

The Amiri typeface

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In 1905, the famous Bulaq printing press in Cairo (also known as al-Amiriya, the royal press) issued a new Arabic typeface as part of reviving the then moribund printing press. This typeface later came to be one of the most widely used and highly regarded Arabic typefaces, even in the digital era.

Arabic has strong calligraphic traditions with many styles, and Naskh (“to copy”) is the most commonly used style in typesetting. One of the most novel features of the Bulaq typeface is maintaining the aesthetics of Naskh calligraphy while meeting the requirements (and limitations) of typesetting, a balance that is not easily achieved.

Amiri is a revival of that typeface, and though it is not the first one, I believe it is the most elaborate and most complete, as all other revivals omit many of the letter forms in the metal type either for simplicity or limitations of early digital systems. On the other hand, features that are merely a result of the limitations of metal typesetting are not reproduced in Amiri, when appropriate.

Work on the Amiri typeface started slowly in late 2008, with the first alpha release in November 2010 and the first beta in December 2011. Though formally still in beta stage, it is now considered to be mature enough for general use. It will not be marked stable until there are no metric-incompatible changes planned.

The Amiri family includes regular, bold, slanted and bold slanted fonts. Though slanted type is not a particularly Arabic concept, it is provided because of widespread use in contemporary typesetting, especially on the web, and right-leaning fake-slanted Arabic is very unnatural. The bold font is not as polished as the regular one, and still needs more work.

Amiri fully covers the “Arabic” and “Arabic Supplement” blocks in version 6.0 of Unicode, and thus it supports any language written in Arabic that is supported by Unicode. This includes, for example, Arabic, Fula, Hausa, Jawi, Kashmiri, Kurdish, Ottoman Turkish, Pashto, Persian, Punjabi, Sindhi, Swahili, Urdu, Uyghur and Wolof. Work on new Arabic additions to version 6.1 of the standard is under way. “Arabic Presentation Forms–A” and “Arabic Presentation Forms–B” blocks are also covered for the sake of completeness, though they are composed mostly of compatibility characters.

Great care has been taken to make sure Amiri can be used to typeset the Qur'an (the book of Islam)

قالَ دَبْلِيمُ الْمَلِكُ لِيَبْدَا الْفِيلَوْفِ : قَدْ سَعَتُ هَذَا الْمَلَكُ ،
فَاضْرِبْ لِي مَثَلَ رَجُلٍ كَثُرَ أَعْدَاؤُهُ ، وَاحْدَقُوا بِهِ مِنْ كُلٌّ

Sample from Kalilah wa Dimnah, Bulaq, 1938.

أَبْجَدْ هُوَ حَطِيْ كَلْمَنْ سَعْفَصْ قَرْشَتْ ثَخَذْ ضَطْغَ .٪۹۸۷۶۵۴۳۲۱۰
أَبْجَدْ هُوَ حَطِيْ كَلْمَنْ سَعْفَصْ قَرْشَتْ ثَخَذْ ضَطْغَ .٪۹۸۷۶۵۴۳۲۱۰
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أَبْجَدْ هُوَ حَطِيْ كَلْمَنْ سَعْفَصْ قَرْشَتْ ثَخَذْ ضَطْغَ .٪۹۸۷۶۵۴۳۲۱۰

The four styles in the Amiri family.

صِفْ خَلَقَ خَوْدٍ كَمِثْلِ الشَّمْسِ إِذْ بَرَّغَتْ
يَحْظَى الْضَّرِيعُ بِهَا نَجَّلَةً مِعْطَارِ

Arabic pangram set in Amiri.

by providing the needed glyphs and shaping rules, sometimes working around the shortcomings of Unicode.

Amiri is free software, available under the terms of the SIL Open Font License (OFL) v1.1. Additional free licenses will be considered if the need arises (e.g., to remix it with another free typeface).

The development of the Amiri typeface has been supported by the TUG development fund and Google Web Fonts, as well as generous donations from enthusiastic users. Amiri also owes much of its existence to the great help offered by its users reporting bugs, testing on platforms and configurations to which I do not have access, and offering great insight on various aspects of typesetting and language support.

Short to medium-term plans for Amiri include coverage of recently added Arabic characters to Unicode, polishing the bold font, and spinning off specialized fonts, e.g., a font for Qur'an typesetting with defaults that are more suitable for Qur'an than regular text. Longer-term plans include math and display companions.

Amiri has been developed exclusively using free software, mainly FontForge, Inkscape, Python and VIM.

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<http://amirifont.org>