The development of British Public Diplomacy in the Arab world

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Introduction

According to Edmund Gullion who was among the pioneers in defining public diplomacy in 1965, the term is a reference to any type of international diplomacy aside from the direct interaction and engagement between governments (Brahm 2006). Most importantly, it refers to the way different governments address audiences and publics by using a variety of direct and indirect means including media and cultural products. In 1973, Mordecai Lee pointed out the general objectives of public diplomacy, which include: implementing public policy, coordinating with local and international news media to better cover the government, informing the public about the relevant and different government activities, and mobilizing or influencing the public to support the government (Lee 1999).

It seems that public diplomacy always accompanies actual diplomacy and policies on the ground. For example, Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Minister, mentioned in 1937 that: "It is perfectly true, of course, that good cultural propaganda cannot remedy the damage done by a bad foreign policy, but it is no exaggeration to say that even the best of diplomatic policies may fail if it neglects the task of interpretation and persuasion which modern conditions impose" (as cited in Taylor 1982). In general, an important shift in terminology happened during the previous few decades as the term "propaganda" was gradually replaced with the more acceptable expressions such as "soft power", "public relations", or "public diplomacy" (Zaharna 2004; Kruckeberg & Vujnovic 2005).

A Historical Review

Britain has been involved in public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East for more than four centuries. The first cultural diplomacy activities can be traced back to the time the East India Company (1600) was established in the region and to the early travelers and missionaries who interacted with Arabs for trade or religious conversion. The British interest in the region is mostly due to its wealth and strategic geographical importance, as Britain fought the Ottomans in order to occupy many parts of the Middle East in the First World War. Indeed, the East

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India Company was involved in gathering vital intelligence and information on the status quo which later helped the British colonize most of the Middle East (Bayly & Bayly 2000; Bowen, Lincoln & Rigby 2002; Bowen 2005).

As for the modern Middle East, the British interest in the region is mostly due to its geo-political importance, as mentioned above. During the First World War, British forces were very concerned about the information flow to the masses and specifically their image. For example, the British forces occupied Basrah in the South of Iraq on the 22nd of November 1914 during which they controlled all the publishing houses, bought all the private printing presses, and cancelled the licenses of all the available newspapers (Barakat 1977; Al-Rawi 2010; Al-Rawi 2012). Immediately, the British government established *The Basra Times* in November 1914, which remained a government-run publication until it was commercialized in 1921. With the new British occupiers, *Al-Awqat* newspaper in Basrah was first published in 1915 and continued until 1921, and it appeared in four languages: English, Arabic, Turkish, and Persian and mainly took its news from the British news agency, Reuters. The newspaper mostly aimed at defending the British and attacking the Germans and Ottomans (Al-Rawi 2012). In other Iraqi cities, the British authorities established several other newspapers such as *Al-Arab* in Baghdad and *Najma* in Kirkuk. In Mosul, the British forces established *Mosul* newspaper in November 1918 to serve the same purposes (ibid.). Afterwards, *The Baghdad Times* was published in English and Arabic in 1921 and became the British government's tool to reach out to the public (Ali 1997: 529). This publication was followed by *The Times of Mesopotamia*, and the British journalist and government official, Ernest Main, was the editor of the two former newspapers (Scudieri 2014). During the British occupation, many other newspapers flourished such as *Sada al-Haqiqa*, *Al-Iraq*, and *Al-Sharq*, which praised the British and stood against the 1920 Iraqi Revolution (Al-Rawi 2012). In brief, the public diplomacy involvement of the British government in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world can be regarded as extensive yet very direct in its approach; hence, the majority of people regarded the British publications as propaganda.

Shortly after the end of the official colonial periods, the Public Relations Office (PRO) of British embassies in the Middle East region played an important part in disseminating favorable messages towards Britain. Due to its past colonial heritage, Britain remained the most active country in the region in terms of its public diplomacy effort and impact (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950). This was also true in terms of military interventions in some countries that later gained independence from Western powers such as the case of the 1941 anti-monarchy rebellion in Iraq and the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956. In relation to the rebellion in Iraq, Britain had to reinstall the monarchy and defeat the Iraqi rebels' army which included shelling their radio in Basra on May 3, 1941 (Stark 1962: 89). Most importantly, Britain was interested in maintaining a steady oil flow from the Middle East region as it even designed detailed plans to use nuclear bombs in the Middle

East from late 1940s to early 1960s in case of a Soviet invasion in order to destroy oil wells in coordination with the United States (National Security Council 1948; British Foreign Office Memorandum 1951; Chiefs of Staff Committee 1956).

