

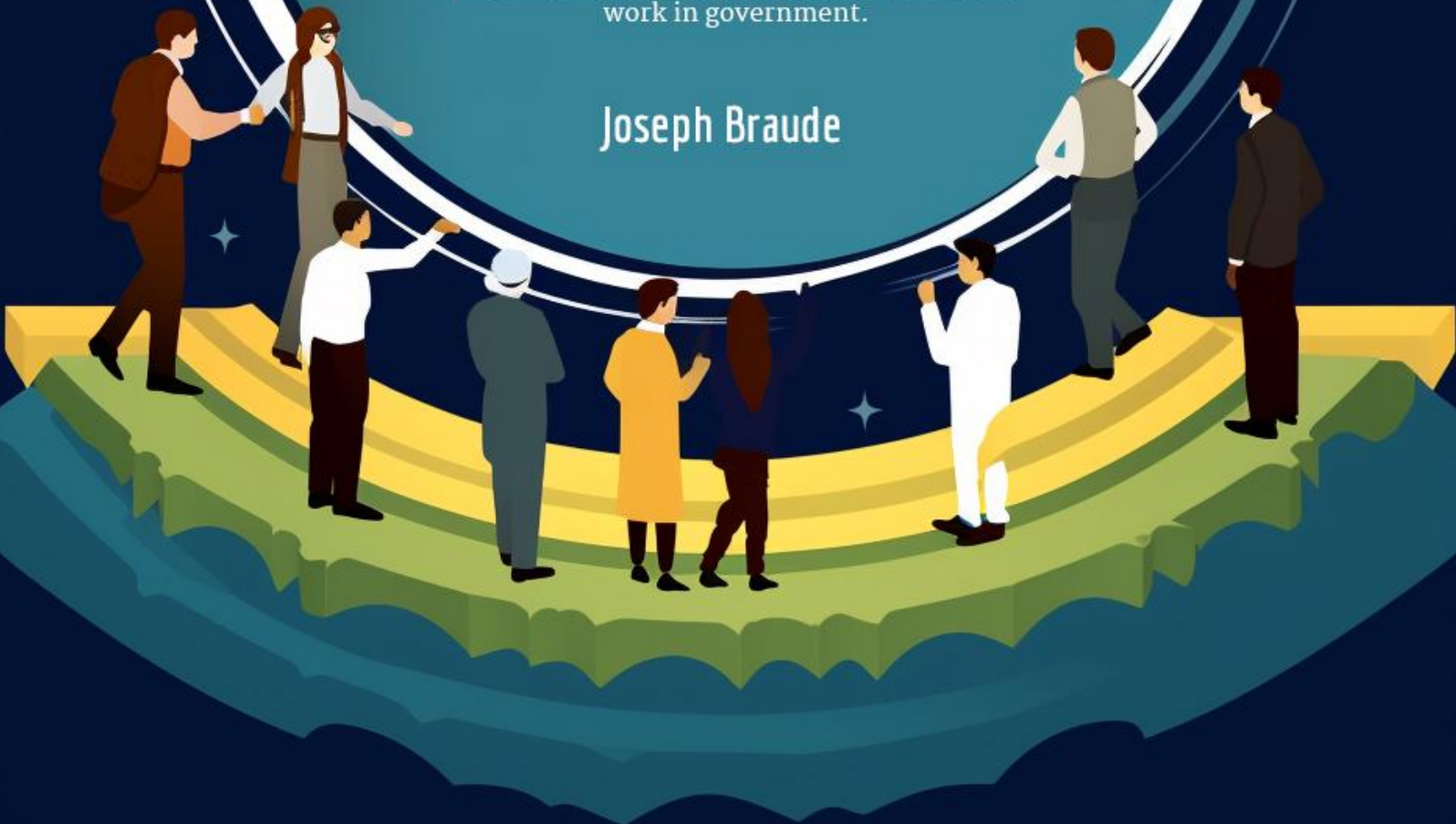


Applied Wits

Arab Think Tanks as an Engine of Development

The Arab region's reformist think tanks want to help resolve internecine conflict, hone a problem-solving approach to policy, and professionalize young researchers en route to work in government.

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Executive Summary

Arab think tanks, a burgeoning civil sector across the region, can serve as a hub for international partnership in support of liberalizing trends. As with their equivalents in any part of the world, Arab think tanks can serve as a hub for “track two” discussions to resolve the region’s internecine conflicts. They can inform local policies, raise public awareness of national challenges and potential solutions, and professionalize young researchers who may go on to serve in government. They can also provide a perch for Americans who seek to map an Arab country’s field of competitive engagement in other sectors.

Most Arab think tanks are starved for funding, however. They also lack analytical autonomy in most authoritarian environments, and strain to operate safely in countries wracked by civil war. Among the ones that overcome these challenges to attain a modicum of stability and latitude, their scope of inquiry remains limited, for the most part, to defense and international affairs. Environmental policy, social policy, and other important areas of study lack investment and focus.

