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# Decoding Daesh: Why is the new name for ISIS so hard to understand?

By Alice Guthrie  
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Arabic translator Alice Guthrie investigates 'Daesh', the name for ISIS adopted by several world leaders. But how can a name undermine a terrorist organisation? And why do the English-speaking media find the name so difficult to understand?

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A peaceful demonstration in Baniyas, Syria on 6 May 2011 in response to the Bayda and Baniyas massacres ([https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayda\\_and\\_Baniyas\\_massacres](https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayda_and_Baniyas_massacres)).

Photograph: SYRIAN FREEDOM (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/https://www.flickr.com/photos/syrian-freedom-captured/5736128537>)

Over the last few months, there has been a concerted effort by several senior global politicians (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/tony-abbott-say-hell-now-use-daesh-instead-of-isil-for-death-cult-but-why>) to give a new name to the group known as ISIS, or Islamic State, IS or ISIL (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-vs-islamic-state-vs-isil-vs-daesh-what-do-the-different-names-mean-9750629.html>). That new name is 'Daesh'. If you've followed coverage of this attempted official linguistic sea change, you'll have gathered that the new name, although it's just an Arabic acronym equivalent to the English 'ISIS', apparently delegitimises the organisation, mocks them, and thus drives them to threaten taking violent retribution on anyone who uses it.

But why does this acronym have this power, and what's so offensive about it? If your access to news media is only in English, you might still be none the wiser. You may have got the impression from this coverage that the *exact* meaning and connotations of the word cannot quite be fathomed by anyone – that this word is a nebulous drifter, never to be pinned down. Basically, the coverage seems to imply, it's obscured by a *veil*, like so much else in the Arabo-Islamic world, and we can't hope to get it spelled out for us. It's far too Eastern and weird for that.

Well, I'm an Arabic translator, so my work revolves around pinning down and spelling out Arabic words and explaining them in English, and I'm here to let you know that there's nothing mysterious about this new acronym: it may be from a language quite different to English, and an Eastern one at that, but trust me: it can be explained.

## Linguistic Misunderstandings

*It's really not that complicated, and certainly not uncharted territory at all.*

I've come across some wildly inaccurate blethering lately about the word's significance and its signification: even if you don't know any Arabic at all, you might have been surprised to read in your major liberal broadsheet that although this new name is a transliteration of the Arabic acronym equivalent to ISIS, there are 'certain schools of thought' as to what the name means, or that you are being offered

analysis based on ‘rough translations’ of the words in the acronym. If you’re particularly observant, you may have asked yourself how one of the words in the Arabic acronym of ‘Islamic State’ in Iraq and Syria can also mean ‘to crush or trample underfoot’ (as a major UK broadsheet faithfully ‘explained’ recently) – perhaps pondering, over your cornflakes, which of the words is the one with this double meaning: ‘state’ or ‘Islamic’, ‘Iraq’ or ‘Syria’? And wondering why you haven’t ever heard tell of this strange phenomenon before? If you’re a linguist, you will have scoffed at repeated references to a word that seems to shift between being a noun and a verb according to how it’s ‘conjugated’, taking extravagant semiotic leaps along the way. Perhaps, getting the impression from all this that the Arabic language is such uncharted territory, you even got inspired to start learning it, and get stuck in at the East–West decoding coalface? Is this ringing any Orientalist bells

([https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism\\_%28book%29](https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_%28book%29))? But it’s really not that complicated, and certainly not uncharted territory at all.

The main misapprehensions about the word currently circulating in our media boil down to the following list:

- That *daesh* is an Arabic word in its own right (rather than an acronym) meaning ‘a group of bigots who impose their will on others’
- That it can be ‘differently conjugated’ to mean either the phrase above or ‘to trample and crush’
- That one of the words in the acronym also means ‘to trample or crush’
- That it is an insult or swearword in its own right
- That it has different meanings in the plural form

Read around a bit, across several UK and US broadsheets, and you will quickly spot the same misinformation being repeated almost word for word: publications are either quoting each other as supposed reliable sources on the story, with acknowledgments, or simply repeating each other’s lines without explicitly referencing them. In most cases, the explanation is not only wrong, it doesn’t actually make sense. But why all this speculation? Why so much mystery? Why are phrases like ‘rough translation’ and ‘possibly linked to this word’ being used, making the story out to be as elusive and contested as many of the political developments on the ground in Syria? Clearly none of these journalists or their researchers have accessed an Arabic/English dictionary (there are many freely searchable online) nor – even easier – contacted an arabophone, to check these basic facts.

