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**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE COMMISSION**

**FOLLOW-UP TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN
ARABIC LANGUAGE CENTRE AT ESCWA**

Summary

At its twenty-second session, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) adopted resolution 239 (XXII) dated 17 April 2003, in which it requested the secretariat to consider the establishment of an Arabic language centre of which the objective would be to raise the technical and linguistic standard of the Arabic terminology used in United Nations documents.

Pursuant to that resolution, ESCWA undertook a number of activities, including carrying out consultations with relevant United Nations departments, academic institutions and member country experts; preparing technical studies on the project and discussing them at an expert group meeting which was held for that purpose; and preparing a project document in accordance with the recommendations made at that meeting.

This report includes a brief account of the activities undertaken and is presented to the twenty-fifth session to decide on the appropriate course of action.

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I. BACKGROUND

A. OVERVIEW

1. The twenty-fifth session of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) coincides with the proclamation by the General Assembly of the year 2008 as the International Year of Languages, pursuant to the resolution adopted on 20 October 2005 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) at its thirty-third session.¹ The Commission is hereby presented with a report on the activities undertaken by the secretariat related to Arabic translation at the United Nations.
2. The Arabic language was adopted as one of the official languages of the General Assembly and its main committees pursuant to General Assembly resolution 3190 (XXVIII) of 18 December 1973, recognizing “the significant role of the Arabic language in preserving and disseminating the civilization of man and his culture...and aware of the need to achieve greater international cooperation”.
3. Over the years, delegations of Arab States Members of the United Nations have submitted requests and proposals concerning Arabic language services in the Organization. Notable among these were the proposal by the delegation of Egypt presented to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session in 1994,² and the letter addressed to the Secretary-General by the permanent representative of Qatar to the United Nations in his capacity as Chairman of the Arab Group for the month of July 2001.³
4. The General Assembly has expressed in a number of resolutions its commitment to exploring the necessary means for improving the quality of translation of documents issued in the six official languages,⁴ and has repeatedly requested that efforts to improve the quality control of language services at all duty stations should continue and that training opportunities in the six official languages are equally available to all language staff, including those at duty stations away from Headquarters. It has also requested that translation should reflect the specificities of each language, and expressed a commitment to ensuring continuous dialogue between translation staff at various United Nations headquarters and duty stations and between translation services and Member States with regard to the standardization of terminology used. It has also expressed a commitment to ensuring that Member States, which are the main users of United Nations documents, are periodically briefed on terminology.

B. THE ROLE OF ESCWA

5. The subject is of particular interest to the ESCWA secretariat. Being well aware of the continuous attention given by Arab delegations to the use of the Arabic language in the various areas of the work of the United Nations, the Commission responded to the requests and proposals made by those delegations to the United Nations Secretariat concerning Arabic language services. ESCWA believes it can play an effective role in that regard because of its geographical location in the Arab region, the fact that it deals with various fields of United Nations work and its ease of access to expertise available in the region.
6. Strengthening the use of Arabic language requires the coordination of terminology, maintaining the highest standards of quality and giving due consideration to the specificities of the Arabic language in translated texts. The comparative advantage of ESCWA can be used to enhance coordination in those areas

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Records of the General Conference, Thirty-third Session*, Paris, 3-21 October 2005, vol. 1 and corrigenda: Resolutions, chap. V, resolution 41.

² Proposal by the delegation of Egypt, A/49/32/Rev.1, annex II.

³ Letter dated 31 July 2001 from the permanent representative of Qatar, A/56/261.

⁴ General Assembly resolutions on the Pattern of Conferences, 53/208, 54/248, 55/222, 56/242, 57/283 B, 58/250, 59/265, 60/236 B, 61/236, 62/225.

within the Organization and between the Organization and the relevant institutions in Member States in view of its geographical location and proximity to the required language resources.

7. Accordingly, ESCWA member countries unanimously adopted resolution 239 (XXII), dated 17 April 2003, in which they requested the ESCWA secretariat to take the necessary measures to propose a coordination mechanism for Arabic translation issues in cooperation with Arabic translation services, particularly at United Nations Headquarters in New York, Geneva and Vienna. That resolution was endorsed by Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution 2003/8, dated 18 July 2003.

II. CONCEPT STAGE

8. Pursuant to the relevant resolutions adopted by ESCWA and ECOSOC, ESCWA initiated consultations on the subject. A task force was established to follow up on communication with the departments concerned at Headquarters and other duty stations and on consultations with experts in member countries. It also undertook the preparation of the necessary studies.

