

THE BROOKINGS PROJECT ON  
U.S. POLICY TOWARDS THE ISLAMIC WORLD



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October 2004

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NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR COOPERATION?  
NEW ENGINES FOR REFORM?

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## THE AUTHOR

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# INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the relationship between the United States and the Arab world has reached a low point. Since then, the official America—the U.S. administration—has sought a credible partner in the Middle East to fight terrorism, promote reform, and enhance the image of the United States in the region. However, given the tense relations on the governmental level, these goals might be better pursued by the unofficial America—U.S. think tanks, media, and other civil society groups—working with their counterparts in Arab society to promote a common reform agenda that can strengthen relations on a societal level.

Recently, the United States has taken a strong interest in Arab political and economic reform. While the United States and other Western powers have developed reform initiatives on their own, such as the Greater Middle East Initiative and the Middle East Partnership Initiative, the Arab world has, internally, also begun to place a high priority on reform, evident in such documents as the Sanaa Declaration and the Alexandria Declaration.

With reform on the minds of both Western and Arab scholars, policymakers, and government officials alike, now is the time to examine the role of Arab civil society organizations, and think tanks in particular, as

a catalyst for reform. Civil society refers to the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan affiliations but separate from the state and the market.<sup>1</sup> Think tanks, which are research and outreach organizations dedicated to public policy, are an important part of the civil society world. Think tanks, as a global phenomenon, have gathered momentum since the end of the Cold War and the subsequent rise of democratic regimes worldwide. Such organizations flourish in a healthy democratic political system. In turn, democracy flourishes along side a strong, independent civil society, with think tanks playing an important role of connecting ideas and research with the government, the public, and the media.

Among civil society organizations, think tanks are particularly well-situated to develop new ideas pertaining to political, social, and economic reform in the Arab world. The role of think tanks in society is to seek access to, and ideally improve, the policymaking process by injecting new ideas into the debate. In order for any reform initiative to be successful in the Middle East (particularly outside initiatives offered by the United States or Europe) it must be subject to domestic debate. Thus, with the current surge of Western reform initiatives, an opportunity has blossomed that can empower the Arab world's research institutions, which have long suffered from

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Hawthorne, "Middle East Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?" *Carnegie Papers* 44, (March 2004).

direct governmental intervention and a lack of sufficient funds.

This paper will explore the growing potential of Arab think tanks as a catalyst for reform and examine the current advancements in some of the region's notable institutions, to discover to what extent such fledgling organizations might contribute to reform projects in the Arab world. This paper will also examine the Middle East programs in U.S. think tanks, post-September 11, to explore the possibilities of expanding U.S.-Arab think tank cooperation in the future.

Civil society organizations play an important role in defining the relationship between the United States and the Arab world. The U.S. "war on terrorism" has negatively impacted America's image both within Arab governments as well as on the Arab street. The traditional Arab regimes have no choice but to accept the new American priority. But, the Arab street, as well as the majority of Arab intellectuals, has turned against the effort following the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. They consider the military campaigns as a form of neo-colonialization, especially in the case of Iraq. The majority of liberal Arab researchers and intellectuals work for semi-official or quasi-independent research centers; their support for U.S. reform initiatives has eroded since the American intervention in Iraq. The lack of consensus on how to handle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has further complicated the U.S.-Arab relationship, as the war on terrorism brought forth a dramatic shift in U.S. policy towards the Middle East.

These factors have added obstacles to the way American and Arab think tanks approach each other. The rise of anti-Americanism, the deterioration of the U.S. image, the uncertainty in Iraq, and the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have all made it more difficult to secure a constructive discourse between Arab elites and their American counterparts. That said, American and Arab think tanks do still have the opportunity engage in a cooperative dialogue, which could be of mutual benefit. At the same time,

Arab think tanks hold the potential to play their own, effective role in supporting positive change.

Arab civil society as a force for change should be taken with reservation, as the civil infrastructures are still premature and the traditional forces (the clergy, Islamic radical groups, and the political elites) continue to play a major role in squeezing out and suppressing civil society organizations. Furthermore, Arab civil society organizations are often ineffective for one of two reasons. First, several of them remain heavily controlled by the state. The lack of professionalism, funding, and the heavy-hand of the regime propel these think tanks to adopt a conciliatory approach towards the regime's requirements. That reconciliatory approach not only negates the possibility of challenging the repressive regimes, but also is harmful to civil society as a whole. On the other side, organizations that have achieved autonomy from the state are often accused of being puppets of Western governments and NGOs, and even international donors, thereby damaging their credibility at home.

The challenge, therefore, is to identify the ways that Arab think tanks can support reform by developing new programs, expanding on existing programs, and by improving the U.S.-Arab think tank partnership. To do so, it is worthwhile to examine the history of Arab think tanks as well as the Middle East-focused programs in U.S. think tanks, in order to better understand the potential path forward.





## PART I: ARAB THINK TANKS: THREE DECADES OF EVOLUTION

**D**uring the past three decades, the Middle East has experienced a think tank boom.<sup>2</sup> The development of Arab think tanks began in the late 1960s. The first think tanks focused mainly on the Arab-Israeli conflict and began with the establishment of al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS) in Egypt in 1968. During the next thirty years, political and economic liberalization in the Arab world opened the door for individuals and groups to create new foundations for promoting democracy, fighting illiteracy and poverty, projecting civil society advancements, and empowering women.

Currently, there are more than 80 think tanks in the Middle East (including Israel, Turkey, and Iran). During the last ten years, the number of think tanks in the Arab Middle East has doubled; the average age of think tanks is eleven years.

Arab think tanks have taken many important steps toward promoting political liberalization throughout the past 35 years. These steps include:

- Providing timely information to the Arab people, especially to the small group of intellectuals and policymakers in the Arab World.
- Changing the way Arab leaders and intellectuals conceive of politics and policymaking. In the past, political discourse rested mostly on ideology, law, and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Think tanks, however, have introduced a new discourse that is more concerned with gathering facts and research than with just abstract concepts.
- Removing policy-analysis from the field of ideology and morality and evaluating policy in terms of cost-benefit analysis.<sup>4</sup>
- Familiarizing the intellectual elite with foreign trends and policies. This has been particularly useful in de-mythologizing the enemy, something that is central to a successful settlement between Israel and the Arabs.<sup>5</sup>

The first generation of think tanks aimed at reinforcing Arab unity and addressing common Arab concerns. Over time, think tanks evolved to reflect the political, economic, and cultural changes throughout the region, eventually turning their

<sup>2</sup> The first think tank in the region was the Maurice Falk Institute for Economic Research, founded in 1964 in Jerusalem. Israel outnumbers the rest of the region in its number of think tanks and think tank activities, with Turkey having the second most. This paper, however will focus solely on the important, but little understood, rise of think tanks in the Arab states.

<sup>3</sup> “Special Policy Forum Report: Ideas and Influence in Middle East Politics: the Role of Think Tanks,” PolicyWatch 207, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (July 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

focus to the Arab-Israeli conflict and political and economic reform.

