The Impact of Social Media Usage on the International Relations of the Middle East

By

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Abstract

In the globalisation age, soft power and public diplomacy influence governments' and non-state entities' international interactions to be cooperative and transactional.The Middle East is one of the regions of the global political economy where, public diplomacy and applying social media have played a vital roles in the communication of actors in this region. But whose trends and events go on the opposite path of the global manner. We have neither the collaboration and trustworthiness to witness the increase of violence and hostility in the area, nor the trustworthiness to observe this process. This study contends that there is a correlation between the growing relevance of social media in the Middle East and the rise of violence and hostility in the area. The diversity in cultures and identities, as well as the traditional view on power, interest, and communication in the Middle East, are the origins of the region's disparate responses to globalisation trends.-The problem and hypothesis of the research will be conceptualized in the framework of Joseph Nye and Arjun Appadurai viewpoints. The methodology of the article is descriptive–analytical and the method of data collection is documentary

Keywords: Middle East. Complex region. Public Diplomacy. Social Media. Antagonism. Joseph Nye. Arjun Apadurai

Introduction

Globalization has almost led international relations to a more cooperative manner through an increasingly important role in a new type of power and diplomacy. The importance and function of the new type of diplomacy and the new way of communication through social media are the part of this development. Public diplomacy is a tool that the actors use to mobilize soft power resources to attract the public of others. Soft power is the most important instrument for implementing and determining foreign policy and its political, ideological, and cultural directions in the globalization era.

Middle East is one of the region of global political economy that its trend and events go on the opposite path of the dominant trend of globalization. It is the tensest area of the world in the globalization era which has witnessed tens of interstate and non-states conflicts and wars in the two last decades, especially after the cold war. These conflicts have left many human and capital losses(Statista, 2021)[i].

The interesting things that there are the increasing growth of interest and using globalization elements like public diplomacy and social media in the Middle East's everyday life of peopleIn the era of globalisation, the Middle East has witnessed the proliferation of communication and the application of new tools for influencing public opinion, pursuing self-interests, and manipulating minds through the use of the most popular social networks, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Al hurra, 2019). One minute is witnessing an action, 3.7 million searches on Google, 38 million WhatsApp messages, 973,000 Facebook logins, 174K views on Instagram, 4.3 million Video views on YouTube and 481 thousand tweets1 The role of Facebook in Arab uprisings in 2011, ISIS used social media to attract foreign fighters and spread propaganda, the number of Internet users in the region and etcetera are some of effects of new social media spread in the region (Internet World Stats , 2012) [ii]. Furthermore, the number of religious channels in the region rose from 50 channels in 2011 to 75 channels in 21049 (Northwestern University 2016) [iii].

The Question of Research

The main question of this research is What is the impact of public diplomacy and social media on Middle East international relations?

The Hypothesis of Research

The application of public diplomacy and social media by state and non-state actors in the Middle East, leads to the escalation of antagonism in the region.

Research Methodology

The methodology of this research is Analytical-descriptive and it uses theoretical framework of Public Diplomacy and the Soft Power of Joseph Nye and Arjun Appadurai perspective to globalization. Research data has been collected based on the library method.

Theoretical framework of the research

This study is conceptualized in Joseph Ney and Arjun Appadurai propositional theoretic framework. According to the neoliberal approach of international relations, the soft power and public diplomacy lead to friendship and co-operations among actors

(Nye J. , 2004, pp. 5-6) [iv]. In fact the neoliberalism theory has an optimistic approach to applying public diplomacy and its effects on the relations of actors in the globalization era. Therefore, examining the problem closely in a more complex theoretical view is necessary. Arjun Appadurai as one of the theorists of globalization, describes the importance of culture in globalization age. The main article of Appadurai is "In the Global Cultural Economy, Disjuncture and Difference. In his research, Appadurai highlighted five different dimensions of cultural flux, namely five escapes: mediascapes, ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and Ideoscapes. Appadurai note that "the central problem of global interaction is the tension between cultural homogeneity and heterogeneit (Appadurai, 1990, p. 295) [v]. He describes globalisation within the context of several escapes. Appadurai thinks that the consequences of the technoscape and mediascape may vary between locations and civilizations. (Appadurai, 1990, pp. 300-305) [vi]. We believe that through the synthesizing of the key concepts of Appadurai thought with joseph Nye perspective, we reach to a more effective theory and analytical model to conceptualize the different outcomes of the expansion of social media in the international relations of the Middle East.

