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Updates on technology policy issues

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MEER INFORMATIE IK SNAP HET

Posted by Andrew McLaughlin, Director of Global Public Policy

Hundreds of millions of users around the world use [Google Earth](#). Many of them have strong -- and sometimes conflicting -- opinions about how places should be named and where borders should be drawn. Disputes over place names and territorial borders exist in nearly every region, and constitute some of the most emotionally charged geopolitical issues in the world today. Since we launched Google Earth in 2004, we have done our best to anticipate these controversies and to address them in a principled, rigorous, and consistent way.

We want Google Earth to merit users' trust as an authoritative reference for geographic information; to do that we're aiming to be transparent about the policies we follow when we encounter sensitive geopolitical disputes. In this blog post, I present our approach to naming bodies of water. In future blog posts, I'll discuss our policies on issues like place names, border locations, the content of placemarks generated by the Google Earth community, and the reasons for the blurred imagery that appears in a number of locations.

Like any cartographic publisher, our policies have come under scrutiny from many groups, particularly when multiple countries disagree about the correct name for a shared body of water. While most bodies of water have a common name (think "Pacific Ocean"), others are called different names by different countries and cultures. Some variations in placenames are attributable to language-based variations (think "Germany" in English, "l'Allemagne" in French, "Deutschland" in German, etc.). Other differences, however, reflect broader political, historical, or cultural disputes. For example, the body of water between the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula is known as the "Sea of Japan" in Japan, but as the "East Sea" in South Korea.

As the publishers of a geographic reference tool, we believe that Google should not choose sides in international geopolitical disputes. For this reason, we've chosen to implement a uniform policy of *Primary Local Usage*.

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Caribbean Sea in English, Mar Caribe in Spanish, etc.). But if different countries dispute the proper name for a body of water, our policy is to display *both* names, with each label placed closer to the country or countries that use it.

One of the great features of Google Earth is that it enables us to provide significantly greater amounts of information than flat paper maps. So in addition to showing both disputed names, we also provide a clickable text box that provides some more detailed explanatory text. For example, if you click on the "Yellow Sea" or "West Sea" placemarks, you will get: "The Yellow Sea is the common English name associated with this maritime feature, known in China as Huáng Hǎi or 黄海 (Mandarin). In Korea, this feature is commonly referred to as the West Sea; in Korean Sŏ Hae or 서해 (Hangul)".

For language clients other than English, we display only the preferred name in the relevant language. For example, the Japanese client of Google Earth shows "Sea of Japan" in Japanese (日本海), while the Korean version shows "East Sea" in Korean (동해). In these cases, we still include *both* labels in the click-box political annotation. We believe this solution makes our product more helpful to users in each language by presenting the name they expect to see, but without sidestepping the existence of a disputed alternative name. In that way, we provide more, rather than less, information while maintaining a good user interface and experience.

When our policy says that we display the "primary, common, local" names for a body of water, each of those three adjectives has an important and distinct meaning. By saying "primary", we aim to include names of dominant use, rather than having to add every conceivable local nickname or variation. By saying "common", we mean to include names which are in widespread daily use, rather than giving immediate recognition to any arbitrary governmental re-naming. In other words, if a ruler announced that henceforth the Pacific Ocean would be named after her mother, we would not add that placemark unless and until the name came into common usage. Finally, by saying "local", we aim to reflect the primary and common names used by countries that actually border the body of water, as they are the countries recognized under international law as having a special sovereign stake in it.

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geopolitical disputes.

Alternative Policies We Considered

As we worked our way through the current set of disputed names for bodies of water, we considered and ultimately decided against several alternative policy approaches, including:

Authoritative International Institutions. We considered attempting to extricate Google entirely from the problem of deciding placenames by simply deferring to the determinations of an existing, authoritative, multilateral or multistakeholder institution. Under this policy, we would simply adopt *in toto* the naming choices set by that body, without exercising any independent judgment of our own. In particular, we considered using the publications and documents of the [United Nations Cartographic Section](#) as the authoritative references for naming bodies of water. Under scrutiny, though, the U.N. Cartographic Section's publications do not provide the level of coverage and detail that we hope to achieve for Google Earth. Moreover, quite understandably, the United Nations as an institution does not take official positions on geographical names (which would occasionally require it to take sides among the competing claims of two or more member states), but instead the Cartographic Section only issues guidance in the form of "informational practices" for use in U.N. documents and publications. Moreover, the U.N. is viewed by some as a politicized organization, favoring the claims of some countries and regions over others. Also within the U.N. system, we looked at the [reports](#) of the U.N. Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, which convenes every five years. That Conference, however, does not take positions on geopolitical disputes between countries, and so reliance on its reports is not a realistic option.

