The MENA2050 Regional Vision Team

Note 2



Encouraging MENA Think Thanks to be More Proactive Contributors to the Public Discourse on a Postwar Regional Vision

Authors: Omar Al- Ubaydli, Layal Alghoozi, Noora Alozaibi, Arnon Bersson, Noor Elgallal, Ben Grischeff, and Munya Yusuf; with support by ChatGPT

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Designers: Karim Al-Nassar, Hayvi Bouzi.

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Executive Summary

For a society to be well-equipped to confront challenges and to propose reforms, it needs to have a vibrant think tank ecosystem that is well-integrated into the policymaking community. This is especially true in the case of complex problems such as how to resolve regional conflicts in the MENA region, and how to forge a future vision that will allow the region to fulfill its economic and cultural potential. Unfortunately, in the case of developing a post Gazan War vision for the Middle East, the public discourse is dominated by Western think tanks, with Arab think tanks making a modest contribution that is sometimes characterized by general prescriptions. The result is a distorted public narrative on the ideal future direction.



Figure 1: Lord Wellington at Waterloo, by Robert Alexander Hillingford; 16 years following his victory versus Naploleon, in his capacity as Prime Minister, Lord Wellington would establish the world's first security think tank, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

This note explores how MENA think tanks - especially Arab ones - can make a more proactive contribution to the public discourse on a postwar regional vision. It combines a light review of the relevant academic literature with insights gained from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 experts who are either from the region, or who have in-depth knowledge of the region. A full description of the method can be found in [Note 0], including information about the authors and MENA2050. **Notably, the interviews broached some highly sensitive issues that we are unable to present in the published version of this note.** The key conclusions are as follows.

Conclusion 1: In a mature intellectual and policy ecosystem, think tanks make a significant contribution to statecraft by producing novel ideas in a timely fashion, and in a manner that is accessible to policymakers. Their contributions are distinct from - but complementary to - those made by university academics, private consultancies, and the in-house research departments of government entities.

Conclusion 2: While diverse intellectual ecosystems are typically the most effective, homegrown think tanks are better placed to support policymakers and the general public than are external or foreign think tanks.

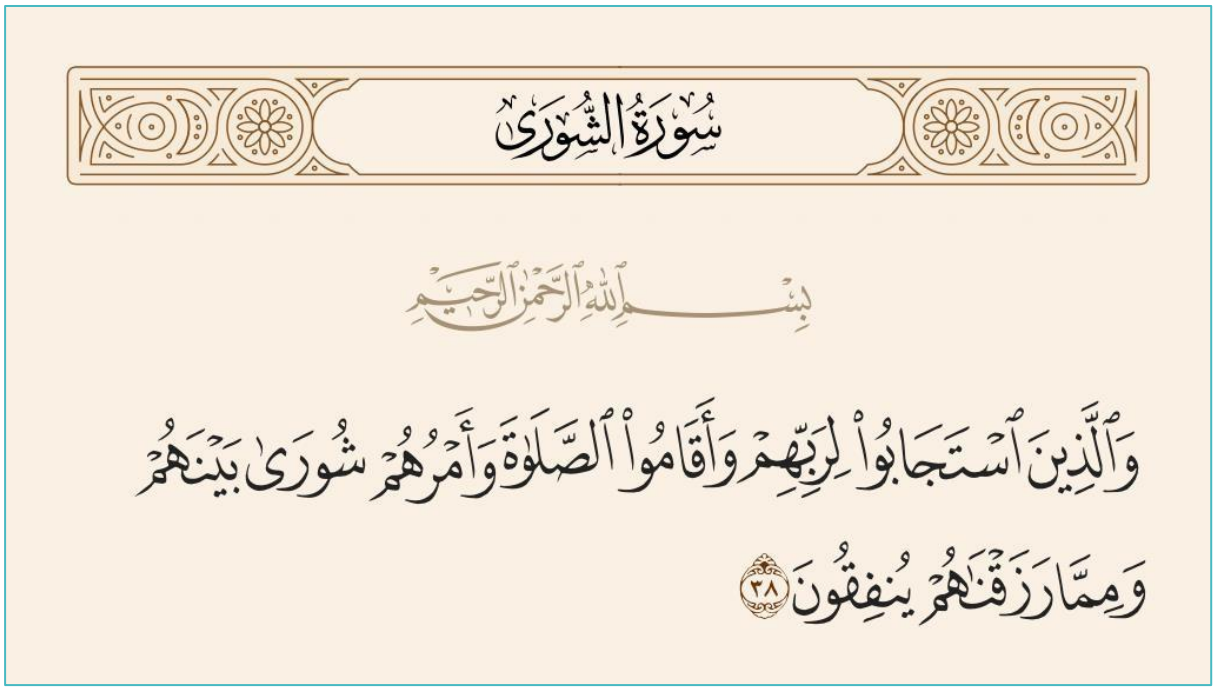


Figure 2: The 38th verse of the 42nd chapter of the Quran, which reads: "who respond to their Lord, establish prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and donate from what We have provided for them;"

Conclusion 3: As the current Gazan War continues, Western and Israeli think tanks have been active contributors to the public discourse, including the presentation of detailed roadmaps and visions for the region following the conclusion of the conflict. In contrast, Arab think tanks have made more limited contributions to the public discourse, and have generally avoided presenting detailed roadmaps and visions. This creates an imbalanced public discourse, where homegrown Arab perspectives are underrepresented.

Conclusion 4: Experts - including those with direct experience - find the view that Arab think tanks produce confidential prospective and prescriptive analyses that are analogous to the publicly available work produced by their nominal Western and Israeli counterparts to be credible. However, comparing these institutions internationally might be a misguided endeavor because Arab think tanks are established for a different purpose; they are more comparable to the Cold War-centric America research centers of the 1950s and 1960s, and are therefore not designed to influence the public discourse.

Conclusion 5: Experts believe that confidential memoranda are an imperfect substitute for publicly disseminated research, albeit one that has the advantage of sometimes allowing for a more candid dialogue with the government. Engaging the general public elevates the quality of the final product significantly, and enriches the public discourse. However, a combination of purposeful design choices, the socio-political system, and a general lack of awareness yields a situation where think tanks in the Arab world do not feel the need to engage the public, and focus more on the narrow engagement of government officials, even if this potentially affects the quality of the research from an academic and intellectual perspective. Yet, recent changes, including social media, mean that Arab think tanks are slowly warming to the idea of publicly disseminating their research.

Conclusion 6: Experts are firm in the belief that there is an abundance of capable human resources, and they also believe that there are sufficient financial resources in principle. However, the latent human resources can potentially be underutilized. This stems from a potential lack of clarity in the mission of some Arab think tanks. As a result, a lack of financial and human resources is a significant contributor to the phenomenon of Arab think tanks making a smaller contribution to the public discourse on regional roadmaps and visions than Western think tanks.

Conclusion 7: For the experts who perceived a genuine weakness in Arab think tanks' contribution to regional visions and roadmaps in the public domain, structural remedies include more funding - especially independent funding; more training and professionalism, possibly by cooperating with mature global think tanks; greater data availability by government entities; and higher levels of institutional support for youth.

Introduction

Think tanks are defined by their desire to produce policy-relevant research in a timely manner and in an accessible language, and to then use that research to influence policy. The current Gazan War is the sort of crisis that functions as a call-to-arms to think tanks inside and outside the MENA region: the stakes are high, and the unprecedented and unpredictable manner in which the crisis is developing means that there is a significant knowledge gap in policy circles that think tanks are well-positioned to fill.

Accordingly, many Western think tanks - which have access to top human and financial resources - have exerted significant effort on the important issue of roadmaps for the region, and detailed visions on what the Middle East should look like five, 10, and 20 years from now. These musings are generally available in the public domain, and therefore have a significant impact on the public discourse regarding the crisis and the region's future. Even if the first iterations of such visions are raw and riddled with questionable assumptions, like all scientific output, the act of disseminating it allows others to reflect upon its content, resulting in refinements and improvements that ultimately yield a far superior final product. Moreover, engaging the general public stimulates valuable thinking among the ranks of ordinary citizens, which then feeds back into policymakers' thinking processes.

Within the MENA region, the situation is quite different. Israeli think tanks have been highly proactive in developing visions and roadmaps for the region, often having a significant impact on the public discourse. However, Arab think tanks have been much less active in this specific class of research activity.



Figure 3: Light at the end of the tunnel

A primary reason is that they are being just as active as their Israeli and Western counterparts, but behind closed doors, in the form of confidential memoranda that are delivered directly to policymakers within closed circles. Given the manner in which the public dissemination of research raises its quality and enriches the public discourse, there may be value in motivating Arab think tanks to be more proactive in the public domain.

This note seeks to answer the question: how can we encourage MENA think tanks - especially Arab ones - to be more proactive contributors to the public discourse regarding the postwar vision for the region? This note combines academic sources with original data gathered from personal interviews with key MENA stakeholders. It is the second in a series created by the non-governmental organization MENA2050. More details on the method used and on the purposes of this project can be found in the accompanying background note.

Section 1 of this note provides readers with a brief primer on how think tanks contribute to regional visions based on the academic

literature. Section 2 presents the views of contemporary stakeholders drawn from a series of face-to-face interviews. Section 3 synthesizes the findings.

1. How Think Tanks Contribute to Visions

1.1. How Think Tanks Differ from Other Knowledge Institutions

Think tanks offer unique contributions to the production of knowledge worldwide. The distinctions between diverse knowledge providers can be obscured, with respective institutions competing for personnel and funding (Bajenova, 2016). However, as will be discussed, think tanks, including the knowledge that they produce, offer unique contributions to the knowledge production industry. The distinctiveness of think tanks, and the unique value that they offer policy debates, will first be explored by virtue of comparison with universities, private consultancies and in-house research departments of government entities.

Think tanks are widely recognized as, in broad terms, "independent centers for expert, scientific and authoritative advice" (Stone, 2013). Often, due to the academic expertise and acumen associated with the production of think tank research, they are thought of alongside universities in the knowledge production industry. The institutions certainly share common traits, including, but not limited to, the appointment of academic researchers, the application of rigorous research standards and use of open discussion to scrutinize research. Whilst both rely on a baseline of credibility and expertise present in the production of their research, the purpose, methodologies and processes behind this research are not necessarily similar.



Figure 4: K Street in Washington, D.C. has become a metonym for the American lobbying industry

Think tanks are "non-profit research institutions that have the explicit primary goal of influencing government policy". This is a key aspect of what most fundamentally separates think tanks from universities in the methodologies and character of knowledge produced by the respective institutions. Research created to influence policy must be timely and written in a style suitable for reading by lay policymakers (Al-Ubaydli et al., 2022). Think tank research is more impact-oriented and less esoteric than that of universities. It is about shaping the debate - the primary goal is to influence contemporary public policy debate with analysis that is based on intensive research. Universities and research institutes are disengaged from the "times, terms and spaces" of politics - the search for political access is not a priority (Hauk, 2017).

University research can therefore afford more extensive peer-review over a longer period, as it is less limited by the purpose to contribute to the contemporary debate, in contrast to think tanks research. Generally, think tank research is therefore more contemporary, punctual and digestible but less academically scrutinized than that of universities.



