

# TRANSLATING ARABIC LITERATURE INTO FINNISH

**Maria Pakkala, PhD**

Series editor **Alexandra Büchler**

LLENYDDIAETH  
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**Translating Arabic Literature into Finnish**  
**2010 – 2020**

Maria Pakkala, PhD

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### **About the author**

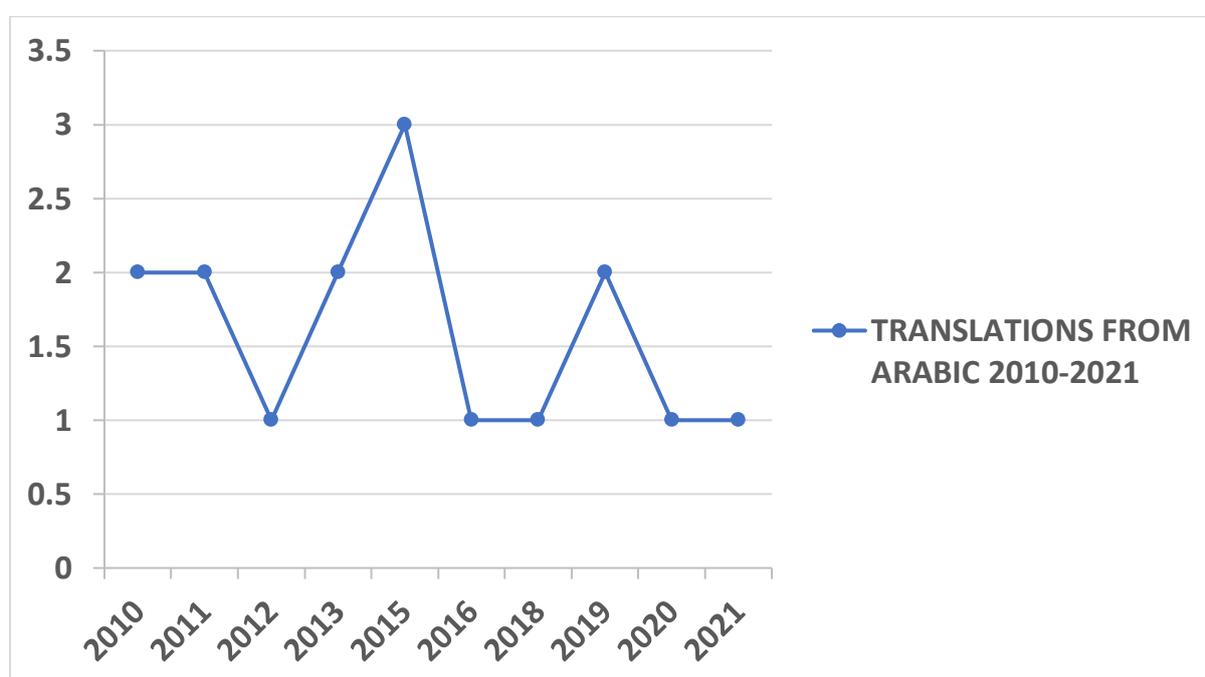
Maria Pakkala holds a PhD in Arabic and Islamic studies from the University of Helsinki, Finland and a degree in Translation from the Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Morocco. She has taught Arabic and translation in Finland and abroad and worked as a professional translator for over twenty years. An award-winning literary translator from Finnish into Arabic, she has published over forty titles ranging from novels, non-fiction, poetry, plays and children's literature. She is also the author of the 2012 studies on the flow of translation from Arabic into Finnish and from Finnish into Arabic supported by the Anna Lindh Foundation.

## Contents

Introduction .....	4
Methodology.....	5
1. Publishing.....	6
1.2. Choice of works.....	8
1.3. Bilingual works .....	9
Theatre.....	10
2. Dissemination and reception.....	11
2.1. Dissemination and availability to readers.....	11
2.2. Events.....	12
2.3. Media and critical reception .....	13
3. Policy and public / private support .....	14
3.1. Prizes .....	15
3.2. Grants.....	15
4. Translation .....	16
4.1. Translators .....	16
4.2. Conditions of work and translation quality monitoring .....	18
4.3. The Finnish Association of Translators .....	19
4.4. Quality and critical reception of translation.....	19
4.5. Language and translation training opportunities .....	20
5. Conclusions.....	20

## Introduction

About one-fifth of the published titles in Finland are translations.<sup>1</sup> Most of these translations are made from English, followed by major European and Scandinavian languages.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, for example, the total number of titles translated from other languages besides the ones mentioned above do not exceed 128 titles.<sup>3</sup> That being said, it is not surprising that only 14 translations from Arabic into Finnish have appeared in the last decade. Arabic remains a rather marginal language on the Finnish literary scene despite the positive changes that have occurred in the last decade.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>1</sup> [www.statista.com/statistics/804999/number-of-books-translated-into-finnish-by-original-language](https://www.statista.com/statistics/804999/number-of-books-translated-into-finnish-by-original-language), 28.2.2021.

<sup>2</sup> The Finnish Centre of Statistics:

[www.stat.fi/tup/suomi90/huhtikuu.html#:~:text=K%C3%A4%C3%A4nn%C3%B6skirjallisuuden%20osuus%20Suomessa%20ulkaistusta%20kirjanimikkeist%C3%A4,suomennoksia%20on%20tehty%20englanninkielisest%C3%A4%20kirjallisuudesta](https://www.stat.fi/tup/suomi90/huhtikuu.html#:~:text=K%C3%A4%C3%A4nn%C3%B6skirjallisuuden%20osuus%20Suomessa%20ulkaistusta%20kirjanimikkeist%C3%A4,suomennoksia%20on%20tehty%20englanninkielisest%C3%A4%20kirjallisuudesta), accessed 28.2.2021.

<sup>3</sup> [www.statista.com/statistics/804999/number-of-books-translated-into-finnish-by-original-language](https://www.statista.com/statistics/804999/number-of-books-translated-into-finnish-by-original-language), accessed 28.2.2021.

<sup>4</sup> The number of Arabic speakers in Finland has doubled since 2015 to reach 34,282 in 2020. Arabic is now Finland's fifth most spoken language. Source: the database of Statistics Finland, the Finnish public authority specifically established for statistics:

[https://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/fi/StatFin/StatFin\\_vrm\\_vaerak/statfin\\_vaerak\\_pxt\\_11r1.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?loadedQueryId=a29fb053-47ff-4097-86a5-970318815f8d&timeType=from&timeValue=2014](https://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/fi/StatFin/StatFin_vrm_vaerak/statfin_vaerak_pxt_11r1.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?loadedQueryId=a29fb053-47ff-4097-86a5-970318815f8d&timeType=from&timeValue=2014), accessed 31.3.2021.

## Methodology

This study aims at analysing the translation flow from Arabic into Finnish in the last ten years (2010–20). Its methodology includes desktop research, interviews and discussions with key players: authors, translators, researchers, columnists, literary organizations and publishers. Snowball sampling proved useful when searching for professionals who have been to Arab countries or who have literary agents or scouts specialized in Arabic literature. The bibliographic information used in this study was collected through research in *The Finnish National Bibliography*,<sup>5</sup> the University of Helsinki library catalogue,<sup>6</sup> the catalogues of Finnish public libraries,<sup>7</sup> and FILI's translation database.<sup>8</sup> This study covers the publications and activities related to translation from Finnish into Arabic up until April 2021.

