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Iran and the Persian Gulf**

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Symbolic Name Strategies: Iran and the Persian Gulf

Vedran Obućina

INTRODUCTION

National and regional identities have always been and still are connected to territory. The sovereignty is largely perceived biased to a territory, although there are some authors who regard territoriality and state autonomy as irrelevant for the sovereignty. Of course, overwhelming number of countries in the world have territory. However, a country does not stem from nature. Rather, it is imaginative formation, and sovereignty cannot be based exclusively on territory, but primarily on imaginative community. The state sovereignty is by far the end result of particular discourse and imaginary. Institutional political science might have problems with this notion of sovereignty, but other social sciences, such as anthropology, considers sovereignty as monopoly where one is included or excluded from a political community, but also what constitutes order, security and normal life, as well as which means (including force) have to be taken not to endanger these principles. The complexity of sovereignty, however, goes beyond this debate. Even the anthropology stresses order and security, without which there is no normal life, no sovereignty, as the states collapse and become rogue. The role of space and spatial presence is especially accentuated in fragmented societies with deep religious, linguistic and ethnic divides. The politics of territoriality, thus, is act of political production, dynamic and changing construction, which based on its inherent exclusivity leads to bordering and conflicts (Blacksell, 2006: 20). This space, a territory, is further used for activity of territoriality as explained by Kevin E. Cox: the activity of defending, controlling, excluding, including (Cox, 2002: 1).



The area of the Persian Gulf is one of the most important regions for the world politics. It is the focus point of energy resources, and Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf kingdoms play a pivotal role in the world. Precisely because of that, USA, as the world (declining) superpower has great interest in the area, as visible in stationing its Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf. That is why the Persian Gulf policy is important on both sides of the Gulf. In the 1960s however, Arab world increasingly began calling the Gulf “Arabian”. The Iranian side thinks it threatens part of historical and cultural identity and heritage of humanity.

It is vital to understand the symbolic nature of this dispute. It is not a novel idea that every nation and every culture has its symbols. But for overtly rational political science it is not of particular interest. This is unfortunate; as many case studies show the symbols and symbolic behaviour are paramount for explaining, and especially understanding, the political thinking, behaviour and decision making. One cannot forget the quote from Evans-Pritchard, “the most difficult task in social anthropological field work is to determine the meanings of a few key words, upon an understanding of which the success of the whole investigation depends” (Evans-Pritchard, 1962: 80). Thus, for the understanding, and not just explaining, the relations between the Arab and Iranian side, one has to understand the meaning of the geographical names as symbolic capital. These names form values, concepts and orientations, or themes, around which many decisions are being made.

In this article I use the UN recognized name for the gulf in question, and spell it out interchangeably as either the Persian Gulf or the Gulf when considering the wider geopolitical area. This is based on an editorial directive from 1999, when the Secretariat of the United Nations stated that the term “Persian Gulf” is used by the Secretariat as the standard geographical term. Moreover, the term “Gulf” is used by the Secretariat to identify or refer to the general geographical area such as the Gulf area, the Gulf region and the Gulf States.

IRANIAN-ARAB RELATIONS IN THE GULF

The twenty-year period of relations between Iran and the Gulf states since the Islamic revolution of 1979 until 1998 can best be characterised as turbulent and unstable since it included major changes such as the revolution, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the Gulf Crisis (1990-1991), as well as regional conflicts such as the dispute over Abu Musa and Tunb islands, and the problems at the annual hajj pilgrimage (Marshall, 2003: 2). Iranian relations with the Gulf States were largely restrained by distrust and the Arab rulers’ fears of Iranian domination. As a result, symbolic strategies are used to proclaim the region “Arabic” or “Persian”. This battle of symbols accelerated after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, as post-Saddam Iraq became overtly Shi’a dominated, in close contact with Tehran regarding economical, social and military aid. This stronghold of Shi’ism forms a real problem, as seen in 2007 by Ehteshami and Zweiri: “The political resurgence of Shi’a communities is a fear that plagues many of the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, many of which have substantial Shi’a populations of their own to manage” (Ehteshami, Zweiri, 2007: 99). In fact,