We also considered adopting the names used by the [International Hydrographic Organization](#) (IHO), an international group that works, among other things, to standardize nautical charts and documents. But the IHO's naming work in recent decades has focused on (a) the naming of undersea features, and (b) setting the boundaries and limits of oceans and seas. It has not undertaken to resolve current

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more widely-respected national-level geographic organizations like the US National Geographic Society and the UK Royal Geographical Society. But these organizations exist only in a handful of large, rich economies, and many believe they do not represent the views and values of other parts of the world. They also occasionally reach differing conclusions on names and naming conventions, and it would be difficult to set a neutral, objective rule for deciding which organization to follow.

Academics. Finally, we also considered conducting a survey of credentialed geography academics to assess their views as to the proper name(s) to be displayed. But this option too is fraught with likely bias -- the mere process of choosing which academics to survey would be highly subjective. And we reasoned that if our chosen experts were evenly split or undecided, we'd still be no closer to delegating the responsibility to outside authorities.

All things considered, we believe that the *Primary Local Usage* rule, if rigorously and evenhandedly applied, is a better choice than any of these three alternatives. Of course, we recognize that this policy will leave some people unhappy about a resulting name that is displayed for each disputed body of water. But we hope they will accept that showing all the names of primary and common use by all the countries bordering a body of water is fair and diplomatic.

Perhaps most importantly, we also recognize that we have no monopoly on geographic truth. Debate about the right policies and practices for Google Earth is valuable. Happily enough, one of the great features of Google Earth is its ability to support the creation and display of data layers by an interested person. It is our fervent hope that different communities will use Google Earth as an open platform to create content that accurately reflects their views. We welcome additions to our community and web layers so that users can access all points of view.



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Yes google; you are right. Currently We Iranian people are weak and isolated and have little role in world policy and the US has banned financial exchange with Iranians, So why to support them when there is such a lot of money on the opposite side of the Persian Gulf?

The name Arabian Gulf that you've recently added to your maps is a conspiracy used by Pan-Arab racist leader Jamal Abdol Nasser in 1960s who was jealous of Iran's promotion and superlative power in the region those days.

Now their oil wells are full and they're making a lot of money so they can so satisfy you that you completely forget about the facts and your creditability. But what about 40 years later that all those wells are emptied?

May be you think that those days there will be pretty enough time for thinking about less important issues like humanity and honesty!

You've broke many Iranian hearts Google Earth!

[Reply](#)

Scott Catledge [April 18, 2008 at 11:11 PM](#)

I abhor the policies and politics of the current Iranian regime. That being said, as a long-time teacher/professor, I have taught both geography and world history for a half century and consider 'Persian Gulf' to be the historical and, therefore, the sole authentic title until such time as all bordering countries agree to a name change.

[Reply](#)

Anonymous [April 19, 2008 at 6:00 AM](#)

half a million signatures against the wrongdoing of google earth:
http://www.petitiononline.com/mod_perl/signed.cgi?sos02082

How much did yo uget paid for adding false inforamtion. There is only one gulf in southern Iran and that is called the PERSIAN GULF

[Reply](#)

Babak Talebi [April 26, 2008 at 4:42 PM](#)

This comment has been removed by the author.

[Reply](#)

Babak Talebi [April 26, 2008 at 5:13 PM](#)

This comment has been removed by the author.

[Reply](#)

Babak Talebi [April 26, 2008 at 5:24 PM](#)

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Your decision to post an indirect response on this obscure blog instead of directly engaging and explaining your decision in a professional and public manner does a disservice to your well-earned positive reputation.

