

Learning Arabic: Part 1

By Abu Bakr Salmaan ibn Nasir

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The religion has been distorted and changed beyond recognition by the People of Desires and Innovations until the common Muslim has come to regard innovations as sunnahs and the Sunnah as something strange. Generations of Muslims have lived in the darkness of ignorance of the Qur'aan and of the religion of Allaah. This cancer has eaten away at the flesh of the Muslim Ummah leaving it extremely weak and humiliated. And how could it be otherwise when the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) told us:

Allaah raises up peoples by this Book, and puts down by it others. (Reported by Muslim (no. 817), ibn Maajah (no. 218), Ahmad (1/35), and ad-Daarimi (no. 3365).

So when the Ummah neglected Allaah's book, Allaah lowered and humiliated us as He (سبحانه وتعالى) informed us:

That is because Allaah will never change the blessing which He has bestowed on a people until they change what is in their ownelves. [Al-Anfaal (8):53]

Verily never will Allaah change the condition of a people until they change what is in their ownelves. But when Allaah wills a people's punishment, there can be no turning it back, nor will they find, besides Him, any protector. [Ar-Ra'd (13):11]

So it is imperative that we return to this Qur'aan and be of those who memorize it and study it. And, sadly, it is a common practice amongst not only the non-Arabs but the Arabs as well to merely recite it without contemplation of its verses! But the Qur'aan is:

A Book which We have revealed to you, full of blessings, that they may ponder its verses, and that men of understanding may receive admonition. [Saad (38):29]

Do they not then ponder upon the Qur'aan, or are there locks on their hearts? [Muhammad (47):24]

Do they not ponder upon the Qur'aan? Had it been from other than Allaah, they would surely have found in it much contradiction. [An-Nisaa' (4): 82]

It is a book which:No falsehood can approach it from before or behind it; it is revelation from One Full of Wisdom, Worthy of all Praise. [Fussilat (41):42]

In it is guidance for all the affairs of mankind as Allaah (وتعالى سبحانه) tells us:

And We have not revealed the Book to you except that you may clarify to them those things in which they differ, and as a guidance and a mercy for a people

who believe. [An-Nahl (16):64]

And have you not heard, my dear Muslim brother, may Allaah guide you to that which pleases Him, the words of your Lord admonishing you not to be like the People of the Book before you who neglected the scripture:

Has is not come time for the Believers that their hearts should in all humility engage in the remembrance of Allaah and of the Truth which has been revealed (to them), and that they should not become like those to whom was given the Book aforetime, but long ages passed over them and their hearts grew hard? For many among them are rebellious transgressors. Know that Allaah gives life to the earth after its death. Already have We shown the Signs plainly to you, that you may learn wisdom. [Al-Hadeed (57):16-17]

So just as Allaah brings life to the earth after its death, likewise, Allaah is the one who gives life to the hearts and heals them after their death. And that healing is in this Glorious Qur'aan:

Oh mankind, there has come to you an admonition from your Lord and a healing for what is in the chests, and a guidance and mercy for the believers. [Yoonus (10):57]

And take stern warning from the saying of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه و سلم):

“Most of the hypocrites of my Ummah are its reciters.”
[Saheeh al-Jaami' no. 1203]

They recite the Qur'aan, not seeking to understand it so that they may gain Allaah's pleasure but for some worldly gain:

“Whoever recites the Qur'aan, then let him ask Allaah by it, for verily there shall come a people who shall recite the Qur'aan, and ask the people by it.”
[Saheeh al-Jaami' no.6467]

So it is critical then that we recite this Qur'aan seeking by it Allaah's pleasure. And it is imperative that we understand and act by this Qur'aan as the Prophet (صلى الله عليه و سلم) said,

“On the Day of Judgment, the Qur'aan and its people who used to act by it in the world shall be brought, being lead by Soorah al-Baqarah and Aal 'Imraan, which shall be arguing on behalf of their companions.” [Reported by Muslim]

