

Title: Orientalist Translation of the Holy Qur'an: Between Objective Cognitive Neutrality and Ideological Employment

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Abstract

This article aims to uncover the underlying motivations behind the interest of Orientalists in translating the Quran. It distinguishes between the cognitive, cultural, and religious aspects of these translations and the potential ideological and colonial backgrounds they may carry. In this context, the research addresses several points that enable a better understanding of the nature and goals of these translations, including an analysis of the general features distinguishing Orientalist translations of the Quran, and the identification of the methodologies used in their production—whether they adhere to scientific accuracy and objectivity, or lean toward bias and subjective viewpoints. The article also discusses the major consequences of transferring the Quranic text into European languages, attempting to determine whether these translations aim to interpret the Quran as a religious reference, or if they seek to shape and frame the consciousness of Muslim populations in ways that serve projects of dominance and control.

Keywords: Orientalism, translation of the Quran, ideology, bias, interpretation.

Introduction

Translation is a means of civilizational communication and cultural influence between nations, and a way to transfer knowledge, sciences, and various experiences from one civilization to another. Translation was one of the most important factors in the renaissance of Islamic civilization during its golden age.

Thus, translation became a means of the development of Arab-Islamic civilization, which is why the West, in its attempt to find a way out of the darkness of the Middle Ages, turned to the Islamic world to draw inspiration from its civilization, sciences, and ideas. Translation was one of these means and movements that Western thought focused on, as it considered that translation developed Islamic

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civilization and significantly contributed to Europe's transition from the Dark Ages to the Age of Enlightenment.

Western Orientalists paid great attention to translation due to its significant role in transmitting Arab culture to the Western world and introducing it—ultimately aiming to control it. The Qur'an was among the first works to be translated into European languages. In fact, the translation of the Qur'an into European languages (such as French, English, and German) received the greatest focus from Orientalists. The true reasons and motivations behind this intense interest remain unclear: was it to understand the Qur'an itself, or rather to fight it—condemning it by distorting and misrepresenting its meanings, portraying it negatively in people's eyes out of fear that they might be influenced by Islam, embrace it, and defend it—leading to our progress and their decline?

In this study, we will attempt to uncover the true purpose behind the translation of the Qur'an by Orientalists. Was the aim cultural, religious, and scholarly, or was it ideological and colonial in nature? Hence, our main research question is: What were the objectives that Orientalists sought to achieve through translating the Qur'an—were they religious, scientific, and objective, or were they ideological, subjective, and biased?

From this central question, several sub-questions arise, through which we aim to explore the following: What are the characteristics of Orientalist translations of the Qur'an? What methods did the translators follow in producing their translations—were they scientific methods marked by accuracy and objectivity, or were they subjective and biased approaches? What were the main consequences of translating the Qur'an into European languages? And finally, were these translations interpretive in nature (aimed at explaining the Qur'an), or were they intended to influence and control the direction of Muslim societies?

As for the study's methodology, we adopted the historical-comparative method in order to maintain objectivity in presenting information and comparing it to identify points of divergence and convergence, truth and error, and to present it to the reader in the best possible form. We also relied on the analytical method to examine certain texts that highlight the serious errors made by Orientalists with regard to the Qur'an.

1- The Concept of Orientalism

Although the term *Orientalism* emerged in the West two centuries ago, it has received—and continues to receive—significant attention. This is evidenced by the fact that intellectuals, scholars, and thinkers, whether traditional or contemporary, Arab or Western, have shown ongoing interest in the topic. They have discussed it in their books, works, and encyclopedias, such as the one written by the thinker Abdel Rahman Badawi titled *Encyclopedia of Orientalists, Orientalism and Orientalists: Their Merits and Faults* by Mustafa Al-Siba'i, *The History of the Qur'an* by the Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke, *The Methodologies of Orientalists in Translating the Meanings of the Qur'an: A Historical and Critical Study* by Dr. Abd al-Radi bin Muhammad Abd al-Muhsin, and *Mohammed and the Qur'an* by the Orientalist Rudi Paret. All this interest stems fundamentally from the value the East holds for the West, and the importance of Islam and the Qur'an to human civilization in general and Western civilization in particular.

