

Negotiating Meaning and Sensitivity: Translating Awliya, Jihad, and Kafir in the Indonesian Qur'an Translation by the Ministry of Religious Affairs

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Received August 17, 2025; Revised December 29, 2025; Accepted February 04, 2026

Abstract

Objective: This article aims to analyze the dynamics of the translation of the terms awliya, jihad, and kafir in the 2002 and 2019 editions of the Ministry of Religion's Al-Quran Translation. This study highlights the changing meaning and strategy of translation in response to Indonesia's social and political context. **Theoretical framework:** This study uses Quranic semantics, contextual interpretation, and Qur'anic translation theory as an analytical framework. Quranic semantics maps the field of meaning of terms, contextual interpretation emphasizes historical and contemporary contexts, while translation theory assesses the strategy of translation of meaning. All three are used integratively to read the relationship between text and context. **Literature review:** Previous studies of the translation of the Qur'an in Indonesia have generally dealt with linguistic or historical aspects separately. Comparative studies across editions of official translations with a focus on sensitive terms are still limited. This article fills this gap by systematically linking linguistic analysis, interpretation, and social dynamics. **Methods:** This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach based on literature studies. The data was analyzed through searching for verses containing the terms awliya, jihad, and kafir in the 2002 and 2019 editions of the translation. The analysis was carried out using semantic approaches, contextual interpretation, and translation theory. **Results:** There is a shift in translation from a literal approach to a contextual and moderate approach. The term awliya is interpreted more relationally, jihad is contextually explained to prevent violence, and kafir is recontextualized to "disobedient" or "kufr". These changes reflect the response to Indonesia's social sensitivities. **Implications:** Theoretically, these findings confirm the translation of the Qur'an as a dynamic and contextual practice of interpretation. In practical terms, this study supports the development of more accurate and moderate translations. Another implication is the strengthening of religious moderation and harmonization between religious communities. **Novelty:** The novelty of this article lies in a comparative analysis across the official translation editions of the Ministry of Religion. The focus on three sensitive Quranic terms, combined with Indonesia's socio-political context.

Keywords: translation of the quran, jihad, kafir, ministry of religion, religious moderation.

INTRODUCTION

The Quran is the main source of Islamic teachings that serves as a guideline for Muslims in various parts of the world. Because it is revealed in Arabic, the understanding of the message of the Qur'an for non-Arabs is highly dependent on the translation process [1]. The translation of the Quran is not only a process of translation, but also a translation that involves the interpretation of a particular linguistic structure, socio-cultural context, and theological framework. Therefore, the translation of the Quran has a high complexity and has the potential to give birth to differences in understanding in the community [2].

In the Islamic scientific tradition, the translation of the Quran often raises debates, especially when dealing with terms that have sensitive theological and social content [3]. The terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* are examples of Quranic terms that often give rise to differences in interpretation because they have layered and contextual meanings. Translations that do not pay attention to the diversity of meaning and historical context of the term have the potential to cause a simplification of meaning that has an impact on the religious attitudes and social relations of Muslims with other groups [4].

The Indonesian context presents its own challenges in translating the Quran. As a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, living in a pluralistic society and nation-state system, the sensitive use of Quranic terms has significant social and political implications [5]. The term *kafir*, for example, often becomes a debate in interreligious relations when understood literally and released from the context of the descent of the verse. Similarly, the term *jihad*, which in Islamic texts has a wide scope of meaning, is often reduced to the meaning of violence. Meanwhile, the term *awliya* also raises polemics when it is associated with issues of leadership, political loyalty, and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims [6].

Along with the development of the times and the socio-religious dynamics, the need for a translation of the Qur'an that is not only linguistically accurate but also sensitive to the social context is getting stronger [7]. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, as a state institution that has authority in the preparation of official translations of the Quran, has made a number of revisions to adapt the translation to the development of language and public understanding [8]. The revision of the 2019 edition of the Qur'an Translation as a refinement of the 2002 edition reflects institutional efforts to respond to the challenges of radicalism, intolerance, and the need to strengthen religious moderation in Indonesia. However, the change also raises academic questions about the methodological approach used and its implications for people's religious understanding [9].

