

10 March 2025

English
Original Arabic

**United Nations Group of Experts On
Geographical Names
2025 session**

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 9 (a) of the provisional agenda *

**Promotion and capacity-building: Strengthening publicity and increasing
awareness of the importance of standardized geographical names**

**The role of Saudipedia Encyclopedia in documenting and
updating geographical names in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Submitted by The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia **

* GEGN.2/2025/1

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Introduction:

Geographical names are a key component of the foundational elements of spatial data for any country, with official names serving as entry points into geographic reference databases.

Saudi Arabia pays significant attention to geographical names, as these names are a primary element of geospatial information supporting and enabling many different sectors.

The digital platform of the Saudi Encyclopedia "Saudipedia" is one of the initiatives of the Human Capability Development Program, aiming to be a knowledgeable reference about Saudi Arabia. It helps in enhancing and disseminating reliable information in an encyclopedic format, via a platform that was created according to the best practices to become the primary reference for Saudi knowledge in multiple languages.

In the context of unifying efforts related to geographical names in Saudi Arabia, Saudipedia aims to document geographical names in its regularly updated content that keeps up with Saudi Arabia's cultural, historical, and geographical richness.

Research Objectives:

This paper aims to highlight Saudipedia's efforts in documenting the cultural, historical, and national aspects of geographical names in Saudi Arabia, as the encyclopedia operates based on the new digital media model by providing encyclopedic content in a multi-section integrated digital platform. It includes a section dedicated to geography, which contains a rich information base to expand knowledge about Saudi Arabia's Provinces, helping to build a deeper understanding of its geography, showcasing national efforts concerned with documenting geographical names in cooperation with the National Committee for Geographical names, based on the operational mechanisms of official bodies, and according to the methodology followed by them.

Based on this principle, Saudipedia writes geographic content in a well-defined framework and in accordance with clear standards and policies, referring to traditional sources such as books, studies, and digital sources, as well as government and academic bodies concerned with documenting geographical names, while focusing on the cultural, historical, and anthropological aspects related to the names. Many names carry stories and reflect aspects of the lives of ancestors, historical or social events that occurred in these areas, and Saudipedia aims to preserve them in collective memory. This type of documentation ensures the accuracy of information and prevents names from being lost or their identity fading over time, contributing to the creation of a reliable record that can be referred to in the future.

Despite the linguistic and cultural challenges in documenting geographical names, Saudipedia plays a vital role in emphasizing the importance of these names and providing integrated data about them. Saudipedia believes in the impact this has on culture and society, as it enhances the preservation of cultural heritage, helps researchers and students access accurate and comprehensive information about geographical areas, and introduces the diversity of cultures in Saudi Arabia. It also has an economic and tourism significance, as it provides visitors with rich background information about each location, increasing its tourism value and encouraging the discovery of more places in Saudi Arabia. Saudipedia also promotes community engagement through a dedicated section for content enrichment, giving individuals with local knowledge of places the opportunity to document and contribute to improving the accuracy of its database.

Research Problem:

This study aims to answer the following question:

"How does Saudipedia address the gap in updated information about geographical names?"

To answer this question, we have reviewed the current practices, systems, terms, information, studies, and documents available to us on the issue of the gap and discrepancies in geographical information and the updating of their names.

The first United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held in Geneva in 1967, recommended that each country establish a national committee specializing in geographical names, with particular focus on standardizing the writing of geographical names within the country. This means that geographical names should always be written in the same way, for example, Jazan shouldn't be written with "i" (Jizan) in some instances and "a" (Jazan) in others¹.

Accordingly, the encyclopedia ensures that it adheres to strict standards and policies that include scientific methodologies, striving to provide highly credible information sources, document geographical names, and utilize them in its content.

Despite the publication of a considerable number of dictionaries, atlases, books, and scientific studies on geographical names, discrepancies in the writing of these names and the lack of standardization are evident. However, it is clear that the country has succeeded in producing detailed maps that cover all regions since the 1950s, despite the vast size of Saudi Arabia. Maps are among the information sources that spread quickly among researchers and those interested².

Given the importance of accuracy, the national authority responsible for producing and drawing maps is the Saudi General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information, which announced in 2023 the launch of its updated official map of Saudi Arabia with the approved international borders. This map has been provided to all government entities, the private sector, academia, individuals, and the media³.