The second observation I made is that many researchers, whenever they mention the word *Orientalism*, almost always pair it with the word *invasion*—as if it were its twin. Not only that, but some of them go so far in their discussions, books, and writings as to condemn Orientalism and everything related to it. We wonder what the reason behind this might be. Is it the Orientalists themselves? Or is this condemnation of Orientalism and Orientalists rooted in the intellectual void we currently experience? On the other hand, there are those who defend and support Orientalism—not out of bias, but because they view it as an intellectual movement concerned with the study of Eastern civilizations. They see it as a scholarly effort that has achieved what Muslims themselves did not—an academic endeavor dedicated to studying the East, the Arabs, Islam, and Muslims. Yet despite this, many critics accuse supporters of Orientalism and Orientalists of being their loyal disciples, who view Orientalists as the hope for salvation, progress, and advancement—a way out of the deep darkness that has long haunted many of our thinkers.

When we previously mentioned that Orientalism originated in the West, this does not mean that it remains confined to that sphere. In fact, the reality is that it has occupied a significant and prominent place in Arab writings as well. One clear indication of this is that many of our thinkers studied Orientalism under the guidance of Orientalists themselves. Scientific missions led them in that direction, based on their belief that studying in the West—the West which possesses knowledge—would pave the way for them to reach the level the West had achieved. For, in their view, no revival is possible without an enlightened intellect.

And because Orientalism has had a significant influence on Arab-Islamic thought, I find it necessary to offer both a linguistic and a terminological definition—though briefly.

Linguistic Definition: *Orientalism* is the Arabic rendering of the English word *Orientalism*, derived from the idea of turning toward the East. That is, the pursuit of knowledge and languages of the East. It refers to those Western scholars who are concerned with this field. Accordingly (Ahmad, 1958, p. 311), there is a close connection between the linguistic meaning and the terminological one, which will be presented next.

It is also said that the word *Orientalism* is derived from the root word *Sharq* (East) (Ibrahim, 1960, p. 482). It is said *Sharqat al-shams shurūqan*—"the sun has risen"—meaning the sunrise or the place where the sun rises, symbolizing the focus on that geographical area of the world, namely the East. If we trace the word back to its origin, we find that it comes from the word *ishrāq* (illumination), to which three letters were added: *alif*, *sīn*, and *tā'*, forming *istishrāq*, meaning the pursuit of light, guidance, and illumination. In this sense, it is said: "The intent is not the East as a geographic location, but rather the East associated with sunrise, light, and guidance." (Al-Sarhani, p. 3). *Ishrāq* (illumination) comes from the *Sharq* (East), the land where the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—were revealed. Since Islam became the predominant religion, the meaning of *Orientalism* came to signify the study and understanding of Islam, Muslims, and Muslim lands—their beliefs and laws, history, society, heritage, and more. This is in reference to the meaning in the Arabic language.

As for European languages, there is another definition which indicates that what is meant by the "East" is not the geographical East, but rather the East associated with sunrise, brightness, light, and guidance. This is precisely what Sayyid Muhammad Al-Shahid addressed in his definition of Orientalism, drawing upon Western dictionaries. He argued that the term *Orientalism* is not solely linked to the geographical East, but conveys the idea of the East as the place of the rising sun—thus carrying a symbolic meaning of dawn, light, and spiritual enlightenment, in contrast to sunset, which symbolizes decline and ending. Sayyid Muhammad Al-Shahid turned to European linguistic dictionaries—German, French, and English—to examine the meaning of the word *East* (*Orient*), and he found that the term used to refer to the East in the context of Oriental studies was *Morgenland* in German, meaning "Land of the Morning." Morning is when the sun rises, and this word implies a shift from a purely geographical or astronomical meaning to a more symbolic one—focusing on morning as a time of light and awakening. In contrast, the term *Abendland*, meaning "Land of the Evening," is used to refer to the West, symbolizing darkness and rest. (Al-Shahed, 1994, p. 211)

In Latin, the word *Orient* means "to learn" or "to seek knowledge about something." In French, the word *Orienter* means "to guide," "to direct," or "to lead." In English, the terms *Orientalism* and *Orienteer* mean "to direct the senses toward a certain direction or relationship in the fields of ethics, society, thought, or literature, or toward personal interests in the intellectual or spiritual realm."