their words met the truth during the uprising labelled Arab Spring that occurred throughout the Arab world. It included the biggest Shi'a community in the Persian Gulf outside Iran and Iraq, Bahrain. The Shi'a majority in the country was awakened by Iranian-Iraqi cleric Hadi al-Mudarrisi, a personal representative of Khomeini in Bahrain, which culminated in riots during 1979 and especially in 1981, and forming of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, with headquarters in Tehran (Panah, 2007: 74, 75). Similar organisations and activities were formed in Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia. Eventually, these uprisings led to the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in May 1981, as some sort of containment versus Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf (Ehteshami, 1995: 132; Legrenzi, 2002: 25). It also supported Iraq in the Iraq-Iran war, by giving Saddam Hussein finances and military aid (Panah, 2007: 85), and was organised under the tutelage of USA and UK (Mafinezam, Mehrabi, 2007: 69). After the war, the export of the revolution seized, as numerous obstacles emerged, especially considering Iranian national pride connected to Shi'ism, which wasn't favoured among many Shi'ites of Arab descents. Although the export itself failed, the Islamic movements mushroomed after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in various countries of Middle East and North Africa.

The Arabs decided to call the Gulf "Arabian" during the height of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. At the time Pan-Arabism was at its highest, leading to later failed political project of unification of the Arab world. The idea is in fact a bit older, as it united Arabs in their efforts to fight against the Ottomans and subsequent colonial or semi-colonial rule by the European powers. It is no wonder Nasser was the one who proclaimed the Gulf "Arab", as Egypt was often seen as the hub of Pan-Arabic feelings and attitudes (El Bernoussi, 2014: 9), as well as the place where the idea of the Arab League was conceived, whereby "...Nasserism used the League as a framework for Arab action" as the Nasserism didn't regard Pan-Arabism "...as simply the existence of loose cultural, social, economic and even political bonds between Arab states, Nasserism decided to turn it into an ideology, imposing a higher form of solidarity on the Arab scene, which did not correspond in practice with the actual state of affairs, except on the emotional level" (Sirriyeh, 2000: 54). In effect, Pan-Arabism was "a macro nationalism, or the projection of micro nationalism onto the larger geographical area, based on common interests (religion, culture and race) as the basis of aspiration for political entity, in more than one state" (Henry, 2003: 297). The accent on macro nationalism is important. Next to the idea of nation state, never really accepted in its Western meaning, Arab countries focused on the shared tradition of Islamic values, importance of Shari'a, and common Muslim community ummah, as well as socialist ideas, revolutionary zeal and technical modernisation.

The identification process with Pan-Arab movement is traceable in almost all Arab countries, but its decline in late 1970s showed how the regional identities gain more ground. As the demise of Pan-Arabism occurred, a distinct notion of *khaliji* (Gulf) identity occurred in the GCC countries (Legrenzi, 2002: 32). In this sense, it might be even clearer why the name for the Gulf in GCC countries is "Arabian" and not "Arab". Both names would have been linguistically correct, but GCC countries use the name of Arabian Gulf with spectacular care.



It doesn't show the "Arab" character of the region, but Arabian, as they form the identity of Arabia, and not of the whole Arab world. The Pan-Arabism again came to the fore through the ideas and activities of the Muslim Brotherhood, although it is primarily a Pan-Islamic movement, the same as Mawdudi's ideas in Pakistan, Khomeini's in Iran, etc. It is also visible in the attitude toward the Palestinian question. The Pan-Arabic notion can be seen also in the Arab Spring, as the protests showed Arab solidarity.