### Arabic Acronyms as Activism

*In Arabic, acronyms are not anything like as widely used as they are in English, and so arabophones are not as used to hearing them as anglophones are. Thus, the creation and use of a title that stands out as a nonsense neologism for an organisation like this one is inherently funny, disrespectful, and ultimately threatening of the organisation’s status.*

So what *does* Daesh really mean? Well, D.A.E.SH is a transliteration of the Arabic acronym formed of the same words that make up I.S.I.S in English: ‘Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’, or ‘الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام’ (*‘al-dowla al-islamiyya fii-il-i’raaq wa-ash-shaam’*). That’s the full name chosen by the organisation, and – when used in full – it’s definitely how they want to be referred to. In Arabic, just like in English, that phrase consists of six words, four of which make it into the acronym (‘in’ and ‘and’ are omitted): ‘دولة *dowla*’ (state) + ‘إسلامية *islamiyya*’ (Islamic) + ‘عراق *i’raaq*’ (Iraq) + ‘شام *shaam*’. That last word, ‘shaam’, is variously used in Arabic to denote Damascus (in Syrian dialect) ‘Greater Syria’ / the Levant, or Syria – hence the US-preferred acronym ISIL, with the L standing for Levant. In Arabic there is a single letter for the sound ‘sh’, hence our transliteration of the acronym having five letters, not four. And the vowel which begins the word ‘*islamiyya*’ becomes an ‘a’ sound when differently positioned in a word, hence the acronym being pronounced ‘*da’ish*’ when written in Arabic, and the ‘a’ coming over into our transliteration of the acronym. Of course the amazing Arabic letter ‘ع’ which begins the word for ‘Iraq’ is unpronounceable to an anglophone, and can’t be written in Latin letters, hence the use of an ‘e’ (or occasionally an ‘e’) in the transliteration.

Still with me? Nothing mysterious there – or nothing that anyone who speaks Arabic wouldn’t be able to explain. It’s not a previously existing word in its own right. It does indeed now mean ‘tyrannical, despotic, murdering fundamentalists who claim to be Islamic and claim to be a state’ but only as a result of how it sounds (more on that in a minute) and as a result of the associations that quickly attach to a neologism, in the same way that they have attached to the word ISIS. So it’s not based on any previous – or mysterious, or quasi-mystical Eastern – meaning.

And so if the word is basically ‘ISIS’, but in Arabic, why are the people it describes in such a fury about it? Because they hear it, quite rightly, as a challenge to their legitimacy: a dismissal of their aspirations to define Islamic practice, to be ‘a state for all Muslims’ and – crucially – as a refusal to *acknowledge and address them as such*. They want to be addressed as exactly what they claim to be, by people so in awe of them that they use the pompous, long and delusional name created by the group, not some funny-sounding made-up word. And here is the very simple key point that has been overlooked in all the anglophone press coverage I’ve seen: in Arabic, acronyms are not anything like as widely used as they are in English, and so arabophones are not as used to hearing them as anglophones are. Thus, the creation and use of a title that stands out as a nonsense neologism for an organisation like this one is inherently funny, disrespectful, and ultimately threatening of the organisation’s status. Khaled al-Haj Salih, the Syrian activist who coined the term back in 2013, says that initially even many of his fellow activists, resisting Daesh alongside him, were shocked by the idea of an Arabic acronym, and he had to justify it to them by referencing the tradition of acronyms being used as names by Palestinian organisations (such as Fatah). So saturated in acronyms are we in English that we struggle to imagine this, but it’s true.