Their companions- that is, those who used to recite them and study their meanings and act upon them. However, for the one who has been deprived of the ability to understand the Qur'aan, in all its subtleties and the depths of its knowledge, I fear that he shall be deprived of this great honor and blessing. And the key that will open the door to understanding the Qur'aan is the Arabic language for Allaah (سبحانه وتعالى) has revealed it as an Arabic Qur'aan:

We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'aan, in order that ye may learn wisdom.
[Yoosuf (12):2]

Thus have We sent it down as an Arabic Qur'aan and explained therein in detail some of the warnings, in order that they may fear Allaah, or that it may cause them to have a lesson from it. [Taa Haa (20):113]

An Arabic Qur'aan, without any crookedness, so that they may have Taqwa.
[Az-Zumar (39):28]

A Book, whereof the verses are explained in detail as an Arabic Qur'aan, for people who know. [Fussilat (41):3]

So it is imperative, my dear brother or sister, that you strive in learning this blessed language.

And in shaa Allaah, the next installment of this article shall contain some advices on how one should go about learning the Arabic language.

Learning Arabic: Part 2

By Abu Bakr Salmaan ibn Nasir

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All Praise is due to Allah, we praise Him, and we seek His Help. Whomsoever Allah guides, there is none to misguide him, and whomsoever Allah misguides, then none can guide him aright. I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship, except for Allah, Alone and without partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His Slave and His Messenger.

The best of speech is the Book of Allah. And the best of guidance is the guidance of Muhammad. And the worst of affairs (in the religion) are the newly created matters. And every newly created matter is a bid'ah (innovation). And every bid'ah is a form of misguidance. [1]

Much has transpired since the first part of this article was posted up on our website. For one, we have opened up a da'wah center-cum-bookstore. Amongst our objectives, as many of you already know, is to educate the Muslims about their blessed religion and to convey knowledge of it to them in every manner possible. Knowledge of Arabic opens the doors to understanding the religion of Islam and its books. Without it, one can never hope for more than a basic level of knowledge and understanding.

Unfortunately, however, most go about learning Arabic in the wrong way altogether, or they do not give it the importance it is due. For this reason, I have laid out the following guide for learning Arabic:

Seek Allah's Help

First, it is imperative to seek Allah's help in this matter by making du'a to Him.

Allah's Messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said: **“Indeed, whoever does not ask Allah (تعالى), He becomes angry with him.”** [2]

And ibn ‘Abbas reports that the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) instructed him, saying: **“When you ask, then ask Allah, and when you seek help, then seek help in Allah. And know that if the ummah were to gather to benefit you with something, they would not benefit you except with something Allah has already written for you.”** [3]

And this is the reason why the servant of Allah recites in every rak'ah of every prayer, the verse from Surah al-Fatihah: **“You Alone we worship, and from You alone we seek help.”**

Knowing What You're Up Against

Learning any language encompasses two main facets:

- * **Understanding the grammar.**
- * **Gaining Vocabulary.**

The grammar is the scheme according to which the language works. Any good textbook will perform two tasks: teaching you the grammar and a decent amount of vocabulary. The most important criterion for judging any textbook is its ability to help you understand the grammar of the language. Once you know how the language works and become comfortable with the constructions it uses, you will be able to unlock the door to understanding the language.

With regards to vocabulary, it is important to note that no amount of textbooks can ever give you a sufficient amount of vocabulary to be proficient in the Arabic language. No matter what textbook you use, odds are that you will probably not learn more than a 1,000 or 2,000 words. When you consider that the native speaker who reads Arabic books proficiently has spent a lifetime amassing a running vocabulary of anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 words if not more, you must understand that merely studying a textbook on Arabic for a few hours every week or every month is not a substitute for a lifetime of immersion.