By this analytical model, we argue in this research that, because of the diversity and differential position of cultures in the Middle Eastern countries, we encounter a distinguished situation that could be conceptualized by the concept of heterogeneity. Therefore, when public diplomacy and soft power are used in the Middle East, public diplomacy and soft power collide with this cultural diversity leading to tensions, conflicts and rivalries among the countries of the Middle East.

The Literature Review

There are some theoretical, descriptive and case study researchs that related to our article. Joseph (Nye, 2008) [vii] researchs about the public diplomacy and Soft Power are the main ones. But as mention above, his works are also based on a optimistic perspective to globalization and it's outcome in the world . The other near research to our article is the the work of (Jad & Jabado, 2016) [viii], Islamic State's Mediated by Public Diplomacy in Syrian and Iraq: The Synergistic Use of Terrorism, Branding, and Social media. This paper examines ISIS's mediated by public diplomacy approach in Syrian and Iraq and its ability to combine terrorism methods with communication strategies to gain media access and publicity, push news frames that fit the group's objectives, and aid the group. Finally, enlist allies and repel adversaries.

The work of (Uzun & Barghandan, 2017) [ix], Public Diplomacy of Turkey and Iran: The Syrian Case, discusseTurkey and Iran's public diplomacy regarding their foreign policies towards Syria from 2010 and 2016. The authors explain the media's role in both countries. Other research in this field includes the works of (Appadurai, 1990) as part of the theoretical framework for this study.

These studies are close to the subject of our paper, although none of them focuses on the impact and function of public diplomacy and social media in the cultural complex environment of the Middle East.

The Cultural Political Economy of the Middle East

The Middle East's cultural and political economy is diverse, non-complementary, and heterogeneous. There are many artificial boundaries, identities, economies, nations, and so on.This heterogeneous situation complicates the cultural-political economy of the region. Today, the major Nationalities in the Middle East include Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Kurds, and Jews. Most of the countries in this region are multi-ethnic countries. We see divers kind of political system in the region, like some democracies (Israel and Turkey), undeveloped democracies (Iraq and the Palestinian regions), republican regimes (Egypt and Syria), monarchies(Saudi Arabia), semi-liberal monarchies (Jordan and Bahrain), and religious regimes(Iran). Almost all of the Middle East countries have tried to impose an identity from above. Whether these attempts are ideological, religious, dynastic, or power-centered, they have always failed and often lead to division and sectarian tensions (Kumaraswamy, 2006, p. 63) [x].
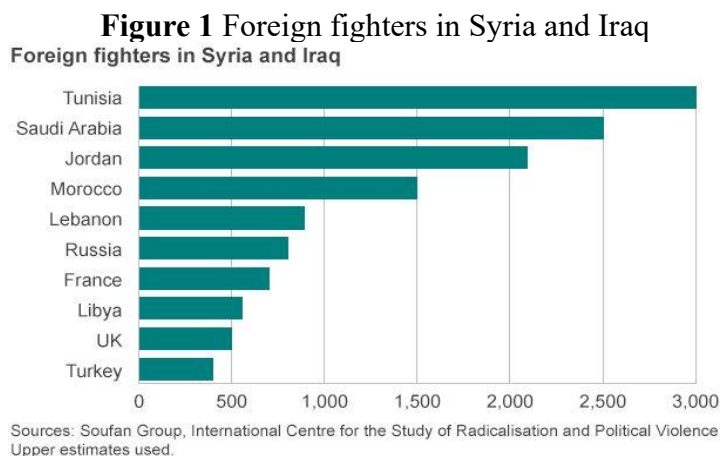
Therefore the failure of public diplomacy due to Cultural diversity and complex identities in the Middle East may lead to counterproductive. It involves cultural misunderstanding about communication patterns, and thus leads to tensions, antagonism and conflicts among countries (Zaharna, 2010, p. 128) [xi].