Studies on the translation of the Qur'an in Indonesia have generally focused on historical and linguistic aspects. Research that specifically compared the official translations of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the 2002 and 2019 editions, with a focus on the most sensitive Quranic terms, is still relatively limited. In addition, studies that relate translation changes to Indonesia's socio-political dynamics and religious moderation discourse have also not been conducted in depth and systematically [10].

Based on this background, this study aims to examine the issue of sensitive and actual issues in the translation of the Al Quran in Indonesia through the analysis of the terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* in the 2002 and 2019 editions of the Ministry of Religion's Al Quran Translation. This research is expected to make an academic contribution to the study of translation and interpretation of the Quran and become a reference for efforts to strengthen the understanding of Islam that is moderate, contextual, and in harmony with the social reality of Indonesian society [11].

Novelty and Implications. This study offers a novel contribution by critically examining the translation of the Qur'anic terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* in the official Indonesian Qur'an

translation issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs through the lens of semantic negotiation and socio-religious sensitivity. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on lexical equivalence or theological accuracy, this research foregrounds translation as a culturally embedded and ideologically mediated practice. It highlights how translation choices are shaped not only by linguistic considerations but also by historical context, interreligious relations, and the state's role in managing religious harmony within a plural society. By juxtaposing classical exegetical meanings with contemporary Indonesian renderings, the study uncovers subtle shifts in meaning that reflect deliberate strategies of moderation, inclusivity, and political prudence [12].

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it enriches Qur'anic translation studies by proposing "negotiated sensitivity" as an analytical framework that bridges translation theory, Islamic studies, and sociolinguistics. This framework helps explain why certain semantic reductions, expansions, or neutralizations occur in official religious translations. Practically, the findings are relevant for translators, religious scholars, and policymakers involved in producing authoritative Islamic texts in multicultural contexts. The study underscores the need for transparency in translation methodology and encourages critical literacy among readers of translated sacred texts. Furthermore, it offers valuable insights for Islamic education by demonstrating how translation can influence religious understanding, interfaith perception, and civic coexistence. In broader terms, this research contributes to ongoing debates on how Islamic discourse can be articulated responsibly in modern nation-states without sacrificing doctrinal integrity or social cohesion [13].

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research rests on three main theoretical foundations, namely the semantic theory of the Quran, the theory of contextual interpretation, and the theory of translation of the Quran. These three approaches are used integratively to analyze the translation of the terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* in the 2002 and 2019 editions of the Al Quran Translation of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia.

Qur'anic Semantic Theory

Qur'anic semantic theory is a linguistic approach that understands the meaning of Qur'anic terms based on the internal relationships between words in the Qur'anic value system [14]. This approach emphasizes that the meaning of words is not static or lexical alone, but is determined by the field of meaning formed through paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships in the text. Toshihiko Izutsu, as the pioneer of this approach, points out that the key terms of the Qur'an form a network of ideological meanings that represent the Qur'anic worldview [15].

In this study, Qur'anic semantics is used to explore the spectrum of meanings of *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* in various verse contexts. This analysis allows mapping the conceptual meaning of the term before it is translated into Indonesian, so that it becomes the basis for evaluating the accuracy and completeness of the meaning in the translation of the Ministry of Religion [16].

Contextual Interpretation Theory

Contextual interpretation emphasizes the importance of understanding the verses of the Qur'an by considering the historical context of the revelation and its relevance to today's social reality [17]. This approach was developed by Fazlur Rahman through the concept of dual movement and further systematized by Abdullah Saeed through interpretive stages that connect the context of the text and the context of the reader. Contextual interpretation aims to extract the universal value of the Qur'an without ignoring the socio-historical context of the verses [18].

In this study, contextual interpretation serves to assess whether the Ministry of Religion's translation of the terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* has taken into account the context of the descent of the verse and the social impact of its meaning in Indonesia. This approach is important to avoid reducing meaning and generalizations that have the potential to lead to religious and social misunderstandings [19].

