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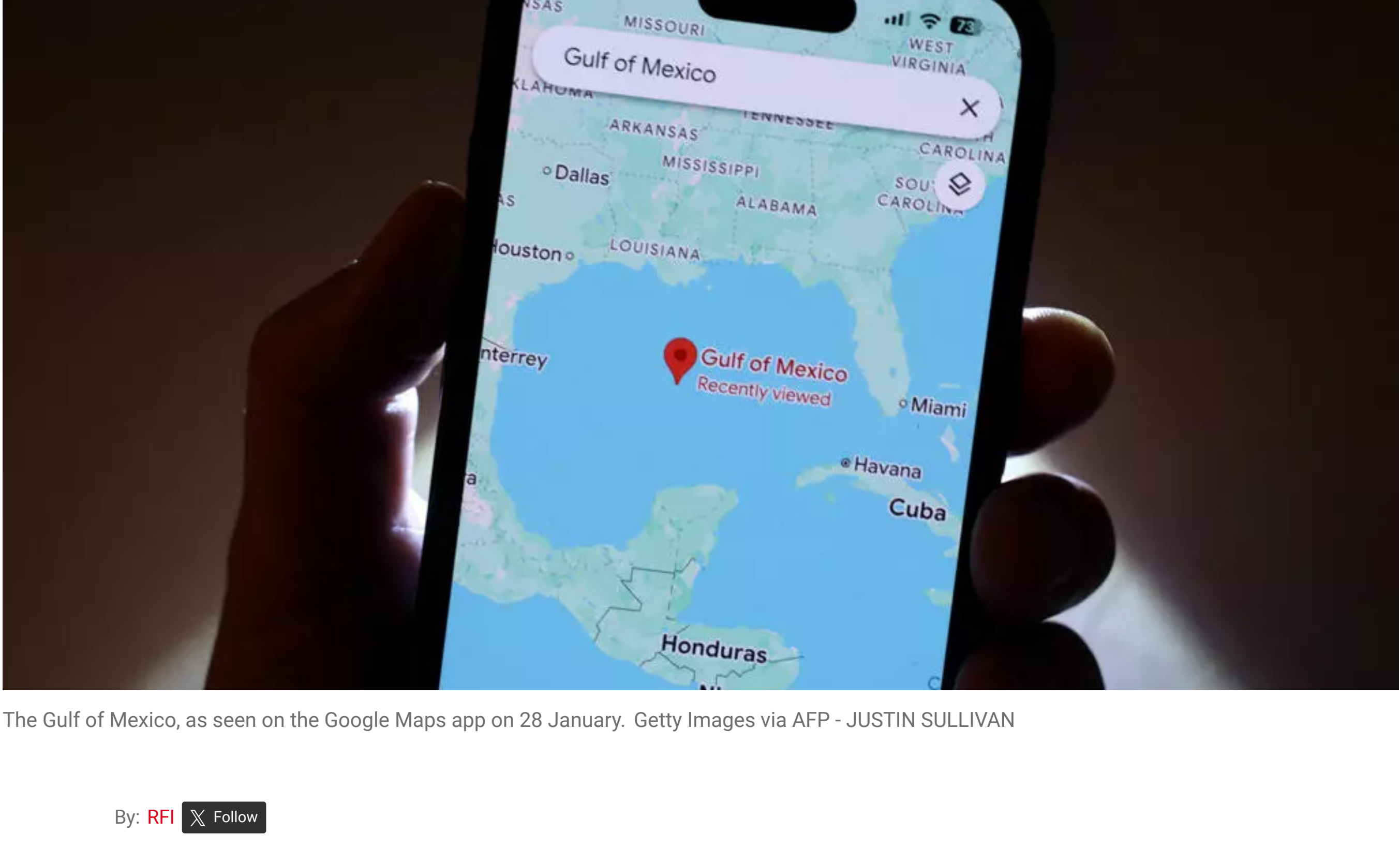
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Google Maps: 20 years of plotting a course through geopolitics

As Google Maps celebrates the 20th anniversary of its launch in North America, new questions are arising over the way it shapes our view of the world, thanks to its compliance with demands from Donald Trump to change the names of geographic locations.

