

UNITED NATIONS  
ECONOMIC  
AND  
SOCIAL COUNCIL



Distr.  
LIMITED

E/CONF.61/L.5/Add.8  
19 May 1972

ENGLISH ONLY

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SECOND UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE  
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES  
London, 10-31 May 1972  
Item 11 of the provisional agenda

WRITING SYSTEMS  
TRANSFER OF NAMES FROM ONE WRITING SYSTEM INTO ANOTHER  
TRANSLITERATION OF THE ARABIC ALPHABET

LON.72-263

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## WORKING PAPER

Comparative Study of the Romanization of the Arabic Alphabet  
Prepared by J. Breu, Austria, Chairman of  
The Working Group on a Single Romanization System

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## I. Description of the Arabic alphabet and its peculiarities:

1. The Arabic alphabet is used for writing Arabic, the national language of many countries in North Africa and southwestern Asia, belonging to the Semitic group of languages.
2. The Arabic alphabet - together with other alphabets of the group of Semitic scripts - is defective in so far as normally only consonants are written. The reader has to find out for himself which vowels to pronounce in a given written text. Only exceptionally vocalized texts are printed. Arabic texts run from right to left.
3. Many Arabic characters have special shapes in different positions within a word: initial, medial, and final. In many cases there exist further forms for isolated characters.

## II. General problems of the romanization of the Arabic alphabet:

1. Some Arabic characters are pronounced in different ways in different Arabic countries.
2. It is usual with all romanizations of unvocalized texts to insert Roman vowel letters for the missing Arabic vocalization.
3. The difficulty of the different shapes of the characters, ligatures and many specific spelling regulations make it impossible for a person not conversant with the Arabic language to romanize Arabic texts or reconstruct the original Arabic text from a romanized text.

## III. Comparison and evaluation of important existing romanizations:

1. Resolution 12 of the 1st Conference of the United Nations on the Standardization of Geographical Names noting the romanization system currently being employed in the transliteration of names for official romanized maps of some Arabic-speaking countries, such as Libya and Saudi Arabia, noting further the different romanization system being used in the current mapping of other Arabic-speaking countries, such as Lebanon and Syria, recognizing the variety of systems being used in other Arabic-speaking countries,

- recommends that those Arabic-speaking countries which intend to produce romanized maps or gazetteers for official use investigate the possibility of agreeing on a single system for the romanization of Arabic geographical names for official use in all Arabic-speaking countries, or alternatively, if a single romanization system proves to be impracticable, that the use of two systems only be considered, one based on the French system of transliteration and the second on the English.
2. In the circular no. 4 of the Austriar Member were enclosed romanizations as they have been actually used in the mapping of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya. Since these romanizations are more or less similar to the BGN/PCGN system on the one hand or to the IGNF system on the other according as the prevailing foreign languages are English or French it is not necessary to reproduce them once more. Copies of this "national" romanization have been distributed not only to all members of our group but also to the Cartography Section of the UN.
  3. In the meantime the expert of the Arabic division has contacted authorities in the various Arabic countries with a view to implementing resolution 12 of the Geneva conference.
  4. The result of this endeavours has been the "Conférence régionale des pays Arabes pour la normalisation des noms géographiques", Beyrouth 1971. On the following two pages a report of this conference is reproduced:

Rapport du Lt.Col.M.Z.AYOUBI

Sur la conférence régionale des pays Arabes pour la normalisation des noms géographiques.

Lieu : Beyrouth entre le 23 et le 31 Août 1971 Palais de l'Unesco.

Délégations: Secrétariat Général de la ligue arabe.

Palestine - Liban - Jordanie - Tunisie - Iraq - Syrie - Arabie Séoudite - Yemen - Egypte - Lybie - Soudan - Abou Dhabi et Dubai.