## THE CASE STUDY OF EGYPT

Egypt can be seen as representative of the way in which the think tank phenomenon has developed in the Middle East. The region's first think tank, al-Ahram Center, was established in Cairo following the 1967 defeat. It was designed to fill a knowledge gap on Israel within Egypt and the Arab world. It sought to develop a better understanding of the nature of the conflict between Israel and the Arabs. ACPSS is still the largest and most influential research institution in Egypt. Though it works within a semi-official or governmental publishing house, al-Ahram Center has always focused on world politics and the political, economic, and social aspects of Arab society in general and Egyptian society in particular. Since the establishment of al-Ahram Center, many Arab scholars and researchers have used ACPSS as a model to create their own independent think tanks.

ACPSS is engaged in different bilateral dialogue agreements with American think tanks. The head of the Center, Dr. Abdel Monem Said Aly, emphasizes that the Center has not altered its research program dramatically following September 11. But rather, the Center has been working on programs prior to September 11 related to Islamic fundamentalism, and the relationship between the Islamic world and the West. A central work of al-Ahram Center is the *Arab Strategic Report*, an annual report published since 1985. The Center also publishes books and monographs on topics including international relations, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and political, economic, and social issues related to Egypt. ACPSS also provides in-depth analysis of Egyptian, Arab, and international current events through its al-Ahram Strategic File. A fourth program, the Public Opinion Polls Studies Program, conducts public opinion polls mostly focused on economic and political issues.

During the second half of the 1980s a second think tank wave developed. During that time the first fully independent Egyptian think tank emerged. The Ibn Khaldun Center came into being when its founder, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, received an award in 1985 from Kuwait for his achievements in the social sciences.<sup>6</sup> Three years later, using the award money and other consultancy fees, Ibrahim formed the Center as a non-profit, limited liability firm under the companies' law of Egypt. The Center is privately owned and is managed by a core staff, which chooses its board of trustees and suggests its research studies and projects.

The Center's goal was to apply the most contemporary social science research to serve developmental processes in Egypt and the Arab world. It seeks the adoption of a comprehensive conception that deals with the social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions of development for the sake of freedom, justice, and creativity. To achieve that goal, the Center opened a number of affiliated offices in several Arab countries. In the late 1990s, the ambitious agenda led to a clash between the Egyptian government and the Ibn Khaldun Center, leading to the closure of the Center for three years (from June 2000–June 2003) and the arrest of Ibrahim and 27 other Ibn Khaldun Center associates. Ibrahim has since been released and the Center recently celebrated its reopening with a series of conferences.

The Ibn Khaldun Center has put forth many seminars on the topics of religion and politics, history, literary issues, Egyptian affairs, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and regional and international affairs. The Center has also put together conferences on civil society and democratic transformation in the Arab world; ethnic, racial, and religious minorities in the Arab world; women in development; and population and environmental policies. The Center also undertakes several micro-credit projects aimed at reintegrating Islamic militants, educating young Egyptian women, and reaching out to the Egyptian public. It is presently exploring an initiative of dialogue on Islam and

<sup>6</sup> The Ibn Khaldun Center was named after the great Arab thinker, Abdel Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), the founder of Arab social science.

democracy around the Muslim world, to be held in conjunction with the American think tank the Brookings Institution.

Egypt's first independent non-profit economic-oriented research institute was founded in 1992 to meet the challenges of an open market system. The Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES) was created out of the need to develop a role for the private sector in the national dialogue over public policies and needs. The emerging private entrepreneurs lacked the necessary research and academic background to pursue work in a new atmosphere. Thus, Egypt's private sector contributed to the start-up and USAID, along with other international donors, got on board to fund the fledgling organization. ECES is considered an advocacy think tank that presents an additional resource for policy alternatives, and works with the business lobby to articulate certain policies. ECES conducts on-going research consisting of flagship activities and focused projects on topics such as trade liberalization, and the role of the state and deregulation. ECES also puts together conferences, workshops, and roundtable discussions. ECES additionally issues many types of publications: a working paper series, policy viewpoint series, a distinguished lecture series, the *Business Barometer*, as well as several books. The executive director is Dr. Ahmed Galal, an international economic expert, and his deputy is Dr. Samiha Fawzy from Cairo University.

## NEW TRENDS

Along with traditional research centers, several other types of think tank trends have developed in Egypt that reflect how the Arab Middle East responds to international changes.

One new area has been the increased use of information technology for organization and outreach. In order to circumvent the high costs of logistical infrastructure, some Arab groups have sought to utilize Internet capabilities and launch what are called "Online Based-Research Units" or "virtual think tanks." The most

successful of these is the "Islam Online" website, launched by Muslim scholar Dr. Youssef Qaradawi (Qaradawi is based in Qatar, however the head office and most of the work is run from Cairo).

Islam Online's operators are developing a political research unit to expand the ambitious project's outreach. Qaradawi heads a governing committee that ensures that nothing on the website violates the principles of Islamic law (*Shar'ia*). Although other small ideological online research units have recently emerged, the Islamic units are most likely to be successful due to their advocacy nature. The genuineness of the virtual think tanks is still contested, not only in the Middle East but all over the world.

A second recent development is the rise of university-affiliated centers. A majority of scholars who are working for research institutions in the Arab Middle East have received postgraduate degrees or professional training from western universities. Two of Egypt's major universities, Cairo University and the American University in Cairo are thus constantly absorbing talented, western-educated scholars who, in turn, lend their expertise to develop western-style university-affiliated research centers.

At Cairo University, the Center for Political Research and Studies (CPRS) was launched in 1987 by several reputable scholars, including Ali Aldeen Hilal, Mostafa Kamel Al Sayeed, Ahmed Youssef Ahmed and others. The CPRS aims at encouraging and carrying out research on issues of interest for policymakers and national institutions as well as the academic community. In the mid-1990s, the university, through the faculty of economics and political science, supported the launching of more specialized centers.

The latest of such specialized centers is the American Studies Center (ASC), launched in 2002. The leading scholars involved in establishing the center were Hala Abou Bakr Seoudy, Lobna Abdel Lateef, and Mohamed Kamal. The later is a key member of the National Democratic Party's Policies Committee.

ASC is the leading American studies center in Egypt and its objectives reflect the mounting awareness of the necessity to study American politics from a more focused perspective. The major objectives are: to advance American studies using an interdisciplinary approach; to integrate academic and applied experiences; to prepare a new generation of researchers; and to provide advice and consultations to official and non-official institutions.

The ASC's activities include conducting joint projects and exchanging fellows with other institutions of similar interests, and establishing links with other think tanks abroad. These centers regularly invite speakers from different eastern and western think tanks, diplomats, and public figures to participate in exchange programs and joint projects.

The Center for the Study of Developing Countries (CSDC), founded in 1995 by Dr. Mohamed El-Sayed Salem, is considered another dynamic center. The Center has four main projects: basic research on agents and concepts of development; public lectures with the framework of "development debates"; organizing workshops on policy-related issues; and evaluating development efforts in the Center's "Report on Development in Egypt." CSDC also has five publication series: *Development Forum* (published in Arabic and English); *Development Issues* (books dealing with policy-related issues from workshops); *Development Library* (books presenting the findings of basic research at the Center); *New Perspectives* (a quarterly bulletin); and *Development Notes*.

