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**Writing systems and pronunciation:
Romanization**

The Issue of the Romanisation System for the Arab Countries:
Between Legitimacy and Practices. Which Solutions?

Submitted by the Arabic Division **

**THE ISSUE OF THE ROMANISATION SYSTEM FOR THE ARAB COUNTRIES:
BETWEEN LEGITIMACY AND PARCTICES. WHICH SOLUTIONS?
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I) Introduction:

Since the adoption of the Arabic Romanization system in 1971 by the Arab League and its amendment by the United Nations Group of Experts for the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1972, there is a controversy as to its implementation by the Arab countries themselves.

From the 22 countries that compose the Arab world, only two countries which are Saudi Arabia and Libya fully implement this system in the cartographic documents that they publish or have published in the past!

The practices in the rest of the other Arab countries are very different: while some and they are the most numerous, do not apply any system and are satisfied only by using others transcription systems, they use Romanization' versions that are more or less suitable to their own context.

Jordan applies since the 90s the unamended original version of Romanization System called Beirut 1971 with the replacement of the letter "ZED" by "DHAD".

This paper tries to address the genesis of this system, the registered practices, the obstacles to its implementation and the suggested and recommended solutions to find a satisfactory outcome.

II) Genesis and internationally registered practices: UNGEGN and Arabic Division:

On the recommendation of the United Group of Experts for the Geographical Names in its 3rd Session (1971, New York), the Arab League adopted in Beirut, in August 23 to 31, 1971, in the presence of almost all Arab countries rulers at that date (16 countries), a Romanization system from Arabic to Latin characters.

This system was presented during the Second UN Conference of the Group of Experts on geographical names held in London in 1972.

Without any discussion or consultation either among the various UNGEGN Commissions or during the proceedings of the Second Conference and with the presence of only two Arab representatives at this conference, namely Lebanon and Egypt, it was decided without the Arab League' consultation to amend it and adopt it by the recommendation No. 8/II (!).

Hence the question of its legitimacy! Does this system have sufficient legitimacy to be recognized by the Arab countries as well as by the international community?

Did it receive enough cooperation, consultations and explanations to be proposed for adoption in 1972?

Could the failure to fulfill his criteria, by itself, justify its fragile legitimacy and the constantly observed questions since its adoption?

It should be noted that this system, later known for the different UNGEGN resolutions by the recommendation III / 9, as 'System of Beirut', is almost identical to the system BGN / PCGN 1956.

During the work of the 5th UNGEGN Session (New York, 1973) and again in the absence of the concerned Arab countries, it was decided, by the French proposal, to join to the 8/II resolution an addendum in which a variant called 'B' of the amended Beirut system was added. This variant based on the French pronunciation was specifically reserved for the Maghreb' countries supposed to be French speakers.

Following the resolution III / 9 of the Third Conference (Athens, 1977) which recommends that, due to *'the encountered technical and practical difficulties in the application of the amended Beirut system'*, the Arab countries have to meet and find a solution. The question of the application of this system and the encountered problems, were discussed again during the 8th UNGEGN Session (New York, 1979) where an Arab representative announced that the Arab countries met in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) and an agreement was reached for the implementation of this system by all Arab countries! (WP No. 55)

It is at the 17th UNGEGN Session (New York, 1994), and this time in the presence of more Arab countries, that the representative of France raised the issue of the implementation of the called Alternative B of the amended Beirut system, based on French phonetics.

A strong reaction and opposition from the present Arab countries including those of the Maghreb to the proposal of the representative of France was registered. All the Arab participants as well as other non-Arab delegations, stressed the linguistic unity of the Arab world and that in accordance with the principles of UNGEGN, each language should have only a single Romanization system.

A resolution calling *'the Arab League to continue its efforts to organize a conference devoted to the study of the encountered difficulties in the application of the amended Beirut 1972' system of transliteration and to submit as soon as a possible a solution to the UNGEGN '*, was adopted for this purpose, at the Seventh Conference (New York, 1997).

The issue of the Romanization' system from Arabic to Latin characters was again discussed during the work of the 20th UNGEGN Session (New York, 2000) where the Arab countries have not the issue of the system' application, but the introduction of new changes to the current system. (!). They were then told that any suggestion of change must be asked in writing and should be formalized by a resolution of the Conference. (See Report of the Session).

During the Eighth Conference (Berlin, 2002), the Arab countries present, without consulting the Arab League, absent, have attempted to introduce a new request of the amendment of the Beirut system. This includes in particular, the replacement of the cedilla, below some specific letters, by lines and replacing "Z " by "Dh'' for the Romanization of the corresponding arabic letter "ظ , Dhad " , .

