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A Case Study of Qur’ānic Exegesis from Khorasan

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INSCRIBING PERSIAN IN THE ARABIC COSMOPOLIS: A CASE STUDY OF QUR’ĀNIC EXEGESIS FROM KHRASAN

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Abstract: Scholarly discourse on the Persianate tends to focus on the influence of Persian in Iran and further east, and often occludes the way in which the Persian language is inflected and present in the Arabic cosmopolis further west. Similarly, the formation of ‘Islamic classics’ and scholarly genres including exegesis tends to ignore the role of Persian works (and texts produced in a Persianate context). Through a case study of Qur’ānic exegesis in Persian and its reception west of Iran, we demonstrate how Persian is inscribed into the Arabic cosmopolis such that the development of post-classical exegesis should place these works alongside the major Arabic classics of al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha‘labī and al-Basīṭī; in effect, we contend the study of Qur’ānic exegesis cannot ignore the study of Persian exegesis. Through examining rare manuscripts, we show how scholars read, copied and promoted Persian tafsir in Arabophone contexts. Not only does this study follow up on and test some earlier scholarly works dealing with the circulation of Persian translations of the Qur’ān and its commentaries as well as the scholarly impact of the Persians further west, it indicates the contribution of Persian exegesis to a normative understanding of the Islamic exegetical traditions at the heart of the madrasa.

Keywords: Persianate tafsir, Arabic cosmopolis, Khorasan, Levant, Nisapur

Dissatisfied with the way in which some recent scholarly formations consider the nature of the ‘classic’ in the Islamic tradition with their Arabo-centric bias, and similarly disappointed with the way in which the cultural formation of the Persianate seems to neglect the ‘scriptural’ and more explicitly ‘religious’ disciplines, we present this study on the significance of Persian Qur’ānic exegesis in the classical period. Scholarly discourse on the Persianate tends to focus on the influence of Persian language, civility and courtly culture in Iran, Anatolia and further East and often occludes the way in which the Persian language and learning is inflected and present in the Arabic cosmopolis further west.2 Marshall Hodgson, from whom the concept is
drawn, conceived of the Persianate as a zone in which the rise of New Persian brought a “new overall cultural orientation within Islamdom”; as such, it informed all the languages of high culture that emerged in Muslim contexts and beyond. ³ It is difficult to separate Persian from Arabic when one considers the reception and transmission of Islamic learning diachronically in parts of the Islamic East; we should rethink the cultural space as the Perso-Arabic cosmopolis. Similarly, the formation of ‘Islamic classics’ and scholarly genres including exegesis tends to ignore the role of Persian works (and of texts produced in a Persianate context). ⁴ Hodgson was primarily concerned with power and culture but in his quest for understanding the course of ‘conscience’ in world history, it is not inconceivable that he would have included texts and knowledge production that in its social and cultural formation of selfhood and civility would include the ‘religious’. ⁵ Unfortunately, many have built on his conceptualisation to separate the sphere of culture from religion. ⁶

Through a case study of Qur’ānic exegesis in Persian and its reception west of Iran (as well as nodding towards the East), we demonstrate how Persian is inscribed into the Arabic cosmopolis such that the development of post-classical exegesis should place these works alongside the major classics of Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jaḥr ḳal-Ṭabārī (d. 923), Abū Ӏshāq Ṭāmāl b. Muḥammad al-Nisābūrī al-Tha’labī (d. 1035) and his student Abū l-Ḥasan ӀAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥīdī (d. 1076), all Persian origin exegetes from the ‘Nishapur’ school who wrote in Arabic. ⁷ In effect, we contend the study of Qur’ānic exegesis as a disciplinary formation cannot ignore the study of Persian exegesis. Through examining rare manuscripts, we will show how scholars read, copied and promoted Persian tafsīr in Arabophone contexts. Not only does this study follow up on and test some earlier scholarly works dealing with the circulation of Persian translations of the Qur’ān and its commentaries, ⁸ as well as the scholarly impact of the

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⁵ That reading the Qur’ān was closely associated with adab and ethical formation does not need extensive argument; for some indications, see Nuha Alshaar (Ed.), The Qur’an and Adab: The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam (Oxford: Oxford University Press and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2017); Francesco Chiabotti et al. (Eds.), Ethics and Spirituality in Islam (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (ed.), Adab and Modernity: A Civilising Process? (Leiden: Brill, 2020).
Persians further west,\textsuperscript{9} it indicates the contribution of Persian exegesis to a normative understanding of the Islamic exegetical traditions at the heart of the madrasa.\textsuperscript{10}

Our use of Persian or even the Persianate is not linguistically reductionist, nor are we perpetuating a nationalist reading of Persian as inscribing the extent and limits of Iran or the Persian Empire.\textsuperscript{11} We do not assume that translation is a simple process of transmission or transmutation from one discrete culture into another through annexation or simple appropriation,\textsuperscript{12} nor are we making larger claims about the nature of a cosmopolitan culture, an ‘Islamic’ republic of letters in which Persian is closely inscribed and determinant for the Arabic cosmopolis. Rather, we reflect on the evidence for the multivocity of linguistic scholarly networks and traditions that are intertwined and demonstrate how scholars who were familiar with materials in Persian drew upon and reflected them in their Arabic scholarly output without either ceding through linguistic syncretism or a theory of translation from one to the other.

