The Historiography of the Qur’an in the Muslim World: The Influence of Theodor Nöldeke

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Almost 75 years after the initial publication of Theodor Nöldeke’s *Geschichte des Qorâns*,1 Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Zanjānī (1892–1941), an Iranian religious scholar, made a brief reference in the final chapter of his *Tārikh al-Qurʿān* to an edition of Nöldeke’s work revised by Schwally, Bergsträsser and Pretzl. He described Nöldeke as a great scholar and his *Geschichte des Qorâns* as a valuable contribution. Al-Zanjānī’s work also included an outline of Nöldeke’s discussion on the order of the revelation of the suras.2 It is probably safe to say that al-Zanjānī’s book is the first independent work on the history of the Qur’an by a Muslim scholar. This fact leads one to wonder about the apparent lack of previous interest in the historiography of the Qur’an among Islamic scholarship. The present paper seeks to address this question and offer an overview of historical scholarship on the Qur’an contributed by Muslim writers both before and following Nöldeke.

1. Before Nöldeke

In its contemporary usage, the subject area ‘history of the Qur’an’ encompasses the revelation of the Qur’an, chronological dating of its chapters, the initial recording and subsequent preservation of its contents, its compilation, the early manuscripts, the variant readings, development and evaluation of the Qur’anic script and the associated punctuation system, and last but not least, the translation of its meanings into other languages. Prior to the twentieth century, Muslim writers seldom concerned themselves with these issues. Thus, never during the premodern period was the issue of history of the Qur’an as interesting to Muslim theologians, commentators, historians and philologists as other aspects such as the question of its inimitability, the
issue of whether the Qur’ān was created (ḥudūth) or existed eternally (qidam), and whether or not any distortions have crept into the original text. Some may argue that the classical Islamic literature on Qur’ānic scholarship which dealt with the issue of variant readings and discrepancies among Qur’ān compilations may amount to works on history of the Qur’ān in its modern sense. In this writer’s opinion, however, such a classification is unjustified. The bulk of material compiled in early Islamic works such as maṣāḥif books merely constitute raw data and reports, the authenticity or validity of which may or may not be recognised. From the viewpoint of modern Qur’ānic scholarship, the many reports on compilation of the Qur’ān narrated in al-Bukhārī’s al-Jāmi‘ or Abū ʿUbayd’s Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān and Ibn Sa‘d’s al-Ṭabaqāt, or the reports in al-Suyūṭī’s al-Itqān, specifying the order of revelation of Qur’ānic verses, do not constitute historiographical literature on the Qur’ān in their own right in the accepted sense of the term, unless these are accompanied by critical discussions, evaluations and other analytical material.

I first want to address the question of why, prior to the twentieth century, no Muslim scholar has ever authored a book specifically dedicated to or entitled ‘the History of the Qur’ān’. We should perhaps not set too much in the store by the exact wording of this title, but even so one may wonder why, in comparison with Western writers, so few Muslim scholars have concerned themselves with the historical aspects of the Qur’ān. I believe the answer to this question lies in the fact that the subdiscipline of Qur’ānic historiography, as an independent branch of Qur’ānic scholarship, originated in the West. As mentioned above, in classical Islamic literature one can occasionally find reports or even chapters dedicated to discussions of the chronological ordering of verses and chapters of the Qur’ān, or comments on the process of the compilation of the Qur’ān undertaken during the caliphates of Abū Bakr and ʿUthmān, but such unsystematic studies can never be considered the same as the recent works specifically devoted to Qur’ānic historiography authored by, for example, Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Zanjānī, Mahmūd Rāmūnī and Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Aʿzāmī. The latter works all demonstrate a modern – to some extent, Western – approach and defy classification in terms of the genres of traditional Islamic works.3 A work on specific subjects in history of the Qur’ān such as the compilation of the Qur’ān, the history of the variant readings and the transformation of the Qur’ānic script by the prominent scholars of the premodern and early modern periods such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī or even al-Ālūsī al-Baghdādī (1857–1924) would be as much an anachronism as a world cup game played in the third century!4

The above discussion gives rise to the question of why the history of the Qur’ān as we know it today, should be considered a Western discipline. The reasons are threefold:

1. The Western academic tradition was generally more preoccupied with history, including the history of knowledge, concepts and disciplines, than the Muslim
scholarship tradition. Consequently, historical subdisciplines such as the history of Islamic law and jurisprudence, the history of ḥadīth and the history of Arabic grammar were not much developed among the Muslim scholars of the Middle Ages. Following the European Renaissance, Western interest in historical research grew profoundly. The historical approach to study of religions and their scriptures is a relatively modern phenomenon and dates back to less than three centuries ago. Therefore, it is only natural and unsurprising that the pioneering historical works on the Qur’an were authored in the West, where historical scholarship has been noted.

2. The second reason relates largely to the chronological ordering and dating of Qur’anic verses and chapters. It has to do with the fact that throughout the centuries, Muslims have become habituated to the Qur’an’s present configuration and have therefore come to take it for granted. This made investigating the relative chronology of the Qur’an superfluous or unnecessary for many scholars. On the other hand, when Westerners began to read Islamic scripture, they sought to understand the Qur’an in terms of their own background in Christian and Jewish Scriptures. The chronological order is better maintained in the books and narratives of the Bible than in the Qur’an, which is by comparison irregular and repetitive. Furthermore, the basic chronological division into the Old and the New Testament has remained valid till today. This has motivated interest in the problem of chronology.

