

Bridging the Policy Gap: Reinventing Arab Think Tanks Through Participatory Governance

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Abstract:

The topic of research and think tanks, particularly the issue of their rationalization, has gained significant attention within the literature of political science, economics, and even social policy. This is based on the fact that the role of these think tanks has become a fundamental pillar in the process of formulating public policies capable of instigating development at various levels, particularly in the Middle East. From this perspective, this study attempts to delve deeper into the reality of research centers in the Arab world and the most significant challenges that hinder their participation in the public policy-making process. It also explores ways to enhance their role and performance. This is achieved by proposing a vision based on employing a governance approach to evaluate the performance of research centers as a participatory vision that enables them to effectively integrate into the decision-making process.

Keywords: Think Tanks; Participatory; State; Private Sector; Civil Society.

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1.Introduction:

Public policy-making processes include think tanks and research centers as informal actors. The changing demands of international and national policies together with societal transformations have led think tanks to establish essential roles which parallel formal actors in public policy development. The dynamic nature of think tanks has made them a significant academic focus which draws more and more researchers and scholars. Think tanks maintain functional importance because they work within intellectual and procedural systems that help evaluate decision-makers' performance through detailed practical assessments of various issues and challenges. Think tanks contribute to public policy development through three essential activities: identifying problems and collecting data and creating workable policy solutions for policymakers' challenges.

Research studies have focused on understanding their functions and governance systems while evaluating their role in policy development and seeking methods to boost their operational performance. According to scholar Rudolf Traub-Merz in "Do We Need More Think Tanks?" think tanks and research centers remain essential because the modern world requires them to handle its complexities and governments need knowledge-based frameworks to overcome development challenges. The United Nations recognizes think tanks as essential links that connect knowledge with power.

The research by "James McGann" shows how think tanks play a vital role in decision-making because insufficient information about political, social and economic issues hinders policymakers. The wide range of research centers together with their abundant information enables public policymakers to assess different alternatives and enhance their decision-making process. According to Donald E. Abelson in his book *Do Think Tanks Matter?* Think tanks serve as essential components of civil society organizations because they can use diverse resources to shape both public policy content and its final results.

The main issue of this research focuses on research centers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at a time when most international research and reports show that think tanks in the Arab world are weak in both performance and influence within power structures and public policy processes. The study investigates this problematic framework by asking two questions.

- 1** - What are the effective ways to activate research centers in the Arab world?
- 2** - What governance mechanisms can be implemented to protect Arab research centers' independence while improving their effectiveness in the public sphere?

The study expands its analysis of Arab research centers by investigating obstacles that prevent their public policy involvement while identifying strategies to boost their operational capabilities. The research will use a governance-based framework to assess research centers' performance through a participatory approach that enables their meaningful involvement in decision-making. The research addresses its main problem through these essential themes:

2. The General Context of the Approach

2.1. The State

The weak performance and effectiveness of think tanks and research centers in some countries—particularly in the Arab world—are closely tied to the prevailing model and general context in which the state remains the sole actor shaping and regulating the concept and operation of these institutions. This approach has led to significant difficulties in the emergence of research centers with a strong connection to the decision-making process, especially concerning data collection and proposing viable policy alternatives to address political, social, economic, and even cultural challenges facing policymakers.

Moreover, the state's monopolization of the political process renders it incomplete and demonstrably inadequate in confronting the diverse problems and crises encountered by decision-makers. A political process structured in this manner inherently lacks participatory governance—one that integrates and consults all relevant stakeholders in addressing the issue at hand¹. Consequently, this adversely impacts the role and performance of think tanks in policy-making, as they lack sufficient administrative and financial independence. This, in turn, hinders their ability to establish mechanisms capable of influencing power structures.

As reported by McGann and Whelan, the Think Tank intersection with state interests can distort their function, transforming them into tools to promote specific government programs on wider public interests². This misalignment not only erodes the trust of the public in participatory governance, but also inhibits the diversity of the essential perspectives for the development of solid policies³. Ultimately, the monopolization of the state apparatus suffocates the pluralism that is crucial to encourage inclusive governance, leading to a trend in which the Think Tanks lose their role as independent supporters for the informed political discourse.

The state's structural and functional changes have consistently revealed institutional weaknesses in adapting to new and existing challenges in the socio-economic environment. From this viewpoint, a participatory approach stresses the need to extend the decision-making domain which the state currently controls to include all actors who have direct or indirect connections to policy matters. The expansion of decision-making authority is essential for creating an effective response to both internal and external environmental changes.

