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2013 MENA Think Tank Summit Report: Increasing the Effectiveness of Think Tanks in the Middle East and North Africa: Key Opportunities for Institutional Growth

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Disciplines
African Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

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2013 MENA THINK TANK SUMMIT REPORT

Increasing the Effectiveness of Think Tanks in the Middle East and North Africa: Key Opportunities for Institutional Growth

Istanbul, Turkey

December 11-13, 2013
The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is in a period of upheaval and transition. Syria is in a state of chaos; Libya is struggling to recover from Qaddafi’s long reign; and since 2011, two Egyptian leaders have been forcibly overthrown, partially through mass protests. While not all MENA countries are facing such drastic turmoil, all are certainly affected.

Think tanks in the region are now in a political landscape unlike the ones in which most of them were founded. In much of MENA, governments have historically been prone to acting without consulting scientific research; this habit has failed, resulting in weakened systems of governance. With new policies, systems, and institutions forming, and existing ones being forced to adapt, MENA think tanks must find ways to insert their expertise into the political process, or else waste a unique opportunity to meaningfully direct policy.

Think tanks cannot wait for the dust of change to settle before they act: now is the time to operate more efficiently and productively than ever before, while the political nature of the area is changing. This is a time when think tanks can influence policy with long-lasting effects. If, conversely, think tanks are reactive instead of proactive, they will find that transitory phases have solidified into new political orders, and many opportunities to reach decision-makers with relevant research will have dried up. Now, in the midst of this transition, is when think tanks must be planning, meeting, sharpening their operations, searching for new ways to carry out research, and actively reaching out to key audiences, instead of passively waiting for their turn to have a say.

It is with this sense of urgency in mind that forty-seven representatives from thirty-eight think tanks in nineteen countries gathered for the inaugural MENA Summit in Istanbul. The diversity of the participants and the audacious scope of the collaborative initiatives proposed as a result are indications of the Summit’s
timeliness and weight. Participants convened for two-and-a-half days in four roundtable discussions and three breakout sessions, all centered on tackling major institutional challenges. Problems discussed included: the necessity of a transnational legal framework to protect think tanks; concerns about limited and conditional funding; censorship; the constraints of political environments; and the lack of qualified staff.

The conference proceeded under Chatham House rules in order to encourage free and productive discussion. This report is written under those same rules, in order to represent the conference’s themes and ideas. The report details six major themes discussed, under two broader headings: institutional challenges and capitalizing on transitions. It concludes with a list of the thirteen most pertinent recommendations for MENA think tanks.
Institutional Challenges

Think tanks all over the world face challenges regarding funding, staffing, communication, and uniqueness of vision. MENA think tanks in particular must negotiate the need to obtain funds while maintaining institutional coherence, finding and retaining qualified staff, operating in restrictive political environments, and building collaborative relationships. Answers to these challenges are necessary if think tanks are to meet the changing needs of MENA societies. Participants in Istanbul discussed these issues in depth and put forward several possible concrete solutions.

DIVERSIFYING FUNDING

Funding is a core need of think tanks, but it continues to be a major challenge in MENA. Private funding from within the region has traditionally been scarce; public funding is available in some countries, but often has strings attached. MENA think tanks have long looked to Western donors, but complain that to obtain these funds they must follow ‘Western agendas.’ Meanwhile, short-term, project-based funding has become increasingly the financial norm for think tanks, leading to compromised institutional visions. Think tanks often must tailor projects to meet the funding requirements on an ad hoc basis, regardless of overarching preferences. Project-based funding also tends to favor shorter projects with fast deliverables, crowding out long-term research which can deliver better-informed analysis.

Western Funding

Most participants agreed that funding is one of the most pressing concerns for MENA think tanks. While there was disagreement on the issue of Western funding—many favored moving away from Western funding altogether, while others took a less absolute approach—participants agreed on the importance of engaging with these donors in a more productive way. Participants agreed that MENA think tanks had to be more forthright in making sure that Western donations be ‘uncolored,’ and needed to use networks such as that of the TTCSP to urge donors to give more long-term and core institutional funding, rather than funding one-off projects and setting overly-specific conditions.
Diversifying: Looking to Private Donors within MENA

The consensus among participants was that MENA think tanks needed more diverse funding sources. Those who favored phasing out Western funding altogether supported seeking private sponsors from within the MENA business community. Participants saw great potential in this strategy: if think tanks could prove to corporations that they offer a valuable product (such as energy research) donations would flow in. It was also widely proposed that think tanks hold large-scale networking events with MENA corporations to start this process. Other proposals for attracting private sector support, such as giving them roles on advisory boards, highlighting the contributions of specific prominent scholars, and sending corporations relevant publications, were also brought forth. Some participants also suggested seeking more ‘South-South’ funding from developing countries outside MENA, as well as reaching out to East Asian powers.

