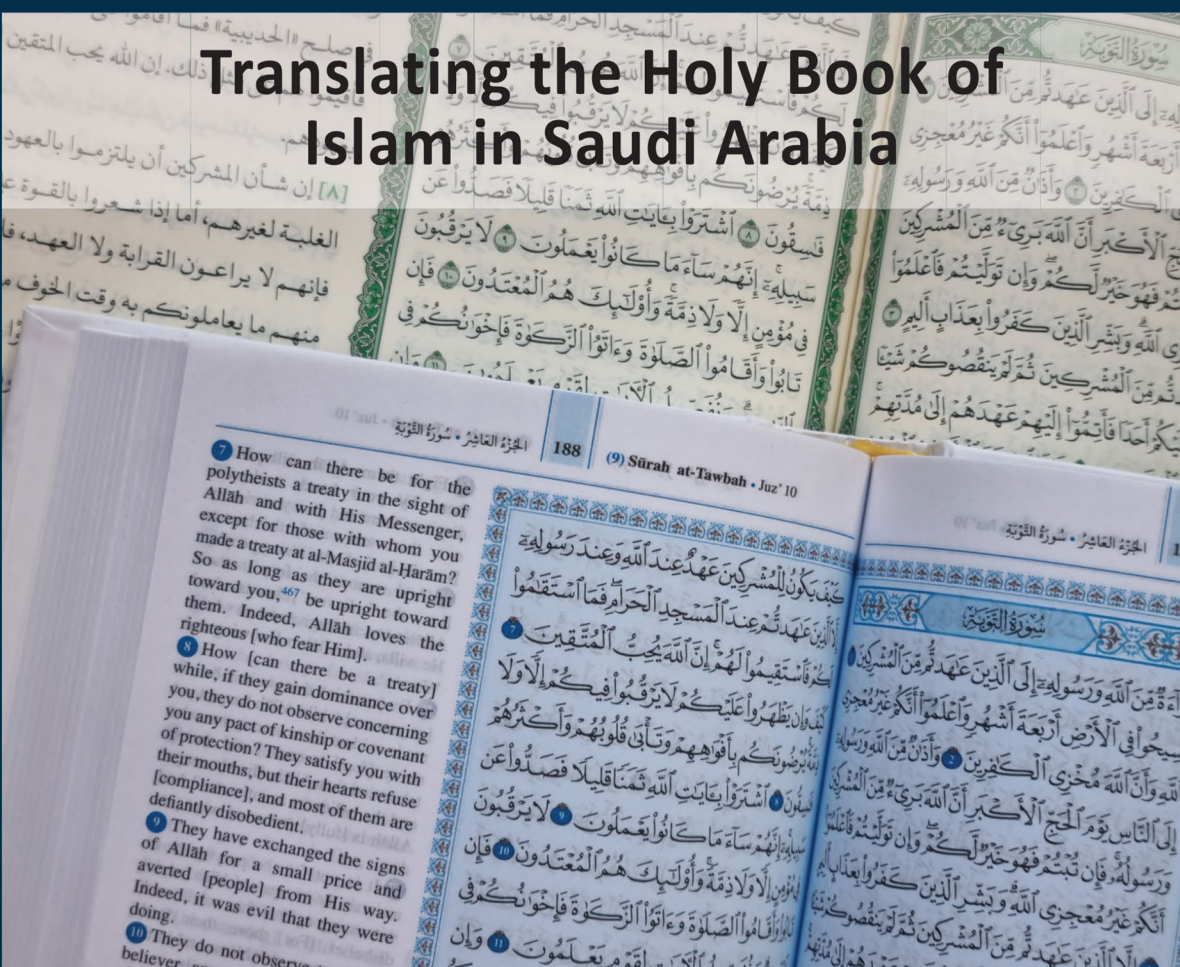


## The Kingdom and the Qur'an

### Translating the Holy Book of Islam in Saudi Arabia





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## 5. Translation for Everyone: Collaborative Saudi Publishing Projects in Foreign Languages

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As discussed in previous chapters, Qur'an translations were introduced into the general Islamic religious discourse 'from above', as a result of an alliance between the Saudi government and 'established' ulema. However, in addition to officially approved systems of Islamic learning and missionary activism, many private and non-government initiatives in the country also include publishing projects. This kind of 'unofficial' Islam is not necessarily 'oppositional' to the government (in the way, for example, many radical jihadist movements have been); it should instead be understood as a parallel religious framework that is similarly oriented towards the propagation of Sunni-Salafi Islamic learning. These 'unofficial' initiatives have often originated from non-Arab Islamic communities: this was the case during the formative period of the modern Saudi state (that is, prior to the reforms implemented by King Faisal) and has not changed in recent times. During the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s, when publishing 'new' translations of the Qur'an became a mainstream activity in Saudi Arabia, many private commercial presses also became involved. Furthermore, the influx of foreign workers into Saudi led many local religious organisations, which had previously been oriented primarily towards Arabic speakers, to begin publishing books in foreign languages. These publications included translations of the Qur'an.

It is hard to outline all of these endeavours in a systematic way. Some projects were run independently, some emerged from collective efforts and initiatives spearheaded by local scholars, yet others involved no

more than the commercial reproduction of previously published works. Increases in Saudi missionary activities during the 1980s and 1990s opened the way for translations to be published abroad but, as has been addressed in previous chapters, these were always produced under some degree of supervision by Saudi-based religious foundations. This raises the questions of how and to what degree non-governmental Islamic institutions from the Kingdom have contributed to the Saudi Qur'an translation industry.

## The Qur'an in 'Turkistani': The First Foreign-Language Translation Produced in Saudi Arabia

If al-Hilālī and Khān were the first Saudi-based scholars to produce a translation into English in the early 1970s, translations into a number of 'Muslim' languages had already been the subject of interest some years before, in the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> One such example is the first translation of the Qur'an into Uzbek, by Maḥmūd al-Ṭarāzī (1895–1991), an emigrant from Soviet Central Asia who settled in Medina in the late 1940s.<sup>2</sup> Before moving to Saudi Arabia, he received a religious education in Tashkent and Bukhara and taught in a *medrese*, but he had to leave his homeland forever to avoid persecution by the Soviet authorities.<sup>3</sup> Al-Ṭarāzī's translation, first published as a lithograph in Bombay in 1955–56, was sponsored by the Nūr al-Dīn family from the Saudi city of Taif, also expats from Central Asia; it was mainly distributed by a judge based in Taif—one Mīrzā 'Abd al-Karīm Khān. The translation was reprinted in Medina in 1975–76 (where the author lived until his death) and Jeddah in 1980–81. Some copies made their way to the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, where they were sold illegally, since authorities there considered al-Ṭarāzī a dangerous Islamic threat to state-supported

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1 This is true of Khān, at least, as he worked in Saudi Arabia until his death.

2 Fillip Khustuntdinov, 'Turkestani Muslim Communities ... Have Been Deprived of this Happiness: The Dissemination of Tarazi's Qur'an Translation and Exegesis in Soviet Uzbekistan', *Islamology*, 11.1 (2021), 84–103, <http://dx.doi.org/10.24848/islmlg.11.1.07>

3 Vahrom Muminov and Valihan Alihanov, 'Prosvetitel iz Taraza', *Znamiya truda*, 12 November 2005, 2–5.

atheism in Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> In his introduction, al-Ṭarāzī describes his primary motivation as a deep concern for the local people about the lack of availability of Qurʾanic teachings in their language, Uzbek, and positioned the work as a ‘translation with commentaries’ rather than a *tafsīr*. Its title, which employs an outdated term for the Uzbek language, was *Qurʾān karīm, mutarjam wa-muḥassuhā bi-l-lughā Turkistāniyya* [‘The Qurʾan, translation and commentary in the Turkistani language’].

The translation generally follows the premodern interlinear pattern. It comprises the Arabic text (reproduced from an unidentified Indian edition of the *muṣḥaf*) accompanied by a phrase-by-phrase translation into Uzbek using Arabic script, placed just below the lines of the original, and footnotes in the margins that provide short explanations. To date, no in-depth study of its content has been undertaken, but a few introductory findings make it possible to evaluate it from the perspective of twentieth-century Muslim translations. First of all, the translator notes that many ‘translations and *tafsīrs*’ already exist in Persian but that these are not accessible for the ‘Turkistani’ (meaning Central Asian, specifically Uzbek) reader.<sup>5</sup> Al-Ṭarāzī then explains that, at the request of numerous fellow Uzbeks and with the approval of a scholar named Ibn Yamīn, he embarked on his translation. Ibn Yamīn, also known as Muḥammad Amīn al-Andijānī, belonged to the same generation of migrants from Central Asia as al-Ṭarāzī and shared his Hanafi background.<sup>6</sup> From this, as well as names of the sponsors and distributors involved in the project, it is easy to determine that the primary target readership was members of Uzbek diaspora living outside Soviet Central Asia, for example, those living in living in India, Pakistan, or Arabic countries. The project was, then, not simply a devotional undertaking but also intended to partially compensate for the lack of education in the national language and identity available to members of this exiled community.

