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**PROMOTION OF THE ARABIC DOMAIN NAMES SYSTEM
AN ESCWA PROJECT**



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The implementation of an Arabic domain names system (ADNS) will make the Internet accessible to all Arabs, irrespective of their ability to understand English. Until recently, English or “Latin” characters, were the only set that could be used in Internet addresses or domain names. However, through the implementation of Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs) by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), people, especially young people and women with limited or no access to foreign language education, can benefit from using the Internet in their own language. This will help to bridge the digital divide and increase the Internet penetration rate, both in the ESCWA region and globally.

OBJECTIVE

The main objective of the involvement of ESCWA in the sphere of domain names is to contribute to overcoming the language barrier on the Internet through the development of a system that is interoperable with the global domain name system.

PHASES

Since 2003, ESCWA has taken the lead in activities to promote and support the implementation of an ADNS, in partnership with the League of Arab States. That year marked a unification of efforts in the Arab region towards the use of Arabic characters in domain names, following five years of detached attempts and activities. To that end, the Arabic Domain Names Task Force (ADN-TF) was formed under the auspices of ESCWA to raise awareness and produce globally recognized and regionally endorsed standards and guidelines. The main milestones achieved by ADN-TF included an Internet-Draft entitled Guidelines for an Arabic Domain Name System, which was submitted to the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) in 2004. In 2005, the two-year Arabic Domain Names Pilot Project was launched as a test bed for Arabic domain names that provided a “proof of concept” on the use of Arabic characters in a full IDN.IDN implementation.

Since 2007, ESCWA has continued its support through a time-phased project, the different phases of which are as follows:

Phase I (2007-2009) aimed to overcome the language barrier on the Internet through the development of an ADNS which is interoperable with the global domain name system. The principal outcome of this phase included the following:

- (a) Evaluation of the Arabic Domain Names Pilot Project, which was based on guidelines formulated by ESCWA as a test-bed for the proposed standards;
- (b) Development of an Internet-Draft entitled Linguistic Guidelines for the Use of the Arabic Language in Internet Domains, which was submitted to the IETF and subsequently published as informational category Request for Comments number 5564;
- (c) Development of a Preliminary Feasibility Study on the Establishment of the Domain Name Registry for the “.arab” and “.عربي.” generic Top Level Domains (gTLD).

During this phase, the scope of work was extended to cover the use of Arabic script used in languages other than Arabic, such as Urdu and Farsi. For this purpose, ESCWA co-founded the Arabic Script in Internationalized Domain Names Working Group (ASIWG) with Afiliat (the registry for the .info top level domain TLD) and PIR (the registry for the .org TLD). ASIWG convened four expert group meetings in 2008-2009 to resolve common technical and linguistic issues, and settled other matters through deliberation in a mailing list and a wiki site.

Phase II (2009-2010) built on the success achieved in Phase I of the project, the results of which had been endorsed by the League of Arab States and its Arab Working Group on Domain Names and Internet Issues (AWGDNI). Phase II focused on acquiring the Arab TLD “.arab” and its IDN equivalent in Arabic, “.عرب”, as well as establishing the associated Arab TLD Registry. These activities came in response to ICANN’s new gTLD programme, which allows the introduction of new names at the gTLD level. In late 2009, a Dot Arab Steering Committee was founded by the League of Arab States, which convened seven meetings from then until the end of 2010. The Steering Committee agreed to set up the Arab TLD Registry through a competitive and transparent Request for Proposals (RFP) exercise to select front-end and back-end technical operators, bearing in mind that the League of Arab States will be the owner of the names.

The main achievements during this phase were:

- (a) The design and launch of a Request for Information exercise to solicit information on the design, governance structure, and implementation modality of the Arab TLD Registry;
- (b) The creation of the Arab TLD Charter, a strategic framework for defining, implementing and managing the Arab TLDs during the period 2010-2014;
- (c) Community-level public consultation to assess the demand for Arab TLDs, assist in policy development, help to establish a governance framework and provide guidance to the Steering Committee;
- (d) The establishment of a governance structure for the Registry, the front-end and back-end technical operations of which will be outsourced through an RFP exercise;
- (e) Cooperation with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in the development of the application dossier to be submitted to ICANN.

ESCWA is continuing its support to these regional efforts through **Phase III (2011)** to maintain regional momentum. The purpose of this phase is to engage prospective partners and interested Internet-related entities in the acquisition process for Arab TLDs and in responding to future RFPs, while enhancing community awareness of the importance of the domain name industry and the opportunities offered by the planned Arab TLD Registry. This phase presents the Registry as an investment/business opportunity for the region and addresses the community build-up process required prior to submission of the application dossier to ICANN. Arab Governments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations are all called upon to participate in making the Arab TLDs a success.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

- Improved percentage of online digital Arabic content, which is currently extremely limited in comparison with other languages on the Internet;
- Increased number of Internet users in the Arab region once the language barrier has been removed;
- Promotion of Arab culture and identity on the Internet through the registration and use of Arab TLDs;
- Build-up of the domain name registry/registrar industry through the establishment of enterprises acting as registries, registrars and resellers, and increased job opportunities in this field.

BENEFICIARIES

- Arab-speakers who are not currently using the Internet because they have limited or no knowledge of English;
- National, regional and international enterprises and institutions which may opt to use a website address using Arabic characters and/or a domain name that is representative of the Arab regional or cultural scope of their work;
- Internet Service Providers and national organizations managing TLDs.