

Muslim Terminologies in English: Preserving Authentic Meanings

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Abstract: *The translation of Qur'an terminology poses distinctive challenges because the Quran's semantic content is inseparable from its particular linguistic form. Walter Benjamin's claim that sacred text is "untranslatable precisely because the meaning and the letter cannot be dissociated" captures a central tension for translators: fidelity is not only to what is said, but also to how it is said. Within this frame, "proper equivalence" is best pursued not by forcing approximate target-language substitutes, but by seeking communication at comparable levels-concept to concept, sentence to sentence, and, where relevant, poetic effect to poetic effect-while remaining within the linguistic norms of the receptor language. The contemporary growth of Muslim communities in English-speaking societies has intensified the need for reliable English renderings of Islamic religious terms found in the Qur'an and Ḥadith, the primary sources of the Shariah. Yet many widely used English equivalents are inherited from Biblical or Western theological vocabularies and may carry doctrinal assumptions that conflict with Islamic meanings. This creates a risk of conceptual distortion. Terms such as Tawḥīd, Allah, Rasul, Ṣalah, Dua, Waḥy, Malaik, Wuḍu, Zakah, and Iman are not merely lexical items; they encode a theological worldview, legal obligations, and devotional practices that may be flattened or misrepresented through habitual substitutions (e.g., "God," "prophet," "prayer," "revelation," "angel," "tax," "faith"). Where English lacks a true conceptual match, transliteration accompanied by concise explanation is often the most responsible strategy, preserving doctrinal integrity while enabling comprehension. This study argues for a calibrated approach that treats key Qur'ani terms as technical religious vocabulary and promotes a controlled "Muslim English" register: retaining essential Arabic terms, standardizing transliteration, and providing glossaries for students, new Muslims, and non-Muslim readers. Such an approach respects the sanctity attributed to revelation, reduces reliance on misleading Biblical analogues, and supports clearer understanding of Islamic teachings across English-speaking audiences.*

Keywords: *Qur'an; terminology; untranslatability; Walter Benjamin; equivalence; transliteration; Islamic lexicon; Muslim English; Biblical equivalents; semantic distortion; Arabi.*

Our aim of writing is to examine the difficulty of translating Islamic terminologies into English. The main objective of the article is to semantically point out the differences and nuances of translating Islamic terms in English. Learning Arabi is a solution of our many problems which our elders neglected, and it is not difficult to learn compared to other languages. Moreover, a major reason of the multiple socio-religious problems of the Muslim community in Southern Asia is non-familiarity with the language of the Qur'an. I point out that translation of Islamic terms into English is only appropriate when words of the source and of the target language are cross-culturally equivalent, having the same referents and connotations in both languages. Translation of the terminology of the Qur'an is difficult in any language. A distinctive opinion related to untranslatability is provided by the German language expert, Walter Benjamin: "Sacred text is untranslatable precisely because the meaning and the letter cannot be dissociated".

This approach seeks to achieve "proper equivalence" which focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content. In this, one is concerned with such communication as poetry to poetry, sentence to sentence, and concept to concept. The aim of the translator should be to translate the text into the level of linguistic appropriateness common to the receptor's language. The continuous growth of Muslim communities in English-speaking countries has been attended by increased need of trustworthy English versions of religious terms for the Qur'an and Ḥadith. In this context, the rendering of Islamic religious terms into English also acquires special significance. The Qur'an and Ḥadith are considered the canon sources of the Shariah (moral and religious laws) in Islam. The Qur'an is the word of Allah, and Ahadith are the sayings and statements of Rasulullah (S) that are regarded as important tools for understanding the Qur'an. In Muslim belief and tradition, the sacred or central religious texts are protected by Allah from any tampering or double meaning by humans.

The English language is akin to a bouquet containing roses, carnations, Delia, pansy, chrysanthemum, of multifarious languages and has ability to absorb new words, without prejudice. This ability grants it a rich status amongst others languages. It has a blend of Arabi roots, enhancing English with warmth. However, it will not attain the Fasahat (elegance), Balaghat (conciseness), Hilawat (sweetness), Malahat (saltiness) of Arabi beside its Jami'at (comprehensiveness).

Islamic terms with their true meanings along with its origin are necessary to learn for those who study Islam in English. We have got so accustomed to western equivalents today that the spirit of the Islamic terminologies is forgotten. It is considered fashionable to use English terms. An example of this is when Masjid is referred to as Mosque even by those who regularly go the Masjid to offer Salah. The beauty of the word Masjid will dawn upon people when they realize that it is a place where one goes to perform Sajdah. Due to the extension of the British Empire, slavish minds have adopted Biblical terms and coined names for religious as well as local names. If the English feel difficulty in pronouncing any name or word, they usually distort its spelling and pronounce as they wish, but every religion or nation have their own glossary with deep rooted meanings, which cannot be translated or changed.