Insofar as texts are reflective of a way of life and the intellectual networks that sustain it, we are trying to reinscribe Persian exegesis as a way of life and multilayered form of knowledge production into the study of Islamic exegesis. As such, we provide a different mode of the ‘provincialisation of Arabic’ in a decolonial turn in the study of exegesis that traditionally might assume Arabic normativity of the tradition with respect to which other linguistic expressions are mere facets of vernacularisation.\textsuperscript{13} One final caveat: we are not discussing a neglected field of translation in this case from Persian to Arabic in the way in which previous specialists have discussed Greek into Arabic in the ’Abbasid period or Sanskrit into Persian in early modern India; our concern is not with translation but the influence of multivocality and linguistic plurality from East to West within the Islamic world.\textsuperscript{14} Before considering some

\textsuperscript{9} Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially 37-56, which focuses on the ‘rational sciences’ but similar things might be said of exegesis, which played a somewhat liminal role between the ‘rational’ and ‘scriptural’ or revealed.

\textsuperscript{10} In the Islamic East, the Persian influence came with Islamisation, see Chiara Formichi, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Handbook on Islam in Asia*, ed. Chiara Formichi (London: Routledge, 2022), 9-11.

\textsuperscript{11} Mana Kia points to this potential problem in *Persianate Selves*, 8-11.


examples of classical Persian exegesis that constitute our main evidence for the significance of Persian in the formation of the Islamic Qur’ānic exegetical traditions, it might be useful to consider the abiding influence of Persian in Arabic literary, theological and intellectual formation through a few cursory examples.

PERSIAN IN THE ARABIC COSMOPOLIS: OVERLOOKED MATERIALS

While examining manuscripts in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, one can encounter several Persian manuscripts that were copied and circulated in Egypt. Some of them now housed in Europe were acquired by French Orientalists, collectors and travellers. Among the most favoured ones are the literary and poetic works of Persian poet Saʿdī (d. 1292) of Shiraz, particularly his Golestān, which were copied, read and translated by Muslim translators of the French colonial army in Egypt (e.g. BSB Cod. Pers.147 and 148). There is also an original Arabic manuscript, BSB Cod. arab. 892, including Persian phrases and notes (e.g. rūz-nāmah-ye `Alī), and another Arabic manuscript, BSB Cod. arab. 824, whose first folio is a two-layered sheet, the second one including Persian textual elements and calligraphy. Several thousand copies of Arabic and Persian manuscripts in Egypt were collected by Jean-Joseph Marcel (d. 1845), the French scholar, philologist and printer who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte during his invasion of Egypt. Arabs’ interest in reading and translating Persian was not limited to colonial officers or political purposes. The local printing houses, including the Saʿīdiyyah publishing house, close to al-Azhar mosque and university, were instrumental in translating and promoting original Persian works. An example is the five-volume Sīrat al-Amīr Ḥamzah al-Bahlawān (the Tale of the Warrior Amīr Ḥamzah), which is the Arabic translation of the famous Persian Qiṣṣah-ye Amīr Ḥamzah Pahlavān or Ḥamzah-nāmah (the Tale of Ḥamzah). Also, Egyptians were highly engaged with Persian poets and polymaths at the turn of the 20th century. For instance, Wadiʿ Afandī al-Bustānī, influenced by English poet Edward FitzGerald, translated poems by ʿUmar Khayyām, introducing him as al-shāʿir al-faylasūf al-Fārisīyy (Persian poet and philosopher) published with Matbaʿat al-Maʿārif. Both these Persian

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17 The Ḥamzah-nāmah along with other epic works seems to have enjoyed a revival with the advent of print culture in the 19th century with a publication in Lucknow in 1855 at the famous Naval Kishore Press. See John William Seyller and Freer Gallery of Art, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 2002). On the role of the Naval Kishore press in the formation of the ‘Islamic classics’ in the North Indian context on the cusp of formal British empire in India (published in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, as well as Sanskrit and later Hindi), see Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008), especially 266-350.
works were famous and well-circulated in South and Southeast Asia since the late 14th and early 15th centuries.\textsuperscript{18}

Figure 1: Sīrat al-Amīr Ḥamzah al-Bahlawān\textsuperscript{19}

In the late 19th century, the seminarians at al-Azhar in Cairo were well-acquainted with the Islamic scholarship of Persians – which was well-attested in the Mamlūk period but especially from the Ottoman, as discussed in el-Rouayheb.\textsuperscript{20} This is evident in Ṭanṭāwī Jawhari’s (d. 1940) social-political work, \textit{Ahlām fi l-siyāsah} (Political Dreams), which ends with a note about his interlocutor, the Iranian cleric ʿAbd Allāh al-Zanjānī (d. 1941), who published his book on \textit{Taʾrīkh al-Qurʾān} (History of the Qurʾān) in Cairo, Tabriz and Tehran, among others. Interestingly, as stated by Jawhari, he was a link between Iranian and Cairene seminaries and academic institutes and communicating recent \textit{tafsirī} literature between these places.\textsuperscript{21}

This period also saw wider cultural links between Persia and Egypt as well as the religious context of ‘reconciling’ different Islamic confessions (\textit{taqrīb bayn al-madhāhib}), which was primarily inflected in Persian and Arabic.\textsuperscript{22} Jawhari used to be connected with al-Khīdīwiyyah school, where interest in reading Persian and other languages of Muslim communities was common. This claim is also supported with a catalogue of Persian (and Jawi) materials from al-Khīdīwiyyah library compiled by ʿAlī Afandī Ḥilmī b. Sultan b. Muḥammad al-Dāghīstānī in c. 1888.\textsuperscript{23} It might also be possible that Persian manuscripts and printed volumes in Cairo were brought by Ottoman Turks who were already competent in Persian, given its prominence as a courtly language; however, the circulation and reading of such works may highlight their

\textsuperscript{18} Regarding the reception of the Tale of Ḥamzah and Persian poetry (e.g. Khayyām) in Southeast Asia, see respectively Majid Daneshgar, “Persianate Aspects of the Malay-Indonesian World: Some Rare Manuscripts in the Leiden University Library,” \textit{Dabir} 8 (2021); Majid Daneshgar, “A very old Malay Islamic Manuscript: Carbon Dating and Further Analysis of a Persian-Malay Anthology,” \textit{Indonesia and the Malay World} (2021).