3. The third reason has to do with the general attitude of Muslims towards the holy text and their perception of the duties of an Islamic scholar. By default, the Muslim scholar, throughout the course of the centuries, has applied himself to deriving Islamic legal code from the Qur’an and understanding its various theological, legal, exegetical and literary aspects. From this vantage point, the holy text is timeless. Its divine status means that it exists independently of temporal constraints. This is especially true in the prevalent (Ashʿarī and ahl al-ḥadīth) view in which the Qur’an is held to exist independently of time and location. This notion of the pre-eternity and timelessness of the Qur’an was, however, a problematic concept to Western scholars. To them, acquiring a detailed historical understanding of the events during the life of the Prophet and his personality was of much higher priority; for this knowledge was instrumental in theological and ideological interaction with their Muslim counterparts. This subsequently gave rise to the first ever translations of the Qur’an in Europe such as the Corpus Toletanum. In a later period when the Western approach to Islamic studies had taken a more systematic form in academic circles, the evolution of Islamic thought remained the prime focus. From the perspective of Western scholars, the Qur’an had developed in stages: it had grown from a period of infancy, through childhood and adolescence. The contemporary Qur’an, which enjoys a complete writing system along with full punctuation and diacritics, including even the signs of al-waqt (pause during reading), is a completely mature text. Even the all-important development of Qur’an translations or the Islamic tradition of manuscript
illuminations (tadāḥhib) is part of the history of the Qur’an. It is only natural to assume that from the point of view of a Western scholar, such a work possesses a rich background and significant history. This highlights the priority of historical studies as the focus of Western Qur’anic scholarship.\(^7\)

In sum, it is the needs of a society and the problems and questions posed by its scholars that drive the rise of new disciplines and determine the course of further developments. The need for the historiography of the Qur’an as an independent field of inquiry in Qur’anic studies was not particularly felt by Muslim society and thus it did not warrant research during the early centuries of Islamic period. Because of this, the limited amount of such material which had been gathered and was of a rather general character, would often find its way into the prefaces of various commentaries or works of a general nature which were usually supplied with generic titles such as ‘Ulūm al-Qurʾān (‘Qur’anic Sciences’).\(^8\)

2. After Nöldeke

As previously mentioned, historical Qur’anic scholarship has its roots in the Western tradition and it was with Nöldeke–Schwally’s *Geschichte des Qorâns* that the field finally achieved maturity in its modern approach. Although prior to Nöldeke, there were a number of contributions to the subject by other Western individuals, including Gustav Weil (1808–89),\(^9\) William Muir (1819–1905)\(^10\) and Aloys Sprenger (1813–93),\(^11\) it was Nöldeke who first supplied an independent work which carried the title ‘The History of the Qur’an’.\(^12\) After him, many more scholars have worked on the subject but never again – to my knowledge – has anyone in the West entitled a book in a similar fashion;\(^13\) it seems that ‘The History of the Qur’an’ as an independent title faded into obscurity in contemporary Western literature.\(^14\) Conversely, in the same period in the Muslim world (Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, the Indian subcontinent and the Arab world) many works have been authored under the title ‘The History of the Qur’an’. In the West, this field has been pursued as an elaborate discipline with various specialisations, many of which have been treated in independent works under headings such as *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur’ān* (Arthur Jeffery, 1937), *Introduction to the Qur’ān* (Richard Bell, 1953), *Introduction au Coran* (Régis Blachère, 1977), *The Collection of the Qur’ān* (John Burton, 1979), and *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Angelika Neuwirth, 1980). Also over the past couple of decades, emerging questions pertaining to the origins of the Qur’anic text and its particular linguistic style, the socio-historical context in which Islam developed and the ‘issue of the sources’ have gained prominence and established newfound connections with the old and traditional areas of inquiry in Qur’anic historiography. Works including *Quranic Studies* (John Wansbrough, 1978), *Hagarism* (Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, 1979) and
Die Syro-Aramäishe Lesart des Koran (Christoph Luxenberg, 2000) may be interpreted as contributions within this trend.

The situation is, however, completely different within the Muslim world. Some of the more prominent works by Muslim scholars which bear the title of ‘History of the Qur’an’ have more or less been directly influenced by earlier original contributions by Western sources like Nöeldeke, Blachère and Bell and often contain serious criticism of Western scholarship. The unifying characteristic of such works is their underlying Islamic approach to historical Qur’anic scholarship; that is, they are intended to be primarily appreciated by a Muslim audience. Certain questions, forms of evidence and inferences that have priority for Western scholars may be treated as topics of secondary interest in the writings of their Muslim counterparts.

The earliest known Muslim work on the history of the Qur’an in the twentieth century can be attributed to Mūsā Jārullāh Turkistānī (1878–1949) and is entitled Tārīkh al-Qurʾān wa l-maṣāḥif (‘The History of the Qur’an and its Manuscripts’). This somewhat compact piece of writing was authored in Arabic in St Petersburg, and was chiefly intended as a supplement to reform and improve the educational standard of religious schools in Russia rather than being a scholarly work on the history of the Qur’an in the modern sense. As the author pointed out in his introduction, he offered an exposition of several couplets from al-Shāṭibī’s al-‘Aqīla as well as Ibn Jazari’s al-Ṭayyiба on the collection of the Qur’an and its recitation, so that students of Islamic studies would acquire a greater understanding of the Qur’an, its history and the associated sciences than what was commonly offered at seminaries at the time. Some of his remarks show his familiarity with related works by non-Muslims on the subject: ‘In recent centuries we often see non-Muslim scholars taking a keener interest and paying greater attention than Muslim scholars to the history of the Qur’an and the early codices.’ Additionally, Mūsā Jārullāh wrote a number of separate articles on the history of the Qur’an.