During the Second World War, Britain was active in countering the Fascists and Nazi messages from Radio Bari and Radio Berlin since radio was regarded as "the most effective form of propaganda in the region" at that time (Vaughan 2002: 157). In order to be more effective in disseminating anti-communist propaganda, Britain created in January 1948 the Information Research Department (IRD) at the British Foreign Office which remained functional until 1977 (Defty 2004). IRD was responsible for the distribution of anti-communist materials by using a variety of channels like British embassies as well as the BBC External Services. In June 1946, the British Ambassador in Iraq mentioned that countering the communist ideology could be achieved by highlighting some contrasts represented in "the British ideal of moderation, toleration, social progress, and individual freedom" (Vaughan 2005: 152). After the end of WWII, the UK government established the Central Office of Information (COI) in April 1946 whose aim was to support foreign policy as well as promote trade and British values (Taylor 1999). It is also important to note that the news agency, Reuters, played another significant role in supporting the British Empire and disseminating pro-British messages (Read 1994). In the mid-twentieth century, the news agency "accepted British government subsidies, but the Foreign Office ascribed great importance to keeping Reuters free from the 'taint of propaganda'," (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950: 78). In general, Reuters provided a Western and pro-British view of the world as it had monopoly of the news market that lasted for many decades (Putnis 2008).

Indeed, British public diplomacy efforts in that period followed a variety of strategies including the creation of reading rooms that exhibited posters and had radios, films, and books used in different parts of Arabs countries in order to attract people to them. For example, there were eight reading rooms used in Iraq that had "an audience of 50,000 by 1948 with the help of the British Council, showing films in schools and different organizations," (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950: 24). Some of these reading rooms were immobile and reached as far as the Chubeish area in the sparsely populated marshes of Iraq. The British Embassy prepared reading rooms "built entirely of reeds to match the other dwellings in the area, even though reed construction proved inconvenient," (Davis 1949: 65; as cited in Perry 2013).

The PRO was also focused on disseminating "motion pictures, collect[ing] and distribut[ing] news and news photographs, and supervis[ing] the releases of Reuters and the Arab News Agency" (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950: 22). Some of the films that were shown to the public included *Top Liner* (describing the new British sea liner, the Queen Elizabeth), *Flight for Tomorrow* (a film of a civil air display in Britain), and *Atomic Physics* (presenting the work of atomic scientists) (as cited in Perry 2013).

Other means of influence included establishing schools and nurseries as well as running sports and recreational clubs such the Alwiyah Club in Baghdad, which exclusively served British expatriates and a number of Iraqi elites and intelligentsia (Kwarteng 2013) who were targeted for their influence on local politics. In relation to education, the British Ambassador in Beirut believed that running a British school in Lebanon in the mid-1950s was "the best single contribution we could make to the future of the Middle East," which could "attract the children of important families and to build up understanding of Britain both by their impact upon the pupils and by their contact with the parents," (Vaughan 2005: 155). In the same period in Iraq, the British Council established the Ta'assissia Primary School in Baghdad that had 82 children, most of whom were Iraqis. The nursery school was described by a British diplomat in 1947 as "the most practical and successful piece of publicity work which I have seen so far in the Middle East…[since] English and Iraqi children are as a matter of course invited to each other's birthday parties. I do not think it would be possible to exaggerate the excellent atmosphere of this school and the good which it must inevitably do in cementing Anglo-Iraqi good relations" (Ibid: 156).

In addition to the above efforts, the British MI6 was running the Arab News Agency (ANA), which operating from Cairo as well as the United Press, both distributing news stories to Arabic newspapers in the region (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950). The British were also actively involved in running some radio stations like the ones in Tripoli and Benghazi in Libya, which remained under their control until 1954, while also creating and supporting other radios like 'Radio Baghdad' in Iraq and 'Radio Ramallah' in Jordan in order to counter anti-British messages that were mostly coming from Egypt during Gamal Abdul Nasser's rule (Vaughan 2002). This new interest and added efforts occurred after Anthony Eden instructed the IRD to invest more time in countering Nasser's pan-Arab messages instead of exclusively attacking the communists in the spring of 1956, and the Americans joined the British propaganda efforts through Voice of America (VOA) to attack Nasser (Briggs 1997). In fact, the British government was so desperate to gain the approval of the Arab street that they hired in January 1956 the Iraqi journalist, Younis Bahri, to work for Radio Ramallah. Ironically, Bahri was a well-known anti-British voice who became famous for agitating the public throughout the years he spent at Radio Berlin during the Second World War (Vaughan 2002).

It is important to note here that other British radio stations were operating in the region including Egyptian State Broadcasting (ESB) in Cairo (1934), the Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS) in Jerusalem (1936), and the Near East Broadcasting Service (NEBS) in Jaffa (1941) (Stanton 2013). Further, the Asharq Al Adna (Near East) radio was another important station that operated in a clandestine manner (Castle 1956) until it was called the Voice of Britain (Boyd 2003: 446). The radio became popular in many parts of the Arab world. For example, it "dominated foreign radio broadcasts to Iraq" since "the public like[d] both its

music and its news bulletins," (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950: 75) and was heavily used to send vital propaganda messages to Arab audiences during the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis.

