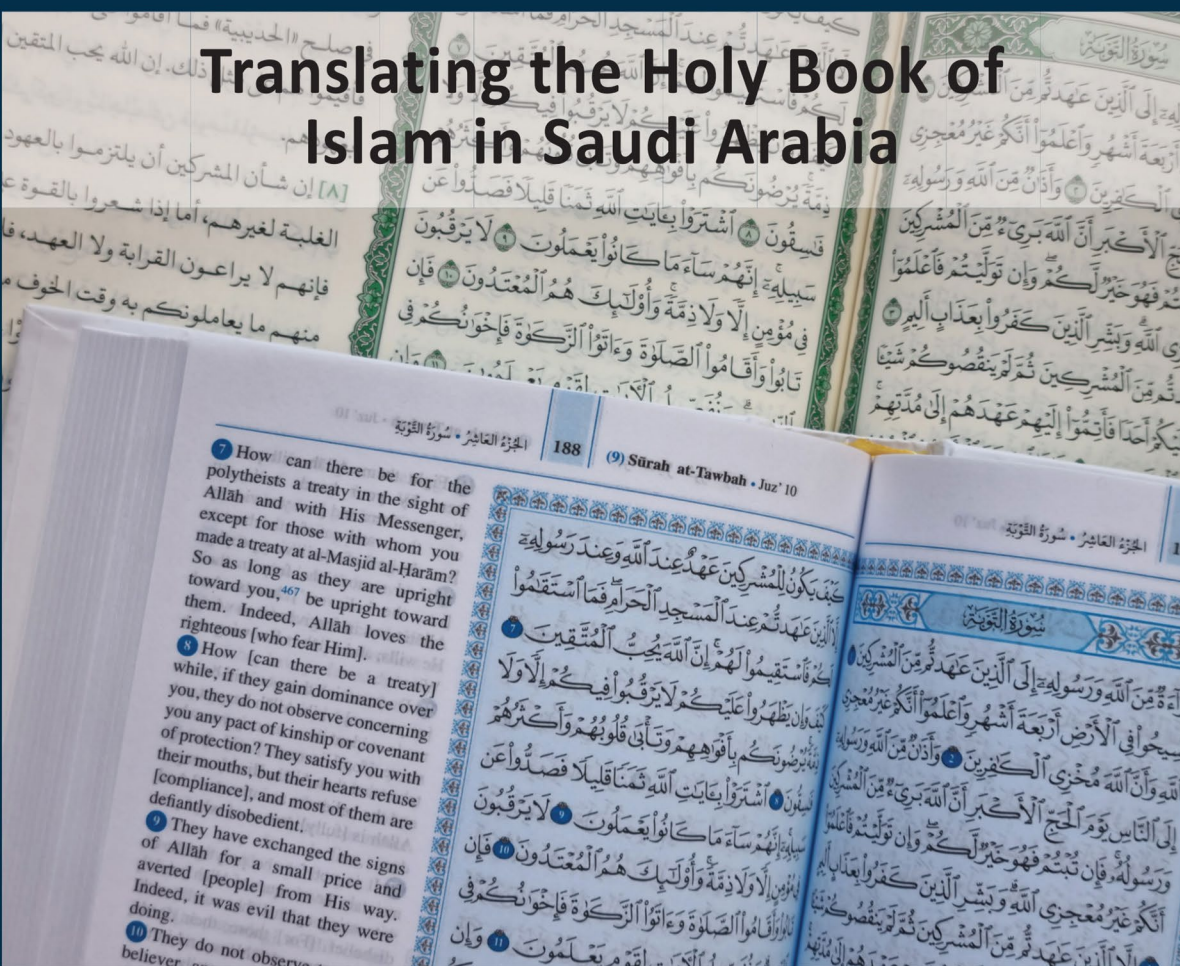


The Kingdom and the Qur'an

Translating the Holy Book of Islam in Saudi Arabia



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2. The Muslim World League: A Forerunner to International Translational *daʿwa* Networks

The MWL: An Innovative Step in the International Promotion of Islam

The Muslim World League (MWL, known in Arabic as Rābiṭat al-ʿĀlam al-Islāmī) officially came into being on 15 December 1962. This global Muslim organisation, with headquarters in Mecca, remains one of the most influential transnational Islamic institutions. It has realised many different goals, from the cultural and religious to the political, and now maintains offices in more than a hundred countries, including many Western states. As an organisation formed from the policies and ideology of Saudi Arabia's then crown prince who would become king Fayṣal b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Āl Saʿūd (1906–1975), it has been described as an attempt to 'impose respective moral and the political authority on the entire Muslim world'.¹ During its sixty-year history, the MWL has had a significant impact on the global level, playing a role, for example, in the Saudi response to the threat posed by Nasser's pan-Arab radical regime in Egypt and, more recently, in the 'globalisation' of Saudi Salafism as the 'most correct' version of Islam. It has shaped many of the discourses surrounding the modernisation of Islam and is involved in even secular developments within the Kingdom (for example, progress in

1 Samir Amghar, 'The Muslim World League in Europe: An Islamic Organization to Serve the Saudi Strategic Interests?', *Journal of Muslim in Europe* 1.2 (2012), 127–41 (p. 129), <https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-12341234>

modernising education) that are considered to be implicated in Islamic revival: as Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi from MWL noticed in late 1970s, 'The future of Islam depends on Saudi Arabia [...]. The circumstances are also conducive to the promotion of Islamic ideals.'²

Since its inception, the MWL has been actively engaged with current political trends in the Islamic world. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, a time when Saudi Arabia supported the Muslim Brotherhood and was also active in the mobilisation of Muslims against the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the MWL contributed significantly to these initiatives.³ Reinhard Schulze's comprehensive study of the organisation's early years shows that it not only built on previous Muslim activist achievements but also introduced new structural forms of international influence.⁴ Nowadays, the MWL is registered as an NGO in Saudi Arabia and is headed by a Supreme Council made up of sixty members from all over the world.⁵ Publishing has always been one of the MWL's priorities. Its Department of Press and Publication was established in the organisation's first year. This chapter asks how this office of the MWL has contributed to the Qur'an translation industry and which of its works have had the most crucial impact.

