Foreign Policy Think Tanks and Decision Making Processes

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An important though perhaps less familiar element in government decision making processes is linked to the work of think tanks. Israeli think tanks, like their counterparts elsewhere, seek to influence – whether directly or indirectly – decision making within government agencies.

Think tanks are especially prominent in the United States, in view of special features of the American political system, and in particular the turnover in thousands of personnel when a new government assumes office. However, the influence of think tanks is also increasing in other areas of the world. Their number is growing steadily, and there are currently dozens of think tanks and research institutes active in Israel seeking to influence policy on matters of society and politics, particularly foreign affairs and security.[1] Some have links to universities; others are independent. Among the most prominent are the Institute for National Security Studies, the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Research, the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern & African Studies, the Institute for Policy and Strategy, the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, the Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs, the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies – Mitvim, the Forum for Regional Thinking, the Center for the Renewal of Israeli Democracy – Molad, the Institute for Zionist Strategies, and the Israel/Palestine Center for Research & Information

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– IPCRI. In addition, since foreign affairs and security matters touch on so many areas, other institutes have contributed to decisions made over the years. Prominent in this regard are the Israel Democracy Institute, on issues concerning the interface between security and democracy; the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, regarding the issue of Jerusalem in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; and Reut Institute, which was among the first to focus on the phenomenon of delegitimization.

This paper seeks to clarify the nature of the target audiences of Israeli think tanks dealing with foreign policy; how they influence decision making, if such influence can be measured; and the nature of the challenges they face at present.[2]

Background

A classical definition of think tanks is that of Yehezkel Dror, who presents them as "enclaves of excellence in which groups of multidisciplinary scholars and professionals work full time on main policy problems."[3] Troy calls them "universities without students."[4] Another definition is that of James McGann, who heads the University of Pennsylvania project that rates think thanks worldwide; he defines them as "organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice on domestic and international issues in an effort to enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues."[5] The term "think tank" was first used in the 1950s to refer to bodies such as the Rand Corporation, but the phenomenon predates the label. The first think tanks can already be found in the 19th century in England and in the early 20th century in the United States.

Think tanks are institutions, usually non-governmental, that seek to influence the policy of various government agencies. In most cases they function as an auxiliary source for shaping policy and making decisions, in response to the difficulty of government entities to digest huge amounts of information, often in limited amounts of time. In order to separate the "urgent" from the "important," government agencies are generally forced to prefer what is "urgent." Think tanks can balance this tendency because they are able to prioritize the "important" over the "urgent." Moreover, government agencies, both civilian and military, sometimes prefer to outsource some research projects, whether as original research or as the continuation of research work already done by them, in order to obtain a

second opinion. Think tanks are sometimes an alternative, accessible source of knowledge for government agencies; they also play an important role in reinforcing the link between civilian society and government.

The central role of think tanks over the years has been to identify, analyze, and assess issues, and offer suggestions and recommendations to optimize how they are handled; to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and knowledge; and sometimes, as is common in North America – though less so in Western Europe and Israel – to provide either an interim position for people waiting to take office with a change of government or a "second career" for outgoing officials. Think tanks are generally known for their long term analyses that rise above the immediate, short shelf life "products" that are usually at the center of the public agenda and command much media focus. How and to what extent think tanks exert influence at various stages of policy formulation is a function of the resources at their disposal, the access that researchers have to the people that shape policy, and sometimes the institute's own ideological bent and the degree to which it matches the line taken by the government.

Many organizations may claim the title, but not all think tanks are the same. Within the think tank category there are a host of sub-categories, including party/ideology-based, governmental, independent, and academic. This range is sometimes the result of developments relating to the context and history of each country, but can also derive from other sources. For example, the use of government funding for research institutes in authoritarian regimes could be an attempt to create a misleading impression of signs of civil society or alternative voices in that country.[6] Another way for authoritarian regimes to influence decision making is through contributions to an existing institute, or even the establishment of a dedicated institute, usually in the United States and in Western Europe, to promote their interests and objectives. This is particularly noticeable in the activities of some of the Gulf states in Washington, D.C.[7] In academic think tanks, which are closer to the model of "research institute," the staff is dominated by university faculty members; this in turn influences the availability of researchers and research products, which lean more toward historical and/or theoretical papers. These institutions are not designed to serve the government, although in several cases they have produced high level officials. These institutes are designed first and foremost to serve the academic world, and thereby indirectly stimulate the public debate on issues within their purview.

