

WALKING A THIN LINE: THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN ARAB TRANSITIONS AND FOREIGN SUPPORT

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The role of civil society in bringing about change in the Arab world has been widely acknowledged. Today, civil society organisations (CSOs) face the challenge of helping consolidate the process of reform at a time when progress towards democratisation is uncertain. Emerging think tank and policy research initiatives are at the centre of these efforts, upholding progress towards more open and democratic political regimes and moving from a logic of protest to one of institutionalisation and influence in policy-making processes.

The rise of think tanks and research institutes in the last decade responds to the need to bring together sound research on contemporary issues and policy-making, as well as to fill the “participatory gap”, which relates to the exclusion of civil society in policy-making processes¹. Think tanks constitute the link between research and politics. They are associated with the tasks of translating the findings of academic research into viable policy concepts and convening policy-making and civil society representatives to devise better policies. In addition, by informing the public debate on the political challenges ahead, think tanks are a useful tool for bridging the gap between “the view from the street” and institutions during times of critical political reform.

In the Arab world, think tanks have a short history. Non-democratic regimes

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1. James McGann (2012). “2011 Global Go To Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice”, p. 8, http://www.gotothinktank.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/2011-Global-Go-To-Think-Tanks-Report_FINAL-VERSION.pdf

and the restriction of freedom of expression did not facilitate the transmission of thought and ideas in Arab societies. For a long time repressed or co-opted by authoritarian regimes, think tanks operated with full acknowledgement of their political environment. At best, they remained politically neutral and provided expert views on a set of policy proposals or reforms introduced by the regimes in place, but they did not necessarily contribute to the tasks of policy formulation. Sometimes think tanks also played a role in constructing the intellectual discourse of the political elite.

With the advent of the Arab uprisings and the transformation of political regimes in the region, think tanks and policy research institutes have devoted their efforts to creating a pro-democracy and pro-dialogue environment to uphold the progress made by revolutionary forces. A series of new initiatives have emerged as part of thriving regional civil societies. Their aim is to reconstruct the “battle of ideas” in fast-changing political landscapes. As a participant of a recent workshop put it, “in Libya Muammar Gaddafi killed ideas before killing his own people,” which shows the need for think tanks to reconstruct the intellectual foundations destroyed by former authoritarian regimes.²

What role for think tanks in the Arab transitions?

The work of think tanks and policy research institutes provides an indication of the openness of a political regime. The emergence of new research initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa speaks for the desire to consolidate democratic advancements through in-depth discussions about the rule of law and socio-economic reforms, the protection of the rights and dignity of citizens and the creation of more inclusive political systems.

2. Workshop “Rethinking the Role of Think Tanks and Research Institutes and EU Policies towards the Mediterranean”, Madrid, 14th December 2012.

Despite the lack of consensus regarding how think tanks can best contribute to such tasks, the majority of new-born research initiatives in the region aim to bridge the gap between knowledge and power by promoting better political reforms. Such an encompassing definition reveals the emergence of three critical roles for Arab think tanks: informing, convening and advocating democratic reform.

Informing: Political research in the times of authoritarianism hardly ever produced self-critical analyses. In a sense, the Arab Spring unveiled the need for a better understanding of the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of Arab countries – a sort of “thinking awakening” taking place alongside political revolutions. At an early stage of transitions to democracy, think tanks need to connect new political discourses with the general public and promote a “culture of informed citizenship.” The facilitation of information to civil society becomes a crucial component of the work of a think tank; thus, many regional initiatives are producing relevant information on the new government structures, policies and reforms.

A few initiatives deserve particular attention. In Egypt, a group of human rights and democracy activists founded the Egyptian Democratic Academy (EDA) soon after the demise of the Mubarak regime. The goal of the EDA is to promote “the values of democracy, human rights and political participation (...) and to promote the values of freedom of opinion and expression, openness, political and religious tolerance.”³ This organisation has had a remarkable impact via the organisation of capacity-building and empowerment programmes for CSOs. However, the leadership of the EDA soon considered that research and information tasks on political developments in Egypt required the establishment of

3. Website of the Egyptian Democratic Academy: <http://egyda.org/blog/about/>

the think tank Egyptian Policy Centre (EPC), which was founded in late 2012, with the aim of producing sound research on the Egyptian political system in the making.