Other forms of British public diplomacy efforts included the publication of Arabic language magazines. Before the Second World War, the British government ran an Arabic magazine in Egypt that was abolished after the war (Vaughan 2005: 157). The magazine was called *Adab wa Fan* or "*Literature and Art*" that was published by Hodder & Stoughton Limited in London. The few issues that are available often contain articles that praise the efforts of the British government's achievements such as eradicating diseases in its empire as well as preserving archeological sites and artifacts (*Adab wa Fan* 1944). Afterwards, the British Central Office of Information (COI) in collaboration with the Foreign Office's information departments published another magazine called *Al Aalam* (The Globe) in June 1952 without revealing the identity of the real sponsors. The magazine became very popular among Arab audiences with a circulation that 28,000 by the end of 1952, which increased to 50,000 and upward of 80,000 by the year 1956 (Ibid. p. 158). The goal of the concealed publication was to "provide an alternative to the extremely nationalist, trashy, but attractively produced pictorial magazines printed in Egypt, which…have completely monopolised the field," (Ibid.). The magazine was also meant to counter communism as each issue contained two or thrre critical items taken from IRD sources.

During World War II, Freya Stark, who worked for the British Embassy and at *Baghdad Times* with Ernest Main (Stark 1962: 92), emphasized the impact of face-to-face communication in the dissemination of British propaganda. Stark, who once described herself as "imperialist as any of the people here," (Stark 1951: 111), established the British network of *Ikhwan al Hurriya* (Brotherhood of Freedom) and revealed that "the aim of our Brotherhood is a sincere attempt to differentiate and to establish the legitimate principles of persuasion," (Stark 1962: 68). It was supposed to convince Arabs to side with the Allies or become neutral (Vaughan 2005; Al-Rawi 2010). In relation the approach, Stark mentioned that

> The spoken word is the traditional way by which every great movement in the Arab world has spread, from ancient beginnings to the last revolt which freed it from the Turks. The Abbasside Empire was established by 'oral propaganda'; the Old Man of the Mountain, Hasan i Sabah, said in the eleventh century that with the help of two friends he could overthrow a kingdom and he did by 'oral propaganda' (Stark 1962: 68).

It is important to note here that the British public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East have sometimes clashed with the interests of other foreign governments that were also actively seeking to exercise a similar influence. For example, the US government helped several Arab countries like Lebanon and Egypt in developing their telecommunication abilities. As a result, the British felt threatened by American aid to

government broadcasting projects in countries where they had historically held a position of influence (Vaughan 2002). In a diplomatic cable, the British Ambassador to Iraq, Harold Beeley, complained once that many Iraqi students are finding it increasingly difficult to study in the UK, warning that they might go instead to the USA and "come back with American ideas and tend to encourage the use of American [technological] equipment. This is bound to weaken our own position and that of British experts serving the Iraq Government," (as cited in Vaughan 2005: 156). In Syria, the British Embassy noticed that the French cultural influence in the country was overwhelming due to the colonial French past; however, the British Council, which started working in Damascus in 1945, tried to exert some influence on Syrians by actively presenting the advantages of British culture and education (Ibid.). In the following section, more details are provided on the role of the British Council.

The British Council and Public Diplomacy

The British Council can be regarded as one of the most important cultural diplomacy tools that is used by the British government. Previous survey research shows that cultural industries like the British Council can help enhance friendship and trust between countries and that people who speak English fairly or well are more likely to have positive views of the UK and to establish some trade relationships (British Council 2013; Lien & Lo 2017).

The British Council was, indeed, very active in disseminating pro-allied messages to the different Arab publics especially during the Second World War. For example, the British Council's distribution of carefully selected books in the region that were printed or supported by the British government and its affiliated publishing houses like Wellington House was part of public diplomacy efforts (Holman 2005). This cultural diplomacy approach was similar to that used by the US government through Franklin Books. Leonard, Small, and Rose (2005) rightly describe the BBC and the British Council as far more effective than any other British agency because they are both "'inside-outside'- to be non-governmental in their approach to public diplomacy, while understanding and sharing its overarching goals," (2005: 45).

Founded in 1934, the British Council was sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and got funding from the Overseas Development Ministry. In 1940, it got a Royal Charter by King George the Sixth with an annual budget of £100,000. The charter mentioned that the goal behind creating the British Council was "promoting a wider knowledge of Our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between Our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and other countries for the purpose of benefiting the British Commonwealth of Nations," (The British Council 1940: 3). For example, the British Council is instrumental in disseminating the image of Britain as a diverse and inclusive society (Richardson 2005). The first Middle Eastern office was established in Cairo in 1938, and the Council created many offices afterwards in the majority of Arab countries. In 1956, the

Council received an increased budget of £150,000 in order to expand in the Middle East, which was clearly done to enhance pro-British activities against communist and Nasser's propaganda. Freya Stark, for example, mentioned the importance of the British Council since "the good it is doing is immense," (Stark 1962: 118). According to the CIA report on Iraq in 1950, the British Council tried to achieve many cultural diplomacy goals as stated below:

> The aims of the British Council is to spread a [sic] knowledge of British culture and institutions among Iraqis, encourage the learning of English and strengthen British-Iraqi friendship. Its chief work is done at its Council Institutes in Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, and Kirkuk, where Iraqis are encouraged to attend courses and lectures. The Council shows films, and its institutes sponsor musical recitals, teas, art exhibits, chess clubs, and discussion groups for both men and women (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950: 22).

