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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Subtitling Strategies and Interpretative Choices in Rendering Quranic Verses into English In Documentaries

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## ABSTRACT

Subtitling Quranic verses in documentary films presents unique linguistic, cultural, and interpretative challenges, yet it remains an underexplored area in audiovisual translation studies. Unlike traditional Quranic translation research, which primarily focuses on written translations of the text, this study examines how Quranic verses, when naturally integrated into the discourse of documentary films, are subtitled. Drawing on a dataset of 47 Quranic verses across 10 out of 29 investigated documentary films, this research analyses subtitling strategies in films that address social, political, and cultural issues in Arab and Islamic contexts. Using Al-Shloul's (2023) taxonomy of subtitling Islamic cultural items (ICIs), the study categorises and evaluates the techniques employed to render Quranic verses while maintaining their contextual relevance within the films. It explores whether subtitlers prioritise semantic accuracy, brevity, or contextual adaptation, and examines how these choices influence the transmission of Quranic meanings within the broader narrative of the documentaries. The findings reveal key patterns in the representation of Quranic discourse in audiovisual media, highlighting the constraints imposed by subtitle space and time, as well as the interpretative decisions that shape the portrayal of the Quran within authentic spoken interactions in documentary storytelling. By exploring the complexities of subtitling sacred texts in non-religious contexts, this study contributes to both Qur'anic translation studies and audiovisual translation research. It offers new insights into the intersection of Qur'anic discourse, media, and linguistic adaptation, shedding light on how religious texts are mediated in contemporary documentary storytelling.

## KEYWORDS

Audiovisual translation, Subtitling, technical constraints, ideology, manipulation, Quranic verses.

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## 1. Introduction

Documentary films serve as powerful mediums for reflecting everyday language and lived experiences, capturing the socio-cultural and political landscapes of the communities they portray. In Arabic and Islamic contexts—where religious teachings are deeply woven into daily life—it is common for speakers to reference Quranic verses in their discourse. These verses, revered as sacred texts, also function as sources of wisdom, guidance, and rhetorical strength, seamlessly integrated into both formal and informal communication. As documentaries strive to authentically depict the realities of Arab and Islamic societies, Quranic verses naturally emerge within the cinematic discourse—not as isolated religious citations, but as expressions embedded in the spoken language of film participants. However, translating these verses into subtitles for international audiences presents complex linguistic, technical, and cultural challenges, raising critical questions about how to faithfully and effectively render such culturally significant content.

While Quranic translation has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry in written contexts, its subtitling within audiovisual media remains largely underexplored. Unlike traditional translation, subtitling must operate within strict spatial and temporal

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limitations, requiring the condensation of meaning into concise and readable text. This process often demands strategic decision-making that transcends linguistic equivalence, engaging with cultural, contextual, and communicative dimensions. The challenge intensifies when subtitling Quranic verses, given their sacred status and divine authority, which place additional ethical responsibilities on the subtitler. Furthermore, the choices made by filmmakers and subtitlers directly influence how these verses are presented, shaping audience perception and interpretation. Despite the significance of this dynamic, scholarly engagement with the subtitling of sacred texts—particularly in documentary film—remains limited.

To address this gap, the present study adopts Al-Shloul's (2023) Taxonomy of Subtitling ICLs as a theoretical framework for categorising the strategies used to subtitle Quranic discourse. Within this taxonomy, literal translation emerges as the most frequently employed strategy, followed by omission and dummy compensation. These choices are shaped not only by technical constraints—such as subtitle length and reading speed—but also by broader considerations, including the film's thematic focus and its target audience.

By analysing 47 Quranic verses subtitled across 10 out of 29 selected documentary films, this study contributes to the growing body of research on the subtitling of sacred texts. It aims to bridge the gap in literature that has primarily concentrated on written Quranic translation, by exploring the unique challenges and ethical implications of rendering Quranic verses in a cinematic context. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the intersection of religion, media, and translation, highlighting the need for deeper scholarly engagement with the subtitling of Quranic discourse in a globalised audiovisual landscape.

## **2. Literature Review**

The translation of Qur'anic verses has long been a subject of academic debate, with scholars focusing on the challenges involved in balancing linguistic accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and theological fidelity. Many researchers, such as Simms (1997), Morris (2000), Long (2005), and Agliz (2015), explore these complexities, emphasising the difficulties of translating sacred texts, particularly the Qur'an, which requires preserving its spiritual meaning while ensuring accessibility to diverse audiences. The translation of religious texts, especially the Qur'an, involves more than just a linguistic exercise; it requires a delicate negotiation between linguistic precision and theological depth (Rahman, 1988; Abdul-Raof, 2004; Khalaf & Yusoff, 2012). In this context, Larson (1997) and Abdul-Raof (2005) discuss the theological dimensions of Qur'anic translation, underlining the importance of remaining faithful to the source text (ST) while ensuring that it is comprehensible to non-specialist readers.

However, while substantial scholarly attention has been directed toward written translations of the Qur'an, far less has been devoted to its subtitling in audiovisual contexts, where unique constraints—such as screen space, timing, and visual context—further complicate the translation process. Subtitling, as a form of audiovisual translation, introduces unique challenges, particularly due to the limitations imposed by space and time. Subtitlers must condense complex meanings into brief, readable text while maintaining clarity, fidelity, and reverence for the ST. As Gottlieb (2005) argues, subtitling requires careful consideration of the balance between linguistic fidelity and the need for brevity, a tension exacerbated when translating sacred texts (Al-Shloul, 2025). This challenge is compounded in the case of Qur'anic verses, as subtitlers must navigate not only technical limitations but also the need to uphold the sanctity and theological gravity of the Qur'anic message. Díaz Cintas (2009) further explains that subtitling often necessitates modifications to the ST to conform to the conventions of the medium, including pacing, readability, and cultural adaptation. Al-Shloul (2023) offers a valuable framework for understanding these challenges by categorising various subtitling strategies for ICLs, including Qur'anic verses. This taxonomy, later extended in Al-Shloul and Alkhomayes (2025), provides a systematic model for analysing how sacred texts are rendered in film, and forms the methodological foundation of the present study.

