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Political legitimacy and celebrity politicians

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Published in:
Middle East Critique

DOI:
10.1080/19436149.2018.1516336

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Pace, M., & Bergman Rosamond, A. (2018). Political legitimacy and celebrity politicians: Tony Blair as Middle East envoy 2007-2015. *Middle East Critique*, *27*(4), 383-398. https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2018.1516336

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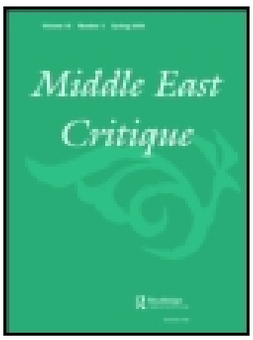

Middle East Critique

ISSN: 1943-6149 (Print) 1943-6157 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccri20

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To cite this article: Michelle Pace & Annika Bergman Rosamond (2018): Political Legitimacy and Celebrity Politicians: Tony Blair as Middle East Envoy 2007–2015, Middle East Critique, DOI: 10.1080/19436149.2018.1516336

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2018.1516336

Published online: 01 Nov 2018.

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Middle East Critique, 2018
Vol. 0, No. 0, 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2018.1516336

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Political Legitimacy and Celebrity Politicians: Tony Blair as Middle East Envoy 2007–2015

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ABSTRACT *After Tony Blair resigned as the United Kingdom's prime minster in June 2007, he was appointed as the official envoy of the Quartet on the Middle East. His appointment was marred with controversy not the least with regard to his suitability for the role and his performance as peace envoy, with many observers questioning his ethical credentials. The EU along with the US, Russia and the UN make up the Quartet and funded Blair's office until 2012. With the US and the EU as the key regional players in this conflict, Blair became an embodiment of these players in this specific role. This article employs critical discourse analysis to nuance whether Tony Blair's role as Middle East envoy, and as an embodiment of the EU, was indeed a legitimate one in terms of achieving at least some of its stated aims, particularly those pertaining to the Palestinians who live under Israel's colonization. It does so by engaging with the work of John Street and more broadly the literature on celebrity politicians and by counterbalancing this conceptual framework with a critical reflection on Blair's time as Middle East envoy.*

KEY WORDS: *Celebrity; celebrity politician; critical discourse analysis: Israel; Middle East envoy; occupied Palestinian territories; Palestine*

This article engages with the role of personalities in the Middle East conflict. Specifically, it seeks to shed light on the role of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair as Middle East envoy in this intractable conflict between 2007 and 2015. Surprisingly, very little academic reflection has been offered on his controversial role as Quartet representative. Our research puzzle centers on the question of whether Tony Blair's role as Middle East Quartet envoy was a legitimate one given that it has raised fierce criticism for its ineffectiveness. Because Blair's role as Quartet special representative raised near constant controversy, it is important to evaluate what headway, if any, Tony Blair made in nearly eight years in the post. Like Mark Wheeler, we posit that Tony Blair is a 'celebrity politician,'[1] who is 'media savvy' and not unfamiliar with the mediatization[2] and celebritization

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[1] Mark Wheeler (2013) *Celebrity Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 17.
[2] Douglas Brommesson & Ann-Marie Ekengren (2017) *The Mediatization of Foreign Policy: Political Decision-Making and Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

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of politics.[3] Blair skillfully made use of celebrity society and media to project his star power across the globe, in particular in the Middle East. Our investigation draws upon celebrity politics literature,[4] whose scholarly contributions enable us to uncover the 'celebritization' of the Middle East conflict through the appointment of an internationally known politician, Tony Blair, as a Middle East envoy. Celebrity politicians, like Tony Blair, employ techniques similar to those of entertainers, including taking part in photo opportunities with actors and pop stars and appearing on chat shows to build their charisma and to influence their audiences.[5] Former US President Barak Obama, who frequently was caught on camera with actors like George Clooney and Leonardo Di Caprio, is another example of a celebrity politician.

Yet, celebrity politicians attempt to convey the impression that, although extraordinary in many ways, they are like ordinary citizens, going about their business and being like the rest of us,[6] a practice pursued by Blair.[7] Nevertheless, they are extra-ordinary, being situated within privileged society in the corridors of power. Moreover, they employ marketing ploys/techniques to overcome the cynicism that often is attributed to politicians. Celebrity culture tends to attract more attention and wider audiences than party political broadcasts, and, by mixing popular culture with serious political messages, an issue can be made known to wider audiences.[8] We argue that such techniques similarly are used when politicians take on global roles as the case of Tony Blair as Middle East envoy shows. Here, we analyze Blair's different personas and his performance as the Quartet's Middle East envoy by employing critical discourse analysis of a range of materials, including written biographies, TV documentaries, as well as key documents from the Office of the Quartet Representative Tony Blair 2007–2015. In preparing for this article, we made use of the following website: http://www.tonyblairoffice.org/quartet/pages/6213/. However, this site is no longer available. One reason for this might be that the TB Quartet office wishes to obscure his lack of achievement as envoy. However, we also have employed secondary literature and other sources in developing our argument. By doing so, we are able to shed light on the importance of individual agency, celebrity qualities and privilege of a key political figure engaged in the Middle East conflict and who embodies, at least partially, the EU, as a key member of the Quartet, and the resultant failure of a potentially meaningful advancement toward a peaceful solution of this intractable conflict. We believe that had Tony Blair mixed his celebrity status with tactful diplomacy and mediation behind the scenes, rather than being in the limelight of the global media, more could have been achieved in terms of persuading Israel to engage in meaning negotiations with

[3] Wheeler, *Celebrity*, p. 17; Matthew Kelly (2014) US Middle East Policy and the State-Capitalism Controversy in Imperialism's Historiography, *Middle East Critique*, 23(1), p. 84.