The framework establishes a collaborative bond between state institutions and think tanks. The centers maintain a vital role in this causal relationship because they have the required information and expertise needed to handle new and complex issues. Think tanks serve decision-makers by delivering expert analysis and policy alternatives through their specialized human resources and data collection from their daily work with various issues⁴.

The pluralist theory explains how think tanks interact with the state through their research institutions which function as: "A diverse set of organizations that advocate for the interests of various competing groups, seeking to integrate their policy agendas within the broader framework of public policy outcomes"⁵.

Under this approach think tanks contribute to public policy formulation by creating a space for state and center policy agenda bargaining and negotiation processes. Pluralist scholars believe that think tanks gain both independence and decision-maker influence through their participation in this relational dynamic which involves all actors including research institutions.

2.2. The Private Sector

The framework shows that private sector involvement with think tanks and research centers represents an optimal method to enhance research institutions' participation in decision-making processes. The relationship between these entities developed through time as global economic changes occurred.

The concept of research centers emerged during the early 20th as a tool which business leaders used to establish a connection between themselves and state institutions. The exchange of ideas and expertise between policymakers and elites consisting of prominent economists, statisticians, political scientists and others occurred to use their academic expertise for public policy influence.

The United States functions as a worldwide leader for think tanks and their main development factors need examination to understand private sector involvement with these institutions. The United States research center concept emerged from business leaders who established the Institute for Government Research (later renamed Brookings Institution) through Robert Brookings'

leadership in 1916. The Brookings Institution founder Robert Brookings established think tanks to develop government policies that would reduce growing class and partisan conflicts and promote worldwide peace. Businessman Andrew Carnegie created the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to provide policymakers with research-based ideas and alternatives from experts and academics who focused on public benefit fields⁶.

Think tanks attempt to expand their funding base through partnerships with major business leaders and private sector institutions because government funding remains scarce. The use of private funding as a solution to funding shortages in countries appears beneficial at first but it compromises the credibility of research and reports produced by these centers. Most credible think tanks with established credibility work with the private sector as one of three main actors under the participatory approach (state - private sector - civil society).

The German experience demonstrates a funding model which unites state and private sector support for research centers. Research centers in Germany receive their funding from state and private sector sources in equal proportions of 23% each while 25% receive funding only from private sources. The Economic and Social Research Institute (WSI) of the Hans Böckler Foundation operates as a leading research center for public policy economics through its position under the German Trade Union Confederation and its role as a training ground for future academics and political activists. The German Industry Federation (BDI) launched the Institute of German Economy (IW) in Cologne as its largest privately funded economic research institute to support entrepreneurial development and research-economic sector connections⁷.

The analysis demonstrates that think tanks connected to private-sector institutions create a functional balance to solve different problems which leads to national growth and development.

2.3. Civil Society

Civil society represents the public sphere which exists between state institutions and societal organizations. Through this connection consensual visions can be expressed to create social integration that matches state policies with societal perspectives. Antonio Gramsci analyzed the state-civil society connection as a multifaceted relationship. The state maintains its traditional dominance through legitimate coercive power but this no longer fits the modern state's functional role.

Gramsci understood that modern states need to establish political hegemony through methods which exclude both violent and material coercive measures. According to his perspective the achievement of consensus through private institutions such as political parties clubs trade unions and corporations would enable the integration of civil society into governance⁸.

International governance organizations together with experts recognize civil society organizations (CSOs) as essential for connecting grassroots communities with political elites in Western democracies because they influence public policy and improve participatory governance and development results⁹¹⁰. The third sector known as civil society provides important value to economic and social policies through both formal partnerships and informal cooperation. Civil society uses its functional space to create an environment that supports business and developmental initiatives by sharing solutions which match or support private sector goals while solving economic and societal issues. Many countries have started to include civil society in public policy development because this approach helps policies better represent public interests¹¹.

The institutions and organizations of civil society have successfully proven that the state does not hold a monopoly on decision-making authority. The modern intellectual and historical developments have transformed the state into its current form while creating a public domain for civil society to operate. Civil society operates within its own sphere to form either cooperative or oppositional ties with the state which influences how modern governance functions especially when it comes to think tanks.

Think tanks as knowledge hubs demonstrate the various ideological streams which exist within numerous civil society organizations. Political scientists widely agree that think tanks serve as essential tools for studying how policy actors interact because they study the intricate relationships between political forces and economic factors and ideological beliefs and ethical considerations. Think tanks function as essential actors who drive policy discussions while conducting analysis and developing new solutions to persistent problems.

The combination of state institutions with the private sector and civil society through think tanks creates an environment that makes public policy more inclusive and effective while governance adjusts to societal changes¹².