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4 Khustuntdinov, ‘Turkestani Muslim Communities’, p. 86.

5 Uzbekistan is the most populous nationality of the region. Currently, half of the seventy-six million people living in the five countries that make up Central Asia, live in Uzbekistan.

6 On the term ‘Turkestani/Turkistani’ and Uzbek migration to the Hijaz, see Bayram Balci, ‘Central Asian Refugees in Saudi Arabia: Religious Evolution and Contributing to the Reislamisation of Their Motherland’, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 26.2 (2007), 2–21.

Another notable aspect of al-Ṭarāzī's introduction is the fact that he refers to previous efforts made in the field of Qur'an translation and interpretation, especially those by 'Indian' scholars. He does not mention any particular names but acknowledges their legacy as his *murshīd al-ṭarīq* ('guidance to the way') and *dustūr al-ʿamal* ('the basis for the work').<sup>7</sup> Al-Ṭarāzī may be referring here to Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī and his eighteenth-century translation into Persian or some later Qur'an commentators writing in the Indian subcontinent. Strictly from its introduction, however, the *Qurʾān karīm, mutarjam wa-muḥassuhā bi-l-luḡha Turkistāniyya* seems to be a continuation of the Hanafi tradition of commenting on the Qur'an in other languages.

However, al-Ṭarāzī's translation is not free from modern influences. A preface, written in 1954 by Shaykh Ibn Yamīn, describes the work as a 'literal translation' [*tarjama ḥarfīyya*]. It explains that such translations cannot be correct without the addition of interpretive commentary and that al-Ṭarāzī's work is largely grounded in the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, this accords with the 'translation of the meanings' paradigm, which was already well established in discussions of the translatability of the Qur'an at the time.

Although a comprehensive analysis of this translation is yet to be written, even a preliminary reading reveals some of the theological priorities of the text. For instance, in his commentary on Q. 1:3, al-Ṭarāzī says that this verse is the primary basis of the Islamic creed, as it highlights the concept of the 'Oneness of God in His essence and attributes'.<sup>9</sup> The translator had links to the official Saudi establishment and his works include an Uzbek translation of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* (which was published and thus approved by the Saudi MOIA<sup>10</sup>). Nevertheless, his translation of the Qur'an appears to only partially reflect Salafi hermeneutics. It more fully accords with the Sunni mainstream Matūrīdī approach to Islamic theology, which does not problematise literal or metaphoric interpretations of the divine attributes, as happened later with the majority of Salafi translations.

7 Maḥmūd al-Ṭarāzī, *Qurʾān karīm, mutarjam wa-muḥassuhā bi-l-luḡha al-Turkistāniyya* (Medina: Dār al-Imān, 1975), p. 6-7.

8 al-Ṭarāzī, *Qurʾān karīm*, p. 8.

9 al-Ṭarāzī, *Qurʾān karīm*, p. 2.

10 Maḥmūd al-Ṭarāzī, *Tawḥīd kitābī* (Riyadh: Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Call, and Guidance of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, [n. d.]).

Much of the extra-Qur'anic material in al-Ṭarāzī's commentaries touches on histories of the prophets and the meaning of rare Arabic words (*gharā'ib al-Qur'ān*), and it thus appears that he called upon classical *tafsīr* texts as his main sources. Al-Ṭarāzī's translation was initially quite popular among the Uzbek diaspora, and even in the first years of Uzbeki independence, but the modern generation of readers find it hard to read—primarily because the Arabic script is no longer used in Uzbekistan.

This case of Qur'an translation demonstrates some quite interesting connections between the classical Hanafi tradition of Qur'an interpretation in foreign languages using interlinear works, national revivalism in the Central Asian context, pre-Salafi Islamic education in Saudi Arabia, and, finally, the emerging interest in Qur'an translations inside the Kingdom. Al-Ṭarāzī's translation was widely published in a number of editions in India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Uzbekistan, and it can be justly said to be a very successful project for its time. The reasons for its success can be attributed to the author's personal connections and his prestige as an Uzbek scholar both in the UzSR and the Uzbek diaspora, as well as his reputation as a fighter for the cause of religious revolution against Russian-Bolshevik imperialism. Al-Ṭarāzī sometimes signed off his writings with the title 'Grand Mufti of the People of Turkestan on behalf of al-Idāra al-Dīniyya li-Lajnat al-Waḥda al-Qawmiyya al-Turkistāniyya' (The Religious Administration of the Committee for the Liberation of Turkistan).<sup>11</sup> This organisation seems to be nothing other than the 'Nationales Turkistanisches Einheitskomitee' (NTE), which was created in 1942 in Nazi Germany to 'liberate' Central Asia under the leadership of the Uzbek Vali Qayumxon (1904–1993). After the fall of the Third Reich, it continued its efforts, mostly in cooperation with various US-supported anti-Soviet movements.<sup>12</sup> It is not yet clear how al-Ṭarāzī was connected to this movement, but it seems likely that his involvement may have begun in the early 1950s when Vali Qayumxon and his former NTE network joined the newly created

11 For some of al-Ṭarāzī's letters [in Arabic] in which he uses this title in his signature, see <https://www.facebook.com/mahmudtarazi/photo/s/a.485055471545247/485056568211804/>

12 See on this figure: Coşkun Kumru and Sevil Gözübüyük, 'Esir Türkistan Yargılanıyor: Veli Kayyum Han'ın Nürnberg Sorgulamalarına Dair Notlar', *Journal of Social and Humanities Sciences Research*, 7.58 (2020), 2424–33.

'Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations' (ABN) and Qayumxon took up the post of vice-president under the leadership of the Ukrainian anti-Soviet freedom fighter Yaroslav Stetsko (1912–1986).<sup>13</sup> Although these links are not well-studied, they show that al-Ṭarāzī had some connections with Uzbek emigrants to the West as well. What is clear, however, is that al-Ṭarāzī's translation was the first contemporary interpretation of the Qur'an into Uzbek, the most widely spoken Central Asian language, and that the personality of the translator, who was famous in Uzbek circles, made a significant contribution to the popularity of this work.

## The 'Saheeh International' Qur'an: A New 'Saudi' Team Translation into English

This translation, first published in 1997, has a few notable aspects that distinguish it from other works in the genre. First of all, it is the product of teamwork, rather than an individually-authored translation like most of the other interpretations that were printed in Saudi Arabia (and beyond) in the second half of the twentieth century. Secondly, it was produced by three Muslim converts, and, finally, all three translators are women, which is quite rare in this male-dominated field. For instance, until 2022 none of the translations published by the KFGQPC were authored by women; likewise, no women were employed to revise any of its Qur'an translations. The Saheeh International translation, despite these unusual aspects, has barely received any academic attention.

Recently, however, interviews conducted with the translation team have shed light on how this work came into being.<sup>14</sup> These interviews and also a further, personal interview with the principal member of the translation team,<sup>15</sup> Emily Assami (known as Umm Muhammad),

13 'Turkistan is not Alone', *ABN Correspondence*, III:5 (1952), 2–3.

14 See, in particular, 'Translators' Experiences I: Amatullah 'AJ' Bantley, Saheeh International', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4JPZTHCnvo>; 'EP 094—Atheism to Islam, Translating the Qur'an, Running a Publishing House—Amatullah Bantley', *Ilmfeed Podcast*, 10 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uPU4eM4sMo>; 'First All-Female Team To Produce A Quran Translation', *Facebook*, 3 November 2021, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=957066955157664](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=957066955157664)

15 Faraz Omar, 'Interview with Umm Muhammad of Saheeh International', *Muslimink*, 26 February 2015, <https://www.muslimink.com/society/interview/interview-umm-muhammad-saheeh-intl/>.



tell the story behind the Saheeh International translation, which can be summarised as follows.