The production of policy-oriented research to uphold democratic reform is also the main objective of the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (ITES). Its existence dates back to the times of Ben Ali but after the Tunisian revolution the institute has transformed its *raison d'être* and confessed that “for decades, the ITES was an instrument to serve the dictatorship – producing reports which were the work of an eclectic group of national experts and which provided fallacious arguments for a regime whose only strategy was to preserve the privileges of the ruling class.”⁴

The u-turn made by ITES reveals a frequent dynamic of reform of an existing think tank as a consequence of revolutionary processes in the region. It also demonstrates how think tanks and policy research institutes are adapting their agendas to accommodate the information and research needs of countries in transition. In a similar vein, Libya's Sadeq Institute was founded in April 2012 after the demise of the Gaddafi regime with a view to act “as an independent and non-partisan think tank (...) to foster a culture of informed citizenship in Libya by providing a forum for the whole of Libyan society to participate in policy-making.”⁵

Convening: Think tanks can also act as connectors within societies undergoing political transformation. A few initiatives are aimed at bringing together the pro-democracy factors within societies and reinforcing

4. Website of the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (ITES): <http://www.strategie.tn/index.php/fr/2012-07-30-10-54-48/lites-en-bref>. Translation of the original text in French provided by the author.

5. Website of the Libyan Sadeq Institute: <http://www.sadeqinstitute.org/who-we-are/>

dialogue between political factions. In so doing, think tanks convene political actors with diverse – and often diverging – views on key topics of the reform agenda, which provides an opportunity for outlining inclusive policy proposals. Other initiatives aim at overcoming the lack of connections between civil society actors and the new political leaders. In this way, they provide an added component of legitimacy to the new political systems.

Think tanks with a focus on convening activities can act on three different levels: promoting their relationship with government officials, reaching out to the media and interacting with the people. While their action on people and the media can contribute to building a better democratic culture, their action towards the government is based on the need to challenge the deep roots of authoritarian states and to transform state administrations from a culture of repression to a democratic culture. Most of these tasks are implemented by means of closed workshops and meetings with government officials and civil society representatives.

A new Gaza-based think tank, Palthink for Strategic Studies, defines itself as a “think and do tank”, bringing together diverse Palestinian actors in order to “stimulate and inspire rational public discussions and around core issues that concern the Palestinians and the Region.” In October 2012 Palthink hosted an exchange of views between Khaled Meshaal, Head of the Political Office of Hamas, and non-Hamas actors of Gaza.⁶ In a similar vein, the Brookings Doha Centre - based in Qatar and a branch of the Washington-based institute - is implementing the “Transitions Dialogue” programme to “bring together mainstream Islamists, Salafis, liberals and leftists, along with U.S. and European officials, to exchange ideas, develop consensus, and forge new

6. Website of the Palestinian Palthink Centre: <http://palthink.org/en/?p=808>

understandings in a rapidly changing political environment.”⁷

Advocacy: The ultimate goal of think tanks is to suggest policy solutions and, in so doing, to achieve political impact. This role goes beyond the generation of information and research and, in the context of Arab transitions, often translates into actions aimed at the reinforcement of democratic systems in post-revolutionary scenarios. Some new regional think tanks complement their research capacities with the provision of targeted proposals for policy-makers, including members of the newly-elected parliaments, administration officials, and high-ranking politicians.

Some voices have argued that policy recommendations for specific actors are a core component of consolidated think tanks but that they might backfire in deeply divided societies. At an early stage of a transition process, politically-oriented think tanks can be portrayed as the political opposition by certain societal actors. This is the case for Islamist parties, who can be pushed to radicalism with the emergence of polarising debates on the role of religion in politics. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, for instance, carries out advocacy activities and combines the publication of in-depth reports and testimonies on the human rights situation in Egypt with the “development, proposal and promotion of policies, legislations and Constitutional amendments.”⁸

Can external actors support think tanks in Arab transitions?

A critical issue for think tanks is their independence. External influence – either by national or international actors – can be exercised with financial, political

7. Website of the Brookings Doha Centre: <http://www.brookings.edu/about/centers/doha/initiatives>

8. Website of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies: http://www.cihrs.org/?page_id=48&lang=en

or governmental means.⁹ As mentioned above, think tanks were often co-opted by authoritarian regimes exerting varying degrees of political or governmental patronage on the research produced. The stigma of foreign intervention in Arab affairs also runs deep and explains the reluctance of think tanks today to accept foreign funding. It is worth recalling that Arab revolutions were often associated with national pride and the liberation from authoritarian regimes enjoying close relationships with external powers.

Foreign assistance is thus confronted with historical suspicions of external interference, prompting contradiction in the policies that external powers can implement to support Arab transitions. On the one hand, the credibility of the actors receiving external support might be endangered if accusations of foreign interference arise. On the other, a lack of commitment by external powers is matched with criticism for not doing enough to support the Arab transitions. External powers are thus required to walk a thin line not to be accused of being behind the curve in their response to the Arab Spring or of an excessive interventionism.

