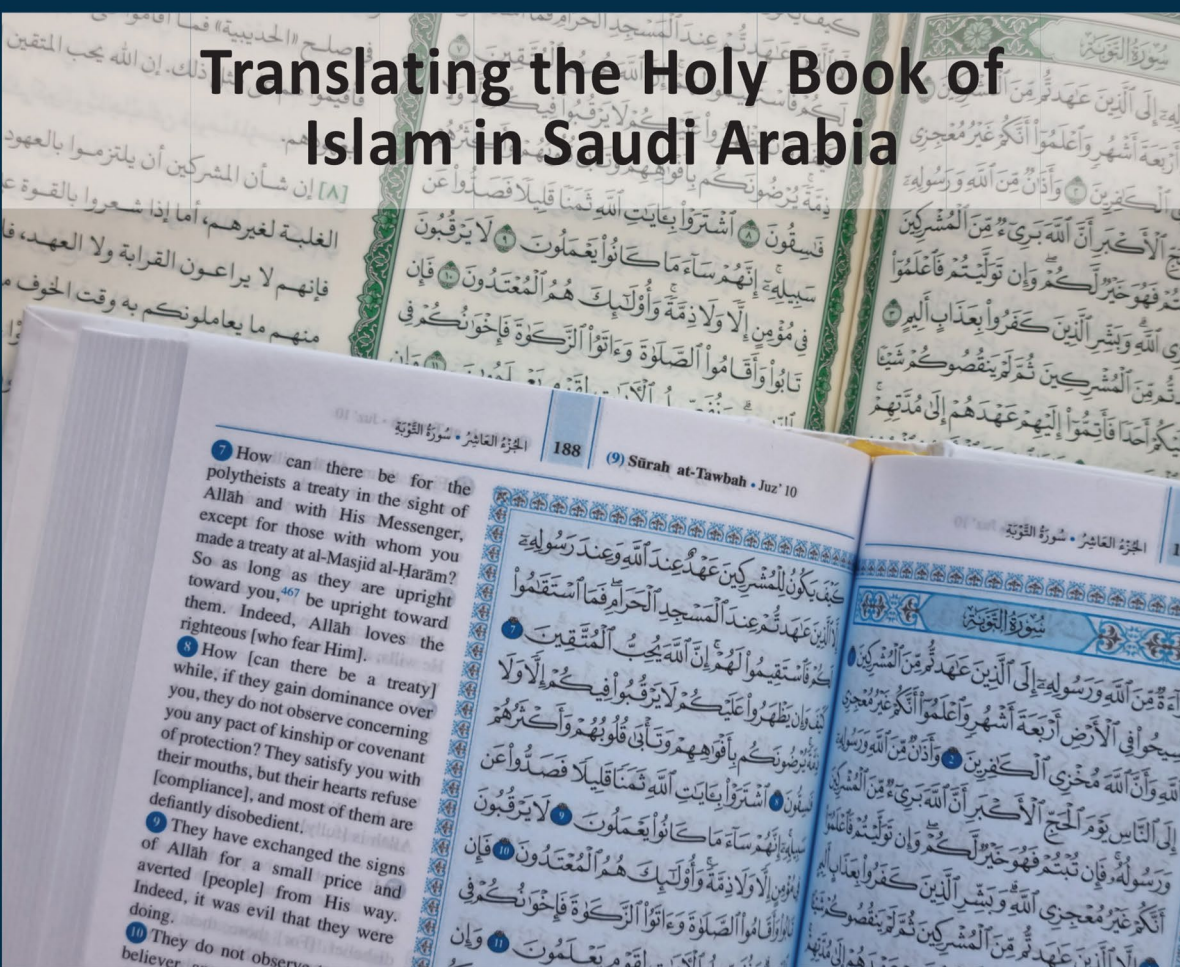


The Kingdom and the Qur'an

Translating the Holy Book of Islam in Saudi Arabia





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Cover image: Photograph by Mykhaylo Yakubovych (2023) of the Qur'an with a commentary published by King Fahd Qur'an Printing Complex (2019) and the Saheeh International Qur'an Translation (Riyadh, 2018).

