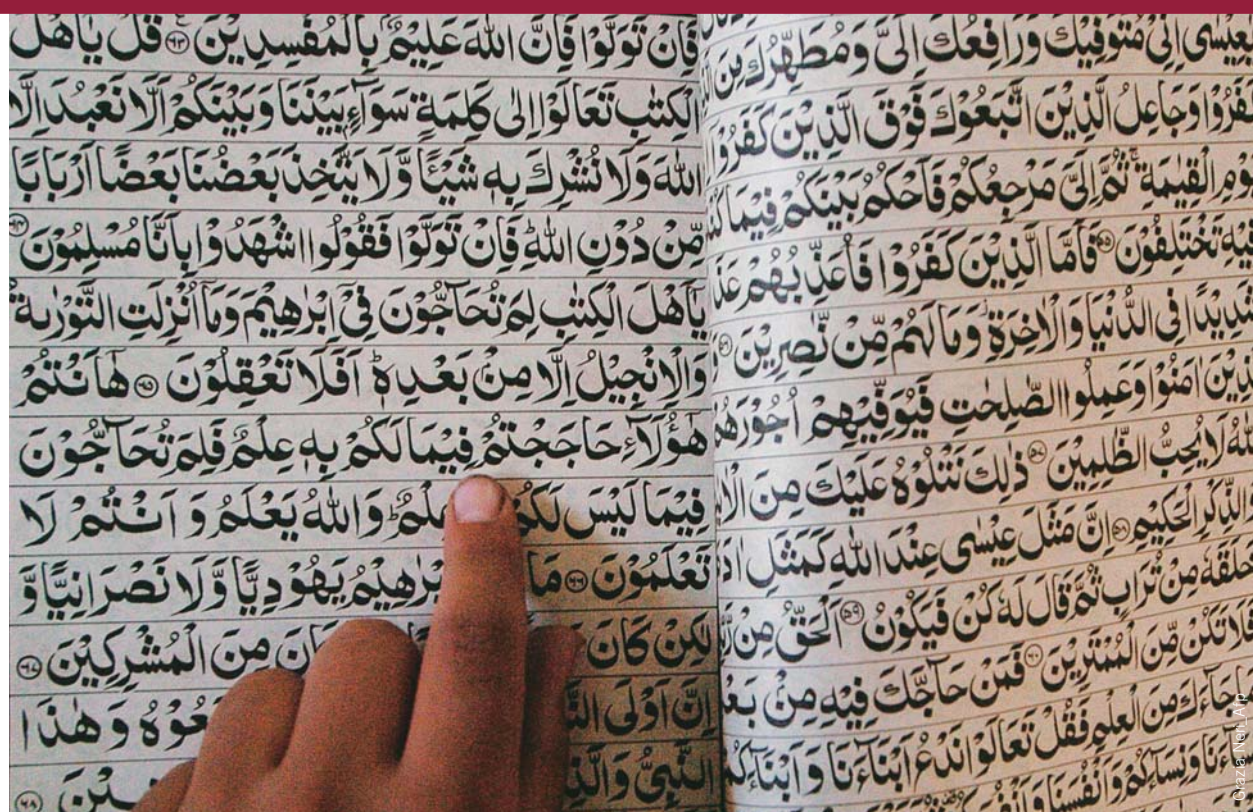


A Christian risks upsetting the millenary order of Islam: Professor of Islamic law at Lausanne University, Sami Awad Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh has set the Koran in chronological instead of descending order (from the longest to the shortest chapter) as for the official version wished by the third Ottoman caliph mid 7th century. An innovation which should be popular amongst the moderate Muslims

## Reading the Koran through the lens of time

RELIGIONS

edited by Farian Sabahi



**D**o the problems connected with the comprehension of the Koran depend on the fact that several chapters are not in chronological order? This was the thinking of an Egyptian writer, who taught professor Awad Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh to read it using the lens of time.