### Satire and Made-up Monsters



*The use of this word is part of a multi-pronged, diverse range of efforts by Arabs and Muslims to reject the terrorists' linguistic posturing, their pseudo-classical use of Arabic, their claims to Quranic authority and an absolute foundation in sacred scripture, as reflected in their pompous name.*

All of this means that the name lends itself well to satire, and for the arabophones trying to resist Daesh, humour and satire (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://countercurrentnews.com/2014/09/muslims-around-the-world-are-making-parody-videos-to-mock-isis/>) are essential weapons in their nightmarish struggle. But the satirical weight of the word as a weapon, in the hands of the Syrian activists who have hewn it from the rock of their nightmare reality, does not just consist of the weirdness of acronyms. As well as being an acronym, it is also only one letter different from the word 'daes' *داعس*, meaning someone or something that crushes or tramples. Of course that doesn't mean, as many articles have claimed, that 'daesh' is 'another conjugation' of the verb 'to crush or trample', nor that that is 'a rough translation of one of the words in the acronym' – it's simply one letter different from this other word. Imagine if the acronym of 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' spelt out 'S.H.I.D' in English: activists and critics would certainly seize the opportunity to refer to the organisation as 'shit' – but I think it's safe to say that no serious foreign media outlet would claim that 'shit' was another conjugation of the verb 'shid', nor a rough translation of it. Of course, that analogy is an unfair one, given the hegemonic global linguistic position of English, not to mention the heightened currency of scatological words; but there is a serious point to be made here about the anglophone media's tendency to give up before it's begun understanding non-European languages.

And obviously understanding things outside of English, and explaining them to each other via our (social)media hive mind is hugely important on many levels: in the broadest sense, it allows us to attempt to take our place as global citizens, and feeds our connection to other humans on planet Earth. Sadly, the story of the word 'Daesh' is neither the only nor even the worst example of anglophone media failing us in this regard. But there's something specifically important in this particular story which is being overlooked as a result of all the lazy journalism around it: the use of this word is part of a multi-pronged, diverse range of efforts by Arabs and Muslims to reject the terrorists' linguistic posturing, their pseudo-classical use of Arabic, their claims to Quranic authority and an absolute foundation in sacred scripture, as reflected in their pompous name. This ridiculous claim has of course been masterfully (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://binbayyah.net/english/2014/09/24/fatwa-response-to-isis/>) and witheringly (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://lettertobaghdadi.com/14/english-v14.pdf>) deconstructed at the Islamic level, but at the secular level, satire is a crucial weapon in the fight against these maniacs: there is a fertile tradition of Syrian satire as not only defiance but coping strategy (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5RifYxWr-4>), and which has been quite under-reported. In satirical Arabic media (and conversation) various diminutives of the word (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://bedna7al.com/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9/%D8%AF%D9%8E%D8%B9%D9%8E%D8%B4%D9%8E-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AC%D9%85-%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8>) have also gone viral – elegantly diminishing their subject, belittling them, patronising and relegating them to a zone beyond any formal naming in a single sweep.

*'If an organisation wants to call itself 'the light', but in fact they are 'the darkness', would you comply and call them 'the light'??'*

Whether the word Daesh is insulting to its subject because it sounds ridiculous, or because it actually sounds sinister, depends slightly on who you ask. Some Syrians I've talked to rate the satirical value of the word very highly; for others, such as al-Haj Salih himself, however, the main weight of the word is not around humour, but around two very serious points he and others make. First of these is that both the shape of the word and the combination of letters in it are redolent of words from *al-jahaliyya*, the pre-Islamic dark ages or 'age of ignorance' that – as well as being a time rich in poetry and narrative heritage – has huge connotations of hideous barbarity in the popular imagination, being the realm of jinns and monsters and evil spirits and marauding freaks. This has also been overlooked in anglophone coverage, or been confused with an idea of the word having a previous set meaning in and of itself: as we know, it doesn't. But given the connotations of this *type* of word, it sounds (to many an arabophone ear) very clearly like it must denote some crazed, bloodthirsty avatar belching back out from the guts of history. As al-Haj Salih very gently and firmly expresses to me by phone when I interview him for this piece, 'If an organisation wants to call itself 'the light', but in fact they are 'the darkness', would you comply and call them 'the light'?' The second, and equally important, point that al-Haj Salih stresses to me is another take on why a neologism is insulting: it's an obviously fictitious name, for an obviously fictional concept. Once again, the movement's claim to legitimacy as a state and to rule is being rejected as nonsense, reflected in a fabricated nonsense name for them.