No data about translating Arabic literature previous to this date could be found from the Finnish Centre of Statistics,<sup>9</sup> the Finnish book publishers association,<sup>10</sup> or any other authority. During the time of writing, it was not possible to access the UNESCO's Index Translationum database because the website was under maintenance. The Finnish Literature Exchange (FILI) has a searchable translation database, but its data is incomplete. It contains mainly the translated works supported by FILI, most of which are translations from Finnish into other languages.

This research refers to available bibliographical data regarding single volumes, anthologies, bilingual/multilingual publications and edited collections but not publications in periodicals as there have been no complete issues dedicated to Arabic literature. Online resources available in the public domain are taken into consideration, as well as other translations such as drama works adapted for the purpose of staging. However, this study does not refer to the religious literature translated from Arabic into Finnish nor to the dictionaries and the glossaries published.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.kansalliskirjasto.fi/](http://www.kansalliskirjasto.fi/), accessed 27.2.2021.

<sup>6</sup> [www.helka.fi](http://www.helka.fi), accessed 27.2.2021.

<sup>7</sup> [www.helmet.fi](http://www.helmet.fi), [www.jkl.fi/kirjasto](http://www.jkl.fi/kirjasto), [www.turku.fi/kirjasto](http://www.turku.fi/kirjasto), etc., accessed 27.2.2021.

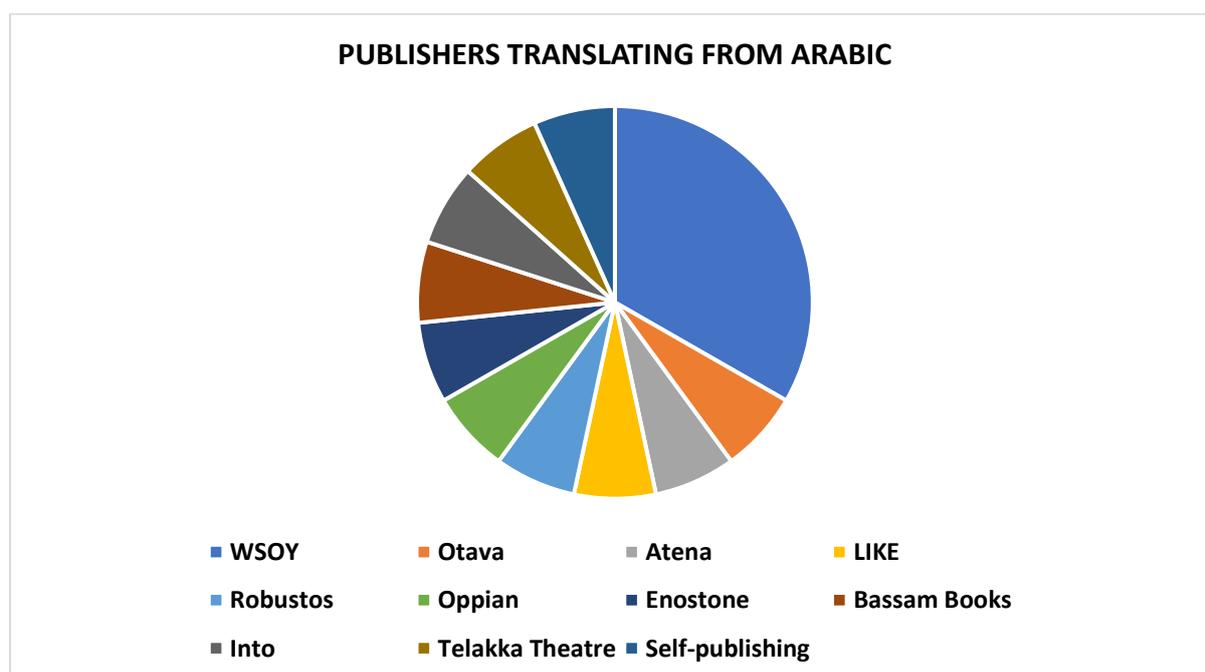
<sup>8</sup> <http://dbgw.finlit.fi/kaannokset>, accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>9</sup> [www.stat.fi](http://www.stat.fi), accessed 27.2.2021.

<sup>10</sup> [www.kustantajajat.fi](http://www.kustantajajat.fi), accessed 27.2.2021.

## 1. Publishing

The literary works translated from Arabic into Finnish find homes in several publishing houses of varying sizes.<sup>11</sup> Comparing with the last decade, WSOY appears to be the only publisher who has remained interested in Arabic literature and has kept publishing translations from Arabic over the last ten years. By contrast, Bassam Books and Otava have published much less and Karisto has not published any translations from Arabic at all.<sup>12</sup>



**WSOY** (Werner Söderström Ltd),<sup>13</sup> Finland's largest publisher, has published five translations from Arabic in the last decade and has one novel, *Kelloja ja vieraita* (Watches and Guests), forthcoming this autumn.<sup>14</sup> Established in 1878, WSOY publishes a wide range of fiction and non-fiction from both Finnish and international authors.<sup>15</sup> It actively seeks interesting books through its large network of agents, scouts and literary connections worldwide. It follows the International Prize for Arabic Fiction's shortlist at least, but has difficulties in making

<sup>11</sup> A list of Finnish publishers can be found at the following address: [www.kirjastot.fi/kirjallisuus/kustantajat](http://www.kirjastot.fi/kirjallisuus/kustantajat).

<sup>12</sup> **Otava Publishing Company Ltd** is the second largest publisher in Finland. It has brought forth only one title from Arabic in the last decade, and that in cooperation with Professor Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, who serves as a professor of the Arabic language and Islamic studies at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland: [www.otava.fi](http://www.otava.fi).

<sup>13</sup> [www.wsoy.fi](http://www.wsoy.fi).

<sup>14</sup> [www.wsoy.fi/kirja/hassan-blasim/kelloja-ja-vieraita/9789510472583](http://www.wsoy.fi/kirja/hassan-blasim/kelloja-ja-vieraita/9789510472583), accessed 3.4.2021.

<sup>15</sup> In the previous decade, these two publishers had the lead. Basam Books published 13% of the books translated from Arabic and Karisto 11%.

decisions on which titles to purchase because an English translation is not usually available.<sup>16</sup>

Another important publisher, when it comes to Arabic literature in Finnish, is **Like Kustannus**.<sup>17</sup> Founded in 1987, it offers Finnish and translated 'non-fiction, works of popular culture, literature, and comic books.'<sup>18</sup> Like Kustannus has published translations from more than twenty languages, thus making an invaluable contribution to Finnish literary culture. It has only published one Arabic title in the last ten years but had previously brought forth several important titles. What also makes Like Kustannus special is its relationship with Kääntöpiiri,<sup>19</sup> a small publisher responsible for bringing forth four of Nawal El Saadawi's books between 1988 and 1992.<sup>20</sup> Like Kustannus republished El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (امرأة عند نقطة الصفر) in 2002.

