

CONSOLIDATING ARAB-WEST INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: A HABERMASIAN APPROACH FOR OUR TIMES

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Abstract

Pondering the fragile outcomes of current Arab-West inter-governmental and inter-ambassadorial relations, it has become essential for Western diplomats and politicians to be well informed about the current framework of Western foreign policies and applicability towards Arab countries. The article suggests that the application of Jürgen Habermas's critical theory and the theory of communicative action presents a vital if not urgent mission for enhanced Western foreign policies towards Arab nations. It facilitates rational prospects to enlighten Western diplomats and politicians about vigorous Habermasian notions in the development of future Western foreign policies; to challenge the blind spots that exist at the centre of Western foreign policies; to form cooperative policies away from Eurocentric and prejudiced orientations of Western international relations theory; and to offer contemporary approaches that safeguard Arab-West inter-governmental and inter-ambassadorial relations. The paper concentrates on various Habermasian intuitions in order to constructively improve future Arab-West international relations and to enhance the interpretations that have captured the minds of non-Muslim spectators.

Keywords: Arab-West international relations; Western foreign policies; Western public diplomacy; Western diplomats and politicians; and Jürgen Habermas.

Introduction

In an era that has seen Arab-West inter-governmental and inter-ambassadorial relations surrounded by suspicion, apprehension and irrational consequences, it is essential that Western diplomats and politicians are well informed regarding the current framework of Western public diplomacy, foreign policies and applicability towards non-Western societies to further enhance their knowledge with regards to the MENA region. For Western diplomats and politicians, this requires a cohesive awareness surrounding the current political approaches and consequences of leading Western nations, including the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (U.S.), towards the MENA region. In this regard, Habermas's intuitions appear to have positive implications for the current practices of Western public diplomacy and foreign policies. These implications include Habermas's notions of constructive interaction, critical reflection, rationale and self-criticism, and pragmatic comprehension. These intuitions can play an influential role in promoting balanced Arab-West socio-political and intercultural dialogues while expanding the context of Western public diplomacy and developing the Western international relations theory (IRT) via the application of Habermas's educational themes. In promoting the case for a highly applicable Habermasian epistemology around these political matters, the paper is introducing Habermas's critical theory and the theory of communicative action as potential guiding principles for Western political approaches.

American and British foreign policies

Before delving into the discussion of how to improve Arab-West inter-governmental and inter-ambassadorial relations, a brief overview of Western foreign policies will be given with examples of American and British foreign policies. The reason for concentrating on these two administrations in this paper is due to their involvement in the socio-political affairs of the MENA region.

The U.S. and the UK administrations regulate their policies primarily to maintain their national and international interests as well as to preserve their presence and influence across the globe (Khalil, 2014). As a result, it can be argued that their political strategies and objectives seem to function in accordance with their vested interests and tend to shape their foreign policies and diplomatic ambitions. In the case of the MENA region, for example, Jones (2012) stresses that historically, the U.S. had no interest in aligning with the British political and colonial divisions, however, their enchantment towards the MENA region increased in the 1930s purely after the discovery of its natural resources. The U.S. objectives grew in influence and began to have a socio-political and economic impact on the MENA region (Baxter & Akbarzadeh, 2008; Khalil, 2014).

Whilst supporters of American foreign policies may view the American approaches as constructive to maintain peace and diplomatic relations worldwide, this may arguably be inaccurate, especially when reviewing the catastrophic conditions in the MENA region and the resulting hostility of Arabs towards Western foreign policies, in particular, U.S. foreign policies (Kafaji, 2011). In this context, Azar (2011) stresses that the U.S. policymakers have constrained abilities to form flexible foreign policies due to the restrictions imposed on them by the American constitution and as such went to claim that the current U.S. approaches towards the MENA region have created scenarios of rivalry as well as a great deal of dissatisfaction among the Arabs towards Western initiatives.

Historically, Great Britain had various geo-strategic and political ambitions in the MENA region in order to strengthen its geo-strategic presence and influence (Ben-Bassat & Ben-Artzi, 2015; Ortega, 2012; Özyüksel, 2016; Raymond, 2003). For this reason, Britain began to cooperate with tribal Arab leaders to undermine the dominating Ottoman Empire during the initial stages of the twentieth century (Mather, 2014). The British authorities proposed a system of self-determination and nationalism to the Arabs in recognition of their cooperation (Friedman, 1970; Mather, 2014). Arguably, the British objectives were directed towards defeating the Ottomans and subsequently guiding the Palestinian people to liberty and democracy (Fantauzzo, 2015). However, this perspective can be refuted, principally when reflecting upon the current conditions of the Palestinian people, especially their lack of self-determination and the associated implications on the troubled MENA region.

