



The Liberal Peace Discourse and the Institutionalization of Violence in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Middle East, due to its strategic importance, has long experienced protracted conflicts shaped by colonial processes rooted in Eurocentrism. Its transformation into a highly militarized and securitized region stems from the West's self-interested, colonial approach, evident in interventions or disengagement from the region. Following the Cold War, the liberal peacebuilding discourse sought to spread liberalism globally and integrate the Middle East's economic-political systems, notably through the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This discourse raised hopes for resolving conflicts and fostering lasting peace, but the failure of Oslo and escalating conflicts undermined its emancipatory claims. Liberals attributed this to implementation flaws rather than the discourse's incompatibility with the region's socio-political structures. Post-liberal peace initiatives, civil society efforts, and substantial investments to build trust also failed in conflicts like Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq. These programs, particularly under the New Middle East framework, prolonged peace processes, entrenching cultural violence and dehumanization. Without addressing root causes or historical contexts, these initiatives industrialized peace and perpetuated covert violence. The neoliberal peace discourse's economic integration exacerbated inequalities, fostering relative deprivation and structural violence. The concept of Middle Eastern exceptionalism normalized and entrenched violence, revealing a Eurocentric, neo-colonial approach. Addressing the research question—how has the liberal peace discourse influenced the formation and persistence of violence in the Middle East?—the hypothesis posits that it normalizes and perpetuates violence. The study seeks to reveal how the region's colonial, Eurocentric formation and paternalistic liberal and neoliberal peace interventions prolong peace cycles and reinforce cultural violence. As violence is consistently normalized as a Middle Eastern trait, with causes reduced to internal cultural factors, examining the historical and global roots of violence offers a clearer picture of its institutionalization. Clarifying this is essential to show how historical cultural violence and dehumanization now sustain overt and structural violence.

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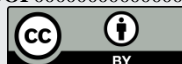
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Methodology

The theoretical framework of this research is international historical sociology, which examines the relationship between violence and the liberal peace discourse within the region's historical context, grounded in a critique of Eurocentrism. Drawing on the relational approach of this framework, the research methodology employs the case-narrative method. Unlike approaches measuring variable impacts, this method selectively traces the causal sequence of events with an outcome-oriented approach (Lachmann, 2013). In this method, "narrative meaning, as a causal linking force, is a function of past and present contexts, and reality emerges not from primary effects but through interactions" (Abbot, 2001: 193). Thus, in this study, violence in the Middle East is selectively traced through the historical sequence of events—from the region's colonial formation to interventions by democracy-promoting liberal discourse programs—to illustrate how external-internal and colonial-global interactions contribute to the institutionalization of regional violence. The data collection method is library-based.

Result and discussion

The liberal peace discourse, rooted in Kant's philosophy and democratic peace theory, posits that democracies are inherently peaceful and avoid mutual conflict. It promotes positive peace through economic integration, liberal institution-building, and international cooperation, contrasting with realism's negative peace (conflict management). After the Cold War, liberal peace evolved from state-centric to community-based approaches, incorporating non-state actors in democratic state-building. However, it remained Western-centric, seeking to integrate the East into a hierarchical global order.

In the Middle East, the Oslo Accords (1993) applied liberal peace to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but failed due to disregard for historical contexts and unequal negotiating parties. Liberals attributed this failure to implementation issues rather than the discourse's incompatibility with regional socio-political structures. The New Middle East initiative, with economic integration and trust-building programs, exacerbated structural violence and relative deprivation, industrializing peace. U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, prioritizing Western interests over local contexts, fostered corruption, insecurity, and the emergence of groups like ISIS, failing to secure lasting peace.

The liberal peace discourse suffers from universalism, neglecting cultural and historical diversity, and prioritizing state-building over sustainable peace. By imposing Western values and securitization, it has normalized and institutionalized violence. Middle Eastern exceptionalism, grounded in Eurocentrism and Orientalism, attributes violence to regional culture, marginalizing local agency. Eurocentrism frames the Middle East as a subject for civilization and modernization, embedding violence through the Westphalian order and colonial border demarcations.

Colonialism significantly shaped the Middle East's violent formation. The imposition of the Westphalian order and artificial territorial divisions disrupted the region's historical and natural order, institutionalizing violence. The narrative of artificial borders, rooted in colonial perspectives, overlooks local agency. The Western, fluid, and politically driven definition of the Middle East reflects Eurocentrism and Orientalism. By prolonging peace processes and ignoring conflict roots, the liberal peace discourse has reinforced cultural violence and dehumanization, rendering sustainable peace elusive. Western interventions, militarization, and the industrialization of peace have entrenched and perpetuated violence in the region.

Conclusion

The liberal peace discourse, rooted in Eurocentrism and the hierarchical global order particularly after the Soviet collapse and the spread of liberalism, promised sustainable peace through democratization but has proven a failed idea. The Middle East, marked by intense conflict, experienced this through initiatives like the Oslo Accords. However, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan to the Taliban and the Gaza crisis, involving Palestinian massacres, underscore this failure. Rather than reducing violence, liberal peace has institutionalized it, rendering the Middle East a zone of persistent conflict.

The colonial, Eurocentric formation of the Middle East, sidelining local agency, facilitated liberal peace interventions under the pretext of emancipation. By prolonging peace processes and ignoring cultural violence, liberal pacification has perpetuated violence cycles and commodified peace. Its priority is not peace but sustaining violence for Western interests, securing Western stability through Middle Eastern insecurity. Post-liberal approaches, such as hybrid or everyday peace, reduce local actors to implementers, preserving Eurocentric frameworks and defining peace from a Western lens, thus embedding violence.

The discourse's normalization of cultural violence has fueled overt violence and populist, racially charged movements in the West. Israel's actions following the Al-Aqsa Flood and Western support for Palestinian dehumanization and genocide exemplify this. Intertwined with Eurocentrism, liberal peace entrenches and perpetuates violence in the Middle East.

Keywords: liberal peace; the Middle East; peacemaking; the Middle East peace process; The institutionalization of violence.

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