Arab-Western Relations Through Habermas and Communicative Action

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Abstract

Over the decades, it has been observed that the Arab countries and the Western countries have considered it important to maintain rational, supportive cultural, ethnic and socio-political relations between the two regions. Western public diplomacy has been occupied with conducting research based on the enhancement of relations between the Arab and Western governments. However, their research has proved futile as the outcome of the international dialogue between the Arab world and the Western world paints a bleak picture of peace and cooperation in places like the Middle East and North Africa. In addition to this, International Relations Theory has been regarded as biased and discriminatory as it applies to the Western world more than it applies to the Arab world. For this reason, efforts are being made to modify the traditional Western foreign policies so that both countries can benefit from them. The current paper recommends that the Critical Theory and the Theory of Communicative Action offered by Jürgen Habermas provide rational concepts for inter-governmental relations between the Western and the Arab world and can also be utilized for future Western diplomacy training programs. Moreover, the present paper appraises the Western countries with certain Habermasian approaches and Islamic notions that will assist in improving the relations with the Middle East and North Africa regions.

Keywords: Arab and Western relations, Foreign policy, Habermas's Critical Theory and Theory of Communicative Action, Inter-governmental relations.

Arab-Western International Relations

Introduction

Before delving into the discussion of Western and Arab intergovernmental relations, a brief overview of the foreign policy created by the Western world will be given, along with an example of American foreign policy specifically. The reason why American foreign policy is being discussed is that America seems to be an active participant in advancing beneficial and rational policies for its own betterment along with that of the Arab world. The United States government is in charge of maintaining relations with over 200 countries in the world. The purpose of having a foreign policy is to regulate how the

United States carries out its relations with the rest of the nations. The foreign policy also focuses on proposing certain goals that can be agreed upon by the other countries. Another function of foreign policy is to ensure that the United States is well-guarded against any kind of foreign threat. Foreign policy works towards protecting and advancing America's national interests around the globe. National interests, as the name suggests, work in accordance with any country's needs and shape foreign policy so that the political, social, cultural and economic needs, along with humanitarian concerns, are dealt with. Foreign policies change with the passage of time and also with the changes in the national interest.

America's national interest was primarily based on staying independent of European influence, as the European countries were known for advancing their colonies. American foreign policy has been an active participant in maintaining peace around the globe. It functions to maintain diplomatic relations with other countries and international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organizations of the American States. The United States performs the role of an ally to ensure territorial and international security and make efforts to limit weapons use. Foreign policy also considers issues such as those concerned with trade, travel, and business while providing aid and relief to disaster-stricken areas. The United States has been seen at the forefront when it comes to negotiating with other countries in order to resolve conflicts. Lately, the United States has been involved in resolving the conflicts faced by Arab countries such as Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and others.

Discussion

In the past few years, the International Relation Theory has been the subject of criticism as the Arab nations have labelled it as prejudiced and Eurocentric due to various reasons. One such reason is that the policies involved can be used for the benefit of the Arab world but are only beneficial for the Western countries. Such a scenario becomes problematic, as it does not help in presenting solutions that can resolve the conflicts occurring in the Arab world. An example of this is the Arab Spring that took place on the 18th of December, 2010. Many intellectuals also refer to the Arab Spring as the Arab uprisings. The public's attempt at converting the nation into a democratic state brought about a wave of rebellion. The movement was carried out to pressure the government to embrace the change and give up on the old ways of running the country. A rebellious impulse was noted in the public that aimed at transforming the political structure of the nation. This sudden change required not only change in the political structures but cultural and social transformations as well.

However, the efforts of the people went to waste as their rebellions were not backed up by the Allied forces. The United States did not intervene in this situation as Saudi Arabia was against the notion of being turned into a democratic nation. It should be noted that the act of revolution does not influence the foundations of a certain nation only. Its impact can be seen in international relations with other nations around the globe. While it is noticeable that revolutions can be disruptive to international relations, they can also be the cause of interstate wars. However, some revolutions, such as those in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, seem to have had non-disruptive revolutions that left no impact on

international relations. One of the reasons why allied nations do not intervene when a nation is on the brink of revolution is that it can harm the allied forces. The security of the risk of war is intensified in such situations, and even if a war does not take place, it can become an obstacle to maintaining peaceful relationships with the allied nations. Intervening in conflicts can also make a nation hostile towards Western nations, which puts international relations at risk.