[4] John Street (2004) Celebrity politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6(4), pp. 435–452; idem (2012) Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* 14(3) pp. 346–356; David Marshall (2013) Personifying agency: The Public-Persona-Place-Issue Continuum, *Celebrity Studies,* 4(3), pp. 369–371; idem (2014) Persona studies: Mapping the Proliferation of the Public Self, *Journalism,* 14(2), pp. 153–170; A. Cooper (2008) *Celebrity Diplomacy* (London: Paradigm Publishers).

[5] Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*.

[6] Street, Celebrity politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation. p. 346.

[7] Alastair Campbell (2007) *The Blair Years: extracts from the Alastair Campbell diaries* (London: Hutchinson); Tom Bower (2016) *Broken Vows: Tony Blair: The Tragedy of Powe*r (London: Faber and Faber).

[8] Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*.

the Palestinians by taking account of the latter's cause. Known as a figure with highly persuasive powers, Blair could have focused on persuading Israel, the dominant power, and its settler colonial enterprise, that the day will come when the US and its allies will take a strong stance against Israeli practices unless the Israeli government recognizes the Palestinians as equal partners and, as such, their human rights more broadly.

We commence our article by exploring the rise of Tony Blair as a celebrity politician, drawing upon celebrity politics and humanitarianism scholarship. We proceed by identifying privileges and conflicts of interest surrounding Blair's role as a celebrity Middle East envoy. In so doing we unpack the conflictual context of the Middle East and Tony Blair's role within it. This in turn gives rise to a set of ethical questions as to the appropriateness of Blair's appointment as special envoy, which we address through our use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as our main methodology in the second part of our article. We particularly are interested in discursive mechanisms that reveal privilege, power relations, the construction of Blair's multiple celebrity personas[9] and Euro-centricity. We conclude by contending that Blair's role as Middle East envoy was not legitimate and as such puts the ethical permissibility of the EU and the entirety of the international Quartet into doubt.

Framing Tony Blair's Rise as a Celebrity Politician

Tony Blair created his style and celebrity status over several years, starting with his attempts to re-launch the Labour Party under the label Cool Britannia. In this respect, John Street notes that 'Popular culture was the focus of many New Labour initiatives and Tony Blair cultivated close relationships with the likes of Bob Geldof (of Boomtown Rats) and Bono, assuming that they would be well placed to articulate the significance of Blair's debt reduction policy to the Bush administration at the time.[10] Blair's political persona was created in the hinterland between politics and popular culture and he was aware of the power of celebrity in communicating political messages to the British electorate.[11] Blair cultivated his celebrity and this, together with the semblance of trustworthiness and sincerity, provided a stepping-stone to his political career in the Middle East. Yet, it soon became clear that Blair had a tendency to prioritize his personal business interests at the expense of local peace initiatives. As we argue in our analytical section, Blair's suitability for the position of Middle East envoy can be questioned on many grounds, including colonial ones. Blair had been the prime minister of a former colonial state, and, as such, he was implicated in its history and previous foreign policy pursuits. From 1923 to 1947 the British Empire ruled a League of Nations-approved mandate over Palestine and played a major role in the Middle East region's instability. Earlier, in 1916, British colonial officials based in Egypt had convinced Arab leaders to revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which was a belligerent against Britain and its allies during World War I. In return, the British promised their support for the establishment of an independent Arab state that would include Palestine. However, 18 months later, the Balfour Declaration committed the British Empire's full support for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine.

[9] Marshall, Persona Studies: Mapping the proliferation of the public self.
[10] Street, Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?, pp. 349–350.
[11] Ibid, p. 350.

After the Ottoman Empire surrendered in 1918, Britain and France carved up its Arab provinces among themselves, a decision that entailed the creation of artificial borders, support for newly imposed monarchies and other leaders, who easily could be influenced by these external powers. To justify the failure to grant independence to these new states—Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Transjordan, they constructed the concept of mandates, meaning they held the mandate to rule them until such time that the League of Nations should judge them sufficiently developed to become independent. In 1947–48, the Palestine Mandate ended in a civil war between the native Palestinians and European Jews who immigrated there after 1923 to establish a Jewish homeland as promised them in the Balfour Declaration. The UN partition Resolution of 1947 was intended to create a Jewish and a Palestinian state but the Palestinian state has yet to come to fruition.

By situating our study of Palestine and the Middle East within celebrity politics scholarship, we are able to analyze the co-constitution and disruption of the boundaries between politics and the contemporary modern entertainment industry. The portrayal of the Middle East in popular culture is plain to see. Moreover, we live in what Robert van Krieken labels as a 'celebrity society,' defined by celebrity culture,[12] in which global audiences are accustomed to the blending of politics and popular culture.[13] President Barack Obama was no stranger on the US talk show circuit: A few months after his inauguration in 2009, he made history by being the first sitting US President ever to appear on a late night talk show, as a guest on 'The Tonight Show' with Jay Leno. Former British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was a regular on the British satire show *Have I got News for You* on several occasions during the period 1999–2006. The most astounding example of the celebritization of politics is the election of reality television star Donald Trump to the US presidential office in 2016.