To engage this field, American think tank professionals will need to overcome a legacy of distrust within the region, in addition to various imbalances in the present relationship between their own institutions and Arab counterparts. Several Arab governments still promulgate conspiracy theories about American and other Western powers, in which think tanks appear often as an alleged tool of Western hegemony in the region. Add to this problem the claim of exploitation: some Arab think tanks accuse Western institutions of farming out “wholesale research” for little pay, while investing little in Arab think tanks’ development. Indeed, operational funding for Arab think tanks has been assigned a low priority in most American grant-making institutions that support development projects in Arab countries. Meanwhile, money has been flowing in the opposite direction: tens of

millions of dollars in support for Washington think tanks, emanating from the region's oil-rich states, does more to enrich the American side of the industry than empower its Arab equivalent.

To chart a new course in American engagement of Arab think tanks, Americans can challenge conspiratorial rhetoric on the subject in Arab lands by coordinating with local advocates of partnership. In talks with Gulf donors to American think tanks, they can offer to expand the relationship to include capacity building for policy institutions within the region. Meanwhile, greater American appreciation for the role Arab think tanks can play in fostering indigenous reform and development can inspire American grant-making institutions to assign the field a higher priority.



James McGann defines think tanks as “institutions of research, analysis, and engagement that generate policy advice on domestic and international issues, enabling policymakers to make informed decisions, and bridging the gap between the government and the public at large.” His taxonomy of think tanks draws distinctions among government-, university-, party-, and business-affiliated institutions. He traces the gradations of independence among think tanks of each variety, ranging from those subservient to government on the one hand to those that enjoy a diverse and broad-based supply of private funding on the other.¹ McGann has also shown that while the West, where think tanks originated, remains the global leader of the industry, younger think tanks in developing countries have gone on to make important contributions. His 2019 study of think tanks in Asia, for example, demonstrates that in countries of diverse political structures, from democratic South Korea to authoritarian China, local think tanks have made a distinguished contribution to government reform, social cohesion, and economic growth.²

¹ James McGann, *Think Tanks: The New Knowledge and Power Brokers in Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), pps. 4-5

² *Ibid.*, pps. 1-9

Beyond their universal function as a hub and distributor of useful analysis, think tanks can serve a vital function in ideologically contested environments: provide a safe space for quiet engagement among feuding factions. They can also address the gap in awareness and connectivity between such fraught environments on the one hand and distant powers on the other. Finally, in any part of the world, a think tank can enrich the outlook of staffers and fellows who go on to serve in government, as well as help mid-career public servants refine their ideas while between government jobs.³

Arab think tanks carry the promise of providing all these services across the Middle East and North Africa. Their numbers, moreover, have grown considerably in recent years. In 1996, Palestinian policy researcher Khalil Shikaki estimated that the Arab region harbored 15 think tanks, of which only “six or seven produce publications regularly or have any influence on the political leadership of their respective countries.”⁴ By 2019, the University of Pennsylvania’s Global Go To Thinktank Index Report surveyed approximately 1,000 Arab think tanks. Though the largest and most influential of these were headquartered in relatively stable Arab countries, others operate in the region’s war-torn environments, from Libya to Yemen.⁵

But the University of Pennsylvania study’s evaluation of these institutions also found numerous shortcomings, which speak to the long road ahead for Arab think tanks to realize their potential. The study’s estimations of regional excellence in nearly every category suggest that most of the institutions do not meet international standards; Israeli, Iranian, and Turkish think tanks consistently topped and disproportionately populated the list. Judging from the study’s sub-rankings by field of research, moreover, most Arab think tanks

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Khalil Shikaki, Ahmad Fakhri, Mustafa Harmaneh, Yossi Alpher, “Ideas and Influence in Middle East Politics: The Role of Think Tanks” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 1996, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/319BCct>

⁵ James G. McGann, “2019 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report”, The Lauder Institute, January 2020, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/3IH7BSc>

appear to maintain a singular focus on defense and hard politics, to the exclusion of other sectors.⁶ Consider, for example, that while Arab think tanks made a modest showing among the top-ranked institutions addressing “defense and security” (three Arab think tanks out of 110 globally) and “foreign policy and international affairs” (three out of 156 globally), none made the list in “domestic economic policy,” “environmental policy,” “international development policy,” “international economic policy,” “science and technology policy,” “social policy,” or “transparency and good governance.” As to “food security,” “domestic health affairs,” “global health policy,” and even “energy and resources,” Arab think tanks made only one showing per category.⁷

American think tanks, their personnel, and their benefactors can and should support improvements in these institutions by engaging them more substantially, both in the security and foreign policy realms and in the more underserved areas of expertise noted above. In so doing, they can strengthen Arab think tanks’ role as a catalyst for reform of the region’s governing structures, civil sectors, and societies. But an examination of Americans’ present role in Arab think tanks shows that the connectivity remains limited — and at that, mostly confined to the “defense and security” and “foreign policy and international affairs” divisions toward which Arab think tanks are overwhelmingly skewed.

