

Issues in Cultural Diplomacy: The Changing Communications Paradigm between the U.S. and Muslim World

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Abstract:

Conflict resolution professionals and diplomats in the 21st century continues to face significant challenges arising from a clash of cultures. On the global level, one of the most terrific cultural clashes in the 21st century was the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The attacks and subsequent media narratives that shaped international discourse reflected a clash of incompatible values that captures what Huntington phrased as a "clash of civilizations." It is clear that cultural differences will continue to affect traditional diplomacy and consequently provide more challenging work experience for diplomats around the world. This essay addresses the issue of diplomatic communication and cultural diversity between the U.S. and the Muslim world. It also explains the importance of integrating diplomacy with social media in addressing cultural clashes.

Introduction

Culture, perceived as a system of meanings, values and symbols assumes significant differences in race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion, with potential for misunderstanding, miscommunication and conflict (Lebaron, 1993). At the global level, the most terrific cultural clash in the 21st century was the 9/11 terrorist attacks on World Trade Center and the Pentagon. These attacks reflected incompatible cultural values, fed by media frenzy, that raise mutual fears, and escalate into a clash of collectives' identities (John, 2006). This issue of cultural differences has also affected traditional diplomacy and has made the work of diplomats more complex and complicated. Today, diplomats must be proficient in different areas including a familiarity with a variety of tools such social media to be able to deal with multiple conflicts. Effective communication is essential in the process of addressing issues of cultural diversity. In this context, communication does not only consist of clearly transmitting information, ideas, thoughts feelings and needs, but also listening and understanding the other cultural dimensions. This paper will deal with diplomatic communication and cultural diversity issues between the Islamic world and the United States. In this paper, I will explain the need to integrate social media and diplomatic communication in addressing cultural diversity.

Cultural clashes between the Islamic World and the Western World after 9/11

The twentieth century was rife with war and violence. Everyone hoped that the twenty-first century would be a century of peace. Then the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon occurred, and dashed the hope for peace. These acts of violence shocked the world, ironically, just when the United Nations had designated 2001 the year of dialogue among civilizations (Daniel, 2007). The Islamic extremist organization al-Qaeda lead by Osama Bin Laden believed to be behind the terrorist attacks that killed more than three thousand people created a rift in the relations between United States and Muslim societies. The event of nine-eleven automatically raised the complex issue of Islam and

terrorism or Islam and violence to the collective consciousness of many in the Western World. What makes the relationship complex is that even though not all Muslims are terrorists but Al-Qaeda is an Islamic organization, which claimed to fight in the name of Islam and defend Islamic values. The fact is the 9/11 events have deteriorated an already unstable relationship between the Western world and the Muslim world. After 9/11, the global war on terrorism intensified with the US-led attacks on Afghanistan that began in October 2001 and in March 2003 the invasion Iraq (CNN Library 2013). Obviously, the "Operation Freedom" and expanded U.S counter terrorism operations across the Muslim World brought about a strategic realignment as a number of countries in the Muslim world sided openly with the U.S. in the global war on terrorism or quietly expanded their counter-terrorism cooperation.

However, extremists and many Muslims have developed an anti-American sentiment. For example, in Pakistan, President Musharraf openly opposed extremism, a stand that position was not representative of the entire Muslim community. The alliance with central Asia helped to remove the Taliban threat and the war in Iraq actually strengthened the U.S power in the Middle East. However, the long-term threat is not popular support for the extremists but the strengthening of Islamic fundamentalist forces between Sunni and Shiite and the manipulation of Shiite movement by Iran. The challenges are that the fight on terrorism has also created negative perceptions of the Western World particularly the United States. The U.S. credibility has decreased considerably specifically after the removal of Saddam regime. Most people in the Arab world disapproved of the war in Iraq. The fact is, radical and dogmatic interpretation of Islam has developed in many Muslim societies (Cordesman, 2013). This situation remains a consistent threat to the United States national security and interests. How can diplomatic communication help to change the negative perception of America?

Understanding the Islamic world

For diplomatic communication to be effective between the United States and the Muslim world, it is important for America to understand the culture and values of the Islamic world but also share the culture and values America stand for. Perceptions and assumptions can be the greatest enemies in building relationships. Such notions as justice, human rights, non-violence are important values in the United States and at the same time, there is an assumption that the Islamic societies do not welcome it. It is important for the Western World and United States to understand the values of justice, human rights abuses and non-violence from the Islamic perspectives.