Like Kustannus receives information about interesting books from literary agents, scouts and publishers' rights teams around the world.<sup>21</sup> When a book is an international success, it helps with the decision to translate it into Finnish. However, at the end of the day, the manuscript itself is the basis upon which publishing decisions are made in Finland. International success or prizes awarded might help but they are not crucial. Except for Nordic and Anglo-American literature, other languages are hard to sell on the Finnish book market. This is a major consideration, especially since small publishers often do not make any economic profit.<sup>22</sup>

**Basam Books** only published one translation from Arabic in the last decade.<sup>23</sup> To bring that book forth, they cooperated with the academic scholar of Arabic and Islamic studies Dr Janne Mattila who is a researcher of Islamic philosophy. Basam Books Ltd<sup>24</sup> was established

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<sup>16</sup> Information from an email by Ms Leena Balme, publishing manager at WSOY, on 4.5.2021.

<sup>17</sup> [www.like.fi](http://www.like.fi).

<sup>18</sup> [www.like.fi/in-english](http://www.like.fi/in-english), accessed 3.4.2021.

<sup>19</sup> Kääntöpiiri published around 40 books in 1988–1994. Five of these were translations from Arabic. In 1994, Kääntöpiiri announced the cessation of its activity. *Like Kustannus* acquired the company in 1999, and in 2020, Kääntöpiiri announced that it would resume its work with the same old publishing line i.e., only books written by women. [www.like.fi/like-kustannuksen-tarina](http://www.like.fi/like-kustannuksen-tarina), accessed 3.4.2021.

<sup>20</sup> [www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000003894869.html](http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000003894869.html), accessed 3.4.2021.

<sup>21</sup> Information from an email by Mr Petri Leppänen, publishing manager at *Like Kustannus*, on 25.3.2021.

<sup>22</sup> According to the Finnish magazine *Suomen kuvalehti*, small publishers such as Into and Basam Books make zero profit: [www.suomenkuvalehti.fi/kirjailijanpaivakirja/keskikokoiset-kustantamot-tulos-nolla-hyva-olla](http://www.suomenkuvalehti.fi/kirjailijanpaivakirja/keskikokoiset-kustantamot-tulos-nolla-hyva-olla), accessed 4.4.2021.

<sup>23</sup> Compared with the years 1995–2008 when it published seven titles.

<sup>24</sup> [www.basambooks.com](http://www.basambooks.com).

in Helsinki in 1993 and is responsible for publishing fiction, non-fiction, classics and poetry. The company's founder and director, Batu Samaletdin,<sup>25</sup> himself chooses the titles to publish, based on his own judgement and on the recommendations of experts in the field. It is Mr Samaletdin who makes the final decision whether to publish an Arabic book's translation into Finnish.

**Atena** is a midsize company founded in 1986 in the city of Jyväskylä,<sup>26</sup> and publishes both fiction and non-fiction. In the last decade, it published one title from Arabic: Rajae al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (Banat al-Riyadh), translated by Sampsa Peltonen. Publishing manager Laura Kuitunen decided to publish the book after she had read it herself in English. Ms Kuitunen closely follows foreign publishers, agents and scouts, orders manuscripts and assesses their suitability for translation into Finnish. In this case, she made a very good decision because the translation was a success in Finland. The decision was based on the text itself not on the success of the book elsewhere. Ms Kuitunen mentioned that translator Sampsa Peltonen is also active in proposing titles.<sup>27</sup>

The limited number of translations from Arabic into Finnish is not due to a lack of interest in Arabic literature but rather to the lack of expertise. 'The general attitude towards Arabic literature is curious but ignorant', as translator Sampsa Peltonen points out.<sup>28</sup> Although Finnish publishers seem to be keen to find Arabic works, it is difficult for them to evaluate the artistic and commercial potential of any given book in Arabic.<sup>29</sup> The small Finnish literary market has its peculiarities. Therefore, marginal literature is further marginalized by the small scale of the market.

## 1.2. Choice of works

Most of the Finnish publishers I interviewed for this study do not search specifically for Arabic literature and do not have agents who specialize in that field particularly. In the Finnish publishing industry, the text itself is the most important factor in deciding whether

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<sup>25</sup> Information from an email received by Mr Batu Samaletdin, publishing manager at Basam Books, on 25.3.2021.

<sup>26</sup> [www.atena.fi](http://www.atena.fi).

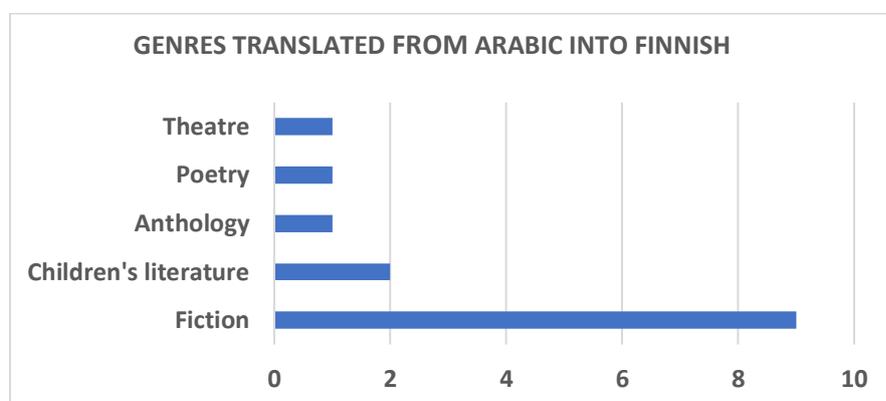
<sup>27</sup> Information from an email by Ms Laura Kuitunen, publishing manager at Atena, on 25.3.2021.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with translator Sampsa Peltonen on 7.4.2021.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with translator Sampsa Peltonen on 7.4.2021. Leena Balme, publishing manager at WSOY, made the same point in an email sent on 4.5.2021.

or not to translate a book.<sup>30</sup> Other factors mentioned by the interviewees include the timing and suitability of the title to the Finnish context.

Major and midsize publishers receive their information from scouts, literary agents and rights teams abroad. They also follow the new titles of previously published foreign writers. Smaller publishers, on the other hand, tend to make their decisions based on their own evaluation or on an expert's suggestion. Choosing a text from any language other than English and Nordic languages is always a risk in the Finnish market. However, 'Finland has fairly good mechanisms for financing translation projects whose artistic or cultural value is greater than their commercial potential.'<sup>31</sup>



### 1.3. Bilingual works

In the last few years, four bilingual titles have appeared, although only two of them are relevant to this study.<sup>32</sup> *Ruosteisia luonnoksia* (Rusty Sketches) is a poetry art book by Finland-based Iraqi poet and artist Muhaned Durubi.<sup>33</sup> Durubi's debut is a trilingual work translated into Finnish by Sampsä Peltonen and into English by Andy Willoughby. It has received a decent amount of media attention and literary references,<sup>34</sup> and an art exhibition

<sup>30</sup> Only some Finnish publishers have been to the Sharjah book fair, and most of them have not succeeded in building solid or long-term relationships with Arab publishers or agents.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with translator Sampsä Peltonen on 7.4.2021.

