

Working Paper No. 1
20 August 1992
ENGLISH ONLY

SIXTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE
ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
New York, 25 August-3 September 1992
Item 4 of the Provisional Agenda*

REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR
REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE FIFTH CONFERENCE

Country Paper

Submitted by Jordan

* E/CONF.85/1 Rev. 1

Sixth UN Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names
New York 25 August - 3 September 1992
Country Paper / Jordan

Historical Background:

Since geographical names are strongly related to the history of a country, Jordan is not an exception in that case. A short look at the history of Jordan and the civilizations and peoples who have lived on its land apparently shows the link between these peoples and the names of the cities and towns that are still keeping these names for thousands of years. These peoples include the Edmoites, Moabites, Ammonites whose names were mentioned in the Bible, the Nabataeans, Greeks and Romans. Islam came to the country in the 7th century AD and its effect has been clearly left on many of the geographical names.

Cartographic Background:

Jordan was put under the British mandate directly after World War 1. The British government produced maps at various scales for Jordan and Palestine in English. In the early 1960's the American AMS (Army Map Service) produced a complete cover for the Kingdom at a scale of 1:50,000. Those maps were in English and the system adopted came from BGN/PCGM systems. The Americans also published in 1972 an official Standard Names Gazetteer for Jordan. Those maps were all translated into Arabic at the Lands and Surveys Department first, then at the

Military Survey Directorate. But the greatest part of this work was accomplished at the Royal Jordanian geographic Centre (RJGC).

The Arabic names on these translated maps have suffered from many mistakes for various reasons. The most important of those was the ignorance of those people in the transliteration systems which the Americans and British have adopted. This is in addition to the existence of some mistakes made on these maps when they were originally produced, and the inconsistency in following the transliteration system adopted. Then in the early 1980's the Royal Jordanian Geographic Centre (RJGC) adopted a special transliteration system based on the Modified Bayrut System with little amendments made. (see Annex).

Achievements Regarding Geographical Names:

First, the government of Jordan formed a National Committee for geographical names. That committee was active for 3 years in the early 1980's.

Another committee was also formed at the RJGC for the same purpose, and is still active today. Some of its activities include the checking and verifying of the name registers of field completion and the choosing of names in their final form. A gazetteer for towns and villages in Arabic was produced and it has been recently entered into the computer. It includes various information about these villages such as the coordinates, the population, the altitude and the administrative location as such.

It has been decided to update the Official Standard Names Gazetteer which had mainly taken those names from the maps at a scale of 1:50,000 produced in 1961, 1962. It was decided then to enter this gazetteer in the computer, with the

amendments and additions, in Roman letters and at a later stage would be entered into Arabic. But his project is at halt nowadays.

Goals and National Programmes:

- 1 - Forming a new national committee for geographical names and activating its role.
- 2 - Producing a computerized names register which will help in updating the official Standard Names Gazetteer.
- 3 - Solving the problem of different places having the same name, a situation that causes confusion.
- 4 - Maintaining on maps the Arabic names for villages and sites in the occupied territories, which the occupying Israeli authorities try to abolish or replace by Hebrew names.

Problems and Solutions:

- 1 - Collecting of geographical names in the desert:

Existing topographical maps show very few names of the features in the desert region. Collecting of these names is not easy since many parts in the desert are uninhabited. Field collection of names in the desert should be made in the spring time with the help of the bedouins when they can be seen there with their herds of sheep and camels. Features which do not have names could be given ones by the National Names Committee when it comes into existence.

2 - Standard and Dialectal Forms of Names:

One of the main difference between standard and dialectal Arabic is the short vowels. This does not show big difference in written Arabic since these vowels are not normally represented in writing. But the problem arises when transliterating these names into Roman letters where these short vowels have to be represented. This could lead to confusion when writing the names of these locations in Roman letter, unless the exact pronunciation of these names is known.

3 - Publicizing the Transliteration System

The transliteration system used by RJGC is not yet known or used by other governmental departments or by the public in Jordan. Steps are being taken to publicize the system and make it known and used by other potential users through conferences, symposia and public information media.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- 1 - It is essential to form a national geographical names committee for the standardization of names of locations.**
- 2 - It is very important to update the Official Standard Names Gazetteer through cooperation with international organizations that have good experience in this field.**
- 3 - The necessity for a unified transliteration system on the Arab World level, through exchange of advice and information and cooperation with public information media.**

4 - Making the United Nations and UNESCO aware of the fact that the Israeli authorities in the occupied territories are trying to efface and abolish the ever existing Arabic names of locations in the occupied territories in Palestine and replace them by Hebrew names.