Figure 5: A reviewer at the American National Institutes of Health evaluating a grant proposal

This allows think tank research to be more accessible to ministers, government officials, and other policymakers with whom think tanks seek to gain an audience whilst still benefiting from open discussion, scrutiny and peer review (Al-Ubaydli et al., 2022). Even if this may not to be to the same extent as universities, it is an advantage that think tanks have over private consultancies and in-house research departments of government entities. Private consultancies are politically and ideologically neutral, which is not necessarily the case for think tanks. Their research is dictated by the client that funds it – it is not intended to inform public debate but to respond to client demands. The primary goal of private consultancies is to win clients. Think tanks must attract a diversified funding matrix, which, although challenging in some contexts, inspires confidence and credibility in their publications. This is not necessarily the case for private consultancies, who are less reliant on this level of transparency and public accountability to achieve recognition (Hauck, 2017). Private consultancies often have access to higher quality resources due to how much they are able to charge clients. However, they suffer from a limited capacity for peer review, due to their work being conducted strictly internally. Additionally, as they do not publish their research, private consultancies find difficulty in attracting the best scholars, as they are unable to publish their research and in doing so gain acclaim from their peers (Al-Ubaydli et al., 2022).

Similar pitfalls and advantages can be attributed to in-house research departments of government entities. The fundamental purpose of government research departments is, obviously, to produce policy recommendations that further the interest of their respective governments. Research suggests that they are at a disadvantage in doing so when they fail to outsource information and commit to a closed approach to conceptualizing policy. There exists extensive empirical evidence that suggests that diversity and openness spurs innovation and the development of ideas (Reed, 2012) and that feedback and collaboration improve the quality of those ideas (Ware, 2008). Think tanks occupy a space in the knowledge production industry that foregrounds open debate, collaboration and academic rigor whilst avoiding the more drawn-out process of universities. Think tanks and especially universities are advantaged in their ability to openly and collaboratively generate knowledge, but think tanks have the advantage of being able to contribute to contemporary debates with more punctuality.

1.2. The Importance of Homegrown Think Tanks

Based on the above, and in light of the considerable ongoing challenges and geopolitical shifts, in principle, MENA societies should embrace the establishment of think tanks that can contribute to the formulation of effective policies. In fact, Middle Eastern governments and policymakers have been generating research of a similar ilk in closed discussion spaces, such as in the in-house research departments of government ministries, or in dedicated think tanks that feed research exclusively to the government that sponsors them, without disseminating that research to the broader public. However, in the public sphere, there is a relative lack of homegrown think tanks and research centers in the MENA region dedicated to forwarding policy suggestions based on evidence and research, often creating an intellectual vacuum that Western institutes are free to fill as they comment on the security developments in the region.

This imbalance in the public sphere creates a risk of underrepresenting voices and perspectives from the MENA region, reinforced by higher levels of government and self-censorship in the mediaspace. For example, public debates about security developments in the MENA region are often dominated by Western voices, and over time, given the inevitable challenges that geographical distance creates, this spawns the tendency to talk about the region rather than engage with the people within it. This risks reinforcing a pattern of Western-centric discourse that perpetuates stereotypes, entrenches power inequalities, and marginalizes the voices of those directly impacted by policies and conflicts in the region.

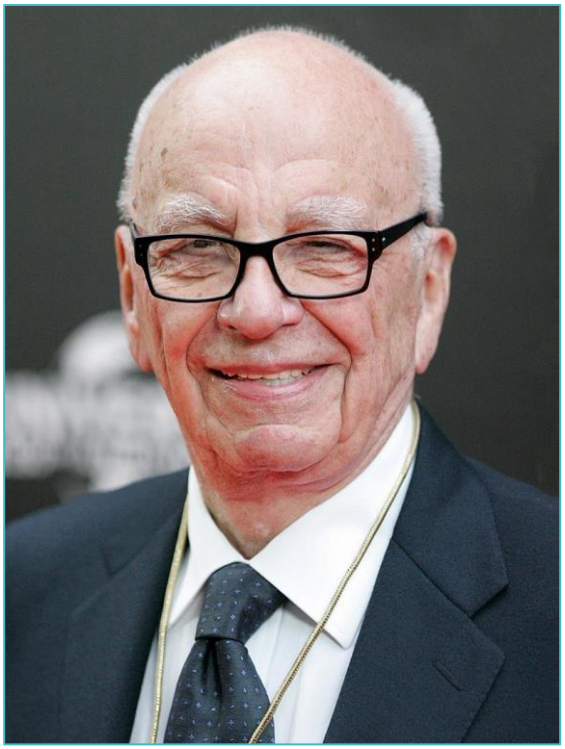


Figure 6: Media mogul Rupert Murdoch

As the imbalances of publicly disseminated research on the MENA region accumulate over time, a natural consequence is that Western think tanks - on occasion - approach the MENA region from a position of assumed superiority, viewing themselves as knowledgeable experts whose perspectives must be imparted to the inhabitants of these nations. This attitude ignores the rich history, diverse cultures, and nuanced perspectives that exist within the region, reducing its inhabitants to passive recipients of Western wisdom rather than active participants in shaping their own destinies.

The palpable frustration that the MENA region's residents feel when engaging this distorted public discourse is accentuated by one of the key advantages that homegrown researchers have over their external

counterparts: people on the ground have access to higher quality information, and have a more sophisticated understanding of the context and nuance relating to the issues being analyzed (Al-Ubaydli, 2023). This is especially true in the case of some of the more complicated conflicts the MENA region has witnessed, such as the Syrian Civil War, where Westerners conducting desk research from thousands of miles away inevitably commit significant analytical errors. It is important to note, however, that we are not claiming that homegrown research is always and everywhere superior to that produced by Western think tanks; in fact, diversity of perspective enriches the discourse. However, the quality of the public debate is elevated when externally-produced research plays a secondary role, and when homegrown research is the leading source of insights.



Figure 7: The East Offering its Riches to Britannia, painted by Spiridione Roma for the boardroom of the British East India Company

Furthermore, beyond its epistemological weaknesses, the research produced by Western think tanks frequently serves the interests of Western governments and corporations rather than those of the people living in the MENA region, highlighting again the importance of having homegrown think tanks. This dominance of think tanks serving alternative agendas further undermines the credibility of indigenous voices trying to affect the public discourse, and also impedes the development of solutions that are contextually appropriate and sensitive to the realities of life in the region. It is in this regard that the closed homegrown think tanks and in-house research departments that tend to be preferred by governments in the MENA region potentially - and inadvertently - contribute to the distorted public discourse.

1.3. Selected Publicly Visible Efforts by Western Think Tanks to Contribute to a Post-Gazan War Vision

The goal of producing a regional vision following the conclusion of the Gazan War has attracted research and publications from prestigious and reputable think tanks of the Western world, such as the Foreign Policy Research Institute (US), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (US), and Chatham House (UK). These institutions, especially Chatham House and The Foreign Policy Research Institute, are renowned for their expertise on matters concerning international relations.

This is reflective of the content and focus of the majority of Western contributions to the Post-Gaza Conflict Vision – it tends to broaden the debate and suggest that the conflict is a reflection of an urgent need for Western powers to reconceptualize their approaches to international governance, justice and conflict resolution. We here present a selection of efforts by such think

tanks, without claiming that they are representative of the general sentiments expressed.



Figure 8: Chatham House

Chatham House has made various contributions to debates surrounding a Post-Gazan War Vision. For example, Professor Yossi Mekelbeg's article "Israel–Palestine: A chance to end the cycle of conflict" (Mekelbeg, 2024) posits an argument that is popular in prevailing academic circles: the international collective security mechanism established after World War II has proved unable to manage conflicts peacefully. In fact, he argues that the conflict does not require "management," per se, which has, and would continue to, prolong the suffering endured. This paradigm of "management" must be reconceptualized. Conflict management has characterized the international community's approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict until this point - the article argues that such an approach is deceptive, and makes it difficult to address the root causes of the conflict both conceptually and with effective international policy.

Dr. Renad Mansour, a Senior Research Fellow for Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme, relays that the "rules based international order" is waning and facing exposure to its hypocrisy amidst its apparent inability to ensure global justice. This is an increasingly prevalent perspective in Western academia. Therefore, Mekelbeg similarly proposes that a fundamental change to the international rules-based order is necessary to tackle the Israel-Palestine conflict sustainably and productively. This change requires "moving past the orthodoxy of the rules-based international order and leveling the playing field". It must be catalyzed by public pressure for justice in the MENA region, Global South, and Global North, without which no regional nor international governing body will purport to alter the rules-based order, Mekelbeg suggests (Mekelbeg, 2024).

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) has published three out four parts of a research series concerning the governance of Gaza after the War. The four parts are titled: "The Israeli Perspectives," "The Palestinian Perspectives," "The International Perspectives", and "The Regional Perspectives". The CEIP offers a more comprehensive and holistic contribution to the Post-Gazan War Vision. It addresses internal Israeli debates, including the ontology of political Judaism and its consequences for Gaza and Palestinian Communities in the Occupied

Palestinian Territories (Shafir, 2024). Their report on the Israeli perspective deploys former Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan's remark that "Israel has no foreign policy, only a defense policy with international implications" to encapsulate their perspective on the Israeli position today (Rynhold, 2024). The CEIP calls for a reconstitution of how the Israel-Palestine conflict is approached by the international community and predominantly the US. It recommends a US-driven assistance program to Palestine which focuses on institutional and infrastructural rebuilding of Palestinian "banks, microcredit facilities and small-scale infrastructure," working alongside non-Hamas affiliated municipal Palestinian leadership to do so (Garber, 2024).



Figure 9: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace located at 1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW in the Dupont Circle neighborhood of Washington, D.C.

The details for such an arrangement are unspecified. CEIP's contributions broadly reflect the sentiment that the post-Gazan War Vision is an opportunity for a necessary reconstitution of international justice, governance and Western foreign policy – both theoretically and practically.

In approaching the Post-Gazan War Vision from this often-macroscopic perspective, it may be argued that Western think tanks demonstrated the limitations in their ability to consider the lived realities of the Gazan conflict in the MENA region from the ethnographic perspective that homegrown research affords.

Leon Hadar, a Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Middle East Program, has published an article contributing to the post-Gazan War vision titled: 'The "Day After" in Gaza: Bridging the American and Israeli Visions' (Hadar, 2024). The Institute is non-partisan, "seeks to publish well-argued, policy-oriented articles on American foreign policy and national security priorities" and clarifies that the views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

As implied by the title of the article and specialisms of the institute, this report approaches the Post-Gaza war vision from the perspective of American foreign policy. It focuses on how the Gaza Conflict complicates American relations with Middle Eastern States, with a particular focus on relations with Israel but also Saudi Arabia in the wake of the conflict. It aims to establish policy grounds upon which the US can retain sustainable relations with Israel and the Arab world whilst remaining committed to a two-state solution. Hadar proposes that "if and when the war and Gaza ends and Hamas is defeated," the US and Israel would be in a position in which a shared vision for Gaza, which would be accepted by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, is possible. The main components of this shared vision, according to the report,

would include “demilitarization (of Gaza by the Israeli military), Palestinian autonomy, and economic reconstruction.” Here, an independent Palestinian state living in peace with Israel, which is the two-state solution towards which the Biden administration is committed, is regarded as a “long-term goal as opposed to a concrete policy proposal that could be pursued in the near future” (Hadar, 2024).