<sup>32</sup> Two of the bilingual titles that appeared in the last ten years are children's books translated from Finnish into Arabic, which makes them irrelevant to this study.

<sup>33</sup> <https://muhaneddurubi.fi>. Muhaned Durubi is the pen name of Muhannad Mohmed Khorshid.

<sup>34</sup> [www.kirjaviekoon.blogspot.com/2020/01/muhaned-durubi-ruosteisia-luonnoksia.html](http://www.kirjaviekoon.blogspot.com/2020/01/muhaned-durubi-ruosteisia-luonnoksia.html) and [www.larissaraudas.fi/larissaraudas.fi/blogi/blogit/ruosteisia-luonnoksia-irakilaissyntyisen](http://www.larissaraudas.fi/larissaraudas.fi/blogi/blogit/ruosteisia-luonnoksia-irakilaissyntyisen), accessed 30.4.2021.

by the same name was held at the Cultural Centre Caisa.<sup>35</sup> Durubi was able to find his place in the Finnish artistic scene within a short time and has contributed to a number of cultural events.<sup>36</sup> The Anna Lindh Foundation, for example, invited him to read his poems as part of the cultural programme of the Middle-East Conference held in 2019.<sup>37</sup> Muhaned Durubi's debut was also covered in several newspapers.<sup>38</sup>

The other bilingual publication relevant to this study is also a collection of poems. Alkafagi's *Nainen Lähi-idästä* (A Woman from the Middle East, امرأة من الشرق الأوسط) was translated by Sari Kuustola in 2018. Kuustola has contributed to another bilingual project that aims at promoting the Finnish-Arabic poetry exchange.<sup>39</sup>

## Theatre

Hassan Blasim has also succeeded in theatre. His playwriting debut, *Digihattupeli*, brilliantly translated into Finnish by Sampsa Peltonen, was staged in 2016 in Tampere's Telakka (Shipyard) Theatre,<sup>40</sup> in cooperation with Tartu Uus Theater in Estonia.<sup>41</sup> The play was co-produced and co-directed, with actors from both theatres, and was performed in both countries. It is the only play written in Arabic to be translated and performed in Finland and Estonia.<sup>42</sup> It attracted media attention in both countries,<sup>43</sup> and received a good deal of praise as well.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> [www.caisa.fi/fi/tapahtumat/event/C571D3A16024457CDD809C13A62650AE/Ruosteisia\\_luonnoksia\\_Rusty\\_sketches](http://www.caisa.fi/fi/tapahtumat/event/C571D3A16024457CDD809C13A62650AE/Ruosteisia_luonnoksia_Rusty_sketches) accessed 11.4.2021.

<sup>36</sup> [www.soundcloud.com/search/sounds?q=durubi](https://www.soundcloud.com/search/sounds?q=durubi); <https://kirjasto.one/runoklubi/ruosteisia-luonnoksia-ja-muuta-tiksi-open-micissa-6-2-2020-kuultua-ja-nahtya>, accessed 30.4.2021.

<sup>37</sup> [www.annalindhfinland.fi/meera-band-muhaned-durubi](http://www.annalindhfinland.fi/meera-band-muhaned-durubi), accessed 30.4.2021.

<sup>38</sup> <https://muhaneddurubi.fi/press-and-interviews>, accessed 30.4.2021.

<sup>39</sup> See 4.1. Translators, below.

<sup>40</sup> [www.arablit.org/2016/04/04/digital-hats-analog-ambitions-staging-hassan-blasim](http://www.arablit.org/2016/04/04/digital-hats-analog-ambitions-staging-hassan-blasim), accessed 4.4.2021.

<sup>41</sup> [www.tinfo.fi/sv/Pristagarna\\_pa\\_Thalia-festen\\_1432016](http://www.tinfo.fi/sv/Pristagarna_pa_Thalia-festen_1432016), accessed 4.4.2021.

<sup>42</sup> Osiris Theatre has translated and staged two plays but the translation was made from Finnish into Arabic. The plays (*Tsunami* and *Letters from Mosul*), directed by Liisa Isotalo, were staged in two languages.

<sup>43</sup> [www.yle.fi/uutiset/3-8458246](http://www.yle.fi/uutiset/3-8458246); <https://www.ts.fi/kulttuuri/855289/Sydamen+hakkerit>; <https://www.tinfo.fi/fi/Ensi-iltoja/3667/Digihattupeli>; <https://www.uusteater.ee/tekstid/digital-hats-analog-ambitions-staging-hassan-blasim>; [www.voima.fi/arvio/teatteria-netin-ihmispeleista](http://www.voima.fi/arvio/teatteria-netin-ihmispeleista), accessed 4.4.2021.

<sup>44</sup> [www.aamulehti.fi/teatteri/art-2000007586559.html](http://www.aamulehti.fi/teatteri/art-2000007586559.html), accessed 4.4.2021. For reviews in English see [www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jul/30/the-nightmares-of-carlos-fuentes-arcola-theatre-review](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jul/30/the-nightmares-of-carlos-fuentes-arcola-theatre-review) and [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/nightmares-carlos-fuentes-arcola-theatre-review-witty-and-rawly-topical-9637587.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/nightmares-carlos-fuentes-arcola-theatre-review-witty-and-rawly-topical-9637587.html), accessed 4.4.2021.

## 2. Dissemination and reception

### 2.1. Dissemination and availability to readers

Books published in Finland are available in physical and online bookshops. Moreover, Finland has an excellent library network that is free and accessible all over the country.<sup>45</sup> In remote areas, people can request books to be delivered to their nearest library bus stop. Most importantly, the library system ensures the availability of these books even when they are sold out.

The city library's collection of Arabic books has increased in number and in quality over the last ten years. A positive development has also occurred in the number of acquisitions of e-books and in the organization of other activities directed at various age groups in the Arabic-speaking community. For example, the 'Fairy-tale Caravan' [Satukaravaani] reading project was established in 2017–19 to encourage children to read literature in their home language as well as in Finnish. The 'Fairy-tale Caravan' held lectures and literary/cultural activities as well as bilingual reading sessions. These sessions used translated books and are available online.<sup>46</sup>

The municipal libraries have Arabic books in different formats: printed books, but also electronic books and audiobooks. Of the books translated from Arabic, Hassan Blasim's forthcoming novel is the only one that will be published in all three formats.<sup>47</sup> Blasim's previous book, *Allah99*, was published in both print and electronic formats.

In addition to public libraries, university libraries also have a fair number of Arabic books. Literature related to Arabic studies is available at the Helsinki University campus library. The main range of Arabic books in this library collection is devoted to the classical production – classical Arabic and Islamic culture – with a rather modest selection of modern Arabic literature.

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<sup>45</sup> According to the Finnish Centre of Statistics, the country has about one thousand public libraries (including institutional libraries and library buses): [www.tilastot.kirjastot.fi/?orgs=1&years=2020&stats=100#results](http://www.tilastot.kirjastot.fi/?orgs=1&years=2020&stats=100#results), accessed 4.4.2021.