Despite their university connections, a lack of funding affects the global outreach and accessibility of these centers, although most of the staffs are well connected to the official circles in Egypt and other Arab countries. For example, at Ain-Shams university, Egypt's second largest, the Middle East Research Center, works on a regional scale and is also active in organizing conferences and seminars. However, it has very limited international presence, despite the fact that it was established in late 1960s.

A third development in the think tank evolution is their link with professional groups. For more than four decades, the American-based Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) has not only carried out its own research but also convened leading policymakers, strategists, planners, intellectuals, businessmen and researchers into a membership organization. In 1999, the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs emulated the CFR model and emerged as an independent non-governmental organization, devoted to examining foreign affairs issues that have a direct or indirect bearing on Egyptian national interests. The declared mission of the Council is: to promote a deep and objective understanding of all external affairs, regional as well as international, in order to enhance Egyptian strategic, economic, and political national interests.

The Council was set-up by a group of diplomats, academics, professionals, military experts, and businessmen who "agree on the need to invigorate and stimulate the profound and far reaching interaction between Egypt and its regional and international environment as the world steps into the twenty first century in a climate of unprecedented and fast breaking events." The Council publishes annual reports, occasional papers, newsletters, and organizes roundtables discussions, conferences, briefs, and statements both in English and Arabic. The Council also sends special delegations to the United States, Europe, Latin America, and the Far East. For instance, the Council, in collaboration with the British Royal Institute of International Affairs (the Chatham House), organized a conference to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## THINK TANKS IN THE BROADER ARAB WORLD

A sampling of think tanks elsewhere in the Arab world further illustrates the evolution of research institutions in the region.

The Center for Arab Unity Studies is one of several small to medium-sized research centers in Lebanon and is considered the most notable and unrelenting

think tank in the Levant region. Since its emergence in 1975, the Center is the only Arab research center that continues to devote most of its research efforts to Arab nationalism and Arab unity. The Center's members come from different backgrounds: former politicians, academic scholars, and human rights activists. The signatories of the founding declaration called for establishing a center that carries out "independent, and scientific research into all aspects of Arab society" that would be free from any government in an atmosphere far removed from partisan politics.

The Center has earned a high reputation as a serious institution, and the Center's books are used as textbooks in many Arab universities. Although the Center for Arab Unity Studies has been largely interested in Arab ideologies and nationalist movements and kept itself away from the local politics, that tone has changed in recent years. The Center now has taken on a few single-country studies as well (such as reports on Palestine, the Algerian crisis, and Lebanese reconstruction).

Another new trend is the emergence of joint think tanks, co-organized with Western partners. One of the best examples of a U.S.-Arab think tank partnership is the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute (R-QPI), established in October 2003 following an agreement between the RAND Foundation and the Qatar Foundation.<sup>7</sup>

The new policy institute is a non-profit organization that aims to harness the research and analytical skills of hundreds of RAND experts in the United States and Europe, to study some of the most important Middle East issues. The institute will forge ties with other educational programs within Qatar's Education City, and train the region's policy analysts on research methods that can help leaders make informed policy decisions. One example of a project that has been undertaken by R-QPI is a study commissioned by the government of Qatar to determine whether the country's public

school system provides students with an adequate range of skills in order to become successful in the changing economic marketplace.<sup>8</sup> RAND has an ambitious project to expand the goals of R-QPI to disseminate RAND analysis throughout the Middle East, given the centrality of Doha not only to the Arab world, but also to South Asia. Doha would be "an operating facility" that allows the expansion of RAND's policies and analysis. Qatar is also currently exploring the idea of hosting a Brookings office in Doha, which would jointly plan Brookings's U.S.-Islamic World Forum among other activities.

The United Arab Emirates is another state that has achieved considerable success in recognizing the importance of think tanks and their role in a changing world. The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) is a research institution dedicated to the promotion of professional research both in the UAE and the Gulf. The Center, presided over by the son of the president of the UAE, Sheik Mohammad Bin Zayed, aims to keep pace with daily developments and anticipate the future in light of tangible data and facts. The Center undertakes many activities including a *Strategic Studies* and *Occasional Paper Series* and an Emirates Lecture Series, which is known for inviting people from many different backgrounds for contributions.

The Center is noteworthy in overcoming one of the major criticisms of Arab Middle East think tank—the lack of a durable discourse. The Emirates Lecture Series opens a regular window for scholars and experts from all over the world to share ideas with their Arab counterparts. As of 2003, the Center had published 60 papers in Arabic through its *Occasional Paper Series*. The papers in this series are interdisciplinary monographs drawn primarily from the fields of political science, international relations, economics, and sociology. More recently, the Center started publishing occasional papers in English and distributing them

<sup>7</sup> The objective of the Qatar Foundation is to upgrade Qatar's scientific and artistic capabilities. In order to achieve its objectives, a number of separate but interrelated bodies have been established and are already working in the fields of education science and community development. Qatar Foundation, "Homepage" <<http://www.qf.edu.qa/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

through international networks. The global outreach of these papers still remains to be seen though.

In an attempt to adopt professional standards, the Center has taken a rare step among Arab think tanks by issuing an unambiguous criticism against what it called the “gloating” Arab media’s coverage of attacks on coalition forces in Iraq. The Center’s daily “Editorial Newsletter” issued that criticism in November 2003. It argued that the conflict in Iraq should not be used as a venue for settling scores in ideological disputes or political confrontations with the United States.

Another organization, the Dubai-based Gulf Research Center (GRC) augments the Emirates’ attempts at reaching global partnerships. The Emirate’s independent research center has engaged in a partnership agreement with the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Both institutes have reached a translation agreement, following a bilateral collaboration on three workshops that discussed the future of Persian Gulf security, and the implications of the U.S. military campaign in Iraq. The agreement will allow the IISS to translate its four major publications: *The Military Balance*, *Survival* (a quarterly journal), *Adelphi Papers* (research papers), and *Strategic Comments* (short briefings on strategic issues), into Arabic.

A third UAE think tank, the Zayed Center for Cooperation and Follow-Up, is considered by many regional observers as illustrative of a negative episode in the development of Arab think tanks. Although the Center was established in 1997 at the direction of the president of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the same government decided to close it down in mid-2003 because of its internationally-controversial activities. The original goals of the Center were to consecrate and defend Arab national identity, to support cooperation with international and regional organizations, and to help formulate an Arab strategic vision. The Center’s activities, however,

soon proved to be at odds with these goals. In particular, Jewish organizations criticized the Center for what they charged was its anti-Semitic literature. Others focused on anti-American output. The controversy over the Zayed Center reflects the often blurry role of research entities in the Arab world, since the Center had engaged in issues that contradicted with, and embarrassed, the interests of its main funding source, the government of the UAE.