Hence, learning the basic grammar that you will need to be a proficient reader of Arabic books is easy, and many I know have learned it in as little as three, four months. Once you have finished the basic textbook that you have studied, you will have to continue with working on amassing vocabulary. There is no specific book one can read for this. The only way to attain this objective is to simply start reading simple books with a dictionary always in hand and looking up the words you do not know, finally working up to more difficult books. At times, this will be difficult, but as long as you are diligent, you will find the effort pays off.

It is important to remember that the most important objective is to learn to understand the Qur'an. So, in order to understand the Qur'an, one needs knowledge of the vocabulary of the Qur'an along with a basic knowledge of grammar. It is very highly recommended therefore that at whatever stage you are at, you make it a point to study the Qur'an. Take Surah al-Baqarah or Aal 'Imran, whichever you prefer, and study it closely. Listen to it daily, in the car, at home. Read from it daily, read its translation, if possible, its tafsir as well. Do not let yourself be distracted and move on to other things, not even other parts of the Qur'an. Listen to the one surah you have chosen constantly and continuously. And read that one surah constantly. Within months, simply by doing this, you will find that you have picked up most of its vocabulary. In fact, you will be surprised to learn that if you study al-Baqarah or Aal 'Imran in this manner, you will have gained enough vocabulary to understand large portions of the Qur'an. Again, I must emphasize, use the long surahs because they rely more on commonly repeated words than the shorter surahs do, so studying them will be easier and of greater benefit than say studying Juz' 'Amma (the 30 th Juz').

Keep in mind, each area has its own select vocabulary, if you want to understand the Qur'an, there is a certain set of vocabulary that will come into play in doing that. If you want to understand the Hadith of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) there is a certain vocabulary for doing that. If you want to understand the writings of the scholars, there are certain sets of vocabulary for doing that.

After the Qur'an, the next most important thing to understand is the Sunnah of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم). Probably the best book to read for that is Riyadh us-Salihin of Imam an-Nawawi. The Arabic/English Dar-us-Salam edition is available on our website. Read the Arabic and the translation. For you Urdu readers, fret not, we have it in Arabic/Urdu as well. This will help to gain some of the additional vocabulary you need.

Finally, moving on to books of the scholars. It is best to start with easy books, so here is a list of books that I suggest for the beginner to read:

* **Kashf ush Shubuhah** , by Muhammad ibn 'Abdul Wahhab. This is a very basic, short book related to Shirk.

* **Al-Usool ath-Thalathah** , also by ibn 'Abdul Wahhab. A basic short book related to the fundamentals of the religion.

* Next, one should move on to **Sharh Thalathat il Usool** , the explanation by Shaykh ibn 'Uthaymeen of the previous book.

* The next book on the list to read is **Kitab ut-Tawhid** by Imam ibn 'Abdul Wahhab, along with al-Qawl ul-Mufid , Shaykh ibn 'Uthaymeen's very beneficial explanation of it. This is a longer book and starts to get into more complicated matters, but it is in the usual simple style of ibn 'Uthaymeen which makes his books so beneficial and so easy to understand. And this wonderful book is without equal concerning the topic of Tawhid and is a must for every one who cares about his Deen.

Remember to always keep your dictionary handy while reading these books to look up words you do not know. You may not like it, but in the end, that is the only way to build your vocabulary and understanding. These books are particularly good to start off with due to the simple language and style employed by both Imam Muhammad ibn 'Abdul Wahhab and Shaykh ibn 'Uthaymeen in their writings.