During certain political crises, the British Council was accused of being 'culturally imperialist' and had to leave temporarily such as the case of Egypt and Syria in 1956, Iraq in 1967, and Libya in 1973 (The British Council, n.d.).

The BBC and Public Diplomacy

The British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) has been of vital strategic importance for the UK's public diplomacy. Its budget which was provided by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's 'Grant In Aid' was about a third of the total funds allocated to Britain's public diplomacy. The network was, for instance, given £225 million in the fiscal year 2004-2005 from a total budget of £617 million (FCO 2005). However, in 2014, the source of funding changed due to budget cuts, so BBC started to be funded by the UK license fee payer. Unlike during the Second World War and the early stages of the Cold War, the BBC started to acquire more independence from the British government at a later stage. Through its attempts to achieve objective journalistic practice, the BBC assists in promoting British values and ultimately better serve the interests of the UK government (Gillespie, Webb, & Baumann 2008; Gillespie et al. 2014; Sreberny 2014). Indeed, **"British public-diplomacy broadcasting has long emphasized objective news, as heard on the BBC,"** (Krause and Van Evera 2009: 117). It is true that the government paid for the BBC to operate, yet it did not attain real influence on the news organization. A BBC correspondent once revealed the following:

> We are not told by the FCO this is the agenda for the year, now please disseminate…There have never been any directives, there's never any email coming from anyone in the Government saying please say this on air. If this was the standard at the BBC I don't think many of us would be working for it…But coming from the developing world where TV stations, newspapers are often tools of the government I understand why it's sometimes difficult for people in those countries to accept that while the

BBC gets funding from the Government it is not a tool of the Government (as cited in Mirchandani & Abubakar 2014: 10).

In comparison to the US Department of State's Al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa, the BBC is now completely different. However, in relation to its alleged independence from the government, Britain "may actually make the BBC an active, if unwitting, tool of British public diplomacy," (Ibid.: 8). This is because audiences can be further attracted to listen or view the BBC as objectivity and credibility can be important appeals, while British values are indirectly promoted.

Currently, the BBC operates in about 33 languages and has a variety of platforms including TV, radio, Internet, mobile apps, and social media with an estimated 230 million weekly users (BBC n.d.). Nicholas Cull mentioned that international broadcasting (IB) is one of the most effective means of influence, stating: "Thanks to the achievement of the BBC World Service, IB has long been the most widely known element in British public diplomacy" (Cull 2008: 34). One of the major goals of the BBC and its social media outlets is to create a global outreach or conversation around important issues. This is part of what the BBC service called "Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK." In general, the BBC brand is currently regarded as a solid one due to its news credibility, and it claims it has become "the most trusted and objective international news provider," (Ibid). The global conversation's goal is part of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office plan to extend the outreach of the UK government (Gillespie 2013). N. Shreim (2015) observes that the "long-term relationship of cultural harmonization between the BBC's multilingual journalists and their global audiences has formed the basis for fostering a 'Global Conversation' by the World Service's global networks," (2015: 534).

In relation to BBC Arabic radio service, it was created as the first foreign language service, and "on the 3rd of January 1938, at exactly six o'clock, the sound of Big Ben was broadcast throughout the Near and Middle East from a 3rd floor studio at BBC Broadcasting House in London," (Jaber 2008). Each broadcast would begin with recitation from the Koran followed by news and commentary (Partner 1988). Before and during the Second World War, BBC Arabic service proved to be a very important propaganda tool that was used to counter Hitler's message sent via Radio Berlin and Mussolini's Radio Bari that both aired in Arabic (MacDonald 1977; Rawnsley 1996; Sreberny & Torfeh 2012; Williams 2012). By 1953, the BBC Arabic Service aired 28 hours per week. The 4 hou daily programs were not enough to compete with other radio stations like that of Cairo and Damascus, driving the BBC Arabic staff to complain (Vaughan 2002). However, the number of transmission hours was still more than other foreign radio stations in Arabic like that of France (3 hours), Egypt (2 hours), and USSR (1 hour) (Partner 1988). The early stages of BBC Arabic witnessed many challenges especially in relation to gaining credibility among listeners. For example, Freya Stark (1893-1993) referred in a letter dated May 20, 1941 to the problem of BBC's credibility during the 1941 revolution in Iraq. She mentioned the BBC presented the "Iraq situation [as] developing satisfactorily"