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The Gulf of Mexico, as seen on the Google Maps app on 28 January. Getty Images via AFP - JUSTIN SULLIVAN

By: [RFI](#) [Follow](#)

This anniversary fell on Saturday, 8 February, and on Monday [Google](#) announced that it had changed the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the "Gulf of America" for those using its Maps application inside the [United States](#), complying with an executive order by President

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...nounced that the changes are made since the [Geographic Names Information System](#) (GNIS) – a database of names and locations of cultural and geographical features in the US – has been updated.

"When official names vary between countries, [Google] Maps users see their official local name," Google said. "Everyone in the rest of the world sees both names."

Claudia Sheinbaum, the president of [Mexico](#), wrote to Google to ask it to reconsider. She also sardonically suggested that the company could rename the United States "Mexican America", pointing to a map from before a third of her country was seized by the US in 1848.

Territorial disputes

The naming of places, like the drawing of maps, is an unavoidably political consideration, particularly when it comes to territorial disputes, and Google Maps has juggled toponymy and cartography over its 20 years of existence.

In the midst of the [Arab Spring](#) in August 2011, as rebel troops took over [Tripoli](#), RFI reported that Google Maps had erased the name of the city's *Place Verte* ("Green Square") and replaced it with Place des Martyrs ("Martyrs' Square") – its previous name before Muammar Gaddafi's regime changed it. This despite the fact that Gaddafi was still alive at this time.

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However, in the previous month [South Sudan](#) had been recognised by the United Nations following its independence from Sudan – but not by Google Maps.

In 2016, the tech company found itself in the crosshairs of the government of India, the world's second most populous country. The Indian administration launched a bill to impose strict controls – on pain of fines or even imprisonment – on how the country was represented on all [online mapping tools](#).

Google maps thus had to adapt to New Delhi's preferences regarding territorial disputes with Pakistan over Kashmir, claimed by Islamabad, and with China over Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing wanted to make an independent state.

Middle East conflict

The same year, the US company found itself at the centre of a social media storm, particularly in the Arab-Muslim world, when a union of [Palestinian](#) journalists pointed out that neither the word "Palestine" nor the designation "Palestinian Territories" appeared on Google Maps. Nor, at that time, did the words "Gaza" or "West Bank".

Palestinian towns were indicated, and the 1967 borders were drawn in dotted lines. But as for the disappearance of the terms "Gaza" and "West Bank", Google blamed a "bug". Still today, "Palestinian Territories" does not appear.

NGOs on both sides of the Israel-Palestine conflict continue to keep a tally of West Bank villages not mentioned or "wiped off the map". The Avaaz Foundation, a non-profit organisation, launched a campaign aimed at the Silicon Valley giant named [#ShowTheWall](#), to have Israel's controversial separation barrier shown on Google Maps.

'We do our best'

Google Maps has been known to play it safe and attempt to keep both parties of a conflict on side. Following the 2014 annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of [Crimea](#) by the Russian Federation, to avoid incurring the wrath of either Kyiv or Moscow – and for fear of being banned in either territory – the company created three maps of the location that year.

For Russian users, Crimea was shown as separated from [Ukraine](#) by a border. For the Ukrainians, the map remained as before, showing Crimea attached to their territory, without a border. For the search engine's users in the rest of the world, Crimea was shown bordered with two dotted lines, reflecting a conflict.

This is also the current state of affairs on the application with Georgia and [Kosovo](#), although not currently with eastern Ukraine.

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"We do our best to represent disputed borders," explained a spokeswoman for Google Maps at the time. "Where appropriate, the borders of these disputed areas are drawn in a special way."

In a divided world, and with those divisions played out in the digital sphere, such ability to adapt is increasingly crucial.

This article was adapted from the [original French version](#).

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