From the 1980s onwards, the Saudi city of Jeddah had a growing community of foreigners, of both Muslim and non-Muslim religious backgrounds. Emily Assami (who was born in 1940 in California) moved there in 1981 from Damascus, where she had previously lived with her Syrian husband. The two other team members, Mary Kennedy and Amatullah 'AJ' Bantley, had similar backgrounds. Asam, however, taught Islam for foreigners at an Islamic Centre in Jeddah and was the only one to have studied Arabic and Islamic Studies on a level that would allow her to carry out translation projects. Thus, we have three American converts living in Jeddah at the beginning of 1990s who were dissatisfied with the availability of Islamic literature in English. According to Bantley, their original plan was to edit the Hilālī-Khān translation (which was known for its rather 'problematic' English). They later decided to undertake a completely new translation. The project began on a much smaller scale, as Asam explains:

When I came to Jeddah, there were many English-speaking Muslims of various nationalities (something non-existent in Syria), and I was recruited to teach at an Islamic centre and became aware of the need to have printed material in understandable English for our students. I was also working with a charitable organisation that mailed whatever information they could find in English to individuals, organisations, and schools in several African countries.

I often went to Abul-Qasim Bookstore looking for anything suitable to send to Africa and for our Islamic Centre. Since there was very little suitable material at that time, the owner asked me and two colleagues, a typesetter, and an English editor, to produce some booklets teaching prayer and other basic subjects, which he published. That was the beginning of Saheeh International. We continued to produce booklets for our Centre and others.<sup>16</sup>

The private initiative, registered as 'Abul-Qasim Publishing House and Bookstore', was the first printing press in Jeddah to concentrate on the production of Islamic books in English. Established at the end of the 1980s as a bookstore owned by Amatullah Bantley, it started actively publishing at the beginning of the 1990s. It printed a few books like *Hajj*

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<sup>16</sup> Omar, 'Interview with Umm Muhammad'.

and *Umrah: according to the Qur'an and Sunnah* by Abu Ameenah Bilaal Philips (1993), and *The Muslim at Prayer: A Comparison to Prayer in the Bible, with an Introduction to the Mosque in Islam* by Ahmed Deedat (1993), which appear to have been produced especially for *da'wa* purposes. The 'Saheeh International' translation of the Qur'an was similarly intended for promotion among English-speaking foreigners living in Saudi Arabia as well as abroad. Due to her academic qualifications in Arabic and Islam, Asam who took on the role of translator, while the two other team members were responsible for editing the target text. They were aware of the limitations of the most popular Muslim-authored Qur'an translations that were promoted by Islamic publishers in the early 1990s. The works by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (in both the KFGQPC and IIT editions) and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall both used more or less archaic vocabulary and a Biblical style of writing. In contrast, the Saheeh International team adopted the innovative approach, like al-Hilālī and Khān, of opting to use modern English. Unlike them, however, the individuals behind this text were much more fluent in the target language.

A few things are immediately striking about the first edition of the Saheeh International translation (Jeddah, 1997).<sup>17</sup> The first is that the names of the people who actually worked on the project are not mentioned at all, perhaps due to the fact that they had no formal religious credentials. Secondly, the exact title of the work is *The Qur'an: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings*. Thirdly, the cover references two new publishing institutions—the aforementioned Abulqasim Publishing House and al-Muntada al-Islami, a well-known Islamic charity based in London (est. 1986), also known as the Al-Muntada Trust. Due to the wide connections of the latter organisation, the Saheeh International translation quickly became known to readers outside Saudi Arabia.

The editorial preface to this first edition is very informative. It tells a story of a new translation, produced after thorough consideration of previous English translations of the Qur'an (by Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, and Hilālī-Khān), with a strong focus on the features of the target text:

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17 Saheeh International, ed., *The Qur'an: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings* (Jeddah: Abul-Qasim Publishing House, 1997).

In spite of the amendments made by al-Hilālī and Khān in their translation of the Qur'an, certain drawbacks remain. They admittedly concentrated their efforts on corrections pertaining to *‘aqeedah* rather than perfecting the language, the English rendering leaves something to be desired [...] Consequently, many people have continued to prefer A. Yusuf Ali's translation because of its linguistic superiority and the fact that it is generally easier to follow without the numerous interruptions and insertions. The publisher concluded with a plea for a solution to such problems or an alternative. At length, we considered the possibility of editing the English text of The Noble Qur'an, but after some thought, decided that a thorough procedure involving systematic research would be more conducive to overall improvement.<sup>18</sup>

Other references in the prefatory material suggest the team's translatorial approach. This characterises the new text as 'presenting the core meanings, as far as possible, in accordance with the *‘aqeedah* of Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jami'ah' [*sic*] and aligns itself, through mentions, with the teachings of Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Taymiyya.<sup>19</sup> These methodological aspects, as well as the special attention that is paid to the names and attributes of God,<sup>20</sup> generally accord with the modern Salafi hermeneutical tradition. Moreover, the prefatory texts contain justifications of Qur'an translation that cite an influential work called *Mabāḥith fī ‘ulūm al-Qurʾān* ['Studies in the Qur'anic Sciences'] by Shaykh Mann'ā al-Qaṭṭān (1925–1999), an Egyptian-born scholar who spent most of his life working in Saudi universities. This book, first published in 1971, sanctions 'explanatory translation' of the Qur'an for use in *da'wa*, but also asserts that translation can provide a theologically correct vision of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and worship (*‘ibāda*) but really nothing more.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that this idea of 'approximate' translation, along with other milestones of Salafi exegesis, became main features of the Saheeh International translation. In contrast to many other translations (especially those produced in the Saudi context), the translators intended to translate almost every word in the text rather than loading it with Arabisms, as is the case in the newest editions of the Hilālī-Khān translation. This goes against the growing trend of adding to the English

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18 Ibid., p. iii.

19 Ibid., p. viii.

20 Ibid., p. vi.

21 Mann'ā al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī ‘ulūm al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: Dār Wahba, 2000), p. 309.

language by using newly introduced Arabic words, an idea expressed, for example, by the influential Palestinian-American thinker Ismail al-Faruqi (1921–1986), a leading figure in the International Institute of Islamic Thought. In his *Toward Islamic English* (1982, also republished later) al-Faruqi claimed that the English language, in terms of its use in the Islamic context, needs enrichment from Arabic; he also encouraged the use of Arabic vocabulary<sup>22</sup> and provided a list of transliterated terms and their explanations. The Saheeh International team, however, rejected this methodology, preserving only some basic terms, such as the divine name Allāh and *zakāt*.

A second edition of the Saheeh International translation was published in 2004 by the Al-Muntada al-Islami Trust, with a few corrections. This edition has been reprinted many times without any further changes. Comparison of the first edition of 1997 and a recent one from 2019 (both published in Saudi Arabia)<sup>23</sup> reveals some differences. Notably, the later edition demonstrates a further simplification of the text. For example, in Q. 1:7 ('who have evoked [Your] anger'), the word 'evoked' has been changed to 'earned', and a reference to al-Qurṭubī's *tafsīr* in the division between the divine names *al-Raḥīmān* and *al-Raḥīm* has been erased. Some rephrasing can be observed in Q. 2:30, *nusabbiḥu bi-ḥamdika wa-nuqaddisu laka*, which is translated in the first edition as 'we declare Your praise and sanctify You', while in the recent version it reads as 'we exalt You with praise and declare Your sanctity', which seems to be a more precise rendition of the original. In other places, such as Q. 4:34, there are more significant changes, probably related to the purposes of justifying the Islamic position on the punishment a husband can inflict on his wife. The 1997 edition reads as follows:

But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them.

and gives the following explanation in a footnote:

As a last resort. It is unlawful to strike the face or to cause bodily injury.

<sup>22</sup> Ismail Al-Faruqi, *Toward Islamic English* (Riyadh: IIPH, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Saheeh International, ed., *The Qur'an: Arabic Text with English Meanings* (Riyadh: Dar Aljumuah, 2019).

In contrast, the 2019 edition contains a small but significant change, with the edition of 'lightly' in brackets:

But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance—[first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them [lightly].

The commentary is also completely changed. It reads:

This final disciplinary measure is more psychological than physical. It may be resorted to only after failure of the first two measures and when it is expected to amend the situation and prevent family breakup; otherwise, it is not acceptable. The Prophet ﷺ (who never struck a woman or a servant) additionally stipulated that it must not be severe or damaging and that the face be avoided.