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Conclusion

Saudi Arabia was far from the area of the Muslim world where discussion of the translatability of the Qur'an began. Hanbali legal sources are generally quite silent on the issue, in contrast to the Hanafi sources, and an obvious reason for this, of course, is that the Hanbali school has never been predominant in any non-Arabic Muslim environment, which means it has not had to engage with the demand for interlinear or separate interpretation in foreign languages. Still, browsing the history of discussions on translatability in Saudi Arabia, it is clear that, over recent years, presentation of the Qur'an in non-Arabic languages has become an issue that is more debated and which has been subject to changing internal dynamics. While in the mid-twentieth century there were still questions over the permissibility of translating the Qur'an, by the 1960s and 1970s, the prevailing opinion had generally shifted to favour the idea of the 'translation of its meanings'. Just a few decades later, Saudi Arabian publishers, both official and non-governmental, have become the largest producers of Qur'an translations in the Muslim World.

In its first and earliest stage, this translation movement, which included many different actors (translators, religious authorities, state, publishers and, finally, readers), was not home grown. Most debates on whether and how to translate the Qur'an made their way to Saudi Arabia via scholars from Egypt, Turkey, and India. Despite tensions between al-Azhar scholars and Salafi circles, a huge network of these and other interested parties contributed to the discussions, despite their different intra-Sunni religious backgrounds. In the late 1920s and 1930s, before the rise of local education networks, al-Azhar dominated these discussions. This is not only because of scholarly mobility between Egypt and the Hijaz [the western region of modern-day Saudi Arabia that includes

Mecca and Medina] but also because it was attended by Saudi students. At the same time, many Saudi scholars started to look at translation from the perspective of Salafi sources, above all, Ibn Taymiyya and later interpreters from the family of the *āl al-shaykh*, the descendants of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, the eponymous founder of the Wahhabi movement. The Wahhabi scholarly establishment began to reformulate its own views on translation, finding ‘proofs’ for its permissibility in new re-readings of Ibn Taymiyya and his followers. With the coming of a new generation of Western-educated Saudis, especially after the educational reforms implemented by King Faisal between 1964 and 1975, all of these discussions were finally contextualised within modernity. Increased levels of migration of foreign workers to Saudi Arabia also catalysed an interest in translation. This also had the effect of facilitating translation projects that were carried out by non-Saudi expats, such as the globally popular Saheeh International translation by three American female converts.

These groups, united by the developing Salafi canon, reached a consensus about the ‘permissibility’ of translating the Qur’an by conceptualising translation as a kind of ‘interpretation’ (*tafsīr*) that could be used as a powerful missionary tool. They agreed that such translations could be used, firstly, to ‘correct’ the creed of non-Arabic speaking Muslims and, secondly, to promote the ‘correct’ version of Islam to non-Muslims. The core values of the Qur’an promoted by this approach as ‘universal meanings’ include Islam’s two most important theological issues, namely, *tawḥīd* (‘Divine Oneness’) and *‘ibāda* (‘Worship of God’). The Salafi approach to translation generally prioritises theology over all other issues. In most of the translations produced in or for Saudi Arabian publishers, as well as those published by Saudi sponsors abroad, the foremost concern is how to interpret references to God’s divine attributes. Many other issues are relegated to the periphery, to the extent that the reader is usually directed to consult other sources for information about them. It is only recently, during the 1990s and 2000s, that Saudi scholarship has started to contextualise issues such as the relationship between Islam and science, religious violence, interreligious relations, women rights, and so on. This process has also been subject to changing dynamics, broadly moving from more conservative (even ‘radical’) readings to more liberal interpretations in

recent years. A good example of this, which has been reused throughout this volume, is the treatment of Q. 1:7—whether or not a translation names Jews and Christians in a rather negative context.

The majority of these theological shifts have mainly taken place following the establishment of a number of specific institutions in the 1960s, and, especially, the 1980s. The first Qur'an translations published in Saudi Arabia (into Uzbek and English) had nothing to do with Salafi scholarship, and even those works published by the Muslim World League still adhered to mainstream Sunni exegetical trends. It was only with the appearance of the KFGQPC that a new approach was implemented, one that prioritised a Salafi reading over all other interpretations. Sanctioned by state authorities, the translation movement in Saudi Arabia reached its highest point with the establishment of the KFGQPC. It was only then that 'authorised' versions of the translations of the Qur'an were published and the idea that an institutional effort produced a kind of 'theology of correct translation' entered the field. This emphasised that translation should not be (or even could not be) an individual undertaking but, instead, must be a communal expression of *ijmā'*^c [scholarly consensus]. The model of the KFGQPC, with its numerous boards that 'approve' every work at various stages, has since been followed by many other publishers. Henceforth, the act of translation is only one part of a collective effort, and translators are sometimes rendered invisible to shift focus onto the numerous commissions and committees that revise and approve the text. This institutionalisation is exemplified by the many editions that are known as 'King Fahd Complex translations' rather than by the name of their translator/author.