Terminological Definition: Researchers differ greatly on the intended meaning of the term *Orientalism*. However, what is generally agreed upon—as mentioned in the linguistic definition—is that it emerged in the West around two centuries ago, with slight variations in the timeline depending on the different European dictionaries. What is certain, however, is that the study of Eastern languages and religions—especially Islam—began much earlier than that. It is likely that the term *Orientalist* appeared before the term *Orientalism*. In this context, Arberry, in a study on the subject, states: "The original meaning of the term *Orientalist* dates back to the year 1638, referring to a member of the Eastern or Greek Church."

He adds: "In 1691, Anthony Wood described Samuel Clarke as a 'notable Orientalist,' meaning that he had knowledge of some Eastern languages." Furthermore, in his notes on Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Lord Byron refers to "Mr. Thornton" and his many references which indicate a deep engagement with Orientalism.

Among the Western scholars who have addressed the emergence and definition of Orientalism is the Orientalist Rudi Paret, who states: "Orientalism is a science specifically related to the study of language. The closest thing to it, then, is to think about the name given to it. The word Orientalism is derived from the word *Sharq* (East), and the word *Sharq* means the place where the sun rises. Therefore, Orientalism is the science of the East or the science of the Eastern world. Up to this point, everything is quite clear. But what does the word *East* mean in this particular context? It seems that the name *East* has undergone a change in meaning. The East, in relation to us (referring to German Orientalists), refers to the Slavic world, the world beyond the Iron Curtain. This area is specifically studied by the field of Eastern European research. However, the East, as it is concerned with Orientalism, is geographically located in the southeastern direction in relation to us.". Similarly, we find the French Orientalist Maxime Rodinson, who discusses the birth of Orientalism, stating: "People began studying languages and gathering information for purely doctrinal purposes, but these studies lost their appeal with the fall of Granada in 1492... Then, these studies were resumed as part of Semitic studies in general in Rome, where the focus was on unifying the Eastern churches... These studies were then expanded to become a collection of Islamic studies.". This means that the goal was to create a specialized branch of knowledge to study the East, and there was a pressing need for specialists to establish journals, societies, and academic departments dedicated to this field.

As for the term Orientalism as mentioned in some writings of Arab Muslim thinkers, it means: "Anyone who teaches about the East, writes about it, or researches it—whether that person is specialized in anthropology, sociology, history, or philology in its specific or general aspects—is considered an *Orientalist*, and what they do is referred to as *Orientalism*."

After discussing some of the concepts of Orientalism, it becomes clear that it is essentially an intellectual trend concerned with the study of Islam and Muslims. This includes all the studies produced by Westerners that address issues related to Islam and Muslims, whether in doctrine, tradition, history, or other areas of Islamic studies.

2-Goals and Motivations of Orientalism

What did the Orientalists aim to achieve by translating the Qur'an? Was it to refute and distort it? Or to affirm and support it?

We should not jump to conclusions or make hasty judgments without knowledge or a careful, thoughtful reading. The West is not one entity; not all of it is hostile to Islam, nor is the entire West focused on distorting Islam and the Qur'an. Even the Qur'an, in many of its verses, distinguishes between the aggressors and the just. Allah says: "And among the People of the Book are those if you entrust them with a heap of gold, they will return it to you, but among them are those if you entrust them with a single dinar, they will not return it to you unless you are standing over them. That is because they say, 'There is no blame upon us concerning the unlettered.' And they speak untruth about Allah while they know." (Qur'an, Al-Imran 3:75).