For Americans to contribute more robustly to improving the quality and impact of these Arab institutions, they need to scrutinize the field, as well as explore the structural challenges American think tanks would themselves face in engaging it.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pps. 109-112

⁷ *Ibid.*, pps. 113-117

American Think Tanks Appraise Their Arab Counterparts

Periodically over the past three decades, American Mideast policy researchers have examined the field of Arab think tanks as a subject of strategic focus in its own right. That is, they appraised the significance of these institutions collectively as a non-state actor in the region, then mulled ways of using them as a channel to advance U.S. policy goals. Such explorations naturally employed a rubric informed by American policy priorities at any given time.

Consider the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's 1996 forum "Ideas and Influence in Middle East Politics: The Role of Think Tanks." Participants noted the supporting role some Arab think tanks had played in bringing about the newly inked Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, and asked what further contributions they could make to the peace process. Khalil Shikaki, a visiting fellow from a think tank in Ramallah, observed that not only had the "original Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles [grown] out of discussions that began between Israeli think tanks and PLO officials," but that Arab and Israeli think tanks had also jointly convened track two discussions between the parties. Going forward, panelists suggested, Arab think tanks could advance the nascent peace process by "help[ing] transform the peace reached between leaders to a peace between peoples." They could "educate the public and deconstruct false perceptions bred by ignorance that stand as barriers to peace," as well as "provide information to the public that governments may not be prepared to impart."⁸

After the September 11 attacks, as the more expansive challenges of countering extremism and reforming Arab governance region-wide came to the fore in the United States, American studies of Arab think tanks adopted a new gloss that reflected the shift. A 2004

⁸Khalil Shikaki, Ahmad Fakhr, Mustafa Harmaneh, Yossi Alpher, "Ideas and Influence in Middle East Politics: The Role of Think Tanks" *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 1996, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/319BCct>

Brookings Institution report noted approvingly that after the 2001 tragedy, American think tanks' Middle East programs "were no longer centered around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," and that "internal Arab political, economic, and social conditions" within Arab states had now taken center stage. On the one hand, this observation reflected a new interest by American researchers in surveying the expanse of Arab think tanks, now proliferating rapidly, beyond Arab-Israeli matters. On the other, Washington's new strategic focus on "public diplomacy" — in essence, correcting Arab misapprehensions of America, its culture, and its intentions vis a vis the Middle East — narrowed the inquiry. The Brookings report repeatedly stressed the potential to use Arab think tanks as a conduit to "enhance the image of the United States in the region," at a time when "the relationship between the United States and the Arab world has reached a low point."⁹ Like the larger set of public diplomacy initiatives which the U.S. undertook at the time, the emphasis on rebranding America obscured a more important area of inquiry: how to bolster Arab think tanks' capacities for the sake of empowering them to promote reform.

A further inflection point in the study of think tanks followed the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011-'12, when American hopes ran high for swift democratic transitions across the region. The 2013 U Penn *Mena Think Tank Summit Report*, summarizing proceedings from a gathering of Arab think tank leaderships in Istanbul, adopted the rubric of "capitalizing on transitions." Speakers stressed that "the public ... [is now] a political force," and that think tanks should accordingly focus on educating the public to use its new power to foster improved governance. Positing that think tanks could now free themselves from Arab government control, the report counseled "find[ing] the sweet spot between influence and independence," meaning that they should consider maintaining their close ties to government in order to ensure that it listens to their recommendations. Participants expressed so much confidence that people power would grow and dominate the landscape that they worried think tanks would lose their relevance as a distinctive driver of reform. "It

⁹ Ezzat Ibrahim, "Arab and American Think Tanks: New Possibilities for Cooperation? New Engines for Reform?", *Brookings Institute Working Paper*, October 2004, accessed online: <https://brook.gs/34Tdsxa>, pp. 1

may be that MENA governments, having witnessed the potential power of mass movements, are bypassing think tank advice and instead paying heed to public opinion in their policies.” Think tanks must “seek audiences with the people” for their “scientific research” so as to serve as a check on populism.”¹⁰

It need hardly be demonstrated that key findings in each of these studies were subsequently overtaken by events. In the years following 1996, obstacles to an Israeli-Palestinian “peace between peoples” metastasized, while the political will to overcome them through a concerted multi-sector civic effort did not emerge.¹¹ Over the generation following the September 11 attacks, the popularity of the United States increased, decreased again, and sometimes swung back for reasons unrelated to American public relations campaigns. A consensus meanwhile emerged in Washington that the U.S. had focused too much on trying to improve perceptions of America and not enough on addressing the dysfunction in Arab governance and politics in which anti-Americanism festered. As to the march toward Arab democracy which the 2013 University of Pennsylvania study predicted, it faced the setbacks of successive Islamist electoral sweeps followed by a counterrevolutionary authoritarian resurgence. The latter shift, in particular, challenged the view that think tanks’ influence rested largely on their relationship with a mass audience. They faced different problems instead, as subsequent sections will show.