The role of documentary filmmaking further complicates the subtitling process. Documentaries serve as powerful tools for social commentary, often addressing political, cultural, and religious issues that resonate deeply with audiences (Pathak, 2024). In many Arabic-speaking societies, Qur'anic verses are naturally woven into everyday speech and thus become embedded within documentary narratives. These references, while contextually ordinary, carry profound religious and ideological significance. Scholars such as Lee-Wright (2009), Aitken (2013), and Pathak (2024) highlight the potential of documentaries to shape public discourse and engage audiences in critical reflection. Renov (2012) similarly argues that documentaries function as cultural artefacts, mediating between lived experience and mediated representation. When Qur'anic verses appear in these films, subtitlers face the dual challenge of preserving sacred meaning while ensuring that the translation remains accessible and relevant to a diverse, often global, audience.

Despite the growing body of literature on audiovisual translation and documentary filmmaking, the specific issue of subtitling Qur'anic verses in documentaries remains under-researched and under-theorised. While considerable research has been conducted on general subtitling practices and written translations of sacred texts, the intersection of religious sanctity, technical constraints, and audience diversity in audiovisual media has yet to be fully explored. The process of subtitling Qur'anic verses in

documentaries necessitates not only technical precision but also ethical responsibility, as translators must faithfully convey sacred meaning within strict temporal and spatial parameters, all while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

Moreover, the issue of manipulation in subtitling—whether technical or cultural—has received increasing scholarly attention (Díaz Cintas, 2012; Andino, 2014; Moll, 2017; Belhaj, 2022; Al-Shloul, 2023). Scholars such as Díaz Cintas (2012), Belhaj (2022) and Al-Shloul (2023) argue that deviations from standard subtitling conventions, including omission, simplification, or neutral placeholders (e.g., “Speaking Arabic”), can significantly shape viewers’ reception and interpretation of the text. When such strategies are applied to Qur’anic verses, they raise not only technical concerns but also profound ethical implications, particularly when omissions or modifications obscure or distort the religious message. These issues are further complicated by external pressures—whether ideological, political, or editorial—that may influence subtitling decisions (Baker, 2006; Nornes, 2007; Haj Omar, 2016). The risk of ideological filtering becomes especially pronounced in international documentaries aimed at Western audiences, where certain Qur’anic references may be omitted or softened to align with perceived audience sensitivities.

This study builds on the foundational work of Al-Shloul (2023), who examined subtitling strategies across a corpus of nine Arabic documentary films, focusing on the broader category of ICIs. While Al-Shloul’s study introduced a useful taxonomy for analysing subtitling strategies and offered insights into the (de)-Islamisation of discourse, the current research expands the scope and depth of analysis in several key respects. First, the dataset is significantly larger, comprising 29 documentary films, thereby offering a broader empirical base. Second, whereas Al-Shloul’s analysis encompassed a wide range of ICIs—including religious references, idioms, and socio-political expressions—this study narrows its focus to Qur’anic verses exclusively, allowing for a more nuanced and in-depth exploration of how these sacred texts are rendered and received in audiovisual form. Third, while Al-Shloul’s research focused primarily on the phenomenon of (de)-Islamisation, this study pays closer attention to how subtitling strategies impact the integrity and reception of Qur’anic content, considering both technical limitations and broader ideological implications. By isolating Qur’anic verses as a distinct and critically important category of ICIs, this research offers a deeper understanding of the interpretive and translational decisions that shape how religious meaning is negotiated in the global media landscape.

In conclusion, while existing literature provides a solid foundation for understanding Qur’anic translation and audiovisual subtitling, significant gaps remain—particularly in the subtitling of sacred texts within the documentary genre. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the strategies used to subtitle Qur’anic verses in Arabic documentary films, analysing how these strategies respond to technical, cultural, and ideological constraints. In doing so, it contributes to broader conversations on media representation, translation ethics, and the global mediation of Islamic discourse.

### 3. Research Questions

This study aims to explore the subtitling strategies employed in rendering Qur’anic verses in documentary films while considering linguistic, cultural, and technical constraints. To achieve this, the research addresses the following key questions:

- What subtitling strategies are used to render Qur’anic verses in Arabic documentary films, and what patterns emerge in their frequency and distribution?
- How do subtitling strategies vary across different documentaries, and what contextual or thematic factors influence these choices?
- To what extent do technical constraints and contextual factors—such as space and time limitations, target audience, and documentary themes—influence the choice of subtitling strategies, and what qualitative insights can be drawn from specific examples of how Qur’anic verses are rendered in documentary films?

### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the subtitling strategies employed by subtitlers to render the Quranic verses in Arabic, as featured in the selected documentary films, into English. It investigates how these Quranic verses, naturally integrated into spoken discourse, are represented in subtitles and explores whether the choices made are influenced by technical constraints, cultural considerations, or audience accessibility.

#### 4.1 Data Collection

The Quran consists of chapters called Surahs in Arabic. Each Surah [chapter] consists of verses called Ayat in Arabic. Verses of the Quran are one of the ICIs’ categories. The selection process aimed to ensure diversity in topics and themes, focusing on documentaries that explore social, political, and cultural issues related to Arab and Islamic societies. The films selected feature Quranic references as part of everyday language, reflecting how religious discourse naturally appears in conversations. The inclusion of these verses in documentaries serves multiple functions, such as reinforcing cultural identity, providing moral or ethical commentary, or enhancing the documentary’s narrative authenticity. The analysis focuses on the frequency and patterns of

subtitling strategies used for rendering these Quranic verses into English subtitles. By examining how these verses are translated, condensed, omitted, or otherwise adapted, the study provides insight into the challenges and strategies employed in subtitling sacred texts within the constraints of audiovisual translation.