Therefore, we cannot place all Orientalists in the same category. We must differentiate between them based on the goals they sought to achieve through their translations of the Qur'an. These goals vary depending on the time and place, as well as the individuals and groups involved. The motivations behind certain types of Orientalism may be driven by specific references and political agendas, or they may be influenced by particular knowledge and sciences.

As the starting points differ, the goals will inevitably differ as well. Hence, we ask: What are the main goals the Orientalists sought to achieve through their translations of the Qur'an?

A. The Religious Goal: Any researcher in the history of Orientalism can clearly see that the religious goal was a direct cause of the emergence of Orientalism. The religious goal greatly supported European Oriental studies on Arabs and Islam. The religious goal accompanied Orientalism throughout its long stages, and until the 19th century, Orientalism had hardly freed itself from the religious background from which it originally derived, except to a very small extent.

In general, from the beginning, the Orientalists had a clear and evident goal: to work on combating Islam, protecting Christianity, and promoting missionary work. The Orientalists were concerned with translating the Qur'an "to attack Islam, distort its virtues, and alter its truths, in order to prove to their followers, who were subject to their religious leadership, that Islam— which, at the time, was the only rival to Christianity in the eyes of the West—was a religion unworthy of spreading, and that Muslims were barbaric, thieving, bloodthirsty people, driven by their religion toward bodily pleasures and distanced from any spiritual or moral elevation.". The fear of the West regarding the spread of Islam, due to the strength with which Islam spreads and reaches people, and the way people embrace it, led many Christians to harbor animosity toward Islam and oppose it. Asif Hussein says in an article titled "The Intellectual Path of Orientalism": "When Islam emerged on the scene in the Middle East, both Judaism and Christianity felt threatened and refused to acknowledge the position Islam had reached. However, the vitality of the new religion spread from the Arabian Peninsula to China, leaving several Islamic empires' marks on world history. Soon, the Christians realized that Islam had come to stay... Neither Judaism nor Christianity accepted this confirmation, so they attacked Islam and left no plan untried in an attempt to destroy people's trust in Islam as a revealed religion...". Thus, the power of Islam was the reason for its opposition by Christians, who sought to undermine it by distorting it in order to keep people away and prevent its spread. Christians used knowledge of Islam as a tool for missionary campaigns aimed at opposing Islam and the Qur'an.

In general, early Christian writings were highly biased and hostile toward the Qur'an, considering Islam to be "heresy... and like other ancient heresies, it could pose a threat to Catholic faith unless studied in its true form so that it could be fought with the appropriate means." Therefore, the goal of the Orientalists in translating the Qur'an was to cast doubt on its authenticity and undermine it, with the intention of diverting Muslims from it, weakening Islam, and diminishing its strength. This would lead to Muslims losing their power and influence, which could eventually result in some losing faith in Islam and adopting another religion. This was the work that Orientalists aimed to achieve through missionary efforts to convert Muslims. This view was confirmed by Orientalist Rudi Paret in his book *Arab and Islamic Studies in German Universities* (German Orientalists since Theodor Nöldeke), where he considered the main goal of Orientalists' efforts to be to prevent Islam from spreading and promote Christianity. He said: "The goal of learning Arabic and translation efforts in the 12th and 13th centuries was proselytization, to convince Muslims in their language of the falsity of Islam and attract them to Christianity... for the Christian West's position during the medieval period towards Islam was one of opposition and contention."

What the Orientalists sought in their study of Islam was not to support or champion it for its spread and expansion. Instead, their goal was to fight it and distort it, so that people, particularly Christians, would distance themselves from it. This led Christians to use "knowledge of Islam as a means for missionary campaigns that spread to the Islamic countries, with the primary goal of deterring Christians from Islam." We read in Zaqqouq's account that the decision to establish the Chair of Arabic Language at the University of Cambridge in 1636 explicitly stated two objectives: one commercial and the other missionary. In a letter from the academic authorities at Cambridge on May 9, 1636, to the founder of the chair, it was stated: "We recognize that our aim in this endeavor is not merely to approach good literature by exposing a large portion of knowledge to the light, rather than keeping it confined to the scope of this language we seek to learn. We also aim to serve the king and the state through our trade with Eastern countries, and to glorify God by expanding the boundaries of the Church, and by preaching Christianity to those who are now living in darkness."