Arguably, the single most important and earliest standalone piece of published scholarship belongs to Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Zanjānī. His Tārīkh al-Qurʾān, which later gained recognition in the Arab world, was first published in Cairo in 1935. It consists of a substantial introduction and three main parts. The introduction offers a brief biography of the Prophet as well as an overview of the general state of world affairs at his time. The first part of the book covers the following topics: the development of writing in the Hijaz, the Qur’anic script; the commencement of divine revelation; the chronology of the revelation of the Qur’an; the Prophet’s recitation of the Qur’an to his companions; the writing and transcription of the Qur’an while it was being revealed upon the Prophet’s command, and its actual writers; the principal writing materials at the time of the Prophet; the collectors and compilers of the Qur’ān.
at the time of the Prophet; the chronology of revelation of suras; and the chronological ordering of Meccan and Medinan verses.

In the second part, al-Zanjānī discusses the process of collection of the Qur’ān during the caliphate of Abū Bakr, Ĕumar and ʿUthmān and the order of the suras in the manuscripts compiled by ĔAli b. Abī Tālib (muṣḥaf ĔAli), Ubayy b. Kaʾb, Ibn Masʿūd, Ibn ĔAbbās and Jaʾfar al-Ṣādiq. The names of the master reciters of each reading are given along with the list of those who have transmitted each version. Also covered is the issue of punctuation and iʿjām (the dotting of Arabic letters to differentiate them).

The third part of the book concerns the translation of the Qur’ān into European languages, the historiography of the Qur’ān from the point of view of Western orientalism, and the fawātīḥ al-suwar (the so-called ‘mysterious letters’). Considering that he was educated in Iran, Iraq and Egypt, the scope of al-Zanjānī’s command of European languages is unclear. Nevertheless, his work clearly manifests the influence of Nöldeke’s Geschichte des Qorâns in both structure and content. His writings were published at a time when no other standalone work on the subject existed throughout the Muslim and Arab world. Consequently, this rather compact and modest book has had a lasting influence on subsequent writings in the Muslim world.

Moving forward to the early twentieth century, we find Muḥammad Ĕabd Allāh Drāz (1894–1958), who offered a thorough treatment of the history of the Qur’ān in his writings. He graduated from al-Azhar University in 1916, and later pursued advanced studies in France in 1936 where he was a student of Louis Massignon. He authored two doctoral dissertations in French, both of which were later translated into Arabic and a number of other Islamic languages. His second dissertation was entitled Initiation au Qurʾān: exposé historique analytique et comparative, which he later published in Cairo (in 1949) and Paris (in 1951). The first chapter of this work, ‘The Collection of the Text of the Qurʾān’, offers a comprehensive summary of the subject. While drawing attention to the earlier works of Mūsā Jārullāh and Abū Ĕabd Allāh al-Zanjānī, the book contains numerous references to the major Western contributions including the works of Nöldeke and Schwally, Jeffery and Lammens. On occasion he does not hesitate to support his arguments by quoting Nöldeke. As an example, he writes: ‘It is impossible to explain everybody’s acceptance of the ʿUthmānic codex without dispute and opposition in terms of blind submission on their part. We find Nöldeke (GdQ, vol. 2, p. 93) admitting, “This can be considered the strongest indication that the Qur’ānic text has a high level of completeness and accuracy.”’

Ṣubḥī al-Šāliḥ (1925–86) is a later figure who, like Drāz is considered among the pioneers of historical Qur’ānic scholarship in the Arab world. He studied at al-Azhar and the Sorbonne and later taught at the Universities of Damascus and Beirut. He wrote extensively on various Islamic disciplines, but is particularly
recognised for his *Mabāḥith fī ʿulūm al-Qur‘ān* (‘Studies in Qur’anic Sciences’), the second chapter of which deals exclusively with history of the Qur’an. Although major Western scholars are frequently named and referenced throughout the work, it is Régis Blachère who receives the greatest attention, and he is cited systematically whenever there is a connection with the topic at hand. Sometimes al-Ṣāliḥ dismisses Blachère’s views, at other times he recognises their validity, and on yet other occasions he cites them only to support the dominant Muslim position.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a number of Muslim exegetes also became interested in the history of the Qur’an. Two well-known Shi‘ī jurists and exegetes, namely Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabarānī (1892–1982) and Sayyid Abū’l Qāsim al-Kūthī (1899–1992), have treated the subject in some detail in their respective works on the Qur’an. In his *al-Bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur‘ān*, which saw initial publication in Najaf in 1955, al-Kūthī dedicated a whole section to the history of the Qur’an, where he covered such topics as its collection, the ḥadīth of the sab‘at aḥruf (the seven ‘modes’ or ‘versions’), the perennial question of alterations in the holy text, the variant readings and the prominent reciters, and the subject of naskh (‘abrogation’) in the Qur’an. Al-Kūthī, whose expertise in Islamic jurisprudence and law is widely recognised, was the first Shi‘ī figure to explicitly dismiss as inauthentic the bulk of reports which accredit collection of the Qur’an to the first caliph (Abū Bakr) due to their internal inconsistency and lack of agreement with other historical evidence or religious precepts. By discarding such reports, as John Burton had done, he dated the initial collection and compilation of the Qur’an to the time of the Prophet himself.