Accordingly, this study examines 47 Quranic verses or parts of verses in Arabic that appear in 10 out of 29 selected documentary films. These verses were identified in the ST corpus, either as full verses or as partial references integrated into the spoken discourse of documentary participants. Table 1 below provides an overview of the documentary films investigated and the Quranic verses identified.

**Table 1**

*List of the Documentary Films Investigated & the Quranic Verses Identified*

| <b>S</b> | <b>Films</b>                                          | <b>Directors</b>                | <b>No. Of Verses<br/>(Total 47)</b> | <b>Broadcasting<br/>platforms</b> | <b>Quranic<br/>References<br/>Found in the ST</b>                                                                       |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | <i>The Dissident</i> (2020)                           | Bryan Fogel                     | 0                                   | Amazon Prime                      | -                                                                                                                       |
| 2        | <i>The Sick War</i> (1983)                            | Nawal Al-Maghafi                | 0                                   | Amazon Prime                      | -                                                                                                                       |
| 3        | <i>What Comes Around</i> (2018)                       | Reem Saleh                      | 1                                   | Amazon Prime                      | Q83:8                                                                                                                   |
| 4        | <i>Imad's Childhood</i><br>(2022)                     | Zahavi Sanjavi                  | 0                                   | Amazon Prime                      | -                                                                                                                       |
| 5        | <i>Welcome to Ouzville</i><br>(2020)                  | Jay B. Jammal                   | 0                                   | Amazon Prime                      | -                                                                                                                       |
| 6        | <i>Dugma: The Button</i><br>(2016)                    | Paul Salahdin Refsdal           | 14                                  | Amazon Prime                      | Q14:42 (Twice),<br>Q14:43, Q14:44,<br>Q85:1, Q85:2,<br>Q85:3, Q85:4,<br>Q85:5, Q85:6,<br>Q85:7, Q85:8,<br>Q85:9, Q85:10 |
| 7        | <i>The Muslim Traveller's Guide to Granada</i> (2015) | Malik Basso                     | 2                                   | Amazon Prime                      | Q2:254, Q4:78                                                                                                           |
| 8        | <i>I Heart Quran</i><br>(2015)                        | Patrick Stein &<br>Howard Cohen | 3                                   | Amazon Prime                      | Q100:6, Q100:7,<br>Q100:8                                                                                               |

|    |                                                 |                                        |   |              |                                              |
|----|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---|--------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 9  | <i>Birth of a Monster</i><br>(2017)             | Paul Moreira                           | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 10 | <i>Women of ISIS</i><br>(2019)                  | Thomas Dandois<br>& Alexandra<br>Kogan | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 11 | <i>Undercover in ISIS</i><br>(2016)             | Martin Himel                           | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 12 | <i>City of Ghosts</i><br>(2017)                 | Matthew<br>Heineman                    | 1 | Amazon Prime | Q5:33                                        |
| 13 | <i>Killing field</i><br>(2020)                  | Mark Willacy                           | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 14 | <i>Jihad: Afghanistan's<br/>Holy War</i> (2014) | Jeff B. Harmon                         | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 15 | <i>Killing Gaddafi</i><br>(2017)                | Jacques Charmelot                      | 5 | Amazon Prime | Q7:198, Q7:199,<br>Q7:200, Q7:201,<br>Q7:202 |
| 16 | <i>My War</i> (2018)                            | Julien Fréchette                       | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 17 | <i>The Colonel's Stray<br/>Dogs</i> (2021)      | Khalid Shamis                          | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 18 | <i>7 Days in Syria</i><br>(2016)                | Robert Rippberger                      | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 19 | <i>Cries From Syria</i><br>(2017)               | Evgeny Afineevsky                      | 2 | Amazon Prime | Q31:6, Q2:216                                |
| 20 | <i>Sky and Ground</i><br>(2018)                 | Talya Tibbon &<br>Joshua Bennett       | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |
| 21 | <i>The Ruins of Raqqa</i><br>(2018)             | Matt Brown                             | 0 | Amazon Prime | -                                            |

|    |                                           |                                        |    |              |                                                                                                             |
|----|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 22 | <i>Aleppo: Notes from the Dark</i> (2014) | Michal Przedlacki & Wojciech Szumowski | 16 | Amazon Prime | Q1:1, Q1:2, Q1:3, Q1:4, Q1:5, Q1:6, Q1:7, Q9:51, Q3:18, Q3:19, Q3:20, Q24:44, Q3:14, Q3:159, Q22:39, Q22:40 |
| 23 | <i>Defusing Human Bombs</i> (2011)        | Asad Qureshi                           | 0  | Amazon Prime | -                                                                                                           |
| 24 | <i>E-Team</i> (2014)                      | Katy Chevigny & Ross Kauffman          | 0  | Netflix      | -                                                                                                           |
| 25 | <i>Born in Gaza</i> (2014)                | Hernán Zin                             | 0  | Netflix      | -                                                                                                           |
| 26 | <i>Born in Syria</i> (2016)               | Hernán Zin                             | 2  | Netflix      | Q3:103 (Twice)                                                                                              |
| 27 | <i>The White Helmets</i> (2016)           | Orlando von Einsiedel                  | 1  | Netflix      | Q5: 32                                                                                                      |
| 28 | <i>For Sama</i> (2019)                    | Waad al-Kateab & Edward Watts          | 0  | Channel 4    | -                                                                                                           |
| 29 | <i>Syria's Torture Machine</i> (2011)     | Channel 4 (UK)                         | 0  | Channel 4    | -                                                                                                           |