B. The Scientific Goal: The efforts of many Orientalists were focused on studying and comprehending Arabic books, translating the Quran, Hadith, and Tafsir (interpretation), and studying the Arabic

language as well as compiling dictionaries. They believed that Europe could not rise or progress without turning to the East to learn about the achievements of Islamic civilization in all scientific fields. Rudi Paret states: "If Europe wants to advance in civilization and science, it must turn to the core of knowledge, studying its languages, literature, and civilization." This led some Orientalists to write in every field in which Muslim scholars had written. They left no area untouched, studying it with precision and scrutiny. They wrote, translated, and took much from Eastern civilization.

These reasons led some Orientalists to engage in the study of Islam purely scientifically, attempting to be objective and non-biased, avoiding preconceived judgments. Their motivation was "a love for exploring the civilizations, religions, cultures, and languages of nations." These Orientalists made fewer mistakes in understanding Islam and its heritage compared to others because they did not deliberately distort or alter the facts. Therefore, their research was closer to the truth and sound scientific methodology than the work of the majority of Orientalists. Some of them even converted to Islam and believed in its message. Consequently, some Orientalist studies were purely scientific in nature, aimed at benefiting from the enlightening aspects of Eastern civilization's history and examining the important sciences and knowledge that flourished within the Arab-Islamic civilization.

Objectivity in the study of Eastern sciences among some Orientalists went beyond mere academic interest. "Those who changed their names, or who believed and hid their faith, or those who remained true to their beliefs but maintained respect, objectivity, and impartiality toward Islam and its people, even though this negatively affected their scientific careers. They faced various forms of harassment, such as not being invited to conferences and seminars, having their research not published in Orientalist journals, and being denied opportunities to work in centers or schools dedicated to Arabic, Islamic, and Oriental studies. They rarely received recognition from Muslims themselves."

There is no doubt that Orientalism, through its scientific objectives, has served the West first and humanity as a whole. However, "one must be cautious not to hastily label as 'objective' or 'fair' everyone who offers a few words of praise, or mentions some commendation of Islam, or writes a study that neutrally presents certain facts about Islam, without considering their other writings and examining all their positions and biased articles against the true religion and their distortions of it. The objectivity of such individuals can therefore be called 'relative objectivity.'" Thus, we should not judge these studies merely by their appearance. Some Orientalists may present their studies of Islam as scientific and objective, while in reality, they aim to understand Islam and the Qur'an only to distort them and portray them to the public as incomplete, corrupted, or racist—all with the goal of attacking Islam and undermining its sources of strength.

3-Characteristics of Orientalist Translations

The Orientalist motives for studying Islam in general—and the Qur'an in particular—largely reveal the key features and characteristics that define Orientalist translations of the Qur'an. The religious, scientific, and colonial motivations (which may appear objective but are in fact rooted in colonial ideology) clearly demonstrate and explain the corruption and weakness of many such translations. In fact, as Maurice Bucaille stated, "If we look for the reason behind the corruption in translation, we find that it is more due to these underlying motives than to a lack of knowledge of the Arabic language."

Among the main features that have significantly contributed to the distortion of Orientalist translations of the Qur'an are the following:

- **Ignorance of the Arabic Language Among Orientalists:** Many studies, both Arab and Western, have confirmed that most Orientalists who translated the Qur'an had little to no knowledge of the Arabic language and were far from proficient in it, even though Arabic is the fundamental tool required for accurate translation into European languages. "It has been acknowledged that the Islamic world preserved the heritage of ancient times—medicine, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, and the sciences—and this preservation was a strong incentive for translations from Arabic into Latin. However, this did not yet lead to a philological study of the Arabic language. Even the earliest Latin translation of the Qur'an, dating back to 1143, reflected a paraphrasing of ideas rather than any attention to the

original form and style of the Arabic text." Thus, how can someone who lacks knowledge of the Arabic language—its expressions and grammatical rules—possibly provide a sound translation of the Qur'an?