despite all the uncertainty during the war, British losses, and the danger of besieged troops in Habanyya. Stark cited Adrian Holman, an Embassy attaché in 1940, ironically saying that "he can't see the satisfactorily," while Stark mentioned that she "can't even see the developing" (Stark 1962: 105). Also, the CIA's report on Iraq in 1950 confirmed that the programs of BBC Arabic were "characterized by Iraqis as propaganda, while BBC English news bulletins [were] highly trusted." (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950: 23-4). It seems that one of the main reasons behind this kind of mistrust and bias in reporting were related to the pressures exerted on the BBC by the British government. In 1955, for example, former British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, who opposed Nasser's rule, seemed to be dissatisfied with the BBC's coverage in the region because he wanted it to take a more partisan stance, stating that "the provision of vigorous material is needed. I do not see how we can rely on the BBC for this," (as cited in Vaughan, 2002: 158). In order to enhance its credibility in the early stages, BBC Arabic tried to hire famous Arab journalists and intellectuals such as Isa Sabbagh (Gillespie & Baumann 2006: 4). Other challenges faced by BBC Arabic service during the 1970s and 80s were mostly technical, represented in the limitation of radio transmission that could not reach rural areas of both the Arab world and francophone and lusophone Africa (Mytton 2011).

Similar to its previous interest, the BBC established its Arabic television channel as its first non-English service to broadcast. In fact, BBC Arabic television first started airing in 1994 as part of the Saudi-run Orbit network. However, the TV station criticized Saudi Arabia in some of its reports which led to its broadcasting license being revoked, an opportunity that the founders of Al-Jazeera TV in Qatar took to establish their channel with the help of BBC Arabic employees (Bahry 2001). After his inauguration in 2007, the UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, felt some pressure following two terrorist bombing attempts on June 29 and 30 of the same year. In his speech to the UK Parliament, he pledged to enact new policies and changes by adding more funding for a BBC Arabic channel in addition to a Farsi TV channel with editorial independence for the Iranian people (as cited in Shi 2008). On March 11, 2008, BBC Arabic television was established by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and began broadcasting. The Arabic channel began with an annual budget of £25 million, which increased by an extra £2.2 million for three more years in 2011 (BBC News 2008, 2011). However, in 2014 the channel was funded by the UK license fee payer. Similar to the BBC in general, the Arabic station was created as a public diplomacy necessity and as strategically vital following the attacks of 9/11, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The goal was to enhance Britain's "influence in a region where Great Britain had long been a dominant player" (Shreim 2015: 534). There was a concern that Britain was not involved in important discussions on the Middle East due to the emergence of other regional media outlets. Back in 2003, vital conversations and debates were taking place on Al-Jazeera, in a context where heated anti-Western sentiments were prevalent, (Leonard & Smewing 2003). Hence, BBC Arabic television is partly expected to provide a necessary platform for political and democratic discussions in order to indirectly exert influence on the public and elites

as well as give a British tinge to the debates. Currently, BBC Arabic TV has become popular in the Middle East because of the perceived and objective news which is something the Arab audience "could trust" (Chapman & Director 2007) though there is still a clear preference for British news and the promotion of UK politics in its programs (Al-Rawi 2016).

As mentioned above, one of the goals of the BBC is to establish global conversations around significant issues that concern the world like global warming and the war on terror. This is very much true in relation to its Arabic service which has actively tried to appeal to "transnational Arab identities" (Shreim 2015) by acting as a unifier of different Arabic-speaking audiences that have diverse geographical locations and ideological backgrounds. For example, the famous TV programs '*Nuqtat Hewar*' (Discussion Point) as well as 'G710' that were also available on social media outlets were regarded as platforms for global conversations, both of which were closely monitored by BBC staff (Abdel Sattar et al. 2012; Gillespie 2013). Other important venues are routinely used by BBC staff to engage more Arab publics; for example, during the London 2012 Olympic Games, an average of 17 tweets were posted daily on the BBC Arabic Twitter page. By the end of the sporting event, the Twitter account had accumulated some 36,112 more followers (Shreim 2015).

Recent Developments in British Public Diplomacy

Currently, British public diplomacy is mostly run by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and this activity is defined as "work aiming to inform and engage individuals and organizations overseas in order to improve understanding of and strengthen influence for the United Kingdom in a manner consistent with governmental medium and long-term goals" (Foreign Affairs Committee 2007: 125). On its website, the FCO states it works "at home and overseas to safeguard Britain's national security and build Britain's prosperity" with the help of over 13,000 people in about 270 locations (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2012). In fact, the FCO has some specialized departments like the Department for Culture, Media & Sport that run different museums and tourism bodies to promote cultural diplomacy and brand the UK as a highly cultured nation (FCO n.d.).