Although there are some misunderstandings and divisions among Sunni, Shiite and Sufi Muslims, they all agree that, the function of any society is to maintain a healthy peaceful relationship between human beings themselves and between human beings and God. In consequence, when conflict erupts and destroys these relationships it is an obligation for Muslim theologians, jurists, and philosophers to use Islamic teaching to restore peace. Ultimately, whenever there is disharmony at any level it is a deviation of human beings to practice peace. Therefore, the notion of justice, human rights, and non-violence are profoundly bound to the concept of peace in Islam and Islamic society.

Justice

Justice is a core Islamic ethic reflected throughout the Quran and the life of the prophet Muhammad. The Quran concept of justice is not different from the universal view of justice. "O! You who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it is against rich or poor" Quran 4:135. Muslims have to reject all kinds of injustice and promote justice for all humanity. Muslims consider the Quran as God's truth and God's command to all Muslims. It is the responsibility of the Muslim to do right and avoid wrong. For "Jihad" is a defined as a struggle at the personal and collective level to realize justice on earth. Abdullah Schleifer defined "Jihad" as an instrument of the social-political order in Islamic society. The purpose of "Jihad" is self-transformation but also the transformation of the Islamic society through education and moral reform. However, it is also true that the practice of jihad expresses some elements of violence. Jihad is a Holy war that Muslims are supposed to fight to reject evil in society. What constitutes evil varies from one culture to another. For example, in the Islamic World women should cover their hair while in the Western World it is not required. From a Muslim point of view, it is wrong while in the West, covering a woman's head could be seen as abuse of women rights specifically when they are forced to do it in the name of religion.

Human rights

Many western writers agree that the concept of human rights is fundamentally alien to Islam. The main reason is that the concept of human rights in the Shari'a, the Islamic law, is more a matter of duty rather than right. The tradition (Hadith Sahih, 1986) said, "No one truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself..." and that "the whole of a Muslim for another Muslim is inviolable, his life, his property, and his honor". The traditions establish the mutual right of Muslims without including clearly non-Muslims. This can be problematic in the context of cultural diversity setting. Another important issue is the gender discrimination in the Islamic law, which is not compatible with the international law on "women rights" in family and community. The women discrimination is

controversial in Islam. Many Muslims believe it derives from the pre-Islamic Arabic culture introduced in Islamic law. There is a connection between the issues of women rights and violence and abuse in the Muslim world.

Non-violence and violence

Peace and nonviolence go hand in hand; non-violence is an important step in the process of peace. One of the main principles of nonviolence in Islam according to Prophet Mohammed is "La dahrar wa la dharar" translated to mean, "Not harm and not be harmed" (AL-Bukhari, Book 2 Vol. 1, 1997). Although the prophet teachings did not prohibit the use of force, however Islam allows force when it is necessary. However, there is no doubt that Islam spread around mostly through violence and war. Mecca was conquered through violence and the use of force etc. Many Western values are in disagreement with Islamic approach in spreading Islam through war. This also has been an historical tension between the West and the Muslim world.

Political-social organization

It is impossible to understand fully the Islamic culture without looking into the political social organization. The medieval Islamic jurists divided the world into two spheres: Dar al-Islam, which means the abode of Islam and Dar al-harb meaning the abode of war. This implied that Muslims have a distinct and separate community. This belief is due to the Quran verses and the practices of the prophet. The political organization of the Islamic society has its root in the constitution of Medina, which is in essence a social contract freely accepted by all parties. "The chart of Medina" established the outline of mutual rights and obligations of members of the Muslim community, the role of the prophet and the Muslims relationships with non-Muslim living in Medina. It was a model of Islamic state. After the death of the prophet, Islam community split in different branches due to political and religious view. The most serious is between Sunni and Shiite. For the majority Sunni the Islam community was not only a moral and social community but also political. This dispute became more vigorous today, as Muslims face the challenge to define Islamic political life in a world where the glorification of western political culture, democracy, and freedom is pervasive. Contrary to western values, the caliphates – the successors of the prophet play the role of political and religious leader in Islamic societies because in Islam, God is the sovereign of human affairs. In Islam, there is no distinction between religion and state while in the West particularly in America there is a clear separation between state and religion (Yetkin, 2005).

