

Paper presented at the UN/ICA Week of Geographical Names in Timișoara
Timișoara (Romania), September 9-13, 2008

EXONYMS IN THE ARAB WORLD
- IN ARABIC AND INTERNATIONAL CARTOGRAPHY

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Motto:

"Different use will not be considered a problem, but rather an opportunity."

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Arab World Identification

From the point of view of our toponymic considerations, the notion of the Arab World does not quite follow the membership list of the League of Arab States, but it includes, by principle, all countries in which Arabic is either the official language, or at least one of the official languages. Thus the Arab World consists of two groups of states, in Africa and in Asia.

Obviously well known Arab countries in Africa are Mauritania, Morocco (with Western Sahara), Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Sudan, but also five other countries which are seldom associated with the Arab World, namely: Chad, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and the Comoros, where Arabic is one of the official languages.

The Arabic countries in Asia, in the Middle East, are: Bahrain, the Emirates, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen. We also include here Palestine, a state-to-be, and Israel - a state in which Arabic language, at least formally, retains certain official status.

Maps availability and quality of toponymy

All those countries produce only a few maps in Arabic that are widely available. The simplest proof from everyday life is to ask for Arabic maps in a bookshop, newsstand etc. - most common reaction is a surprised face of a vendor. Specially this must be said about North African countries which used to be a part of the French colonial empire: Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Arabic maps of those countries almost do not exist and are hardly available.

At the same time French toponymy on maps that are widely available, practically consists of just exonyms. As it has been on many occasions indicated, French renderings which were supposed to reflect the Arabic local names, have played that role in a very particular way. They make superficial impression of Arabic-sounding. In fact the Arab names are much deformed and distorted through uncareful French spelling which was introduced by linguistically incompetent geodesians and cartographers, who were completely lost in front of the mixture of

rich variety of Arabic and Berber dialects. French toponymy, for that reason, may be called a separate entity in itself, a complete parallel exonymic system.

Similar situation could be observed in Libya under the Italian rule. After the liberation, however, and specially after the 1969 revolution, the toponymic problem was radically solved, at least at the level of official cartography, in conformity with all-Arab agreements.

Such countries like Djibouti, Somalia, Chad and the Comoros probably never produced any Arabic maps and, to this author, only one Arabic map is known to exist for Eritrea. Apparently it was produced by the Eritrean exiles and resistance people living in the Sudan in the years seventies of the past century when the country was still dreaming of independence.

The situation is obviously further complicated by the fact that in those last mentioned countries very few people actually speak Arabic as their mother tongue (Chad in this respect has better position, it can count comparatively many Arabic-speaking inhabitants). Arabic language has occupied there since ages mostly a position of a vehicular language (sort of *lingua franca*) in a multiethnic tribal society and, as one of the official languages, it was adopted there for historical reasons and religious motivations (most of the population in those countries being of Muslim denomination).

In the Middle East, the situation is slightly better. But even in countries like Kuwait or the Emirates it is easier to find local maps overwritten with names in English lettering than those printed in Arabic alphabet. Maps in English aimed at general public very seldom keep up with any reasonable standards of

transliteration or transcription and through them the distorted Arab names often find way to international mass media.

A very particular situation appears in Israel. The sphere of official use of Arabic in that country is quite narrow. Despite the existence of a sizeable Arabic-speaking population, almost all geographical names in Israel were renamed in Hebrew (often after the evidence taken from the Bible). Then, as such, the names were from Hebrew transliterated into Arabic letters. In such forms they appear for example on road plates (sign posts) indicating directions and on stamps of post-offices that are applied on letters. Such Hebrew names in Arabic letters constitute a full series of Arab exonyms, or rather a whole third toponymic layer, a sort of a parallel toponymy for this territory (the first layer being original Arabic names, the second layer - new Hebrew toponyms; there are also widely used names in English, a mixture of various transcription systems and historical English exonyms). Maps with official Hebrew names in Arabic alphabet are not known to exist (only occasionally and marginally such names appear, for example, on bilingual maps of Jerusalem - *ipso facto* they can not be numerous). Maps published by the Arabic-speaking Palestinians themselves use traditional Arabic names even though they were officially changed since half a century or more, and only occasionally they include new creations as mentioned above.

We can also observe the slow appearance of spontaneous Hebrew-Arabic translations of new Israeli place names (those without Arabic precedents), beside the Hebrew-Arabic transliterations mentioned above.

This is the very general situation in the Arab World, a starting point for any consideration, as observed from outside.

Names for the Arab users

The situation within the Arab-speaking world is not any less complicated. For their own local use, the Arabs can safely rely on maps of their own respective countries only if those maps are produced locally, when they constitute a domestic product. The problem arises within the inter-Arab international cartography.

By principle, all Arab countries use the same Arabic literary language, called by the linguists Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It is only a written Arabic that nobody uses in daily speech, unless on official occasions. Everyday language of the Arabs is split into a big variety of local and social dialects, as much different from each other as they all differ from the MSA. Furthermore, the everyday use of Arabic alphabet does not require writing short vowels. In result thereof various readers can read the same words differently under the influence of their own mother dialects even if they pretend reading in standard Arabic.

Parallel toponymy

The expression *parallel toponymy* applies here to variant names used interchangeably in the same socio-linguistic context, when users make choice of a given variant spontaneously and without apparently applying to the choice any special importance. It may happen that in a discourse between two individuals one of them regularly uses one variant name whereas the other would rather use another name. From the psychological point of view, each of them would probably treat that small difference as personal characteristics of the interlocutor, resulting for example from dialectal diversity. Furthermore, since it does not break down the informative value of communication., and mutual understanding in the discourse still remains possible, both would not even pay attention to such a small difference.

