TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM FOR ARABIC
BGN/PCGN 1956 System

The BGN/PCGN 1956 System for the Arabic alphabet is designed for use in transliterating standard written Arabic. It was adopted by the BGN in 1946 and by the PCGN in 1956 and has been applied by the Board, so far as practicable, to the systematic romanization of geographic names in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, the United Arab Republic (Egypt), Libya, the Sudan, and Tunisia.

The system is designed to bring about uniformity in the spelling of geographic names in Arabic-language areas by eliminating deviations resulting from pronunciation differences in various dialects, except as stated in the special rules.

In contrast to several other languages, uniform results in the transliteration of Arabic are difficult to obtain, since vowel points and some of the diacritical marks necessary for the certain identification of the Arabic words are almost always omitted from both handwritten and printed Arabic. It follows that the transliterator must be able to identify the words used in the names and must know their standard written Arabic spelling, their proper vowel pointing, and how to eliminate pecularities resulting from dialectical variation. The problem is complicated in most Arabic-language areas by the fact that a large proportion of the geographic names are not available in the Arabic alphabet. This applies to Arabic names as well as to those of non-Arabic origin. Even when Arabic script is available it is not always possible to determine the proper voweling from dictionaries and other reference tools.

The transliteration of the Arabic consonants, vowels, and dipthongs, with examples of the application to geographic names, is given in the tables. Hamzah, often omitted in such tables, is included in its logical position before alif as a consonant in order to avoid any question as to its proper treatment.

The notes and special rules explain details of transliteration not stated in the tables.

TABLE I

TRANSLITERATION OF THE ARABIC CONSONANTS

(Only the isolated forms of the letters are given; see any Arabic grammar or standard reference work for the combining forms in initial, medial, and final positions and for consonant ligatures.)

ARABIC LETTER	NAME OF LETTER	TRANSLITER-ATION		EXAMPLES AND REMARKS
ء	hamzah	omit (initial)	ابوكمال	Abū Kamāl
		' (medial)	بئر زيت	Bi'r Zayt. See note 1.
		' (final)	صنعاء	Şan'ā'
ا	alif	omit	ام العمد	Umm al 'Amad. See note 2.
ب	bā'	b	البحرين	Al Baḥrayn
ت	tā'	t	الكوت	Al Kūt. The combination of *tā'* with *bā'* can be rendered as t/h for bibliographical purposes. See notes 3 and 4.
ث	thā'	th	الثليثوات	Ath Thulaythuwāt. See remarks on *tā'*.
ج	jīm	j	الجزيرة	Al Jazīrah
ح	ḥā'	ḥ	المحمودية	Al Maḥmūdīyah. See note 5.
خ	khā'	kh	خيبر	Khaybar. See remark on *kāf*.
د	dāl	d	دمنهور	Damanhūr. The combination of *dāl* with *bā'* can be rendered as d/h for bibliographical purposes. See note 4.
ذ	dhāl	dh	وادي الذهب	Wādī adh Dhahab. See remark on *dāl*.
ر	rā'	r	الروضة	Ar Rawḍah
ز	zāy	z	الزاوية	Az Zāwiyah
س	sīn	s	سليمانية	Sulaymānīyah. The combination of *sīn* with *bā'* can be rendered as s/h for bibliographical purposes. See note 4.
ش	shīn	sh	الشام	Ash Shām. See remark on *sīn*.
ص	ṣād	ṣ	قيصومة	Qayṣūmah. See note 5.
ض	ḍād	ḍ	ضور	Ḍawr. See note 5.
ط	ṭā'	ṭ	القنيطرة	Al Qunayṭirah. See note 5.
ظ	ẓā'	ẓ	ابوظبي	Abū Ẓaby. See note 5.

TABLE I (Continued)

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ARABIC LETTER	NAME OF LETTER	TRANSLITER-ATION	EXAMPLES AND REMARKS
ع	'ayn	'	ابوعريش Abū 'Arīsh. This is a raised turned comma.
غ	ghayn	gh	بغداد Baghdād
ف	fā'	f	الفرات Al Furāt
ق	qāf	q	قطر Qaṭar
ك	kāf	k	الكويت Al Kuwayt. The combination of *kāf* with *hā'* can be rendered as k/h for bibliographical purposes. See note 4.
ل	lām	l	حلب Ḥalab
م	mīm	m	مكة Makkah
ن	nūn	n	نخل Nakhl
ه	hā'	h	جبل هارون Jabal Hārūn. See remarks on *tā'*, *dāl*, *sīn*, *kāf*; see also notes 3 and 4.
و	wāw	w	وادي موسى Wādī Mūsá
ي	yā'	y	اليمن Al Yaman. See notes 1 and 6.

NOTES

1. *Hamzah* is written in Arabic over all initial *alifs* except those which belong to the definite article *al* or bear a *maddah* (see note 10). When the purpose is to indicate the presence of the sound described as a glottal stop, it is written over internal and final *alif*, *wāw*, and *yā'* (without dots). *Hamzah* following i is written ئ (almost always the *yā'* is in the ـي or ـئـ form) and the dots are omitted. Example: بئر. *Hamzah* following u is written ؤ. *Hamzah* following a long vowel is written ء without anything under it ("without a bearer"). The transliteration of *hamzah* (') should always be carefully distinguished from that of *'ayn* (').

2. *Alif* as such is not transliterated when it is bearer of *hamzah*, but see *fatḥah alif* and *alif maddah* in Table II. See also note 1 above and note 10.

