

Arabic

The United Nations recommended romanization system was approved in 1972 (resolution II/8), based on the system adopted by Arabic experts at the conference held at Beirut in 1971 with the practical amendments carried out and agreed upon by the representatives of the Arabic-speaking countries at their conference. The table was published in volume II of the conference report¹.

In the UN resolution it was specifically pointed out that the system was recommended "for the romanization of the geographical names within those Arabic-speaking countries where this system is officially acknowledged". It cannot be definitely ascertained which of the Arabic-speaking countries have adopted this system officially, especially since 2007 when there are efforts by the Arabic Division to promote a modification of the UN system (ADEGN romanization, see the section on other romanization systems below), with varying success². Judging by the use of names in international cartographic products which rely mostly on national sources it appears that the UN system or its modification is more or less current in Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia³, United Arab Emirates and Yemen, there and in some other countries the system is often used without diacritical marks. For the geographical names of the Syrian Arab Republic international maps favour the UN system while the local usage seems to prefer a French-oriented romanization. Also in Egypt and Sudan there exist local romanization schemes or practices side by side with the UN system. The geographical names of Algeria, Djibouti, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia are generally rendered in the traditional manner which conforms to the principles of the French orthography.

Resolution 7 of the Seventh UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (1998) recommended that "the League of Arab States should, through its specialized structures, continue its efforts to organize a conference with a view to considering the difficulties encountered in applying the amended Beirut system of 1972 for the romanization of Arabic script, and submit, as soon as possible, a solution to the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names". At the Eighth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (2002), the Arabic Division of the UN Group of Experts announced that it had finalised proposed modifications to the UN recommended romanization system. These proposals would be submitted to the League of Arab States for approval.

Arabic is written from right to left. The Arabic script usually omits vowel points and diacritical marks from writing which makes it difficult to obtain uniform results in the romanization of Arabic. It is essential to identify correctly the words which appear in any particular name and to know the standard Arabic-script spelling including proper pointing. One must also take into account dialectal and idiosyncratic deviations. The romanization is generally reversible though there are some ambiguous letter sequences (*dh, kh, sh, th*) which may also point to combinations of Arabic characters in addition to the respective single characters.

Romanization

In the romanization system below column 1 denotes an independent consonant character, column 2 the initial, column 3 the medial and column 4 the final form of a character. Column 5 gives the romanization equivalent.

	1	2	3	4	5		15	ص	ص	ص	ص	ş
1	ء				ء ^A	16	ض	ض	ض	ض	ض	ḍ
2	ا			ا	- ^B	17	ط	ط	ط	ط	ط	ṭ
3	ب	ب	ب	ب	b	18	ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ	ẓ
4	ت	ت	ت	ت	t ^C	19	ع	ع	ع	ع	ع	‘
5	ث	ث	ث	ث	th	20	غ	غ	غ	غ	غ	gh
6	ج	ج	ج	ج	j	21	ف	ف	ف	ف	ف	f
7	ح	ح	ح	ح	ḥ	22	ق	ق	ق	ق	ق	q
8	خ	خ	خ	خ	kh	23	ك	ك	ك	ك	ك	k
9	د			د	d	24	ل	ل	ل	ل	ل	l
10	ذ			ذ	dh	25	م	م	م	م	م	m
11	ر			ر	r	26	ن	ن	ن	ن	ن	n
12	ز			ز	z	27	ه	ه	ه	ه	ه ^C	h ^C
13	س	س	س	س	s	28	و			و	و	w
14	ش	ش	ش	ش	sh	29	ي	ي	ي	ي	ي	y

^A Not romanized word-initially.

^B Not romanized, but see romanizations accompanying *alif* (ا) in the table for vowels.

^C In certain endings, an original *tā’* (ت) is written ة, i.e., like *hā’* (ه) with two dots, and is known as *tā’ marbūṭah*. It is romanized *h*, except in the construct form of feminine nouns, where it is romanized *t*, instead.

Vowels, diphthongs and diacritical marks (ب stands for any consonant)

	1	بَ	a		6	بُ	(A)		11	بِي	á
	2	بَو	aw		7	بَا	ā		12	بَب	a ⁿ
	3	بِي	ay		8	أ	ā		13	بِب	i ⁿ
	4	بِ	i		9	بِي	ī		14	بُب	u ⁿ
	5	بُ	u		10	بُو	ū		15	بَب	(B)

^A Marks absence of the vowel.

^B Marks doubling of the consonant.

Note. When the definite article *al* precedes a word beginning with one of the "sun letters" (*t, th, d, dh, r, z, s, sh, ş, ḍ, ṭ, ẓ, l, n*) the *l* of the definite article is assimilated with the first consonant of the word: *الشارقة* ash-Shāriqah.