Theory of Translation of the Quran

Qur'anic translation theory views translation as an explanation of meaning, not a substitute for the Arabic text of the Quran [20]. Therefore, the translation of the Qur'an is essentially *tafsiriyah*. Experts distinguish between literal and interpretive translations, with the tendency that interpretive translations are more suitable for conveying the message of the verse completely and communicatively [21].

In this study, translation theory was used to evaluate the strategy and choice of diction of the Ministry of Religion in translating sensitive terms. The principle of equivalence of meaning, clarity of language, and theological prudence are the benchmarks to assess whether the translations of *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* have been faithful to the meaning of the verse and can be understood correctly by Indonesian readers [22].

Table 1. Summary of the Theoretical Foundations

Theory	Main Characters	Key Focus	Contribution to Research
Qur'anic Semantics	Toshihiko Izutsu	The relationship of the internal meaning of the Quran	Mapping the spectrum of meanings of <i>awliya</i> , <i>jihad</i> , and <i>kafir</i> in source texts
Contextual Interpretation	Fazlur Rahman, Abdullah Saeed	Historical context and contemporary relevance	Assess the suitability of the translation with the context of the verse and the social reality.
Theory of Translation of the Quran	Abdul Raof, Al Zarqani, Newmark	Translation of meaning and correspondence	Evaluating the accuracy of the Ministry of Religion's diction and translation strategy

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with an analytical descriptive design to examine the translation of the terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* in the 2002 edition of the Translation of the Quran of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia and the 2019 revised edition [23]. This approach was chosen because the object of research is a religious text that contains conceptual, theological, and social meanings that can only be understood through interpretive analysis. This research is a literature research with the main data source in the form of the text of the Quran and its translation, as well as supporting data from classical and contemporary *tafsir* books, especially *Tafsir Al Azhar* by Hamka and *Tafsir Al Mishbah* by M Quraish Shihab, as well as academic literature related to Qur'anic semantics, contextual interpretation, and translation theory [24].

The analysis was carried out by integrating three main approaches, namely Qur'anic semantics, contextual interpretation, and Quran translation theory [25]. Qur'anic semantics is used to map the field of meaning of the terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* in the Qur'anic text through tracing the root words, relationships between concepts, and variations in the use of terms in verses. Contextual interpretation is used to understand the verse based on the historical context of the revelation and its social relevance in the context of modern Indonesia. Translation theory is used to evaluate the translation

strategy applied in the translation of the Ministry of Religion, especially related to the choice of diction, expansion or narrowing of meaning, and addition of contextual information [26].

The object of this research is the Translation of the Al Quran of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, with an analysis unit in the form of verses that contain the terms awliya, jihad, and the word kafir in various morphological forms. Verses are chosen based on the frequency of occurrence and the level of sensitivity of their meaning in religious and social discourse in Indonesia. The data collection technique was carried out through documentation studies by identifying, grouping, and comparing the redaction of translations between editions. Data analysis is carried out in stages through data identification, thematic categorization, interpretation based on theoretical frameworks, and conclusion. The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of sources and approaches, by comparing the official translations of the Ministry of Religion, interpretations of mufasir, and relevant academic studies [27].

Table 2. Operational Analysis Scheme

Terms	Focus of Analysis	Theoretical Approach	Analysis Indicators	Data Analyzed	Analysis Output
Awliya	Relational meaning and socio-political implications	Quranic semantics and contextual interpretation	The root word, the relationship with the concepts of loyalty, leadership, and protection; the context of Asbab Al Nuzul; Translation Diction Options	Verses containing the term awliya and its translations, 2002 and 2019 editions	Mapping the meaning of awliya and evaluating the accuracy of translations
Jihad	Variations in meaning and potential reduction in meaning	Quranic semantics and translation theory	The field of jihad, the relationship with qital and sabr; the context of Makkiyah and Madaniyah; Translation Strategy	Jihad verses and translation editorial comparison	Analysis of the tendency of the meaning of jihad in translation
Kafir	Sensitivity of terms and social implications	Contextual interpretation and translation theory	The context of the use of the word kafir; relationship with faith and shirk; Matching options, and additional details	Verses that contain the word kafir in various forms	Evaluation of the semantic and social impact of pagan translation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Translation of the Term Awliya

The results of the analysis show that the term awliya in the Ministry of Religion's Translation of the Quran has undergone a shift in emphasis from the 2002 edition to the 2019 refined edition [28]. In verses like QS. Al Maidah verse 51, awliya in the 2019 edition, is translated as "loyal friend", accompanied by additional information that

emphasizes the context of loyalty relationships, not formal leadership. This choice of diction reflects the Ministry of Religion's efforts to avoid rigid structural meanings and open up a more contextual reading space [29].

