The Arabic script has numerous diacritics, including ɻjām (i'jām, consonant pointing), and tashkīl (tashkil, supplementary diacritics). The latter include the ɻḥarakāt (vowel marks; singular: ɻḥarakah (haraka)).

The Arabic script is an impure abjad, where short consonants and long vowels are represented by letters but short vowels and consonant length are not generally indicated in writing. Tashkīl is optional to represent missing vowels and consonant length. Modern Arabic is nearly always written with consonant pointing, but occasionally unpointed texts are still seen. Early texts such as the Qur'an were initially written without pointing, and pointing was added later to determine the expected readings and interpretations.

**Tashkīl (marks used as phonetic guides)**

The literal meaning of tashkīl is 'forming'. As the normal Arabic text does not provide enough information about the correct pronunciation, the main purpose of tashkīl (and ɻḥarakāt) is to provide a phonetic guide or a phonetic aid; i.e., show the correct pronunciation. It serves the same purpose as furigana (also called "ruby") in Japanese or pinyin or zhuyin in Mandarin Chinese for children who are learning to read or foreign learners.

The bulk of Arabic script is written without ɻḥarakāt (or short vowels). However, they are commonly used in some religious texts that demand strict adherence to pronunciation rules such as Qur'an (al-Qur'ān). It is not uncommon to add ɻḥarakāt to hadiths (al-hadīth; plural: abhādīth) as well. Another use is in children's literature. Harakat are also used in ordinary texts when an ambiguity of pronunciation might arise. Vowelled Arabic dictionaries provide information about the correct pronunciation to both native and foreign Arabic speakers.

Short vowels can be included in cases where readers could not easily resolve word ambiguity from context alone, or simply wherever their writing might be considered aesthetically pleasing.

An example of a fully vocalised (vowelised or vowelled) Arabic from the Qur'an (Al-Fatiha 1:1):

\[
\text{bism Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm}
\]

In the Name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful...

Some Arabic textbooks for foreigners now use ɻḥarakāt as a phonetic guide to make learning reading Arabic easier. The other method used in textbooks is phonetic romanisation of unvocalised texts. Fully vocalised Arabic texts (i.e. Arabic texts with ɻḥarakāt/diacritics) are sought after by learners of Arabic. Some online bilingual dictionaries also provide ɻḥarakāt as a phonetic guide similarly to English dictionaries providing transcription.
**Harakat (short vowel marks)**

The *harakāt*, which literally means 'motions', are the short vowel marks. There is some ambiguity as to which *tashkīl* are also *harakāt*; the *tanwīn*, for example, are markers for both vowels and consonants.

**Fathah**

The *fatḥah* (فتحة) is a small diagonal line placed above a letter, and represents a short /a/. The word *fatḥah* itself (فتحة) means opening, and refers to the opening of the mouth when producing an /a/. Example with *dāl* (henceforth, the base consonant in the following examples):  /da/.

When a *fatḥah* is placed before the letter  (alif), it represents a long /aː/ (as in the English word “father”). Example: /daː/. The *fatḥah* is not usually written in such cases.

**Kasrah**

A similar diagonal line below a letter is called a *kasrah* (كسرة) and designates a short /i/. Example: /di/. When a *kasrah* is placed before the letter  (yā'), it represents a long /iː/ (as in the English word “steed”). Example: /diː/. The *kasrah* is usually not written in such cases but if yā' is pronounced as a diphthong /aj/, *fatḥah* should be written on the preceding consonant to avoid mispronunciation. The word *kasrah* means 'breaking'.

**Ḍammah**

The *ḍammah* (ضمة) is a small curl-like diacritic placed above a letter to represent a short /u/. Example: /du/. When a *ḍammah* is placed before the letter  (wāw), it represents a long /uː/ (as in the English word “blue”). Example: /duː/. The *ḍammah* is usually not written in such cases but if wāw is pronounced as a diphthong /aw/, *fatḥah* should be written on the preceding consonant to avoid mispronunciation.

**Maddah**

The *maddah* (مدة) is a tilde-like diacritic which can appear only on top of an *alif* and indicates a glottal stop /ʔ/ followed by a long /aː/.

In theory, the same sequence /ʔaː/ could also be represented by two *alifs*, as in ُّا, where a hamza above the first *alif* represents the /ʔ/ while the second *alif* represents the /aː/. However, consecutive *alifs* are never used in the Arabic orthography. Instead, this sequence must always be written as a single *alif* with a *maddah* above it—the combination known as an *alif maddah*. Example: /ʔaːn/.

