

The Qur'an After Babel: Translating and Printing the Qur'an in Late Ottoman and Modern

Turkey

by

M. Brett Wilson

Department of Religion  
Duke University

Date:-----

Approved:

-----  
Dr. Bruce Lawrence, Supervisor

-----  
Dr. Carl Ernst

-----  
Dr. Erdağ Göknaç

-----  
Dr. Charles Kurzman

-----  
Dr. Ebrahim Moosa

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
Religion in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2009

ABSTRACT

The Qur'an After Babel: Translating and Printing the Qur'an in Late Ottoman and Modern

Turkey

by

Michael Brett Wilson

Department of Religion  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Bruce Lawrence, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Carl Ernst

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Erdağ Gökner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Charles Kurzman

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Ebrahim Moosa

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Ph.D. in the Department of  
Religion in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2009

Copyright by  
Michael Brett Wilson  
2009

## Abstract

This dissertation examines the translation and printing of the Qur'an in the late Ottoman Empire and the early years of the Republic of Turkey (1820-1938). As most Islamic scholars deem the Qur'an inimitable divine speech, the idea of translating the Qur'an has been surrounded with concern since the first centuries of Islam; printing aroused fears about ritual purity and threatened the traditional trade of the scribes. This study examines how Turkish Muslims challenged these concerns and asserted the necessity to print and translate the Qur'an in order to make the text more accessible.

With the spread of the printing press and literacy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Qur'an translations have become increasingly important as means of transmitting the meaning of the text to expanding audiences. I investigate the rise of Qur'an translation through a historical survey of Ottoman and Turkish language translations and an examination of the debates surrounding them waged in periodicals, government archives, and monographs. While Turkish translations have often been construed as a product of nationalism, I argue that the rise of translation began with a renewed emphasis on the Qur'anic theme of intelligibility bolstered by the availability of printed books, the spread of state schools, and increased knowledge of European history and intellectual currents. Turkish nationalists later adopted and advocated the issue, reconstruing the "Turkish Qur'an" as a nationalist symbol.

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the meaning of Qur'an translation itself has changed and incorporated a variety of new concerns.

Asserting translation of the Qur'an in the late Ottoman Empire became synecdoche for a new vision of Muslim authority and modernity that reduced the role of the ulama and created space for interpretive plurality on an unprecedented scale. Meanwhile, some Turkish intellectuals came to appreciate the symbolic value of Turkish renderings for the assertion of national identity in the Islamic sphere. While the notion of translation as replacement has withered, in practice, translations have come to play a robust role in Turkish Muslim life as supplement and counterpoint to the Qur'anic text.

# Dedication

*For Cristina*

## Contents

Abstract .....	iv
A Note on Transliteration and Translation.....	ix
Abbreviations .....	x
Acknowledgements .....	xi
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Printing the Qur'an in the Late Ottoman Empire.....	27
2.1 Muslims and Print .....	29
2.2 Printing in the Ottoman Empire .....	32
2.3 Exposing the "Muhammadan Error": Printing the Qur'an in Europe .....	38
2.3.1 Orthographic Authenticity .....	41
2.4 Towards an Istanbul Edition of the Qur'an.....	47
2.5 Foreign Printed Qur'ans .....	54
2.6 Propagating the Word: Thwarting Print-Capitalism .....	71
3. The Rise of Turkish Commentaries on the Qur'an (1842-1908) .....	80
3.1 The Qur'an in the Age of Translation .....	83
3.1.1 Translating Qur'anic Commentaries .....	85
3.2 Rise of the Commoners: Qur'anic commentary for the public.....	97
3.3 Beyond Commentary: The (Re)Opening and Limits of the Translation Debate	109
4. Comprehension and Unity (1908-1922) .....	119
4.1 Unity via Arabic .....	120
4.2 Missionaries and Conspiracy .....	131

4.3 Revolutionary Comprehension .....	135
4.3.1. Incorruptible Meaning: Musa Carullah Bigiyev.....	146
5. Translation and Nation .....	168
5.1 The First Translations of the New Republic .....	170
5.2 The State-Sponsored Translation Project .....	195
Conclusion.....	207
Bibliography .....	215
Biography.....	226



## A Note on Transliteration and Translation

For Arabic terms, I have followed the transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Therefore, only technical terms and Qur'anic passages are fully transliterated. For Turkish, I use modern Turkish orthography for both Ottoman and modern Turkish passages in order to ensure consistency. For Turkish language works with Arabic titles, I have used the Turkish transliterations as found in the catalogue of the Islamic Studies Research Center Library (ÍSAM).

All translations of Turkish and Arabic sources are my own unless otherwise noted.

## Abbreviations

BOA = Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (The Ottoman Archive of the Prime Ministry - Istanbul)

EI = Encyclopedia of Islam, Online Edition, (Brill Online: 2009).

EQ = McAuliffe, Jane Dammen. *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*. 6 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006.

KI = *The Koran Interpreted*. Translated by A. J. Arberry. London: Allen & Unwin; New York, Macmillan, 1955.

## Acknowledgements

I have accrued many debts and the list of my lenders is long. Thanks to Cristina, my better half, for continual support, astute criticism, and a generous ear. She not only accompanied me through the highs and lows of graduate school life but also read my work and provided invaluable feedback. *Muṭumesc*. Few graduate students have the good fortune to work with an advisor whose encouragement, humor, and magnanimity rival his intellect, whereas the *dawla* of fortune has given me not one, but a team of such mentors. Bruce Lawrence has been pivotal to my scholarly formation as well as to this project. My gratitude to him is immense for his unfailing enthusiasm, critical insight and robust belief in my potential. His appreciation for the Qur'an and interest in its translation have rejuvenated this project. I want to thank Ebrahim Moosa for his exacting standards, generosity with his time, energetic support, and good humor to match. Erdağ Gökner's nuanced understanding of Turkish literature and history has been invaluable, and translating a late Ottoman novel under his guidance was a pleasure. The UNC Chapel Hill contingent has been no less generous. Carl Ernst's interest in Qur'anic scholarship has been influential and reading Arabic texts with him was a rare treat. Thanks to Charles Kurzman for practical advice, brainstorming sessions, and consistent good company.

Outside the committee, Anne Blackburn has been a stalwart supporter since my undergraduate days. I am very grateful for her efforts. Not only did she convince me to

pursue graduate work, but she also provided detailed notes and lucid criticism on several chapters as well as moral support. Ken Perkins was instrumental in stoking my interest in the Middle East and has been great advisor and friend. Kevin Reinhart has been a wonderful conversation partner for all things Islamica, but mostly Turcica, over the years. Ahmet Karamustafa has provided both encouragement and inspiration. Irvin Cemil Schick offered invaluable advice on Ottoman print history and calligraphy as did Malissa Taylor. Both Amit Bein and Susan Gunasti read and commented closely on a preliminary version of Chapter 5.

I would also like to thank the staffs of the American Research Center in Turkey (ARIT), the Islamic Studies Research Center (ISAM), the Prime Ministry's Ottoman Archive (BOA), Süleymaniye Library, the Turkish Parliamentary Library, and Atatürk Library for their assistance during fieldwork. Institute of Turkish Studies (ITS) and the Duke University Center for International Studies (DUCIS) helped make this dissertation possible with research support. Behind the scenes, Gay Trotter, Nancy Robbins, and Nisa Moosa also deserve thanks for making things run smoothly.

Last, but certainly not least, thanks to my mother Betty Wilson and father, Rev. Michael Wilson, for all the sacrifices that parents make.

## 1. Introduction

Excellence with regard to poetry is limited to the Arabs and those who speak the Arabic language. Poetry cannot be translated and does not render itself to transmission. And whenever it is converted into another language its concinnity [linguistic structure] (nazm) is broken, its meter is rendered defunct, its beauty evaporates and that something that inspires wonder and admiration simply absents itself.<sup>1</sup>

Al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-Hayawan*

We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his people, that he might make all clear to them<sup>2</sup>

Qur'an 14:4

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!  
What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title.

Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*,  
William Shakespeare

---

<sup>1</sup> Sherman Jackson, "Al-Jahiz on Translation," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 4, no. Spring (1984): 101.

<sup>2</sup> *KI*

The intellectual history of translation reads as a tragedy. For millenia, authors and consumers of translations from diverse cultural backgrounds have expressed their misgivings about the fundamental loss experienced when moving between languages. “From the perception of unending inadequacy stems a particular sadness. It haunts the history and theory of translation...There is a special miseria of translation, a melancholy after Babel,” writes George Steiner.<sup>3</sup> As Dante beautifully expressed it in *Convivio*, “Nothing fully expressive, nothing which the Muses have touched can be carried over into another tongue without losing its savor and harmony.”<sup>4</sup> If translation history is framed as tragedy, the act on the Qur’an might constitute its nadir, the point at which anxiety and skepticism over the possibility of transfer and adequate representation reach their highest pitch. With few exceptions, Muslim scholars opine that true translation of the Qur’an is impossible, due to its otherworldly eloquence and/or the idea that the Qur’an is an Arabic text, by definition. Endowed with inimitable style and a “surfeit of meaning” to match, the Qur’an is deemed the embodiment of divine speech in Muslim thought, the pinnacle of eloquence, the upper limit of linguistic majesty and possibility.<sup>5</sup> A priori, any attempt at reproducing it in another language will inevitably be inferior, human rather than divine, composed rather than revealed. In this vein, translation is tragic because it portends to render heavenly speech mundane.

---

<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 283.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce B. Lawrence, "Approximating Saj' in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of Sura 93 (Al-Ḍuḥā) and the *Basmala*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005): 65.

The first native English-speaking Muslim to translate the Qur'an, Marmaduke

Pickthall writes:

The Koran cannot be translated. That is the belief of old-fashioned Sheykh's and the view of the present writer. The Book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the Glorious Koran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Koran -- and peradventure something of the charm -- in English. It can never take the place of the Koran in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so.<sup>6</sup>

What is the origin and nature of this skepticism? As in most prophetic biographies, Muhammad's contemporaries disputed his claim to speak on behalf of the divine.

Skeptics accused him of being a madman, of composing poetry, and taking his material from foreigners;<sup>7</sup> detractors demanded that he perform a miracle in order to prove the authenticity of his prophecy. The Qur'anic text responds that its own miraculous eloquence, otherworldly imagery, and sonic beauty constitute proof of divine origin.

Verse 17:88 states that even if humankind and the spirit world were to collaborate, they could not produce anything to rival its grandeur. As linguistic miracle, an instantiation of God's speech wrought in the Arabic language, the quality of language is held forth as evidence of authenticity and divine authorship. To translate, to tamper with the language runs the risk of undermining the very miracle of the text. Muslim thought has, therefore, generally deemed the attempt to translate or "rival" divine language as doomed to failure.

---

<sup>6</sup> Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: Dorset, 1985), vii.

<sup>7</sup> Q 16:103, 41:44

A second factor that challenges translation concerns the self-conscious Arabicity of the text. Distinctively, the Qur'an speaks about itself repeatedly as an "Arab(ic) recitation." Unlike the Hebrew Bible or the Greek New Testament, the Qur'an is markedly self-conscious about its own language of communication, affirming its Arabicity on numerous occasions.

*We revealed it as an Arabic recitation (qur'ān) so that you might understand.* 12:2

*We have revealed it as an Arabic judgment.* 13:37

*Even so We have sent it down as an Arabic Koran, and We have turned about in it something of threats, that haply they may be godfearing, or it may arouse in them remembrance.*<sup>8</sup> 20:113

It contrasts itself with non-Arab revelations, like the Torah or the New Testament, which required translation.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest recorded discussions on translating the Qur'an stemmed from the practical question of how non-Arab converts should perform their obligatory daily prayers (*salat*). Muslims are required to pray five times a day and those prayers involve the recitation of the Qur'an. How were new converts to perform these prayers if they could not pronounce Arabic correctly and could not understand what they were saying? Would it be preferable to say them in Arabic, but mispronounce the words or more beneficial to express the meaning in a language which one could properly pronounce as well as understand? An important legal thinker of Persian background, "Abu Hanifa" Nu'man b. Thabit (d. 767) granted permission to Persian speakers to perform their obligatory daily prayers in Persian, regardless of whether they knew

---

<sup>8</sup> KI

<sup>9</sup> Q 41:44



Arabic. Abu Hanifa reasoned that the text called the Qur'an consisted fundamentally of the meaning contained within language. He found support for this view in Qur'anic passages that portray the Qur'an as a message that had been communicated via prophets since time immemorial. For instance, Q 26:196:

*Truly it is in the Scriptures of the ancients. Was it not a sign for them, that it is known to the learned of the Children of Israel? If We had sent it down on a non-Arab and he had recited it to them, they would not have believed in it.*<sup>10</sup>

The message to the Jews, Abu Hanifa continued, was not an Arabic text. Therefore, the linguistic form of the message was incidental, not essential. He wrote:

The Qur'an is the eternal uncreated speech of God, while languages are all temporal and created. We can thus infer that it is unlawful to regard the Qur'an as being the Qur'an in any one particular tongue.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, he argued that the inimitable or miraculous aspect of the text inhered in its meaning, not exclusively in the Arabic form. Abu Hanifa did not permit the recitation of an interpretation of the Qur'an because it does not convey the precise meaning. He also stipulated that one can only recite a translation known to be accurate.<sup>12</sup> Abu Hanifa's opinion asserts both the translatability of the Qur'an as well as the legality of ritual prayer in non-Arabic languages. Though this opinion is one of the first meditations on Qur'an translation in the history of Muslim thought, in retrospect it appears unconventional in its approach to defining the Qur'an and unique in permitting translations as well as their ritual use. The bulk of subsequent legal thought

---

<sup>10</sup> *KI* (modified).

<sup>11</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, "Translating the Meanings of the Qur'an: Traditional Opinions and Modern Debates," *Afkar/Inquiry* 3, no. 5 (1986): 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

moved in the opposite direction, defining the Qur'an as intrinsically Arabic, prohibiting translation, and limiting obligatory prayer to Arabic.

Abu Hanifa's chief disciples Muhammad al-Shaybani and Muhammad Abu Yusuf modified his opinion, allowing non-Arabs to say their prayers in Persian *only if* they were incapable of reciting the *Fatiha* accurately. This conditional permission would expire once the person had learned to recite properly in Arabic. Unlike their teacher, they defined the Qur'an as both meaning as well as Arabic linguistic form.<sup>13</sup>

Other legal schools displayed less flexibility than the early Hanafis and insisted on Arabicity as an essential component of the Qur'an. The prevalent view held Arabic as a sacred language characterized by what Benedict Anderson calls the "non-arbitrariness of the sign," the notion that a particular language not only conveyed a divine message, but also embodied it.<sup>14</sup> Broadly speaking, Muslim thought came to regard Arabic as a "truth language" and the Arabic arrangement of the Quranic as intrinsic, not incidental, to revelation.<sup>15</sup> Malik b. Anas, the eponym of the Maliki School thought it was unacceptable to even make an oath using God's name in another language, much less translate the Qur'an or recite a translation in prayer. Summarizing the Maliki position, Abu Bakr Muhammad b. al-'Arabi argued that verse 41:44 indicates that no language other than Arabic can produce elucidation (*bayān*) or inimitability (*'ijāz*), and challenges Abu Hanifa's claim that the Qur'an can be translated into

---

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Reinhart, "Jurisprudence," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippen (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 437.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed. (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Persian.<sup>16</sup> Al-Shafi'i, eponym of the Shafi'i school, opined that it was not lawful to recite the Qur'an in Persian, even if a Muslim were ignorant of Arabic or illiterate; such a Muslim must perform the prayers without recitation since anything non-Arabic is, by definition, not the Qur'an. Al-Shafi'i ruled that a translation is mere human speech and invalidates prayer if recited. In similar fashion, the Hanbali School held that the Qur'an is Arabic by definition and viewed prayer in any other language as invalid. Hanbali jurist Muwaffaq al-Din b. Qudama argued that any rendering of the Qur'an could only be regarded as an interpretation or explanation of the text (*tafsir*).<sup>17</sup> Hanbali scholar Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Qudama al-Maqdisi (d. 682/1283) regarded his thirteenth century contemporaries that supported translation as apostates who attempted to lead Muslims astray. He lamented that

some apostatizing non-Arabs in our time began to call for the translation of the Qur'an and other devotions of the prayers, and for the use of such translations in their daily worship. Their true aim is, however, to use this as a means of facilitating apostasy for the rest of their people, and 'the casting of the Qur'an which was sent down from God behind their backs (2:101)'.<sup>18</sup>

The association between deviance and translation would prove to be an enduring theme.

A text intrinsically defined by its original language and deemed impossible to imitate is a text that cannot, in a formal sense, cross-linguistic boundaries. Therefore, in Muslim legal discourse, a "Qur'an translation" came to be something of an oxymoron; asserting the possibility of translation became tantamount to challenging

---

<sup>16</sup> Ayoub, "Translating," 35.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

its unique status as matchless, Arabic divine speech. Qur'anic uniqueness presents the tradition with a mixed blessing. On one hand, the community feels itself to be in possession of a divine linguistic production, God's direct address to humanity, which is a unique treasure. On the other hand, the inability to truly convey it across linguistic boundaries presents a special melancholia that pervades that history of attempts to render and explain the text in other tongues. The tone of translators is apologetic, defeated, inept, while the critics most often express disappointment and, at times, outrage and contempt.

In nearly unanimous fashion, Muslim legal traditions agree upon the formal untranslatability of the Qur'an. However, concepts of translation are not universal; languages, cultures, and literary traditions exhibit substantial diversity in their understandings of what it means to translate and what relationship the translated text has with the original. How do ulama discourses invoke the concept? What precisely do they mean when they assert that the Qur'an cannot be translated?

While legal opinion rejects one understanding of translation, other forms of re-writing the text or "bringing it to understanding" remain licit.<sup>19</sup> Medieval and modern debates over Qur'an "translation" are debates about *tarjuma* (Tr. *tercüme*). *Tarjuma* almost certainly derives from the Hebrew/Aramaic word, *targum*. In Hebrew, *targum* means translation, and theoretically can apply to any type of translation. In rabbinical literature, *targum* is used exclusively to refer to the Aramaic Biblical text, including the

---

<sup>19</sup> Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, (Northwestern University Press, Evanston: 1969), 13.

Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible as well as the original Aramaic portions, including individual Aramaic words in the Hebrew passages (e.g., Gen 31.47; cf. Shab. 115a; Yad. 4:5). *The Targum* refers to the “Aramaic translation par excellence,” the Targum of Onkelos.<sup>20</sup> It was regarded with great esteem and came to hold an important place in Jewish ritual. Jews were exhorted to read the weekly portion of scripture privately “twice in the original and once in the Targum” (Ber. 8a). This practice of first reading the Hebrew and then the Aramaic translation is still maintained in many orthodox circles.<sup>21</sup> *Tarjuma* is also used in Islamic literature to refer to the biography of a Sufi, saint or scholar.

In Qur’an translation literature, *tarjuma* bears connotations of interchangeability, much like the Latin term, *translatare*. In other words, *tarjuma* suggests the existence of a *tertium comparationis* a realm of pure meaning outside of language in which meaning ideally resides.<sup>22</sup> Given the linguistic specificity of the Qur’an, the interchangeability suggested by *tarjuma* implied that another text could stand in place of the Arabic Qur’an, a suggestion which most scholars strongly condemned. *Tarjuma*, as an interchangeable text, is the understanding of “translation” that Muslim scholars reject for the Qur’an. They deem *tarjuma* of the Qur’an impossible and forbid regarding any rendering of the Qur’an as *tarjuma*.

---

<sup>20</sup> "Targum," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), [http://proxy.lib.duke.edu:6957/ps/start.do?p=GURL&u=duke\\_perkins](http://proxy.lib.duke.edu:6957/ps/start.do?p=GURL&u=duke_perkins) (accessed 13 July 2009).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, *Translation, History, and Culture* (London ; New York: Pinter Publishers, 1990), 3.

Another term, *tafsīr*, impinges crucially on the notion of translation in Arabic and in Islamic discourse. The most basic, pre-technical meaning of *tafsir* is to make plain what is concealed or to open up what is closed. The word occurs as a *hapax legomenon* in Qur'an 25:33, in a verse that seems to respond to the criticism of the unbelievers that the Qur'an is revealed piecemeal rather than all at once: "They do not bring to you any similitude, but what we bring to you [is] the truth, and better in exposition (*wa-aḥsana tafsīran*)."<sup>23</sup> The passage suggests that God has provided an *explanation* for the piecemeal revelatory process or, perhaps, that opposition to Muhammad "will be countered with divine assistance."<sup>24</sup>

As a genre, the word *tafsir* is usually translated as commentary, interpretation or exegesis. Jews and Christians writing in Arabic use *tafsir* to refer to translations as well as commentaries on the Bible.<sup>25</sup> In Islamic literature, it suggests a range of explanations of and expansions on the Qur'anic text. Some texts with the name *tafsir* include multiple types of writing: etymology, commentary on the text, expanding at length on individual words, citing relevant narrative material, and, in other places, translating or paraphrasing.

Similar to the relationship between *translation* and *interpretation*, the boundary between *tafsir* and *tarjuma* is sometimes clear, other times blurred. The fourteenth

---

<sup>23</sup> Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Classical and Medieval," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Brill, 2009), <[http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=q3\\_COM-00058](http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=q3_COM-00058)> (accessed 29 July 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Rippin, "Tafsīr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs. (Brill Online 2008), <[http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam\\_SIM-7294](http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-7294)>.

century dictionary *Lisan al-‘Arab* defines *tarjuman* (translator/interpreter) as “*mufassir al-lisan.*” that is, one who performs *tafsir* on language. A *tarjuman* is simultaneously a *mufassir*; the activities, if not the genres, of *tarjuma* and *tafsir* are part and parcel of one another and difficult to distinguish. During the Abbasid Empire, Ibn Abbas the “heros eponymus” of *tafsir* was referred to as the *tarjuman al-Qur’an*.<sup>26</sup> The proximity of *tafsir* and *tarjuma* in Arabic reflects the contemporary truism that *every translation is an interpretation.*

In *Bahr al-Muhit fi Usul al-Fiqh*, the Shafi’i jurist al-Zarkashi (d. 794/1392) reports a conversation in which a jurist tells his students that translating (*tarjuma*) the Qur’an is forbidden. A student then asks him if that means that no one is permitted to *tafsir* the Qur’an. This astute question points out the heart of the matter: the distinction between *tafsir* and *tarjuma* is often woolly. The teacher responds by attempting to distinguish between the two:

It is permissible to *tafsir* one language with another, because *tafsir* consists of what stands in the essence from the meaning for what is necessary and obligatory. *Tarjuma* is the exchanging of a word by another word to replace it in what is understood of the meaning for the respective hearer of those words. Whereas *tarjuma* transfers the understanding of the hearer in that respect, *tafsir* notifies the hearer of what the *mutarjim* understood, and this is a good distinction.<sup>27</sup>

The opacity of this response speaks directly to the problem. Digging through the verbiage, we glean that *tarjuma* replaces, whereas *tafsir* informs the hearer what the interpreter understands rather than replacing the original text. The distinction between replacement and explanatory supplement is crucial. For renderings of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Gilliot, “Exegesis,” 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Muhammad b. Bahadur Zarkashi, *Bahr al-Muhit fi Usul al-Fiqh* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 2000), 361.

Qur'an Muslim scholars almost unanimously rejected the former and embraced the latter.

As an activity, several important theorists of hermeutics and translation contend that the process involved in translation is the same process involved in all forms of understanding and interpretation.<sup>28</sup> Both *tarjuma* and *tafsir* are modes of interpretation, ways of bringing the Qur'an to understanding. However, the development of Qur'anic interpretation under the name *tafsir* has obscured the proximity of these interpretive activities. Mention of *tafsir* immediately conjures up the *genre*; among students of Islamic literature, *tafsir* is synonymous with al-Tabari, al-Razi, and Sayyid Qutb, famous works of Qur'anic commentary. *Tafsir* became the domain of the ulama, the Islamic scholars, and only those within their ranks could delve into this genre. Not only was *tafsir* limited to the ulama, but it was restricted to those who possessed certain skills and learning in various field. Over time the prerequisites for composing *tafsir* became more and more numerous. It paralleled the increasingly unattainable requirements for conducting *ijtihad*, independent legal reasoning. *Tafsir* became a validated genre of literature on the Qur'an in which a limited circle of scholars could participate.

What about the other mode of interpretation – *tarjuma*? Unlike its sibling *tafsir*, *tarjuma* did not evolve into a distinct genre of Muslim literature. Rather it remained a means to an end, a tool for disseminating works across linguistic boundaries. *Tarjuma*

---

<sup>28</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, xii. Hans-Georg Gadamer expresses a similar view in *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).



retained its verbal, active sense, as well as its generic association with the act of replacement or substitution. In sum, two modes of “bringing to understanding” – *tafsir* and *tarjuma* – took very different trajectories: the former became a clearly delineated genre of Qur’anic exegesis, while *tarjuma* of the Qur’an became prohibited.

Though most scholars rejected *tarjuma* as a mode of representing the Qur’an, many practiced translation surreptitiously within the *tafsir* genre. For example, the oldest known translation of the Qur’an is a Persian language interlinear translation that accompanies a highly adapted translation of al-Tabari’s *tafsir* work *Jami’ al-Bayan*. The introduction states that Samanid ruler Abu Salih Mansur (I) b. Nuh (r. 961-967) commissioned the work and also requested a fatwa from the ulama of Transoxiana permitting the translation. The ulama responded that it is permissible to read and write *tafsir* for those who do not know Arabic.<sup>29</sup> The first official legitimization of a translation condones *tafsir* but says nothing about *tarjuma*. The formal prohibition of *tarjuma* remained in force as the actual process of translation took place under the guise of *tafsir*.

Despite the formal prohibitions in legal compendia on *tarjuma*, oral and written translations played an important role in the propagation of Islam. The social realities of Muslim ritual often departed dramatically from the letter of legal compendia. The ritual use of translations in Bukhara and the Volga is well attested, and, as Travis Zadeh argues, Abu Hanifa’s pro-translation fatwa probably granted *post facto* legitimacy to the

---

<sup>29</sup> Travis Zadeh, "Translation, Geography, and the Divine Word: Mediating Frontiers in Pre-Modern Islam" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2006), 480.

existing phenomena of Persian language ritual.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, some jurists, like Shafi'i scholar 'Imad al-Din Shahfur b. Tahir b. Muhammad al-Isfara'ini (d. 471/1078-79) broke ranks and argued that *tarjuma* was a necessity and obligation for propagating and teaching Islam among non-Arabs.<sup>31</sup> He wrote that the necessity of translation was clear given that "the Arabs and those who know Arabic are fewer in number than those who do not know [Arabic]."<sup>32</sup> Zadeh characterizes the situation in Transoxiana and Khurasan:

It is clear from Isfara'ini's statements and from other documentary evidence that well before the fifth/eleventh century non-Arabic speaking Muslims had fully integrated Persian as a vehicle for communicating scripture in the space of official religious discourse...the codicological evidence of Persian *tafsirs* alone underscores the fact that starting as early as the fourth/tenth century Persian translations indeed were produced and financed through official mediums, proliferating throughout Transoxiana and Khurasan.<sup>33</sup>

Scholars speculate that the first Eastern Turkic translations were composed as early as the eleventh century. These renderings in Central Asian Turkic languages were based upon interlinear Persian translations.<sup>34</sup> However, no manuscripts from that period have survived, existing copies date back only to the fourteenth century. These texts are either bilingual Arabic -Turkish or trilingual, Arabic - Persian - Turkish. Translations in Anatolian Turkish, the predecessor to Ottoman and modern Turkish, most likely began to appear in the fourteenth century following the break-up of the

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 477-478. On Bukharan translations, see Ashirbek Muminov, "Disputes in Bukhara on the Persian Translation of the Qur'an," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* LIX (2006): 301-308.

<sup>31</sup> Zadeh, 518-521.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>34</sup> Zeki Velidi Togan, "The Earliest Translation of the Qur'an into Turkish," *Islam Tetkikleri Enstitüsü Dergisi* 4 (1964): 3.

Anatolian Seljuk state into territories ruled by Turkish beys.<sup>35</sup> Most works from this period are not interlinear word-for-word renderings, but rather “explanatory translations” (*tefsirli tercümeler*) that paraphrase and explain complete verses or chapters.<sup>36</sup> Interlinear translations debuted in the fourteenth or early fifteenth century, the oldest known copy bearing the date of 827/1424. Such works often provide word-for-word Turkish equivalents underneath Arabic terms, forming an interlinear glossary for understanding the Arabic. In many examples, this technique produces syntax that is awkward for Turkish sentence structure as the order of the Arabic text is followed.<sup>37</sup>

Interlinear, manuscript Qur’an translations neither attempted nor threatened to replace the Arabic Qur’anic text as they are clearly supplementary texts. The translation is subordinated graphically on the page, written or scribbled in smaller script underneath the well-calligraphed Arabic original. Such a format stands in sharp contrast to modern bilingual translations in parallel columns that suggest equivalence in meaning and prestige. The earliest Turkic and Turkish translations do not rhyme, nor are they written in meter as some early Persian translations. This suggests that they did not function as texts to be recited ritually or in homilies as Travis Zadeh has indicated for Persian translations.<sup>38</sup> Also unlike the Persianate sphere, reports of Turkish language prayer and the use of translations in ritual are notably lacking in historical accounts from the Ottoman period. While the evidence for constructing a

---

<sup>35</sup> Ahmet Topaloğlu; Mehmet bin Hamza, *XV. Yüzyıl Başlarında Yapılmış Satır-Arası Kur'an Tercümesi* (Istanbul: Devlet Kitapları, 1976), xvii.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Zadeh, “Translation,” 522.

social history of how such texts were used is fragmentary, interlinear translations in Anatolia appear to have played a minor role in the teaching and interpretation of the Qur'an in comparison with conventional *tafsir* works. Over one hundred manuscripts exist today, but this is a small quantity in comparison with *tafsir* works, and their glossary-like arrangement suggests that literate elites used them to aid their reading of the Arabic text. In a predominantly illiterate society, the commoners learned about the meaning of the Qur'an through oral teaching and narrative, while the ulama and literate few primarily engaged Arabic, Persian, and Turkish language commentary works. Written translations appear to have comprised a marginal literature accessible to and used by a small minority.

Within the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish republic, a critical mass of Ottoman/Turkish intellectuals came to view direct engagement and comprehension of the Qur'an as a necessity. Though such a view is not without precedent in Islamic discourse, it came to hold new power in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bolstered by the spread of literacy via state schools, the emergence of nationalism, efforts at constitutional government, print technology as well as increased knowledge of European history and intellectual currents. In conjunction, these factors made possible the view that disseminating the Qur'an via print and in the language of the people was necessary and even natural. It also resulted in a critical approach to the ulama, their authority as mediators of Islamic knowledge, and the dominance of Arabic language in the religious sphere. For such thinkers, the tragedy of translation was not

the potential loss in the act, but rather, the fact that translations had been prohibited. As tragedy “eventuates in . . . a revelation of the forces opposing man,” they felt the absence of translations had contributed to the backward state of Islamdom and fostered the multipronged difficulties faced by Muslim societies from the eighteenth century onward, including poverty, illiteracy, as well as political and military weakness.<sup>39</sup> Composing Turkish commentaries, printing and, ultimately, translating the Qur’an altered the media by which Turkish Muslims engaged the text. Translation, in the guise of both *tafsir* and *tarjuma*, gained newfound legitimacy in the early years of the Turkish republic and thereafter became a prevalent means of understanding the text.

Over the course of the twentieth century, translation has become a key vehicle for interpreting and communicating the Qur’an in an increasingly impersonal milieu of religious education in which printed texts replace oral teaching and *tarjuma* overwhelms classical *tafsir*. Translation served as a more direct explanatory genre for the literate Turkish citizen who lacked madrasa education and came to embrace a more democratic notion of Islamic knowledge as accessible to every citizen rather than the preserve a religious elite. Translation has come to be a pervasive mode of interpretive literature on the Qur’an in the modern Turkey, having transformed from a prohibited genre, to normative Islamic literature.

---

<sup>39</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 10.

Competing notions of Qur'an translation, informed by fundamentally different conceptions of language and politics of identity, persist in modern Turkey. However, the widespread use of translations under various titles has established a de facto policy of *translation by any other name*. In practice, the view of *translation as replacement* propounded by the ulama has largely transmuted to that of *translation as necessary supplement* to the Qur'an. German-Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin wrote that a translation should give "voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony."<sup>40</sup> In a similar vein, reading Turkish translations forms a counterpoint to the recitation of the Arabic Qur'an.<sup>41</sup> Whereas the latter remains the sole basis of ritual and oral recitation, the former complements the ritual supremacy of Arabic as a text for reading and explaining.

While modernization of state and society forms the backdrop to Qur'anic accessibility, printing and translating the Qur'an in late Ottoman Turkey did not follow technological and cultural developments step by step. Rather, they are temporally staggered; they come "late" in comparison with neighboring Muslim polities. For example, Ottoman Muslims opened a printing press in 1727 but did not print the Qur'an until the 1870s, whereas Iranian presses printed Arabic *mushafs* in the 1820s. While the translation of Western literature, Muslim modernism, and the inklings of linguistic nationalism appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, Ottoman Muslims did not publish

---

<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 79,

<sup>41</sup> Ebrahim Moosa, "Contrapuntal Readings in Muslim Thought: Translations and Transitions." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006): 107-118.

*tarjuma* of the Qur'an until 1908. Meanwhile, Indian Muslims published translations in the middle of the nineteenth century. This illustrates the point that the history of print and translation in Ottoman and modern Turkey is not simply a history of technical modernization or a reflection of broader trends in Muslim polities. The late adoption of Qur'an printing and translating points to a particular historical trajectory and also to the fact that printing and translating the Qur'an was a particularly sensitive matter in Istanbul, the abode of the Caliphate as well as the Shaykh al-Islam. Both these activities were subject to extensive contestation resulting in their "delay" relative to neighboring Muslim polities.

Translating the Qur'an posed a clear challenge to the authority of the ulama to act as the official interpreters of the Qur'an and the status of Arabic as the dominant language of Islam within Turkey. Conceptually the tension/confusion between *tafsir* and *tarjuma*, interpretation and translation constituted the space of opportunity for the assertion of new authorities and renderings of the Qur'an into Turkish. Since *tarjuma* as an activity and *tarjuma* as a genre did not figure among the Islamic sciences, they were not, a priori, the domain of the ulama. *Tafsir*, on the other hand, necessitated not only madrasa credentials, but also mastery of certain skills and genres of Islamic literature. The assertion of *tarjuma* was metonymic for a new vision of Islamic authority, demanding greater access to Qur'anic knowledge as well as the right of non-ulama to speak about Islamic matters; it involved a revival of the opinion of Abu Hanifa that translation was possible, permissible, and beneficial for non-Arabic speaking Muslims.

In response, most late Ottoman and early republican ulama disapproved of *tarjuma* and strove to define translations of the Qur'an as *tafsir*. This was an attempt to prevent non-ulama from engaging in translation and to restrict interpretive authority. The ulama continued to disavow translation and characterized their translations as "synopsis of the meanings" (*meal*), *tafsir* or "translation of the meanings" (*tercüme maani-i Kur'an*). However, the erosion of ulama power in modern Turkey enabled diverse writers outside the professional religious class to engage in translation of the Qur'an, and many of these translators embraced *tarjuma* (Tr. *tercüme*) as well as the notion that there could be an instantiation of the Qur'an in the Turkish language. This marked a sea change in the conception of the Qur'an as meaning over form, the nature of Muslim authority, and the place of Turkish language in Islamic pedagogy and personal study. Moreover, written Turkish language underwent dramatic changes over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, shifting from the florid Ottoman style replete with Arabic and Persian vocabulary and grammatical elements to a simpler Turkish style, closer to spoken language and shorn of rhetorical excess. In 1928, the Turkish state replaced the Perso-Arabic script with the Latin alphabet and, in the nineteen thirties, the government sponsored the creation of new words based upon Turkish roots and the purging of Arabic and Persian terminology.

Nevertheless, even during the first years of the Turkish republic, translations remained thoroughly constrained to the commentary tradition. Steiner writes that, "each age translates anew, that interpretation, except in the first momentary instance, is always reinterpretation, both of the original and of the intervening body of



commentary.”<sup>42</sup> Turkish translators encountered an immense “intervening body of commentary” that constrained the range of licit translations they could make. Highly concerned for “accuracy,” devout intellectuals and the ulama expected translations of the Qur’an to be informed by and agree with *tafsir*. To varying degrees, translators practiced *tarjuma* through *tafsir* consulting or claiming to consult works of Qur’anic commentary to guarantee the “correctness” of their translations. Unlike translators of Western literature, for instance, Qur’an translators presented their work to an audience that was intimately acquainted with the text and felt it knew what the translation ought to contain. Contrary to what might be supposed, the cultural and linguistic proximity of the Qur’an substantially augmented the difficulty of their task. Whereas in the European context, “The Western Arabist or translator of primitive song travels light,” the Turkish Qur’an translator carried the burden of immense cultural baggage.<sup>43</sup> Lawrence Venuti describes translation as “fundamentally ethnocentric” since “the very function of translating is assimilation, the inscription of a foreign text with domestic intelligibilities and interests.”<sup>44</sup> However in the case of Turkish Qur’an translations, the source text was already part of the culture, and, to a great extent, the Islamic exegetical tradition governed the process of assimilation. As Steiner posits, these interpreters actually *re-interpreted*, taking into account both the original text as well the voluminous

---

<sup>42</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, 262.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 11.

commentary tradition. As Chapter 5 illustrates, they worked within a context akin to a translation Panopticon, subject to intense scrutiny from critics.

Much has been made of the role of nationalism in the emergence of Turkish translations. A plethora of narratives about the Turkish reforms in the nineteen twenties and thirties present translations of the Qur'an as a consequence of nationalism, often portraying President Mustafa Kemal as the patron and instigator of these texts.<sup>45</sup> My contention is that the role of nationalism has been somewhat misconstrued. The prevalent understanding suffers from anachronism. Whereas most observers point to the nineteen twenties as the beginnings of translation due to Turkish nationalism in the early republic, the perceived need of and arguments for translation emerge from the intellectual milieu of the late Ottoman period, as far back as the reign of Mahmut II (r. 1808-1839) in which it is a stretch of the imagination to speak of Turkish nationalism. The initial impetus for Turkish commentaries and translations emerged from the conviction that the meaning of the Qur'an ought to be accessible to those unversed in Arabic (as explored in Chapter 2). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, this sentiment may have gained support from the nascent nationalist discourses in circulation, but, even if so, translations were never construed as a nationalist symbol prior to 1918, when Ziya Gökalp penned a poem casting the "Turkish Qur'an" as an essential text for the Turkish nation (Chapter 3). The necessity

---

<sup>45</sup> Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 487; Mahmut Esat Bozkurt, *Atatürk İhtilali* (Istanbul: Burhaneddin Matbaası, 1940), 313; Charles H. Sherrill, *A Year's Embassy to Mustafa Kemal* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 193–96.

to disseminate and understand the Qur'an's meaning, often affiliated with Muslim modernists and Ottoman literati, propelled the argument for Turkish language renderings in a manner that was instrumental rather than symbolic. Only with the rise of the Turkist (Türkçü) movement in the Second Constitutional Period (1908-1920) do we begin to witness the nationalist appropriation of Qur'an translation as a symbol of the imagined Turkish nation. Hence, nationalist discourse enters the conversation on the tail end, rather than at the beginning. This nationalist vision of Qur'an translation was seldom expressed prior to the republic and most likely held by a small contingent of Turkists. Nationalism was not the initial animus for translations of the Qur'an. However, the idea of making the Qur'an accessible "bringing it to the people" meshed seamlessly with the populist message of Turkish nationalism in the early years of the republic. The idea of a Turkish translation gained a new found symbolic capital as well as state support at the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.

Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the usage, prevalence and accessibility of the genre have undergone a sea change, transforming a marginal, suspect form of religious literature into a key medium for interpreting and communicating the Qur'an. Islamic groups study and promote their translation of choice. Bookshops of all varieties vend a diverse selection, newspapers give away copies as gifts for subscribers, and authors of diverse backgrounds continually compose new versions. Translations have attained not only popular usage, but also official sanction. The Directorate of Religious Affairs has published several versions and

recently commissioned a Kurdish-language edition.<sup>46</sup> The shift is all the more remarkable given that, not only modernists, but also traditionalists and conservative factions make use of, endorse, and compose translations that resonate with their understanding and practice of Islam.

Whereas Qur'an translation has been haunted by a sense of loss and liability, the crucial shift in modern Turkey is that many Muslims came to see translation as an opportunity rather than a liability; the benefits of broader dissemination, keener understanding, and, for some, the nationalistic symbolism of using the Turkish language came to outweigh the liabilities of semantic dissonance and rhetorical impoverishment. Though necessarily different from the original, the translated Qur'an "projects an echo, at times a loud echo, of the vibrant spiritual core of Islam."<sup>47</sup> Many Turkish Muslims came to embrace the capacity of a translation to be a "mirror which not only reflects but also generates light."<sup>48</sup> In the renowned essay, "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin remarks that "a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life."<sup>49</sup> Turkish discourse on and ongoing practice of Qur'an translation reflects a robust "afterlife" as well as a profound, if rarely fulfilled, desire for translation to articulate

---

<sup>46</sup> "Diyanet'ten Kürtçe Kuran Çalışması," *Yeni Şafak*, March 18, 2009, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/Gundem/?t=18.03.2009&i=175672>.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce B. Lawrence, *The Qur'an: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>48</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, 319.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 71.

the Qur'anic text and for divine speech to resonate in the Turkish language – for Logos to bellow forth without mediation.

The present dissertation traces the emergence of Qur'an translation from the first printed Ottoman Turkish commentaries on the Qur'an in the mid-nineteenth century through 1935, when the first state sponsored translation and commentary appeared in print in Latin characters. Chapter 2 deals exclusively with the history of printing the (Arabic) Qur'an in the late Ottoman Empire, and provides a detailed account of how the Ottomans came to print the Qur'an and the role that printed copies played in the broader shift toward Qur'anic accessibility. Chapter 3 examines printed Qur'anic "commentary-translations," an intermediate genre between conventional *tafsir* and independent *tarjuma* that became prevalent in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This chapter also queries the shifts in interpretive literature and audience occasioned by the rise of the printing press. Chapter 4 details how the debates on translation during the Second Constitutional Period reflected anxieties about the relationship between Arab and Muslim communities leading up to and during World War II. Additionally, it probes the association of translation with progress and illustrates the Turkist appropriation of Qur'an translation as a national symbol. Chapter 5 explores the controversial translations published during the first two years of the Republic of Turkey that incurred brutal criticism in the press. It weighs the nature of critiques and examines the state sponsored translation project that materialized in response.

In addition to the seminal work on translation *After Babel* by George Steiner, the title “The Qur’an After Babel,” invokes the Tower of Babel narrative contained in Genesis and alluded to in the Qur’an, the legend which explains the enigma of human linguistic diversity.<sup>50</sup> Drawing upon this symbol, I mean to frame the erection of Arabic as the ummatic language of Islam as another Babel-like edifice. Never completed, yet dominating the landscape, the hegemony of Arabic in the articulation of Qur’anic interpretation began to wane when the printing press, nationalism, Muslim modernism, and the political decline of the ulama eroded the tower’s foundations in the late Ottoman Empire and Turkey. New modes of knowing, novel means of communication, and reconfigurations of power sent deep fissures up the walls of the structure. Unlike the legendary ziggurat, the collapse of Arabic was not absolute. Its vestiges remain; its prestige looms. What follows traces the metamorphosis in the perception and use of Turkish as a medium of Qur’anic articulation over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

---

<sup>50</sup> Genesis 11:1-9; Q 28:38, 40:36-7

## 2. Printing the Qur'an in the Late Ottoman Empire

The craft of printing and publishing is worthy of being characterized as the mother of civilization. It is a high art, without equal, deserving to be called the most useful and highest of human inventions.<sup>51</sup>

Ahmet Cevdet Pasha

In conjunction with translation, printing constituted the major avenue by which accessibility to the Qur'an increased. Via print, copies of the Qur'an underwent a transformation in terms of production, cost, format, and distribution. The printing press dramatically expanded the availability of the Qur'an by increasing the number of copies and lowering their cost. It enabled the Ottoman state to produce and distribute physical copies of the text on an unprecedented scale as a means of both education and propaganda. Printed Qur'anic mushafs became a symbol of the Ottoman Caliphate's claim to administrative and Islamic authority, its power over the Qur'anic text, as well as the empire's ongoing modernization.