2) Your utilization of a "local use" rule, even if legitimate would require some form of data backing it up. Is the measurement related to population? what "local use" threshold are you holding yourself to? (33%? 5%? or is a handful of 'locals' enough?)

Are you considering bordering shoreline? Is the GDP of the populated countries part of the measurement? Are you conducting polls? How often do you update your "local use" standard - or once decided, is the usage then fixed for eternity?

What is your metric? and where is the evidence to back it up? In the case of the Persian Gulf which is the biggest issue currently being discussed regarding Google Earth (Aside from the Israeli/Palestinian town name - not a body of water, but also goes unaddressed in this blog post) - you fail to recognize that the name Persian Gulf was first coined (local use) by the Arabic tribes to describe the gulf they would have to cross to get to the "Persians".

3) This decision also strikes me as rather weak and somewhat cowardly as it indicates a willingness by Google to accede to artificial political pressure rather than to achieve Google's mission of providing accurate information for it's consumers.

Your flippant use of the hypothetical renaming of the Pacific Ocean by a random monarch strikes me as a perfect example of this weak argument. It is a badly disguised analogy to Gamal-Abdul Nasser's pan-Arabist political ideology that lead to the invention of the term "Arabian Gulf".

Which brings up another question - if a tyrant forces the use of a particular term by his people (lets say under penalty of death) - would that population's usage then qualify under your 'local use' standard? Is this not then an encouragement for Tyrants to leave a lasting legacy by manipulating Google Earth's arbitrary policy?

If Google Earth had existed just 40 years ago, maybe we would have had such lofty bodies of water as the Pol Pot River, Idi Amin Lake, and the Northern Stalin Sea. Maybe even the Red Mao Ocean (1.3 billion Chinese after all).

In my personal estimation, based on the April 8th date of this post (months after official requests for an explanation), this explanation reflects a poorly thought-out and ill-conceived excuse after-the-fact to sweep the issue under the (Persian) rug and to provide Google executives with a face-saving PR talking-point.

I suspect this effort will be a far-cry short of what is needed to silence your critics.

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Inamorato April 26, 2008 at 5:41 PM

Babak, can you believe we're still having this problem with people? I mean the most recent wars that THIS country has had were called the "Persian" Gulf Wars. Furthermore, I have never known any Arabs to call the Gulf anything other than Khaleej-e Fars. Who is pushing for the name Arabian Gulf? This is so odd to me! Who are the pressure groups on the OTHER side? I can't even believe we're still fighting this. It's like having to convince people to call "Persia" "Iran." This all seems very odd to me.

[Reply](#)

Ara April 27, 2008 at 1:04 AM

And this from a UN communiqué:

United Nations Secretariat
ST/CS/SER.A/29/Add.2
94-33224 (E) 180894

Prepared by Editorial Control
To: Members of the staff

Subject: Use of the term "Persian Gulf" Addendum

Attention is once again drawn to editorial directive ST/CS/SER.A/29 and Corr.1 and Add.1 on the use of the term "Persian Gulf". The purpose of the present addendum is to urge that care be taken to ensure the appropriate use of this term in documents, publications and statements prepared by the Secretariat.

The full term "Persian Gulf" should be used in every case instead of the shorter term "Gulf", including in repetitions of the term after its initial use in a text.

[Reply](#)

arya April 29, 2008 at 7:58 PM

Seriously inamorato, why are we still having this discussion? National Geographic was good enough to realize their mistake and after doing their research they made their correction.

Google shouldn't just agree to give any local name to any body of water with an international boundary. Should Google also allow "Arvand Rood" to be an alternate name to the Shatt al-Arab waterway? No, because it is not internationally recognized and nobody outside of Iran calls it Arvand.

People can't just decide to create an alternate name for a prominent body of water. What if

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Jonathan Kroner May 9, 2008 at 12:12 PM

"The map is not the territory" or is it? Fascinating debate--thank you Google. If only Korzybski, Sapir, and Whorf were around for this.