**Dagger alif**

The *superscript (or dagger) alif* (الْاءْ خَانِجِرِيَّةٌ), is written as short vertical stroke on top of a consonant. It indicates a long /aː/ sound where *alif* is normally not written, e.g. ُّ) (hādīhā) or ُّ (rahmān).

The dagger *alif* occurs in only a few words, but these include some common ones; it is seldom written, however, even in fully vocalised texts. Most keyboards do not have dagger *alif*. The word Allah  (Allāh) is usually produced automatically by entering *alif* lām lām hā’. The word consists of *alif* + ligature of doubled lām with a *shaddah* and a dagger *alif* above lām.
Arabic diacritics

Alif waslah

The waslah (وَصْلَة) or hamzat wasl (ٌHAMZAT WÂSÂL) looks like a small letter sâd on top of an alif (ا) (also indicated by an alif (ا) without a hamzah). It means that the alif is not pronounced, e.g. (بٱسْم).

It only occurs in the beginning of words (can occur after prepositions and the definite article). It is commonly found in imperative verbs, the perfective aspect of verb stems VII to X and their verbal nouns (masdar). The alif of the definite article is considered a waslah.

It occurs in phrases and sentences (connected speech, not isolated/dictionary forms) 1) to replace the elided hamza whose alif-seat has assimilated to the previous vowel, e.g., في اليمن (urtles) or في اليمن (urtles) (alif by itself is also indicative of the connecting hamza); 2) in hamza-initial imperative forms following a vowel, especially following the conjunction و, e.g., قَمَ وَشَرَبَ الْمَاء.

Sukun

The sukun (سُكُون) is a circle-shaped diacritic placed above a letter. It indicates that the consonant to which it is attached is not followed by a vowel; this is a necessary symbol for writing consonant-vowel-consonant syllables, which are very common in Arabic. Example: (دَد) dad.

The sukun may also be used to help represent a diphthong. A fatḥah followed by the letter (ي) (yâ') with a sukun over it indicates the diphthong ay (IPA /aj/). A fatḥah followed by the letter (و) (wâw) with a sukun indicates law/.

Tanwin (final postnasalized or long vowels)

The three vowel diacritics may be doubled at the end of a word to indicate that the vowel is followed by the consonant n. These may or may not be considered harakât, and are known as tanwin (تنوين), or nunation. The signs indicate, from right to left, -un, -in, -an.

These endings are used as non-pausal grammatical indefinite case endings in literary Arabic or classical Arabic (triptotes only). In a vocalised text, they may be written even if they are not pronounced (see pausa). See 'rāb for more details. In many spoken Arabic dialects, these endings are absent. Many Arabic textbooks introduce standard Arabic without these endings. The grammatical endings may not be written in some vocalized Arabic texts, as knowledge of 'rāb varies from country to country, and there is a trend in simplifying the Arabic grammar.

The sign (۝) is most commonly written in combination with (ا) (alif), (ٍ) (tâ' marbûtah) or stand-alone (۝) (hamzah). Alif should always be written (except for words ending in tâ' marbûtah, hamzah or diptotes), even if an is not.

Grammar cases and tanwîn endings in indefinite triptote forms:

- -un: nominative case;
- -an: accusative case, also serves as an adverbial marker;
- -in: genitive case.
Shaddah (consonant gemination mark)

The shadda or shaddah (شدة) is a diacritic shaped like a small written Latin "w". It is used to indicate gemination (consonant doubling or extra length), which is phonemic in Arabic. It is written above the consonant which is to be doubled. It is the only harakah that is sometimes used in ordinary spelling to avoid ambiguity. Example: /dd/ /madrasah/ (‘school’) vs. /mudarrisah/ (‘teacher’, female).

I’jam (phonetic distinctions of consonants)

The i’jam (إعجام) are the pointing diacritics that distinguish various consonants that have the same form (rasm), such as /bl/, /tl/, /nl/, and /lj/. Typically ijam are not considered diacritics but part of the letter. Early manuscripts of the Qur'an did not use diacritics either for vowels or to distinguish the different values of the rasm. Vowel pointing was introduced first, as a red dot placed above, below, or beside the rasm, and later consonant pointing was introduced, as thin, short black single or multiple dashes placed above or below the rasm (image). These i’jam became black dots about the same time as the harakat became small black letters or strokes.

Typically, Egyptians do not use dots under final /yā/ (ی), both in handwriting and in print, as alif maqṣūrah (ی). This practice is also used in copies of the mushaf (Qur'an) scribed by 'Uthman Ṭāhā. The same unification of yā and alif maqṣūrā has happened in Persian, resulting in what the Unicode Standard calls "arabic letter farsi yeh", that looks exactly the same as yā in initial and medial forms, but exactly the same as alif maqṣūrah in final and isolated forms (ی).