Ottoman Muslims in Istanbul began to use the printing press in the eighteenth century, establishing the first Muslim-run press in the world. However, Muslim printers in Istanbul did not print the Qur'an until the late nineteenth century, decades after their co-religionists in Russia, Iran, Egypt, and India. The state did not grant permission for printers to publish the Qur'an due to opposition from the calligraphers

---

<sup>51</sup> Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, *Cevdet Tarihi* (Istanbul: Matbaa'ı Amire, 1309/1891-2), 3: 78.

and certain segments of the ulama. Much scholarship and political discourse presents opposition to printing as a religious one. While this is partially true, it is necessary to unpack what “religious” opposition meant in this context because the adjective “religious” actually tells us very little about the nature of the resistance to this new technology in a predominately Muslim society. The Qur’an, the Hadith and the classical legal texts had nothing to say about print technology. As such, Muslims decided to accept or reject this technology, and others, based on what they perceived to be beneficial or harmful in their particular context; it was a matter of interpretation and divergent opinions on the matter arose. Multiple factors figure into such an evaluation, including the economic ramifications for calligraphers, the threat posed to existing authority, and pious concerns about the ritual purity of an unknown method of reproduction as well as concerns about accuracy and the potential of textual corruption. The decision to print or not to print the Qur’an in Istanbul incorporated all the aforementioned concerns.

The calligraphic Qur’an became a symbolic focal point of resistance to the sweeping and often frightening changes confronted by Ottoman Muslims in the nineteenth century, including the modernization of the state, the threat of colonization by European states, and the influx of European culture and technology. For the discontents of modernization, the manuscript Qur’an became synonymous with the preservation of Islam and Ottoman culture. Reformers, on the other hand, came to identify the printed Qur’an as a step toward the attainment of modern civilization in Ottoman lands. Politically, the printed Qur’an became linked with the centralization of



the Ottoman state and, under Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909), the state distributed printed copies far and wide to proclaim and reaffirm the authority of the Ottoman sultan as the Caliph of all Muslims.

## ***2.1 Muslims and Print***

The scholarship on the introduction of the printing press in the Ottoman Empire, and in the rest of the Muslim-majority world, has generally focused on the difficulties and resistance faced in attempts to establish printing presses. In particular, studies have pointed out the hesitancy of Muslims to print religious texts, the Qur'an first and foremost.<sup>52</sup> Many scholars assume that the reasons for Islamicate caution toward print technology stems from something intrinsic to Islam.<sup>53</sup> The majority of such observations are based not on primary research, but upon generalizations from isolated cases, the reports of foreign travelers, and, at times, speculation.

Francis Robinson's cogent essay "Islam and the Impact of Print in South Asia" is an important meditation on the subject. Yet despite the many excellent points this essay makes, Robinson fails to evade some of the pitfalls of extant literature on print in the Islamicate sphere. On the first Muslim-run printing press in the Islamicate world,

---

<sup>52</sup> Michael Albin, "Printing the Qur'an," *EQ*.

<sup>53</sup> "Islamicate" is a term developed by Marshall Hodgson to denote aspects of culture, politics, and institutions in predominately Muslim societies that may be informed by, but remain distinct from the religion of Islam *per se*. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Vol. I The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 57. On the use of the term for conceptualizing and teaching Islamic studies see, Bruce Lawrence, "Islamicate Civilization: The View from Asia," In *Teaching Islam (AAR Teaching Religious Studies Series)*, ed. Brannon Wheeler, p. 51-76 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Dar'ül-Tiba in Istanbul, he writes, "the one press operated by Muslims in Istanbul in the 1730s and 1740s aroused so much opposition that it had to be closed down."<sup>54</sup> In fact, this press closed because after the death of its founder and vital force, Ibrahim Müteferrika, it was difficult to find a print master capable of filling in his shoes and the press encountered financial difficulties. Its temporary closure had nothing to do with any sort of religious fanaticism against the press itself.<sup>55</sup> The press continued to function albeit intermittently throughout the eighteenth century. The problems it encountered were financial and managerial, not religious.

Robinson also ventures the sweeping generalization that resistance to print can partly be explained because, "Muslims...were always fundamentally skeptical of the written word. 'Language,' declares Ibn Khaldun, 'is merely the interpretation of ideas that are in the mind...'"<sup>56</sup> Yet the insufficiency of the written word in comparison with speech was hardly an idea particular to Muslims. Such a notion was common, but not dominant, in many cultures including the Greco-Roman and the European context in which printing was invented.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, such "skepticism" toward the written word hardly stopped Ibn Khaldun, and thousands of other Muslims, from writing copiously. The connection between Ibn Khaldun's theory of language and Islamic attitudes

---

<sup>54</sup> Francis Robinson, "Islam and the Impact of Print," *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>55</sup> Cevdet, *Cevdet Tarihi*, 120-121.

<sup>56</sup> Robinson, *Islam*, 72.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 145; Loveday Alexander, "The Living Voice: Skepticism toward the Written Word in Early Christian and in Graeco-Roman Texts." in *The Bible in Three Dimensions*, ed. D.A. Clines (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

toward print technology is elusive. Scholarly literature also emphasizes the importance of orality in Islam to such an extent that the importance of written culture is sometimes obscured.<sup>58</sup> Writing and symbols of literate culture played an integral part in Islam from the beginning, as is evident in the symbolism of written culture contained in the Qur'an.<sup>59</sup>

In the context of print history, the assumption that "Islam" governs the acceptance or rejection of print technology leads some scholars to ignore political and economic factors that differ substantially across the various climes and polities with majority Muslim populations. The lands touched by Islamicate textual and political traditions are and always have been remarkably diverse.<sup>60</sup> Writing the grand history of printing in Islamicate lands, and in specific, printing the Qur'an, must take this diversity into account. As Carl Ernst suggests, this broader history of Islamicate print should be based upon a number of specific studies, rather than upon speculation or the easily accessible sources that many European observers have used.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word : Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>59</sup> Q 2:282-284; Irvin Cemil Schick, "Text" in *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, forthcoming in 2010); EQ "Writing and Writing Materials."

<sup>60</sup> Bruce Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998), 33-34.

<sup>61</sup> Carl Ernst, "Ideological and Technological Transformations of Contemporary Sufism," in *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, ed. miriam cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 194.

## ***2.2 Printing in the Ottoman Empire***

The decision to allow or not to allow printing figured into the calculus of Ottoman rule. Some print historians argue that the European experience with the printing press was “revolutionary” in sundry ways. Elizabeth Eisenstein writes that print brought about the most radical transformation of intellectual life in western history, one that affected every area of life.<sup>62</sup> In religious, political, and linguistic terms, the effect of print on continental Europe was “disruptive” and “divisive.”<sup>63</sup> Historians are divided on the extent to which print was revolutionary and which changes can be attributed to it, much like revisionist historians now question the very notion of the Protestant Reformation as a discrete historical phenomenon.<sup>64</sup>

The Ottoman Empire governed a vast multilingual, multi-religious empire with territories in southeastern and central Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa. It stands to reason that a polity with such potential cleavages would demonstrate a healthy dose of caution against anything that might exacerbate them. Yet, did the Ottomans understand the role of print in the turmoil that swept across many parts of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? It is difficult to say. As yet, there are no known historical documents to support such a hypothesis. However, it is clear that the Ottoman state did view the press as a tool with the potential to facilitate

---

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 119.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>64</sup> For a revisionist view of the changes that print technology precipitated see David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450-1830* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

political and religious fragmentation at various points in history. This view was not necessarily based on the Holy Roman Empire's experience with print, but rather upon the internal events of the Ottoman Empire itself.<sup>65</sup>

The Ottoman state followed a path of cautious acceptance and control of print on the part of non-Muslim communities. The state allowed non-Muslim communities to use printing presses. Istanbulite Jews (refugees from Reconquista Spain) established a printing press in Istanbul in the 1490s. Their first product was the Jewish law book *Arba'ah Turim* of Jacob Ben Asher in 1493. The port cities of Salonika (Thessalonica) and Izmir (Smyrna) had presses in 1504 and 1675 respectively. As an example of the kind of division that could be amplified through print, the first Greek press is instructive. The first book printed bore the title "A Treatise Against the Jews" (1627/1628)—hardly a tract conducive to amicable relations among Ottoman communities. More generally, the Greek presses served as a vehicle for carrying on the conflict between various churches.<sup>66</sup>

Though Sultan Beyazıt II (r. 1481-1512) did not permit the printing of works in the Perso-Arabic script, books in Islamicate script printed in Europe circulated with official consent in Istanbul toward the end of the sixteenth century. An early example, Nasir al-Din Tusi's Arabic commentary on Euclid's *Kitab Tahrir usul li-Uqlidis*, (Rome, 1594) sold freely in Istanbul during the late sixteenth century. Appended to this book

---

<sup>65</sup> Wahid Gdoura, *Le début de l'imprimerie arabe à Istanbul et en Syrie : Évolution de l'environnement culturel, 1707-1787* (Tunis : Université de Tunis, Institut supérieur de documentation, 1985), 90-93.

<sup>66</sup> Kemal Beydilli, "Matbaa," in *Türk Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: Türk Diyanet Vakfı), 107.

was Sultan Murat III's (r. 1574-1595) printed 1588 edict in Ottoman Turkish, which permitted the sale of non-religious printed books in the Ottoman domains. This document gave official sanction for European merchants Branton and Orazio Bandini to import and sell Turkish, Persian, and Arabic books in Istanbul. Beydilli argues that "this edict not only constituted the first example of Turkish printing, but it also shows that there was no serious bias against printed books."<sup>67</sup> If printed books in the Arabic script were permissible, why were Islamic texts in particular singled out for prohibition?

It has been suggested that the prohibition on Islamic books remained because the ulama opposed print technology, an idea that bears some truth but which is an oversimplification of the situation. It is a mistake to approach "the ulama" as a monolithic entity. As in any sizeable and diverse body of human agents, the Ottoman ulama was divided into various factions and held a range of opinions on a given topic. Undoubtedly, some of the ulama opposed the importation and application of a new, foreign technology, about which they knew little and whose ramifications for social and intellectual life were unknown. The ulama appear to have been primarily concerned about the ritual purity of the process and the respect with which the Qur'an was treated.<sup>68</sup> In particular, they had misgivings about the application of heavy

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Cevdet, *Tarihi*, 76.

pressure upon the text and about the possibility of impure materials in the machinery or brushes, such as animal hair or skins.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, higher echelons of the ulama penned the formal opinion (*fatwa*) that enabled the opening of the first Muslim-run press in 1727 and numerous leading members of the ulama wrote statements supporting the venture. Furthermore, Beydilli notes that members of the ulama played a critical role as proof readers for the press from the very start and, after Müteferrika's death, members of the ulama corps took over the day to day operations of the press, in addition to serving on committees overseeing the publications.<sup>70</sup> The printing press held many benefits for these men of learning as books were expensive and sometimes scarce.

Whereas little is known about any organized ulama opposition to the first printing press in Istanbul, several studies argue that the calligraphers constituted the main source of opposition. They reportedly staged a demonstration against the press and attempted to incite the people against it.<sup>71</sup> However, after the ulama issued a fatwa (1727) that gave permission to print only non-religious books, the opposition subsided rapidly and a press was established without further obstacles. The calligraphers feared that the press would eliminate their jobs and leave them destitute. Islamic books, particularly the Qur'an, were the most sought after type of works. Estate registries demonstrate that the Qur'an was the most commonly owned book, and Islamic works

---

<sup>69</sup> Albin, "Printing the Qur'an," *EQ*.

<sup>70</sup> Beydilli, "Matbaa," 108.

<sup>71</sup> Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, 40; Imre Karacson, "İbrahim Müteferrika," *Tarih-i Osmani Mecmuası*, I, No. 3 (Aug., 1910), 183-4; Selim Nüshet Gerçek, *Türk Matbaacılığı I* (Istanbul: 1939), 58.

constituted more than three-fourths of all books owned by the ruling (*askeri*) class in the eighteenth century.<sup>72</sup> Since Islamic books constituted the bulk of copyists' work, they did not want to compete with a printing press producing Islamic texts. On the other hand, very few people wanted to purchase works of history, geography, and other non-Islamic genres. Therefore, the copyists and calligraphers felt assured that their trades would be preserved when it was announced that religious texts would not be printed and they posed no further opposition to the operation of the press. Dar'ül-Tiba went unscathed in the Patrona Halil uprising of 1730-1 that toppled Sultan Ahmet III, executed the Grand Vizier Ibrahim Paşa, and denounced the Frankish tendencies of the court. The printing press remained intact through this political shake-up which had a decidedly anti-Western tenor.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most plausible explanation is that opposition to printing Islamic texts was roused by a combination of economic concerns about earning a living as copyist and pious concerns about textual purity and corruption. The upshot is that framing opposition to printing as a "religious" phenomenon oversimplifies the situation. It is not that Ottoman Muslims in general opposed the printing of religious works on the basis of religion. Rather, the occupational interest of the copyists coincided with the pious concerns of certain segments of the ulama, and this coalition wielded the political clout to block an action which threatened their interests. During a

---

<sup>72</sup> Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton University Press: 2008), 38-40.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Olson, "The Ottoman Empire in the Middle of the Eighteenth Century and the Fragmentation of Tradition: Relations of the Nationalities (Millet), Guilds (Esnaf) and the Sultan, 1740-1768," *Die Welt des Islams* 17 (1977): 329-344.



period in which the Palace had a precarious hold on power (Sultan Ahmet III was deposed just three years later), the Palace was keen not to upset the political balance by aggravating these factions. In summation, pious concerns constituted just one element of opposition to printing Islamic works, an element that figured into a larger economic and political calculus.

It is worth asking whether or not the idea of printing such works was even entertained by proponents of the press. The founder and head of the press, İbrahim Müteferrika had little to no interest in printing Islamic works. His primary motivation was to propagate scientific and secular knowledge in the empire and wanted to print works on geography, history, medicine, astronomy and military techniques. As such, the religious exemption from printing would have been no grand concession for him. It may have been an intentional measure included to avert potential opposition to his effort to bring in a new technology as smoothly as possible. The irony of the situation is that ultimately the kind of books and knowledge Müteferrika wanted to promulgate posed far more of a threat to the status quo than printed Islamic books. The new sciences and epistemologies, not printed copies of the Qu'ran, facilitated the intellectual and cultural rifts in late Ottoman society over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is interesting to note that Ottoman Christians at times opposed the printing religious texts as well, not because of sanctity issues, but rather because of competition among Christian factions. Michael Albin writes, "Beginning in 1620, debate raged over the publication of Protestant books in Arabic, a move that was opposed by the

Orthodox patriarch, who complained to the sultan, and the sultan intervened to close Greek and Arabic presses.”<sup>74</sup> Both the Christian millet as well as the Ottoman rulers understood the power of the printed word.

From the perspective of the Ottoman ruling class, restrictions on print should be viewed as a means of maintaining order. The Ottomans had a keen sense of the relationship between religious and political dissent. It is unclear whether or not the Ottoman state perceived a relationship between print and divisive politics in Reformation Europe. Nevertheless, Ottomans understood from domestic developments that printing presses could deepen internal rifts and give voice to divisive interests that complicated the state’s ability to rule and tax effectively.

### ***2.3 Exposing the “Muhammadan Error”: Printing the Qur’an in Europe***

The printing of the Qur’an in Arabic and in translation began as European ventures in the sixteenth century when Ottoman armies and occupations extended into Central Europe and Europeans saw the Ottomans as a major threat to their existence. Martin Luther and others viewed the outward conduct of “the Turks” as highly commendable, particularly their abstinence from alcohol and their martial discipline. Christian thinkers reconciled these contradictions by understanding the Ottoman threat as a punishment from God for the wicked ways of Christians. The quest to understand the Ottomans in sixteenth century Europe resulted in a new genre of

---

<sup>74</sup> Albin, “Printing the Qur’an.”

literature, the *Turkenbuchlein*, a pamphlet that describes “the Turks” as a scourge of God sent to punish Christendom, enumerating their various reprehensible activities and attributes.<sup>75</sup> The first *Turkenbuchlein* appeared in 1522. This genre attempted to subvert the outward successes of the Ottomans by portraying them as marauding invaders who followed a ludicrous book written by a false prophet.

European publishers began to print Arabic editions of the Qur’an during the same period. However, unlike the *Turkenbuchlein*, the first printed Qur’an was not intended for a European audience. In fact, very few Europeans knew Arabic in this period; the first Arabic grammar for readers of Latin was not published until 1540. Orientalist scholars during this period exclusively used polyglot editions of non-European texts since their chief method of language learning was based on the comparative method. As Angela Nuovo points out, “No one in Europe would have been able to approach a completely Arabic edition.”<sup>76</sup>

Publisher Paganino de' Paganini produced the first ever full-length printed Qur’an in Venice in 1537/8. Nuovo’s research demonstrates that these Venetian printed Qur’ans were intended for export to the Ottoman Empire and possibly other Islamicate ports. The “print capitalism” of early modern Europe sought to include the Qur’an in its commerce.<sup>77</sup> It was a bold idea indeed to attempt to sell Qur’ans to Muslims, since, in many contexts, Muslims were forbidden to sell Qur’ans to non-

---

<sup>75</sup> Harry Clark, "The Publication of the Koran in Latin: A Reformation Dilemma," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15, no. 1 (1984): 4.

<sup>76</sup> Angela Nuovo, "A Lost Arabic Koran Rediscovered," *The Library* XII, no. 4 (1990): 282.

<sup>77</sup> Anderson, *Imagined*, 36.

Muslims and the jurists did not look favorably upon non-Muslim possession of the text. Paganino's venture to sell printed Qur'ans to Muslims failed. Scholars have pointed out that, in conjunction with the issue of provenance, the text included numerous errors. Some argued that the stilted, clumsy appearance of the Arabic text in this printing was unlikely to satisfy the aesthetic tastes of Ottoman Muslims.<sup>78</sup> However, these explanations for failure place undue emphasis on the appearance and content of the text. It is doubtful that Ottoman authorities needed or took the time to analyze the minutiae of the Venetian edition. Printed books in the Arabic script did not have official sanction to circulate in the Ottoman domains prior to 1588. Printed editions of the Qur'an did not become legal, as we shall see below, until the 1870s. Quite simply, Paganino's books were illegal whether or not they had defects in content or style. Therefore, Ottoman authorities could have recognized the illegality of Paganino's imported books at first glance. There was no question of the public evaluating these texts and judging the merits of the Venetian Arabic type-face.

Only one known copy of this Venetian edition exists. It was found in the library of the Franciscan Friars of San Michel in Isola Venice.<sup>79</sup> Some scholars thought the Pope had destroyed the rest of the copies because the Qur'an was a prohibited book. Wilhelm Ernst Tentzel (1659-1707) upheld this theory and added that God did not permit the printing of the Qur'an in Arabic and that those who sought to do so would

---

<sup>78</sup> For a similar argument in Qajar Iran see Ulrich Marzolph, "Early History in the Printing of Iran," in *Middle Eastern Languages and the Print Revolution : A Cross-Cultural Encounter : A Catalogue and Companion to the Exhibition*, ed. Eva-Maria Hanebutt-Benz, et al. (Westhofen: WVA-Verlag Skulima, 2002), 264-269.

<sup>79</sup> Nuovo, "A Lost Arabic," 273.

face a premature death.<sup>80</sup> The theory of papal burning conflates the widespread burning of Protestant and other literature subversive to Catholic interests with the scarcity of the Venice Qur'an. In fact, as Nuovo has indicated, it is highly unlikely that an Arabic book would be perceived as dangerous since no more than a handful of European scholars could read Arabic. Moreover, the text bears the stamp of the Vicar of the Holy Office that decisively disproves the idea that the Catholic Church destroyed them. Rather, the Venetian edition most likely circulated in the Ottoman Empire and was then confiscated and destroyed. Jean Bodin's *Colloque entre Sept Scavans* suggests that the publisher Alessandro Paganino traveled to the Ottoman Empire in order to sell the book. Upon the discovery of errors and the attempted distribution of a prohibited book, Ottoman authorities intended to execute Paganino. The intervention of a Venetian ambassador managed to spare his life, but the authorities may have amputated his right hand.<sup>81</sup>

### 2.3.1 Orthographic Authenticity

In one sense, copying the Qur'an constituted a ritual act; its practitioners belonged to a lineage of calligraphic masters who passed along the art, which in addition to act of writing itself, involved a set of pious dispositions cultivated through

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>81</sup> Jean Bodin, *Colloque Entre Sept Scavans* (Librairie Droz, Geneva 1984), 352; A forthcoming piece on the matter by Hartmut Bobzin, "The enigma of the first printed Arabic Koran" in *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* should shed further light on this incident.

disciplines of the body and the mind. A calligrapher had to be in a state of ritual purity to copy, out of respect for the text.

However, one must also be careful not to romanticize the occupation of the scribe. Scholarship on calligraphy tends to focus on elite and Sufi calligraphers who produced the ornate masterpieces that adorn Islamic art collections. Meanwhile, this scholarship pays less attention to the thousands of average scribes who produced the unsightly and mediocre copies of the Qur'an that fill the back shelves of archives and libraries. The widespread saying, "All calligraphers are ignorant" (*kullu khattatun jahilun*) speaks of the run of the mill copyist, as does the poet Fuzuli's jeremiad in Ottoman Turkish that "the omission of one dot makes the [Turkish word for] eye 'blind'" (*bir nokta sukutuyla gözü kör eyler*).<sup>82</sup>

Many have pointed out that Islam is a cult of authenticity that prizes the transmission of *'ilm* (sacred knowledge) from Muhammad, the early Muslim community, the great scholars, and saints of the past. The *isnād*, a genealogical chain of masters and disciples, was the key textual device for legitimating this knowledge, linking a discourse to temporally and/or geographically distant sources of authority. In this respect, the Ottoman copyists and calligraphers were no different. The craft was transmitted through master-disciple relationships; the successful pupil received a license (*ijāza*) with the names of his master, his master's master, *etc.* Therefore, works signed by an Ottoman calligrapher bore a stamp of authenticity that traced back

---

<sup>82</sup> Thanks to Irvin Cemil Schick for suggesting the inclusion of these quotes.

generations and ostensibly guaranteed the quality and reliability of the work. As Francis Robinson observed in South Asia, the printing press disrupted the person-to-person transmission of Islamic knowledge.<sup>83</sup> With print, the author of a work could still justify credentials via the *isnād*; hence the content of the text maintained a connection to Muslim trajectories of authenticity. However, the method of textual *reproduction* via print could no longer trace its origins back to the early Muslim community, but rather to fifteenth century Germany and the non-Muslim print men who developed that technology.

Neither the Venetian edition, nor any other printed book from Europe, possessed the guarantee of Islamic authenticity offered by the calligraphic tradition. Such a guarantee did not necessarily mean that books produced by said copyists would be error-free; Muslim scribes committed just as many errors as other men of the pen. However, the Ottoman calligraphic tradition was linked to a past of well-known and respected Muslim figures, which gave the practitioner an aura of reliability or, at the very least, included him in an Islamic textual tradition. Print technology bore a completely different and unknown lineage. While some of those involved in the production of the Venice Qur'an were likely of Arab origin,<sup>84</sup> print technology and its practitioners stood outside the Ottoman Muslim re-production of Islamic texts, discursive authority, and techniques of self-formation.

---

<sup>83</sup> Robinson, "Islam and the Impact," 69-71.

<sup>84</sup> Nuovo, "A Lost Arabic," 285.

The first attempt at selling a printed Qur'an to Muslims ended in failure and it may have ruined its publisher Alessandro Paganino, physically and financially. The Qur'an was not easily incorporated into the print-capitalism of Europe as Ottoman Muslims did not become customers for European-made Qur'ans. Given the Ottoman military advance on Europe and Ottoman control of the Eastern Mediterranean, Europeans did begin to take a keen interest in the Ottomans and in understanding their holy book, the Qur'an. As a means toward this end, many thought that the time for printing a Latin translation of the Qur'an had come. They reasoned that, in light of the Turkish advance on Central Europe, the success of the Turks and their upright outward character might be perceived as signs of divine favor for Islam. Therefore, Martin Luther and others felt it was necessary to expose the folly of the Qur'an. Publishers Bibliander and Oporinus hoped to do so by printing Robert of Ketton's Latin translation *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* (*The Law of Muhammad the False Prophet* a.k.a. the Toledan Qur'an), a rendering by an English monk in the city of Toledo, Spain during the twelfth century.

On the other hand, many opposed the printing of the Toledan Qur'an because they felt that the Qur'an was a dangerous book, bereft of value;<sup>85</sup> some opined that it was a "poisonous thing of which more garbage than good fruit is to be expected."<sup>86</sup> Opponents granted the necessity for scholars to read and understand the Qur'an, but even then, they insisted that only *pious* scholars do so. The fear that scholars of lesser

---

<sup>85</sup> Hartmut Bobzin, "A Treasure of Heresies," in *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 163.

<sup>86</sup> Clark, "The Publication," 12.



piety might be adversely affected by reading the Qur'an points to the level of concern about the possibility of conversions to Islam. The authorities seem to have feared the effects as well. Joseph Oporinus, who took charge of the printing process, wrote that, "the magistracy is afraid that if so pestiferous a book is published, the sky will fall."<sup>87</sup> Printing, which implied broad circulation, was therefore undesirable and unnecessary.<sup>88</sup>

In the end, Martin Luther's personal support for the publication of a Latin translation of the Qur'an won the day. For Luther, Christian Europe faced two devils, the inner Devil—the Pope, and the outer Devil—the Turks. He writes:

It has struck me that one is able to do nothing more grievous to Mohammad or the Turks, nor more to bring them to harm (more than with all weaponry) than to bring their Koran to Christians in the light of day, that they may see therein, how entirely cursed, abominable, and desperate a book it is, full of lies, fables and all abominations that the Turks conceal and gloss over. They are reluctant to see the Koran translated into other languages, for they probably feel that it would bring about apostasy in all sensible hearts.<sup>89</sup>

Luther connects the printing ("bringing the Qur'an to the light of day") of the Qur'an and its translation. Yet Luther explains Muslim opposition to translation in a novel way: he claims that Muslims oppose translation in order to *hide* its contents. In stark contrast to the doctrine of Qur'anic inimitability, Luther understood Muslim opposition to Qur'an translation to be a cover up for a text about which they were actually embarrassed. For Luther, translating scripture was a means of defeating both the inner and outer devils—the vernacular Bible broke the Catholic Church's grip on access to the

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>88</sup> Bobzin, *Treasure*, 163.

<sup>89</sup> Clark, "The Publication," 10-11.

scriptures, whereas the translation of the Qur'an exposed the error of the Turks. The printed, translated Qur'an would be a resource for the Protestant pastors who would warn the people.

Our opinion about this is: because the Turks are satisfied with this work, that the pastors have a true witness to the people for preaching the abomination of Mohammad through which they should become the more inimical to him and strengthened in our Christian belief, the more joyously and manfully to struggle, kindled to risk body and worldly goods as they teach...<sup>90</sup>

Christians should publish the Qur'an, "to honor Christ, to do good for Christians, to harm the Turks, [and] to vex the devil."<sup>91</sup> Without such a translation, it would be difficult to combat the threat:

[...] if the holy fathers don't get the heretical book to read, how would they take steps against its secret poison, preached on corners, and warn and protect the church? One must open sores and wounds in order to heal them<sup>92</sup>

Protestants printed Latin renderings of the Qur'an in order to refute the text, and to ensure this effect, they printed it together with explicit refutations. Many editions bore a preface by Martin Luther himself. Additionally, Luther translated and amended a version of Ricoldo da Monte Croce's Latin refutation of the Qur'an into German under the title *Verlegung des Alkorans* in 1542.<sup>93</sup> The success of Luther's position resulted in the printing of the Toledan translation -- three issues in 1543 and a second edition in 1550. The books enjoyed commercial success, selling briskly.

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Bobzin, *Treasure*, 167.

## ***2.4 Towards an Istanbul Edition of the Qur'an***

As mentioned, printing presses of non-Muslim communities had existed in Istanbul since the late fifteenth century. The state gave permission to the first Ottoman Muslim run press, Dar'ül-Tiba to print works in Ottoman Turkish in the early eighteenth century. However, this press was not given permission to publish any works dealing with religious matters. İbrahim Müteferrika (d. 1745), a Unitarian convert to Islam from Kolozsvár, Transylvania (now Cluj, Romania), was the chief protagonist in establishing the press in Istanbul. In 1726, he wrote a treatise titled “The Usefulness of Printing” in which he pleads for the adoption of printing by Ottoman Muslims.

Müteferrika argues that printed text has more clarity, is useful for education, passes on knowledge, enables error-free replication, lasts longer, makes books less expensive, improves organization with table of contents and index, permits greater dissemination, and fights ignorance. Müteferrika makes reference to the destruction and loss of many books in war and fires. He also notes that Europeans profit from the book trade, but that they make many errors. Ottoman Muslims should, therefore, engage in printing, do it properly, and benefit as well.<sup>94</sup> His reference to the “errors” committed by European printers is unspecified but intriguing. Did Müteferrika know about the flawed European printings of the Qur'an? Or was this merely a rhetorical

---

<sup>94</sup> İbrahim Müteferrika, “The Usefulness of Printing,” in *The Book in the Islamic world : the Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, ed. George Atiyeh, (Albany [Washington, D.C.]: State University of New York Press; Library of Congress, 1995), 289-292.

jeremiad aimed to bolster his argument for why Muslims should undertake the “correct” use of the printing press?

It is highly probable that Müteferrika knew of European printings of the Qur’an and Qur’an translations, many more of which had been published in the years subsequent to the Venice edition (1538) and the Toledan Translation (1543, 1550). Müteferrika mentions that the Jews lost their scripture due to ignorance and that the Christians had carelessly collected books leading to corruptions and false beliefs. On the other hand, Muslims had protected the Qur’an with the greatest care.<sup>95</sup> Given his upbringing and education in a Unitarian milieu in which printing ventures thrived, his keen interest in bringing print technology to the Ottoman Empire, and earlier Ottoman experiences with printed Qur’ans from Europe, Müteferrika almost certainly knew something of Qur’an printing ventures.<sup>96</sup> Yet as the rest of his corpus and activities demonstrate, Müteferrika concerned himself primarily with bringing Western military and scientific knowledge to the Ottoman Empire, not with mass producing Islamic texts.<sup>97</sup>

Moreover, no demand existed at this time for printed religious works. The concept of cheaper printed books via print was largely unknown, literacy was very low, and copyists and some segments of the ulama harbored suspicions about the new

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>96</sup> Niyazi Berkes, *Ibrāhīm Müteferrika*, EI; “İlk Türk Matbaası Kurucusunun Dinî ve Fikrî Kimliği,” *Belleten* XXVI, no.102 (1962): 715-737.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

technology. As far as we know, there was no desire or perceived need to reproduce the Qur'an and other Islamic works via the printing press.

The abstention from publishing Islamic texts continued until the early nineteenth century. By that time, numerous European translations of the Qur'an had been published. Moreover, in an act of "enlightened despotism," Russian Empress Catherine II had undertaken the production of printed Qur'ans for her Muslim subjects published in St. Petersburg (1787, 1789, 1790).<sup>98</sup> In Istanbul, publishers began to print Islamic works at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1803, Sultan Mustafa III's daughter Hadice financed the printing of one thousand copies of Hanafi scholar Mehmed Birgivi's (d. 1573) treatise *Vasiyetname*, a basic treatise on the articles of faith. This work became the first printed Islamic text in Ottoman history. Birgivi was a pre-eminent, conservative Hanafi jurist who clashed with the famous Shaykh al-Islam Ebu's-Su'ud (d. 1574) on a number of matters, rejecting attempts to manipulate classical Hanafi fiqh for contemporary exigencies.<sup>99</sup> The choice of a text by Birgivi as the first printed Islamic work was symbolic.<sup>100</sup> It appears to reflect a broader effort by the Ottoman Palace to rally around a Sunni-Hanafi collective ethos mixed with a European trajectory of modernization.

---

<sup>98</sup> Albin, "Printing the Qur'an."

<sup>99</sup> See Colin Imber, *Ebu's-Su'ud: The Islamic Legal Tradition, Jurists--Profiles in Legal Theory*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 144.

<sup>100</sup> Christoph K. Neumann, "Book and Newspaper Printing in Turkish, 18th-20th Century," in *Middle Eastern Languages and the Print Revolution*, edited by Eva Hanebutt-Benz; Dagmar Glass; Geoffrey Roper, 227-48, (Westhofen: WVA-Verlag Skulima, 2002), 233.

Consider the purpose for which this particular work was intended. Hadice Sultan sponsored its publication for the edification of the soldiers of the new European style army, the New Order corps (*Nizam-i Cedid*), which Sultan Selim III (r. 1798-1807) founded in 1793. The text was in simple Ottoman Turkish and included vowel markings. Hadice sponsored this venture so that the soldiers and “the people” would gain the basic minimum knowledge of religion and how to perform the daily prayers.<sup>101</sup> This printed version of *Vasiyetname* therefore also constituted the first religious manual for the military. Given the low level of literacy at the time, this book can only have been intended for the officers.<sup>102</sup> In addition to printing this work, Hadice Sultan also intended for a mosque to be built near the barracks in which the soldiers could hear sermons and receive advice from imams.<sup>103</sup>

The printing of Birgivi’s text was one of a number of measures taken to establish a loyal military force with a Sunni affiliation. The New Corps were named the “Victorious Muhammedan Soldiers” (*Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye*). The Sunni affiliation of this new force stood in direct opposition to the Janissaries who were strongly associated with the Bektaşi Sufi order, an order that takes its name from a thirteenth century spiritual teacher named Hacı Bektaş Veli. The Bektaşi order incorporated elements of Twelver Shi’a theology and departed from prevalent Sunni practice and belief in a number of respects including the consumption of alcohol and

---

<sup>101</sup> Ali Birinci, "'Birgivi Risalesi': İlk Dinî Kitab Niçin Ve Nasıl Basıldı?," in *Tarih Yolunda: Yakın Mazî Siyasî Ve Fikrî Ahvâli* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2001), 194.

<sup>102</sup> The number of officers increased dramatically after 1802 when conscription in Anatolia began. By 1806, the corps boasted 1,590 officers and 22,685 men, *EI*, "*Nizâm-i Djedid*."

<sup>103</sup> Birinci, 195.

the theopoesis of ‘Ali. Not all Janissaries were members of the Bektaşî order. However, in the foundational myth of the Janissaries, Hacı Bektaş blesses the new military unit and the Janissaries came to be closely affiliated with this order.

The Bektaşî order used Turkish extensively as a ritual language and preserved many pre-Islamic Turkic motifs in its mythology and ritual.<sup>104</sup> It was strongest in the provinces and among rural people, not in the cities among the urbane and educated. In some sense, the Bektaşî order represented provincialism, localism, and decentralization as well as a religiosity at odds with the prevalent Sunni practice. In the attempts to re-order and modernize the empire, the Bektaşî order epitomized the antithesis of order and modernity. In the drive to centralize power in the early nineteenth century, Sultan Mahmud II eliminated the power of the provincial notables, the Janissaries, and the Bektaşî order. The palace co-opted some provincial powers with concessions and others by force. The Janissaries resisted military reforms and interfered in politics, often colluding with certain ulama factions to control and even depose the Sultan. In 1826, the Janissaries were slaughtered in a bloody purge which official chroniclers gave the eerie title “The Auspicious Incident” (*Vaka-yi Hayriye*). By way of affiliation, Bektaşî leaders were executed or exiled and their disciples were urged to join Sunni orders.

Aside from force, the printing of Sunni religious texts and their affiliation with the new European style army appears to have played a role in the symbolic politics and of this campaign as well, promoting cosmopolitan, ulama-mediated, text-based Sunni

---

<sup>104</sup> See Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Alevî ve Bektaşî İnançlarının İslam Öncesi Temelleri* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları 2000).

Islam over and against the localism, eclecticism, and orality of the Bektashi 'Alidism. In an attempt to resist colonialism and oppose Balkan nationalist movements, the Ottoman state attempted to develop a unified collective ethos around Sunni Islam, supported in official statements and bolstered by an increasing number of printed Islamic books.

However, Istanbul presses did not print the Qur'an in this period. The Qur'an, Book among books, remained the exceptional text *par excellence*, exempt from the rigors of the moveable type printing press. The first "Ottoman" printings of the Qur'an did not occur in Istanbul. Rather, it was the "selfish, illiterate genius" Mehmed Ali (1769-1849), the renegade Ottoman governor of Cairo, who first endeavored to print it.<sup>105</sup> In 1832, the government newspaper *al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyya* announced plans to print portions of the Qur'an (*ajzā'*) for student use in the government schools.<sup>106</sup> Scholars have dated the earliest Egyptian printing of the Qur'an to April 1833. These were not complete copies of the Qur'an (*muṣḥaf*) but selected portions, and, unfortunately, no copies have survived.

The Qur'an is usually articulated as a complete book, but early Qur'anic printings reflect the fact that portions of the Qur'an played an important role in the lives of Muslims. The Qur'an is divided into thirty portions, one for each day of the

---

<sup>105</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Vol. III - The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 217.

<sup>106</sup> EQ, "Printing the Qur'an."



month. These divisions govern the recitation of Qur'an and Muslims often memorize the text according to this schema.

The Egyptian ulama had reservations about printing Islamic texts due to concerns of ritual purity in the printing process. Specifically, they questioned whether or not the mechanics of the press involved the use of dog skins. As a precautionary measure, Mehmed Ali requested that the Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh al-Tamimi, place his seal on the printed copy to lend the authority of the ulama establishment. It seems that this measure did not assuage the concerns of some scholars. Many viewed the press as *bid'a* – deviation from the tradition; others felt that the use of metal letter blocks and heavy pressure to print the name of God showed disrespect and/or violated the norms of ritual purity. Despite this opposition and the likelihood that this text did not receive thorough editing and correction by scholars, Mehmed Ali moved the project forward.<sup>107</sup>

East of the Ottoman territories Qur'an printing advanced more rapidly. Presses in Iran had produced copies of the Qur'an in the eighteenth century and perhaps even earlier. In India, the Qur'an was printed in Bombay (1852), Calcutta (1856/7), and Lucknow (1852), and after these initial printings numerous editions followed. Bolstered by the crown's support, Muslims from various cities in the Russian Empire printed the Qur'an beginning in the late eighteenth century. Paradoxically, Istanbul, the first Muslim-ruled polity to operate a press and the symbolic head of the Islamic world,

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 269-270.

had yet to produce a printed edition of its own, despite the fact that the printing of other Islamic materials had begun some fifty years earlier. Though the Qur'an was not *printed* in Istanbul, printed copies were circulating in the city and in many other parts of the empire. They entered Anatolia and Istanbul, at the latest, by the 1850s, precipitating a great deal of controversy among the ulama and the state bureaucracy.

### ***2.5 Foreign Printed Qur'ans***

The Ottoman state viewed the circulation of foreign printed copies of the Qur'an with great suspicion and concern. For the most part, these texts came from Iran though printed copies from India, Russia, and Europe are known to have circulated as well. There was a long history of Iranian-Ottoman rivalry over territories and subjects in eastern Anatolia. During the nineteenth century, the Ottomans and Qajars played a precarious diplomatic game among the European powers and between themselves. These two Muslim empires were on the verge of war in the 1830s. Russia and Great Britain mediated the second Treaty of Erzurum in 1847, which divided the disputed eastern Anatolian territory and established a boundary commission to define the entire border.<sup>108</sup> Like its predecessors, this treaty did not diffuse the tensions between the two states over the eastern Anatolian region. In 1848, Nasir al-Din (d. 1896) acceded to the throne in Iran and contended for recognition as the leader of Shiite Muslims.<sup>109</sup> Nasir

---

<sup>108</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions* (Princeton University Press Princeton, NJ, 1999), 24-26.

<sup>109</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir Al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896* (University of California Press, 1997), 232-237.

al-Din Shah was keen to assert his claim to be the Sultan of the Shiites as Shiites living in Ottoman Baghdad and eastern Anatolia had been subject to various persecutions. Ottoman authorities had turned a blind eye to Kurdish Sunni tribes' periodic raids into Shiite towns and villages in Western Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Ottomans also ignored, perhaps even encouraged, the persecution of the Shiites of Iraq.<sup>110</sup> Following the example of the Russian Tsar who had attained obtained legal authority to protect Ottoman Christians in the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, Nasir al-Din wanted extraterritorial authority to protect Shiites under Ottoman rule.

The Ottomans viewed the circulation of Iranian printed Qur'anic copies in Ottoman territories within this contentious context. It is hard to overstate the importance of this context yet it is impossible to trace the dynamics of this episode without reference to archival material. The Ottoman Archives of the Prime Ministry offer a wealth of documents on the subject that have not been consulted in previous studies.<sup>111</sup>

The conflict over printed Qur'ans appears in the archival records during the 1850s. A communiqué from the Grand Vizierate to the eastern provinces orders administrative bureaucrats to notify the customs officials that Iranians are prohibited from bringing printed Qur'ans to and selling them in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>112</sup> An official memorandum to the Palace in 1853 describes the “nefarious activities” of the consuls in

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 233, e.g. the massacre of Kerbala 1843.

<sup>111</sup> Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 53-54 touches very briefly upon the issue of foreign printed Qur'ans.

<sup>112</sup> Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, (Ottoman Archives of the Prime Ministry) hereafter “BOA,” A.MKT.UM 113.99; 6/S/1269—November 19,1852

the eastern Anatolian town of Erzurum and orders their dismissal and replacement.

This document also states that copies of the Qur'an printed in Iran should not be sent to the "well protected domains" – i.e. the Ottoman territories – and that Iranians traveling to Kurdistan, Iraq, and Erzurum should be watched closely. Aside from the suspicion of political intrigue on the part of Iranians, the memorandum does not provide any reason why the Qur'ans printed in Iran should not be allowed to circulate in Ottoman territories.<sup>113</sup> There is no mention of the content of these books or any suggestion of textual corruption. These documents suggest that the Ottoman state was concerned with the provenance of the books, not their content.