3.A Critical Look at the Reality of Arab Think Tanks

The MENA region adopted think tanks and research centers as a concept after Western nations especially the United States during the post-independence modernization period. The development of think tanks in the region resulted from

two main factors: the post-independence modernization initiatives of Arab states and the superficial attempt by policymakers to replicate Western models that support scientific research and knowledge-based societal development.

The transformation has resulted in higher intellectual production levels and the emergence of an educated elite who want to address regional social and political issues. Academic institutions together with university research and intellectual forums work to transform theoretical discussions into practical policy suggestions. The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) supports UAE decision-makers through its research-based public policy recommendations. The Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in the Arab Republic of Egypt stands as the oldest think tank in the Arab region and holds positions 59th globally (excluding American think tanks), 32nd among the best global centers in defense and national security and 35th among the most important centers in foreign policy and international affairs¹³. The center demonstrates strong ties to Egyptian decision-making especially when dealing with security and foreign policy matters. The Gulf Research Center (GRC) and the Arab Planning Institute (API) and the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies have managed to elevate their security and energy policy recommendations to the top decision-making levels in Gulf state governments¹⁴.

The research by Hind Aqil Al-Mezir in "Arab Social Research Centers: Contributions and Challenges" examined think tanks in the MENA region through categorization and functional analysis. The research findings led us to create a list of major Arab think tanks which we present in the following table with their geographical locations.

Table 01: Some of the Most prominent Research Centers in the Arab World

No.	Center Name	Country	Overview of the Center
01	Center for Political and Strategic Studies	Egypt	An independent think tank focusing on political and strategic issues, as well as security and defense matters. It operates under the Al-Ahram Foundation.
02	Center for Arab Unity Studies	Lebanon	This center focuses on a wide range of Arab-related issues, particularly in the fields of political, economic, developmental, educational, intellectual, and philosophical studies.
03	Arab Planning Institute	Kuwait	This center aims to support efforts toward achieving economic and social development in Arab countries

			by providing consultancy services and forward-looking research to enhance decision-makers' performance.
04	King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies	Saudi Arabia	The center's goal is to support research and studies in Islamic, cultural, and social fields, aiming to expand the horizons of knowledge, particularly in the Gulf region.
05	Center for Human and Social Studies and Research	Morocco	An independent research institution and academic center that includes numerous researchers and experts in various fields of knowledge.
06	Ibn Khaldun Center for Studies and Research	Jordan	An independent research institution focusing on all fields of humanities and social sciences.
07	Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies	Qatar	An independent intellectual research institution that addresses social, political, economic, psychological, and intellectual issues, particularly in their practical and applied dimensions.

Source: Hind Aqil Al- Mezir, Arab Social Research Centers: Contributions and Challenges – An Exploratory Study (Sultan Qaboos University). p.61.

4.Critical Examination of Arab Think Tanks' Current State

The table (01) demonstrates how Arab think tanks maintain identical performance levels and research designs which results in a lack of specialized expertise and functional separation. The institutions conduct research on wide-ranging topics without developing focused expertise in particular fields which weakens their analytical capabilities. According to Hillman and Baydounar the governance frameworks of regional think tanks follow state-security priorities which produces generalized outputs while restricting their independence¹⁵. Security-dominated narratives according to Sumpf, Araj, and Crompton restrict critical thinking and prevent think tanks from addressing intricate socioeconomic issues¹⁶.

The functional performance and institutional development of Arab think tanks encounter various obstacles which prevent them from achieving their goals. The main obstacles to think tanks' performance arise from political environments and governance structures which follow a security-oriented "police state" paradigm because governments depend on intelligence services instead of

research institutions for analysis. The influence of think tanks on policy development has suffered as a result. Johnson explains that think tanks affiliated with civil society face difficulties in moving past conflict-based policy because their research supports state security perspectives¹⁷. Their ability to develop strong independent policy solutions remains restricted because of this limitation.

The implementation of intricate bureaucratic procedures for information access stands as a significant barrier to think tanks' operational growth. Scientific research needs an environment that supports academic freedom together with diverse intellectual currents and unrestricted information access to enable strong policy debates and alternative decision-making approaches. Several states use national security and territorial integrity as pretexts to suppress ideas while criminalizing information exchange¹⁸.

Funding represents another critical challenge. The state maintains its position as the main financial supporter for most Arab think tanks. The state funding ensures operational continuity but it creates major disadvantages because any state criticism makes institutions vulnerable to collapse which damages their credibility and legitimacy. The absence of meaningful private sector involvement in state funding transforms many think tanks into instruments that support regime policies. Private sector actors who exist in large numbers across Gulf states do not provide significant financial support to think tanks except to those that demonstrate political or economic or intellectual activity. The limited private sector funding for research centers results from inadequate coordination systems between private entities and research centers as well as decision-makers' concerns about political stability risks from private funding.