\textsuperscript{19} Various copies of this early printed volume are found in different libraries. This is from the Iranian Parliamentary Library, Tehran. It is available for open access for which we are grateful.

\textsuperscript{20} el-Rouayheb, \textit{Islamic Intellectual History}.

\textsuperscript{21} Ṭanṭāwī Jawhari, \textit{Ahlām fi l Siyāsah} (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalābī, 1935).

\textsuperscript{22} Rainer Brunner, \textit{Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century} (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

significant among Arabs. The reception of Persian literary, scholarly and scholastic materials in the heart of Arabophone regions was established much earlier. Several historical reports inform us about Persians and Arabs moving between each other’s lands, from Bukhara and Nishapur (in Khorasan) to the Levant, Mecca, Medina and Cairo; a simple perusal of names in the many biographical dictionaries indicates that process and we have the famous attestation of historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) on the central significance of non-Arabs especially Persians in the scriptural disciplines such as ḥadīth, in Arabic grammar and in the rational sciences.

The Islamic ecumene was a connected zone of intellectual networks, exchange and knowledge production. The inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago interacted with Persians in the world of Islam from the earlier period, just as the Arabic-speakers of the African continent had strong ties with Persian thinkers and schools of thought in the Gulf and India. One of the most important reports about the way in which Arabs and Persians communicated with each other after the emergence of Islam is the book Tārīkh-e Nīsāpūr. It includes various sections about the people of Nishapur as well as Khorasan who left there for Arabophone regions and vice versa. Nishapur, according to this report, was the homeland of many Arab thinkers and scholars, which gave rise to its region of Pusht or Busht being called “Arabestān-e Khorāsān” or “Khorasan’s Arabia.”

On the other hand, many people bearing the nickname or family name of al-Nisābūrī or al-Bukhārī left Khorasan towards the Levant, Arabian Peninsula, Anatolia and other locales. In this vein, Persians emerged as the critical link in disseminating learning in the rational disciplines between Central and Western Iran and Egypt. One example is the well-known theologian Shams ad-Dīn Maḥmūd b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1348). His commentary Maṭālīʾ al-Anzār: Sharḥ ǰawālīʾ al-Anwāʾ [Insider’s Lights: A Commentary on the Work] – on ʿAbd Allāh al-Bayḍāwī’s (d. 1319) Ṭawālīʾ al-anwāʾ min maṭālīʾ al-anzār [The Rising Light from Far Horizons] – was produced in the “khānqah of the Mamlūk Emir Sayf ad-Dīn Qawṣūn al-Nāṣirī (d. 1342) and [was] presented as a gift to the Mamlūk Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (d. 1341) during the latter’s third reign.” His commentary, Tasdīd al-qawāʾid [Contriving the Principles], on another well-attested and pithy theological text, Tajrīd al-ʿaqāʾid [Summation of Belief] by Shiʿi theologian, Naṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274), who served the Ismailis of Alamut and later the Mongols in Baghdad and Maragha, was completed in 1324 in Tabriz but circulated widely in Iran, being glossed by ʿAlī al-Jurjānī (d. 1413) in

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24 On the Ottoman Qurʾānic exegetical tradition and the role of Persian in it, see Susan Gunasti, The Qurʾan between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic: An Exegetical Tradition (London: Routledge, 2019).
26 Regarding Nishābūr, see the works of Richard W. Bulliet such as: “The Political-religious History of Nishapur in the Eleventh Century,” Islamic Civilisation 950-1150 (1973).
28 As translated by Al Ghouz (see the following source).
Shiraz as well as in Egypt and the Ottoman lands.\textsuperscript{30} Being in contact with thinkers in Isfahan, Tabriz, Damascus and Cairo demonstrated ʿIṣfahānī’s extensive scholarly network and how Persianate and Arabophone inhabitants were in contact. This becomes important when one realises that

\[i\]t is not rare to find Mamlūks that have arrived in Egypt during the days of al-Ẓāhir Barqūq (r. 1382–1389 and 1390–1399) said to have known Persian, or to have been known as ‘Persians,’ some of them functioned as envoys to the Timurids.\textsuperscript{31}

Other Mamlūks linked to Persians and Central Asian communities through competence in their languages are, among others, Mankalī Bughā al-Salaḥī (d. 1432) – also the “inspector of the Markets of Cairo”\textsuperscript{32} – and Asanburghā al-Dawādār (d. 1400).\textsuperscript{33} These rulers could have played a role in the circulation of Persian materials in their regions. In this regard, one would now wonder to what extent Persian, as a language of ʿulūm al-dīn, was read and circulated across the Arabophone region, particularly before the dominance of the Ottomans in most parts of the Arab world.