The described phenomenon may be observed in various languages that are strongly divided into dialects, but Arabic linguistic environment is particularly apt for creating such situations. It is in Arabic that a notion of the *third language* – *lughathalitha* was born. It is a sort of an intermediary language between the MSA and speakers' dialects, created spontaneously for the sake of better immediate communication. Names used in such contexts also undergo similar adaptation.

From Arabic into Latin

Toponyms that are noted down in Arabic alphabet without vowels and pronounced in many variant ways, allow for the most diversified Latin spellings, when it comes to Romanization procedures necessary for international mapping. Usually it remains at the discretion of individual transliterators or transcribers. Persons actually dealing with writing Arab names in Latin alphabets seldom follow any systematic approach. And thus it results what we observe at present - all possible styles of writing Arabic names, hundreds of exonyms (or just variant names?) appearing in books, on maps, in media. Except for a handful of specialists, users normally have all kinds of problems with finding accurate way of pronouncing them, and occasionally even in identifying right objects which are designated by such names.

Inter-Arab agreements

According to the agreements repeatedly confirmed by the Arab countries themselves, under the aegis of the UNO, the national standardization of geographical names should be executed in a way that every single name be noted

down with the use of all diacritic signs and vowels that are necessary for univocal reading of Arabic words. Such materials, unfortunately, were never prepared and put at the disposal of wider public. In fact, only in a few countries they were at all produced (like Libya or Saudi Arabia) but were preserved there as classified.

At the same time this author has known just one Arabic printed map where geographical names were noted down with the use of necessary vowels. It is a map accompanying the agreement on the delimitation of a Saudi-Yemeni border line.

Practical situation in the Maghreb

When the users (schools, offices etc.) in the Arab countries of the West need educational material like maps in Arabic, usually buy them from the East, mainly Damascus, Beirut and Cairo. And here appears another trap to fall in, and a sort of a vicious circle. Producers of maps in the Eastern Arab countries have no Arabic maps available from the West, so they can only use various European sources. They simply try to retranslate the names from a variety of Latin variant forms and transcription/transliteration systems back into Arabic.

In that way the readers receive publications, like school atlases in Morocco, Tunisia or Algeria, produced let us say in Damascus, with geographical names which bear only a distant and superficial resemblance to original local names. Maghrebian children read names in their atlases that are in contradiction with their daily life and their living linguistic experience.

It must be observed that for some well known features of the Maghreb, like names of important cities or mountains, specially if they are of non-Arab origin, there exists in the East a whole set of already well established variant names which

are actually never used in the West (except in imported school atlases). It is an artificially created cartographic reality, not necessarily matching with the real life.

This is what I would like to call Arabic exonyms which are produced in quantities within the Arab World itself.

Names versus scientific terminology in Arabic

The specific situation within the countries using the MSA as the official language is further complicated in another sphere analogical to toponymy, that of the specialized modern terminology. At least four important standardization centres work on the arabization of new scientific terms, namely in Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo and Rabat. The problem is that they lack in coordination and more often than not come to divergent conclusions and decisions. The ensuing academic and educational publications reflect that terminological variety which does not facilitate exchange of knowledge and ideas between the Arabic countries and is harmful to possibilities of distributing scientific books on all-Arab scale.

Understanding of the problem of such divergencies in the world of science is quite common in certain circles of interested Arab researchers and teachers but the technical and psychological obstacles to joint work and obtaining unified results are stronger. Additionally, it is not a matter of everyday concern of an average Arab reader.

Understanding dangers coming from divergencies in the geographical nomenclature is much less widespread.

Opposition to standardization

The intermixing and overlapping of the MSA use with everyday dialectal reality creates troublesome syndromes in certain spheres. Since the standardization procedures may create a picture of the Arab World different from daily dialectal experience of Arab-speaking users, a certain opposition in this respect can be observed.

It is not necessarily declared in open because it could mean an uncomfortable situation of being in opposition to one-nation and one-language ideology being prevalent in the Arab World. What some circles of professional geographers in the Maghreb are doing about it, may seem to be a sort of a boycott, or an Italian strike at the same time. The free discussions on standardization procedures are endless and without conclusion; proposed transcription or transliteration systems multiply; those who agreed on common rules and procedures are labeled and treated as incompetent (in fact, at their level of decision-making competence they usually have not much to say when the question of practical application arises); the procedures that were agreed upon on international, inter-Arab scale are not implemented; and the general commentary, that is often heard, says that those rules are good for the Arab East but not for the Arab West (in reality it is not quite exact - one of basically Maghrebian countries, Libya, implemented those rules without much trouble once a political decision was taken in that direction by appropriate authorities).

Conclusions

A **problem** - for the givers:

a) the solution of the problem lies entirely within the sphere of responsibility of the Arab countries themselves;

b) whatever the rules are accepted, there is a problem in practical application;

c) the most important, first step to be taken is the national standardization to be executed by individual countries according to principles that were agreed upon;

d) transliteration of names into Latin alphabet (Romanization) according to one system, which is by principle a quasi automatic procedure, would be the next step;

e) editing, publishing and widespread distribution of standard toponymy are final steps.

An **opportunity** – for the receivers:

a) expecting the distribution of ready materials from the Arab countries may still last for a certain time and received results may be uneven (various countries may adopt different timetables and diverging criteria for selecting the toponyms);

b) continuous invitation and encouragement should be addressed to the Arab countries in this respect so as to bring some positive effect in a certain perspective;

c) in the meantime, the receiving countries should best follow the Polish experience and produce by themselves lists of toponyms for individual Arab countries until those latter's original elaborations become available.