To understand Islam, it is necessary to be familiar with and understand the words and terms used in the Qur'an and their real meanings. With this, a clearer picture of Islamic teachings and science will be possible. English speaking people and the western world must be familiarized with Islamic terms and their usage so that the wrong equivalents of Muslim terms - especially those adopted from Biblical sources - do not replace them. Some western thinkers, even today, consider Islam and Muslims to be unimportant and backward, hence, they have never bothered to include Islamic terminology in regular vocabulary and use. Muslim writers and scholars must use simple Islamic terms in their writings so that an awareness of these terms is created.

One reason for this ignorance is that the media is controlled by the West and Zionist lobby who also govern media of the Muslim world through their touts, resulting in a bigger gap between the real Islam and how it is understood by English audiences. Many westernized Muslim scholars themselves do not appreciate and understand the difference between the Biblical terms and Islamic terms and do not encourage the use of Muslim terms.

It is an injustice to communicate the message of Islam through Biblical terms, which actually many times carries repugnant meaning upon in-depth study. English words cannot convey the real meaning of the concepts of the Qur'an and Shariah. For example, the concept of Tawhid and the name of Allah are unique to Islam as compared to other religions. Using the word God for Allah distorts the philosophy of Tawhid, because in Christianity God represents the concept of Trinity. Similarly, the word Rasul is referred to as Prophet even though Rasul stands for a much wider divine status, conferred by Allah on His 'Chosen Persons'. Why do we continue using Biblical terms which cannot convey the true meanings of Islamic teachings? It is time that Muslim linguists pay attention to this and use Islamic words and terms in their writings instead. If French, German, Italian, Spanish and other European words are used in English conveniently with their original meanings intact, and without distortion of pronunciation and spelling, why can't Arabi words be used similarly?

Islamic and Biblical terminologies developed over vast expanses of time were rooted in a host of cultural and linguistic contexts, and have generated enormous literary works in their respective languages, employing numerous methodologies. One of the major differences, however, between the Qur'an and the Biblical terms is that the Qur'an is the compilation of divine words which Rasulullah (S) received through Jibra'el (as) and did not add to it a single word his own, while the text of the Bible was revised several times for clarity by the Church. Therefore, the original Bible was adulterated and this change destroyed the spirit of meanings. Compared to this, the meaning of the apparent words of the Qur'an is almost the same, except Tawil, which was 1400 years ago. It was not modified with time for clarity of the text. Having investigated the essential differences between the Qur'an and the Biblical terms, this point is considerable. A Christian cleric may not realize the difference but Muslim scholars deeply understand the difference between the terms in Arabi vs. their use in Biblical literature. I can say that such attempts to prove the similarities between Qur'an and Scriptures are nothing but to explore beyond the initial and superficial similarities in order to truly communicate the biblical gospel.

Arabi words are so rich and superior in conveying the sense that no other language can rival it and express deep meanings behind particular words as aptly as Arabi. It is unfortunate that Muslim scholars continue using Biblical, English and at times mythological terms to explain the meanings of the Qur'an, and other literature of Islam. Often Muslims too mention Rasulullah and write and say "Peace be upon him", instead of "Sallallahu Alahay Wa'alehi Wasallam." Allah has made it incumbent on every Muslim to send Salaw'at upon Rasulullah when remembering or mentioning him. "Peace be upon him" (loosely written as PBUH) does not convey the deeper meaning and the Dua of Salaw'at; moreover, the reader does not receive Thawab for saying it. Here are key examples where clarity is often lost:

Allah vs "God": "God" in English is a generic theistic term. In Christian usage it frequently operates within Trinitarian reference. Allah, in Islamic discourse, is the proper name (and Ism al-Azam) anchoring Tawhid and excluding any sonship, partnership, or division. Therefore, simply substituting "Allah = God" can mislead readers about what is being affirmed and denied.

Rasul vs "prophet": In the Qur'an, a Rasul is a messenger commissioned with a Risalah-a binding divine message, authority, and public conveyance. The Biblical idiom of "prophet" often suggests Pope. The roles overlap in part, but they are not equivalent; "prophet" can understate the Qur'ani sense of commissioned public authority.

Şalah and Dua vs "prayer": English often collapses both into "prayer," but they are distinct: Şalah is a defined act of Ibadah with stipulated times, integrals, and legal conditions.