Other systems of romanization

The proposed changes to the UN system agreed to by the Arab delegations to the Eighth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Berlin (2002)⁴ and later called the standard or unified system for the romanization of Arabic (2007)⁵ or the **ADEGN romanization** envisage the following:

1. the character (ظ) to be romanized as *dh* instead of *z*;
2. the cedilla (ç) to be replaced by a sub-macron (ç̣) in all characters with cedillas.

The **BGN/PCGN 1956 System** is identical to the UN system. The only difference lies in the treatment of articles. The original transliteration table, published in vol. II of the report on the Second UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, contains examples (but not explicit rules) where the definite article is always written with a small initial and connected by hyphen to the main part of the name, e.g. البصرة al-Baṣrah, الرياض ar-Riyāḍ. The practice of the BGN and the PCGN, however, is not to use hyphens between articles and names and to capitalize the first definite article in a name, e.g. Al Baṣrah, Ar Riyāḍ.

The **I.G.N. System 1973** (sometimes also called Variant B of the Amended Beirut System⁶) has the following equivalents to the romanizations of the amended Beirut system:

UN	I.G.N.	j	= dj, j ^A	ū	= oû, ô ^A
a	= a, e, é, è ^A	n	= n, ne ^B	w	= ou
ā	= â, ê ^A	q	= q, g ^A , gu ^C	y	= i, î ^F , y ^G
á	= a	s	= s, ss ^D	z,	= z
ḍ	= ḍ	ş	= ş, ç ^E	'	(not romanized)
ḥ	= ḥ	sh	= ch	'	= ', aa ^H
i	= i, e ^A	ţ	= ţ		
ī	= î, ê ^A	u	= ou, o ^A		

^A Used according to the local pronunciation.

^B *ne* is used word-finally after *a, e, i, o*.

^C *gu* is used before *e* and *i*.

^D *ss* is used between vowels.

^E *ç* is used in some conventional names.

^F *î* is used as second element of a diphthong.

^G *y* is used word-initially or between vowels.

^H *aa* is specific to Lebanon.

The transliteration **ISO 233:1984** gives every character and diacritical mark a unique equivalent and e.g. long vowels in Arabic *ā, ī* and *ū* are consequently written *a', iy* and *uw* respectively in the ISO transliteration. Other main correspondences:

UN	ISO	a ⁿ	= á	gh	= ğ
ā (ḷ)	= â	ḍ	= ḍ	h (ḥ)	= ħ
á	= ay	dh	= ḍ	ḥ	= ḥ

i ⁿ	= í	sh	= š	y (ﻯ)	= ÿ
j	= ğ	ṭ	= ṭ	y (ﻱ)	= y
kh	= ħ	th	= ṯ	z,	= z
ṣ	= ṣ	u ⁿ	= ú		

The **Royal Jordanian Geographic Centre (RJGC) System**⁷ is essentially the same as the ADEGN romanization. The sub-macron is used instead of the cedilla.

UN	RJGC	ḥ	= ḥ	z,	= dh
-ah (ة)	= -a	ṣ	= ṣ		
ḍ	= ḍ	ṭ	= ṭ		

The **Survey of Egypt System (SES)** of romanization has the following correspondences with the UN system:

UN	SES	dh	= dh (z)	ṭ	= ṭ
á	= a	ḥ	= ḥ	th	= th (t)
ā	= â (a)	ī	= î	ū	= û
-ah (ة)	= -a	j	= g (j)	z,	= z (d)
aw	= ô (au)	q	= q (k)	‘	= ‘
ay	= ei (ai)	s	= s (c)		
ḍ	= ḍ	ṣ	= ṣ		

The variants in parentheses are used depending on pronunciation and tradition. Not all the variations have been given above. The article is always written *el-* (El-Kafr el-Qadîm, Sharm el-Sheikh).

In **Algeria** there is at present no official romanization system, the prospects of establishing such a system are being discussed in the Permanent Commission for Toponymy (CPST) at the National Council of Geographical Information (CNIG)⁸. **Lebanon** in 2002 submitted a document where all geographical names were romanized using the UN system⁹ but later has started using the ADEGN romanization of 2007¹⁰. In **Mauritania**, the romanized name forms in official maps edited since 1969 have been rendered in accordance with a simplified version of the I.G.N. system¹¹. In **Morocco** the official romanization system for Arabic script dates from June 17, 1932, although changes to this are being planned¹². In **Tunisia** the Directorate of Topography and Cartography adopted in 1983 officially the amended Beirut system with minor modifications (e.g. adding a letter *g* to the table). Information on some of the countries above might be out of date and needs further survey.

References

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