In the present-day, the foreign policy initiatives of the UK government seem not to have evolved to pragmatically accommodate the political changes in the MENA region and lack the sensitivity required to deal with the challenges related to Arab Muslims. In this context, Ahmad (2016) emphasizes that the current political approaches of the UK towards the MENA region indicate various symptoms of confusion, including a lack of consistency in dealing with the despotic Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad (Leech-Ngo, 2015; Wintour, 2017). For this reason, it has been suggested that the current UK administration needs to effectively and realistically cooperate with the international community, including the United Nations (UN), to protect Syrian civilians and genuinely facilitate a political solution, unlike what has been achieved to date (Benn, 2015).

Western international relations and the European Union's democracy assistance policy framework

Over the past quarter-millennium, the established international theory within and outside the discipline of International Relations has been the subject of various forms of criticism, emanating primarily from its prejudiced approaches and Eurocentric concentration and ambitions (Hobson, 2012). This is because the policies of international theory tend to be utilized for the betterment of Western nations, unlike the theory's implications on non-Western societies, including Arab Muslims in the MENA region. This notion tends to become problematic as it does not assist in presenting balanced political resolutions to the ongoing conflicts in the MENA region. Using the current Syrian dilemma as an example, the public's initial attempts at converting the nation into a democratic state brought about a wave of rebellion and irrational Western intervention which, ultimately, led to a civil war and resulted with Syria being turned into a battlefield. The attempts were carried out from the bottom-up to pressurize the Syrian regime into embracing political changes and giving up the archaic and despotic ways of governing the country. The rebellious impulse was noted among the Syrian people and aimed at transforming the socio-political and cultural structure of Syria, however, the heavy response of the government towards civilians undermined people's confidence in the regime and further complicated the issue at hand. The situation further deteriorated when the demands of the Syrian people were not fully endorsed by many influential authorities including Western governments. It should be noted that the ongoing implications of the conflict among rivals in Syria and the MENA region produce destructive consequences, not only for the nations involved

but also for future international relations across the globe. Such consequences are best represented by the heavy waves of suffering immigrants from Syria into Europe and other parts of the world.

In exploring the European approaches towards the MENA region, it has been claimed that the current conceptual structure and policy implications of the European claims of Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity (PfDSP) tend to lack the aptitude needed to accommodate the socio-political changes in the MENA region (Teti, 2012). In addition, although the European Union's (EU) democracy assistance policy framework perceives its approaches as pioneering and receptive to the demands of revolutions (Cavatorta & Pace (2010); Echagüe & Youngs (2005); Leigh (2011); Schimmelfennig & Scholtz (2008); Tocci & Cassarino (2011), nevertheless, it has been indicated that the framework tends to be inadequate and incompetent to effectively manage global affairs (Teti, 2012).

The reluctance of pragmatic interference by allied Western nations, including the UK and the U.S., in the MENA region can be attributed to the vested interests of these Western nations themselves (Weatherby, Arceneaux, Leithner, Reed, Timms & Zhang, 2017). However, choosing to remain aloof and not facilitate pragmatic political discussions that take the demands of the public into consideration, can be extremely damaging. In addition to the ongoing threats posed to global security and world economy, as well as the frightening loss of lives among civilians in the MENA region, an implication that may occur due to the lack of pragmatic responsiveness by Western nations is the increase of hostility towards the Western world among Arabs (Kafaji, 2011).

In pondering the current state of affairs within Arab nations, it should be noted that applying Western socio-political and cultural transformations on Arab Muslim societies or vice versa can lead to the exemption of cultural and religious sensitivities. Consequently, it can be stated that the implementation of contemporary Habermasian notions provide an opportunity to bring the many differing schools of thought together, enhancing the levels of rational comprehension in order to collaboratively bring about a much-needed resolution and understanding.