Think tanks have also expanded into new, previously untapped, areas in the Arab world. For example, the first Yemeni think tank was launched in February 1999. The Yemen 21 Forum represented a milestone in the evolution of civil society in Yemen. It is a non-profit, non-governmental body that aims to help in the country’s strides towards the 21st-century. The late Abdulaziz Al-Saqqaf, the founder of the center, noted at the Forum’s inauguration that it was openly based on the American think tank model. “When one thinks of think-tanks, the American experience immediately comes to mind. Although the philosophical roots and human experiments with think tanks run far back in history, the concept was perfected in its present format in the American setting. However, Europe and other countries quickly adopted the idea, and practice it to the extent that it has become a world phenomenon.”<sup>9</sup>

Among the research centers in the Palestinian Territories, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), an independent non-profit institution, stands out as a distinguished center eager to advance the goals of scholarship and knowledge on issues of concern to Palestinians. Thanks to the efforts of Khalil Shkaki, the founder and the well-known pollster, the Center has a reputable position in the field of public opinion polls. The survey unit has been engaged in several types of survey research activities including regular public opinion polls, a democracy index, and empirical studies of transition to democracy. The Center conducted up to 75 public polls in the last seven years. Such high level of activity has given the

<sup>9</sup> “The Yemen 21 Forum: Yemen’s First Think Tank” *Yemen Times* (15–21 Feb 1999). <<http://www.yementimes.com/99/iss07/focus.htm>>

Center a reputation in the West for its professionalism. In some cases, Shkaki's professional exertion have led to heavy restrictions from the Palestinian Authority. Last year, when Shkaki announced the result of an unprecedented poll among the Palestinians on the "Right of Return," unidentified gangsters—reported by the media to be affiliated with the PA—broke into and looted his offices to express unease at the survey's outcome.

## OBSTACLES TO ARAB THINK TANK PERFORMANCE

Despite this growth in activity and increase in professionalism, Arab think tanks still face challenges in three main areas. The first is the control exerted by Arab regimes over their work. Regimes still play a significant role in framing many think tanks' agendas and defining the institutions from their inception. While many think tanks would prefer not to operate with close government ties, they also recognize that in some cases maintaining such ties provides a sort of political protection without which they could not conduct their work.

Of course, the possibility of establishing semi-independent or fully independent research centers is enhanced if Arab governments allow a degree of political openness and a relatively liberal dialogue within society. To a certain extent, such conditions exist in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco. Research centers in these countries enjoy some degree of independence and autonomy in conducting research. But their ability to sketch out research that explores policy alternatives depends on their relationship with the government and on their financial independence.

In countries where the state dominates the political landscape, however, and does not provide civil society or the political opposition any space to express themselves, the possibility of launching credible research institutes with any autonomous programs is almost nonexistent. Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Syria, Libya,

and many of the Gulf States fall into this category. In these countries, research centers that do exist are directly affiliated with the ruling party or dominant political organization. They do not have the ability to suggest policy alternatives that may clash with the interests of the dominant political elite.

A second challenge is insufficient human and financial resources. The overall weak state of the social sciences in the Arab world has hindered the development of qualified indigenous researchers to staff the region's think tanks. There are only an estimated 5,000 Arab researchers looking into the full range of social and political trends and issues that affect the Middle East. Only 2,000 publish on a regular basis through 85 research institutions that cover all domestic and international issues.<sup>10</sup> These numbers are quite small compared to the thousands of researchers who conduct work on domestic and international issues in Washington, DC, alone.

In terms of funding, the absence of indigenous philanthropic donations to civil society organizations, especially to research centers, hinders the autonomy of Arab think tanks. Most private funding for civil society organizations goes to radical Islamic organizations. The philanthropy culture does not have deep roots in the Arab world, particularly as wealthy businessmen and public figures do not have a history of supporting research activities (The exception is the small Gulf countries, where businessmen have begun to make donations to research institutions and civic and cultural groups).

The largest financial resource for Arab think tanks comes from Western institutions. Each year social science and public policy research institutions in the Arab Middle East receive approximately \$15 million in aid. For instance, the Ford Foundation donates approximately \$5 million, U.S. based international organizations (including the World Bank) donate \$2 million, the European Union donates \$3 million and

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10 "Special Policy Forum Report."

the remaining \$5 million comes from local sources (\$3 million from governmental sources, \$1 million from the sale of products and services, and \$1 million from local philanthropists).<sup>11</sup> This leads to a situation in most Arab countries in which new research and development institutions are competing in a tight financial market to attract resources from inside and outside their countries.

A third challenge is the difficulty liberal-oriented think tanks (and liberal civil society organizations in general) face in reaching out to the masses on the same scale and effectiveness as Islamist organizations. The message of think tanks is often very abstract and does not connect easily with the public. Some think tanks are attacked for their foreign style, outside connections, and lack of authenticity. Recently, some have attempted to reach a broader audience through Arab satellite channels and regional and international newspapers. But building local credibility remains a key challenge.

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<sup>11</sup> Salim Nasr, "Reform and Development in the Region: What Does the Past Tell us About the Future?" Paper presented at "Think Tanks as Civil Society Catalysts in the MENA Region: Fulfilling their Potential," a conference sponsored by the Center for International Private Enterprise and the World Bank Institute, Broumana, Lebanon, 6–8 February 1999.

## PART II: THE DAWN OF A NEW PARADIGM

### THE WASHINGTON THINK TANK PHENOMENON

While the boom of think tanks is evident throughout the world, American think tanks have developed at an even faster pace since the end of the Cold War, due to sufficient funding, plenty of experts, and the status of the United States as the sole superpower. The total number of American think tanks exceeds 1,500, but by excluding university-affiliated centers and public educational organizations, the number drops to approximately 300.

In much of the contemporary media coverage, think tanks have been described as America's shadow government. For example, the right-wing think tanks are thought to heavily influence many of President George W. Bush's policy issues; more than 20 experts from the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute (AEI) have joined President Bush's administration since early 2000.

The reality is far more complex. Policy-making in Washington, in the words of Martin Indyk, director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, resembles "jockeying," where people of ideas and people of political power are chasing each other to promote domestic and international policies. The role of ideas is very important in the U.S. policy-making process. When administrations change, the top-level policymakers often move in and out

between think tanks and the old and the new administrations. Consequently, people who developed ideas and policy prescriptions on the outside have the opportunity to go into the new administration and sell these ideas on the inside, while those in government move to think tanks to develop new ideas or defend old strategies.

The first generation of American think tanks began with a focus on educating and informing both policy-makers and the public about the potential consequences of pursuing a range of foreign policy options and global engagement. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (established in 1910) and the Brookings Institution (established in 1916) are considered the flagships of the first generation. The Second World War created the emergence of a second generation, as the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government found themselves in dire need of foreign and defense advice and analysis. U.S. expansion and increasing responsibilities required the think tanks' expertise to develop coherent and solid national security policies. RAND (established in 1945) was the flagship of the second generation, serving as a government contracted think tank, preparing research that was funded and utilized by government departments and agencies. The third generation witnessed the emergence of advocacy think tanks that seek to influence both the direction and content of foreign policy, with an emphasis on advancing a specific ideological

line.<sup>12</sup> This wave started with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (established in 1962), and was followed by the Heritage Foundation (established in 1973).