One of the main areas of Islamic sciences, through which Persians and Arabs could possibly have the highest level of collaboration, is the category of tafsir. Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʿwīl āy al-Qurʾān [Compendium of the Exposition of the Exegesis of Verses of the Qurʾān], better known as Tafsir al-Ṭabarī, one of the oldest comprehensive exegeses on the Qurʾān, was translated early at the Samanid court in the 10th century CE and begins with a preface through which it is clearly said that scholars from neighbouring regions of Iran are asked to join the army of translators – whether this occurred in Tabriz or Khorasan needs further investigation – to translate a copy of this tafsir brought from Baghdad “as the Qurʾān used to be ignored”:

This book is an exegesis of the glorious Qurʾān made by Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, God’s mercy upon him, translated into the Persian language. In order to do this, the [Arabic] book had been brought from Baghdad as there was an ignorance about the Qurʾān. And they presented it to Amīr Muẓaffar Abū Šāliḥ Maṃṣūr b. Nūb b. Naṣr b. Ahmad b. Ismāʿīl, may God’s mercy be upon all of them. It seemed very difficult for him to read and comprehend it in the Arabic language. As such, he ordered to translate it into the Persian language. He gathered the thinkers of Transoxiana asking them “can we translate this book into the Persian language?” they answered “Yes, whoever is unable to comprehend Arabic is


\textsuperscript{33} Yosef, “Cross-Boundary Hatred,” 179-180.
allowed to read and write the Qur’ān commentary in Persian, as also stated by the Glorious God ‘We have not sent a messenger except in the language of his people’ (Q 14:4).”

Translators from Transoxiana, Balkh, Bab al-Hind, Samarqand, Espanjab (Sepanjab) in Turkistan (?), Fergana in Uzbekistan gathered and completed this task. The translation remains the earliest Persian rendition of the Qur’ān as well as its exegesis that is extant and was part of the patronage of New Persian at the Samanid court; as such, it represents the expression of vernacular learning and an attempt to communicate to those unfamiliar with Arabic.

Unsurprisingly, the core argument of tafsir production in the Muslim world relied on a left to right movement, from Arabic to the other languages of Asia. This has also affected academic discourse, which does not allow us to go beyond old-fashioned frames, viewing the so-called classics of tafsir: from al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Bayḍāwī, al-Jalālayn to ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā. Not only did this general classification lead scholars to neglect other exegetical traditions, it also convinced them that the so-called Islamic classics in the first place came from an Arabo-Sunni background. Whether Persian (and other) exegetical works were considered as a pedagogical medium in the Arabo-Sunni context, or were read by native Arabs, was not considered. Unearthing historical evidence in this study demonstrates that classical Persian Qur’ānic exegeses produced from the classical period (1000–1300 CE) were among the important materials in Islamic intellectual history. A normative approach that designates Sunni texts in Arabic as classics will tend to marginalise other works even if they are in core genres of Islamic learning such as exegesis. It also perpetuates a colonialist epistemology that pits core versus periphery, normative versus dissonant, classic versus anomalous.

EXEGESES FROM PERSIA

Tafsir in the Persianate context, with a particular emphasis, received special attention from the late 19th century. Apart from the famous comprehensive Arabic exegeses of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1319), which were considered to be the scholarly product of Persian scholars of Islam, Orientalist scholars studied several relatively


36 Although we do not believe in ascribing “classics” to any work, as there might have been many works which were marginalised, removed or modified over the course of history, and replaced with those produced in or for the court.

unknown Qur’ān manuscripts. One of them is a mysterious commentary widely known in Iran as “Tafsīr-e Cambridge” or the Cambridge Qur’ānic Commentary. In fact, this is MS Mm.4.15 preserved in Cambridge University Library whose content, orthography and details seem valuable for Islamic intellectual history. This copy belonged to the famous Dutch Arabist Thomas Erpenius (1584–1624) and was bought from his widow in 1632. The opening page of the manuscript includes Latin notes, some of which were penned by Erpenius. This copy, which only comprises the second volume, from the chapter on Maryam (Q19), was copied by someone known as Muḥammad Abū al-Fatḥ al-Faqīh al-Ghārīb in 1231. A number of scholars, including Edward G. Browne, wrote a long essay about its origin, style and identity, confirming its significance to the history of Persian Islam. Later on, it was fully edited and accompanied with a critical introduction, by Iranian scholar Jalāl Matīnī in 1970, who also established that the commentary was produced when Persian orthography was in transition. Its “archaic” particularities led Browne to conclude it could originally have been produced earlier, in the 10th century, contemporaneous with the famous Persian epic Shāhnāmah, and it could have been the first known Persian prose work. Therefore, it might be regarded as the oldest Persian manuscript held in Cambridge University Library.

We have no information, at present, about the actual author of this commentary or the origins of the scribe. Even reading the scribe’s name and colophon was a topic of debate between Browne, Robertson Smith, Rieu and de Goeje; was he someone Arab or Persian? Interestingly, some parts of this copy include marginal points in Arabic, apparently written by a native speaker, trying to show an alternative style of writing Arabic verses of the Qur’ān, particularly those with long vowels (alif) (e.g. ff. 15, 119). It contains a Latin interlinear translation of the Persian commentary (f. 323) – not examined in former studies. Having marginal Persian, Arabic and Latin notes demonstrates its circulation in different hands over the course of history. However, Browne and Matīnī agreed on its provenance from Khorasan. Given Browne’s hypothesis about the antiquity of the text, this could be the oldest known Qur’ānic commentary of Khorasan and the Persianate world, which moved back-and-forth between the hands of Arabists and Persianists. It is not farfetched to imagine that this commentary was in the possession of Arabs, as Khorasan and Nishapur were a hub of Arab itinerant scholars.