Part of the reason for the proliferation of think tanks is that the government system is unable, and sometimes unwilling to deal with many subjects. Think tanks can also help train senior officials for civil service. What sets many think tanks in Israel and elsewhere apart is the mix of people with practical experience and academics from various disciplines, with a range of political views, which helps professional institutes (as distinct from those that were established to promote certain ideological perceptions) to maintain impartiality. As the same time, this heterogeneity can be a weakness, as it can hinder cooperation between the researchers.

How Do They Influence?

A central question is how to assess the influence of a think tank. There are cases where decision makers have talked explicitly about the contribution of think tanks. For example, in 1998 MK Yossi Beilin stated that "without the conditions created by these organizations, we would never have achieved the Oslo Accords and the understandings on a permanent agreement,"[8] inter alia thanks to the platforms provided for meetings behind the scenes and ideas raised by think tanks. Another case where there is broad agreement regarding the influence of think tanks was their contribution to the re-formation of American strategy in Iraq and the surge in 2007.[9] Nonetheless, in most cases an assessment of the influence and performance of think tanks is far from simple. Think tanks compete with the views and objectives of other players in the arena, so it is doubtful whether one institute can claim credit for any changes in policy.

Sometimes the notion of "influence" actually connotes "exposure." The number of publications (books, articles, commentaries, and opinion pieces), the number of followers and posts on social media, and the number of conferences are, on the face of it, one way of estimating an institute's influence. However, there is not always a direct link between the degree of exposure and the degree of influence.[10] While media exposure creates the impression that a particular think tank plays a central role in shaping policy, this does not necessarily mean that the positions of its researchers have any influence on the decision makers or the public in general. Sometimes the opposite may be true: greater visibility may be achieved at the expense of credibility and intellectual seriousness.

There are a few other indicators for assessing the influence of think tanks, for example, the closeness of its head and the team to decision shapers and decision makers (in the case of institutes engaged in national security,

for example, this means closeness to the various security and intelligence agencies). The team's abilities and background are also significant, and practical background in the areas studied can help in accessing the relevant sources of knowledge, while enhancing the prestige of the researchers. Finally an institute's financial strength and its source of financial support are sometimes linked to its prestige and influence.

Overall there is tension between the desire to influence decision makers and the public discourse, and the drive to write succinct, incisive, and relevant articles and reviews that will arouse public interest, while also retaining the respect of the academic/professional community. Some of the principles that guide academic writing are different from those that guide policy-oriented writing. This is mainly due to the differing needs of government agencies and their ability to benefit from the research. For example, if the text is too long, high ranking government officials will rarely read it, and at best, they will delegate the reading to a lower grade assistant.

In many cases access to decision makers or the opportunity to engage them is limited. Even when the think tank reaches decision makers, these individuals generally prefer that their links with think tanks remain discreet, in particular, recommendations with respect to any matter currently on the agenda. It is hard for a think tank to publicize the fact that it is advising people in government, and it certainly will not disclose the spirit of its recommendations, in case it loses its audience's trust. There is also structural tension between dealing with long term issues, which can be expected to affect the future of a nation, and the attempt to adjust output to the immediate requirements of those who define policy, and the desire of the think tanks to be involved in what is happening in the "real world" and create "user friendly" material.