While some U.S. think tanks are quite old, the crowding of the field is a very recent phenomenon, going back twenty years or so. The recent trend has seen more think tanks created of a staunch ideological position than in the past. Many of those think tanks, particularly in the extreme right, are well funded by corporate interests.

### MIDDLE EAST PROGRAMS IN U.S. THINK TANKS

Following the September 11 attacks, U.S. think tanks scrambled to create new programs and initiatives, shedding light on the status and goals of American foreign policy on the Middle East. What was new about these initiatives is that they were no longer centered around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the previous focus of U.S. programs on the Middle East. Internal Arab political, economic, and social conditions, previously not major projects for American think tanks, became key issues of research and discussion.

There appears to be two broad reasons behind this shift. On the one hand, the attacks had traumatized the very premise of the existing research agendas. The policy-making elite and the media questioned the credibility of American research institutions, as most existing programs had failed to predict the expanding terrorist networks. Many also felt that the government and think tanks alike had focused on the wrong issues while the attacks were planned. For example, in the 1990s, most think tanks built up their China-focused programs as many looked for threats from Asia. On the other hand, the cruelty of the attacks left policy-makers, in both the White House and Congress, with little choice but to search for explanations and new

strategies to respond to global terrorism. The highly regarded think tanks were the precise haven to meet such imperative needs.

Both non-partisan and advocacy think tanks created special programs to deal with the provocative reality in the Middle East and the long-term war against terrorism. The September 11 attacks thus limited many regional focused think tanks' domination over analysis and discussion of the region's politics. For instance, the competition between the Middle East Institute and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy over presenting different approaches to American Middle East policymaking gurus became less central, as multiple new competitors came on to the court.

The enmity between hard-line conservatives and liberal scholars has intensified following the September 11 attacks. The escalating criticism broke new ground in the summer of 2003 when the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed HR 3077, the International Studies in Higher Education Act, that could require university international studies departments to show more support for American foreign policy or risk their federal funding. Many right-wing think tanks are leading the campaign against Middle East academic scholars at some left leaning research centers, which they accuse of being "enclaves of debased anti-Americanism."<sup>13</sup>

How these debates play out are quite important, not just inside the think tank hallways in Washington, but well beyond. In the wake of the Iraq war, a BBC correspondent gave an insight into the significant role of Washington's think tanks, "While the tanks are moving towards Baghdad, think tanks are maneuvering for influence in shaping the interpretation of the war... Experts on all sides of the debate are convinced that the shape of a new world order is being sketched out at the moment in Washington."

12 Joshua Brustein, "Think Tanks," *Gotham Gazette* online, 3 March 2003. <<http://www.gothamgazette.com>>

13 Michelle Goldberg, "Osama University?," *Salon.com*, 6 Nov 2003 <[http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2003/11/06/middle\\_east/](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2003/11/06/middle_east/)>.

## MIDDLE EAST PROGRAMS AT AMERICAN THINK TANKS

Almost three years after the September 11 attacks, several new Middle-East related programs have emerged in U.S. think tanks, while several old ones have continued or expanded their activities. This paper will examine, in brief, the programs of eight key think tanks to demonstrate the growing interest in the Arab and Muslim worlds in the Washington think tanks, as well as determine the likelihood of establishing successful partnerships between U.S. and Arab think tanks.

### THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE (AEI)

Long before the September 11 attacks, this conservative think tank started a Middle East studies program. Initially, the program focused on traditional politics, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict. After September 11, AEI turned its focus to new projects in a way that was consistent with the Republican administration's agenda on democratic reform, changing regimes, Islamic terrorism, and radicalism in the Middle East. AEI has been particularly associated with the now famous "neoconservative" movement and brought together many neoconservative thinkers to work on the Middle East. It has also provided a frequent host to Bush administration speakers on Middle East policy, offering the guarantee of a favorable audience and setting.

The increase in AEI's publications and activities on the Middle East after September 11, 2001 is a strong indication of its change in focus. In the two years prior to September 11 (September 11, 1999–September 10, 2001) AEI held eight events and published four publications and 73 articles on the Middle East. In the two years after September 11 (September 11, 2001–September 11, 2003) AEI held 45 events, published 33 publications and 221 articles on the Middle East.<sup>14</sup>

## HERITAGE FOUNDATION

The main principles of the Heritage Foundation are to promote conservative public policies based on the premises of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense. The Heritage Foundation is the classic example of an advocacy think tank. A few days after the September 11 attacks, the conservative foundation formed the Homeland Security Task Force to confront domestic vulnerabilities.

Heritage's ongoing activities are very diverse, and most of them include timely publications that seek to inform and influence both the executive and the legislative branches of the U.S. government. Heritage publishes four different types of publications: "Backgrounders" (in-depth information on different topics), "Executive Memoranda" (written for congressional staff and researchers for quick reference and action), "Heritage Lectures" (public figures from all over the world), and "Web Memos" (online exclusive analysis that supplies information on fast-breaking developments). These publications have dramatically increased following September 11. In the two years prior to September 11, 2001, Heritage published 10 Executive Memos and two Backgrounders related to the Middle East. Between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2003 Heritage held nine lectures, and published 36 Web Memos, 11 Executive Memos, and 19 Backgrounders.<sup>15</sup>

### CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The non-partisan Carnegie Endowment for International Peace works on the Middle East from two perspectives. One is the Democracy and Rule of Law project, which examines the issues of political reform and democratic political change in the Arab World, and the other is the examination of U.S. policy itself. Carnegie does not work directly on the

14 American Enterprise Institute website. <<http://www.aei.org/>>.

15 Heritage Foundation website. <<http://www.heritage.org/>>.

Israeli-Palestinian peace process or security issues. A third program, the Non-Proliferation Project, deals with weapons of mass destruction, which includes certain countries in the region.

The Democracy and Rule of Law Project launched the “Arab Reform Bulletin” in June 2003. Writers for the bulletin are not just Americans, but also include Europeans and Arabs. In the first quarter of 2003, Carnegie’s *Foreign Policy* magazine began to be published in Arabic. The bimonthly magazine is published through a joint venture with the Kuwaiti-based publishing house Dar al-Watan. Dar al-Watan began publishing the “Arab Reform Bulletin” in Arabic in May 2004 as well.

Benefiting from its visiting scholars from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, and others, Carnegie has gained an astute view of how U.S. policies are seen in the Middle East. Carnegie’s publications on the Middle East have dramatically increased following September 11. The two years prior, Carnegie published four Issue Briefs and five articles on the Middle East. In the two years following the attacks Carnegie has published twelve issues of the Arab Reform Bulletin, one book, 16 Issue Briefs, 81 articles, seven Policy Briefs, and three reports on the Middle East.<sup>16</sup>

### **CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS)**

The Middle East and terrorism has been one of CSIS’s major issues for a long time, largely because of the number of strategic and military experts working there. CSIS defines its focus as: the new challenges to national and international security; the major geographical regions, and global governance; international trade and finance; technology; energy; and world development.

