
**United Nations
Group of Experts on
Geographical Names**

**Working Paper
No. 54**

**Twentieth Session
New York, 17 – 28 January 2000**

**Item 16
of the Provisional Agenda**

STANDARDIZATION IN MULTILINGUAL AREAS

A New Transliteration System from Hebrew into Arabic

Prepared and submitted by Prof. Naftali Kadmon, Israel

A New Transliteration System from Hebrew into Arabic

Preliminary remark: In the following text, transmitted to the UNGEGN Secretariat by e-mail, verbal description of Hebrew, Arabic, Persian and Malay letters had to substitute for the respective letters. A copy of this document in *WordPerfect 5*, including the graphic form of the letters under review, can be obtained from the author.

In 1931 the Government of the British Mandated Territory of Palestine published a booklet with the names of all cities, towns and villages in the Territory [1]. Each name was presented in its English (not just romanized) form, as well as in Arabic and Hebrew script. The list was preceded by a set of transliteration rules: from Arabic into English, from Hebrew into English, from Arabic into Hebrew and from Hebrew into Arabic. These rules served the British *Survey of Palestine*, and after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 also its successor, the *Survey of Israel*. The latter organization, the national authority for surveying and mapping, employed these rules in its official maps with two main exceptions. The *Academy of the Hebrew Language* devised a new romanization system for Hebrew in 1956 (published in 1957); This system, though under review (see [2]) is still in force in Israel. And in the transliteration of Arabic toponyms into Hebrew, *ghain* was represented by the Hebrew letter 'ayin with an inverted comma as diacritic, instead of by the letter *gimmel* (*g*), thus more closely following orthography.

Lately it was decided to transliterate (or translate, as the case may be) all Hebrew road signs not only into Roman script and English, but also into Arabic. In doing so, the *Public Works Department (PWD)* encountered several problems. Some Hebrew consonant letters have no Arabic equivalent, and the former rules (see above) resulted in phonetically unsatisfactory rendition of Hebrew toponyms.

In 1998 a Committee was set up to propose new transliteration rules from Hebrew into Arabic. The Committee consisted of expert representatives of all public signboarding authorities, chief among them the *PWD*, and representatives of the *Survey of Israel* as the official mapping authority – since orthography in maps and road signs should coincide – as well as linguists expert in both languages, Hebrew and Arabic. In deliberations extending over more than a year a new set of transliteration rules was developed. In the case of most Hebrew consonant letters there is no problem, because the majority of Hebrew letters have a direct and precise equivalent in Arabic. However, there are several exceptions. Thus, Hebrew has letters for the /*g*/ phoneme as well as for /*p*/ and /*v*/, all of which are non-existent in the classical Arabic alphabet as employed by the British Mandatory authorities in the transliteration rules mentioned above and as used in Arabic in Israel. This is distinct from e.g. Egyptian Arabic in which the letter *gim* is the equivalent of Hebrew *gimmel* (/g/). However, some Persian and Malay consonant letters are already being widely used in the Arabic transliteration of western words, among others in the Arabic press in Israel, and the Committee proposed to incorporate in the new rules those representing the three Hebrew consonant letters for *g*, *p* and *v*. Thus, Hebrew *gimmel* (/g/) is represented by Persian *ch* (Arabic *g* but with three dots below it), and Hebrew *pe* (/p/) by Persian *p* (Arabic *b* but with three dots below); see *Romanization Systems and Roman-Script Spelling Conventions*, [3]. Hebrew undotted *bet* (/v/) which has no equivalent in Arabic, and its Persian equivalent is the Arabic letter for /w/ (*waw*), is represented by the Malay letter for /p/, i.e. Arabic /f/ but with three dots above it (see e.g. *Alphabets of Foreign Languages* [4]).

Both Hebrew and Arabic are defective alphabetic scripts; vowels are mostly represented by markers (see *Glossary of Toponymic Terminology* [5], term No. 286). But whereas Hebrew has five basic vowel sounds (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*) with some modifications, Arabic has three (*a*, *i*, *u*). Adequate approximation to Hebrew *e* and *o* had to be introduced; Stress,

too, has to be accounted for, often introducing an additional *alif*, *ya* or *waw*. Word endings, too, have to be adapted, and in many cases *fat'ha-alif* must substitute for Hebrew *qammaz-he*.

The complete set of rules, together with a list of several hundred examples, was submitted for consideration to the Academy of the Hebrew Language, the legally constituted sole authority on topics concerned with the orthography of Hebrew and its transliteration into other languages and scripts. It is hoped that ratification -- with or without modification -- will be obtained in the foreseeable future.

Notes

- [1] *Transliteration from Arabic and Hebrew into English, from Arabic into Hebrew and from Hebrew into Arabic, with Transliterated Lists of Personal and Geographical Names*. Government of Palestine, 1931.
- [2] *Considerations for and against a revision of a romanization system -- the case of Hebrew*. Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1998, document E/CONF.91/L.11.
- [3] *Romanization Systems and Roman-Script Spelling Conventions*. Prepared by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names Foreign Names Committee Staff. Published by the Defense Mapping Agency, 1994.
- [4] *Alphabets of Foreign Languages*. Second edition, 1933, reprinted with incorporation of supplement of 1938 and certain revisions. Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use, London, 1956.
- [5] *Glossary of Toponymic Terminology*. Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1998, document E/CONF.91/L.13.