Additionally, the economic dimension of the book trade appears in archival documents. They indicate that printed Qur'ans had become a less expensive alternative to calligraphic copies and the demand for cheaper versions grew steadily. This phenomenon did not escape the notice of entrepreneurs in Istanbul, who attempted to secretly print and sell Qur'ans in the city, where printing the holy book remained prohibited. Qur'an printing became a black-market business venture. In 1856, a certain Hafiz Ahmet attempted to secretly print the Qur'an in the Istanbul neighborhood of Kocamustafapaşa. The police caught and detained him and his associates. Upon interrogation, they "confessed" to their "errors" and the state conducted an investigation about their activities and connections.<sup>114</sup> They were imprisoned and then

---

<sup>113</sup> BOA A.AMD 42 61, 2/C/1269—March 13, 1853

<sup>114</sup> BOA A.MKT.NZD 180/35 22/B/1272—March 29, 1856

released later on bail.<sup>115</sup> Hafiz Ahmet was shown to be the chief protagonist and to have a contract with an Iranian by the name of Taki Efendi.<sup>116</sup>

The prohibition on printed copies of the Qur'an enjoyed limited success. Official reports demonstrate that thousands of copies were seized by Ottoman authorities. For example, in 1861, customs officials seized fifty-four full copies and twenty-one portions of the Qur'an at the eastern Anatolian city of Sinop. These books, like subsequent seizures, were sent to the religious authorities in Istanbul where they were to be stored in an appropriate location, usually a storage facility belonging to the Ministry of Education.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, the printed Qur'an blockade was far from complete. Later in the same month (March 1861), a strongly worded memorandum reiterated and intensified the order to stop and seize Qur'ans of Iranian provenance. The customs officials are to be given "firm orders" (*tenbihat-ı kuviyye*) and to take decisive measures to effect an "absolute prohibition" of Iranian Qur'ans. This document emphasizes that the texts are "not free of errors and mistakes" and suffer from "printing defects."<sup>118</sup> This document presents the first such suggestion of prohibiting them due to the actual content. However, this bureaucratic memo does not detail the nature of the insufficiencies in these texts. It is, therefore, difficult to gauge how one should understand the accusation of error and distortion.

---

<sup>115</sup> BOA A.MKT.NZD 184 61; 2/N/1272—April 14, 1856; A.MKT.MVL 89 9; 27/Za/1273—July 19, 1857

<sup>116</sup> BOA A.MKT.NZD 185/11 8/N/1272—May 13, 1856

<sup>117</sup> BOA MKT.NZD 345/85 28/Ş/1277—March 11, 1861

<sup>118</sup> BOA A.MKT.UM 463 115 13/N/1277—March 25, 1861

On the one hand, it is highly probable that there existed some minor errors such as those that occur in many hand-written *maṣāḥif* and in almost all early printings of the Qur'an. On the other hand, for political purposes, Ottoman officials may have invented or, more likely, exaggerated the gravity of the mistakes in order to elevate the prohibition of foreign Qur'ans from the mundane realm of imperial competition to level of the defense of true religion. In this way, the Sultan could pose as the defender of the Qur'an and of Islam in contrast to his eastern rival, the Shah.

However, the flow of printed works from Iran and elsewhere did not cease. In October 1861, a flurry of concern within the Ottoman bureaucracy repeatedly reminded the various branches of government and particularly the customs officials in the provinces to enforce the command which forbade the selling and buying of foreign Qur'ans.<sup>119</sup> Officials observed that printed copies could be found in schools and in the hands of children in the eastern province of Sivas.<sup>120</sup> The issue of textual corruption cropped up again in the same month, yet in a different guise. A message to the Grand Vizierate states that the texts cannot be allowed to circulate because during the printing process the text was not treated with the proper respect.<sup>121</sup> It remains unclear whether this document indicates that the printers were not careful enough, and therefore committed errors or, alternately, that the standards of ritual purity for handling the Qur'an were ignored.

---

<sup>119</sup> BOA A.MKT.UM 509/80 11/R/1278—October 16, 1861 [Catalog has mislabeled as 18.R]; also e.g. BOA A.MKT.UM 509/90 19/R/ 1278—October 24, 1861; BOA A.MKT.UM 513/50 1 19/R/ 1278—October 24, 1861

<sup>120</sup> BOA A.MKT.UM 515/47 8/R/1278—October 13, 1861

<sup>121</sup> BOA A.MKT.UM 513/84, 22/R/1278—October 27, 1861

A few days later, officials inquired to the headquarters of the ulama bureaucracy as to what exactly was included in this prohibition. Were other texts containing verses of the Qur'an and prayers to be prohibited as well?<sup>122</sup> Customs officials encountered a variety of printed works and sought to discern the extent of the ban on Qur'anic materials. Officials in Istanbul were not pleased with the implementation of the embargo and threatened to launch an investigation into the activities of the customs officials, who had responded to the order sluggishly and committed errors in its enforcement.<sup>123</sup> It is likely they were suspected of illicit activities, perhaps benefiting from bribes or other perks from the book traders.

The implementation of the ban on foreign Qur'ans took its toll on cross-border travelers in various ways. Consider the case of Crimean refugee, Emir Salih. Customs officials detained him upon finding thirty-six printed copies of the Qur'an and one hundred and twenty copies of the last thirtieth of the Qur'an (*amme cüzü*) in his possession. Seeing that Emir Salih was a poor elderly refugee traveling across a border far from his home, the officials struggled with how to implement the prohibition.

He says that he had some property in the Crimea which he attempted to sell, but was unable to do so. In exchange for the property, he obtained thirty-six copies of the Qur'an and one hundred twenty copies of the *amme cüzü*...<sup>124</sup>

The Crimean traveler had sold all he owned in Russia and carried it with him in the form of printed Qur'anic texts. Taking them from him would mean depriving him of all

---

<sup>122</sup> BOA A.MKT.NZD 377/94 8/Ca/1278—November 11/12, 1861

<sup>123</sup> BOA A.MKT.UM 515/47 25/R/1278—October 30, 1861

<sup>124</sup> BOA I.MVL 484/21939; 26.[Za].1279—May 14, 1863

his worldly possessions. “Given that he is from the impoverished class and is also elderly,” Ottoman officials were hesitant to leave the refugee destitute. They appealed to their superiors in the search for “compassionate measures” that would both enforce the law as well as protect the meager assets of Emir Salih.<sup>125</sup> Authorities decided that the books had to be seized, stored, and preserved according to the law, and that Emir Salih should be compensated for the books, as well as for his expenses. He was to receive 3,576 *kuruş* for his books.<sup>126</sup>

In cases like Emir Salih’s, Ottoman officials actually succeeded in preventing the circulation of foreign printed Qur’ans. However, on the whole, this policy failed to stem the tide. Printed editions continued to circulate as confirmed by the continuous repetition of orders from Istanbul to enforce the ban and the frequency of reported confiscations. The continued smuggling and illegal printing of the Qur’an point to the demand for an affordable alternative. Handwritten Qur’ans were expensive items which took several months to produce. Orlin Sabev’s study of estate records in Ottoman Sofia demonstrates just how costly manuscript Qur’ans were.

The Quran was usually the most expensive manuscript possessed by Muslims. In the case of Sofia its value was usually estimated at approximately 300-500 Ottoman silver coins (*akçe*) in the 1670s, 1000-2000 *akçe* in the second half of the 18th century, and 30-50 piasters (*guruş*), that is, 3600-6000 *akçe* in the first decades of the 19th century. In comparison, the average price of a cow for instance varied between 600 and 1000 *akçe*....For example the inventory of a certain El-hac Abdullah Ağa from Bursa, dated 1734, included a Qur’an that cost 1260 *akçe*, more than a pair of oxen. Thus only rich

---

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*



and well-to-do Muslims could afford the luxury to buy and own such an expensive book.<sup>127</sup>

The lack of affordable copies fueled a strong demand for a cheaper alternative which printers could provide. Therefore, selling smuggled or illicitly printed copies of the Qur'an became a lucrative business, one in which many engaged despite its illegality.

Even Qur'ans printed in Europe became a topic of debate in the late Ottoman public sphere. Around 1870, an unknown Ottoman writer objected to the printing of the Qur'an in London, thereby igniting a debate with the famous journalist, poet, and playwright Namık Kemal (1840-1888) over the necessity of printed Qur'ans in Ottoman lands. The opponent of the venture argued that publishers were greedy profiteers who set their sights on the livelihood of calligraphers. The printing and multiplication of the Qur'an, in his view, would both violate the sanctity of the text and leave the calligraphers destitute. He also accused the publishers of attempting to deceive the public into welcoming a printed version of the Qur'an through sly introductions and marketing. In response, Namık Kemal defended printing the text, and print technology in general, as an advance in technology like the tramway and the photograph which would improve the lives of Ottoman Muslims. He noted that, at the time, copies of the Qur'an for schoolchildren were expensive items and found it strange that men of religion would impede a technology that would make them more available.<sup>128</sup>

Furthermore, Kemal pointed out that printed Qur'ans were already a reality in Istanbul,

---

<sup>127</sup> Orlin Sabev, "Private Book Collections in Ottoman Sofia, 1671-1833 (Preliminary Notes)," *Etudes balkaniques*, no. 1 (2003): 41.

<sup>128</sup> Namık Kemal, "Kemal'in Mudafaası," *Mecmua Ebüzziya* 3, no. 25 (1880): 769-71.

“For fifteen years, [printed] copies of the Qur’an from every corner of Europe and especially from Iran have come to Istanbul and remained.”<sup>129</sup> Refusing to print was to ignore the present and reject the inevitable. Moreover, he argues that the publishers had no need of deception because there was already a great demand from various classes “from the most learned of the ulama to the porters” in the bazaar for inexpensive copies of the Qur’an.<sup>130</sup> In regard to the accusation that Qur’an printing would be a commercial venture, Kemal asks, “do the calligraphers write out the Qur’an as a good deed?”<sup>131</sup> Calligraphers, Kemal continues, should not be allowed to impede technological and social progress on the claim that their business is somehow sacrosanct; he adds that no one protested on behalf of the row-boat paddlers when the steam ferries were introduced.<sup>132</sup>

In agreement with Kemal, by 1871, the Ottoman state conceded that its Qur’anic embargo had failed and began to search for a new solution to the problem. They did not lift the embargo, but rather the state attempted to supply copies printed under state supervision for circulation and thereby render the foreign-printed Qur’ans superfluous. Historian, jurist and statesman, Ahmet Cevdet Pasha (1822-1895) reports that the authorities allowed a Qur’anic manuscript copied by the renowned Ottoman calligrapher Hafiz Osman (1642-1698) to be printed via photolithography in France and sold in Istanbul. To this end, the state employed the services of an entrepreneurial

---

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 770.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* 771

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* 770

Frenchman by the name of Monsieur Fanton in 1871-2 (1288). However, these texts “did not come out properly.”<sup>133</sup> The text includes a statement by a committee of scholars who found mistakes in Hafız Osman’s rendering, alluding to a table listing the errors and their corrections.<sup>134</sup> It is unclear whether or not these are the unsatisfactory elements to which Cevdet refers.

There is another question about this text. Was it printed in France, as Cevdet writes, or in Istanbul? The source of confusion is Victor Chauvin’s *Bibliographie des Ouvrages Arabes* that indicates that this printing occurred in “Constantinople.”<sup>135</sup> If it was indeed in Istanbul, then it would be the first *legally* printed Qur’an in the Ottoman capital. Several possibilities exist: Cevdet Pasha may have erred, confusing the French lithographer Fanton with French provenance of the text. Otherwise, perhaps it was in fact printed in France but the publishers wanted to conceal the foreign origin of this edition and created a fictitious Ottoman provenance. Either way, the unsatisfactory appearance of this version contributed the growing perception that the Ottoman state needed to take control of the printing process.

The shortcomings of the French lithographed 1871-2 (1288) version and the ongoing circulation of contraband Qur’ans made it evident that a strong demand for

---

<sup>133</sup> Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, *Tezâkir*, ed. Baysun Cavid, 2nd ed., vol. IV, *Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınlarından; 2 Seri; No. 17*, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1986), 128; also see Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006), 319.

<sup>134</sup> Malissa Taylor, "The Anxiety of Sanctity: Censorship and Sacred Texts." In *Ottomans and Europe: Travel, Encounter and Interaction (Until the End the 18th Century)*, ed. Seyfi Kenan (İstanbul: İSAM Yayınları, Forthcoming 2009).

<sup>135</sup> Victor Chauvin, *Bibliographie des Ouvrages Arabes* Volume X ( Liege/Leipzig: 1907), 30.

affordable copies existed, which manuscripts were unable to satisfy. An important memorandum to the Ministry of Education on May 2, 1873 confessed these realities:

Given that the printing of the Qur'an is prohibited, some within the Ottoman domains have secretly engaged in printing the text and Iranians and others had illegally imported copies of the Qur'an, most of which contained errors. Moreover, handwritten copies of the Qur'an had become scarce and this caused hardship upon the people who, by necessity, had turned to printed Qur'ans smuggled by certain traders who subverted the embargo by various tricks.<sup>136</sup>

This document took the historic decision to print the Qur'an and ordered no less than 500,000 copies, a immense undertaking that would create an unprecedented number of copies within the empire and beyond.<sup>137</sup>

Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, who was key in obtaining permission for the project, writes that the Sublime Porte had wanted to print portions of the Qur'an for many years but had been unable to secure permission from the ulama to move forward on the venture.<sup>138</sup> In lieu of this permission, black-market printing and sales thrived. It was these illicit printings in Istanbul by foreigners that provided new stimulus to the ulama and the state to undertake Qur'an printing:

...Iranians in Validehan and other neighborhoods [in Istanbul] printed the Qur'an secretly and some of the printed sheets ended up in grocery stores. As this was disrespectful to the Qur'an, the Bab-i Fetva complained constantly and Bab-i Ali forbid the sale of these printed Qur'ans and sometimes confiscated them. Meanwhile, a muşhaf by Hafiz Osman was printed by photolithography in France and a number of these were brought to the Ottoman Empire. Bab-i Ali gave them permission and they sold them, but these prints did not come out properly. A special council of the ministers gave Matbaa-i Amire permission to print a muşhaf with the condition that they follow all the necessary acts of respect and purity (*ihtiramat*).<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup> BOA A.MKT.MHM 453.60-4/Ra/1290—May 2, 1873

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Cevdet, *Tezâkir*, 128.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

Print historian Kemal Beydilli has suggested that those involved in this first official Qur'an printing venture performed ritual ablutions prior to working on the project and maintained a state of ritual purity throughout the printing process. This conjures up images of print men washing their feet, hands, face, ears, etc. as if they were going to say their prayers in a mosque. This intriguing observation is based on the phrase *ihtiramat-ı lazime* — “necessary reverences” — in Cevdet's text.<sup>140</sup>

That very well may be true. An official document that recommends printing the Qur'an makes repeated reference to the respect for and the preservation of the text. The state leased the right to print the Qur'an to the Imperial Press (*Tabhane-i Amire*) in the form of a monopoly. In order to protect the text, the Grand Vizierate stipulated that some representatives of state ministries would oversee the project in order to ensure conditions of purity and respect.<sup>141</sup> It further specified that in the course of printing, “not one sheet of paper is to be wasted or destroyed” and that the process was to be carried out in conditions of extraordinary protection for the text. The utmost attention, care for detail, and unparalleled respect were to be paid to the text in the venture.<sup>142</sup>

Nevertheless, the *ihtiramat-ı lazime* might also refer to the chosen means of printing itself rather than the state of ritual purity of the printmen. Cevdet points out that, at one point in time, the ulama had debated whether or not the process of binding

---

<sup>140</sup> Personal conversation with Professor Beydilli in Istanbul, Summer 2007.

<sup>141</sup> BOA A.MKT.MHM 453.60 04/Ra/1290—May 2, 1873

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

books showed disrespect toward the Qur'an. Reportedly, some religious scholars found the process objectionable because of the manner in which the binder had to strike the pages with a metal tool and smash the sheets in a wooden press. These acts, Cevdet explains, were viewed as inconsistent with the displays of reverence and purity demanded when interacting with the written Qur'an. Yet binding had become permissible and, in comparison argued Ahmet Cevdet, the printing process was not as violent:

Even if there are processes and actions in the course of printing viewed to be greatly injurious, beating the books with a metal tool and crushing them in a wooden press [during binding] which are of *even greater* detriment [than printing] have become permissible for binding the Qur'an, under the notion of "matters are judged by their intention" in the field of *Usul al-Fiqh*, in order to protect the pages of the Generous Qur'an from harm and from being scattered about<sup>143</sup>

Following the same logic, the scholars came to view printing the text favorably with the good intention of multiplying them.<sup>144</sup> The good represented by the broader dissemination of the Qur'an outweighed the bad in the acts of mechanical violence involved in binding and printing.

The new technology of photolithography would alter the process by which mushafs were printed. Initial documents recommending the printing of the Qur'an did not demonstrate a clear preference for lithography at the outset. Officials asked whether letter-block printing or photolithography would be more appropriate in order to produce a "high quality and correct" *mushaf* and, crucially, how much the venture

---

<sup>143</sup> Cevdet, *Tarihi*, 76.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

would cost.<sup>145</sup> Ultimately, they chose photolithography, a method that was less expensive and made it possible to reproduce any manuscript. Photolithography could produce exact reproductions of old and venerable manuscripts. This new technique promised, in theory, to solve the problem of reliability and accuracy since no new typesetting was involved. Printers could simply choose a venerable manuscript copied by a respected calligrapher and transform it into a printed book. Hence, photolithography enabled the linking of the manuscript tradition with the new technology. However, the importance of aesthetics should not be exaggerated. Archival evidence shows that the state took the decision to print without choosing a method beforehand.<sup>146</sup> The consideration of which method was preferable, block letters or lithography, was a secondary concern. Qur'anic commentaries and other texts had previously been printed with block letters.

In order to assuage concerns about printing the text, an announcement was appended to the 1874 edition that emphasized this linkage between the calligraphic and print traditions. Composed by Ahmet Cevdet himself, it begins, "For four hundred years, most of the copies of the Qur'an have been written with the *naskh* (Tr. *nesih*) script and many talented masters in this art have come and gone."<sup>147</sup> The announcement pays homage to the master calligraphers of the Ottoman Empire, Şeyh Hamdullah, Hafız Osman, Seyyid Abdullah Efendi, and the master whose text they

---

<sup>145</sup> BOA A.MKT.MHM 453.60 04/Ra/1290—May 2, 1873

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> Cevdet, *Tezâkir*, 128.

chose to reproduce for the first lithographed edition, Şekerzade Mehmed Efendi (d.1752). The announcement recounts that Sultan Ahmed III sent Şekerzade to Medina in order to make a copy of a renowned manuscript. Şekerzade copied this Qur'an "letter by letter" and brought the final product to Istanbul where it gained acclaim as a Qur'an of unparalleled beauty.<sup>148</sup>

The announcement links the photolithographed Qur'an with the Ottoman calligraphic tradition and connects the text in question to Medina, the City of the Prophet. It is only at the very end that the announcement mentions the new arts of printing and lithography. After journeying from seventh-century Medina through four-hundred years of Ottoman calligraphic tradition, the announcement presents a perplexing and anti-climactic statement: "On this occasion, the text was read to the Head Reciter Timur Hafız and *the errors seen therein* were corrected by the Head of the Ulama Izzet Mustafa Efendi and printed via the art that has appeared in our age, photolithography by Kolağası Hafız Ali Efendi."<sup>149</sup> After all the fanfare and authenticity conjuring, we learn that, upon examination, nineteenth century scholars found "errors"<sup>150</sup> in the venerable *muşhaf* of Şekerzade and corrected them. Whereas the preceding portion of the announcement proclaims that the text's accuracy and authority were beyond reproach, these final lines cast doubt upon the calligraphic tradition. It is interesting that scholars felt the need to question Şekerzade's text.

---

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 128-129. (emphasis added)

<sup>150</sup> 'görülen yanlışlar'



However, the ulama insisted on an inspection committee as a condition for approving the print project, giving them a role in the process.

The acknowledgement of mistakes did not end with the pre-printing correction process. Upon studying the colophons of early printed Qur'ans from the nineteenth century, Malissa Taylor found that nearly all of them contain admissions about the mistakes found in the manuscripts, for example, this passage:

The copies of the Quran al-Karim that the famous calligrapher Hafiz Osman produced in the year 1682/3 (1094 h.) have been multiplied and reproduced by photograph and have been read aloud by us from start to finish. It is certified that they contain no error in any word other than those mistakes of diacritic marks and short vowels that are shown in the table that we arranged.<sup>151</sup>

She writes, "This is not the ringing endorsement that we might have expected.

Somewhat comically, the note from the proofreaders actually contains a misspelled word, calling into question their competence."<sup>152</sup> Whereas one argument against printing had been the fear of error, the preparations for print actually *highlighted* the mistakes and insufficiencies of the esteemed calligraphic tradition that was so enshrouded in authenticity. Taylor remarks:

The rather striking irony in this case is that if there are mistakes in the 1288 (1871/2) Quran, then they appear there not because the printing was faulty but because it was accurate; its fidelity to the original would preserve everything exactly as set down by the calligrapher with hitherto unprecedented precision.<sup>153</sup>

Print and the various procedures of checking and correction surrounding it, contrary to earlier fears, contributed more to exposing error than to causing it. Oft times it had

---

<sup>151</sup> Taylor, "The Anxiety of Sanctity."

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

played a very similar role in early modern Europe, where the greater scrutiny that widely circulating printed texts received led to crosschecking and subsequent revisions.<sup>154</sup> This dynamic contributed to the development of critical editions and text criticism as a discipline.

---

<sup>154</sup> Eisenstein, *Print Revolution*, 48-49.

## ***2.6 Propagating the Word: Thwarting Print-Capitalism***

Benedict Anderson has observed that capitalism was essential in making print technology revolutionary in early modern Europe.<sup>155</sup> The Bible was the first text printed and Protestant reformers along with entrepreneurial publishers outflanked the Catholic Church with this new technology according to conventional Reformation historiography. At the outset, Bible printing was in the hands of the reformers and the private entrepreneurs, out of the control of Rome. Protestant-Humanist forces not only made political and intellectual waves across Western Europe, they also made a good profit from printing which partially funded the continuation and expansion of the socio-intellectual foment sweeping the continent.

In stark contrast, the Ottomans intentionally took the capitalism out of printing and thereby undermined its potentially divisive nature. As examined above, numerous Ottoman subjects as well as foreign businessmen engaged in the business of printing the Qur'an surreptitiously and imported copies from abroad. They showed an entrepreneurial spirit akin to that of their predecessors in Reformation Europe. The Ottoman state did everything in its power to forbid this activity, and ultimately opted to make Qur'anic publication a state managed venture.

---

<sup>155</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 43-44.

Even before the advent of printing, the Ottoman state had taken on the responsibility of providing and maintaining copies of the Qur'an for mosques, not only in the capital but across the empire. The provision of Qur'ans constituted a form of sultanic munificence, an honor akin to that of providing the shroud to cover the Ka'ba in Mecca, and to building monumental architecture and public works. Like these works, the Qur'an, as an object, possessed a kind of symbolic capital, which the state tapped into and managed. Ottoman subjects, to some extent, understood the provision of copies of the Qur'an for mosques and institutions to be a function of the state or of wealthy patrons, who usually had close ties with the state. The Ottoman archives swell with requests from remote provincial mosques and schools for copies of the Qur'an or for the repair of existing copies, and the state usually obliged such requests.<sup>156</sup>

Books were valuable items. Often times, copies of the Qur'an could even function as instruments of wealth and exchange. Ottoman subjects used copies of the Qur'an to pay off loans and even to accumulate as a form of wealth.<sup>157</sup> For example, one Christian official held several hundred copies of the Qur'an in his personal library. Whereas one might be tempted to view this evidence of a voracious appetite for mushaf collecting, in fact, these books constituted a sort of personal bank account.<sup>158</sup> Holding wealth in books rather than in cash made a great deal of sense in economic contexts subject to dramatic inflation and devaluation of currency. Another example of the

---

<sup>156</sup> BOA A.DVN. 98/73 1270; BOA I.MVL 525 23572 16/Ş/1281—January 14, 1865

<sup>157</sup> BOA A.MKT.UM 560/12 1/Za/1278—April 30, 1862

<sup>158</sup> Personal conversation with Kemal Beydilli, Summer 2007, Istanbul

Qur'an's monetary value appears in the reports of Qur'anic theft. As comical as it sounds, Ottoman thieves often pilfered these valuable objects despite their sacred status. Those caught found themselves in fetters,<sup>159</sup> imprisoned,<sup>160</sup> and given new careers as rowers on naval galleys for lengthy and undoubtedly inauspicious periods.<sup>161</sup>

Given the cost, the Ottoman state often had to provide copies of the Qur'an to subjects and institutions in various circumstances. The decision to print the Qur'an made it possible to distribute large quantities of the Qur'an across the empire for schools, mosques, and local elites on an unprecedented scale. The printing of the Arabic Qur'an in the Ottoman Empire drastically increased the distribution and accessibility of the book.

Even the provinces knew about the capital's printing ventures at an early date and sought its assistance in order to supply its new state schools. In 1871/2, the first year of Ottoman Qur'an printing, officials on the island of Crete requested one hundred full versions and four hundred Qur'anic portions for the impoverished elementary school students.<sup>162</sup> Ottoman officials in Montenegro issued a very similar petition with greater emphasis on religious necessity. For lack of books, the people of the cities Podgorica and Işbozi "had not been able to learn their religious duties and obligations and fallen into a state of ignorance."<sup>163</sup> They noted the poverty of the local residents and asked the state to provide Qur'ans and religious treatises that would teach the basic

---

<sup>159</sup> BOA A.MKT.NZD 10/M/1267—November 15, 1850

<sup>160</sup> BOA A.DVN.MHM 2-A/51 21/Ra/1262—March 19, 1846

<sup>161</sup> BOA A.MKT.MVL 108/35 7/Za/1275—June 8, 1859

<sup>162</sup> BOA I.MTZ.GR 13/427 20/R/1288—July 9, 1871

<sup>163</sup> BOA I.ŞD 34/1661, 26/S/1294—March 12, 1877

precepts and practices of Islam.<sup>164</sup> Moreover, Istanbul distributed Qur'ans for a variety of disparate cases, for example, to honor war veterans from the Russo-Ottoman conflicts as well as for active troops.<sup>165</sup>

As Sultan Abdülhamid II emphasized his title of Caliph in the Pan-Islamic campaign to unite Muslims against European colonialism, the Ottoman state used printed Qur'an as a means of proclaiming the Ottoman caliphate and winning the allegiance of Muslims across Asia. A memorandum in 1883 (1300) points explicitly to this aspect of Qur'an distribution in the Indonesian archipelago:

Since there are eighteen to twenty million Muslims on the island of Java in the Dutch colonies, copies of the Qur'an printed at Matbaa-i Osmaniye [Ottoman Press] have been sent, in the name of the Sultan, to some of the notables there with the intention of making a favorable impression. A suitable quantity of the aforementioned text will be distributed via the Governor of Batavia.<sup>166</sup>

Closer to the Bosphorus than Java, the shaykhs and nobles of the Najd in Arabia received their fair share of imperial beneficence as well. In 1889, Istanbul sent an impressive number of Qur'anic texts and other gifts to the denizens of the Najd, including two hundred full versions and eight thousand portions of the Qur'an as well as two-thousand grammars—totaling ten-thousand, two-hundred printed books. A small fortune in watches, *kafiyas*, and robes accompanied the mountain of books.<sup>167</sup>

---

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> BOA İ.DH 61791 15/L/1294—October 23, 1877

<sup>166</sup> BOA İ.HR 290.18200, 29/C/1300—May 7, 1883; BOA İ.HR 290/18200-2 10/B/1300—May 17, 1883

<sup>167</sup> BOA İ.DH v. 87416 dol. 121 27/Ca/1306—January 29, 1889

Given that this sizeable shipment was only for the Najd, the massive proportions of Ottoman distribution of Qur'anic materials come into view.<sup>168</sup>

The connection between loyalty to the Ottoman state and the presence of printed Qur'ans appears in a document from the province of Ottoman Yemen, which was re-conquered in 1871-1872. Official Muhammad Hilal Efendi drew attention to the "strange publications" and air of dissention that circulated in Yemen. He argued that there was a need for a display of sultanic beneficence in order to win the favor of the local population and thereby quell the commotion surrounding the unusual Ismaili treatises making their way around the province. Muhammad Hilal noted that in the local mosques "the copies of the Qur'an are all handwritten; there is not a single printed copy."<sup>169</sup> He also stipulated a connection between the presence of copies of the Qur'an and the level of religious observance, "However many [printed] copies there are in the local mosques, that is how much Qur'an recitation there will be."<sup>170</sup> In Muhammad Hilal's mind, there appears to have been a clear relationship between printed Qur'ans as a symbol of modernity/ imperial investment and the loyalty of Yemeni subjects to central power manifested via Sunni observance. Muhammad Hilal recommended that the sultan send printed copies of the Qur'an as a gift to the province, suggesting that beneficial repercussions will ensue for the empire. This act, he argues, will make a "favorable impression," and, secondly, "further acquaint the

---

<sup>168</sup> Ottoman envoy Muhammad Başala recommended similar gifts for the rulers of the Sudan; see Selim Deringil, "Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991), 353.

<sup>169</sup> BOA İ.DH v. 94394 dol. 122, 12/Ra/1308—October 25, 1890

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

people with the Exalted State” and advance their obedience and submission one degree higher.<sup>171</sup> This official pinned high hopes on the efficacy of printed Qur’ans from the Sultan to improve the state of religious observance, dissuade Yemenis from heretical inclinations, and enhance governance in his respective province. Whether or not these purposes were likely to succeed is less interesting than the fact that such concerns would be connected at all to printed copies of the Qur’an. The printed Ottoman Qur’an became a symbol the Ottoman Sultan’s authority and the path of Sunni loyalty in a distant province in which Zaydi Ismaili discourses posed a direct challenge.<sup>172</sup>

The political symbolism affiliated with the printed Qur’an in the nineteenth century has parallels with the transformation of calligraphic Qur’anic manuscripts in the Abbasid Empire. Yasser Tabbaa’s work demonstrates the relationship between the Sunni Revival and the shift from angular to cursive script in Qur’anic manuscripts beginning around the tenth century. He argues that the development of more legible script based upon a new recension of the Qur’an appeared as a direct response to the Ismaili Fatimid state, which continued to use the Kufic script.

The new script, with its improved orthography and the correct numeration, would have left no doubt in the mind of Muslims that they were reading one of the new orthodox recensions, certainly not a Qur’an with an aberrant reading. The canonization of the text is made clear and visible by the new canonical script, and the two processes conjoin to reaffirm the absolute control of the content and the form of the Sacred Book by the Abbasid State.<sup>173</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (University of California Press, 1993), 49-50.

<sup>173</sup> Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 43-44.



In Ottoman Yemen and elsewhere, the printed Qur'an served a similar function; controlled and distributed by the Ottoman state, and clearly identifiable from manuscript copies, the printed Qur'an was an unmistakable emblem of the Ottoman sultan and his control over the sacred text.

The Ottoman state did not run printing presses as a business in the nineteenth century, just as it had not done so in the eighteenth century. The state gave thousands of free copies of the Qur'an to poor students, economically strapped mosques, and, additionally distributed large quantities as gifts to notables across the Islamicate regions, from the Najd and Afghanistan, to Java. The state sold other copies at an intentionally low price to the populace and took care to send copies to remote provinces. In stark contrast to the print entrepreneurs of early modern Europe, the Ottoman state controlled Qur'an printing and viewed it more as a public good and political tool than a business opportunity.

While Ottoman Qur'an distribution did not make a financial profit, it did make political sense within its policies toward religious and educational institutions. Since the early nineteenth century, the centralization of state power, the creation of a civil court system, and the establishment of secular state-run schools marginalized the role of the ulama and of the madrasas.<sup>174</sup> Many members of the ulama worked in the new schools, particularly as religious teachers, but they worked within the framework of a

---

<sup>174</sup> İsmail Kara, "Turban and Fez: Ulema as Opposition," in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elisabeth Özdalga (London: New York, 2005), 164.

state organized curriculum. The new schools expanded literacy and created a new class of secularly educated subjects familiar with European learning and less beholden to the ulama.<sup>175</sup> Within this context, printed religious texts served as a means of mass distribution of Islamic knowledge, which was gradually beginning to elude the mediation of the ulama. Islamic learning has extolled the virtues of person-to-person transmission in order to ensure that the student has not only read, but also properly understood a particular text. The presence of a living, breathing teacher thereby guaranteed an interpretation within the parameters of the discursive tradition. Yet, the material fact of an increased supply of inexpensive religious books, in conjunction with an alternative school system, opened new avenues for transmission of Islamic knowledge that gradually weakened the role of the ulama.

More than simply a religious issue, Ottoman policies toward Qur'an printing reflect the concerns of Ottoman statecraft. After recognizing the difficulty of suppressing printed Qur'ans in the nineteenth century and acknowledging the demand for such texts, the Ottoman state set about printing its own editions. It distributed

---

<sup>175</sup> On literacy and reading practices see, Benjamin Fortna, "Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 21(1-2) (2002): 33-41.

them far and wide as a means to heighten and homogenize Sunni observance, provide copies for school children, and to unify Muslims behind the Ottoman Caliph.<sup>176</sup>

The printed Qur'an forms only one piece in the process of the vernacularization of the Qur'an and of Islamic literature as a whole in the late Ottoman Empire. Yet it is a crucial piece without which translation *per se* would have been of little consequence. The manuscript Qur'an translations in libraries across Turkey and the absence of any known controversy surrounding them testify to the political irrelevance of Ottoman Qur'an translation before the age of print. The printed book presupposed a far broader audience, one that reached beyond the ulama ranks and literate elites, promising to address newly educated sectors of the populace and thereby extend the reach of book knowledge to heretofore-unlettered audiences. Given the controversy stoked by a printed *Arabic* language Qur'an, which very few Ottoman subjects could understand, it is little wonder that printed Turkish translations of the Qur'an invited a new controversy.

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.; Chapter Six "Morality" in Benjamin C. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire*. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

### 3. The Rise of Turkish Commentaries on the Qur'an (1842-1908)

If the Prophet had come to this realm, he would have spoken Turkish (*Türkî*).

Yusufoğlu Abdurrahman, 1397 CE

From the eighth century to the present, the vast majority of Islamic scholars have considered Arabic the only valid language for Muslim ritual and the preferred idiom for the elaboration of Muslim law. At various points in history, Persians, most famously in the Shu'ubiya current, and other non—Arab Muslims expressed their discomfort with the dominance of Arabic language. Speakers of Turkic languages intermittently protested the hegemony of Arabic in Muslim ritual and intellectual discourse since at least the fourteenth century CE. In the realm of Islamic literature, Turkish stood a distant third to Arabic and Persian in terms of prestige. Prior to the emergence of the Ottoman dynasty in Anatolia and the development of Chagatay literature in Transoxiana, Turkic languages did not boast the level of cultivation, technical vocabulary, and extensive written traditions of Arabic and Persian. Even literate elites in Anatolia often held Turkic languages in low esteem.

Following the disintegration of Seljuk rule in Anatolia in the thirteenth century, a number of Turkic rulers held sway over small principalities in Anatolia. This era witnessed some attempts to dignify Turkish language and literature on religion as rulers wanted to understand the meaning of Islamic works. For instance, Yusufoğlu Abdurrahman of Aksaray's *İmadülsîlâm* laments the prevalent disrespect for Turkish

language and pleads for the composition of vernacular religious literature. Perceiving the inability of most Muslims in Anatolia to derive guidance from the Arabic legal works, Yusufoglu composed this work in order to teach common Turkish speaking Muslims about the elements of Islamic worship. However, Yusufoglu had difficulty finding any scholars willing to read his work.

It is unfair that they do not pay any attention to this book; they say frivolously, 'It is Turkish.'... If the book conveys worthy subjects via this medium, do not say that 'its clothes are Turkish' and make light of it as one deprived of light who says 'what is under the lamp.' Do not remain ignorant of the benefits of this book. These Turkish stories which the ulama call "Türki" and belittle are Turkish language sermon books. But this is a book of religious legal rulings. In time of need, it is common practice to express the religious rulings in another language so that the people understand, and the benefit is the same [as in any other language].<sup>177</sup>

Yusufoglu draws a connection between the vernacularization of legal texts in Turkish and the translation of the Holy Book itself, "Perhaps because the rulings of the Qur'an were made plain [in the vernacular], a Turkish language Qur'an translation appeared."<sup>178</sup> He is referring to the early interlinear renderings of the Qur'an in Old Anatolian Turkish. For Yusufoglu, the imperative of communicating vital information to local Muslims demanded the use of Turkish, and this concern outweighed the importance of prestige assigned to Arabic.

Another early attempt to validate Turkish as an Islamic language comes from the pen of Balıkesirli Devletoglu Yusuf. In the introduction to his *Vikaye Tercümesi*

---

<sup>177</sup> Yusufoglu Abdurrahman, *İmadüIslâm* in Osman Ergin, *Türkiye Maarif Tarih* (Istanbul: Osman Bey Matbaası), 5: 1604-1605. Translation is my own.

<sup>178</sup> Balıkesirli Devletoglu Yusuf, *Vikaye Tercümesi* in *ibid.*, 1605.

(1462/3), Yusuf penned verses on the translation of the Qur'an and the right to perform ritual prayer in languages other than Arabic:

<i>Bu hanife kim sahip usul Ma'nidir Kur'an dedi bir kavl ol</i>	<i>Abu Hanifa, master of jurisprudence said the Qur'an isn't the words, but the sense</i>
<i>Farsça Kur'anı caiz gördü pes Kim namazda okusun, kilsin heves</i>	<i>He viewed the Persian Qur'an as valid no less Whoever reads it in prayer, may he do it with zest</i>
<i>İle olsa her ne dilce olsa ger Lafız alet, ma'ni olur muteber</i>	<i>Wherever, in whatever language, extend! Language is mere tool, meaning is the end</i>
<i>Pes kaçan söz olsa ma'nili ögat Nola Türk ola diyen ya tat.<sup>179</sup></i>	<i>If a saying escapes them, explain it with haste Let the ones called "Turk" have a taste</i>

In support of his argument that Turkish is a valid Islamic language, Yusuf cites the opinion of early legal thinker Abu Hanifa (699-767) that permitted prayer and the limited recitation of the Qur'an in Persian. This controversial opinion of Abu Hanifa became the paradigmatic example for the validation of vernacular languages as media of ritual, scripture, and religious knowledge in both pre-modern and modern Muslim discourses. Throughout the poem, Yusuf argues that language is merely a vessel which transmits meaning. He diminishes the importance of Qur'anic Arabic per se, claiming that any idiom, even Turkish, can convey Divine speech.

Writers had a difficult time gaining respect for books in Turkish language, particularly in relation to religious matters. That is not to say that no religious works existed in Turkish. Some Sufi orders used Turkish extensively, and writers composed Islamic verse in Turkish including the Mevlid of the Prophet as well as the popular fifteenth century poem about the Prophet titled *Muhammediye*. However, in the literary

---

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 1605.

culture of the ulama, Arabic was the language of choice for Islamic genres from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Ottoman ulama luminaries Mehmet Birgivi, Ebu's-su'ud, Taşköprüzade, and Evliya Çelebi (a.k.a. Haji Khalifa) wrote their most important Islamic works in Arabic. It was far more common for Ottoman religious scholars to compose in Arabic or to translate famous works from Arabic and Persian into Ottoman Turkish. Outside of Sufi literature and popular Islamic works, Turkish did not gain renown as a language for Islamic genres like Qur'anic commentary and legal. However, the transformations encountered by Ottoman society in the nineteenth century instigated a shift toward communicating with the public and using more accessible language, trends which Islamic literature of the period also reflects.

### ***3.1 The Qur'an in the Age of Translation***

The nineteenth century witnessed a revolution in Ottoman literature on several fronts including the broad circulation of printed books, the beginning of Ottoman journalism, the emergence of the Ottoman novel, and the increased translation of European and Islamicate works into Turkish. Translation played such a key role in this period that it has been called the “age of translation.”<sup>180</sup> The initial impetus for translating Western works into Turkish had been the need to learn European military methods, science, and technology in order to defend the empire. A series of Ottoman

---

<sup>180</sup> Saliha Paker, "The Age of Translation and Adaptation, 1850-1914: Turkey," in *Modern Literature in the Near and Middle East, 1850-1970*, edited by Robin Ostle (London, New York: Routledge, 1991), 17-32.

military defeats convinced many Ottoman statesmen and literati that reform was necessary and that the acquisition of European science and martial prowess was integral to the survival of the state. Recall that Ibrahim Müteferrika had had precisely this aim in establishing the first Ottoman printing press. The dissemination of science was linked from the beginning to print and translation.<sup>181</sup> The ruling class also became interested in European history as a model for reform. Biographies of great leaders in Europe figured among the earliest printed translations in the nineteenth century, for example the Ottoman Turkish translations published in Egypt *The History of Catherine the Great* (*Katerina Tarihi*—Cairo, 1829) and *The History of Napoleon* (*Bonapart Tarihi*—Alexandria, 1833). Material and political survival constituted the earliest concerns as reflected in the printing presses of Istanbul and Cairo.

However, the translation movement in the early part of the century was not limited to history, geography, and military subjects. Ottoman Turkish translations of Islamic texts held an important place in the literary trajectory of the period. Historical and literary scholarship has largely neglected this phenomenon and focused on the shift toward Western genres.<sup>182</sup> The publication of Islamic literature in Ottoman constituted a sea change in terms of access to traditional religious knowledge. Not only was this literature in Ottoman Turkish, but it was also composed largely in a clear, direct, even simplified Turkish prose accessible to readers with low levels of literacy.

---

<sup>181</sup> Johann Strauss, "Turkish Translations from Mehmed Ali's Egypt: A Pioneering Effort and Its Results," in *Translations: (Re)Shaping of Literature and Culture*, ed. Saliha Paker (Istanbul: Boğaziçi University Press, 2002), 112.

<sup>182</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006), 118.



The spread of public education created a new class of students and literate low-level bureaucrats who became consumers for literature of this type. As the number of literate Muslims increased, the difficulty of religious texts gradually decreased. A genre of easy-to-read, Turkish language Islamic literature emerged that was clear, condensed and increasingly available for purchase at book shops toward the latter quarter of the century.<sup>183</sup>

The florescence of translation, vernacular Islamic literature and the development of simpler Turkish prose affected the manner in which late Ottoman readers approached the Qur'an. Whereas oral commentary or Arabic and Persian commentaries had mediated the interpretation of the Qur'an before the nineteenth century, increasingly Turkish language printed-books became a viable means of understanding the text for Ottoman Muslims.

### **3.1.1 Translating Qur'anic Commentaries**

Turkish speakers in Cairo began translating European literature into Turkish and publishing it at Mehmet Ali's Bulaq Press during the 1820s and 1830s. An influential population of Turkish speakers inhabited and ruled Cairo in the nineteenth century. Mehmet Ali himself hailed from the Ottoman province of Yanya and knew

---

<sup>183</sup> Johann Strauss, "Who Read What in the Ottoman Empire (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)?," *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 6 no. 1: 47.

very little Arabic. Cairo's "age of translation" into Turkish preceded a similar trend in Istanbul by at least two decades.<sup>184</sup>

In 1842, the Bulaq Press published a Turkish translation/commentary on the Qur'an titled *Tefsir-i Tıbyan* by Mehmet el-Antebi (d.1698/9). Commissioned by Sultan Mehmet IV (r. 1648-87), *Tefsir-i Tıbyan* is a translation of the Arabic language commentary *al-Tıbyan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Damascene scholar Hıdır b. Abdurrahman al-Azdi (d. 1371). *The World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an* regards *Tefsir-i Tıbyan* as the first printed Turkish translation of the Qur'an. Yet that judgment depends on how one defines "translation." Though *Tıbyan* contains a great deal of translation and paraphrase, it also includes considerable extra-Qur'anic material: occasions of revelation, oral reports from the Prophet, as well as West Asian narrative traditions known as Hebrew folklore. In many ways the *Tıbyan* bears closer resemblance to a traditional commentary than a translation. El-Antebi does not present the text as an equivalent to the Qur'an or attempt to reproduce Qur'anic style. On points of disagreement among classical commentators, he often lays out the various positions and opinions of respected authorities. *Tefsir-i Tıbyan* represents an intermediary genre between conventional Qur'anic commentary and literary translation, which for the sake of convenience I refer to as "commentary-translation."

Yet the text is more than merely a translation of a commentary. Recep Arpa's study of *Tıbyan* reveals that el-Antebi made substantial changes and additions to al-

---

<sup>184</sup> Strauss, *Turkish Translations*, 111.