<sup>46</sup> [www.kirjastot.fi/satukaravaani?language\\_content\\_entity=fi](http://www.kirjastot.fi/satukaravaani?language_content_entity=fi), accessed 4.4.2021.

<sup>47</sup> [www.wsoy.fi/kirja/hassan-blasim/kelloja-ja-vieraita/9789510472583](http://www.wsoy.fi/kirja/hassan-blasim/kelloja-ja-vieraita/9789510472583), accessed 3.4.2021.

Because Finland is a bilingual country, translations into Swedish are also available.<sup>48</sup> Some of Nawal El Saadawi's and Hassan Blasim's books, for example, are also available in Swedish. Furthermore, there have been reissues of several of Nawal El Saadawi's books and at least one of Hassan Blasim's.

It is fairly easy to suggest new acquisitions and the library is usually keen to get new and interesting books. The Helsinki Metropolitan Library has around 2,237 books in Arabic, ranging from children's literature to fiction and science.<sup>49</sup> At the beginning of 2020, Arabic was the eighth most borrowed language group in the city library system.<sup>50</sup>

## 2.2. Events

In the past, Arabic literature was almost absent from public cultural events but this has changed over the last decade, thanks mainly to the success of Finland-based Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim whose works are translated into Finnish by Sampsa Peltonen.

Hassan Blasim is invited to a wide range of literary events, book fairs and other activities organized in Finland throughout the year.<sup>51</sup> Blasim himself believes that it took the Finnish literary community a long time to notice him. When he was invited to read a passage from one of his short stories in Arabic at the Helsinki Lit festival in 2015, he took the organizers and the audience by surprise and criticized the Finnish literary community's attitude towards him. He outspokenly lambasted them for only noticing him after he had received international recognition and also for not being interested in his opinion and only inviting him to read a passage in the exotic Arabic language to an audience of non-speakers.<sup>52</sup> Soon enough Blasim was invited to the Helsinki Lit festival again, as a fully established author, and

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<sup>48</sup> Finnish and Swedish are Finland's two official languages. There are also several official minority languages: Sami, Romani, Finnish Sign Language and Karelian. However, Finnish and Swedish are mentioned here as the major languages when it comes to literary production.

<sup>49</sup> Information from an email by librarian Dr Iiro Laukola from the city library, Helsinki, on 21.4.2021.

<sup>50</sup> The most borrowed language groups in consecutive order were: Finnish, English, Swedish, Russian, French, Spanish and German. Arabic was the most borrowed non-European language.

<sup>51</sup> Blasim was invited several times to the Helsinki book fair and to the Annikki Poetry Festival among many other events: see [www.issuu.com/messukeskus/docs/kirja19\\_messulehti\\_issuu2](http://www.issuu.com/messukeskus/docs/kirja19_messulehti_issuu2); [www.annikinrunofestivaali.net/esiintyjat-2013.htm](http://www.annikinrunofestivaali.net/esiintyjat-2013.htm) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuvuSj6gClo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuvuSj6gClo), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>52</sup> [www.arena.yle.fi/1-2874360](http://www.arena.yle.fi/1-2874360), accessed 10.4.2021.

was interviewed about his work and his world-view. The Helsinki Lit festival is a major cultural event which is broadcast on Finnish television.<sup>53</sup>

Hassan Blasim's translator Sampsa Peltonen is invited to most events as an interpreter, which adds to the visibility of the translator's work. His translations are very well received and deserve all the praise they have garnered because they are beautifully smooth and creatively faithful to the spirit of the original writing and style.

Hassan Blasim is also invited to various universities, cultural events, seminars, reading sessions and discussions. These events are usually well attended, and translator Sampsa Peltonen is often invited as well.<sup>54</sup>

### 2.3. Media and critical reception

There is very good coverage of the books translated from Arabic in the Finnish media. However, this coverage centres mainly on the work of Hassan Blasim.<sup>55</sup> The Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) has invited him to take part in several cultural programmes. Among Blasim's appearances on national TV, one can mention programmes such as *Strada*<sup>56</sup> and *Möt författaren*,<sup>57</sup> as well as the *Kirjakerho* radio programme to which Sampsa Peltonen was also invited.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to media attention, the works of Hassan Blasim receive reviews that appear in major literary magazines<sup>59</sup> and literary blogs.<sup>60</sup> There have also been several academic papers focusing on his work.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Author interviews can be watched online: [www.arena.yle.fi/1-50157423](http://www.arena.yle.fi/1-50157423), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>54</sup> The city of Lahti invited Hassan Blasim and Sampsa Peltonen; see [www.epressi.com/tiedotteet/kulttuuri-ja-taide/kirjailijavieraana-hassan-blasim.html](http://www.epressi.com/tiedotteet/kulttuuri-ja-taide/kirjailijavieraana-hassan-blasim.html), accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>55</sup> Finland's largest newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, 'Allah99 represents the best literature', [www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000006045772.html?fbclid=IwAR1\\_XWkv6rkQAFFM7fyIaAVa5UDEbs3kP5XjjkGC6CflyxrdUvfO9MzaWY](http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000006045772.html?fbclid=IwAR1_XWkv6rkQAFFM7fyIaAVa5UDEbs3kP5XjjkGC6CflyxrdUvfO9MzaWY), and the Tampere-based daily newspaper *Aamulehti*, 'The most important novel of the millennium', [www.aamulehti.fi/kirjat/art-2000007476159.html](http://www.aamulehti.fi/kirjat/art-2000007476159.html), accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>56</sup> <https://arena.yle.fi/1-2286619>, accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>57</sup> <https://arena.yle.fi/1-3319030>, (19.2.2016), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>58</sup> <https://arena.yle.fi/audio/1-2232663>, accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>59</sup> Critiques of Blasim's work were published in *Parnasso*, one of the most respected literary journals in the country (see Jani Saxell, 'Miten totuus lavastetaan', *Parnasso* (5/2012)), and in equally important literary magazines such as *Kiiltomato* ([www.kiiltomato.net/hassan-blasim-vapaudenaukion-mielipuoli](http://www.kiiltomato.net/hassan-blasim-vapaudenaukion-mielipuoli); [www.kiiltomato.net/hassan-blasim-irakin-purkkajeesus](http://www.kiiltomato.net/hassan-blasim-irakin-purkkajeesus)), *Voima* (<https://voima.fi/artikkeli/2019/kaikki-maailman-kasvot>; <https://voima.fi/artikkeli/2014/teravinta-karkea>) and *Maailman kuvalehti* ([www.maailmankuvalehti.fi/2014/2/yleinen/maittavan-makabeeria](http://www.maailmankuvalehti.fi/2014/2/yleinen/maittavan-makabeeria)) and

The appreciation of Hassan Blasim's work in Finland is also seen in the prizes and the accolades awarded to him. He received the ministry of culture's Finland Award in 2015 for his literary work,<sup>62</sup> the Tampere City Literary Prize in 2012 for his book *Madman of Freedom Square*,<sup>63</sup> and the Helsinki Metropolitan Library Literature Prize in 2016.<sup>64</sup>

A few words should be said about the Finlandia Prize and the discussion that was had about Hassan Blasim's eligibility. This prize is probably Finland's most prestigious literary award. It is awarded annually for the best novel written by a Finnish citizen. The novel may be written in Finnish or Swedish, the country's two main languages, but non-Finnish citizens are not eligible. *Allah99* was expected to be a Finlandia Prize favourite.<sup>65</sup> However, according to the rules, the book must have been originally published in Finland, or at least have simultaneously appeared in Finland and abroad, but *Allah99* first appeared in Arabic and was therefore ineligible for the prize.<sup>66</sup>

### 3. Policy and public / private support

Although the remuneration of literary translators and their working conditions leave much to be desired, it can at least be said that the cultural sphere seems to respect and value their work. The importance attached to literary translation and appreciation of the work is reflected, for example, in the various grant systems and prizes. Most of these prizes are for translations into Finnish.

