

● It's all in the name

Place names matter. They not only help to locate particular locations but often invoke particular feelings and attachments. From Lake Disappointment in Australia to Victoria Falls in Zambia, place names can and do commemorate geographical conditions and/or former heads of states. Place names can also provide vivid insights into contemporary geopolitics.

Take the name 'Macedonia' as an example. A former socialist republic of Yugoslavia, Macedonia gained independence in 1993. Unfortunately for the newly independent Macedonian government, neighbouring Greece objected to the name itself.



Photo by [will ockenden](#)

Fearing that Macedonians might appeal to the Macedonian-speaking minority in northern Greece and resentful that the ancient kingdom of Macedon was being invoked, a Greek-American lobby in particular persuaded the Clinton administration to oppose the name 'Republic of Macedonia'. So, as a consequence, when Macedonia joined the United Nations it was called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).

Unable to resolve their differences, an American Ambassador Matthew Nimetz has had the thankless task of bringing the two sides together. In August 2009, he concluded that 'efforts to solve the name issue continue, even though Greece's answer is not positive'. One tangible outcome of this schism is Greece's resistance to Macedonia to joining NATO in April 2008. Angered by this objection, Macedonia referred the issue to the International Court of Justice, noting that Greece violated the 1995 Interim Accord, which was supposed to prevent such obfuscation. Recent meetings in February 2010 failed to fundamentally alter the dispute over place names.

But Macedonia is not unique. The British and Irish isles remain haunted by place naming. The most obvious is 'Northern Ireland'. Or should we call it the 'occupied six counties' or 'Ulster'? For Irish nationalists and unionists, the place name favoured is not an innocent one. Each invokes a different geography and history. Take the 'occupied six counties' as a starting point. For Irish nationalists, the term 'Northern Ireland' while geographically accurate does not highlight the contested nature of the island of Ireland.

By using a term like the 'occupied six counties', Irish nationalists remind audiences that they resent the continued British colonial presence and locate Northern Ireland within a broader Irish context composed of a total of 32 counties. The 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty divided the island and created the geographical and legal conditions for partition. To this day, Irish place names remain controversial – is it Londonderry or Derry? Or is it Doire or Doire Cholmchille? To use English place names is, for Irish nationalists, a provocative gesture, which naturalizes the 800 years of British dominance.

Place names, therefore, are never politically innocent. For many parts of the world, especially where communities are divided, place names invoke and provoke. The Falklands or the Malvinas? The West Bank or Judea and Samaria? New Zealand or Aotearoa? Burma or Myanmar? Most recently, the Iranian government has insisted that planes flying into Iranian airspace will need to ensure that their monitors correctly identify the Persian Gulf and not the Arabian Gulf.



In their different ways, they provide daily reminders for citizens and governments alike that the attachments we have to places matter deeply. Geographers around the world are showing us how, where and why these attachments matter.

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Further reading:

- [On Macdeonia](#) (UN Regional Information Centre)
- [On the Derry/Londonderry dispute](#) (Wikipedia)
- [On the Persian Gulf controversy](#) (BBC News)
- For an academic interpretation: [Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming](#) (Ashgate)
- [Klaus Dodds and Lara Manóvil \(2001\) 'Back to the Future? Anglo-Argentine-Falkland relations and the implementation of the 14th July Agreement'](#), *Journal of Latin American Relations*, 33: 777-806

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