Ever since, the term has been a reason for serious disagreement and a widened "gulf" between the two peoples, between Iran on the one side, and GCC countries on the other. This dispute has to be solved if any real cooperation on both sides of the Gulf is going to be achieved, but it involves more than just the name change. It is a symbol of deep mistrust: "The dispute, which continues to affect relations, is symptomatic of a bigger problem, we suggest, and has much to do with role perception as well as the prevailing balance of power in the region" (Ehteshami, Zweiri, 2007: 102). The name is a symbol of power, and for Arabs the official UN name means Iran enjoys dominance in the region. As the Arab national and economic powers grew after the Second World War, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser proclaimed a global campaign in 1968 of changing the name of Persian Gulf to Arabian Gulf, as a showcase of Arab presence and overall character in the region. Later, GCC countries accepted this name and started to lobby and campaign worldwide for acceptance of this name. Both Shah Pahlavi and the leaders of the Islamic Republic showed great discomfort and rejection of Arab states' renaming of the Gulf, whose Persian adjective has been recognised by the United Nations. Iran claims the right to historical name again because of the politics of memory and politics of history: the Persian Gulf is Persian because since Achaemenid dynasty Iranians have been present in this region. They conquered Bahrain, expelled Portuguese from Hormuz straits, built a navy, and only succumbed under the pressure of British in 18th century. Challenges from 19th century endured. British domination in Iraq and its influence over the ailing Ottoman court resulted in division of Shatt al-Arab. Oil rich future province of Khuzestan became an Iranian province, a decision that provoked war by Saddam Hussein in 1980. On the other hand, British gave islands of Abu Musa and Tunb to emirate of Sharjah, a decision still contested between Iran and the United Arab Emirates. The subsequent name change in Arab countries is seen in Tehran as a direct attack on multiculturalism of the region, suppression of rightful Iranian identity and international legal rights. More importantly, it is seen as a move directed to destabilize Iran internally, causing havoc within the Arab-speaking minority in Iran. At the time, Iran was biggest ally of USA in the Middle East and had three major objectives shared with Washington: to protect the safety of the Shah's regime against internal subversion sponsored by radical Arab regimes or the Soviet Union; to prevent radicalism dominating any other Gulf state; to protect Iranian oil resources and installations; and to preserve freedom of navigation (Marshall, 2003). The backup and the British withdrawal from the Gulf resulted in Iranian occupation of the contested islands and the recognition of independent Bahrain.



EXPORT OF THE REVOLUTION

Immediately after the Islamic Revolution, it was revolutionary ideas that came at the fore of the Iranian policy toward the Persian Gulf, not nationalism. The policy was influenced by Iranian stand towards Palestinian question, Lebanon and hajj. Ayatollah Khomeini laid in the Constitution notions of oppressors (*mustakbarin*) and oppressed (*mustazafin*), in which oppressors are USA, other Western countries, but also the royal houses in the Arab states. With the idea of export of revolution, Iranian new authorities called for revolutions in the Arab kingdoms, and Muslim unity. In effect, Khomeini considered Iran just a base for all-Muslim revolution. Maybe this is the biggest miscalculation of Khomeini, out of very little tactical mistakes in his political career. By considering Iran mere as a place which hosts the rightful movement, he underestimated deep national feeling and memory of Iranian people, and of many Iranian mullahs. Indeed, in first years of the Revolution Khomeini and his first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan suggested the name dispute to be solved by simply naming the gulf “Muslim” or “Islamic”. This suggestion was quickly withdrawn, as Iraq attacked Iran. The export of the revolution was not intended as staging a revolution in another country, but influencing with ideas and role model of the Islamic Revolution for particular segments of society looking to establish a just Islamic society. It was particularly oriented toward the Gulf monarchies, which are “...acting in the interests of imperialism and being puppet regimes” (Panah, 2007: 74). With the idea of export of revolution, Iranian new authorities called for revolutions in the Arab kingdoms, and Muslim unity. In effect, Khomeini considered Iran just a base for all-Muslim revolution and liberation of Muslim people suffering under the oppressive regimes. The royal Arab households are oppressors because they form the power elite, the leaders and chiefs who are object of opposition and resistance, according to Qur’an: “...they are responsible for oppression and should be the target of revolutionary struggle” (Lafraie, 2009: 44). It also included some other Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, but didn’t include secular Turkey nor Pakistan, which whom new regime in Tehran sought to establish good relations.

