On the Arabic Letters Feh & Qaf

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During the early stages of Arabic script, the shapes used for letters Feh and Qaf were often indistinguishable. Eventually, the two letters were rendered distinct through the use of dot marks. Also, in separate and final form, the Qaf tended to possess a deeper bowl than the Feh. These two visual features have remained in place to this day and continue to distinguish between Feh and Qaf.

In most of the Arab realm, the Feh carried one dot above, while the Qaf carried two: ف ق

In Morocco, on the other hand, both letters carried a single dot. The Feh carried it below, while the Qaf carried it above: ڢ ڧ . This convention came to be the norm for the Moroccan (Maghribi) style of writing. The letter Feh in Morocco usually looked like ڢ in contrast to ف used elsewhere. The difference between these two glyphs is comparable to the difference between **a** and **ɑ** in the Roman alphabet.

In the following graphic showing traditional text written in Moroccan style, the Fehs are marked by green rectangles, while the Qafs are enclosed in orange rectangles.

In a more modern context, the following image shows a hand-painted traffic sign advising drivers to stop at a checkpoint. The Arabic word for *stop* (قف) consists of two letters, Qaf followed by Feh. As in the previous image, the two letters (at the top of the sign) are marked by orange and green rectangles.

The hand-painted sign makes use of the Moroccan convention of the dot above for the Qaf and the dot below for the Feh.

In contrast, a more recent typeset sign uses the standard Arabic convention of two dots above the Qaf and one for the Feh.

The orthography of Modern Standard Arabic is based on the same closed repertoire of letters and marks in all Arabic-speaking countries. Stylistic preferences can vary from one region to the other, but the repertoire does not. The following image is particularly interesting because it presents a medley of signs from different periods and distinct styles. Both larger signs display the street (French *rue*) names in Arabic and French. Best translated as *alley*, the Arabic word (زنقة) happens to include a Qaf—highlighted in turquoise. In the sign on the right, the Qaf is carrying two dots, while the one on the left carries one: two visual conventions, side by side, for the same letter. The stylistic choices depicted by the more recent signage in Morocco demonstrate that it is aligning itself—at least, in

the public sphere—with pan-Arabic orthographic practice. This shift does not indicate a change in the repertoire of letters, but only a change in style. The Feh remains a Feh and so does the Qaf.


Unfortunately, the Arabic fonts supplied with MS Windows and macOS systems have never supported this variation as a stylistic choice. More recent fonts such as Arabic Typesetting (MS Windows) have added support for characters U+06A2 ڢ and U+06A7 ڧ, but no glyph variants for the standard Feh and Qaf (U+0641 & U+0642). Recognizing this deficiency, Monotype's Bustani font includes support for the glyph variants through the stylistic set feature of OpenType. In the following sample, the underlying text for both lines is identical. The top line shows the default style, while the Moroccan stylistic set was activated for the second line. All occurrences of Feh and Qaf have been highlighted.

What about taking care of such a difference through a locale-specific setting? In the case of Moroccan, such an approach would not be acceptable because the variation is not always desirable. A locale-specific approach is most appropriate when a particular variation is universally accepted. For instance, in the style used for Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uyghur languages, the bowl of the Feh is typically deep like that of the Qaf: ڧ . Should these languages then use U+06A7 instead of the standard Feh (U+0641)? No, they should not. In practice, the readers of these languages use the standard Feh because they are aware that they consider it semantically identical to the Feh of the Arabic language. Historically speaking, some styles have depicted the final and separate shapes of Feh with a deep bowl as of the Qaf, as the following sample of Maghribi style confirms:
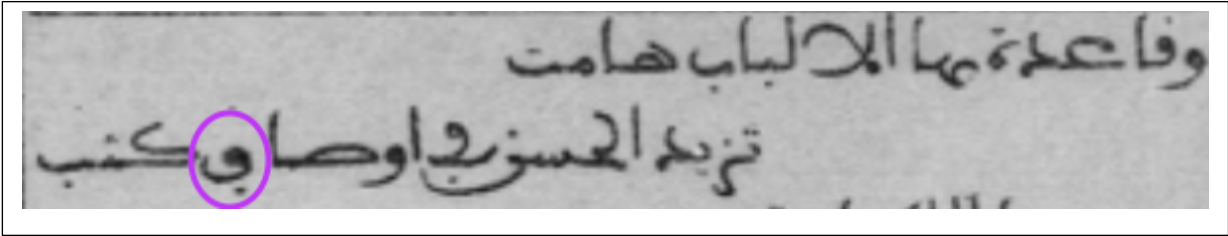
When would the use of the standard Feh and Qaf (U+0641 & U+0642) be deemed inappropriate? Let's consider the case of the Bambara language (a.k.a. Bamana, used in Mali) when written in Arabic script. Wherever the Feh or Qaf appear, they are invariably written in traditional Maghribi form. The following sample shows multiple occurrences of Feh [1]:
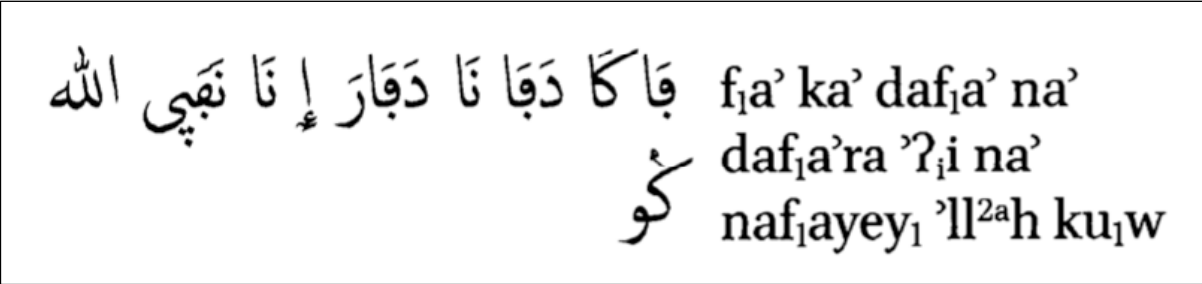
In Bambara, the Feh always appears with a lower dot. Its readers expect nothing else. It would make sense in such a case to always use U+06A2 ٮ and U+06A7 ڧ.

[1] Meikal Mumin & Kees Versteegh (eds.), *The Arabic Script in Africa: Studies in the Use of a Writing System*. Brill (Leiden). 2014.