In other ways, however, all three studies identified trends in Arab think tanks that proved prescient and remain relevant. First, they detected an arc of improvement in the quality of Arab thinks’ output. Each study argued in substance that for decades, a handful of Arab government-controlled think tanks had published mostly anti-Israel diatribes and paeans to the ruler — tethered to ideology, inflected by emotion, and heedless of the region’s actual

¹⁰ James McGann, “2013 MENA Think Tank Summit Report: Increasing the Effectiveness of Think Tanks in the Middle East and North Africa: Key Opportunities for Institutional Growth”, *The Lauder Institute*, December 2013, <https://bit.ly/3iWqwqt> pp. 11

¹¹ Mohammed Dajani (former Professor at Al-Quds University and founder, Wasatiya movement), in conversation with the author, Jerusalem, July 2, 2019.

needs and problems. More recently, the studies observed, younger scholars have adopted a more solutions-oriented approach. They idealize sober analysis, scientific inquiry, and evidence; take greater interest in national and regional development issues; and aspire to global standards of research and writing and the international respect and access such work brings. Another observation which the three studies shared was that any Arab think tank with an independent streak faces precarious circumstances: it struggles to survive financially given the dearth of local or foreign support, and strains to operate freely due to pressure by host governments to deliver conclusions that conform to official policy.

These shared observations provide a useful point of departure for a survey of the competitive field.

Liberal Arab Think Tanks: A View from Inside One

One way to learn about the status of reformist think tanks in the region today is to work inside one. Since 2012, I have been a senior fellow at the Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research, a prominent institution headquartered in Dubai. A departure is warranted into the circumstances in which the organization started, its output since then, and the challenges it has navigated along the way.

The Center emerged through the interconnected lives of four Saudi liberal reformists, all born in the early 1970s, of whom three had come to their ideals from a background in Islamist extremism. Abdullah bin Bjad al-Otaibi and Mishari al-Dhaydi had been thought leaders of the Ahl al-Hadith, a Salafi group that counseled nonrecognition of the Saudi state or any other government in the region, with the qualified exception of the Taliban.¹² They spent two years behind bars, where they began to widen their intellectual horizons by reading books from other cultures, available in the prison library.¹³ They also befriended a third ex-radical: Mansour Alnogaidan. Formerly a spiritual leader in the “Brotherhood of Burayda,” which fused Amish-like asceticism with militancy, he underwent his own prison transformation to become a proponent of Islamic reform and a piercing critic of the country’s senior clerics. All three, having defected from their extremist camps, incurred death warrants from former comrades and needed a new home.¹⁴

They had also come to agree on a new worldview which they call “liberal incrementalism” (al-liberaliya al-tadrijiya). The concept and rationale bears describing. It holds that the road

¹² Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 100.

¹³ Abdullah bin Bjad al-Otaibi (Senior Fellow, Al-Mesbar Center for Research and Studies), in conversation with the author, Dubai, July 1, 2010.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Rubin, “The Jihadi Who Kept Asking Why,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 7, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/07/magazine/the-jihadi-who-kept-asking-why.html> (accessed May 27, 2017).

to liberalism in Arab lands runs not through revolution, but rather through a long-term process of promoting classical liberal principles and constructing civil institutions that adopt them. They argue that although autocrats and liberal democrats ultimately seek different outcomes, they can reach a generational truce, accommodating each other's interests for the sake of mutual benefit. For Otaibi, Dhaydi, and Nogaidan, the United Arab Emirates was the prime example of a reformist autocracy with which they could come to terms and win the space to pursue their agenda.¹⁵

The fourth figure to whom the Al-Mesbar Center owes its founding, Turki Aldakhil, had never joined an extremist group. Born to a conservative Saudi family in Riyadh, he grew up curious about the world beyond the kingdom and keen to test the chinks in clerics' armor. He deepened his understanding of the Saudi Salafi mindset by studying theology at Al-Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, one of the three institutions in the kingdom that licensed clerics to preach. But he graduated from the seminary to pursue a comparatively worldly career in Saudi establishment news media, then worked his way up from the domestic press to pan-Arab broadcasting.¹⁶ For insight into the future of his field, he made a student's sojourn to the University of Oregon's Department of Media Studies, where he explored how American news outlets were migrating their presence to the Internet. He had picked an especially poignant time to live there: on September 11, 2001, he and his Saudi roommates in Eugene, Oregon, huddled around their TV and watched New York's Twin Towers collapse. "Within a day of the terror attacks," he recalled, "a group of American students of all faiths allayed our unease. . . . They assured us that they understood the difference between the fundamental decency of the Saudi people and the warped ideology to which the hijackers had fallen prey. They formed a circle around our mosque, providing a sort of emotional security for us as we prayed." Thus he returned to

¹⁵ Mansour Alnogaidan (Director, Al-Mesbar Center for Research and Studies), in conversation with the author, Dubai, September 28, 2014).