As mentioned in Chapter One, translation of the Qur'an was not considered problematic in the Saudi context in the 1950s and 1960s. The first plans to produce translations were announced in this era of modernisation, soon after the establishment of the MWL. During its first two years of operation, 1962 and 1963, in fact, the Department of Press and Publication released details of at least five projects to produce Qur'an translations in English, French, Japanese, Chinese, and Yoruba.⁶ A few articles on the rationale for and the methodology of Qur'an

2 Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, 'Education and Society in Saudi Arabia', in *Education and Society in the Muslim World*, ed. by M. W. Khan (Jeddah: King Abdulaziz University, 1981), 89-99 (p. 98).

3 Muhammad Haniff Hassan, 'Mobilization of Muslims for Jihad: Insights from the Past and their Relevance Today', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 5.8 (2013), 10-15.

4 Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Islamischen Weltliga* (Leiden: Brill, 1990). This study remains the most profound investigation on the establishment and early activities of the MWL.

5 'Affiliated Councils and Organizations', *The Muslim World League*, <https://themwl.org/en/Bodies>

6 Schulze, pp. 333-34.

translation appeared in the MWL journal at the time. One editorial piece, entitled 'Lights on the translation of the Noble Qur'an', insisted on the 'permissibility' of translating the holy book by emphasising the importance of translating its 'meanings' for *da'wa* [missionary] purposes.⁷ The following issue of the same journal included a ten-page article by Muhammad Asad, the translator working on the English-language edition, with the title 'Introduction to the Translation of the Meanings of the Qur'an'.⁸ From these preliminary publications, it is clear that, even in its early years, the MWL considered translations of the Qur'an to be part of the institution's long-term strategy for the global promotion of Islam.

The First Translations

The MWL focused first on publishing a French translation of the Qur'an, perhaps because it was the simplest project. An edition, translated by Muhammad Hamidullah, had been already published in 1959 by Le Club français du livre, and it was decided to reprint this existing French translation without mentioning that Saudis had not been involved in its production.⁹ The MWL's approach to the English-language edition, however, was very different. The production of this version was the first Saudi-sponsored Qur'an-translation project, and it has an interesting, if rather controversial, history.

The translator on the English project was Muhammad Asad (1909–1992), a convert to Islam who worked as a journalist, traveller, writer, and diplomat.¹⁰ Widely travelled in both the East and West, Asad had many connections all over the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia. He had stayed at the court of the first ruler of the modern Saudi State, King 'Abd al-'Aziz between 1927 and 1932. From that point onwards, even after years of living and working in Pakistan and finally moving back to the West in 1959, Asad enjoyed a level of support from the

7 'al-Ḍaw' 'alā tarjmāt al-Qur'ān', *The Muslim World League Journal*, 10 (1964), 42–44.

8 Muḥammad Asad, 'al-Muqaddima fī tarjmāt al-Qur'ān', *The Muslim World League Journal*, 11 (1964), 42–54.

9 Muhammad Hamidullah, *Le Saint Coran* (Paris: Club Francais du Livre, 1959).

10 His real name was Leopold Weiss. He was born in the Austro-Hungarian city of Lemberg, now Lviv in Ukraine.

royal family and other Saudi authorities.¹¹ He developed an interest in translating the Qur'an around 1960 and began his first draft just before the establishment of the MWL. Asad describes his motivation to undertake the project in his introduction to the first edition of his English translation:

Familiarity with the bedouin speech of Central and Eastern Arabia—in addition, of course, to academic knowledge of classical Arabic—is the only way for a non-Arab of our time to achieve an intimate understanding of the diction of the Qur'an. And because none of the scholars who have previously translated the Qur'an into European languages has ever fulfilled this prerequisite, their translations have remained but distant, and faulty, echoes of its meaning and spirit.¹²

Seeking to use his knowledge of Arabic-language variants to reproduce the true meaning of the Qur'an in English, then, Asad embarked on his translation with approval from King Fayṣal, the successor of 'Abd al-ʿAzīz. Fayṣal continued Asad's Saudi patronage and, in 1963, directed the MWL in Mecca to subscribe in advance to Asad's forthcoming translation.¹³ During his first three years of work, Asad completed nine suras [chapters], which he published under the title *The Message of the Qurʾān* in 1964.¹⁴ Its copyright page lists both Geneva and Mecca as its places of publication, acknowledging that the translation was authorised by Asad's local Swiss Islamic centre and also by the MWL. *The Message* was initially distributed in Switzerland and beyond, with some copies sent to Saudi Arabia as well. Although published under a dual Swiss-Saudi banner, it was printed in the Netherlands by Mouton and Co, the Hague, a publisher that was later incorporated into De Gruyter, the well-known German academic press. The book's cover includes the price of the volume in three currencies—details which gives some indication of the intended areas of distribution: Saudi Arabia (16 riyals), Austria

11 Elma Ruth Harder, 'Muhammad Asad and the Road to Mecca: Text of Muhammad Asad's Interview with Karl Günter Simon', *Islamic Studies*, 37.4 (1998), 533–44.

12 Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qurʾān, Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), p. 5.

13 See Martin Kramer, 'The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss)', in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. by Martin Kramer (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1999), pp. 225–47.

14 Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qurʾān (Suras 1–9)* (Mecca: MWL, 1964).