In general, British public diplomacy efforts are coordinated by the Public Diplomacy Strategy Board (BPDSB) in cooperation with the programs of the Foreign Office, the British Council, and the BBC (Roberts 2007). Chaired by the Foreign Office Minister of State responsible for Public Diplomacy, the BPDSB also includes coordinating the organization of cultural and sporting events like the London 2012 Olympics (Zhou, Shen, Zhang & Zhong 2013; Pamment 2014). The Board is responsible for identifying priorities and objectives, both thematically and geographically, of central public diplomacy (Foreign Affairs Committee 2006). Other British agencies are also involved in public diplomacy especially the British Tourist Authority (BTA) and British Trade International (BTI) (Leonard & Smewing 2003). Before the emergence of social media, British public diplomacy followed a basic

marketing approach by projecting the UK's image to an overwhelmingly passive audience (Vickers 2004). Christopher Meyer, the British Ambassador to the US, once mentioned that "We're babies in the proper use of information technology," (as cited in Henrikson 2006: 1).

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the British government was involved in numerous public diplomacy activities since it occupied Southern Iraq and needed to gain some credibility. In fact, the BBC World Service Trust started in August 2005 *al Mirbad TV* and a radio station in Southern Iraq where British troops were stationed. The Department of International Development (DFID) spent $11.81 million to cover the expense for two years after which the station would be required to search for funding from other sources (Cochrane 2006). FCO was also involved in public diplomacy by proxy. For example, the Index on Censorship was partly funded by the British Foreign Office's Human Rights Programme Fund to support a group of Iraqi journalists in writing reports that will be later published online and in print (Jayasekera 2003). After the withdrawal of British soldiers from Iraq, public diplomacy efforts continued. For instance, BBC Media Action ran a media program in Iraq called "Consolidating Media Freedom in Iraq" which was funded by the UK government's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the United States government's Department for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour and Europe Aid (Kaisy 2014).

The British government also established a regional media center in Dubai around 2008 as part of its efforts to create strong networks with elites in the region and directly present the views of the UK government to Arab media outlets located in Dubai Media City. During the Arab Spring events in 2011, the British Foreign Office funded the bilingual (English & Arabic) "Egyptian Voices" (aswatmasriya.com) website in coordination with Reuters (Aswatmasriya n.d.). Finally, it seems that the British government has recently tried to target moderate Muslim leaders such as the Egyptian preacher Amr Khalid in order to influence him, and there are also indications of support, financial and otherwise, from the British government to select Arabic-language media, allegedly including Al-Hiwar TV, to promote a moderate rhetoric. The channel's headquarters is actually located in London (Sakr 2008: 293-4).

In a 2003 report supported by the British Council, Leonard and Smewing published a review of British public diplomacy's preferred strategies in the Middle East. The authors emphasized a few important areas that must be improved such as enhancing the capacity of information and communications technologies. They also acknowledged the problem of mistrust of Western motivations and the growing anti-Americanism and stressed the need to promote specific viewpoints which include: highlighting Britain's Europeanness and the differentiation from the Americans, assertion and proof against of the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, the presentation of alternative narratives to those highlighted by extremists, and emphasizing Britain's diversity (Leonard & Smewing 2003).

More recently, there have been some developments especially after Lord Carter of Coles' review of British Public Diplomacy that was issued in December 2005. The review "led to a radical new approach within the U.K. British public diplomacy moved from a loose emphasis on promoting the national brand to a tight focus on a small number of strategic objectives of major relevance to foreign policy," (Cull 2009: 19). British embassies around the world started working on different issues and using a variety of platforms. For example, J. Pamment (2012) studied a couple of British media campaigns including "Scotland in Sweden", which was sponsored by the British Embassy and British Council in Sweden as well as the Scottish Executive, and the "Climate Change Initiative" that was run by the British Embassy in Washington.

Social Media and Public Diplomacy

Most UK embassies in the Middle East have been increasingly using social media as well as experimenting with novel approaches to connect with the Arab publics. Tom Fletcher, the former British ambassador to Lebanon, for instance, started following a new approach which he called "Naked Diplomacy" (Fletcher 2016). He mentioned that the British staff at the Embassy used social media extensively as they "experimented on Twitter– first tweet-up with a PM, with a diva, first RT of a Western diplomat by the President of Iran, online scraps with terrorists and satirists, #Leb2020 and much more," (Fletcher 2015).

Mostly on the move and with the use of his mobile phone, he managed to post about "10,000 tweets during his ambassadorship, on average six or seven per day. That drew in nearly 48,000 followers– 'twice as many as the Foreign Secretary'," (BBC Magazine 2015). His unconventional public diplomacy method was focused on actively reaching out to the public in order to better brand the UK as well as to provide an alternative and better narrative to that which extremist groups like ISIS promote. For example, he worked with celebrities and sports icons to promote unity among Lebanon's sectarian society, including blood donations for victims of a bomb attack and a job-swap with an Ethiopian domestic worker (Ibid.).

