



The role of think tanks in the decision making process of foreign politics

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About

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Introduction:

The role and specificity of policymakers is undoubtedly an influential factor in international relations. Statesmen are first and foremost the policymakers thus actors on the international platform. However, they work under the name and interests of the state.¹ In this sense, the issue of the influence of think tanks and research centers on the external political decision-making process is an important topic on the local and international level. This is resultant of the evolution of state international relations and foreign policy, as well as the emergence of international institutions and new actors on the world stage.

On the basis of the impacts these centers have on the policymakers, this study highlights the most important factors that can be used by those centers to influence the policymakers, in addition to note the most important international centers that have an active role in political decision-making, as well as a comparison between countries in terms of the preparation of these centers, their progress, the nature and relevance of the studies in this matter.

1. Haki Tawfiq, Saad, 'The Principles of International Relations' Fifth Edition; Legal Library, Baghdad, 2010, pg 185.

The concept of Think Tank centers:

“Think tanks are public-policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy. Think tanks may be affiliated or independent institutions that are structured as permanent bodies, not ad hoc commissions”.²

Moreover, think tanks are defined as “institutions that carry our research and studies directed to the policymakers including guidance and recommendations on certain domestic and international issues, with the aim of enabling the policymakers on external politics to formulate policies on public policy issues. Furthermore, (think tanks are) production and management of knowledge and research centers, and specialize in certain scientific or intellectual issues, that seek to serve the development and improvement of policy-making and rationalized decisions or in build future visions of society or the state”. Additionally, these centers are known as centers that “gather and organize distinct and specialized group of researchers working on an in-depth and extensive study to provide consulting or future scenarios that can help policymakers to modify or draw policy based

2. ‘2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report’, translated, Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 10/04/2016; pgs. 4-5 for more information <http://www.bayancenter.org/2016/04/1936/> Khalid Elewi Al-Ardawi, ‘Activating the role of research centers in Iraq’s policymaking’, Euphrates Center for Development and Strategic Studies, 13/05/2013.

on these proposals in different areas.³

There are attempts to distinguish the definition and tasks of think tanks and study and research centers based on the belief that research and study centers “do not serve the academic purpose or draw (studies) objectively in a neutral focus.. as for think tanks, they seek in targeting specific goals in their strategy by seeking to engage in the general political decision-making. ⁴ These institutions often act as a bridge between the academic and policymaking communities and between states and civil society, serving in the public interest as independent voices that translate applied and basic research into a language that is understandable, reliable, and accessible for policymakers and the public. ⁵

The emergence of think tanks

As the prelude of the Industrial Revolution, the Scientific Revolution also led to the emergence of research and study centers. In the beginning of its inception, these centers were associated with educational institutions and universities. These centers represent a strategic pillar that backs scientific research and defining social attitudes in key and critical issues of interest to this community.

3. Khalid Elewi Al-Ardawi, ‘Activating the role of research centers in Iraq’s policymaking’, Euphrates Center for Development and Strategic Studies, 13/05/2013; pg. 2.

4. Ibid.

5. ‘2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report’, translated, Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 10/04/2016; pg. 5.

Therefore these centers were named “Think Tanks”. A think tank supports the policymakers at various levels and is an essential source of information and recommendations, particularly in developed countries. The multiplicity of research and studies centers opens up the diversity of views and propositions that address problems faced by their community and institutions at all levels.⁶

Also «(one) can consider the emergence of think tanks as a result of vital events in the history of a country, or as a result of the issues of national urgency that leads to the search for the best political solutions, and they are, in many cases, ones that stem from individual ideas or a group of people with long term visions.⁷

The evolution of research and studies centers can be divided into five phases:-⁸

First stage: Beginning in 1910 (the year which saw emergence of the first research centers in the United States) until 1930 (a phase that followed the First World War).

The first research center of its kind and in its modern form was established in the United States; with the establishment of the Carnegie

6. Adnan Farhan Al-Jewarin, ‘The role of independent Arab and Iraqi research and study centers’, Network of Iraqi Economists, Baghdad, 07.02.2016.

7. Amy Congor Baitencourt, National dialogue on the the establishment of think tanks, Journal of Strategic Observers, No. 9-1, Kashif Center for Strategic Studies, 2005; pg. 44.

8. Adnan Farhan Al-Jewarin, ‘The role of independent Arab and Iraqi research and study centers’, Network of Iraqi Economists, Baghdad, 07.02.2016.

Endowment for International Peace Institute in 1910. Following this, the Brookings Institute in 1916; Hoover Institute in 1918 and the Century Foundation in 1919.

Second stage: Between 1930 and 1951.