However, not all of the complete and partial translations into one hundred different languages that have been published in Saudi Arabia, can be labelled as having 'Salafi/Wahhabi' hermeneutical features—and, of course, this raises the issue of how to contextualise this term at all. For example, if it comes to the 'literal' [*zāhir*] interpretation of divine attributes such as God's 'hand' [*yād*], which is mentioned in Q. 67:1, almost all existing translations, from late-medieval interlinear translations to so-called 'Orientalist' renditions, provide the same reading.¹ Those interpretations, especially once republished for a

1 For example, among more than twenty translations into Russian, there is only one that interprets *yād* as 'power' ['vlast'], see *Kalyam Sharif* (Kazan: Huzur, 2020).

second time after being first issued by institutions such as the KFGQPC, have made their way to readers in a broader Sunni or generally Muslim context, and are not limited to especially 'Salafi' religious circles.

It is also true that the Saudi translation networks were not the first to use *tafsīr* as their primary translation tool (albeit normally conceptualised as a kind of exegesis), and the question of which exegetical sources should be used to guide translation choices was always of paramount importance. From the early twentieth century onwards, Salafi scholarship developed its own canon of exegetes, starting from al-Ṭabarī and finishing with Ibn Kathīr. Another crucial set of questions has been how those interpretations are used, which opinions are selected and why, how reliable are printed editions grounded in the manuscript tradition, and what is the impact of the numerous 'abridgements' (*mukhtaṣars*) on the transmission of information. It was partly because of these issues that publishers and revising committees (primarily the KFGQPC) started to recommend the use of contemporary interpretations with a one-dimensional hermeneutic. Relying on the modern *tafsīr* by the Saudi scholar ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Nāṣir al-Saʿdī, for example, is much easier than using classical works because it usually only gives one interpretation per verse. This simplification of meaning accords well with a strategy that aims to provide a clear-cut core text in translation.

Most of the key features of the modern Salafi approach are represented by one of the earliest and probably the most influential Saudi translations of the Qur'an, that by Hilālī and Khān. Even keeping in mind the fact that its later incarnations are much more influenced by Salafi hermeneutics than the earlier ones, the work was revolutionary in terms of both its language and approach. First, it used modern English (though neither al-Hilālī nor Khān were native speakers) and, secondly, it used plenty of *tafsīr* sources, mostly drawn from the classical Sunni corpus and the exegetical legacy of al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr. This is probably the main reason why this translation has been so popular: it is not merely an English translation but is viewed as a

According to its introduction, this translation is designed to avoid any kind of 'literality', especially in the verses dealing with the divine attributes (labelled by the translators as 'ambiguous' ['nejasnyje']). From this point of view, it proposes its Sunni theological interpretation (in its Ashʿarī/Māturīdī manifestation) as comprising a kind of 'correct' non-Arabic *tafsīr*, rather than an actual 'translation' of the text.

'trustworthy' interpretation. The authority of the Hilālī-Khān translation was further solidified by Darussalam's and other publishers' decision to retranslate it into a number of other languages because of its broad use of classical exegetical sources.

Another recent example of the Salafi approach can be seen in a partial translation of the Qur'an into English by Waleed Bleyhesh al-Amri, a Saudi scholar affiliated with Taibah University, who spent long time working in various research and administrative positions for the KFGQPC. Published in 2019 under the title *The Luminous Qur'an*, this comprises the first three suras of the Qur'an. Al-Amri includes plenty of commentary, in which he almost always mentions his exegetical sources, since, according to the introduction, 'the aim must be to overcome, as much as possible, the intermediary rule of the exegetical corpus—whose importance in understanding the Original is undeniable—in the actual representation available in the product of translation'.²