Placing Habermas's critical theory and theory of communicative action in Western discussions

Habermas was born in Germany in 1929 during an era of National Socialism. He established his critical theory in order to facilitate a political revolution in the German society and subsequently modify the economic situation (Alway, 1995). Moreover, it has been emphasized that Habermas's critical theory endeavours to create a human society that rationally comprehends and mutually respects the liberties and demands of all individuals (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). In this context, Joll (2010) perceives Habermas's critical theory as a liberating wave in which the protection of the freedom and rationale of society is achieved and well-kept. On the other hand, Habermas's theory of communicative action articulates and endorses the constructive implications of rationality when mutual communication occurs (Schaefer, Heinze, Rotte, & Denke, 2013). Furthermore, the theory of communicative action delivers rational illustrations that are directed towards solving political speech, especially within the public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1989). The theory also stresses the influence of exchanging good reasons in situations where people negotiate mutually, and understand and respond rationally to the matters being discussed (Habermas, 1976/1991; Habermas, 1981/1984).

It is worth noting that Habermas's perception towards the unity of knowledge is associated with the heritage of modern work by Dewey (1922, 1956a, 1956b), along with the efforts to pinpoint standard procedures for reinforcing knowing, learning and instruction (Lovat, 2013). Coming to the critical theory presented by Habermas, it can be understood that his main purpose for remodelling the theory was to bring rational changes in the way different institutes of society function (Braaten, 1991). In the context of Western public diplomacy and foreign policies as illustrated previously in this paper, it may seem that there is an exigency in the Western setting to develop rational methods of understanding towards the demands of Arab Muslims in the MENA region. These potential methods may greatly benefit from Habermas's philosophies that have been presenting the public society with rational approaches and allowing people to circulate their issues instead of being victimized by authorities (Braaten, 1991). In this regard, it can be understood that Habermas's critical theory works towards liberating the public from the grip of the authorities (Held, 1980), especially when the act of emancipation is carried out by giving a voice to one's opinions and providing a rational argument (Braaten, 1991). The significance of Habermas's critical theory, once utilized in Western public diplomacy and foreign policies towards the MENA region, can lead to ending marginalization, ending dictatorship and emancipating people from despotic Arab rules. Interestingly, critical theory is based on three elements; theoretical reflexivity, consciousness, and the normative purpose (Leeper, 1996). These

rational elements may significantly contribute towards the creation of a balanced public sphere, in which Arabs and Westerners can benefit from shared responsibility; differences in ideology and culture, interests and knowledge.

Habermas asserts that the critical theory of society promotes critical reflection, which illustrates the association between human interests, objectivity and practical knowledge (Patrascu & Wani, 2015). Over the years, Habermas's critical theory has been utilized to remodel the historical materialism of society so that the concerns of the present day Western world can be understood according to the shift in Western politics and economy (Patrascu & Wani, 2015). Additionally, the applications of Habermas's critical theory within political Western approaches can lead to productive outcomes, including a critique of ideology and the diagnostic explanation of socio-political dilemmas (Braaten, 1991), along with effective concentration on society (Bernstein, 1995). The theory also leads to analyzing rational and informative affairs from a social theoretical perspective (MacKendrick, 2008), and rejuvenating critique and rational thinking (Freundlieb, Hudson & Rundell, 2004). As a result, Habermas's critical theory has the potential to facilitate Western representatives towards the MENA region with effective interaction and engagement strategies within dialogues, particularly when discussions are conducted by Western representatives regarding socio-political and religious affairs. Habermas's critical theory can also provide the platforms necessary for self-criticism and rational reflection which ultimately create the desired constructive comprehension and effective communication (Freundlieb, et al., 2004).

On the other hand, Habermas's theory of communicative action is structured upon two balanced concepts of rationality which model knowledge to pave the way for actions (Bolton, 2005). These include the concept of cognitive-instrumental rationality which assesses actions and leads to a successful acceptance of objectives. This is in addition to the concept of rationality that is derived from communicative rationality and seeks mutual understanding (Bolton, 2005). Habermas's theory of communicative action can play a vital role in emancipating the people from the strains of the society (Habermas, 1984). In this context, it should be noted that Habermas's concepts are based on incorporating the norms of participation and that of transparency. This implies that Western diplomats and politicians have the authority to express their ideas and be vocal about their concerns associated with any matter related to other people (Habermas, 1984). According to Habermas, in order to resolve any issue, it is essential for groups or communities to come together and have a rational debate that would allow them to understand each other's concerns and come to a mutual agreement. For this reason, Habermas has based his concepts on two main themes; changing relationships and the structures of state and power (Lloyd-Jones, 2004).