Elsewhere he rejected the validity of the ḥadīth of the sab‘at aḥruf on both internal grounds (i.e. content) and external ones (i.e. the asānīd). He also questioned the status of the ‘seven readings’ (al-qirā‘āt al-sab‘a) as mutawātīr. Later translated into both Persian and English, al-Kūthī’s work greatly influenced the general atmosphere of Qur’anic scholarship in Iran, where many subsequent scholars followed him in rejecting the role of Abū Bakr in the collection of the Qur’an and asserting that it was the Prophet who had the text collected. In his extensive introduction to the *al-Tafsīr al-ḥadīth*, the Syrian Sunnī scholar, Muḥammad ‘Īzzat Davaza (1887–1984), took a somewhat similar position. The late al-Ṭabarānī, on the other hand, in his voluminous commentary *al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qur‘ān*, includes a lengthy section on the reports about the history and collection of the Qur’an in connection with his discussion on rejecting any possible alterations to the Qur’anic text. Al-Ṭabarānī offers a completely different view from that of al-Kūthī about the authenticity of reports that link Abū Bakr to the collection of the Qur’an. Yet they both agree in their refusal to use the title of ‘History of the Qur’an’ to characterise their respective discussions, preferring instead titles that are more recognisable and common in the classical Islamic literature.
ʿAbd al-Ṣābūr Shāhīn (1928–2010) was the author of arguably the most influential and well-recognised work on the history of the Qur’ān in the Arab and particularly Sunnī, Muslim world. He too was a graduate of French schools and was hence familiar with Western Qur’ānic scholarship. His work, *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān*, first published in 1966, covered all of the major topics in historical Qur’ānic studies and contained frequent quotations from Nöldeke, Schwally and Blachère. An important distinguishing feature of Shāhīn’s work is his expertise in Qur’ānic script and the less-commonly reported or rare readings of the Qur’ān (*shawādḥī*); the relevant sections in *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān* are unparalleled in quality and authority. He mentions only al-Zanjānī and al-Khūṭī among contemporary Muslim writers, and in the case of the latter his tone is usually critical.

The first and most comprehensive work in Persian on the history of the Qur’ān was *Tārīkh-e Qurʾān* authored by Maḥmūd Rāmyār (1922–84) and published in 1967. A profound command of the Arabic and Persian languages and sources, and knowledge of English, French and German have made his work, in this writer’s opinion, the most reliable and comprehensive of its kind among the Islamic contributions to the field. His book was published at approximately the same time as Shāhīn’s *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān*, but – being in Persian – has never enjoyed the same level of recognition and popularity as the works of Shāhīn and al-Zanjānī in the Arab world.

Rāmyār held a doctoral degree in political science from Tehran University. After becoming acquainted with William Montgomery Watt, he undertook a second doctoral dissertation under Watt’s supervision at Edinburgh University, from October 1974 to July 1977. Prior to this, he was briefly (in 1965) in France, during which time he worked on a translation of Blachère’s *Introduction au Coran*. Later, he became a Member of Parliament, although for most of his life he was a Professor of Islamic studies at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. His work is important in many respects, but we shall focus here on the degree to which it has been enriched with so many references to Western sources, especially Nöldeke-Schwally’s *Geschichte des Qorâns*. Needless to say, throughout the book, Rāmyār introduces numerous other Western figures, both pre- and post-dating Nöldeke, whose views he later proceeds to examine.

He offers a critical assessment of the Western position from the point of view of an orthodox Muslim who is clearly familiar with their methodology and sources. By providing occasional quotations and careful presentations of Western views he adds greatly to the knowledge of the average reader who might know only Persian. For instance, in his revised edition of Nöldeke’s *Geschichte des Qorâns* (at vol. 2, p. 20), Schwally has reiterated the claim made by Caetani about the losses during the battle of Yamāma where he states that these fatalities were mostly from the new Muslim
converts and that the lists such as that found in Ibn Sa’d’s *al-Tabaqāt* name only two individuals who are certain to be well-known reciters (*qurrā’*). Rāmyār responds to this claim by consulting lists in several sources including the *Ansāb al-ashrāf* and the *Futūh al-buldān* (both by al-Balādhūrī) and arguing that if we base our conclusions on the reports in Islamic sources, the list of people killed in the battle of Yamāma would include many more *qurrā’* and even transcribers (*kuttāb*) of the revelations. Many other instances of criticism of non-Muslim authors can be found throughout the book, on topics including but not limited to the alleged tutors of the Prophet, the story of Bahira the Monk (pp. 120–33), Buhl’s view on the ‘mysterious letters’ (p. 292), the claims by Garcin de Tassy and Mirza Kazem Beg about their discovery of new suras (pp. 378–80), and Schwally’s criticism of the alleged collection of the Qur’an during the reign of Abū Bakr (pp. 393–400).

Other contemporary Iranians who have written on the history of the Qur’an along more or less similar lines include Sayyid Abū’l-Faḍl Mir-Muḥammadī, Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir Ḥujjatī, Sayyid Muḥammad Rezā Jalālī Nā’īnī, Alī Ḥujjatī Kermānī and Muḥammad Hādī Ma’refat. One need look no further than Muḥammad Hādī Ma’refat (1930–2008) to find a substantially different view of Qur’anic history. He was a student of the late Sayyid Abū’l Qāsim al-Khūṭī in Iraq and from a young age demonstrated a keen interest in Qur’anic studies and exegesis, in contrast to majority of his peers in the seminary, who tended to apply themselves to positive law and legal theory. He published his first and most important work, *al-Tamhīd fi ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, in multiple volumes in Iraq and Iran, two of which are dedicated to the history of the Qur’an, its collection and compilation, and its multiple readings. It also contains a discussion of Qur’anic scripts. The closely related *Tārīkh-e Qurʾān* is an abridged edition of his *al-Tamhīd* in Persian, which was written for university curricula in Iran. Perhaps his most surprising position, at least to Sunnī Arab and Western scholars, is his powerful criticism of the established ʿUthmānī writing system (*rasm*). He maintains that during transcription of the early manuscripts, a lot of inadvertent mistakes crept into the copied text, due to various reasons that may include the inherent imperfections or crudeness of the early scripts and lack of sufficient cognitive skills on part of the transcribers. Later, many of these mistakes came to be considered part of the sacred text and thus were deemed beyond modification. He supplies an extensive list of the assumed orthographical errors in the Qur’an and goes on to recommend that they should be modified in a consistent manner to conform to the established and modern orthographical standards of the Arabic script.