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<https://suomenkuvalehti.fi/jutut/kulttuuri/kirjat/pillu-on-irakissa-monen-lukon-takana-piileksiva-tabu-hassan-blasim-lataa-esikoisromaanissaan>, accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>60</sup> 'Blasim is Finland's most internationally successful author alongside Sofi Oksanen', <https://anunihmeellisetmatkat.wordpress.com/2014/04/14/pispalasta-suurikin-ponnistaa/?fbclid=IwAR15rzNimWsuQu3p1GH4mmxEZtCMbQWhu8AKg04ffypcy2Fj2iyg2XB8o5M> and <http://readerwhydidimarryhim.blogspot.com/2014/09/hassan-blasim-irakin-purkkajeesus.html>, accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>61</sup> Muhaned Durubi's work has also received media attention as mentioned earlier.

<sup>62</sup> [www.yle.fi/uutiset/3-8511439](http://www.yle.fi/uutiset/3-8511439), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>63</sup> [www.tampere.fi/tampereen-kaupunki/ajankohtaista/tiedotteet/2014/06/31082015\\_46.html](http://www.tampere.fi/tampereen-kaupunki/ajankohtaista/tiedotteet/2014/06/31082015_46.html), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>64</sup> [www.helmet.fi/fi-FI/Tapahtumat\\_ja\\_vinkit/Vinkit/Helmetkirjallisuuspalkintofinalisti\\_2016\(101902\)](http://www.helmet.fi/fi-FI/Tapahtumat_ja_vinkit/Vinkit/Helmetkirjallisuuspalkintofinalisti_2016(101902)), accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>65</sup> Oskari Onninen wrote in the daily paper *Helsingin Sanomat* that 'one of the potentially favourite novels, Blasim's *Allah99*, is out': [www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000006280740.html](http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000006280740.html).

<sup>66</sup> Katri Talaskivi, 'Ammattitaitelijuus ja kirjailijana olemisen ehdot muunkielisten kirjailijoiden näkökulmasta', *Kulttuuripoliittikan tutkimuksen vuosikirja*, 5:1 (2020).

### 3.1. Prizes

The **State Prize for Translators** (Kääntäjien valtionpalkinto)<sup>67</sup> is awarded by the Finnish State Literature Commission in recognition of an excellent translation or of a long and meritorious adaptation.

The Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters (SKTL) awards a number of prizes, including the 10,000 euro **Mikael Agricola Prize**, which recognizes the best translation into Finnish of a book of fiction during the previous year. The SKTL is also responsible for the **Hollo Prize**, which, in turn, recognizes the best translation into Finnish of a non-fiction book.

The **Kääntäjäkarhu** prize<sup>68</sup> is awarded by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) for the best translation into Finnish during the previous year. An equally important prize is the **Kääntäjäpalkinto** (The Translator Award), worth 3,000 euros, which is awarded by the Kalevi and Irene Sorsa Foundation once every three years. Sampsa Peltonen was awarded this prize in 2020.<sup>69</sup>

### 3.2. Grants

There are several foundations that offer financial support for literary translators in Finland, the main ones being the KONE foundation,<sup>70</sup> Wihuri foundation,<sup>71</sup> the Finnish Cultural foundation,<sup>72</sup> Alfred Kordelin Foundation,<sup>73</sup> and the Finnish Educational Fund.<sup>74</sup> The KONE foundation also offers a residency programme, which allows researchers, artists and translators to retreat and work in a beautiful mansion in Western Finland.<sup>75</sup>

Although FILI mainly supports the translation of Finnish literature into other languages, it also aids translations into Finnish. FILI has even made exceptions in the case of some Finland-based authors such as Hassan Blasim who do not write in the country's non-

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<sup>67</sup> [www.kirjasampo.fi/fi/kulsa/saha3%253Au1c4fa5b5-2aa4-4bbd-b668-2e563ab01bdd](http://www.kirjasampo.fi/fi/kulsa/saha3%253Au1c4fa5b5-2aa4-4bbd-b668-2e563ab01bdd), accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>68</sup> [www.kirjasampo.fi/fi/kulsa/saha3%253Au13da9b50-ebbb-411a-924b-bd5f738cf1a8](http://www.kirjasampo.fi/fi/kulsa/saha3%253Au13da9b50-ebbb-411a-924b-bd5f738cf1a8), accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>69</sup> [www.sivistysrahasto.fi/sorsan-kaantajapalkinto-2020-sampsa-peltoselle](http://www.sivistysrahasto.fi/sorsan-kaantajapalkinto-2020-sampsa-peltoselle), accessed 17.4.2021. Peltonen was nominated for several other translation prizes too: [www.wsoy.fi/uutiset/jarl-hellemann-palkinto-george-eliotin-teokselle-daniel-deronda-ja-sen-ka%CC%88a%CC%88nta%CC%88ja%CC%88lle-alice-martinille](http://www.wsoy.fi/uutiset/jarl-hellemann-palkinto-george-eliotin-teokselle-daniel-deronda-ja-sen-ka%CC%88a%CC%88nta%CC%88ja%CC%88lle-alice-martinille), accessed 17.4.2021.

<sup>70</sup> [www.koneensaatio.fi](http://www.koneensaatio.fi), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>71</sup> [www.wihuri.fi](http://www.wihuri.fi), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>72</sup> [www.skr.fi](http://www.skr.fi), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>73</sup> [www.kordelin.fi/en/grants](http://www.kordelin.fi/en/grants), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>74</sup> [www.sivistysrahasto.com](http://www.sivistysrahasto.com), accessed 10.4.2021.

<sup>75</sup> [www.koneensaatio.fi/en/manor/presentation/](http://www.koneensaatio.fi/en/manor/presentation/), accessed 10.4.2021.

dominant languages. FILI has supported Hassan Blasim's travel to international events and has supported the translation of some of his works into Bulgarian.<sup>76</sup>

## 4. Translation

### 4.1. Translators

Active literary translators in Finland can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Until 2010, a good number of the literary adaptations from Arabic into Finnish were done by academics for whom translation was more of a passion.<sup>77</sup> Literature is still translated by people driven by passion and motivated by the cultural importance of this work – but the academics seem to have left the field.

The most prolific Arabic-Finnish translator is award-winning **Sampsa Peltonen**, although he only translates literature as a part-time activity.<sup>78</sup> Peltonen's translations are very well received and praised for their high quality, vividness and flow.<sup>79</sup> It has to be added that Peltonen's good knowledge of contemporary Arab culture together with his expertise in Finnish language and literature mean that his translations are masterpieces on their own right. Moreover, his translations sell well and their lending queues at the public libraries are long.