(25 shillings) and Switzerland (15.50 Swiss Francs). The copyright is cited as belonging to Pola Hamida Asad, Muhammad Asad's second wife, his first reader, and sometimes even the editor of his books. She is also mentioned in the acknowledgements, as is the Secretary General of the MWL, Muḥammad Sarūr al-Ṣabbān (1898–1972), a prominent Saudi writer and intellectual who secured MWL funds for Asad.¹⁵

The MWL leaders seem to have trusted Asad completely, as he was allowed to produce his translation without any directives or supervision. After publication, however, the members of the publishing board examined the translation and found it rather challenging. Raising serious objections to some of Asad's interpretations, they took the decision to destroy virtually the entire print run of *The Message's* first edition and never to print another. Among the points that most troubled the MWL, Abdul Majid Khan explains, were

[Asad's understanding of] Isra³ and Mi^craj not as physical occurrences but as purely spiritual [...]; the view that the jinn in some cases should be understood as 'elemental forces of nature' [; and ...] his interpretation of 24:31 and 33:59 as to whether women had to wear the hijab.¹⁶

The MWL representatives disagreed with Asad's 'rejection' of (or, more precisely, his attempt to rationalise) wonders and miracles described in the Qur'an. Asad's response, included in the complete edition finally published in 1980, was the following:

But even such extraordinary, 'miraculous' messages cannot be regarded as 'supernatural': for the so-called 'laws of nature' are only a perceptible manifestation of 'God's way' (sunnat Allah) in respect of His creation—and, consequently, everything that exists and happens, or could conceivably exist or happen, is 'natural' in the innermost sense of this word, irrespective of whether it conforms to the ordinary course of events or goes beyond it.¹⁷

This position on miracles was one Asad shared with Egyptian commentators, including Muḥammad al-Marāghī (see Chapter One)

15 Ibid., p. 4.

16 Abdul Majid Khan, 'A Critical Study of Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'an* (1980)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Aligarh Muslim University, 2005), p. 120.

17 Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), p. 427, fn. 71.

and the earlier Grand Mufti, Muḥammad ʿAbduh.¹⁸ Saudi scholars of the time, however, especially those in academic religious circles who were becoming more familiar with the English language, considered such readings to be completely irreconcilable with their Sunni-Salafi beliefs.¹⁹ Although there was no specific campaign to discourage or discredit Asad's translation, some fatwas [legal opinions] issued in the 1970s (and, especially, after the publication of the entire, finished work) were extremely critical.

An illuminating example is the 1992 ruling by the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta (PCSRI [Lajnat al-Dāʿima li-l-Buḥūth al-ʿIlmiyya wa-l-Iftāʾ]) that advises against a plan to republish *The Message of the Qur'an* in Dublin, Ireland.²⁰ Although a first printing of Asad's complete translation had been produced in the city in 1980, officials were aware that this reissue of *The Message* had a good chance of reaching a wide range of readers and libraries via one of the biggest networks of academic publishers. The key objection raised with the committee about Asad's translation in this case centred on his claim that the prophet Isa [Jesus] has already died and will never return as Muslims falsely believe. Historically, the Islamic exegetical tradition had not been concerned with the issue of how to understand Jesus's disappearance from the material world, but this changed in the twentieth century due to the Ahmadi movement's specific stance on the issue. For Ahmadi Muslims, Jesus's death, as reported in Q. 3:55, is a pure historical fact. Many Sunni Muslims, however, believe that Jesus was taken to Heaven while alive; they interpret the relevant Qur'anic verb, *mutawaffika*, to mean 'taking away' as opposed to 'causing to die' in any real, physical sense. The issue at hand in Dublin was that Asad's translation of the relevant phrase as 'Verily, I shall cause thee to die' was similar to that used by the Ahmadi translator Muhammad Ali in his 1917 translation ('I will cause you to die') and unlike that of, for example, Abdullah

18 See Muhammad al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr al-Marāghī*, 30 vols (Cairo: Sharikat al-Ḥalabbī, 1946), xxx, pp. 241–44. I am grateful to Johanna Pink for this reference.

19 An example is the translation committee that worked with Muḥammad Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilālī and Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān in the late 1960s. On this, see Chapter Four.

20 See *Fatāwā al-lajna al-dāʿima li-l-buḥūth al-ʿilmiyya wa-l-iftāʾ*, 4 vols (Riyadh: Maktabat al-ʿUbaykān / Riʾāsat Idārat al-Buḥūth al-ʿIlmiyya wa-l-Iftāʾ, 1412/1992), esp. iv, p. 213.

Yusuf Ali's post-1938 translation ('God said: 'O Jesus! I will take thee'). Asad was never entirely clear on the rationale for his rendition of this phrase, but his approach generally fits with his stated effort to show that the Qur'anic text accords with the natural world order. Opinion among the PCSRI was that the translator had not been concerned enough with the implications of Ahmadi-Sunni theological conflicts. Thus, after a long apologetic statement on the single issue of whether or not Jesus was taken to heaven alive, the committee issued a decisive statement on Asad's entire work:

In his translation, there are brutal mistakes and disgusting disbeliefs, and this is why the Consulting Board of the Muslim World League in the Holy City of Mecca has prohibited its printing and distribution.²¹

The mentioned prohibition by the MWL may relate to the organisation's decision to destroy its copies of *The Message*, as discussed above.