¹⁶ Hadir Muhammad, "Man Huwa al-l'ami al-Sa'udi Turki 'l-Dakhil, Mudir Qanat al-'Arabiyyah [Who is the Saudi Media Figure Turki Aldakhil, A Director at Al-Arabiya]," Al-Mirsal, December 23, 2015, accessed online: <http://www.almsal.com/post/297275> (accessed May 27, 2017).

the Gulf bearing a profound lesson in tolerance, heightened affinity for the United States, and new skills in digital media.¹⁷

Together, Otaibi, Dhaydi, Alnogaidan, and Aldakhil possessed some of the rarest and most important qualities for effective political action in their homeland. They had an encyclopedic understanding of Saudi Islamist discourse, from the treatises of the religious establishment to the trenches of radicalism. Three of the four also had a proven capacity to actually impact the extremist milieu, having not only inhabited it but also served as leaders within it. Erudite and quick-witted, they understood how to funnel scholarship and theory into public discussion and practice. Turki Aldakhil contributed establishment credentials, a track record in Saudi establishment politics, and a vision to carry it into the twenty-first century informed by cutting-edge practices in the West. In the eyes of distant foreign governments, this combination could actually be misconstrued as dangerous — and indeed, it would not have been easy at the time to find a Western democratic state willing to harbor all four figures, in light of the backgrounds of some. UAE authorities, by contrast, understood who they were and where their ideas had led them. Thus over the decade following the September 2001 attacks, they enjoyed the freedom to use the territory to build an intellectual foundation for their cause.

The Dubai-based Al-Mesbar Center was founded by Aldakhil, managed first by Otaibi and later by Alnogaidan, and grounded in scholarship from all four principals and their colleagues. (Reflecting the founders' perception of how a think tank works, "Al-Mesbar" is a medieval Arabic nautical term for a periscope.) Its stock in trade, a monthly book-length volume of scholarship, examined the inner workings of the major Islamist movements, their splinter groups, and their chief actors—one faction at a time, hundreds over a decade, beginning in Saudi Arabia and extending into the larger Arab and Muslim world and beyond. In parsing each group's aspirations, strengths, and weaknesses, the books provided rare knowledge to a larger audience of liberals who lacked intimacy with the

¹⁷ Turki Aldakhil (general manager, Al-Arabiya), in discussion with the author in Dubai, December 2016.

terrain. Al-Mesbar also published books that helped envision a corrective to extremist trends. For example, scholarship by and about women in the region documented the conditions they faced and ideas they had developed about how to pursue their rights. Other books empathically portrayed the presence of Jews, Christians, and Muslim minority sects in the Gulf and beyond, serving to counter ignorance and demonization and press the case for pluralism and equity.¹⁸ Crucially, special volumes about the many nonviolent readings of Islam introduced Saudi and Gulf elites to salubrious models for religious leadership: the syncretism and tolerance of Islam as traditionally practiced in Indonesia, for example, and the merits of Sufism, Islam's mystical strand, in nurturing body and soul. In the sense that this output carried formulations as to how to apply classical liberal principles to government, the Al-Mesbar Center provided the "advice on domestic and international issues, enabling policymakers to make informed decisions" which McGann describes among an effective think tank's attributes. Inasmuch as the issues, ideas, and stories which the books used to sway government policies also proved useful to Arabic media — as a basis for journalism, documentaries, public affairs programming, and other content — the Center has also served McGann's key goal of "bridging the gap between the government and the public at large."

These strides are mitigated, to be sure, by the tradeoffs inherent in operating in an authoritarian environment. Al-Mesbar publications limit their scrutiny of high politics in the UAE and do not publish the work of scholars who have antagonized the Emirati establishment, whatever their scholarly merit. All the group's findings and arguments are premised on support for dynastic continuity in that country, and any differences with state policy are thoughtfully conveyed as a difference over the best means to achieve the leadership's delineated end-goals. But the organizations' principals share a genuine

¹⁸ For a representative sample, see: Yusif Ali al-Mutayri, *Al-Yahud Fil-Khalij* [The Jews in the Gulf] (Dubai: Dar Madarik Publishing, 2011); Al-Mesbar Center, *Al-Aqbat Fi Misr Ba'd al-Thawrah* [The Copts in Egypt after the Revolution] (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research, 2012); Rita Faraj, *Al-Mar'ah fi 'l-'Alam al-'Arabi Wa-Tahaddiyat al-Islam al-Siyasi* [Women in the Arab World and the Challenges of Political Islam] (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research, 2013); Al-Mesbar Center, *Indonesia: Al-Islamiyun, Al-Shi'ah, Al-Sufiyyah* [Indonesia: Islamists, Shi'a, and Sufis] (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research, 2013).

commitment to these goals, and accordingly regard the concessions they must make as well worth the freedom of movement and operation, the opportunity to make their case to decision-makers convivially, and the protection from Islamist extremists which such an arrangement affords. In sum, the Center's chief actors feel they have found McGann's "sweet spot between influence and independence" — and thanks to the smooth conduits of connectivity they have built between their research and Arabic broadcast media, they have also found "audiences with the people ... [for their] scientific research."¹⁹

¹⁹ James McGann, "2013 MENA Think Tank Summit Report: Increasing the Effectiveness of Think Tanks in the Middle East and North Africa: Key Opportunities for Institutional Growth", *The Lauder Institute*, December 2013, <https://bit.ly/3iWqwqt> pp. 11

Obstacles to Arab Think Tank Development

Replicating such a “sweet spot” is of course very difficult. As noted previously, numerous Arab think tanks have begun to operate in countries where authoritarian rule remains strong, such as Algeria and Egypt, as well as ideologically contested environments where a government has lost central control, such as Yemen and Libya. Of these, some resemble the Al-Mesbar Center in that they were established outside the state system by Arab liberals, then proceeded to negotiate a modus vivendi with the government to grow their operations. Others, by contrast, trace their inception to a decision from the upper echelons of authority. That is, the state created it to serve as a framework to *acquire* Arab liberals or reformists and activate them to serve its interests through directed research.