Knowing the Books You Will Be Using

First, you must choose a textbook to use. There are many out there, but here, only three shall be discussed:

* **The Arabic Course for English Speaking Students** , (commonly referred to as “The Madinah Books.” We can obtain it for you if you want, call us.) by Dr. V. Abdur-Rahim. This three book set is essentially the same as the books used in the University of Madinah Arabic Program . The only difference is that an English key has been added for the lessons in the first two books. Most of you have probably heard of it. This set has the advantage that it places heavy emphasis on Qur'anic and Hadith vocabulary. However, this is not in and of itself a good reason to buy this book set. If you do not have someone who will be teaching you, you are probably going to have a hard time learning from these books even with the keys to the lessons in the back. They were simply not designed for self teaching. In fact, the lessons themselves are completely in Arabic. The keys in the back are helpful no doubt, but for someone who wants to learn on his own, they are not sufficient. If you have someone who will be teaching you on the other hand, these books work excellently. Again, this is not to say that you cannot learn Arabic on your own from these books. It is possible. I know a number of brothers who have done so, but it is much better to use a book that was originally designed for English readers. If you are going to use this book, which many of you no doubt will since its probably already collecting dust on your shelf, then I highly recommend you use a grammar aid as a reference because I find that many people who go through the first two books come out with a need for more grammar.

* **Modern Standard Arabic**, by Peter Abboud. This book is divided into a two-volume set. It has been used at many universities around America . It is very thorough in its coverage of grammar and in providing drill material to help drive the concepts home. It also has a good section at the beginning on learning handwriting and pronunciation. If you get just the first volume and go through that, it will give you most of what you need, but if you buy the second one, that would be better. This is a very good book were it not for the obscure linguistic terminology that the average reader will find difficult to decode on his own. If used along with a grammar aid such as Wightwick's, which shall be discussed shortly, you might find that problem to be a surmountable one. This book is by no means flashy. It is not full of pictures and flashy print like the other books that are out there, but if you are able to go through it fully, you will come out with a good grasp of Arabic grammar, in shaa Allah. And it is certainly cheaper than much of what is out there. I myself learned Arabic from the first volume of this book. This book has a tape set that is supposed to go with it, but you are supposed to write to the publisher to request them, I am not sure if they even still make them available. Consequently, I never bothered to get them.

* **Ahlan wa Sahlan**, by Mahdi Alish. This is another book that is used as a university textbook in America . Most will find it easier as it is filled with illustrations and has a more “user-friendly” approach whereas people complain about the Abboud book because of its “dry,” academic style and difficulty. This book utilizes simpler, easier to understand terminology for grammar as well as having the added benefit of using the Arabic grammar terms. It has an extensive tape/CD set to go with the lessons as well. If you are going to teach yourself, GET THE TAPES, GET THE TAPES, GET THE TAPES. If you have not gotten the idea yet, I mean GET THE TAPES. The truth is, some people can do without the tapes or CD's, but for many, having audio reinforcement of whatever they are learning is

essential. This book has the drawback of being expensive, especially when throwing in the cost of the CD set, however it does have a number of advantages over the Abboud book which make it more feasible for use as a teach-yourself textbook.

Almost any textbook can be used provided it gives you the proper background in getting the grammar down and some vocabulary, the important thing is that you be able to go through it and understand it properly. As each person is different, no one can decide definitively which will fit best for you.

The next most important tool for learning Arabic is the dictionary you use. There are two that are recommended:

* **Arabic-English Dictionary:** The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. This dictionary is the best there is. Period. It is extremely thorough in the vocabulary it covers. Its greatest advantage is also its greatest drawback. The words are organized alphabetically according to their root letters. Knowing the roots helps one to gain a better understanding of the words derived. It is a problem, however, for beginners as they will have trouble finding the word they are looking for at times until they figure out how to find the roots. And that is why they need:

* **Al - Mawrid**, by Ruhi al-Ba'albaki. This dictionary is organized in a simpler manner according to basic alphabetical order. This makes word easy to find. The drawback however is that the definitions are not very thorough. If you want to truly learn the Arabic language, rely on the Hans Wehr dictionary. Al-Mawrid should be only as the last resort. I call this "the cheater's dictionary." Sure, you will find the words, but if you cannot access the Hans Wehr, you cannot really access the Arabic Language. You have been warned.