This shift may reflect that fact that, in the mid-1990s, the problem of 'wife-beating' was not yet widely discussed in Islamic scholarship. More recently, especially after 2001, the topic of violence in Islam has moved to centre stage in both academia and religious communities. The revised 2019 commentary, with its reference to Prophetic practice ('[he] never struck a woman or a servant'), is thus designed to be more dissuasive of domestic violence than the more or less literal translation from 1997.

There are some cases where the Saheeh International translation resembles a brief *tafsīr* rather than a translation. This result is common where the intention is to produce a widely accessible translation of the Qur'an, particularly through the use of modern plain language: such 'tafsīrisation' is found in many Salafi interpretations of the Qur'an, which tend to produce a one-dimensional reading of the source text. This approach can be seen in the Shaheeh International text, where the literal translation of words relating to the divine attributes is accompanied by a footnote apology for it. For example, appended to Q. 2:19 is a note that reads 'Allah [...] has certain attributes [...] Islamic belief requires faith [...] without allegorical meanings or attempting to explain [...]'). It can also be seen in the work's translation of the phrase *ṣibghata-llāhi wa-man aḥsanu mina-llāhi ṣibghatan wa-naḥnu lahu ʿābidūn* in Q. 2:138, especially when compared with other translations published in Saudi Arabia.

Since *ṣibgha* literally means 'colour' or 'hue',<sup>24</sup> a literal translation of the verse would be something like: 'The Colour of God! Who is better in colour than God alone? And we worship Him!' Some translations of the Qur'an do provide quite a literal reading of this verse, but these are still based on *tafsīr*. For example, Pickthall renders it as follows: '[We take our] colour from Allah, and who is better than Allah at colouring. We are His worshippers'. However, modern Salafi exegetes have tended to simplify the discussion by understanding *ṣibgha* as 'religion'. Al-Sa'ādī, for one, interprets the verse as meaning *ulzimū ṣibghat Allāh wa-huwa dīnuhu* ['accept the colouring of God, meaning His religion'].<sup>25</sup> This kind of interpretation is clearly given to avoid any anthropomorphism of God. English translations, produced and/or revised in Saudi Arabia, give the following picture (in chronological order):

**Yusuf Ali (1965, reprint of 1946)**

[Our religion is] the baptism of God; and who can baptise better than God? And it is He whom we worship.

**Hilālī-Khān (1978)**

[Our religion is] the Baptism of Allah and who can baptise better than Allah? And We are His worshippers?

**Yusuf Ali (1991)**

[Our religion] takes its hue from Allah, and who can give a better hue than Allah. It is He, Whom we worship.

**Hilālī-Khān (KFGQPC, 1997)**

[Our Sibghah (religion) is] the Sibghah [Religion] of Allah [Islam] and which Sibghah [religion] can be better than Allah's? And we are His worshippers [Tafsir ibn Kathir].

**Saheeh International (1997)**

[And say, 'Ours is] the religion of Allah. And who is better than Allah in [ordaining] religion? And we are worshippers of Him'.

24 *Ṣibgha* is sometimes used by Arabic Christians in their baptism rituals, during which a dye is added to the baptismal water, according to some exegetes and historians. For example, see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an tā'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, 16 vols (Cairo: Dār Hijr, 2001), II, p. 115.

25 Nāṣir b. 'Abd Allāh al-Sa'ādī, *Tafsīr al-Karīm al-Rahmān fī tafsīr kalām al-mannān* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2002), p. 63. A similar interpretation can be found in *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar* and many of the KFGQPC translations.

This small example generally illustrates the way the meaning of *ṣibgha* has evolved and shifted in these English translations. While the first editions of Yusuf Ali and Hilālī-Khān mainly replicated the interpretation mentioned in classical *tafsīr* sources, which read the verse as referring to the Christian practice of baptism, later revisions and additions have eradicated this interpretation. It is also clear that the Saheeh International team rendered this verse in the same ‘explanatory’ *tafsīr*-based way as the revised Hilālī-Khān translation of 1997.

The Saheeh International translation has enjoyed growing popularity. This is due mainly to the simplicity and accessibility of both the core text and the accompanying commentary, which amounts to more than 2,000 footnotes (though many of these are brief). Although never published by any official institutions or with the official backing of any religious authorities in Saudi Arabia, it is widely used as a book for individual reading and as a source for quotations from the Qur’an. Indeed, in the UK, it is one of the most popular Muslim translations and is available in almost every Sunni mosque and Islamic centre in the country. Its success is partially due to the fact that it has been distributed gratis by the Al-Muntada al-Islami Trust and other Islamic networks. Recently, editions have also been published by Saudi publishing houses such as Aljumuah and Noor International, and these are distributed by Darussalam. Saudi ulema rarely discuss this work, but some ‘pro-Salafi’ literature on Qur’anic Studies evaluate it fairly positively. Abdur Raheem Kidwai, in his 2018 *God’s Word, Man’s Interpretations: A Critical Study of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century English Translations of the Quran*, for example, describes the Saheeh International translation as ‘fairly good’ for giving readers a ‘clear and comprehensive picture of the articles of faith’ but also ‘somewhat vague and unspecific’.<sup>26</sup> This latter comment likely means that the authors are not always informative when it comes to commentary. Another reviewer has noted that ‘What distinguishes the Saheeh International translation of the Qur’an from other female translations is that it does not reflect the feminist mindset. Instead, it enjoys widespread popularity with some of Islam’s most conservative

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26 Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *God’s Word, Man’s Interpretations: A Critical Study of the 21st Century English Translation of the Quran* (New Delhi: Viva Books, 2018), p. 92.

followers'.<sup>27</sup> This is an obvious jab against the feminist translation by Laleh Bakhtyar (2007), but the review nevertheless shows approval for the Saheeh International team's work. In 2017, the popular news website *Daily Beast* published a detailed article on this translation, claiming that it 'has become the main version used in English-language propaganda put out by ISIS'.<sup>28</sup> Overall, in comparison to the Hilālī-Khān translation, it has not received very much criticism. The interpretation of the Qur'an by the Saheeh International team is thus one of the most successful translation projects ever carried out in Saudi Arabia.

## Private Publishers: Darussalam, the *Tafsīr al-'ushr al-akhīr* Project, the Noor International Center, and Others

The history of Saudi book printing has its roots in the late nineteenth century, while the first Saudi law governing the activity of press and related resources was issued by royal decree in 1929.<sup>29</sup> Since its introduction, the originally strict law has been updated a few times to give more freedom to publishers while still protecting religious authorities from being criticised in any printed materials. For example, Article 3 of the Saudi 'Law on Printed Materials and Publication' (Royal decree No. M/32, enacted on 29 November 2000) currently says that 'The objectives of printed materials shall include the call to Islam, good moral standards, guidance to all that is right and good, and the dissemination of culture and knowledge'. Article 8, meanwhile, clearly states that 'Freedom of expression is guaranteed through all means of publication within the provisions of the Sharia and the law', and Article 9 says that 'Any person in charge of printed material shall observe [the highest standards of] objective and constructive criticism that serves the public interest, employing facts and true information'. As these

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27 Neha Pasha, 'Translation of the Qur'ān: A Study of Saheeh International', *Aligarh Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 3.2 (2020), 91–99 (p. 98).

28 Katie Zawadski, 'How Three American Women Translated One of the World's Most Popular Qurans', *Daily Beast*, 26 March 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-three-american-women-translated-one-of-the-worlds-most-popular-qurans>.

29 Sulaymān al-'Unayzī, *Qir'ā fi nīzām al-maḥbū'āt wa-l-nashr al-Sa'ūdī* (Riyadh: al-Muntadā al-'Alāmī al-Sanawī al-Awwal, 1424/2003), p. 1.



potentially contradictory articles do not apply to high-level religious institutions, the clearest directive come from Article 9, part 3:

Any material impinging on the integrity or undermining the reputation or dignity of the Grand Mufti of the Kingdom, members of the Senior Ulema Council, state officials or employees, or any natural or corporate person [...] not be published by any means.

In the latest version of the law, Royal decree M/32 from 28 October 2003, the Grand Mufti's office has been removed.

The decree also sets out a number of criteria for publishers. To be a publisher, one must be a Saudi citizen, 'be well-known for good conduct', and obtain a licence for this activity (Article 5). Furthermore, 'any author, publisher, printer, or distributor who wants to print or distribute any printed material shall provide the Ministry with two copies for approval before printing or circulation' (Article 13). Thus, the publication industry within the country operates under quite strict regulations, although the practical application of the law might at times be more liberal. Certainly, when it comes to the publication of religious materials prior to the digital age (that is, until the early 2000s), it is hard to envisage that anything would be printed that was in explicit conflict with the Sunni-Salafi vision of Islam. This is why religious books were historically printed in Egypt and Lebanon in larger numbers than by any Saudi printing houses. One can hardly imagine, for example, any Shii books being published in Saudi Arabia.