Jonathan Kroner

[Reply](#)

kamal May 14, 2008 at 12:46 PM

To all my compatriots above,
This is how it's done first they deny our history
Then they change facts
After they redraw maps
And you could imagine what comes next
Don't you all out there give up on Iran for a second

Love you all and anything and everything Persian

Long live the sons of Cyrus

[Reply](#)

U.S. Citizen and Proud of it May 15, 2008 at 12:54 PM

You have written a multi-page policy blog to justify your ignorance and overt acquiesce to forces trying to marginalize the maps in existence for over a thousand years. All you have done is the exact opposite of what your stated objective is which is not entering political debate. Google's overall policy was supposed to be "Don't be Evil" which seems like you have lost. Go ask your founders what they meant when they were trying not be evil.

[Reply](#)

Eiman May 16, 2008 at 2:22 PM

It's pretty obvious that the Arabic Gulf needs to be changed to Persian Gulf. It's unbelievable that a group of smart people like those at Google don't understand historical fact. The United Nations recognizes this body of water as Persian Gulf; no one except a few politically motivated group of people want to call it Arabic Gulf.

Google, you're really starting to piss people off now.

[Reply](#)

Eiman May 16, 2008 at 2:30 PM

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabian_Gulf

[Reply](#)

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Surely, this is reflected badly on the Google brand and company. At the end of the day however, it is not the doing of the entire organization but a handful of people who failing to do their job properly and address this matter. I encourage the author of this blog to reconsider his reasoning here and do the right thing.

[Reply](#)

Babak Talebi [May 23, 2008 at 12:01 PM](#)

The most unbelievable thing is that Google has not even deigned to respond to NIAC's request for a sit-down. not once, not twice, but THREE times we have asked for a meeting.

When the National Geographic was convinced - it took us and our allies 8 weeks. But at least they sat down and listened to the other side.

[Maybe Google likes to be associated with the likes of Saddam](#)

[Reply](#)

Anonymous [November 2, 2008 at 3:56 PM](#)

Dear Andrew McLaughlin,

Accrding to your comment

"If all bordering countries agree on the name, then the common single name is displayed (e.g. "Caribbean Sea" in English, "Mar Caribe" in Spanish, etc.).", then I think all bordering countries agree on the name of Palestine instead of Israel to the region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

As a researcher and scientist I had special interest and dedication to use google and google scholar, but I now I would gladly switch to any other searchable archive who stands on its standards

[Reply](#)

davood [December 12, 2008 at 11:33 AM](#)

would you please show the world documents from U.N. or other world authorities that allows you to change the name of the persian gulf to arabian. you are playing with history and it is not funny.

[Reply](#)

Yo [January 29, 2009 at 6:06 PM](#)

This comment has been removed by the author.

[Reply](#)

Unknown [February 6, 2009 at 9:56 AM](#)

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Anonymous [March 19, 2009 at 9:56 PM](#)

This comment has been removed by the author.

[Reply](#)

davood [March 23, 2009 at 11:51 AM](#)

google has lost it's confidence in truth with the world by calling persian gulf which has been known to everyone since 500 B.C. by calling it arabian gulf. the world knows better to believe this foolish and absurd display by google. why don't google show the world when this decision was made? as the source of money for google runs out (look what is going on in dubai now, the joke is over and people are fleeing there by thousands) maybe google will come to their senses and correct the mistake.

[Reply](#)

Anonymous [April 1, 2009 at 11:02 PM](#)

Google is a racist company! It does not care about the Iranian people and international laws. Google has made it a policy to insult a whole nation by taking bribes. Everybody knows that this policy is politically-motivated and constitutes identity theft.

As long as Google keeps abusing the name Persian Gulf, there is no reason to not boycott Google Earth. Even if someone gives me a copy of the latest enterprise version of Google Earth for free, I will not accept it! I have already advised many of my relatives and friends to not use Google Earth and encourage everyone out there to never download or buy Google Earth.

As an Iranian, it hurts my heart that Google Earth is fabricating the history behind a name that is attached to the Persian heritage. Despite all the legal and historical documents about this waterway, you have deliberately chosen to ignore such realities and attack our history in the harshest way.

You are only damaging your reputation and credibility. You have already lost many of your Iranian customers and will continue losing customers if you keep abusing this name. The only way you may have a chance to win back your once loyal customers is to unconditionally revise your policy and learn to be more honest to your customers.