- **Ignorance of Islam:** Many of the problems found in Orientalist translations of the Qur'an stem from a lack of understanding of Islam, a poor command of the Arabic language, and reliance on unreliable sources in forming judgments about Islam. Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad, in his book *The Truths of Islam and the Falsehoods of Its Opponents*, states that the root cause of the Orientalists' translation errors is either "ignorance of Islam or ignorance of the Arabic language. Some of them are ignorant of Islam, and some are ignorant of the language, even though they are considered Orientalists, because they memorize its vocabulary without truly appreciating it or penetrating its essence beyond the surface of grammatical rules and structures." He adds: "Their ignorance of understanding is greater than their ignorance of the Arabic language, because Islam belongs to God alone, and its prohibition of associating others with Him forbids the Muslim from submitting to oppression or yielding to domination by people or by the circumstances of life. It forbids him from surrendering to failure or to unjust distribution, and from submitting to any fate he is not content with and knows that God is not content with either." This means that the weakness of Orientalist translations of the Qur'an at times, and their corruption at other times, is fundamentally due to ignorance of Islam. And this ignorance stems from a lack of knowledge of the Arabic language. The two are interlinked. Whoever masters and understands Arabic is certainly capable of translating the Qur'anic text properly and grasping its truth and meanings—and the opposite is equally true.

There is also a truth that Muslims must pay attention to: ignorance of the Arabic language and ignorance of Islam were not the only reasons behind the corruption of Qur'anic translations. In fact, some Orientalists master Arabic better than the linguists themselves, and know more about Islam than many Muslims do. Yet, some of them do not want the Qur'an to spread, nor Islam to persist. All of this stems from a deep hatred of Islam and Muslims, driven by pure racial prejudice.

- **Ignorance of the Qur'an's Characteristics:** Although Orientalist studies have engaged with some modern linguistic approaches—such as theories of symbols, signs, and their interrelations—they paid little attention to the unique system and structure of the Qur'an. This structural aspect is not a superficial feature or a marginal trait of the Qur'an; rather, it is the essence of its uniqueness and the very foundation of its miraculous linguistic character.

The Qur'anic structure refers to the unique style of composition in formulating sentences, constructing expressions, and modes of delivery within a tightly integrated framework that ensures harmony between meanings, with both the meanings and words being tailored to suit the context and circumstances.

Conclusion

Since long ago, Orientalists have been deeply involved in translating the Holy Qur'an. However, their intentions were often clear and loaded with ideological backgrounds far removed from academic objectivity and scientific rigor. Their translations revealed deliberate distortions in understanding and transmission, frequently driven by suspicious motives aimed not at enriching knowledge, but rather at distorting the image of Islam and the Qur'an. This was largely due to their weak linguistic competence and their lack of mastery of the basics and essence of the Arabic language, in addition to their ignorance of the core truths of Islam. These shortcomings prevented the realization of accurate and comprehensive translations of the Qur'anic text—both in its apparent and deeper meanings. Most Orientalist translations showed a clear lack of proper understanding of the meanings of the Qur'an, whether due to ignorance or, more often, intentional distortion. The aim was to separate Muslims from their source of spiritual and civilizational strength, once they (the Orientalists) realized how unique the Qur'an is compared to other revealed books—thanks to its distinctive features that captivate hearts and minds and regulate the life of a Muslim in all its aspects. For Muslims, the Qur'an is not merely a

religious text, but a comprehensive system of values sufficient for the development of both the individual and society. From this perspective, the translations produced by Orientalists were nothing more than a means of attacking Islam, its Prophet, and its Book. The process of distortion and manipulation persisted for centuries and became a significant barrier to the world's reception of the Islamic message in a clear and impactful manner. Thus, Orientalist translations moved away from any true scientific contribution and fell into the realm of ideological exploitation aimed at undermining the Qur'an and its teachings.

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