It is the era of the Second World War and the emergence of the United Nations Organization and other international organizations. The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research AEI was also founded in 1943. Following this, the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies in America and the Rand Corporation were both established in 1948.

Third stage: Began in the early 1950's until the late 1960s.

This stage began in 1951, during which around 91% of research centers in Europe and America were founded, noting that around 58% of them were founded in the seventh and eighth decades of the twentieth century. International Institute for Strategic Studies IISS was founded in London in 1958, the Conflict Resolution Research Center at the University of Michigan in 1959 and the Institute of the Stockholm Peace Research Institute SIPRI in Sweden in 1966.

Forth stage: Between 1989 and 2000.

This stage extends from 1989 which saw the end of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, up until 2000 which marks beginning of the era of globalization.

Fifth stage: the final stage which began in 2001 and continues to the present time.

In 2001 the world declared its Global War on Terrorism and primarily devoted to the US national security considerations on the grounds that the issues of national security as well as the war on terror have become the primary concern of the United States.

Moreover, think tanks are diverse in many areas, some of which work within their local geographic scope while others work on a cross-border global scale. Europe, the United States and Britain have focused on this type of centers, of political, economic, cultural, security and strategic, technological and educational etc focus. Moreover, these centers are usually stand-alone independent institutions or follow government agencies. It can also be affiliated to certain people and those with political influence within the state and may represent some political parties in some cases.

The following table illustrates the diversity of such centers:

Figure 1: Categories of Think Tank Affiliations

CATEGORY	DEFINITION
AUTONOMOUS AND INDEPENDENT	Significant independence from any one interest group or donor and autonomous in its operation and funding from government.
QUASI INDEPENDENT	Autonomous from government but controlled by an interest group, donor, or contracting agency that provides a majority of the funding and has significant influence over operations of the think tank.
GOVERNMENT AFFILIATED	A part of the formal structure of government.
QUASI GOVERNMENTAL	Funded exclusively by government grants and contracts but not a part of the formal structure of government.
UNIVERSITY AFFILIATED	A policy research center at a university.
POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATED	Formally affiliated with a political party.
CORPORATE (FOR PROFIT)	A for-profit public policy research organization, affiliated with a corporation or merely operating on a for-profit basis

Source: The global trend indicator report about think tanks for 2015 <http://www.bayancenter.org/2016/04/1936/>

Think tanks distribution by country

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA		ASIA		CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE		WESTERN EUROPE	
Angola	4	Afghanistan	6	Albania	14	Andorra	2
Benin	15	Armenia	14	Belarus	21	Austria	40
Botswana	13	Azerbaijan	13	Bosnia and Herzegovina	14	Belgium	53
Burkina Faso	16	Bangladesh	35	Bulgaria	35	Denmark	41
Burundi	5	Bhutan	9	Croatia	11	France	180
Cameroon	21	Brunei	1	Czech Republic	27	Germany	195
Cape Verde	2	Cambodia	10	Estonia	17	Greece	35
Central African Republic	2	China	435	Finland	28	Iceland	7
Chad	3	Georgia	14	Hungary	42	Ireland	14
Congo	3	Hong Kong	30	Kosovo	3	Italy	97
Congo, Democratic Republic of	7	India	280	Latvia	11	Liechtenstein	2
Cote d'Ivoire	12	Indonesia	27	Lithuania	19	Luxembourg	6
Eritrea	5	Japan	109	Macedonia	18	Malta	4
Ethiopia	25	Kazakhstan	8	Moldova	9	Monaco	2
Gabon	2	Kyrgyzstan	10	Montenegro	4	Netherlands	58
Gambia	6	Laos	3	Poland	42	Norway	15
Ghana	37	Macao	1	Romania	54	Portugal	21
Guinea	2	Malaysia	18	Russia	122	San Marino	1
Guinea-Bissau	1	Maldives	6	Serbia	24	Spain	55
Kenya	53	Mongolia	7	Slovakia	18	Sweden	77
Lesotho	4	Nepal	12	Slovenia	19	Switzerland	73
Liberia	3	North Korea	2	Ukraine	47	United Kingdom	288
Madagascar	5	Pakistan	20			Vatican City	1
Malawi	15	Philippines	21				
Mali	12	Singapore	12				
Mauritania	2	South Korea	35				
Mauritius	8	Sri Lanka	14				
Mozambique	4	Taiwan	52				
Namibia	15	Tajikistan	7				
Niger	4	Thailand	8				
Nigeria	48	Turkmenistan	1				
Rwanda	7	Uzbekistan	8				
Senegal	16	Vietnam	10				
Sevchelles	3						
Sierra Leone	1						
Somalia	6						
South Africa	86						
South Sudan	5						
Swaziland	4						
Tanzania	15						
Togo	4						
Uganda	28						
Zambia	13						
Zimbabwe	26						