The CSIS Middle East program covers most aspects of

U.S. policy towards the region identifying new voices, framing emerging challenges, and developing opportunities for positive change. The ultimate rationale behind these tasks is an ambition to move from a “threat driven” to an “opportunity driven” paradigm. To achieve this vision, CSIS tends to follow the path of exploring the change driving social and political forces, such as information and communication technologies, demographics, and media in the Middle East. CSIS also works towards creating a partnership between American and Western academics and professionals and their counterparts in the region to address imperative problems.

CSIS’s “Roundtable” project focuses on U.S. relations with key states in the region such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The Middle East and Islam Roundtable has been formulated to study U.S.-Islamic world relations, and the role of these states in reducing terrorism. The Transnational Threats Initiative is a unique program for dealing with a wide range of correlated issues, with the Middle East located at the heart of them. These issues include the convergence of transnational crime, drug trafficking, money laundering, and terrorism.

In general, the CSIS Middle East Program doubled its efforts in 2003 as the Center held six briefings and meetings, and published a total of 10 articles, publications and presentations whereas it published only five each in 2002 and 2001. In 2003, ten CSIS experts testified before Congress while only five did so in 2002 and four in 2001.<sup>17</sup>

### **RAND CORPORATION**

The Center for Middle East Public Policy (CMEPP) is responsible for developing and coordinating RAND Corporation’s research projects on the region. In the past, policy analysis focused primarily on strategic and geopolitical issues related to American national security

16 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace website. <<http://www.ceip.org>>.

17 Center for Strategic and International Studies website. <<http://csis.org>>.

in the region, but recently the Middle East project has expanded to adopt a broadened approach towards that region. RAND differs from other think tanks in that it does a great amount of contracted research and analysis for the U.S. government, much of which is classified.

RAND considers the challenges confronting this vital region as overwhelming, both in their number and complexity. All of the following challenges demand repeated and high-level attention, both from regional decision-makers and from those beyond the region who are committed to stability in the Middle East: equitable resolution of the Palestine problem in a fashion sensitive to Palestinian desires for statehood and legitimate Israeli demands for national security; the nation-building process in Iraq; promotion of democracy in a way that endorses, rather than undermines stability; the war on terrorism, along with the diminution of extremism and radicalism; elite succession in a number of important states; and the challenges of the Arab human condition, as described by the U.N.D.P. report in the areas of women's rights, education, and social equity.

RAND also participates in the aforementioned R-QPI partnership, another innovative program. RAND's public activities related to the Middle East were not greatly affected by September 11. In the two years prior, CMEPP published 12 articles and held 11 events on the Middle East while in the two years following the attacks, CMEPP published nine articles and held 17 events.<sup>18</sup>

## THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

The non-partisan Brookings Institution moved quickly to develop a massive program to deal with the post-September 11 challenges that fit its status domestically and globally. From the beginning, Brookings was aware of the necessity of addressing the U.S. relationship with the Islamic world in a different way. Its first foray was the launch in Fall 2001 of the Project on U.S. Policy

Towards the Islamic World, which sought to understand and improve American policy towards the world's Muslim states and communities.

Brookings then launched the Saban Center for Middle East Policy in May 2002, within which the earlier Project was then housed. The Saban Center seeks to provide Washington's policymakers with "balanced, objective, in-depth, and timely research and policy analysis" to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> The Saban Center mobilized a large number of experienced and knowledgeable Middle East experts, many from the former President Clinton administration.

Some of the major activities of Brookings include a speaker series, that has hosted such Arab leaders as King Abdullah of Jordan and Sheik Hamad of Qatar; a visiting fellows program that brings researchers and leaders from across the Muslim world to spend time in Washington; and a meeting series that convenes task forces of experts and policymakers to meet and share ideas. The Islamic World Project has also issued monographs and working papers of remarkable diversity. In the first two years, the monographs covered such topics as the "Youth Factor," which sheds new light on an incoming problem of demographics in the Islamic world as well as "An Uneven Fit," which questions the possibility of adapting the Turkish model to other Arab and Islamic nations, and lastly, the "Need to Communicate" which examines how the United States can improve public diplomacy with the Islamic world. Currently in the works at the Brookings Press is the first book series to focus on U.S. policy with the Muslim world. A final program Brookings began post-September 11 is the U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which seeks to bring together leaders and opinion shapers from the United States and the Muslim world. Its January 2004 meeting in Doha, Qatar convened together some 165 U.S. and Muslim world leaders from the fields of politics, business, media, and civil society, with former President Clinton giving the keynote speech on US-Muslim world relations.

18 RAND Corporation website. <<http://www.rand.org/nsrd/cmepp/pubs.html>>.

19 The Brookings Institution, Saban Center for Middle East Policy website <[http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/sabancenter\\_hp.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/sabancenter_hp.htm)>.

The emergence of the Saban Center demonstrated the new focus on the Middle East in Washington policy post-September 11. This is evident in the number of the Center's events and publications. Compared to its non-existence pre-9-11, in 2002 the Center held 15 public events and a wider number of private sessions for key policymakers (forums, symposiums, briefings, and luncheons) and 16 events in 2003. The number of published articles by Saban experts on Middle East issues jumped from 21 in 2002 to 94 in 2003.<sup>20</sup>

### THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is a dedicated think tank/professional organization concerned with increasing the American public's understanding of the world and contributing ideas to U.S. foreign policy. The unique jurisdiction and the vast membership of the Council across the country have given it a powerful status. After the September 11 attacks, CFR selected fifty members, out of four thousand, to consider the future dilemmas and the repercussions of the war on terrorism along with other special task forces. CFR also added a fourth goal to its mission statement: outreach.

The Council, through the reconfiguration of all research areas, has tried to reach beyond the traditional foreign community to the more general public. To achieve this goal, the Council enriched its website with a vast amount of foreign policy content through "the Source for Ideas and Information" (Databank). CFR has a generally positive reputation on the Arab street in that the Council's special missions to the region are well-covered and well-respected in the media and in the political arena.

Since the September 11 attacks, CFR has proved how the American political system can get the utmost benefits from such research organizations. Due to the large

number of Council members (up to 59 experts), the number of op-eds, articles, and interviews by CFR members has jumped from 35 the two years pre-September 11 to 108 the following two years. The Council's Middle East-related meetings increased as well from only one meeting in 1999 to 15 in 2002 and 29 in 2003. The number of the special reports on the region was six in 2003 with only one in both 2001 and 2002.<sup>21</sup>

### THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY

Since its establishment in 1985, the pro-Israel Washington Institute has been considered one of the most influential think tanks on Middle East politics, and one the State Department takes quite seriously. Experts from the Institute have produced articles covering a broad range of Middle East issues in widespread newspapers, magazines, and websites. The Washington Institute produces a variety of series publications, including Policy Foci (30–50 page publications) and Monographs and Policy Papers (75–250 page studies).

The production schedule at the Washington Institute has interestingly been fairly consistent both before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, indicating an established and stable organization. In the two years prior to September 11, 2001, it produced 19 various publications. In the two years following, it produced 19 publications. In the two years prior to September 11, the Institute held approximately 84 events in Washington (including small meetings, policy forums, conferences, etc.) For two years after that date, it hosted 90 events.<sup>22</sup>

20 Saban Center at Brookings website. <[http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/sabancenter\\_hp.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/sabancenter_hp.htm)>.