Wudu is not only ablution, as explained in English, but a statutory pre-requisite of Islam; it is Wajib i.e. to be performed in a specified manner, before Şalah.

Dua is calling upon Allah-supplication and request. When both are translated as "prayer," readers may mistake Şalah for informal devotion and miss its precise legal-ritual structure. This same word of prayer is used for appeal before the judge, King, President, Prime Minister etc. How can we then use the same words of respect for the Creator and the creation?

Wahy vs "revelation": In Islam, Wahy is a specific mode of divine communication to selected prophets, guarded in authority and scope. "Revelation" in English can also mean personal insight, mystical experience, or doctrinal unveiling across traditions. Wahy does not only mean disclosing something but it consists of many things which is not conveyed by the word revelation. That broader range can dilute the Qur'ani meaning.

Malaik vs "angels": In some Christian cultural imagination, "angels" are sentimentalized, gendered, or associated with ideas foreign to Islam. The word Angel is wrongly used for Malaik because in Christianity Angels are thought to be the daughters of God, while in Islam Malaik are the divine creation appointed by Allah for different assignments. In the Qur'an, Malaik are precise servants of Allah: never divine, never His "children," defined by obedience.

Zakah vs “tax/poor rate”: Rendering Zakah as “tax” reduces a Fard Ibadah-embedded pillar-purification, growth, the right of the needy, and obedience to Allah-into a state-like fiscal instrument. The term “tax” flattens its spiritual and legal character. Poor rate or Tax cannot convey its deep meaning, nor it do justice by the words. Therefore, using Biblical terms to convey meanings of Islamic terms can distort the meaning completely.

Im’an vs “faith”: “Faith” can become mere inward sentiment or belief-claim. Im’an, in Qur’an and Sunnah discourse, is a structured reality involving affirmation, conviction, and moral-legal manifestations, classically discussed alongside Islam and Ihsan. The true meaning of Im’an can’t be conveyed by the word “faith”. An entire Surah is available in the Qur’an which is known as “Surah al-Muminun” for its meaning and explanation. To use the word faith, instead of Im’an, is ignorance.

Masjid vs “mosque”: Masjid is transparently tied to Sujud (prostration), preserving the inner semantic architecture of submission. “Mosque” communicates “place of Muslim worship,” but not the Qur’ani root-logic carried by Masjid itself.

The cumulative effect is conceptual, not merely stylistic: repeated Biblical equivalents can quietly reframe Qur’ani meanings-making Tawḥid sound like generic monotheism, Risalah like Biblical Prophetism, Ṣalah like informal prayer, Waḥy like inspirational insight, and Zakah like a tax scheme. A more consistent method is to treat core Qur’ani terms as technical religious vocabulary: retain them in transliteration (Allah, Tawḥid, Rasul, Ṣalah, Dua, Waḥy, Malaik, Wudu, Zakah, Im’an), give a brief gloss at first mention, and then use them consistently-just as English retains non-English technical terms (e.g., karma, zeitgeist, and Latin in law). This approach does not reject English; it preserves doctrinal clarity and prevents “semantic drift,” allowing Qur’ani Arabi to transmit the Talim of Tawḥid with minimal interference from inherited theological assumptions embedded in Biblical religious language. Similarly, we should not spell and pronounce Makkah and Madinah as Mecca or Medina. Non-Muslims write and address the name of our beloved Rasul as Mohd in hate, and due to ignorance Muslims continue to follow it blindly. This is contempt against our beloved Rasul. The name “Muhammad” must be written completely. It is a pity that Muslims write “Koran” instead of Qur’an. It is not stylish to use English terms without understanding its negative impact; incorrect pronunciation destroys the entire sense of Islamic words and invites Az’ab instead of Thawab.

The learned writer of the first encyclopedia of Islam, “Ikhwan al-Safa”, “Al Shakhs al-Fadil Saheb al-Rasail”, the 9th Shi’i Fatimi Ismaili Imam, Ahmad al-Mastur (as) values the place of Arabi compared to that of other languages:

“Arabi compared to other languages is like the Ins’an (human) in relation to all living beings. The human form is the final phase of development of all living beings. Likewise, the Arabi language is the perfection of all languages; similarly, its script is considered to be perfect as well”.