The rapid changes and growth that took place in the Saudi publishing industry during the 1960s and 1970s reflected the age of modernisation but also the country's fight against illiteracy. In 1952, the United Nations reported that Saudi Arabia had 306 elementary schools but that illiteracy levels remained at between 92% and 95%.<sup>30</sup> Following the introduction of educational reforms in the 1960s and the propagation of mass education, the publishing market started to change rapidly, if not dramatically. A report published by the International Publishers Association in 2016 states that Saudi Arabia comprised the largest Arab

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<sup>30</sup> Tariq Elyas and Michelle Picard, 'A Brief History of English and English Teaching in Saudi Arabia', in *English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia: New Insights into Teaching and Learning English*, ed. by Christo Moskovsky and Michelle Picard (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 70–84.

book market that year, exporting \$25m worth of books and related goods and importing \$125m worth. The country published 2,387 different titles in 2014, primarily in the fields of religion and social sciences.<sup>31</sup> However, despite this rapid growth, Saudi Arabia still faces the same problem as many other Arab countries. As a study from 2017 points out,

Arabs in two of the three countries with large expatriate populations—Saudi Arabia and the UAE—reported significantly lower levels of book reliance than Asian and Western expatriates. The study also found that Arabs rely less on books than on TV, interpersonal sources, or the Internet for information and entertainment.<sup>32</sup>

## Darussalam

By the 1980s, the age of global Saudi missionary activities, carried out through organisations such as the Muslim World League and subsequently the King Fahd Complex, was in full swing. Demand for translations of Islamic materials into foreign languages such as English and French prompted the creation of commercial presses oriented towards the global Islamic book market.<sup>33</sup> One of the first such global publishers was Darussalam, which was established in Riyadh in 1986 and uses the tagline 'Global leader of Islamic books'. Now a multilingual international publishing house operating in twenty-eight countries, Darussalam remains a leading press in Islamic publishing at the global level, with large distribution networks in both the East and West. Its founder, Abdul Malik Mujahid, was a migrant from Pakistan who worked first in an advertising agency, then the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Defence before finally starting his own successful publishing business.<sup>34</sup> In 2016, Darussalam published more than 600 Islamic books

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31 International Publishers Association, 'IPA Country Report on Saudi Arabia', 30 June 1916, <https://www.internationalpublishers.org/copyright-news-blog/410-ipa-country-report-saudi-arabia>.

32 Justin D. Martin, Ralph J. Martins, and S. Shageaa Naqvi, 'Do Arabs Really Read Less? "Cultural Tools" and "More Knowledgeable Others" as Determinants of Book Reliance in Six Arab Countries', *International Journal of Communication*, 11 (2017), 3374–93.

33 On state and non-state *da'wa* publishing, see Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da'wa: A Global History of Islamic Missionary Thought and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 212–43, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474451543>

34 For a brief biography of Abdul Malik Mujahid, see his unofficial blog at <https://abdulmalikmujahid.wordpress.com/2017/07/24/abdul-malik-mujahid-biography>

in English,<sup>35</sup> mostly on the Qur'an, Sunna, *tafsīr*, Islamic law, and history; it also published many textbooks, manuals, and children's books. As of 2023, Darussalam has published Qur'an translations in over twenty-five languages, the most prominent being English, French, Urdu, Spanish, Persian, Hindi, Pashto, Sinhala, Russian, Chinese, and Bengali. According to an article published in the *Daily Pakistan* in 2020, 'after launching the Punjabi translations by Prof. Roshan Khan Kakar and his assistant Rai Shahzad, Darussalam Publishers, is now the second largest publisher of translations of the Holy Quran in the world',<sup>36</sup> the largest being KFGQPC. But how true is this claim?

One of Darussalam's first Qur'an translation projects was (as mentioned in previous chapters) an edition of the Hilālī-Khān translation that appeared in 1994. Darussalam has since reprinted Hilālī-Khān ten times, and it is probably due to their endeavours that this work continues to be readily available in the West.<sup>37</sup> Darussalam still sells the Hilālī-Khān translation, but it has recently started to distribute other translations, including *The Clear Quran* by Mustafa Khattab, sponsored by the US-based Al-Furqaan Foundation, and Adil Salahi's *The Quran: A Translation for the 21st Century* (both of these books are printed and distributed by other publishers in the UK and USA). In addition, Darussalam has produced a few textbooks designed for Qur'anic education in English, notably, *Methodical Interpretation of The Noble Qur'ān: Part 30* by Aḥmad Nawfal, which is a rather short explanatory Salafi *tafsīr* of the final juz<sup>3</sup> of the Qur'an, translated from the Arabic work *al-Tafsīr al-manhajī*.<sup>38</sup>

However, Darussalam has made a few original contributions to the Qur'an translation landscape. One is a translation into Sindhi (a language with thirty million speakers in Pakistan) by Amīr Buaksh

35 Talha Mujahid, 'Darussalam—the Global Leader in Islamic Publications', *Saudi Gazette*, 26 June 2023/8 Dhū-l-Hijja 1444, <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/161230>

36 'Saudi-Based Publisher Introduces Punjabi Translation of Holy Quran', *Daily Pakistan*, 14 November 2020, <https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/14-Nov-2020/saudi-based-publisher-introduces-punjabi-translation-of-holy-quran>

37 A further factor is that this translation is perceived as being 'approved' by the KFGQPC.

38 Ahmad Nawfal, *Methodical Interpretation of The Noble Quran (Part-30)* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2020).

Channā, a scholar working in King Saud University.<sup>39</sup> Channā's *Qur'āni Karīm, Tarjami e Tafṣīr* differs from the classic work published by KFGQPC (by Taj Maḥmūd Imrōtī, d. 1929)<sup>40</sup> in its use of modern language and incorporation of plenty of commentary. Darussalam has also produced original translations into Sinhala, Gurmukhi, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Pashto, Bengali, Malayam, Nepalese, and a few other languages, almost all of which are spoken in South Asia. Coupled with the aforementioned Punjabi translation, this list shows that this region is a particular priority for the company. Darussalam has also been more successful than the KFGQPC when it comes to Persian translations. In contrast to the KFGQPC's reliance on al-Dihlawī's classic translation from the eighteenth century, Darussalam have published an original work named *Tafṣīr Aḥsan al-kalām* (by Ḥusayn Tājī and 'Abd al-Ghafūr Ḥusayn), an explanatory translation that claims to be based on the Sunna corpus as well as the *tafṣīrs* of Ibn Kathīr and al-Qurṭubī.<sup>41</sup> When it comes to African languages, Darussalam has produced two translations, the first into Somali (by the Salafi scholar Cabdicaziiz Xasan Yacquub)<sup>42</sup> and the second into Swahili (by 'Alī Muḥsin al-Barwānī [1919–2006], a scholar and politician from Zanzibar who spent most of his life in the UAE).<sup>43</sup> The Swahili translation was initially published in 1995 in Abu Dhabi,<sup>44</sup> but it looks as if Darussalam edited this text before publishing their edition, adding more commentary from the *ḥadīth* corpus.

Interestingly, when it comes to Turkish and Albanian, Darussalam has chosen to translate the English Hilālī-Khān interpretation (1994 or

39 Amīr Buaksh Channā, *Qur'āni Karīm, Tarjami e Tafṣīr* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2018).

40 For more on him, see Annemarie Schimmel, 'Translations and Commentaries of the Qur'ān in Sindhi Language', *Oriens*, 16 (1963), 233–35.

41 Ḥusayn Tājī and 'Abd al-Ghafūr Ḥusayn, *Tafṣīr Aḥsan al-Kalām bi-zobān-Fārisī* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2012).

42 Cabdicaziiz Xasan Yacquub, *Kuraanka Kariimka. y Waxaa Tarjumay C. Xasan Yacquub* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2020), pp. i–ii.

43 'Alī Muḥsin al-Barwānī, *Tafṣiri ya maana ya Qur'an Tukufu kwa lugha ya Kiswahili* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2012).