#### **4.2 Data Analysis Process**

To systematically categorise and interpret the subtitling strategies, this study adopts Al-Shloul's (2023) taxonomy of subtitling strategies for ICIs. This framework offers a structured approach to analysing the treatment of religious and culturally embedded expressions in audiovisual media. While many studies treat religious content as part of the broader category of cultural elements, applying general subtitling taxonomies to analyse such items, this approach often overlooks the unique characteristics of religious language that distinguish it from other cultural expressions. To address this gap, Al-Shloul (2023) conducted an empirical study focused on subtitling strategies for ICIs, using data from nine documentary films. Through an abductive methodology, Al-Shloul (2023) developed a specialised taxonomy that responds to the specific challenges of subtitling Islamic content, building on existing frameworks by Gottlieb (1992), Nedergaard-Larsen (1993), Pedersen (2005; 2007), and Díaz Cintas and Remael (2014). Al-Shloul's (2023) taxonomy includes nine distinct strategies, as shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*The Taxonomy of Subtitling Strategies of ICIs (Al-Shloul, 2023, p.340)*

| Subtitling Strategy | Description |
|---------------------|-------------|
|---------------------|-------------|

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Loan                | Transferring the ST word into the TT by using the TL alphabet (i.e., transliteration/ naturalisation).                                                                                                                                            |
| Literal Translation | Literally translating the ICI (word by word) into the TT that has a semantically identical equivalent.                                                                                                                                            |
| Substitution        | Replacing the closet TT equivalent of the ICI with another TT lexical item.                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Transposition       | Rendering an ST cultural concept expressed in the form of an ICI into its cultural accepted equivalence of the concept in the TT.                                                                                                                 |
| Addition            | Adding a new ICI to the TT that is not mentioned in the ST at all.                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Compensation        | Makeup of the loss of the ICI translation by providing a general description that is relevant to the ICI either in terms of function or meaning.                                                                                                  |
| Dummy Compensation  | Makeup of the loss of the ICI translation by providing irrelevant information to what is uttered in the film (i.e., compensating the TT with mock substitutes that are not relevant to the ICI in the ST either in terms of function or meaning). |
| Omission            | Completely omitting the ICI.                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Condensation        | Partially omitting the ICI(s).                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

In this study, all back translations of Quranic verses are taken from *The Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Quran in the English Language* by Al-Hilali and Muhsin Khan (1984). This translation has been chosen for several reasons. Firstly, I am not theologically qualified to translate the Quran myself, and using an established translation ensures accuracy and fidelity to the original text. Secondly, the Hilali-Khan translation is widely recognised as a source-oriented translation, aiming to preserve the original meaning while providing supplementary explanations. It includes additional clarifications within the body text as well as in footnotes, helping to contextualise complex theological and linguistic aspects of the Quran.

Furthermore, as stated on the credit page of the book, this translation has been revised and edited by a committee at *The Presidency of Islamic Research, IFTA, Call and Guidance*, under the supervision of the *King Fahd Complex for Printing the Holy Quran* in Madinah, Saudi Arabia. This institutional backing adds to its credibility and scholarly reliability. Additionally, the Hilali-Khan translation is among the most widely used English translations of the Quran, particularly within the English-speaking Muslim world. Its widespread adoption suggests a level of acceptance and trust among scholars and general readers alike.

Moreover, this translation aligns with the objectives of the present study, as it not only provides a faithful rendering of the Quranic text but also highlights key interpretative nuances that are relevant to the analysis of subtitling strategies. Given the complexity of translating sacred texts—where theological, linguistic, and cultural considerations intersect—using a well-established and extensively reviewed translation ensures that the study maintains scholarly rigour and methodological consistency.

All 47 Quranic verses that appeared in the 10 selected documentary films (out of the total 29 investigated) were included in the analysis—no verses were excluded. Each verse was identified directly from the spoken content of the films and its corresponding subtitle was documented as it appeared on screen. The analysis was carried out using a manually coded Excel spreadsheet, where the following data points were systematically recorded for each verse:

- The timestamp of the verse as it appears in the ST.
- The corresponding subtitle, the target text (TT), as it appears in the film.
- The back translation of the verse using the Hilali-Khan (1984) version.
- The subtitling strategy employed, based on Al-Shloul's (2023) taxonomy.

Each subtitled Quranic verse in the dataset was analysed to determine which of these strategies were employed and whether the choices made were influenced by space and time constraints, target audience considerations, or broader contextual factors. The analysis further explores how these subtitling strategies impact the representation of Quranic discourse in the documentary medium. Special attention is given to cases where subtitles alter, condense, or omit elements of the original meaning, assessing whether such modifications arise due to technical limitations or broader translational challenges. Additionally, the study considers how the chosen subtitling strategies align with the communicative function of the verses within the documentary's narrative.

While technical constraints inherently shape subtitling choices, external influences—such as ideological framing or audience reception—also play a pivotal role. This study critically evaluates the rationale behind different subtitling strategies, distinguishing between necessary adaptations due to technical limitations and deliberate modifications influenced by external factors. It systematically identifies instances where technical constraints intersect with ideological or cultural considerations, offering a nuanced understanding of how subtitlers navigate these challenges.

The analysis is further informed by existing research on subtitling constraints, particularly Al-Shloul's (2023) examination of industry standards. Al-Shloul's (2023) study reviewed subtitling guidelines from audiovisual translation scholars, specialised subtitling committees, and major streaming platforms, including Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Channel 4. These platforms impose varying degrees of regulation on subtitling practices. While Amazon Prime does not enforce specific subtitling guidelines, both Netflix and Channel 4 maintain strict technical constraints, particularly concerning subtitle length and readability.