Hence, celebrity society[14] and culture are part of political life and celebrity politicians use entertainment techniques to conduct politics. This requires investigation into the role of celebrity politicians in constituting global politics and their capacity to offer solutions to pressing international problems like the Israel-Palestine conflict.[15] Simply put, individuals matter in setting the direction of the global ethical agenda.[16] Here we question the privileged position of celebrity politicians in international society and the Euro-centricity that surrounds their work. Moreover, we argue that the 'trustworthiness' and 'sincerity' of their actions need to be treated with caution. Drawing on research conducted by Rosario Forlenza and Bjørn Thomassen,[17] we suggest that Blair has

[12] Robert van Krieken (2012) *Celebrity Society* (London: Routledge).

[13] Caitlin Hamilton & Laura J. Shepherd (2016) *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in a Digital Age* (London: Routledge).

[14] R. van Krieken, *Celebrity Society*; Kafah Bachari (2016) Ice Cream in Gaza, in: Ru Freeman (ed.), *Extraordinary Rendition: American Writers on Palestine* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press), pp. 293–300.

[15] Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy*; Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*; Street, 'Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?'

[16] Annika Bergman Rosamond (2015) Humanitarian Relief Worker Sean Penn: A Contextual Story, in: L. Richey (ed.) *Celebrities as New Development Actors: When Does Context Matter?* (Oxford: Routledge). Annika Bergman Rosamond (2016) The Digital Politics of Celebrity Activism Against Sexual Violence: Angelina Jolie as Global Mother, in: L. J. Shepherd & C. Hamilton (eds) *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age* (Oxford: Routledge).

[17] Rosario Forlenza & Bjørn Thomassen (2016) *Decoding Donald Trump: The Triumph of Trickster Politics*, Available at: http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/04/decoding-donald-trump-the-triumph-of-trickster-politics/#.WQg-udhMTIU, accessed 30 April, 2017.

qualities of a trickster manipulating his own self-narrative to create trust in his public celebrity 'persona.'[18] Celebrity politicians like Blair have access to international institutions such as the EU, which provide them with legitimacy and power. Having such access at the highest level of the political and military hierarchies, we argue, should enable celebrity politicians of Blair's order to have influence on matters of peaceful conflict resolution. However, this does not seem to follow automatically. We argue that through tactful diplomacy, celebrity politicians should be able to encourage world governing bodies and conflict parties to take meaningful, immediate action and to redirect global attention and resources toward ending conflict and inspiring peacebuilding.[19] Yet Blair, the celebrity diplomat,[20] appears to have imposed his own agenda onto the Middle East and demonstrated insufficient regard for local Palestinian voices. Like other A-listers, Tony Blair was happy to take part in photo shoots on his foreign travels, seeking media attention, but not necessarily doing much to resolve the intractable conflict.

These reflections indicate that celebrity diplomacy complements and challenges traditional forms of statecraft and diplomacy[21] in ways that are not without controversy. In his work on celebrity diplomacy, Andrew Cooper argues that the transformation of diplomacy in part has to do with the diversification of diplomacy itself—it has widened to include a range of new actors and spaces for celebrity engagement.[22] Celebrity diplomacy is then conducted by 'non-orthodox agents' and has the opportunity to 'shape the agenda of global issues.'[23] While Cooper's work centers on megastars we argue that his framework is applicable to famous politicians such as Blair. Politicians who historically conducted their diplomatic maneuvers behind closed doors now supplement such tactics with spin-doctors who instruct them on how to work the media. For example, Tony Blair's Director of Communications and Strategy from 2000 to 2003 was Alastair Campbell, a former British journalist, broadcaster, political aide and author. Campbell became known for the ways in which, intentionally or not, he elicited press attention to Blair's political moves.[24]

Tony Blair's role as the Quartet's Middle East envoy drew attention and much controversy about his appointment as portrayed by the international media's relentless coverage of his travels in the region. Blair accepted his position as Middle East envoy after he left Downing Street in June 2007. His remit was to help develop the Palestinian economy and improve governance. Initially, Palestinians welcomed his appointment as a high-profile figure who would be working toward change in their everyday lives in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt).[25] Eight years is a long period for such a prominent role. When we searched for actual concrete results emerging from Blair's work as Quartet representative, we found very little to show for it. In 2015, the Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, stopped meeting with Quartet envoy

[18] Marshall, Personifying Agency: The Public-Persona-Place-Issue Continuum; Marshall, Persona studies: Mapping the proliferation of the public self.
[19] Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
[20] Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy*.
[21] Ibid, *Celebrity Diplomacy,* p. 11.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid; see also Street, Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?, p. 352.
[24] Campbell, *The Blair Years*.
[25] Author Interviews conducted by Michelle Pace in the oPt, May, June and October 2016.