So the insult picked up on by Daesh is not just that the name makes them sound little, silly, and powerless, but that it implies they are monsters, and that they are made-up.

*Originally hailing from the city of Raqqa, Daesh's current Syrian headquarters, al-Haj Salih says his main goal in making a new name for Daesh was to avoid people getting used to referring to a tyrannical and despotic movement as a 'state'.*

All of this is why some Syrian activists therefore see it as so important that use of the word 'Daesh' spreads, and have been working hard to make that happen – so effectively in fact, as we know, that the word has been taken on by several global heads of state and their associated media, who have a limited grasp of the specifics behind the term. Originally hailing from the city of Raqqa, Daesh's current Syrian headquarters, al-Haj Salih says his main goal in making a new name for Daesh was to avoid people getting used to referring to a tyrannical and despotic movement as a 'state'. Although he regretted his efforts when the word was used by Assad, and although he was



the victim of death threats and assassination attempts in Raqqa (he is now based abroad), on the whole he has been pleased to see the word widely adopted by the Arabic media since summer 2013. In terms of its use by global heads of state and media, he feels that this is only natural, and right, as 'The people who suffer most at the hands of Daesh should decide what they are called'.

### A Peculiarly Anglophone Problem?

There is surely an interesting parallel between the refusal to use the name Daesh prefer, and our anglophone media's misreading of the word itself – every article that recycles the same confused notions about the word denies the concrete meaning of Arabic, and relegates it to being a fluid and shifting language, inherently unintelligible.

It was noted in the Arabic press that the Spanish Secretary of State for Security, Francisco Martínez, correctly explained the link between the words 'daesh' and 'daes' in November when he made a speech requesting that Spanish media adopt the new term, and it's easy enough to find that explanation in the mainstream Spanish press (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2014/11/18/546b5776ca474117168b4592.html>). Although the French media is not entirely free of confusion around the word's meaning and origins – with some press articles clearly based on the same misreading of one or two sources as their anglophone counterparts are, or throwing in bizarre new angles such as that 'Daesh' is pejorative 'in Lebanon' – the crucial difference is that a quick search reveals articles in major French broadsheets that explain it without any problems ([https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/daesh-etat-islamique-la-guerre-des-noms-a-commence-22-09-2014-1865537\\_24.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/daesh-etat-islamique-la-guerre-des-noms-a-commence-22-09-2014-1865537_24.php)). If other dominant European languages can get it right in their media, why can't the anglophone media manage this little linguistic research task? Do we really live up to our stereotype of monolingual insularity this much, even at major broadsheet fact-checking level?

*This cannot fail to raise questions about the attitude to 'them' all this might reflect: is there something uniquely challenging for our anglophone media about Arabs and Muslims?*

It seems there might actually be a systemic unwillingness to explain, on the part of the mainstream anglophone media – or, at best, an assumption that these things will not be explicable. How else can one interpret this total disregard that has been shown for the easy research avenues available to anyone setting out to investigate the story of a name? There is a vast community of bilingual arabophone people in the anglophone world, not to mention all the academics and people like me with a good acquired command of Arabic, very easily found and contacted. Even if that somehow proved too difficult, what about all the resourceful tech-savvy young researchers capable of, well, copy-pasting words into an online dictionary? More worryingly, this cannot fail to raise questions about the attitude to 'them' all this might reflect: is there something uniquely challenging for our anglophone media about Arabs and Muslims? Would we accept this kind of journalistic linguistic fog about, say, Greece? Have you heard that Syriza is a 'rough translation' of a Greek verb meaning 'to wrest back power from a neoliberal global economic conspiracy of elite cronyism and structural inequality, and start a programme of radical resource redistribution and social justice, while wondering whether you will soon be ousted by a CIA-sponsored coup'? Well, just take my word for it, it is.

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Alice Guthrie is a freelance literary and media translator, writer, editor and researcher. She is a former Translator in Residence (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180612141828/https://www.freewordcentre.com/explore/projects/translators-in-residence>) at Free Word.

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