Azdi's text to the extent that it should be considered a mixture between original composition and translation. El-Antebi incorporated additional material from other commentaries, expanded at length on narratives, and provided his personal opinions on some topics that directly contradicted those held by al-Azdi. "For example, on the issue of knowing the meaning of the symbolic [or "vague"] verses [*mutashābihāt*, Q 3:7], whereas al-Azdi says that only God is able to know their significance, el-Antebi defends the ability of those who are well versed in knowledge to know their meaning," writes Arpa.<sup>185</sup> Such adaption was characteristic of Ottoman scholarship and it challenges contemporary notions of authorship and translation.

Composed in the seventeenth century, *Tıbyan*'s Turkish prose is antiquated, though remarkably clear given its age. The clarity and longevity of *Tıbyan* point to an important trajectory in the history of Ottoman translation. Qur'an translation represents a different translation lineage from literary, scientific, and historical translations. Whereas the translators of Western literature and histories strove to render these works into the elaborate Ottoman Turkish of the literati (*inşa*), the Qur'an was translated and commented upon in a simpler, more direct style of Turkish prose. This trend reflects the phenomenon observed by Andre Lefevere whereby authors translate central religious or cultural texts in a more literal, conservative fashion than

---

<sup>185</sup> Recep Arpa, "Ayıntabi Mehmed Efendi'nin Tıbyan Tefsiri Ve Osmanlı Toplumundaki Yorum Değeri" (MA thesis, Uludağ Üniversitesi, 2005).

other forms of literature.<sup>186</sup> Additionally, it suggests that such works were designed to be more accessible and used in oral teaching.

*Tıbyan*'s publication marks the transmutation of Turkish language commentary-translation from manuscript into print medium. *Tıbyan* was printed eleven times in the late Ottoman period. *Tıbyan*'s reproduction and popularity in the nineteenth century reveal that many Ottoman Muslims of the period derived their knowledge of the Qur'an from a seventeenth century source. While vernacularization and other tectonic cultural shifts were occurring, the content of religious literature of the period remained remarkably contiguous with the past. In some ways, *Tıbyan* was outdated for Ottoman men of learning who followed European science. It contains examples of pre-scientific cosmology and legendary extra-Qur'anic narratives, for instance, describing the planet Jupiter as "a woman that had been stoned for her sins."<sup>187</sup>

### 3.1.2 *Mevakib*: A Work of the New Ottoman Man

Other works bear more directly on the predicament of the nineteenth century. Ottoman statesman and Ambassador İsmail Ferruh Efendi (circa 1747-1840) composed the most notable "new" commentary-translation of the Qur'an for the nineteenth century Turcophone world. Yet again this work is difficult to classify in terms of genre

---

<sup>186</sup> See the introduction in Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures : Essays on Literary Translation, Topics in Translation ; 11*, (Clevedon ; Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1998), 7.

<sup>187</sup> Taha Akyol, "Ramazan, İslam Ve Çağımız," *Milliyet*, October 15 2004.  
<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2004/10/15/yazar/akyol.html>

as it is an adaptive translation of a fifteenth century Persian language *tafsir* work. It remains within the intermediary genre of commentary-translation.

İsmail Ferruh's biography merits examination because he marks the emergence of a new kind of Muslim author that became increasingly prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A high level statesman of considerable learning and wealth, Ferruh did not have the madrasa education conventionally required for the composition of Qur'anic commentary or other genres of Islamic literature. Rather he was an autodidact in matters Islamic with eclectic intellectual interests. Ferruh was a genteel layman who entered Islamic conversations through the practice of translation, a craft which bore no prerequisites other than knowledge of the languages involved. Writers of similar background and social state would attain increasing influence as commentators on Islamic matters over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century as newspapers and periodicals provided a new forum for public expression.

İsmail Ferruh's family hailed from the Crimea. He was the son of a wealthy merchant and became a rather successful trader in his own right. He entered the employ of the government as Overseer of the Imperial Storehouses.<sup>188</sup> Ferruh belonged to the generation of reform during Sultan Selim III's reign known as *The New Order* (*Nizam-i Cedid*, 1793-1808). The modernization of the Ottoman army constituted the

---

<sup>188</sup> Mehmet Alaadin Yalçınkaya, "İsmail Ferruh Efendi'nin Londra Büyükelçiliği Ve Siyasi Faaliyetleri (1797-1800)," in *Pax Ottomana: Studies in Memoriam Prof. Dr. Nejat Göyünç*, ed. Kemal Çiçek (Ankara: Sota-Yeni Türkiye, 2001), 383.

primary thrust of this reform effort, but it also included the development of Ottoman foreign embassies and measures to bring Western sciences to the empire. Among various bureaucratic posts, Ferruh served as Ottoman Ambassador to England between 1797 and 1800, thereby becoming one of very few Ottoman statesmen to have spent an extended period in a European country. He participated actively in English social life and reportedly joined the Freemasonic Lodge, an affiliation that has caused some controversy in recent years. Some conservative scholars find it difficult to accept that a Freemason could have produced such an influential and conservative rendering of the Qur'an.<sup>189</sup>

We learn of Ferruh's Masonic affiliation from the memoir *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe during the years 1799, 1800, 1801* by Mirza Abu Talib Khan (1752-1806) of Lucknow. Abu Talib made İsmail Ferruh's acquaintance in London and wrote on his initiation into the Masonic brotherhood:

I was frequently urged by several of the Freemasons to become one of their brethren; but as I was not perfectly convinced that their principles were comfortable to my mode of thinking, I begged leave to decline the honor. They however prevailed upon effendi Ismael, the Turkish ambassador, and Effendi Yusuf, his secretary, to embrace their tenets; and both these Mohammedans were initiated into all the mysteries of Freemasonry.<sup>190</sup>

Upon his return to Istanbul, Ferruh established The Beşiktaş Scientific Society, a group dedicated to the discussion of Western scientific and philosophical topics as well as

---

<sup>189</sup> Author Ducane Cündioğlu has questioned Ferruh's relationship with Masons albeit in a journalistic fashion. See, Ducane Cündioğlu, "'Mason' Olduğu Söylenen Kur'an Mütercimi (1)," *Yeni Şafak*, October 3 2000. <http://yenisafak.com.tr/arsiv/2000/ekim/03/dcundioglu.html>; ----, "'Mason' Olduğu Söylenen Kur'an Mütercimi (2)," *Yeni Şafak*, October 6, 2000. <http://yenisafak.com.tr/arsiv/2000/ekim/06/dcundioglu.html>

<sup>190</sup> Abu Taleb Khan, *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe During the Years 1799 to 1803*, trans. Charles Stewart (New Delhi: Sona Publications, 1972), 98.

literature. This assembly of learned gentlemen gathered in Ferruh's Bosphorus-side mansion in the Istanbul neighborhood of Ortaköy.<sup>191</sup> Some historians have called this society the first Freemason lodge in the Ottoman Empire. However, this designation is questionable.<sup>192</sup> It is more probable that the group's interest in European science and philosophy as well as Ferruh's alleged involvement with Freemasonry in London led some to call it a Masonic lodge. It is unclear whether or not it had any formal status as a lodge. Several intellectual luminaries of the period frequented this circle including the polymath and official historian Şanizade Atullah.

The reign of Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839) did not bode well for groups perceived as secret societies. First and foremost, Mahmud persecuted the Bektaşî Sufi Order because of its ties to the Janissary corps, which he abolished in 1826. Mahmud's reign combined centralization with the importance of Sunni identity, conformity, and stringency of religious practice. This sultan banned the Bektaşî Order, confiscated its properties, and exiled or executed its leaders.

İsmail Ferruh's Scientific Society was not a Bektaşî lodge. However, given its profile and association – real or imagined – with Freemasonry, it remained vulnerable to charges of Bektaşîsm. “Bektaşî” became a catch-all slander for social and religious deviancy, applied to non-Sunnis as well as to liberal intellectuals. At this sensitive

---

<sup>191</sup> Cevdet Paşa, *Cevdet Tarihi*, XII: 184.

<sup>192</sup> The Freemasons of Turkey trace their history back substantially further than this supposed lodge and do not make mention of İsmail Ferruh in their list of famous Turkish Masons. However, the matter is complicated by the fact that the archives of Ottoman lodges were controlled by foreign obediences prior to 1909 and many were destroyed in various wars and upheavals. See, Celil Layiktez, *The History of Freemasonry in Turkey*.

([http://eng.mason.org.tr/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=31](http://eng.mason.org.tr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=31));

junction, a personal rivalry erupted between a member of the society, Şanizade, and a well connected bureaucrat, the Head Physician Behçet Molla. One of Şanizade's friends made a joke about Behçet's incompetency for the position of Head Physician since he was primarily trained as a historian. This joke somehow reached Behçet's ear and was erroneously attributed to Şanizade. Behçet pulled the strings of power and obtained Şanizade's dismissal from the position of official historian. Furthermore, he accused the Scientific Society of being a Bektâşi group. The group was disbanded and several of its participants were exiled to various parts of the empire. The state exiled Şanizade to the provincial town of Tire in Western Anatolia where he died shortly thereafter. Initially exiled to the Anatolian city Bursa, İsmail Ferruh's exile was commuted to Kadıköy, a suburb of Istanbul, due to the fact that he was working on a Qur'anic commentary.<sup>193</sup> Ahmet Cevdet saw the accusations as baseless and implies that Ferruh's participation in a pious project served as evidence that he was not a religious deviant and therefore lightened his sentence for involvement with the society.<sup>194</sup>

İsmail Ferruh was known as a "learned man of literary talents."<sup>195</sup> He composed a treatise on logic titled *Risale fi'l-mantık*, which was never published. Moreover, he possessed a high level of expertise in Persian language. Ferruh tutored the famous poet Süleyman Fehim Pasha, who in turn taught the language to Ahmet Cevdet Pasha.<sup>196</sup>

---

<sup>193</sup> Cevdet Paşa, *Cevdet Tarihi*, XII: 183.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Thomas Naff, "Reform and the Conduct of Ottoman Diplomacy in the Reign of Selim III, 1789-1807," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83, no. 3 (1963): 304.

<sup>196</sup> Richard Chambers, "The Education of a Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Alim, Ahmed Cevdet Paşa'," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4, no. 4 (1973): 457.



Ferruh's *Mevakib* is an adapted translation of the Persian language Qur'anic commentary *Mawahib-i 'aliyya* by Kamal al-din Husayn b. 'Ali al-Kashifi (d. 910/1504-5).<sup>197</sup> Ferruh's choice of this particular commentary appears somewhat strange given that it had already been translated into Turkish by Abu al-Fadl Muhammad b. Idris Bidlisi (d. 982/1574-5).<sup>198</sup> However, Ferruh did not undertake this project in order to bring a fifteenth century Qur'anic commentary into Turkish for the first time. Rather, he intended to create an accessible commentary based upon *Mawahib* that would be meaningful to people in his own day. Ismail Ferruh made a conscious effort to create a text that spoke to a broader swath of readers than the conventional literature written by men of his pedigree and stature. The introduction to the work elucidates his desire to make the Qur'an accessible to the common people (*avam*).

Since the days of my youth, I passed my time studying most of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Qur'an commentaries. Since most of these—particularly those in Turkish—have been elucidated and expressed in a word-by-word fashion, it has been a difficult matter for the common people to bring together, make sense of, and connect the meaning of these texts. Despite being poor in perception, it has long been my desire to make accessible and to expand only what is beneficial by way of an abridged translation of a commentary, to organize the meanings of the noble verses as a text, in the brilliance of Nishapur,<sup>199</sup> completely setting them forth and appending them as best as possible, both to make understanding easy for those who are neither familiar with nor conversant in the science of Arabic and in a manner that will facilitate the complete recitation of the Qur'an from the *mushaf-i šerif* which is included for those who want to do recitations. Even if the dimensions and scope of my house of dreams is

---

<sup>197</sup> He is better known as Ḥusayn Wa'iz al-Kashifi.

<sup>198</sup> *EI* "Kāshifī, Kamāl al-dīn Ḥusayn b. 'Alī": "the *Mawāhib-i 'aliyya* is a shorter commentary on the Qur'ān, composed in 897-9/1491-4 and dedicated to 'Alī Shīr Nawā'ī, from whose name the work's title is derived. It is also called *Tafsīr-i Ḥusaynī*, after the author. The book has been lithographed several times in India (Storey, i, 13), Iran, and printed in four volumes in Tehran 1938-50. There is a Turkish translation by Abu 'l Faḍl Muḥammad b. Idrīs Bidlīsī (d. 982/1574-5) and also an adaptation, *Mewākib tefsīri*, by Ismā'īl Ferrukh Efendi (d. 1256/1840), Istanbul 1959."

<sup>199</sup> A reference to the city where Kashifi lived part of his life.

poor, [I gain encouragement from] the prophetic report, “ *al-umūr marhūna bi-awqātiha*,” that is, *matters are subject to their times*.<sup>200</sup>

Lacking the credentials of a madrasa education, Ferruh cites his immersion in Qur’anic commentaries since his childhood to bolster his credibility. The “word-for-word” works in Turkish refer to the interlinear translations or glosses that often gave only the meanings of words and phrases which were not linked in grammatically consistent sentences. Such works often assumed that the reader understood Arabic to some degree. İsmail Ferruh wanted to present a coherent, flowing text that could be easily understood by a reader with no knowledge whatsoever of Arabic. Moreover, he hoped that the format at would also allow for the Arabic text to be used in recitation.

The combination of a translation and a text for recitation suggests a linkage between cognition and ritual that was somewhat novel for this period. For non-Arabic speakers, the act of ritual recitation typically stands apart as an activity separate from the study of the meaning of the Qur’an in commentaries. The most common format of the exegetical genre was not conducive to recitation because often the single word or single verse constituted the unit of analysis, disrupting the flow of the Qur’anic text.

Ferruh continues,

In this work, I intended and inclined toward transmitting and transforming, in the manner described above, the Qur’an commentary of Husayn Wa’iz titled *Mawahib* from the Persian language to eloquent Turkish. The author began to write the translation with little capacity, depending on the assistance and aid of the subject’s easy nature. Furthermore, even though I took the aforementioned commentary as a basis, I also

---

<sup>200</sup> Kamal al-Din Husayn b. ‘Ali Kashifi, *Mevakib: Tercüme-i Tefsir-i Mevahib*, trans. İsmail Ferruh Efendi (Dersaadet: Matbaa-i Amire, 1865), 2.

included the commentaries of *Tibyan*, Baydawi, *Kashshaf*, and Khazin<sup>201</sup> for comparison and agreement, the occasions of revelation of the verses, and the narratives with which some of the commentators embellish their pages of expression and elucidation in order to set forth the meanings of the verses. I have chosen to compose this in succinct, coarse Turkish (*Turki*) avoiding the subtleties of the *literati* in order to facilitate the understanding of the common people and make it easy to consult, which is the fundamental goal. It has been titled *Mevakib* because it accompanies *Mawahib* its source.<sup>202</sup>

There is some tension in Ferruh's stated intention of translating into first "eloquent" or "pleasant" (*azab al-beyan*) as well as "coarse" (*kaba*) Turkish. The former adjectives seem to suggest the possibility of Turkish being more eloquent than Persian as he juxtaposes the two unequally, "from Persian language to *eloquent* Turkish." It may be read as a statement on the comparative value of Turkish language vis-à-vis the language of poetry and refined expression, Persian, from which Ottoman divan literature drew many models and much inspiration. The reference to "coarse" Turkish speaks not the general status of the language but rather to the style that Ferruh has chosen for this particular work: simple prose that those with basic literacy can read, and potentially also a style of Turkish that is easy to understand orally as the text could have been read aloud to unlettered audiences at mosques or Sufi lodges.

İsmail Ferruh completed *Mevakib* in 1830, but, for reasons unknown, it was not published until 1865 at the Matbaa-i Amire in Istanbul, where it was reprinted in 1870 and 1879.<sup>203</sup> Thereafter, *Mevakib* was thrice printed in the margins of *Tefsir-i Tıbyan* and

---

<sup>201</sup> A reference to *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Jalil: Lubab al-ta'wil fi ma'ani al-tanzil* by Khazin al-Baghdadi, 'Ali b. Muhammad,(d. 1341).

<sup>202</sup> İsmail Ferruh, *Mevakib*, 2-3.

<sup>203</sup> Süleymaniye Library holds a copy dated 1253/1837-8, from Cairo, Süleymaniye - Hüsrev Paşa - 297.2 000006 and another dated 1246/1830-1, Süleymaniye Library 297.211- Veliyüddin Efendi-77

again by itself in 1905. A publishing house in Istanbul printed a modernized version in the Latin alphabet in 1959 and authors commonly cite the work in print and electronic media.<sup>204</sup>

While the Bulaq editions (1841-2, 1849) of the *Tıbyan* were exported to and circulated in Istanbul in the 1840s, Istanbulite publishers printed *Tıbyan* for the first time in 1866-7 and, thereafter, it became the most commonly printed and circulated version in Istanbul. At first glance, it seems surprising that *Tıbyan*, a one-hundred and fifty year old commentary/translation in archaic Turkish would circulate more widely during the nineteenth century than İsmail Ferruh's *Mevakib*, which he composed in the 1820s. On the spectrum between the genres of commentary and translation, *Tıbyan* more closely resembles a commentary whereas *Mevakib* is closer to translation. In comparison with *Mevakib*, *Tıbyan* is more comprehensive and considerably longer. It includes a greater deal of information from classical commentaries and narrative traditions. For Ottoman Muslims acquainted with the classical *tafsir* tradition, *Tıbyan* would have appeared more familiar than *Mevakib*. Secondly, its age may have given it more rather than less desirability despite the archaism of idiom. *Tıbyan* had circulated in manuscript form for over a hundred years and in printed form since the 1840s. This longstanding presence in literate circles may have even conferred a sense of reliability. The joint editions of *Tıbyan* with *Mevakib* in the margins appear to have resolved the problem of linguistic archaism, which seems to have accelerated toward the end of the

---

<sup>204</sup> Süleyman Fâhir, ed., *Kur' âni Kerim Ve Meâli Mevâkib Tefsiri. Eser: Merhum İsmail Ferruh Efendi* (Istanbul: Bütün Kitabevi, 1959).

century. Finally, authorship may have played a role in *Tıbyan*'s popularity. Its author Mehmet el-Antebi was a member of the ulama, whereas İsmail Ferruh Efendi never held a position in the *ilmiye* ranks, and had no advanced formal training in Islamic fields of knowledge. These two works constituted key sources of reference for Turkish literati into the first quarter of the twentieth century.

### ***3.2 Rise of the Commoners: Qur'anic commentary for the public***

In addition to *Tıbyan* and *Mevakib*, a number of Turkish language commentaries and translations on particular chapters of Qur'an appeared throughout the nineteenth century. These texts, in the main, followed the pattern of adapted translations from Arabic and Persian works set by the *Mevakib* and *Tıbyan*, yet they often included original translations of the Qur'anic text which they placed before the explanation and commentary. These translations shed more light on the middle and latter portions of the century than *Mevakib* and *Tıbyan* given that most were composed during those periods, whereas the aforementioned works were simply reprinted long after their composition.

After 1850, these succinct Turkish language commentary-translations appeared in print with increasing frequency. The theme of accessibility reverberates in the introduction and style of these works, echoing Ferruh's ethos from the 1820s. These commentaries also reiterate the importance of comprehension versus mere recitation, whose value in and of itself diminished in Islamic discourse. The theme of rational

comprehension became more and more prevalent toward the end of the century with the expansion of Ottoman public education, the development of the press, and the spread of Muslim modernism.

Pre-nineteenth century translations of *tafsir* works often identified the madrasa students or Sufi novices as the intended audience. However, in the nineteenth century authors began to designate the public at large as the imagined readership. Johann Strauss points out that some translations of literary and scientific works remained in manuscript form and were “destined for a select readership of statesmen and government officials who had commissioned them.”<sup>205</sup> He has aptly dubbed this category of texts “translation[s] of restricted access” and argues that printing these works for general consumption was revolutionary.<sup>206</sup> A parallel class of restricted access translations of Islamic works circulated among ulama and Sufi circles.

In the seventeenth century, İsmail Ankaralı (d.1042/1631) wrote a Turkish commentary on the *Fatiha* with the intention of writing an accessible Turkish language work for a limited audience: “This exquisite book and noble compilation has been written and composed in *Türkî* so that it will be useful to all the students and easy for the novices to understand.”<sup>207</sup> However, Ankaralı, a scholar and commentator on Jalal al-Din Rumi’s *Masnavi* could not refrain himself from “adorning and embellishing” the work with quotes from the saints and the ulama. He cites long passages of Persian

---

<sup>205</sup> Strauss, *Turkish Translations*, 114.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-115.

<sup>207</sup> Ankaralı İsmail Efendi, *Fatiha Tefsiri: Futuhat-i Ayniye* (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Ahmed Kamil, 1912), 5.

poetry every two or three pages, often using them to make an argument or prove a point. The ease of reading in Turkish that he intended for his students no doubt suffered due to his copious embellishments, but to his great credit, the Turkish passages are remarkably lucid even today. İbrahim Gözübüyükzade Kayserivi (d. 1834) wrote for a similar limited audience in the early nineteenth century in his translation of Qur'an chapter 93 titled *Tercüme-i Süre-i Zuha*.

Upon the repeated requests from a group of pure pupils among the students and with the petition of the two houses of the secure and noble Nile, this lowly servant began to translate Sura Duha (Q 93), Sura Kadr (Q 97), and Sura 'Asr (Q 103) in a Turkish of unrivaled clarity.<sup>208</sup>

Apart from translations of restricted access, there had been intermittent efforts to address to the commoners in religious literature, as in Yusufuğlu's aforementioned work *Umdet'ül-islam*. Such works did not necessarily assume that the masses could read; rather, they took it for granted that such works would be read aloud in mosques and reading circles. It was more common for imams or shaykhs to orally translate books for their audiences, than for works to be composed in the vernacular and directly address the commoner.

The shift from restricted access translations to what we might call public Islamic texts written for the median Ottoman reader occurred only with the evolution of a print-based public sphere in the last third of the nineteenth century. The first seventy years of the century had indeed witnessed exciting new developments—the

---

<sup>208</sup> İbrahim Gözübüyükzade (Kayserivi), *Tercüme-i Süre-i Zuha*, ed. Mahmud Raci (Istanbul: Ali Şevki Efendi Matbaası, 1870/1 ), 2.

beginning of religious printing, the first Ottoman Turkish newspapers, and the translation of European literature—yet these advances were relative. Compared to international standards, the quality of printed works, publishing capacity, accessibility and diversity of reading materials remained rather low. The true blossoming of the Ottoman press in terms of technical refinement and simplification of language did not come until the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1908). In this period, the Sultan promoted the technical refinement of the Ottoman press in order to create a positive image of the Ottoman Empire abroad. A publisher in the city of İzmir named Ahmet Sabri remarked on the stimulus and development of the publishing industry during the period:

After the Sultan's encouragement that we bring the national literary efforts to a level that will reflect well upon the Ottomans, the purveyors of our craft began to show advanced works that will reflect well upon us in very little time. Are not the works found every day in the field of publication indications that prove our claim as to the degree of progress in our country in the finest of all the crafts, the craft of printing--works pertaining to literature, which deserves to be characterized as the chief teacher together with the positive effects in the religious sciences and various arts and especially in ethics?<sup>209</sup>

The state recognized that printing ventures remained in an unsatisfactory state and the Sultan actively promoted its evolution. These efforts resulted in technically higher quality products, larger distributions, and more diverse publications. For instance, prominent publisher Ahmet İhsan describes in his memoirs how the Palace subsidized

---

<sup>209</sup> Kıtapçı Ahmet Sabri in Ömer Naci (Muallim), *Hulasat'ül-İhlas*, ed. Ahmed Sabri (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Abu al-Diya, 1889), 3-4.



the printing of photographs in the paper *Servet-i Funun*, a significant technical advance at the turn of the century.<sup>210</sup>

However, the Hamidian regime was autocratic and tightly controlled the press through censorship. Accordingly, opposition forces established presses abroad. Despite the Pan-Islamic discourse of the Hamidian regime, in many ways his regime continued and deepened the reforms instigated by the Tanzimat which promoted the weakening of the ulama. This fact is reflected in its press policy. While projecting himself as the Caliph around the world, the Sultan's government took special care to remove books dealing with Islamic law from circulation, many of which were burned in the furnace of an Istanbul hamam.<sup>211</sup> Meanwhile, opposition intellectual Rıza Tevfik (1866-1949) pointed out that works on Western science, materialism, and evolution by Ludwig Büchner, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and John Stuart Mill "were sold freely in the Istanbul bookshops."<sup>212</sup>

In conjunction with the expansion of public education in this period, the progress of the press served as the midwife to a more pervasive and broader reaching public sphere. It was within this sphere that Islamic texts came to address the commoners in the vernacular with rising frequency.<sup>213</sup> *Littérateur extraordinaire*,

---

<sup>210</sup> Ahmet İhsan Tokgöz, *Matbuat Hatıralarım*, ed. Alpay Kabacalı, 1. baskı. ed., Anı Dizisi 13. (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 1993).

<sup>211</sup> Fatima Demirel, "Yeni Bulunan Belgelerin Işığında II. Abdülhamid'in Yaktırdığı Kitapların Bir Listesi," *Müteferrika*, no. 2 (2005): 3-24.

<sup>212</sup> Deringil, *Well Protected*, 54.

<sup>213</sup> Kemal Karpat points out that a similar trend occurred in the scholarly debates held in the sultan's presence during the month of Ramadan (*huzur dersleri*). Whereas these contests were traditionally held in Arabic, Sultan Abdülhamid II ordered the scholars to converse in Turkish so that a larger portion of

official historian, and translator Muallim Ömer Naci (1850-1893) composed a clear, concise Turkish commentary in 1889 on Sura al-Ikhlās (Q 112) in which he notes with regret that the knowledge concerning this important Qur’anic chapter has remained inaccessible to most believers. He writes that the books of the ulama which comment on Ikhlās have been seen by the “elites in the umma” but have remained “veiled from the masses.”<sup>214</sup> Naci still found it necessary to justify this novel type of composition given that non-Arabic Qur’anic interpretation remained something out of the ordinary. He argues that the simplified style of commentary embodied in his work should be “considered among the duties that govern a monotheist’s zealous pen, being a service in the same category” as literature on the inimitability of the Qur’an (*i’jāz*) and “Divine mystery” (*muamma ilahi*) that explicate the meanings of the Qur’an.<sup>215</sup> As intimated by the publisher, the elegance of layout and visual clarity of the type in the work are indeed testaments to advances in Ottoman printing. In conjunction with the simple, direct Turkish prose, this *tafsir* evokes clarity on multiple registers and exemplifies the new species of late nineteenth century commentary works.

A profound level of simplicity and popularization of Qur’an interpretation appears in Mehmet Fevzi Kureyşizade’s *The Beneficial Essences in the Chapter Waqī’a* [Q 56]

---

the audience could understand. See Karpat’s important work *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 337-338.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 4. Naci wrote an entire work on the “divine enigma”, Muallim Naci, *Muammay-ı ilahi yahud bazı süver-i Kur’aniyenin evailindeki huruf-ı tehecci* (Istanbul, 1884).

(*el-Havasü'n-nafia fi tefsir-i sureti'l-Vakia*). Kureyşizade (d. 1900) served as the mufti of the Thracian city Edirne. Written in very plain style, the popular inclination of the piece at times reaches the level of condescension. Though addressed to the commoner, it defends itself against the potential critiques of the elite:

Though the noble meaning of the generous verse has been made clear up to this point, I saw it appropriate to make clear only the gist and meanings such that they would settle nicely in the minds of the commoners and the *hoi polloi* that are not versed in the letter and spirit [of the text]<sup>216</sup>

This passage is a self-defense mechanism of the author, who feared that more adept readers might confuse the simplicity of the text with that of his own intelligence. Kureyşizade makes it clear that his knowledge is not limited to the succinct exposition in this particular work, but rather that he has descended into simplistic explanations for the benefit of inferior minds. Kureyşizade seems to have felt that composing Islamic literature in the popular register held the potential to hurt his reputation as a competent scholar.

Nevertheless, the potential benefits of vernacular interpretation outweighed the occupational hazards for Kureyşizade. He came to argue, like many others in his generation, that merely reciting Qur'anic verses did not suffice for the predicament of contemporary Muslims.

Even if anyone recites the aforementioned Qur'anic chapters with a pure ablution and has correct beliefs but does not understand their meanings, it will be accepted by His Exalted Grace and Generosity, yet it cannot be denied that the state and effect in reading it knowingly, in a summarized fashion will be different.<sup>217</sup>

---

<sup>216</sup> Kureyşizade Mehmet Fevzi, *el-Havasü'n-nafia fi tefsir-i sureti'l-Vakia* (Istanbul, 1896), 7.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Our author does not specify exactly what would change in the “state” and “effect” upon a cognizant reading of the Qur’an. He merely acknowledges that it possesses an important difference, which he perceived to be self-evident and edifying.

Therefore, I desire to give, in the path of guidance, to our brethren whose tongues are free from blame and calumny and whose blessed hearts are pure from envy and enmity and who take refuge in and know the power of the God who commands "Verily God will pay the reward of the good," and reading the noble verse, "Give me an honest tongue among the others" (Q 26:84) by composing the noble commentary titled *The Beneficial Essence in the Chapter Waqī'a* making plain in the Turkish language the noble prophetic reports, illustrious works, and reports which are transmitted about the uniqueness of the aforementioned noble verses and the time of reading.

The author addresses the work to “our brethren,” which appears to indicate the general Muslim readership. This interpretation is suggested by the fact that the author felt the need to convince his readers of the merit of reading it whereas Sufi disciples and madrasa students would be obliged to read any work their master put in front of them, and elite patrons already had an interest in reading the work given that they commissioned its composition. In contrast, Kureyşizade perceived the need to attract the interest of the general readership and he did this through the use of an enticing literary “hook.” Before even stating the purpose of the work in the introduction the author is quick to point out that whoever recites *Sura al-Waqī'a* “regularly at the appointed time will never be poor ...”<sup>218</sup> At the bottom of the same page, the pertinent prophetic reports are cited reaffirming this talismanic property of the *sura*. Protection from poverty and misery must have presented an enticing prospect for Ottoman Muslims during a period of severe economic hardship in the late nineteenth century.

---

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

In addition to the appeal to a general audience and incentives geared toward its needs, the structure and style of *el-Havas* demonstrate a profound vernacularization, addressing a lower stratum of literacy and education than most works. The Turkish prose is remarkably simple. Structurally, the author explains and re-explains the meaning of the verses repetitively in ever easier-to-understand formats. The first section is titled: *Explanation that makes clear the gist in succinct fashion*. He, then, titles the following section, *Summary of the external meanings of the verses mentioned up to this point*, pursued by yet another review portion that recaps the main points. Kureyşizade made sure that he did not leave anyone behind through constant summary, simplification, and review. Moreover, he explains basic Islamic parlance throughout the work.

Upon the reprinting of İsmail Ferruh's *Mevakib* in 1902, the expansion of the audience and of the public sphere appears in the publisher's note, which explains the decision to reprint the work in connection with the demand, not of the *literati*, but of the public (*amme*).

This book is being printed in stately fashion because İsmail Ferruh Efendi translated and transmitted this *tafsir* into eloquent Turkish and during the period of translation, like Kashifi, he confirmed and consulted the reliable books and achieved a commentary that was eloquent and also gained the *appreciation and good will of the public*<sup>219</sup>

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the “public” and the “commoners” began to matter as readers, no longer mere listeners, of Qur'anic interpretation in a manner

---

<sup>219</sup> Mehmet Antebi and İsmail Ferruh, *Tefsir-i Tıbyan ve Tefsir-i Mevakib* (Dersaadet: Şirket-i Sahafiye-yi Osmaniye, 1902), 2. (emphasis added)

unprecedented for Ottoman history. In terms of literacy, the traditional elite/commoner dichotomy gradually broke down.

The conventional categories of authorship became outmoded as well. The composition and compilation of Qur'an exegesis historically pertained to the ulama corps. As surveyed above, beginning with İsmail Ferruh Efendi, a number of non-ulama authors, typically state functionaries, entered the realm of Qur'an interpretation, most often as "translators" or compilers of classical *tafsir* works. The authorship of works on Qur'anic hermeneutics came to reflect the bifurcation of the Ottoman education system into *madrasas* and state schools as well as the larger cultural divide between *alaturca* and *alafiranga*. Some authors had madrasa backgrounds, others studied in state institutions or with private tutors, some worked in the ulama ranks, others as administrative bureaucrats.

The idea that Muslims needed to understand the meaning of the Qur'an became far more prevalent in this period. However, it was not without its skeptics. Ali Suavi (1839-1878), a member of the ulama and journalist, conceded that it was beneficial to know the meaning of the Qur'an but questioned the necessity of direct study and rejected the argument that most Muslims were ignorant of the text. He contended that everyone, even jurists, know the Qur'an *indirectly* by means of various intermediaries; namely, the meaning of the Qur'an has been divided up and disseminated through doctrinal pamphlets, works on ethics, biographies of the prophet, and sermons in clear language that everyone can understand. Therefore, all Muslims with or without education, know the meaning of the Qur'an indirectly through

these various avenues. Suavi admits that there is virtue in knowing the meaning according to the order and arrangement of the Qur'an itself for those who have the time to do so. Yet, he implies that this direct study remains secondary because the Qur'an has pervaded Islamicate culture in so many ways that one cannot avoid confronting its meaning just by being a part of Muslim society.<sup>220</sup> Suavi's notion of the pervading force of the Qur'an in general culture resembles Bassnett and Lefevre's concept of the cultural "image of the text" which often has more impact on society than the actual contents of the text itself.<sup>221</sup>

The new importance of Turkish as a language of mass communication occasioned meditation on the Ottoman Muslim's relationship to Arabic. Ali Suavi explores this topic in the treatise *The Turkish Language and Script (Lisan u Hatt-ı Türki)*, written in Paris in 1869. Central to this tract is the question of whether Arabic is the language of the Arabs or the *lingua Islamica*, common to all Muslims. Suavi argues that Arabic is the language of Islam, not the language of the Arabs, since most of those who use the Arabic language are either non-Arabs or Arabized Muslims (*musta'rab*) and because Turks and Persians, not Arabs, actually organized Arabic grammar.<sup>222</sup> Suavi writes that his Ottoman ancestors "did not see Arabic as a foreign language,"<sup>223</sup> as Arabic, along with Turkish and Persian, was an organic part of Ottoman scholarly and literary culture for the preceding generations. Only with the vernacular turn in

---

<sup>220</sup>Ali Suavi, "Lisan u Hatt-ı Türki" *Ulum* (Paris: 1869) in Ducane Cündioğlu, *Türkçe İbadet* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 1999), 159.

<sup>221</sup>Bassnett and Lefevre, *Translation, History*, 9-10.

<sup>222</sup>Suavi, "Lisan u Hatt-ı Türki," in Cündioğlu, *Türkçe İbadet*, 157-8.

<sup>223</sup>*Ibid.*, 158.

Ottoman textual practices and with the beginning of the nationalist view of languages as the property of particular peoples did Arabic begin to appear “foreign.”<sup>224</sup>

For Suavi, the importance of Arabic as the language of ritual and scripture served a pragmatic purpose, namely, to support Muslim unity. “This is not a religious matter,” he writes “but rather an attempt to avoid differences of opinion and unite all the Muslim peoples under one Word (*kelime-i vahide*).”<sup>225</sup> For Suavi, the language of scripture and worship is not important for religion *per se*, but rather for the political unity of Muslims. The Arabic language is the tie that binds all Muslims together, and severing that tie holds the potential to divide the multilingual, multiethnic Muslim *umma* and weaken it yet further vis-à-vis Europe. His claim that the medium of Arabic is not *religiously* significant marks a sharp departure from the prevalent notion that Qur’anic Arabic is an inimitable and sacred language, possessing intrinsic value. Suavi’s views represents a pragmatic turn in the view of Islamic language during a period of political, military, and economic weakness in the Ottoman Empire and Islamdom as a whole. His political understanding of Arabicity foreshadowed Rashid Rida’s similar position on the matter by several decades.<sup>226</sup>

---

<sup>224</sup> Anderson, *Imagined*, 36.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.* 160

<sup>226</sup> Rashid Rida, "Tarjumat al-Qur'an," *al-Manar* 11 (1908), 268-74; On Rida, see Chapter Three.



### ***3.3 Beyond Commentary: The (Re)Opening and Limits of the Translation Debate***

In addition to the increased use of Turkish in commentary works, the nineteenth century witnessed the appearance of debate on the actual translation of the Qur'an. Translation (*tercüme*) represented the next step in increasing accessibility and fostering an approach to religion that prioritized rational comprehension. Opinion on the matter was far from unanimous; as on sundry other cultural issues, views on the validity and desirability of Turkish language renderings of the Qur'an bifurcated into those who defended the integrity of the Arabic-based textual tradition and those who viewed this tradition as outmoded and incommensurate with a modern society whose primary language was Turkish. The question of which language could serve as the medium of Islamic knowledge constituted a crucial intellectual question for the period. As literacy, Turkish-language media, and European modes of epistemology spread, the role of Arabic as a sacred language – one in which most Ottoman subjects did not have functional literacy—came under increased scrutiny. Furthermore, the weakening of the ulama corps over the course of the nineteenth century, the guardians of and adepts in Arabic-language Islamic texts, eroded an important basis of social and political support for Arabic.

Nevertheless, under the reign of Abdülhamid II, strict control of the press, particularly over religious publications, made it impossible to publish a work under the title Qur'an translation (*Kur'an tercümesi*). While the sultan permitted the publication of Turkish language Islamic texts, including Qur'anic commentary, he was not prepared to allow the publication of outright translations. Abdülhamid II did not want to aggravate

the ulama, whom he feared, and, additionally, did not want to alienate his Arab subjects, many of whom perceived Turkish translations as a threat to the authority of the Arabic Qur'an and equated the abandonment of Arabic language as the abandonment of Islam. Along with the impossibility of publishing a translation, the published conversations on the matter during this period are limited due to the fact that serious public discussion about Islamic subjects was severely curtailed.<sup>227</sup> What we have are only glimpses into the published thought of writers within a restrictive public sphere.

On the question of whether translating the Qur'an was possible, it is clear that, at least in conversation, some of the intelligentsia had begun to argue for its necessity in the late nineteenth century. However we know about them mostly via counter arguments. To publicly voice such a controversial view in the Hamidian period, one that stood at odds with the goals of the sultan's campaign for Pan-Islamic unity, would have been a risky venture. Responses to pro-translation arguments appear in the writings of several well-known nineteenth century authors.

Prolific novelist, publisher, and popular writer, Ahmet Midhat (1844-1912/3) engaged the subject in his extensive monograph defending Islam, *Good Tidings: The Truthfulness of Muhammad (Beşair: Sıdk-ı Muhammediye, 1894)*. The book takes the format of a conversation between Midhat and his friends. One of the author's interlocutors notes that among the Muslims of the world, Arabic speakers constitute a

---

<sup>227</sup> Hanioglu, *Brief History*, 140.

minority and suggests that this demographic imbalance will likely lead to a growing desire to translate the Qur'an.<sup>228</sup> In response, Ahmet Midhat recognizes that the translation of the Qur'an is an important issue in contemporary Islam and suggests why no decision or conclusion on the matter of translation has been reached:

Firstly, since Qur'anic eloquence is inimitable, it is impossible to translate exactly. Secondly, since many words in Arabic have no equivalent in the target language it would be necessary to change these words, and it is expected to open the door to distorting the Noble Qur'an from translation to translation. Thirdly, some rulings are made by analyzing and evaluating the words of heavenly books, changing these words in a translation will close the door to these methods.<sup>229</sup>

This is a reasonable summary of prevalent legal thinking on the matter with which he appears to concur. However, Ahmet Midhat recognizes that the printed vernacular commentaries have already come close to making Qur'an translation a reality, "The commentaries like the *Mevakib* and *Tıbyan* are so succinct that they appear more like translations than commentaries."<sup>230</sup> Additionally, he acknowledges the existence and legitimacy of interlinear translations.

The Persians even created interlinear texts with one line of Arabic and one line of Persian. However, no one has been granted permission to do a translation without the Arabic text accompanying it or to regard this translation in the place of the Book of God (*Kitabullah*). Not giving permission to do so has been thoroughly established.(Midhat 1894)<sup>231</sup>

Referring to Persian interlinear translations, Ahmet Midhat appears to be unaware that the same type of texts exist in the Turkish language, dating back to the fourteenth

---

<sup>228</sup> Ahmet Midhat, *Beşair: Sidk-ı Muhammediye* (Istanbul: Kirk Anbar Matbaasi, 1894), 97. This piece of data, the minority of Arabic speakers in the Umma, became the launching pad for many pro-translation arguments in subsequent years.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

century. It is likely that such texts were translations of limited access used by particular ulama circles, and Ahmet Midhat and the broader Ottoman readership were unaware that they existed. Only the printed works like *Tıbyan* and *Mevakib* were broadly known. It is notable that Ahmet Midhat views the translations as permissible as long as they include the original Arabic text and are not regarded as being the Qur'an itself. This opinion is not commonly expressed by legal scholars, though interlinear translations were tacitly accepted in Iran, Transoxiana, and Anatolia.

Nevertheless, Ahmet Midhat also had ambivalent feelings about translations, which he viewed as a genre of commentary. Even the commentary tradition, he argues, is not as reliable as the prophetic reports (*ḥadīth*) because no one understood the Qur'an as well as the Prophet himself. Accordingly, he displayed more enthusiasm for the project of Hacı Zihni Efendi to translate prophetic reports into Turkish.<sup>232</sup> Commenting on the atheist writer Beşir Fuad (1852-1877) who committed suicide, Ahmet Midhat attributed his tragedy to not knowing Arabic or Persian, being ignorant of Islamic knowledge, and reading French translations of the Qur'an. "One can imagine the grave consequences of such deficiencies in a Muslim and Ottoman," wrote Midhat.<sup>233</sup> The stain of translation looms.

Historian and statesman Ahmet Cevdet Pasha held that fully translating the Qur'an was a formal impossibility, but demonstrated a reserved support for its necessity. In an Arabic-Turkish lexicon on Qur'anic vocabulary, he writes that "in

---

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-3.

<sup>233</sup> Berkes, *Development*, 293.

order to appreciate the refinement of the Qur'an, one must be quite skilled in Arabic. Each person enjoys (*zevk*) the Qur'an according to his or her ability and skill in Arabic.” Yet he adds that: “It is not possible to truly translate the Qur'an into other languages.”<sup>234</sup> In these brief sentences, Cevdet illustrates the conundrum that the Qur'an as a linguistic miracle presents for those unversed in the Arabic language: one can only appreciate the Qur'an according to his or her proficiency in Arabic; yet translation cannot effectively transmit the miracle contained therein. A daunting linguistic chasm stands between the Qur'an and the Muslim unlettered in Arabic.

After recognizing the imperfection of translation, Cevdet makes a case for his Turkish lexicon of Qur'anic vocabulary. First, he notes that “some notable figures in the past have translated [the Qur'an] into Turkish so that those who do not know Arabic can superficially understand the primary meanings.”<sup>235</sup> By recognizing that translations only conveyed preliminary or superficial meanings, Cevdet avoids claiming that a translation could stand in the place of the Arabic Qur'an, while at the same time, affirming their value. Ahmet Cevdet felt that existing translations like *Tıbyan* had begun to encounter trouble transmitting even the superficial meaning because of their archaic language. This phenomenon prompted him to “set about translating the Qur'an in the Turkish dialect that is current in Istanbul,”<sup>236</sup> that is, to write a lexicon of

---

<sup>234</sup> Ahmet Cevdet, *Lugat-i Kur'aniye* “Introduction” in Süleyman Tevfik, *Tercümelî Kur'an-ı Kerim* (Istanbul: Maarif Kütüphanesi-Ahmed Kamil Matbaası, 1927), 4.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid. It is noteworthy that Cevdet uses the term translation (*tercüme*) to describe Turkish re-writings of the Qur'an instead of commentary (*tefsir*) or synopsis (*meal*). These latter terms were far more acceptable for referring to Turkish renderings during the Hamidian period.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

Qur'anic terms. Rumors circulated that Ahmet Cevdet was actually translating the Qur'an. However, it is probable that such reports conflated this unfinished lexicon with a translation of the Qur'anic text.