Tony Blair, because he considered the former British prime minister to be heavily biased in favor of Israel. In 2016, the Palestinian Authority announced it was cutting ties with the Middle East Quartet after a damning report issued by the latter which criticized both sides to the conflict. For example, Saeb Erekat, chief Palestinian negotiator in the Middle East Peace Process talks, issued a strong statement claiming: 'It does not meet our expectations as a nation living under a foreign colonial military occupation.'[26]

In fact, Blair's engineered scheme (when he was no longer Quartet envoy) together with Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and US Secretary of State John Kerry to restart the 'Middle East Peace Process' in 2016 fell apart after Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reneged on his initial agreement to bring pro-peace elements into the ruling coalition in Israel.[27] It also emerged that Blair had been acting as political adviser to Egypt's President el-Sisi, in an attempt to help the latter appear as though he had achieved some political points on the back of a series of failures at home and abroad. Therefore, Blair's role as Middle East envoy became equated too closely with big business, support for Egypt's authoritarian president and Israeli interests. After stepping down as prime minister, Blair has accumulated a lot of wealth from his lucrative businesses across the Middle East.[28]

Taking Stock of Scholarly Interventions on Celebrity and Politics

A key position of our article is that popular culture and international politics are co-constitutive.[29] As we have shown above, we draw upon celebrity politics literature[30] in making this claim, including debates on celebrity diplomacy[31] and humanitarianism.[32] This scholarship takes stock of both politicians who have acquired celebrity status as well as celebrities who engage in humanitarian work and political activism. The Tony Blair persona and brand exhibit elements of both politician and celebrity, and that persona has been the subject of many non-fictional accounts and several feature-length films. This chosen frame helps us shed light on the celebritization of the Middle East's most intractable conflict at the expense of an improvement in the daily lives of local communities affected by it. It adds value to existing scholarship on the Middle East conflict and power relations present within it, in particular the role of exogenous actors in local 'peacebuilding' processes and their inability to transform local conditions.

[26] *The Times of Israel* (2016) Palestinian authority said to sever ties with the quartet, July 5, 2016. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinian-authority-said-to-sever-ties-with-the-quartet), accessed December 9, 2017.

[27] *The New Arab* (2016) How Netanyahu double-crossed Tony Blair and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, May 19, 2006. Available at: https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2016/5/19/how-netanyahu-double-crossed-tony-blair-and-abdel-fattah-al-sisi, accessed December 9, 2017.

[28] Bower, *Broken Vows: Tony Blair: The Tragedy of Power*.

[29] Jutta Weldes (2003) *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave); and Roland Bleiker (2009) *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave & Macmillan).

[30] Wheeler, *Celebrity*; Street, Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter?

[31] Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy*.

[32] Lisa Ann Richey (2016) *Celebrity Humanitarianism and North-South Relations: Politics, Place and Power* (Oxford: Routledge); L. Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*; Ilan Kapoor (2013) *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity* (Abingdon: Routledge).

This is because celebrity humanitarianism, of which peacebuilding is one expression, is often 'ideological,' 'self-serving' and solidifies the 'very global inequality it seeks to redress.'[33]

Specifically, we argue that Tony Blair's celebrity status and persona(s) got in the way of peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict. Indeed, a key contention here is that celebrities, whether politicians or Hollywood A-listers, can bring global attention to a particular conflict zone or ethical dilemma, but also risk disabling ongoing (fragile) peace processes by conducting themselves in self-promotional ways or employing discourses that distort people's sense of reality on the ground.[34] In the next section, we provide an account of the conflictual context in which our study is situated and Blair's role within it.

Tony Blair as Middle East Envoy: His Celebrity Privilege and Conflicts of Interest Revealed

From June 2007 until his resignation in May 2015, Tony Blair was the envoy of the international Quartet, the contact group established in 2002 by the US, Russia, the UN and the EU to negotiate peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Its establishment was a reaction to the outbreak of the second intifada in late 2000 and the collapse of peace negotiations a few months later. Comprised of the four most powerful players in the Middle East peace process, the Quartet was deemed to be suited for dealing with the intractable conflict between Israelis and the Palestinians. On paper, the Quartet's powerful but small membership was to allow it to act swiftly and decisively, and its informal structure was to give the flexibility needed to navigate the often erupting 'crises' in this conflict and to adapt to changing developments on the ground.[35] The Quartet thus proposed a Roadmap and a set of Principles aimed at resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The Roadmap, published in 2002/03, sought to address three fundamental shortcomings of the Oslo peace process of the 1990s.[36] In addition to calling for parallel (rather than sequential or conditional) implementation of each side's obligations and insisting on monitoring of and accountability on both sides, the Roadmap sought to articulate a more clearly defined end game. It also made political and financial cooperation with the Palestinian Authority dependent on the recognition of the three Quartet principles: Recognition of Israel; renunciation of violence; and adherence to previous diplomatic agreements, in exchange for the diplomatic recognition of a Palestinian government.

Tony Blair's mandate as Quartet Representative (QR), was set out in a letter from the UN Secretary General on August 22, 2007, and stipulated that, as QR, Tony Blair was to: (a) Mobilize international assistance to the Palestinians; (b) Help identify and secure international support in order to address the institutional governance needs of

[33] Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism.*

[34] Norman Fairclough (2006) Tony Blair and the language of Politics, *Open Democracy,* December 20, 2006. Available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-blair/blair_language_4205.jsp, accessed December 9, 2017.

[35] Khaled Elgindy (2012) The Middle East Quartet: A Post-Mortem, *Analysis Paper*, Number 25, February. (Washington DC: The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings).