21 Council on Foreign Relations website. <<http://www.cfr.org/>>.

22 Email communication with Washington Institute representative, June 2004.

## PART III: A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

### THE IMAGE OF U.S. THINK TANKS IN THE ARAB WORLD

The paradox of American power in the 21st century, in the words of Joseph Nye, is that world politics is changing in a way that makes it impossible for the strongest world power to achieve its international goals alone.<sup>23</sup> Developing sustained alliances and partnerships requires a “give and take” culture. In such a situation, it is the role of U.S. think tanks to contribute, vehemently, to developing knowledge about the Middle East and Muslim world among both American society and its policymaking community.

Without debate, the U.S. image in the Arab world is quite terrible at this time, declining even lower after the Iraq war. Thus, a challenge for civil society and think tanks is that the image of U.S. think tanks in the Middle East is largely conjoined with the image of American foreign policy as a whole. The people of the Arab world make no distinction between the branches of U.S. government, and often include civil society in that grouping, including American think tanks.

In the Arab world, the public is often unaware of the diversity and debate within the American think tank community and often don't realize that many can be

quite critical of prevailing policy. People are used to linking local intellectuals and researchers, in the mainstream, to the ruling elite or the political regime. This reflects on the way people perceive external institutions, ideas, and visions. People assume whatever the external regime is, civil society organizations and intellectuals are manipulated and guided by that regime and interest groups.

The people's perception is due, in part, to the contradictory coverage by the Arab media of these research institutions. In many cases, the official Arab media decries what it considers the biased or the unfair portrayal of the Middle East by American think tanks. Usually such judgments are the result of misinterpreting the think tanks' unfavorable reports that criticize the ruling regimes. On the other hand, the same media applauds American think tanks whenever they publish reports that are in favor of their patron regimes. Therefore, the majority of the average population, and segments of the well-educated populace, are subject to conflicting and contradictory messages.

The question remains, why are the Arab think tanks, in general, reluctant to engage in a constructive partnership with their American counterparts? To answer the question, it is crucial to mention the dominant per-

<sup>23</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr. “U.S. Security Policy: Challenges for the 21st Century.” *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda* 3, No. 3 (July 1998). <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itps/0798/ijpe/pj38nye.htm>.

ception in the Arab Middle East that most American researchers and analysts are influenced heavily by the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. Whether this is entirely true or not, Arab think tanks prefer to keep a distance from fully or integral relationships with their American counterparts as long as there is no political settlement with Israel.

The first Arab think tanks came to fruition in the heydays of Arab nationalism and socialism, and their purpose was, mainly, to offer insights into the Arab-Israeli conflict. For many years, major American think tanks have been identified by Arab politicians and analysts as Israeli propaganda, even if certain institutions are not pro-Israeli in their political leaning. Furthermore, the fact that Arab leaders and politicians are used to blaming the American media for keeping the facts about the Middle East from the American public has widened the gap between both sides.

This idea has partly changed due to the spread of the Internet and Arab and foreign satellite channels. Arabs are now exposed to instant and informative, independent or semi-official, sources of news and opinions. For the first time in five decades, Arab viewers are exposed to American, and even Arab analysts without having to go through the gatekeepers or “big brother.” That is not to say that the Arab Middle East is the only one responsible for misperceptions. Many American scholars have acknowledged the necessity of addressing the distrust issue on both ends.

One issue that should be further examined is the relationship between American and Arab analysts’ appearance on Arab satellite channels and the way in which Arab viewers perceive the different American or Arab ideas and visions. American analysts and politicians are used to appearing on *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*, the most watched satellite channels in the Arab world, but the reaction from the Arab world to their messages is generally ambiguous and often dismal.

The American image in the world has deteriorated since the beginning of the military campaign in Iraq.

Since the outset of the war on terrorism, Arab satellite channels have invited a large number of both liberal and conservative analysts from major American think tanks to appear. However, this concurrent drop in image indicates that the effectiveness of the American invitees at swaying Arab public opinion is minimal.

One interesting explanation is the focus by Arab media on neoconservatives. The rise of the right-wing think tanks in U.S. politics post-September 11th, and the impact of new organizations like the Project for New American Century (PNAC), founded in 1997, has certainly captured the Arab world’s attention. By using the Internet, several Arab reporters and columnists have been able to access PNAC literature, which describes President George W. Bush’s policies toward the Arab world, especially that related to preemptive wars. To a certain degree, the focus on neoconservatives has thus established a set of guidelines in the Arab media and in most political circles that emphasizes the hijacking of American decision-making by an extreme group. Such literature offers justifications to ideological streams, and even the official media, on how American domestic and foreign policy are controlled by an extremist network.

The current ad hoc coalition between the Bush Administration and the neo-conservative stream, including some conservative think tanks, has branded the majority of U.S. think tanks into that stream, especially in the countries in which American foreign policy is experiencing an image setback. The non-partisan think tanks are, still, showing a steady manifestation in the Arab media due to their gravity and the impartiality in most cases.





## BUILDING A BRIDGE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Legacies of the past and the complexity of the present should not dissuade both the American and Arab think tanks from developing a tangible relationship. The fact that there is a growing enthusiasm and consciousness among the Arab world to witness how global integration is working, and an aspiration for political, economic, and social change offers the finest moment for such a relationship to develop.

Working together is the most effective and efficient mechanism to avoid the pitfalls laid out earlier. The current joint projects between American and Arab think tanks are ambitious, but feasible, and offer hope and models for further projects. The Brookings Project on the Islamic World, RAND's joint center in Qatar, and Carnegie's unique bulletin on Arab reform have established a base from which to attain first hand information on what is going on in the region. Such well-respected think tanks have realized, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the benefit of working with the Arab world's elite to jointly answer the questions that trouble the relationship of the United States with the region. In turn, such joint programming has opened space for valuable dialogue.

Social science researchers and political elites are often engaged in interlocking connections across the region. Such connections offer both advantages and encouraging steps. In most Arab countries, dominant political regimes encircle a fledgling civil society, attracting both

mature as well as younger intellectuals to governmental organizations into its own realm. The civil society organizations, including think tanks, and the individual researchers equally suffer from governmental scrutiny. These dynamics impede the natural growth of independent and credible think tanks.

Iron-fist policies have not, however, thwarted independent researchers and activists from attempting to establish their own research entities. Although governments' inducements to attract more people to its dominion are increasing, the number of independent research centers is also increasing.

In a quest for gradual political and social reform, American think tanks should seek to engage both established, regime-affiliated thinktanks, as well as emerging independent thinkers and institutions. Engaging in constructive partnerships with both entities will be useful to help create change from within the ruling regimes, through recognizing the effective powers, while at the same time strengthening independent think tanks and civil society. The RAND project in Qatar is an example of obtaining a gradual reform course and how to activate a mutual research partnership to modernize education and local communities. Furthermore, the Carnegie and Brookings projects show why it is important to seek a full understanding of Arab social and political forces, both of the ruling regimes as well as the opposition and other

marginalized forces. To exclude either is to miss the story, while multifaceted partnerships allow an organization to engage with the whole social and political picture.