According to Díaz Cintas (2013) and Karakanta et al. (2020), the recommended subtitle duration is approximately six seconds, with a two-line limit per subtitle and a maximum of 42 characters per line in English. These guidelines, which align with the recommendations of Díaz Cintas and Remael (2014), ensure readability and synchronization with audiovisual content. However, no explicit subtitling guidelines exist for Quranic verses or other ICs, leaving subtitlers with significant flexibility in their approach.

Given these constraints, subtitlers must often condense, paraphrase, or omit Quranic verses to meet readability requirements. However, such modifications raise questions about whether technical necessity alone drives these changes, or whether external influences—such as ideological positioning, audience sensitivity, or cultural considerations—also shape the final output. By integrating qualitative textual analysis with a structured classification framework, this study identifies patterns in how Quranic discourse is mediated through subtitles in documentary films.

Through this methodological approach, the analysis offers a comprehensive examination of the decision-making processes that govern the subtitling of Quranic verses. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of the intersection between translation, ideology, and technical constraints in audiovisual media, highlighting the implications of these choices for cross-cultural communication and audience perception.

## **5. Findings & Discussion**

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study, focusing on the subtitling strategies used to render Qur'anic verses in documentary films. The analysis is structured into three key parts. First, *Patterns and Trends in Subtitling Strategies* provides a statistical overview of the frequency and distribution of different strategies. Second, *Subtitling Approaches Across Different Documentaries* examines how these strategies are applied in specific films, highlighting variations based on thematic and contextual factors. Finally, *Interpreting the Subtitling Choices: Technical, Linguistic, Cultural, or Ideological Considerations* delves into the motivations behind these decisions, exploring how linguistic, cultural, and ideological factors can shape the translation of Qur'anic verses in subtitles.



### 5.1 Patterns and Trends in Subtitling Strategies

This section provides a statistical overview of the frequency and distribution of subtitling strategies used for rendering Qur'anic verses in documentary films. By identifying prevalent strategies and highlighting variations across different films, the analysis offers insights into broader subtitling practices. The findings underscore the adaptability of subtitlers in managing technical constraints, such as time limitations and line length, which, while restrictive, play a crucial role in shaping subtitling choices.

The dataset includes 47 Qur'anic verses, either in full or as partial excerpts. However, the total number of subtitling strategies employed reaches 54, as shown in Table 3 below. This discrepancy arises from the occurrence of seven instances of *subtitling couplets*, a phenomenon identified by Al-Shlool (2023). A subtitling couplet refers to cases where a single Qur'anic excerpt is rendered using two distinct subtitling strategies simultaneously. For example, a verse may be subtitled using both literal translation and loan translation, reflecting an attempt to balance linguistic accuracy with audience comprehension.

**Table 3**

*Analysis of Subtitling Strategies: Frequency and Percentage of Utilisation*

| Subtitling Strategies | Frequency of Subtitling Strategies Utilised | Percentage of Subtitling Strategies Utilised |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Loan                  | 5                                           | 9.3%                                         |
| Literal Translation   | 24                                          | 44.5%                                        |
| Substitution          | 1                                           | 1.8%                                         |
| Transposition         | 1                                           | 1.8%                                         |
| Addition              | 0                                           | 0%                                           |
| Compensation          | 5                                           | 9.3%                                         |
| Dummy Compensation    | 4                                           | 7.4%                                         |
| Omission              | 13                                          | 24.1%                                        |
| Condensation          | 1                                           | 1.8%                                         |
| Total                 | 54                                          | 100%                                         |

Table 3 meticulously delineates the frequency and percentage distribution of subtitling strategies employed in the translation of Qur'anic verses in the selected documentary films. This breakdown provides a nuanced understanding of the varied approaches adopted by subtitlers, offering insights into the intricacies of rendering sacred content. The predominant use of the "Literal Translation" strategy (44.5%) underscores a tendency to maintain linguistic fidelity, closely adhering to the original Arabic

expressions. The substantial frequency of "Literal Translation" suggests a concerted effort to convey the exact semantic nuances of the Qur'anic verses in English, aligning with a preservationist approach.

The data also reveals that the "Loan" strategy, which involves the use of transliteration, is employed in 9.3% of cases. This moderate presence suggests that subtitlers adopt a balanced approach, incorporating Arabic terms into the English subtitles while avoiding excessive reliance on direct transference.

Conversely, the absence of the "Addition" strategy warrants attention. In Al-Shloul's (2023) taxonomy, "Addition" refers to the introduction of ICIs in the TT that are absent in the ST. In the case of Qur'anic verses, adding content that is not in the original text is both inappropriate and unnecessary. The 0% occurrence of this strategy reflects the subtitlers' careful approach, aligning with the sensitivity required when translating religious content.

Furthermore, the use of "Compensation" (9.3%) and "Dummy Compensation" (7.4%) indicates an effort to navigate technical constraints while maintaining linguistic integrity. "Compensation" likely serves as an adaptive measure to convey meaning despite the limitations imposed by subtitling conventions. In contrast, "Dummy Compensation," which involves replacing omitted content with unrelated information, functions as a form of omission, removing the intended meaning of the ST. For example, in one instance, the phrase "Speaking Arabic" replaced a Qur'anic verse rather than providing a meaningful translation.

The relatively high frequency of "Omission" (24.1%) is noteworthy, suggesting a strategic decision to prioritize brevity, accommodate viewing constraints, or maintain the documentary's pacing. However, the combined use of "Dummy Compensation" and "Omission" raises questions about whether these omissions are purely technical or influenced by external considerations such as audience expectations or content sensitivity.