In fact this proposal, except the letter ''Dhad'', is simply a return to the initial system adopted by the Arab League in 1971!

It should be noted that long before that date, only Jordan has applied this **new / old system**. (See WP No. 86 of the 18 Session, Geneva, 1996).

No significant official progress has been reported since there, except the Arab countries with the initiative on some of them, organized scientific and technical meetings on the issue of the management of geographical names in general and of the romanization system in particular.
Of these meetings, we can mention:

• The meeting in Tripoli (Libya) in December, 2004.
• The meeting in Beirut (Lebanon) in May, 2007.
• The meeting in Beirut (Lebanon) June, 2008.
• The meeting in Beirut (Lebanon) in May, 2010.

These have been attended by an average of fifteen Arab countries, with the presence of representatives of the Arab League.

Several general recommendations relating to the geographical names were adopted during these meetings (databases, atlases, etc.).

Regarding the romanization system, other changes were proposed, particularly during the third meeting (Beirut 2007) which has known the introduction of other letters.Participants in these meetings, unanimously, have agreed that this new system, called, **'Unified Arab System, 2007''** must first be presented to the Arab League for its transmission through diplomatic channels to all Member States for opinion and suggestions and after organizing an official conference under its auspices, for its final adoption. (See Report No. 2, 2005 Tripoli, No. 3, 2007, No. 4, 2008 and No. 5, 2010, Beirut).

 And it is only after this step that it will be presented to the UNGEGN, with a resolution' draft for its adoption.
This approach has been advocated in total respect to the fundamental UNGEGN principles which clearly stipulate that for a system to be applicable:

- It should be a consensus for its use by the countries sharing the same language, (See Terms of reference of the Romanization system' WG),
- The maximum of stability of the romanization systems (Resolution No. IV/15) is needed,
- The new romanization systems are considered for international use only if relevant countries implement them in their mapping production. (See Resolution No. IV/15),
- The romanization system must be unique (see Resolution I / 9),
- There must be a recognized legitimacy for this system, from an official authority.

III)   Why then, there is difficulty for the adoption of the Arabic romanization system?

This can be explained in part by the following factors:
- First, it should be noted, that the Arabic romanization system is shared by 22 states and consequently, with the process followed until now, it is extremely difficult to gather all of them in order to discuss and come out with a joint decision.
- The management of the problems related to geographical names do not have the same importance and differs from one country to another.
- Almost all the Arab countries do not have bodies in charge of the standardization of geographical names, and even those that have, are not so active.
- The existence of several local languages often having official or national status, in parallel with Arabic, is a factor that impedes the adoption of a given system. These languages have sounds that no Arab character can exactly reflect like the sound **GA** or **VA.**
- The lack in the Arab world of proven, stable and permanent competencies, in the field of geographical names.

Finally, some believe that the political depth related to the language issues and to the nomination in general and the lack of control of all the parameters associated with them, are elements helping at a certain caution**.**

The participants in the informal meetings mentioned above and in order to consider these points, advocated that each Arab country having some special linguistic specificities, could add to its

convenience, additional letters to transcribe the sounds that are not taken into account by this proposed new system.

In this case don't we risk to have 22 systems! Knowing that in almost all Arab countries, there are several languages in use. For example, in the Maghreb countries there are several languages called Berbers; In Somalia and Sudan, we also track several languages that are not even related to the Arab, etc...

IV) Advocated solutions to reach a consensus on the adoption and application of this system:

The romanization system proposed during the ordinary and informal meeting in 2007 and later précised should be submitted to the Arab League, in accordance with the related recommendations in order to submit it in an official way to all member States for review and possible enhancements.

It is only after this step, a formal conference under the auspices of the Arab League through its specialized structures including the ALECSO (the equivalent of Arab UNESCO), which should legitimately speak about this system.

This approach is consistent not only with the specific resolutions of the meetings held so far, but it is also compatible with the UNGEGN Resolution No. VII/4.

It should be recalled that in an attempt to resolve this match, a working session, involving the UNGEGN President and the Vice Chairperson was held in Tunis in 2007 with the General Director of the ALECSO. Promises have been given so that the Arab League through its structure takes an initiative to implement the provisions of this resolution.

We do believe that this objective approach which is rational, thoughtful, consistent with the various UNGEGN recommendations as well as with those of various Arabic Division' meetings, if followed, will be able to provide the best consensual solutions for the adoption of this Romanization system by the entire Arab world.

We are also convinced that the non-application of this system is not due to the differences between the various Arab states on its