Figure 10: U.S. President Joe Biden's official portrait, 2021

Before moving on to the parallel efforts by MENA think tanks that are available in the public domain, it is important to highlight two features of the work conducted by Western think tanks. First, it is proactive, with many of the arguments being made merely days after the conflict erupted in early October; Western think tanks do not restrict themselves to an academic-style retrospective analysis of events that happened in the past - they actively seek to influence on-going events and the future order. Second, Western think tank research contains reflections that dynamically respond to the events that are unfolding on the ground, and in a timely manner. In other words, one cannot dismiss the work of Western think tanks as being boilerplate rehashing of long-standing intellectual arguments. On the contrary, the analysis being put forward and the proposals being made are materially distinct from those done in previous years.

1.4. The Limited Volume of Publicly Visible Efforts by MENA Think Tanks to Contribute to a Post-Gazan War Vision

Against this backdrop, there is a notable lack of publicly visible efforts by MENA think tanks contributing to a Post-Gaza war vision. A notable exception is the Israeli Initiative, a detailed roadmap jointly produced by two Israeli think tanks, MITVIM and the Berl Katznelson Center. The plan consists of three stages, culminating in a “fundamental change in Israel’s national security and foreign policy approach”, and the “establishment of a demilitarized, peaceful Palestinian state and the foundation of a US-led regional alliance of moderates”. This reflects the significantly greater propensity for Israeli think tanks to provide publicly disseminated, detailed visions regarding the period following the conclusion of the Gazan War as compared to Arab think tanks.

To be clear, browsing the websites of Arab think tanks reveals significant interest in current conflict and future paths to success. However, the publicly-available contributions are typically characterized by being retrospective analyses of an event, or
- when they are forward looking - talking in very general terms, with little in the way of

specific roadmaps or definitive prescriptions. As a result, within the public discourse, the detailed visions that can be exposed and discussed by both journalists and ordinary people tend to be either Western or Israeli in nature, implying a significant intellectual vacuum on the Arab side.

This paucity of research is indicative of a broader challenge facing the region, namely, the general shortage in research initiatives and regional research centers. For instance, a study conducted on research in MENA found that one of the challenges is the low priority attributed to research, partly to "the lack of incentives as well as support to researchers in MENA" (Lages, 2015).

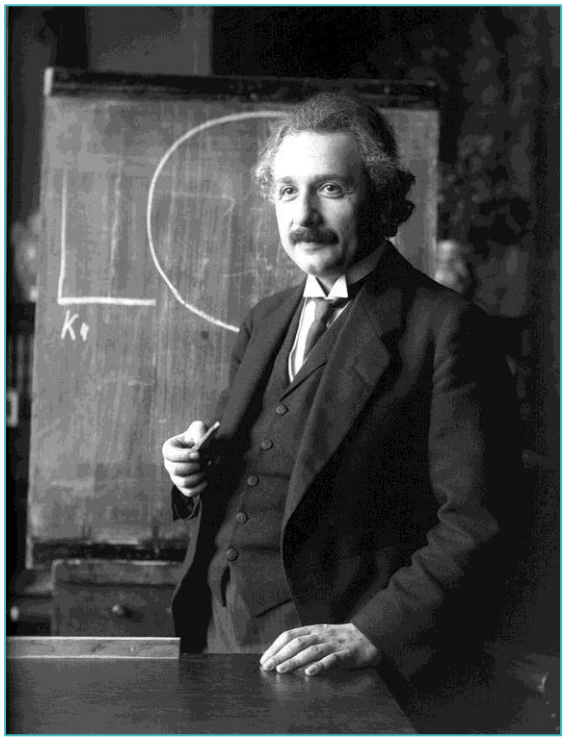


Figure 11: Theoretical physicist Albert Einstein, who immigrated to the United States, is an example of "brain drain" as a result of political change

Indicative of the generally low spending on research in the region, according to Statista, the MENA region's total gross expenditure on research and development (R&D) in 2021 exceeds $52 billion (Statista, 2022). In contrast, the US spent $679 billion in 2022 on R&D alone (Statista, 2023).

Beyond the issue of spending in R&D, it seems that there is a lack of 'demand' for externally-sourced policy-oriented research as policymakers in the region prioritize other means of getting things done, most notably a preference for in-house research. Some analysts (Al Mulhim, 2013) argue that this contributes to a significant 'brain drain' in the region, leading many talented researchers or academics to seek opportunities abroad due to better academic and professional prospects, among other causes. This cyclical drain of human capital can diminish the research capacity and expertise within the region, explaining the scarcity in public initiatives engaging on the conflict and other topics of regional importance.

Linked to this is the political sensitivity of the discussion on a post-conflict Gaza vision. Many think tanks in the MENA region may be hesitant to publicly engage in discussions about a post-Gazan war vision due to concerns about alienating certain stakeholders.

However, limited contributions to the public discourse do not necessarily imply inactivity. Many would prefer to engage in closed door discussions as the situation evolves. There are some few regional think tanks which have even publicly engaged in debates and research on the conflict, such as the Qatari based Centre for Humanitarian Studies (CHS), an independent research center that generates scholarship and engages in policy and practice on conflict mediation, humanitarian action, and post-

conflict recovery in the Arab world and beyond. Likewise, some Turkish think tanks have published analyses of the situation in Gaza and the day after although more on an ad-hoc basis rather than through strategic or concerted efforts.



Figure 12: The Abraham Accords

Nevertheless, despite some regional efforts to provide valuable insights into the conflict, the region faces a significant shortage of publicly visible efforts by think tanks contributing to post-Gaza war visions.

2. Contemporary Stakeholder Perspectives in the Middle East

Note: for a full description of the protocol used for conducting these interviews, selecting the participants, etc., please refer to the accompanying background note.

1.5. Interview Questions

Note: the interviews conducted contained a broader range of questions than those presented below; what follows is an abridged presentation of the questions posed, with the more sensitive questions removed from this paper.

Preamble: Think tanks should be at the heart of the process of generating a post-conflict vision for the MENA region. However, in the public domain, with the exception of Israeli think tanks, the region's think tanks make limited publicly-visible contributions. As a result, the views and initiatives of Western think tanks acquire an outsized role in the public discourse, leading to a systematic under-engagement of Arabs who live in the MENA region.

Question 1: A central claim is that Arab think tanks are highly active and proactive, but that such energies remain "behind closed doors", taking the form of confidential memoranda that are delivered to the relevant policymakers directly. What level of credibility do you attach to such a claim?

Question 2: Do you think that in the public sphere, the underactivity by Arab think tanks is a problem? If they do produce confidential memoranda, to what extent are confidential memoranda an effective substitute for openly shared research? Are the ideas and aspirations of ordinary Arabs adequately represented by the non-Arab think tanks that are more active in the process of generating a post-Gaza vision?

Question 3: Do you think that Arab think tanks lack the human and financial resources required to generate substantive ideas that merit dissemination in the public sphere?

Question 4: How can Arab think tanks be encouraged to put more research out into the public domain?

1.6. Interview Participants

Due to the heavy editing and abridgment resulting from the sensitivity of the issues discussed – including the questions posed that are not included in this note, all participants are anonymous.

1. Israeli researcher.
2. US diplomat.
3. Iranian researcher.
4. Gulf researcher.
5. Iraqi Researcher.
6. Sudanese diplomat.
7. Saudi researcher.
8. Turkish researcher.
9. Lebanese researcher.
10. UK researcher.

1.7. Responses

This section presents heavily abridged but still lengthy responses to the questions. One of the reasons is the sensitivity of some of the issues discussed with the participants. Readers who are interested in the main findings should skip to section 3 (synthesis).

***Question 1**: A central claim is that Arab think tanks are highly active and proactive, but that such energies remain "behind closed doors", taking the form of confidential memoranda that are delivered to the relevant policymakers directly. What level of credibility do you attach to such a claim?*

Israeli Researcher (Participant 1): I think it's correct. My impression has always been that many of the think tanks I was working with have a significant amount of official involvement, either through their board or directorship. If I look at their websites or things like that, I see that there isn't a lot of outward activity going on. I don't think it's because they're not working. I think they are working but several of the think tanks I know do most of their work for their own governments, [national or subnational]. I have friends who work in think tanks that I can't even find their websites. I know they exist and that they work, but [how influential they are] is a very different question.

You can ask me a question after about how influential think tanks in Israel are and I think that would be an interesting question as well, but I think they certainly do have an audience. I think that in [some Arab states] the structure of governance is less formal than it is in the US or in Israel, so I think researchers can influence people who affect policy at different levels. It doesn't mean that you have to be talking directly to the [senior official]. I think there are in these systems multiple ways of accessing the decision making people, and I think that if a think tank has good ties to people who have influence, they can influence in that way.



Figure 13: The Good Advice (original title: Le bon conseil), by Jean-Baptiste Madou

I think there are confidential memoranda that are tailored to relevant policymakers. I think they inform people who then have access to the policymakers, which I think is a really important aspect. And as I say, several of the most influential think tanks that I know in the [Arab world]—if you look at what they publish openly—they seem to not be working and I know they are. So obviously there is a different channel in which they get their influence in, and I think that part of that also has to do with the fact that the governments in [parts of the Arab world] don't have very developed in-house policy analysis shops. They have other people doing it for them.

I think influence is more based on who [researchers] have access to and less their formal position is… I think that in general, because the decision making processes in these countries are less rigid, there are different people who influence through different ways. I think those people are looking for smart people to tell them things. By the way, in a certain way that's different than the system in Israel, for instance, where our think tanks are more prominent in that they publish more and their websites are full of good information and everything

else, but I'm not at all sure how much influence they have on the government.



Figure 14: The metaphor of a revolving door has been used to describe people switching jobs, from working as lawmakers, to being lobbyists, and vice versa

Because either you're sort of looking for two things when you're working for a think tank. [There's knowledge generation and policy influence]. In Israel I think we do an OK job, not a great job, of generating knowledge. I don't think that knowledge necessarily has a lot of influence on policy. I think in Israel, for instance, there are think tanks, which I objectively would say are not the best, which are more influential than others that are better because they're on the right political side, because they have the ear of people who are significant. Israel is a more open society... so you see a lot more of what's going on. But in terms of the amount of influence, certainly think tanks have in Israel, much less influence than they do, for instance, in the US. Because the whole concept of an American think tank is, I think, very different from what it is either in [parts of the Arab world] or Israel.