Power and Diplomacy in the Context of Differential Cultural Region of the Middle East

In the context of culture, civilization, and political economies between countries and regions, there is no same understanding and inclusive perspective to power and the means of power in the Middle East's international relations. The misleading use of information includes the predominant manner, the use for hostile aims, and the attractions of masses opposite of rival, the struggle to manipulate minds, win public opinion, and pursue the self-interests by the actors are the main pattern in the regions. Therefore, we encounter a priority of political goals and political changes in target environments and every actor, state and non-state is pushed in a zero-sum game equilibrium. This trend results in the increasing increase of Hate Speech, sectarianism, distrust, conflict, and war.

## The Spread of the use of Social Media in the Middle East

According to the statistics in December 2015, ISIS was able to attract many foreign fighters from other countries, as shown in the figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq

Sources: Soufan Group, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence Upper estimates used.

(BBC News, 2014)[xii]

According to a study by Northwestern University in Qatar, the number of religious channels in the region rose from 50 channels in 2011 to 75 channels in 2014.In a few years, the number of Muslim and Christian religious TV channels has increased by 50 % in the Middle East and North Africa.

Figure 2 Increase of Religious Channels in Middle East 2011-2014
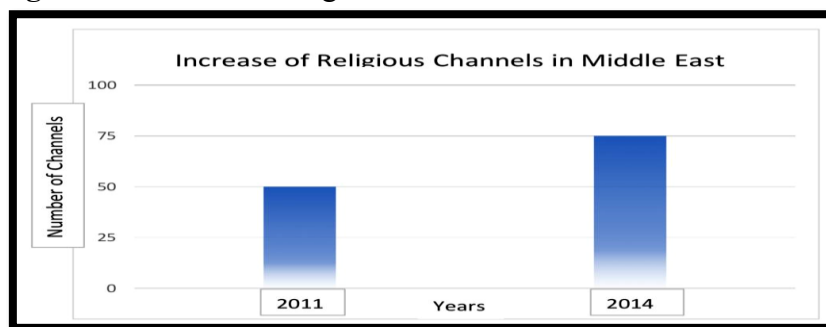
(Northwestern University 2016) [xiii].

Internet Usage in the Middle East

The statistics from world internet usage and population statistics show an increase in the number of internet users in the Middle East in 2021 compared to 2012. The number of internet users in 2012 reached 90,000,455 from the population of the Middle East that reached 223608203 and represents 40.2% compared to 2021, when the number of internet users reached 199,845,130 from the population that reached 265,587,661 and representing 75.2%, shown   in the figure 3 and Table 1 below.

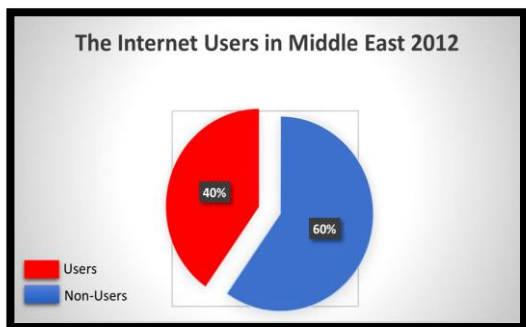**Figure3.**Internet Usage in the Middle East 2012

Table 1. Middle East Internet Usage & Population Statistics 2021

| MIDDLE EAST REGION	Population (2021 Est.)	Internet Users 31-MAR-2021	Population (Penetration) %	Internet Users %
Middle East	265,587,661	199,845,130	75.2	3.9
Rest of World	7,610,177,926	4,969,930,477	65.3	96.1
WORLD TOTAL	7,875,765,587	5,169,775,607	65.6	100.0

(Internet World Stats)xiv

Facebook as Tool of Public Diplomacy

Facebook is an important tool for public diplomacy in the era of the development of information that removes barriers and boundaries between nations and people, helping them communicate with each other and learn about their cultures. It plays an important role in the Arab revolutions, called the Arab Spring revolutions, which was also called ""The Facebook Revolutions," denoting the increase in the number of Facebook users in the middle east

The statistics show that the number of Facebook users in Middle East in 2012 was 23811620, representing 10.6% compared to 2019, which amounted to 136100000 representing 53%, as shown in the Figure 4   below.