Research studies demonstrate that Arab think tanks perform poorly in policymaking compared to Western institutions. The majority of Arab institutions fail to establish proper institutional frameworks and functional adaptability which are necessary conditions for achieving autonomy and developing new competencies and improving performance quality and gaining stakeholder support to enable meaningful participation in public policy formulation and decision-making refinement. The research environment faces severe shortages of material and human resources which are essential for think tank operations leading to unclear connections between decision-makers and research centers about policy development processes¹⁹.

The University of Pennsylvania's 2019 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report shows the Middle East's weak position through its 507 think tanks among

8,248 worldwide (including Iran, Turkey, and Israel). The distribution across Arab states appears as follows:

Table 02: Distribution of Think Tanks in the Arab World by Country

Country	Number of Centers
Yemen	27
Saudi Arabia	10
Morocco	15
Jordan	28
Algeria	09
Syria	10
Oman	03
Kuwait	16
Bahrain	13
Tunisia	21
Palestine	36
Lebanon	28
Egypt	39
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	15
Qatar	15
Libya	03
Iraq	32

Source: _____, University of Pennsylvania (Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, 2019), p.45.

The same report established a regional ranking of the most important think tanks and research centers active in the Middle East. Based on the fact that our topic is related to the Arab region, we will attempt, through the table below, to present the most important think tanks and research centers in the Arab region, according to what was stated in the 2019 report.

Table 03: Top Arab Think Tanks: Regional Rankings by Country and Institution

Country	Name of Think Tank / Research Center	Regional Ranking
Egypt	Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies	03
Qatar	Al Jazeera Center for Studies	04
United Arab Emirates	Emirates Policy Center	06
Morocco	Policy Center for the New South	07
Saudi Arabia	International Institute for Iranian Studies	08
Egypt	Egyptian Center for Economic Studies	11
Morocco	Center for Studies and Research in Social Sciences	12
United Arab Emirates	Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research	14
Saudi Arabia	King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center (KAPSARC)	15
Egypt	Information and Decision Support Center	19
United Arab Emirates	Dubai Public Policy Research Center	20
Morocco	Royal Institute for Strategic Studies	21
Libya	Libyan Organization for Policies and Strategies	24
Egypt	Economic Research Forum	25
Egypt	Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs	27
Egypt	Arab Women Organization for Training and Research	28
Tunisia	Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies	29
United Arab Emirates	Emirates Diplomatic Academy	30
Bahrain	Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies	31
Algeria	Think Tank for Business and Economic Policies	32
Morocco	Moroccan Institute for International Relations	33
Iraq	Middle East Studies Institute	34
Lebanon	Center for Arab Unity Studies	35
Saudi Arabia	King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies	36
Jordan	Al-Quds Center for Political Studies	38

Libya	Sadeq Institute	39
Jordan	Arab Thought Forum	40
Qatar	Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies	41
Palestine	Contemporary Center for Policy and Analysis	43
Morocco	Amadeus Institute	44
Kuwait	Arab Planning Institute	48
Saudi Arabia	Gulf Research Center	49
Bahrain	Bahrain Center for Human Rights	51
Egypt	Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies	53
Kuwait	Center for Strategic and Future Studies	55
Lebanon	Lebanese Center for Political Studies	56
Algeria	Research Center in Applied Economics for Development	59
Kuwait	Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research	60
Egypt	Egyptian Center for Public Policy Studies	62
Lebanon	Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations	63
United Arab Emirates	Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research	64
Tunisia	Maghreb Economic Forum	66
Tunisia	Tunisian Observatory for Democratic Transition	67
Lebanon	Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs	68
Oman	Tawasul	69
Egypt	Arab Alternatives Forum for Studies	71
Jordan	Al-Rai Center for Studies	72
Jordan	Arab Institute for Security Studies	73
Palestine	Palestinian Center for Peace and Democracy	74
Tunisia	Center for Mediterranean and International Studies	77
United Arab Emirates	Future Center for Advanced Research and Studies	79
Yemen	Saba Center for Strategic Studies	82
Iraq	Hammurabi Center for Research and Strategic Studies	83
Lebanon	Lebanese Institute for Market Studies	84
Jordan	Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies	85
Tunisia	Khayr al-Din Institute	92
Palestine	Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey	93

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	Research	
Palestine	Pal-Think for Strategic Studies	94
Yemen	Organization for the Defense of Rights and Democratic Freedoms	95
Palestine	Palestinian Policy Network	97
Morocco	Aziz Belal Center for Studies and Research	98
Morocco	Arab Center for Scientific and Human Research	100
Egypt	National Planning Institute	101
Morocco	General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises (CGEM)	102

Source: _____, University of Pennsylvania, (Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, 2019), pp.109-112.

