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REPORT OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN DIVISION

(OTHER THAN ARABIC)

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R E P O R T

of the

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN DIVISION

(other than arabic)

**GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEMS (GIS) AND THE TOPONYMIC DATA BASE  
IN ISRAEL - ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY**

The modern trend towards integrated and computerized information systems for all data which have geographical coordinates as their independent variable (named GIS for short) is beginning to affect toponymy. The "Survey of Israel", National Institute of Geodesy, Cartography and Geographical Information, is in the process of setting up the core of the national GIS. One of the aims - and tasks - of such a system is to generate interfaces, i.e. links, between the various data bases affecting, or affected by, the GIS. One of the first data bases so linked to the GIS is the toponymic gazetteer. On the one hand this is an ideal target for this process, since all records (in the computer sense) include the geographical coordinates of the name. On the other, the data describing and defining each toponym are not, as yet, sufficient for completely automated use of this file. Therefore, names placement cannot be performed entirely by automation; however, interactive cartographic processing on the screen supplies the human editing facility. Thus, very good progress is being made in first automatically "rough-placing" a name, and then, if further "fine adjustment" is required, stringing the name cartographically as required into its proper position, which may be curved and even winding. This is done interactively on the screen with the aid of powerful Arc/Info software. The Survey of Israel, as coordinating agent, invites all institutions in Israel concerned with

geographical names to use GIS-compatible forms and formats. This stresses the need for the sort of activities proposed by UNGEGN Working Group II concerning Automation and Toponymic Data Files, and in particular Resolution 17 of the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

#### TOPONYMS OF GREEK ORIGIN

In some non Greek-speaking countries in the Eastern Mediterranean area there can be found toponyms of Greek origin. In the main these are names of populated places and ruins. Some examples are Nablus (Neapolis), Tarabulus (Tripolis), Tarqumiya (Tetra komia), Fandaqumiya (Penta comia), Iskandaria and Iskandarun (Alexandria), and there are many others. While a recently initiated investigation into these names may constitute an intra-divisional research project, it could also - with, at least, four Divisions involved - be of inter-divisional interest. Studies of this kind, involving toponymy, geography, history, ethnography and linguistics, constitute ideal subjects for inter-disciplinary cooperation.

#### A SURVEY OF HISTORICAL PLACE NAMES IN ISRAEL

Toponyms change with time, and even with location. But besides leading an independent active life they are affected by documentation and the method of storage. Those place names which have found their repository only, or chiefly, in maps, may in time - sometimes in an uncontrolled way - change their location, or even be completely obliterated from the map. In other cases a name itself may undergo changes as a result of changes in documentation.

In the course of the past 50 years a not inconsiderable number of place names has disappeared from the topographic maps of Israel, mostly for reasons connected with cartographic processes, such as scale reduction and the generalization involved. Insofar

as such names were not ingested into the national toponymic data base, represented today by the official gazetteer, they are in danger of being lost. The Government Names Commission, as official toponymic authority of the State of Israel, therefore decided to make a survey of such names and in particular those which may shed light on the historical-toponymic process in the area. The survey is expected to last a number of years. The list of "resurrected" toponyms, when completed, will be put at the disposal of archaeologists, historians and linguists, as well as researchers in other disciplines concerned with the historical geography of the Land of the Bible. After proper ratification by the Government Names Commission, they will be added to the official gazetteer of Israel.

#### DENSITY OF STANDARDIZED NAMES

The computed density of standardized geographical names in Israel is  $0.327 \text{ sq. km}^{-1}$ , i.e. one official name per 3.06 sq. km. This number reflects only the names approved or given by the Government Names Commission, since it was founded in 1951. It thus includes all names of populated places with an independent administrative status as well as all "interurban" geographical names of any description. Excluded are names in urban areas, i.e. names given by local authorities within the area of their municipal jurisdiction. In the first quarter of 1989, 48 standardized names were added, at a density of one name per 431 sq. km.

#### INTER-DIVISIONAL ACTIVITY

In May, 1988, a talk was given by the representative of the "Eastern Mediterranean Division" (other than arabic) at the Landesvermessungsamt (State Cadastral Office) of Niedersachsen in Hannover, Federal Republic of Germany. The talk, which underscored the work of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and the Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names, was titled "Toponymy - serious aspects and light-hearted

considerations of a relatively unknown discipline", and demonstrated some of the principles touched upon, through examples from the areas covered by the Dutch-German and the Eastern Mediterranean Divisions. In the news media of numerous countries, but also in some otherwise excellent atlases, a very high proportion of foreign place names are still rendered by exonyms (sometimes unrecognizable by the local population) or else by transcription, and translation even of the names of cities. In the discussion following the talk the opinion was expressed by a member of the audience that standardization, including the standardization of geographical names, especially in school atlases, is a kind of cultural extermination. In reply it was said, inter alia, that the same might be said of the standardization of such items as weights and measures but which, in the end, benefited humanity.