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Technical expertise: Writing systems and pronunciation

**Romanization of Arabic geographical names: towards a single and
unified Arabic romanization system**

Submitted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

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The multiplicity of systems for Romanizing Arabic geographical names has led to some doubt about their usefulness. The need for these systems appeared early on, as Johann D. Michaelis, the famous German orientalist and theologian, was one of the scholars who led the important Danish expedition to Egypt, Arabia and Syria (1761-1767). The expedition was headed by a civil engineer named Carsten Niebuhr, accompanied by four men: a painter, a botanist, a physician and an astronomer. They were commissioned by two of their kings, King Frederick V and King Christian VII, with a mission to explore the Arabian Peninsula. Niebuhr's journey lasted for six consecutive years, from 1761 to 1767. All the others died during this journey, except for Niebuhr, the author of the two books that were first published in Copenhagen in 1772 and 1776, that is, after the end of the journey, indicating the desire of the Danish court and the European community at the time to know news of the journey. Niebuhr published two books about the journey: *Description of the Arabian Peninsula Beschreibung von Arabien* in 1772, and *Travels through the Arabian Peninsula Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern* in 1776. This journey attracted the attention of scholars and readers alike, as it was a scientific mission in which scholars participated in collecting information, each in his field of specialization. Niebuhr says of these achievements: "Although death has taken my companions, their labors have not been in vain, for Forskal has done a great deal of work... and has furnished me with important information on natural history, and De Haven has left accurate information on the journey from Copenhagen to Cairo and from Suez to Mount Sinai." This work is almost the first topographical description of Arabia to reach European readers.

Niebuhr relates: "Five scientists were ordered to undertake this journey to Arabia, and each of them was to record what he would see in his own field of science. Professor Friedrich Christian von Haven was chiefly concerned with oriental languages; Professor Peter Forskal with natural history; our physician, Dr. Christian Karl Cramer, was also to collect and record notes on natural history. The painter and engraver Georg Wilhelm Baurenfiend was to assist his fellow travelers with drawings of landscapes, costumes, and the like. I was charged with the task of describing the features of the land. It is certain that the scholars would gain much important information about Arabia if we had stayed so long there and if everyone had returned safely. However, we did not reach Yemen until the end of December 1762. Mr. Von Haven died on the 25th of May 1763 in Mocha. Mr. Forskal also died." "On the 11th of July at Yarim, another Yemeni city. After this sudden loss of two of our companions we decided to go to Bombay by the last ship sailing from Mocha to India that year. On our way to India Mr. Baurenfiend died on the 29th of August that year near the island of Socotra. Mr. Cramer died on the 10th of February 1764, at Bombay.(1)"

Karsten Niebuhr (1733-1815) says in the introduction to his book: "He was tasked, in particular, with providing a geographical description of the Arabian Peninsula, but he did not master the Arabic language to the extent that would qualify him to read all the Arabic books. In fact, the only book available to him on this journey was "Description of the Earth" by Abu al-Fida. Also, the Greek geographers distorted the Arabic names in a way that made it difficult to recognize them. Therefore, I prepared this geographical description through my observations and through the oral information or stories that I collected from the people of that country. Therefore, this description is not comprehensive and complete." He also says: "The names of a large number of cities and villages were mentioned in colloquial language, and when these names matched the old names, this was confirmation that they had not changed. Since not all Arabs know their homeland completely, and are not always willing to cooperate with strangers, I had to inquire a lot about the names that were not known to me so that my sources would be more reliable."

In his introduction to the questions, he posed to the members of the expedition, Michaelis stated: "Knowing the names as they are written and pronounced in the country is of great importance for the progress of geography and natural history, and how much confusion and ambiguity there is when these names are written incorrectly. What do those who do not know the Eastern languages and do not possess their grammar do? - and this is impossible during a short journey and through conversations - they will write the names in Latin letters, and the writing will differ according to the book. The reason for the difference is sometimes due to the spoken language or knowledge of the spoken Arabic pronunciation, and sometimes to the language of the European listener. Scholars who are fluent in Eastern languages are not able to know how to write the word in Arabic; and thus, they cannot compare the descriptions of the travelers of cities, rivers, mountains, animals, and plants with what we find in the Arab geographers and naturalists. Nor is it easy to connect between the report of a German traveler and an English one. We will have dozens of different ideas about the same thing when reading many journeys, and as a result of writing the words incorrectly, fertile and correct ideas will become a burden on memory and a source of errors; because they lead us to imagine different things as if they were one thing. Let us imagine the name of a table, Or a mountain,

or a small city, written by a traveler in Latin letters. How shall we recognize the same name in the writings of another traveler? Shall we not think that there are two or three cities instead of one? Natural history must, indeed, be more than a term. But it is nothing, but a vocabulary divided according to the natural order of genera and accompanied by a definition. When languages differ, this vocabulary is of no use, as happens when the same things are expressed in different voyages, and in different Latin letters, and so find the names given in another voyage. Voyages do not inform us of the customs, laws, and politics of a people whose language we do not understand. Send to France or England a German who has learned nothing but his mother tongue, and we shall obtain a marvelous description of these nations.