Think Tank Networking: Sharing Funding Opportunities

Participants agreed that think tanks in MENA need to more actively share information about financial sources. It was suggested that think tanks could set up a database of known funding opportunities for specific projects. It was also widely suggested that think tanks form coalitions to collectively seek funds: In this way, they would have greater leverage when negotiating the terms of funding agreements.

Governmental Involvement

Some participants suggested lobbying for constitutional provisions guaranteeing government funds for policy research and think tank activities, but others opposed this: some participants warned that state funding tends to put limitations on what can be researched, limits cross-border cooperation due to state rivalries, and keeps research topics state-centric. Still, it was widely suggested that think tanks should press governments to give tax-breaks for private donations to think tanks: tax laws in the Arab world currently give private donors no such incentives.

Core Funding

Regardless of the preferred funding sources, participants agreed that think tanks needed more funding to support institutional capacity-building, rather than funds that were tied to specific projects. With such funding, delegates argued, think tanks could address other pressing issues such as the scarcity of qualified personnel and would also be free to direct core funds towards projects that suited institutional visions.

STAFFING ISSUES

Participants agreed that attracting and retaining qualified staff was very difficult, especially when recruiting personnel from within the region. It was noted that many think tanks look for Western-
educated staff, as they do not trust MENA universities to provide adequate preparation. When think tanks do seek local talent, they struggle to convince potential employees to work for lower salaries and less job security than is often available in government ministries. Discussions mainly focused on ways to better prepare think tank staff to be effective researchers, but also touched on other issues.

A number of participants suggested ways to bridge the education gap when considering local hires. Some suggested establishing more structured internship programs in cooperation with local universities, particularly focusing on graduate students: graduate students are potential new hires who are not very costly and are very adaptable to institutional culture. Others suggested setting up think tank-sponsored policy analysis, research, and writing programs at MENA universities. Still others suggested establishing multilateral educational programs for the next generation of policymakers and think tank scholars. Setting up exchange programs with famous international institutions was also mentioned.

Recommendations on how to make think tank jobs more appealing included introducing more professional development for staff and ensuring that workers are given adequate incentives in the form of pay, job security, and promotion opportunities. Participants also discussed campaigns to promote think tanks as viable careers within their home countries.

COMMUNICATING MORE EFFECTIVELY

The average policy maker has 30 minutes to read policy recommendations per day, and has little appetite for long, abstract, academic publications. It was agreed that think tanks in MENA must develop and publish condensed forms of research and expand their usage of modern media technologies in order to reach policy makers.

CAPITALIZING ON TRANSITIONS

Policy Environments: Finding the Sweet Spot between Influence and Independence

Participants asserted that no MENA country—save Israel—has the necessary open environment in which think tanks may thrive. While some think tanks have found that their governments do actively censor them or pressure them to channel their research and activities in a certain direction, even these institutions admit that they probably engage in self-censorship and must more directly face controversial issues. Participants discussed the challenges of conducting meaningful research on the domestic, rather than international level, and stressed the importance of finding a way to shift research agendas towards the issues within their own nations. Other participants discussed the trade-offs between influence and independence: those think tanks with the most access to decision-makers may be able to serve as advisors, but do not give innovative ideas or voice potentially controversial opinions, whereas think tanks that do carry out more daring research have few receptive friends in government.
It was agreed that there are inherent tradeoffs between influence and independence. It would be helpful for MENA institutions to share experiences, so as to determine the best methods for finding ‘the sweet spot’ on the spectrum between influence and independence, to make the greatest overall policy impact.

Participants also argued that think tanks’ goals should be to promote healthy dialogue when discussing policy with decision makers, rather than trying to force decision makers to take specific paths. While some think tanks genuinely operate with dialogue in mind, decision-makers still must be convinced that constructive dialogue, not simple lobbying, is what think tanks truly seek to promote, before policymakers will willingly come to the table.

GREATER NETWORKING AMONG THINK TANKS

Transnational cooperation, in the think tank community and elsewhere, is sorely lacking in MENA, which has lower regional trade and less-open borders than almost any other region in the world. Participants argued that MENA cannot prosper without greater collaboration. Israeli think tanks in particular expressed a keen wish for greater institutional cooperation with their regional counterparts.

GREATER NETWORKING AMONG THINK TANKS

It was widely agreed that think tanks need to work as a unified body in order to boost security, communication, efficiency, innovation, and the dissemination of relevant research. Think tanks in a network, participants agreed, would have strength in numbers and thus would be able to draw greater attention to attempts by individual governments to intimidate, censor, or shutter think tanks. Furthermore, these networks could serve as sources of ‘track II diplomacy.’ Networks could be specialized, focused around specific research areas or sub-regions, allowing for experts in the same field to share and collaborate. They would also provide members with access to fellow institutions’ international networks, increasing opportunities for collaboration. MENA networks could also conduct pooled training and share staff with expertise in demanded fields, thereby cutting down on personnel costs and increasing members’ abilities to conduct specialized research. More-established think tanks in the network could also provide capacity building and advice for newer institutions.