After Khomeini’s death, however, the obligation of exporting the revolution completely failed and Iranian officials satisfied with the revolution in one country. In the end, the national feelings prevailed. Relations with Arab neighbours, especially those among the GCC states gradually became better under the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, but the Iranian policy toward the Persian Gulf became essentially national and not Pan-Islamic. The religious principles in Persian Gulf policies were deemed eternal, not prone to bargain by changing governments or different political factions. Security and careful cooperation became major segments of Iranian Persian Gulf policy, while not forgetting the permanent obligation to the revolutionary principles. The problems persist, especially because of difficult status of Shi’a Muslims in Bahrain (where they form majority), Kuwait, Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Only with Oman the relations are excellent, and Omani Sultan is often seen as an intermediary. One of the reasons is surely in religious symbolism – while most of the Arab



Gulf states, with exclusion of Iraq, are predominantly under the influence of Wahhabism, Oman is biggest Ibadi country in the world.

CONTINUING DISPUTES

The relations between GCC countries and Iran improved remarkably during the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies, and with a benevolent stand of Omani Sultan Qaboos. It continued under Ahamdinejad presidencies, as both Iranian and Saudi leaders showed publicly affection between two religiously connected countries. It was an effect of change of tune in the Iranian foreign policy, where confrontationist and revolutionary speech was gradually substituted by a more diplomatic and pragmatic standpoint, and especially after King Abdullah came to throne in Riyadh. But, the core problems stayed. Additional shortcomings in the relationship in the Persian Gulf include Iranian nuclear program and surface-to-surface missiles, which is considered a threat in Arab countries, and which Tehran failed to correctly explain to the same countries (Ehteshami, Zweiri, 2007: 103). On the other side, since 1984 the GCC countries established the Peninsula Shield Force for rapid deployment against external aggression, comprising “...units from the armed forces of each country under a central command based in Saudi Arabia” (Legrenti, 2002: 25). Given the American presence in the region, and the proximity of GCC countries to the Iraqi government, but also the experience in Kuwait, this force was obviously made as a containment against Iran, and later changed its orientation while still preserving the same idea of the military alliance.

The international pressure of the GCC countries can easily be seen in subsequent Summits of South American and Arab countries in 2000s. In Brasilia Declaration of 2005 the countries on summit “call upon Iran Islamic Republic for a positive response to the United Arab Emirates initiative to reach a peaceful settlement for the three UAE islands question (Tonb Alkobra, Tonb Alsoukra and Abou Moussa) through dialogue and direct negotiations, in accordance with the United Nations Charter and International Law”. The same sentence was incorporated in the Doha Declaration of 2009, as well as in some other international and bilateral declarations (for example in a joint meeting between the EU and the GCC countries in Brussels) although the issue is obviously and solely bilateral problem between UAE and Iran.

The name strategy is obvious way to determine who has more power and influence in one of the world’s most important geopolitical areas. In 2006 Iranians delivered to the UN’s Group of experts on geographical names a provisional agenda stating that “...any change, destruction, or alteration of the names registered in historical deeds and maps is like the destruction of ancient works and is considered as an improper action. (...) the names of geographical features (...) should not be utilized as political instruments in reaching a political, tribal and rational objective, or in any clash with national interests and other’s values”. The document lists number of historical references to the Gulf as Persian (Fars), beginning from the Pars Sea in the Pars Empire, the travel accounts of Pythagoras, Diseark, Herodotus, medieval Islamic travellers, to the Portuguese rule of Hormuz, and all the way to at least ten contracts signed



from 1507 to 1960 including mostly the Arab countries. There are also vastly documented maps throughout this period, which attest to the world's decision to label this gulf as Persian. As the final decision, the United Nations use the name too.

IRANIAN ARAB MINORITY AND INFLUENCE OF PAN-ARABISM

The rise of Pan-Arab nationalism threatens the integrity of Iran. It started openly with a conference of Arab jurists that declared Iranian province of Khuzestan an integral part of the Arab homeland, and continued with Egyptian influence over neighbouring Arab countries to foster Pan-Arab politics in the "Arabian Gulf".

