Like all scripture, the interpretation of the Quran is difficult for even the most experienced scholar.

The main religious text of Islam, it has produced its own religious science of interpretation: Tafsir, or the exegesis of the Quran.

Arguably, it is impossible to understand and interpret the Quran without understanding its historical context, as languages quickly evolve and old meanings are lost over time.

The actual spelling of some verses of the Quran is still disputed. Initially recited verbally by the Prophet, who, according to tradition could neither read nor write, the Quran was transcribed later by other men.

The conversion from oral to written text gave rise to several possible readings of the book, seven of which are considered canonical.

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|  |  | **There are many English translations of the Quran, at least fifty by some counts.** |

The translation of religious scripture, from the Old Testament and the New Testament to the Quran, therefore automatically encounters problems in [determining the meaning of the source](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/tinkering-with-the-word-of-god), then reproducing it as a translated text that preserves its meaning.

However, besides the standard problems and consequences of translating scripture, the [nature of translation](http://www.arttimesjournal.com/theater/totranslate.htm) as an act that is seen to profane Holy Scripture, at least in Islam, has often given translators of the Quran leeway to tinker with the text.

Translators of the Quran have thus either directly intervened in the text or framed it via "paratexts" to reflect both their subconscious and wilful biases and ideologies.

Paratexts include prefaces, footnotes, and additions to the text such as glossaries, titles and covers.

There are many English translations of the Quran, at least fifty by some counts.

**Translations with a purpose**Quranic translations are driven by different motives.

The process, choice of words and structure, and presentation of the translation can influence readers' attitudes and the way they perceive the text. Far from being neutral messengers simply rendering the Quran from one language to another, translators of the Quran may have other agendas.

Consider, for example, that the first translation of the Quran into Latin by the monk Robert of Ketton. The [translation was a recognition by the Catholic Church](http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/863/cu7.htm) of the need to understand "the enemy", and was intended as a refutation.

In the same category, one can place other translations of the Quran, such as the 1649 translation by Alexander Ross, and the 1734 translation by George Sale - who in his preface titled *Preliminary Discourse* claimed the Quran was a "manifest forgery."

Sale arguably wanted to push the readers [to reject the divine origin](http://www.meforum.org/717/assessing-english-translations-of-the-quran) of the Quran and Islam.

Many English translations can be said to have had the same purpose, at least in part. These include translations by Reverend J Rodwell in 1861 and by NJ Dawood in 1956, who sought to subvert the text by manipulating the order of the chapters.
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In other words, those translators chose to ignore the canonical sequence of suras of the original Quran, deliberately producing an incoherent text.

Their goal was to portray the text as resulting from "self-deception, catalepsy, or hallucination", if we accept Middle East journalist Eric Walberg's arguments.

On the other hand, there are translations defending or promoting Islam.

One of these is The Koran Prepared, edited by Mirza Hairat Dehlawi. In his introduction to the translation, Dehlawi wrote the translation was intended as an "exhaustive reply to the manifold criticisms of the Quran by various Christian authors such a Sale, Rodwell, Palmer and Muir".

Similarly, translations could be reflecting denominational biases, ie: the translator's affinity to one of the many subsects of Islam (Shia Islam, Sufism, etc).

For instance, Syed V Mir Ahmed Ali arguably produced the standard English Shia-centric translation of the Quran, while Muhammad Ali, a follower of the Ahmadi sect, denied in a footnote in his translation the mainstream Muslim view that supports the story of Jesus' virgin birth.

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|  |  | **Unfortunately, translations of the Quran can also advance bigoted views.** |

Unfortunately, translations of the Quran can also advance bigoted views.

For instance, the Hilali and Muhsin Khan translation reads more like a supremacist Muslim, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian polemic than a rendition of Islamic scripture.

Translations of the Quran have also been used to advance feminist views. In 2007, Laleh Bakhtiar, an American convert to Islam, published her translation, titled *The Sublime Quran*, "providing a woman's point of view".

In her introduction, [she challenges](http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/islamic-feminism-fighting-theology-theology)the traditional Quranic exegesis, which has been used to justify both the inherent superiority of men over women, and the legality of men beating women.

A translator may even seek to produce an aesthetically pleasing text. In a recent English translation of note, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* by Tarif Khalidi, a lot of effort went into producing a poetic translation which could emulate the original, [whose style](http://www.theinimitablequran.com/QuranicStyle.html) has been described as somewhere between poem and prose.

Ideology is a major topic in translation studies. Translators, like all human beings, bring their biases and agendas to the table, and not less so when they translate scripture.

However, this is not always bad - or indeed an act of betrayal.

A literal reading of the text without annotation and proper framing, both in the original and in translations, is arguably one of the causes of radicalization - as discarding the accumulated layers of historical interpretations that down-tone the often violent worldview of the seventh-century effectively serves to reproduce such an outlook among zealots.

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***Opinions expressed in this article remain those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of al-Araby al-Jadeed, its editorial board or staff.***