44 See Gerard C. van de Bruinhorst, 'Changing Criticism of Swahili Qur'an Translations: The Three "Rods of Moses"', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 15.3 (2013), 206–31, (206), <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2013.0118>. For more on the first edition of this translation, which was supported by al-Azhar University, see also: Faruk Topan, 'Polemics and Language in Swahili Translations of the Qur'an: Mubarak Ahmad (d. 2001), Abdullah Saleh al-Farsy (d. 1982) and Ali Muhsin al-Barwani (d. 2006)', in *The Qur'an and its Readers Worldwide*, ed. by Suha Taji-Farouki (New York: Oxford University Press in Association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 2015), pp. 491–501.

1996 edition) rather than the original Arabic. In the case of its Turkish translation, it even produced a trilingual edition in Arabic, English, and Turkish.<sup>45</sup> Darussalam has also printed a partial translation of Hilālī-Khān into Russian (comprising the last five parts of the Qur'an, *juz*'s 25–30), which looks like a word-for-word reconstruction of the English text with no influence from any other sources. This means it is effectively unable to compete with the numerous Russian translations available that are translated directly from the Arabic.<sup>46</sup>

Darussalam's Indonesian translation is a reprint of the KFGQPC's edition of *Al Quran Dan Terjemahnya*, the Qur'an translation produced by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs.<sup>47</sup> There are further cases of reprints from KFGQPC translations: for example, the Spanish translation published by Darussalam seems to be nothing more than a reproduction of Abdel-Ghani Melara Navío's translation which was published in 1997 by the KFGQPC. In this instance, Darussalam made the strange decision to use the Ḥafṣ reading for the Arabic text, despite the fact that the translation was based on the Warsh reading, which was (correctly) used in the original KFGQPC edition.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, the only original translation into a European language produced by Darussalam seems to be a work in French, *Le Sens Des Versets Du Saint Qouran*, which was printed in 1999 and later reprinted in 2000 and 2005.<sup>49</sup> The translator, Cheikh Boreima Abdou Daouda from Niger, is a graduate of IUM. In his introduction, Abdou Daouda says that his work depended on (or rather, was 'inspired by') the French translation published by the KFGQPC as well as the Hilālī-Khān English translation. The influence of the latter is quite evident not only from the core text but also from the commentary, which mentions the same *tafsīr* sources as are used in Hilālī-Khān. For example, in his rendition of Q. 1:7, Abdou Daouda refers explicitly to Jews ('juifs') and Christians ('chrétiens'), a feature that can be observed in the original version and earliest editions of the Hilālī-Khān translation. It is also apparent in his treatment of Q. 2:3, in which the wording of the verse is exactly the same

45 *İngilizce ve Türkçe Olarak Kur'an'ın Kerim'in Meali ve Tefsiri* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2004).

46 *Perevod smyslov Blagorodnyi Kur'an na russkom jazyke* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2009).

47 *Al Quran Dan Terjemahnya* (Riyadh: Darussalam: 2010).

48 *Del Noble Coran* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2003).

49 Cheikh Boreima Abdou Daouda, *Le sens des versets du Saint Qour'an* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1999).

as is found in the KFGQPC's version of Hamidullah, while the relevant explanation is exactly the same as in Hilālī-Khān:

**Boreima Abdou Daouda (1999)**

*Qui croient à l'Inconnaisable (ghayb), accomplissent la Çalât (Iqâmatouç-Çalât) et dépensent de ce que Nous leur avons attribué (c'est-à-dire donnent la Zakât, dépensent pour eux-mêmes, pour leurs parents, leurs enfants, leurs femmes et font charité aux pauvres et pour servir la cause d'Allah—Djihâd).*

**Muhammad Hamidullah (1990/1991)**

*Qui croient à l'invisible et accomplissent la Salat et dépensent [dans l'obéissance à Allah], de ce que Nous leur avons attribué.*

**Hilālī-Khān (1997)**

Who believe in the Ghaib and perform As-Salât (Iqâmat-as-Salât), and spend out of what We have provided for them [i.e., give Zakât, spend on themselves, their parents, their children, their wives, etc., and also give charity to the poor and also in Allāh's Cause—Jihād].

A question that remains is how Darussalam's review processes work. Many of the editions contain absolutely no information about the names of any individuals or special committees that involved in any reviewing or editing activities prior to publication. What is known, however, is that one of Darussalam's co-founders, 'Abd Allāh al-Mu'tāz, who was particularly involved in promoting the publication of Qur'an translations, is a student of Shaykh Ibn Bāz. He is an active member of many Saudi-run Islamic projects in the Middle East and Africa, including the authoring of some books on Qur'anic Studies, among them a popular *tafsīr* in Arabic.<sup>50</sup> It is also known that, for particular projects, Darussalam has historically invited external expert native speakers of specific languages with knowledge of Islam to join the board of their research committee [*al-lajna al-'ilmīyya*], on a similar basis as the KFGQPC.

The Hilālī-Khān translation exerts an enormous influence on Darussalam's translations. Not only has the company treated its new edition of this text as a kind of standard, producing 'versions' of this translation in multiple other languages, but many of its non-Hilālī-Khān-based Qur'an translations have clearly used it as a prototype when it comes to the issue of commentary and interpolations into the

50 'Abd Allāh al-Mu'tāz, *al-Fawā'id al-ḥisān min ayāt al-Qur'ān* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2006).

text. The Hilālī-Khān translation is usually positioned in their literature as a ‘summarising commentary’ that offers a concise version of the opinions present in classical *tafsīr*. Beyond this, it should also be noted that, in contrast to the KFGQPC, Darussalam has relied on the authority of individual translators rather than its own institutional authority. This can be seen, for instance, in the fact that its translations never include any kind of preface or introduction written by religious scholars or established officials intended to endow the text with their stamp of approval.

Darussalam’s reliance on the Hilālī-Khān translation has also contributed to the tone of Salafi *da‘wa* activities. The company prioritises Asian languages primarily because of their large number of speakers and the high level of demand for Qur’an translations in them. Consequently, missionary activities in the corresponding areas follow the Hilālī-Khān in remaining loyal to the basic hermeneutical principles of the modern Wahhabi reading of the Qur’an.<sup>51</sup> Many of the translations Darussalam has printed for the rest of the world, however, have not fallen on fertile ground and so have remained relatively unsuccessful. Furthermore, in countries like the UK and USA in the West, and Pakistan in the East, Darussalam has developed very good networks for book distribution; in some other countries its translations have had little chance of reaching readers. Darussalam’s commercial policy of pursuing copyright has also prevented many of its translations being reprinted by other publishers, and this has effectively limited the circulation of some of its texts. However, despite all this, having printed over twenty translations of the Qur’an, it is, indeed, the largest private Saudi publisher of Qur’an translations.

### The *Tafsīr al-‘ushr al-akhīr* Project

In contrast to the other publishing projects discussed so far, the *Tafsīr al-‘ushr al-akhīr* is dedicated solely to Qur’an interpretation in multiple languages and pursues a rather more ‘centralised’ exegetical approach. Its title translates as ‘Commentary on the Last Tenth of the Qur’an’, that

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51 The theological bent of these translations can also be seen influencing other kinds of Islamic literature published by Darussalam, for example, through their use in quotation. Having said that, some books in English published by Darussalam instead use the KFGQPC edition of Yusuf Ali’s translation.

is, *juz*'s 28–30, from sura 58 to the end of the Qur'an. It is a production of the Old Industrial City Communities Awareness Bureau [al-Maktab al-Ta'āwunī li-Taw'īyyat al-Jāliyyāt], which is based near the Saudi capital, Riyadh. The organisation was set up in 1998 as a part of efforts by local ulema to work with fast-growing diaspora communities (both Muslim and non-Muslim) in the capital city. Later renamed *Jam'iyya* ['Society'], it is one of a few dozens of such 'awareness bureaus' established around the Kingdom. Their funding comes from both state and private sources in equal measure (and is coordinated by the MOIA),<sup>52</sup> and their network of offices has pursued many different projects, both local and global, including sending books abroad for missionary purposes. The bureaus' activities include the collection and distribution of charitable donations, the organisation of educational camps (especially during Ramadan), the provision of training in the basics of Islam, and the printing religious books. Websites of the *Jam'iyya* are usually filled with success stories of individuals' public conversion to Islam. Given the remit of the Communities Awareness Bureau, it is unsurprising that it has prioritised the production of Islamic texts in translation, particularly the most indispensable works.