In Israel, a think tank is where people who finish their careers in government go because they don't want to go home yet, so they work in these organizations.. You look at a place like [a prominent Israeli think tank], and out of there forty people who are listed as senior fellows or program directors, over thirty or more of them are retired generals or diplomats. Then a lot of the people at the lower end are young PhD's and researchers who do a lot of the work but they're not the names. While in the US, because you have this swing between Republicans and Democrats all the time, so you have people who are in government and then leave government and then go work for a think tank and then come back into government. I have friends now, who are just leaving the government, the Biden administration, and going back to think tanks after being in government for two to three years. In Israel that movement, the one from the think tank into government, almost never exists, and I think that in the [parts of the Arab world] it's also different. I think it's different in another way, where
U.S. leadership and the policy making community are very comfortable using external expertise because they do it all the time on all sorts of issues. They're willing to have people outside of government who are giving them advice and making analysis for them, and then they decide whether they accept it or not.

US Diplomat (Participant 2): I would say, one caveat, I don't know the Arab think tank world in detail, but what I know of it, and I know a little bit more maybe about the situation in a couple of the Gulf countries. I would say your observation sounds true. It sounds accurate to me that there's much more private activity that goes straight up to government folks and less that's focused

out into the public domain. I think also maybe it has to do with funding dynamics that out in the Gulf, there may be a belief in the government, which is accepted by people, that if we fund you, we own what you produce, or in some ways, you did it for us, and we want it. We don't want it put out into the public domain. Maybe some of that is going on, too. I don't know.

Iranian Researcher (Participant 3): You need to split your question into two, because if we say that they ought to be or could be more active in public, the question is which public. Is it their own public? Or is it the public in this case of Western states that are very influential when it comes to Middle East affairs. So those are different kinds of which you can reach with different kinds of methods, and both would entail different risks I would imagine.

If you compare Arab think tanks to Western think tanks you can say that in general Western think tanks have to deal with a particular kind of tension, and that tension is between being independent, and being listened to by those with power. If you are too independent, there is a risk that they will discard you.

On the other hand, if you are only saying what they want to hear, you are becoming their intellectual alibi and you are not really adding anything to the conversation. It is a difficult balance to strike depending on how sensitive the topic is. …[It could be a minefield of a topic that you're addressing]… which could lead to harsher and more publicly visible reactions. In these cases, you might start second-guessing it, wonder how far we [the think tank] should go, how we should phrase it etc.



Figure 15: Monday demonstrations in East Germany (1989–1991) helped bring down the Berlin Wall.

… if you give that paper directly to the decision makers, it's still behind closed doors, so the conversation is richer and the fallout contained. It also means that their feedback is coming directly to you. If you publish it as a public paper, the audience is much more difficult to calculate, as the work is readily available and accessible.

If you write a good, accessible paper that ordinary people can read and understand, then your ability to shape public opinion is great. This leads us to the question of whether public opinion is of any consequence. In fairly established European democracies, it is. If it is loud enough, a politician has to contend with it.

Gulf Researcher (Participant 4): I can tell you based on anecdotal experience that everything operates behind closed doors. There's this aura of secrecy… and they kind of frame it in a way that [aligns with policymakers' needs].

Iraqi Researcher (Participant 5): In terms of credibility, I think it is credible - as far as the action has been taken. So long as advice has been given to decision makers; that is important. What matters is how this can be implemented and it is important that there will be a big policy change and it has to be done through decision makers and has to be influenced by think tanks. But how tangible the result will be is what matters. The good thing is that it is happening, there is action, even if it is behind closed doors - and there are many reasons for why it may be happening behind closed doors. The downside of it is that it is not public, and because it is not in a public domain, it is not easy to follow up, or maybe even include them in the policy at all - I am not sure how far it can be heard by the policy makers or decision makers. [However] in terms of proactivity, there are many things happening behind closed doors. On the flip side, we never know how far they can go and what may be the end result of having these actions actually considered.

Sudanese Diplomat (Participant 6): My first reaction to the question was to consider what are the Arab think tanks? When you think of think tanks you will usually think of Chatham House or the Kennedy Center for Research - I doubt that any Arab think tanks would come to mind immediately. To find Arab think tanks you would have to look them up (even if you are in that field), many of them are in the Gulf, the majority [of Middle Eastern ones] being in Israel, but in the rest of the Arab world they are spread out.

I find the Arab/Middle East think tanks more of a government endorsed institution
- endorsed through funding. When you take a look at what Chatham House gets, or what the Kennedy Center gets; there are many donations from various people who are interested.



Figure 16: Chile, one of several Spanish territories in South America, issued a Declaration of independence in 1818

I am not familiar enough with the Arab/Middle East think tanks, but I know that they [have limited levels of] economic independence... Yes, there are intelligent people working there, there are some very hardworking people working there, there is some very interesting research that goes on in these think tanks, and there are some fantastic Arab/Middle Eastern and regional scholars who are doing research but there is not complete [independence].

Saudi Researcher (Participant 7): I think Arab think tanks are active and produce original thoughts. They publish different studies and opinions on current affairs, particularly on the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The problem is that what they

produce is not necessarily in line with or meets the expectations or views of the most powerful Israeli and Western think tanks. For example, most Arab think tanks support the two-state solution, which not many policymakers in the West or in Israel—especially with the current government—support, at least the majority of them. That's why perhaps policy institutions in the Arab world are seen as passive and not contributing to the debate or pushing the debate to find solutions and a way forward.

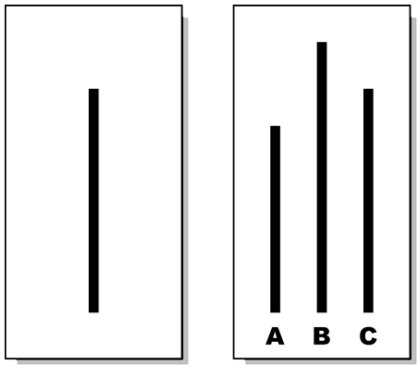


Figure 17: Which line matches the first line, A, B, or C? In the Asch conformity experiments, people frequently followed the majority judgment, even when the majority was wrong.

Another reason, in my opinion, is linked to the fact that there aren't many think tanks in the Arab world in the same way that we see in the West or in Israel, and I am talking about the number of think tanks. There are a few think tanks here and there, which, of course, will affect the diversity of thoughts and the quantity of published research.

Turkish Researcher (Participant 8): Yes, but that's what think tank business is about, too. There are two sides of that argument. On the one side, maybe three, in fact, you first do the research, you reach a few conclusions, then at the second step, you bring together the decision makers and try to create a conducive environment for those research results, for that policy research results. Then, of course, you have got to do things behind closed doors. We also prepare confidential memos and other things, too, because there are also different sides of the same argument. But I also agree that if you only do the things behind closed doors, that [limits diversity of perspective], which [may decrease effectiveness]. Because if you start to think like the decision-maker stem cells, that's not part of the think tank business as far as I see.

Lebanese Researcher (Participant 9): To start with, I question the notion of an "Arab think tank" We may be here confusing different types of entities. What is a think tank in the United States, where the term originates, is not the equivalent of what a "think tank" is in the Arab world. The elements that created the think tank sector in the United States have not had their equivalent in the Arab world.

To assume that an organization that is concerned with research is automatically a "think tank" may accordingly be a stretch. This may explain the "bad ratings" for the Arab "think tanks". These Arab "think tanks" are closer in institution and composition to the academic research centers in the United States in the '50s and '60s that preceded think tanks, the various "Area Studies" departments at US universities, which featured a relationship with the US Government that approximates, without claiming it to be identical with, the one that Arab "think tanks" have with their respective governments today.

To reiterate, Arab "think tanks" today have more of an affinity with "Area Studies

Centers of the 1960s United States, than they do with the think tank universe in DC today. This assertion is based on the fact that the main ingredient for think tanks in the United States is independence.

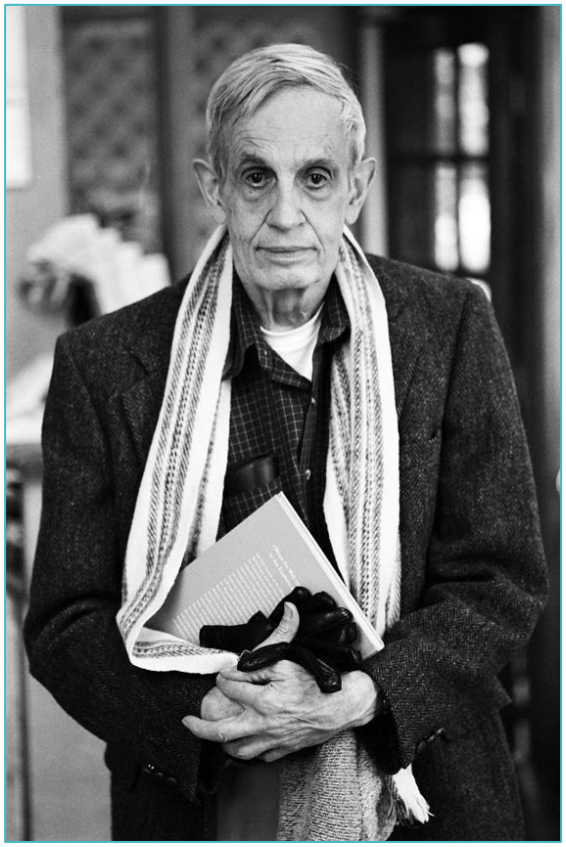


Figure 18: John Forbes Nash Jr. (June 13, 1928 – May 23, 2015) was an American mathematician and economist who performed government research during the Cold War

Evidently, some may protest by underlining that US think tanks are not independent from funders, or at times partisan leanings, with respective ideological or political tendencies tending to be dominant. Nonetheless, in its ideal form, a think tank is a place where research is conducted independently from the government, and it is funded by private or even government donors as a function of affinity with the type of research that is happening; the funding of a think tank, in principle and to a large extent in practice, is not a mandate to generate desired results. In other words, the funders of think tanks do not say, “here is an amount of money, and we would like you to get this output or this outcome or this result”; but rather, “we like the type of work that you do, and therefore we fund you”.

Clearly, this ideal can be and has been challenged since at times the type of research a think tank engages in may get “tweaked” in order to attract more funding. Still, certainly in theory and to a satisfactory extent in practice, the main ingredient in the work of a US think tank is independence. The US Government does not assign to think tanks what to think about, and what results to generate. It is the think tank that engages in the thinking and then makes it available to the government.

Another important aspect to note is that, rather often, a revolving door situation exists, in which members of think tanks transition to government within a certain Administration, and at the end of its tenure, they leave government and are back in the think tank circles. There is nothing comparable in the Arab world.

Back in the '50s, in the '60s, in the midst of the Cold War, government funding that went to certain area studies department in various universities was more of a mandate, asking scholars them to consider scenarios, possibilities, strategies, and policies. And these happened behind closed doors. Professors, with subject matter expertise, who were engaged in teaching and research, were thus commissioned by the government and provided the government with their output.

Arab “think tank” are more akin to those area studies or university research centers. In both cases, there was/is a value in

keeping the matter behind closed doors, since it was/is commissioned, it was/is to yield policy positions — it is inadvisable in the process of forging this policy to allow adversaries or enemies access to the process, hence the hint of discretion, if not secrecy. The reason in the case of the Arab world is more nuanced, or problematic. In the case of the US Area Studies Centers, the relationship was partly financial, but was also based on trust: the Government commissioned, provided funds, the academic center produced research that aimed to be objective.... This is [sometimes] not the case in the Arab world.