What wields more influence on government agencies – internal thinking processes or external thinking processes? This depends on the nature of the organization and the issue at hand. On the one hand, if the organization decides that it wants to deal with certain issues and asks its staff to prepare papers, it will probably give these papers priority. In contrast, when an external element makes a suggestion, if the subject is not high on the decision maker's agenda, the suggestion could well be ignored. At the same time, however, think tanks sometimes have considerable influence precisely because they are outside the establishment.

The nature of the political system in the United States and the fact that its senior officials are replaced when a new president takes office, leads

to a situation where American think tanks are ahead of their colleagues worldwide in terms of influence on decision makers. By the end of the 20th century many American think tanks had changed their orientation, and moved from the "universities without students" model to becoming active players in the political game. A more conservative view of the role of the think tank states that it should indicate possible courses of action and not itself determine the preferred option. This is possible for those think thanks that do not want to take part in the political debate and shy away from any ideological identification. Today, some think tanks bear their political allegiance with pride. For example, the Heritage Foundation contributed to policy shaping in the Reagan era, while the Center for American Progress (CAP) became a source for liberal thinking and was very helpful to Barack Obama's election campaign. Indeed, during the Obama campaign one of the heads of CAP said, "We don't claim to be objective."[11]

Avenues of influence for think tanks include:

a. "Influence from within" – government officials with former think tank experience bring the expertise they developed in the earlier stages of their career.

b. Consulting and short term questions. Researchers, whether by temporary appointment or participation in ad hoc task teams, can influence the processes of shaping policy and making decisions.

c. External influence – by disseminating knowledge in the form of publications and conferences, in such a way that experts are not involved in the daily work of government officials but try to enrich their knowledge from the outside.

d. The existence of forums in the framework of think tanks that constitute a "neutral space" for government officials, where they can come and discuss issues, hear various opinions, and obtain a broader perspective in their field of activity.

Challenges Facing Think Tanks in the Current Era

Globalization, technological changes, and the rise of social media have increased the competition for the attention not only of the public but also of decision makers. Think tanks compete in a crowded arena, where consultants, lobbyists, NGOs, the media, and individuals seek to compete with think tanks products.[12] Notwithstanding this growing competition, think tanks are often perceived as a more credible source and as consistent providers of insights.[13] At the same time, in order to compete in the "market

of ideas," and in addition to maintaining their status and academic presence by publishing professional books and papers, think tank researchers are often required to maintain a presence on social media and blogs.

There is an inherent tension between dealing with long term issues, which are expected to affect the future of the country and society, and the attempt to tailor products to the immediate requirements and needs of policymakers, and in fact to maintain some kind of lobbying activity to realize them.[14] However, in order to produce succinct position papers – often the recommended length is no more than two pages – there is a need for basic research on the subject. Moreover, in most cases think tanks also want to influence both the public discourse (whether as a means of influencing the decision makers, or as an end in itself) and the academic discourse, and for that purpose they require more extensive research. In the past think tanks put more emphasis on the number of books and policy studies they produced; today for some think tanks the emphasis has become an attempt to identify significant changes, whether in policy or in legislation, as a result of their activity.[15] Changes in how think tanks see themselves have a direct effect on how their researchers prioritize the various tasks they are expected to perform.[16] Shifting requirements turn the think tank team into "multifaceted individuals who are part scholar, journalist, marketing executive and policy entrepreneur."[17] The relative advantage of think tanks in the past was their ability, based on their freedom from pressures of time, to think about and discuss issues in depth. According to McGann, "Increased competition, donor expectations, the 24-hour news cycle and the expectation to respond to politics" will place a strain on think tanks.[18] Today they are also required to produce their insights more quickly, to the extent that the Heritage Foundation, for example, decided to put the emphasis on "quick-response policy research."[19] As the think tanks turned into entities that respond to short term needs of policymakers and the media, they lost some of their relative advantage. Because of the focus on the speed of the response (which sometimes comes at the expense of depth), the think tanks have given up some of their ability to provide an independent and well-founded point of view in their field of interest.