Languages are difficult to learn in their infancy, for it is rare that we can study the grammar sufficiently to write correctly. To master the languages of the East, we must either know them all or be taught by a teacher who is fluent in Arabic, Ethiopian, Syriac, Chaldean, Hebrew, and Samaritan, so that he may show us the similarities between these languages. Such a teacher is difficult to find in Eastern countries. Travelers who are forced to learn the language in their own country waste valuable time. When they are able to take advantage of their journey, they are forced to end it and return to their own country. I admit that the grammar we learn in Europe is not enough to make the traveler speak fluently in Arabic or any other language of the East, and the same applies to his teacher, even if he understands the language from books because he lacks experience. But prior knowledge of the Arabic language will enable him to speak it easily when he mixes with its people. The second thing that reduces the benefit of the journey comes from the fact that we leave the travelers to their own devices, observing what they like. Or without asking them specific questions and without specifying the topics that interest us, they see many things that they do not care about. But the situation would be different if they knew that this or that topic is of interest to the European world and that knowing it removes the mystery surrounding it. For the trip to be more beneficial, we must present questions to the travelers, each of them will ask questions and make observations that remain vague and do not provide clarification on the issue we want to know specifically, because the matter may be trivial and well-known in the countries we visit, so we forget to record it. The search for truth requires means that are not available to everyone, because the traveler only spends two weeks or a month in the places of research. The lack of time and the many temptations prevent him from thinking about all the data that might facilitate his task, data that the European world imagines in his quiet office. The latter, surrounded by a huge library, can discover dozens of things that are missing only one thing, which is what the traveler sees because he does not carry with him the books that allow him to be alert. But if the European scholar takes the trouble to furnish the traveler with complete and detailed questions, the latter will be able to accomplish what other travelers have failed to do. These are the two things which have made most journeys to the East less useful and fruitful. I would add that we have not paid enough attention to a place on the globe which deserves our greater attention. How much loaded news about Palestine has been chewed by tongues, and how much of it has brought us useless details about the holy places. I do not aim to discourage those who wish to visit these places, because there is much to discover, for most of their predecessors have ignored what is worth seeing and studying. We can hardly find, among the thousands who have toured Palestine in search of great things and the tombs of saints, one who has paid attention to what the nature of the place has produced; but let me say that the accounts we have of Arabia are few. Nature has left in this region riches which are still unknown, dating back to before Christ, and the language of its people is different from the language of western Arabia which we know. Since this language is the key to understanding Hebrew and thus to understanding the most important books, i.e. the Bible, how much would we benefit if we mastered the language of the eastern Arabian Peninsula as much as we mastered the language of the western part of this country? The names that have disappeared in the latter, such as the names of plants or many fossils, are found in the former, pp. 9-11"(2).

Despite this explicit call to build a special system of Romanization to be followed by everyone who writes about the Arabian Peninsula, Carsten Niebuhr did not adhere to these instructions, but rather replaced it with a system that was interesting and enjoyable for the Arab reader, not the European, since he used to write the names in Arabic at that early time along with the language of the book, and this facilitated the process of transferring them into Arabic, but it did not solve the problem that Michaelis spoke about(3).

Most travelers who traveled the Arabian Peninsula did not respond to this desire, and some responded only to some letters that were not in the English language. The problem continued until the twentieth century.

Ameen Rihani complained in 1928 about the absence of a system for romanization, saying: "The absence of a scientific system for Romanizing names and places in the Arabian Peninsula will lead to an exacerbation of the contradictions and differences that disturb scholars and confuse the ordinary reader. Every traveler who follows his imagination or ear will increase the confusion, as he will hear the Syrian say Muhammad M'hammed, the Hijazi say Muhammad M'hammad, and the Asiri say Muhammad Mehemmed; but the muezzin and the one leading the prayer everywhere will say Muhammad. So why do we not follow those who know and respect classical Arabic?(4) Among those who responded to these calls is Alois Musil, who developed his own system, which he published in his book: Arabia Petraea in 1908.(5)

Transkription.

