

A War of Words:

The Ongoing Battle for the Gulf's Name

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On January 11, 2023, Iran summoned the Iraqi ambassador to express its discontent with a recent event in the region: The 25th Arabian Gulf Cup. The Gulf Cup is a biennial soccer competition held among the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Iraq, and Yemen – in other words, all countries around the Gulf except Iran. Despite other long-standing conflicts between Iran and its Arab neighboring states, Iran expressed its clear opposition to the situation simply for including the “Arabian Gulf” tag in the name of the soccer tournament.¹

Despite the heated nature of the ongoing debate, it is relatively recent in origin. As far as the records go—Greek geographers in this case—the term “Persian Gulf” had always been the undisputed name for the body of water between the Arabian and Persian peninsulas. Following the Greek classification of the region, the Persian geographers and later the Europeans kept the tradition and associated the “Persian Gulf” with the body of water, hence creating consensus

and strong historical evidence for continuing the use of the “Persian Gulf.”²

However, in the 1950s, the consensus began to fade away with Sir Charles Belgrave, the British advisor to the ruler of Bahrain, being the first Westerner to suggest the term the “Arabian Gulf.” Although Belgrave’s suggestion was shut down by the British government and sent to the archives, it was the beginning of what became one of the most contentious modern debates between Iran and the Arab states. Bolstered by the rise of Arab nationalism in the 1960s, other Arab countries began to adopt the “Arabian Gulf” in support of the Gulf’s Arab states.³ While the Arab countries had the momentum and the power of nationalism to change, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 significantly reduced Iran’s political influence and isolated the country from the West. Still, the Iranian government stood firmly in opposition and countered the Arab campaign by announcing the “National Persian Gulf Day,”

rebranding the highest soccer league as the “Persian Gulf Pro League,” and even threatening airline bans over “Arabian Gulf” tags.⁴

Although cultural differences may have played a role, the naming dispute is primarily fueled by politics, both foreign and domestic. In the late 19th century, the British established a series of protectorates and signed treaties with local rulers in the Gulf due to its strategic location along the trade routes between Europe and the Indian subcontinent, which was then a British colony. The discovery of oil in the region in the early 20th century further cemented British interest in the area. After the second world war, declining British influence forced the Americans to step in and provide security for the Gulf states. In the 1970s, the U.S. established military bases in the region, including the Fifth Fleet, a strategically important naval base in Bahrain, which sits on the Arabian Gulf.

As a result, both Britain and

the U.S. were heavily involved in the naming dispute. The first attempt to change the name occurred after the British attacked Kharg Island in 1837, which led to an official warning from the Qajar Dynasty, the dynasty that governed the region known as Iran today.⁵ In response, Britain attempted to rename the Gulf as the “Britain Sea,” but the name failed to gain traction. After the nationalization of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and the severance of diplomatic

ties between London and Tehran, the British retaliated by introducing the term “Arabian Gulf.” Concurrently, Arab countries inspired by Arab nationalism dropped the “Persian Gulf” and adopted the new label “Arabian Gulf” as part of their offense against Iran, especially after Iran’s support of Israel in the Arab-Israeli War. Once the U.S., an ally of the Shah of Iran, took over the security responsibility in the region, it adopted the term “Persian Gulf” alongside the rest of the Western diplomatic community. However, after the Iranian Revolution pitted the U.S. against the new Islamic regime, the U.S. government was split over which name to use. While some American agencies, including the US Board on Geographic Names, continued using “Persian Gulf,” others, such as the US Navy, adopted the term

“Arabian Gulf” so as not to antagonize their Arab allies in the region.⁶

While it is true that the term “Persian Gulf” was the first to be introduced and widely used among geographers, Arab states maintain that they have the right to change the name to reflect the changing political and cultural influences. One of their arguments is that the Persian Empire, which the Gulf was named after at the time of the Greeks, no longer exists. Furthermore, the fact that six Arabic-speaking countries—Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE—surround the Gulf, compared to Iran being the only Persian country, lends support to the argument that Arab states have the right to change the name.

The naming dispute has created headaches for diplomats and journalists around the world. On the one hand, there is a consensus among intergovernmental organizations to continue using “Persian Gulf” on maps and in official documents. To name a few, the United Nations, the International Hydrographic Organization, the European Union, and NATO all adopted the “Persian Gulf” name. On the other hand, some organizations have attempted to remain neutral in the dispute by simply referring to the body of water as “the Gulf” such as *the New York Times*—which does not have an official position but rather alter-

nates between the two names^{7,8}—and *The Economist*.⁹ However, Iran still rejects a neutral position and argues that taking a neutral stance means abandoning the rightful, historical name.

Throughout the dispute era, many solutions were alluded to such as simply the “Gulf” by the Arabs or the “Islamic Gulf” by others. Could there be any solution in the near future, given that Iran is standing firm and the Arabs will not submit either?

Considering the sensitive nature of the two names—both of which hint towards an ethnic group—and their correlation with the power dynamics in the region, neither side would submit to the other’s demands and agree to their official name in the foreseeable future. As relations warm in the region thanks to a peace deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the powder keg of names will likely stabilize for the moment, only to be reignited by another spark in the future. This time, the inclusion of the term “Arabian Gulf” in the name of the 25th Gulf Cup was the spark that renewed debates and disputes in the region, underscoring the persistent complexities and tensions that continue to impact diplomatic relations. That being said, the Kuwaiti ambassador should perhaps expect a call from his Iranian counterpart regarding the name when his country hosts the 26th “Arabian Gulf Cup” in December 2024.