Table 2 (includes sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Western Europe)

Source: The global trend indicator report about think tanks for 2015, Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning

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CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA	MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA	NORTH AMERICA	OCEANIA				
Anguilla	1	Algeria	9	Canada	99	Australia	63
Antigua and Barbuda	2	Bahrain	4	Mexico	61	Fiji	1
Argentina	138	Cyprus	6	United States	1835	New Zealand	5
Aruba	1	Egypt	35			Papua New Guinea	1
Bahamas	2	Iran	59			Samoa	1
Barbados	9	Iraq	31			Vanuatu	1
Belize	4	Israel	58				
Bermuda	3	Jordan	21				
Bolivia	59	Kuwait	14				
Brazil	89	Lebanon	19				
British Virgin Islands	1	Libya	2				
Cayman Islands	1	Morocco	15				
Chile	44	Oman	3				
Colombia	40	Palestine	28				
Costa Rica	37	Qatar	7				
Cuba	19	Saudi Arabia	4				
Dominica	3	Sudan	5				
Dominican Republic	31	Syria	6				
Ecuador	18	Tunisia	18				
El Salvador	13	Turkey	32				
French Guiana	1	United Arab Emirates	7				
Grenada	1	Yemen	22				
Guadeloupe	5						
Guatemala	12						
Guyana	4						
Haiti	2						
Honduras	9						
Jamaica	6						
Martinique	2						
Montserrat	1						
Nicaragua	10						
Panama	12						
Paraguay	27						
Peru	33						
Puerto Rico	6						
St. Kitts and Nevis	1						
St. Lucia	3						
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	1						
Suriname	3						
Trinidad and Tobago	12						
Turks and Caicos Islands	1						
United States Virgin Islands	1						
Uruguay	21						
Venezuela	20						

Table 3 (includes Central and South America, the Middle East and North Africa, North America, Oceania)

Source: The global trend indicator report about think tanks for 2015, Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning

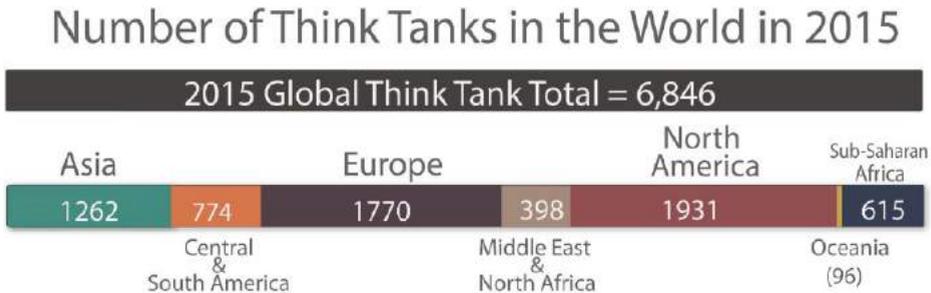
The importance of think tanks in the decision-making process of external politics

Think tanks directly or indirectly contribute in supplying policymakers with the most vital information, studies and research related to an issue thus, the impact of these centers through their research influence and effect external policy making. These centers work to prepare studies related to different fields, including political, economic, military, cultural, and technological and other studies. For example, in the United States of America “there are 1984 think tanks, of which 374 are based in the capital city Washington”⁹ all working to offer the policymaker with reports and studies of choices and alternatives available in making external political decisions.

9. Sabah Abdul Razzaq Kubba, ‘American research centers and their role in the decision-making process in foreign policy’, Ahmadi Publishing, First Edition, Baghdad, 2015; pg. 29.

Figure (1)

Number of Think Tanks in the World in 2015

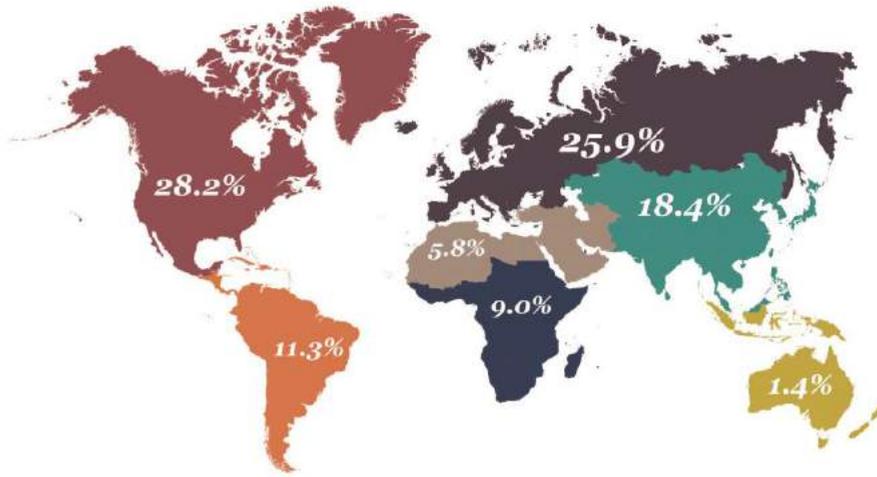


Source: The global trend indicator report about think tanks for 2015, Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning

The significance of think tanks is illustrated by comparing these centers as dynamic informational reservoirs and effective in writing studies and research, whether these institutions are independent or ones affiliated to a university or a particular institution. In this sense, a policymaker is in dire need of making sound and correct decisions relying on accurate and valid facts, data collection and report writing to be clear and thorough to him.

Figure (2)

Global Distribution of Think Tanks by Region



Source: The global trend indicator report about think tanks for 2015, Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning

It is noted that these centers began to widen within the same country or in the countries in general, as shown from the map above. This indicates that these centers a vital and active role in public policy-making process in general and to contribute to the political decision-making in general, as well as conferences, seminars and workshops held by these institutions to publicize their work and demonstrate how they can contribute to foreign political decision-making

The role of think tanks in foreign policy decision-making process

Decision-making process is not only based on theoretical rules and logical calculations toward successful results, and there is no frame of reference for integrated and reliable in decision-making either, as certain ambiguities and lack of information took control of many important and fateful decisions that shook the international arena during the last century. Those who study the decision-making process and even those involved in making some of the past and important ones are subject to complex and vague parts in the process¹⁰.

Think tanks have had a prominent role in establishing facts and knowledge and in reaching realistic results through studies and research it carried out. These centers also worked with international changes and remained at the core of political decision-making in deriving information; this does not mean that other institutions do not have a role in it, but think tanks has the most important role in this.

Moreover, some influence of think tanks on decision-making and the policymaker can correlate with specific political stances in cases where it is financed by governmental institutions or organization or profitable corporation. This center will seek to issue studies and research that will aid the policymaker in making decisions that are primarily in the interest of an institution or organization which supports the policymaker himself.

10. Ali Abdul Ridha, 'Who makes the decisions?', Al-Nabaa Magazine, Nabaa, news and information network, No.7, Issue 30-31, 1999.

Amidst international change some policymakers sought to adopt or create research institutions or think tanks centers that will help the policymaker, as well as “these centers usually face financial or legal hardships thus the policymaker himself or the institution that he administers is usually supportive of the institution (or center) when carrying out his work or making decisions”.¹¹

Comments:

- For the purpose of supporting decision-making institutions, reconsideration should be given to think tanks and cooperation with them in order to pursue a successful foreign policy.
- What considerably ails think tanks centers is the difficulty of access to information, so it is worth to have a loop of communication between these centers and official government institutions in order to reach reliable and accurate research and studies, whether it's in Iraq or any another country.
- Work on creating a culture of support for think tanks similar to what exists among citizens in the United States.

11. Interview with researcher and vice president for Policy and Research at The Middle East Institute Mr. Paul Salem, ‘The contribution of research and study centers in public policy-making’, Baghdad, 28/01/2016. For the full interview:

[/2016/01/1502/org.bayancenter.www//:http](http://2016/01/1502/org.bayancenter.www//:http)

Conclusion:

It is difficult to be completely knowledgeable about what would always affect the foreign policymaker. In the sense that one cannot limit or define these influencing factors or variables in which one can say it is the only affecting aspects in the decision-making process. Think tanks are one of these factors or variables in foreign policymaking as studies and research partly offer guidance to the entire process.

To pursue a successful foreign policy and in achieving its goals depends on the extent of knowledge of the political decision-maker and any alternatives before it and think tanks offer political decision-makers some of the information and options and alternatives available for him to proceed in the decision-making process.

Finally, in light of international changes and changes in international relations, think tanks prominence will be greater in the foreign political decision-making because of their important role in the preparation, collection and analysis of information for future international developments process, noting that it depends on the nature of the political system in the country.

Sources:

1. Saad Haki Tawfik, *'The Principles of International Relations'*, Legal Library, Fifth Edition, Baghdad, 2010.
2. *'2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report'*, translated, Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 10/04/2016.
3. Khalid Elewi Al-Ardawi, *'Activating the role of research centers in Iraq's policymaking'*, Euphrates Center for Development and Strategic Studies, 13/05/2013.
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8. Interview with researcher and vice president for Policy and Research at The Middle East Institute Mr. Paul Salem, '*The contribution of research and study centers in public policy-making*', Baghdad, 28/01/2016.