Die Unterstreichu ng (_) des umschriebenen Buchstaben bezeichnet die aspirierte, die Unterpunktierung (.) die emphatische und die Überstreichu ng (^) die palatalisierte Aussprache.

' = <u>ا</u> , <u>ء</u>	z = <u>ز</u> (<i>s in Rose</i>)	k = <u>ك</u> (<i>dunkles k</i>)
b = <u>ب</u>	s = <u>س</u> (<i>ss</i>)	ž = <u>ج</u> (<i>tsch</i>)
t = <u>ت</u>	š = <u>ش</u> (<i>sch</i>)	k = <u>ك</u> (<i>gk</i>)
t = <u>ط</u> (<i>ts</i>)	s = <u>ص</u> (<i>ssh, sz</i>)	č = <u>ع</u> (<i>zsch</i>)
ž = <u>ج</u> (<i>dsch</i>)	đ = <u>ح</u> (<i>dh, dah</i>)	l = <u>ل</u>
b = <u>ح</u> (<i>ch in ich</i>)	t = <u>ط</u> (<i>th</i>)	m = <u>م</u>
b = <u>ع</u> (<i>ch in Cherub</i>)	z = <u>ظ</u> (<i>zh</i>)	n = <u>ن</u>
d = <u>د</u>	' = <u>ع</u> (<i>Kehlautanstoss</i>)	h = <u>ه</u>
d = <u>ذ</u> (<i>ds</i>)	r = <u>ر</u> (<i>ghr</i>)	w = <u>و</u> (<i>un</i>)
r = <u>ر</u>	f = <u>ف</u>	j = <u>ي</u>

Abkürzungen.

'Ab = 'Abbād	Ĥn = Ahāli Ĥanzīra	Nm = Na'ēmāt
'Ad = 'Adwān	Ĥr = Ĥrejše	Řw = Řwārne
'Am = 'Amārin	Ĥt = Ĥwētāt	Šb = Ahāli-š-Šōbak
'Az = 'Azāzme	Ĥt'T = Ĥwētāt et-Tihama	Sd = Sa'īdijjīn
Bk = Belkāwīje	Ĥw = Ĥēwāt	Šb = Šbūr
Bl = Balāwne	Kb = Ka'ābne	Sl = Salājta
Bs = Ahāli Busejra	Kf = Kufrabba	Sn = Ahāli Šenefhe
Dg = Da'ge	Kr = Ahāli el-Kerak	Tb = Terābin
Dn = Ahāli Dāna	Lj = Lijājne	Tf = Ahāli-t-Tāfile
'Ej = Ahāli el-'Ejma	Md = Ahāli Mādaba	Th = Tijāha
Ĥm = Ĥamājde	Mn = Ma'ānijje	Zl = Zullām
Ĥn = Ĥanāgre		

Many systems for the Romanization of Arabic letters were developed in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, including dictionaries of Arabic with Romance languages, without vowels. In the twentieth century, international efforts began for Romanization with vowels; the most important of which are:

1. The Romanization systems and the Latin spelling conventions adopted by the United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN) and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for Official British Use (PCGN).