Semantically speaking, *awliya* has a broad field of meaning, including closeness, protection, loyalty, and leadership [30]. Analysis of the context of the verse shows that the prohibition of making certain parties *awliya* is related to alliance relations that have the potential to harm Muslims in conflict situations, not an absolute prohibition on interfaith social relations. By translating *awliya* as "loyal friend", the Ministry of Religion seems to emphasize the dimensions of political and ideological loyalty, in line with the contextual interpretation approach [31].

When compared to Tafsir Al Azhar, Hamka tends to interpret *awliya* as a leader or party that becomes the strategic basis of the *ummah*. This difference shows that the Ministry of Religion's translation emphasizes more sociological and national dimensions, while Hamka emphasizes moral vigilance and religious identity. These findings show that the Ministry of Religion's translation is not just a translation of language, but a representation of institutional interpretation oriented towards social harmonization in Indonesia [32].

Translation of Verses Containing the Concept of Jihad

Analysis of verses containing the concept of *jihad* shows that the Ministry of Religion consistently uses the strategy of adding contextual information to avoid reducing the meaning of *jihad* to physical violence. On QS. In Al Furqan verse 52, the phrase "wage *jihad* against them with him" is given an additional explanation "(Al Quran)", which affirms that *jihad* in the verse means *da'wah* and intellectual struggle, not war [33].

A similar strategy is also seen in the translation of QS. Al Baqarah verse 191. The addition of the caption "(who fight you)" to the phrase "kill them" shows the Ministry of Religion's explicit attempt to affirm the defensive character of warfare in Islam. With this approach, the verse is understood as the legitimacy of self-defense in conditions of oppression, not the order of unlimited violence [34].

From the perspective of translation theory, this strategy reflects the use of interpretive but responsible interpretive translations. Semantically speaking, *jihad* has a wide spectrum of meanings, ranging from spiritual struggle to physical resistance in certain contexts [35]. The findings of the study show that the translation of the Ministry of Religion seeks to maintain the breadth of this meaning by clarifying the context of the verse, so that Indonesian readers are not trapped in a narrow and ideological understanding of *jihad* [36].

Minimization and Recontextualization of Kafir Terms

The results of the study show that there is a systematic pattern in minimizing the use of the word *kafir* in the Ministry of Religion's Translation of the Quran, especially in the 2002 edition and further emphasized in the 2019 edition. The verb from the root *k f r*, which in the previous edition was translated as "kafir", has been changed to "disbelieve" or "kufr", especially when the word is in the form of *fi'il* and refers to an attitude or action, not a social identity [37].

This change reflects a shift in semantic approach from identity labeling to an emphasis on theological and moral attitudes [38]. Linguistically, the word *kufr* in Arabic means to cover up or deny the truth, which is not always synonymous with a person's religious identity. By choosing the equivalent of "ungkar" or "kufr", the Ministry of Religion seeks to maintain the accuracy of the meaning while reducing the pejorative connotation of the word *kafir* in the plural Indonesian social context [39].

From the perspective of contextual interpretation, this strategy is in line with the need to maintain harmony between religious communities and prevent negative generalizations against non-Muslim groups. These findings show that the Ministry of Religion's translation does not stand in a vacuum, but interacts with the socio-political dynamics and religious moderation discourse in Indonesia. Thus, the change in the translation of the word kafir can be understood as a form of recontextualization of the meaning of the Qur'an in order to remain faithful to the theological message of the Qur'an while being relevant to the national reality [40].

