

**Ninth United Nations Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names**

New York, 21 - 30 August 2007

Item 5 of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports by divisions of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical  
Names on the situation in their divisions and on the progress made in the  
standardization of geographical names since the Eighth Conference**

**Report of the East Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic)**

Submitted by the Division Chairman\*\*

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\*\* Prepared by Naftali Kadmon, Emeritus Professor, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel,  
with material on Cyprus supplied by Mr. Prodromos Vasileiou.

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REPORTS BY DIVISIONS OF THE UNGEGN ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR  
DIVISIONS CONCERNING THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Report of the East Mediterranean Division (Other than Arabic)

Paper presented by the Division Chairman\*

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## Report of the East Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic)

This division consists of two countries: the State of Israel and the Republic of Cyprus. The present report is of a concise character; more detailed information is found in the national reports of the countries concerned and in some other papers presented to this conference.

### Transliteration Matters

#### (a) Romanization of Hebrew

As a result of changes in the composition of the Israeli population over the past 50 years, pronunciation habits have somewhat changed throughout this period – and the (“simplified”) romanization system is after all intended chiefly to enable road and map users to ask for directions. In September 2006, fifty years since the “old” romanization of Hebrew was officially adopted in Israel, the amendments were officially ratified and are already in the early stages of implementation. The relatively few changes are being presented to the Ninth Conference in a separate paper under item 16 (a) of the provisional agenda.

#### (b) Hebrew-to-Arabic transliteration

New transliteration rules from Hebrew into Arabic for Hebrew geographical names, presented in a preliminary report to the twentieth session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, New York, January 2000, were officially ratified in May 2007. They are being applied to road signs in Israel produced by the competent authority, the National Roads Authority, and in maps of the Survey of Israel. In concise form they are being presented to this conference in a separate paper under item 16 (b).

#### (c) Arabic-to-Hebrew Transliteration

This system has been in operation since 1990, though not applied uniformly. Many Arabic consonant letters have their equivalent in Hebrew, but six (ث, ج, خ, ص, ذ, غ) require an apostrophe after the Hebrew letter (respectively 'ת, 'ג, 'ח, 'ך, 'ס, 'ע). In consultation with the new Academy of the Arabic Language in Israel the system has now been amended by a single consonant letter, namely غ ,ghain (the sixth above), being transliterated by Hebrew 'ך, i.e. ך (r) with an apostrophe as a diacritic. The transliteration system was formally ratified in November 2006.

#### (d) Romanization of Arabic in Israel

This system, too, has been adopted after consultations with the new Academy of the Arabic Language in Israel. It is in general identical with the amended Beirut system, except that in order to reduce the number of diacritics, the underscore of the Roman consonant letters

representing ح, ص, ظ, ط, ض (respectively h, s, d, t, z) has been omitted. Reversibility is not being aimed at in a system designed primarily to serve “western” users who are unfamiliar with these particular Arabic sounds, and should be easily read by Roman-reading persons entering Israel from Jordan or Egypt. The system was ratified in May 2007.

(e) The Romanization of Greek in Cyprus

The transliteration of the Greek alphabet into the Roman writing system, was prepared jointly by the Permanent Committees for the standardization of Geographical Names of Greece and Cyprus and approved by the U.N. during the Fifth conference for the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1987 as ELOT 743. In December 1988, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cyprus gave instructions for its obligatory application to all Government and Semi - Government Sectors. The Romanization writing system of the Greek alphabet has began to be implemented also in the private sector, in the press, in books and in various studies. Concerning the pronunciation of the romanized writing system of Greek, a “Note on Pronunciation” is presented on the face of some maps and on some other publications.

Publications

(a) National Gazetteers

The Cyprus Permanent Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names in compliance with the repeated resolutions of the U.N. Conferences on the standardization of geographical names proceeded with the compilation of the following national gazetteers of Cyprus:

- (i) The Concise Gazetteer of Cyprus (about 2000 entries);
- (ii) The Complete Gazetteer of Cyprus (about 67000 entries).

(b) Booklet/Guide on the standardization of geographical names.

A booklet/guide in the Greek language for local use, on standardization and on the transliteration into the Roman alphabet of geographical names in Cyprus, has been prepared and will soon be published for local distribution.