Table 1: Standard Arabic Consonant Characters

	Final form	Medial form	Initial form	Independent form	Unicode value (Independent)	Romanization	Roman Unicode value (lower case)	Example - Pointed Script	Example - Unpointed Script	Example - Romanization
1	ء	ء	ء	ء	0621	<i>not romanized in word-initial position see Note 2</i> <i>in all other positions see Note 2</i>	- 2019	أَبُو ظَبْيٍ بَيْتُ زَيْتٍ	أَبُو ظَبْيٍ بَيْتُ زَيْتٍ	Abū Zāby Bī'r Zayt
2	ا	ا	ا	ا	0627	See Notes 3 & 10	-	أُمُّ الْعَمَدِ	أُمُّ الْعَمَدِ	Umm al 'Amad
3	ب	ب	ب	ب	0628	b	0062	الْبَحْرَيْنِ	الْبَحْرَيْنِ	Al Baḥrayn
4	ت	ت	ت	ت	062A	t	0074	الْكُوتِ	الْكُوتِ	Al Kut
5	ث	ث	ث	ث	062B	th	0073+0304	الثَّلَاثُواتِ	الثَّلَاثُواتِ	Ath Thulaythuwaṭ
6	ج	ج	ج	ج	062C	j	006A	الْجَزِيرَةِ	الْجَزِيرَةِ	Al Jaḥīrah
7	ح	ح	ح	ح	062D	ḥ	1E29	الْمَحْمُودِيَّةِ	الْمَحْمُودِيَّةِ	Al Maḥmūdīyah
8	خ	خ	خ	خ	062E	kh	006B+0068	خَيْبَرٍ	خَيْبَرٍ	Khaybar
9	د	د	د	د	062F	d	0064	دَمَنْهَوْرٍ	دَمَنْهَوْرٍ	Damanhūr
10	ذ	ذ	ذ	ذ	0630	dh	007A+0304	ذَهَبٍ	ذَهَبٍ	Dhahab
11	ر	ر	ر	ر	0631	r	0072	الرَّوْضَةِ	الرَّوْضَةِ	Ar Rawḍah
12	ز	ز	ز	ز	0632	z	007A	زُورَةٍ	زُورَةٍ	Zuwārah
13	س	س	س	س	0633	s	0073	السُّلَيْمَانِيَّةِ	السُّلَيْمَانِيَّةِ	As Sulaymānīyah
14	ش	ش	ش	ش	0634	sh	0073+0068	الشَّامِ	الشَّامِ	Ash Shām
15	ص	ص	ص	ص	0635	ṣ	015F	قَيْصُومَةٍ	قَيْصُومَةٍ	Qayṣūmah
16	ض	ض	ض	ض	0636	ḍ	1E11	ضَوْرٍ	ضَوْرٍ	Ḍawr
17	ط	ط	ط	ط	0637	ṭ	0163	الْقَنْيَطَرَةِ	الْقَنْيَطَرَةِ	Al Qunayṭirah
18	ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ	0638	ẓ	007A+0327	ظَفَارٍ	ظَفَارٍ	Zuḥār
19	ع	ع	ع	ع	0639	ʿ	2018	أَبُو عَرِيْشٍ	أَبُو عَرِيْشٍ	Abū 'Arīsh
20	غ	غ	غ	غ	063A	gh	0067+0068	بَغْدَادٍ	بَغْدَادٍ	Baghdād
21	ف	ف	ف	ف	0641	f	0066	الْفُرَاتِ	الْفُرَاتِ	Al Furāt
22	ق	ق	ق	ق	0642	q	0071	قَطَرْ	قَطَرْ	Qaṭar
23	ك	ك	ك	ك	06A9	k	006B	الْكُوَيْتِ	الْكُوَيْتِ	Al Kuwayt
24	ل	ل	ل	ل	0644	l see Note 10	006C	حَلَبٍ	حَلَبٍ	Ḥalab
25	م	م	م	م	0645	m	006D	مَكَّةَ	مَكَّةَ	Makkah
26	ن	ن	ن	ن	0646	n	006E	نَخْلٍ	نَخْلٍ	Nakhl
27	هـ	هـ	هـ	هـ	0647	h	0068	جَبَلُ هَارُونَ	جَبَلُ هَارُونَ	Jabal Hārūn
28	و	و	و	و	0648	w	0077	وَادِي غَضَا	وَادِي غَضَا	Wādī Ghada
29	ي	ي	ي	ي	064A	y	0079	الْيَمَنِ	الْيَمَنِ	Al Yaman
30	ة	-	-	ة	FE93	ah or at see Note 4	0061+0068, 0061+0074	القَاهِرَةِ الْمَدِينَةُ الْمُنَوَّرَةُ مُحَافَظَةُ دِمَشْقٍ	القَاهِرَةِ الْمَدِينَةُ الْمُنَوَّرَةُ مُحَافَظَةُ دِمَشْقٍ	Al Qāhirah Al Madīnah al Munawwarah Muhafazat Dimashq

2. The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) (1972, 1973).
3. The system of the National Geographic Institute (IGN) (1973), which is compatible with French writing and is preferred in French-speaking countries such as the Maghreb and Lebanon.
4. The romanization of the Arab Division of Experts on Geographical Names (ADEGN) (2007) differs from UNGEGN (1972, 1973) in two ways: (ظ) is dh instead of z; and the subscript of cedilla is replaced by a subscript () in all letters containing cedilla.

المؤتمر العربي الثالث للأسماء الجغرافية في

بيروت

٢٠ و ٣١ أيار (مايو) ٢٠٠٧



النظام العربي الموحد

لنقل

الأسماء الجغرافية

من الأحرف العربية إلى الأحرف اللاتينية

Arabic Romanization System

كما جرى الإتفاق عليه من قبل الخبراء العرب الذين حضروا المؤتمر العربي الثالث للأسماء الجغرافية في بيروت وكما صدق من قبل ممثل الأمين العام لجامعة الدول العربية.