The preceding analyses support that the different concepts of justice, human rights, non-violence and the political system are the cultural aspect of Islamic societies. Although the Muslim world is internally weak, suffering from internal tensions and conflicts, abused by foreign powers, it is a religious duty for all Muslims to stand for the worldwide Muslim community.

Cultural Approach to Conflict resolution

Although conflict is inevitable in all societies, the nature of conflict and the way it is resolved differ from one socio-cultural context to another. Most western countries view conflict as a political matter, or policy so it can be constructive or destructive. In North America, for example conflict signals a need for change. In this context, conflict can lead to separation, hostility, civil strife, terrorism, and war; it can also encourage dialogue, social justice and can lead to a stronger relationship and peace. Conflicts erupt because of different interpretations of issues, values, interests and relationship. In the view of some western conflict resolution theorists, conflict cannot be very resolved. The resolution of conflicts requires developing communication skills by listening to each party by a mediator and proposing an arrangement to address all kinds of conflict.

In the contrary, most Muslim communities see conflict as destructive of the harmony established by God. Human need, physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual, all have to be in harmony with the Islamic principles and values. Therefore, Islamic approach to conflict resolution is different from western approach. Islam uses different sources to resolve conflict in Islam but the Quran is the main source because it is the holy sacred text and recognized by all Muslims. Then it is the primary source of Islamic law – Shari'a. Muslim also refers to the prophet's practices during his lifetime to resolve conflicts (Abdulhamid, pp.1-14, 187).

First, Islamic approach of conflict resolution has its roots in Arabic tradition where rituals and ceremony play an important role. The rituals of Sulh (settlement) and Musallah (reconciliation) have their origins in tribal and village context. Long time ago Arabic tribe dealt with different conflicts in the desert life and they come to realize that Sulh is the best alternative to end or less violence and vengeance. The condition of Sulh is to bring parties in conflict to pledge to forgive and forget everything that happened and initiate a new relationship

Sulh is an important term in both the vocabulary of Islamic law and the language of tribe custom. According to Islamic law Shari'a, the purpose of Sulh is to end conflict and hostility among believers so

that they can build relationships in peace and amity.... In Islamic law, Sulh is a form of contract, legally binding on both the individual and community level.

When there is a murder, in order to prevent any blood revenge, the family of the murderer calls on a delegation of mediators comprised of village elders, notables and religious leaders usually called the Muslihs, those who have gained the esteem of the community (Jabbour, 1996).

The mediator's initiates a meeting and interrogates the two parties involved in the murder. As soon as the family of the guilty party calls for mediator's intervention, the process of reconciliation starts. The task of the mediators is not to judge, punish or condemn the offending party but to preserve good names of both. The families involved make a commitment to a new relationship. Sometimes, the family of the victim pays a blood price, which is usually an amount of money or goods decided by the mediators, it can be animals, food, etc. The ritual ends in public ceremony performed in the village. The family of the victim and the guilty party make a line on both sides of the road, greet each other, and accept apologies. Then, the family of the murderer visits the home of the victim to drink a cup of bitter coffee the ritual concludes with a meal hosted by the family of the offender.

Islamic societies apply traditional methods to resolve interpersonal, family, community and inter-religious disputes for hundreds of years. When Islam gained the control of power in Arabic societies, conflict resolution strategies were incorporated into Islamic the Shari 'a laws. Therefore, submission to the Islamic authority as a mediator is a moral imperative. The arbitrator or mediator will ask sometimes to swear in the name of God and the Quran to establish the truth in the process for conflict resolution and reconciliation. In general, diplomats are mediators and it important that diplomatic communication take into account these important aspects of the Islamic world. Ignoring these cultural issues could easily lead to failure in building relationships (Aziz, A. and Funk, 2001).

