious factors.

Chapter Three, 'The Hilālī-Khān Translation: The First Interpretation of the Qur'an in a Foreign Language by Saudi Scholars', provides the first comprehensive study of the textual history of this influential Qur'an translation into English— one which was first published in the USA in 1977 and prepared by scholars affiliated with the IUM at the time. The Hilālī-Khān translation provides a good illustrative example of how the original text of Qur'an translations can be subject to significant change in later editions, sometimes to the extent of completely changing the original and introducing new meanings that bear the hallmarks of a Salafi interpretation of the Qur'an. The Hilālī-Khān translation (particularly the later editions published by Darussalam and the KFGQPC) has also paved the way for a growing trend of '*tafsīr*isation' of translation, the idea that the core meanings of the Qur'an will not be understood 'properly' by the reader if it is not supplemented by the 'correct' (in its Salafi or mainstream-Sunni sense) classical interpretation [*tafsīr*]. This approach demonstrates the way that, in general, the Muslim tradition tends to view translation as a kind of commentary, seeing the translator (and also editor and publisher) as interpreters with the religious authority to undertake exegesis.

The fourth chapter, 'The King Fahd Complex Glorious Qur'an Printing Complex: A Turning Point in the History of Qur'an Translations', discusses a unique phenomenon in twentieth-century Muslim intellectual life: the creation of a special institution (in 1984) for the production, revision, and publication of translations. While a significant proportion of the translations published by the KFGQPC are merely revised editions of earlier works, the organisation has also produced more than fifty newly-prepared translations, some of which have become extremely influential in various parts of the Muslim world. Remaining a leading international actor in the field, the KFGQPC has become the gold standard for many Salafi readers of the translations, as well as a broad range of Sunni audiences, with its own set of regulations and requirements for its translations, in terms of both their content and formal features.

Finally, Chapter Five, 'Translation for Everyone: Collaborative Saudi Publishing Projects in Foreign Languages', explores individual and

private publishing projects in Saudi Arabia, past and present. These range from standalone, one-off translations such as ‘Saheeh International’, one of the most widely distributed Qur’an translations in the English-speaking Muslim world; to those produced by commercial publishing projects such as Darussalam, which publishes in a range of languages; to missionary initiatives such as the *Tafsīr al-ʿushr al-akhīr* project. Additionally, the chapter discusses some examples of how digitisation in the field of Islamic sources is changing the face of translation, rendering the translator less visible and promoting the production of a kind of multi-language translation which aims to provide the same reading and interpretation in every language.

This volume is not an attempt to provide an exhaustive bibliography of all the translations published in Saudi Arabia, nor a comprehensive biographical study of the translators themselves. Instead, it focuses on a select number of case studies with the aim of, for example, identifying any common background among translators and/or editors, their shared exegetical choices, as well as other features that are essentially related to the Salafi hermeneutic trend. A number of excellent studies have already covered the most essential features of Salafi exegetical traditions in modern Qur’an translations.⁵ This volume will build on these to show that not every translation that appears from Saudi publishers is positioned as conforming to Salafi reading of the Qur’an; instead, many of them are positioned as mainstream Sunni works (which, in many cases, is fairly accurate). Such variation in interpretation also shows the complexity of what I denote as the ‘translation movement’. It is also worth noting that the dynamics of Qur’an translation as a genre and a living field are changing and evolving, with more and more translations published every year. This means that the translation movement may yet experience some intriguing new turns: every translation published quickly passes into history, only to be rewritten with the publication of newer works.

5 See, for example: Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur’anic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities* (Bristol: Equinox, 2019), pp. 49–71, <https://doi.org/10.1558/isbn.9781781797051>; Massimo Campanini, *The Qur’an: Modern Muslim Interpretations*, trans. by Caroline Higgitt (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 8–20; Walid A. Saleh, ‘Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of *tafsīr* in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach’, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies*, 12 (2010), 6–40, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2010.0103>