يرجى تثبيت خط الرومنة المرفق
(Romanization Font) قبل تصفح
أو طبع هذا الكتيب

بيروت – لبنان ٣١ أيار (مايو) ٢٠٠٧

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5. Other systems such as the American Library Association and the Library of Congress. It is close to the Romanization of the German Oriental Society and the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft and Hans Wehr,

which are used internationally in scientific publications by Arabs, and other different systems in Germany and the international standards organizations ISO.(6)

Conclusions:

This large number of Romanization systems for Arabic letters when transferred to Latin letters illustrates to us the importance of the Arabic language for researchers and orientalists from travelers and pioneers of knowledge and literature, but in return it shows us the urgent need to collect the fragments of these systems into one approved system that is simple and can be applied automatically. The Arab Division of Experts on Geographical Names will conduct intensive contacts with stakeholders, developers, and users of these systems to consult on the possibility of developing a comprehensive, inclusive and unified system for Arabic Romanization. The unified Arabic Romanization system approved by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) in August 2017 (Resolution XI/3), based on the system adopted by Arabic language experts at the conference held in Beirut in 2007, and taking into account the practical amendments and corrections made and agreed upon by representatives of Arabic-speaking countries at the Fourth Arab Conference on Geographical Names held in Beirut in 2008, and some clarifications and amendments agreed upon in Riyadh in 2017. The system can meet all the requirements of these systems, and this is an example of that:

Examples in Literary Arabic

Arabic	أمجد كان له قصر	UNGEGN	إلى المملكة المغربية	UNGEGN
Arabic with diacritics (normally omitted)	أَمْجَدُ كَانَ لَهُ قَصْرٌ		إِلَى الْمَمْلَكَةِ الْمَغْرِبِيَّةِ	
IPA	/ʔamdʒadu kaːna lahuː qasˤr/	Amjad Kana Lahu Qasr	/ʔila l.mamlakati l.mayribij.jah/	Ilá Al Mamlakah Al Maghribiyyah
ALA-LC	Amjad kāna lahu qasr	Amjad Kana Lahu Qasr	Ilá al-mamlakah al-Maghribiyyah	Ilá Al Mamlakah Al Maghribiyyah
Hans Wehr	amjad kāna lahū qasr	Amjad Kana Lahu Qasr	ilā l-mamlaka al-maǧribīya	Ilá Al Mamlakah Al Maghribiyyah
DIN 31635	'Amǧad kāna lahū qasr	Amjad Kana Lahu Qasr	'Ilā l-mamlakah al-Maǧribiyyah	Ilá Al Mamlakah Al Maghribiyyah
UNGEGN	Amjad Kana Lahu Qasr	Amjad Kana Lahu Qasr	Ilá Al Mamlakah Al Maghribiyyah	Ilá Al Mamlakah Al Maghribiyyah
ISO 233	'amǧad kāna lahu qasr	Amjad Kana Lahu Qasr	''ilaǧ ''almamlakat ''almagribiǧat	Ilá Al Mamlakah Al Maghribiyyah
ArabTeX	am^gad kAna lahu qa.sr	Amjad Kana Lahu Qasr	il_A almamlakaT alma.gribiyyaT	Ilá Al Mamlakah Al Maghribiyyah
English	Amjad had a palace	Amjad had a palace	To the Moroccan Kingdom	To the Moroccan Kingdom

(IPA) International Phonetic Alphabet
 ALA-LC American Library Association – Library of Congress
 Hans Wehr Hans Wehr transliteration system
 DIN Deutsches Institut für Normung (DIN) standard for the transliteration

UNGEGN United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.
 ISO International standard
 ArabTeX ArabTeX

References:

- (1) Carsten Niebuhr, (d. 1815 AD, ed. 1969 AD), **Description of the Arabian Peninsula**, presented and reviewed by Saeed bin Fayez Al-Saeed (1435 AH - 2005 AD), second edition, Academic Publishing and Printing Authority, Graz - Austria, King Abdulaziz Foundation (unpublished work).
- (2) Michaelis, Johann D., (2006), **A Collection of Questions about the Arabian Peninsula**, translated by Abeer Al-Mundhir, Arab Publishing House, Beirut.
- (3) Carsten Niebuhr,(1776), Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern (Band 2); Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, p.211
- (4) Rihani, Ameen, (1928), Ibn Sa'oud of Arabia: His people and his land, Constable and Co. Ltd., London, p. xi.
- (5) Musil, Alois, (1908), Arabia Petraea, Ethnologischer Reisebericht, No. 3. Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, Vienna, Austria.
- (6) Romanization of Arabic – Wikipedia.