A think tank operates in a context that abounds with contradictions and pressures. The head of the institution must, on the one hand, satisfy those who donate funds to support the activity. On the other hand, it must be free from external influences and maintain its independent status – unless they have knowingly decided to represent a particular ideological line. Due

to changes in the world of philanthropy, think tanks today receive more individual donations for specific projects rather than general funding from charitable foundations.[20] Short term funding might challenge the independence and the innovation of think tanks. Donors who only fund specific projects that are important to them may force think tanks to avoid risky experiments and new directions in research and to stop some of the thinking "outside the box."[21] It also reduces their ability to conduct interdisciplinary research.[22] And due to their growing influence, think tanks are required to be more transparent about their sources of funds, which for some think tanks is a problem. In this context, in 2016 following a press investigation, an alleged link was found between commercial companies in the field of security who donate to leading think tanks in Washington and some of the publications of those think tanks, which in effect were used to promote the commercial interests of the companies involved.[23]

Challenges and Opportunities for Foreign Policy and Security Think Tanks in Israel

Since the 1990s the number of think tanks in Israel has multiplied. Aizencang-Kane attributes this to the weakening of the large political parties, the rapid development of the third sector, the proliferation of pressure groups that become NGOs and operate under the guise of research institutes, and the fact that think tanks are a channel of influence for philanthropic elements.[24]

Think tanks are flourishing in Israel, even as they encounter many of the dilemmas faced by their overseas counterparts. However, there are also aspects unique to the Israeli context. On the face of it, because of the general public's extensive interest in foreign and security issues, there is more room for think tanks to try and communicate their insights. In fact, the tendency to relate to many subjects as sensitive security matters somewhat limits their scope for influence. The dominant position of the security establishment in Israel, which also poses problems for the activities of the Foreign Ministry and the National Security Council, restricts the space for think tanks. Former and current members of the Knesset complain about the lack of knowledge in the Knesset on foreign and security affairs, in spite of their centrality to the work of the legislators. Think tanks can try to change this situation by holding briefings for Knesset members and their assistants, speaking to the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee, maintaining closer ties with the Knesset's Research & Information Center, and issuing more frequent invitations to members of the Knesset to take

part in their regular activities. In the Israeli context, the coalition-based political system is also characterized by suspicion and lack of basic trust between senior officials, who often prefer external research as long as it is perceived as unbiased.

Compulsory military service in Israel means that some of the researchers in think tanks can potentially influence the army's tactical and strategic thinking, at least during their reserve duty.[25] At the same time, while in the military, they are exposed to the same processes of indoctrination that can lead to fixed patterns of thinking. At least in the past more attention was paid to Middle East experts in comparison to researchers from the disciplines of political science and international relations, thanks to their familiarity with Arabic and also to the perception that they understood the "mentality" of the other side better than policy shapers and decision makers.[26] Now policy shapers and decision makers recognize the enormous complexity resulting from globalization processes and changes following the Arab uprisings, and the need to extend their attention to disciplines and subjects that were not previously studied. In principle, therefore, they are more open to studies from think tanks that deviate from the narrow view of the field of security. The issue of the peace process and the need to maintain links with countries that do not officially recognize Israel has over the years opened up some room for advancing back channels by promoting Track II initiatives with similar institutions in other countries. These channels are very important in the Israeli context and may include political dialogue on bilateral and regional issues, academic and professional analysis of areas where there are shared interests, and the creation of informal frameworks that include elements from the political and government system.

Conclusion

Think tanks straddle academic and government institutions, engage in basic research and policy formulation, and seek to bridge two distinct worlds. The challenge they face is therefore to generate reliable output that has a long shelf life, like an article in an academic journal, but at the same time is accessible, like a newspaper article. Think tanks have various privileges, and apart from the fewer time constraints to which researchers are subject (compared to decision makers), they are supposed to be freer of limits on their thinking. Compared to people in the government who are engaged in matters of national security, in most cases they are freer from security sensitivities and problems of classified material. Adopting elements of the

American model of the "revolving door" and more frequent movement of experts from think tanks to the centers of shaping policy and decision making, and vice versa, could help to improve the decision making process in Israel, even if an improvement in the process does not necessarily yield an improvement in the quality of decisions. Such movement between different worlds stimulates thinking and contributes to both sides: think tanks benefit from the experience of people who come from the corridors of power, while they in turn are exposed to different opinions while free of the constraints that accompany jobs in the civil service.