Diplomatic communication between the Islamic world and the United States

Admittedly, anti-American sentiment is high in many Arab countries. The foreign perception of the United States is actually more complex than one can imagine. It is not just an issue of public diplomacy but also a matter of cultural differences. It also includes a widespread disagreement with US policy including military intervention in Islamic countries. Diplomatic communication consists of negotiating peace between states, in this process there is an agenda of coming to a mutual agreement and acceptable outcome for both parties (O'Connor and Griffiths, p.27, 2006). This process of communication affects cultural conventions, norms, meanings, assumptions, ideals and perceptions. After 9/11, a new force arose to respond to the threat from Al Qaeda in the form of outright rejection of violence in all its forms. Diplomatic communication has been playing an important role in addressing the cultural clashes and all its implications. In the field public diplomacy, officers have initiated programs based on local concerns and conditions. For example, in Cairo American artist have been helped to set up studio for local youths in an at risk neighborhood. In Saudi Arabia, diplomatic communication has helped to organize a joint American-Saudi archaeological excavation. The event added understanding to the complexity of the pre-Islamic history. In Pakistan, diplomatic communicators have worked with the government on a counter-IED (Improvised Explosive Device) media campaign to raise awareness about bombs that kill civilians.

However, one of the most important aspects that need attention is to address the current cultural clashes specifically the idea that American culture should not be welcome in Islamic countries. The United States needs to tell America's story to educate elites and other opinion leaders in these dynamic places such Cairo, Beirut, or Lahore. A Muslim journalist mentioned, "Americans will always associate the Muslim world with 9/11". This is why it is important to implement programs to undermine support for violence in Afghanistan, Yemen or Pakistan (Douglas and Neal, pp.2-7 2013). In this particular context, the role of diplomatic communication should protect the states interests by promoting not only its own culture but also learning from the other culture. The State Department must encourage diplomats to balance between promoting one culture and understanding the other culture. This requires not looking at culture in terms of superiority and inferiority but in terms of cultural difference or diversity.

The Ummah Islam although very diverse in terms of tribe, religion, and linguistic line, shares one identity. The Arabs in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are all concerned about American policy that affects other Muslims around the world and specially the Middle East. In addition to that, most Muslim countries allow different degrees of personal freedom. Within each country different Islamic group have specific relationships with their government. For example, Sunnis and Shiites typically have distinct relationships with the ruling authorities depending on their Sunni or Shiite orientation (Kemal, p.12, 2001). Right after 9/11, diplomatic communication has adopted an approach that focused on fighting terrorism. Many Muslim nations supported the U.S. operation to fight terrorism in Muslim societies. This situation has divided the Islam within and led to a radicalization of one group against others. To address this issue, diplomacy communication must be aware of the diversity of it audiences in term of cultural perspective within the Islamic world itself. Engaging the Arab world may not be possible unless the diplomats invest in effective communication dialogue with all parties of the Muslim world. Diplomat must be serving on the ground, which is the best place to understand the target the right audience. In this

process, trust is essential to prevent the breakdown of cultural affinity. Trust is one of the key elements to effective communication. What makes the environment in the Muslim world very challenging is the fundamental mistrust of United States objective in most regions. Gallup polls found that "fewer than 3 in 10 Muslim (28%) surveyed believed the West respect Muslim."(Abu Dhabi Gallup center, Nov. 2010) For this reason, America needs to do more than just speaking about America as the greatest nation of the world. Muslims in general regard justice as an integrating aspect of life based on their religious beliefs. Engaging in the Muslim world without prioritizing genuine empathy and understanding will not make a big change in the relationship. Programs that empower Muslim citizens specifically in the field of diplomacy, entrepreneurship and women's empowerment will be welcome. These programs could help create a bond between the citizens and America. Reaching the Muslim world should not only be from government to government but also is diplomats top Muslim citizens. In fact, citizen network can effectively shape people's opinions about the United States. Consequently, there is need to maintain trust at the institutional level but also between the citizens of both countries. The United States do not favor any religion over another. There is also an expression of cultural diversity in the American society. Diplomatic communication must support the notion of cultural diversity that allows population to maintain multiple identities such as religions, nationalities, family, and getting education in the same environment and without being necessarily a threat to one another. In sum, listening is the one of the most important key elements in diplomatic communication (Wolvin, 2010).