The statistics demonstrate significant shortcomings in think tank development and spread throughout the Arab world. The region's leading country Egypt maintains only 39 think tanks which proves that insufficient numbers of think tanks negatively affect institutional performance. The current Middle Eastern crises demand expanded think tank capacity because Arab think tanks lack the ability to research and specialize in all contemporary issues affecting regional populations.

5. Towards Activating Research Centers in the Arab World

The Arab world needs to transform its political environment according to scholars and stakeholders who want to improve think tanks' performance. The establishment of independent research centers faces resistance from authoritarian systems because these systems create politicized institutions which promote regime ideologies. The approach of this study adapts to existing democratic practices within these systems even though the conceptual and procedural validity of this perspective remains valid. The approach works within present political structures to enhance think tanks' operational effectiveness while creating conditions for democratic growth that supports peaceful Middle Eastern political change.

The activation of research centers in the Arab world depends on two essential determinants according to this framework:

5.1. Determinant of Collaborative Funding

Public policy evaluation and refinement think tanks develop specific knowledge communities that accept their concepts and information. The centers

use their research and studies along with consultations and public engagement through opinion leaders to increase their influence across formal and informal spheres.

Arab think tanks need to establish essential relationships with governments and private sector institutions and business leaders and civil society organizations who share their visions to access diverse funding sources. The collaboration between institutions strengthens their independence and analytical credibility because no single donor can free their analyses from their funding agenda²⁰.

The Arab world needs a unified incubator which combines state institutions with private sector entities and think tanks to develop developmental environments and break state control over research institutions.

5.2. Determinant of Functional and Interconnected Engagement

Any organization's operational framework depends on its institutional structure and functional boundaries according to its governing institutional and functional perspective. The functional performance of these centers will increase substantially when Arab think tanks establish partnerships with both the private sector and state institutions.

The state functions as the main actor in Arab political systems because it controls educational and training policies which determine the human capital that supports most active think tanks in the region. The support for Arab think tanks exists in two main ways:

- Higher Education Institutions maintain a vital relationship with think tanks because they supply academic expertise and research faculty and institutional legitimacy which helps think tanks recruit talent and build credibility and maintain research operations²¹.
- Think tanks establish functional partnerships with both private sector entities and state institutions to match their research with societal requirements through advisory roles and consultancy projects and co-funded initiatives²².

The functional performance of Arab centers functions as a vital link between State institutions and private sector entities. The centers can enhance their operational performance to generate meaningful reports and studies which support political choices and foster strategic dialogues. According to Nauffal and Abouchdid (2020) national research strategies need to match university plans to make research centers more effective as strategic intermediaries. Research collaboration efforts would strengthen the regional economic and social development impact of research activities²³.

To improve think tanks' functional efficacy at the civil society level, local engagement needs to be elevated to an international framework through networking with non-profit international organizations and stakeholders, provided such collaborations safeguard national unity and constants. International networking has become a fundamental tool for think tanks to activate their work because it enables specialized research on vital issues (e.g., human rights, justice, employment, and unemployment) and facilitates the exchange of relevant international comparative experiences for the studied socio-political contexts²⁴.

These frameworks together create substantial improvements in the operational effectiveness of think tanks throughout the Arab world.

6. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that participatory governance provides a theoretical and practical framework to connect think tank intellectual and research production with state policy operational areas and private sector aspirations. The approach would successfully reduce the difference between foresight and developmental trajectories in Arab nations.

Public policy formulation through participatory governance benefits from think tanks as essential actors because they provide policymakers with multiple crisis management alternatives. The collaborative relationship between research centers and governance stakeholders strengthens Arab think tanks' practical expertise which enables them to tackle societal challenges more effectively and develop specialized functional capabilities.

The participatory approach shows strong potential to activate Arab think tanks despite the challenges that hinder their development. The private sector and research centers' partnership at the institutional hierarchy level generates an influential pressure system which affects decision-makers. The dynamic process transforms restrictive environments that limit think tanks' autonomy into flexible ecosystems that welcome collaborative models of societal service.

The new approach will transform Arab think tanks from their current peripheral advisory position into central positions for evidence-based policymaking which will lead to better governance structures in the region. The emerging ecosystem would improve policy results while building a stronger social bond between governments and their people through development strategies that incorporate knowledge and inclusivity.

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