(c) UNGEGN Promotional Brochure:

In close co-operation with the Greek delegation the UNGEGN Promotional Brochure has been translated into Greek and published in draft form in a limited number of copies. It is planned to produce a sufficient number of copies to be officially presented locally and distributed to the Government and to semi-governmental services, to Universities and to secondary schools.

### Toponymic Guidelines for Cyprus:

The Toponymic Guidelines were first prepared in 2000 in English in draft form, and were unofficially distributed to the delegates during the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Berlin in 2002. They comprise all items required by the user for the correct implementation of geographical Names. Unfortunately, due to some necessary corrections and amendments they have not yet been officially edited. They are to be revised and amended and published officially in the near future.

### A tri-scriptual toponymic database

The majority of the digital mapping projects carried out by the Survey of Israel, both in topographic as well as in urban cartography, are based on the national geographic information system (GIS). The national toponymic database is, as yet, a separate entity.

As a result of the amended transliteration systems outlined above, work is now beginning on a new database of all populated places in Israel, as well as the names on all official road signs, in all three scripts – Hebrew, Arabic and Roman. This would, by all accounts, be the first digital tri-scriptual (and bi-directional) database in the world; the bi-scriptual bi-directional digital database of Israel (Hebrew and romanized) was also the first of its kind in the world.

### Bi- and tri-scriptual digital maps

Bi-scriptual maps (Hebrew and romanized/English) as well as Arabic ones are being produced also by private mapping firms in Israel. While the official romanization system for Hebrew geographical names had been binding on Government institutions and many other public bodies since 1957, various other systems were and still are being used by different private and even public institutions, as reported in the past. This fact is a result of the different linguistic background of the constituent population components employing the names, most often in transcription and not in transliteration. Thus, touristic texts (e.g. brochures, guidebooks etc.) in the languages spoken by tourists make use of different transcriptions into these languages. With the emerging new toponymic tri-lingual database, and with the new list of exonyms or rather traditional historical names in Israel (see separate paper on donor-recommended exonyms under item 10 of the provisional agenda), it is intended that all Israeli toponymy will be uniform and standardized in all three scripts.

### Problems with vocalization (plene script)

As distinct from fully alphabetic Greek as used in Cyprus, Hebrew uses a “defective” alphabetic script, often incorrectly termed “consonantic”. In the past, all official Israeli maps in Hebrew carried full vocalization, i.e. with all vowel points. Until recently, the computer system of the Survey of Israel employed in producing new digital maps was unable to cope with the vowel points. This resulted in the adoption of “plene” script (ktiv malé; see paper on

the romanization of Hebrew under item 16 (a) of the provisional agenda), which replaces certain vowel points by consonant letters. The new system of the Survey of Israel is intended to overcome these problems, using a plene system with auxiliary or partial vocalization, as found in the printed media in Israel.

### Toponymic education

The Academy of the Hebrew Language has recently been holding a workshop on the new transliteration systems mentioned above, spread over four weeks, for representatives of the mapping and road-signing institutions as well as for journalists and for some other representatives of the public media.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Geography, continues to offer an annual course under the name "Toponymy – the study of geographical names". Particulars of this course and its textbook (Toponymy – the lore, laws and language of geographical names) were presented at the Eighth Conference in 2002.

### Toponyms in the three-dimensional cadastre

The Israeli three-dimensional cadastre is still being built up. The definitions of underground entities – natural ones such as caves and man-made ones, e.g. mines, tunnels, subways and other underground installations – are being uniquely and three-dimensionally based on numerical values related to the relevant two-dimensional surface cadastral units, i.e. blocks and parcels of land. In such cases geographical names are at present only indirectly involved, because blocks of land are tied to named topographic features, whether man-made or natural. However, in the future a special term for underground names may have to be defined.

### Nautical charts

All Israeli nautical charts, small- and large-scale, both of the Mediterranean Sea and of the Gulf of Eilat, are being produced in bilingual versions, namely Hebrew and English, with toponyms romanized.

### Summary

This report briefly presents the main items of toponymy and the standardization of geographical names which were dealt with in the two countries of the division, namely Israel and Cyprus, in the five-year period since the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. The report concerns the following topics: transliteration (Hebrew, Arabic and Roman in Israel, Greek in Cyprus); publications; toponymic guidelines for Cyprus; tri-scriptual databases and bi-scriptual maps and the three-dimensional cadastre in Israel; and toponymic education.