- Ordre du Jour:
- 1 - Adoption des listes des noms géographiques des pays membres en arabe.
  - 2 - Etablissement d'un système unique de romanisation des noms géographiques arabes.
  - 3 - Etude des modifications apportées par Israël à la toponymie des territoires arabes occupés.
  - 4 - Etude de la possibilité d'établissement d'un atlas des pays arabes contenant les noms géographiques en caractères arabes et latins.
  - 5 - Etude de l'élection d'un expert arabe joignant le groupe d'expert pour la normalisation des noms géographiques au sein du Conseil Economique et Social des Nations Unies.
  - 6 - Choix d'un plan arabe unique aux réunions de la 2ème conférence Internationale sur la normalisation des noms géographiques.
  - 7 - Travaux occasionnels.

Programme :

- Le 23 - Overture
- Le 24 - Commissions
- Le 25 - Excursion au Nord du Liban - visite du Président de la République - des Cèdres.
- Le 26 - Commissions
- Le 27 - Excursion au Sud du Liban - Sidon - Chateau de Beaufort, Tyr.
- Le 28 - Commissions
- Le 30 - Commission du Rapport final.
- Le 31 - Fin de la conférence.

La conférence a approuvé la composition de 3 commissions pour exécuter les points de l'ordre du jour.

- 1 - Commission d'étude des listes des noms géographiques présentées par les pays arabes.
- 2 - Commission de la Palestine et des territoires arabes occupés.
- 3 - Commission du transfert de noms géographiques arabes en caractères latins.


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J'ai été élu président de la deuxième commission.

Recommandations Finales:

- 1 - renvoi des listes pour révision et complètement contenant:
  - a - Les noms géographiques physiques importants.
  - b - Les noms géographiques humains importants comportant:  
Divisions administratives : villes - villages - localités importantes - canaux - bassins - puits - nom des tribus - ressources souterraines - Sites touristiques historiques et stratégiques.
- 2 - Ces listes doivent comporter le nom officiel en arabe classique et le nom local avec les signes diacritiques arabes.  
  
Noms anciens si possible, population et le nom écrit en caractères latins selon le système établi par la conférence régionale.  
  
Ces noms doivent être classés suivant l'ordre de l'alphabet arabe dans des tableaux à titre d'exemples (4 tableaux).
- 3 - Alphabet (voir en annexe) le système définitif adopté pour les pays arabes
- 4 - Vérification de la liste des noms géographiques et leur localisation sur carte de la Palestine au 1/250.000.
- 5 - Etablissement de la carte au 1/1.000.000 de chaque pays arabe en caractères arabes et latins avant la session de la 2ème conférence internationale de Londres.
- 6 - L'union des géographes arabes va proposer pour le groupe arabe un expert qui sera représenté à la 2ème conférence, internationale.
- 7 - Plan arabe face à Israël qui modifie graduellement les noms géographiques arabes par des noms hébreux.
- 8 - Plainte des nations arabes contre Israël au Secrétariat des Nations-Unies par ses modifications injustes et inhumaines des noms géographiques et surtout les noms de lieux de cultes.

Recommandations générales:

- 1 - Les listes des noms géographiques doivent être envoyées au secrétariat de la ligue arabe dans un délai ne dépassant pas le fin de l'année 1971
  - 2 - La conférence recommande l'adoption des chiffres arabes et le système décimal pour les degrés, altitudes, distances.
  - 3 - Les noms géographiques de renommée mondiale doivent figurer entre parenthèses à côté de nom prononcé en arabe littéraire.
  - 4 - La conférence recommande à la ligue arabe d'établir un atlas thématique des pays arabes en caractères arabes et romains selon les listes officielles des pays membres. Cet atlas sera considéré comme un document international concernant les pays arabes.
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5. The regional conference of the Arabic countries adopted a "Transliteration of Arabic Geographical Names to Latin Alphabet" which is reproduced on the following 4 pages:

Transliteration of Arabic Ceog. Names to Latin Alphabet (1)