A bridge between East and West on the historiography of the Qur’an and its dating, however, is found in the works of Mehdī Bāzargān (1907–95) the first post-revolutionary prime minister of Iran. His most notable work on the subject is *Seyr-e tahawwul-e Qurʾān* (‘The Evolutionary Course of the Qur’an’), a title which
reveals the degree to which the viewpoint of contemporary Muslim scholars has transformed. Bāzargān grew up in a deeply religious family and harboured Iranian-nationalist tendencies. During the 1940s he studied engineering at Central College in France. Later – while in Shah Prison – he would combine his classical knowledge of Qur’anic sciences and exegesis with the Western scholarship of such figures as Régis Blachère.

According to him, the early revelations had shorter verses. Verse length grew gradually and linearly over the years. To him the overall trend suggests a gradual evolutionary process in the revelation of the Qur’an in terms of both syntax (form) and content. After a thorough examination of the old sources and existing theories, he classified the verses into a number of theme-based categories and then proposed a ‘mathematical model’ which attempted to estimate the time of revelation of each category in the 23-year span of the Prophet’s mission.

By comparing the predicted results with the available historical reports on dates of certain verses, he evaluated the accuracy of his proposed model. After having obtained and evaluated his chronology, he used it to examine the degree to which different themes appeared, giving plots of the frequency of different topics against time. He thus gives an account of the way in which the treatment of different topics developed over time. In common with Richard Bell, in Bāzargān’s chronological sequence for the Qur’an, many suras including Sūrat al-Baqara are broken down and the resulting fragments of verses are independently dated.48

Contemporary Qur’anic historiography involves many scholars from Muslim countries other than Iran and the Arab world. The Indian subcontinent has long been a major centre of Qur’anic historical scholarship. That may be due to the fact that certain British orientalists (notably William Muir, Edward Sell and Arthur Jeffery) published some of their writings in the subcontinent, which resulted in Indian Muslims’ very early exposure to Western scholarship. However, to the extent of my knowledge, no English-language works have ever been published by the Muslim writers of the subcontinent, practically all of the published material has been in Urdu, often designated with the Arabic title Tārīkh al-Qur’ān. A few of these works, however, were later translated into English.49 The oldest known book on the history of the Qur’an in the Urdu language, published in 1917 in Lahore, was apparently written by Maulana Muhammad Ali Lahori (1931–78) and entitled Jam‘-i Qur’ān (‘The Collection of the Qur’an’).50 A number of other works on the Qur’an have since been written in Urdu and a list of these can be found Appendix IV below. All of these were only known in the Urdu-speaking world and consequently these works failed to have a major impact on scholarship elsewhere.

Turkish was among the first languages of the Muslim world to feature a modern work on the history of the Qur’an. The earliest of such writings, entitled Târîh-i
Kur‘ân-ı Kerîm, was authored by Sherefettin Yaltkaya (1879–1947), and was published in 1915 in Istanbul. Even though Turkish Qur’anic scholarship holds the distinction of having the greatest number of historical works on the Qur’an among the Islamic languages, nearly all these are almost unknown outside the cultural borders of Turkey. In this respect, three major works by Muhammad Hamidullah (1908–2002) and a Turkish translation of Muḥammad Muṣṭafa al-Aʿzami’s Kur’an Tarihi Vahyedilisiden Derlenişin deserve mention. It is notable that thanks to a geographical and cultural proximity with Europe, Turkish is the only language (among Islamic languages) to feature research on the so-called historicity of the Qur’anic text.

3. Literature on the History of the Qur’an in the Muslim World

As mentioned above, prior to the twentieth century, Muslim scholars had never before undertaken independent scholarly works on the historical context of the Qur’an. The amount and diversity of literature produced during the past century on the subject, however, is substantial. Many of these works are of limited academic or scientific significance and are only worth mentioning in the context of highlighting a general rise in interest in the subject. On the other hand, there are also a number of very worthy contributions that serve well as reliable academic textbooks in universities and seminaries. The works of Maḥmūd Rāmyār, Muḥammad Bāqir Ḥujjatī and Muḥammad Hādī Maʿrefat are the most notable examples in this category.

Translations of Nöldeke’s Geschicht des Qorâns in the Muslim world have had a history that can be characterised as inconsistent at best. It was Amīn al-Khūlī (1895–1966) who first referred, in his article on ‘Tafsîr’ in the Dâ’irat al-maʿarif al-Islāmiyya to an Arabic translation of this work undertaken by a graduate of the Faculty of Literature at University of Cairo, but this never saw publication and its fate remains unknown. A partial Turkish translation by Muammer Sencer was released in Istanbul in 1970, but this was merely an abridged rendition of the second volume of the original German text. At the same time, there was a faithful and fluent translation in Persian underway (translated by the late Iranian scholar and politician, Sayyed Muḥammad Beheshti (1928–81) during his stay in Germany, where he led the prayers at Imām ʿAlī Mosque in Hamburg between 1965 and 1970), but this also remains unpublished to the present day. In a side-by-side comparison I performed on the majority of this work some ten years ago, the degree of its accuracy and faithfulness became evident to me. It is not clear whether Beheshti ultimately intended to publish his translation: his family has prepared it for publication, but apparently its release has been delayed for some reason.

The only complete translation of Nöldeke into one of the languages of Islamic scholarship is an Arabic version carried out under the supervision of Georges Tamer.
This was published in 2004 in Beirut and Berlin and quickly gained recognition in the Islamic world, making Nöldeke, Schawally, Bergsträsser and Pretzl accessible to many Muslim scholars who had previously no means of accessing these texts. Tamer’s translation is sufficiently fluent and modern. However, it seems that confusion caused by the sheer amount of cross references in the original text has led to numerous unintentional omissions on part of the translator. Moreover, possibly due to his not having a particularly strong background in Qur’anic studies, some key terms or even ordinary expressions have sometimes been rendered incorrectly in an obvious way.