Overall, the results of the study show that the 2002 and 2019 editions of the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Al Quran Translation show a strong tendency towards a contextual and moderate approach in translating sensitive Quranic terms. Through diction selection strategies, addition of contextual information, and shifting meaning from structural to relational, the Ministry of Religion seeks to bridge the meaning of the Qur'an text with the socio-religious needs of the Indonesian people. These findings confirm that the translation of the Qur'an is a dynamic interpretive space and is inseparable from the social, political, and national context in which the translation is produced and received [41].

Table 3. Translation Strategies and Interpretive Implications of Sensitive Qur'anic Terms in the Indonesian Official Translation

Qur'anic Term	Verse Example	Translation Strategy Applied	Semantic Shift Observed	Interpretive Orientation	Socio-Religious Implications
Awliya	QS. Al-Mā'idah 5:51	Lexical reorientation and contextual explanation	Shift from structural meaning (leader/authority) to relational meaning ("loyal friend")	Contextual and sociological interpretation emphasizing political and ideological loyalty	Reduces exclusivist readings and discourages rigid interfaith boundaries; supports social harmony and national cohesion
Awliya (comparative)	Tafsir Al-Azhar (Hamka)	Classical exegetical interpretation	Emphasis on leadership and strategic allegiance of the ummah	Moral vigilance and preservation of religious identity	Highlights contrast between individual exegetical authority and institutional-state interpretation
Jihad	QS. Al-Furqān 25:52	Addition of explicative gloss ("with it [the Qur'an]")	Clarification of jihad as da'wah and intellectual struggle	Interpretive and explanatory translation	Prevents reduction of jihad to physical violence; promotes non-violent religious engagement
Jihad	QS. Al-Baqarah 2:191	Contextual restriction through added clarification ("who	Framing jihad as defensive rather than offensive	Ethical-contextual interpretation	Counters extremist misinterpretations and reinforces principles of

		fight you”)			self-defense and justice
Kafir / Kufur	Various verses (2002–2019 editions)	Semantic minimization and relexicalization	Shift from identity label (“kafir”) to moral-theological action (“disbelieve”, “kufur”)	Theological-attitudinal interpretation	Reduces stigmatization of non-Muslims and supports interreligious coexistence
Kafir / Kufur	Verb forms (fi’il)	Distinction between belief-action and social identity	Emphasis on denial of truth rather than group identity	Linguistic and contextual sensitivity	Aligns Qur’anic meaning with plural social realities in Indonesia

In-Depth Analysis

The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs’ Qur’an translation represents not merely a linguistic endeavor but an institutional act of interpretation shaped by theological responsibility, socio-political sensitivity, and national context. The comparative analysis of the 2002 and 2019 editions, particularly through the translation of the terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir*, reveals a deliberate shift toward contextualization and moderation. This shift reflects an awareness that Qur’anic translation functions as a powerful mediator between sacred text and lived religious experience in a plural society.

The term *awliya* illustrates how semantic multiplicity necessitates interpretive caution. In the Qur’anic semantic field, *awliya* encompasses meanings such as closeness, loyalty, protection, and authority. Earlier translations tended to crystallize this term into rigid political or leadership categories, which in the Indonesian context risked legitimizing exclusionary readings. The 2019 translation reframes *awliya* relationally, emphasizing loyalty-based alliances rather than formal leadership. This adjustment does not negate the Qur’anic warning embedded in the verse but situates it within historical conditions of conflict and vulnerability. Consequently, the translation avoids absolutist prohibitions on interreligious relations and instead underscores ethical discernment in alliances.

A similar pattern emerges in the translation of *jihad*. The file demonstrates that the Ministry consistently resists reductive interpretations that equate *jihad* exclusively with physical warfare. By embedding contextual clarifications—particularly in verses often cited to justify violence—the translation restores the broader Qur’anic conception of *jihad* as moral, intellectual, and spiritual struggle. This approach reflects an interpretive translation strategy that prioritizes meaning over lexical literalism. Importantly, it also functions as a counter-discourse to radical interpretations that thrive on textual isolation and semantic narrowing.