[36] Avi Shlaim (2005) The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process, in: Louise Fawcett (ed) *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

the Palestinian State, focusing as a matter of urgency on the rule of law; (c) Develop plans to promote Palestinian economic development including private sector partnerships, especially concerning access and freedom of movement and (d) Liaise with other countries, as appropriate, in support of the agreed Quartet objectives, a mandate very much focused on Blair keeping his eyes firmly on the Palestinian side, the occupied party.[37]

As Quartet Representative, Blair's mandate was to bring continuity and intensity of focus to the Quartet's efforts in support of the Palestinians in accordance with the Road Map. From September 1, 2007, Blair was to spend a significant part of his time in the region, working with the main parties and others to create lasting government institutions representing all Palestinians, a robust economy and a climate of law and order for the Palestinian people. The members of the Quartet also agreed that an office of the Quartet Representative be established in Jerusalem. The Representative was to be assisted in his work by a small team of experts seconded by partner countries and institutions.[38]

Blair's role as Quartet special representative, raised controversy and it is therefore important to evaluate what headway, if any, he made in nearly eight years in this role. In 2014, a cross-party group of British MPs warned that Israel's policies—which include restrictions on building, access to water, and 3G for Palestinian mobile providers—were proving seriously counterproductive. In a report on the UK's development work in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPts), international development committee (IDC) members stated that:

> We saw Israel taking a range of actions that hinder Palestinian economic development and must, at the very least, cause deep resentment on the Palestinian side, even amongst the most moderate and pragmatic people, and so will actually worsen Israel's own security.[39]

Several World Bank overview reports on the West Bank and Gaza concluded that the lack of a clear political horizon toward peace and reconciliation created an unsustainable economic situation.[40] Similarly, a Carnegie Endowment report stipulated that questions remained with regard to the sustainability of the recorded progress made in the Palestinian economy (under then Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's institution building program) in light of the ongoing diplomatic stalemate with Israel.[41] Against the backdrop of such rather damning stories one might ask how Tony Blair was viewed in the eyes of Palestinians themselves during his time as Middle East envoy charged with the task of improving the economy in the region?

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[37] Ban Ki-Moon (2007) Letter dated August 22, 2007 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, Atlanta and available at: https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/30488809BE5749B58525734E006BE870, accessed November 20, 2017.

[38] Ibid.

[39] UK Parliament (2014) The UK's Development Work in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, International Development Committee, Third Report. Available at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmintdev/565/56502.htm, accessed May 24, 2016.

[40] See, for example, World Bank (2016) *The World Bank In West Bank and Gaza.* Available at http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza, accessed November 20, 2017.

[41] Robert Danin, Oussama Kanaan, Firas Raad & Marwan Muasher (2012) *Palestine: Economic Challenges and Political Implications*, March 27 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

> What do you think Tony Blair achieved as Middle East envoy during his time here?' (Chuckle) 'Hah! Tony Blair added one more road block for Palestinians! While he stayed at the American Colony no one could freely enter the hotel amenities without high security checks cause his Royal Highness was there![42]

What was Tony Blair doing during all these developments? There is little evidence that Blair managed to challenge the *status quo* in his role as Middle East envoy. Like more orthodox celebrities, he acted in 'ideological' and 'self-serving' ways, 'promoting the celebrity brand' and as such solidifying 'the very global inequalities it seeks to redress.'[43] In fact, 'most celebrities do not fundamentally challenge statist practices and discourses of sovereign integrity and capitalism … but reproduce these through their privileged position' in society.[44] The appointment of a European celebrity politician, whom many critics have accused both of lying and fabricating the reasons for his own country's participation in the second Gulf War, was controversial. His appointment, while reassuring to some, should have inspired more concern among world leaders and institutions. Further, one might ask to what extent the local populations were consulted in this political decision. Like other expressions of celebrity politics, there is reason to challenge the colonial and privileged bias of Blair's years as a Middle East envoy.[45]

While Blair was Middle East envoy, he conducted business in Israel and the Arab countries and depended on the expertise and money of the British government to achieve both endeavors.[46] In Israel, Tony Blair and Ehud Barak, the former Israeli prime minister, were known as 'the twins' because both, since leaving office, had become wealthy businessmen with a range of vested interests in the Middle East. Again, Blair's privilege and celebrity status are indicative of a lack of connectedness with bottom-up sentiments in the occupied territories and within the progressive side of the Israeli community. Aside from privilege and celebrity status, he appeared to make a good deal of money out of his position in the Middle East. On May 13, 2015, Blair met President Buhari of Nigeria supposedly to advise the president on the skills of governing effectively. After asking to be left alone with the president, Blair offered the sale of Israeli drones and other military equipment to help defeat the Islamic uprising (the threat posed by Boko Haram, the Islamic terror group known for murdering hundreds of civilians in the north of the country). President Buhari confided to his aides that Blair only was interested in looking after his own business.[47] Moreover, there were rumors that during his role as Middle East envoy, Blair also engaged in a romantic association with one of Israel's richest women, Ofra Strauss, which further diminished his status as a Quartet representative and added secrecy and glamour to his celebrity persona.[48] This gives rise to a set of ethical questions as to the