Which of these varieties fares best in the region? Which type of Arab think tank can best serve as a point of entry for American specialists in a range of fields, whether to help grow the institution itself or to work through it to engage the host country?

Consider the case of Algeria. In 2014, the media company that owns the television network *Al-Shurouq* and a daily newspaper by the same name created a think tank called the Al-Shurouq Center for Research and Strategic Studies. At its inaugural banquet, director Ali Fudhayl said it was a “pioneering venture in Algeria, especially given the absence of any serious institutions of its kind.”²⁰ He said its purpose would be to serve as “a resource for officials, whether in economics, politics, security, societal, or cultural policies inside the country, as well as counterterrorism practices.”²¹ In mission and structure, it bore some

²⁰ Echorouktele. “Milad Markaz al-Shuruq li ‘l-Dirasat wa ‘l-Buhuth al-Istratijiya [Birth of the Al-Shuruq Center for Strategic Research and Studies].” YouTube video, 3:53. January 15, 2014, accessed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fzE6dGjq0o>.

²¹ ‘Abd al-Hamid al-‘Uthmani. “Fi Hafli Bahij Hadharahu Wuzara’ wa Sufara’ wa ‘Ulama wa Mufakkirun ... Itlaq Markaz al-Shuruq li ‘l-Dirasat wa ‘l-Buhuth al-Istratijiya [In a Sumptuous Gathering Attended by Ministers, Ambassadors, Scholars, and Intellectuals ... Launch of the Al-Shuruq Center for Strategic Research and Studies].” *Al-Shuruq*, January 13, 2014.

similarity to the Al-Mesbar Center, in that it grew out of a liberal media enterprise separate from the state but well disposed to partner with it. Six years later, however, the organization had published little in the way of research, nor convened any public conferences. The problem, according to Algerian observers, lay in the restrictions they faced airing critical views of the government's domestic social and cultural policies.

Among more stable think tanks in the country, Algiers hosts the African Union's "African Centre for Studies and Research on Terrorism," a regional enterprise with a security focus. In 2008, the United States Ambassador to Algeria, David Pearce, spoke at the opening of its workshop on combating terrorist financing in North and West Africa — marking a period which saw the beginnings of intensified security cooperation between the two countries. But the organization's mandate is narrow, limited to intelligence and hard power coordination. Its relationship with the public, or non-government researchers, remains limited and severely constrained.²²

Similar challenges have weakened nascent research institutions in Egypt which sought to balance a relationship with the Egyptian establishment on the one hand with foreign partnerships on the other. The 2012 arrests of dozens of NGO workers in Egypt on bogus charges of conspiring with foreign actors against the state had a chilling effect on a range of nascent liberal think tank ventures that had launched in the heady months following the Arab Spring demonstrations.²³ Liberal independent scholar Amr Bargisi, for example, sought to build a research facility that would conduct feasibility studies for the construction of civil institutions embodying liberal universalist principles. He courted American sources of financial and intellectual support, including private philanthropists motivated by the opportunity they saw, amid counterrevolutionary army rule in Egypt, to help roll back Islamism. But the international support base Bargisi assembled did not win the requisite

²² "Africa Center Hosts Workshop on Combating Terrorist Financing in North and West Africa." *United States Africa Command*, December 16, 2008. <http://bit.ly/1LlcxCC>.

²³ Ernesto Londoño, "In Egypt, NGO crackdown and draft law have chilling effect", *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2012, accessed online: <https://wapo.st/3IGlVui>

buy-in from state authorities, and Bargisi judged the development of the think tank in Cairo to be unworkable and likely dangerous.²⁴ One does find continuity among Egyptian think tanks long established and supported by the state, such as the storied Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies; or formally tied to the government, such as the Center for Information and Decision-Making Support, the official think tank of Egypt's cabinet.²⁵ The former offers a point of access and temporary residency for visiting American researchers. The latter, while mainly closed off from public view, has been assessed as approachable by researchers who have sought to build ties with it. Thus some opportunities, insufficiently tapped by American inquirers, stand to be tested.

