

Lost in Arabic Translation

by Abdurrahman R. Squires

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[Lost in Arabic Translation](#)

by Souheila Al-Jadda

The Christian Science Monitor - September 16, 2004

Here are some interesting excerpts from this article:

"...the word meaning "appear" sounds like bada. The word meaning "start" sounds like badaa, with a slight guttural inflection...But there is a big difference in saying, "He appeared to shoot," and "He started to shoot." It could mean the difference between an acquittal and a conviction...only 54 of 279 Arabic speakers employed by State are fluent. Of those, only six were fluent enough to appear on Arabic television programs...A former military translator...came forward to say she had mistranslated a letter from the Syrian government...She translated the letter as saying that the Syrians gave him permission to visit another country, Qatar. Later...she realized that the word "Qatar," could also mean "homeland" or "region"...Alouni said he was discussing the "[Nawawi 40](#)," a commentary of 40 of the Islamic prophet's sayings compiled by Imam Nawawi, a revered 13th century Islamic scholar. But in Arabic, the word "nawawi" also means "nuclear," and the interpreter thought Alouni was referring to 40 nuclear weapons."

From what I've read, lack of competent Arabic translators is a problem that has plagued the U.S. State Department and intelligence agencies for decades. There's an episode in the new novel [Harbor](#), by Lorraine Adams, which Umm Zaid in her recent [review](#) describes as follows:

"The law enforcement agents of the novel have genuinely good intentions -- to stop and prevent foreigners from committing acts of terrorism on our soil. But, ignorant of Arabic and Islamic customs, the agents follow the trail of the wrong people. Ignorant of naming customs, the agents assume the immigrants are using code names or aliases. They have a translator on staff -- a Jordanian who is unable to decipher the guttural Maghrebi Arabic the Algerians speak, which is a mixture of French, Arab, and Berber words. Has Aziz really said what the agents think he has? Is Ghazi's reading the Qur'an the signal they believe it is? Harbor asks, where does petty theft end and terror begin? How far are petty criminals willing to go in the pursuit of the buck? And the Muslim and / or immigrant reader wonders, could this happen to me?"

This should serve as food for thought who any one who doesn't realize that, when it comes to the Middle East, the U.S. government is stumbling, bumbling and tripping all over themselves.

Speaking of bumbling, last month's issue of the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) has a nice article (see link below) which describes how a lot of journalists were duped by the lies of the notoriously corrupt Ahmad Chalabi. He was telling them what they—and the Bush Administration for that matter—wanted to hear so critical thinking and skepticism quickly took a back seat to amassing evidence, however weak, to justify military action against Iraq. In spite of this being pretty much common knowledge now, especially since Chalabi has been hung out to dry, this article provides a lot of details that I haven't seen elsewhere and does it from the perspective of someone who knows the journalistic trade.

[How Chalabi Played the Press](#)

by Douglas McCollam

It comes as no surprise to me that Judith Miller, a self-appointed "expert" on Islam and the Middle East, fell prey to Ahmad Chalabi and is mentioned in the above article. If you want to see incompetence exposed and raked over the coals, **PLEASE** read the scathing [review](#), by the late [Dr. Edward Said](#), of Judith Miller's [God Has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting From a Militant Middle East](#). Frankly, I find it rather hard to believe that Miller's career survived in the aftermath of this dressing down by the well-known Palestinian Christian author of [Orientalism](#). In spite of this devastating review and Miller's continued bigoted, misinformed and shallow journalistic slant, just after 9/11 she was one of the "experts" on Islam that was regularly showing up on CNN and other news networks. It just goes to show you how simplistic and uninformed most of the dialogue is that's going on about the Middle East.

[A Devil Theory of Islam](#)

by Edward W. Said

A review of **God Has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting From a Militant Middle East**, by Judith Miller

Be careful or you might just learn something...

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