In addition to Nöldeke–Schwally, two other equally remarkable contributions, by Richard Bell and Régis Blachère respectively, have been translated into Islamic languages, both under the title of ‘Introduction to the Qur’an’. Bell’s outstanding work, revised by William Montgomery Watt, has been translated into Turkish (by Süleyman Kalkan), Persian (by Bahā’ al-Din Khurramshāhī) and Indonesian (by Taufik Adnan Amal). Also, Blachère’s Introduction au Coran has been translated into Persian (by Rāmyār) and his other, shorter, text, Le Coran, has been rendered into Persian and Arabic. Within the Muslim world, a number of Islamic texts have been translated into other languages of the region, including the works of Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-ʿAlamatī (Turkish, Indonesian), ʿAbd al-Ṣābūr Shāhīn and Ibrāhīm al-Abwārī (Persian, Indonesian), and Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Zanjānī’s Tārīkh al-Qur’ān has been published in Persian, English and German.

This article concludes by providing appendices listing the more notable contributions by Muslim writers on the history of the Qur’an in the six major languages of the Islamic world, namely Arabic, Malay, Persian, Turkish, Urdu and Indonesian. It should be mentioned that the list is only partial and is in no way exhaustive, but it should hopefully prove useful as a preliminary catalogue of the most prominent works in the field.

APPENDICES

Appendix I: Works in Arabic


Abd al-Fattāh Qādī, Ṭārīkh al-muṣḥaf al-sharīf (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1420/1999).


Muḥammad Ḥusayn ʿAlī al-Ṣaghīr, Ṭārīkh al-Qurʿān (Beirut, n.p, 1403/1983).


Appendix II: Works in Indonesian


Wawan Djunaedi, Sejarah qiraʿat al-Qurʿan di Nusantara (Jakarta: Pustaka STAINU, 2008).

Ibrahim al-Ibyariy, Pengenalan sejarah Al-Qurʿan, tr. Saad Abdul Wahid (Jakarta: Rajawali, 1988).


Abdussabur Syahin, Sejarah Al-Qurʿan, tr. Ahmad Bachmid (Jakarta: Rehal Publika, 2008).


**Appendix III: Works in Malay**


**Appendix IV: Works in Persian**


Appendix V: Works in Turkish

Muhsin Demirci, Kur'ân Tarihi (İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı, 2005).
Ali Eroğlu, Kur’an Tarihi ve Kur’an İlimleri Üzerine (‘On the History of the Koran and the Sciences of the Koran’) (Erzurum: EKEV Yayınları, 2002).
İsmet Ersöz, Kuran Tarihi: Kur’an-ı Kerim’in İndirilisi ve Bugüne Gelişi (İstanbul: Ravza Yayınları, 1996).
Muhammed Hamidullah, & Macit Yasaroglu, Kur’an-ı Kerîm Tarihi ve Türkçe Tefsirler Bilbiyografyası (İstanbul: Yagmur Yayınları, 1965).
Muhammed Hamidullah, Kur’an-ı Kerim Tarihi Bütün Eserleri 9 (İstanbul: Beyan Yayınları, 2000).
İsmail Hakkı İzmirli, Tarih-i Kur’an (Kur’an-ı Kerimin Tarihi) (İstanbul: Böre Yayınları, 1956).
İsmail Karaçam, Kur’an-ı Kerim’in Nüzulü ve Kerâati (İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı Yayınları, 1995).
Şaban Karataş, Şia’da ve Sünni Kaynaklarda Kur’an Tarihi (İstanbul: Ekin Yayınları, 1996).
Osman Keskioglu, Kuran Tarihi ve Kur’an Hakkında Ansiklopedik Bilgiler (İstanbul: Nebioğlu Yaynevı, 1953).
Şevket Kotan, Kur’an ve tarihselcilik (İstanbul: Beyan Yaynevı, 2001).
Theodor Nöildeke & Friedrich Schwally, Kur’an tarihi, tr. Muammer Sencer (İstanbul: İlke Yayınları, 1970).
Vahap Okay, Müslümanlar için Kur'an Tarihi (İstanbul: Okay Yaynevı, 1960).
M. Şerefeeddin Yaltkaya (1879–947), Tarih-i Kur’an-ı Kerân (İstanbul, 1331/1915).
Appendix VI: Works in Urdu


Maulana Muhammad ʿAlī, Jamʿi Qurʾān (Lahore: Mufīd-i ʿĀm Press, 1917).

Abū Muḥammad Muṣṭilḥ, Alamgir Tārīkh i Qurʾān (Hyderabad: Quran Academy, 1952).

ʿAbd al-Latīf Rahmānī, Tarikhul Qurʾān (Delhi: Shah Abuʾl-Khayr Academy, 1983).


Ṣubḥī Sāliḥ, ʿUlām al-Qurʾān, tr. Gholam Ahmad Ḥarīrī (Faisalabad: Malek Sans, 1994).

Tamannā ʿImādī (Syed Hayatul Haq Muhammad Mohi-ud-Din), Jamʿuʾl-Qurʾān (Karachi: Rahman Publishing Trust, 1994).


NOTES
This essay was presented at the ‘Colloque: Les origines du Coran. Le Coran des origins’ (Paris, Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 3–4 Mar. 2011). I am grateful to Behnam Sadeghi for useful discussions as well as his written comments on the first draft.