Integrating social media and diplomatic communication

The purpose of diplomacy is to promote the interests of the state within the international system. The US government's top national security priority is to advance the interests of the United States within the world but also to make many other nations more stable by effective and democratic governance. To get to their messages across the world, diplomats need to recognize that progress toward this goal will be affected not only by what governments do but also the interconnected social network of global citizens. Technology in diplomacy is inevitable today. The advances in social media have attracted interest to states that can benefit from it. Diplomacy seems to be the last arena to use. The technology keep changing however, what is important is to continually pay attention to the change and adapt to every new generation. In fact, the ultimate goal of diplomacy is to be in service of the ideal of peace and stability worldwide. Even though the means change but the end should remain the same. The question is how to integrate diplomacy and social media but also how to monitor information?

While autocrats and dictators are deterring their people to access social media such as Facebook and twitter at the same time activists used social media to change their governments. Even though many scholars disagree with the fact that social media is the driving force for revolution in many nations but it is undeniable that social media are the key factors for change. During the 2010 Egyptian uprising in Tahrir Square, masses of people primarily youth, young adults organized through Facebook and other social media started the most powerful Arab political movement of the century. In 2008, the revolution in Tunisia started with a large protest by Bouazizi. In addition, two years after the Ben Ali regime could no more control the information environment. A network of social media created a rapid spread of information across Tunisia the greater Middle East region and the globe (Martin and Jagla, pp.2-5, 2013).

The main political claim during the Arab spring was freedom, justice, job equality and the end of dictatorship. Many Muslims perceived these protests as the invisible powerful hand of the United States. For many Muslim across the globe, the U.S and the Western World are trying to spread democratic system in all Muslim countries. It is necessary for American diplomats to engage in a healthy communication to clear up the cloud generated by the Arab spring with new communication tools to advance the nation's interests. In addition, there is a need to innovation in technology to face the challenges of global communication and policy. Additional investment will definitely help advance and sustain the US government interest across the world and specifically in the Muslim world. For example, Tamara Coman-wittes, Director of the Saban Center of Middle East policy at the Brookings Institution raise a concern that the US government may need more of an investment to make a transition to this new world of pervasive technology. It is the responsibility of the diplomats in the age of rapid information to monitor and understand issues before the widespread. This requires familiarity with new technologies and social media. For example monitoring Facebook twitter was one of the most crucial aspects during the Arab spring. The challenge of diplomatic communication is how to analyze the rapid and massive flow of information before its release. The former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright pointed out once "The advent of technology is almost opposite of diplomacy."(Martin and Jagla, 2013)

Diplomacy is delicate it is time consuming in its process and could take several years to reach specific goals. However, social media release information and pressure diplomats to make decisions or react on different issues. When dealing with cultural clashes, it is important that these two approaches be balanced specially when it a sensitive matter

Diplomats would have to learn how social media could be a tool to address cultural cluster through consistent verbal, non-verbal, and written communication. Diplomatic communication can maintain its role of influence and using social media to inform, educate, and engage with foreign public of the Arab

world.

Conclusion

Cultural clashes are inevitable in every multicultural society. In the international level, globalization has made the world smaller and cultures interacted and interrelated. The United States need to maintain a healthy relationship with the Muslim world for its own national security. With all the efforts since the 9/11 events, no one can deny the persistent tension between the two worlds. Diplomatic communication can be a great tool in addressing cultural clashes. Diplomatic communication should emphasize empathetic listening, and consistent dialogue that are important elements in building peace in the midst of diversity. Today, one cannot avoid the use of social media in diplomatic careers. Traditionally, most powerful decision-makers have maintained information to validate their power but the 21st century has shifted to a network of private citizens and organizations around the world. Global citizen's network is a reality and diplomats have to adapt to it. In fact, it is almost impossible to stop the dynamic of social media in the worldwide level. For this reason, the United States must integrate social media in diplomatic communication process that must help address extremism and issues related to cultural diversity. An open and honest dialogue with the Muslim world is possible through diplomatic communication. The US should expand and invest in social media technology to reach young educated Muslims and share American cultural values through online education in the universities in Muslim countries.

The U.S. must safeguard freedoms with clear rule of law but there is a need to be concerned with what is taking place in the Muslim world for national security reasons. Former US Ambassador to Iraq and Dean of the University of Denver's Josef Korbel School of international studies Christopher R. Hill's statement that "problems associated with the lack of accountability for the outcome of a rapid spread of information among populations using networks can impact the stability of nations" (Martin and Jagla p.3, 2013) is instructive.

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