


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

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Item 5 (c) of the provisional agenda*

Technical expertise: Writing systems and pronunciation
**Romanization of Arabic geographical names: towards a
 single and unified Arabic romanization system**
Summary**

The proliferation of romanization systems for Arabic geographical names has given rise to a certain scepticism about their usefulness. The need for such systems became evident at an early date. Johann D. Michaelis, the well-known German orientalist and theologian, was one of the scholars who promoted the important Danish expedition to Egypt, Arabia, and Syria from 1761–1767, led by Carsten Niebuhr, hoping to investigate the relationship between southern Arabian and Hebrew dialects and to verify obscure information about flora and fauna mentioned in the Bible.

To that end, he set out a hundred questions for them to seek answers to on their journey. He emphasized that they should use a system for romanizing Arabic geographical names rather than having different writers write them differently, which would mean that a report from a German traveller would not correspond to that of an English one. Dozens of different ideas about the same thing would arise when reading about various journeys, and fertile and valid ideas could become a burden on the memory and a source of error.

Carsten Niebuhr did not stick to these instructions. Instead, he used a system that was congenial for an Arabic reader but not a European. At that early time, names were written in Arabic within the language of the book. That certainly made it easier to convey them in Arabic, but did not solve the difficulty that Michaelis was talking about. Most travelers to the Arabian Peninsula did not respond to this wish. The response of some was limited to certain characters that do not appear in the English language. The issue persisted into the twentieth century. A large number of romanization systems for Arabic letters have appeared. There is an urgent need to consolidate these disparate systems into one approved system that is simple and machine-usable.

* [GEGN.2/2025/1](#).

** The full report was prepared by Abdullah Nasser Alwelaie, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information. The report will be available under document symbol GEGN.2/2025/27/CRP.48, in the language of submission only, at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/4th_session_2025/.