1 T. Nödeke, Geschichte des Qorāns (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1860).


4 In his *al-Fihrist* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrīfa, 1417/1997, p. 184), Ibn al-Nadīm has made reference to Ṭārīkh ʿāy al-Qurʾān li-taʿyīd al-sulṭān by Abūʾl-ʿAbbās Jaʿfar b. Ahmad al-Marwāzī (d. 274/887). Judging from the fact that the list of his works in *al-Fihrist* does not demonstrate any remarkable expertise or interest in Qurʾānic scholarship, his book can hardly be classified as a historiographical text on the Qurʾān. Also Ibn Ṭawūs (Ṣaʿd al-Suʿūd (Qum: Dušil, 1421/2000), p. 186) has referenced another similarly entitled work by Abūʾl-Hassan ʿAlī b. ʿIsā b. Dāwūd al-Jarrāh, known as al-Rummnāḥi (d. 334/946). The cited material, however, clearly characterises the work as an exegetical text. Fāris Taḥrīzīyān al-Ḥasūn (the editor of Ṣaʿd al-Suʿūd) has points out that the correct title is probably Taʿrīj al-Qurʾān.

5 It is safe to say that the notion of pre-eternity (qiḍām) of the Qurʾān among the Ashʿarīs and al-Ghazālī’s somewhat Ṣūfī bias towards the Qurʾān have contributed to this view.


7 To better understand the transformation of Muslim viewpoint in recent decades one can refer to some of the recent works on historicity of the Qurʾān, including the writings of Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Mohamed Abed al-Jabri. For similar works in Turkish refer to the following: Omer Özsoy, *Kur'an ve Tarihselcilik Yazıları* (‘Writings on the Qurʾān and its Historicity’) (Ankara: Kitābiyyāt, 2004); Mehmet Paçoğlu, *Kur'an ve Tarihselcilik Tarihi Məsələsi*, Kur'an-ı Anlama' da Tarihselik Sempozyumu (‘Symposium on the Role of Historicity in Understanding the Qurʾān’) (Bursa: Kurav-Bayrak, 2000); Şevket Kötağlan, *Kur'an-ı Tarihselcilik* (‘The Qurʾān and Historicism’) (Istanbul: Beyan Yayınları, 2001); Hayrettin Karaman et al. (eds), *Kur'an-ı Kerim, Tarihselcilik ve Hermenötik* (Istanbul: Işık Yayınları, 2003).

8 For an example of such commentaries, see al-Qurtubi’s introductory section in his al-Jāmī li-ahkām al-Qurʾān (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d).


13 Despite this, Muslim scholars have authored a considerable number of books and essays which bear the title of ‘History of the Qurʾān’. Perhaps the most famous is al-Azami’s work, *The History of the Qurʾānic Text from Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003), which has since been translated into Turkish and Indonesian.
14 This is especially true in the case the Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān which has no entry designated as ‘History of the Qurʾān’. Instead of this general title, there are several specialised entries on collection of the Qurʾān, historical dating of the Qurʾān, the variant readings, Qurʾān translation, script, etc. On the other hand, in Persian sources such as Dāyeratul Maʿāref-e Qurʾān-e Karim (‘Encyclopaedia of the Holy Qurʾān’) (8 vols up to now. Qom: Büstān-e Ketāb, 1382 SH/2005) and Dāyeratul Maʿāref-e Tashayyu’ (‘The Encyclopaedia of Shiʿism’) (14 vols. Tehran: Saʿīd Mohebbi Publishing, 1377 SH/1998), there are dedicated entries with the title of ‘History of the Qurʾān’.

15 Mūsā Jārullāh Rustūfīdunī, Tārīkh al-Qurʾān waʾl-maṣāḥif (St Petersburg: publisher, 1313/ 1905).


17 Rustūfīdunī, Tārīkh al-Qurʾān, p. 12: ‘wa-kathārān mā narā rījālān min al-ʿulāmāʾ al-
ajānīb yaḥtamān wa-yāʾtaḥān bi-tārīkh al-maṣāḥif waʾl-Qurʾān akhtar min iʿtināʾ ʿulāmāʾ al-
Islām bihī fī hādhāhiḥ l-qurūn al-akhīrā.’


19 In his 1935 introduction, Ahmad Amīn (1878–1945) has praised al-Zanjānī’s work (p. zaʾ, p. hāʾ, p. taʾ). Also the High Committee for Arabic Translation of the Encyclopaedia of Islam ( = Dāʾirat al-maʿārif al-Islāmiyya) has included an opening section in English in which al-Zanjānī’s text is introduced to the Western audience and its significance is explained (p. hāʾ, p. wāʾ).

20 In his article on ‘Tafṣīr’ in Dāʾirat al-maʿārif al-Islāmiyya (15 vols. Cairo: Wizārat al-Māʾarif, 1933–60), vol. 5, p. 369), after bestowing high praise upon Nödeke and recommending his discussion as indispensable to mainstream Muslim scholarship, al-Khūlī goes on to say ‘A graduate of the Faculty of Literature at the University of Cairo has indeed produced a translation of Nödeke’s Geschichte des Qorāns into Arabic, but it has not been published’. It seems plausible to suggest that al-Zanjānī, who had spent some years in Cairo, had received his knowledge of Nödeke’s text through the same unpublished work.

21 It appears that many Shiʿī scholars and commentators, when they refer to Tārīkh al-Qurʾān, almost always have al-Zanjānī’s work in mind, as this is the only text from which they quote. Examples include Jaʿfar Murtaḍā al-ṢĀmīlī (al-Sāhibīn min sīrat al-nabī al-ʿẓām), Makārim Shīrāzī (Tafsīr-e Nemūneh), Muṭṭafā Khomēnī (Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm) and Jaʿfar Subhānī (Maḥfūḥ al-Qurʾān). For examples of Sunnī texts, see Muhammad ʿAbd al-Ṣāmīlī al-Zurqānī, Manāḥīl al-ʿirfān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān (2 vols. Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1362/ 1943), vol. 2, p. 77.