In order to exert influence more effectively, think tanks must maintain and develop their existing research base, exploit their knowledge base in order to influence the public discourse, and use the contacts of their researchers with their colleagues in government in order to promote ideas. Sometimes government entities invite experts in their fields to discussions on specific matters in order to help them formulate policy, but it is important to develop a more systematic method for encounters with policy shapers and decision makers, who can make use of think tanks from the stage of identifying and defining problems, all the way to finding solutions. Greater emphasis on this two-way contact will be fruitful for both parties. Think tanks can derive benefit from the contact with government elements not only in order to influence, but also in order to learn. It is this interaction that often makes think tanks unique and distinguishes them from university research institutions.

Notes

1   According to the *2016 Global Think Tank Index Report*, there are 58 think tanks in Israel, which makes Israel twentieth in the world in the number of think tanks. See http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent. cgi?article=1011&context=think_tanks.

2   Since 2013 the Institute of National Security Studies has conducted an annual discussion on the issue of think tanks, as part of a series of similar discussions taking place all over the world initiated by the Global Think Tank project. The meetings have been attended by representatives of many of Israel's most prominent institutes in the field of foreign policy and security, and inter alia this paper reflects some of the insights to emerge from the sessions.

3   Yehezkel Dror, "Required Breakthroughs in Think Tanks," *Policy Sciences* 16 (1984): 199

4   Tevi Troy, "Devaluing the Think Tank," *National Affairs* 10 (winter 2012): 76.

5   Andrew Stele, *What Should Think Tanks Do? A Strategic Guide to Policy Impact* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 5.

6   Peter W. Singer, "Washington's Think Tanks: Factories to Call Our Own," *Washingtonian*, August 2010, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/washingtons-think-tanks-factories-to-call-our-own.

7   Amir Tibon, "Hacks, Money and Qatari Crisis: How Gulf States Entangled D.C. Think Tanks in Their Fight for Influence," *Haaretz*, June 5, 2017.

8   Perla Aizencang-Kane, *On the Link between Knowledge and Policy: The Place of Research Institutes and Think Tanks in the World and in Israel in Processes of Shaping Public Policy* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Research, 2004), p. 131.

9   Singer, "Washington's Think Tanks."

10   Donald E. Abelson, "Old World, New World: The Evolution and Influence of Foreign Affairs Think Tanks," *International Affairs,* 90, no. 1 (2014): 141.

11   Edwin Chen, "Soros-Funded Democratic Idea Factory Becomes Obama Policy Font," *Bloomberg,* November 18, 2008.

12   James G. McGann, *The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy and Governance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

13   Stele, *What Should Think Tanks Do?* p. 43.

14   Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009), p. 167.

15   McGann, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 164.

16   Stele, *What Should Think Tanks Do?* p. 88.

17   McGann, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 167.

18   Ibid., p. 171.

19   Abelson, "Old World, New World," p. 137.

20   McGann, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 161.

21   Carmit Heber, "Think Tanks and Their Influence on Policy: Background and Questions for Discussion," Israeli Institute for Democracy, May 24, 2011.

22   McGann, *The Fifth Estate,* p. 162.

23   Eric Lipton and Brooke Williams, "How Think Tanks Amplify Corporate America's Influence," *New York Times*, August 7, 2016.

24   Aizencang-Kane, *On the Link between Knowledge and Policy*, pp. 200-7.

25   Arie M. Kacowicz, "Israel: The Development of the Discipline in Unique Setting," in *International Relations Scholarship around the World,* eds. Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Waever (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 202.

26   Mark A. Heller, "International Relations Research in Israel," *Orbis* 26, no. 3 (1982): 763.