Figure 4. The Facebook Users in Middle East 2012-2019
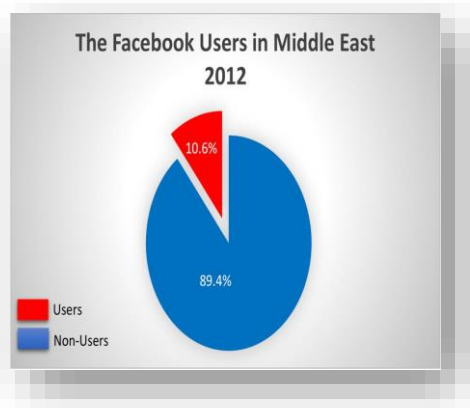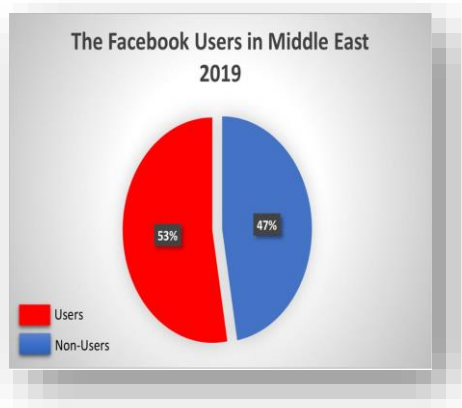
(Internet World Stats)xv

However, according to the most recent figures, as of 31-MAR-2021, the number of Facebook users in the Middle East reached 145,441,200 out of 199,845,130 Internet users, indicating that the proportion of Facebook use is roughly 72 percent, as shown in Table 2..

Table 2. Middle East Internet Usage & Population Statistics 2021

MIDDLE EAST	Population (2021 Est.)	Internet Users 31-MAR-2021%%	Population (Penetration) %	Facebook 31-MAR-2021
Bahrain	1,748,296	1,707,533	97.7	1,495,900
Iran	85,028,759	78,086,663	91.8	40,000,000
Iraq	41,179,350	24,525,000	59.6	25,520,000
Israel	8,789,774	7,002,759	79.7	6,200,000
Jordan	10,269,021	8,700,000	84.7	6,386,000
Kuwait	4,328,550	4,256,466	98.3	4,227,000
Lebanon	6,769,146	5,546,494	81.9	4,160,000
Oman	5,223,375	4,011,004	76.8	2,963,700
Palestine (State of)	5,222,748	3,381,787	64.8	3,116,000
Qatar	2,930,528	3,056,000	104.3	2,935,000
Saudi Arabia	35,340,683	31,856,652	90.1	26,280,000
Syria	18,275,702	8,500,000	46.5	8,500,000
United Arab Emirates	9,991,089	10,316,000	103.3	10,316,000
Yemen	30,490,640	7,903,772	25.9	3,341,600
TOTAL Middle East	265,587,661	199,845,130	75.2	145,441,200

(Internet World Stats , 2012)[xvi]

The Consequences and Effects of Social Media usage Among the Middle East Actor Relations

The aforesaid evidence shows that expanding the use of social media not only has led to the strengthening of relations among the actors in the Middle East, but it has also led to an intensification of hostility and enmity among them. This manner has happened in various ways including:

The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilizing in inciting from

External Agendas

Technological development and the spread of social media-fueled the Arab Spring uprisings and called them ""the Facebook revolutions"", with the help of foreign agendas. According to a report by Al Mayadeen channel on YouTube, there was document issued on October 2010 for a project put forward by Robert Ford under the name "The Arab Spring Initiative in the Middle East" (Al Mayadeen chanel , 2010) [xvii].