A. CONSULTATIONS

9. The ESCWA secretariat initiated consultations with all relevant parties within the Organization and in the region. Consultations were held with the Under-Secretary-General for the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM); Member States were requested to appoint a focal point for the issue; and missions were undertaken to New York, Geneva and Vienna in order to study the technical aspects and functions of the proposed mechanism, implementation requirements and ways and means of cooperation and partnership.

B. STUDIES PREPARED

10. The task force established by the secretariat prepared a preliminary study on the project and a number of studies on the rationale for assigning the task to ESCWA; the feasibility, objectives and expected benefits of the proposed mechanism; its proposed role in the area of terminology coordination and in providing expertise in the various areas of specialization of the work of the United Nations. Those studies were discussed at the expert group meeting held for that purpose.

C. EXPERT GROUP MEETING

11. ESCWA organized an expert group meeting to consider the establishment of a United Nations Arabic language centre, which was held in Beirut on 2 and 3 May 2007. The meeting was attended by experts from ESCWA member countries and other Arab States, and representatives of DGACM and Arabic translation services at United Nations Headquarters in New York, Geneva and Vienna as well as other international organizations and specialized agencies. It was also attended by specialists from translation schools, research institutes and Arabic language academies.

12. The main objectives of the expert group meeting were the following:

(a) To review the progress made by ESCWA in implementing the legislative mandate conferred on it by the two aforementioned resolutions;

(b) To discuss issues related to the establishment of a United Nations Arabic language centre and its role in expanding the use of the Arabic language in United Nations documents and improving their quality in response to requests by Arab Member States and in implementation of relevant General Assembly resolutions;

(c) To review the preliminary feasibility study prepared by ESCWA on the establishment of the centre and to seek the views, comments and suggestions of meeting participants;

(d) To discuss the issue of terminology coordination in United Nations documents and the role of the proposed centre in that regard, the effect on the quality of the language used in technical documents and the ability to express in Arabic the latest terminology in the various scientific, technological, economic and social fields, taking into consideration the specificities of the Arabic language and ensuring correct usage and full utilization of the cultural heritage.

13. The meeting concluded with a number of recommendations, including the following:

(a) United Nations Headquarters and other duty stations, including regional commissions and specialized agencies, should focus on maintaining a high quality of translation into Arabic and on measures for its improvement and development. Due attention should be paid to the coordination of terminology and the provision of continuous training, in view of the fact that United Nations documents are used as the basis for building terminology databases and evaluating translated texts in many organizations and agencies;

(b) There is a need for a coordination mechanism for Arabic language terminology and translation that would bring together representatives from Headquarters in New York and other duty stations, including regional commissions and specialized agencies, and operate within an integrated system of cooperation and partnership. At the regional level, and as part of the current global integrated management approach followed by DGACM, ESCWA will monitor, research and disseminate current Arabic terminology in collaboration with other translation services and sections, and in accordance with the original mandate determined by the ESCWA and ECOSOC resolutions and within the framework of integrated global management approach being implemented by conference services management;

(c) Terminology must be drawn from modern standard Arabic, using a methodology that respects the specificities of that language and enhances clarity and accuracy; expertise of specialized institutes should be sought, in cooperation with the relevant institutions in the Arab region, including those of the League of Arab States, Arabic language academies, and translation centres, schools and institutes;

(d) A project document should be prepared, covering all the points mentioned and modes of finance and submitted to the twenty-fifth ESCWA session.

14. The report of the expert group meeting was issued in document E/ESCWA/OES/2007/EGM.1/8, and is distributed as a background document of the twenty-fifth session.

III. CURRENT STAGE

15. In accordance with the recommendations of the expert group meeting, and in the light of consultations with Headquarters and other duty stations, ESCWA has prepared a project document outlining the general objectives and functions of the centre, its proposed activities in the areas of terminology coordination in various specializations, training in United Nations language functions and the dissemination and exchange of information through specialized networks. The project document also outlines expected financial requirements, covering the staffing and equipment needed for the centre. An executive summary of the project document is annexed to this report.

