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REPORT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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In names standardization work, both at the international and national levels, major efforts have been expended to romanize (through transliteration and transcription) various non-Roman scripts. Among the better known schemes in existence are the McCune-Reischauer system for Korean and the Hepburn system for romanizing Japanese script. All these systems are oriented toward the requirements of the user and are, thus, designated receiver systems. (An exception is the Hanyu Pinyin system for conversion of Chinese Han characters into Roman script; this is a donor system.) The Arabic speaking countries in the Middle East have recently considered a reverse conversion: to arabize names from Roman script writing systems. Such an important undertaking requires due consideration and study.

Roman script names already have been converted to non-Roman writing systems in atlases produced by various countries (e.g., in Russian Cyrillic). Because of the small-scale maps prevalent in such atlases, the number of names to be thus converted has been relatively small. However, the task takes on new dimensions and importance if a commitment to larger scale publication is made; the need for name conversion would increase dramatically. It is probable that a small number of non-Arabic names already exists in conventional Arabic script spellings; for instance, ""Neu York" is used as a German conventional for "New York," and "Nueva York" is the Spanish conventional name, and نيويورك has been noted in Arabic script. These conventional name forms have, in most cases, been part of the language for a considerable period of time and are, therefore, well established.

In the context of the donor and receiver principles, arabization of Roman script writing would cast Arabic as the target script (the receiver) and Roman as the source script (the donor). A few aspects and examples of the complexity involved in such an effort are here briefly discussed; specifically, the conversion of English language names.

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Although both the English and Arabic writing systems are fully alphabetic in nature, the phonological correspondence between them is very uneven.

Taking into consideration the disparity that exists between the writing system of English and the phonetic representation of words, a phonemic approach to Arabic script conversion could be considered. The difficulty encountered in the very irregular orthographic practice on the one hand and the spoken forms on the other is demonstrated by US names such as Worcester (in Massachusetts) and Wooster (in Ohio)- different graphic configurations pronounced almost identically--and names such as Tucson, Knoxville, Arkansas where consonants that are written are not pronounced. In following this approach, since the English alphabet represents the phonemic (morphophonemic) level of the sound system, the spelling of a name would not always give an indication as to its proper pronunciation as is the case with the vowel digraph "ou" occurring in Houston. A point to consider also is the fact that for the native speaker some US names have lost over time the affiliation to the original language they were borrowed from; rather, they are considered properly English names today. For example, Detroit is no longer considered a French name and Montana is not taken to be Spanish. Difficulties that will have to be addressed exist in both the consonant and vowel repertories. For instance, characters corresponding to g, p, and v do not occur in standard literary Arabic and, therefore, others will have to substitute for them. Arabization of English names will require that vowel elements are rendered in script so that they are unambiguously perceived. To attain consistent treatment in this area will be particularly challenging.

In light of the existence and past activities of the Working Group on a Single Romanization System for each Non-Roman Writing System and its concern with the donor and receiver principles, it would seem appropriate to raise the question whether conversion from Roman to Arabic script is required within the context of the United Nations and whether such conversion from various Cyrillic scripts, Devanagari, Thai, and other writing systems is also necessary. An additional question is whether conversion of each such script into all the others is a proper concern and a useful project to pursue. If the answer to these questions would be in the affirmative, the effort and time involved should be weighed against actual benefits. It is also conceivable that such a proposition for conversion would considerably impact on other UN programs, since the subject matter is of a highly technical and complex nature requiring extensive exchanges among the parties concerned. This is not to overlook, however, that the chief interest and initiative reside with the relevant authorities in the countries into whose scripts foreign names are to be converted. Writing systems exist for the benefit of the members of a given linguistic community, in this case, foreign names in Arabic script serve mainly Arabic-speaking readers.

As for names of features within the jurisdiction of the United States, the US group willingly extends any cooperation at whatever level desired, either within the framework of the UN or through bilateral or multinational arrangements.