That one of the authors of the PCSRI fatwa was the religious authority Ibn Bāz is surprising as he was well known for championing the translation of the Qur'an.²² His involvement in the ruling suggests that other motivations were at work in the committee's disavowal of Asad's work. The translator had fallen out of favour with the Saudi authorities after his main patron, King Fayṣal, was killed in 1975. Asad was unable to maintain his ties with the Saudi religious elite while living in the West, and he was supplanted by other translators working locally. His background—as a practising Jew who converted to Islam or, at a broader level, as an educated Westerner who embraced an 'Eastern' identity and was engaged in the struggle for the global Muslim Ummah—may have allowed him and his translation of the Qur'an to rise above the controversies surrounding it; however, the fact remains that Asad's translation has never been printed in Saudi Arabia. Today, it is one of the most influential Qur'an translations worldwide. Not only

21 Ibid., p. 215.

22 According to Ahmad Totonji (Aḥmad Tūtūnjī), one of the founding members of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, who had forged close ties with Saudi establishment ulema while in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s and 1990s, Ibn Bāz frequently secured funds for his numerous assistants from various parts of the Muslim world to go on *da'wa* missionary trips. Such activities could be hardly imagined without a favourable approach to the translation of various Muslim texts. See Aḥmad Tūtūnjī, *Sittūn 'āmma bayna al-sharq wa-l-gharb: al-takḥīṭ wa-l-muthābara wa-l-tanfīdh* (Amman: Dār Fan, 2022), p. 287.

has Asad's edition itself been translated into many languages (including German, Spanish, Bosnian, Turkish, and Swedish), it is now viewed by many as a kind of *tafsīr*. Nevertheless, it has never been considered part of the Salafi religious domain. The Saudi press, even now, prefers to gloss over the controversy generated by Asad's translation, mentioning simply that the MWL 'had some concerns about this work and thus prevented its distribution'.²³ And criticism continues to be levelled at *The Message of Qur'an*. For example, M. I. R. Elnemr recently wrote that

the translator [Asad] ignores the occasion of revelation so he misrepresents the meaning of some verses; moreover, he has a confusion because of unawareness the principles of Tafsir and Hadith that lead him to stick to the ideology of rational school.²⁴

Such views are representative of Salafi and mainstream Sunni objections towards this work. Other translations, including those fully endorsed by the MWL, however, have also met with similar critique.

(Dis)Approved for Publication: The First MWL Translation of the Qur'an into English

Following the controversy over Asad's work, the MWL decided to publish an English translation that was already widely accepted rather than one which had yet to be reviewed and revised. The Department of Press and Publication accordingly published a limited print run of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's 1917 translation in Mecca in 1965.²⁵ To this researcher's knowledge, this was the first-ever complete English translation of the Qur'an to be printed in Saudi Arabia. It came out just one year after the controversial publication of Asad's *The Message*, and the speed at which it was produced reflected the simplicity of the production process: the two-volume edition comprised no more than a reprint of an edition Yusuf Ali first published in New York in 1946, with

23 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shibaylī, 'Risālat al-Qurʿān: tarjamat Muḥammad Asad li-l-muṣḥaf al-sharīf', *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, 15 June 2017, 7.

24 M. I. R. Elnemr, 'The Ideological Impact on the English Translations of the Qur'an: A Case Study of Muhammad Asad's Translation', *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Translation*, 3.7 (2020), 30–41 (p. 39).

25 Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary by A. Y. Ali* (Mecca: Muslim World League, 1965).

no revisions, additions, or any other kind of corrections.²⁶ The decision suggests that the MWL was deeply concerned about the controversy over Asad's translation and sought to hastily replace it with something already widely known and popular in the Muslim world.

A similar publishing project came to fruition a few years later. In 1977, the MWL published Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's English translation of the Qur'an to distribute gratis via its office at the United Nations in New York.²⁷ Like the hasty Ali reprint, this bilingual edition was an 'as-is' reproduction of a work— one originally published in India in 1938.²⁸ Although Pickthall's work has never since been republished by the Saudi government, some pro-Salafi commentators remain positive towards this translation and its translator into the twenty-first century. '[T]he appeal of his Quran translation and his other remarkable writings on Islam', one recently observed, 'rank as a native English speaker Muslim's valuable gift which has superbly served the cause of Islam for almost a century'.²⁹ This praise suggests why Pickthall's translation might have been selected by the MWL as a good alternative to Asad's: although both authors are Westerners who had converted to Islam, Pickthall was a native speaker of English. His translation found a readership in both the Muslim world and the West.

These two translations, by Yusuf Ali and Pickthall, were the only complete Qur'an translations into English to be published by the MWL. After the establishment of the KFGQPC in 1984 (see Chapter Four), all translation publishing projects were carried out by the new organisation. The MWL may never have succeeded in developing and producing its own translation of the Qur'an into English (or French, as the announced translation by Muhammad Hamidullah was never published), but it was able to produce translations in other languages. These editions merit

26 Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary* by A. Y. Ali (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1946).

27 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: Text and Explanatory Translation* by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (Mecca: Muslim World League, 1977).

28 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran* (Hyderabad–Deccan: Government Central Press, 1938).

29 Abdul Raheem Kidwai, 'Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's English Translation of the Quran (1930): An Assessment', in *Marmaduke Pickthall: Islam and the Modern World*, ed. by Geoffrey P. Nash (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 230–47 (p. 247), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004327597_013

attention because they exemplify how the organisation increasingly sought to use translation of the Qur'an for missionary purposes.

The MWL's Japanese Translation

The MWL's Japanese edition was produced with the help of a domestic reviser named 'Abd Allāh 'Abbās al-Nadwī (1925–2006). He was an Islamic scholar of Indian origin who played quite an important role in the development of Qur'anic Studies in Saudi Arabia. Al-Nadwī moved to Saudi Arabia in 1950 and joined the MWL from its very beginnings in 1962. After completing his doctoral studies in Linguistics in the UK and a *da'wa* mission to South Korea, the Philippines, and Singapore on behalf of the MWL, he was appointed as the head of the Translation and Muslim Minority Affairs unit, a position he held from 1971 to 1976. Al-Nadwī published many books, including a bilingual (Arabic-English) dictionary entitled *Vocabulary of the Holy Qur'an* (1983), on which project Ibn Bāz, the head of the PCSRI, acted as editor.³⁰ In this work, al-Nadwī cites at least nine different Qur'an translations, showing himself to be well-acquainted with the issues and problems inherent in translating the holy book. In another, *Tarjamāt ma'ānī al-Qur'ān al-karīm wa-taṭwīr fahmuhu 'inda-l-gharb* (1996) [Translation of the Meanings of the Qur'an and Development of Its Understanding in the West], he discusses the many theoretical implications of the great demand for translations of the Qur'an throughout the Muslim world. Thus, al-Nadwī was not only one of the MWL's top-ranking experts on foreign languages but also someone with very high-level connections in the Saudi religious hierarchy.