The Role of Social Media in Hate Speech and Sectarian Incitement

According to the Middle East Panorama, an intelligence source revealed that the social media pages and groups with the names of Omar, Abu Bakr, Ali, Hussein, Muhammad, Jesus, Al-Masih, and Christians are all forged, and they all start from one place and one hall in Israel, and they have been very successful.. Besides, the source added that one of these Zionists ould be named Omar, Ali, Zainab, or Aisha, and they will be presenton our pages and in the public pages.

The reason is to stir up sectarian strife among various religious sects in the Arab countries to create more religious tensions, in general, and sectarianism within the same religion and in particular between Sunnis and Shiites, in particular. The source pointed out that Avichay Adraee has honored a group of Unit 8200 in the Israeli army affiliated with the second largest device for eavesdropping, jamming, espionage, and electronic technology in the world after America. It began years ago aiming to enter and penetrate through the social media with different Arab names and open public and private pages in which it has recruited thousands of young high school students to form the largest electronic army to spread Zionist, penetrate into the depths of the Islamic world, poison the culture and thought of Muslims, and strike their moral, human and ideological values. They are quietly working to sow discord, promote rumors, target activists and intellectuals, and inflame religious sectarian strife (Taghrib News Agancy, 2016) [xviii].

> The Arab world has become aware with the passage of time. The real enemy of regional stability is Iran, which is trying to create a Shiite crescent with a   terrorist version.
> _____
> ___
> Who is   the most danger and Muslims from these countries?

The Role of Social Media in Tarnish the Reputation of   the other

On the Facebook, ""Avichay Adraee"", one of the official spokesmen of Israeli army who speaks Arabic, has approximately 2000,000 followers in the Middle East and communicates with them daily and uses all the malicious methods of sedition among Muslims. Dr. Faisal Al Kasim, who works for the Al Jazeera channel, recently organised a poll with the question, "What is the most hazardous nation in the Middle East for Arabs and Muslims?" The poll was released on the 23rd of December, 2019."?". It is clear from the vote that the highest dangerous rate in the Middle East is Iran. Then Israel will come, and start commenting, polish their image, and discredit Iran image as shown in the figure 5 below

Figure 5. publishing of Avichay Adraee   on facebook page

(Avichay Adraee Facebook, 2019)[xix]

In this turbulent environment, states undertake to filter sites according to political, social, security and conflict, as shown in the Figure 6 below (Faris & Nart, 2008, pp. 26-27) [xx]. This shows the distribution and cleavage of countries and their interest in the type of filtration of sites according to varying degrees depending on the type of threat to the state.

Figure 6. distribution of countries and their interest in the type of filteration of sites
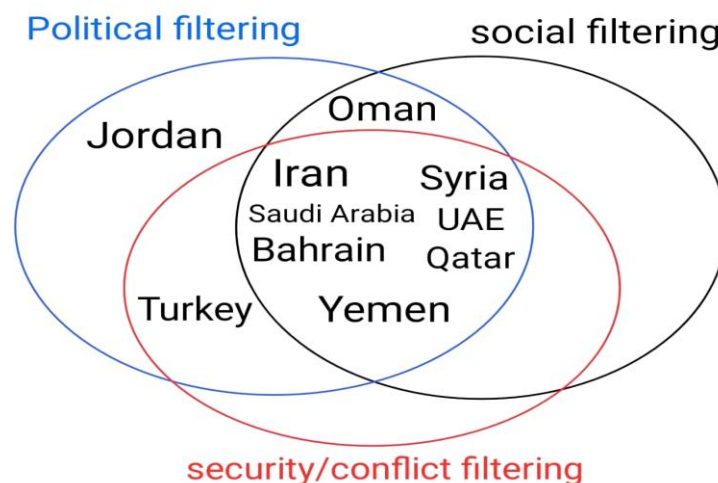
(Faris & Nart, 2008, pp. 26-27) [xxi]