It should be noted that the Western world and the Arab world represent two entirely different communities, each having different ideologies, religions, and cultures. These two groups have been in a state of conflict since the beginning as there have been disagreements on matters of economy and other matters. However, an important aspect that has come to the forefront is that while the Western world has a strained relationship with the Middle East and the North African regions, the same cannot be said about its relationship with Saudi Arabia. The reason for that lies in the Western world's point of interest, such as its trade, economy, and business that it shares with Saudi Arabia. For this reason, the Middle East and North Africa have a conflicted relationship with the Western world, and any dialogue between the two regions seems futile, as agreements cannot be reached on both ends due to the difference in the national interests and the policies that are followed by the Western countries.

Habermas's Critical theory and Theory of Communicative Action

Coming to the Critical theory presented by Habermas, it can be noted that Habermas's main purpose in remodelling the said theory was to bring about changes in the way the different institutes of the society functioned. Having witnessed a part of history that had left a deep impact on not only Habermas but his generation as well, the philosopher presented different approaches that allowed the public to put forth their issues instead of being victimized by the government. Therefore, it can be said that the Critical theory was formulated after the intellectuals had witnessed the atrocities that had been imposed by none other humans who were barbaric to the point that they massacred others on the basis of the difference in ideologies and ethnicities. The critical theory works towards liberating the public from the grips of the government so that the members of a society can improve their standards of living. The act of emancipation can only be carried out by giving voice to one's opinions and providing a rational argument.

From this perspective, Habermas's Critical Theory and the Critical Theory used by Islamic intellectuals go hand in hand as both work towards ending marginalization and emancipating the oppressed. The influence of Critical theory can be seen in the field of International relations theory as well. It should be noted that critical theory is based on three elements: theoretical reflexivity, consciousness, and normative purpose. Habermas's theory of Communicative Action plays a vital role in emancipating people from the strains of society. In addition to this, communicative rationality has implications for international relations theory. While addressing the contributions of Habermas, it should be noted that the theory of international relations is based on incorporating the norms of participation and transparency. This implies that the involved nations have the authority to express their ideas and be vocal about their concerns.

Looking back at the history of the Arab world, it is evident that for a certain time period, Muslims were superior to the Western nations. However, the shift in power from the Muslims to the Europeans led to feelings of hatred and disgust towards the latter kind. Muslims have been prejudiced towards the West for taking control of power and for bringing about trying to change the Islamic way of life by controlling those lands. The Arab uprisings have been a cause of transformation in the Middle East and North Africa. The acts of rebellion became a source of dismantling the hold of Arab leaders and allowed several countries belonging to the Arab world to elect a support that followed the basic principles of Islam. The rise of various groups in the Middle East and North Africa has created conflicts within those regions. This gives rise to the question of whether Islam will be prevalent in the Arab world in the near future or not.

Meanwhile, Western policymakers have been insistent on democratizing the Arab world, which would lead to the separation between the government and the religion. The involvement of religion has been a cause of concern for the Western world as politicians and economists believe that Islam will become an obstacle in matters of politics and will hinder the transformation of Arab countries into democratic states. The appearance of certain groups like Al-Qaeda, Taliban, and ISIS has led to an increase in conflicts between Western countries and the Muslim world. According to Habermas, in order to resolve any issue, it is essential for the groups or communities to come together and have a rational debate that would allow them to understand each other's problems and come to a mutual agreement. Changing relationships and the structures of state and power are two main themes on which Habermas bases his concepts (Lloyd-Jones, 2004). International relations have been the topic of critical debates over the years (PATRASCU & Wani, 2015). This area of discourse studies the origins and outcomes of being in a world that is divided into states (PATRASCU & Wani, 2015).

International relations indulge in studying diverse areas such as foreign policy, international political policy, ethics, affairs related to the military, history, the economy, and so on and so forth (PATRASCU & Wani, 2015). The involvement of critical theory in international relations can be seen from the 1980s onwards. The function of critical theory in international relations is to act as part of a problem solver when conflicts arise in areas such as society, economy, politics, and foreign relations (PATRASCU & Wani, 2015). Habermas asserts that the critical theory of society promotes critical reflection, which illustrates the link between human interests, objectivity and practical knowledge (PATRASCU & Wani, 2015). For many years now, Habermas's critical theory has been utilized to remodel historical materialism so that the concerns of the present-day Western world can be understood according to shifts in Western politics and economy (PATRASCU & Wani, 2015).