Stop distorting facts! Stop violating international laws! Stop insulting a whole nation! Stop taking bribes! Stop spreading nonsense! Stop ignoring all the letters that we have sent you, let alone all the petitions and demonstrations! We will never stop fighting for the truth. If you want to stay in business, you simply have to change your policy and use the one-and-only legitimate name, Persian Gulf.

Don't expect to be in business by playing dirty games with us. We will not allow a bunch of crooks like you to insult our history and demonize us! Don't even think that your racist propaganda will be forgotten or accepted by us.

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<http://www.petitiononline.com/sos02082/petition.html>

<http://www.arabian-gulf.info/>

<http://pg.m2ix.com/>

[Reply](#)

davood April 18, 2009 at 4:31 PM

i have a suggestion for google earth people. why don't you google arabian gulf and see what you get?

(it would say arabian gulf does not exist) and also read what you see when you wikipedia persian gulf. it is funny how ignorant you people can be?

[Reply](#)

mim May 3, 2009 at 7:41 AM

Unfortunately, this will be a dark point on the history of this great company "forever"! coz history can't be erased or changed while it's being documented everywhere!

I abhor current Iranian policy and politics (+religions) also as much as I do for these kind of acts; they are both stupid!

plz correct your mistake Google and use the correct name till all boundary countries agree for a unique name! you've no right to invent a name dude! ;))

[Reply](#)

Unknown May 6, 2009 at 5:23 PM

um, what is all the fuss about? the note on the name clearly states that "arabian gulf" is a minority name!

and it seems to me that only a rather narrow sector of people are incensed about this!

just an observation!

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arya May 6, 2009 at 6:36 PM

re: Jason

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There is absolutely no historical basis for the term arabian gulf. It was made up less than a century ago because certain Arabs like Gamal Abdel Nasser wanted to increase the influence of Arabs around the world.

[Reply](#)

Haleh January 26, 2010 at 5:23 PM

To Google Map

Yes, I will also remove the app 'google map' from our pc and won't buy any world atlas if they contain the new name 'Arabian Gulf'. I'd rather use other maps, those free of Hypocrisy.

Also from now on will search on MSN instead of Google .

Deciding to choose that name without a poll indicates a grave disrespect from your side towards the Iranian people many of whom still prefer to be called Persians.

A very offended/hurt Persian, H

[Reply](#)

elee of BH June 9, 2010 at 2:05 AM

Hey, if you hate Google soooo much now, why you are almost the only one here? You are just creating more enemies for your self by the day. Just stop it and try to live in peace for once because if it wasn't the name of the Arabian Gulf then you will definitely be fighting about something else. Admit it opposing and making life difficult is in your blood. "God bless the ARABIAN gulf and its people".

[Reply](#)

Unknown November 28, 2010 at 11:05 PM

I was one of the Google lover but I don't like Google any more because it follows political purposes, and it used incorrect name(Arabian gulf)beside of Persian gulf.

This lost credibility of Google Earth.

[Reply](#)

Unknown January 12, 2011 at 3:29 PM

It is wrong for Google map to take political side against any countries. There are no legal disputes for the body of water called the Persian Gulf. If so, please provide any proof or documents so the viewers would know why the Persian Gulf is the only Gulf or place that has no name! This is disgusting.

[Reply](#)

DanM February 23, 2011 at 7:29 PM

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[Reply](#)

Unknown March 18, 2011 at 7:44 PM

It seems that you have no knowledge of what Persian Gulf is called.

National Geographic Society uses the name Persian Gulf to refer to this body of water. United Nations calls it Persian Gulf. All non political organizations use the term Persian Gulf.

The only people who use the incorrect term are unfortunately illiterate Arabs living off oil or people buying that oil. Anyone with a school diploma knows that.

I am interested that Google maps claims it does not know it!

[Reply](#)

Mohsen Jamali April 1, 2011 at 10:41 PM

It's completely political that Google say such a lie. It's disgusting to say such a lie and then try to prove it by some law.

[Reply](#)

Unknown April 26, 2011 at 5:45 PM

This is very insulting to Iranians, just because certain individuals in certain countries challenged the historical and legal name, "Persian Gulf" it has led to its complete removal from Google Maps regardless of feelings of a whole nation.

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