The recent trend of writing *tafsīr* specifically for translation, either as a whole or to be partially used in Qur'an translations (be it the KFGQPC-produced *al-Muyassar* or its recent alternative, *al-Mukhtaṣar*) also continues the classical trend of conceptualising translations as a kind of commentary. Such commentary, both then and now, prioritises the provision of a 'correct' perspective of religious creed and treats as secondary anything related to other aspects of the text such as literary style, historical background, and legal rules. This theological stance is the main reason that Salafi scholarship has generally remained critical of so-called Bucaillism, an attempt to harmonise modern science with Islamic belief. Even though numerous booklets talking about the compatibility of the Qur'an, Islam, and science are published in Saudi Arabia for missionary purposes, this trend has been less present in exegetical literature and, subsequently, in translations of the Qur'an. As Muḥammad b. Šāliḥ al-ʿUthaymīn, a very popular Salafi religious authority, wrote in his commentary on Q. 35:13:³

2 Waleed Bleyhesh al-Amri, *The Luminous Qur'an. A Faithful Rendition, Annotated Translation of the First Three Suras of the Message of God by Waleed Bleyhesh al-Amri* (Medina: Endowment for Cherishing the Two Glorious Revelations, 1440/2019), p. 38.

3 'He makes the night merge into the day and the day into the night; He has subjected the sun and the moon—each runs for an appointed term' (Abdel Haleem).

We do not agree nor disagree with the question of whether the Earth is revolving around the Sun or not: maybe it revolves, maybe the sun also revolves [...] What is the benefit of this kind of knowledge? Glory to Allah, who made Earth firm, revolves it or not.⁴

First and foremost, he suggests, readers' focus should be on belief and worship rather than scientific understanding.

When it comes to the promotion of these Qur'an translations, many digital projects realised in Saudi Arabia are playing a critical role. Texts are available on KFGQPC websites or via multilanguage resources like IslamHouse.com, and newer projects are being developed for use in specialised apps. Processes of digitisation contribute to the 'standardisation' of Qur'an interpretations in order to expedite their dissemination in many languages. The result is an even further simplification of the text, as can be illustrated by the recent example of *al-Tafsīr al-mukhtaṣar* and its translation. Another case in point is the Saudi-based Rowwad Translation Center, the main caretaker of QuranEnc.com, probably the biggest (in terms of the number of translations uploaded) online source for Qur'anic interpretations. This project was initiated in 2019 with the help of IslamHouse, through the efforts of their director Shaykh Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-ʿUlī. Financed by donations from the Awqaf Mohammed Abdelaziz al-Rajhi Foundation, the Rowwad Translation Center now curates material on QuranEnc.Com in over sixty languages (which includes around a hundred complete translations of the Quran), many of which have been 'corrected'. The 'corrections' implemented by the Rowwad Translation Center mostly relate to Salafi theological issues such as their stance on God's divine attributes. As of the beginning of 2023, this emerging network has produced five more or less 'new' translations in just three years: into Fulani, English, Bosnian, Tamil, and Serbian. The last of these is obviously based on their Bosnian translation, while the Bosnian translation itself looks somewhat like an edited version of the Besim Korkut translation (also published by the KFGQPC). It is not entirely clear whether these have already been distributed in printed form, but the digital versions contain King Fahd National Library cataloguing numbers, ISBNs, and a publishing

4 Muḥammad al-ʿUthaymīn, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, 36 vols (Qasim: Muʿassasat Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-ʿUthaymīn al-Khayriyya, 1436/2014), xxxvi, p. 117.

date, so some copies at least must exist in print as well. Their format is very similar to the translations printed by KFGQPC—a short formal introduction followed by a translation with parallel Arabic text in verse-by-verse style.⁵ What is noteworthy about these works is that they make no mention of the names of any translators or editors at all, listing just the name of the Rowwad Translation Center.

Innovative in the production of both printed and digital versions, Saudi Arabia continues to demonstrate more support for and promotion of Qur'an translations, both at official and private levels, than any other country. Huge investment in this field in the 1960s and 1970s led to the growth of a flourishing Qur'an translation industry, and it is hard to believe that its supremacy will be challenged by any other state or institution in the near future. Whether the works themselves are accepted or criticised, popularised or neglected, Qur'an translations published in Saudi Arabia or with Saudi support abroad now undoubtedly constitute the biggest contribution to the contemporary Muslim understanding of the sacred text of Islam at a global level.

5 See *Plemeniti Kur'an Prijevod značenja na bosanski jezik* (Riyadh: Jama'at al-Da'wa wa-l-Irshād al-Ta'wiyya al-Jāliyyāt bi-l-Rabwa, 1444/2022).