The infrequent application of "Transposition" (1.8%), "Condensation" (1.8%), and "Substitution" (1.8%) aligns with the need for meticulous linguistic representation, particularly given the sensitivity of the Qur'anic text. As a sacred scripture, the Qur'an requires careful handling in translation, and subtitlers must navigate both linguistic and cultural complexities with heightened caution. The restrained use of "Transposition" may reflect the challenges of accurately conveying Arabic syntactic structures into English while preserving cultural and religious significance. Similarly, the limited application of "Condensation" suggests an effort to maintain conciseness without compromising meaning. The careful deployment of "Substitution" reinforces the subtitlers' commitment to preserving the authenticity of Qur'anic verses while ensuring intelligibility in the target language.

Overall, the distribution of these strategies highlights the complexities of rendering Qur'anic verses in documentary subtitles. The dominance of "Literal Translation" reflects a strong commitment to linguistic fidelity, while the strategic use of "Compensation" suggests an awareness of pragmatic constraints. The frequent occurrence of "Omission" and "Dummy Compensation" underscores the challenge of balancing accuracy with technical limitations, raising concerns about the extent to which these choices alter meaning. While this quantitative analysis provides insight into the frequency and distribution of different strategies, a deeper qualitative analysis is essential to examine specific instances in detail and uncover the underlying motivations behind these subtitling decisions.

## **5.2 Subtitling Approaches Across Different Documentaries**

This section delves into a meticulous examination of subtitling strategies employed in each film individually, unravelling the intricate decisions made by subtitlers in the translation and presentation of Quranic verses, as shown in Table 4 below.

**Table 4**

*Subtitling Strategies Utilised in Each Film: An Examination*

| <b>Film</b>              | <b>Number of Quranic Verses</b> | <b>Subtitling Strategies Utilised</b>                      |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>What Comes Around</i> | 1                               | - Omission                                                 |
| <i>Dugma: The Button</i> | 14                              | - Subtitling couplet: Literal translation + Loan (3 cases) |

|                                                |    |                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                |    | & Literal translation + Substitution<br>- Literal translation (9 cases)<br>- Dummy compensation                                                   |
| <i>The Muslim Traveller's Guide to Granada</i> | 2  | - Omission<br>- Dummy Compensation                                                                                                                |
| <i>I Heart Quran</i>                           | 3  | - Omission (3 cases)                                                                                                                              |
| <i>City of Ghosts</i>                          | 1  | - Omission                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Killing Gaddafi</i>                         | 5  | - Dummy compensation (2 cases)<br>- Omission (3 cases).                                                                                           |
| <i>Cries from Syria</i>                        | 2  | - Omission<br>- Condensation                                                                                                                      |
| <i>Aleppo: Notes from the Dark</i>             | 16 | - Literal translation (7 cases)<br>- Omission (2 cases)<br>- Subtitling couplet: Literal translation + Loan (2 cases)<br>- Compensation (5 cases) |
| <i>Born in Syria</i>                           | 2  | - Subtitling couplet: Literal translation + Transposition<br>- Omission                                                                           |
| <i>The White Helmets</i>                       | 1  | Literal translation                                                                                                                               |

The analysis of subtitling strategies across the selected films offers a nuanced perspective on the translation and presentation of Qur'anic verses in documentary contexts. *Dugma: The Button* stands out for its use of a subtitling couplet—combining literal translation with the loan strategy—indicating a deliberate effort to balance linguistic authenticity with accessibility. The prevalence of *Literal Translation* in multiple films highlights a commitment to preserving semantic nuances, aligning with a preservationist approach to translation. Meanwhile, *Aleppo: Notes from the Dark* employs a diverse range of strategies, including compensation and subtitling couplets, demonstrating a multifaceted approach to rendering Qur'anic verses.

Conversely, the frequent use of *Omission* (24.1%), particularly in films such as *I Heart Quran* and *City of Ghosts*, suggests a deliberate effort to streamline content, potentially influenced by technical constraints or pacing considerations within the documentary format. As shown in the table above, five out of ten films do not translate or render the Qur'anic verses at all, relying on *Omission* or *Dummy Compensation* strategies, which may indicate that these verses are not deemed essential to the narrative. The remaining five films adopt varied subtitling approaches, with some opting for more direct translation methods. However, *Omission* is also observed in three additional films, bringing the total number of films employing this strategy to eight out of ten.

This pattern of omission may not be solely dictated by technical or narrative constraints; external factors could also influence these decisions. A more extensive qualitative analysis is required to determine whether such omissions stem from considerations beyond linguistic and technical limitations—a discussion explored further in the following section.

Furthermore, it is observed that films incorporating Quranic verses in their discourse exhibit varying densities of such content. Notably, two films stand out in terms of the number of Quranic verses included: *Dugma: The Button*, which contains 14 verses, and *Aleppo: Notes from the Dark*, which involves 16 verses. These films tend to opt for full translations of most of the verses, suggesting that the Quranic content plays a significant role in the narrative and thematic structure of these films. In contrast, other films in the dataset that include fewer than five verses opt to either omit or partially omit them. This disparity could indicate that the films with fewer verses may deem the Quranic content as irrelevant to the plot or less integral to the overarching narrative. Conversely, films like *Dugma: The Button*, and *Aleppo: Notes from the Dark*, with a larger number of verses, demonstrate a stronger alignment between the Quranic discourse and the film's central narrative. The presence of 14 or 16 verses suggests that these films actively integrate the Quranic references into their narrative framework, using them to serve or complement the film's themes. This observation raises the possibility that subtitlers in these films perceive the Quranic content as essential for conveying the film's message, which may explain their decision to fully translate the verses. By contrast, in films with fewer verses, the subtitlers may feel less compelled to fully translate or even include the verses, as they may not be considered central to the narrative. Thus, the density of Quranic verses in the film, coupled with their perceived relevance to the film's discourse, appears to influence subtitling choices, suggesting a nuanced relationship between the content and the narrative structure.