This statement clearly explains the unique status of Arabi compared to the other languages of the world. The Saheb al-Rasa'il did not force to follow Arabi as the language of Allah, but provided compression and reference to a language they call Suryaniyah, which Adam (as) and his contemporaries used to speak. Some sources indicate Arabi as a human form of the language of the Malaik. This first human language is said to have developed into diverse tongues and scripts- Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Arabi are specifically mentioned-as succeeding generations of Adam's descendants moved out across the face of the Earth. The changes in language are seen by the "Ikhwan al- Safa" as instrumental of changes in the sciences and creeds of the various nations. Al Shakhs al-Fadil Saheb al-Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa, the 9th Shii Fatimi Ismaili Imam Ahmad al-Mastur (as), however, honored Arabi above all other languages for being the most "sweet" within the structure of the cosmos, particularly due to its having twenty-eight letters, a mathematically "perfect" number which accords with, among other things, the number of the lunar mansions of Indo-Arab astrology. Thus, they describe the Arabi alphabet as the "Seal of writings," much as Rasulullah (S) is the "Seal of the Anbiya." Numerology is central to the Ikhwan's theories of language; for example, they state that the letters of the alphabet Adam (as) possessed were simply the numerals one through nine, but that by those "Nine Letters" he knew the names and qualities of all things.

The scholars of Arabi literature understand that all the words used by the Qur'an are the best and appropriate for the meanings they convey. Is it right to translate such great terms in to any other language which cannot convey its true and full meaning? Arabi is a complete and a perfect language, while all other languages are passing through development process. Translating Islamic terms in English is possible only when the essence and the culture of Islam are transplanted in it. Without the transplantation of "Muslim Culture" in English, translation of Muslim terms is not possible. Though we know that the beauty of the Arabi language and especially its extraordinary subtleties and Hikmah of the Qur'an can never be translated to bring out their full meanings, we must use the medium of English which is an international language to fight back the assault on Islam firmly and effectively. In order to preserve the excellent characteristics and connotations, we must introduce "Muslim English" to the world so that our objective is achieved while maintaining the sanctity of the original meaning of the Qur'an. Arabi words will convey what is understood during reading, and would remove all doubts.

Arabi has long stood as one of the great enriching forces in the history of world languages. Through its influence in science, mathematics, medicine, trade, navigation, agriculture, music, and literature, Arabi contributed not only ideas and knowledge to other civilizations, but also a remarkable number of words that entered Western vocabulary and became permanent features of everyday speech. The spread of these words was not accidental; it was the natural result of centuries of contact between the Arab and Muslim world and Europe, especially through Andalusia, Sicily, the Mediterranean trading routes, and the translation movements that carried Arabi learning into Latin and later into other European languages. As a result, Arabi left a deep linguistic legacy that can still be heard today in English, French, Spanish, and many other languages. In the field of knowledge and science, the Arabi term al-Jabr gave rise to the word "Algebra," reflecting the pioneering mathematical contributions of Muslim scholars, while al-Kimiya became associated with "Chemistry," and al-Kuhl evolved into "Alcohol." In

administration and maritime affairs, Arabi also made its mark, as al-Amir or Amir al-Baḥr developed into “Admiral,” a title that passed into European usage through naval contact and governance. In music and the arts, al-Ud, the famous stringed instrument of the Arab world, became the “lute,” influencing European musical culture in both name and form. Likewise, Tunbur contributed to the French “tambourine,” and Qitharah is linked to the development of the word “Guitar.” Arabi also enriched Western vocabulary through words connected with nature, trade, and daily life. The word Anbar became “Amber,” Buraq became “borax,” laymun became “lemon,” Naranj gave rise to “Orange,” and Zirafah became “Giraffe.” Similarly, Qahwah developed into “coffee” and “café,” testifying to the role of the Arab world in introducing both the drink and its name to Europe. The Arabi word Sukkar became “sugar,” and in Spanish it survives as Azúcar, showing how Arabi vocabulary entered European languages in distinct but related forms. The term Makhzan, meaning storehouse, passed into French as magasin, while Qanah contributed to “cane.” Even words carrying more unusual or vivid meanings bear Arabi roots: Qhul became “ghoul,” Gharbala became “garble,” Safara influenced “safari,” Tafriq is linked with “traffic,” and Tarif gave rise to “tariff.” These examples show that Arabi enriched not only specialized or scholarly language, but also the ordinary vocabulary of commerce, travel, food, music, and imagination. Indeed, the presence of these words in Western languages is evidence of a profound civilizational exchange in which Arabi served as a bridge of Knowledge and Culture between East and West. It preserved ancient learning, expanded it through original scholarship, and then transmitted it onward, leaving its imprint not only on intellectual history but also on the very words people speak. Therefore, Arabi may rightly be regarded as the most influential language in the enrichment of world languages, for its contribution extends far beyond grammar or vocabulary alone; it reflects a history of cultural vitality, intellectual leadership, and enduring global influence.