The complex political system of Iran is followed by rather easy and logical territorial structure. Iran is divided into five regions, which is a decision brought by Rouhani government. The official division is based on thirty one provinces (*ostan*), governed by an appointed governor (*ostandar*). These are by alphabetic order: Alborz, Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Bushehr, Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiari, Esfahan, Fars, Gilan, Golestan, Hamadan, Hormozgan, Ilam, Kerman, Kermanshah, Khorasan North, Khorasan Razavi, Khorasan South, Khuzestan, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Kordestan, Lorestan, Markazi, Mazandaran, Qazvin, Qom, Semnan, Sistan and Baluchistan, Tehran, Yazd and Zanjan. The provinces are further divided into counties (*shahrestan*, lit.the land of the city), and subdivided into districts (*bakhsh*, lit.district) and sub-districts (*dehestan*, lit. the village space). Although divided in provinces, Iran is not a federal state. There has been much debate over the local and regional autonomies, decentralisation and other forms of devolving mechanisms for sub-national units, especially those that are homes for large numbers of ethnic minorities. The government so far has not answered these questions. Many presidential candidates stressed the importance of answering the ethnic and religious minorities' requests. They have travelled extensively in these areas to claim their support, both from the reformists and conservative camps. It is interesting only Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did not talk about ethnic issues or make special promises to ethnic minorities, but he "...emphasised the need to decentralise the state bureaucracy and empower the provincial governors, this was seen in line with his election platform of "social justice" and change in distributive policies, as Ahmadinejad promised he would put national wealth at the service of the masses and not the economic elite concentrated in central part of Iran"(Tohidi, 2009: 318). It is interesting thus, that Ahmadinejad in fact softened large amount of ethnic minorities, focusing on his populist appeal of return to the revolutionary ideas of equality, justice and anticorruption, highlighting his own humble background, austere lifestyle, visible already in his clothes, named *khaksari* (down-to-earth), like notorious five-dollar shirts, rejecting Western clothes and condemning the wearing of neckties, as a sign of submission to the Crusaders (David, Robinson, 2006).

In the 20th century, Iran has embarked on massive Iranization of provinces' and cities' names. It began with rightful distinction between Persia and Iran. For many centuries, Iran was called by its Hellenised name Persia, although Iranians themselves never seized to call their



homeland Iran, which means Land of Aryans. The country was officially renamed in Iran in 1935, under the Reza Pahlavi rule. Reza Shah famously warned all embassies in Tehran to use the name Iran and threatened to expel all those who use the name Persia. After the Islamic Revolution, the official name stayed in form of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since Pahlavi regime came to power after the overthrow of Qajar dynasty, language policies were used to strengthen the idea of Iranian nation state. The same is used under Islamic Republic, albeit with an important change of meaning. Under the Pahlavis the language was a tool for nationalism and tightening of the idea of an Iranian nation in modern sense. The Islamic Republic, however, puts accent not on nation of Iran, but on its Islamic character. While Pahlavi regime forbids all languages but Farsi, Islamic Republic gave constitutional possibility to use other languages as well. The Article 15 of the Constitutional Law states: “The common and official language and script of the people of Iran is Farsi. Official documents, correspondence and texts as well as textbooks must be in this language and script. However, the use of local and ethnic languages in the press and mass media or the teaching of their literature in schools, along with Farsi, shall be free”. It is a clear break with the policy of language assimilation by the Pahlavi regime. Also, Islamic Republic gave constitutional advantage to Arabic, as seen in the Article 16 of the Constitutional Law: “Since Arabic is the language of the Holy Qur’an and Islamic sciences and education, and Farsi language is completely intermixed with it, this language shall be taught in all classes and in all fields of knowledge after the primary classes up to the end of high school education”. As language of Qur’an and liturgy language of Islam all over the world, Arabic had great influence on Farsi. Although Pahlavi dynasty tried to Iranianize the language, it was still heavily intertwined with Arabic, a fact even further accentuated in the Islamic Republic. Arabic gives special identity to Iran as a Muslim nation and as an Islamic Republic; otherwise it would not be given the special constitutional presence. After all, “(T)he most common instrument of identity-building is language policy” (Beyme, 2014: 26). Indeed, the language has been used often as a tool for strengthening a nation state, especially in those countries where there was widespread presence of ethnic and national minorities (for example, Spain, USA, India, USSR, Yugoslavia). Iran resembles a society with dominant majority, where one ethnic community, Persians or Fars, is dominant and other minorities don’t have institutional cooperation with majority. Only well organized minorities have possibility to influence policies regarding their status. But as much as language policy may come from the centre, it can be a political weapon of minority as well.