Think tanks are confronted with a similar dilemma. At an early stage of their work they require external support, often by means of financial assistance. But at the same time they are cautious when this support is channelled via external funding. The risk of intromission can translate at home into a loss of credibility of their research, less impact on policy-making processes and the animosity of local populations. This situation contrasts with foreign political aid during the transitions to democracy in Portugal and Spain, when German foundations played a crucial role in providing practical support, advice, training and funding to democratic forces and CSOs, including policy research initiatives.¹⁰

9. On this, see the outcomes of the strategic workshops of the Consortium for Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) led by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. Information on this project is available here:
http://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/public_policy/rapp/rapp_research/Pages/ifi_rapp_capri_project.aspx

10. Michael Pinto-Duschinsky (1991). "Foreign Political Aid: The German Political Foundations and Their US Counterparts", *International Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 33-63.

What role for Europe?

Arab civil society has not been a central component of Europe's approach to the region. Despite having its own basket within the 1995 Barcelona Process – the first comprehensive European Union policy initiative to promote Euro-Mediterranean cooperation –, the EU ended up prioritising government-to-government relations and considering authoritarian diplomacies as the most appropriate interlocutors to strengthen EU-MENA relations.

The trend has been revised in light of the Arab Spring and in the policy reviews of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and other EU instruments. The proposal to establish a Civil Society Facility (CSF) to promote people-to-people contacts first appeared in the European Commission and High Representative's Communication "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean".¹¹ Ever since, the European Union has put civil society at the centre of its response to the Arab Spring, streamlining its €22 million budget for CSOs under the CSF. In addition to this instrument, the revision of the ENP published in May 2011 announced the establishment of a European Endowment for Democracy (EED) "to help political parties, non-registered NGOs and trade unions and other social partners," as part of the EU's partnership with societies.¹² The EED's initial budget of €14 million will be directed to grant-making projects for pro-democracy activists.

Think tanks are not specifically mentioned in any of the two Communications

11. European Commission (2011). "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean" [COM(2011) 200 final], http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011_200_en.pdf

12. European Commission (2011). "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood. A Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy" [COM(2011) 303], http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf

of the European Commission. However, a third document assesses the efforts of the EU to strengthen its engagement with research institutions. The Communication “The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations” recognises the assets of these organisations in contributing to generating “more effective policies.”¹³ Despite lacking an exclusive EU instrument, think tanks and policy research institutes can apply for projects under the CSF, the EED and other programmes such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

Yet European support for democratic transitions is no stranger to the dynamics of rising nationalism in the region, making external backing to think tanks unpopular. The conditionality and more-for-more principles behind the EU's support for Arab transitions have raised the eyebrows of local organisations. In addition, Europe has still to bear the consequences of a long-standing support of former dictators and its colonial past, which diminish the EU's capacity to influence.

There are, however, at least three ways by which Europe could have a positive impact on the role of think tanks in democratic transitions:

1. The EU must not limit itself to funding civil society initiatives but to advocating that relations between the political and social spheres in countries in transition are built on solid ground. Think tanks have a particular role to play in bridging the gap between civil society and governments by promoting inclusive policy-making processes. When direct involvement and support poses a problem, the EU should encourage people-to-people contacts as well as include civil society representatives in negotiations where usually only government officials

13. European Commission (2012). “The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations” [COM(2012) 492 final], <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2012:0492:FIN:EN:PDF>

are involved. It can do so by promoting the participation of think tanks and other CSOs in policy dialogues where regional governments and EU bodies are involved. This is particularly relevant for areas of cooperation which tackle state structures, for instance the reform of the security and judicial sectors, rule of law and good governance.

2. Through its many cooperation projects, the EU should promote regional networks in which Arab think tanks are involved. Support for these networks would facilitate the establishment of permanent platforms for sharing best practices among think tanks and civil society representatives. By supporting networks such as EuroMeSCo, FEMISE, the Anna Lindh Foundation and others, Arab think tanks would benefit from regular contacts with their counterparts in Europe and EU policy-makers. In addition, indirect support for think tanks via regional networks opens the door to overcoming accusations of external interference and direct funding by foreign actors.

3. The CSF and EED should devise mechanisms which are flexible enough to accommodate the needs of nascent organisations. The bureaucracy and paperwork associated with the Calls for European-funded projects are often difficult to overcome by new and understaffed think tanks. The EU should adopt new funding mechanisms by which control and accountability are exercised once the project is implemented – and not so much via an extenuating application process. In so doing, the EU should keep its promise to identify and support emerging civil society initiatives in post-revolutionary scenarios.