Considering the areas that are observed by international theory, it should be noted that the Western world has most often had misconceptions about the way Arab countries feel when it comes to important issues in foreign affairs (Corm, 2007). The Westerners believe that the Arab people are of a similar mindset and, therefore, forget that the experiences of the Muslim world are different from those of the Europeans (Corm, 2007). The religious wars and the expansion of secular nations in modern times have been a source of trauma for the European nations (Corm, 2007). Therefore, the Arab nations lack the kind of mindset that the Europeans have when it comes to politics. Looking at

the example of Israel, World War II invokes feelings that the Arabs could not feel, while the Europeans were traumatized by the event. Also, the fear of Muslims dominating the European nations has led to strained relationships between the Arab world and the Western world (Corm, 2007).

In addition, the involvement of the United States forces in Iraq has created a lot of problems for the Muslim nations. Such circumstances then become a reason for strained intergovernmental relationships between the Western world and the Arab world (Corm, 2007). Misconceptions on the part of both regions have led to disastrous dialogues between the West and the Middle Eastern and North African regions. The refusal to accept the policies offered by the West can be understood from the West's involvement in helping Israel against Palestine (Corm, 2007). The aim of critical theory in such a situation is to address the conflicts between the Western nations and the Middle Eastern and North African regions. Habermas suggests that critical theory is crucial as it exposes the tensions between the different nations. With the help of rational argument, nations can come to an understanding of contemporary issues in a variety of ways.

Habermas asserts that the logic behind communicative actions is to initiate a rational argument between two parties so that they can share their cultural beliefs and desires and, by doing so, learn about the needs of the other group. In this way, both groups will be able to reach a mutual understanding, as in the case of the Western world and the Arab Muslim countries (Roach, 2013). He also claims that the different groups should give voice to their opinions and advance the principles of justice so that both parties are aware of each other's ideologies and political structures (Roach, 2013). Habermas stresses the legitimization of democratic institutions and the rule of law (Roach, 2013). The process of legitimization has been divided into three parts: rationalization, argumentation and the involvement of groups. Legitimization allows democratic groups to channel their democratic will into political bodies.

Furthermore, Habermas has presented his views on globalization while focusing on the political situation of the European Union. He admits that the transformation of the political structures of the European Union will prove to be fatal, as in the case of Iraq and Kosovo (Roach, 2013). Habermas argues that a state's sovereignty acts as a building block in creating international peace. This statement can be applied to the situation of Palestine and the role of Western countries. The United States, despite being at the forefront of advancing peace among the nations, has not intervened in the conflict between Palestine and Israel. The European countries seem to be on the side of the Israeli people, which makes it difficult for the Arab countries to have any form of dialogue with the Western countries.

Another example of this is the war in Iraq that was carried out by the United States administration during the time of President Bush (Corm, 2007). The false claims made by the administration that a democratic nation was necessary and beneficial for Iraq only proved that the United States was biased and was carrying out such an action for its personal interests. The relationship of the Western world with the Muslim countries has been declining over the years due to the difference of opinion between the two regions. The United States has shown interest in the issues of the Arab nations in

cases when its own economy was impacted, such as the fluctuations in gas prices (Corm, 2007). The event of 9/11 has also been a cause of conflict between the Western world and the Middle East and North Africa regions.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the conflict between the Western world and the Arab world is due to the difference in opinions of the mentioned countries. History stands to show that Western countries have only intervened in situations where their economy or security was impacted. Such an intervention shows the Western world is biased in its foreign policy and is one of the reasons why the Arab world does not have positive perspectives regarding the Europeans. Habermas's critical theory and theory of communicative action highlight that in order to overcome conflicts, the involved groups should have a rational debate followed by evidence that supports the argument. Without listening to the demands of the other group, positive outcomes will not take place. For countries to solve their problem, it is necessary that the Western world should modify its foreign policy so that there is a mutual understanding between the Europeans and the Muslim nations. The reason why international relations has been a subject of critique for years now is that it has been structured according to the political and social structures of the Western world. The same policies cannot be implemented in the Arab nations due to the differences in opinions and ideologies. To end the conflicts between the two regions, it is crucial that both mutually agree on a common goal. The purpose of having intergovernmental relations is to advance one's own national interests around the globe and to have other nations agree on it; it is necessary that the needs of the others are also taken care of.

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