The large urbanisation and rise of urban centres in Iran caused these differences to be less visible, as the urbanism has a capacity to effectively address inter-group conflict in nationalistic settings; the cities indeed may be critical spatial, economic, and psychological contributors to national ethnic stability and reconciliation (Bollens, 2007: 1). Distant from the spheres of institutionalised politics, cities can offer real time face-to-face negotiations among neighbours of different ethnic backgrounds. Such is the case of Tehran or Esfahan, large conglomerations which host citizens stemming from all Iranian backgrounds. On the other hand, urban centres can become a focal point for unresolved nationalistic and ethnic conflict, as a platform for the expression of conflicting sovereignty claims involving areas outside the



urban region or for tensions related to foreign immigration (Bollens, 2007: 6). It can be noticed in some other Iranian cities, such as Ahvaz, Kermanshah, Zahedan and Tabriz. To research the cities is important, as Bollens mentions, because of the territorial, economical and political consequences: “(T)erritorially, cities can be important symbolic and military battlegrounds and flashpoints for violence between antagonistic ethnic groups seeking sovereignty, autonomy or independence. Economically, they are frequently focal points of urban and regional economies dependent on multi-ethnic contacts, social and cultural centres and platforms for political expression, and potential centres of grievance and mobilisation. Politically, cities can include or exclude minority groups from formal and informal participation processes, and they are arenas where the size and concentration of a subordinate population can present the most direct political threat to the state”.

Arabs live in the south of Iran, around Persian Gulf, and make a bit more than three per cent of population. They adhere to both Shi'a and Sunni forms of Islam. The presence of Arabs in these areas stems back to the origins of the Persian Empire. Although many linguists and genealogists trace the origins of Arabs throughout contemporary Iran, today there are three main hubs of Arabic existence in Iran: Khuzestan, where most of Iranian Arabs live; Fars, where tribe of Khamseh reside; and Khorasan, where tribes of Sheybani, Zangooyi, Mishmast, Khozaima and Azdi live, but they speak predominantly Farsi. Nationalisms and the perceptions Iranians and Arabs have of themselves and of each other helped to shape policies of mistrust in the Persian Gulf. In approaching this, historical memory of Iran shapes the core of the Tehran's policies toward the Persian Gulf. It is worldview that considers Iran a superpower solely because of the thousands years of history and indeed the presence in the Gulf, a presence which makes Arab kingdoms especially worried. Khuzestan was renamed during the Pahlavi regime from original name Arabestan. The whole region saw overwhelming change of names. Cities of Mohammareh, Al-Ahwaz, Khafajiyeh, Howeizeh, Ma'shur and Fallahieh were renamed as Khorramshahr, Ahwaz, Sousangerd, Azadegan, Mahshahr, and Shadgan, respectively (Azizi-Banitorof, 2002). Number of Arabs living in Khuzestan is difficult to estimate, and it is between one third of the province (with Lurs and Persians consisting other two thirds) and overestimated number of 75 per cent of population. The language policy had its local resistance in using the dual names. Among themselves, Arabs in Khuzestan have used and still do use the Arab names of the cities; although in official correspondence only Iranian name is used.

In comparison to some other ethnic minorities in Iran, such as Baloch and Kurds, Arabs are less prone to secessionism, especially because they are overwhelmingly Shi'ites. But, in the overall dispute over the Persian Gulf name and the Arab uprisings in recent years, the Khuzestan Arabs showed increasing dissatisfaction with their status within the Islamic Republic. Immediately after the Islamic Revolution, Khuzestani Arabs raised revolt asking for a bigger autonomy. The decline to federalise the country led to terrorist activities stemming from Khuzestan, including Iranian Embassy siege in London in 1980, when six armed men held Iranian embassy staff hostage. They were members of one of many small secessionist groups and armed fronts. After the Iran-Iraq war, which hit Khuzestan badly, the oil rich