Arabic consonants		Transliteration	Examples	
Arabic Letter	Name of Letter		Arabic Word	transliteration
أ	Alef	A	اربيل	Arbil
ب	bé	B	بنها	Bahha
ت	té	T	تدمر	tadmur
ث	thé	<u>Th</u>	ثرتار	<u>Tharthar</u>
ج	Jim	J	جبل	Jabal
ح	hé	<u>H</u>	حمص	<u>Hims</u>
خ	khé	<u>Kh</u>	خبير	khaybar
د	dal	<del>DH</del> D	دمام	Damman
ذ	Dzal	<u>DH</u>	ذهبان	<u>Dhahban</u>
ر	ra	R	رفع	Rafah
ز	Zafn	Z	زبيد	zabid
س	Sine	<del>S</del> s	سيناء	Sīna'
ش	Shine	<u>Sh</u>	شبين	Shibīn
ص	Sad	<u>S</u>	صفد	<u>Safad</u>
ض	Dad	<u>D</u>	ضبعة	<u>Dabah</u>
ط	<u>Tah</u>	<u>T</u>	طنطا	<u>tanta</u>
ظ	Zhah	<u>Zh</u>	ظهران	<u>Zhahrān</u>
ع	Aīn	<u>A</u>	عكا	Akka
ع بالكسرة		<u>I</u>	عراق	<u>Iraq</u>
ع بالضممة		<u>U</u>	عمان	<u>Uman</u>
ع بالسكون		c	بعلبك	Bālabak
وسط الكلمة				
غ	Ghaīn	<u>Gh</u>	غدير	<u>Ghadīr</u>
ف	Fé	F	فالوجة	Fallujah

ق	Qaf	Q	قطر	Qatar
ك	Kaf	K	كوت	Kūt
ل	Lām	L	ليبيا	Libya
م	mim	M	مصر	misr
ن	noun	N	نجد	Najd
ه	Hé	H	هيت	Hīt
و	Waw	W	وهراڻ	Wahrān
ي	yé	Y	يمن	Yaman



b- Vowels and Diphthongs and Special Marks :

Arabic Vowels and Diphthongs		Transliteration		Example	
Arabic letter	Name of letter			Arabic Word	Transliteration.
الهزة ( ء )	Hamza	ء	ء	كربلاء	Karbla <sup>ʾ</sup>
-	-	َ	َ	بئر	Bir
الفتحة ( - )	Fatha	أ	أ	تل	Talī
الكسرة ( / )	Kesra	إ	إ	إربد	Irbid
الضمة ( ' )	Damma	و	و	القدس	Al Quds
الفتحة ملا الالف ( آ )	Fathah and Alef	آ	آ	باب المندب	Bāb Al Mandab.
الكسرة مع الياء ( إ )	Kesra & Yé	إ	إ	المدينة	Al Maḍīnah
الضمة في الواو ( ؤ )	Damma and Waw	ؤ	ؤ	صو	SŪR
التاء المربوطه ( ة )	Ta Marbouta	ه	ه	مصراته	Musrātah
التاء المربوطه ( ة ) في الجملة المركبة	Ta Marbouta in the compound sentence	ت	ت	بركة السبع	Birket as-Saba

C - the article al (أل)

Solar Letters	Lunar Letters	Example	
		Arabic	Transliteration
as	أَسْ	السيدة	as- Sayyidah
ash	أَشْ	الشارقة	ash - Shāriqah
_____	al	الجبل	Al Jabal
_____	_____	الوادي	Al Wādi

{1) As agreed upon in the Seminar on Geographic Arabic names held in Beirut from Aug. 23 to Aug. 31, 1971.

6. The following page contains a comparative table of the outstanding romanizations of the Arabic alphabet. First column: Arabic characters, 2nd column: pronunciation in the phonetic script of the International Phonetic Association, 3rd - 8th columns: romanizations. ISO = romanization of the International Organization for Standardization, PI = romanization of the Instruktionen der alphabetischen Kataloge der preußischen Bibliotheken, IGNF = Principes de translittération de l' arabe en caractère latins, ed. IGNF, LC = romanization of the Library of Congress, BGN = BGN/PCGN romanization, AC = romanization of the Beyrout conference of the Arabic countries.