[42] Author Interview, Michelle Pace, with Palestinian businessman, Ramallah, June 2016.
[43] Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity*, p. 1.
[44] Bergman Rosamond, Humanitarian Relief Worker Sean Penn – A Contextual Story.
[45] Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity.*
[46] Edward Malnick, Claire Newell, Robert Mendick & Luke Heighton (2015) The True Scale of Tony Blair's Global Business, *The Telegraph,* June 11. Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/investigations/revealed-the-true-scale-of-tony-blairs-global-business-empire/, accessed December 9, 2017.
[47] Bower, *Broken Vows: Tony Blair: The Tragedy of Power*, pp. xix–xx.
[48] Ynetnews.com (2011) *Report: Tony Blair Romantically Linked to Ofra Strauss*, September 25. Available at: https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4127145,00.html), accessed December 9, 2017.

appropriateness of Blair's appointment that we will address below through our use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as our main methodology.

Understanding Blair's Celebrity Politician Status through CDA

In his works, Norman Fairclough[49] explored the constitutive relationship between language and politics, not least the ideological underpinnings of the British Labour Party under Blair's leadership. Fairclough identified a discursive linkage between Blair's domestic ideological commitments and his stance on international politics, which embraces 'the legitimizing' of 'preventive warfare' in the fight against human rights abuse and terror, and, as such, seeking to wed normative commitments with national interests.[50] In unpacking the discursive markers employed to shed light on Tony Blair's time as a Middle East envoy, as celebrity politician and as an embodiment of the EU, we are inspired by Fairclough's CDA, because of its emphasis on the linkage between language and politics. As opposed to discourse theory, associated with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,[51] a key position within CDA is that there is a social reality outside the boundaries of discourse, and therefore 'discursive practice is viewed as one dimension or moment of every social practice in a dialectical relationship with the other moments of social practice.'[52] In Fairclough's[53] own words, 'discourse can misrepresent as well as represent realities.' Moreover, it 'can be implemented to change realities and in some cases improve human wellbeing,' as well as obscure and sustain hardship, suffering and injustices such as those physically experienced and discursively articulated in the Middle East conflict. Therefore, CDA assumes a constitutive link between language and social practice, and texts sustain this linguistic arrangement. Hence, discourse is not a set of neutral reflections on social practice, but rather helps to construct our understanding of the social and political world. Some forms of suffering and violent practices are deeply physical causing human trauma and as such exist beyond language. The failures of the EU, the Quartet and, by extension Blair, as the embodiment of that constellation, to bring about any positive change to the Middle East conflict require a nuanced understanding of the discursive practices at play at the time of Blair's role as envoy.

Fairclough's version of CDA also offers good methodological tools to identify linguistic representations of structural inequalities upheld during Blair's time as a 'peace' envoy. For example, Blair's business interests and his previous entanglements within world politics and military interventionism raise questions regarding the normative contents of his peace mission. Through our reading of the selected material, we have been able to identify a range of representations of Blair's persona: Blair the celebrity diplomat and embodiment of the EU trusted by the Quartet to bring peace to the Middle East; and Blair the interventionist who imposes typically western norms or

[49] N. Fairclough (1995a) *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Longman); Idem (1995b) *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold); Idem (2000) *New Labour, New Language?* (London: Routledge); Idem, Tony Blair and the Language of Politics.

[50] Fairclough, Tony Blair and the Language of Politics, p. 1.

[51] Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso).

[52] Louise J. Philips & Marianne Winther Jorgensen (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage Publications), pp. 18–19.

[53] Fairclough, Tony Blair and the Language of Politics, p. 1.

values on a region, without taking much account of local knowledge; as well as Blair, the respected and wealthy businessman. We do acknowledge that the EU has had its own specific identity and challenges in the conflict long before and after Tony Blair acted as the Quartet's envoy, not least with regard to its repetitive discursive practice of its belief in the two-state solution. However, we contend that during his term in this office, Blair embodied the EU to the extent that he played his part in the theatrical machinery that the EU and other international actors set up to sustain belief in a future Palestinian state.[54]

As we will show below, one such line of discursive colonial practice is that of Blair as the protector of vulnerable distant others in need of exogenous protection. Norman Fairclough's emphasis on the uncovering of inequalities and power relations across discourses provides a productive basis for such critical analysis. That is, the practical use of CDA involves selecting appropriate texts. Our analysis centers on two TV documentaries, biographical material, a select few YouTube clips and media commentaries, all with a focus on Tony Blair as peace envoy and as a statesman with celebrity attributes.[55] We unpack such texts to explore how discourses 'are activated textually and arrived at, and provide backing for, a particular interpretation.'[56] We operationalize our framework by tracing the semantic markers employed across discourses on Blair the western envoy, the celebrity diplomat and by extension the embodiment of the EU's external ambitions. We pose a set of questions to these texts, including: 1) How are Blair's different personas articulated across texts; 2) How is Blair represented as a Middle East envoy across texts?; and 3) What power relations and privileges do the aforementioned discourses present in the texts?