**Professor, what are the changes to the Koran in chronological order?**

We're upsetting the attitude of radicals who

way too often use faith as a pretext. After all, true Islam is the Revelation of Medina, where Mohammed is only a prophet. The message after migration to Medina, on the other hand, has a strong juridical connotation, derived from the historical context and by the fact that Mohammed became the political and military leader of the Islamic community. Now, with the chronological version of the Koran, moderates can demonstrate how the Medina revelations were motivated by a special historical context,



reason why they have no absolute value. For example, the sabre verse of Medina times ordered believers to kill the hypocrites, while the previous verse of the Mecca age, dating back to the true Islam, invited them to forgiveness. Even the position of women worsens moving towards Medina and it's at back then that believers were ordered to veil their faces, lower their look and safekeep their private parts.

**How did this idea come about?**

I bought my first Koran in Arabic in Jerusalem. I was sixteen and I couldn't understand a thing, so that the following week I gave it to a Muslim. It gave me the impression of a work without head or tail, with many repetitions. In 1977, I was writing a thesis for my doctorate on minorities in Egypt, so I went to Cairo to visit writer Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf-Allah who explained to me how the problem of Koran was the cluttered text which could be remedied by placing the various chapters in chronological order. I looked everywhere, but could not find a Koran in Arabic in chronological order.

**So we're speaking of an absolute novelty?**

No, I've resumed the same order proposed in 1923 in the Al-Azhar Islamic center, the most important in the Sunnite world, which had already signaled the chronological order at

the start of each chapter. But the most interesting question is the order which I have restored, corresponding more or less to the Koran by Ali, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, which the Shiites refer back to.

**How come the Islamic world has not attempted to publish the Koran in chronological order up till now?**

They fear change, are not sure of the Revelation order and don't know how to manage repetitions: these are Islamic precepts which have only been taught once or on more than one occasion.

**Does the Muslim dogma authorize the division of Surahs into chronological order?**

We should rather inquire whether the current order was decided by Mohammed himself. The greatest majority of experts doesn't believe this to be the case. After all Ali's Koran was in chronological order: if Maometto had wished for a Book in the current order Ali would have not dared contradict him. From a theological point of view, it is therefore admissible to publish a Koran edition in chronological order.

However, in order not to rub up against Islamic sensitivity, I added a table of chapters based on common use at the end of my edition, leaving anyone the freedom of reading the Koran as desired.





\_The chronological Koran will allow moderates to demonstrate that the Medina revelations were the result of a specific historical context and therefore do not have absolute value

#### **What difficulty did you find?**

Following al-Azhar indications would have been easy: it would have been enough to input the right command into the computer and the various chapters would have been set in the given order. But I decided otherwise, dividing the Koran into two parts: the Mecca one revealed between 610 and 622 a.C. and the Medina one dating back to the period between 622 and 632, when Mohammed was not only a prophet but also became the political and military leader of the Islamic community.

#### **What are the differences?**

The Mecca Koran is moralist, egalitarian, with few laws. The verses subsequently revealed after migration (*hegira*) to Medina, on the other hand, are mainly of a juridical and political nature. And its precisely this second part which today causes the greatest problems. It was difficult to decide what to do with these verses which, while contained in the Mecca Surahs, were revealed during the Medina age and therefore subsequently. I decided to leave

them were they were, marking them with a red H to indicate they belonged to the Hegira age. And, vice versa, the Medina verses contained in the Mecca chapters have been marked with a black M. So the reader can distinguish one from the other by a simple glance.

#### **And how did you manage the so-called satanic verses, revealed and then abrogated?**

I marked the abrogated verse and the abrogating one. The prophet Mohammed, borrows customs and traditions of Jews and Christians, for example in the case of fasting which initially coincides with the Jewish kippur... These are similarities which should not be underestimated and, due to this, in the notes I refer readers to Jewish and Christian texts.

#### **You're a Christian, do you expect any reaction from radical Islam?**

It's too soon to tell, my translation published by Aire has only been in bookstores for a few weeks now. But I hope to receive positive feedback by those who will manage to understand the Koran this way. Muslims should not feel threatened, because after all I've taken their book in hand without making any major changes, following the order of al-Azhar experts and exclusively including the changes admitted by the Muslim religious authorities.