Research Cooperation
Participants suggested that think tank networks could identify key common issues and work on them collectively. Current areas of common interest include strengthening protective legal frameworks for MENA think tanks and studying how the involvement of certain countries or think tanks affects collaborations. It was also put forth that cross-border research teams be created, as network members could then engage in research on issues that might be too controversial within certain countries. Such collaboration, participants argued, would have the additional benefit of decreasing overlap in research topics.

**More Regular Regional Meetings**

Participants expressed strong interest in continuing to hold annual regional meetings modeled after the Istanbul Summit. Suggestions for other issue-specific meetings were also put forward, so as to establish a mutually agreeable framework in which to discuss critical issues.

**A Formalized MENA Think Tank Network with an Online Portal**

Participants discussed details concerning the creation of a formalized MENA think tank network, including membership criteria, the delegation of decision-making authority, and the scope of work. It was also suggested that such a network include a potential online portal to MENA think tank activities. Such a venture would require funding for infrastructure and staff and would need to remain constantly relevant and active in order to provide a relevant portal to the MENA think tank community.

**CAPITALIZING ON TRANSITIONS: HOW CAN THE THINK TANK COMMUNITY ADJUST TO CHANGES IN MENA?**

With MENA in flux, think tanks are being challenged to find new ways to operate. Think tanks must understand the changes that are happening in the region and use all available foresight to take advantage of these changes.

**The Need for Long-Term Vision**

Participants agreed that think tanks need to move away from short-termism in which institutions focus on here-and-now problems, usually by examining “forensic evidence” of past events. MENA think tanks need to instead strive to anticipate new developments and identify long-term challenges. Participants stressed that the Syrian crisis, Iran, and possible U.S. retrenchment and Russian reemergence will be pivotal to the region over the next five to ten years.

**The Need for Greater Public Engagement**

As the public becomes a political force in MENA, it is important that think tanks be able to engage the citizenry. Thus, think tanks must disseminate research in ways that are digestible to the public: the use of the main local language, effective media presence (social and traditional), and the publication of policy briefs are critical. Participants particularly stressed that in such a
polarized region, a key role of think tanks should be to foster meaningful and informed public debates.

Participants agreed that the public in MENA will play a growing role in shaping think tanks’ agendas. Think tanks in MENA have a history of choosing their niches so as to keep key societal needs on the periphery. Participants agreed that if MENA think tanks are to shape policy for the general good, they must start consulting the public in order to know its needs. This includes holding public forums, engaging with youth in meetings, and collaborating with NGOs and CSOs to keep a finger on the public pulse.

While think tanks have traditionally bridged the gap between public needs and policy makers, the public, in some cases, is now crossing the gap on its own. It may be that MENA governments, having witnessed the potential power of mass movements, are bypassing think tank advice and instead paying heed to public opinion in their policies. In order to ensure that scientific research, rather than pure populism, informs the policymaking process, and in order to stay relevant, participants stressed that think tanks must seek audiences with the people. This can be done through holding open seminars, conferences, etc., engaging civil society, and disseminating research through social media in digestible lengths and forms. A number of participants also emphasized the need to seek a greater presence on television.

Rising populism, as delegates noted, presents think tanks with an even more complicated environment: institutions must worry not only about crossing informal red lines drawn by governments, but also about facing pressure to jive with public opinion. In some MENA environments, contradicting populist ideas may now be just as risky as crossing governments.
The first MENA Summit was a productive forum for regional scholars to meet and openly discuss major institutional challenges during a pivotal time of transition. Participants expressed appreciation and satisfaction for the Summit organizers’ work, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Turkey, and the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program of the University of Pennsylvania in the United States. The group also thanked SRATİM and its staff for serving as host in Turkey. After the success of this first conference, participants expressed a strong desire to hold further annual meetings in this vein, and discussions and plans are already underway concerning next year’s Summit.

There was a clear sense of excitement about the ideas and proposals presented at the Summit, and a strong desire to translate them into concrete actions that will strengthen the region’s think tanks and improve the economic, political, and social environments in which they operate.

Key issues discussed fell into two major themes: institutional challenges, and adjusting to political transitions. The need to diversify funding, solve perennial staffing issues, find ways to balance independence and influence, and the need for networking all pertain to institutional growth. Regarding the need to adjust to transitioning nations, participants emphasized the importance of long-term vision in policy analysis and greater public engagement.

It is the wish of the participants and the organizers that this conference be not a one-time venue for discussion, but that it serve as a catalyst for greater networking and increased discussion among MENA think tanks. Many initiatives for better collaboration and performance were put forth during the conference. These initiatives—be they organizing for further discussions on key policy issues, collectively seeking new funding sources, or finding new ways to engage the public—offer promise that this conference will serve as a springboard for a stronger, more effective, and more connected MENA think tank community.

