

Persian or Arabian Gulf?: Symbolic meanings of names



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The government of Iran recently issued a strong statement demanding airlines that use the Iranian airspace to refer to the waterway between Iran and the Arab states as the *Persian Gulf*, not the *Arabian Gulf*. The Minister of Transport, Hamid Behbehani warned that the airlines that do not comply with this directive will be banned from flying into the Iranian airspace. In a swift and sharp response, Khaled Al-Adwa, a Kuwaiti Member of the Parliament condemned the Iranian demand and stressed that the gulf has been; and will remain “Arabian.” This controversy over the name of a body of water—an inanimate entity—tells us something extremely crucial about the properties of language in general and names in particular. It demonstrates that words and names are not simply badges that we stick to people and entities. In fact, it is through names and words that we define ourselves and others. People view names as symbolic capitals, and they fight for their control and ownership.

Since social positions, interests, and identities are rarely the same, people use different names and words to create

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and represent realities differently. From this point of view, names are like packages that contain linguistic, social, political and cultural values. Take for example, the Arabic name ‘Maryam’ and its English equivalent ‘Mary.’ Although both of them refer to the same person—the mother of Jesus Christ—they do not have the same social meanings; they invoke different sets of images to Muslims and Christians. This is because although Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet they do not believe in many things about Him and Mary that have become part of the mainstream Christian tradition, for example the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The name ‘Mary’ invokes images and traditions that do not agree with Muslims’ understandings of Jesus and Mary, and that is why, despite the fact that Muslims love Jesus Christ and his mother, they do not name their daughters ‘Mary.’

The same principle applies to names

of places. History is replete with instances where names of places have been changed by people to mark the end of an old era and the beginning of a new one. For example, after the Russian Revolution of 1917, the city of St. Petersburg was renamed Leningrad, in honor of their leader Vladimir Lenin. At that time, the name “Leningrad” was a linguistic symbol of the victory of socialist ideology and the harbinger of a new world free of capitalist exploitation. A few decades later, in early 1990s, however, as the social and political realities changed with the collapse of socialism, people reverted to the old name St. Petersburg. Replacing Leningrad with St. Petersburg can be seen as a symbolic act by which people tried to show their disaffiliation with the socialist ideology. A more recent example is the renaming of the city of Pretoria in South Africa as Tshwane. The mayor of the city, Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, beautifully captured the so-

cial, political, and cultural change that the new name symbolized. He claimed that by changing Pretoria to Tshwane, “we are confirming the demise of oppression and the advent of freedom ... the death of apartheid and the birth of democracy.” To the mayor and the black people in general, the name Pretoria is a symbol of slavery and oppression, whereas Tshwane stands for freedom and liberation.

The controversy regarding the name of the water body between Iran and the Arab states also needs to be seen in the larger social and political changes that have been taking place in the Middle East over the last few decades. The Arab states of Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar together constitute a solid economic and political block. In the recent past these Arabic-speaking countries have emerged, despite the economic downturn and its huge impacts on Dubai, as a strategic center of international business and trade. The strengthening of this new identity requires a symbolic capital too. The ownership of names symbolizes the political and economic dominance of the Arab states. Arab’s insistence on calling the waterway the “Arabian Gulf” rather than the traditional “Persian Gulf” therefore represents a struggle for the control over the symbolic capital.

It is worth mentioning here that the traditional name of the waterway under discussion as evidenced by old historical documents is the Persian Gulf. Since Arabs started to use the term Arabian Gulf, international organization such as the National Geographic also adopted it in one of its publications in 2004. The Government of Iran and Iranians worldwide protested against the use of the term “Arabian Gulf” by the National Geographic, which later issued a statement clarifying its policy regarding names. They argued that the primary name of the waterway is the Persian Gulf, but it has been the policy of the National Geographic to mention a secondary name if it is commonly recognized. Google Earth followed suit in using the name “Arabian Gulf.” Angered by this, more than a million Iranians signed an online petition in 2008 asking Google to drop the name “Arabian Gulf.”

Whether or not the old name “The Persian Gulf” manages to hold the ground or the new one “The Arabian Gulf” blows it away, what remains certain is the deeply-entrenched symbolic values that people attach to names and words. People fight for the control and ownership of this symbolic capital because they constitute ways to define their own and others’ identities. This naming controversy clearly suggests that Shakespeare was wrong when he said: ‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’

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Iran’s Jamaran guided-missile destroyer, is seen at right, in an exercise, in the Persian Gulf, Iran, Sunday, Feb. 21, 2010. Iran on Friday launched its first domestically built destroyer, calling it a major technological leap for its naval industries. (AP)