When using Arabi terminology in English writing, consistency and readability should guide usage. As a general rule, it is preferable to retain the singular Arabi term and avoid Arabi plural forms or other inflected derivatives where an accepted English plural already exists. For example, it is encouraging that American media has increasingly adopted Muslim in place of Moslem, and it is equally sensible to use the standard English plural Muslims rather than Arabi forms such as Muslimoon, Muslimat, Muslima, or Muslimah. Care should also be taken to avoid incorrect automated substitutions such as “Massaged,” an error sometimes suggested by word-processing software. Thus, Islam remains preferable to alternatives such as Islaam, al-Islam, allslaam, or al Islam. Similarly, Hajj is now the accepted spelling, and there is little benefit in reviving forms such as Hadj or Haj, though it may be helpful to explain the term briefly in parentheses where needed. The same preference for dominant and intelligible usage applies across other common Muslim terms. Ramadan should be preferred to Ramazan, Ramzan, Ramdan, or Ramadhaan. Eid is more appropriate than id or Id. Hadith should remain the standard form, without variation into al-Hadith, Hadeeth, al-Hadeeth, or Hadis. Zakat is more widely established than Zakah and should be used in place of terms such as alms or “religious tax,” both of which carry meanings and associations that do not accurately reflect the Qur’ani concept. Likewise, Salah is preferable to variants such as Salaat. Overall, the objective should be clarity, consistency, and fidelity to established English usage while preserving the integrity of

Islamic terminology. A restrained transliteration policy-using the singular Arabi term, adopting ordinary English plurals, and favouring dominant spellings-serves both precision and readability.

Therefore, for proper spread of the Talim of Islam, preserved in Arabi, we must use terms from the Qur'an and Hadith Literature while learning or reading about Islam. English speaking community, especially Muslims, must be acquainted with the real terms of the Qur'an to understand Islam correctly, rather than get misled by words which do not convey the true meaning of Islam.

Though no language has been spared from being influenced by other languages, when other foreign words can retain their original spelling and meanings, why can't we do the same with Arabi? Muslim writers must compulsorily provide a glossary of terms for young Muslims, new Muslims and non-Muslims. It is advisable to use an Arabi word in English, when we find that the English word fails to communicate its true essence. If it is not an Islamic term, just an Arabi word, many scholars do not like to use it. We must use Muslim terms exclusively from Arabi, rather than adopt from local languages of other Muslim countries like Urdu, Hindi, Malay, Swahili, Farsi or Turkish.

Muslims who translate the Qur'an or write Islamic literature in English should use principled caution with Biblical or Church-shaped terms, because vocabulary is never neutral: words carry inherited doctrines, imagery, and implied metaphysics. Qur'ani Arabi conveys the Talim of Tawhid with rigor and clarity: Allah is absolutely One-without division-in His essence, attributes, and exclusive right to be Ibadah. Much of "religious English," however, developed within a Christian theological universe in which ideas such as Trinity, Incarnation, original sin, atonement, priesthood, and sacramental mediation often sit in the background even when not explicitly stated. As a result, certain English equivalents can quietly pull Qur'ani meanings into a non-Qur'ani conceptual map.

For students involved in Islamic studies, one of the hardest things to grasp and remember is the variety of terminology that one is taught. Many students feel overwhelmed by so many new terms and concepts. For over a thousand years, thousands of Muslims have studied and learned these terms. I have read that some of the Awliya use to drink Zamzam and make Dua for increase in 'ilm and to sharpen memory. Al Shafa'e suggested:
"To stop the declining of memory, one should abstain from sins. Knowledge is Noor, and the Noor of Allah is not friendly to the sinner."

Keep a notebook only for terminology and divide it into sections according to the field of knowledge (Hadith, Tafsir, Aqidah) and in each section record the names and definitions of all the terminology you have studied. How you write it down will depend on you, just make sure it is easy to browse through, find what you are looking for, read and understand. Keep it with you whenever you are studying, and remember that terminology is not limited to the field you learned it in. Terms learned in Fiqh or Hadith will be needed in Tafsir and Sirah as well, that is why it is highly recommend to keep a notebook for terminology, and divide it into various sections so terms do not get mixed. In this regard, al-Shafa'e makes it clear that there are

certain Islami terms and Islami phrases such as: Tasbiḥah, Takbirah, Taḥmidah, Tahlilah, Tashahhud that must be learned and pronounced by Muslims in Arabi. In this case translation is not allowed, and transliteration becomes the appropriate strategy.

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