

Arabic Arithmetic: the Abjad Numerical System

(Some light reading material)

The Abjad numerical system is a simple substitution cipher that relates numbers to the Arabic alphabet. It is mentioned in traditional children's guides to reading the Qur'an popular in the Indian subcontinent, such as the *Qa'idah Baghdadi* (to repeat: this is a children's study text, not an 'Iraqi terrorist group), as well heavy grammar texts such as Haywood & Ahmed and Wright's *Grammar*. The 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet take values in units from one to ten, then in tens until a hundred, then in hundreds until a thousand. Vowels (harakat) have no numerical value. The following are the numerical equivalents of each Arabic letter (where capitalisation is used instead of the standard dot below a letter):

alif	1	ba'	2	jim	3	dal	4	ha'	5
waw	6	zay	7	Ha'	8	Ta'	9	ya'	10
kaf	20	lam	30	mim	40	nun	50	sin	60
'ayn	70	fa'	80	sad	90	qaf	100		
ra'	200	shin	300	ta'	400	tha'	500	kha'	600
dhal	700	dad	800	Za'	900	ghayn	1000		

The order of letters is memorised using the following mnemonic of meaningless words with arbitrary vowels:

Abjad hawwaz HuTTy kalamun (or kaliman) sa'faS qurishat (or qarshat) thakhkhadh DaZZagh

(It is this same order of letters that gives rise to lists in Arabic text being "numbered" alif, ba', jim, dal, ha', etc. rather than alif, ba', ta', tha', etc.)

Although the system developed links with esoteric knowledge, magic etc. (see Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, Anchor Books, 1st ed., 1971, where he uses Abjad to explore the meanings of various Sufi terms and names, often with seemingly-contrived connections), it is occasionally used also by orthodox Sunni scholars, as in the following examples.

Note that in all these cases, the system is used to denote numbers by letters or words and NOT vice-versa, so the popular modern practice of replacing the Basmalah by its numerical equivalent 786 is an inversion of correct usage.

1) The poetical lines used to remember the dates of birth and death of Imam Malik b. Anas:

Fakhr-ul-a'immati Maliku
Ni'm-al-imam al-saliku
Mawliduhu najmu hudan
Wafatuhu faza Maliku

Pride of the Imams: Malik
An excellent Imam, Traveller on the Path!
His year of birth is the star of guidance
His year of death is "Malik has succeeded."

Therefore, Imam Malik's year of birth is NaJM ("star"), $N+J+M = 50+3+40 = 93$ AH. His year of death is FAZa MALiKu ("Malik has succeeded"), $F+A+Z+M+A+L+K = 80+1+7+40+1+30+20 = 179$ AH.

2) Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751), in his Jala' al-Afham fi l-Salat wa l-Salam 'ala Khayr al-Anam (Polishing the Mind by sending Blessings and Peace upon the Best of Mankind), Maktabah al-Mutanabbi, Cairo, N.D., p. 103, says that the Torah contains a prophecy referring to the Prophet descended from Isma'il who would be "BiMADMAD" (ba', mim, alif, dal, mim, alif, dal). He argues that this is equivalent to MuHaMMaD since the two are numerically equivalent, both being equal to 92.

3) In the classic poetical text on Tajwid by Shams al-Din Muhammad b. al-Jazari (751-833), the author describes it as having "Qaf and Zay lines in number," i.e. 107 lines.

4) In the simpler poetical text on Tajwid by Sulayman al-Jamzuri (12th Century H), the Tuhfat al-Atfal, the author says, "Its lines are NaDD," i.e. 58 in number, and "Its date is 'bushra liman yutqinuha' ('good tidings for the one who perfects it')," i.e. the year 1198.

5) The contemporary Shaykh of Hadith 'Abdul Ghaffar Hasan often uses the Abjad system, including giving some of his grandchildren "historical names," where the year of birth is encoded in the name. For example, he states in his *Intikhab-e-Hadith*¹ that Imam al-Bukhari's dates of birth (194) and death (256) encode as SiDQ (Truthfulness) and NUR (Light) respectively.

The Abjad system is often misused in futile attempts to foretell the future from the Qur'an: predict the coming of the Mahdi, Jesus, and even the Day of Judgment, especially using the huruf muqatta'at that occur at the beginning of certain surahs. It should, however, be of interest to Arabic and mathematics teachers, as well as to children and adults in general, especially parents. It may also be helpful in navigating through the

¹ "Selection of Hadith", written at the request of Mawlana Mawdudi as the basis of Hadith study for Jama'at-e-Islami members – Shaykh 'Abdul Ghaffar later left the Jama'at, along with Amin Ahsan Islahi, Dr. Israr Ahmed and others, after a serious disagreement with Mawdudi, may Allah have mercy upon him.

modern nightmare of choosing and remembering usernames, passwords, PIN numbers etc.

To reiterate, numbers are remembered as words and phrases, rather than vice-versa, underlining the superiority of language, especially Arabic, over mathematics in the Islamic tradition. This would seem to support Hamza Yusuf Hanson's point that this is in significant contrast to the Western tradition, where the influence of mathematician-philosophers such as Descartes and Newton (who were not familiar with Arabic!) meant that mathematics came to be regarded as being superior to language in its capacity to convey Truth. The highest truths are spiritual truths, and these can only be expressed, if at all, through language. Language reaches its peak with pure Arabic, and Arabic reaches its peak with the Qur'an.

In the Name of Allah, Most Merciful, Ever Merciful. The Most Merciful! He taught the Qur'an. He created Man. He taught him speech ... (Qur'an, opening of Surah al-Rahman or Chapter: The All-Merciful)

Usama Hasan

London,

28th Dhu l-Qi'dah 1422 / 10th February 2002.