Hamza (glottal stop semi-consonant)

Although often a diacritic is not considered a letter of the alphabet, the hamza (ة) is a separate letter in writing, is written in unpointed texts, and is not considered a tashkīl. It may appear as a letter by itself or as a diacritic over or under an alif, wāw, or yā. Which letter is to be used to support the hamzah depends on the quality of the adjacent vowels.

- If the syllable occurs at the beginning of the word, the glottal stop is always indicated by hamza on an alif.
- If the syllable occurs in the middle of the word, alif is used only if it is not preceded or followed by /i/ or /u/.
- If /i/ or /u/ is before or after the glottal stop, a /yā/ with a hamzah is used (the two dots which are usually beneath the yā disappear in this case). /ء/.
- If /ul/ is before or after the glottal stop, a /wāw/ with a hamzah is used: /ة/.

Consider the following words: /ة/ /sax/ ("brother"), /ة/ /isra/ ("Israel"), /ة/ /rumm/ ("mother"). All three of above words "begin" with a vowel opening the syllable, and in each case, alif is used to designate the initial glottal stop (the actual beginning). But if we consider middle syllables "beginning" with a vowel: /ة/ /na/ ("origin"), /ة/ /isra/ ("Israel" — notice the /i/ syllable), /ة/ /ra:/ ("heads", singular) /ة/ /ra:/, the situation is different, as noted above. See the comprehensive article on hamzah for more details.
History

According to tradition, the first to commission a system of harakat was Muawiyah I of the Umayyad dynasty, when he ordered Ziad Ibn Abih, his wālī in Basra (governed 664–673), to find someone who would devise a method to transcribe correct reading. Ziad Ibn Abih, in turn, appointed Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali for the task. Abu al-Aswad devised a system of dots to signal the three short vowels (along with their respective allophones) of Arabic. This system of dots predates the i'jām, dots used to distinguish between different consonants.

Evolution of early Arabic calligraphy (9th – 11th century). The Basmala was taken as an example, from kufic Qur’ān manuscripts. (1) Early 9th century, script with no dots or diacritic marks (see image of early Basmala Kufic); (2) and (3) 9th–10th century under Abbasid dynasty, Abu al-Aswad’s system establish red dots with each arrangement or position indicating a different short vowel; later, a second black-dot system was used to differentiate between letters like fā’ and qāf (see image of middle Kufic); (4) 11th century, in al-Farāhīdi’s system (system we know today) dots were changed into shapes resembling the letters to transcribe the corresponding long vowels (see image of modern Kufic in Qur’an).
Abu al-Aswad's system

Abu al-Aswad's system of Harakat was different from the system we know today. The system used red dots with each arrangement or position indicating a different short vowel. A dot above a letter indicated the vowel a, a dot below indicated the vowel i, a dot on the side of a letter stood for the vowel u, and two dots stood for the tanwīn.

However, the early manuscripts of the Qur'an did not use the vowel signs for every letter requiring them, but only for letters where they were necessary for a correct reading.

Al Farahidi's system

This is the precursor to the system we know today. al-Farāhīdī found that the task of writing using two different colours was tedious and impractical. Another complication was that the i'jām had been introduced by then, which, while they were short strokes rather than the round dots seen today, meant that without a color distinction the two could become confused.

Accordingly he replaced the harakāt with small superscript letters: small alif, yā’, and wāw for the short vowels corresponding to the long vowels written with those letters, a small s(h)īn for shaddah (geminate), a small khā’ for khafff (short consonant; no longer used). His system is essentially the one we know today.[2]

References


External links

• Online Arabic Diacritic Tool (http://www.arabic-keyboard.org/tashkeel/)
• Interactive lesson for learning Arabic short vowels (http://www.salaamarabic.com/lesson/plan/1495/vowels)
• Free Comprehensive Reference of Arabic Grammar (http://arabic.tripod.com/)
• Vocalised Arabic (and other) texts online (for children) (http://www.childrenslibrary.org/icdl/SimpleSearchCategory?ids=&langid=309&pnum=1&cnum=1&text=&lang=English)
• Fully vocalised, transliterated and translated online Qur’ān with audio (http://transliteration.org/quran/WebSite_CD/MixNoble/Fram2E.htm)
• Sakhr Multilingual Dictionary (uses Harakat) (http://qamoos.sakhr.com/)
• web-based Arabic Notepad that supports full vowelization (tashkiil) (http://www.eiktub.com)
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