Figure 19: Harry St. John Bridger Philby (1885–1960) in Arab robes

UK Researcher (Participant 10): Yes, I think that there is truth in this. I think that the role of think ranks is varied and depends on the type of think tank and depends on the specific country. When I have interacted with think tanks in the region, my impression has been that they have more freedom of maneuver when they are speaking directly to policymakers - whereas publishing things for the general public is usually the most controversial or difficult thing to do. I think that when they speak directly to policymakers, then the policymakers feel that they are getting help, they are getting a service, and they are not going to [have sensitive issues put out in the public domain]. I think there is a lot that happens behind closed doors, of course that means that it is hard to assess what is taking place.

For example, [a few years ago], I spent some time visiting think tanks [in an Arab country] and had some conversations with them about relations between [that country] and Britain, and also about [a regional war]. I was surprised in a positive way about the types of discussions we could have behind closed doors - they were definitely more open than what you would have seen in the media. That would be one example where the topics we were dealing with would be very sensitive. I think it was easier for those specialists to speak freely if they were among experts and officials, not something that would get into the media and sound like a loud public criticism.

***Question 2**: Do you think that preference by Arab think tanks for communicating via confidential memoranda has downsides? In the public domain, are the ideas and aspirations of ordinary Arabs adequately represented by the non-Arab think tanks that are more active in the process of publicly disseminating a post-Gaza vision?*

Israeli Researcher (Participant 1): So I think that there is a conceptual difference here that comes out of your question. There's two kinds of think tanks. There is,

let's call it the academic think tank, whose purpose is to generate knowledge and then there is, what is very common in the US, an advocacy think tank which generates knowledge but in order to influence policy. It doesn't only exist so that people will know interesting things. It exists because they have an agenda–not necessarily a political or an ideological agenda–but they want their government to do things better. So in the US, I would say that this would be the difference between the Brookings Institute or RAND and a place like the American enterprise Institute or The Center for New American Security or things like that where people aren't only analyzing but are also advocating for policy.



Figure 20: John von Neumann, consultant to the RAND Corporation

So you could have a think tank like RAND, I think, is a really good example but also like Brookings, whose job is to develop knowledge. Or The Council of Foreign Relations or the Middle East Institute. They don't necessarily have a specific policy they're trying to push. They're trying to develop knowledge and they feel that getting that knowledge out there will make the government work better because it will be better informed.

But I think there is a second kind of think tank which is more dominant in Israel but also very popular in the US, which is a think tank that has an agenda. That is trying to develop policy alternatives and the difference between those two is that, the first is, we usually have a lot more money, and we'll have people who work full time, who sit and work all night. The second will spend a lot of it trying—trying to influence. Trying to not only write its analysis, but make sure to get to the right table where people read them. One is more academic direction and one is more advocacy.

I think that the confidential memoranda are important if your job is to inform or influence policy. Part of this is that I come from a different place, right. People who are economists... for example, would probably say that we should be sharing this information because the more people have the information, the better. I come from the field of foreign policy, and in foreign policy, I am not only trying to educate the public but I am mostly trying to educate the people making the decision. In that way... if a million people read my paper... that's great, but if a senior advisor to the prime minister or a senior minister read the paper and mentioned the ideas in it to the prime minister, that's probably even more important, so it's really the question of what you think the purpose of a think tank is.

[Regarding] "the ideas and aspirations of ordinary Arabs": is that the job of a think tank? Is the job of a think tank to express the ideas of ordinary Arabs or ordinary

citizens in general, or is the purpose of a think tank to bring expertise to bear? And experts don't necessarily think like ordinary people. They don't think better, they just think differently because they think more profoundly about certain things and less profoundly about others. So I don't think it is necessarily the job of a think tank to represent the ideas and aspirations of ordinary people. I think where it might be very important is if you think that governments don't know the ideas and aspirations of the people. In other words, my job wouldn't be to express the aspirations of the people because I think they should be expressed, but because I think that if the government doesn't understand the aspirations of the normal ordinary people, it would get things wrong. So, if in Israel, it's part of my job to reflect to the people who read what I'm writing what ordinary Muslims or Arabs... think about the situation because it's important for them to understand that in making their own decisions.

I think [in general], the more that people know, the better the policy they make... It's not always true but it's usually true and it's certainly more true when you're telling them about Others who they don't understand. So... if somebody was writing for an [Arab] audience explaining what Israelis felt or thought about the war in Gaza, I think it would be useful because that would then help them understand why the Israeli government is doing certain things. Or if I was writing for the Israeli government, and you don't hear these too much – but in the beginning people would say "oh why aren't there allies supporting us more," so I did write a paper which explained how. What the feelings were of people in the [Arab] elites and non-elites towards the crisis and how that then affected the ability of the government to take a position in this way or the other way. I think that think tanks are elite organizations, they don't necessarily represent the ideas and aspirations of ordinary people. What they need to do is help their target audience understand better what is going on in the world.



Figure 21: A Debate among Scholars, Razmnama illustration

US Diplomat (Participant 2): I think there's a place for private-funded research to go straight to the government. I don't have any problem with that. I think, ideally, think tanks, or at least some think tanks, there should be a shared duty.

Ideally, it works better if some of it maybe is private and some of it is public. If all of it is private, I think the public market marketplace of ideas, so to speak, the broad public discourse of policy and intellectual exchange is impoverished... I think that

impoverishes the overall level of policy discourse in a society.

[About the question relating to non-Arab think tanks being active in producing a post-Gaza vision] You mean, for example, Western think tanks who write about the... Middle East? Yeah, I think that's a fair point. I mean, [I would like to hear US think tanks say that] one of [their] missions and aspirations is to include more [regional] voices in [their] scholarship and in [their] programs. [I] understand that it's a challenge and you want to try to do it. The premise is correct that if all of it's being done by people from outside the region, you're getting voices, perspectives from outside the region. I have a certain perspective on the Middle East region more broadly. It's been shaped by 30 plus years of living out in the region. But in the end, I'm an American, I'm educated in American schools. My deepest allegiances and the springs of my thought are Western. And the history that I drink from and that has shaped me is largely American and Western. So you miss all that if you don't have Middle Eastern perspectives in the discussions about a post-Gaza vision, for example, or other subjects, it's inevitably distorting. It's a smaller slice of the broad discourse of ideas and of perspectives that it's important to have.

Yeah. I mean, you, for example, or someone like you could stay here for 10 or 15 years and work here. You could write about American history and American policy and perspectives. But it's not going to be the same as a whole range of Americans who do it, who were born here and educated and know the culture and know the language and the literature and the art and everything else that shapes a person's perspective about culture. I just flipped it and talked about you being here or someone like you. But what you're asking is others who write about the region from the outside. It's the same dynamic. It's a limited perspective. You're right.



Figure 22: Social media app icons on a smartphone screen

Iranian Researcher (Participant 3): In a world of social media, governments don't get to influence the channels of communication and what is in them to the degree that they could thirty years ago. The idea that discretion and behind-the-scenes conversations can fully gauge and engage where the public is, [I disagree with]... It's not about whether you are right or whether what you are proposing will be successful eventually, it's about the fact that you don't have the full spectrum of positions, suggestions and thoughts. This conditions how wide your scope of the landscape is – it is much more narrow.

This means that the people in the West pontificating about the Middle East have no clue except when they travel there and talk

to someone, which isn't a bad method, but isn't a sufficient method.

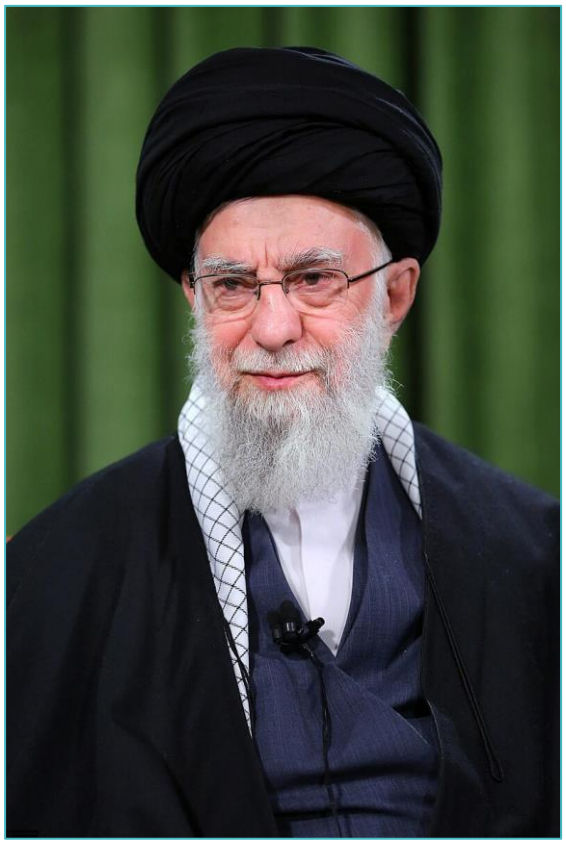


Figure 23: Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

[Applied specifically to Iran] The Iranian context is both more complicated and somewhat similar. Because of the linguistic affinity, in the Arab world you can still be active if your audiences and topics are region wide. There is also a variation in how these countries deal with thought production. Iran is all of this but in one country – 85 million people, a political elite that [struggles to produce a unified voice], with their own agendas, media outlets and think tanks. Their work is mostly in-house production for the various groups that sponsor them. They will use the intellectual production towards the ends that they want to propagate, either within the elite or through the media outlets.

In this sense, it is a bit like the US. There is a revolving door in terms of professional career between policy think tanks and government positions. In Iran, you don't have this in the same smooth way, but it does exist to some degree. The difference is that the state looms large, similarly to other states in the Middle East. In the end, the one that seems to become the primary interlocutor for outside interests is the one that is run by [a specific government entity]... it sets the parameters.

Gulf Researcher (Participant 4): I feel as though there is still much to be done, at least to amplify the voices of the youth. So in the GCC or in the Arab world, so to speak, by extension, there is a large number of Gen Z's millennials whose voices remain unheard. So if I were to pick up a piece of work or a research paper from one of those organizations, seldom will I find something that represents the views or narratives that Gen Z's or millennials have or their worldviews towards the [war] in Gaza.

Ironically, a better source or a better way to gauge public opinion would be Instagram. Sometimes, I would find more on Instagram, looking at my friends' stories. At least, this is one aspect of it or of looking at it. It's just one way to gauge how these people feel, at least. I feel as though, in a sense, these think tanks.

... If you look at public opinion or polls here and there, which is something else that these think tanks don't share publicly. They don't share these polls or whatever. I think, fine, if you don't want to share something sensitive... then you'll have other foreign think tanks doing that on your behalf. So Gallup will do those whatever polls, and another think tank that recently did the polls [on current regional affairs]

Iraqi Researcher (Participant 5): This is linked to the first question. If you do this confidentially and in a discreet way you cannot follow it up, and then you cannot measure the impact of it. Yes, you can act on it but you do not know how far it can go. The best thing is that the Arab think tanks can do that themselves - they are not well represented by international think tanks, although the international think tanks can pave the way for the Arab think tanks to show them how to do it. Because for any reason the Arab think tanks cannot really show that for everyone, except those people who are supposed to receive it - therefore they can learn from people who have done it before and how that can be done. There is an element of geopolitical tensions, or religious, or cultural or even sometimes political tensions... Arab think tanks should go outside their comfort zone - and by not doing so, this is not really helping to set the standard for the next generation.