Meanwhile, by contrast, a variety of think tanks in the war-torn, ideologically contested environments face a different set of obstacles, yet have shown energy in striving to overcome them. Typically operating on a shoestring budget, they are often fueled by the energy of volunteers, or scholars with other day jobs who contribute substantial effort for meager supplementary wages. The year 2004 saw the launch of the Yemen Polling Center in Sanaa. With a staff of three, it carried out demographic and sociological surveys of Yemenis, with modest support from international organizations which sought the data for the planning of relief and humanitarian efforts in the country. In the Libyan capital Tripoli, shortly after the 2012 overthrow of Qadhafi, a young, British-educated Libyan social entrepreneur, Anas El-Gomati, created the Sadeq Institute as an independent research body. The government of Prime Minister Eyad El-Sarraj granted the organization latitude to operate autonomously, and the group convened an international conference for researchers. Research studies carried out by the organization remain unavailable for public view — taken down from the group's Web site owing to domestic political sensitivities, according to Gomati. Operations froze in 2018 for lack of financial support. The global

²⁴ Amr Bargisi (Independent scholar), in discussion with the author in New York, June 2016.

²⁵ Markaz al-Ma'lumat Wa-Da'm Itikhadh al-Qarar [Center for Information and Supporting Decision-making] homepage, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/34WsrX3>

economic downturn due to COVID-19 led would-be donors to stall their intended contributions.²⁶

Asked about the challenges he faced in garnering outside support, Gomati said that even before the virus wreaked economic havoc worldwide, neither American nor European philanthropy had been forthcoming in supporting Arab think tanks. The kind of funding which Western think tanks themselves offered to their nascent Arab counterparts, he said, was “exploitative in nature,” amounting to commissioned, wholesale information retrieval for use by senior fellows in the West seeking to buttress their own writing with fresh evidence. “It’s better than nothing,” Gomati said, “but it is no foundation to build an institution.”²⁷

²⁶ Interview with Anas El-Gomati (Director of the Sadeq Institute), August 23, 2020.

²⁷ Ibid.

How American Think Tanks Can Help

Despite these challenges, as noted earlier, Arab think tanks, if given a chance to grow, have the potential to help fill gaps in knowledge and connectivity between local policymakers on the one hand and their counterparts in distant capitals on the other. In some ways, the opportunity to do so has grown: beyond the ease of publishing and distributing research globally via online platforms, the routinization of videoconferencing through applications like Zoom enables policy institutions anywhere to convene international symposia and workshops at minimal cost.

But while technical and geographical impediments have eased, a range of structural imbalances still conspire to constrict these forms of exchange — not altogether, to be sure, but in three key ways that skew the connectivity. These imbalances merit attention, with an eye to how they might be overcome so that American think tanks can do more to support the development of their Arab counterparts.

The first of the three is the stark imbalance between the translation of Westerners' Mideast policy research into Arabic on the one hand and the translation of Arabs' equivalent work into English on the other. Western think tanks including the American Carnegie Center and the British Royal Institute of International and Strategic Studies have endowed projects to translate their scholars' work into Arabic and promulgate it systematically. Doing so has grown these institutions' influence, as well as helped Arab media and policy elites gain a clearer understanding of how Western institutions perceive and parse their region. It has also provided a small but badly needed amount of revenue to the Arab think tanks that carry out the work — the sort of “wholesale” contract services which Libya's Gomati said were among the few sources of Western funding available to Arab think tanks. The same

Western institutions have invested considerably less, however, in translating Arabic policy research into English.

An exception is Fikra Forum, a project of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy that promotes dialogue among policy voices by translating research in both directions — primarily from Arabic into English. A dedicated translation and editing unit sifts through submissions from across the region — substantially more material than it has bandwidth to use — and designates 15 articles each week to publish simultaneously in the two languages.²⁸ This seemingly modest output reflects considerable effort: as noted in the prior chapter, many bright and talented Arab scholars were denied a decent education in critical thinking and evidence-based polemics. Fikra Forum’s collaborative editing process affords them the opportunity to gain some of these skills, while enriching an English-speaking policy audience with information and perspectives to which it would otherwise not have access.²⁹ The fact that Fikra Forum is virtually unique in this respect among American think tanks reflects a stunning deficit.³⁰

The second imbalance is sub-regional in nature. Among the minority of Arab policy research that wins an international audience, the lion’s share emanates from Lebanon and Egypt — whether via the policy institutions of those countries or through think tanks in other countries where scholars from Lebanon or Egypt reside. This trend, too, relates in part to education: it stems from the long history of intellectual engagement between American and other Western centers of higher learning and those Arab institutions in which they have long been vested. For example, a sizable community of Arab scholars and policymakers of international renown share an alma mater in the American University of Beirut. They enjoy the benefit of transnational human networks — and traditions of

²⁸ Catherine Cleveland (Wagner Family Fellow and Managing Editor of Fikra Forum, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy), in conversation with the author, Washington, October 28, 2020.

²⁹ David Pollock (Bernstein Fellow and Director, Project Fikra, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy), in conversation with the author, Washington DC, October 28, 2020.