In the aforementioned *Tarjamāt ma'ānī al-Qur'ān al-karīm wa-taṭwīr fahmuhu 'inda-l-gharb*, al-Nadwī shares his experience of working on the MWL's Japanese Qur'an translation project, which began in 1963.³¹ The translator, Umar Mita (Ryoichi Mita, 1892–1983), was a Japanese Muslim convert and one of the founders of the Association of Japanese Muslims. He lived in Saudi Arabia for three years, between 1962 and 1965, during

30 'Abd Allāh 'Abbās al-Nadwī, *Vocabulary of the Holy Qur'an* (Jeddah: Dār al-Shurūq, 1983).

31 'Abd Allāh 'Abbās al-Nadwī, *Tarjamāt ma'ānī al-Qur'ān al-karīm wa-taṭwīr fahmihi 'inda-l-gharb* (Mecca: Muslim World League, 1996), p. 7.

which time he improved his Arabic language skills, explored the idea of translating the Qur'an into Japanese, and completed his first draft.³² Al-Nadwī revised this draft, despite having no knowledge of Japanese, and his discussion of the process is fascinating: Mita would translate his 'understandings of the verse' into English from Japanese orally, while al-Nadwī would listen carefully and compare his colleague's rendition with existing English translations and the Arabic text.³³ The pair spent two years and eight months working in this way, painstakingly going through the entire translation. In 1972, the final product was printed in Hiroshima, Japan under the label of the Association of Japanese Muslims and the MWL.

The Mita-al-Nadwī collaboration was the first Muslim-authored translation of the Qur'an in that language. Reprinted several times, this version remains one of the most popular in Japan, especially among local Muslims, and it has been praised for its language choices: Hans Martin Krämer, in his recent study of the reception of Qur'an translations in Japan, points out that this edition makes good use of specific linguistic phenomena. As example, he notes how Mita's translation of Q. 4:

[...] shows how language choices for Allah are different from language choice for husband against their wives and for wives themselves. Language choice is apparent in the use of nouns referring to Allah [...] and verbs addressing Allah's act as shown with respectful sentences [...] These differences in language choice aim at educating humans not to be arrogant and to be humble since only Allah is the most high.³⁴

Krämer also suggests that Mita makes a conscious cultural choice to use more Christian than Buddhist Japanese vocabulary in his translation.³⁵

Saudi sponsorship of Mita's Japanese translation took place against a wider political background, particularly the Saudi establishment's

32 Hans Martin Krämer, 'Pan-Asianism's Religious Undercurrents: The Reception of Islam and Translation of the Qur'an in Twentieth-Century Japan', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 73.3 (2014), 632–35, <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814000989>

33 During this process, he came to the conclusion that Pickthall's translation was much more accurate than Yusuf Ali's, and it is safe to assume that it was al-Nadwī's idea that the MWL publish Pickthall's work in 1977.

34 Ely Triasih Rahayul and Ahmad Fauzan, 'The Language Choice as a Reflection of Islamic Communication in the Quran-Japanese Translation', *Madania*, 24.1 (2020), 73–82 (p. 82), <http://dx.doi.org/10.29300/madania.v24i1.3073>

35 Krämer, p. 635.

activities in the East. In 1971, King Fayṣal made an official visit to Tokyo.³⁶ The publication of the MWL's Japanese translation, when viewed in this context, appears to be part of a cultural diplomatic strategy, an attempt to strengthen cultural ties between the two countries. The Mita-al-Nadwī edition is also notable because it constituted the first successfully published translation of the Qur'an into a foreign language to be produced at the behest of the MWL. It was not the last translation into Japanese to be printed by a Saudi institution, however. In 2018, a new translation by Saeed Sato was published by the KFGQPC.

The MWL's Turkish Translation

Translating the Qur'an into 'non-Muslim' languages proved to be problematic due to a lack of available scholars with the appropriate combination of skills in linguistics and Qur'anic/Islamic studies. This led the MWL to embark on projects to translate the Qur'an into 'Muslim' languages, such as Turkish. Interest in religion grew in Turkey during the 1960s and 1970s as the Demokrat Parti, which had come to power in 1950, implemented policies that increased religious liberty.³⁷ There was a strong demand for a new translation of the Qur'an to replace Muhammed Hamdi Efendi Elmalılı's 1935 *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* [God Religion Quran's language] because it contained a large amount of Arabic and Persian words that were difficult for many readers to understand. Several new translations appeared as a result. Perhaps the most comprehensive of these was *Kur'an-ı Kerim Meali* [The Meanings of the Noble Qur'an] by Süleyman Ateş, which was published in two volumes in, respectively, 1974 and 1977.³⁸ With the increase in religious freedom, more and more Turkish people began traveling to Saudi Arabia's holy cities to perform the Hajj, and the Muslim World League did not have an approved translation to distribute to these pilgrims.

36 J. A. Allan and Kaoru Sugihara, *Japan and the Contemporary Middle East* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), p. 148.

37 Muhammet Abay, 'Türkçedeki Kur'an Meâllerinin Tarihi ve Kronolojik Bibliyografyası', *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi*, 10.19–20 (2012), 232–303 (pp. 252–54).

38 Süleyman Ateş, *Kur'an-ı Kerim Meali* (Istanbul: Yüksel Matbaası, 1974); Süleyman Ateş, *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Yüce Meali* (Ankara: Kılıç Kitabevi, 1977).