Sudanese Diplomat (Participant 6): The fact that [these researchers] ... choose to do it secretly, makes it (in my view) less effective. There are situations where it is nice to be part of closed door meetings and express opinions and have the Chair come out and say "this is the view of the room"-
i.e. in negotiations where you do not want to expose "Aysha said this", or "Hamza said that". Ultimately taking the collective view of a number of people, and it can be a compromise view because everyone in the end finds the minimum common denominator. Those are situations where it is possible - but it makes us less effective if we work through others. If someone does all the research and all their views are in there, then requests for me to take them forward without exposing their identity - I agree, it would be diluting their opinion,

their energy and their contribution. And why would the Western world want to serve you, and not their own interests?



Figure 24: Orator at Speakers' Corner in London, 1974

Saudi Researcher (Participant 7): I have worked with several think tanks. It's natural for any think tank to have some confidential reports produced for specific stakeholders. There are some others that are accessible to the public or anyone interested in reading them. However, I agree that there are many confidential reports. There are more confidential reports than the ones that people or any person in the public can access, and that's why there is a need for think tanks to support the diversity of thoughts and push and help these think tanks produce more content.

There is also another reason, which is that the concept of think tanks and policy institutions and the role that they play—not just in politics but also in society—are not yet very well understood by everyone in the Arab world. 90% of think tanks in the Arab world were born fairly recently, in the last

10 years. There is therefore a lack of awareness among those even in these think tanks of how important ideas and thoughts are to both the public and government. Again, because if you look at the system in the Arab world, the Arab countries or societies [do not have pluralistic political systems], so I understand why there is still misunderstanding or people don't fully understand. Also, [civil servants] in these countries [sometimes] do not fully understand the importance of these think tanks.

Turkish Researcher (Participant 8): Yeah, this is especially after the Gaza situation now. I remember seeing some research results by the Arab think tanks as far as I see. I mean, I saw the ones from Israel. We are also doing something here, and I'm talking to our Arab counterparts on how to move forward regarding the issue. But I agree... it impairs the results. As I told you, [a lack of diversity of perspectives] is not a good thing. It limits how you are viewing the situation at the end of the day.

UK Researcher (Participant 10): These are very interesting questions. I think that confidential memoranda are not a substitute for the publicly shared research - they perform different functions. If you are trying to have an effect on policy, then you need to choose from a range of tools that might include private or public. This is not only an issue in the Arab world, sometimes Western governments or multilateral organizations are more open to different ideas when they are produced in that private forum. Alternatively, I spoke to an official at the US government that did some long term scenario analysis - I remember him saying to me that superiors would be more interested in his work if it got picked up by the New York Times. Sometimes, they would not actually bother to read his report, but if a journalist expressed interest and pulled out the key points, it had influence.

It is a wider issue that the private and public have different functions, but I think that there is a particular role that can be played by having these discussions in a public domain, because you get to inform the public and you may then be able to spark more ideas from a wider talent pool. Most people are not inside the think tank system or the policy system, but they might still have good ideas.



Figure 25: A soldier from the Italian Army stands guard during the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon.

As another example, when I used to work at [entity], in order to have the status of a charity in the UK, [entity] had to have a public benefit - that would be part of the mandate. So if we designed any sort of project, or the government asked us to do

something, we would usually want to have at least some element of that be for public benefit - and that might just be about promoting a better understanding, so that people can understand why this problem may be occurring or why a certain action is being taken. Sometimes it might be, as mentioned previously, to build a broader talent pool and gain more ideas.

This is where we come to this very interesting question about the known Arab think tanks generating a post-Gaza vision. I think that, unfortunately, there is a huge gap
- a lot of what we have heard from experts around the world has been about Arab solutions for post-war security and governance in Gaza, but [sometimes] it seems quite removed from reality, and it seems very theoretical. There is a sense that maybe Arab countries can help, maybe [some Arab countries] could help put in military forces - but it is not backed up by any research, even about whether those governments would want to put in those forces, let alone whether the population would accept them. I feel there is a huge gap and a vacuum of proper policy and it needs a reality check from people who are closer to what is happening.

***Question 3**: Do you think that Arab think tanks lack the human and financial resources required to generate substantive ideas that merit dissemination in the public sphere?*

Israeli Researcher (Participant 1): I don't know enough about it. My feeling would be that certainly in [certain parts of the Arab world], there is no shortage of financial resources. I think the human resources - that could be [an impediment]. In other words, because you need people who have experience with this certain kind of analysis and thinking, and I find in a system like the Israeli and American system, it's very useful to have people who worked in government in think tanks. I don't know to what extent that happens in... Arab think tanks, so I don't think it's so much the lack of financial resources.



Figure 26: Scholars at the Abbasid library (Maqamat al-Hariri), Illustration by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, 1237

Iranian Researcher (Participant 3): Yes, but you have to look at the process. They don't lack human resources because the human resources don't exist. I don't think that there is a lack of talent in the MENA region. The question is whether this is a viable career. There is always that danger that it becomes ossified very quickly. The other thing is that a lot of countries have a tendency to say that if we're going to spend money on this, we are going to go for a shiny place in London or New York.

They tend to avoid the local flora and fauna. They think that will garner them good will and influence in DC, which is not a bad

thing, but it is not going to make you smarter regarding what you need to do at home.

Gulf Researcher (Participant 4): I mean, it varies across space. For instance, if I were to talk again about think tanks in the Gulf per se, I am confident that they are well funded.... Other parts of the Arab world, I am not quite sure. I can't say conclusively whether they're lacking or not, but I don't think it's a question of lacking in terms of financial resources. I think it's the question of those financial resources being spent on the topic of bringing in all those foreign experts. They're like, Oh yeah! I will bring [a senior former Western official] to talk about his time [in office], and I'll pay him this much. This happened here, by the way; they flew in [an official], and they had a public event and all this ceremonial stuff, [treating him with great deference]. In reality, all while overlooking the sort of very problematic approach that [this official's government] had had towards international alliances and commitments and all of that.

Iraqi Researcher (Participant 5): Yes, that is part of it but it is not the main thing. The lack of resources and ... the fact that it is not part of the culture is an issue... In order for independent think tanks to rise, they need to have enough resources and they currently do not. Basically, the only source of income for those people [those who work in Arab think tanks] is either their private business or their income from employment from the government. The second option is that it is not going to be independent at all because they [those who work in Arab think tanks] are going to get paid by the people who they are supposed to advise.



Figure 27: Avicenna (Ibn Sina) at the sickbed, miniature by Walenty z Pilzna, Kraków (ca 1479–1480)

Sudanese Diplomat (Participant 6): No, I think that the resources can be made - we are not poor. What we lack is not the resources, is not the human resources - my god we do have a whole world of intellectuals - we have people, we do not lack human expertise. I think the financial dependence (mentioned earlier in response to question 1) comes with [conditions]. So, I do not agree - we have both the human and financial resources; what we miss is the independence.

Saudi Researcher (Participant 7): To be frank, I am not in a position to comment on the funding of these think tanks. I haven't worked in all think tanks to give you the answer, but I agree the number of these institutions should be supported and increased by, of course, funding them,

which will enable them to do their role. I mentioned earlier that there are a few think tanks in the Arab world, and I guess it's not maybe the lack of funding but the lack of expertise and political will to increase the number of these think tanks because, if you look at some Arab countries, not all Arab countries have the same issues. For example, I wouldn't imagine think tanks in countries like Saudi Arabia or the UAE would be suffering from a lack of funding. So I guess it's not the lack of funding but more like there's not enough think tanks and experts, of course, in these institutions.

Turkish Researcher (Participant 8): … I don't think it is related with the of human and financial resources, just on the contrary. I mean, there are human resources as far as I see, and there are financial resources.

Lebanese Researcher (Participant 9): I don't think it's either the human or financial resources. What they lack is the basic definition of what their role is … I think these are the elements that are lacking. There is a large multitude of qualified individuals across the region who have the foresight, the knowledge, and the substantive ideas. So that is not the issue. The impediment is not financial, nor is it in human resources. It is the clarity in the structure of the institution, in the definition of their mission.

UK Researcher (Participant 10): I do not think that this is the main explanation. I am sure that there are maybe think tanks that are short of funding, or are totally reliant on government funding - I think that is always a problem for think tanks. But at the end of the day, especially in [certain Arab countries], you do have some money that is available from government and also from the private sector, and in terms of human resources, I think there has been a really big change since I started covering the Middle East 20 years ago, I think there are now many more people… who have studied subjects that are very relevant to policy making, and you see sometimes people working in the government positions, you see more local think tanks than you used to see. The talent pool is quite large, but quite a lot of people end up going abroad because they think there are more opportunities. So, I do not think that this is the main problem.



Figure 28: A UK ministerial despatch box that the Chancellor of the Exchequer uses to present their budget to Parliament

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Question 4*: How can Arab think tanks be encouraged to put more research out into the public domain?*

Israeli Researcher (Participant 1): The real question I have is there is sort of a thesis behind all these questions and the thesis is that [Arab] think tanks don't have enough influence and we can maybe reverse it and what I am saying is that I am not sure it can be reversed. This is because I think it is something that is implicit in how the system works. Even in Israel, where we

have a sort of very noisy political system and different parties, the amount of influence that the think tanks actually have is fairly low. The way you usually gain influence as a think tank in Israel is one of two ways. Either you influence a specific person, and that person is powerful, or has access to powerful people and then your ideas can get out there, or if we have certain of the more professional and less sort of advocacy think tanks, where if you release an analysis that is sort of very in-depth and scientific. Then in the end, people will sort of take that as the basis for the debate.

[For example], the Israel Democracy Institute… publishes a poll every year that is the same poll every year, with the same questions for many years. So when that is published, it becomes influential because then people say OK let's see what the public thinks this year as opposed to what the public thought last year. Because that think tank is seen as an organization that has a professional status, so people will listen to it.

Or an economic institute that releases economic data. So they are. For instance, we in Israel have something called the Kohelet Forum, which is a right wing think tank that was very influential in the past. It was influential before the war. Since the war started, we don't really hear about them, but they're very influential in the reform movement before the war because… our politicians and their people don't necessarily think a lot deeply about complex issues . Not that they're foolish but because they have a lot of things to do. So somebody comes to them and says this is the new law that we have written about how to change the courts, and they take that and say "oh, thank you", and take it and use it to change the courts. So to the extent that think tanks are producing something which the people who are consuming them need. So as they say, you've taken a specific technical issue and you've analyzed it and now you're presenting it with a fair degree of professional competence to somebody who understands it less well than you do, so they may well adopt it.