³⁰ “Fikra Forum”, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, accessible online: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum>; Interview with David Pollock (Bernstein Fellow), June 2019

excellence — that have been nurtured and maintained by Lebanese and Americans working in consort since American Protestant missionaries endowed the university in the nineteenth century. No equivalent institutions with a historical pedigree dating back that far have endured in North Africa or the Gulf littoral.³¹

To be sure, new Arab nodes of international educational partnership have emerged more recently in the Gulf states: beginning in the 1990s, the UAE and Qatar financed the construction of academic branches for Western universities within their borders, including Georgetown's Doha campus and "NYU Abu Dhabi."³² It will take time, however, before these hubs engender their own distinctive networks and intellectual culture. Some countries in the Maghreb harbor policy institutions that maintain meaningful connectivity with counterparts of Europe: thanks to French-Arabic diglossia among elites in these countries and their enduring engagement with France, numerous think tanks in Morocco, Tunisia, and even the comparatively closed society of Algeria maintain relationships with their French counterparts.³³ Tunisia, moreover, has seen an inflow of American support for local think tanks, among other NGOs, since the 2010-'11 revolution.³⁴ For the most part, however, Maghrebi think tanks lack access or sustained engagement with their counterparts in Europe or the United States. Meanwhile, countries with their own distinguished indigenous intellectual traditions and a vibrant community of think tanks — notably Iraq — distantly trail their Egyptian and Lebanese counterparts with respect to their international human networks.

The designations "Arab" and "Western" are of course artificial and problematic to apply in an interconnected world. Consider the many Americans of Arab ethnic background who

³¹ Robert Kaplan, *Arabists: The Romance of an American Elite* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995)

³² Anya Kamenetz, "Should Top U.S. Colleges Expand Overseas?", *Newsweek*, March 5, 2013, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/341daVU>

³³ Cite the 2019 U Penn study of think tanks toward the beginning. There should be something about Francophone or North African think tanks that at least partially supports this observation.

³⁴ "Tunisia: Foreign Assistance", *Foreign Assistance*, accessed online: <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/explore/country/Tunisia>

contribute vitally to their country's policy research on the Middle East and North Africa — and, for that matter, the visiting scholars from Arab countries who often join them at some of America's leading think tanks to conduct collaborative research. Is such a hybrid community producing "American" research or "Arab" research? The presence of such a mixture within an American think tank's walls adds variety and diverse perspectives, and gives visiting research fellows from the region a special opportunity: the freedom to explore, debate, and express ideas on American soil that many Arab states would deny them.

The third imbalance relates to the question of financial influence on American think tanks by outside elements. In 2014, a landmark investigative report in the *New York Times* found that foreign powers have donated considerably to American think tanks, and, in doing so, are "increasingly transforming the once-staid think-tank world into a muscular arm of foreign governments' lobbying in Washington." Among major Arab donors, the report noted that the United Arab Emirates had provided \$1 million to the Center for Strategic and International Studies to build a resplendent new headquarters near the White House. This sum was dwarfed, in turn, by Qatar's \$14.8 million, four-year donation to the Brookings Institution which established a satellite facility in Doha.³⁵ The report argued that American think tanks' quest for such funding — and, naturally, the desire to maintain the flow of revenue — compromised their independent gaze on donor nations and the regional agendas they were pursuing: "Some scholars say they have been pressured to reach conclusions friendly to the government financing the research."³⁶

On the one hand, the *New York Times* assessment may have exaggerated the relationship between foreign funding and influence: in response to the charge that their research was compromised by the largesse, defenders of the think tanks have argued that foreign funding does not *create* convivial voices so much as it finds its way to voices that are

³⁵ Eric Lipton, Brooke Williams and Nicholas Confessore, "Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks", *The New York Times*, September 6, 2014, accessed online: <https://nyti.ms/2SU9Buj>

³⁶ Ibid.

already convivial. On the other, the departure of one Mideast policy voice from a leading think tank after she found herself at odds with a foreign donor appeared to support the *New York Times* story's case.³⁷ In any event, the *Times*'s tabulation of foreign capital invested in American think tanks made clear that Gulf powers had spent considerably more on building goodwill with American think tanks than the United States has invested in building the capacity of Arab ones.



To summarize, the potential of think tanks to serve policy and public engagement applies as much to the Arab region as anywhere, but the political, cultural, and material constraints the region's think tanks face remain formidable. While long-established institutions ensconced or backed by Arab states endure — and some nascent groups have carved out a space for themselves to function — think tanks with an independent streak face daunting obstacles. The United States, for its part, has done relatively little to assist them, and a range of structural challenges have reduced American think tanks' wherewithal to do so. Nonetheless, openings and opportunities to boost the American role in supporting these institutions have emerged, and merit exploration.

³⁷ The scholar is Michele Dunne, who had served the State Department and White House National Security Council in Mideast policy-related posts for nearly two decades. In 2013, while leading the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, she told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that in her view, the U.S. should halt military aid to Egypt in response to the army-led ouster of President Mohamed Morsi, which she dubbed a "military coup." Bahaa Hariri, principal funder of the Hariri Center, and daughter of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, called the Atlantic Council to complain. Four months later, Dunne resigned her post. It should be noted that the *Times* acknowledged in its reporting that Dunne cited an unrelated reason for her departure.