Research Topics:

- Documenting geographical names and their origins in Saudipedia.
- The cultural and historical dimensions of geographical names emphasized by Saudipedia.
- Publishing geographical names in Saudipedia in global languages.
- Collaboration between Saudipedia and the national committee for geographical names.
- Aligning the publication of geographical names in Saudipedia with SEO standards.
- Challenges and proposed solutions for Saudipedia's role in documenting and updating geographical names.

First Topic: Documenting Geographical names and Their Origins in Saudipedia

Saudipedia plays a pivotal role in preserving geographical identity and enhancing awareness of the history of places and landmarks in Saudi Arabia. It does this by linking them to the historical, social, and cultural context, contributing to the documentation of geographical names in Saudi Arabia from a cultural and historical perspective. This helps in preserving national identity and consolidating knowledge of the country's geographical heritage. It also strengthens national belonging by highlighting names that are an essential part of Saudi Arabia's history and culture. Saudipedia relies on interactive maps, images, and historical research to present geographical names in a comprehensive and easily accessible way. Undoubtedly, this approach helps in analyzing the geographical and demographic evolution of Saudi Arabia over time.

In terms of how the Saudi encyclopedia focuses on this area, it monitors and documents various types of geographical names in the content it provides, including:

- 1- Cities and villages names: The Saudi encyclopedia is keen on clarifying the origins of place names and their connection to history and geography. For example, the encyclopedia mentions city names derived from the formation of the land and its natural features, or from historical figures who lived or passed through these locations. It also highlights the origins of names of newly established settlement areas (hijr) that were part of King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman's project to settle the Bedouins.
- 2- Names of valleys, mountains, and deserts: The encyclopedia emphasizes the linguistic meanings of natural site names and their connection to the cultural and geographical heritage. It discusses the geological history and natural formation of mountains, valleys, and deserts, with a focus on the natural

factors that contributed to their formation. The linguistic origin of each name is also analyzed, whether it is linked to natural features (such as Mount Uhud or al-Jubail governorate) or derived from tribal and historical names like Wadi Al-Dawasir or ar-Rub' al-Khali Desert.

- 3- Names of archaeological and historical sites: The encyclopedia shines a light on the cultural and historical significance of archaeological sites and their role in shaping the local identity of each region. It reviews historical sources that mention these landmarks, whether in books, official records, or even in historical poetry sources from the Arabian Peninsula. Additionally, it refers to verses and poems that mention the names of these sites.

Second Topic: The Cultural and Historical Dimensions of Geographical names Emphasized by Saudipedia

Saudipedia's efforts align with the Saudi Vision 2030 in documenting and highlighting the cultural and heritage legacy of Saudi Arabia. It also contributes to promoting cultural tourism by providing comprehensive information about geographically significant places and landmarks, with a focus on emphasizing the cultural and historical dimensions of geographical names and their relationship to popular heritage. Many geographical names reflect stories, legends, and the popular heritage, thus contributing to the documentation of aspects of Saudi society's oral history.

Saudipedia also focuses on clarifying the temporal transformations in place names and how some geographical names have changed over time, along with the reasons for these changes, whether linguistic, social, or political. Furthermore, it highlights the role of names in defining national identity, as geographical names are an important part of national identity, reflecting the inhabitants' connection to the land and the deep historical roots.

Based on this, Saudipedia sought to clarify the methodology of place naming in Saudi Arabia through the National Committee for Geographical names. The committee follows a standardized approach in naming places; names are not arbitrarily assigned. Instead, the committee researches the origin of the name, and if the name is deemed inappropriate, a more suitable name is derived. Alternatively, historical references are used to search for the name if it has been forgotten. Consequently, these standards have led to the creation of encyclopedic articles dedicated to documenting official geographical names. The encyclopedia ensured that both the common name and the official name are mentioned, alongside highlighting the local pronunciation. Examples include articles on cities, governorates, and centers, where the encyclopedia has adopted a specific template that links the origin of the name to its location⁴. These include:

- Article on (How are Geographic Locations Named in Saudi Arabia?)
- Series on the Geographic Dictionary of the Saudi Arabian Countries.
- Article on (Al-Arid)⁵.
- Article on Riyadh.
- Article on (Dir'iyah Governorate)⁶.
- AlUla Governorate.
- Al-Ahsa Governorate.

Third Topic: Publishing Geographical names through Saudipedia in Global Languages

Saudipedia has addressed the gap in updated information about geographical names by highlighting the efforts of Saudi Arabia in the field of geographical names and their related aspects. This is achieved by retrieving national content related to geographical names from its trusted sources and converting it into diverse digital content through several approaches:

- 1- Writing encyclopedic articles based on reliable sources such as the General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information, the National Center for Documents and Archives, and the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives (Darah), to document the names of places and geographical landmarks, including cities, governorates, natural landmarks, and other geographical designations.