So, I think that often, when think tanks tend to be influential is when they're analyzing problems that are new so the government hasn't necessarily thought about what it wants to do… I will give an example, so suddenly there's Covid, and it's new and no one knows what we should do. Once they've decided what to do, they're not going to keep on asking the experts because they've already decided. When the Houthis first started shooting at ships. So somebody has to be the one that goes like; OK this is the thing that we should do and the government says if it thinks it's a good or bad idea. Once a government has decided what it's going to do, then your chances of changing its mind afterwards are fairly low. So I think a really important function for think tanks is to always be thinking about future problems and then framing them and showing their importance before the government has already begun to think about these problems seriously. I think that's sort of the sweet spot where you can have influence. Where you explain the problem and you explain how to think about the solution before the government has already decided.



Figure 29: Portrait of former British Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, who once told Parliament: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow"

An example, if today somebody comes to the government of [an Arab state] and says; we think you should pursue this or that policy towards the [established adversaries]. The government has already decided what it wants its policy to be towards the [those adversaries], so the chances of you changing that policy aren't very good. But if you could come and say the next problem you are going to see is this. So if you think about this now, these are some things you should be thinking about. I think governments tend to pay more attention when they haven't decided yet what it is they want to do. I think once they've decided, it's very difficult to sort of convince them to think differently.

US Diplomat (Participant 2): I don't think we're stuck in where we are and where the region is forever... I think there also needs to be more, maybe a lot of folks who are in think tanks and who aspire to it. There needs to be more training, more professionalization. I think there are a few high performing folks at the very pinnacle in some of the countries. I think, let me put it in a more positive way. I think the region could benefit from more collaboration with Western think tanks and with American think tanks in particular, especially in fields where a lot of the writing and a lot of the programming would be in English. I think if there was more collaboration, there could be more mentoring and more professionalization of people who want to do it. Training, how to write, how to write cohesively, coherently, persuasively in English, how to speak persuasively in programming. I think there's room for a lot of training and improvement that could make the situation better out in the region.

Some of these factors, these other factors, they're more difficult to deal with. But I think the training, the mentoring professionalization aspect is something that could have a big impact and is very accessible to improvement.

Gulf Researcher (Participant 4): Data and information need to be readily available to those or any consumers of data, whether you're a casual follower of the news, an armchair expert, a full-on kind of scholar, or whatever. The information needs to be out there!

Also... there needs to be institutional support for youth within those organizations! ... You need more [of putting] them on the front lines in order to represent [their] organization. I would mold them not in my image but more or less in the image of someone who thinks with an

open mind and not only that but also participates in global forums.

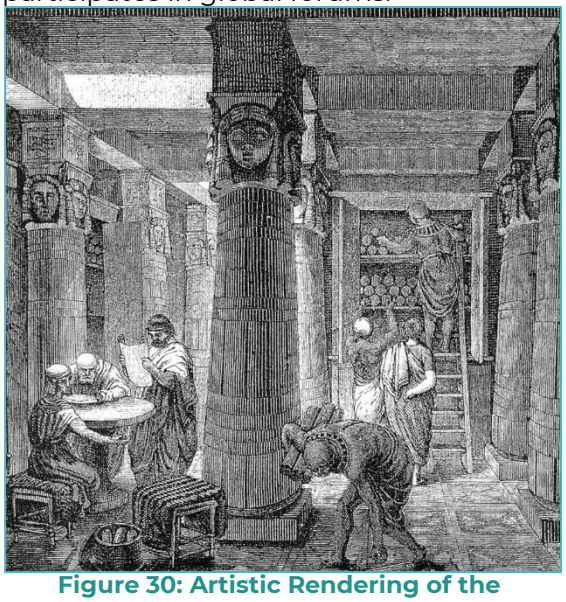


Figure 30: Artistic Rendering of the Library of Alexandria, based on some archaeological evidence

Saudi Researcher (Participant 7): I don't think they are passive, as I've mentioned before. I think it's because they don't have enough think tanks. For example, here in the UK, you will have hundreds and hundreds. In the Arab world, we're still new to understanding the concept of think tanks and their role. I think the main issue to address this is to increase the number of think tanks or maybe fund some research departments belonging to universities to produce more research, facilitate more dialogue, and increase awareness in general.

Lebanese Researcher (Participant 9): It will depend on two complementary elements.

(1) The governments [need to show greater appreciation for] the value of independent thinking, and (2) independent thinkers need to highlight, underline to the government and to society the fact that we are all in this together. The time for adversariality will be in some future happy time in which we can afford to be adversarial. But the current phase, in the decades to follow, we cannot afford to be harshly adversarial. We have to be cooperative. These two elements might incrementally push in the direction of changing the nature of the presumed passivity of "think tanks" [in the public domain].

A grave concern is that the region may be facing dangerous times, with the question of Palestine being central to its future, with unpredictable, severely dramatic changes. The possibilities of disaster are not minuscule. It is crucially important for the process of reflecting on how to engage the general population as well as the intellectuals, analysts and experts in a productive cooperative trust.

The cardinal rule remains to first do no harm. My concern is that very often what may appear to be an effort at reconsidering might end up doing harm. It is thus crucially important in trying to reform, to ensure that however flimsy the current stability or the current order is not done harm, and is pushed forward delicately. In my opinion, this is not a time for revolution. This is a time for cooperation. This is a time for an evolution in which all stakeholders, state and society, work in tandem. We cannot afford the type of disruption, even if well meaning, that the region has faced in too many places.



Figure 31: On the barricades on the Rue Soufflot, Paris, 25 June 1848 (1848-49), by Horace Vernet

UK Researcher (Participant 10): There are things that think tanks themselves can do, there are things that governments can do or that governments potentially should do - it may be quite a long term thing. There have already been some changes in terms of the involvement of more young people from the region and looking at regional issues. Sometimes, where countries in the region have good relationships with external countries, it can be interesting to form research partnerships. I am probably biased in favor of that because when I was at [entity], the main project that I ran was about looking at future trends in the [region] and we then partnered with think tanks in the region and sometimes
university centers to run workshops together. That was quite productive because being from the UK was not too sensitive, and I think that when it worked well we were sometimes able to create a bit of space
- for example we held an event on [MENA country X in MENA country Y], at a time when the relations between [X and Y] were very bad. We were able to bring some [country X] speakers to [country Y], and I think it helped that the [hosting institution] thought it was positive to collaborate with an outside think tank. Of course that could vary at different points in time, but I think sometimes that can be helpful.

There may sometimes be opportunities where think tanks can show themselves to be useful by doing that insider work that is not published. It is not necessarily a bad thing to work behind the scenes sometimes
- it can be an effective way to work. If people from governments in the region were going to listen to me, I would say that getting the voices from thinkers in the region into international policy debates is really important, and that it is different from having government spokespeople. Voices from the region need to be heard. If we are going to talk now about the region post-Gaza, we are thinking more about issues of international interest, rather than some of the issues of domestic policy reform. There is a really big risk that policies are going to be made now that are divorced from reality, because the dominant voices are coming from think tanks in Washington and from really intelligent people, people who visit the [regional security conferences] for a few days, but they do not have the deep expertise that comes from living somewhere and just knowing it from the inside

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***Question 5**: Do you have any other comments/suggestions?*

Israeli Researcher (Participant 1): No, just one thing I think is sort of a general comment to think about. I remember I was reading the interview questions and in the preamble it says: with the exception of Israeli think tanks, the region's think tanks. That's true, but that doesn't mean that the Israeli think tanks are more influential.

Israeli think tanks have less influence than people outside of Israel think that they do. On policy and government. They write, talk to people, and discuss and publish a lot but their actual influence on the people who are actually making policy is not very high. Individuals might have significant influence: We have some organizations that are not very influential, but their head is. So if he says something, [the government] may listen to him but that's not because of the think tank that he's in. It's because of who he is.

Iranian Researcher (Participant 3): The caveat is that I don't speak Arabic. Many people that work on the Arab region don't speak Arabic, I think this is a problem, a lot of people in DC obviously don't. They are more than happy to pontificate about the region the in-depth knowledge that speaking the local the languages can give you.



Figure 32: Arabic calligraphy written by a Malay Muslim in Malaysia

This isn't a world where you can just do everything in your own language anymore. Being able to produce something in English and inevitably in Chinese is important for you to punch above your weight. Because you cannot avoid the consequences of conversations happening in English.

One last thing, perhaps heighted in the Arab region, is that people often tend to overstate what actual decision makers can decide about. It would be good if people could take ordinary people seriously to a larger degree and also look at behavioral patterns. What 100,000 people in a city do on a daily basis is more mundane but perhaps more consequential than top-down decisions.

Iraqi Researcher (Participant 5): No. My suggestion really is just to, as a region, focus on how we can develop businesses between all countries - Arab and non-Arab countries, especially post-Gaza period, which means we need to work on developing business relationships with Israel through a mutual benefit. Israel as a country holds one of the highest numbers of billions and that is because the number of innovations that this nation has is more than any other nation on this planet. The MENA region has so many problems: agriculture, energy, desertification, even cultural issues
- that need to be resolved, and this innovations can be a business opportunity for the Arab countries and vice versa - to create business opportunities for Israeli companies and other companies from different countries to work in the in this resource rich region. So it is really about how we can build a sustainable, peaceful business relationship to enable the whole region to grow together.

Turkish Researcher (Participant 8): I think the important issue, I think, is when it comes to the think tanks, to increase face-to-face, person-to-face-person interactions. I think we need to know each other a little bit. Although this [lack of diversity of perspective] thing... all those issues are real in the region. I think if there is going to be more interaction, it's going to be helpful for

all of us. Because when you know people, then you talk more with those people. I think that opens up new possibilities for interaction between our countries at the end of the day. It may be useful. I don't think that we have any venues for bringing think tanks from this region together. I think we need to do something like that. They shouldn't leave that to the Americans, maybe, but I'm not sure.

Maybe the Americans will do that. Because the last time I participated in such meetings, it was the Americans, US Chambers to organize the meetings. But their interest at the end of the day is not very real. They are not living in this region. So I think we need to find a new mechanism to bring together the think tanks of this region. We need to find a way for that.

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3. Synthesis

This section synthesizes all of the preceding ones, combining what we have learned from the academic literature with the knowledge gained from engaging stakeholders, while excluding the sensitive issues that arose in the discussions but that we are unable to publish. It is a standalone section that serves as a concise presentation of this entire report. The key findings will be presented in a series of remarks whose numbering corresponds to the relevant question in the stakeholder perspectives. Remarks that start with the number "0" are inferred from the academic literature.

Remark 0.a: In a mature intellectual and policy ecosystem, think tanks make a significant contribution to statecraft by producing novel ideas in a timely fashion, and in a manner that is accessible to policymakers. Their contributions are distinct from - but complementary to - those made by university academics, private consultancies, and the in-house research departments of government entities.

Policymakers do not have the time or expertise to analyze complex issues in real time, and so to support sound decision making, they partially outsource research to a combination of in-house researchers, private consultancies, policy think tanks, and university academics. Each has strengths and weaknesses that render the four options as complementary components of an effective intellectual support ecosystem. The key advantages that think tanks exhibit are the ability to produce research in a more timely manner than university scholars, and using the non-technical language and conciseness that policymakers need. Moreover, when compared to in-house researchers and private consultancies, think tanks possess the advantage of the ability to speak openly and freely, thereby eliciting a much broader range of enriching feedback, and also allowing them to contribute to the public discourse.

