

Ideas and Influence in Middle East Politics:

The Role of Think Tanks

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Brief Analysis

Research think tanks are a relatively new phenomenon in the Middle East. For example, the al-Ahram Center in Cairo has only been in operation since 1968, and it was addressing strategic issues virtually alone until the 1980s. There are about fifteen institutions in the region working on strategic issues now, but even so, only six or seven of them produce publications regularly or have any influence on the political leadership of their respective countries.

The peace process has been the single greatest impetus behind the creation of more research institutions in the Arab world. In part, connections with the United States (where many think tanks look for counterparts in the Middle East) have created the need for Arabs to spawn their own centers to interact with U.S. institutions. Furthermore, Arab governments recognize the need for research organizations and have increased the demand for their work. Consequently, the groundwork has been laid for training researchers and publishing the types of works that are necessary for effective policy analysis.

Nevertheless, the level of social, political, and strategic research in the Arab Middle East remains very poor in terms of the numbers of researchers and research institutions. Outside of government, there are only 5,000 social and political researchers in the entire Arab world only 2,000 of whom publish regularly working in a total of eighty-five institutions covering all domestic and international issues. Total financing for Arab think tanks is only \$15 million a year (\$5 million from the Arab world and \$10 million from U.S., European, and Japanese sources), restricting the functions of the institutions to a large degree.

Yet however limited their means, think tanks in the Arab world play three important roles. First, they have changed the way Arab leaders and thinkers conceive of politics and policy. Whereas past discourse was mostly grounded in ideology, law, and philosophy, think tanks have introduced a discourse concerned more with gathering actual facts than with anything else.

Second, think tanks have removed policy analysis from the realms of ideology and morality. Instead, they evaluate policy in terms of options associated with particular costs and benefits. This is an important change for the political elite and the public more than it is for the leadership, because while the leadership are relatively capable of assigning specific costs to different policy options, the political elite and the public are not normally aware of the range of policy options, nor capable of assessing their respective costs.

Finally, think tanks are critical for familiarizing the intellectual elite with a knowledge of the other an understanding of the political, religious, and cultural dimensions of the other party to the negotiating process, i.e. Israel. In terms of the peace process, this understanding contributes to the de-mythologizing of enemies that is central to the success of the peace process.

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In the many authoritarian countries in the Middle East, ideas coming from outside the political elite are not

considered very important and can easily be silenced. Therefore, think tanks do not play a significant role in either making policy decisions or in even just formulating policy options. Nevertheless, they are still capable of having an impact.

The Center for Palestine Research and Studies in Nablus has several target audiences for its work. The center influences the Palestinian leadership, especially Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian decisionmakers. It educates the intellectual and business elite, and more indirectly, it helps to shape public attitudes. Finally, the center enlightens external actors like Israelis, Jordanians, Europeans, and Americans about the Palestinian community.

The center communicates with these audiences in a number of ways. It arranges meetings with policymakers. It sends faxes to policymakers, including Arafat. And it involves policymakers in the discussion and research phases of its work. In addition, the center educates those who are not necessarily at the heart of decisionmaking or policymaking like members of the new Palestinian Council but who are nonetheless important members of the political community.

Unfortunately, the center is only able to influence some issues and only some of the time. Further, its level of influence on these issues is minimal at best. However limited the impact, though, several variables contribute to the center's effectiveness:

- Timing-- Beginning operations as the Israelis were leaving parts of the West Bank and before the Palestinian Authority had established its reins of control, the center was able to develop free of many constraints. Additionally, the center established itself at a hopeful moment in the peace process, when new problems required fresh ideas a ripe time for the efforts of a research institution.
- Independence -- The center's ability to work is unfettered by financial and political constraints. Its multiple sources of funding free it from the political agenda of any one donor, and the organization has no ties to the government that could compromise the integrity of its work.
- Reliability -- The center reports the truth as much as possible; unfortunately, the realities of an authoritarian regime make it impossible to do so all of the time. But its rigorous, scientific methodology ensures the credibility of its work.
- Relevance -- The center addresses issues that are current and timely, such as Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Palestinian economic issues, Israeli elections, etc.
- Access -- It is essential to gain access to decisionmakers in order to effectively communicate ideas. Gaining access without corruption and without sacrificing independence is extremely difficult but is both necessary and possible. The center, in spite of much rejection, finally gained access to Arafat as he became more sensitive to the currents of public opinion. Such access facilitates the impact of the center's work on decisionmaking in the highest levels of the Palestinian leadership.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS FROM THE DISCUSSION PERIOD

Contributions to the Peace Process The current peace process developed from the channels of communication forged between research institutions in the Israeli and Arab communities. Long before government officials were negotiating, scholars from think tanks were in direct contact. For example, the original Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles grew out of discussions that began between Israeli think tanks and PLO officials.

The greatest contribution think tanks make in the peace process is to help transform the peace reached between leaders to a peace between peoples, by educating the public and deconstructing false perceptions bred by ignorance that stand as barriers to peace. While serving in this capacity, think tanks are also able to provide information to the public that governments may not be prepared to impart. Furthermore, the informal and unofficial nature of think tanks have offered a safe venue in which some academics linked to political groups could open channels of

communication with their counterparts on the other side. This is how Likud thinkers, for example, first came into contact with PLO-affiliated scholars and experts.

Government–Think Tank Connections There is no "revolving door factor" in the Middle East think tank community: unlike in the United States, officials in the Middle East do not move back and forth between governments and think tanks as their parties move in and out of power. Though think tanks in the Arab world distance themselves from the reins of government control as much as possible, they need to recognize the nature of the environment in which they operate saturated with authoritarian regimes and chart a course accordingly; in terms of government control, this means that certain political and defense issues are extremely sensitive and, quite often, taboo. Ultimately, then, think tanks must restrict their activity in order to ensure their survival and their ability to function at all.

With respect to the think tanks' impact on Middle East governments, sometimes the governments are open to fresh ideas and analyses offered by think tanks, but frequently they are only interested in work that supports their own agendas. This is mostly a function of the personality of the leadership in power.

Financing and Control Although as private institutions, think tanks are relatively able to shield themselves from government control, the issue of private-sector financing presents new problems for maintaining independence and integrity. The available capital to finance think tanks is scarce in the Middle East, making funding for certain research operations a difficult task. Furthermore, most private donors have a political agenda. But since almost all think tanks have their own political agendas, they try to select donors whose political agendas do not differ significantly from their own. Also, think tanks can diversify their financial sources, in order to free them from the financial and thus political constraints of any single donor. Fortunately, on most issues, private donors do not try to dictate the direction or conclusion of a think tanks' work; for instance, donors rarely concern themselves with economic and social issues.

Another constraining factor for some think tanks is the institutional control of sponsoring universities. Specifically, the direction of the think tank is guided and ultimately dictated by the currents of intellectual thought in the university, not by the researchers in the think tank. This is especially true for Israeli think tanks, most of which are housed under the auspices of major universities.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Greg Saiontz. ❖

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