In 2002, the Communities Awareness Bureau started to distribute its own book, *Tafsīr al-ʿushr al-akhīr min al-Qurʾān al-karīm wa-ilayhi aḥkām tuhimmu al-muslim* ['An explanation of the last tenth of the noble Qur'an, also including critical matters in the life of a Muslim']. This volume contained a few statements on the virtues of the Qur'an in Islam, the Arabic text of the *tafsīr*, and a collection of traditions on various topics relating to Muslim life, the pillars of Islam, and basic Islamic rules for women. The last of these is imaginatively written, taking the form of a dialogue between two persons, one named 'Abd Allāh ['servant of God'], and the other named 'Abd al-Nabī [literally, 'servant of the Prophet']. Their conversations offer a simplified outline of Wahhabi/Salafi theological doctrine concerning the 'Oneness of God in divinity, attributes and dominion' and exhibits a strong anti-Sufi and anti-Shii bias, although neither of the contested groups are mentioned by name. The project's main website features letters of support for this

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52 'Services and Statistics', MOIA, <https://www.moia.gov.sa/AboutMinistry/Branches/Riyadh/Pages/Message.aspx>



work from top-ranked Saudi scholars like Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh b. Jibrīn, a member of the Council of Senior Scholars, and many others.<sup>53</sup>

When it comes to the core text of the book, the *tafsīr* of suras 1 and 58–114, the project has changed a few times. Initially, the Communities Awareness Bureau used *Zubdat al-tafsīr* by ʿUmar b. Sulaymān al-ʿAshqar (1920–2012) but, by 2010, had started to promote the KFGQPC-published *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*. Interestingly, just ten years later, the new (nineteenth) edition of the Arabic text was changed again, this time to *al-Mukhtaṣar fī tafsīr al-Qurʿān al-karīm*, which was originally published by the Tafsir Center for Qurʿanic Studies. So, when the cover of the book and the relevant website says that it has been translated into sixty languages (!), it is not completely clear which version was the basis for these. However, it soon becomes apparent that most of the translations were carried out at the time when the Arabic text was drawn from *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*, although apparently different editions were used. For example, a French version of *Tafsīr al-ʿushr al-akhīr* includes reference to Jews and Christians in Q. 1:7 (as is found in the first edition of *al-Muyassar*), while the English does not. Thus, the project remains the biggest promoter of this ‘standard’ exegesis as produced by the KFGQPC.

The translations of the Qurʿanic verses that are provided before the *tafsīr* of each verse do not seem to have been guided by any coherent policy. The French translators used a quite rare recent work, published by Zeino Editorial House (Paris) called *Le Noble Coran*,<sup>54</sup> while the English translator used Saheeh International; the Russian translator used Abu Adel’s translation; the Bosnian, Mehanovic’s translation (which is said to be based on Ibn Kathīr); while the Spanish and German texts only provide a translation of the *tafsīr*, with no accompanying translation of the Qurʿanic verses themselves. There is also variation in the popularity of the translations used. Despite this disparity, the translators demonstrate an overall orientation towards the use of distinctly Salafi interpretations in their respective languages.

*Tafsīr al-ʿushr al-akhīr* represents the final evolution of the Saudi translation movement, and illustrates how the vision of Qurʿanic

53 See the promotional video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rglM7ZCrPSs>

54 *Le Noble Coran. Nouvelle traduction. Traduit par l'équipe des éditions Zeino* (Paris: Éditions Zeino, 2012).

interpretation as a kind of *tafsīr* has been subordinated to the promotion of Salafi doctrine. As a result, recourse to a somewhat authoritative but short and simplistic *tafsīr* (be it *al-Muyassar* or *al-Mukhtasar*) has become an inherent part of the multi-language *da'wa* strategy of Saudi organisations. With fifty million copies printed so far in such a large number of languages, this book has made its way around the world. It is available in at least seventy countries, according to the website, and can be found in mosques and Islamic centres in Europe, the UK, and the USA.<sup>55</sup>

Although none of the three *tafsīrs* used in the different editions of *Tafsīr al-ʿushr al-akhīr* is particularly original, the project has made them so widely available globally that no other Qur'an commentaries can compete with them. Despite the diverse translation strategies and approaches, and taking into account the fact that some of the translations have not undergone any scrutiny or review process prior to publication, a kind of 'standardised' text has emerged. It is one and the same in every language and, as such, is now considered to be the basis for any 'authorised' translation that is 'correct' from the Salafi theological perspective. As a result, it is hard to find any systematic critique of this book, especially after the initial 'individual' *tafsīr* was replaced by collectively authored interpretations that are generally deemed to be 'more acceptable' (especially in the case of the KFGQPC's *al-Muyassar*). This seems to be a recent trend in Salafi circles, particularly since the rise of mass Islamic missionary activities in the 1980s. New works continue to be based on classical sources but reframe the tradition in a way that moves away from the encyclopedic nature of *tafsīr* towards more simplistic and linear ethical guidance, as Johanna Pink has shown in her analysis of translations of Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr* into Indonesian.<sup>56</sup>

## The Noor International Center

Around 2018, another publisher specialising in 'translating the meanings of the Holy Quran into international languages' emerged in

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<sup>55</sup> See their website at <https://www.tafseer.info/en>

<sup>56</sup> Johanna Pink, 'Eight Shades of Ibn Kathīr: The Afterlives of a Premodern Qur'ānic Commentary in Contemporary Indonesian Translations' in *Malay-Indonesian Islamic Studies*, ed. by Majid Daneshgar and Ervan Nurtawab (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 109–33.

Riyadh, registered as Noor International. This publishing house, during its first four years of operation, has printed English, French, Spanish, and Latin American Spanish translations of the Qur'an.<sup>57</sup> Their strategy is to rely on existing translations. In English, they have reprinted the most recent edition of Saheeh International, both the complete text and excerpts.<sup>58</sup> Their French translation is not new either. They have chosen to republish *Le sens des versets du Coran* by the Tunisian scholar Nebil Radhouane, first published in 2012 by the al-Muntadā al-Islamī Trust,<sup>59</sup> reproducing both the text of the translation and the accompanying commentary. According to the author's introduction to one of the latest editions (Noor International excluded this text, probably to make the text more practical in usage), he used '*les exegeses d'Ibn Kathîr, At-Tabarî, As-Sa'îdî et Al-Baghawî. Quant à la lecture, elle s'est toujours appuyée sur la version de Hafṣ*'.<sup>60</sup> This suggests that Noor International, like the KFGQPC, follows the 'standard' Salafi exegetical canon developed in established ulema circles. The use of the Ḥafṣ reading in this translation, however, has given it a more universal outlook than would the use of, for example, the Warsh reading.<sup>61</sup>

The most recent two texts published by Noor International, the Qur'an in European Spanish and in Latin American Spanish, are also reprints of existing translations. Both works were produced by the al-Muntada al-Islami foundation in association with Dār Qira'āt and share some features.<sup>62</sup> The introduction included in the first edition of each does not provide the names of the translators, instead referring to 'a team effort'. Hermeneutically, both translations contain a lot of interpolations and plenty of commentary, and they do not seem to be particularly dependent on popular pre-existing Spanish translations, such as those by Abdel-Ghani Melara Navío (also published by KFGQPC and Darussalam) or Isa Garcia. The introductions refer to the legacy of some 'exégetas' [exegetes], although no specific authority

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57 See Noor International's online store at <https://store.noorinternational.net/>

58 *The Qur'an* (Riyadh: Noor International, 2019).

59 Nebil Radhouane, *Le Noble Coran—Sens traduits et annotés par les soins du Pr Nebil Radhouane* (Riyadh: IPC Al-Muntada Al-Islami, 2012).

60 Radhouane, *Le Noble Coran*, p. 11.

61 The Warsh reading is popular only in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and some parts of West Africa.

62 *El Corán. Traducción en lengua española latinoamericana* (Riyadh: Al Muntada Al Islami, 2017).

is named. These works require further study, but, overall, they appear to be explanatory translations with a special accent on theological issues (for example, the divine attributes), simple commentary, and minimal use of Arabic terminology (such as *ghayb*). As the introduction clearly states, this kind of simplicity is used 'para que tanto el lector musulmán como el no musulmán se beneficien de dicho conocimiento' ['so that both the Muslim and non-Muslim reader can benefit from such knowledge'].<sup>63</sup> Although Noor International Center has only published four translations so far, only one of which is more or less original, it seems clear that their priority lies in distributing books outside the Muslim world for missionary purposes.

