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Meeting of the working group on romanization systems

The stability and appropriateness of the United Nations system for the romanization of Arabic geographical names

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Introduction

1 The United Nations system for the romanization of Arabic was approved at the Second UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1972. At the Eighth UN Conference in 2002, the Arabic Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) reported that proposals for the modification of this system had been agreed by that Division, and that these proposals would be submitted to the League of Arab States for approval.

2 The proposals concern modifications to the romanization of five Arabic consonants:

UN-approved System		**Proposed Modifications**	
Ḥ	ḥ	H	h
Ṣ	ṣ	S	s
Ḍ	ḍ	D	d
Ṭ	ṭ	T	t
Ẓ	ẓ	Dh	dh

3 The proposed modifications to the first four of these consonants essentially represent stylistic alterations only. Underlining could certainly be used instead of the cedilla if a particular country were to prefer this; the system itself would not be materially affected. The fifth proposal, however, involves more than a stylistic alteration. It proposes the replacement of one consonant[1] (a modified "z") by a completely different digraph (a modified "dh"). The present paper puts forward two vital reasons why this proposed modification should be considered cautiously.

[1] The 17th letter of the Arabic alphabet

Reason 1: The stability of the current system

4 In the three decades since the approval of the UN system, it has been applied in several countries of the Arabic Division of UNGEGN. These countries, as identified by the UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems[2], are Iraq, Kuwait, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. A good illustration of the application of this system can be found in the experience of the General Directorate of Military Survey (GDMS) in Saudi Arabia, as noted in a paper submitted by that country to the Eighth UN Conference in 2002[3]. In its conclusion, the paper informs us that the UN 1972 system for the romanization of Arabic "…has been tested, approved and it is used in geographical names database (more than 75,000 names) and map production at GDMS."

Thus it is clear that a considerable amount of precious work already accomplished within the Arabic Division of UNGEGN would be jeopardised if the proposed modification were accepted.

Reason 2: The appropriateness of the current romanization

5 It is instructive to note that this particular Arabic consonant is rendered as a modified "z" by leading dictionaries from the Arabic language into 4 different receiver languages:

Into French (and English): it is rendered as **ẓ** in the *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français-Anglais*, R Blachère et al, multiple fascicules, 1963→

Into Russian: it is rendered as **з** with a subdot in the *Arabsko-Russkij Slovar'*, H K Baranov, 1984

Into German: it is rendered as **ẓ** in the *Arabisches Wörterbuch für die Schriftsprache der Gegenwart*, H Wehr, 1952

Into English: it is rendered as **ẓ** in the *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, edited by J M Cowan, 1971

The use of a modified "z" is therefore well established, and attested by leading academics, across a wide field of receiver languages: French, Russian, German, and English. It is important that the UN system's use of a modified "z" should not be interpreted as an exclusively English-language convenience.

Conclusion

6 This paper argues that the UN-approved system be retained as it has stood for 30-plus years, for reasons of stability and appropriateness. Should the use of cedillas be found less stylistically suitable than underlining, then the 17th letter of the Arabic alphabet would ideally be romanized as **z** and not as the proposed **dh**. Finally, since Arabic is acknowledged to be one single language spoken across the Arabic Division, the UN-approved system should be encouraged as the single system for Arabic in those countries of the Division which have not yet adopted it.

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[2] *Report on the current status of the United Nations romanization systems for geographical names*; Eighth UN Conference document E/CONF.94/CRP.81, submitted by UNGEGN

[3] *Geographic Names Transliteration in GDMS*; Eighth UN Conference document E/CONF.94/INF.77, submitted by Saudi Arabia