Since the 2000s, Western-based scholars of Islam, Walid Saleh and Travis Zadeh, among others, have demonstrated the significance of Qur’ānic commentaries in Arabic and Persian from Khorasan, respectively. Saleh categorises them as commentaries of the school of Nishapur, among which the most known are those of Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 1015), al-Tha’labī (d. 1035) and his student al-Wāḥidī (d. 1076), while Zadeh sheds light on how the theological-religious affiliation of commentators may have contributed to the production, distribution and reception of Persian translative commentaries. As Saleh stated, commentaries by al-Wāḥidī along with

41 Browne, “Description of an Old Persian Commentary,” 505.
those of his master, al-Tha’labī, are the main sources of *tafsir* in this region, and form the base on which the next generation of popular commentaries like *al-Kashshāf* of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144) as well as *al-Jalālayn* were written.\(^{42}\) Besides, Zadeh argued, while having similar approaches to translation, the Persian commentaries of Khorasan were inspired by earlier Arabic *tafsir* attributed to the companion and cousin of the Prophet, ’Abd Allāh Ibn ’Abbās, as well as by some local ones including those of al-Tha’labī and al-Wāḥidī. More importantly, Persian exegeses, particularly those of Isfarāyinī and Sūrābādī (see below) used eloquent Persian terms and phrases while producing their commentaries, proving their purpose was to promote a Persian reading of the Qur’ān; a vernacular Qur’ān, as Zadeh puts it.

\section*{READERS OF KHORĀSĀNĪ TAFSIR}

Among the commentaries from Khorasan, some were instrumental in shaping the Islamic literature of non-Persian regions. Liu Zhi (d. c. 1739), one of the most influential Muslim scholars of China, used several Arabic and Persian materials while writing his works on ‘Muslim philosophy’ in Chinese in 1704. The list of books he used shows that three main Qur’ānic commentaries were used by him while reading the Qur’ān. Two of them were in Persian and one in Arabic. The Arabic one is the famous commentary of ‘Qādirī, referring to the name al-Bayḍāwī, while the Persian are two less-examined commentaries, *Tafsir-e Zāhidī* and *Tafsir Baṣā’ir-e Yamānī*.\(^{44}\) In the Han kitab tradition that formed the Chinese Islamic corpus bringing Sufism into conversation with Confucianism, many of the works studied seem to have been mediated by Persian, especially from the Persian Sufi tradition; in exegesis, the major work seems to have been *Tafsir-e Ḥusaynī* by Ḥosayn Vā‘ez-e Kāshefī (d. 1504).\(^{45}\) Other figures in that tradition, such as Wang Daiyu (d. 1658) and Ma Dexin (d. 1874), seemed to have read the same Persian ‘classics’ in Sufism and *tafsir*.

*Tafsir-e Zāhidī* or *Laṭā’if al-Tafsir* is a commentary by a Shāfi‘ī scholar, al-Shaykh Abū Naṣr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad al-Sulaymānī al-Darvāzajakī, who was known as *Fakhr al-a‘immah* (the Pride of Scholars), *Sayf al-Millah wa l-dīn* (the Sword of the Community and the Faith), al-‘ālim al-zāhid (the Pious Scholar) and more importantly, *Tāj al-mufassirīn* (the


Crown of Qur’ān Exegetes). According to an early manuscript copy kept in the Parliamentary Library of Iran (Ms. 8487/1387), this work was copied in Bukhara on 8 November 1125.

It is said he began writing it in 1115 and completed it in 1125. This commentary attempted to apply Persian terms and phrases, as many as possible, while translating and interpreting the Qur’ān. It is believed this commentary was influenced by the mystical teachings of the Sufi Khwāja ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 1088) and some earlier Arabic traditions, which was common in the Khorasan region, including those of Ibn ʿAbbās. Interestingly, he is also critical of the Muʿtazilah as well as Karrāmiyyah, two other sects with their own exegetical tradition particularly on the western side of Bukhara, in Nishapur, to the extent they are seriously humiliated and cursed by al-Darvāzjakī — perhaps a reason for Tafsir-e Zāhidī’s marginalisation in the next generation of exegetical works.46

Figure 2: fl. 6, Ms. GMS 167. Tafsir-e Ḥusaynī or Mawāhib-ʿAliyyah, Auckland Libraries, New Zealand. This page also shows Kāshefī’s reference to Tafsir-e Zāhidī47


47 This manuscript copy is perhaps the one where Jalāl Matīnī could only find its first part while publishing the Persian edition of Tafsir-e Husaynī.
The other Persian exegesis shaping Chinese Muslim philosophical works in the Han Kitab was *Tafsir-e Baṣāʾir-e Yamīnī* or according to Ḥājj Khalīfah, *al-Baṣāʾir fi l-Tafsir* produced in c. 1182. This is a classical Persian commentary on the Qurʾān by Muʾīn al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd b. Abī l-Ḥasan al-Nisābūrī (contemporary of Bahram-Shah of Ghazna [d. 1157]) which was well-known among non-Persians. Given its period, orthography and exegetical features, this *tafsir* has particular significance in terms of exegesis and literature. Every chapter begins with a well-developed introduction addressing the biography and occasion of the revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) of the sūra (e.g. fl. 136, on Q 12), which is, of course, a method constructed by formal exegetes. This *tafsir* is also among the pioneering exegetical works that drew upon narratives and *ḥikāyat* from Islamic and literary sources, influenced by scriptural traditions, in order to interpret a verse. Interestingly, as stated also by Leslie and Wassel, the number of such Islamic materials and commentaries could be more in the “West,” especially on the western side of China where the core lands of Islam were located. This makes sense, too, as another copy of *Tafsir Baṣāʾir-e Yamīnī* (Ms. *Supplément Persan 57* in Bibliothèque nationale de France), gives more information about its circulation among Arabs, particularly where he discusses the story of Prophets. For instance, to interpret Q12: 22 “And when he reached maturity, We gave him wisdom and knowledge. This is how We reward the good-doers,” it (fl. 140) says:

When Joseph (pbuh) was forty years old, We granted him whatever We had already promised him; thus We granted him prophecy and sovereignty by which he could rule and issue decrees. And We enlightened his consciousness and perception through which he could speak with certainty …

This part as well as the next verse, Q12:23, include long Arabic marginal and supercommentaries – showing native hands – as well as a few Turkish interlinear translations. Moreover, our opinion about them being kept by Arabs is based on the name of the Arab scholar, Ahmad b. Abī al-Barakāt (including his handwriting in Arabic) as well as Ibrāhīm Afandi (fl. 1), apparently an Ottoman in Egypt. Apart from these two commentaries, whose reputation reached non-Persian Islamic circles, there are a few more works whose scribes or place of inscription would suggest how important they were in Islamic intellectual history during a specific period of time. The manuscript *Persan 12* in the Bibliothèque nationale de France is one of them. The first folio includes two Arabic phrases, clearly written by a foreign hand, as *Tafsir al-Qurʾān Fārisiyah* (A Persian Qurʾān Commentary). It also includes an introductory phrase:

This Qurʾānic commentary, one of the works produced by the great Imam known for his virtue among the people, named as Muḥammad al-Isfarāyinī among scholars, great thinkers and noble.

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49 This is narrative or haggadic exegesis seeking to establish and explain the context for revelation (*Sitz im Leben*) in the theory of John Wansbrough – see his *Qu'ranic Studies: Sources and Methods for Scriptural Interpretation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122-48.

50 Leslie and Wassel, “Arabic and Persian Sources,” 104.
This refers to the famous Qur’ānic translation and commentary known as Tāj al-Tarājīm fī Tafsīr al-Qurʿān liʾl-Aʿājim [The Crown of Translations, Exegesis of the Qurʾān for non-Arabs] by the Shafiʿi scholar Abū al-Muẓaffar Shāhīfūr b. Tāhīr b. Muḥammad al-Isfarāyīnī, also known as Shāhīfūr from the 11th century. As mentioned in his preface, his work was an attempt to restructure former Persian translations of the Qurʾān, those which were not fully compatible with the Arabic Qurʾān. This commentary includes a comprehensive introduction divided into four chapters, as the virtues of the Qurʾān, on doctrine of Ahl-e sunnat vaʾl-jamāʿat, regarding the principles of religious piety, the meaning of God’s attributions and the translation of traditional reports about the virtues of the Qurʾān.

The Persan 12’s title page with Arabic notes clearly demonstrates it was in the possession of Mawlānā Jalāl b. Ḥājj Maḥmūd b. Ṣafā, also kept in the family with later research endowment in Mecca (ff. 21, 103, 118) dated yawm al-Tarwiyyah (8th) Dhū’l-Ḥijja 907/14 June 1502. The name of Muḥammad Čelebī, Shujāʿ b. Muḥammad, Nabī b. Ḥasan, etc., can also be seen (fl. 1). The sixth volume of this copy ends with additional information, suggesting its circulation among larger circles where Persians and Arabs were interacting and reading this manuscript, including someone known as Abī Ḥāmid ʿAbd al-Malik bin ʿAbd Allah. Traces of the name of ʿAbd al-Malik Abī Ḥāmid from the late 7th and early 8th AH/13th and 14th CE centuries are found in the list of Haleb’s thinkers. Also, on fl. 13, is an unclear note mentioning the name of Muḥammad b. Ḥāji Awaḍ b. ʿAlī with the date of mid 15 Safar 898/6 December 1492 and further illegible Arabic phrases can be seen. Ibn Awaḍ was Zaydī from Yemen with strong connections to Medina and Mecca, which in that period was ruled by ashrāf who were Zaydī. Persan 12 is interestingly written in the classical format of modern Persian, the one which was originally written during the 12th and 13th centuries. It may allow us to think this copy was written during a period when classical orthography and spelling was still part of the Persian language. Our perception about the popularity of this Persian source among Arabs is also supported by another copy preserved in the Bodleian Library of Oxford University. A two-volume set of this tafsir (MS. Marsh 168 and 169) was copied in Baghdad by Ḥabīb Allāh Jamāl al-Dīn Iṣfahānī in Muharram 948/May 1541. This copy also includes marginal notes in Arabic by different hands, which may again point to the local readers of Persian tafsir. These copies of al-Isfarāyīnī’s tafsir were circulating in Arabophone regions in the mid-15th century, when Arabs were in close association with Mamluk Cairo; they had control over the main cities of Mecca and Medina and had ties with

1 Abū al-Muẓaffar Shāhīfūr b. Tāhīr b. Muḥammad al-Isfarāyīnī, Tāj al-Tarājīm fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān liʾl-Aʿājim, ed. Najib Māyel Hāvīfī and ʿAlī Akbār Ellāḥī Khorāsānī (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e ʿilmī o farhangī, 2006), vol. 1, 5-6, although the editors did not consider the manuscript of Paris as they assumed it should not be Isfarāyīnī’s work.
2 al-Isfarāyīnī, Tāj al-Tarājīm, 6.
5 Also, see Travis Zadeh, The Vernacular Qurʾān.
Yemenis. Subsequently, the Ottomans obtained geopolitical power and ruled Syria and Egypt (1517–1635) and developed their penetration into Mecca and Medina.

