

# What is “islam”?

When Arabic is taught to English speakers, there are two major characteristics that students need to keep in mind before they begin. The first obvious one is that the Arabic script is written from right to left. The second major difference, which is almost always overlooked by teachers, is that there are no capital letters in Arabic. After a little practice virtually all students would get used to writing from right to left. On the other hand, the lack of capitalization in the Arabic script would continue to be problematic not just for English-speaking students learning Arabic but even for native Arabic speakers. We saw in the previous chapter a glaring example of such problems with the word “allah/the god”, which is arguably the most important word in the Arabic language. In fact, as it will become apparent, one can argue that this characteristic of the Arabic script is the main cause of many of the major misunderstandings in the world today.

Capitalization allows the reader to easily tell if a written word is a proper name or a common noun. Absent of capitalization, the context has to be used to determine if a word is a proper name or a common noun. This is much like English speakers using context to determine proper names and common nouns in speech where there is no capitalization. As a general rule, proper names are not translated because in the context they only serve as meaningless labels. Hence, names such as Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Maryam are similar in Hebrew, English and Arabic with some phonetic variations and cross-language mispronunciation. For example, we can see in the Arabic text of the Quran in passages such as 22:78 that Abraham is a proper name and hence it is not translated into Arabic from what it meant in Canaanite or whatever ancient language Abraham spoke. We can see this concept carried forward from Arabic into the three most popular and well known English translations of the Quran:

**YUSUFALI:** And strive in His cause as ye ought to strive, (with sincerity and under discipline). He has chosen you, and has imposed no difficulties on you in religion; it is the cult of your father Abraham. It is He Who has named you Muslims, both before and in this (Revelation); that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and ye be witnesses for mankind! ...

**PICKTHAL:** And strive for Allah with the endeavour which is His right. He hath chosen you and hath not laid upon you in religion any hardship; the faith of your father Abraham (is yours). He hath named you Muslims of old time and in this (Scripture), that the messenger may be a witness against you, and that ye may be witnesses against mankind. ...

**SHAKIR:** And strive hard in (the way of) Allah, (such) a striving a is due to Him; He has chosen you and has not laid upon you an hardship in religion; the faith of your father

**Ibrahim; He named you Muslims before and in this, that the Messenger may be a bearer of witness to you, and you may be bearers of witness to the people. ...**

In the above widely used translations of 22:78, as expected, the proper name Abraham is not translated. However, in addition to Abraham, a couple of other words, “Muslims” and “Allah”, are also not translated.

Let's think about the word Muslims (Arabic: "al-muslimeen") in 22:78 for a minute. The passage makes it absolutely clear that this is the same description used by the followers of Abraham during their time. Were Abraham's followers named what would have been at their time a gibberish word from a future language called Arabic that wasn't even invented yet? Of course not! Proposing that "al-muslimeen" in 22:78 is a proper name is no different than proposing that 1400 years ago in Arabic the believers were literally named "The Believers" long before Modern English was invented. Saying "The Believers" to Arabs 1400 years ago or "Al Muslimeen" to Abraham's followers a few thousand years earlier would have sounded just as gibberish as saying "Qasdhwdk" to people reading this book. It will still be gibberish to the readers even if hundreds of years from now some yet to be invented language will have "qasdhwdk" as a meaningful word. So definitely the Arabic word "al-muslimeen" is a common noun and thus should be translated into English in the same way that it was translated in the Quran into Arabic from whatever ancient language Abraham spoke. So the next question becomes what should the common noun "al-muslimeen" be translated as?

The word “al-muslimeen” is the plural of “muslim” with the definite article “al” preposed. The word “muslim” is of the form *muf‘il* and comes from the Arabic three letter root “slm”. In Arabic the word “salaam”/سلام (form *fa‘aal*) means “peace”. The words “muslim” and “salaam” have a straightforward relation like the relationship between other words of the form *muf‘il* and *fa‘aal*. Words of the form *muf‘il* have the meaning of “maker of *fa‘aal*”. For example, “salaah” means goodness and “muslih” is the maker of goodness, “najaah” means success and “munjih” means the maker of success, “fasad” means corruption and “mufsid” is the maker of corruption, and so on. By the same token, “salaam” means peace and “muslim” means the maker of peace, in other words it means “peacemaker”. It follows that like “islah” means “making good”, “injah” means “making success” and “ifsad” means “making corruption”, “islam” means “peacemaking”. So in 22:78, the common noun “al-muslimeen” should be translated as “the peacemakers”.

Another word that is not translated by the majority of translators in 22:78 and elsewhere in the Quran is the Arabic word “allah”. As we saw in the previous chapter, like the word “al-muslimeen” (peacemakers), the word “allah” is a universal common noun and not the proper name of an Arab deity. The word “allah” is essentially the contracted form of “al-ilah”, which literally means “the god”. With this understanding, let's reexamine 22:78 and provide a better translation.

**22:78. And strive for the god his true striving. He has chosen you and has made no hardship on you in the obligation, the creed of your father Ibrahim. He (the god) named you the peacemakers previously and in this, so that the messenger will be a witness on you and you will be witnesses on humankind. ...**

We are told that the reason for naming the followers of the god's message "the peacemakers" is two fold; the messenger will be a witness on them; and they will be witnesses on humankind.