In order to better understand the way British embassies use social media in the Middle East, we retrieved the available Twitter data of 14 British embassies using the commercial service of Crimson Hexagon, a social media company that has full access to Twitter's historical data, for the period between December 12, 2013 to March 22, 2015. This period was chosen because it followed the major events of the Arab Spring, and it is important to see the audience engagement at that time. As can be seen in the Figure below, the highest number of Twitter posts came from Saudi Arabia followed by Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. The total number of Twitter posts for all the embassies was 22,842 and the total number of retweets by the online audience was 19,895. This means that 2,947 embassy tweets, which constitute %12.9 of the total posts, have not received a single retweet by the online audience (see Figure 1).
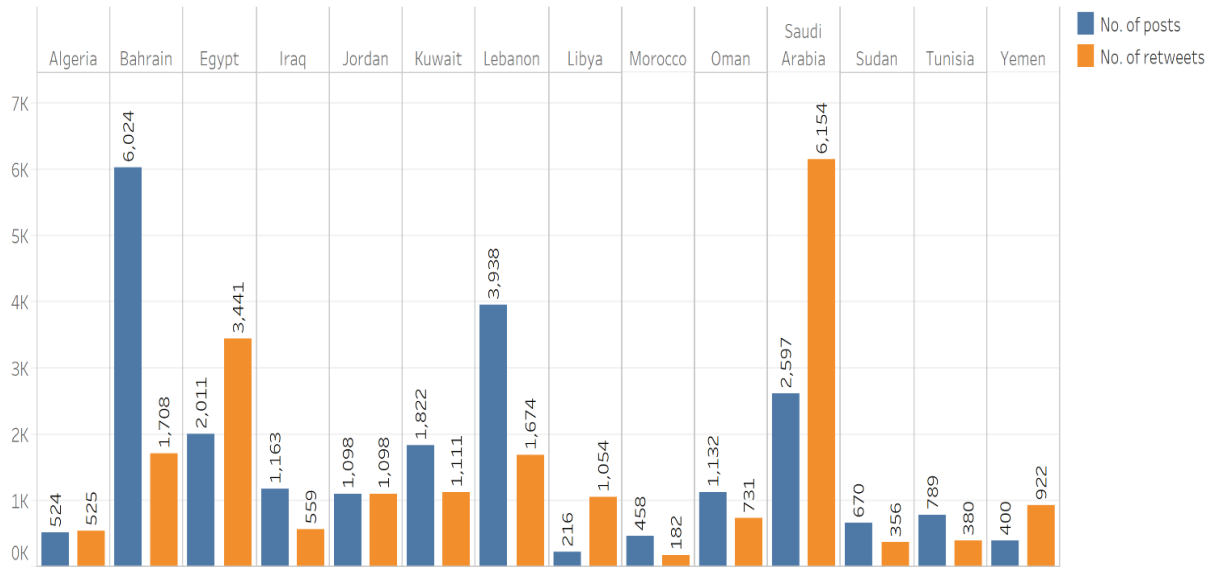
Figure 1- Total of British embassies' Twitter posts and audiences' retweets[*]

[*] The data listed in the figure and table beow is retrieved using Crimson Hexagon online platform for the period between December 12, 2013 to March 22, 2015.

As of September 17, 2016, the total number of Twitter followers for all these embassies was 271,715 with an average of about 19,400 followers for each account, which cannot be regarded as high. Besides, the Twitter followers are not limited to the respective countries themselves; as Table (1) shows, the majority of users are located in other Arab countries and even some Western states.

Table 1- The top 10 geographical locations of audience retweeters for 14 Twitter accounts

Embassy in Saudi Arabia		Embassy in Jordan		Embassy in Bahrain	
Country	Posts	Country	Posts	Country	Posts
Saudi Arabia	9578	Jordan	1295	Bahrain	4076
United Kingdom	6081	United Kingdom	915	United Kingdom	2602
United States	761	United States	103	United States	587
United Arab Emirates	298	Japan	52	Saudi Arabia	467
Turkey	274	United Arab Emirates	35	Turkey	271
Canada	241	Bahrain	27	Germany	129
France	105	Lebanon	15	United Arab Emirates	117
Bahrain	104	Saudi Arabia	15	Kuwait	112
Egypt	83	Canada	13	France	61
Qatar	82	Australia	12	Kenya	61
Embassy in Kuwait		Embassy in Yemen		Embassy in Lebanon	
Country	Posts	Country	Posts	Country	Posts
United Kingdom	639	United Kingdom	322	Lebanon	1089
Kuwait	490	Yemen	301	United Kingdom	737
United States	60	United States	156	United States	164
Japan	43	Saudi Arabia	33	Syria	74
Saudi Arabia	42	Turkey	26	United Arab Emirates	45
United Arab Emirates	36	Belgium	23	Bahrain	36
Bahrain	31	Bahrain	18	France	30