The MWL responded by publishing *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Açıklamalı Meali* in 1982.³⁹

This latter translation was prepared by a team of Turkish scholars in cooperation with the MWL. It is unusual in being a collectively authored work; the majority of modern Turkish interpretations until that point had been produced by an individual translator. The six members of the original translation team were, at the time, affiliated with the theological department at Marmara University in Istanbul. Their introduction to the translation states that the project was initiated by the MWL but does not give any further information about the organisation's involvement in the production. It does not say, for example, whether the MWL maintained any degree of oversight. It does, however, describe the working process of the translation team: each member was allocated approximately one-sixth of the Qur'anic text to translate individually, then all worked together in a later stage to ensure the entire translation was stylistically cohesive.

The *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Açıklamalı Meali* contains some innovative features. Like almost all Turkish Qur'an translations, it prefaces each sura [chapter] with a short introduction. However, it also appends comments to the main text; these offer some clarification but do not refer to exegetical or other sources. The volumes also include an unusually detailed thematic index, beginning with the topic of *ahlak* [ethics] and finishing with *muhtelif mevzular* [varieties]. Within the text itself, some interpolations set in brackets offer further auxiliary information, such as explanations of pronouns or interpretations of some key concepts. The style of the translation seems to be rather late Ottoman/Early Modern Turkish and resembles that of Elmalılı's 1935 work. The very beginning of the chapter *Sūrat al-Baqara* uses Qur'anic vocabulary in almost every verse: 'müttakiler' (for *muttaqīn*) in verse 2; 'gayb' (for *al-ghayb*) and 'rıziktan infak' (for *mimmā razaqnāhum yunfiqūna*) in verse 3; 'azap' (for *ʿadhāb*) in verse 7, etc. Another good example of this reliance on Arabic as well as Arabic loan words can be seen in Q. 2:218, where almost all of the key concepts in the translation are expressed in language based on Arabic words:

39 Ali Özek, Hayrettin Karaman, Ali Turgut, Mustafa Çağrıncı, İbrahim Kafi Dönmez, and Sadrettin Gümüş, *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Açıklamalı Meali* (Istanbul: Ayyıldız Matbaası, 1982).

İman edenler (*alladhīna amanū*) ve hicret edip (*hājarū*) Allah yolunda cihad edenler (*jāhadū*) var ya, işte bunlar, Allah'ın rahmetini (*rahīmat Allāh*) umabilirler. Allah, gafur (*ghafūr*) ve rahimdi (*rahīm*)

[Indeed, those who have believed and those who have emigrated and fought in the cause of Allah—those expect the mercy of Allah. And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful].

Generally, the translators of MWL's Turkish edition follow the 'literal' trend found in twentieth-century Saudi exegesis related to theological issues. However, some noteworthy exceptions exist, and one example is the phrase *yawma yukshafu 'an sāqin* in Q. 68:42. It is translated literally as 'O gün incikler açılır' [the Day the shin will be uncovered], but a comment explains that 'this may refer to hardships, or [the Day] when all truths are revealed clearly' [*işlerin güçleşmesi veya bütün hakikatlerin apaçık ortaya çıkması kastedilir*]. This comment offers two competing interpretations: one, the more widespread, is that this expression refers to some kind of 'horrifying things' [*shiddat al-amr*] that will happen during the Day of Resurrection; the second (about 'revealed truths' [*haqā'iq al-umūr*]) is found in a number of late Ottoman *tafsīr* works, such as those by Abū Su'ūd, Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī, and a recent edition of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Alūsī's called *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*.⁴⁰ A third interpretation of this verse, one quite popular in Salafi circles that understands the phrase to refer literally to 'Allah's shin', is not mentioned here at all.

The influence of the modern Turkish exegetical tradition can also be seen in the commentary provided on Q. 3:7, which states that God has sent down the Book, in which are verses that are *muḥkamāt* [of clear meaning] and also verses that are *mutashābihāt* [ambiguous]. The *Kur'an-ı Kerim* translators render the phrase '*wa-mā ya'lamu ta'wīlahu illā-llāhu wa-l-rāsikhūna fī-l-'ilmi yaqūlūna [...]*' in this verse in the most widely accepted way, as '*Halbuki Onun tevilini ancak Allah bilir. İlimde yüksek pâyeye erişenler ise [...]*' [No one knows its interpretation except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say [...]], that is, they include a full stop after 'Allah'. Yet, they also mention an alternative reading—one that carries on to suggest it is not only God who knows the true meaning of the Qur'an's verses but also 'those grounded

40 See Shihāb al-Dīn al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm wa-l-sab'a al-mathānī*, 11 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2014), x, p. 39.

in knowledge' [*al-rasikhūna fī-l-'ilmi*]. In accordance with this alternative interpretation, the Turkish translation comments that '*müteşâbih âyetlerin manaları, zaman içinde ilmin gelişmesi ile çözülecektir*' [the meanings of the *mutashâbih* verses in the Qur'an will become clear with the development of science over time]. Also, the index to the translation includes a list of so-called '*kevni/kozmozolojik*' [cosmological] verses, a popular trend in the 1960s and 1970s. Such scientifically inflected exegesis was later criticised in some Salafi circles as being 'pseudo-rationalism'.

The *Kur'an-I Kerim ve Türkçe Açıklamalı Meali*, therefore, blends two exegetical styles. It is a conservative Sunni rendition of the Qur'an insofar as it follows contemporary Saudi-Salafi discourse by relying on literal/grammatical translations and many 'Arabicised' wordings. Further editions of this translation were published within only a few years by both the KFGQPC, in 1987, and the state-supported Turkish Religious Foundation (TDV), in 1993. These editions preserve much of the original 1982 work, introducing only very minor changes. This translation remains popular in Turkey, being distributed under the name *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Meali* [The Turkish Religious Foundation Translation], but has also become an important source for Qur'an translations into other languages.⁴¹ Published in both Saudi Arabia and Turkey by state-supported organisations, it is one of the most successful projects of the MWL and of the KFGQPC, which later adopted it and still publishes the translation as its only Turkish edition.