The treatment of *kafir* represents perhaps the most socially sensitive intervention. Linguistically, the root k-f-r denotes concealment or denial, not inherently a fixed social identity. Earlier translations that rendered this term uniformly as “infidel” or “unbeliever” contributed to stigmatizing categorizations within Indonesia’s multi-religious society. The revised translation demonstrates a semantic and ethical recalibration by distinguishing between disbelief as an action or attitude (*kufur*) and religious identity. This recontextualization reduces the pejorative force of the term while remaining faithful to its theological meaning. It signals a conscious move away

from identity labeling toward moral evaluation, aligning translation practice with the broader national agenda of religious harmony.

Taken together, these translation strategies confirm that the Ministry's Qur'an translation operates as a dynamic interpretive project rather than a static linguistic transfer. The integration of Qur'anic semantics, contextual interpretation, and translation theory allows the translation to respond to contemporary challenges without severing its connection to the classical exegetical tradition. The shifts observed between the 2002 and 2019 editions indicate institutional recognition that meaning is not only embedded in words but also produced in interaction with readers' social realities. Ultimately, the data show that the Indonesian Qur'an translation functions as a site of negotiation between text, tradition, and context. Its evolving treatment of sensitive terms reflects an effort to safeguard theological integrity while preventing social harm. This analysis affirms that Qur'anic translation, especially when produced by a state institution, is inseparable from ethical responsibility and socio-political awareness. The Ministry's approach demonstrates how translation can serve as a constructive instrument for religious moderation, contributing to a more inclusive and contextually grounded understanding of Islam in contemporary Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The translation of the Quran by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia reflects an institutional interpretation that is responsive to Indonesia's social and religious dynamics. The analysis of the terms *awliya*, *jihad*, and *kafir* in the 2002 and 2019 editions of the Qur'an shows a shift from a literal approach to a more contextual and moderate translation. In the term *awliya*, the Ministry of Religion's translation emphasizes the meaning of loyalty and contextual closeness, not just formal leadership. This approach shows that the prohibition in the related verse is related to strategic alliances that are detrimental to the *ummah*, not an absolute prohibition on interfaith social relations. In the verses that contain the concept of *jihad*, the strategy of interpreting the meaning with the addition of contextual information is used to maintain the breadth of the meaning of *jihad* as a moral, intellectual, and spiritual struggle, as well as to prevent narrow and violence-oriented meanings. Meanwhile, in the term *kafir*, there is an attempt to recontextualize it through reducing the use of the word and shifting the equivalent to the form "disagreement" and "kufr", especially when referring to attitudes and actions. This shift aims to avoid pejorative identity labeling and support the harmonization of interreligious life in a pluralistic Indonesian society. Theoretically, this study confirms that the translation of the Qur'an is a dynamic practice of interpretation, influenced by semantic considerations, historical context, and social needs. In practical terms, these findings provide the basis for the development of more accurate, contextual, and responsible translations of the Quran. This study is limited to three Quranic terms and the official translation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, so that further research can expand the scope of the term, compare translations across institutions or countries, and examine readers' acceptance in a broader social context.

Acknowledgments

The authors express sincere gratitude to colleagues and institutions that supported this research. Appreciation is extended to academic peers at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta and Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta for constructive feedback and scholarly discussions. Special thanks are given to experts in Qur'anic translation and linguistics who provided insights during manuscript development. The authors also acknowledge institutional support and access to relevant translation documents that enabled a thorough and critical analysis of contemporary Indonesian discourse.

Author's Contributions

Trisno Susilo conceptualized the study, formulated the analytical framework, and led the writing of the manuscript. Riza Tamami contributed to data interpretation, semantic analysis, and critical discussion of key Qur'anic terms. Moh Abdul Kholiq Hasan supported literature review, contextual analysis, and methodological refinement. All authors collaboratively revised the manuscript, approved the final version, and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and scholarly quality of the work presented in this article for international academic audiences worldwide readership.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest associated with this study. This research was conducted independently and was not influenced by political, religious, or institutional agendas. No financial support or external funding affected the research process, analysis, or interpretation. All arguments and conclusions presented in this article reflect the authors' academic judgment and commitment to objectivity, transparency, and ethical standards in Qur'anic studies and translation research within contemporary Indonesian Islamic scholarship and public discourse, nationally and internationally.

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