



Limitations of think tanks in Egypt

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Think tanks are an important feature of the decision-making process in many countries of the world, especially in the more developed and democratic ones. Most of the world's most influential think tanks can be found in the democratic countries, where governmental and non-governmental actors often allocate large resources to these institutions.

Think tanks in the world's mature democracies are usually either linked to state institutions, political parties, private interest groups or academic institutions. They produce research that informs the policy-making process or that seeks to promote the ideas of a particular interest group or political party by influencing the media and public opinion.

In the US context, where most of the world's think tanks are found, think tanks occupy a prominent place in policy-making circles and often play a visible role in promoting certain domestic and foreign policies. Government-funded think tanks in the US include institutions such as the United States Institute of Peace and the Congressional Research Centre, which both rely primarily on direct government funding.

Other think tanks such as the Carnegie, Brookings and American Enterprise and Heritage Foundations rely on private funding and are associated with particular political currents and ideologies. For example, the American Enterprise Institute played an important role in formulating and promoting the foreign-policy orientations of former US president George W Bush, and many of the people associated with it later occupied prominent positions in the Bush administration.

More recently, foreign funding has become a feature of the US think tank community, with institutions such as the Brookings and Middle East Institute receiving generous funding from Gulf countries such as Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia with the aim of producing research that supports the interests of these countries.

Other types of US think tanks, such as the RAND Corporation, the Cato Institute and the Euro-Asia Foundation, act as profit-oriented institutions that produce research based on commissions

from private companies and groups.

Thus, in the US context we find a diversity of think tanks associated with various governmental and non-governmental institutions. These usually have access to significant financial resources, qualified personnel, and the institutional capacity needed to affect the public debate and the policy-making process and are thus an essential feature of the American political system.

Looking at the Egyptian context, we find that think tanks in the modern sense of the word first appeared with the creation of the National Institute for Sociological and Criminal Research in 1956 and the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in 1968. The creation of the Al-Ahram Centre was particularly significant because it was linked to a desire to make more informed foreign-policy decisions after the defeat of 1967 in the war with Israel and to rely on experts rather than those close to the regime in the making of these decisions.

It was also linked with the realisation that research and knowledge are important in foreign policy and in warfare. The primary mandate of the Al-Ahram Centre upon its establishment was to provide in-depth knowledge about Israeli society and the Arab-Israeli conflict to Egyptian decision-makers. In later years, its mission expanded to include the study of other regional and international issues. Starting in the 1980s with the production of the first Arab Strategic Report, domestic issues also became a fundamental part of the mandate of the Centre.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, other think tanks associated with governmental and non-governmental institutions began to appear in Egypt. In 1986, the Information and Decision Support Centre was created to advise the office of the prime minister, and this played an important role in producing research that supports government policies, especially under the former Ahmed Nazif government.

In the 1990s, the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies and the Economic Research Forum were created with funding from businessmen associated with the former ruling National Democratic Party and international financial institutions with the aim of promoting liberal and market-oriented economic policies. These centres produced research that sought to shift public policies and public opinion in this direction.

Other think tanks tied to civil society and advocacy groups were also created during this period. The Ibn Khaldoun Centre and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies have produced studies and reports that have promoted human rights and political liberalisation. They have relied primarily on foreign funding from Western democracies that have sought to promote democratic values in Egypt and across the globe.

On the regional level, think tanks were also created to promote various political agendas. In 1975, the Centre for Arab Unity Studies was created to promote the values of Arab unity and socialism. The Arab Thought Forum was created in the 1981 with the aim of promoting reform in the Arab world. More recently, the Brookings Institute in Doha and the Carnegie Centre in

Beirut were created to support various regional and international foreign-policy agendas.

A common feature of all these think tanks, including government-supported think tanks such as the Al-Ahram Centre and the Information and Decision Support Centre, is that they are often forced to rely on foreign and regional rather than on local funding.

Governments in Egypt and in the Arab region in general do not have sufficient appreciation of the importance of think tanks, and they have failed to allocate sufficient resources to support these important institutions. Similarly, non-governmental actors are often unable to secure private funding to finance think tanks. As a result, foreign funding has been the only available alternative for think tanks in Egypt and across the region, and this has rendered them vulnerable to the fluctuations and uncertainty of this type of funding.

Another important challenge facing think tanks in Egypt and the region more generally has been the difficulty of finding suitably qualified researchers due to often low quality of higher-education standards across the region. Investing in higher education and sending local researchers abroad for training and graduate studies would be an important way of strengthening think tanks and enabling them to effectively support the policy-making process.

Finally, decision-makers in Egypt and the Arab world do not always rely on the input of local think tanks and resort instead to international institutions and foreign consulting companies in making important reforms and decisions, and this can lead to distorting domestic interests and priorities.