MWL Translations into African Languages

Another of the MWL's successful translation projects, realised between 1962 and 1973, was a translation into the Yoruba language, which is mainly spoken in Nigeria and has more than fifty-million speakers.⁴² The translation was initiated by the Nigerian political leader Ahmadu Ibrahim Bello in reaction to early missionary translations and as part of a pro-Islamic agenda led by local elites. Bello was a Nigerian statesman

41 For example, it is the basis of the Russian translation by Fazıl Karaoğlu (1994) and the Crimean Tatar translation by Rıza Fazıl (1998).

42 Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu, 'The Earliest Yoruba Translation of the Qur'an: Missionary Engagement with Islam in Yorubaland', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 17.3 (2015), 10–37.

who was heavily involved in the independence of Northern Nigeria (an autonomous division within the country), and served as its first and only premier from 1954 until 1966.⁴³ He had close ties with the MWL, serving as a member of al-Majlis al-Tāʿsīsī, its Constituent Council, and established links between this organisation and the local scholars who carried out the translation. The work itself was another collaborative effort: the Muslim Council of Nigeria, specifically its Lagos branch, commissioned a committee to undertake the actual translation.⁴⁴ Their text was revised by a further board of scholars from Lagos, handed over to the MWL for approval in 1972, and finally published in 1973 (together with the Arabic source text) by the Lebanese company Dār al-ʿArabiyya. After publication, it was distributed by The Light of Islam publisher in Maiduguri, Nigeria.⁴⁵ The translation used Roman script and soon gained popularity. According to one study, 25,000 copies were distributed in the first two years.⁴⁶ The initial print run was followed by two more, one in 1977 and the other in 1983. This translation, with some revisions, was republished by the KFGQPC in 1997.

In 1979, the MWL also published a translation in Hausa, which currently has some fifty-million speakers, again through the publisher Dār al-ʿArabiyya.⁴⁷ This edition was later revised by the KFGQPC and republished by them in 1991. Its translator was Shaykh Abu Bakr Mahmud Gumi (1924–1992), who was also a member of the Constituent Council of the MWL and its representative in Lagos. He is considered to be ‘the first Nigerian ever to write a complete translation of the Qurʾan into Hausa’.⁴⁸ A close friend of Ahmadu Bello, he was an active protagonist of the Salafi movement in West Africa, criticising local Sufi orders for their ‘misinterpretations’ and promoting the idea of Islamic

43 Hassan Maʿayergi, ‘Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qurʾan into Minority Languages: The Case of Africa’, *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs Journal*, 14.1–2 (1993), 156–80 (p. 172).

44 The committee included Muhammadul-Awwal Augusto, Tijani A. Akanni, Hasani Yusau Dindey, and some other scholars.

45 *Al-Kurani ti a tumo si ede Yoruba* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿArabiyya, 1973).

46 Mofakhkhar Hussain Khan, ‘Translation of the Holy Qurʾān in the African Languages’, *The Muslim World*, 77.3–4 (1987), 250–58 (p. 255).

47 *Al-Kurʾani mai girma. Da Kuma Tarjaman Maʿanōninsa Zuwa Ga Harshen Hausa* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿArabiyya, 1979). A partial translation into Hausa had previously been published in 1975 and distributed in Nigeria (see Khan, p. 255).

48 Andrea Brigaglia, ‘Two Published Hausa Translations of the Qurʾān and Their Doctrinal Background’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 35.4 (2005), 424–49 (p. 428).

governance in Nigeria. In some senses, he continues to be a heroic figure for local Muslims.⁴⁹

As some researchers have noted, the Saudi state used the activities of the MWL to help create a network of religious schools and centres in Nigeria during the 1970s.⁵⁰ It is no coincidence that both of the MWL's successful publishing projects in African languages also emerged from this context: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia deliberately established ties within Nigerian Muslim political circles. Both the Yoruba and Hausa translations were part of a soft-power strategy to spread the Salafi-Wahhabi view of Islam, especially in the case of Gumi's translation. In contrast to the Japanese and Turkish translations produced by the MWL, a 'Salafi hermeneutics' was broadly applied to both the African-language interpretations.

The MWL's Bulgarian Translation

Perhaps the last MWL project to be more or less successful in terms of the eventual production of a published text was the Bulgarian translation that appeared in 1993, *Sveschen Koran. Prevod Nedim Gendzhyjev*.⁵¹ Published by the Saudi-run King Fahd bin 'Abd al-'Azīz Foundation with support from the MWL representative in Vienna and the Eastern European Muslim Council (EEMC) based in Vienna, this work sought to fill the gaps in Islamic learning that emerged in Eastern Europe during the years of communist rule. The introduction to *Sveschen Koran* was written by one of EEMC's directors, al-Fātiḥ 'Alī al-Ḥasanayn. A scholar from Sudan who later obtained a degree from the University of Belgrade (in Yugoslavian times), al-Ḥasanayn played an active role in the Islamic revival in the Balkan states. He developed close ties with local politicians through membership of various Middle-Eastern relief organisations, including becoming an advisor to Alija Izetbegović (1925–2003), the first president of the newly independent Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Al-Ḥasanayn's introduction to the Bulgarian

49 See Usman Faruk, *The Life and Times of Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi: Lessons for the Muslim Ummah* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press Limited, 2013).