Remark 0.b: While diverse intellectual ecosystems are typically the most effective, homegrown think tanks are better placed to support policymakers and the general public than are external or foreign think tanks.

Homegrown think tanks have access to the contextual and on-the-ground knowledge that enables them to produce more accurate analyses of the issues that interest their domestic policy making community.



Figure 33: Royal Navy ships in Canton during the First Opium War in 1841

This is due to a combination of their geographical proximity to the issues being analyzed, and their immersion in the local culture. Moreover, they are less likely to suffer from the conflicts of interest that can potentially undermine the value of advice provided by foreign and external think tanks.

Remark 0.c: As the current Gazan War continues, Western and Israeli think tanks have been active contributors to the public discourse, including the presentation of detailed roadmaps and visions for the region following the conclusion of the conflict. In contrast, Arab think tanks have made more limited contributions to the public discourse, and have generally avoided presenting detailed roadmaps and visions. This creates an imbalanced public discourse, where homegrown Arab perspectives are underrepresented.

Given the gravity of the Gazan War, Western and Israeli think tanks have understandably exhibited significant initiative in proposing long-term solutions, including detailed roadmaps and visions for the region, and this can be confirmed by noting the publicly available nature of these analyses. Inevitably, these proposals primarily reflect the perspective of the authoring think tank, be it Western or Israeli.

In contrast, within the public domain, Arab think tanks have focused more on retrospective analysis, and when producing forward-looking documents, they have tended to speak in general terms rather than producing detailed roadmaps. This is not to suggest that they are inactive - in fact, Arab think tanks counter that they do produce such detailed roadmaps, but in the form of confidential memoranda that are not publicly disseminated.

The unintended consequences of this asymmetry is an imbalanced public discourse within the policy making space, whereby the perspectives of Western and Israeli think tanks dominate, while the perspectives of Arab think tanks are underexposed.



Figure 34: Brookings Institution, founded in 1916 in Washington, D.C.

Remark 1: Stakeholders - including those with direct experience - find the view that Arab think tanks produce confidential prospective and prescriptive analyses that are analogous to the publicly available work produced by their nominal Western and Israeli counterparts to be credible. However, comparing these institutions internationally might be a misguided endeavor because Arab think tanks are established for a different purpose; they are more comparable to the Cold War-centric America research centers of the 1950s and 1960s, and are therefore not designed to influence the public discourse.

Several of the stakeholders have worked in or closely with Arab think tanks, and personally know the researchers who work there, allowing them to affirm with total confidence that a lot of the work that these entities do takes the form of confidential memoranda delivered directly to policymakers. This perception is reinforced by the fact that Arab think tanks tend to be

funded by the government, as this creates a culture of the funder feeling as though they own exclusive access to the think tank's output, much as a client for a private consultancy does. Note that in light of the narrower the differences in political culture between Arab and Western countries, the need for Arab think tanks to engage with and influence the general public is diminished.

Beyond this, the frequent presence of senior government officials in key leadership positions in Arab think tanks provides the scholars with the direct channel that enables them to support policy. The looser nature of decision-making in the region also means that senior government officials are more amenable to the idea of listening to a smart compatriot offer advice in a closed setting, enhancing the demand for confidential research memoranda.

Finally, the underexposure of Arab think tank output may partially reflect the limited allocation of resources to these institutions, which curtails their output; and the higher likelihood that their output runs counter to Western narratives, leading to its tacit marginalization in public discourses dominated by Western media outlets.

Remark 2: Stakeholders believe that confidential memoranda are an imperfect substitute for publicly disseminated research, albeit one that has the advantage of sometimes allowing for a more candid dialogue with the government. Engaging the general public elevates the quality of the final product significantly, and enriches the public discourse. However, a combination of purposeful design choices, the socio-political system, and a general lack of awareness yields a situation where think tanks in the Arab world do not feel the need to engage the public, and focus more on the narrow engagement of government officials, even if this potentially affects the quality of the research from an academic and intellectual perspective. Yet, recent changes, including social media, mean that Arab think tanks are slowly warming to the idea of publicly disseminating their research.

Building on the observation that contemporary Arab think tanks are closer in design and purpose to Cold War-era American research centers, these organizations see that their primary role is to engage and support policymakers. Accordingly, disseminating their work undermines their mission because - due to the socio-political constraints - it limits their ability to present accurate and impartial analysis to the government. Were it not for the protection afforded by confidentiality, openly discussing government policy could be counterproductive.

Despite the advantages that confidentiality affords to Arab think tanks, the closed exchange of knowledge may limit its ability to reach its full potential quality-wise. Exposing things to the public allows for the

contribution of a much larger number of talented people, as most do not have the opportunity to work in a think tank. The views of underrepresented groups within the think tank community - such as youth - risk being marginalized. The rate at which think tanks will learn from one another, and from their own experience, is potentially curtailed when their research remains confidential. Moreover, at the societal level, the confidentiality may under certain circumstances represent a missed opportunity, as the public discourse is artificially impoverished, and intellectual production is needlessly hoarded.

Ironically, in certain cases, the preference for confidentiality is cultural rather than reflecting a strategic assessment of the pros and cons of public dissemination. Moreover, there is a fundamental lack of awareness at the societal levels - spanning policymakers, think tank researchers, and the general public - about the role that think tanks play, and about the most effective way to marshal their resources.



Figure 35: Mark Zuckerberg, co-creator of Facebook, in his Harvard dorm room, 2005

Finally, stakeholders have the sense that these systems are gradually changing in some parts of the Arab world, propelled by organic evolution in the social attitudes, and also due to the proliferation of social media, which makes government officials more attuned to the views of the general public.

Remark 3: Stakeholders are firm in the belief that there is an abundance of capable human resources, and they also believe that there are sufficient financial resources in principle. However, the latent human resources can potentially be underutilized. This stems from a potential lack of clarity in the mission of some Arab think tanks. As a result, a lack of financial and human resources is a significant contributor to the phenomenon of Arab think tanks making a smaller contribution to the public discourse on regional roadmaps and visions than Western think tanks.

In the very basic sense, there is a near consensus that there are many talented actual and potential researchers in the Arab world. Moreover, the financial resources required to operate effective think tanks exist, too. However, those financial resources are tied to governments which have a nascent understanding of the role that think tanks play, and of the operating systems that maximize productivity. As a result, financial resources are not deployed as effectively as they might be within Arab think tanks, rendering “think tank scholar” a non-viable career choice for many capable researchers. There is a genuine brain drain within the sector, reflected in the choice by many Arab researchers to work in Western think tanks and permanently migrate there. The result is a self-induced lack of financial and human resources in Arab think tanks.

Remark 4: For the stakeholders who perceived a genuine weakness in Arab think tanks' contribution to regional visions and roadmaps in the public domain, structural remedies include more funding - especially independent funding; more training and professionalism, possibly by cooperating with mature global think tanks; greater data availability by government entities; and higher levels of institutional support for youth.

Lack of funding is a chronic, pan-global issue in the think tank community, and given the relative complexity and difficulty of contributing to the public discourse on detailed regional visions, more resources will likely provide a much needed boost to such activities in the Arab world. Moreover, even financially well-resourced Arab think tanks would benefit considerably from cooperating with mature Western think tanks as a way of elevating the skills and professionalism of their own researchers, especially the younger ones. This goes hand in hand with offering greater opportunities for young researchers to author research, attend events, and publicly represent the organizations that employ them.

Beyond the financial and human inputs to think tank research, there is also a need for greater data availability. Prospective and prescriptive analyses are data-hungry exercises, and researchers seeking to undertake them in the Arab world often see their efforts scuppered by government entities that are overly cautious or simply too bureaucratic to provide the researchers with the data they need.

Further to the above, on a tactical level, think tanks would do well to focus on issues that their governments haven't thought much about, and less on ones where policymakers already have well-established positions. This is due to the fact that senior officials are relatively unlikely to change their mind about issues that they have considered and acted upon; whereas when it comes to greenfield issues, their willingness to openly consider the advice of think tank scholars will be considerably higher.

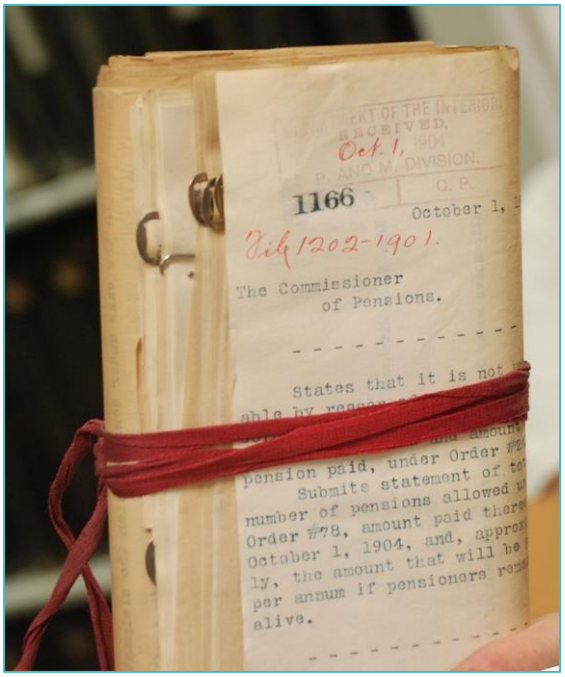


Figure 36: Bundle of US pension documents from 1906 bound in red tape, which is an idiom for excessive bureauracy

Finally, it is worth noting that some stakeholders believe that the current system in the Arab world works well and that there is no need for significant reform, beyond the aforementioned pan-global yearning for more funding and better awareness. Confidential memoranda are as or more effective than publicly-disseminated research, and there is little to be gained from engaging the public on such issues when compared to the importance of

directly speaking to policymakers in a suitable language.

Conclusion

If the MENA region is to affect a sustainable improvement in its circumstances, a central element of that change needs to be developing the tools required to diagnose its problems and propose effective solutions. At present, arguably the most pressing concern is the Gazan War, but there are other crises and wars underway, and the future will surely bring more challenges that need to be confronted.

A mature intellectual ecosystem requires the presence of think tanks that can produce policy-relevant research in a timely manner, and in a language that non-specialists - be they senior officials or ordinary people - can understand. Moreover, there are benefits to publicly disseminating that research. Certainly, there exist security- and defense-related dossiers that are best tackled using confidential memoranda due to the need to keep thinking hidden from adversaries. However, for some topics, the epistemological benefits of openly sharing research potentially exceed any losses associated with foregoing confidentiality.

In the Arab world, many think tanks are well-funded and have good-quality researchers, yet they make limited contributions to the public discourse. Under certain circumstances, this represents a foregone opportunity to elevate the quality of research output. The challenges that the MENA region is facing are difficult enough to warrant an all-hands-on-deck approach, and that includes mobilizing think tank scholars to think hard about how to tackle these problems, and to allow them to leverage the benefits of public dissemination as they seek to refine their ideas.

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