The three publishers of Qur'an translations discussed above are, of course, not the only ones. Although they are the biggest, some other, local publishers are active in the field as well. For example, a new translation of the last *juz'* of the Qur'an into Tigrinya (which is spoken in Eritrea) has recently been published by the Cooperative Office from Umm Hammam area in Riaydh. The translator, a Salafi preacher called Dr Bayan Salih, follows the trend we have already seen insofar as he applies the 'standard' exegetical canon, from al-Ṭabarī and al-Baghawī to al-Sa'dī and al-Ashqar.<sup>64</sup>

## *Al-Mukhtaṣar fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*: The Arabic Text and its Numerous Translations

The Tafsir Center for Qur'anic Studies (established in 2008) is another very active non-governmental institution that has generally toed the line when it comes to promoting the Salafi hermeneutical approach. Designed as a multipurpose think tank for Qur'an interpretation with generous funding (mostly from private Saudi nationals), the Center has managed to make its name in a very short time through one long-term project, *al-Mukhtaṣar fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*. Six editions of this work have come out in print since 2019.<sup>65</sup> Initially, it was a typical contemporary

63 Ibid., p. b.

64 Bayān Sāliḥ, *Tarjamat ma'ānī juz' ʿamma. Al-Luḡha al-Tijrīniyā* (Riyadh: al-Maktab al-Ta'āwunī li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Irshād wa-Ta'wīyyat al-Jāliyyāt bi-Umm Hammām, [n. d.]).

65 *al-Mukhtaṣar fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm* (Riyadh: Markaz Tafsīr li-l-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyya, 1441/2021).

Qur'an interpretation in Arabic (very similar to the KFGQPC's *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar* and obviously inspired by it). However, it has become available in fourteen languages, from Albanian to Spanish, over the last couple of years.<sup>66</sup> Not all of these translations have appeared in print as of 2022; many were instead designed for online use. Nevertheless, this breadth is quite impressive, exceeding the number of available languages of its main predecessor, *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*. Who authored this work, what are its main features, and how it is being translated and promoted?

The cover page, somewhat similarly to *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*, says the book is written by 'a group of *tafsīr* scholars', but the prefatory material gives a few specific names. The *matn* [core text of the work] was written by Shaykh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Shinqīṭī<sup>67</sup> from Medina, a student of Ibn Bāz and a collaborator in the production of the *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*. A number of other scholars involved in the project are also mentioned, including a well-known Saudi authority on *tafsīr*, Musā'id al-Ṭayyār from King Saud University, who performed the final edit.<sup>68</sup> Subject to an impressive number of revisions, their work was designed to provide: (i) a short outline of the meanings of the verses; (ii) explanation of unusual terms used in the Qur'an; (iii) guidance that accorded with the practice of the *salaf al-umma* (i.e., the first generation of Muslims); (iv) a selection of the meanings deemed most relevant and significant; and (v) an outline for the reader of the 'benefits' of every group of verses.<sup>69</sup>

The authors of *al-Mukhtaṣar* say they used the same style as al-Ṭabarī, and also comment that his interpretation was viewed as a decisive authority by the entire writing committee. In common with *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*, again, the team behind this work made it 'accessible for translation into other languages',<sup>70</sup> thus we have a second modern *tafsīr* that is destined not only for the Arabic reader but also for a wider audience in other languages. The text keeps silent, however, on how this 'accessibility' was actually effected from a semantic perspective.

66 See 'Tarājim', <https://mokhtasr.com/تصفح-المختصر-والترجم>

67 *al-Mukhtaṣar*, p. 8.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., p. 6.

70 Ibid., p. 10.

The structure of the commentary in *al-Mukhtaṣar* differs a bit from that in *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*. First of all, it provides a short introduction to every sura called 'aims of the sura' [*min maqāṣid al-suwar*] and additional explanations of (primarily moral) topics at the end of every page under the heading 'some benefits of the suras' [*min fawā'id al-suwar*]. This makes the text more attractive for use as a kind of introductory textbook to the Qur'an, be it in Islamic schools or some other circle of learning. However, the work differs little from *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*. It takes the same approach towards the divine attributes and their literal interpretation, mentions Jews and Christians in its discussion of Q. 1:7, uses many similar expressions, and is similar in size. Even its claim to explain unusual words is implemented in the same way. For example, for the word *ḥawwāriyyūn*, which first occurs in Q. 3:52 and is used for the close followers of Jesus, both commentaries provide the synonym *aṣfiyā'* ['the chosen ones'].

Yet, *al-Mukhtaṣar* goes further than *al-Muyassar* on some levels—namely with regard to some legal rulings. Although both declare that they do not offer detailed commentary on Islamic legal issues, *al-Mukhtaṣar* includes the following explanation under Q. 9:12 to clarify the expression *ṭa'anū fī dīnikum* ['revile your religion']: 'But if they break their oath after having made an agreement with you, if they revile your religion, then fight the leaders of disbelief—oaths mean nothing to them—so that they may stop'.<sup>71</sup> The Arabic *al-Mukhtaṣar* says, 'Some of the scholars argued that what is said by God as *ṭa'anū fī dīnikum* is a proof of the necessity to kill anyone who reviles or mocks the religion intentionally, calling him to repentance before that'; however the relevant English translation rewords this to 'must be put to death'.<sup>72</sup> In contrast to *al-Mukhtaṣar*, *al-Muyassar* uses the more abstract word *qitāl* ['fight'] for the explanation of this verse without drawing any legal rulings.

It is interesting to trace how such an explicit, one-dimensional ruling, promoting death as the punishment for blasphemy,<sup>73</sup> has been interpreted in the various translations available on the project website (mokhtasr.

71 Translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem.

72 *al-Mukhtaṣar*, p. 188.

73 On the broader context for this issue, see John Tolan, 'Blasphemy and Protection of the Faith: Legal Perspectives from the Middle Ages', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 27.1 (2016), 35–50.

com).<sup>74</sup> The Italian translation simply says: *'Alcuni degli studiosi citarono le Parole dell'Altissimo: "Hanno offeso la vostra religione" riguardo l'obbligo di uccidere chiunque offenda la religione di proposito, o la derida, dopo essere stato invitato a smettere'* [*'Some scholars quoted the words of the Most High: "They have offended your religion" regarding the obligation to kill anyone who offends the religion on purpose, or mocks it, after being asked to stop'*].

Conversely, the Russian translation seems to be less 'violent', using the vaguer word *'srazhenije'* [*'fight'*]: *'Nekotoryje uchenyje schitajut obazatelnyj srazhenije so vsemi, kto osoznanno porochit religiju'* [*'Some scholars find it necessary to fight anyone who intentionally blames religion'*]. The French text, meanwhile, says: *'Certains savants se basent sur le verset 12 afin d'affirmer que tout individu portant délibérément atteinte à la religion dans le dessein de la railler doit obligatoirement être tué'* [*'Some scholars base themselves on verse 12 in order to affirm that anyone who deliberately attacks religion with the intention of mocking it must be killed'*].

This comparison of translations is hardly exhaustive, but it makes the general point that most of the translators have followed the wording of the Arabic original very strictly. It must be noted that, in contrast to some other translations like the *Last Tenth of the Qur'an*, none of the versions of *al-Mukhtaṣar* available in other languages provide the actual text of the Qur'an, so the reader cannot distinguish between the actual Qur'anic text and an interpretation written centuries later. In any case, in contrast to the rising popularity of the Arabic version of *al-Mukhtaṣar*, its translations have not really found a large readership, probably mainly because they are only available on the *mokhtasr.com* website, as well as a few other sites.

With its mostly anonymous literal translations, this *tafsīr* seems to be one more attempt to impose a 'standard' interpretation of the Qur'an that prioritises Salafi doctrinal readings over any other issues. *Al-Mukhtaṣar* shares the fate of its predecessor *al-Tafsīr al-muyassar*. As a work designed for an Arabic audience, it cannot compete in popularity with available translations of the Qur'an; rather, it fulfils a niche requirement as an auxiliary exegetical text with strong Salafi

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74 Some of these versions has been already published in print (some even more than once, with minor revisions), while others are only available online.

tendencies, which essentially remains unchanged despite the fact that new editions are published almost every year or two. It does illustrate the latest development in the field of religious translations: by not even mentioning name of the translators, this type of translation makes the translator less visible, and because the final text completely opts out of engaging with any textual issues such as the rhetorical beauty of the Qur'an, or its linguistic features, the translation is reduced to a kind of mechanical enterprise that attempts to provide if not 'the only righteous' pragmatic text, at least 'the authoritative' one, based on the 'predominant' Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an.