The table is confined to the 28 characters of the Arabic alphabet and disregards footnotes specifying alternatives and the often complicated instructions for romanizing further Arabic symbols. This restriction is technically necessary because it is impossible to represent all these complications on a single sheet of paper of the given size, and because on the other hand these details are not essential for judging the merits and drawbacks of the various romanizations.

## Romanization of the Arabic Alphabet, Comparative Table

	API	ISO	PI	IGNF	LC	BGN	AC
ا	ʔ, a:	omit	omit, ʔ	omit	omit	omit	a
ب	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
ت	t	t	t	t	t	t	t
ث	θ	<u>t</u>	<u>t</u>	th	th	th	<u>th</u>
ج	dʒ	ǧ	ǧ	j, dj	j	j	j
ح	ħ	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	<u>ḥ</u>
خ	x	<u>h</u>	<u>h</u>	kh	kh	kh	<u>kh</u>
د	d	d	d	d	d	d	d
ذ	ð	<u>d</u>	<u>d</u>	dh	dh	dh	<u>dh</u>
ر	r	r	r	r	r	r	r
ز	z	z	z	z	z	z	z
س	s	s	s	s, ss	s	s	s
ش	ʃ	š	š	ch	sh	sh	<u>sh</u>
ص	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	ç	ṣ	ṣ	<u>ṣ</u>
ض	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	<u>ḍ</u>
ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	<u>ṭ</u>
ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	d, z	ẓ	ẓ	<u>ẓ</u>
ع	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	omit	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ
غ	ɣ	ġ	ġ	gh	gh	gh	<u>gh</u>
ف	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
ق	q	q	q	q	q	q	q
ك	k	k	k	k	k	k	k
ل	l	l	l	l	l	l	l
م	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
ن	n	n	n	n, ne	n	n	n
ه	h	h	h	h	h	h	h
و	w, u:	w	w	ou	w	w	w
ي	j, i:, a:	y	j	y, i, i	y	y	y

7. We easily distinguish different groups of romanizations. PI, used by the libraries of the German speaking countries, and ISO are almost identical. They are transliterations which represent each Arabic character by a single Roman letter. In order to achieve reversibility they have to use a great deal of diacritics. Both follow a more or less established usage of international linguistics. LC and BGN constitute another group of romanizations. They too are almost identical. They follow partly English spelling conventions, e.g. th, y, but use nevertheless a great number of diacritics. The cedilla of BGN can be more easily applied in typwriting than the dot under the characters of LC. The Arabic countries saw two ways before them. Either to adopt 2 romanizations, one on English lines, the other on a French pattern or to work out a new single romanization for the whole Arabic speaking area. They chose the second way. The resulting AC follows in some details the BGN example. Formal advantages of AC: It can easily be typed and printed. Underlining is the only means to differentiate the basic Roman letters. Disadvantage: Many diagraphs. IGNU shows some French spelling peculiarities e.g. ch, ou, and uses almost as many diacritics as the "English" romanizations. The alternatives j or dj, s or ss, d or z, n or ne are remarkable. Nevertheless all of the romanizations shown on the comparative table can be classified as transliterations, although none of them in the strictest sense of the word.

#### IV. Practical proposals for acceptance by the 2nd UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names:

The direction has been shown by resolution 12 of the Geneva conference. The 1st conference asked the Arabic countries to take the lead in this matter. Therefore the 2nd conference has in AC a firm basis for discussion. There are still some important questions to be answered. How many Arabic countries will officially adopt AC? Will they use it in their official large scale mapping, etc.?

Apart from practical questions - which beyond a doubt favour AC - ISO has the advantage of being internationally accepted and of great simplicity: no diagraphs and not much more characters modified by diacritical signs than LC, BGN or IGNU.

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