Each country has a different degree of filtering in each of the four major thematic areas: the filtering of 1) political content, 2) social content, 3) conflict and security related content, and 4) Internet tools and applications (Faris & Nart, 2008, pp. 18-26) [xxii]

Due to the conflicts and geopolitical rivalries among the countries of the Middle East, they block the websites of opposition political content and prevent access to them. The figure below shows the websites that were blocked by countries for a period between 2016-2018   (Noman, 2019, pp. 7-8) [xxiii].

Table 3 shows the blocked websites prioritized from the most important conflict issues among Middle Eastern countries, namely Iran-Arab conflict, Arab -Turkey relationships, Israel – Iran, Syria and Yemen-Houthis conflict, The Kurds, Gulf crisis, Hezbollah, the Houthis and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Theorizing the application and outcomes of the public diplomacy and social media by state and non-state actors in the Middle East international relations was the problem of this research. The current study hypothesizes is that the use of social media in the international relations of the Middle East leads to specific results like antagonism and the escalation of tensions among the actors in this region. In fact, there is a direct relationship between the growth of public diplomacy and social media use and the escalation of conflicts and antagonism in the Middle East.

The differences in cultures and complex identities in the Middle East, in one hand, and the traditional perspective of power, interest and communication in the region, on the other hand, lead to the dysfunction of globalization elements, especially public diplomacy and social

media in the region. As a result of public diplomacy and social media use, we witness not just cooperation and integrity in the Middle East, but also deterioration of ties, hostility, turmoil, and conflict in the area. So, the failure of public diplomacy due to Cultural diversity and complex identities in the Middle East may lead to counterproductive. It involves cultural misunderstanding about communication patterns leading to tensions, antagonism and conflicts between countries

Table 3. Blocking websites among the Middle Eastern countries

Content Affiliation	Blocking countries
Iran	Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, UAE
Saudi Arabia, Syrian conflict, Israel	Iran, Yemen-Houthis, Syria,
Yemen-Houthis Syria	Saudi Arabia, UAE
Yemen-Hadi Government , Bahrain Kuwait	Iran, Yemen-Houthis
Lebanon-Hariri-aligned	Iran, Syria
Qatar	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen-Houthis
UAE	Yemen-Houthis
Egypt	Iran
Lebanon-Hezbollah-aligned	Saudi Arabia, Egypt
Turkey	Saudi Arabia, Yemen-Houthis, Syria, Egypt
Jordan	UAE
Hezbollah	Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, Oman
Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood)	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Egypt, Syria
Kurds	Turkey, Iran
Pan-Arab websites	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Jordan
Country-focused campaign websites	Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE

(Noman, 2019, pp. 7-8) [xxiv]

There is no homogenous country in the Middle East. They consist of many ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic minorities. However, they were not successful in developing a national identity that reflected their heterogeneity. At the same time, social media occupy an important place in the cultural and political reality of the Middle East and plays an important role in the international relations of the region. The negative impacts of public diplomacy and social media sites among Middle Eastern countries are confined as follows:

-The role of social media in political mobilizing inciting from external agendas
-The role of social media in hate speech and sectarian incitement
-The role of social media in tarnishing the reputation of others

Recommendations

Working to increase national awareness of how to deal with the waves of globalization with its various cultural, media, and political descriptions

Working to raise awareness to reject sectarian and ethnic conflict

Emphasizing that the identity of the state is the collective identity of all members of society and of its various sects and affiliations to achieve social, political, economic, and cultural integration

Noting that the consequences of soft power are not less dangerous than the consequences of using military force and military pressure tools, despite the temptations of its slogans and the attractiveness of its tool

Tightening the controlling and blocking of the websites that contain controversial and hostile political content

Finding mechanisms and rules that enhance joint Arab and Islamic co-operation and increase the ability of countries to limit American and Zionist interference in the region.

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