- 2- Citing articles and textual content with historical maps that confirm the names of places or landmarks. These maps include official names and information that define the types and locations of the named geographical sites, and they are continuously updated. Maps are vital tools for providing information about geographical names and are a quick way to access data about official names and geographical locations.
- 3- Providing archived content that includes names and location information for more than 752 landmarks and sites across Saudi Arabia. This includes textual data and multimedia formats, such as audio and visual content, based on newly updated geographical names in accordance with official map data.
- 4- Translating content related to geographical names into five major global languages: English, Chinese, Russian, French, and German. This enables Saudipedia to serve as an official reference, providing media and knowledge platforms in the regional, Arab, and international spheres with content on both current and new geographical names in Saudi Arabia.

Fourth Topic: Collaboration Between Saudipedia and the National Committee for Geographical names

The National Committee for Geographical names aims to unify efforts related to geographical names in Saudi Arabia in terms of writing, spelling, and all aspects of their national standards, as well as preparing its database.

The committee also strives to be an official reference for all matters concerning existing or new geographical names in Saudi Arabia, offering recommendations regarding them. It has the authority to consult with public and private sector stakeholders concerning geographical names.

As a trusted official reference for all things related to Saudi affairs, Saudipedia provides encyclopedic content that reflects an accurate portrayal of Saudi Arabia, focusing on all cultural, social, economic, political, geographical, and historical aspects within Saudi Arabia.

Saudipedia aligns with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to build a vibrant society and encourage citizens to take pride in their national identity and cultural heritage. Geographical names represent a prominent aspect covered in the encyclopedia, with a dedicated section on "Geography" that covers everything related to Saudi Arabia's geography.

There are several areas of collaboration between Saudipedia and the National Committee for Geographical names, including:

- Standardizing the writing of geographical names in articles, ensuring that geographical names are written consistently in both textual and visual content provided by the encyclopedia.
- Providing sources and approved maps related to geographical names for writing reliable articles about existing and new geographical names.
- Coordinating between Saudipedia and the National Committee for Geographical names when new names are introduced or existing names are changed, to update the published content and produce new content.

Fifth Topic: Aligning the Publication of Geographical names with SEO Standards

Saudipedia ensures that its articles in general, and those related to geographical names in Saudi Arabia in particular, align with trusted official content and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) standards. The goal is to enhance the user experience, improve search engine rankings, and reach the targeted audience.

Saudipedia relies on the Guideline for Search Engine Optimization for Government Websites, issued by the Digital Government Authority, as a reference to enhance the visibility of government websites on search engines⁵
⁶.

The alignment process involves two key approaches, On-Page SEO Optimization and Off-Page SEO Optimization. The first approach involves using common keywords related to geographical names, while the second approach focuses on strengthening external links from trusted sites⁷.

This approach has led to several geographic name articles ranking in the top ten results on Google, including:

- Al-Aqer Mountain: 2nd
- Al-Dahna Desert: 2nd
- Kadmibil Mountain: 3rd
- Wadi al-Rumma: 2nd
- Wadi al-Magmas: 2nd

Additionally, several notable articles gained significant attention on search engines in 2024. For example, ar-Rub' al-Khali Desert article appeared about 580,000 times, Mountains of Saudi Arabia article appeared about 490,000 times, and Map of Saudi Arabia article appeared about 149,000 times⁸.

Sixth Topic: Challenges and Proposed Solutions for Saudipedia's Role in Documenting and Updating Geographical names

Given the religious, political, cultural, international, and scientific importance of places and their names in Saudi Arabia, and after in-depth research in dictionaries, maps, atlases, books, printed reports, digital information sources, and the writing of names on city, village, street signs, and geographical locations, several challenges facing researchers and those interested in geographical names are apparent:

- 1- The lack of an officially approved Romanization system.
- 2- The absence of a comprehensive dictionary that includes all geographical sites, their names, and their histories.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, the following proposed solutions are suggested:

- Discuss the mechanism for controlling the writing of place names on directional road and street signs through a system for transliterating Arabic letters into Latin.
- Unify the methods of writing geographical names.
- Create a comprehensive geographical name database.
- Record audio files for the pronunciation of names of cities, towns, and villages.
- Prepare a national indexed dictionary of geographical names, translated into multiple languages, to serve as a unified reference for geographical names.

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