50 See Sahabi Maidamma Jabo and Umar Ubandawaki, 'Nigeria-Saudi Arabia: Socio-Cultural and Educational Relations', *RIMA International Journal of Historical Studies (RIJHIS)*, 4.1 (2019), 29–37, <http://dx.doi.org/10.36108/IJHSI/2202.11.0140>

51 *Sveschen Koran. Prevod Nedim Gendzhyjev* (Sofia: Kral Fahd bin Abdul Aliz, 1993).

translation states that 'almost all translations and interpretations of the Qur'an in Eastern Europe were written by Christian priests or Jews, not counting those from Bosnia and Herzegovina'.⁵² This claim is somewhat confusing since, while translations by Christian missionaries certainly existed prior to the Soviet era (including in Bulgaria)⁵³, none are known to have been produced by Jewish translators; perhaps al-Ḥasanayn was referring to conspiracy narratives that could be found in many Muslim apologetic texts of the time as a result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. His introduction continues, then, to explain that a few leading Muslim institutions (the MWL, the KFGQPC, and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, known as WAMY) came together to undertake 'this Bulgarian translation as the first in the region'.⁵⁴ The translator, Nedim Gendzev, who was Mufti of Bulgaria at the time, went further, asserting that his was 'the only correct translation of the Qur'an'.⁵⁵ *Sveschen Koran* was published together with the Arabic text (based on the KFGQPC *muṣḥaf* [recitation]) and can, at least, be called the first Muslim translation of the Qur'an in Bulgarian, if one does not count an earlier Ahmadi Qur'an translation made from previous English translations.⁵⁶ It was edited by a professor of Turkic Studies, Ivan Dobrev, and a few local Muslim scholars who were editorial board members.⁵⁷ A browse of this Bulgarian translation suggests that the text was based on Ali Özek's translation into Turkish, as it provides almost identical introductions to the suras.

In 1997, another translation of the Qur'an into Bulgarian appeared. Tsvetan Teofanov worked from an Arabic source text to create this edition, which was published by a locally operating Saudi foundation that goes by the name Taybah Foundation.⁵⁸ This work hints that Saudi influence in the country was not limited to the MWL's translation

52 *Sveschen Koran*, p. 3.

53 See, on this translation, Natanail Nazifoff, 'The Bulgarian Koran', *The Muslim World*, 23.2 (1933), 187–90.

54 *Sveschen Koran*, p. 3.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

56 *The Qur'an in Bulgarian* (Tilford: IIPH, 1989).

57 Ivan Dobrev later published his own translation into Bulgarian—one based largely on Russian and Turkish sources. See Ivan Dobrev, *Svescheniyat Koran, prevod od Ivan Dobrev* (Sofia: BMK, 2008).

58 Tsvetan Teofanov, *Prevod na Sveschenija Koran. Prevede Tsvetan Teofanov* (Sofia: Tayba, 1997).

activities. Bulgaria's relatively liberal laws on religion allowed many Saudi-sponsored Islamic NGOs to be established there in the 1990s.⁵⁹

The Bulgarian translation project was the only one planned by the MWL for the whole of Eastern Europe. Other translations of the Qur'an into the languages of neighbouring countries (Macedonian, Hungarian, Russian, and Ukrainian) were only produced years later—by the KFGQPC.

Concluding Remarks

After the establishment of the KFGQPC in 1984, all of the MWL's projects (as well as its human resources, experts, and contacts in the area of translation) were moved to this new institution. The MWL did have initial discussions with the Complex about producing Qur'an translations in other languages, such as Italian, but all of these were eventually published solely by KFGQPC or as collaborations between the two organisations.⁶⁰ Despite bringing to fruition only a modest number of translations, the MWL clearly promoted the idea of Qur'an translation in its modern sense (as 'translation of the meanings'), firmly establishing this notion within scholarly networks of Salafi scholarship across the world. It can thus be said that, by the 1960s, the issue of the translation of the Qur'an had already become a part of both Salafi doctrine and, especially, Salafi missionary endeavours. The most important contribution the MWL made to the Saudi translation movement was to build local and international networks of translators and revisers but also of publishing and distribution companies. Its policy of approving some translations and rejecting others also established the idea of institutional translation—that state or inter-state bodies were authorised to confirm the 'correctness' of a given translation. Due in no small part to the MWL's adoption of this approach, almost all of the translations it published remain in use today.

To summarise the situation as it stood in 1984 when the KFGQPC was established, the MWL had overseen the successful completion of

59 See Ismail Telci and Aydzhan Peneva, 'Turkey and Saudi Arabia as Theo-Political Actors in the Balkans', *Insight Turkey*, 21.2 (2019), 249–52.

60 'Tarjamat ma'ānī al-Qur'ān al-karīm ilā al-Itāliyya', *Alfaisal Magazine*, 128 (1987), 113–14 (p. 114).

translation projects into Japanese (1972), Yoruba (1973), Hausa (1979), and, finally, Turkish (1982), to which we can add one more cooperative project in Bulgarian (1993). There is also some reference to the MWL in an Albanian translation published in 1988, but it looks as if the organisation simply provided logistical and/or financial support rather than being involved in any revision process.⁶¹ The Eastern European market that appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the collapse of communism helped to establish the KFGQPC, as it was given full authority and responsibility for the promotion of Qur'an translations in the region. Given the Complex's dominant position, the MWL has taken almost no further steps towards publishing translations of the Qur'an into any other world languages (the only exception to this is a Portuguese edition but, as this was later republished by the KFGQPC, it will be discussed in Chapter Four); their activities have been constrained to proposing some revisions of Yusuf Ali's English interpretation. The establishment of the KFGQPC marks the start of a new and much more productive phase of the Saudi Qur'an-translation industry. Before discussing this organisation, however, we turn in the next chapter to consider one of the most globally influential translations to come from Saudi Arabia. Widely known as the 'Hilālī-Khān', after the names of its translators, it was the first English translation to be produced in the scholarly environment of the Islamic University of Madinah in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The history of the work illustrates well how the translation movement developed in the Saudi Kingdom at the very same time that the idea of 'authorised' institutional translations of the Qur'an was crystallising.

61 Same is true for the Taiwan edition of earlier translation into Chinese by Wang Jingzhai. See: <https://www.taiwan-panorama.com/en/Articles/Details?Guid=03d4d3fb-c186-4856-bce1-d58f62c7a0f4&langId=3&CategoryId=11&postname=Sacred%20Task—Shen%20Hsia-huai%27s%20New%20Translation%20of%20the%20Qur%27an>.