

A gulf by any other name

By Ingrid Piller | December 20, 2010 | Language & globalization

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In the year in which I've been away from the UAE, the fervor for the use of "Arabian Gulf" instead of "Persian Gulf" has certainly heated up here. This map showing the travels of Ibn Battuta in Dubai's [Ibn Battuta Mall](#) identified the gulf as "Persian" when I took the first picture in January 2010. By December 2010, when I took the second picture an unsightly white piece of paper had been used to cover up the "Persian Gulf" name. I suppose the official internationally recognized name "Persian Gulf" became unspeakable (or rather unshowable) in this Dubai mall in the wake of [US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's deliberate flouting of international conventions when she used "Arabian Gulf" in October this year](#).

Before I came to live in the UAE, I'm not even sure I was aware that you could call this particular waterway anything other than "Persian Gulf."



December 2010

However, I have since learnt that the name "Arabian Gulf" has been a bone of contention and an efficient way to stir ethnic tensions and passions for about half a century. In the [Huffington Post Jamal Abdi](#) offers the following history of the term "Arabian Gulf:"

The term "Arabian Gulf" first appeared fifty years ago as Pan-Arabism propaganda aimed at unifying Arabs against Iranians, Israelis, and other non-

Arabs in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein later co-opted the term to exploit ethnic rivalries in support of his regional claims and territorial ambitions, including his invasion of Iran and his campaigns against Iraqi Kurds. Later, Osama Bin Laden adopted the term in an attempt to stir ethnic rivalries to bolster his appeal among Arab populations.

The name war around “Persian Gulf” vs. “Arabian Gulf” is an age-old strategy of empire: *Divide et impera!* The fervor with which people fight over nothing more than a name is sad and shocking to see whenever it happens.

One of history’s indictments against our generation will doubtlessly include that we fought over names while the referent of the name was dying. No matter what you want to call it, the Persian Gulf is on the brink of environmental collapse as [Waterlink International](#) explains:

The Persian Gulf’s contained [environment](#) makes it a natural repository for pollutants. Now the Gulf’s marine ecosystem is under stress from the impacts of unprecedented coastal reclamation, oil exploration and tanker movement, [industrial](#) developments and [desalination](#) projects.

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, a gulf by any other name is dying from pollution.