Another aid you will want is **Arabic Verbs and Essentials of Grammar: A Practical Guide to the Mastery of Arabic** by Jane Wightwick and Mahmoud Gaafar. Going through this book will really help you with getting the fundamentals of grammar down solidly. It is probably a good idea to go through this thoroughly once as a review. Afterwards, you will probably want to refer back to it to check certain things until they get ingrained in your memory. This book also has a helpful explanation about the organization of dictionaries such as Hans Wehr's Dictionary which will help in using it more effectively.

There is one final note I would like to make with regards to translations of the Qur'an. If you are going to be studying the Qur'an, then the best translation to use is probably the **Saheeh International translation**. Its language is simple and flows well while being accurate in translation.

Another book you might want to use is **Easy Dictionary of the Qur'an** of Abdul Kareem Parekh. This book follows the order of the Qur'an and lists each word the first time it appears in the Qur'an, giving a simple definition of the word. By the time you are done with Surat al-Baqarah, you will have learned $\frac{1}{4}$ of the Qur'an's vocabulary. That's actually more than it sounds when you consider that most of those words are amongst the most frequently occurring words in the Qur'an. This book is a relatively cheap and handy tool for learning the meanings of the Qur'an.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Unfortunately, many brothers find that they hit a brick wall in terms of learning Arabic in

spite of having made some effort to learn. Often times, this is more a matter of how they tried to learn than of how hard they tried to learn. Many brothers will try and study some of the standard Arabic texts for learning grammar such as al-Ajrumiyyah . While al-Ajrumiyyah is a beneficial book without a doubt, studying and mastering al-Ajrumiyyah and other texts like it is not enough to be able to understand the Arabic language. Remember, all you really need to get started is an understanding of the basic workings of Arabic grammar. Much more important is gaining the vocabulary.

We must keep in mind that those who usually study these grammar texts are Arabs. They have spoken Arabic their whole lives. They are already capable of reading and understanding books in Arabic.

Once, I ran into a brother who was asking me for advice on learning Arabic. He had some understanding, but was unable to read books. When I asked him where exactly he was in terms of his Arabic, he began to explain to me how he had studied al-Ajrumiyyah twice with his “shaykh.” And now he was going to be studying some other grammar text with him, yet he could not even read books. Initially, when I tried to advise him that he should work on his vocabulary and not really worry anymore about grammar, he remonstrated, “No, you see, I'm studying it with my shaykh.” I kept telling him, “Yes, but I have never studied it at all and I read Qur'an, the books of Hadith, the books of the scholars such as ibn Taymiyyah and ibn ul-Qayyim,” but he would only respond with, “No, you see, I am studying it with a shaykh.” Finally, after a lengthy exchange filled with the refrain “but I am studying it with a shaykh,” he finally began to realize that his real deficiency was in vocabulary.

This is a dilemma that many brothers fall into. They will study different grammar texts in their quest to improve their Arabic. They will sometimes even know far more grammar than I could ever know or care to know even, yet they can hardly pick up a book and read. Remember, beyond a rudimentary understanding of the grammar, what you really need is to develop vocabulary. Read basic books with the assistance of the Hans Wehr dictionary and in time you will find that you have made tremendous progress, if Allah wills. This may seem a tedious way to learn the language; that is because it is. However, it is also the only way.

Footnotes

1. See Sahih Muslim (no. 867, 868).
2. Reported by at-Tirmidhi (no. 3373), ibn Majah (no. 3827), Ahmad (no. 9701, 9719, 10178), and this is the wording of at-Tirmidhi. Declared hasan by Shaykh al-Albani in as-Silsilah as-Saheehah (no. 2654).
3. Reported by at-Tirmidhi (no. 2516) and he said, “This is a Hasan Sahih Hadith,” and by Ahmad (no. 2669, 2763, 2803). Shaykh al-Albani graded it Sahih in Dhilal ul-Jannah (no. 316-318).

Source: dkh-islam.com