Since international relations involve the study of diverse areas such as foreign policies and international affairs, ethics, military and history, as well as economy, it can be understood that Habermas's notions towards international relations are to act the part of a problem solver, especially when conflicts arise within societies (Patrascu & Wani, 2015). Considering the areas that are observed by international theory, it is important to point out that the Western world has most often had misapprehensions towards the way Arab nations perceive foreign affairs (Corm, 2007). Thus, it can be stated that Habermas's concepts of rationality and effective communication may facilitate contemporary methods of cooperation and understanding in order to reduce the existing Western misapprehensions towards Arabs.

Habermas asserts that the logic behind communicative action is to initiate a rational argument between two parties so that they can share their socio-political and cultural philosophies and objectives; hence, learn about the views and demands of other parties. With this communicative strategy in consideration, both Arabs and Westerners may have the opportunity to reach a mutual understanding and enhance the levels of cooperation among themselves (Roach, 2010). Habermas also claims that different groups of people should give voice to their opinions and advance the principles of justice so that the awareness of each other's ideology and political structure occurs and develops accordingly (Roach, 2010). In addition, Habermas stresses the legitimization of the democratic institutions and the rule of law (Roach, 2010); hence, it can be stated that Habermas's perspective can safeguard the rational demands of Arabs and convey them to the Western world. For this reason, it is pivotal that Western public diplomacy and foreign policymakers dealing with the MENA region divide the process of legitimization into three concepts of rationalization, argumentation and the involvement of groups. This will allow people to channel their democratic will into political bodies and accomplish their political demands. Furthermore, Habermas has presented his views on globalization while focusing on the political situation of the EU and admits that the transformation of the political structures of the EU will prove to be fatal, especially when considering the horrific cases of Iraq and Kosovo (Roach, 2010). In this connection, Habermas argues that a state's sovereignty acts as a building block in creating international peace, and this declaration can be applied

within Western public diplomacy and foreign policies as well as into the concerning situation of the MENA region. This is of particular importance when it is stated that Arab-West international relations have been declining over the years due to the differences in socio-political and religious perceptions (Corm, 2007).

Conclusion

The paper focused on identifying contemporary Habermasian ramifications for future Western public diplomacy and foreign policies, and offered opportunities to inform Western representatives about the vital constructive Habermasian intuitions for strengthened Arab-West inter-governmental and inter-ambassadorial relations. From the above discussion, it is concluded that the existing challenges between the Arab and Western worlds can be attributed to the variations of socio-political and religious ideologies, and the lack of rational practices to bring the different schools of thought together. History stands to show that Western countries, including the UK and the U.S., have only intervened in situations where their economy or security was to be impacted. Such an understanding indicates a lack of rationality and sensitivity in the Western setting, particularly within public diplomacy and foreign policies towards Arab nations. The paper identified a number of blind spots and various biases within Western foreign policies towards the MENA region and subsequently suggested Habermasian approaches to decrease the existing forms of apprehension. Based on the context of Arab-West international relations, Habermas's critical theory and theory of communicative action have highlighted constructive notions for various political groups in order to mutually conduct a political debate that is, rational and cohesive, and is followed by evidence that supports any emerging arguments. In addition, the paper indicated that without considering the demands of other groups, positive outcomes may have minimal chances to occur. For Western countries to enhance their public diplomacy and foreign policies, the paper revealed that it is necessary for the Western world to modify their political approaches for attaining mutual understanding and effective communication with the Arabs. The paper also revealed that one of the reasons behind the fragile Arab-West international relations and critique lies within the monocular Western foreign policies. To assist in reducing the socio-political, religious and cultural apprehensions that exist between Arabs and Westerners, the paper indicated that it is crucial for both peoples to mutually agree on common and rational objectives based on the application of Habermas's notions. This is essential, particularly when the purpose of inter-governmental and inter-ambassadorial relations is to advance one's national interests around the globe and to have all nations discussing political affairs rationally.

Brief Biography

Mohammad Al-Jararwah is a current Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and Defence Analyst & Translator at the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, Canberra, Australia. Mohammad Al-Jararwah is a former Online Lecturer at Open Colleges, Australia and his interests span Western inter-governmental and inter-ambassadorial dialogues in relation to the Arab world, foreign policies, and public diplomacy.

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