Call it by its name

There is a quiet political conflict over the name of a key waterway — the Persian Gulf

Media coverage of the Middle East often involves eccentricities that have over time become canonised to the extent that even the critical thinkers do not question them. The use of the words 'the Gulf', an abstract reference to the stretch of water separating Iran from the Arabian Peninsula, is one such quirk.

The Persian Gulf's truncated moniker can be spotted in stories published by news sources as diverse as *BBC World*, *The New Yorker*, *National Geographic Magazine*, *The Economist* and even in the products of Google and statements of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM). Those who follow the headlines of the region run into the epithet frequently.

As the curious example of lexical innovation gains currency, the gradual expungement of a major element of geopolitical history in West Asia is expedited, and the bottom line is that historical inaccuracies are condoned for the sake of short-term objectives. In this case, the idea is to delicately inflict reputational costs on Iran for not adhering to the rules of engagement as a responsible player.

The Persian(!) Gulf

The Persian Gulf is an imperative energy hub. On the southern coast of Iran, the Strait of Hormuz remains the world's most pivotal choke point, where the average crude flow stands at roughly 20.5 million barrels per day. According to the United States Energy Information Administration, seven littoral states of the Persian Gulf produced 32 per cent of the world's oil in 2022.

Debates on maritime navigation and energy security are so intertwined with the developments surrounding the Persian Gulf that it is unrealistic to say the waterway is one abstruse entity. Still, the use of 'the Gulf' as a neologism has been so common that it sometimes appears as if the

primary conduit of petroleum transportation in the Middle East has never had any geographic signifiers.

In the lion's share of print and broadcast media materials, 'Persian Gulf' is still the name that's used, averting confusions as to which gulf is in question. Yet, the formalisation of a euphemistic reference to the strategic inlet cannot be ascribed to a casual indifference to a foreign name or imprecision in writing scripts.

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It is highly likely that erasing the Persian Gulf and replacing it with a generic place name has been incentivised by a silent agreement between the US and European political elite to leverage the sensitivities around the toponym to defy an adversary. *The Guardian*'s former Middle East correspondent Brian Whitaker wrote in a 2010 article that he believed changes of policy in how the water should be named don't often reflect logical reasons other than being a 'petty gesture calculated to annoy Iran.'

As the gulf's primary stakeholder in terms of the boundaries of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), Iran sees itself in a position of regional primacy anchored in its sovereign rights of the important waterway. Eclipsing the identity of the large natural stream is perceived as a means of punishing the Islamic Republic for being a bad actor.

Arguably, 'Persian Gulf' is the only globally recognised proper noun that carries a connotation of Persianate civilisation, reminiscing the standing of Iran as the region's source of stability — a role that is now defunct. Tampering with the name, although meant to be a scornful gesture against the theocracy in Tehran, often winds up offending the ordinary Iranians more than it does the clerical establishment because they feel the contraction of a name that reaffirms their ancestral heritage is meant to belittle them at a time when their government is isolated and unpopular. The double whammy of being repressed by an autocracy at home and slighted by global powers that frequently express their support for the Iranian people is too caustic to countenance. No matter the political motives at play, one may wonder if the 'Indian Ocean', for instance, can be reduced to 'the Ocean' in the far-fetched event of a rupture in US-India relations.

Cultural appropriation

Authorities in Tehran have usually objected to the media and governments' invocation of misnomers, including instances where Arab governments have conjured their own denomination to christen the gulf. The coinage of the 'Arabian Gulf', for example, was streamlined in the late 1960s when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser embarked on an ambitious enterprise of rejuvenating the dormant Arab nationalism. The cultural appropriation of a world-famous body of water could serve as one effective way of achieving the milestone.

Nasser particularly mounted a cultural battle against Iran in a bid to overpower a rival that he disliked for ideological reasons. He didn't approve of the secular, pro-West Shah and had called the last Iranian monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi one of the four 'imperialist stooges' of the Middle East who had betrayed the Muslim world cause by recognising Israel.

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Yet, the Arab states' use of a preferred name to describe the Persian Gulf didn't have much appeal beyond their borders, and the English-speaking public discourse remained resistant to embracing it. This doesn't mean as a fallacy it was rejected altogether. Iran has found itself embroiled in occasional disputes with Western governments and institutions over the words 'Arabian Gulf', a radical departure from the elision that 'the Gulf' represented.

Even as the United Nations and many governments continue giving reference to 'the Gulf', they have toponymic standards that clarify what their official policy is. The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, for instance, stated in a fact file prepared by the governmental Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN) that 'Persian Gulf' is the name it recognises. Notwithstanding, government and public agencies, including *BBC World*, have long ditched any reference to the Persian Gulf.

In the case of the United States, it is possible to track a correlation between the fluctuations of Iran-US relations and the repetition of 'the Gulf' in media narratives and political parlance. President Bill Clinton, for example, routinely referred to the Persian Gulf in his statements, as did the presidents before him. Clinton's practice was what had been the norm since Herodotus in 450 BCE. However, as Tehran and Washington stepped up the ladder of escalation since 9/11, American

politicians turned to a discursive shift that included an implicit disavowal of the Persian Gulf as a name with what they believed were more profound undertones.

After President George W. Bush, giving reference to 'the Gulf' evolved into the new normal for the administration, even if it could have easily been mixed up with the Gulf of Mexico. It appeared that the federal officials felt every time they pronounced the full name of the body of water south of Iran, they would be rubber-stamping the Islamic Republic of Iran government.

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The ongoing fracas with Iran is, of course, multi-pronged, and neither Tehran nor its nemeses have displayed an alacrity to relent. There is an endless list of fundamental policy issues over which the Islamic Republic and the alliance of Western democracies do not see eye to eye. Meanwhile, each side is tinkering with some measures of sabotage to beef up its chances of beating the unflappable opponent.

Against this backdrop, it is unlikely that tampering with recorded history is a pragmatic plan of action, even in the middle of what sounds like a cold war. At a time when the peddling of disinformation and pseudo-science is being irresponsibly enabled by the corporate owners of social media platforms, what is needed urgently is a reconciliation with accuracy and integrity in public rhetoric.

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