India	20	Egypt	15	Turkey	27
Turkey	14	France	12	Canada	23
Iraq	13	Canada	11	Egypt	23
Embassy in Egypt		**Embassy in Oman**		**Embassy in Libya**	
Country	Posts	Country	Posts	Country	Posts
Egypt	2989	Oman	669	Libya	673
United Kingdom	1149	United Kingdom	269	United Kingdom	324
United States	288	Russian Federation	41	United States	140
Bahrain	101	Jordan	37	Egypt	76
Turkey	79	United States	33	Turkey	41
Saudi Arabia	64	Bahrain	20	United Arab Emirates	29
Canada	61	United Arab Emirates	19	Bahrain	26
United Arab Emirates	61	Saudi Arabia	17	France	17
Netherlands	47	Kuwait	8	Saudi Arabia	17
France	39	Japan	7	Tunisia	16
Embassy in Tunisia		**Embassy in Algeria**		**Embassy in Iraq**	
Country	Posts	Country	Posts	Country	Posts
United Kingdom	283	Algeria	385	United Kingdom	449
Tunisia	235	United Kingdom	242	Iraq	165
United States	32	France	62	United States	131
Libya	20	United States	37	Bahrain	30
France	17	United Arab Emirates	24	United Arab Emirates	22
United Arab Emirates	8	Bahrain	7	Turkey	19
Bahrain	7	Japan	7	Canada	17
Belgium	7	Spain	7	India	16
Egypt	7	Canada	6	Spain	15
Canada	6	Egypt	6	Brazil	11
Embassy in Morocco		**Embassy in Sudan**			
Country	Posts	Country	Posts		
United Kingdom	162	United Kingdom	245		
Morocco	112	Sudan	101		
United States	17	United States	74		
Bahrain	7	Germany	22		
Iran	7	Ethiopia	18		
France	4	Bahrain	14		
Russian Federation	4	Kenya	10		
Saudi Arabia	3	Canada	8		
Algeria	2	Turkey	8		
Canada	2	Uganda	7		

Based on the Klout score, which ranks users according to online social influence based on a numerical value between 1 and 100, many UK agencies like DFID are involved in retweeting British embassies' tweets which mostly deal with promoting embassy activities in the region. However, the audience's retweets to the embassies' posts contain many types of criticism and direct attacks mostly due to the passive and often pro-government stances taken by these embassies. The British Embassy in Bahrain, for instance, was active online; however, the Shiite protests against the Sunni monarchy, which is closely supported by the British government, seemed to

be the main focus of the online chatter. One Twitter user, David Draiman, for example, mentioned in one of his retweets the following: "But UK is silent on #Bahrain crackdown, #torture & doesn't demand releases of jailed activists. Shameful!" Another user, Maryam Alkhawaja, whose father is a well-known activist imprisoned by the Bahraini authorities, once complained: "@UKinBahrain embassy does better PR work for #Bahrain regime than the up to 13 PR companies they've employed over past 3 years." Also, the Bahrain Human Rights Twitter account retweeted once about another Bahraini activist called, Nabeel Rajab, claiming: "when I was n [sic] prison @ukinbahrain telephoned my lawyer, asked him if I wud [sic] keep quiet if I was released." In other cases, Twitter was sometimes used by others to highlight controversial incidents that happened in the UK itself. For instance, Rashad Alwahaibi from Oman retweeted about the case of the Omani girls who were handcuffed at Stansted Airport and then deported in February 2015 (*Muscat Daily* 2015) saying: "No reaction from @UKinOman When #UKInsultsOmaniGirls by dragging them w/ handcuffs through an a.port. What if a vice versa situation happens?" Another issue that is related to social media use by British Embassies in the Middle East is that many posts were written in English rather than Arabic, based on the qualitative assessment of these tweets.

In brief, there is no doubt that the BBC and the British Council have continuously assisted British public diplomacy efforts from the beginning and can be considered very useful due to their indirect approach in exerting soft power in the region as well as nation branding. Also, social media outlets of British embassies are important tools to reach Arab audiences, but they were not actively engaging local audiences during the Arab Spring. A more effective approach seems to come from certain programs by and the general news coverage of BBC Arabic as well as the personalized social media engagement of British Ambassadors' themselves like the case of Tom Fletcher despite security and other logistical limitations.

It is easy to assess the short-term impact of public diplomacy activities, but it is far more difficult to understand the long term effects of such media policies. There is no doubt that British public diplomacy cannot succeed without improvements in actual policies as both are closely connected. If there are failures in British public diplomacy, they can be largely attributed to placing British economic and political interests first while ignoring cultural sensitivity towards certain socio-political issues in the Arab world.

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