Overall, the varied subtitling strategies reflect the complex interplay between technical constraints, linguistic fidelity, and external influences in the translation of sacred content. This study deepens our understanding of the intricate decision-making processes involved in subtitling Qur'anic verses and contributes to broader discussions on the intersection of language, culture, and representation in documentary filmmaking.

### **5.3 Interpreting the Subtitling Choices: Technical, Linguistic, Cultural, or Ideological Considerations**

Subtitling is not merely a technical process but an interpretative act that shapes audience reception. In the case of Qur'anic verse subtitling in documentary filmmaking, subtitlers sometimes make deliberate choices that reflect broader ideological, thematic, and contextual concerns. The analysis of various films reveals a clear pattern in how Qur'anic verses are rendered, suggesting that subtitling strategies are influenced by the film's intended audience, its thematic focus, and the perceived implications of including certain verses.

One striking example is *Aleppo: Notes from the Dark*, where subtitlers consistently avoid fully translating verses that discuss jihad, holy fighting, or non-Muslims. Instead, they employ omission or dummy compensation, replacing the verses with neutral phrases like "speaking Arabic" or "chanting Arabic." This approach appears to stem from a conscious effort to mitigate potential controversy surrounding jihadist discourse, particularly for a Western audience. Given that the documentary focuses on the suffering of civilians during the Syrian war, the subtitling choices suggest an attempt to prevent any misrepresentation of Islamic teachings that could detract from the film's humanitarian narrative.

Conversely, when verses portray divine mercy or universally accepted Islamic concepts, such as the opening chapter *Al-Fatiha*, they are fully translated. The selective inclusion of these verses indicates a clear thematic strategy: reinforcing Islam as a source of solace and spirituality while avoiding any content that could be construed as militant or exclusionary. This pattern suggests that subtitlers do not merely act as neutral translators but actively shape how religious discourse is perceived in relation to the film's overall message.

The contrast with *Killing Gaddafi* is particularly revealing. Unlike *Aleppo*, this film opts for complete omission of Qur'anic verses, despite the absence of technical constraints. Instead of translating, subtitlers replace the content with vague indications such as "speaking Arabic" or "singing Arabic." This suggests an implicit editorial stance that Qur'anic verses are not plot-relevant or that their inclusion might complicate the intended narrative. The deliberate omission of religious references raises the question of

whether this strategy stems from a belief that Qur'anic discourse is politically or ideologically sensitive in the context of Western media representations of the Middle East.

A strikingly different approach emerges in *Dugma: The Button*, where subtitlers choose to fully translate every Qur'anic verse in the film, using a literal word-for-word translation. This decision is particularly significant given the film's subject matter—intimate portrayals of suicide bombers affiliated with Al-Nusra in Syria. Unlike *Aleppo*, which avoids verses discussing jihad and non-Muslims, *Dugma* fully renders such verses, except for one instance which was a repetition of an aforementioned verse in the ST of the film, including those that describe divine punishment for disbelievers. The choice to retain these verses in their entirety suggests that the subtitlers saw them as crucial to illustrating the ideological worldview of the jihadists depicted in the film.

However, this decision carries serious ethical and interpretative implications. By translating these verses literally, without historical or theological context, subtitlers risk reinforcing the association between Islam and violence. Without explanation, these verses may be misinterpreted as direct endorsements of militancy rather than historically contingent revelations. This raises the possibility of intentional manipulation: was the subtitling strategy designed to reinforce the film's depiction of jihadists as ideologically driven by Qur'anic teachings? If so, this would demonstrate how subtitling is not a neutral act but a means of shaping audience perception in ways that can perpetuate misleading or simplistic representations of Islam.

A particularly revealing aspect of this phenomenon is the full subtitling of *Surah Al-Buruj* in *Dugma*. Unlike other instances where omission or modification was employed, the decision to fully translate an entire Qur'anic chapter suggests a deliberate effort to reinforce the film's ideological framing. This choice serves multiple functions: it highlights how religious texts are invoked in jihadist discourse, provides audiences with an unfiltered view of the subjects' justifications, and avoids editorial interference in interpreting the verses. However, this approach carries significant risks, as it may present an incomplete or skewed representation of Islamic teachings, particularly for viewers who lack historical and theological context.

*Surah Al-Buruj* (Chapter 85 of the Qur'an) is a Meccan surah that narrates the story of the people of the ditch (*Ashab al-Ukhdud*)—a group of believers persecuted and burned alive for their faith. The surah strongly emphasises themes of divine justice, perseverance in the face of oppression, and the ultimate triumph of faith over tyranny. It reassures believers that even in extreme adversity, divine retribution awaits oppressors, and God's promise of reward for the steadfast remains unwavering. In the context of *Dugma*, the inclusion of *Surah Al-Buruj* aligns with the ideological narrative of the film, as it draws a parallel between historical religious persecution and the self-perceived struggle of jihadists. By fully subtitling this chapter, the documentary allows its subjects to frame their actions within a divine struggle, portraying themselves as victims of oppression or as those destined for ultimate victory. However, this selective use of the surah risks stripping it from its broader theological and historical context, potentially reinforcing extremist interpretations while disregarding mainstream scholarly explanations of its meaning.