Despite the caution demonstrated by Ahmet Cevdet and other late Ottoman supporters of translation, there was in fact an attempt to translate the Qur'an in the late nineteenth century by an important scholar and linguist. Born in the city of Frasher in the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire (modern-day Albania), Şemseddin Sami (1850-1904) was an ardent proponent of elevating Turkish language to new levels of importance and refinement in the late nineteenth century. His most famous works include a Turkish language encyclopedia and a Turkish dictionary entitled *Kâmus-i Türki* (1899).<sup>237</sup> In the introduction to the dictionary, Sami stresses the need for bringing Turkish up to par with other literary languages in terms of possessing a comprehensive dictionary and grammar. He laments the fact that despite having a literary tradition of one thousand years, Turkish speakers have neglected to produce a proper literary apparatus and have thereby failed to preserve the language, evinced by the massive accumulation of Persian and Arabic vocabulary at the expense of Turkish words. Moreover, on the basis of grammar and syntax he argues that the tongues spoken in “the East,” Central Asia, and in “the West,” Anatolia and the Balkans, are not different languages, but rather different dialects of the same language—Turkish.<sup>238</sup>

---

<sup>237</sup> Şemseddin Sami, *Kamus'ül-alam* (Istanbul: Mihran Matbaası, 1889); Şemseddin Sami, *Kamus-i Türki*, (Istanbul: İkdâm Matbaası, 1899).

<sup>238</sup> Şemseddin Sami, *Kamus-i Türki* (Istanbul: Çağrı Yayınları, 1987), 2.

Furthermore, the language commonly known as “Ottoman” (*Osmanlıca*) should properly be referred to as “Turkish” (*Türkçe* or *Türki*).

Though he is well-known for his lexicographic and encyclopedic works, few have taken note of Şemseddin Sami’s Qur’an translation project, most probably because it never saw the light of day. Numerous sources indicate that he translated some portion of the Qur’an into Turkish and incurred significant persecution as a result. The Religious Examination Committee denied his application to publish the work and ultimately the manuscript version was destroyed by order of the Ottoman state. A critic, Samih Rifat (1874-1932), lambasted Sami, who was not an Islamic scholar, for attempting to undertake a translation project of such magnitude for Ottoman Muslims, inquiring, “Did you forget that three days ago your book [a Qur’an translation] was rejected in a very strange fashion by the Religious Examination Committee (*Meclis-i Tedkikat-ı Şer’iyye*) and that you were warned not to enter conversations like this after quickly learning a bit of Arabic?”<sup>239</sup>

As to the fate of Sami’s translation, Yusuf Akçura (1876-1935), prominent Turkist, wrote, “Sami Bey even undertook a translation of the Qur’an, but because the Ottoman government definitively prohibited this venture, the portion which he translated had to be destroyed.”<sup>240</sup> A defender of Sami, Vala Nurettin, claimed that Şemseddin was “condemned to the death penalty” because he undertook a Qur’an

---

<sup>239</sup> Samih Rifat, *İkdam* 4 Ocak, (1314) in Agah Sırrı Levend, *Şemsettin Sami* (Ankara: Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1969), 99.

<sup>240</sup> Yusuf Akçura, *Türk Yılı* 1928, 354, in Levend, 99.

translation, but that the government later pardoned him.<sup>241</sup> A conversation, real or imaginary, reported by Yunus Nadi (1880-1945) portrays another version of the affair.

The students of a prominent religious scholar, Hafız Refi Efendi, asked him one day:

-Teacher, are you sad?

He began:

-Don't ask children. Since yesterday, I've been choked up with anger.

-Oh Teacher, why?

-How can I not be angry? Did not an imbecile named Şemseddin Sami translate the Qur'an? Not only that, this buffoon translated the Qur'an and gave it to the Ministry of Education. The ignoramuses over there rather liked this translation, said "congratulations," and showered the idiot with compliments. They recommended the translation for publication and distribution. Nevertheless, the book came to me because someone with common sense said that the Shaykh al-Islam's Office should take a look at this translation.

-You read it and found it to be bad, Teacher?

-What do you mean *did I read it*? Would I ever read something like that?

-Then what did you do, Teacher?

-What am I going to do? I decided to destroy the translation and give that ignorant buffoon eighty paddle strikes in the ass.<sup>242</sup>

Whether Sami was condemned to death or to a disciplinary paddling or neither, it is certain that he fell afoul of the powers that be. Sultan Abdulhamid II placed Sami under house arrest. He was forbidden to receive guests from 1899 onward and spent the remaining years on scholarly projects until his death in 1904.<sup>243</sup> Abdülhamid II's meticulous control of the press and its energetic censors effectively prevented the publication of Sami's Qur'an translation, and stifled public discussion on the matter and of Islamic subjects in general.

---

<sup>241</sup> Va-Nu [Vala Nurettin], "Şemseddin Sami Sinsi bir Türk düşmanı mıydı? Haşa," *Akşam* (15 Teşrinievvel 1943), 3.

<sup>242</sup> Yunus Nadi, "Türkçe Kuran, Türkçe İbadet," *Türk Dili* 25 Ocak (1932)

<http://www.kemalistler.net/printview.php?t=13002&start=0&sid=6c18867fd6e2b755abb8d3d191128e23>

<sup>243</sup> Çiğdem Balım, "Sāmī , Shems ül-Dīn Frāsheri." *El*.



Given the constrictions of the Ottoman public sphere, the most radical affirmation of Turkish as a religious language and argument for translation came from a dissident abroad named Mehmet Ubeydullah Efendi (1858-1937), a madrasa-trained, turban-clad author, translator, spy, adventurer, and Young Turk partisan. In a work published in Cairo titled *The Peoples of Islam*, Ubeydullah contended that in order to truly teach and understand religion, Turks would have to translate both the Qur'an and the prophetic reports into Turkish.

In order to spread public knowledge we Turks need to correct and reform on a path that is particular to our way of teaching. However, in order to learn and understand religion, we are probably obligated to translate the Qur'an and the Hadith completely into Turkish. No one can prevent those among us who want to learn religion via Arabic. However, we categorically cannot accept that religion be restricted only to Arabic. It is keeping religion restricted to Arabic language which leads those who do not know Arabic and want to learn religious truth(s) to try to read and understand the Qur'an from French and English.<sup>244</sup>

In addition to supporting translation, Ubeydullah took the matter one step further and propositioned the idea of a "Turkish Qur'an." That is, he not only argued for a Turkish translation of the text, but also for the production of a Turkish version that might not only explain, but potentially replace the original text for prayer, study, and sermons. The potential for substitution is precisely the contingency that the ulama had labored so diligently to prevent. Mehmet Ubeydullah championed the cause of the Turkish Qur'an with zeal and preached the virtues of Qur'an translation to all who would listen. During his exile in Egypt, Ubeydullah first acquainted, and horrified, Egyptian scholar Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) with the idea of a Turkish Qur'an.

---

<sup>244</sup> Rafiq al-'Azm, *Kıyam-ı İslam*, trans. Mehmet Ubeydullah (Cairo, 1324), 157-158.

Beyond the political implications, a true shift in the media of Islamic communication had occurred, and Turkish attained new dignity as a language with the potential to convey the holy. A profound and far-reaching vernacularization of Islamic literature and Qur'anic commentary occurred over the course of the nineteenth century. The notion that Turkish was a language of its own and the idea that it could serve as a medium of religion became more and more appealing to the late Ottoman literati. Though outright "translations" were prohibited, Turkish language commentaries and renderings of Qur'anic verses appeared in print with increasingly frequency at the turn of the twentieth century.

The spread of public education, the evolution of the Ottoman press, and the assimilation of modern European epistemologies and literary genres cultivated a public far more inclined to learn about Islam and the Qur'an through texts. The decline of ulama prestige, furthermore, diminished the desirability of studying with the living custodians of the interpretive tradition.<sup>245</sup> Yet the Hamidian public sphere had clear limitations, and Qur'anic vernacularization could not proceed beyond its textual-political boundaries. Ubeydullah's assertion of a "Turkish Qur'an" was both revolutionary and deviant; it required not only a textual, but a political revolution for that assertion to transcend the hushed conversations of scattered political dissidents and shape the religious imaginary of the Ottoman Turkish public sphere.

---

<sup>245</sup> On the decline of madrasas and ulama standards, see Amit Bein, "The Ulema, Their Institutions, and Politics in the Late Ottoman Empire (1876-1924)" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2006).

## 4. Comprehension and Unity (1908-1922)

واعتصموا بحبل الله ولا تفرقوا

Hold fast to the rope of God and do not become divided

Qur'an 3:103

Oh Believers! Embrace together the Rope of God, the sublime religion Islam, obey the commands of God and the Prophet, keep away from what they forbid, never separate, let your hearts and souls always be bound tightly together.

Trans. of 3:103, Mehmet Akif, 1910

In the early twentieth century, Muslim thought on Qur'an translation dealt with two competing concerns: the imperative of comprehending the meaning of the Qur'an and, second, the need to defend Muslim unity against nationalist movements and European colonialism. While translating the Qur'an became attractive as a means of facilitating comprehension, it tended to work against the cause of unity, dividing Turkish and Arab Muslims as well as reformists and traditionalists over a symbolic and controversial issue. Not translating the Qur'an presented an inverse prospect, that of maintaining unity while hindering the expansion of comprehension that reformers advocated as crucial to the revival and progress of Muslim society. Rationales for and against translating the Qur'an became linked increasingly to this tension between comprehension and Islamic unity. Theological and linguistic arguments about Qur'anic inimitability and technical difficulties of translation persisted, but they did so in the

shadow of concerns about Muslim political survival and the strained alliance between Turks and Arabs in the face of European power. The political consequences of translation acquired prominence in the late Ottoman public sphere, recalibrating discussions of Qur'anic inimitability to the concerns of revival and unity. The rise of nationalist thought, and in particular, nationalisms with linguistic emphases, deepened differences between Turkish and Arab reformists on the issue of translating the Qur'an. Turkists began to argue for the necessity of translating and reading the Qur'an in Turkish, and Arabists came to defend Qur'anic Arabicity and inimitability with new zest.

#### ***4.1 Unity via Arabic***

Arabist thought developed first among Christian Arab communities during the nineteenth century via Arabic literary societies, cultural associations, and missionary colleges. A variety of Romantic linguistic nationalism that viewed language as the soul of the nation, Arabism cast the Arabs as a people bound by the Arabic language and culture. Arabists took pride in the historical accomplishments of Arabs and highlighted literary achievements. Though many were Christian or secularist, Arabists held up the Qur'an as the pinnacle of Arabic language and made the Qur'an a symbol of Arab national identity.<sup>246</sup> The Egyptian modernist movement led by Muhammad Abduh and

---

<sup>246</sup> Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 125.

Rashid Rida adopted Arabist discourse, combining its Romantic vision of Arab history and language with a program of Islamic reform based on fresh engagement with the Qur'an and Hadith, the revival of *ijtihad*, and modernization of state and society. They also adopted the Arabist view of the Qur'an as a distinctively Arab text and argued for an Arab-led revival of Islam.

Born in Syria, Muhammad Rashid Rida became one of the best-known and most influential Muslim intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Rida was a disciple of the Egyptian reformist thinker Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), with whom Rida established the journal *al-Manar* (*The Lighthouse*) in Cairo. This Arabic-language publication became the vanguard organ of Muslim Modernist thought and enjoyed circulation throughout the Muslim world. A proponent of *ijtihad* and unification of the legal schools, Rida was also an ardent advocate for propagating Arabic language and a stalwart opponent of translating the Qur'an.

Around the turn of the century, conversations among Turkic Muslims about translating the Qur'an, in speech and in print, began to perturb Rida. It was an ulama trained Ottoman citizen from the Anatolian city Izmir, Mehmet Ubeydullah, who introduced the idea of a Turkish Qur'an to Rida.<sup>247</sup> Exiled to the Hijaz by Abdülhamid II, Ubeydullah escaped to Cairo and published a work arguing that spreading “public knowledge” and proper understanding of religion necessitated the complete

---

<sup>247</sup> Cündioğlu, *Türkçe Kur'an*, 27.

translation of the Qur'an and Hadith.<sup>248</sup> In 1908, a Turkic Muslim in the Russian Empire, Shaykh Ahsan Shah Ahmad al-Samari, wrote an inquiry to Rashid Rida on the legitimacy of translating the Qur'an in which he refers to a passage from Istanbulite writer Ahmet Midhat discussing the unresolved issue of translating the Qur'an.<sup>249</sup> He then describes the Russian Empire context:

As for our Turkic and Russian men of letters, they insist on translating it. They argue that claiming that the translation of the Qur'an is not permissible is tantamount to saying that it must remain incomprehensible. So they hold the opinion that translating it is obligatory. It is now being translated in the city of Kazan and the translation is being published serially. Also Zayn al-'Abidin Haji al-Bakawi, one of the volunteer fighters in the Caucasus, is insisting on translating it into the Turkic language. It is our hope, your Excellency, that you will give consideration to this issue.<sup>250</sup>

Rashid Rida responded to this inquiry with a lengthy fatwa published in *al-Manar* on May 30, 1908. Rida used this fatwa to reply to the rising chorus of voices that promoted translations, particularly Turkish translations, of the Qur'an. For Rida this trend threatened to displace the inimitable revealed text and open a Pandora's box of ethnic and linguistic divisions in Muslim Umma.

The possibility of such divisions conflicted with the Salafi vision of Muslim rival, in which the Arabs and Arabic played the lead role. Against the tide of European military and economic power, Rida advocated the revival of the Muslim umma led by the Arabs and unified through the Arabic language.

---

<sup>248</sup> Ubeydullah, *Kıvam-ı İslam*, 157-158.

<sup>249</sup> Ahmet Midhat, *Beşair*, 98-99.

<sup>250</sup> Muhammad Rashid Rida, "Tarjumat al-Qur' an," in *Fatawa al-Imam Muhammad Rashid Rida* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1970), 643. Translation by Mohamed Ali Mohamed Abou Sheishaa, "A Study of the Fatwa by Rashid Rida on the Translation of the Qur'an," *Journal of the Society of Qur'anic Studies* (2003), <http://www.quranicstudies.com/article84.html>

To care for the Arabs and to strive to revive their glory is the same as work for the Muslim union, which was only obtained in past centuries thanks to the Arabs, and will not return in this century except through them, united and in agreement with all other races. The basis of the union is Islam itself, and Islam is none other than the Book of God Almighty, and the Sunna of his prophet, prayer and peace be upon Him. Both are in Arabic. No one can understand them properly unless he understands their noble language.<sup>251</sup>

Rida's vision of reforming the political body of Islam was a revival of the Arabism of the early Muslim empires. Under the Arabs and united in Arabic language, he held, Islam had risen to greatness and established a flourishing civilization. He emphasized that linguistic unity was an essential component in the success of Islam. However, this unity ceased when the non-Arabs "pounced on their thrones, and the non-Arab ulama issued opinions that permitted worship, recitation of the Qur'an, and remembrance during salat in non-Arabic languages."<sup>252</sup> Muslims had neglected the importance of using a common language, which distanced non-Arabs from the message of the Qur'an and allowed divisions to persist among Muslim peoples. It was essential, Rida consistently argued, for Muslims to learn and propagate the Arabic language as a basis of communal unity and as a means to understanding the Qur'an. He went so far as to argue that learning Arabic was obligatory for every Muslim.<sup>253</sup>

For Rida defending the Arabic Qur'an was pivotal to the preservation of any possibility for unity among Muslims and the political ideal of a single Umma ruled by a

---

<sup>251</sup> "Madaniyyat al-'Arab," *Al-Manar* 3 (8 July 1900): 289-293 in Mahmoud Haddad, "Arab Religious Nationalism in the Colonial Era: Rereading Rashid Rida's Ideas on the Caliphate," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 2 (1997): 257.

<sup>252</sup> Muhammad Rashid Rida, "Bab al-asila wa-l-ijaba al-diniyya," *Al-Manar*, 4 (1901), 496.

<sup>253</sup> Muhammad Rashid Rida, "Wujub Ta'lim al-'Arabiyya 'Ala Kull Muslim," *Al-Manar*, no. 14 (1914): 589-592. Rida encountered much opposition to his idea that propagating Arabic was a religious imperative, and he dismissed his opponents as imitators who simply followed their legal schools and did not independently evaluate the proof for his unconventional argument. Rida, *Bab al-Asila*, 497.

single Caliph. Without agreement on the language of the most fundamental and universally recognized text — the Qur'an itself — the chances for collaboration on education, governance, and resisting imperialism appeared impossible. Rida accented and fleshed out the political rationale for opposing Qur'an translation to an unprecedented extent — the preservation of the sacred Word and the political hope of Muslim majority lands were co-terminous.

Rida viewed the desire to translate the Qur'an as a mark of Muslim negligence to sufficiently explain its meanings to people in their own languages.<sup>254</sup> For Rida and most reformist intellectuals, greater understanding of and engagement with the Qur'an formed a key component in reviving Islam and strengthening Muslim peoples. Whereas some saw translation as an ideal means to this end, Rida viewed it as a path to misunderstanding and disunity. For him, the division of Muslims into nations was a sign of wavering faith, and this lack of faith caused some Muslims to be content with a translation in their own language rather than the original. He wrote, "This wavering is one of the effects of Europe's political and civil struggle against Muslims. It allured us to be disunited and divided into different races, each of which thinks that its life lies within it, but which is none other than the death of all."<sup>255</sup> Linked to European aggression, translation was a step in precisely the wrong direction. Rather, Rida urged Muslims to make translation unnecessary by reviving Arabism.

---

<sup>254</sup> Rida, "Tarjumat," 643.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 643.



The obligation now facing the advocates of Islamic reform is to strive to restore Muslim unity to what it was among the early generation of Muslims, which was the best of all Muslim generations. In doing so they can make use of modern educational methods and make the study of Arabic compulsory in all Muslim schools and reviving Islamic knowledge in an independent way, not restricted by the view of the authors from past centuries, which differed in nature with this age in their material and political conditions. However, now we see that some among us, who are infatuated with European policies, are helping it [Europe] sever the remaining Islamic ties of unity by encouraging racial nationalism to the extent that some of them are trying to free their peoples from the need for the Revealed Qur'an.<sup>256</sup>

For Rida, Qur'an translation aided and abetted European attempts to colonize Muslim lands. The translation of the Qur'an and abandonment of the revealed text epitomized division into nations and weakening of Pan-Islamic ties.

In addition to his political rationale, Rida also opposed Qur'an translation on linguistic and theological grounds. Rida defined translation as the understanding of a translator, who may or may not be correct,<sup>257</sup> asking rhetorically, "How can one person make his interpretation a creed for an entire nation?"<sup>258</sup> Since a translation is not the actual text revealed to Muhammad, Rida sees translation of the Qur'an as unreliable for the performance of independent legal reasoning. As translations made *ijtihad* impossible, Rida offered the novel perspective that using translations of the Qur'an constituted an act of imitation (*taqlīd*), arguing that "the Qur'an prohibited imitation in religion and denounced the imitators. Deriving religion from the translation of the Qur'an is imitating its translator, therefore it is a deviation from the guidance of the

---

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 649-650.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 644.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 648.

Qur'an and does not follow it."<sup>259</sup> Because of this prohibition of *taqlid*, Rida held, those who depend on a translation cannot fulfill the description of the believers that appears in the Qur'an: *Say: 'This is my way. I call to God with sure knowledge, I and whoever follows after me.'*<sup>260</sup> Rida interprets this verse to mean that God obliges Muslims to use their minds. Translations are invalid "because doing independent reasoning from a translation is imitation and therefore cannot be considered Islamic."<sup>261</sup>

Translation contained other spiritual pitfalls as well. In Rida's view, one who knows the language of the Qur'an and the other requisite fields for the practice of Qur'anic interpretation would be rewarded for attempting to interpret and putting into practice what he understands, whether or not he errs. Those who rely on translation could not expect to be spared punishment for their errors since they depend upon an unreliable source.<sup>262</sup> Furthermore, Rida warns that translation limits the range of possible meanings to a single meaning and deprives readers of the potential for new understandings. The Qur'an's guidance and knowledge was constantly renewing itself, "inundating the reader according to his preparation and wisdom."<sup>263</sup> New wisdom and secrets might appear to contemporary readers that did not become manifest for previous generations. However, if translated, the text will only yield what the

---

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 644.

<sup>260</sup> KI 12:108

<sup>261</sup> Rida, *Tarjumat*, 644.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 645.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

translator has understood, denying subsequent generations the ability to profit from new discoveries yielded by the inimitable Arabic *naẓm*.<sup>264</sup>

Translation also posed the danger of distortion. If the Qur'an were translated into Turkish, Persian, Hindi, Chinese and other languages, then there will definitely be discrepancies between them "akin to those between the different translations of the Old and New Testaments among the Christians."<sup>265</sup> Seeing such contradictions in these texts, Rida questions how Muslims could wish to subject the Qur'an to distortions and dissimilarities. Unlike the Qur'an, Rida notes, a translation was not protected from alteration.<sup>266</sup>

Moreover, Rida argues that some aspects of the Qur'an are simply untranslatable. As an example, he refers to the verse, "And We send the fertilizing winds (wa arsalnā al-riyāh lawāqiḥa)." (Q 15:22)<sup>267</sup> He points out that the translator might render this verse in the metaphorical sense that some commentators have suggested, namely, that the mention of the wind and the clouds with the occurrence of rain represents the male impregnating the female and the occurrence of a child afterward. If one translated it this way, then the reader would not understand the literal sense of the verse. Consider the possibility, Rida continues, that the translator cannot find a word for "lawāqiḥ (seeds)" that fulfills both the literal and metaphorical meanings. Such a translation would restrict readers to one understanding and impede

---

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 647.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 645.

them from understanding the literal sense “that the wind is actually “lawāqih” because it carries pollen from male trees to feminine ones.”<sup>268</sup>

Citing the prominent Sunni scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Rida notes that some other aspects of the Qur’an are equally untranslatable, for instance the Asma al-Husna, the names of God. In *Warding off the Masses from Theology*, al-Ghazali writes that translating the Divine Attributes is not permissible because they number among the *mutashābihāt* mentioned in 3:7. Therefore, Rida held that translating the Divine attributes amounted to blasphemy (*kufr*).<sup>269</sup> Again referring to al-Ghazali, Rida writes that Persian, Turkish, and other languages lack equivalents to some Arabic words and that the translator who uses his own understanding to fill in the gaps may induce the reader to hold beliefs not intended by the Qur’an. Even Arabic words with Persian equivalents may be misleading because they may be used metaphorically in one language but not in another. Likewise, some words may be homonyms in one language and not in the other. All these pitfalls make perfect translation impossible.<sup>270</sup> Shifting the focus from meaning to effect, Rida adds, “The linguistic arrangement (*nazm*) has a profound effect on the soul that cannot be conveyed by translation.”<sup>271</sup> Why then, Rida inquires, would Muslims exchange the power of the Arabic text for translations?<sup>272</sup>

Advocating comprehension via a return to the sacred sources, but rejecting Qur’an translation, Rashid Rida’s vision for non-Arab Muslims was to maintain the

---

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 645.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 646.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 647.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

pedagogical status quo: Uneducated ordinary Muslims should, “memorize *Surat al-Fatiha* and some short *suras* to recite them in prayer; interpretations of these should be translated for them. In addition, some verses should be read to them in religious lessons and interpreted to them in their own language, as is the practice of many of non-Arab Muslims, even in China.”<sup>273</sup> Rida simply urged the ulama to fulfill their duty to explain the text to the people, a duty they had neglected. Religious scholars, on the other hand, must learn Arabic, understand the Qur’an independently, and refer to the exegetical tradition.<sup>274</sup>

Vis-à-vis the Qur’an, Rashid Rida and the Arab Salafis opted decisively for preservation and unity via the Arabic original with comprehension as a secondary concern. The program suggested for non-Arabs, traditional pedagogy or learning Arabic, did not hold the prospect of ushering in broad comprehension. Rather than mass comprehension, Rida’s answer to the dilemmas facing Muslims was to preserve the Qur’an in its original language and to propagate that language to eliminate linguistic and ethnic differences among Muslims.<sup>275</sup>

Likewise, some Turkish Muslims held Arabist views, advocated the propagation of Arabic language among Turks, and opposed Qur’an translation on theological and

---

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 648.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> It is important to note that Rida’s opinion appeared at an early stage of Turkist thought before the revolution of 1908. At the time of composition, published Turkish translations of Qur’anic commentary existed, but no complete translations of the Qur’an had been published. Rida responded, therefore, not to actual texts, but rather to the idea and potentiality of Turkish language translations of the Qur’an.

political grounds. The journal *Sebilürreşad* argued for more attention to Arabic as opposed to French, which was widely taught in schools.<sup>276</sup> A writer for the journal, Ahmed Naim, argued that it was obligatory to love the Arabs above all others, “for their Islamic zeal, for their racial affinity to Muhammad, for their language being the language of the Kur’an, and for the sake of our gratitude to them for having brought Islam.”<sup>277</sup>

The Islamic scholar and two-time Shaykh al-Islam (1919, 1920), Mustafa Sabri (1869-1954), was the most outspoken Turkish opponent of Qur’an translation. Sabri opposed Turkish translations as well as Turkish language *tafsirs* of the Qur’an. He did not accord much value to common Muslims’ understanding of Islam and doubted their ability to understand properly on their own. Mustafa Sabri reminded Muslims that reciting the Qur’an without understanding was a praiseworthy act linked to the preservation of the Qur’an.<sup>278</sup> If a Muslim wanted to understand the meaning of the verses, Sabri recommended that he consult someone qualified, i.e. a member of the ulama, to explain them.<sup>279</sup> Moreover, Sabri held that it was a duty for Muslims to propagate Arabic amongst themselves as a shared language. If all the linguistic communities were to use their own language, Sabri argued, it would “deliver a blow to

---

<sup>276</sup> Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>277</sup> Ahmed Naim, *İslam’da Dava-yı Kavmiyet* (Istanbul: 1913/4), 51-52 in Berkes, *The Development of Secularism*, 375.

<sup>278</sup> Mustafa Sabri, *Dini Müceddidler* (Istanbul: 1919), 198.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

the harmony and unity of Islam.”<sup>280</sup> An opponent of religious reform, Sabri suspected that proponents of Qur’an translation wanted to replace the revealed text and viewed the promotion of translations as a misguided enterprise by unqualified persons, a project that threatened to injure both textual sanctity and communal solidarity of Islam.<sup>281</sup>

#### ***4.2 Missionaries and Conspiracy***

A specific instance of how translation could injure Muslim unity appeared in the form of concern for missionary activities and translations. Protestant missionaries followed the publication of Qur’an translations with great interest. Many missionaries themselves translated the Qur’an into Asian and African languages with the intention of demonstrating its inferiority in comparison with the Bible. Missionary thought depended upon a notion of textual transparency and rational comprehension of the book. *A propos* translation of the Qur’an, the prevalent missionary rationale held that the Qur’an was a confused mass of distorted Biblical stories, which most Muslims could not comprehend because they did not know Arabic. Translations allowed missionaries to demonstrate the content of the Qur’an and compare/contrast it with the Bible. Once Muslims learned what the Qur’an actually said, so the thinking went, they would realize the superiority and truth of the Bible. Making the Qur’an’s meaning transparent would demonstrate its deficiencies and win converts.

---

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-200.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Missionary publications often cheered on the publication of translations. *The Moslem World*, “A Quarterly Review of Current Events, Literature, and Thought Among Muhammedans and the Progress of Christian Missions in Moslem Lands,” took a keen interest in translations by both missionaries and Muslims. Its editor Rev. Samuel Zwemer explained the paucity of Muslim translations via a novel reading of Qur’anic inimitability:

Islam has never had its Pentecostal gift of tongues [...] The Bible, in contrast to the Koran, has this unique quality, that it can be rendered into all the languages of mankind without losing its majesty, beauty, and spiritual power. The secret lies in the subject matter of the scriptures.”<sup>282</sup>

Whereas the Bible’s content is of the highest quality, the beauty of the Qur’an is “altogether in its style, and, therefore, necessarily artificial.”<sup>283</sup> The Qur’an, for Zwemer, was untranslatable because the rhyme, rhythm, and music of the text could not be conveyed via translation, and, stripped of these superficial, stylistic qualities, the content was extremely disappointing. To translate was to disarm.

Zwemer published a bibliography of translations in 1915 that demonstrates how many missionaries at the time viewed translations. He noted that the first translation of the Qur’an was composed “due to the missionary spirit of Petrus Venerabilis, Abbot of Clugny.”<sup>284</sup> After describing the history of translations in various languages, he highlights a Bengali language translation “with Christian comment and explanation” published in 1908 by an Australian missionary that “can be made a schoolmaster to lead

---

<sup>282</sup> Samuel M. Zwemer, “Translations of the Koran,” *The Moslem World* 5, no. 3 (1915): 245-246.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.



Moslems to Christ.”<sup>285</sup> Zwemer encourages those in other mission fields to compose similar texts. In conclusion, he writes:

When we remember that this work of translation has, with a few exceptions, been the work of Western scholars, Orientalists and missionaries, the contrast between the Arabic Koran and the Bible, the Book for all nations, is strikingly evident. And from the missionary standpoint we have nothing to fear from modern Koran translations; rather may we not hope that the contrast between the Bible and the Koran will be evident to all readers when they compare them in their vernacular?<sup>286</sup>

As for the Ottoman Empire, Zwemer pointed out the difficulties encountered in publishing a Turkish translation and expressed concern that translations would not circulate freely in Muslim lands as long as “orthodox Islam” remained prevalent.

After the revolution of 1908, Julius Richter, a historian of Protestant missionary work, drew a connection between the translation of the Qur’an and religious freedom, including the right to “change one’s religion according to the convictions of conscience.”<sup>287</sup> He hoped that the Young Turks’ rise to power would facilitate the right of Muslims to convert to Christianity. An article in a Young Turk newspaper demanding the translation of the Qur’an gave Richter hope for the future of religious freedom. However, an official proclamation denouncing the article dampened Richter’s expectations, making it clear that the march of freedom would not proceed unimpeded. The constitution and demand for translation still marked a changing scene for Protestant

---

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>287</sup> Julius Richter, *A History of Protestant Missions in the Near East* (New York: Fleming Revell Co., 1910), 180.

missions. Richter thought that Turkey was about to enter a “new chapter [...] an unheard of ‘day of opportunity’” for missionary work in the “Turkish East.”<sup>288</sup>

Missionary support for translations of the Qur’an injected a new cause for concern into the traditional linguistic and theological arguments about the genre. The effect of this concern was mixed. On one hand, some Muslims came to view the emergence of translations as a European conspiracy to destroy the Qur’an, and became even more firmly opposed.<sup>289</sup> On the other hand, missionary rhetoric against the Qur’an, together with polemic translations by missionaries, inspired some Muslims to compose translations. They wanted to rectify the image and elucidate the content of the Qur’an, which Christians had maligned and misrepresented. Lahori Ahmadi scholar Mohammed Ali (1874-1951) wrote,

No other religion has been so cruelly misrepresented as that of the Holy Qur’an. Besides answering the objections of the hostile critics we intend to present to the readers of all creeds and nationalities a true picture of Islam [...] It is with these objects in view that we have undertaken this translation of the Holy Qur’an [...] to convey the true sense of the Holy Book and to remove the misunderstandings under which many people are labouring, thanks to the misrepresentations of Christian writers on Islam.<sup>290</sup>

In Istanbul, devout intellectuals celebrated Mohammed Ali’s translation and some shared his sentiments.<sup>291</sup> Only later did they learn that Mohammed Ali was the leader of

---

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> "Büyük Bir Tecavüz - Kur'an'dan Menfaat Teminine Kalkışan Bir Hristiyan," *Sebilürreşad* 21, no. 542-543 (1923): 181-182.

<sup>290</sup> Zwemer, *Translations*, 253.

<sup>291</sup> "Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Tercümesi," *Sebilürreşad* 23, no. 597 (1924): 387.

the Lahori Ahmadi community and that the translations were being used in Ahmadi missionary efforts abroad.<sup>292</sup>

After reading a French textbook for schoolchildren that contained translated Qur'anic verses, late Ottoman writer İsmail Bereketzade (1850–1918) quipped that it appeared as if a committee had compiled all possible mistakes together in one place. In order to show the true sense of the text, he began writing a regular column in which he translated and explained passages.<sup>293</sup> Refutations of missionary and Western portrayals of Islam became a popular genre, and Rashid Rida even advocated the establishment of a school for Muslim missionaries to counteract Christian efforts.

Heightened missionary efforts to injure the credibility of the Qur'an, often via translation, precipitated a new kind of suspicion for the genre and for reformist translators, many of whom advocated emulation of the Protestant Reformation. Reformist visions of the Qur'an gained currency and space in the public sphere with the political revolution that occurred in 1908. The emerging political scene favored the push for comprehension.

### ***4.3 Revolutionary Comprehension***

In July of 1908, a secret organization of young bureaucrats and military officers named the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, the “Young Turks” or “Unionists”)

---

<sup>292</sup> Some appear to have confused him with the Indian activist and leader of the Khilafat movement, Maulana Mohammad Ali Jouhar (1878-1931), Altuntaş, *Kur'an'ın Tercümesi*, 135.

<sup>293</sup> İsmail Hakkı Bereketzade, "Necaib-i Kur'aniye," *Sırat-i Müstakim* 1, no. 2 (1908): 24.

forced Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II to restore the Ottoman Constitution of 1876. To prevent separatism and strengthen the empire, the new government worked to centralize power by establishing a firmer grip over the remaining Arab provinces. The centralization policy encroached upon the traditional domains of local Arab leaders, stoking Arab opposition. The CUP accorded importance to the Turkish leadership of the empire and the role of Turkish language, implementing measures that gave Turkish language more prominent role in administration, courts, and schools, ostensibly to streamline official communication and cultivate an imperial elite with a shared language. The CUP made Turkish language classes compulsory in elementary schools and made Turkish the language of instruction in secondary and higher education. In 1909, the government began to require the use of Turkish in all courts of the empire, “a measure that led to discontent, inconvenienced judicial officials and litigants, and threatened the administration of justice.”<sup>294</sup>

Opposition to CUP centralization chose the language issue as the focal point of its criticism, accusing the CUP of “Turkification.” Though centralization was the crux of the opposition, critics exploited the symbolic power of the language issue, framing the expanded use of Turkish as proof that the CUP was abandoning Arabic, the language of the Qur’an and the Prophet. Arab opponents equated “Turkification” with the elimination of religion from public life and framed a departure from Arabic as a departure from Islam. A surge of complaints about the irreligious behavior of CUP

---

<sup>294</sup> Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks*, 92.

officials lent credence to these claims.<sup>295</sup> Amid accusations that the new regime in Istanbul was abandoning Arabic and departing from Islam, the sensitivity toward translating the Qur'an became accentuated and gained new political resonance.

The case of Rashid Rida is instructive. Rashid Rida initially supported the 1908 revolution and came to Istanbul in 1909 with a request for the Ottoman state to establish a school to train Muslim missionaries trained in modern fields as well as Islamic studies. In 1910, the Ottoman government offered to support the school under the conditions that it be under the auspices of the Shaykh al-Islam and that Turkish be its language of instruction. Rida viewed the Shaykh al-Islam's involvement as a politicization of the school and held that the CUP wanted to use it as a tool of Turkification. After this episode, Rida became a staunch opponent of the CUP, whom he lambasted as atheists and Freemasons.<sup>296</sup> Moreover, his views on Muslim unity changed. Rida began to maneuver for the establishment of an Arab Muslim Empire, leading the movement to establish an Arab Caliphate in lieu of the Ottoman one and founding a secret society whose *raison d'être* was to foster union between the Arabian Peninsula and the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>297</sup> Having lost hope with the Ottomans, Rida sought British assistance to establish the Arab Empire; he and other Arabists received funds from the British to incite revolt in the Ottoman provinces.<sup>298</sup>

---

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>296</sup> Eliezer Tauber, "Rashid Rida as Pan-Arabist before World War I," *The Muslim World* 79, no. 2 (1989): 105.

<sup>297</sup> Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks*, 181.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 185.

The rise of the CUP and the Constitutional Revolution eliminated the restrictive press laws maintained by the deposed sultan. Press freedom unleashed a deluge of new publications on previously taboo subjects. “Freedom,” “progress,” “civilization,” and “reform” figured among the buzzwords of the day. Dozens of new newspapers and journals appeared in a short span of time following the proclamation of the constitution on July 24, 1908, and an effervescence of enthusiasm for public expression overwhelmed Istanbul. The newly gained press freedom enabled the diversification and maturation of the Ottoman print-based public sphere in which nationalism and Muslim modernism thrived.<sup>299</sup>

The leaders of the CUP (“Unionists”) and much of post-revolutionary literature were influenced by Turkist thought. Turkism (*Türkçülük*) was the proto-nationalist discourse that emphasized the importance of Turkish language, culture, and identity. Drawing inspiration from nineteenth century European lexicographic investigations, Turkists sought to uncover and revive elements of Turkish language and culture that had been submerged within Islamicate civilization. For Turkists, the awakening of Turkish identity formed an integral step in becoming modern and renewing Ottoman state and society. A related Pan-Turkist (*Türklük*) current envisioned a cultural and/or political union of Turkic peoples from the Ottoman and Russian Empires, stretching from Central Asia to the Balkans. Both Turkism and Pan-Turkism gained currency after the 1908 revolution, as did Arab, Armenian, Albanian, and other nationalist discourses.

---

<sup>299</sup> On the post-1908 press see, Palmira J. Brummett, *Image and imperialism in the Ottoman Revolutionary Press, 1908-1911* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

Though the CUP supported Turkist organizations and publications, its platform promoted Islamic unity and Ottoman solidarity.<sup>300</sup>

In addition to nationalist currents, the freer public sphere made it possible for Islamic intellectual activity to thrive in the capital. Ever fearful of the ulama, Sultan Abdülhamid II had exiled a large number of devout intellectuals because he feared their ability to legitimize criticism of the regime. Moreover, the press censor had precluded any meaningful religious debate. In fact, the pious opposition to Abdülhamid had worked with Young Turks abroad, and the constitutional revolution opened the doors to Islamist intellectuals and the public debate on religious matters in general.<sup>301</sup> Devout intellectuals and the ulama established journals and newspapers dedicated to Islamic subjects. Publications like *Beyan'ül-Hak*, *Sırat-ı Müstakim*, *Hayr'ul-Kelam*, *Hak Yolu*, *İslam Dünyası* and *İslam Mecmuası* provided novel forums for debate and exploration of contemporary Muslim concerns.

The periodicals allowed new voices to publicly express a wide range of ideas about “religion” in the abstract and the reform of Islam. Beset by the threat of European colonization and troubled by separatist movements within the empire, the conversations of Ottoman intellectuals focused on the question of how to revitalize society and state in order to survive the difficult political and economic circumstances of the empire and the larger Muslim world. The question of why Islamic civilization had declined and how Muslims would again rise filled the pages of newspapers,

---

<sup>300</sup> Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton University Press: 2008), 187-188.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-1.

journals, and treatises. The role of religion and the need to reform Islam figured prominently in these discussions. Muslim reformist thought, suppressed by Abdülhamid II, found full public expression and elaboration in the post-revolutionary public sphere. Ottoman thinkers appropriated reformist (or “modernist”) thought in diverse combinations. Though different in their principles and approach, competing intellectual outlooks stood in agreement that the existing Islamic institutions needed to be reformed.<sup>302</sup>

Muslim modernism evolved as intelligentsia in various Islamic lands wrestled with the military, economic, cultural, and intellectual forces of modern Europe that increasingly shaped the fortunes of Muslim domains. Torn between the threat and opportunity presented by modernity, Muslim modernists worked to develop an understanding of Islam in harmony with modern European civilization, one based on the sacred sources of Islam that could make use of modern institutions, knowledge and technology for the benefit of Muslim societies. Charles Kurzman writes that modernists pursued four main goals: cultural revival, political reform, promoting science and education, and women’s rights.<sup>303</sup> He argues that freedom of speech or “the right to say novel things in an Islamic discourse” was the central issue of Muslim modernist thought.<sup>304</sup> Modernists argued for the renewal and extension of *ijtihad*, the unification of Islamic legal schools, and the right to read and interpret the Qur’an and

---

<sup>302</sup> Bein, *The Ulema*, 99; Berkes, *The Development of Secularism*, 377.

<sup>303</sup> Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



the Hadith without intermediaries. Additionally, they sought to harmonize the sacred sources with human reason. They tended to emphasize the centrality of the Qur'an, criticize the scholasticism of the ulama, and take a critical approach to Hadith. Some supported capitalism, most championed constitutionalism and virtually all stressed the importance of expanding and improving educational institutions. The eradication of ignorance, superstition, and backwardness was a pervasive theme. To convey their ideas, modernists used traditional literary forms with altered content, novel forms of religious writing including novels, plays, and translations as well as newspapers and journals.<sup>305</sup>

Modernists argued that negligence and misinterpretation of the Qur'an played an important role in the decline of Muslim civilization. This negligence stemmed in part from the ulama. Reformists criticized the ulama for indulging in arcane intellectual pursuits, pursuing their own interests, and failing to teach Muslims the meaning of the Qur'an. Excessive reliance upon classical Qur'anic commentaries, the inflated position of the ulama as intermediaries, and the closing of the "Gate of Independent Reasoning" had distracted and distanced Muslims from the fundamental imperatives and spirit of the Qur'an, held modernists. In their view, the Qur'an advocated the pursuit of science, rational investigation, and progress and did not contradict the necessities of a modern society. Modernists advocated a return to the sources, especially the Qur'an, as an essential step in spurring Islamicate revival.

---

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

As press freedom opened the public sphere to reformist Muslim thought, it also precipitated unprecedented criticism of the religious establishment. Never before had the ulama faced such harsh, public attacks.<sup>306</sup> This critical barrage was matched by state policy. CUP policies eroded the power of the ulama, marginalizing their political and institutional power. In 1909, the government forbade shari'a courts to hear private cases after a civil court had issued a verdict.<sup>307</sup> The CUP took all necessary measures to marginalize the ulama political organization and deny them any significant role in the legislative process.<sup>308</sup> In 1916, the powers of the ulama diminished significantly. The government removed the Shaykh al-Islam from the Ottoman cabinet, transferred the religious courts to the Ministry of Justice, and placed the madrasas under the Ministry of Education.<sup>309</sup>

With the decline of ulama power and the expansion of press freedom, Islamic authority became an increasingly contested matter, and this contestation had clear implications for the access to religious knowledge and texts. Abdullah Cevdet described the changing of the guard via new forums, "The mosque pulpits are no longer the only intellectual centers, no longer the only educators: books, magazines, in short, the press, this European institution, dramatically decreased the influence of the ulama."<sup>310</sup>

---

<sup>306</sup> Bein, *The Ulema*, 102.

<sup>307</sup> Hanioğlu, *Brief History*, 186.

<sup>308</sup> Bein, *The Ulema*, 139.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>310</sup> Abdullah Cevdet, "Son Kırk Sene Zarfında İslamiyet," in Dücane Cündioğlu, *Sözlü Kültür'den Yazılı Kültür'e: Anlam'ın Tarihi* (İstanbul: Tıbyan, 1997), 219.

