

## The Geographical Names of Sudan

### Background

1. In Sudan there are thought to be 136 different languages, and therefore the rendering of geographical names is inevitably a difficult task. Only one of these languages, Arabic, has a written form, and it is limited in its use to the north central portion of Sudan. And although Arabic is the language of government in Khartoum, its limitation of having only three vowels makes it an unsatisfactory mechanism for the field collection of non-written languages, since many of these (eg the Cushitic languages of the north-east such as Bedawi and the Nilotic languages of the south such as Dinka) have five vowels, plus additional consonant sounds not present in Arabic. Conversely, many of these languages do not have the **d/ḍ**, **h/ḥ**, **s/ṣ**, and **t/ṭ** distinctions which Arabic does possess.
2. In Sudan's colonial days, the geographical names were recorded in an English language style, culminating in the publication in 1932 of the Index Gazetteer, containing an impressive 30,000 names. Representation of the 'ayn, as an inverted apostrophe, was the only addition to the standard English alphabet. These spellings were known as Sudan Survey Department (SSD) spellings, and their application on the standard pre-war 1:250,000 scale map series effectively made Sudan a roman alphabet country from the cartographic point of view.
3. Today, the standard mapping of Sudan is the 1:100,000 scale map series, which runs to several hundred sheets of widely varying dates. The earlier sheets maintain the SSD spellings, but in 1976 work began in Sudan on the creation of a National Geographical Names Committee, which finally came into being in 1981. This committee devised a modified Arabic script and accompanying romanization table, designed to cater for the non-Arabic languages of Sudan. For example, characters were created for the letters **p**, **v**, **ch**, **ng** and **ny**, not present in standard Arabic. Digraphs were underlined. Sudan presented a paper outlining this system to the Fourth United Nations Conference in 1982 (E/CONF.74/L.109) and began to apply it to those sheets of the 1:100,000 scale map series which were in work at the time, and also to a 1:4 million scale administrative division map of 1985.
4. Meanwhile, in the 1970s, a block of 1:100,000 scale sheets covering the Red Sea Hills area of north-eastern Sudan had been in work. The dominant language here is Bedawi, and field collection took place in that language, using a modified Arabic script which made provision for the Bedawi vowels and consonants not found in Arabic. This was before the establishment of the Sudanese names committee, and the office treatment of these names fell to PCGN in London. Names such as Jibāl Ōbkīk and Jibāl Emōy resulted, reflecting the Bedawi language.

5. By the late 1980s, the Sudanese names committee had ceased to function, and with its demise the 1982 Arabicization-then-Romanization procedure fell into disuse. It appears that sheets of the 1:100,000 series published since 1989 have reverted to traditional SSD spellings, as has a 1995 edition of the 1:4 million scale administrative map. And when relaying information to PCGN on revised administrative divisions in 1994, the Sudanese embassy in London used what were essentially SSD spellings. Even in the late 1980s, when the Sudanese names committee was possibly still functioning, users of new famine relief aid mapping requested that that mapping should carry SSD spellings. Recent research (February 2004) into the availability of the 1:100,000-scale map series showed that no maps in this series had been acquired by DGIA since 1995, at which point the latest sheets were dated 1990.
6. In 1999, the creation of a new National Committee for Geographical Names in Sudan was announced under the Sudan Ministry of Environment and Physical Development. It is responsible for establishing policies, programmes and plans relating to geographical names matters in the country. Sudan reported to the 6<sup>th</sup> UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2002 that little progress had been made due to lack of funds and the problems of dealing with a large number of languages. Nevertheless, the Committee has stated aims to establish a national standardized system for writing geographical names and to issue a dictionary of toponyms in Sudan, with a view to updating maps and official documents.

#### **PCGN and BGN policy for the treatment of geographical names in Sudan**

7. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> BGN/PCGN Conference in 1998, BGN policy for geographical names in Sudan was to apply the BGN/PCGN System for the Romanization of Arabic to reconstructed Arabic-script forms of names in the country, whereas PCGN took the names as already romanized from official Sudanese sources. PCGN considered that it was not possible to use Arabic nationwide; its irrelevance as a language in (particularly) the south meant that no Arabic or modified Arabic forms existed in many areas, apart from those few devised during the brief existence of the first Sudanese names committee. Furthermore, the Sudan Survey Department did not publish mapping in Arabic.
8. Therefore it was agreed at the 19<sup>th</sup> BGN/PCGN Conference that the use of Roman-alphabet spellings as found on the standard Sudan Survey Department products was warranted, given their long-standing authoritative usage. This decision brought BGN and PCGN policies for Sudan into line, but it left open the question of the practical application of this joint policy.
9. There are several practical problems which immediately surface when trying to make the SSD 1:100,000-scale map series the primary source for approved names, not least because the production of the 900+ sheets covering Sudan has taken place gradually over a lengthy period, during which the whims and practices of the SSD have changed several times. For the purposes of standardization, it was desirable to bring some measure of consistency to the SSD spellings, without on the other hand going so far as to alter their nature. Annex A therefore identifies the problems and inconsistencies encountered on these sheets, and provides agreed standardisation procedures.

PCGN  
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## ANNEX A

- *The Arabic definite article is variously written as **Al** or **El**, and even sometimes as **Aj** or **Ej**. Sometimes, the article is assimilated before a word beginning with a sun letter, but SSD practice here is inconsistent.*

Take each article as found, with all medial instances of the article written with an initial lower-case letter, irrespective of the style on the map sheet.

- The word **Um**, sometimes encountered on SSD maps, should be retained and not changed to the standard Arabic word **Umm**, in case an occasional instance of **Um** actually represents a different (non-Arabic) word.
- *SSD practice used normally to eschew diacritical signs, but they do occur to a limited extent on some more recent sheets.*

All instances of the macron, the cedilla, the ordinary apostrophe and the inverted apostrophe should be retained. This applies not just to Arabic names, but also to many names in the Red Sea Hills area, for example, such as **Jibāl Ūbkīk**.

Remove the underlinings from digraphs such as **gh**, **kh** and **sh**, which only occur on sheets produced during a short period when it was SSD policy to use them.

- *The ‘ayn, when occurring as the initial letter of a word, is sometimes found as an introductory chevron (<).*

Replace this with the inverted apostrophe. Thus <Abd Al **Khallāq** would be written as **‘Abd al Khallāq**.

- *The closing chevron (>) is also sometimes encountered.*

When it occurs initially, it should be omitted, for example Sawlīl Al >Ashraf should be written as **Sawlīl al Ashraf**. When it occurs medially, the closing chevron seems to represent the ‘ayn, and should therefore be replaced by the inverted apostrophe; thus Aj Ja>far should be written as **Aj Ja‘far**.

- *Most generic terms (eg **jabal**, **khōr**, **wādī**) seem to be standardised already, but the plural form of **jabal** is variously **jibal** or **jibāl**.*

Standardise all instances of this latter term to **jibāl**.