23 Muhammad A. Drāz, Madkhal ilāʾl-Qurʾān al-karīm, p. 39; and for another instance see p. 46.

24 His doctoral dissertation was published as ʿṢubbīḥī al-Ṣāleḥ, La vie future selon le Coran (Paris: J. Vrin, 1971).

25 Subhī al-Ṣāliḥ, Masāḥīḥī fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li’l-Malāyīn, 1965), pp. 64–116. For discussion of historical dating of Meccan and Medinan suras, refer to pp. 164–233. Along with his other book on ḥadīth, this work has served as a textbook in a number of Iranian, and possibly Arab, universities.
26 According to a search conducted by myself, al-Ṣāliḥ has quoted Blachère no less than 40 times and Nöldeke about 10 times. Also, compared to Nöldeke, he agrees on many more occasions with Blachère. He (Mabāḥith, p. 177) goes as far as to suggest that Blachère’s French translation of the Qur’an is the most accurate of its kind.

27 Other works which have covered historiography of the Qur’an as an independent subject, include: Muhammad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīm al-Zurqānī, Manāḥil al-ʿirfān fī ʿulām al-Qurʾān (Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabīyya, 1362/1943); Muḥammad Abū Zahra, al-Maʿjīzah al-kubrā (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 1390/1970). For an instance of Western Muslim scholarship on the subject, see the following: Ahmad von Denfer, ʿUlām al-Qurʾān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qurʾān (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1983 [1994]). This has been rendered into German as Mohamed Abdallah Weth (tr.), ʿUlām al-Qurʾān: Einführung in die Koranwissenschaften (Stuttgart: Deutscher Informationsdienst über Islam (Idid), 2005). As a Turkish sample, one can refer to Osman Keskioğlu, Nüz lünden Günümüze Kur’an-ı Kerim Bilgileri (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 1989 [1993]).


31 Mahmūd Abū Rayya, an Egyptian Sunnī scholar, while referring his readers to al-Khūʾī’s discussion of collection and compilation of the Qurʾān in al-Bayān, considers it an unparalleled authority, and singly sufficient on the subject. He even regards it as a religious duty for every Muslim to study it. See his Adwāʾ ʿalāʾ-l-summa al-Muhammadiyya (Cairo: Dār al-Kītāb al-Īsālī, 1377/1958), pp. 248–9.


35 For full publication details see Appendix I. As far as I know, his book has been translated into Persian as Tāriḵ-e Qurʾān by Ḥāmid Bezdī Thānī: Mashhad: Āstān-e Quds-e Radawī, 1382 SH/2003), and Indonesian as Sejarah Al-Qurʾān by Ahmad Bachmid (Jakarta: Rehal Publika, 2008).

36 The initial publication of Rāmīyar’s Tāriḵ-e Qurʾān (Tehran: Andişhe) was in 1967. Later, a more complete version of the book was released in 1983. The only translation thereof is in Urdu as Tārikh al-Qurʾān, tr. Sayyed Anwār Ṭahmī Belgrāmī (Lahore: Mesbah al-Quran Trust, 1415 AH).
37 The final bibliography of his book lists some 500 sources in various Islamic and Western languages.


40 For instance see pp. 18–19 on Nöldeke, Blachère, Schwally, Wellhausen and Jeffery’s views on the etymology of ‘Qur’ān’; pp. 291–3 on Buhl, Bell, Torrey and Blachère acknowledging the existence of complete compilations of the Qur’ān at the time of the Prophet; pp. 619–22 about description of the methods employed by Muir, Sprenger, Weil, Grimm and Hirschfeld in their chronological dating of the Qur’ānic suras.

41 Leone Caetani, Annali dell’Islam (Milan: Hoepli, 1905), II/i, p. 713.


43 On the whole, Rāmyār’s assessment of the intellectual efforts of Western orientalists regarding the history of the Qur’ān is positive. Toward the end of his book (pp. 657–8), after offering a survey of the many contributions of Nöldeke, Schwally, Grimm, Weil and Flügel, he does not hesitate to emphasise their significance, and explains in detail the scholarly undertakings of Blachère. In a similar fashion to Šubhī al-Sālih (Mabāḥīth, p. 177), he honours Blachère’s French version of the Qur’ān as the best available translation.


48 For further discussion, see Ja’far Neknām, Darāmādī bar tārikhozārī-e Qur’ān (‘An Introduction to Dating the Qur’ān’) (Tehran: Hastinama, 2001), pp. 41–51.


51 See Appendix V for further details.

52 More examples of such works are discussed earlier in this article.


54 Theodor Nöldeke & Friedrich Schwally, Kur’āntarihi, tr. Muammer Sencer (İstanbul: İlke Yayınlari, 1970).

A prominent student of Ayatollah Khomeini, an architect of the post-revolutionary constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the first head of the judiciary after the Iranian revolution of 1979, he was killed in a terrorist bombing in 1981.


Several academic dissertations, based on the Arabic translation of Nöldeke-Schwally’s text, have been written in Iran and some Arabic countries, which offer a critical analysis of each of the book’s three independent volumes. For a representative example, see Ahmad ʿUmran al-Zāwī, *Jawla fi kitāb Nöldeke: tārikh al-Qurʾān* (Damascus: Maktabat Dār al-Talās, 2008).

For more representative cases of such errors consult my article (in Persian) ‘Tārikh-e Qurʾān (Nödeke va Schwally): Tārikhche-ye Tadvīn va Naqd va Barresi-ye Tarjome-ye Arabī-e Ān’ in *Pazhūhesh Nāme-ye Qurʾān va Ḥadīth* 51 (1385/2006). In this, different sample fragments from the original German text and its Arabic rendition have been compared.

See Appendix V for details.

See Appendix IV for details.

See Appendix II for details.

See Appendix IV for details.

See Appendices I & IV for details.

See Appendices II & V for details.

See Appendices II & IV for details.

See Appendices I & IV as well as endnote 2 for details.