The diminution of the ulama establishment coincided with a new ethos of access to Islamic knowledge and sacred sources. In post-1908 Istanbul, support for Qur'anic transparency, the need to personally engage and understand the Qur'an, became pervasive. An article titled "Our Neglect of the Qur'an and its Causes," contains a representative argument for comprehension. The author writes that madrasas had neglected teaching the Qur'an and *tafsir* and that imitation of predecessors had deprived Muslims of direct engagement. The consequences were dire since "two of the greatest reasons for the misfortunes of the people of Islam are their neglect of the Qur'an and the Hadith. Therefore every Muslim should approach the Qur'an and Hadith which are the bases of the Islamic religion." The author concludes, "There is nothing as shameful as not trying to read and understand the Generous Qur'an."<sup>311</sup>

Translations of the Qur'an debuted not in book format, but rather in the columns of the newly established Islamic journals, usually in sections dedicated to "tafsir." Just a few weeks after press freedom was enacted, the journal *Sırat-ı Müstakim* began to feature columns by İsmail Hakkı Bereketzade that translated and then commented on verses of the Qur'an. Followed by longer commentary passages, these translations do not bear the name "translation" (*tercüme*).<sup>312</sup> The editor of the journal,

---

<sup>311</sup> Ş. Şerif, "Kur'an'dan Gafletimiz ve Sebepleri," *İslam Dünyası* 1, no. 14 (1913): 217.

<sup>312</sup> Bereketzade, "Necaib," 23-26.

Mehmet Akif, began to compose and publish his own renderings in 1910.<sup>313</sup> In a translation and commentary on Al-Imran .v. 103, Akif pleads for Muslim unity,

*Ey muminler! Hepiniz habel mutinine. Din-i celil İslam'a el birlikte sarılınız, Allah'ın ve Rasulu'nun amirlerine taat, nahilerinden ictinab ediniz, hiç bir zaman ayrılmayınız, kalpleriniz ruhlarınız daima sımsıkı birbirinize bağlı olsun.*

Oh Believers! Embrace together the Rope of God, the sublime religion Islam, obey the commands of God and the Prophet, keep away from what they forbid, never separate, let your hearts and souls always be bound tightly together.

In the commentary section, titled “Unity Brings Life and Excellence, Division Burns and Kills,” he warns that Muslim infighting threatens to destroy the entire umma. United under the mantle of the Prophet, Akif continues, Muslims conquered the world and enlightened peoples who were living in darkness; everyone worked for the progress of Islam with no selfish interests. In thinly veiled commentary on the current state of affairs, he described the lapse of unity, “While among Muslims there was no nationality other than religion, every people began to make a claim to nationality. They sewed hypocrisy among Muslims and then they began to fight among themselves.”<sup>314</sup>

In subsequent years, other journals like *İslam Mecmuası* and *Hayr'ül-Kelam* followed suit, regularly publishing translations followed by explanation. Pointing to the broad interest in translation in the public sphere, prominent Turkist writer Ahmet Ağaoğlu was impressed that translation efforts had “begun in quarters utterly at variance with each other in their tendencies” and that “protests against the translation

---

<sup>313</sup> (Mehmet Akif), "Mevaiz-i Diniyeden: İttihad Yaşatır, Yükseltir; Teferruka Yakar, Öldürür," *Sırat-i Müstakim* 5, no. 116 (1910): 205-07.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

have been remarkably feeble.”<sup>315</sup> The center had moved decisively in favor of Qur’anic accessibility.

Nevertheless, what Ağaoğlu failed to mention was that between 1908 and 1912 virtually no one called the translated texts “tercüme,” and there was a notable absence of discussion about translating the Qur’an. Prominent Turkist intellectual Yusuf Akçura expressed surprise that the translations printed in periodicals had not sparked significant conversation or attracted much attention. In contrast, he wrote, Russian Muslims had debated the merits of translation for years before actually printing one.<sup>316</sup> Bereketzade and Akif did not believe in the possibility of *tercüme* of the Qur’an, and moreover, it seems that the prevalent opinion among devout intellectuals and the ulama remained opposed to the notion of a Qur’an translation. As long as the passages were titled “summary,” “explanation,” or “meanings” or simply did not indicate the genre, no opposition arose. Devout intellectuals thereby established a *modus vivendi* in which they composed and published translated passages of the Qur’an that neither disturbed their consciences, nor upset the doctrine of Qur’anic untranslatability. This *modus vivendi* of *translation by any other name* was fragile. In 1912, a popular book by a Tatar Muslim in Russia brought the issue into the open, explicitly combining the prevalent push for transparency with the genre of *tercüme*.

---

<sup>315</sup> Zwemer, “Translations of the Qur’an,” 259.

<sup>316</sup> Yusuf Akçura, “1329 Senesinde Türk Dünyası,” (1914) in *Türk Yurdu*, III (Ankara: Tutibay Yayınları, 1999), 278.

### 4.3.1. Incorruptible Meaning: Musa Carullah Bigiyev

Just as until today refraining from translating [the Qur'an] did not constitute a sin, from now on, *translating it* will in no way constitute a sin.<sup>317</sup>

A native of Kazan, Musa Carullah Bigiyev (1875-1949) established himself as one of the best-known and most controversial reformist intellectuals in Russia and the Ottoman Empire. Bigiyev studied at a Russian elementary school and then pursued his education at madrasas in Kazan, Bukhara, Istanbul, and Cairo.<sup>318</sup> Bigiyev's articles and excerpts from his books frequently appeared in Istanbul-based journals, and Ottoman writers engaged and challenged his ideas. Bigiyev distinguished himself by the harshness of his criticisms of classical Muslim scholarship and the forcefulness of his support for reform, Western science, and modern education. In his most controversial opinion, Bigiyev argued that God's mercy extended not only to Muslims, but also universally to all humans of whatever faith. Traditionalist Muslim journals in Russia branded him a heretic, and the Ottoman Empire banned his works.<sup>319</sup>

In the same year of the Constitutional Revolution, 1908, this iconoclastic Tatar Muslim began to compose a Turkish language Qur'an translation. Bigiyev generally wrote in the Pan-Turkic idiom advocated by journalist Ismail Gasprinsky. Designed to be intelligible to as many Turkic speakers as possible, this language was a clear,

---

<sup>317</sup> Ibid. 85

<sup>318</sup> Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*, 254.

<sup>319</sup> Ahmet Kanlıdere, *Reform within Islam : The Tadjid and Jadid Movement among the Kazan Tatars, 1809-1917 : Conciliation or Conflict?* (Beyoglu, Istanbul: Eren, 1997), 52-53. Though post 1908 press freedom was unprecedented in Istanbul, it had limitations. The Shaykh al-Islam retained considerable control over the publication and circulation of religious books.

simplified form of Ottoman Turkish. When Bigiyev completed the translation in 1911/2, he encountered great difficulty publishing the work as the Muslim Religious Committee in the Russian city of Ufa denied him permission. The traditionalist ulama journals *Beyan'ül-Hak* (Istanbul) and *Din ve Maişet* (Kazan) applauded the committee's decision.<sup>320</sup> Bigiyev then established his own press in St. Petersburg, where he planned to print his translation as well as a newspaper. Several publications in Istanbul enthusiastically announced the coming of his translation.<sup>321</sup> Despite expectations, Bigiyev did not succeed in publishing the work, and the manuscript version has reportedly not survived.<sup>322</sup>

Though the translation never appeared in print, Bigiyev published his thoughts on Qur'an translation in the popular book *Several Problems for Public Consideration (Halk Nazarında bir Niçe Mesele)* published in 1912. Along with Bigiyev's advocacy of translation, this controversial book addresses the causes of Muslim decline, the definition of faith, the future of Islam, and the state of Turkic language and literature. The Shaykh al-Islam in Istanbul banned *Several Issues for Public Communication* along with his three other books for circulating "heretical ideas."<sup>323</sup> Most popular among madrasa

---

<sup>320</sup> Ahmet Kanlıdere, *Kadimle Cedit Arasında Musa Cârullah : Hayatı, Eserleri, Fikirleri* (Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2005), 71-73.

<sup>321</sup> "Petersburg'da İslam Matbaası," *İslam Dünyası* 1, no. 16 (1913): 256; Haşim Nahid (Erbil), *Türkiye İçin Necat Ve İ'tila Yolları* (Konya: Tablet Yayınları, 2006), 128-129.

<sup>322</sup> Kanlıdere, 143. I have not been able to discover what prevented the translation's publication.

<sup>323</sup> "Haber: Daire-i Meşihat'te." *Tanin* 2, no. 1563 (1913): 6. The Shaykh'ül-İslam later retracted the ban, Musa Carullah Bigiyev, "Teesüf Etmıştim Şimdi Anladım," *İslam Dünyası* 1, no. 10 (1913): 151.

students, the book sold swimmingly, and Bigiyev received letters from Istanbul urging his publisher to ship more copies from Kazan.<sup>324</sup>

In *Several Issues for Public Consideration*, Musa Bigiyev constructs an unconventional scholarly Islamic argument in support of translating the Qur'an. First Bigiyev addresses the view that Arabic is the only valid language for Qur'anic recitation and obligatory prayer. He writes that the exclusive use of Arabic was a logical and useful measure designed by the early religious scholars to preserve the Qur'an forever.<sup>325</sup> The early Muslim community, he continues, had two duties: to preserve the linguistic structure (*nazm*) of the Qur'an and, second, to explicate and propagate its meaning. Bigiyev argues that the community achieved the preservation of the text via the detailed attention to memorization in Arabic and ritual Qur'anic recitation along with sound methods of copying the text. However, he continues, the Prophet did not provide specific instructions regarding the second duty, that of explaining and propagating the meanings of the linguistic structure. That is, he did not provide clear guidance for interpreting the text and transmitting it to non-Arabs. Bigiyev suggests, "maybe the meanings had been established in the signs of language and in the understanding of the community."<sup>326</sup> Therefore, defining a method of interpretation was superfluous: the meanings were transparent in the Prophet's day.

---

<sup>324</sup> Bigiyev, "Teesüf," *İslam Dünyası*, 150.

<sup>325</sup> Musa Bigiyev, *Halk Nazarına bir Niçe Mesele* (Kazan: Mahmud 'Alim Efendi Maqsudov, 1912), 86.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.



For Bigiyev, the preservation and recitation of the revealed Qur'anic *nazm* were the most important pillars of Islam, and the community had successfully preserved the text. Extending the argument, Bigiyev contends that not only the *nazm* itself is established, but also the *nazm*'s meanings, "As every word, every vowel of the Qur'an is preserved, so too are the meanings of the words and sentences preserved."<sup>327</sup> The Muslim linguistic disciplines, he continues, developed in order to preserve the meanings of the words and sentences of the Qur'an, protecting them from alteration. In this manner, "with zeal, the blameless Muslim Umma established both the linguistic structure and meaning of the Qur'an without alteration."<sup>328</sup> Qur'anic meaning was preserved not in works of Qur'anic commentary, but rather in the dictionaries, grammars, and other linguistic genres that developed around the Qur'an. Theoretically, he implies, one could retrieve original meanings through the language and linguistic apparatus. Formalized language was the guarantor of Qur'anic meaning.

The presumption of fixed meaning formed the foundation of Bigiyev's rationale for translating the Qur'an:

If the meaning is established like the *nazm*, by necessity translating the Qur'an is possible. After the meaning has been preserved, saying that translation is not possible is equivalent to saying that the meanings of the Noble Qur'an can never be understood.<sup>329</sup>

\*\*\*

---

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

How to make use of Qur'anic commentaries in translating is a key methodological issue for all translators. Does one seek to explain unknown words with aid from the commentaries? Should one rely primarily on what the letter of the text suggests or should one refer to the interpretative tradition for guidance? In order to make a fresh interpretation and derive new inspiration for the present, as many modernist thinkers sought, some level of independence from commentary works was essential. However, given the difficulty and ambiguity of the Qur'an, most translators made use, some extensive use, of the commentary corpus. With a text that has an immense commentary tradition spanning a millennia, a translator must decide not only how close to bring the reader to the text or the text to the reader, as in Schleiermacher's famous dictum, but also how close to bring the text and reader to the exegetical corpus.

Musa Bigiyev heavily criticized Muslim commentators for distorting the meaning of the Qur'an and pursuing partisan aims. Despite his distaste for and distrust of *tafsir* works, Musa Bigiyev consulted commentaries extensively.<sup>330</sup> However, he aimed to rely more on language and linguistic indicators rather than the opinions of commentators. Bigiyev projects language as a transparent and unbiased mediator of information that could guarantee the reliability of a translation. He felt that the commentators all too often went outside the actual text and interpolated their own understandings, distorting the meaning. Consider his approach to verse 7:117: "And

---

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 88.

We revealed to Moses: ‘Cast thy staff!’ And lo, it forthwith swallowed up their lying invention.”<sup>331</sup> Many commentators interpret the verse to mean that the staff of Moses came alive and ate the “cords and staffs” of the Pharaoh’s sorcerers.<sup>332</sup> Bigiyev writes, “There is not a single letter in this verse or in Taha, v. 69 [...] to justify the translation that it ate their robes and staffs.”<sup>333</sup> In this instance, Bigiyev invokes intra-textual translation, “interpretation by the book,” using different verses in the Qur’an to interpret other verses, a method which he openly endorses in the treatise.<sup>334</sup> Verse 7:117 does not specify what the staff of Moses “swallowed up,” and 20:66 indicates only that the “ropes and staffs appeared to him as though they moved rapidly.” Whereas the Biblical narrative in Exodus states that the ropes and staves of the sorcerers became serpents, the Qur’anic narratives only allude to the possibility of “what they contrived” to be snakes.<sup>335</sup>

Bigiyev argues that Moses’ staff could not have eaten the ropes and staffs of the sorcerers because they had taken the form of snakes through the sorcerers’ magic and that it is “a distortion to the inimitable *nazm* to say that they ate the ropes and staffs

---

<sup>331</sup> *KI*.

<sup>332</sup> E.g., al-Tabari and al-Zamakhshari.

<sup>333</sup> Bigiyev, *Halk Nazarında*, 90. Taha v. 69: And [now] throw that [staff] which is in thy right hand – it shall swallow up all that they have wrought: [for] they have wrought only a sorcerer’s artifice, and the sorcerer can never come to any good, whatever he may aim at!” (M. Asad)

<sup>334</sup> Bigiyev, *Halk Nazarında*, 88. Verses 28:31 and 20:20, 26:32, 7:107, 27:10 also deal with the same incident.

<sup>335</sup> Exodus 7:10 KJV: And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so as the Lord had commanded: and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh, and before his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers: now the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents: but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods. (Exodus 7:10, KJV)

themselves.”<sup>336</sup> Bigiyev’s interpretation seems to contradict his own principle: if he claims to rely on the actual language of the Qur’an and not on extra-Qur’anic material, then how can he claim that the ropes and staves of the sorcerers were actually snakes? No passage in the Qur’an indicates that they had become snakes, though 20:66 is certainly suggestive of that possibility. In fact, conventional interpretations adhere more closely to the letter of the Qur’an since the “cords and staffs” appear explicitly in the text. Bigiyev’s understanding resonates more with the Biblical narrative and extra-Qur’anic traditions than the letter of the text itself.

Additionally, Bigiyev criticizes the commentators for deleting certain verses through abrogation (*naskh*) and for “editing” the meaning of other verses in order to conform to theological opinions. As an example, Bigiyev refers to the verse

And when We desire to destroy a city, We command its men who live at ease, and they commit ungodliness therein, then the Word is realized against it, and We destroy it utterly. (Q 17:16)<sup>337</sup>

This verse is replete with ambiguity due to its succinct style: “Aradnā mutrafihā” *We command its men who live at ease* -- to do what? “fa-fasaqū” *and they commit ungodliness--* of what sort? These questions concerned the commentators, and al-Tabari describes the most prevalent interpretation as that which fills in the blanks to mean *We command those who live at ease to obey God and they commit ungodliness by their rebellion against God.*<sup>338</sup>

---

<sup>336</sup> Bigiyev, *Halk Nazarında*, 91.

<sup>337</sup> *KI*.

<sup>338</sup> See al-Tabari on 17:16

Bigiyev disapproves of this method for translation because it inserts the understanding of the interpreter into a translation and distorts the meaning of the original.<sup>339</sup>

Touting the transparency of language, Bigiyev casts translation as a transfer of meanings from one language to another without interpretation; translation and interpretation are distinct activities. He writes:

*Tafsir* and *ta'wil*, no matter what they are, are mere human thoughts. In the translation, I only considered the customary meanings and the indications of the Arabic language. I did not rely on a human's perspective on even a single letter. I refrained from writing my small, pathetic ideas next to the awe-inspiring, sacred meanings of the Qur'an. I too will curse any buffoons that attempt to do such a thing.<sup>340</sup>

Bigiyev suggests that divine meaning can be accessed seamlessly through human language, and then transmitted into another language without interference from the translator. Therefore, the "human perspective" does not contaminate the divine message, implying that the dictates of formal, established language safeguard the meaning from the whim of the translator. Language and Qur'anic language in particular, appear transparent. For Bigiyev, the translator's role is to convey this transparency without interference. As a writer going against the grain of opinion, it stands to question if Bigiyev makes a substantial or instrumental argument on language. His subsequent thoughts on language and translations suggest that he may have made this argument instrumentally to establish some legitimacy for the undertaking.

---

<sup>339</sup> Bigiyev, *Halk Nazarında*, 91.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

Far from naïve, Bigiyev did not see translation as a perfect form of communication and acknowledged its difficulties, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of its problematic aspects:

Sometimes a meaning will be understood from a sentence but will be different because of the temporal context or differ from the customs of the nations. In this situation, a literal translation cannot be accurate. If someone ignorant of the customs or the meanings translates, they will err.<sup>341</sup>

The passage demonstrates the basic problem of interpretation across time and in different cultural contexts. Meanings change over time while the signs remain the same. As George Steiner suggests, linguistic change over time is perhaps the “most salient model of Heraclitean flux.”<sup>342</sup> Just as you can never step in the same river twice, the meanings of particular words and expressions in language change across time and place. Bigiyev recognizes this problem as well as the problem of meaning and connotation in the minds of different audiences.

Sometimes it occurs that the meanings of the sentence don't conflict, but the image attached to those meanings conflict. When two people with opposing conditions or imaginations hear a sentence, one meaning encompasses two different images in the minds of those two men. In one, perhaps it is quite powerful, and in that other maybe it is rather weak. Accordingly, one sentence influences one of them and makes no impression upon the other. Therefore, the translations of literature like novels and poems are dissimilar to the originals. Because though the meanings of the words are properly translated, the translator cannot envision the images seen with the poet's power of imagination. In this way, the translation may come out soulless. Or, it may not be possible at all. That is because language transmits dry meanings but sometimes it may lack the images that fly impressively in the skies of the imagination. It is true, we said that translation is sometimes impossible on account of the contradictions between meanings and images.<sup>343</sup>

---

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>342</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, 18.

<sup>343</sup> Bigiyev, *Halk Nazarında*, 92-93.

Despite the impossibility of perfect translation across contexts as well as the impossibility of recreating the same effect on the reader when translating literature and poetry, Bigiyev defends the possibility of translating the Qur'an. The Qur'an, he argues, is unlike other forms of literature because, first, the meanings of the words and the sentences are firmly established and preserved in the Islamic intellectual disciplines; second, these meanings "are not forms in the mind, perhaps they are reality itself." Distinguishing the Qur'an from all other forms of human language, Bigiyev draws an ontological connection between the meanings of the Qur'an and the essence of reality. More important to his argument is the fixity of Qur'anic meaning. Just as Bigiyev equated the fixity of the nazm and the fixity of the meaning, he also ascribed the incorruptibility of the nazm to Qur'anic meaning. Qur'anic meaning, he argued, was immune from distortion and alteration just as the consonantal text. Since the meaning is protected, "translating the Qur'an is definitely possible and legally obligatory."<sup>344</sup> Here Bigiyev flips on its head the conventional thinking that Qur'anic translation is both impossible and legally impermissible. Not only is it possible, but translation is also a religious obligation (*farz*). Bigiyev recasts a prohibited practice as a fundamental duty.

Though he opined that translating the Qur'an was both possible and obligatory, Bigiyev did not think that just anyone could translate the Qur'an or engage in interpretation. He spared no invective for commentators and translators whom he

---

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 93.

viewed as unqualified. On İsmail Ferruh's rendering of verse 6:9 in the *Mevakib*: "We covered them and him with the clothes that they were wearing." Bigiyev writes that this translation was "written by the pen of fools who do not know the language, have no foundation, and commit atrocious (*fahiş*) errors."<sup>345</sup> The conventional understanding of the verb *labasa* in the verse is not "covered...with clothes," the more common meaning of the verb, but rather "confused" or "obscured." Bigiyev points out that the same mistake appears in "Introduction to the History of Islam" by the late Ottoman author Mahmud Esad Efendi. Since these works passed inspection by the committee that examined Islamic works in Istanbul, Bigiyev viewed their appearance as an indication of the lamentable state of the religious establishment in Istanbul.<sup>346</sup>

Though Musa Bigiyev advocated Qur'an translation in an unprecedented manner for the late Ottoman context, he did not support the idea of reciting translations or performing ritual prayer in any language other than Arabic.<sup>347</sup> Moreover, Bigiyev expressed no desire to replace the Arabic Qur'an with a translation. In contrast, he viewed the Qur'anic *nazm* as the most precious asset of the Islamic tradition and applauds the early community's zealotry in preserving it at all costs. For Musa Bigiyev translating the Qur'an and expanding awareness of its meanings did not pose any threat to the *nazm* or meaning as both had been successfully established.

---

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.



On the contrary, he argued translation was permissible, possible, and ultimately beneficial for non-Arab Muslims to engage the meaning of the Qur'an.

Translating the Qur'an formed a step in his broader mission to establish intellectual freedom and further rationality and education in the Muslim world.<sup>348</sup> Additionally, he suggested a connection between Qur'an translation and the modernization of Turkic language. Translating the Qur'an, developing Turkic language, and expanding national literature were means of attaining modernity and becoming part of the civilized world.

For Bigiyev and other reformists, progress through Islamic reform had a road-map. Ottoman observers privileged the European historical experience as the most instructive model for religious reform.<sup>349</sup> In particular, intellectuals referred to the Protestant Reformation as the defining moment in the development of European modernity.<sup>350</sup> Moreover, anti-clerical discourses from Europe, particularly from the Reformation and the French Revolution, shaped late Ottoman views of institutional religion.<sup>351</sup> Reformist ulama and devout critics adopted the view that the Ottoman ulama were responsible for the spread of atheism and the decline of Islam in Ottoman lands. In drawing this comparison, they drew extensively on the Protestant Reformation, constructing a narrative in which the Ottoman ulama and the Catholic priesthood were equated as self-interested priestly classes that kept the people in the

---

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>349</sup> Bein, *The Ulema*, 75-76.

<sup>350</sup> Michaëlle Browers and Charles Kurzman, "Comparing Reformations," In *An Islamic Reformation?* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 1-17.

<sup>351</sup> Bein, *The Ulema*, 75-76.

dark and stunted the progress of society.<sup>352</sup> These priestly classes used high-scholarly languages that the people could not understand, the priests - Latin, the ulama - Arabic, and prevented the masses from accessing the truths of scripture on their own. Before the Reformation, writes Haşim Nahid:

When priests magically chanted inscrutable words in an unknown language, Christians used to kneel with a feeling of subservience, kiss the sidewalks of the church, and prostrate themselves at the feet of these half-holy, demigods who intermediated between them and Jesus. Likewise, when our turbaned hojas in embroidered robes and sword in hand repeat the words of God's heavenly sounds from a high, white pulpit, Turkish, Laz, Tatar, Circassian, Indian, and Chinese believers listen speechless and bewitched to these heavenly tones that they do not understand. I would not compare the exalted Muslim religion with abrogated faiths. But what Christians understood then, is how much Muslims understand now.<sup>353</sup>

Nahid, like most reformist thinkers, reached the conclusion that Muslims lacked sufficient knowledge of their faith, and because of this ignorance remained in a state of mental and spiritual subjugation. The Reformation offered a solution to this dilemma.

A truthseeker, a 'renewer' (*müceddid*) appeared among Christians. He translated the Gospel, and from the moment they understood the Gospel, the links of the heavy chains opened, the priests who had appeared as God's regents seemed smaller, and the Gods of the Gospel began to ascend. Finally, they succeeded in breaking the captivity of thought and conscience.<sup>354</sup>

For Nahid, the German translation of the Bible by Martin Luther marked the turning point in the liberation of Christian Europe; Christian understanding of the scripture precipitated a mental and social change that led to the rise of Europe. Following the Reformation model, he thought that translating the Qur'an would bring similar benefits to Muslims. With dramatic flair, Nahid proclaimed, "The Luther of Islamdom has

---

<sup>352</sup> Bigiyev, *Halk Nazarında*, 34.

<sup>353</sup> Haşim Nahid (Erbil), *Türkiye İçin Necat Ve İ'tila Yolları* (Konya: Tablet Yayınları, 2006), 128.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

appeared. This renewer, this religious warrior, Musa Efendi Bigiyev, [...] is now translating the Qur'an into Turkish. This is a good tiding for the freedom of Islamic thought and conscience. A Russian Muslim has taken the first step toward the truth of religion. Let us follow him!"<sup>355</sup>

The idea that understanding the Qur'an via translation was essential to religious, intellectual, and, ultimately, political and economic revival enjoyed widespread currency in reformist circles. In this vein of thought, the Qur'an held such enlightening and inspirational power that simply communicating it would spark Muslim renewal. Lawyer and journalist Celal Nuri, for instance, wrote:

Today, we are in possession of the Qur'anic texts and the Hadith of the prophet, works that are so miraculous, inimitable, blessed, sacred, and holy that communicating them in a new and useful style to the hearts of the believers is sufficient to revive our nation, to turn around our state, and to strengthen our faith. The Qur'an is tremendous. Only we are not aware of this greatness.<sup>356</sup>

Reconnecting with the meaning of the text would start a domino effect with beneficial effects for all aspects of society. Direct understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith via translation, would make it possible for Muslims to achieve progress and "worldly happiness."<sup>357</sup> Writer and bureaucrat, Hüseyin Kazım Kadri remarked that when he saw examples of religious fanaticism among Muslims he reminded himself that "the Qur'an has not been translated in the languages of the Muslim nations."<sup>358</sup> In the effort to remedy the ills plaguing Islamicate societies, "The translation of the Qur'an is a major

---

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>356</sup> Celal Nuri, *Hatem'ül-Enbiya* (Istanbul: Yeni Osmanlı Matbaası, 1916/1917), 323-324.

<sup>357</sup> Ş. Şerif, "Kur'an'dan Gafletimiz Ve Sebepleri," *İslam Dünyası* 1, no. 14 (1913): 217.

<sup>358</sup> Şeyh Muhsin-i Fani, *İstikbale Doğru* (Istanbul: Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası Matbaacılık Osmanlı Şirketi 1913/1914), 10.

step toward the concept of the perfection of Islam and is appropriate to all the social, religious, and ethical goals of Muslim life.”<sup>359</sup> Likewise, controversial author Ubeydullah Afghani thought that individual engagement with the Qur’an through translation would increase faith, prevent evils besetting Ottoman Muslims, and inhibit the “spread of atheism.”<sup>360</sup>

Others doubted the panacea effect that many expected from a translation of the Qur’an. In a book that criticized reformists, Mustafa Sabri pointed out that translations of the Qur’an were not new and that readers had disliked previous ones and found them insufficient. If earlier translations had not freed Islam from its intellectual prison or sparked a revival of the Muslim world, he questioned, why then should Muslims expect a translation to have such an effect now?<sup>361</sup> Moreover, he did not think that the reformers promoting translation had the competence to actually compose one.

Despite the enthusiasm on the part of reform-minded intellectuals, the political climate remained fragile for the publication of a “translation” of the Qur’an. In 1914, prior to the beginning of WWI, publisher İbrahim Hilmi distributed portions of a Turkish translation by an anonymous author. Hilmi was a proponent of revolutionary comprehension, the idea that understanding the Qur’an was an essential piece of revolutionizing late Ottoman society and participating in modern civilization. In the introduction he writes, “As I have worked with all my ability for quite some time in

---

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>360</sup> Ubeydullah Efgani, *Kavm-ı Cedid* (Istanbul: Şems Matbaası, 1915), 16.

<sup>361</sup> Sabri, *Dini Müceddidler*, 196.

order to bring about an intellectual and social revolution in our homeland, my most sincere desire was to translate, print and publish the sublime meaning of the Noble Verses.”<sup>362</sup> Conscious of opposition, Hilmi assured readers that a “Turkish Qur’an” could never take the place of the original and that the Turkish version was only an explanatory translation that could not fulfill ritual purposes.<sup>363</sup> Despite this assurance, the very language that Hilmi used offended the sensibilities of the ulama and devout Ottomans. The expression “Turkish Qur’an” (*Türk Kur’anı*) suggested the possibility of the translation taking the place of the original, whereas prevalent Muslim opinion denied any other text the right to be called “Qur’an.”

Further complicating the matter, it came to light that the unnamed author of the translation was a Syrian-Arab Catholic named Zeki Megamiz. During the printing process, İbrahim Hilmi had told the public that the author was a Muslim. Devout intellectuals saw this episode as an absolute scandal. Writer Ömer Rıza Doğrul viewed the text before it was printed and urged the government to halt the publication process.<sup>364</sup> The ulama journal *Hayr’ül-Kelam* publicly called upon the Shaykh al-Islam’s office to prevent its publication, which responded by prohibiting distribution, seizing copies from bookstores, and banning the work.<sup>365</sup> İbrahim Hilmi described the controversy as a conflict between forces of progress and reactionary ulama:

A newspaper that was the tool of profound fanaticism spit fire, and those who appropriate religion as a means of profit and gain did not want to digest the publication

---

<sup>362</sup> İbrahim Hilmi, “Kur’an-ı Kerim Tercümesi” in Ergin, *Maarif*, V: 1610.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> Altuntaş, *Kur’an-i Kerim Tercümesi*, 88.

<sup>365</sup> Ahmed Şirani, “Kur’an-ı Kerim Tercümesi Hakkında,” *Hayr’ül-Kelam*, no. 17 (1914): 136.

of the Turkish translation of the Holy Qur'an. Unfortunately, the government at that time had to accept their protests and wishes.<sup>366</sup>

The government needed the support of the ulama, and, perhaps more importantly, it did not want to exacerbate the already tense relations with the Arab provinces.<sup>367</sup>

Attempting to publish a translation composed by a Christian while concealing the identity of the author confirmed the suspicions of some devout critics and added fuel to conspiracy theories that linked translation with missionaries and attacks on Islam. Qur'an translation was already a questionable enterprise for Islamic scholars, and the deceptive nature of this first publication attempt deepened concerns that translation would lead to distortion of the text. Anti-missionary, anti-imperialist rhetoric found in this event another example of Christians attempting to destroy the Qur'an.<sup>368</sup> In addition to being Christian, the fact that the author was an Arab, not a Turk, perturbed *Sebilürreşad*, which felt that a native speaker of Turkish should carry out a literary enterprise of this magnitude for the Turkish language.<sup>369</sup> Despite the swift response of Turkish intellectuals and government to squash the translation, some Arabs pointed to this incident as proof that the Turks were departing from Islam and abandoning the Qur'an.<sup>370</sup> At a time of tense Turkish-Arab and Muslim-Christian relations in the Ottoman Empire, this episode exacerbated the situation and cast a shadow over the contested genre of translation.

---

<sup>366</sup> Altuntaş, *Kur'an-i Kerim Tercümesi*, 89

<sup>367</sup> When the Arab revolt occurred in 1916 the Sharif of Mecca included the translation of the Qur'an in his grievances against the Ottoman Turks. Ergin, *Maarif Tarihi*, V: 1927.

<sup>368</sup> "Büyük Bir Tecavüz," 181-182.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>370</sup> Ergin, *Maarif*, V: 1610.

During the First World War (1914-1918), the Ottoman government wanted to preserve Muslim unity at all costs and prevented controversial publications. Translations of the Qur'an, with their potential to alienate the Arab provinces and their divisive effect among the ulama fell under this ban. In 1916, the Arab revolt, led by Sharif Husayn of Mecca and financed by British gold, dealt the coup de gr ace to Turkish-Arab unity. Though hundreds of thousands of Arabs fought on the Ottoman side in the war, the revolt shattered Turkish confidence in the Arabs and bolstered the position of Turkists who viewed the Turks as the spine and the future of the polity. Moreover, this added fuel to the arguments for translating the Qur'an and developing a modern Islam with less dependence on the Arabic tradition. Immediately after the war Qur'an translation reemerged a pressing issue. In 1918, Ziya G okalp penned a poem entitled "Homeland" that immortalized the "Turkish Qur'an" in verse.

A country where in Turkish the call to prayer is said,  
The meaning of his prayer the villager can understand...  
A country in whose schools the Turkish Qur'an is read  
Everyone, young and old, understands the Guide's command...  
Oh Turkish son, there is your homeland!<sup>371</sup>

G okalp's poem endorsed a radical Turkist vision of the Qur'an and its translation. Not only does it place emphasis on comprehension, but it also envisions the performance of Muslim ritual in Turkish and suggests the replacement of the original text with a translation. Moving from the pragmatic to the symbolic, G okalp cast the translation of the Qur'an as an emblem of the newly awakened Turkish nation.

---

<sup>371</sup> Ziya G okalp, *Ziya G okalp K ulliyatı: I. Őiirler Ve Halk Masalları*, ed. Fevziye Abdullah Tansel (Ankara: T rk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1952), 113.

Gökalp argued that there was no contradiction between Turkification, Islamization, and modernization and advocated the restoration of a living Islam that played an active life in the cultural life of the nation.<sup>372</sup> A disciple of Durkheimian sociology, Ziya Gökalp viewed the harmonization of Islam with national culture as necessary for religion to fulfill its social function, namely, to diminish egotism, cultivating concern for the collective interests of society and, second, to reinforce the common language and cultural ties by uniting individuals via collective rituals in shared social spaces.<sup>373</sup> The inaccessible nature of the Arabic ritual and texts made this vision of Islam in the national life impossible. In the Turkist lens, Islamic ritual and study in the national language would bolster the national ethos and make Islam vital in the life of the nation.

Yet the texts that would make this vision possible did not yet exist. There was still no full-length translation or commentary in contemporary Turkish. In 1919, former Shaykh al-Islam Musa Kazım wrote that existing commentaries failed to convey not only the subtleties but also the manifest meaning of the Qur'an. This "great shortcoming in the national literature" deprived millions of the most basic meaning of the Qur'an.<sup>374</sup> To address this need, Musa Kazım composed a translation and commentary of the first two Qur'anic suras titled *Safvet'ül-Beyan*. Avoiding the complications of "tercüme," he called the translation sections "the summarized meaning" (*icmalen manası*) and "summary of explanation" (*hülasa-i tefsir*). The former

---

<sup>372</sup> Ziya Gökalp, "Türkleşmek, İslamlaşmak, Muasırlaşmak," in *Kitaplar* (2007), ed. Mustafa Koç (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1918), 49.

<sup>373</sup> Andrew Davison, "Secularization and Modernization in Turkey: The Ideas of Ziya Gökalp," *Economy and Society* 24, no. 2 (1995): 211.

<sup>374</sup> Musa Kazım, *Safvetü'l-beyan fi tefsiri'l-Kur'an* (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1919), 1.



was a literal translation and the latter a free translation. Consider his renderings of the basmala,

Summarized meaning<sup>375</sup>

Rahman ve Rahim olan Allah'ın ismiyle okurum

I recite in the name of God, Full of Compassion,  
Ever Compassionate

Summary of Explanation<sup>376</sup>

Ey ibad! Deyiniz ki ancak Rahman ve Rahim olan Allah zu'l-celal hazretlerinin ism-i şerifiyle Kur'an-ı Azimüşşan okurum.

Oh servants! Say that I recite the revered Qur'an only in the noble name of God the All-Powerful who is Merciful and Compassionate.

Additionally, the work contains longer passages of commentary in which the author explains interpretations of particular words or verses. Though evincing concern for popular comprehension, Musa Kazım remained within the parameters and format of *tafsir*.

The perceived need to comprehend became dominant among reformists of all stripes as the ideal of Turkish-Arab political unity faded from the realm of possibility. Only a small minority of conservatives led by Mustafa Sabri continued to argue that the value of Arabicity was preferable to broader comprehension of the Qur'an. However, proponents of comprehension differed over which genre, *tarjuma* or *tafsir*, was

---

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 2. For the translation of the basmala into English, I draw on Bruce B. Lawrence, "Approximating Saj' in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of Sura 93 (Al-Ḍuḥā) and the Basmala," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005):79.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 18.

legitimate and appropriate to convey the meanings. In an article titled, “Can the Qur’an be Translated?,” İsmail Hakkı Milaslı describes the opposing views:

One group of people says that there is no benefit in reading words that one does not understand, and that in order to be able to fully understand the rules and the meanings, it is necessary to translate the Holy Qur’an into Turkish. They contend that it has already been translated into a great number of foreign languages and cannot imagine any impediment to a Turkish translation.

On the other hand, another group opposes translating the Qur’an to Turkish and argues that the noble meanings can only be articulated in the form of Qur’anic commentary (*tefsir*). The most fundamental reason for this opposition is their assumption that some want to use the translation in ritual prayer and beyond ritual prayer to replace the Arabic original. Actually among those who favor translation, there are some who want translations simply for understanding just as there are others who are of the opinion that it is necessary to recite the Turkish version in place of the Arabic original in ritual prayer and supererogatory prayer (*dua*).<sup>377</sup>

In contrast to Turkists, most devout intellectuals who advocated comprehension either insisted on calling the translations “*tafsir*” or stipulated that translations be accompanied by commentary. Since a translation could not contain all the nuances of meaning, they viewed a parallel commentary as a necessity in order to facilitate proper comprehension. That is, how one understood the translation was not to be left to chance. The masses should have access, but the enlightened elites would provide pedantic guidance. Thereby, devout intellectuals hoped to ensure continuity with the traditional understandings and prevent divergent or radical interpretations.

By the end of WWI, the ethos of comprehension trumped the call to Arabist Pan-Islamic unity, an argument whose appeal dissipated with the Arab revolt and the marginalization of the ulama. Regardless of the intelligentsia’s banter, the political

---

<sup>377</sup> İsmail Hakkı Milaslı, “Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercüme Olunabilir Mi?,” *Sebilürreşad* 15, no. 390 (1919): 447.

vicissitudes of the second constitutional period (1908-1920) did not permit the publication of a translation and no complete, accessible commentary was composed. However, the conversations had set the wheels in motion and a number of writers began composing translations. The Allied occupation of Istanbul after the war led to the exile of prominent CUP members to Malta. During their imprisonment on the island, Mehmet Ubeydullah as well as the author and parliamentarian Hasan Fehmi Efendi worked on translations of the Qur'an. Hasan Fehmi translated the entire text, which, like many others, was never published.<sup>378</sup> In Istanbul, Hüseyin Kazım Kadri, Süleyman Tevfik, and Cemil Sait all began translations. These forays were individual efforts composed in Allied-controlled Istanbul with one eye on the national resistance movement in Anatolia. The success of that movement and the establishment of the Turkish Republic established the parameters in which Turkist visions of Islamic reform could be pursued.

---

<sup>378</sup> Ömer Hakan Özalp, *Ulemadan Bir Jöntürk : Mehmed Ubeydullah Efendi* (Istanbul: Dergâh, 2005), 261. Like many translations from this period, Hasan Fehmi's translation was never published.

## 5. Translation and Nation

The Turkish government in Ankara announced that it would support the translation and publication of the Holy Qur'an in the Turkish language. Their heretical idea has been headed toward this action for many years in order to turn the devout people among them away from the word of God the Exalted, who revealed it to the Arabian Prophet Muhammad "in the clear Arabic tongue,"<sup>379</sup> with a Turkish translation—which consists of their words, their composition, and their arrangement—in order to facilitate the distortion of the translation so that they can use it as they wish.<sup>380</sup>

—Muhammad Rashid Rida, 1924

The debut of Turkish language translations of the Qur'an in the newly founded Republic of Turkey (1923) sparked lively debates over whether Qur'an translation was possible or desirable, who should engage in interpretation of the text, and what characteristics a Turkish language rendering of the Qur'an should have. Whereas the abolition of the Islamic caliphate, closure of the *madrasas*, and prohibition of the Sufi orders have received considerable attention in histories of early republican Turkey, the state sponsored translation of the Qur'an into Turkish remains both neglected and misunderstood.<sup>381</sup> Muhammad Rashid Rida, who was highly influential in shaping

---

<sup>379</sup> Qur'an 26:195.

<sup>380</sup> Muhammad Rashid Rida, "Tarjumat al-Qur'an wa-Tahrif Tarjuma lahu wa-l-Tashkik fihi," *Al-Manar* 25, no. 10 (1924): 794.

<sup>381</sup> While a few Turkish scholars have devoted considerable attention to the subject, Euro-American scholarship and mainstream Turkish historiography have neglected the topic. Turkish language studies include Halil Altuntaş, *Kur'an'ın Tercümesi ve Tercüme ile Namaz Meselesi* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2001); Düccane Cündioğlu, *Bir Kur'an Şairi*, 2nd ed. (Istanbul: Gelenek, 2004); idem, *Kur'an Çevirilerinin Dünyası* (Istanbul: Kaknüs, 2005); idem, *Türkçe'de İbadet* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 1999); idem, *Türkçe Kur'an ve Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 1998); Osman Nuri Ergin, *Türkiye Maarif Tarihi*, vol. V (Istanbul: Osman Bey Matbaası, 1943), 1606-1638. In English, no book-length study exists on Turkish-language translations in this period. For partial glimpses of the issue, see Berkes, *Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 486-490; John Kingsley Birge, "Turkish Translations of the Koran," *The Muslim World* 28, no. 4 (1938): 394-99; F. Lyman MacCallum, "Turkey Discovers the Koran," *The Moslem World* 23 (1933): 24-28; S. M. Zwemer, "Translations of the Koran," *The Moslem World* 5, no. 3 (1915): 244-61. Bernard Lewis briefly

opinion in the Muslim world, portrayed the state sponsored project as a long-term plot to displace the Arabic Qur'an. Other accounts misrepresent the involvement of President Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in the promotion of Qur'an translation by anachronistically suggesting that he sparked the initiative and led a "campaign" in support of it.<sup>382</sup> Mustafa Kemal had no hand in the composition of Turkish translations published in 1924, other than helping create the political context in which they could be published. Their composition began well before the foundation of the Turkish republic, and their inspiration emerged from the intellectual milieu of the late Ottoman public sphere.

In fact, state involvement in Qur'an translation occurred only after private publishers printed translations in 1924 that ignited considerable controversy, leading the parliament to sponsor the composition of a reliable and eloquent Turkish translation. Support for a Turkish language Qur'an translation and commentary was broad, crossing and complicating the categories "Islamist" and "Turkist" which are often invoked to describe the intellectual divisions of the day. Recent scholarship

---

mentions the translation project but, contrary to his account, the project was actually completed, albeit not by the initial translator: Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 415.

<sup>382</sup> Berkes, *Development*, 487; Mahmut Esat Bozkurt, *Atatürk İhtilali* (Istanbul: Burhaneddin Matbaası, 1940), 313; Charles H. Sherrill, *A Year's Embassy to Mustafa Kemal* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 193-196.

indicates that many intellectuals of the period were devout Muslims as well as nationalists, and the case of Qur'an translation lends further support to this finding.<sup>383</sup>

Unlike the unpopular closure of the *madrasas* and Sufi orders and the abolition of the caliphate, the Turkish state's support for the composition of a Qur'an translation actually responded to the concerns of devout intellectuals to produce a dignified, accurate translation. It did not have the radical flair of other reforms; in fact, it cannot truly be called a "reform" at all. Rather, this Qur'an translation initiative was a state-sponsored writing project of uncertain duration that enlisted the talents of the politically marginalized devout intelligentsia.