province raised questions on ethnic issue and social justice. It is visible in the 2005 riots in Ahwaz. Two months prior to the 2005 presidential elections in Iran, Khuzestan was struck by ethnic-related riots, and presidential candidates thus placed special importance on the ethnic issues. Mehdi Karrubi, who stems from Lurestan and is himself an ethnic Lur, “...visited the city of Ahwaz in the Khuzestan province, and he praised the role of brave young people, particularly Arab, Lur, and the tribes of Khuzestan” (Tohini, 2009: 305). The approach was favoured among reformist and conservative presidential candidates alike, but the conservative elite weren’t too pleased with it. In late February 2005 the chairman of the powerful Guardian Council Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati condemned the candidates’ activities and later accused the United States of fanning the flames of ethnic and religious differences in Iran, as it did in Lebanon and Iraq. This provoked Hasan Abbasian, the chairman of the Association of Khuzestani Arabs in Tehran, to send an open letter to Jannati, calling his stand as unjust, undemocratic and un-Islamic. But not only conservatives have this stand; according to Tohini, many human rights activists, intellectuals and political organisations don’t stand up for the ethnic minorities’ rights. The riots in Ahwaz began after alleged circulation of a letter in which a prominent reformer advocated a government plan to transfer large number of Arabs to other parts of Iran and replacing them with non-Arab ethnic groups, and also changing the Arab names of various places and streets of this province to Persian names. The peaceful demonstration on the Ahwaz streets on April 15, 2005, turned violent and anti-riot police took charge. The circumstances regarding the letter were unclear, but the protest escalated mostly because of vast fuelling of the situation on both sides. The revolts coincided with the pan-Arabist claim over Khuzestan, and the 80th anniversary of the “occupation of lands of Alahwaz by Iranian forces”. Additionally, Arab media and especially Aljazeera accentuated the conflict, while the USA used it as a pretext to condemn the Iranian government for violating the rights of Arabs. The revolt was silent down when the defense minister, a native Arab from Khuzestan, Ali Shamkhani travelled to the region and promised speedy release of the arrested Arabs, and denied existence of any plan regarding the forces migration of Arabs or name changing. The protests calmed down, but were raised again in 2011, to mark anniversary of 2005 protests.

IRANIAN SYMBOLIC STRATEGIES IN THE PERSIAN GULF

Politically, relations between Tehran and GCC countries are substantially better than ever before. It can especially be seen in cooperation regarding the oil production in OPEC, while Tehran “...seeks to cool the UAE hostility regarding mutual claims to Abu Musa and the Tunb islands, working with the other Gulf states to isolate the UAE” (Byman et al, 2001: 75). However, the relations cannot be perfect. Firstly, GCC countries care for the close ties with Washington and accept the US military presence in the region, a fact Iran cannot bear. The need of recognised regional power of Iran is often being blocked by the image of Saudi Arabia (and recently Qatar) in Central and West Asia. Iran stopped revolutionary support for the anti-regime and Shi’ite groups in the GCC countries, but still wants to see a regional



security coalition where only Muslim countries would be present (excluding USA or any Western state) and where Iranian power can be matched only by Saudis. At the present, this is far from achievable.

In the meantime, soft symbolic conflicts continue. The name strategy is an obvious way to determine who has more power and influence. In 2006 Iranians delivered to the UN's Group of experts on geographical names a provisional agenda stating that "...any change, destruction, or alteration of the names registered in historical deeds and maps is like the destruction of ancient works and is considered as an improper action. (...) the names of geographical features (...) should not be utilized as political instruments in reaching a political, tribal and rational objective, or in any clash with national interests and other's values". The document lists a number of historical references to the Gulf as Persian (Farsi), beginning from the Pars Sea in the Pars Empire, the travel accounts of Pythagoras, Dicaearchus, Herodotus, medieval Islamic travellers, to the Portuguese rule of Hormuz, and all the way to at least ten contracts signed from 1507 to 1960, including mostly the Arab countries. There are also vastly documented maps throughout this period, which attest to the world's decision to label this gulf as Persian. As the final decision, the United Nations use the name too.