We have already read about the interaction between Persians and Cairenes during the reign of Mamlûk Sultan al-Nâṣir Muḥammad b. Qalâwûn (d. 1341), and Persians were possibly the main actors and promoters of their local Islamic learning, in Arab spheres, from the prolific school of the Khorasan in the 16th century. On the other hand, the Bodleian MSS Marsh 168–169 were produced in Baghdad in 1541. The first Safavid Shah Ismâʿīl I (r. 1501–1524) captured Baghdad in 1508, persecuted Sunnis, destroying their so-called heretical symbols and tombs, and patronised the tombs of Shiʿi imams around the city of Baghdad.66 Later on, the Ottomans under the rule of Shah Suleyman I (r. 1520-1566) took control of Baghdad in 1534 and began to revive Sunni cultural hegemony, while providing some level of tolerance for the Shiʿa as well as some non-Muslim communities of Baghdad to hold their own beliefs and practices – to some degree.67 This may provide better understanding why the Persian thinker Jamâl al-Dîn Iṣfahânî copied the tafsîr Tâj al-Tarâjîm in Baghdad.68 It was done during the restoration of Sunnism in Baghdad, and when the Safavid Persian Shiʿa had not considered former Persian (-Sunni) classics seriously. Another conjecture for its reception in the Arabian zone is that it addresses global issues of Islamic sciences, viz., highlighting the faḍāʾîl or virtues and qualities of the Qurʾān and describing theological themes of Sunni and Ashʿarî materials.69

Syria was another major Arabophone land welcoming Persianate Islamic culture. It is very close to the north-western cities of Iran (e.g. Tabriz), from where Islamic teachings mixed with Persian arts and literature were flourishing.60 This influence of Persian elements is seen until the early 20th century. The Egyptian physician and commentator of the Qurʾān, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Iskandarânî (d. c. 1888), left Cairo for the Levant. He lived for a long time in Aleppo where he was also buried. Having completed his second and third commentaries on the Qurʾān, he received supportive letters and then autographs confirming the importance of his exegetical perspectives presented by means of empirical scientific accounts. The striking point is that several autographs are scribed in the Persian nastaʿlîq calligraphic style. Among them, there are Muḥammad al-Munshi al-ʿUthmânî, Muḥammad b. Muṣṭafâ Ṭânṭâwî (1825 or 1826–1889) and Bakrî b. Ḥâmid Ṭâṭîr (1835 or 1836–1903) who used this pen. Although this influence began from the “Persian period (586–332 BCE) in the southern Levant,”61 it continued its path after the Islamisation of the region and formative period of Islam through the north and north-

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69 His introductory parts include theological sections covering “regarding the Sunni religious beliefs,” “God’s attributions” and “translation of reports addressing the virtues of the Qurʾān.” See al-Isfârâyînî, Tâj al-Tarâjîm, vol. 1, 7-37.
west regions of Syria, when they had closer contact with the Ottomans. However, Syria became part of the Ottoman empire at the turn of the 16th century, and this is despite the earlier generation of Persians from Bukhara and from Tartus visited each other. In the case of Levantines, we may name Muhammad b. ‘İṣa Yazîd from Tartus, Syria or Abû ʿAbd from Jerusalem who came to Nishapur in the 10th century.62

To gauge the influence of Persian commentaries in the Levant, we rely on a manuscript copy that is the work of Abû Bakr ʿAţīq b. Muhammad Haravî Nisabûrî (d. c. 1100), also known as Sūrâbâdî or Sūrâbânî and Sūrâyânî. He was attached to the Karrâmiyyah pietistic movement and lived in the 11th century in the Khorasan region of the Persianate world.63 There are ambiguities about his origin and the former period of his life, but, according to historical accounts like the one by Ḥamdallâh Mustawfî Qazvînî, he lived during the reign of Alp Arslan, Sultan of the Seljuk Empire (r. 1063–1072) who extended his ruling territory as far as Armenia and Anatolia, as well as in the reign of Malik-Shâh I (r. 1072–1092).64 The common scholarly view is that his tafsîr was divided into seven volumes, which according to Mojtâbâ Mînovî, could have been completed c. 1077–1087.65 There are also ambiguities about the title of the work: whether it should be known as Tafsîr al-Tafâsîr (the Conclusive Commentary of All Commentaries) or Tafsîr al-Basî (the Comprehensive/Large Commentary) – the latter pointed out in our copy. A few copies are extant. Among the oldest is MS India Office Islamic 3840, an incomplete copy, too, of volume six that was part of the India Office collection, now in the British Library.66 It was dated 1129 and its images were reproduced in Iran in 1966 with a short introduction by Mînovî. This copy was penned by Maḥmûd b. Gergîn … Turkî, using particular orthography including archaic particularities.67 The exemplary feature of this tafsîr is that it presents an interesting package of Qurʾānic stories taken from different local and Islamic sources. This is why Mahdavî compiled an extract of the stories of this commentary in 1968. Later, the whole manuscript copy of this tafsîr was edited by ʿAlî Akbar Saʿîdî Sîrjânî (d. 1994) and was, after some delay, published in 2001. The Ottomans had already shown interest in this tafsîr, particularly after the 16th century. One example would be a copy scribed by ʿAbd Allâh al-Qirîmî from Ottoman Anatolia – perhaps, originally from Tatarstan – dated 1557–58. Other copies, which are quite old, include the names of people coming from the Arab world.68 Travis Zadeh also mentions one of its copies penned in Baghdad in 1141, which, according to him, was probably produced in Karrâmî circles of Baghdad.69 However, we came across another old copy of this commentary produced in the Levant. The Leiden University Library houses MS 575 (former 1657), which is the second volume of Tafsîr-e Sūrâbâdî, beginning with Chapter