### *5.1 The First Translations of the New Republic*

The first published translations appeared threatening to the ulama and devout intellectuals and incurred a great deal of criticism from them. Their concern should be appreciated within the context of the marginalization of the ulama and Islamic institutions that occurred steadily following the Constitutional Revolution of 1908.<sup>384</sup> By April 1924, when the first translations of the Qur'an appeared, the new regime in Ankara had reorganized the ulama as a compliant Directorate of Religious Affairs (3 March), abolished the caliphate (3 March), eliminated the shari'a courts (3 March), and

---

<sup>383</sup> Amit Bein, "A 'Young Turk' Islamic Intellectual: Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi and the Diverse Intellectual Legacies of the Late Ottoman Empire," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 04 (2007): 607-625.

<sup>384</sup> Amit Bein, "The Ulema," 282-285.

closed the *madrasas* (15 March).<sup>385</sup> The appearance of Qur'an translations followed on the heels of these revolutionary changes. As the ulama's political power waned, it appeared possible to the devout that the new regime led by Mustafa Kemal might fundamentally alter or marginalize Islam in Turkey.<sup>386</sup> Worry over who translated the Qur'an and how they translated it reflected these broader anxieties about the future of Islam under the new regime.

After the foundation of the republic and the destruction of the office of the Shaykh al-Islam, the ulama establishment lost its ability to block the publication of translations. In 1924, this political shift opened the way for Qur'an translations, three of which entered the Turkish book market that year. None managed to avoid controversy. The authors had similar backgrounds, all having worked the bulk of their professional lives in the service of the Ottoman state and journalism. Not one of the three had ever worked within the religious establishment, nor did they have professional training in Qur'anic disciplines. All claimed to perform a religious service and to consult Qur'anic commentaries. Moreover, each referred openly to their works as "translations" (*tercüme*), and provoked a deluge of criticism.

Both translators and critics claimed to champion the best interests of the people (*halk*). The translators promised to provide accessible texts in simple language to help the Turkish people understand the Qur'an. Critics, on the other hand, saw it as their duty to defend the people from poor-quality translations by unqualified authors and

---

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-223.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

preserve the meaning of the Qur'an as understood by the discipline of Qur'anic commentary.<sup>387</sup>

Private publishers released the first two translations during the first Ramadan of the Turkish republic: Süleyman Tevfik's *Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercümesi* (*Translation of the Noble Qur'an*)<sup>388</sup> and Hüseyin Kazım Kadri's *Nur'ul-Beyan* (*The Light of Clarification*). The first translator, Tevfik (1865- 1939), worked for several years as a French language teacher and then in a variety of minor Ottoman bureaucratic posts until the Constitutional Revolution of 1908, after which he dedicated himself full time to writing and journalism.<sup>389</sup> Tevfik was a prolific translator of French, Arabic, and English texts, as well as the author of a number of compilations and simplified popular books on sundry topics. His translations include Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, French novels by Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Émile Zola, and Arabic works including Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (*The Revival of Religious Scholarship*) and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's *Tafsir al-Kabir* (*Qur'anic Commentary*). His corpus numbers more than 150 works, counting both translations and compilations on subjects as varied as fortune-telling, cuisine, history, language, literature, and writing amulets.<sup>390</sup> Tevfik saw himself as a "people's writer" and a "collector of anecdotes."<sup>391</sup>

---

<sup>387</sup> [Eşref Edip], "Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Tercümesi," *Sebilürreşad* 23, no. 597 (1924): 386.

<sup>388</sup> Tevfik's translation was also released under the titles *Zübdet'ül-Beyan* and *Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Tercüme ve Tefsiri* in the same year.

<sup>389</sup> M. Sabri Koz, "Mehmed Tevfik ve Süleyman Tevfik," *Müteferrika* Kış, no. 4 (1994): 51.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-58, for a bibliography of Tevfik's works.

<sup>391</sup> Dücane Cündioğlu, "Türkçe Kur'an Çevirilerinin Siyasî Bağlamında Bir Kur'an Mütercimi: Süleyman Tevfik," *Müteferrika* Yaz, no. 13 (1998): 22.



Tevfik's translation appeared under three different titles in 1924. Tweaking Tevfik's identity, each version used the pseudonym "Seyyid Süleyman el-Hüseyni," a pen name that he used for many works. In this case as in previous ones, "Seyyid" and "el-Hüseyni" appear to have been chosen to bolster the Islamic credentials of the author, connecting him to descendants of the Prophet's family. In an advertisement of the book published in two different newspapers, the publisher Naci Kasım refers to Tevfik with even more copious honorifics, adding "efendi" (gentleman) and "hazretleri" (his grace), a term of extreme deference, to the already inflated "Seyyid Süleyman el-Hüseyni."<sup>392</sup> These titles seem disproportionate and disingenuous given that most devout intellectuals considered Tevfik to be a literary hack.

Explaining the reason for the publication, publisher Naci Kasım, writes in the introduction:

It is impossible for those who do not know Arabic and Persian to understand the noble meaning of the Noble Qur'an that is the light of guidance of the civilized world, impossible to know its commands that guide the way. Though four noble works in Turkish have been published, [...] these were written a century ago, and their archaic style and stilted expressions prevented the students from benefiting from them.<sup>393</sup>

Kasım refers here to the dearth of *tefsir* works in Turkish and the prevalent practice of consulting Arabic and Persian Qur'anic commentaries. He contrasts them with Tevfik's translation that is a "literal translation [...] in a style that everyone can understand."<sup>394</sup>

---

<sup>392</sup> Naci Kasım's advertisement appeared in several newspapers including *İleri*, 7 April 1924; *İkdam*, 7 April; *İleri*, 10 April 1924. See Cündioğlu, "Süleyman Tevfik," 33.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

This translation encountered criticism and provoked outright dismissals of Tevfik's character. His previous works on profane and esoteric subjects (including cookbooks published under female pseudonyms and works on sorcery) raised questions as to his credibility to translate the Qur'an. The influential Muslim-modernist journal *Sebilürreşad* (*The Path of the Rightly Guided*) denounced this translation as a "misguided attempt" by an unqualified and morally suspect author.<sup>395</sup> Rather than analyze the actual translation, *Sebilürreşad* cast doubt on the reliability and moral rectitude of Tevfik. In order to "give you an idea about the translator and commentator," the journal published passages he composed on casting spells, parts of which involved the incantation of Qur'anic verses.<sup>396</sup> The review remarks, "Sorcery is an art, but if it is mixed with Qur'anic commentary it is a great treason against religion and against the Qur'an."<sup>397</sup> Though Tevfik's translation contained nothing related to sorcery, his previous works on the subject disqualified him as a reliable author on Islamic subjects in the eyes of the ulama establishment and devout critics.

*Sebilürreşad's* dismissal of Tevfik demonstrates that an important segment of the devout intelligentsia felt that Qur'an translators should meet the conventional requirements of moral rectitude and reliability that pertained to other Islamic scholarly disciplines, wherein the quality of knowledge is governed by its source and transmitter as well as by content. The journal defined translation of the Qur'an as part

---

<sup>395</sup> [Eşref Edip], "Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercümelere Hakkında," *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 599 (1924): 11.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

of the scholarly discipline of Qur'anic exegesis. This view differed from the understanding held by the translators and editors of these early republican translations, who viewed translation as standing outside of the Islamic disciplines. For them, translation appeared more as a linguistic craft involving the transfer of meanings between languages for which no special Islamic education or face-to-face transfer of knowledge was necessary. They claimed to consult commentaries to assist in their craft, and some even used the term "tefsir" in the title, but they implicitly defined translation as a separate discipline, distinct from but informed by commentary. Translators and publishers invoked the reliability and prestige of respected Qur'anic commentaries to add credibility to their works while at the same time disavowing that they themselves qualified or even needed to qualify as commentators.

Süleyman Tevfik's translation was not alone on the market. *Nur'ul-Beyan* (The Light of Explication) by Hüseyin Kazim Kadri (1870-1934) was also released in Ramadan 1924, sparking a commercial rivalry between the two. The publisher, İbrahim Hilmi, had initially intended to publish the book in complete volumes (which he eventually did), but allegedly because some bookstores had heard that *Nur'ul-Beyan* would appear in shorter installments, Hilmi decided to distribute the translation piecemeal.<sup>398</sup> In fact, it seems that Hilmi rushed to publish the book in an incomplete format in order to compete with Tevfik's translation on the book market and ride the initial wave of public interest surrounding the release of the first translation of the Qur'an in the

---

<sup>398</sup> İbrahim Hilmi Tüccarzade, "Nur'ul-Beyan," advertisement printed in *İleri, Akşam, İkdam, Vatan* on 8, 9, 10 and 16 April 1924, cited in Cündioğlu, "Süleyman Tevfik," 33, f.n. 11.

Turkish republic. The publishers of both works placed advertisements in multiple newspapers creating a commercial buzz that devout intellectuals and ulama found disrespectful and scandalous for the Qur'an.<sup>399</sup>

Like Tevfik's translation, *Nur'ul-Beyan* attempted to bolster confidence in the reliability of the work, indicating that "a committee that has referred to a number of Qur'anic commentaries" had composed it. However, Kadri was the true author, and the committee of other nonspecialists merely proofread the translation. Like Tevfik, Kadri used a pseudonym, that of "Şeyh Muhsin-i Fani," a penname that he had used previously on other works. Kadri had studied at the English Commerce School in the city of İzmir, where he learned English and French. He obtained knowledge of Arabic and Persian, as well as Latin and Greek, through private tutors.<sup>400</sup> Kadri also had a keen interest in Turkic languages, studying Uygur, Chagatay, and Kazan Tatar.<sup>401</sup> He composed a multivolume Turkish language dictionary that included examples of words used in "Western Turkish" from other Turkic languages, Arabic, and Persian.<sup>402</sup> During the rule of Sultan Abdülhamit II (r. 1876-1909), Kadri held several bureaucratic positions but left government service in 1904 and dedicated his time to agriculture and study. He joined the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) before its rise to power and held seat on the central committee chosen during the first annual congress.<sup>403</sup>

---

<sup>399</sup> [Eşref Edip], "Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Tercümesi," *Sebilürreşad* 23, no. 596 (1924): 377.

<sup>400</sup> Hüseyin Kazım Kadri, *Meşrutiyet'ten Cumhuriyet'e Hatıralarım*, ed. İsmail Kara (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1991), 7.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, fn. 5.

Kadri co-founded the newspaper *Tanin* (Echo), which became an organ of the CUP. After the 1908 revolution, the CUP appointed him to several governorships. However, Kadri later came into conflict with the party and was exiled to Thessalonica, and he and his family fled to Beirut in 1913.<sup>404</sup> After World War I, Kadri returned to Istanbul, where he became involved in the foundation of several political parties and served as a member of the parliament representing the province of Aydın. He held various positions in the Ottoman bureaucracy during the Allied occupation and then resigned in 1921.<sup>405</sup>

A bureaucrat, politician, and journalist, Kadri harbored no illusions about his own competency in Islamic fields of knowledge. In the introduction to his translation, he acknowledges his insufficient training in Arabic language, law, prophetic traditions, and Qur'anic commentary, indicating that he referred to several colleagues for assistance on these matters.<sup>406</sup> Kadri explains his motivation for writing a Qur'an translation:

But since the times in which the needs of humankind have multiplied and the security of life has become hard to come by, together with the resulting decrease in interest in the religious sciences, the ability to compose Qur'anic commentaries gradually decreased, and after this the works that were published either relied on earlier works or were written in the form of translations. For a long time, the difficulties of life that have multiplied and intensified in recent times began to make it unfeasible to spend such a long time studying those types of works.<sup>407</sup>

Kadri emphasizes the loss of security and the “difficulties of life” as reasons for the emergence of simplified forms of Qur'anic commentary and translations. Most likely,

---

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>406</sup> Hüseyin Kazım Kadri under the pen name Şeyh Muhsin-i Fani, *Nur'ul-Beyan: Kur'an-ı Kerim'nin Türkçe Tercümesi*, (İstanbul: Matbaa-ı Amire, 1924), i-ii.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

Kadri is referring to the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), World War I (1914-1918), and the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922), as well as the immense loss of life and sundry deprivations that these wars put upon inhabitants of the late Ottoman Empire. For Kadri, Qur'an translation is a substitute for the expansive commentary tradition; it is the genre of hard times:

Therefore, it became necessary to obtain a large amount of information in a short amount of time and, from all quarters, people began to feel the need for a Qur'anic commentary to be written in Turkish for the Turks, which is abridged, beneficial, in line with contemporary good taste, and easy to study.<sup>408</sup>

Since the late 19th century, Ottoman citizens had turned increasingly to secular, European modes of education, leaving less time for Islamic studies. In order to understand the Qur'an, they relied on condensed commentaries, most of which were archaic Turkish language translations of Arabic and Persian commentaries. Trying to achieve a genre that provided the benefits of both commentary and translation, Kadri described *Nur'ul-Beyan* as an "explanatory translation" (*tercüme-i tefsiri*).<sup>409</sup> The book's format provides the Arabic Qur'anic verse, then its translation, followed by an explanatory passage.

*Nur'ul-Beyan* underwent a level of scrutiny and critique that few Qur'an translations in history have received. The journal *Sebilürreşad* published a series of detailed articles that enumerated the errors perceived in the translation. Eşref Edip [Fergan], the editor, acknowledged that he respected the translators as persons, but

---

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Şeyh Muhsin-i Fani [Hüseyin Kazım Kadri], "Hazret Seyhin Sebil'e İlk ve Son Cevabı" (The Shaykh's First and Final Response to *Sebilürreşad*) reprinted in "Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercüme Hakkında," *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 599 (1924): 8.

argued that they were completely unqualified to attempt a translation of the Qur'an. In several installments, Edip identified and explained what he perceived to be "errors," repeatedly asking the translators to acknowledge their mistakes and immediately "pull their hand away from this matter without the slightest protest [...] leaving it to those who are competent."<sup>410</sup> While a few issues that Eşref Edip points out might be considered real mistakes, most are instances in which Edip prefers one interpretation or word choice over another. For example, Kadri translates "iḥdinā" (Q 1:6) as "Bize...göster": *show us the upright path*. Eşref Edip claims that this sounds like a translation of the Mutazilites and would be better rendered as "Bizi götür": *take us to the upright path*. It is difficult to agree with Edip that such an instance constitutes a "heinous error."<sup>411</sup>

Many of Edip's criticisms stem from confusion over the classification of the work as a *tercüme* or *tefsir*. Indeed, this confusion over genre, and the expectations associated with each, were pivotal in fueling the controversy over *Nur'ul-Beyan*. Initially published piecemeal, the publisher changed the subtitle of the work multiple times, with each new Qur'anic portion (*cüz*) he supplied a new moniker. First, it appeared as *Turkish Translation of the Holy Qur'an, (Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Türkçe Tercümesi)*, then *Explanatory Translation (tercüme-i tefsiri)*, and later as *The Turkish translation of the Explanation of the Holy Qur'an (Kur'an-ı Kerim tefsiri'nin Türkçe Tercümesi)*.

---

<sup>410</sup> [Eşref Edip], "Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Tercümesi," 386-89; "Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercümeleri Hakkında," 8-11; "Kur'an Tercümelerindeki Hatalar," *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 601 (1924): 35-37.

<sup>411</sup> Eşref Edip, "Kur'an-ı Kerim'in," 597: 389.

On 28 April, the head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Rifat Börekçi, wrote an article warning Muslims that the translations of Tefik and Kadri contained mistakes and demonstrated unawareness of the most basic elements of Arabic grammar and the discipline of Qur’anic commentary.<sup>412</sup> Initially, Börekçi had assumed that Kadri embarked upon the translation with good intentions but had erred due to insufficient knowledge. However, Kadri’s translation of 2:184 caused him to rethink this. The verse in question concerns the Ramadan fast and the provisions for those who have difficulty fulfilling the fast.

O believers, prescribed for you is the Fast, even as it was prescribed for those that were before you -- haply you will be godfearing -- for days numbered; and if any of you be sick, or if he be on a journey, then a number of other days; and *for those who are able to fast, a redemption by feeding a poor man*. Yet better. it is for him who volunteers good, and that you should fast is better for you<sup>413</sup>

Commentators have debated the meaning of this passage for centuries. The crux of the matter is what the Arabic verb *yutīqūnahu* means in this context. The verb generally means “to be able to” or “to be able to bear,” with strong connotation of physical ability. Some commentators, and Arberry’s translation above, interpret the verse to mean that those who are physically capable could excuse themselves from fasting by feeding a poor person. This understanding takes the text at face value, reading “those who are capable” in the positive as the text has no indication of negation. In this view, Muslims used to have the option whether to fast or provide food for the poor. In support of this view, the hadith collection *Sahih al-Muslim* records that

---

<sup>412</sup> Rifat [Börekçi], “Beyan-ı Hakikat Müslümanlara,” *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 599 (1924): 7-8.

<sup>413</sup> *KI*, Emphasis added.



the Companion of the Prophet Salama b. al-Akwa' (d. 74/693) said, "When 'and those who can shall feed one of the poor (Q 2:184)' was revealed, those who chose to break their fast [during the month of Ramadan] fed the poor until the verse was abrogated by 'Whoever is present during the month shall fast (Q 2:185).'"<sup>414</sup> Most commentators who hold this opinion argue that this verse was abrogated by 2:185.<sup>415</sup>

However, other commentators read the verse as having an implied negation, though it is not apparent in the text, interpreting it as: *for those who are [not] able to fast, a redemption by feeding a poor man*. For this reading, the Arabic negation "lā" is interpolated in the text. This reading holds that *yuṭīqūnahū* refers to those who are *not* able to fast due to old age or chronic illness.

Following the former opinion, Hüseyin Kazım Kadri translates the controversial passage:

Takatı olduğu halde oruç tutmayanların her gün için fidye vermeleri lazımdır.

Those who are capable but do not fast need to give a redemption for each day.

Rather than recognize this as a valid interpretation with some support in the commentary tradition, Rifat Börekçi described it as a mistranslation, writing that Kadri "knowingly or unknowingly distorted the noble verse 2:184 and confused the thoughts of Muslims... Of course after seeing such an atrocious translation, we became suspicious of the translators."<sup>416</sup> Börekçi, the highest Islamic authority in the county, questioned not only Kadri's competence and knowledge, but also his integrity and good will.

---

<sup>414</sup> John Burton, "Abrogation," *EQ*.

<sup>415</sup> *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* 2:184.

<sup>416</sup> Börekçi, "Beyan," 8.

Börekçi insisted that reading the verse as “those who are not capable” was the only correct interpretation, and that refraining from negating the verb constituted a distortion of the text.

Having invested years of work in this project, Kadri was stunned by the accusations leveled by Börekçi. While he did not claim the translation was perfect, Kadri felt that Börekçi’s critique, particularly of 2:184, was both unfounded and unfair. He responded, “Everyone knows that the text of the Qur’an is — *wa ‘ala alladhīna yuṭīqūnahu* — and the sublime meaning is ‘those who are capable but do not fast.’ To distort this by making it ‘those who do *not* have the capacity to fast’ is not for me to do.”<sup>417</sup> Fighting fire with fire, Kadri describes Börekçi’s reading of *yuṭīqūnahu* in the negative as a distortion of the text. Like Musa Bigiyev and other modernists, Kadri considered this style of interpretation to be a violation of the revealed Qur’anic *naẓm* as it interpolates the negation. However, he did not base this judgment merely upon the language of the passage. Kadri cites the commentary works of al-Baydawi, al-Razi, al-Tabari, Ebu’s-Su’ud, al-Bukhari, and Jalalayn, all of which mention the opinion that the verse means “those who are able but do not fast,” and that it was later abrogated. Al-Razi, for instance, writes that most commentators understand *yuṭīqūnahu* to mean “healthy residents.”<sup>418</sup> Jalalayn indicates that at the beginning of Islam there was a choice between fasting and providing food for the poor given that, in the second year

---

<sup>417</sup> Şeyh Muhsin-i Fani, “Diyanet İşleri Riyasetinin “Beyan-ı Hakikat” Unvanlı Makalesine Cevap,” in *Nur’ul-Beyan*, Appendix: 2-7.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

of the Islamic calendar, Muslims were unaccustomed to the fast and this provision was offered as a means of easing their path.<sup>419</sup> Al-Baydawi and Ebu's-su'ud submit that "yuṭīqūnahū" could refer to those who are able to fast, but break it.<sup>420</sup>

Given the abundance of precedent for his interpretation, its linguistic plausibility, and the fact that he indicated that the verse had been abrogated, Kadri wondered how Börekçi could accuse him of distorting the Qur'an and confusing Muslims. He concluded that, for whatever reason, the Head of the Religious Affairs Directorate had malicious intentions against him and was set upon undermining the translation.<sup>421</sup> However, the writers at *Sebilürreşad* granted him no reprieve. Concurring with Börekçi that the translation had confused Muslims, Ahmet Hamdi Akseki (1887-1951), a leading figure in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, mentioned that, due to Kadri's translation, several newspapers published articles stating that the fast was no longer obligatory and claimed that some Muslims had actually broken their fasts, while others had sought counsel with the ulama on the matter. Furthermore, Akseki argued that those who do not understand abrogation would think that they could "give a few cents to a poor man and suppose that they are absolved from the fast."<sup>422</sup> In addition to the alleged confusion caused by the translation of 2:184, Akseki also challenged its validity, insisting that the true meaning of the verse commands universal fasting and never granted exemption to the healthy. Akseki contended that *yuṭīqūnahū* requires no

---

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>422</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, "Cevabı Mı? İtirafı Mı?," *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 600 (1924): 25.

negation because it implicitly means “lack of capacity” or “cessation of capacity.” He derives this interpretation from unspecified works on language, Qur’anic commentary, and abrogation.<sup>423</sup> In his view, the verse refers to “those who can fast” *with great difficulty and hardship* such as the elderly.<sup>424</sup>

In addition to inaccuracy, devout intellectuals and the ulama criticized the quality of Turkish prose in Kadri’s *Nur’ul-Beyan*, arguing that a translation of the Qur’an, if nothing else, ought to exhibit “the full capacity of expression of the Turkish language.”<sup>425</sup> Leading members of the ulama felt that a Qur’an translation should be a literary masterpiece (*şah eser*) of the Turkish language. This feeling incorporated two complementary concerns, namely that the translation convey some sense of the Qur’an’s linguistic majesty and therefore not diminish the image of the Qur’an via mundane or mediocre prose, and, second, that such a translation be a landmark for the Turkish language itself, bestowing a new level of dignity and sacred legitimacy. Eşref Edip asked rhetorically where the full range of Turkish would appear if not in a translation of the Qur’an. “In terms of language, a Qur’an translation should be a masterpiece of the Turkish language,” he wrote.<sup>426</sup> In his view, Kadri’s translation fell far short of this mark, and many passages failed to meet contemporary standards of Turkish prose style.

---

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>425</sup> Bökçe, 8.

<sup>426</sup> Eşref Edip, 387

The critique of Kadri provides an excellent example of the hopes and expectations of devout Muslims and the ulama for a translation. Not only was the text to be completely “accurate” according to a particular reading of Qur’anic commentary, but moreover they wanted the text to constitute a literary masterpiece of the Turkish language. In their view, the English translations of the Bible and, more recently, Muhammad Ali’s translation of the Qur’an had established the precedent for literary achievement. While justified in some of their concerns, these critics had extremely high expectations for the first translations of the Qur’an. Kadri responded that the point of his composition was not to create a work of literary merit, but simply to convey the meaning to the people in a “language that everyone can understand.”<sup>427</sup> Writing a literary, “high” translation would conflict with his primary motive of making the text accessible. For Kadri, the overly fastidious and hairsplitting critiques missed the guiding ethos of accessibility. He held that it was unfair and self-defeating to interrogate every new interpreter as to whether their work contained any mistakes because this would prevent anyone from attempting to write a translation or commentary on the Qur’an; erring was integral to the process and the inflated expectations, intrusive critiques, and accusations served no other purpose but to stifle new efforts at understanding the text.<sup>428</sup> All in all, the negative reception deeply

---

<sup>427</sup> Kadri, *Diyanet*, 4.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*

disappointed Kadri, who felt he had been personally maligned and wrote several responses to his critics.<sup>429</sup>

In September 1924, yet another Qur'an translation was published, that of Cemil Sait (Dikel) (1872-1942). The son of diplomat and writer Kemal Paşazâde Mehmed Sait, Cemil Sait grew up in a literary milieu and published his first article at age thirteen. He attended the prestigious Galatasaray Lycée in Istanbul, where he studied Turkish as well as French, and went on to attend the Ottoman Military Academy. Cemil Sait spent the bulk of his professional career as a military attaché at Ottoman embassies in St. Petersburg and Tehran. In 1908, following the revolution, he returned to Istanbul and reentered the literary scene.<sup>430</sup> He wrote a series of articles emulating Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* called "İran Mektupları" (Persian Letters), in which he criticized current events in Istanbul. He also championed the women's movement by writing a play and a number of articles in the journal *Kadınlar Dünyası* (Women's World).<sup>431</sup>

Sait argued for the necessity of translating the Qur'an on the basis of practicality. In the introduction to his translation, he points out that Arabic speakers form a minority among the world's Muslims and that many Muslims are completely incapable of understanding the Qur'an in Arabic—a standard line of argument in

---

<sup>429</sup> Kadri sent a response letter to multiple Istanbul newspapers titled, "Hazret Şeyh'in Sebil'e İlk ve Son Cevabı" (The Sheikh's First and Final Response to *Sebilürreşad*), reprinted in "Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercümelere Hakkında," *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 599 (1924): 8 ; also, see his response to the Directorate of Religious Affairs: Şeyh Muhsin-i Fani, "Diyanet İşleri Riyasetinin "Beyan-ı Hakikat" Unvanlı Makalesine Cevap," in *Nur' ul-Beyan*, Appendix: 2-7.

<sup>430</sup> Cemil Sait [Dikel], "Bir Kur'an Mutercimi Cemil Said'in Kendi Kaleminden Özgeçmiş," ed. Ducane Cündioğlu, *Dergah* IX, no. 100 (1998): 46.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*

protranslation repertoires. Given the important role of the Turkic peoples in the Muslim *umma*, he laments the lack of a “literal” (*harfi*) translation in contemporary Turkish.<sup>432</sup> In order to legitimize the need for translation, Sait makes a distinction between the commentary and translation genres and argues that traditional commentary provides the most well known information about the Qur’an based on the Islamic sciences. However, he continues, conventional commentary does not always inform the reader about the exoteric meaning of the Arabic text so much as it provides the personal interpretation of the commentator. The reader unaware of the exoteric or literal meaning of the original then has no means of evaluating the interpretation in the commentary.<sup>433</sup>

Sait casts translation as a literal rendering of the text’s exoteric meaning that complements conventional Qur’anic commentary. He disavows being an interpreter, “My duty consists of literally translating from Arabic to Turkish. It is known that it is not good for a translator to clarify abstruse or vague points. That duty pertains to the commentators.”<sup>434</sup> Demarcating translation from Qur’anic commentary, Sait suggests that translation does not involve interpretation and that his task is to seamlessly transfer information from one language to another. As much as this view conflicts with the contemporary axiom that *every translation is an interpretation*, his noninterpretive definition legitimizes the practice of Qur’an translation for writers without the

---

<sup>432</sup> Cemil Sait [Dikel], *Kur’an-i Kerim Tercümesi* (Istanbul: Şems Matbaası 1924), 3.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

conventional credentials for *tafsir*. The notion that translation was not interpretation but a technical practice separate and distinct from commentary granted theoretical license for authors of various backgrounds, such as Sait himself, to engage in Qur'an translation.

Sait's translation met an equally brutal reception in the journals. In addition to accusing him of incompetence for the task of Qur'an translation, critics argued that Said had not actually translated directly from the Arabic.<sup>435</sup> It soon became unanimous that he had composed the translation based on Albert de Biberstein-Kazimirski's French translation, which had circulated for decades in Istanbul.<sup>436</sup> In a memoir, Sait acknowledged that Kazimirski's translation had inspired him and that he composed the work based on "several different translations," contradicting the statement in his introduction that he had translated from the Arabic original and consulted a number of respected Qur'anic commentaries.<sup>437</sup>

Akseki (penned a stinging critique of Sait's translation. He excoriates Cemil Sait for translating the attributes of God, "Where did you get the nerve to translate a special name of God that cannot be translated into any language? Didn't you understand anything from the commentators who wrote lengthy explanations on every word of the Qur'an but said nothing about Divine names?"<sup>438</sup> Moreover, he accuses Sait of

---

<sup>435</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, "Türkçe Kur'an Namındaki Kitabın Sahibi Cemil Said'e," *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 624 (1924): 404.

<sup>436</sup> This popular French translation was Albert de Biberstein-Kazimirski, *Le Koran*, (Paris: Charpentier, 1841). It was reprinted in sundry editions.

<sup>437</sup> Sait, "Bir Kur'an Mutercimi Cemil Said'in Kendi Kaleminden Özgeçmiş," 47.

<sup>438</sup> Akseki, "Türkçe Kur'an," 404.



committing libel against God for calling the work a Qur'an translation since it is "neither the Qur'an, nor an accurate translation of it."<sup>439</sup> In terms of the actual text, he disputes Sait's claim to translate the Qur'an literally. Akseki's critique focuses on Sait's translation of *Sura al-Takathur* (Q 102:1-2):

*Alhākumu'l-takāthur ḥatta zurtum al-maqābira*

Emvelinizi tekasür etmek arzusu mezara gidinceye kadar sizi takip ediyor

(The desire for accumulating wealth follows you to the grave.)

As an example of non-literal translation, Akseki contends that the word "arzu" (desire) and the verb "takip etmek" (to follow) have no basis in the Arabic original. In his view, Sait had either based this on another translation or distorted the text because of his ignorance. It appears possible that Sait used Kazimirski's rendering of the verse, "Le désir d'augmenter vos richesses vous préoccupe, jusqu'au moment où vous descendez dans la tombe."<sup>440</sup> "Le désir" seems to be the source of "arzu." However, "takip etmek" has no counterpart in Kazimirski's text, which uses "préoccupe" for the Arabic "Alhākumu," so the translation is not completely dependent on Kazimirski. Though most critics were convinced that Cemil Sait had simply translated Kazimirski into Turkish, he appears have used a broader array of sources and/or more independent initiative than previously thought.

Cemil Sait's translation of the term *takāthur* is similar to English language renderings by Muhammad Asad, "You are obsessed by *greed for more and more* until you

---

<sup>439</sup> Akseki, "Türkçe Kur'an," 404-5.

<sup>440</sup> M. Kazimirski, *Le Koran* (Paris: Charpentier, 1869), 517.

go down to your graves,” and Marmaduke Pickthall, “*Rivalry in worldly increase* distracteth you until ye come to the graves.” However, Akseki argues that this translation is incorrect because the word *takāthur* means neither accumulation of wealth nor greed, but rather “boasting of one’s own greatness” (Tr. *tefahür*). The translation of this verse hinges on the translation of the *hapax legomenon* “takāthur,” which is also the title of this sura. For Akseki, the key to properly understanding the verse lies in the occasion of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the narrative genre that explains the context in which particular verses of the Qur’an were revealed. Akseki points out that occasion of revelation literature indicates that this verse appeared when two tribes from the Ansar were arguing over which tribe was greater and had more members. In order to resolve the dispute, they went to the graveyard to count the tombs of ancestors from their tribes, and the boasting of these two tribes occasioned the verse’s revelation. Based on this story, Akseki contends that the passage is not about greed or accumulating wealth, but rather, a warning against vain boasting and pride. He goes so far as to say that Cemil Sait’s translation has nothing to do with the original and is a “fabrication” (*uydurma*).<sup>441</sup> Akseki recommends the translation,

Kesirle *tefahür* sizi bihude işgal etti de kabırlara bile gittiğiniz<sup>442</sup>

(Much boasting overcame you and you even went to the graves )

---

<sup>441</sup> Akseki, “*Türkçe Kur’an*,” 404.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*

Akseki's interpretation has a basis in the Qur'anic commentary tradition. However, Sait's translation of *takāthur* as "desire for accumulating wealth" is also endorsed by respected commentaries, including al-Baydawi and al-Tabari. Akseki's translation, on the other hand, relies heavily on the commentary of Ebu's-su'ud, the famous Ottoman Shaykh al-Islam, which emphasizes the term *tafākhur* (boasting, bragging). Again, it is difficult to go along with the outright condemnation of the translation given its linguistic plausibility as well as its support in the interpretative tradition. Akseki's fierce rejection of *takāthur* as greed is excessive and suggests, moreover, that he may have intended to undermine Cemil Sait's translation.

Cemil Sait's translation occasioned further debate in Ramadan 1932 when President Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938, presidency: 1923-1938) used the text for experimental Turkish Qur'an recitations at selected mosques. Prior to the public recitations, Mustafa Kemal himself gathered together the best reciters of Istanbul and coached them on how to recite Turkish translations. One evening, Mustafa Kemal and Dr. Reşit Galip met with the Qur'an reciters at Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul. Galip handed out copies of Cemil Sait's translation and told the reciters:

You are going to recite the Turkish Qur'an in mosques. So we are giving you each a Qur'an. Yes, this might not be a good translation because it was translated from Arabic to French and then from French to Turkish. However, there is an expert committee preparing a Turkish language Qur'an in Ankara.<sup>443</sup>

As Mustafa Kemal conversed with the committee, one of the translation's deficiencies came into view. Sura al-Nisa' verse 23 (27 in Cemil Sait's translation) concerns the

---

<sup>443</sup> Ergin, *Türkiye Maarif*, V: 1630.

categories of women that one cannot lawfully marry. This verse states that one cannot have wedlock with two sisters at the same time, “except what has already passed.

Surely, God is All-Forgiving, Ever –Merciful.”<sup>444</sup> Cemil Sait translates the verse,

*İki hemşireyi nikah etmeyiniz lakin bir emr-i vaki olmuş ise Allah Gafur ve Rahimdir.*

(Don’t marry two sisters, but if it is a *fait accompli* God is All-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.)

When Mustafa Kemal heard this verse, he angrily replied, “So you can go to Konya<sup>445</sup> take your wife’s sister without knowing it, then later it’s a *fait accompli* (*emr-i vaki*) and, *voilà*, God is All Forgiving and Merciful! This is nonsense!”<sup>446</sup> The phrasing of the translation makes Mustafa Kemal’s interpretation perfectly plausible. The key question is how to translate the succinct phrase *illā mā qad salafa*. Cemil Sait translates it with the Turkish expression “emr-i vaki,” which appears to be a direct extract from Kazimirski’s rendering, “Si le fait est accompli, Dieu sera indulgent et miséricordieux.”<sup>447</sup>

After an uncomfortable silence, one of the reciters, Sadettin Kaynak, told Mustafa Kemal that the translation was faulty and provided a traditional explanation of what the verse meant: *illā mā qad salafa* does not mean *fait accompli*, but rather what happened in the pre-Islamic era, *al-Jahiliyya*, The Age of Ignorance. Only the marriages that occurred before the coming of Islam fall into this category. God is merciful and forgiving of those in this situation because otherwise many women would have been

---

<sup>444</sup> Asad renders it, “but what is past is past.”

<sup>445</sup> Anatolian city

<sup>446</sup> Ergin, *Türkiye Maarif*, 1635.

<sup>447</sup> Kazimirski, *Le Koran*, 67.

left without husbands and become destitute.<sup>448</sup> However, there is nothing in the text itself that demands such an interpretation, and, based purely on the text, Cemil Sait's translation remains within the bounds of plausibility. As a literal translation, Sait's "emr-i vaki" in the French sense of *fait accompli* seems accurate at first glance. However, Osman Ergin has pointed out that *emr-i vaki* bears the negative connotation of something that has happened by accident or by mistake.<sup>449</sup> Therefore, when Mustafa Kemal heard the translation he understood that *accidental* marriages of two sisters would be forgiven. Kaynak claimed the translation was incorrect, but the explanation he provided was far more of a commentary than a correction of the translation. Mustafa Kemal's outrage at this translation and Kaynak's explanation bring into relief the potential conflicts between translations that state only what is in the lines and not the understanding of the living tradition. The gap between the word of the text and the understanding of the interpretive community led many to demand the joint publication of a translation together with a *tefsir* and to oppose printing a translation by itself. The alternative would be to produce a more *sensum per sensum* translation that incorporated contextual information and traditional commentary into the body of the text. However this latter option conflicted with the demand for literal translation as "close" as possible to the original.

As in the cases of Tefvik and Kadri, Rifat Börekçi, head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, issued a warning to Muslims about Sait's translation:

---

<sup>448</sup> Ergin, *Türkiye Maarif*, V: 1635.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, V: 1636, f.n. 1.

The work published with the signature of Cemil Sait by the name of *Türkçe Kur'an-ı Kerim* has been examined. As it is fundamentally not permissible to say “Turkish Qur’an,” it is also not permissible to rely on this work as a translation of the Holy Qur’an, which, upon comparison with the exalted Qur’an, is clearly distorted from beginning to end. Therefore, we consider it a duty to advise Muslims not to be deceived by such works that are published with various purposes.<sup>450</sup>

Given the high expectations for Turkish renderings of the Qur’an, “[t]hese translations, despite being promoted for some time in gilded advertisements in the daily newspapers, caused a deep disenchantment in everyone.”<sup>451</sup> Most devout intellectuals received the Turkish translations of 1924 with disappointment and outrage. A newspaper in the city of Balıkesir reported an incident in the market in which a man saw someone holding a copy of a translation, which he seized, tore to pieces, and then burned.<sup>452</sup> Reviews characterized these translations as “mistake-ridden,”<sup>453</sup> “distorted,”<sup>454</sup> “atrocious,”<sup>455</sup> and “awful.”<sup>456</sup> They described the translators as “negligent,”<sup>457</sup> “unqualified,”<sup>458</sup> and “incompetent”<sup>459</sup> and characterized their engagement with the Qur’an as and “misguided attempts,” “deviations,”<sup>460</sup> and “sin.”<sup>461</sup>

Despite the disappointing debut of the 1924 translations, Börekçi, like many other devout intellectuals, held on to the hope that a suitable translation and

---

<sup>450</sup> Rifat [Börekçi], “İkaz,” *Sebilürreşad*, no. 620 (1924), 349.

<sup>451</sup> Şeref Kazım, “Yeni Neşriyat: Kur’an Tercümelere,” *Mihrab*, 1, no. 1 (1924): 352.

<sup>452</sup> “Yeni Tefsircilerden Müslümanların Ricası,” *Sebilürreşad*, no. 602 (1924): 64.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>454</sup> Börekçi, “İkaz,” 349.

<sup>455</sup> Börekçi, “Beyan-ı Hakkikat,” 8.

<sup>456</sup> [Eşref Edip], “Kur’an-ı Kerim,” 599: 11.

<sup>457</sup> Börekçi, “Beyan,” 8.

<sup>458</sup> [Eşref Edip], “Kur’an-ı Kerim,” 599: 11.

<sup>459</sup> [Eşref Edip], “Kur’an-ı Kerim'in,” 597: 386.

<sup>460</sup> [Eşref Edip], “Kur’an Tercümelereindeki,” 601: 37.

<sup>461</sup> “Yeni Tefsircilerden,” 64.

commentary could be written: “We are of the opinion that a complete Turkish translation and commentary of the Holy Qur’an are necessary. We think that such a translation and commentary will be very auspicious and useful for our nation.”<sup>462</sup> Eşref Edip, a leading critic, pointed out that if the translations had been of a higher quality, he would have celebrated and commended them. Moreover, he viewed Muhammad ‘Ali’s English-language translation of the Qur’an as a model for success, admiring its format, respect for the text in terms of paper quality and binding, and its reception.<sup>463</sup> He wrote that the most noteworthy thing for Muslims was that the English press compared Muhammad ‘Ali’s translation of the Qur’an with the English-language translations of the Torah and the Gospels, which are exemplars of the English language. In contrast, he viewed the Turkish translation attempts as failures in terms of accuracy and style.<sup>464</sup>

## ***5.2 The State-Sponsored Translation Project***

The opposition to uncontrolled translation of the Qur’an mobilized around the 1924 translations, precipitating calls for parliament to sponsor its own translation project. Producing an accurate, eloquent Qur’an translation now became a “powerful idea among the public.”<sup>465</sup> On 21 February 1925, the parliament unanimously decided to fund a project to translate the Qur’an, compose a Turkish-language Qur’anic

---

<sup>462</sup> Börekçi, “Beyan,” 7.

<sup>463</sup> The text in question is: Muhammad ‘Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: Containing Arabic Text with English Translation and Commentary* (Woking, U.K.: Islamic Review Office, 1917).

<sup>464</sup> [Eşref Edip], “Kur’an-ı Kerim’in,” 597: 387.

<sup>465</sup> Cündioğlu, *Bir Kur’an*, 107.

commentary, and translate al-Bukhari's collection of prophetic reports into Turkish.<sup>466</sup>

Eđip described the atmosphere in parliament and the general sentiment about the project:

An exalted comfort, a deep spiritual sensibility had overcome everyone's hearts. This was the spiritual sensibility that brings immense wealth in the midst of all deprivations. There was always a divine joyfulness in the atmosphere of the assembly, which opened with prayers and recitations of the Holy Qur'an and the prophetic reports from the collection of al-Bukhari. There was a deep trust in all hearts that the victory that God had promised to the believers and the determined would certainly come to pass. This spiritual trust and connection gave enthusiasm to everyone.

Those were the times in which hearts had been encouraged by that spiritual joy such that the *translation and commentary of the sacred book and the beloved prophet's words were considered the most sacred task*, the Qur'an, which, amidst all deprivations, invigorated and sustained the nation against an immense invasion by the Crusaders, saved it from despair and hopelessness, giving the hearts determination and perseverance, and before which the entire nation had sacrificed its wealth, its life, its children and its spouses. This decision was taken unanimously and it was desired that the most capable and qualified writers would undertake this task.<sup>467</sup>

In agreement with parliament, the Directorate of Religious Affairs chose Mehmet Akif (Ersoy) (1873-1936) to translate the Qur'an and Muhammed Hamdi Yazır "Elmalılı" (1878-1942) to compose the commentary.

Though his father was a teacher at the Fatih Madrasa, Mehmet Akif pursued his formal education in the state public schools (*mektepe*) and trained as a veterinarian. After finishing his studies, he worked for the Ministry of Agriculture as a veterinarian and then held several teaching positions. Although Akif obtained extensive knowledge of Islamic disciplines and Arabic language, he was not a member of the ulama. After the 1908 revolution, Akif cofounded and edited the Muslim-modernist journal *Sırat-ı*

---

<sup>466</sup> *Türk Büyük Millet Meclisi Zabıt Ceridesi*, II. İntihab Devresi, İkinci İctima Celse, 21 February 1925 (Ankara: T.B.M.M. Matbaası), 210-227.

<sup>467</sup> Eşref Edip Fergan, *Mehmed Akif: Hayati-Eserleri ve 70 Muharririn Yazıları* (İstanbul: Asari İlmiye Kütüphanesi Nesriyati, 1938), 187. Emphasis added.