To strengthen this symbol, Islamic Republic proclaimed April 30 as the National Persian Gulf Day. The date was chosen in memory of the Shah Abbas' successful military campaign and recapture of the Hormuz Strait from Portuguese in 1622. In 2014 Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) called this day as one of the important symbols of national identity.¹ In 2008 Iran also made new series of postal stamps with clearly visible name of Persian Gulf in Farsi and English. The Persian Gulf Studies Centre, an institute of historical, geographical, geopolitical and strategic studies of the Persian Gulf has been founded, and it includes the online Persian Gulf Museum, a collection of 79 historical maps of the Persian Gulf, including the official opinion of UN, documents from British and Portuguese archives, sources from the National Geographic and Encyclopaedia Britannica and others.

Probably the most interesting conflict is seen in the fields of sport. Sport is often used by nationalist movements as a tool for resistance under colonialism, but also as a mobilisation of masses (Henry, 2003: 301). In 2006 Iran banned all goods tagged with the name of Arabian Gulf.² The name dispute is vivid in sports. In 2010 the Islamic Solidarity Games, to be held in April that year in Iran, were cancelled, this time because the organising board in Riyadh refused to continue with the organisation due to the slogans on the medals and pamphlets of the games.³ In 2013, Iran has barred national football team captain Javad Nekounam's lucrative transfer to a club in UAE because of the name dispute, after the UAE formed veteran international "Arab Gulf League."⁴ The GCC countries are often the main sponsor to another sport games, such as Pan-Arabic games, where political statements are often made, struggling for the Arab causes everywhere (Henry, 2003).

¹ <http://english.irib.ir/news/iran1/item/186481-iran-commemorates-persian-gulf-day>

² <http://www.payvand.com/news/06/dec/1270.html>

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8465235.stm

⁴ <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/07/21/iran-bars-captain-uae-transfer-over-gulf-name>



The world is somewhat at difficulties regarding the name strategies. In 1999 the Secretariat of the United Nations made an editorial directive stating that the term “Persian Gulf” is used by the Secretariat as the standard geographical term. Moreover, the term “Gulf” is used by the Secretariat to identify or refer to the general geographical area such as the Gulf area, the Gulf region and the Gulf States. Amidst all the controversies, Google wanted to stay impartial and thus used the name Gulf on its maps. The case irrupted in Tehran with anger.⁵ And while the UK and US continue to use the Persian Gulf, as same as the UN, the case of the American Navy also gained attention. It named the Gulf as “Persian (Arabian) Gulf.”⁶

CONCLUSION

The Persian Gulf name dispute, Pan-Arabic calamities, secessions and terrorism in Iran, Shi’a victims in Sunni countries, and Iranian name changes, all form the symbolic behaviour rooted in the senses of identity and power in the area. By examining the issues at hand, we can better understand the relations often simplified as Sunni-Shi’a divide, revolutionary propaganda, or the political Islam movements. And while relations don’t have to be wholehearted, the common Pan-Islamic desire connects the countries around the Persian Gulf. The national question, on other hand, shows resilience to the Pan-Islamism and the overall acceptance of dichotomy “Us” versus “Them”.

Substantially, Iran will continue its nominal acceptance of the ethnic minorities’ rights, while reserving its right for symbolic strategies of name changing. The relations between Iran and GCC can stay good, but not overall better, not until the kingdoms host American military presence, and while UAE poses its interest for the Gulf islands as precondition for the better relations.

Iran combines mythology and symbols stemming from Cyrus the Great, up to the Islamic unity and fierce nationalism. On its way to claim the power and influence over the Persian Gulf, Iranians meet the macro nationalism of the Pan-Arab idea and micro nationalism of the GCC countries, trying to impose symbolically the Arabian (not Arab) character of the whole region. The issue causes territorial claims, strategies of name changing, containment of the Iranian Arabs, suppression of Shi’a Muslims in Arabian kingdoms, new state holidays, and symbolic battles with real consequences. In understanding the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf, one has to have this issue in sight.

⁵ <http://www.scotsman.com/news/world/iran-s-fury-over-google-not-using-persian-gulf-on-maps-1-2280620>

⁶ <http://www.allgov.com/news/us-and-the-world/navy-causes-controversy-by-changing-persian-gulf-to-arabian-gulf?news=841875>



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