Such a broadening of American think tank ties with their Arab counterparts would be of great benefit. The war on terrorism and the military campaign in Iraq have exposed the insufficient number of American “home-grown” researchers who have knowledge of the Arabic realities or have direct knowledge of the Middle East. There is a sense that American think tanks are often disconnected from true forces and opinions on the ground.

By expanding U.S. programs on the Middle East, there is also an opportunity to engage a new generation of Arab leaders and thinkers. This relationship can be built on personal and professional interaction. Potential mechanisms include visiting fellowships on both sides, internships, conferences, and joint publications. Indeed, as much discussion is made of the need for public diplomacy, think tanks can play a part. At the heart of the enhancement of U.S. public diplomacy in the Arab and Islamic world is the desire to elevate the level of knowledge about the Middle East in the United States. Think tanks and academic research centers are the main resource for such advancement and should explore how to improve their communications strategies, with an eye towards improving outreach towards Arab media and the public.

Besides being open to exploring the possibilities of mutually beneficial cooperation, what then should the Arab think tanks do? With limited resources and tremendous impediments, such research centers have to develop a new paradigm to deal with global trends. Understandably, Arab political regimes have a great deal of influence over sensitive tools like the media and research organizations. But the experience of opening the Arab media market, most particularly the rise of satellite channels in breaking the governments’ monopoly over broadcasting, might be a guideline on how the political atmosphere can be primed for grad-

ual reform, with assistance from Arab civil society and think tanks. Since 1994, the Arab satellite channels have grown dramatically and many of these channels have reached international professional standards. While the home-state governments still watch over these channels, in the final analysis there has been impressive progress towards a freer media and wider flow of information within and across borders in the Arab world.

The region’s think tanks have a growing role to keep the Arab public informed. They should increase their activities and presence in the body politic by increasing their public events, news conferences, popular publications, and televised appearances. They might also explore innovative new programming. For instance, the regional think tanks might explore how they can work together. One idea is to form a common sustained monitoring body, that follows the latest reform actions by Arab governments and emphasizes progression. Such a society could take think tanks out of the traditional paradigm of serving as bureaucratic institutions and move them into research and policy analysis of the international standard. Also, the recent regional developments and the ongoing debates over political, social, and economic reforms, mean that Arab think tanks can take a wider role in aiding public understanding. Collection of needed research for informed opinions and providing a willing host to discussions and debates are key public needs, as well as new opportunities for Arab think tanks.

Simultaneously, if they want to influence external policy and awareness in capitols outside the region, the Arab think tanks ought to give more attention to English language publications and websites. Currently, only four Arab think tanks are able to reach the outside world through this manner. And, even the relatively vibrant centers among them have not made a profound impact abroad, with too few in the Western think tanks and policy community aware of their work. The lack of a professional marketing network thus holds Arab think tanks back from reaching their global objectives and is a need that must be answered.

With support from American political science institutions, Arab think tanks can also do more to promote Arabic literature that deals with understanding and explaining the American political system. This will help to liberate the Arab public from long-lasting stereotypes and misconceptions. In Egypt, for example, there are only two Arabic language academic theses written on the American political system. This is clearly insufficient, and stands in stark contrast to the hundreds of English language articles and books that debate and discuss Egyptian politics in the United States. Addressing the composite political system would allow a space for a more objective examination and analysis, instead of naivety and distortion. Another way to increase Arab knowledge of the American political system would be to develop more visiting fellow programs, in order to expose Arab scholars to the American political system first hand, and vice versa.

Instigating a genuine debate on bilateral relations is another important step to revolutionize the Arab think tank's agenda. Openness to broad discussions on many topics, rather than just the important Palestinian issue, will make dialogues with their American counterparts more fruitful. Deep and diverse dialogues could melt animosity and close the gap between intellectual structures on both sides.

In conclusion, as compared to the breadth of activities in the Washington think tank scene, the Arab think tank world has not yet been a fully viable or decidedly visible force. But, it is growing and emerging in activity and professionalism. The latest developments have created a new need for both sides. While Washington think tanks will benefit from increasing relations with local institutions and civil society, recent events have also given Arab think tanks a chance to play a serious role in political, economic, and social reform, after decades on the sideline.

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## THE BROOKINGS PROJECT ON U.S. POLICY TOWARDS THE ISLAMIC WORLD

**T**he *Brookings Project on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World* is a major research program housed in the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. It was designed to respond to some profound questions that the terrorist attacks of September 11th raised for U.S. foreign policy. The project seeks to develop an understanding of the forces that led to the attacks, the varied reactions in the Islamic world, and the long-term U.S. policy responses. In particular, the project examines how the United States can reconcile its need to eliminate terrorism and reduce the appeal of extremist movements with its need to build more positive relations with the wider Islamic world.

The project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together American and Muslim world leaders from the field of politics, business, media, academia and civil society, for discussion and dialogue;
- A task force of specialists in Islamic, regional, and foreign policy issues (emphasizing diversity in viewpoint and geographic expertise), as well as government policymakers, who meet regularly to discuss, analyze, and share information on relevant trends and issues;

- A visiting fellows program that brings distinguished experts from the Islamic world to the Saban Center at Brookings;
- A series of analysis papers and monographs that provide needed analysis of the vital issues of joint concern between the United States and the Islamic world;
- A Brookings Institution Press book series, which will explore U.S. policy options towards the Islamic world. The objective of which is to synthesize the project's finding for public dissemination.

The project convenors are Stephen Philip Cohen, Brookings Institution Senior Fellow; Martin Indyk, Director of the Saban Center; and Shibley Telhami, Professor of Government at the University of Maryland and Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Saban Center. Peter W. Singer, National Security Fellow at the Brookings Institution, is the Project Director.

## THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY AT THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

The Saban Center for Middle East Policy was established on May 13th, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The establishment of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth, and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable people who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. Its central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's establishment has been made possible by a generous founding grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, senior fellow in Foreign Policy Studies, is the director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's director of research. Joining them is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers in the Middle East. They include Tamara Wittes who is a specialist on political reform in the Arab world; Shibley Telhami who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland; Shaul Bakhash an expert on Iranian politics from George

Mason University; Daniel Byman a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University; and Flynt Leverett, a former senior CIA analyst and Senior Director at the National Security Council who is a specialist on Syria and Lebanon. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings, led by Vice President and Director James B. Steinberg.

The Saban Center is undertaking original research and innovating programming in six areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including postwar nation-building and Gulf security; the dynamics of the Iranian reformation; mechanisms and requirements for fulfilling a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for Phase III of the war on terror, including the Syrian challenge; and political change in the Arab world.

The Saban Center also houses the *Project on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World* which is funded by a generous grant from the State of Qatar and directed by National Security Fellow Peter W. Singer. The project focuses on analyzing the problems that afflict the relationship between the United States and the Islamic world with the objective of developing effective policy responses. It includes a task force of experts, the annual Doha Forum (a dialogue between American and Muslim leaders), a visiting fellows program for specialists from the Islamic world, and a monograph series.



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