Analyzing Tony Blair

In the Channel 4 documentary entitled 'The Rise and Fall of Tony Blair' aired on Saturday June 23, 2007, Andrew Rawnsley, a British political journalist, discursively unpacks Tony Blair's different personas. The discursive mechanisms employed in the documentary also figure in the biographical material we analyzed, including *Tony Blair: The Tragedy of Power*,[57] *Blair Unbound*[58] and *The Blair Years*.[59] The framing of the Blair saga across texts resembles a spectacle in which the reader is taken on a journey through the euphoria that surrounded the prime minister's time in power and the expectations he raised in the UK and globally, with Blair being assigned the attributes of both statesman and celebrity politician.[60] We follow the trajectory of Blair as an outwardly confident person in public who is aware of his celebrity power. We are also discursively introduced to Blair's dictatorship flair and his presidential style. Blair was known to concentrate political control and

[54] Michelle Pace & Somdeep Sen (2019) *The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank: The Theatrics of Woeful Statecraft* (Abingdon: Routledge).
[55] Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*; and Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy*.
[56] Philips & Winther Jorgensen, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, p. 83.
[57] Bower, *Broken Vows: Tony Blair: The Tragedy of Power*
[58] A. Seldon (2007) *Blair Unbound* (London: Pocket Books).
[59] Campbell, *The Blair Years.*
[60] Channel 4 (2007) *The Rise and Fall of Tony Blair* (Narrated by A. Rawnsley). Available at: https://vimeo.com/13187187, accessed December 9, 2017; Bower, *Broken Vows: Tony Blair: The Tragedy of Power;* Seldon, *Blair Unbound*; and Campbell, *The Blair Years*.

leadership within Number 10 Downing Street, often being suspicious of his 'enemies.' As Rawnsley recounts, Blair, moreover, turned to the media 24/7 and grasped the tidal wave of the nation's emotions after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, showing how his antennae for the national mood were exceptional. His popularity soared, as he became the sovereign of the nation's emotions, lending credibility to his status as a celebrity statesperson. The Diana tragedy is a recurrent discursive theme in texts telling the story of Blair, showing his ability to communicate with large audiences drawing upon his celebrity qualities. During discussions as to whether the UK should join the Euro zone, Blair declared 'it is our vision to lead Europe,'[61] which may explain why he was eager to represent the EU within the Quartet of the Middle East. The Channel 4 documentary provides an overview of the discursive paradoxes present in Blair's personality. We observe a person who has too much moral purpose regarding international issues, being of the view that liberal interventionism is an ethical exercise,[62] one that must lead to respect for human rights, while often being in conflict with his enemies domestically. The Tony Blair documentary also gives us good insight into the Prime Minister's close connections with British celebrities, enabling him to add 'hipness' to the Labour party by surrounding himself with British A-listers. Furthermore, the documentary presents Blair's performative journey from a celebrity premier to a crusader of sorts, a discursive label also assigned to him by his former deputy Prime Minister John Prescott.[63] During the Kosovo conflict in 1999 Blair visited one of the refugee camps on the Serbian border with the international media portraying him as being overwhelmed by what he saw, which inspired his moral crusade in the international arena.[64] As we have noted above, Blair strongly believed in humanitarian interventionism, positing that the international community is at times ethically obliged to intervene militarily to save strangers.[65] In Kosovo, Blair gained confidence after being hailed by Muslim refugees (that he sought to help) as a foreign policy hero.[66] This episode in Blair's premiership gave him self-confidence, adding to his celebrity status and statesmanlike features.[67] Kosovo vindicated Blair's faith in his own judgement and his commitment to military intervention, leading him to commit troops to the US-led operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq in the early twenty-first century.

The second film that we explored was the Channel 4 documentary *Dispatches: The Wonderful World of Tony Blair*, narrated by Peter Oborne in 2011. Oborne is a British investigative journalist and in the film he delves into the legitimacy of Tony Blair as a Middle East envoy and celebrity diplomat. Oborne contends that promoting peace in the Middle East brought Blair a high level of international kudos. This is also a recurrent argument in other media texts. The remit of Blair's role was to forge peace between Israelis and Palestinians, a prominent discursive mechanism across this

[61] Channel 4, *The Rise and Fall of Tony Blair*.
[62] Fairclough, Tony Blair and the Language of Politics; Channel 4, *The Rise and Fall of Tony Blair*; Sky News (2017) *Tony Blair: 20 Years On.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwiG4F_0P6A, accessed December 9, 2017.
[63] Channel 4 News (2014) Tony Blair is a Crusader says John Prescott, September 14. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euWgh0NOzcc, accessed December 9, 2017.
[64] Channel 4 News, *The Rise and Fall of Tony Blair*.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

documentary and other texts. Although the post was unpaid, the expenses that came with it were covered by, among others, British taxpayers. Blair's appointment brought high hopes to many because he had been a central figure in the peace process in Northern Ireland. Hence, discursive qualities of peace were assigned to the former prime minister's diplomatic persona. However, Blair's job description as Middle East envoy was never clear.

Although Blair had to refrain from any activity that could be contrary to his mandate, he was not bound by any strict public codes of conduct, posing questions as to the legitimacy of his appointment. Since his mandate was informal, Blair could decide how he would promote it. The Blair narrative then structurally is situated within problematic power relations and a lack of direction. Blair made his own rules—again reinforcing the sense of Blair not being bound by accountability, but rather situated within very pronounced power relations. Because of the secrecy and lack of accountability surrounding Blair's envoy work, a recurrent discursive theme across this documentary is that it was not possible for the global public to know what their Quartet representative actually was doing during his time in the Middle East.