**Sari Kuustola**, who holds a Master's degree in philosophy and works as a full-time translator and interpreter of Arabic, has translated two books of poetry so far, in addition to her valuable contribution to the World Mirror project, which is a poetic exchange between Finnish- and Arabic-speaking poets.<sup>80</sup> Kuustola emphasizes that if it were not for the constraints of her day job, she would definitely be translating more Arabic titles into Finnish.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Hassan Blasim on 22.3.21.

<sup>77</sup> Professor Jussi Aro, Professor Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila and adjunct professor Marko Juntunen.

<sup>78</sup> Sampsa Peltonen is a literary translator, AV translator and an interpreter. He was responsible for translating Ala Al-Aswani's *Chicago* and *Yacoubian Building*, as well as Rajaa al-Sanea's *The Girls of Riyad* and all of Hassan Blasim's works that have appeared in Finnish.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, [www.hs.fi/kirjat/artikkeli/Kerrostalossa+asuu+koko+1900-luku/HS20090907SI1KU01tvi](http://www.hs.fi/kirjat/artikkeli/Kerrostalossa+asuu+koko+1900-luku/HS20090907SI1KU01tvi); [www.kepa.fi/kumppani/arkisto/2009\\_7-8/7199](http://www.kepa.fi/kumppani/arkisto/2009_7-8/7199); [www.kirjavinkit.fi/arvostelut/riadin-tytot](http://www.kirjavinkit.fi/arvostelut/riadin-tytot); [www.sivupiiri.fi/kirja-arvostelut/riadin-tyt%C3%B6t-368](http://www.sivupiiri.fi/kirja-arvostelut/riadin-tyt%C3%B6t-368).

<sup>80</sup> [www.kosmi.fi](http://www.kosmi.fi), accessed 11.4.2021.

<sup>81</sup> Correspondence with Sari Kuustola, 17–30.4.2021.

**Aino Vesanen**, the youngest among Finnish translators from Arabic, holds a Master's degree in Arabic and Islamic studies and works as a translator and interpreter. Her first published literary translation was *Zatunian Kadut* (The Streets of Zatunia, ساحات زتونيا) by Arab Israeli writer Odeh Bisharat. Like most translators interviewed for this study, Vesanen finds it challenging to adapt literary works as a full-time job, taking into consideration that literary translation is time-consuming and meagrely remunerated.<sup>82</sup>

Dr **Janne Mattila**, a researcher of Arabic and Islamic philosophy, enriched the Finnish literary scene with his brilliant translation of Ikhwan al-Safa's *The Case of the Animals versus Man* (تداعي الحيوان على الإنسان). In principle, Mattila would be interested in translating more philosophical texts from Arabic into Finnish but not necessarily literature.<sup>83</sup>

Professor **Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila** used to be one of the most productive translators who translated directly from Arabic into Finnish. He was professor of Arabic language and Islamic studies at the University of Helsinki and now holds an equivalent professorship at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. During the last decade, Hämeen-Anttila has only translated one title for children – a selection of stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

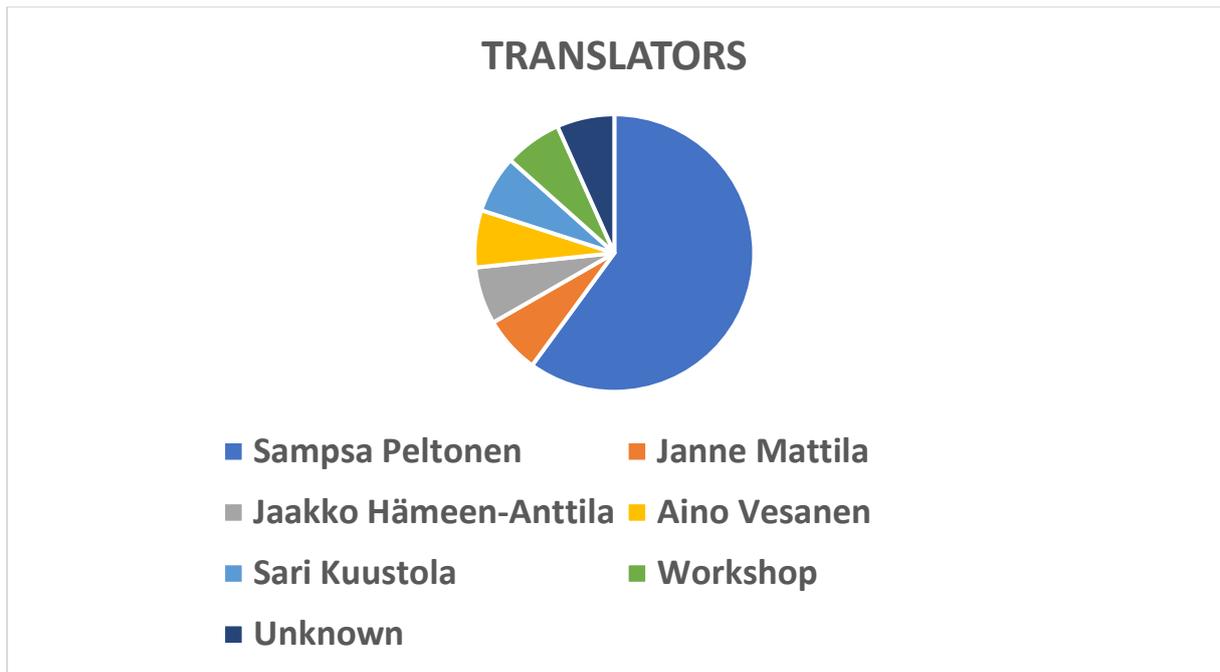
Another academic who has introduced the Finnish reader to several important works is adjunct professor **Marko Juntunen**.<sup>84</sup> Like the other academics mentioned earlier, Juntunen, whose background is in social anthropology and Middle Eastern studies, has not published any translations in the last ten years.

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Aino Vesanen on 29.4.2021.

<sup>83</sup> Correspondence with Janne Mattila, 21–22.3.2021.

<sup>84</sup> In the years 1998–99, Juntunen translated Mohammad Choukri's 'Plain Bread' as well as 'The Time of Mistakes'. He also translated Finland-based Iraqi writer Jusif Abu Al Fawz's 'Astonishment's Bird' (طائر الدهشة).



All the translators related to this study translate literature as a part-time activity, undertaken in their free time as a passion or as a moral obligation. Needless to say, translating literature for a living is rather difficult.

#### **4.2. Conditions of work and translation quality monitoring**

According to a paper published by the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters, the remuneration of literary translators in Finland ranges between 8 and 11.6 euros per 1,000 characters. It is worth noting that most literary translators are freelancers. Hence, they cover their own pensions and annual leave. These costs can easily take over 35% of the fee.<sup>85</sup> As if this alone was not challenging enough, some publishers set a condition of securing a grant before the translator can receive payment; therefore, applying for translation grants from associations or organizations remains the literary translator's best option.

