

# VOA Maps a World of Tricky Pronunciations

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When dark-horse candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won Iran's presidency in June, it raised many questions. But preceding any discussion of the foreign policy implications of the election, the first question on many lips was more basic: how to say the new leader's name. The answer often comes from the Voice of America's online pronunciation guide.

Although originally intended solely as an internal tool for VOA's broadcasters, the publicly accessible Web site, [names.voanews.com](http://names.voanews.com), has found a broader audience. In addition to news bureaus in the United States and abroad, it has won a following at think tanks, at corporations and in higher learning. Average citizens who are curious about the proper pronunciation of names such as al Qaeda and Karol Wojtyła — Pope John Paul II's given name — are frequent visitors.

Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the database has assumed an important role as Americans try to keep up with the cavalcade of foreign names that have come to dominate the news.

"People all around the world use it thousands and thousands of times a day," said Jim Tedder, the broadcaster responsible for the guide. He noted that usage spikes around major world events.

The guide is the high-tech successor to a set of handwritten notecards, created in the 1950s, that used the runic symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet.

"You've got a story that's got to get on the air in five minutes. It's being broadcast around the world, it's usually pretty heavy stuff — it's geopolitical in nature — and you've got this name that's got 30 letters in it and you haven't a clue how to say it," Tedder said about the need for a reliable guide.

The notecards were lifesavers in the broadcast booth, but they were easily lost or misfiled, cumbersome to update, and difficult to share among the network's bureaus and correspondents. An entrepreneurial spark in the slow-moving federal government, Tedder decided to digitize the well-worn cards in 2000, doing the initial work on his own time and coaxing his wife to type some entries.

From the start, he wanted the guide to be accessible to the public — not just VOA broadcasters. To make it easier to use, he traded the phonetic alphabet's

## How to Say It

*The Voice of America broadcasters' online pronunciation guide has become an essential tool for getting names right. Some examples from the guide ([names.voanews.com](http://names.voanews.com)):*

Name	Origin	Pronunciation
ABU GHRAIB	Iraq	AH-boo GREHB
MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD	Iran	mah-MOOD ah-smah-dih-nee-ZHAD
MOQTADA AL-SADR	Iraq	MUHK-tah-dah ah SAH-drr
ABU MUSAB AL-ZARQAWI	Jordan	AH-boo MOO-sahb al zahr-KAW-wee
HUGO CHAVEZ	Venezuela	OO-go CHAH-vehs
VYACHESLAV KYRYLENKO	Ukraine	vyah-cheh-SLAV kyeer-eh-LEHN-kaw
GERHARD SCHROEDER	Germany	G-AIR-hahrt SHREER-durr
GREGORY SCHULTE	U.S.	GREH-goh-ree SHUHL-tee
VICTOR YUSCHENKO	Ukraine	VEEK-tor YOOSH-chen-kaw

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cryptic characters, understood by very few people, for a simple phonetic system that uses only standard letters. Tedder also added two-second spoken audio files that are popular with visitors.

"You don't have to just read it, you can actually listen to it, so that's convenient," said Kee Malesky, a reference librarian at National Public Radio. "I can play that little bit of audio for our reporters or newscasters if it's not clear to them or a particularly difficult name."

Beyond reporting accuracy, getting pronunciations correct assumes additional weight for VOA because it represents the U.S. government to an estimated weekly, worldwide audience of more than 100 million people.

"I've always felt that it's important — particularly for VOA announcers — to make an attempt to pronounce these names correctly," Tedder said. "Subliminally, you say to the listener, 'One, I've done my homework. Two, I care enough about you to try my best to pronounce the name correctly.'" Tedder's passion belies his roots: The 56-year-old grew up in a time and a place — Lynchburg, Va. — where "no emphasis was put on pronouncing foreign names at all," he said.

Now a guardian of proper pronunciation, Tedder officially splits his time between broadcasting duties and

tending the guide, which includes more than 5,300 names and places and grows by a few dozen entries a week. Every day, Tedder uses home-grown search software to scour news wires for new terms. He then researches a name and records the pronunciation in his third-floor cubicle in VOA's Washington headquarters.

Recent entries span the globe, cover peacemakers and terrorists alike, and include such hard-to-say names as Lakshman Kadirgamar, the recently assassinated Sri Lankan foreign

minister, Pierre Nkurunziza, the new president of Burundi, and Ahmed Qureia, the Palestinian prime minister.

Pronunciation is not a science,

which helps explain the various versions of the same name — from a newscaster, a co-worker or the president. Among its disclaimers, the VOA site notes that while the Pashto language is spoken throughout Afghanistan, pronunciation differs between the north and the south, as is the case with American speech.

For people, VOA prefers to say the name as the person says it. Absent the opportunity to ask someone directly, VOA relies on that person's colleagues, speakers of the local language, the country's embassy, the United Nations or outside experts. For place names, VOA relies on geographic dictionaries and other experts. The guide does not try to imitate sounds that English speakers do not use, such as the alternating pitch found in many Asian languages.

VOA's guide is unique among pronunciation resources because it is codified, it is public and it includes spoken samples. Many broadcast news organizations, including ABC and CBS, do not have a written guide and rely on frequent, redundant checks with regional or language experts. This is also the case with government communication departments such as the offices of the White House press secretary and the U.N. secretary-general.

In contrast, the British Broadcasting Corp., and the Associated Press have guides that are much more expansive than VOA's list. The BBC maintains a database of more than 100,000 names. A voice synthesizer can speak listings according to phonetic input. But the resource is available only to the BBC staff. AP distributes written pronunciations to its subscribers but does not make them available to the public and does not provide a searchable database of its thousands of entries. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary provides audio clips for many famous names but does not cover lesser-known people and places.

The Internet has given the 63-year-old VOA, which is barred from broadcasting on television or radio in the United States, rare stateside exposure. Americans can visit the network's Web site just as people in Africa or the Middle East can — and the pronunciation guide gives them one more reason to.

"When I first put in on the Web, if we had gotten very little response outside of the house, then probably we would have just kept it as an in-house vehicle and not allowed it to be disseminated in the public," Tedder said. "But it got to be a hit, and if you got a hit, you go ahead and run with it."



"mah-MOOD ah-smah-dih-nee-ZHAD"