The definition of a witness can be summed up as one who testifies in the case of a dispute. The messenger is by definition the deliverer of the message and therefore in this capacity the message is the vehicle for communication. So what is the issue in dispute and how does delivering the message accomplish the purpose of witnessing against its own followers?

The issue in dispute is mentioned right at the beginning of the passage. By pointing to the true striving for the god, it is implicit in that statement that there is false striving for the god. The message of the passage is that its followers have been described as "the peacemakers" by the god. This message will be a witness against its own followers in the dispute of what constitutes true striving ("jihad") for the god as opposed to false striving ("jihad") for the god. Thus, by virtue of their god-given description, the followers of the messenger cannot corrupt and cause destruction and shed blood and then turn around and claim that they are doing it because they are striving for the god. By describing its followers as the peacemakers, the god's message will be a witness against them.

Many evils in the world and plenty of wars and destruction have taken place by followers of all creeds in the name of striving for the god. So in turn, the peacemakers will be witnesses on humankind that testify the truth in the issue of those like Al-Qaeda who do not strive for the god the true striving and instead corrupt in the earth and shed the blood while claiming to strive for the god. The single word, "peacemakers", describing the true strivers for the god stands as an overwhelming witness against those who cause death and destruction while claiming to strive for the god. There are many implications to understanding "islam" as peacemaking. This is the real legacy of Abraham according to 2:132:

**2.132. And this was the legacy that Abraham left to his sons, and so did Jacob; "Oh my sons! The god has chosen the obligation for you, so do not die except while you are peacemakers."**

As 2:132 indicates, the primacy of the concept of peacemaking as a god-given obligation is not a new invention but it was already very well known to the previous people since the time of Abraham. In fact, the concepts of peace, peacemaking, and peacemakers are mentioned no less than 450 times in the Bible. For example, there are several prominent mentions of peacemakers (Arabic: "muslimeen") in the Bible:

**James 3:18**

**Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.**

Unfortunately, against all grammar and common sense we constantly hear the common nouns *muslim* and *islam* left without translation. In fact, we increasingly hear all sorts of Arabic common nouns that are not translated. As we saw, the word *islam* should be translated as peacemaking, *muslim* should be peacemaker, and *jihad* should be striving.

The term “deen” (دين) in Arabic means obligation. So according to 3:19, our only obligation is peacemaking and this is what we will be accountable for.

**3:19. Surely the obligation at the god is peacemaking and those who were given the book differed in it after knowledge came to them, through oppression between themselves and whoever rejects the signs of the god then the god is swift in calling to account.**

Peacemaking is not a religion and one doesn't even have to be a believer to be a peacemaker as clear from 49:14:

**49:14. The dwellers of the wilderness said “we believed”. Say: “You didn't believe but say we made peace but faith has not entered your hearts and if you obey the god and his messenger, he will not diminish any of your deeds, indeed the god is forgiving, merciful.**

Thus, the opposite of peacemaker/”muslim” is not disbeliever. The opposite of a peacemaker is a criminal:

**68:35. Shall we make peacemakers like criminals!?**

A criminal corrupts and causes bloodshed. On the other hand, by being peacemakers, humans fulfill the responsibility that the god entrusted them with.

**2:30. And when the god said to the controllers: “I am making in the earth a leader”. They said: “Do you make in it that who corrupts in it and sheds blood while we exalt with your praise and sanctify for you?” He said: “I know what you don't know.”**

Everyone naturally knows that corruption and bloodshed is the opposite of peacemaking. Common nouns such as “peace” and “peacemaking” are universal concepts that the god taught humans and they spontaneously appear across cultures, even those that didn't have any contact with one another.

**2:31-33. And he taught Adam the universal names then he showed them to the controllers and said: “Tell me the named of these if you are truthful.”**

**They said: “You be exalted, we have no knowledge except what you have taught us, you are the knowing, the wise.”**

**He said: “O Adam, inform them of their names.” So when he informed them of their names, he told them: “Didn’t I tell you that I know the hidden of the heavens and the earth and know what you show and what you were concealing.”**

Peacemaking is not the meaningless proper name of some Arab religion. It is an action that humans must do to meet their obligation to the god and fulfill the trust that they were entrusted with:

**30:30. So set up your direction to the obligation leaning away from manmade religions, according to the god’s nature that he naturally made humans on, there is no alternative to the god’s creation. This is the worthy obligation but most humans do not know.**

By taking words such as *islam*, *muslim*, and *jihad* as proper names or meaningless labels, their true universal meaning has been lost on both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers. For example, when the word *jihad* is mentioned, the first image that is evoked in the minds of the majority of Arabic and non-Arabic speakers is that of a religious holy war. This meaning has taken hold despite the fact that all Arabic dictionaries say that the word *jihad* simply means "striving". Being Arabic speakers has not helped people avoid this trap because the proper name blocks the true meaning of a word even in Arabic. When such language barriers are removed, those simple universal concepts will be clearly understood. As we saw, according to 22:78, peacemaking is the true striving for the god.

## **Peacemaking = True striving**

As we will see in the next chapters, turning common nouns or universal concepts into meaningless proper names or labels is the cause of all sorts of religious corruptions.