3. An original *tā'* in certain endings is written ة (i.e., *hā'* with two dots) and is called *tā' marbūṭah*. It is transliterated h (silent), except when followed by another word in a unitary expression, when it is transliterated t, as in *hamzah* (isolated form) and *hamzat al waṣl*. A pronounced final *hā'* occurs and for bibliographical purposes may be transliterated /h when a *fatḥah* precedes it (Al Mara/h). Cf. also note 4.

4. The two-letter symbols th, kh, dh, sh, and gh are convenient for use and easily comprehensible. The infrequent sequences of t, k, d, or s followed by h can be unequivocally transliterated for bibliographical purposes by the use of a slant line ("shilling," "solidus") to separate true h from a preceding t, k, d, or s; that is, th represents *thā'*, but t/h stands for *tā'* followed by *hā'*. Cf. also note 3.

5. Where special considerations are paramount, the sub-dot (ḥ, ṣ, ḍ, ṭ, ẓ) may be used in place of the cedilla (ḥ, ṣ, ḍ, ṭ, ẓ).

6. The letter *yā'* is also used in writing *alif maqṣūrah* in which the dots are omitted. See Table II.

TABLE II

TRANSLITERATION OF THE ARABIC VOWELS, DIPHTHONGS, AND SPECIAL DIACRITICAL MARKS

ARABIC LETTER	NAME OF LETTER	TRANSLITER-ATION	EXAMPLES AND REMARKS	
´	fatḥah	a	البصرة	Al Baṣrah. Placed over consonant after which pronounced.
ˌ	kasrah	i	الرياض	Ar Riyāḑ. Placed under consonant.
´	ḑammah	u	القدس	Al Quds. Placed over consonant.
١´	fatḥah alif	ā	باب المندب	Bāb al Mandab. See note 2.
ِي	kasrah yā'	ī	المدينة	Al Madīnah
´و	ḑammah wāw	ū	صور	Ṣūr
ى´	alif maqṣūrah	á	مرسىمطروح	Marsá Matrūḥ
˚	sukūn (jazmah)	omit		Placed over consonant.
´يْ	fatḥah yā' sukūn	ay	صيدا	Ṣaydā
´وْ	fatḥah wāw sukūn	aw	الدوحة	Ad Dawḥah
٭	tanwīn fatḥah	aⁿ		See note 7.
٭	tanwīn kasrah	iⁿ		See note 7.
٭	tanwīn ḑammah	uⁿ		See note 7.
ّ	tashdīd	doubling		See note 8.
ٱ	hamzat al waṣl	'		See note 9.
آ	alif maddah	ā	آلبومعيط	Ālbū Mu'ayṭ. See note 10.

NOTES

7. The classical Arabic grammatical endings written with the so-called nunation symbols (Arabic *tanwīn*) may be transliterated when necessary by aⁿ, iⁿ, uⁿ. In modern Arabic these endings have become silent and are omitted in transliteration: classical *alifuⁿ*, modern *alif*.

8. Doubled consonant sounds are written in Arabic by placing the *tashdīd* over the consonant letter written once. In transliteration the letter should be doubled. When the definite article *al* precedes a word beginning with t, th, d, dh, r, z, s, sh, ṣ, ḑ, ṭ, ẓ, l, n (the so-called "sun letters"), the l is assimilated in pronunciation, giving tt, thth, etc.

In transliteration this l should be omitted and the following letter written twice, once after the a of the article and secondly at the beginning of the next word. Example: An Nīl, not Al Nīl.

9. *Hamzat al waṣl* is transliterated ' in classical forms, as illustrated in its classical name *ḥamzatu 'l waṣli*, but ignored in modern forms, as in *ḥamzat al waṣl*.

10. *Maddah* is a horizontal wavy line over *alif*. Since *maddah* nearly always occurs in word-initial position, no confusion results from the use of ā for *alif maddah* as well as for *fatḥah alif*.

SPECIAL RULES

1. Initial definite articles and prepositions should be capitalized and hyphens should not be used to connect parts of names; e.g., Ash Shāriqah and Tall al Laḥm.

2. If any evidence is found for the use of the definite article in a name, the article will be used in the name chosen.

3. The Arabic word for God will be written Allāh.

4. Phrase names, commonly transcribed as one word, will be written in separate words. The definite article within such names will be written al, not ul; e.g., ʿAbd Allāh, ʿAbd ar Raḥmān, Dhū al Faqār.

5. The word Ibn will be transliterated Bin wherever written without *alif*, that is, between two proper nouns; e.g., ʿUmar Bin al Khaṭṭāb.

6. The Turkish word Paşa will be transliterated directly from Arabic script as Bāshā; the Turkish word Bey will be romanized as Bey in Egyptian names, no matter how written in Arabic-language sources, but in other Arabic areas as Bak where written *bā'–kāf* and as Bayk where written *bā'–yā'–kāf*.

7. The modern colloquial word Sīdī will be given precedence over the classical form Sayyidī. (This does not preclude the spelling Sayyidī if the latter is indicated by the Arabic script or other evidence — for instance if the *yā'* is written with *tashdīd.*)

8. The colloquial word Bū will not be changed to the classical form Abū.

9. The colloquial word for water written *mīm–yā'–tā'* on Arabic maps will be transliterated Mayyat.

10. In place names of Aramaic origin in Lebanon and Syria with an initial cluster beginning with b plus another consonant such as l or h, initial clusters such as bl and bh will be written.

11. In names containing the words for "back, ridge, hill" appearing as either *ẓā'–bā'–rā'* or *ḍād–bā'–rā'* in Arabic sources, the spelling used in the sources will be followed.