It cannot be stressed enough that the MENA think tank community has the opportunity to make a difference now: think tanks, if they act, have a major role to play in the region’s change. They must not wait for new political structures to solidify, but must rather work to strengthen their
community and institutions while inserting themselves strategically and with foresight into the political transition.

With that urgency in mind, the thirteen most relevant recommendations offered at the conference are listed on the following page. Given the current environment, think tanks must act quickly and decisively on the following advice in order to channel regional transitions towards genuine societal progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Diversify funding sources to improve institutional stability and integrity: look particularly towards the MENA business community and ‘South-South’ partnerships.
2. Establish long-term collaboration between Israeli and Arab think tanks, especially concerning the Palestinian people’s future. This will provide a framework for track II diplomacy and will also help to produce workable solutions for all sides, which might not be attainable through isolated think tank work.
3. Foster meaningful public debate and discussion on key issues. Such discussion will both inform the public and guard against misinformation: it will also inform think tanks of public needs.
4. Look to the public when deciding on research and advocacy agendas: keep an eye on public interests and needs through forums, roundtables, etc., and collaborations with CSOs and NGOs.
5. Shift research focus from solely short-term concerns and the examination of the past, to predictive analysis of long-term issues spanning the next five to ten years. The most salient issues include Syria, Iran, U.S. retrenchment, and Russian reemergence.
6. Change the way think tanks disseminate research: use shorter policy briefs and social media so as to better reach both the public and policy-makers.
7. Establish a formal network of MENA think tanks across sub-regions and disciplines. Such a body can push for common think tank interests when dealing with MENA governments, serve as a protective structure, and enhance research abilities and influence.
8. As a think tank community, on a state-by-state basis, push for the establishment of a legal framework to protect think tanks and their freedoms from government encroachment.
9. Establish more structured internship programs with a career track that targets both local and international university students: provide necessary policy-analysis, research, and writing education as part of these internships so as to make up for potential weaknesses in MENA universities.
10. Continue to hold annual meetings of major MENA think tanks and organize regular regional meetings around specific policy issues.
11. Create a well-managed, regularly-updated online portal to act as an information nexus about and for the MENA think tank community.
12. Help Istanbul become a MENA-wide think tank center. Consider the Qatar-style establishment of university-think tank collaborative programs.
13. Share the best practices for finding the policy ‘sweet spot’ between access to policymakers and institutional autonomy.
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THINK TANKS AND CIVIL SOCIETIES PROGRAM

The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania conducts research on the role policy institutes play in governments and civil societies around the world. Often referred to as the “think tanks’ think tank,” TTCSP examines the evolving role and character of public policy research organizations. Over the last 25 years, the TTCSP has developed and led a series of global initiatives that have helped bridge the gap between knowledge and policy in critical policy areas such as international peace and security, globalization and governance, international economics, environmental issues, information and society, poverty alleviation, and healthcare and global health. These international collaborative efforts are designed to establish regional and international networks of policy institutes and communities that improve policy making while strengthening democratic institutions and civil societies around the world.

The TTCSP works with leading scholars and practitioners from think tanks and universities in a variety of collaborative efforts and programs, and produces the annual Global Go To Think Tank Index that ranks the world’s leading think tanks in a variety of categories. This is achieved with the help of a panel of over 1,900 peer institutions and experts from the print and electronic media, academia, public and private donor institutions, and governments around the world. We have strong relationships with leading think tanks around the world, and our annual Think Tank Index is used by academics, journalists, donors and the public to locate and connect with the leading centers of public policy research around the world. Our goal is to increase the profile and performance of think tanks and raise the public awareness of the important role think tanks play in governments and civil societies around the globe.

Since its inception in 1989, the TTCSP has focused on collecting data and conducting research on think tank trends and the role think tanks play as civil society actors in the policymaking process. In 2007, the TTCSP developed and launched the global index of think tanks, which is designed to identify and recognize centers of excellence in all the major areas of public policy research and in every region of the world. To date TTCSP has provided technical assistance and capacity building programs in 81 countries. We are now working to create regional and global networks of think tanks in an effort to facilitate collaboration and the production of a modest yet achievable set of global public goods. Our goal is to create lasting institutional and state-level partnerships by engaging and mobilizing think tanks that have demonstrated their ability to produce high quality policy research and shape popular and elite opinion and actions for public good.
THE LAUDER INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

The Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies offers an MA in international studies, and conducts fundamental and policy-oriented research on current economic, political, and business issues. It organizes an annual conference that brings academics, practitioners and policy makers together to examine global challenges such as financial risks, sustainability, inequality, and the future of the state.

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