62 Nishâbûrî, Taʿrîkh-e Nishâbûrî, 32-33.
63 Zadeh, The Vernacular Qurʾān, 464-562.
65 Tafsîr-e Qurʾān-e Karîm (Tehran: Bonyad-e Farhang-e Irân, 1965), i.
66 The British Library holds four codices: volumes one and two and two copies of volume six. See https://www.fihrist.org.uk/catalog/person_52991598.
67 Thanks to Mohsen Feyzbakhsh for providing us with a scanned copy of this manuscript.
68 For more see, Mahdavî, Qisas-e Qurʾān-e Majid.
69 Zadeh, The Vernacular Qurʾân, 554. This is MS Or. 11311 in the British Library, a copy of volume six.
7, *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* and ending with Chapter 18, *Sūrat al-Kahf.* Despite their sterling efforts to edit and introduce this *tafsir* in the Persian-speaking context, the abovementioned Iranian thinkers did not examine paleographical aspects of the manuscripts, let alone that the Leiden copy under discussion was not examined thoroughly by them nor by Travis Zadeh as far as we checked. The first folio says:

The second volume from *Tafsīr al-Basīṭ* that was given by the pious Imam Abū Bakr ʿAfīq bin Muhammad al-Nīsābūrī known as *Sūrābādī,* God’s mercy upon him.

This page includes additional notes, added later, telling us that they were in the possession of someone known as Ismāʿīl b. Awaḍ in c. 1401, and later “Jalāl”, and we now know that Awaḍ is a family name of Arab communities from Yemen. However, two points that deserve further attention are the colophon and marginal points and glosses. The colophon suggest this work was copied outside the Persianate region and in one of the main Arab-speaking regions, Aleppo in Syria:

Inscribed by the poor servant of God, Ḥasan the son of Aḥmad al-Bukhārī in the city of Aleppo in 769/1367–68.

Being copied by someone known as “al-Bukhārī” clearly explains that classical Persian commentaries used to be copied by Persians coming from Khorasan who used to study and live in Arabophone regions. Arabic marginal notes (fl. 3) and glosses in some places suggest the significance of this *tafsir,* having been read along with other well-known commentaries. For instance, Q18 ends with a short gloss, confirming that *Tafsīr-e Sūrābādī* was read along with *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf* (fl. 303):

‘In fact, Jeremiah (pbuh) is Khīḍr and he is a man from the descendants of Aaron the son of ʿImran, as stated by Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq.’ And Wahb b. Munabbih says that ‘Jeremiah is actually a prophet, who was sent by God when Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) was attacked [and sieged] by Nebuchadnezzar.’ Based on [Tafsīr] *al-Kashhāf* and while interpreting/in the interpretation of *Sūrat al-Kahf.*

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70 The embossed stamp and other signs suggest it was acquired by Levinus Warner (c. 1618 – 22 June 1665), perhaps in Ottoman Turkey.
Figure 3: Fl. 303. MS 575. Leiden University Library, the Netherlands

Given the colophon and this marginal paragraph are written with a few dots (an archaic form of modern Persian orthography), and the similarity of the handwritings, the author of this supercommentary could be the main scribe (namely, al-Bukhārī), who to some extent followed older orthography while copying the text. This demonstrates the simultaneous reading of Sūrābādī and al-Zamakhsharī in the Levant when Persian was still in its classical format and spelling. Although al-Zamakhsharī’s al-Kashhāf used to be one of the main works glossed in tafsir literature, this source confirms it was used as an exegetical instrument to complement reading a Persian Khorāsānī tafsir in the 14th century.

Aleppo used to be known as the metropolis of Syria for a long time and “enjoyed of large share of the Indian and Persian commerce” prior to the 15th century. From the 13th until the early 16th century it was under in/direct control of Mamluk, who attempted to (re)construct monuments like the Great Mosque, and centres of health and science in the Levant. We may mention the establishment of the Bimaristan al-Arghuni in 1354. As such, we may say that Mamluks, having connections with Caucasus and the Persianate world, were instrumental in

71 For example, dhāl instead of dāl.
73 Ibid., 349.
promoting Persian materials across their territories, among which the Qur’ānic commentaries of Khorasan have a particular status.

CONCLUSION

The political context and political theology of different Islamic polities and their processes of facilitating intellectual networks and patronage for knowledge production influences the ways in which disciplines have developed. The question raised here is the influence of linguistic traditions within the development of the classical Qur’ānic exegetical tradition between and across Persian and Arabic. What we need to consider further is not just the way in which multilingualism and polyglot learning and forms of literary and intellectual cosmopolitanism worked within the Islamic republic of letters in the classical and early modern period, but a far more comprehensive understanding of Persianate Islamic intellectual cultures in the East and West and their impact beyond the rational and ethical sciences (as is often emphasised in the study of the ‘Persianate’) in the scriptural sciences. Thus, the next immediate step will be a more comprehensive and diachronic study of Persianate tafsir from its origins to the modern period, a fuller intellectual history perhaps of the school of Khorasan? Along the way, we can further revisit the processes of translation and transmission, cosmopolitanism, epistemological pluralism, as well as a fuller and more nuanced understanding of Islamic learned traditions beyond the binaries of Arabic and non-Arabic, normative and heterodox, and rational and scriptural.
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