His economic interests and his luxurious celebrity lifestyle in East Jerusalem further reinforced the dubiousness surrounding his role as an envoy. For example, Blair spent one million dollars on refurbishing the first floor at the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem for use by the Quartet team during his time as envoy. Yet, he only visited Israel and the Palestinian Authority one week per month, and more significantly, he only visited Gaza three times during his time as an envoy. The said 2011 documentary deconstructs this absence, raising key questions as to the level of local engagement by the Quartet envoy. Again, there are signs of colonial logic in the overall Blair Middle East saga, with politicians, businessmen and others testifying to Blair's absence throughout the duration of his time as envoy.[68] Yet, Blair enjoyed many photo opportunities with elites on both sides of the conflict, even though he never got close to local farmers' fields to see the results of Israeli settlers' destruction of Palestinians' daily lives. Although across media outlets and texts Blair is (self) defined as a savior of sorts, committed to stability and democracy in the Middle East, his image does not include dialogic engagements with those in need.[69]

The above discussion leads us to suggest that for Blair being the Middle East envoy was as much an exercise in celebrity ego politics and a branding exercise as a diplomatic undertaking. His many personal financial interests and friendships in the Middle East are carefully unpacked in the Channel 4 *Dispatches* documentary and elsewhere.[70] One example is his role in the Wataniya (Palestinian-owned) Mobile company. Blair helped to persuade the Israeli government to open up radio frequencies so that the mobile phone company could operate in the West Bank, and he used his role as the Quartet's Representative to the Middle East to do so.[71] The documentary also details

[68] Channel 4 (2011) *Dispatches: The Wonderful World of Tony Blair* (Narrated by P. Oborne). Available at: https://vimeo.com/31079229, accessed December 10, 2017.

[69] British GQ (2017) *Alastair Campbell vs Tony Blair: Will Corbyn Become Prime Minister?*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nu-J16VQho8, accessed December 10, 2017; FT Comment (2015) *Lionel Barber on Tony Blair*. Available at: https://www.ft.com/video/20ae8fb8-3139-345a-a27e-c9471c7dae57, accessed December, 10, 2017.

[70] Channel 4, *Dispatches: The Wonderful World of Tony Blair;* FT Comment, *Lionel Barber on Tony Blair*,

[71] Ibid.

how Blair championed the development of a huge gas field (for Palestinian use) off the coast of Gaza operated by the British Gas Group. Both Wataniya Mobile and the British Gas Group were major clients of JP Morgan, the same American investment bank that paid Tony Blair £2 million a year for a role as a senior advisor.[72] As already mentioned above, the Quartet on the Middle East had no publicly available strict code of conduct under which Blair would have been bound and which would have demanded that he set out in full his commercial interests. Thus, his legitimacy as an envoy and a celebrity diplomat is in serious doubt.

Conclusion

The objective of this article has been to shed light on the inconsistencies surrounding Blair as Middle East envoy, with undeclared financial interests, entanglements within power circles and colonial practices on the one hand, and, the branding of a savior and a peacemaker who could somehow improve the daily lives of Palestinians under settler colonization and occupation on the other hand. These contradictions led to the erosion of Blair's credibility and authority as the Quartet's Middle East envoy. Most Palestinians have perceived the Quartet and Blair's role in it as a smokescreen, buying time for the Israeli government to carry on its colonization and occupation of Palestine. The whole theatrical and showbiz machinery surrounding Blair as Middle East envoy therefore brings into question the very integrity of his office. Given that his job was so challenging, it was crucial and vital that he be seen as an honest broker and not an envoy, whose private commercial interests could influence his role and decisions while carrying out public service. Blair knew how to walk the corridors of power. He lived a dichotomous life as a celebrity, with a lifestyle of luxury in East Jerusalem and as a lucrative businessman, raising very important questions as to his suitability to represent the international community and to bring about at least some positive change in the intractable conflict in the Middle East. What happened on the ground during Blair's time as Middle East envoy is that the Israeli settler colonial order increased in its intensity. The intended and unintended consequences of celebrity diplomacy of the kind Blair undertook as Middle East envoy are not without controversy. His self-fulfilling prophecy and narrative that somehow he could change the dynamics of the Middle East conflict through economic measures led to a dislocation between his remit and his self-representation and expectations. He was disconnected in his own right. Furthermore, in doing so, he is a clear representation and embodiment of the foundational problem in the EU's engagement in the Middle East conflict. Philosophically, there is a lot of moral engagement and investment in this conflict but practically, the EU's engagement is full of contradictions when we note for instance the trade deals that the EU has with Israel, the main occupying power and colonizer in this case. We thus conclude that Blair's role as Middle East envoy was an illegitimate one and both his personality and role brought shame on the EU as well as the other international members of the Quartet. As we have argued in this article this conclusion is similar to the academic debates with which we have engaged, namely that celebrity politicians operate within the confines of the *status quo* and do not radically seek to reform the international order. Blair was a great actor in the theatrical machinery set

[72] Ibid.

up by the international community in the Middle East Peace Process industry.[73] Not only did Blair fail to bring positive developments to the daily lives of Palestinians under occupation but also his unethical misconduct during his time as envoy deepened the settler colonial effects on the very people he was supposed to protect and for whom he worked. Thus, our call is for more research on the potential of bridging peace and conflict studies and celebrity politics, which in turn requires empirically grounded work in specific conflict areas.

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