

Guide to Arabic Pronunciation

There are several regional pronunciation variants. The following gives the most standard version. The letters are given in their isolated form; there are different forms for initial, medial, and final positions.

Transliteration	Name	Character	Pronunciation
ā (or ’)	’alif	ا	long <i>a</i> [a:] (historically [ʔ])
b	bā’	ب	as expected: [b]
t	tā’	ت	as expected: [t]
ṭ or th	ṭā’	ث	like <i>th</i> in <i>thing</i> : [θ]
ǧ or j	ǧīm (jīm)	ج	like <i>j</i> : [dʒ]
ḥ	ḥā’	ح	like whispered <i>h</i> : [ħ]
kh	ḫā’	خ	like <i>ch</i> in German <i>auch</i> : [x]
d	dāl	د	as expected: [d]
ḍ or dh	ḍāl	ذ	like <i>th</i> in <i>these</i> : [ð]
r	rā’	ر	like a Spanish <i>r</i> : [r]
z	zāy	ز	as expected: [z]
s	sīn	س	as expected: [s]
š or sh	šīn	ش	like <i>sh</i> in <i>shoe</i> : [ʃ]

ṣ	ṣād	ص	emphatic <i>s</i> : [s ^ʕ]
ḍ	ḍād	ض	emphatic <i>d</i> : [d ^ʕ]
ṭ	ṭā'	ط	emphatic <i>t</i> : [t ^ʕ]
ẓ or ḍh	ẓā'	ظ	emphatic <i>dh</i> or <i>z</i> : [ð ^ʕ] / [z ^ʕ]
‘	‘ayn	ع	not found in English: [ʕ]
ġ or ġh	ġayn	غ	not found in English: [ɣ]
f	fā'	ف	as expected: [f]
q	qāf	ق	not found in English: [q]
k	kāf	ك	as expected: [k]
l	lām	ل	as expected: [l]
m	mīm	م	as expected: [m]
n	nūn	ن	as expected: [n]
h	hā'	ه	as expected: [h]
w, ū	wāw	و	like <i>w</i> or long <i>u</i> : [w] , [u:]
y, ī	yā'	ي	like <i>y</i> or long <i>i</i> : [j] , [i:]

Standard Arabic only has three vowels (a, i, u) and short vowels are not

written. Also short 'a' often sounds more like English short 'e'. (Persian, discussed below, has more vowels). Three letters do double duty as either consonants or long vowels (long vowels sound like long European vowels, not like long English vowels).

Example: Sanskrit *ardha-jiva* (half-chord) was shortened to *jiva*. Since Arabic does not have the *v* sound, it was changed to *jiba* (جب) and without short vowels, was written with two letters in Arabic: *jb* (جب).

European translators (around the 12th century) thought that *jb* (جب) was *jayb*, meaning *cavity*, *bay*. The Latin word *sinus* was used to translate this word since it also means *bay*, *fold*. From this we get our word *sine*.

Another example: الكتاب المختصر في حساب الجبر والمقابلة is the title of al-Khwarizmi's most famous book (Arabic is written right to left). The fifth word of the title is الجبر which can be transliterated as *āl-jbr*. With the unwritten vowel *i* this gives *āl-jabr* which could be interpreted as *āl-jebr*. This ultimately gave us our word *algebra*

Notes: In Egyptian Arabic, 'j' might be pronounced 'g'. Some dialects pronounce it 'zh'

[ʒ]. The glottal stop ' ([ʔ]) the *hamza* (ء) is used, but it is not an official letter.

Persian modifications

After the Arab conquest, the Arabic alphabet was adopted for Persian (Fārsī, Pārsī, Darī, and Tajik). Since Persian has sounds that are not in Arabic, new letters were added.

Transliteration	Changes	Character	Pronunciation
p	peh	پ	[p]
ch	tcheh	چ	[tʃ]
zh	zheh	ژ	[ʒ]

g	gaf	گ	[g]
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Other letters are modified. Only some of the changes are listed below.

Transliteration	Changes	Character	Pronunciation
ā (or ')	alef	ا	[ʔ, ɔ, æ] or silent
s	se	ث	[s]
h	he	ح	[h] or silent
z	zāl	ذ	[z]
š or sh	šīn	ش	like <i>sh</i> in <i>shoe</i> : [ʃ]
ṣ	sād	ص	[s]
z	zād	ض	[z]
ṭ	tā	ط	[t]
ẓ	zā	ظ	[z]
‘	eyn	ع	[ʔ] also lengthens a preceding vowel
v or u	vāv	و	[v] , [u], [o]

Before the Arab Conquest, the Persians used a different alphabet based on the Aramaic Alphabet called the Pahlavi Alphabet. In old Persian, before Alexander the Great, cuneiform was used. (Note: the Hebrew and Arabic alphabets descend from the Aramaic alphabet, which descend from the Phoenician alphabet or a close relative thereof).

(Developed 2005-2006 by Professor Wayne Aitken for Math 330).