Moreover, subtitling *Surah Al-Buruj* in full while omitting or modifying other Qur'anic verses in the same film raises questions about whether the subtitlers were consciously shaping the film's ideological message. While omission was used elsewhere to navigate cultural sensitivities, the full translation of this Surah might indicate an intentional amplification of the film's thematic alignment with its subjects' worldview. This underscores how subtitling choices are not merely dictated by technical constraints but can also serve broader ideological or narrative purposes, shaping audience perceptions in subtle yet profound ways.

By contrast, *Aleppo* also fully translates an entire chapter, but the chosen chapter—*Surah Al-Fatiha*—serves an entirely different function. Universally recognised in Islam as a foundational chapter of prayer, *Al-Fatiha* is often recited in moments of distress, supplication, or mourning. Its inclusion in *Aleppo* aligns with the film's humanitarian themes, portraying faith as a source of comfort rather than a source of ideological motivation. The stark contrast between the ideological implications of the Qur'anic chapter in *Dugma* and the spiritual connotations of *Al-Fatiha* in *Aleppo* underscores how subtitling decisions shape the religious framing of each film.

Moreover, the overall density of Qur'anic verses in each documentary further contextualises these subtitling choices. *Dugma* and *Aleppo* contain the highest number of Qur'anic verses among the analysed films, suggesting that Qur'anic discourse plays a central role in shaping their narratives. In contrast, films with fewer verses—such as *Killing Gaddafi*—tend to omit them entirely, reinforcing the idea that subtitlers see Qur'anic verses as dispensable unless they directly serve the film's thematic concerns. This discrepancy indicates that, in films where religious discourse is not central to the narrative, subtitlers may prefer to avoid potential controversy by omitting Qur'anic references altogether.

Ultimately, the subtitling of Qur'anic verses in these films is far from a neutral or purely technical process. Instead, it is a deliberate act shaped by ideological, thematic, and audience-related considerations. While some films omit Qur'anic verses to avoid

controversy or maintain narrative coherence, others fully translate them to reinforce ideological framings. The choice to render certain verses while omitting others highlights the power of subtitling as a tool for shaping how religious discourse is perceived, particularly in films dealing with sensitive topics such as war, jihad, and religious extremism.

These findings underscore the importance of critically examining subtitling strategies in documentary filmmaking. When religious texts are selectively translated, omitted, or manipulated, audiences receive an interpretation that may not fully reflect the complexities of the original discourse. This has serious implications for how Islam is represented in global media, particularly in the context of war and terrorism narratives. As such, further research is needed to explore the extent to which subtitling strategies contribute to ideological framing in media representations of the Muslim world.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study investigated the subtitling strategies used to render Qur'anic verses into English in Arabic-language documentary films, drawing on Al-Shloul's (2023) taxonomy for subtitling strategies of ICIs. Through a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis, it addressed three key questions: the types and frequency of subtitling strategies employed; the variation of these strategies across different documentaries; and the extent to which technical, contextual, and ideological factors can influence subtitling choices.

The findings revealed that subtitlers employed a range of strategies—including literal translation, loan, transposition, compensation, dummy compensation, and omission—with literal translation emerging as the most frequently used (44.5%). This trend suggests an attempt to preserve semantic and theological fidelity within the limitations of the subtitle format. Omission, either alone or paired with dummy compensation, accounted for approximately one-third of all cases (33.4%), raising questions not only about technical constraints but also about cultural sensitivity and editorial intent.

A comparative analysis of subtitling practices across documentaries such as *Dugma: The Button* and *Aleppo: Notes from the Dark* showed that subtitling choices were often shaped by contextual and thematic considerations. For instance, while *Dugma* included the full subtitling of Surah Al-Buruj to reinforce its ideological framing, *Aleppo* omitted verses related to interfaith relations and jihad, despite no clear technical barriers. These findings indicate that subtitlers sometimes navigate controversial or politically sensitive content selectively, possibly to align with the expectations of diverse audiences or avoid misinterpretation.

Importantly, the study identified several qualitative insights that illuminate the challenges of rendering Qur'anic material in subtitled form. Quranic verses often carry deep theological and historical significance, which cannot be adequately conveyed within the limited character space and time constraints of subtitles. The absence of contextualising elements, such as footnotes or explanatory commentary, amplifies the risk of semantic distortion or audience misinterpretation—particularly when verses are presented without the broader theological framework in which they were revealed.

Additionally, the research highlighted a lack of standardised subtitling guidelines for religious content across major streaming platforms. This gap has contributed to inconsistent practices in translating Qur'anic references, often leaving subtitlers without clear directives for handling ideologically or culturally loaded material. These challenges echo broader concerns in the field regarding the manipulation of meaning, ideological filtering, and the role of translators as mediators, as discussed by Baker (2006, 2010), Díaz Cintas (2012), and others.

Despite the valuable insights gained, the study was constrained by the absence of direct access to subtitlers, limiting the ability to confirm the intentions behind specific choices. Furthermore, in many cases, subtitlers were not credited, making it difficult to determine authorship or assess whether the subtitles were produced by the filmmakers or the platforms. Future research should engage with subtitlers, translators, and streaming services to deepen our understanding of decision-making processes. Additionally, audience reception studies—particularly those involving Muslim and non-Muslim viewers—could provide further clarity on how subtitled Qur'anic content is interpreted across cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the subtitling of Qur'anic verses in documentary films is shaped by a complex interplay of linguistic fidelity, technical constraints, cultural sensitivities, and thematic intent. While literal translation dominates, patterns of omission and adaptation reveal underlying editorial and ideological currents. In the absence of formalised subtitling standards for religious texts, the task of rendering the Qur'an for a global audiovisual audience demands not only linguistic precision but also an ethical responsibility. Developing clearer guidelines for religious subtitling—anchored in both translation theory and intercultural communication—would serve to enhance accuracy, transparency, and respect for sacred discourse in media translation.

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