*Müstakim*, which later changed its name to *Sebilürreşad*. Akif published the bulk of his poetry in these journals and became a renowned poet with the sobriquet, “the poet of Islam.” In 1913, Akif criticized Ziya Gökalp’s ideas about nationalism and other antireligious publications of CUP-related intellectuals, provoking a statement of disapproval from the CUP that forced him to leave his teaching post. During World War I, Akif worked on several missions for the Turkish intelligence service (*Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*) and played an active role in supporting the Turkish War of Independence through public speeches. He composed the Turkish national anthem, “İstiklal Marşı,” as well as a vast corpus of poetry and prose.<sup>468</sup> After the establishment of the republic in 1923, Akif joined the opposition in the Grand National Assembly, placing him at odds with Mustafa Kemal’s ruling faction. In October 1923, he began to spend winters in Egypt as the guest of his friend and patron Abbas Hilmi Pasha. Beginning in 1925, Akif resided there permanently.<sup>469</sup>

Mehmet Akif accepted the Qur’an translation project with reluctance. He did not consent to calling the work *tercüme* and agreed to participate only with the understanding that the final product would be called a “synopsis” of the meanings (*meâl*).<sup>470</sup> He feared that Turkists would attempt to replace the Arabic Qur’an with his translation and use it for ritual purposes.<sup>471</sup> Moreover, he was concerned that the

---

<sup>468</sup> Ertuğrul Düздаğ and M. Orhan Okay, “Mehmed Akif Ersoy,” in *Türk Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 432-434.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>470</sup> Edip, *Mehmet Akif*, 190.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

translation would be published without a commentary, leading to unsanctioned interpretation by unqualified persons.<sup>472</sup>

Between 1926 and 1929, Akif worked diligently on the project and completed a preliminary draft, but he refused to submit it, insisting on further revisions. It is likely that Akif decided not to submit his translation in 1928 after parliament eliminated the stipulation in the constitution stating that Islam was the official religion of the Turkish republic.<sup>473</sup> He withdrew from the project and returned the advance that he had received.

However, there remained a great desire on the part of friends, readers, and Mustafa Kemal himself for Akif's translation. Many attempted to convince him to share it during his final years, but Akif remained firm and refused all petitioners. Leaving Cairo for medical treatment in Istanbul, he instructed his close friend Mehmet İhsan to keep the translation in his possession and to burn the manuscript if he did not return. Akif passed away in Istanbul, and his wishes concerning the manuscript were reportedly fulfilled.<sup>474</sup> The translation of Mehmet Akif has become an object of popular fascination, a landmark work of Islamic scholarship in the Turkish language which only a handful of Akif's close friends ever had the opportunity to read.<sup>475</sup>

---

<sup>472</sup> Ruhi Naci Sağdıç, "Kur'an Tercemeleri Münasebetiyle Mehmed Akif Merhum Hakkında Hatıralar," *Sebilürreşad* 11, no. 2 (May 1958): 281-283.

<sup>473</sup> Cündioğlu, *Akif*, 129-130.

<sup>474</sup> Düzdağ and Okay, "Mehmet Akif Ersoy," 434.

<sup>475</sup> Fergan, *Mehmet Akif*, 186-205. Cündioğlu has compiled translations of verses that Akif published in various works, but these are not synonymous with the complete translation that was reportedly burned: Dücane Cündioğlu, *Mehmed Akif'in Kur'an Tercümeleleri* (Istanbul: Kaknüs, 2005).

Muhammed Hamdi Yazır “Elmalılı” (1878-1942) took over the translation project in 1931. Unlike the authors described above, Elmalılı was a distinguished member of the professional religious establishment (*ilmiye*). From the last generation of the Ottoman ulama, Elmalılı possessed a wide range of intellectual and artistic interests. He was a poet, calligrapher, translator, and author. Moreover, Elmalılı studied European philosophy and, in innovative fashion, taught in his *madrassa* courses the works of British philosophers John Stuart Mill and Alexander Bain, as well as French philosophers Paul Janet and Gabriel Séailles. He translated these works and published his rendering of Janet and Seailles’ *Histoire de la philosophie* in Turkish.<sup>476</sup>

In addition to his intellectual and artistic pursuits, Elmalılı played an active role in politics. He joined the Committee of Union and Progress and became a representative of Antalya in the Ottoman parliament. Elmalılı held a number of bureaucratic and teaching positions within the ulama ranks and served as the Minister of Pious Foundations. After the closure of the *madrassas* in March 1924, Elmalılı found himself without a job and spent the rest of his days pursuing scholarly projects largely within the confines of his home under difficult financial circumstances. Elmalılı remained highly respected as a scholar, so the Directorate of Religious Affairs chose him to compose the state-sponsored Qur’anic commentary and, later, to take over the translation project.<sup>477</sup>

---

<sup>476</sup> Amit Bein, “The Ulema,” 209.

<sup>477</sup> Yusuf Şevki Yavuz, “Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi,” in *Türk Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 57-58. Very little has been written on Elmalılı in English. On Elmalılı’s understanding of the concept “religion,” see

The introduction to his synopsis of the meanings and commentary, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili (The Religion of God, The Language of the Qur'an)*, is a remarkable document on the subject of Qur'an translation. Elmalılı argues with considerable skill and color against the idea that the Qur'an can be translated and outlines his method of composition. In the opening passages of his introduction, Elmalılı spares no rhetorical flourish in condemning reliance on translations:

The one who feels not the pleasure of truth is doomed to his imagination,  
The one who cannot verify becomes a prisoner to imitation.  
The one who knows not God embraces the World,  
The one who knows not the World in a daydream is twirled,  
The one who embraces a daydream scolds this dimension.  
The one who sees not his hero swoons at her mention.  
The one who sees not the beloved faints at her reflection.  
The one who sees not ahead sobers up at the end of the game.  
The one who recognizes not the law comes to in the flame.  
The one who knows not the Book awakes at the judgment in consternation.  
The one who understands not the Qur'an meanders in translations.<sup>478</sup>

---

Ahmet Karamustafa, "Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır's Philosophy of Religion (1848-1946)," *Archivum Ottomanicum* Vol. 19 (2001): 273-79. Susan Gunasti's doctoral dissertation-in-progress (Princeton University) on Elmalılı's commentary will provide a much-needed study of Elmalılı, his magnum opus, and late Ottoman *tefsir* works.

<sup>478</sup> Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili: Yeni Mealli Türkçe Tefsir* Vol. I (Istanbul: Matbaa-ı Ebüzziya, 1935), 9. Translation is my own. I have altered the original format in order to accentuate the rhyme pattern.

Though Elmalılı rejected the term “translation” and discouraged reliance upon them, he felt that explaining the Qur’an to people was a duty and that he could not refuse to write commentary and “synopsis” that would assist in that task.<sup>479</sup>

Elmalılı defines translation (*tercüme*) as “expressing the meaning of speech in another language in an equivalent expression.”<sup>480</sup> However, he adds further qualifications. A translation is to be equal in all respects:

It must be equivalent to the original expression in clarity and signification, in summary and in detail, in general and in particular, in liberating and in restricting, in strength and in accuracy, in beauty of style, in manner of elucidation, in the production of knowledge, and in craft.<sup>481</sup>

This definition of translation demands no less than perfect semantic equivalence on all registers, for “otherwise it is not a translation; it is a deficient explanation.”<sup>482</sup> Elmalılı employs the logic that translation means “perfect replication” in another language, to the extent that it can be called by the same name as the original text. Since perfect replication of the Qur’an in Turkish is impossible, Qur’an translation too is impossible.<sup>483</sup>

Additionally, Elmalılı suggests that translation should have functional equivalence. He describes the fragility of translation and its ability to evoke contradictory responses in the reader: “The one who reads a translation is frightened at a point where they should be pleased, and pleased at a point where they should be

---

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Willis Barnstone, *Poetics of Translation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 16.

frightened: where there should be peace, there is the proclamation of war, where there should be war, they move to make peace.”<sup>484</sup>

To reinforce the point that only the revealed Arabic text could be considered the Qur’an in any respect, Elmalılı cites Qur’anic verses from which jurists derive the definition of the Qur’an as an Arabic text: “a scripture whose verses are expounded, an Arabic recitation” (Q 41:3). Moreover, he argues that some names of the Qur’an also point to the centrality of the Arabic linguistic form; “*hüküm*” refers to the basis of legal rulings on the Qur’anic text, “*tenzil*” points out that God revealed the Qur’an in Arabic, and “*zikr*” affirms the recited, oral nature of the Arabic arrangement of the Qur’an.<sup>485</sup>

Also in the introduction, Elmalılı criticizes unqualified interpreters of the Qur’an who base their reasoning upon translations. He writes, “One should not move to deduce legal rulings or enter discussions on problematic matters saying that this or that Qur’an translation said such and such.”<sup>486</sup> In order to separate the dilettantes from the experts, Elmalılı lays down a minimum requirement for anyone who wants to write about the Qur’an. He argues that, if nothing else, such a person should be able to correctly read a Qur’anic text that lacks vowel markings. “But what we see now are people who cannot even properly read a Qur’an *with* vowel markings pretending to do

---

<sup>484</sup> Elmalılı, *Hak Dini*, 12.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

independent reasoning (*içtihat*) based on its rulings and meanings,” complained Elmalılı.<sup>487</sup>

Elmalılı deplored the phrase “Turkish Qur’an” (*Türkçe Kur’an*), which was popularized in Ziya Gökalp’s “Homeland” poem and used in Cemil Sait’s 1924 translation and in the 1926 edition of Tefvik’s translation. In 1932, President Mustafa Kemal spearheaded an experimental campaign to recite Turkish translations of the Qur’an at mosques in selected cities around the country, attempting to realize Gökalp’s vision of worship in the national language with a “Turkish Qur’an.” Protests caused the project to be abandoned.<sup>488</sup> Writing shortly after this incident Elmalılı submitted a version of the introduction to his commentary that included the line, “God forbid a Turkish Qur’an!” The editors requested that he remove this line, which he did. However, he replaced it with the interrogative, “Is there such a thing as a Turkish Qur’an, you fool?”<sup>489</sup>

Clearly, Elmalılı did not want his synopsis and commentary to be used for any religious experiments, and the style and format of his text made it unsuitable for such purposes. Many Turks in the late Ottoman and early republican years had envisioned a Turkish translation of the Qur’an similar to Luther’s German Bible, that is to say, a text that anyone with a basic education could read and understand in clear, simple Turkish—a Qur’an for every citizen as expressed in Gökalp’s poem cited above. Elmalılı

---

<sup>487</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>488</sup> Cündioğlu’s *Türkçe Kur’an ve Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi* describes this campaign in detail.

<sup>489</sup> Elmalılı, *Hak Dini*, 15; Cündioğlu, *Türkçe Kur’an*, 65.

produced something quite different. Despite his stated intention to write the synopsis in a “plain and terse” style,<sup>490</sup> the translation uses difficult vocabulary as well as complex and inverted sentences.<sup>491</sup> Moreover, the introduction contains numerous untranslated, unreferenced quotations from the Qur’an in Arabic script, which he uses to prove points throughout the piece.<sup>492</sup> At times, he seems to be writing for an audience that does not need his translation in the first place. (The commentary, on the other hand, is written in a clearer and more accessible style.) Additionally, the format is not conducive to reading the translation as an independent text because lengthy commentary passages interrupt and divide the verses.

Rather than an accessible rendering of the meanings of the Qur’an, Elmalılı’s magnum opus is an erudite, multivolume work of Qur’anic commentary that includes translations of the verses. It was not the Qur’an for the people that late Ottoman intellectuals had imagined would communicate the meaning of the text in simple language. Elmalılı’s *Hak Dini Kur’an Dini* is one of the most formidable pieces of Islamic scholarship composed in the Turkish republican period. In recent years, Elmalılı’s “interpretation of the meanings” has achieved renown in many circles as the best Turkish translation and continues to serve as a key *tefsir* text in Turkish divinity schools.<sup>493</sup>

---

<sup>490</sup> Elmalılı, *Hak Dini*, 16.

<sup>491</sup> Cündioğlu, *Türkçe Kur’an*, 65.

<sup>492</sup> Elmalılı, *Hak Dini*, 15.

<sup>493</sup> Nearly all recent printings of *Hak Dini Kur’an Dili* translate the work into contemporary Turkish through the process of “simplification” (*sadeleştirme*) to facilitate the language for contemporary readers.



At the outset of the Turkish republic, broad support existed for a Turkish language Qur'an translation or "synopsis" of the meanings, as well as for a Qur'anic commentary. The translations published in 1924 emerged out of private initiative and had no connection to any state project. These translations by nonspecialists roused the Turkish Grand National Assembly to sponsor a devout intellectual and a member of the late Ottoman ulama to compose a translation and commentary of suitable quality. Contrary to Rashid Rida's view that the Turkish parliament wanted to alter the Qur'an and lead religious people astray, this motion had precisely the opposite intention: to prevent amateur, poor-quality translations that angered Turkish Muslims. The project engaged the expertise of two devout authors who clearly opposed replacing the Qur'an with a Turkish rendering of the text and rejected the very idea of "translating" the text. The ultimate product, *Kur'an Dili Hak Dini*, took the form of a traditional commentary and did not become canonized as an "authorized version" of the Qur'an in Turkish. Nor did it threaten to replace the Arabic Qur'an as some dreamed and many feared.

Though Rida mischaracterized the impetus and nature of the Qur'an translation project, he and other critics of the early republican government were correct in their suspicions that Mustafa Kemal's regime would attempt to tamper with Islamic ritual. Yet this occurred on a separate timeline and should not be conflated with the sponsorship of a Turkish language *tefsir* and rendering of the Qur'an, an initiative

---

For example, see Elmalılı M. Hamdi Yazır, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili: Meâli*, ed. Sadık Kılıç and Lütfullah Cebeci, 1. baskı (Ankara: Akçag, 2006).

supported by devout intellectuals and ultimately brought to fruition by a respected member of the late Ottoman ulama.

## Conclusion

From the middle of the nineteenth century to 1938, the media of conveying the Qur'an underwent important shifts in the late Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, fundamentally altering the means of access to the text. Affordable, printed editions of the Arabic Qur'an replaced the precious manuscript copies. After years of confiscating printed Qur'ans and negotiating with the ulama and calligraphers, the Ottoman state undertook a massive venture of printing Qur'ans and distributed them across Africa and Asia in order to heighten religious observance, proclaim the Ottoman Caliph's authority, and rally Muslims under his banner against the onslaught of European colonialism. In conjunction with print, Turkish language became an important medium of Qur'anic commentary through translations of Arabic and Persian works as well as original compositions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The expansion of public schools during the nineteenth century as well as the rise of Ottoman journalism contributed to the simplification of Ottoman language and the development of clearer, more direct Turkish prose style. Additionally, a new stratum of literate readership emerged that was increasingly inclined to learn about Islam via simplified Qur'anic commentaries.

Combining the Qur'anic theme of intelligibility with the idea of enlightening the masses and the revival of the Muslim world, a critical mass of late Ottoman intellectuals came to view direct understanding of the Qur'an as a necessity and some thought that

translating the Qur'an was an ideal means to this end. However, the embattled late Ottoman ulama opposed the idea, and the tense relationship between Arab and Turkish subjects of the empire made translating the Qur'an such a highly contentious issue that Ottoman state prevented the publication of any translations. Turkish renderings of the Qur'an asserted a new politics of language that threatened Ottoman Islamic cosmopolitanism and the traditional hierarchy of Islamic authority. Nonetheless, partial translations were being composed and published in periodicals under the genre of commentary or explanation, and the *modus vivendi of translation by any other name* continued until the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. The new state provided a political and intellectual context favorable Turkish translations of the Qur'an, and the majority of intellectuals supported a Turkish rendering. The intelligentsia exhibited a marked enthusiasm for the potential of the project and strongly perceived a need for such a text in the context of the new nation. However, the initial translations left a large segment of the readership disappointed and disenchanted. The commercial atmosphere surrounding their publication, the reputations and methods of the translators, and their lack of style and accuracy led many readers to view the emergence of translations as a tragic affair. Presented with a unique the window of opportunity for the composition of a seminal translation, the publishers and translators squandered their opportunity, inflaming public opinion and casting newfound suspicion on the contested genre of Qur'an translation. In response, Parliament sponsored a translation by a prominent devout poet, Mehmet Akif Ersoy. Yet his strained relationship with the leaders and opposition

to the secularizing policies of the new government caused him to refuse to submit and, later, burn his translation so it would not be used in nationalist attempts to create a “Turkish Islam.” Those who read this work before its incineration described it as the ideal Turkish rendering. Both Akif and the scholar who replaced him, Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, rejected the notion of Qur’an translation (*tercüme*), arguing that at best a Turkish rendering could be considered an explanation of the meanings. The tragic narrative of untranslatibility continued as the most respected Muslim thinkers frankly asserted that the Qur’an could not be Turkish. Though many Ottoman and Turkish intellectuals drew inspiration from the triumphalism of Bible translation in Protestant Reformation, the unfolding of the translation history of the Qur’an in the late Ottoman Empire is replete with defeat, unfulfilled aspirations, and an air of tragedy.

\*\*\*

In July 2009, the Turkish language version of *Newsweek* published an article titled “Translation War between Muslim Communities.” The piece describes how Muslim groups and Sufi orders in contemporary Turkey adopt, study, and promote divergent translations of the Qur’an occasioning a “translation war” in which competing factions condemn one another’s versions. Rather than unity around a common text, the article narrates, Turkish Muslims have expressed and perpetuated their own understanding of Islam via translations, some of which are actually commissioned and sold by the groups themselves. A handy table titled “Which Group

Reads Which Translation,” delineates the preferences of twelve groups of readers. Seminarian, Dr. Süleyman Ateş, remarks that the situation has become so dire that competing Muslim factions threaten to “divide Islam” via sectarian adherence to particular renderings.<sup>494</sup> The Newsweek article also provides a sense of the prevalence of translations in contemporary Turkey. From over one hundred and fifteen Turkish renderings, publishers sell approximately 650,000 to 700,000 copies per year. At least two translations have sold over a million copies each, and two others have sold half a million, one of which has been printed in 150 editions.<sup>495</sup>

However, the article continues, the problem is more profound than the fact that different Muslims read different translations. In the concluding paragraphs, seminarians emphatically argue that many of the translations in circulation are replete with errors and misunderstandings. “The forced renderings, unnecessary/inappropriate expressions, misjudgments, and deficiencies are innumerable,” asserts Professor Hayri Kırbaçoğlu.<sup>496</sup> According to the author of *Toward Understanding the Qur’an*, Ahmet Tekin, a translation published by the Directorate of Religious Affairs contains no less than 380 “mistakes,” and Islamic writer Ali Eren laments that the “atrocious errors” committed by translators have brought even fundamental principles of Islam into a state of controversy.<sup>497</sup> Moreover, the seminarians charge translators with ulterior motives such as pursuing financial gain,

---

<sup>494</sup> Adem Demir, “Cemaatler Arası Meal Savaşı,” *Newsweek Türkiye*, July 5 2009, 52.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

making a career, and becoming famous. Following up on the article, Turkish newschannel Haber Türk hosted a discussion pivoting around the question of whether division over translations threatened to produce understandings so divergent as to threaten the unity of Islam itself. A guest on the show, law professor Dr. Hüseyin Hatemi warned that propping up translations in the place of the original posed grave risks for the future of Islam.

In the episode described above, the “farce” of historical repetition described by Marx attains robust dimensions.<sup>498</sup> The apodeictic arguments, hackneyed critiques, accusations, and predictions of portending doom could have been read, nearly verbatim, in Turkish and Arabic newspapers nearly a century ago. The recent piece in *Newsweek* testifies to the fact that, though translations now form part of the fabric of Islam in Turkey, they remain contentious. Though the issue of what to call translations continues to be debated, seminarians and devout have reached an informal consensus on the term *meal*, a synopsis or interpretation of the meanings. Even the liberal-secular publication *Newsweek* defers to this terminology. *Tercüme* is marginalized and the modus vivendi of *translation by any other name* remains in force. However, the question of naming resolves only half of the question. What is fundamentally controversial is interpretation and the authority to interpret. Unlike published copies of the Arabic text which the state oversees, translations of the Qur’an are subject to no supervision. All comers may try their hand, and the new renderings

---

<sup>498</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852)  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>.

proliferate. As Turkey opened politically in the late forties and early fifties and press freedoms expanded, writers composed a new series of Qur'an translations and debates on Qur'an translation began anew. The tide has not been stemmed since. Turkish Muslims, like Muslims in many parts of the world, have come to rely more and more on translations in their quest to understand the Qur'an. Nevertheless, even in Turkey, the *avant-garde* of Middle Eastern nationalism, the maintenance of Arabic as a sacred language shows no cracks and the recitation of the Arabic Qur'an continues full-force alongside the reading of Turkish translations. Whereas the fear of translation as replacement animates much thinking on Qur'an translation, the Arabic Qur'an and Turkish translations have established a symbiotic relationship in modern Turkey. Translation thrives "not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement."<sup>499</sup>

However, as the recent critiques above demonstrate, seminarians seldom appreciate this complementarity. Their criticism indicates that the logic of translation as replacement remains dominant, not in terms of replacing the Arabic Qur'an as sacred source, but rather in terms of replacing what they view as the meaning of the Qur'an, defined by traditional, or their own, understanding of tafsir. Warning of the division of Islam, critics of translation's proliferation appear to want the meaning of the text to be monovocal, unanimous or at least to number among the possible interpretations recorded by the classical commentators. Therefore they find disturbing the proliferation of new, unusual, and unsanctioned readings and consider the situation

---

<sup>499</sup> Benjamin, *Task of the Translator*, 79.



unhealthy. Such an understanding implicitly considers the meanings of the text to have been exhausted and for the age of legitimate new readings to have ended. In contrast, proponents of the Qur'an as polyvalent *Logos* point to the verse:

Say, even if the ocean were ink  
For (writing) the words of my Lord,  
The ocean would be exhausted  
Before the words of my Lord were exhausted,  
Even if We were to add another ocean to it. (18:109)<sup>500</sup>

Viewed in light of this verse, perhaps the constant tide of new translations — however unconventional — reflect possibilities contained in the ocean, resonances apparent in the Turkish language that have been overlooked or remained unthinkable to previous interpreters. Considered in the logic of replacement, they appear unacceptable; yet, in the harmony of supplement, it may be argued that they are indispensable to the “afterlife” of the Qur'an and the continual unfolding of its meanings across diverse linguistic, cultural, and imaginative landscapes.

Even though a perfect translation of the Qur'an as replacement is a formal impossibility, there persists a desire to see a reflection of the Qur'an in the mirror of Turkish language, a rendering that resonates something of the charm, majesty, and awe of the “Arabic Recitation” (12:2). The rapid transformation of modern Turkish language and the polarization of Turkish society render the production of Qur'an

---

<sup>500</sup> Lawrence, *The Qur'an: A Book of Signs*, 14.

translations as pluralistic as the tastes and religious persuasions of modern Turkish readers, in all registers of linguistic style from heavily Arabicized neo-Ottoman to the contrived vocabulary of Öztürkçe (purist Turkish). Given that renderings of the Qur'an persist in their plurality, the hope for a definitive translation has all but disappeared, and, in practice, the multiplicity of translations has assumed the role of playing dynamic counterpoint to the Qur'anic melody.

## Bibliography

- "Büyük Bir Tecavüz - Kur'an'dan Menfaat Teminine Kalkışan Bir Hristiyan." *Sebilürreşad* 21, no. 542-543 (1923): 181-82.
- "Haber: Daire-i Meşihat'te." *Tanin* 2, no. 1563 (1913): 6.
- The Koran Interpreted*. Translated by A. J. Arberry. London: Allen & Unwin; New York, Macmillan, 1955.
- "Kur'an Tercümelerindeki Hatalar." *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 601 (1924): 35-37.
- "Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Tercümesi." *Sebilürreşad* 23, no. 597 (1924): 386-89.
- "Petersburg'da İslam Matbaası." *İslam Dünyası* 1, no. 16 (1913): 256.
- "Yeni Tefsircilerden Müslümanların Ricası." *Sebilürreşad*, no. 602 (1924): 64.
- Kayserivi, İbrahim Gözübüyükzade. *Tercüme-i Süre-i Zuha*. Edited by Mahmud Raci. Istanbul: Ali Şevki Efendi Matbaası, 1870/1
- Muallim, Ömer Naci. *Hulasat'ül-İhlas*. Edited by Ahmed Sabri. İstanbul: Matbaa-i Abu al-Diya, 1889.
- Akif], [Mehmet. "Mevaz-i Diniyeden: İttihad Yaşatır, Yükseltir - Teferruka Yakar, Öldürür." *Sırat-i Müstakim* 5, no. 116 (1910): 205-07.
- Akseki, Ahmet Hamdi. "Cevabı Mı? İtirafı Mı? ." *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 600 (1924): 23-26.
- . "Türkçe Kur'an Namındaki Kitabın Sahibi Cemil Said'e." *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 624 (1924): 403-06.
- Albin, Michael. "Printing the Qur'ān." In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane McAuliffe.
- Ali, Muhammad. *The Holy Qur'an*. Woking: Islamic Review Office, 1917.
- Altuntaş, Halil. *Kur'an'ın Tercümesi ve Tercüme ile Namaz Meselesi*. İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2001.

- Amanat, Abbas. *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*: University of California Press, 1997.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London ; New York: Verso, 1991.
- Antebi, Mehmet; Ferruh, İsmail. *Tefsir-i Tıbyan ve Tefsir-i Mevakib*. Dersaadet: Şirket-i Sahafiye-yi Osmaniye, 1902.
- Atiyeh, George N. *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*. Albany: State University of New York Press; Library of Congress, 1995.
- Ayoub, Mahmoud. "Translating the Meanings of the Qur'an: Traditional Opinions and Modern Debates." *Afkar/Inquiry* 3, no. 5 (1986): 34-39.
- Barnstone, Willis. *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Bassnett, Susan, and Andre Lefevere. *Translation, History, and Culture*. London ; New York: Pinter Publishers, 1990.
- Bein, Amit. "The Ulema, Their Institutions, and Politics in the Late Ottoman Empire (1876-1924)." Princeton University, 2006.
- . "A "Young Turk" Islamic Intellectual: Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi and the Diverse Intellectual Legacies of the Late Ottoman Empire." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 04 (2007): 607-25.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 69-82. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.
- Bereketzade, İsmail Hakkı. "Necaib-i Kur'aniye." *Sırat-i Müstakim* 1, no. 2 (1908): 23-26.
- Berkes, Niyazi. *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Biberstein-Kazimirski, Albert de. *Le Koran*. Paris: Charpentier, 1841.
- Bigiyev, Musa Carullah. *Halk Nazarına Bir Niçe Mesele*. Kazan: Mahmud 'Alim Efendi Maqsudov, 1912.
- . "Teesüf Etmişim Şimdi Anladım." *İslam Dünyası* 1, no. 10 (1913): 149-55.

- Birge, John Kingsley. "Turkish Traslations of the Koran." *The Muslim World* 28, no. 4 (1938): 394-99.
- Birinci, Ali. "'Birgivi Risalesi': İlk Dinî Kitab Niçin ve Nasıl Basıldı?" In *Tarih Yolunda: Yakın Mazî Siyasî Ve Fikrî Ahvâli*, 193-96. İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2001.
- Bobzin, Hartmut. "A Treasure of Heresies." In *The Qur'an as Text*, edited by Stefan Wild. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- Bodin, Jean. *Colloque Entre Sept Scavans Qui Sont De Differens Sentimens : Des Secrets Cachez, Des Choses Relevées* Genève: Droz, 1984.
- Börekçi, Mehmet Rifat. "Beyan-ı Hakikat Müslümanlara." *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 599 (1924): 7-8.
- . "İkaz." *Sebilürreşad*, no. 620 (1924): 349.
- Bozkurt, Mahmut Esat. *Atatürk İhtilali* İstanbul: Burhaneddin Matbaası, 1940.
- Browsers, Michaelle, and Charles Kurzman. *An Islamic Reformation?* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004.
- Brummett, Palmira Johnson. *Image and Imperialism in the Ottoman Revolutionary Press, 1908-1911*, Suny Series in the Social and Economic History of the Middle East. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Chambers, Richard. "The Education of a Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Alim, Ahmed Cevdet Pasa'." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4, no. 4 (1973): 440-64.
- Chauvin, Victor. *Bibliographie Des Ouvrages Arabes Ou Relatifs Aux Arabes, Publiés Dans L'europe Chrétienne De 1810 À 1885*. Vol. X. Liège: H. Vaillant-Carmanne, 1907.
- Clark, Harry. "The Publication of the Koran in Latin: A Reformation Dilemma." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15, no. 1 (1984): 3-12.
- cooke, miriam; Lawrence, Bruce B. *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- Cündioğlu, Düccane. *Bir Kur'ân Şairi: Mehmed Akif ve Kur'an Meâli*. İstanbul: Gelenek, 2000.
- . "Türkçe Kur'an Çevirilerinin Siyasi Bağlamında Bir Kur'an Mütercimi Süleyman Tevfik." *Müteferrika*, no. 13, Summer (1998): 21-52.

- . *Kur'an Çevirilerinin Dünyası*. İstanbul: Kaknüs, 2005.
- . *Mehmed Akif'in Kur'an Tercümeleeri*. İstanbul: Kaknüs, 2005.
- . *Sözlü Kültür'den Yazılı Kültür'e: Anlam'ın Tarihi*. İstanbul: Tıbyan, 1997.
- . *Türkçe İbadet*. İstanbul: Kitabevi, 1999.
- . *Türkçe Kur'an ve Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi*. 1. baskı. ed. Cağaloğlu, İstanbul: Kitabevi, 1998.
- Davison, Andrew. "Secularization and Modernization in Turkey: The Ideas of Ziya Gökalp." *Economy and Society* 24, no. 2 (1995): 189-224.
- Deringil, Selim. "Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909)." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991): 345-59.
- . *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1998.
- Dikel, Cemil Sait. "Bir Kur'an Mütercimi Cemil Said'in Kendi Kaleminden Özgeçmiş." *Dergah* IX, no. 100 (1998): 46-47.
- . *Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercümesi*. İstanbul: Şems Matbaası, 1924.
- Edip, [Eşref. "Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercümeleeri Hakkında." *Sebilürreşad* 24, no. 599 (1924): 8-11.
- . "Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Tercümesi." *Sebilürreşad* 23, no. 596 (1924): 377-8.
- Efgani, Ubeydullah. *Kavm-ı Cedid*. İstanbul: Şems Matbaası, 1915.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. 2nd ed. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- el-Hüseyni, Seyyid Süleyman. *Zübdet'ül-Beyan*. İstanbul: Amidi Matbaası, 1924
- Ergin, Osman Nuri. *Türkiye Maarif Tarihi*. Vol. V. İstanbul: Osman Bey Matbaası, 1943.
- Eşref, Edip. *Mehmed Âkif: Hayati-Eserleri Ve 70 Muharririn Yazıları*. İstanbul: Asari İlmiye Kütüphanesi Nesriyatı, 1938.

- Fâhir, Süleyman, ed. *Kur'ânî Kerim Ve Meâli Mevâkib Tefsiri*. Istanbul: Bütün Kitabevi, 1959.
- Fani, Şeyh Muhsin-i. *Diyanet İşleri Riyasetinin "Beyan-ı Hakikat" Unvanlı Makalesine Cevap*, 1924.
- . *Diyanet İşleri Riyasetinin "Beyan-ı Hakikat" Unvanlı Makalesine Cevap*, 1924.
- . *İstikbale Doğru*. Istanbul: Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası Matbaacılık Osmanlı Şirketi, 1913/1914.
- . *Nur'ul-Beyan: Kur'an-ı Kerim'nin Türkçe Tercümesi*. Edited by İbrahim Hilmi. Istanbul: Matbaa-ı Amire, 1924.
- Fortna, Benjamin C. "Education and Autobiography at the End of the Ottoman Empire." *Die Welt des Islams* 41, no. 1 (2001): 1-31.
- . *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- . "Islamic Morality in Late Ottoman "Secular" Schools." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 03 (2001): 369-93.
- . "Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 21, no. 1-2 (2002): 33-41.
- Gdoura, Wahid. *Le Début De L'imprimerie Arabe À Istanbul Et En Syrie : Évolution De L'environnement Culturel, 1706-1787*. Tunis: Université de Tunis, Institut supérieur de documentation, 1985.
- Gerçek, Selim Nüzhet. *Türk Matbaacılığı*. 1. Müteferrika matbaası. ed. Istanbul: Devlet Basımevi, 1939.
- Gökalp, Ziya. "Türkleşmek, İslamlaşmak, Muasırlaşmak." In *Kitaplar (2007)*, edited by Mustafa Koç. Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1918.
- . *Ziya Gökalp Külliyyatı: I. Şiirler Ve Halk Masalları*. Edited by Fevziye Abdullah Tansel. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1952.
- Graham, William A. *Beyond the Written Word : Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

- Haddad, Mahmoud. "Arab Religious Nationalism in the Colonial Era: Rereading Rashid Rida's Ideas on the Caliphate." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 2 (1997): 253-77.
- Hamza, Ahmet Topalođlu; Mehmet bin. *XV. Yüzyıl Başlarında Yapılmış Satır-Arası Kur'an Tercümesi*. Istanbul: Devlet Kitapları, 1976.
- Hanebutt-Benz, Eva-Maria et al., ed. *Middle Eastern Languages and the Print Revolution: A Cross-Cultural Encounter: A Catalogue and Companion to the Exhibition*. Westhofen: WVA-Verlag Skulima, 2002.
- Haniođlu, Şükrü. *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*. Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Hodgson, Marshall G. S. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. 3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Imber, Colin. *Ebu's-Su'ud: The Islamic Legal Tradition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- İsmail Efendi, Ankaralı. *Fatiha Tefsiri: Futuhat-ı Ayniye*. Istanbul: Matbaa-i Ahmed Kamil, 1912.
- Jackson, Sherman. "Al-Jahiz on Translation." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 4, no. Spring (1984): 99-107.
- Kadri, Hüseyin Kâzım. *Meşrutiyet'ten Cumhuriyet'e Hatıralarım*. Edited by İsmail Kara. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1991.
- Kanlıdere, Ahmet. *Kadimle Cedit Arasında Musa Cârullah : Hayatı, Eserleri, Fikirleri*. Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2005.
- . *Reform within Islam: The Tajdid and Jadid Movement among the Kazan Tatars, 1809-1917: Conciliation or Conflict?* Istanbul: Eren, 1997.
- Kara, İsmail. "Turban and Fez: Ulema as Opposition." In *Late Ottoman Society : The Intellectual Legacy*, edited by Elisabeth Özdalga, 162-200. London: New York, 2005.
- Karamustafa, Ahmet. "Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır's Philosophy of Religion (1848-1946)." *Archivum Ottomanicum*, no. 19 (2001): 273-79.
- Karpat, Kemal. *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001



- Kashani-Sabet, Firoozeh. *Frontier Fictions*: Princeton University Press Princeton, NJ, 1999.
- Kashifi, Husayn b. 'Ali. *Mevakib: Terceme-i Tefsir-i Mevahib*. Translated by İsmail Ferruh. Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1865.
- Kayalı, Hasan. *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Kazım, Musa. *Safvetü'l-Beyan fi Tefsiri'l-Kur'an*. Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1919.
- Kazım, Şeref. "Yeni Neşriyat: Kur'an Tercümelere." *Mihrab* 1, no. 11 (1924): 352.
- Kemal, Namık. "Kemal'in Mudafaası." *Mecmua Ebüzziya* 3, no. 25 (1880): 769-71.
- Khan, Abu Taleb. *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe During the Years 1799 to 1803*. Translated by Charles Stewart. New Delhi: Sona Publications, 1972.
- Koz, M. Sabri. "Mehmed Tevfik ve Süleyman Tevfik." *Müteferrika* Kış, no. 4 (1994): 45-58.
- Kureyşizade, Mehmet Fevzi. *El-Havasü'n-Nafia fi Tefsir-i Sureti'l-Vakia*: Istanbul, 1896.
- Kurzman, Charles. *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Lawrence, Bruce B. "Approximating Saj' in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of Sura 93 (Al-Ḍuḥâ) and the Basmala." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005): 64-80.
- . *The Qur'an: A Biography*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007.
- . "Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence." Place Published: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- . "Islamicate Civilization: The View from Asia," In *Teaching Islam (AAR Teaching Religious Studies Series)*, ed. Brannon Wheeler, p. 51-76 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- Lewis, Bernard. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. Oxford: OUP, 1968.
- MacCallum, F. Lyman. "Turkey Discovers the Koran." *The Moslem World* 23 (1933): 24-28.

- McKitterick, David. *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450-1830*: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Messick, Brinkley. *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*: University of California Press, 1993.
- Midhat, Ahmet. *Beşair: Sıdk-ı Muhammediye*. İstanbul: Kirk Anbar Matbaası, 1894.
- Milası, İsmail Hakkı. "Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercüme Olunabilir Mi? *Sebilürreşad* 15, no. 390 (1919): 447-49.
- Moosa, Ebrahim. "Contrapuntal Readings in Muslim Thought: Translations and Transitions." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006): 107-18.
- . *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- . "The Unbearable Intimacy of Language and Thought in Islam." In *How Should We Talk About Religion? Perspectives, Contexts, Particularities*, ed. James Boyd White Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006: 300-326.
- Muhammad Rashid, Rida. "Tarjumat al-Qur'an." In *Fatawa al-Imam Muhammad Rashid Rida*, 642-50. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1970.
- Muminov, Ashirbek. "Disputes in Bukhara on the Persian Translation of the Qur'ân." *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* LIX (2006): 301-08.
- Naci, Muallim. *Muammay-ı İlahi Yahud Bazı Süver-i Kur'aniye'nin Evailindeki Huruf-ı Tehecci* İstanbul, 1884.
- Naff, Thomas. "Reform and the Conduct of Ottoman Diplomacy in the Reign of Selim Iii, 1789-1807." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83, no. 3 (1963): 295-315.
- Nahid, Haşim. *Türkiye İçin Necat ve İ'tila Yollar*. İstanbul, 1912/1913.
- Nuovo, Angela. "A Lost Arabic Koran Rediscovered." *The Library* XII, no. 4 (1990): 273-92.
- Nuri, Celal. *Hatem'ül-Enbiya*. İstanbul: Yeni Osmanlı Matbaası, 1916/1917.
- Ocak, Ahmet Yaşar. "Alevi ve Bektâşi İnançlarının İslam Öncesi Temelleri." *İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları* (2000).

- Olson, Robert. "The Ottoman Empire in the Middle of the Eighteenth Century and the Fragmentation of Tradition: Relations of the Nationalities (Milletts), Guilds (Esnaf) and the Sultan, 1740-1768." *Die Welt des Islams* 17 (1977): 329-44.
- Özalp, Ömer Hakan. *Ulemadan Bir Jöntürk: Mehmed Ubeydullah Efendi*. Istanbul: Dergâh, 2005.
- Öztürk, Yaşar Nuri. "Kur'an- Kerim ve Türkçe Meali." Istanbul: Yeni Boyut, 1994.
- Paker, Saliha. "The Age of Translation and Adaptation, 1850-1914: Turkey." In *Modern Literature in the near and Middle East, 1850-1870*, edited by Robin Ostle, 17-32. London, New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Palmer, Richard. *Hermeneutics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969.
- Paşa, Ahmet Cevdet. *Tarih-i Cevdet*. Tertib-i cedit. ed. 12 vols. Istanbul: Matbaa-i Osmaniye, 1891/1892.
- . *Tezâkir*. Edited by Baysun Cavid. 2nd ed. Vol. IV. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1986.
- Pickthall, Marmaduke. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. New York: Dorset, 1985.
- al-'Azm, Rafiq. *Kıvam-ı Islam* Translated by Mehmed Ubeydullah. Cairo, 1906.
- Richter, Julius. *A History of Protestant Missions in the near East*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910.
- Rida, Muhammad Rashid. "Tarjumat al-Qur'an Wa Tahrif Tarjuma Lahu Wa'l-Tashkik Fihi." *Al-Manar* 25, no. 10 (1924): 794-96.
- Rida, Rashid. "Tarjumat al-Qur'an." *al-Manar* 11 (1908): 268-74.
- Robinson, Francis. "Islam and the Impact of Print." In *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Sabev, Orlin. "Private Book Collections in Ottoman Sofia, 1671-1833 (Preliminary Notes)." *Etudes balkaniques*, no. 1 (2003): 34.
- Sabri, Mustafa. *Dini Müceddidler*. İstanbul, 1919.
- Sağdıç, Ruhi Naci. "Kur'an Tercemeleri Münasebetiyle Mehmed Akif Merhum Hakkında Hatıralar." *Sebilürreşad* 11, no. 2 (1958): 281-83.

- Şemseddin, Sami. *Kamus-i Türki*. Dersaadet Istanbul: Ikdam Matbaasi, 1899.
- . *Kamus'ül Alam*. Istanbul: Mihran Matbaasi, 1889.
- . *Kamus-Ül Alâm : Tarih Ve Coğrafya Lûgati Ve Tabir-I Esahhiyle Kâffe-Yi Esmâ-Yi Hassa-Yi Camidir* Istanbul: Mihran Matbaasi, 1889.
- Şerif, Ş. "Kur'an'dan Gafletimiz ve Sebepleri." *İslam Dünyası* 1, no. 14 (1913): 215-17.
- Sherrill, Charles H. *A Year's Embassy to Mustafa Kemal*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.
- Şirani, Ahmed. "Kur'an-ı Kerim Tercümesi Hakkında." *Hayr'ül-Kelam*, no. 17 (1914).
- Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. 2nd ed. London ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Strauss, Johann. "Turkish Translations from Mehmed Ali's Egypt: A Pioneering Effort and Its Results." In *Translations: (Re)Shaping of Literature and Culture*, edited by Saliha Paker, 108-47. Istanbul: Boğaziçi University Press, 2002.
- . "Who Read What in the Ottoman Empire (19th-20th Centuries)?" *Middle Eastern Literatures* 6, no. 1 (2003): 39-76.
- Suavi, Ali. "Lisan u Hatt-ı Türki." *Ulum*, Cemaziyü'l-Evvel 1276 (August 14 1869) 1869, 123-31.
- Suleiman, Yasir. *The Arabic Language and National Identity*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003.
- Tabbaa, Yasser. *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001.
- Tanpınar, Ahmet Hamdi. *Xix. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006.
- Tauber, Eliezer. "Rashid Rida as Pan-Arabist before World War I." *The Muslim World* 79, no. 2 (1989): 102-12.
- Taylor, Malissa. "The Anxiety of Sanctity: Censorship and Sacred Texts." In *Ottomans and Europe: Travel, Encounter and Interaction (Until the End the 18th Century)* Edited by Seyfi Kenan (İstanbul: İSAM Yayınları, Forthcoming 2009).

- Tevfik, Süleyman. *Tercümeli Kur'an-ı Kerim*. Istanbul: Maarif Kütüphanesi Ahmet Kamil Matbaası, 1927.
- Togan, Zeki Velidi. "The Earliest Translation of the Qur'an into Turkish." *İslam Tetkikleri Enstitüsü Dergisi* 4 (1964): 1-19.
- Tokgöz, Ahmet İhsan *Matbuat Hatıralarım*. Edited by Alpay Kabacalı. Istanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 1993.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*: Routledge, 1998.
- Yazır, Elmalılı M. Hamdi. *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili: Meâli*. Edited by Sadık Kılıç and Lütfullah Cebeci. 1. baskı. ed. Ankara: Akçag, 2006.
- Yazır, Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi. *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili: Yeni Mealli Türkçe Tefsir*. Vol. 1. Istanbul: Matbaai Ebüzziya, 1935.
- Zadeh, Travis. "Translation, Geography, and the Divine Word: Mediating Frontiers in Pre-Modern Islam." Harvard University, 2006.
- Zarkashi, Muhammad b. Bahadur. *Bahr al-Muhit fi Usul al-Fiqh*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-İlmiyya, 2000.
- Zwemer, Samuel M. "Translations of the Koran." *The Moslem World* 5, no. 3 (1915): 244-61.

## Biography

M. Brett Wilson studied at Boğaziçi University as an exchange student in 1999-2000 and received a B.A. from the South Carolina Honors College at the University of South Carolina in 2001. He began graduate work at Duke University in the Graduate Program of Religion in 2003.