IV. ACTION TO BE TAKEN

16. The Commission is requested to take the following action:

(a) Take note of the recommendation made in the report of the expert group meeting that consideration should be given to the establishment of a United Nations Arabic language centre (E/ESCWA/OES/2007/EGM.1/8);

(b) Approve the establishment of an Arabic language centre at ESCWA, as proposed in the project document (E/ESCWA/25/5/CRP.1);

(c) Provide the secretariat with guidance on further action to be taken towards the establishment of the centre.

Annex

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT DOCUMENT
ON AN ARABIC LANGUAGE CENTRE AT ESCWA**

A. OVERALL OBJECTIVES

The proposed ESCWA Arabic language centre (ALC) is designed as a centre of expertise. It intends to make a significant contribution to enhancing the quality of Arabic language services across the United Nations system, by providing upstream quality support services. Such services are currently referred to as “quality at source”: end-product quality can be greatly enhanced if quality checks are implemented throughout the production process, beginning at source and, in particular, at recruitment level, and cover academic and professional training; and the availability of resources and documentation in terms of references, research tools and terminology.

Specifically, ALC will aim to achieve the following: (a) consolidate Arabic terminology databases, with a view to standardizing and harmonizing Arabic terminology throughout the United Nations; (b) improve the quality of Arabic texts as a result of such harmonized terminology, optimized use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), qualified staff, ongoing training efforts and quality evaluation procedures; (c) strengthen Arabic support services for the enhancement of language-related activities performed at various United Nations duty stations; and (d) provide support to United Nations bodies that lack in-house, Arabic language-related capabilities through referrals and a database of experts.

B. FUNCTIONS OF ALC

1. Terminology

Terminology will be at the core of the products delivered by ALC, especially in light of member country recognition of the potential of terminology to improve quality of United Nations Arabic texts. The Secretary-General has defined terminology as an axis of reform efforts within the integrated global management initiative.

2. Coordination

Coordination represents the first operational function of the proposed ALC and will feature in all of its activities. ALC will facilitate coordination between those concerned with Arabic as a development language, both regionally and internationally, particularly the Arabic translation and editorial services at United Nations Headquarters in New York, other duty stations and the regional commissions.

3. Training

In addition to helping new recruits to adapt to the work environment, in-house training will help to upgrade the skills of more experienced staff and promotes versatility and variety in the daily tasks of language professionals, thereby fostering personal and organizational growth, pursuant to United Nations policy on human resources management. ALC could also respond to Government requests for Arabic translation training for officials.

4. Outreach

ALC will undertake outreach activities aimed at fulfilling the future staffing needs of the United Nations and promoting language studies in Arab countries, specifically targeting universities that train language professionals in order to raise awareness of the staffing needs of the United Nations. In so doing, ALC could forge strategic partnerships and cooperation with key Arabic language institutes and translation schools.

C. PARTNERS

Partners will contribute to the establishment and development of ALC, and progressively expand their contribution commensurate with ALC activities. Partnerships can be categorized according to their function and projected types of cooperation, including coordination activities, exchanges, loans of personnel and products and services development.

D. ACTIVITIES OF ALC

The activities of ALC can be grouped into the following four categories:

- (a) Terminology coordination, which will be achieved through terminology coordination committees. This consultative mechanism for developing terminology lists and databases will bring together translators, experts in the field, terminologists, readers and concerned international organizations;
- (b) Training, which will include training of recruits to the United Nations in cooperation with academic institutions; continuous staff training for in-house translators through relevant workshops; training for Government officials and translators; and an internship programme;
- (c) Networking, which will be achieved through three vehicles, namely:
 - (i) An Arabic language translators network that comprises translators from English into Arabic, Arabic into English and specialized translators;
 - (ii) The Arabic Translation Academic Institutions and Academies (Majamei) Network;
 - (iii) An international organization Arabic translation network;
- (d) Dissemination and exchange of information, which will be achieved through the ALC website and the organization of relevant conferences and meetings.

E. STAFFING STRUCTURE

Core ALC staff will be responsible for regular work, assisted by supplementary staff as required.

Core staff will include the chief of ALC, who should be a senior professional; a programme officer; and an administrative assistant at a senior general-service level to support the management of the Centre. Supplementary staff would include two professional posts acquired on rotation and secondment from other duty stations through the managed mobility scheme, one research assistant and consultants. All staff will be financed through extrabudgetary funds.

F. THE BUDGET

ALC partners will contribute in kind or cash towards establishing and operating the Centre. The total three-year budget for the establishment and implementation of activities is estimated at \$4 million.