It has to be added that the remuneration does not take into consideration the linguistic and cultural differences between language pairs. As translator Aino Vesanen rightly puts it, literary translators should be paid a decent salary, taking into account that the more the

<sup>85</sup> [www.sktl.fi/@Bin/71a715e74536a72903e989c2ee7ed281/1619967944/application/pdf/344577/KOHTUULLINEN%20KORVAUS%2026.2.2014.pdf](http://www.sktl.fi/@Bin/71a715e74536a72903e989c2ee7ed281/1619967944/application/pdf/344577/KOHTUULLINEN%20KORVAUS%2026.2.2014.pdf), accessed 1.5.2021.

cultural and linguistic differences, the more challenging and time-costly it is to translate. Translating from Arabic into Finnish calls for a good amount of creativity as well as some bold translation strategies for the target text to be fluent and intelligible to the Finnish audience.<sup>86</sup>

### **4.3. The Finnish Association of Translators**

The Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters – known in Finland as SKTL, an acronym of its Finnish name – is a professional organization founded in 1955 whose main objectives include: advancing the professional interests of translators and interpreters; promoting national and international cooperation within the sector; fostering the education and training of translators and interpreters, thereby contributing to improved quality within the sector; and promoting compliance with international recommendations concerning translation and interpreting.<sup>87</sup>

The association has some 1,800 members, grouped into five sections. One of these sections is for literary translators. The association issues a monthly paper called *Kääntäjä-översättaren* which has been published uninterrupted since 1970. It is currently released ten times a year in issues eight or twelve pages long. The association supports literary translators in a number of ways. It offers advice,<sup>88</sup> seminars, workshops, grants, and awards several prizes. The first prize is designed to encourage literary translation into Finnish; the second encourage non-fiction translations into Finnish; the third is related to interpretation and the fourth to the spirit of customer service.

### **4.4. Quality and critical reception of translation**

The quality of translation in Finland is very high. However, there are no verification mechanisms available to measure quality. There are also no journals specializing in literary reviews of translated works. However, there are several literary journals and daily newspapers which review some newly translated works – usually more as a product than as a translation.

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Aino Vesanen on 29.4.2021. Similar views were shared by Sampsa Peltonen, interviewed on 7.4.2021.

<sup>87</sup> [www.sktl.fi](http://www.sktl.fi), accessed 13.3.2021.

<sup>88</sup> The association has a detailed guide directed at literary translators. The guide offers substantive practical information and legal advice: [www.kirjallisuudenkaantajanselviytymisopas.com/mita-liitto-tekee](http://www.kirjallisuudenkaantajanselviytymisopas.com/mita-liitto-tekee), accessed 29.4.21.

#### 4.5. Language and translation training opportunities

The department of Middle Eastern studies<sup>89</sup> at the University of Helsinki has been offering BA and MA programmes in Arabic since 1980, the year the Chair of Arabic was established.<sup>90</sup> Students of the department of Arabic can take some courses in translation but there are no degree programmes that concentrate on literary translation at the department or elsewhere. Students, however, can take a combination of courses through the Master's degree in translation and interpretation.<sup>91</sup>

Sadly enough, graduates from the department of Middle Eastern studies often do not attain fluency in Arabic let alone a deep knowledge of its literature. The very few people who have attained fluency spent substantial periods of time in Arabic-speaking countries.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, translating Arabic literature into Finnish requires not only a good grasp of Arabic, its literature and culture but also expertise in Finnish language and literature.

The **Finnish Literature Exchange** (FILI) offers numerous training possibilities for literary translators. It organizes fellowships, seminars, workshops and conferences as well as mentoring programmes. Although FILI's main role is making Finnish literature travel, it also offers training possibilities for translators of foreign literature into Finnish.<sup>93</sup> FILI has facilitated workshops for translators working between Finnish and Arabic and has supported their work in different ways. Moreover, FILI hosts an online platform that allows translators to keep in touch and helps publishers find translators according to their working languages.

### 5. Conclusions

There has been a surge in interest in Arabic literature in Finland in the last decade, especially following the arrival of unprecedented numbers of Arabic speakers in 2015, but most importantly thanks to Hassan Blasim's international success. 'It seems that for some readers it has been a bit of a revelation that books originally written in Arabic can be

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<sup>89</sup> [www2.helsinki.fi/en/faculty-of-arts/research/disciplines/cultures/middle-eastern-studies](http://www2.helsinki.fi/en/faculty-of-arts/research/disciplines/cultures/middle-eastern-studies), accessed 29.4.21.

<sup>90</sup> Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, 'Middle Eastern studies in Finland', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* (June 2004), 41–3.

<sup>91</sup> [www2.helsinki.fi/fi/opiskelijaksi/koulutusohjelmat/kaantamisen-ja-tulkkauksen-maisteriohjelma](http://www2.helsinki.fi/fi/opiskelijaksi/koulutusohjelmat/kaantamisen-ja-tulkkauksen-maisteriohjelma), accessed 24.4.21. The languages which can be combined with Finnish in this degree programme are English, Spanish, Japanese, French, Swedish, German and Russian, but some students have managed to include translation modules within their BA in Arabic.

<sup>92</sup> Introductory courses in Arabic are offered at a number of universities and schools around the country. However, advanced level courses are not offered anywhere, and it is therefore laudable that the Finnish Institute in the Middle East offers grants to study Arabic in the Middle East. [www.fime.fi/en/education](http://www.fime.fi/en/education), accessed 24.4.2021.

<sup>93</sup> Correspondence with Translation Programme Manager Merja Aho, 24–28.3.2021.

interesting for them. Here, the facilitating factor is obviously that Blasim's works have a direct connection with Finland.'<sup>94</sup>

There are Arabic-speaking writers and artists who either live in Finland or are Finnish citizens. There is more debate now about the condition of Arabic literature in this part of the world,<sup>95</sup> and about the place 'new Finnish literature' has in it.<sup>96</sup> Despite this positive change, the Finnish reader still has an extremely narrow idea about Arabic literature. Classical, modern and contemporary novels are yet to be translated into Finnish not because of a lack of interest but because of a lack of expertise.

Finnish publishers are interested in good Arabic books, despite the fact that choosing a text from any language other than English and Nordic languages is a risk. Providing sample translations into English of the IPAF's short-listed books, for example, would help publishers find these works. Such a catalogue of sample translations could help promote Arabic literature and make it travel better.

YEAR	PUBLICATIONS
2010	2
2011	1
2012	1
2013	2
2015	3
2016	1
2018	1
2019	2
2020	1
2021	1

The number of annual publications of Arabic titles in Finnish translation is modest, as the chart above shows. However, all the published works are direct translations and most of them are well received.

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with translator Sampsa Peltonen on 7.4.2021.

<sup>95</sup> Ahmed Al-Nawas, *A View of the Conditions of Arabic Literature in the Nordic Region* (Helsinki: Publications of the Culture for All Service, 2017).

<sup>96</sup> Marko Juntunen, 'Irakilainen satiiri syntyy Kallion kuppilassa' (An Iraqi satire is born in a café in the Kallio district), *Maailman Kuvalehti* (10/2009), 14–17.

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