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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH AND STUDY
CENTERS (THINK TANKS) IN THE KINGDOM OF
SAUDI ARABIA**

by

Jamal A. Algahtani

March 2014

Thesis Co-Advisors:

James Russell
Robert Looney

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**THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH AND STUDY CENTERS
(THINK TANKS) IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
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ABSTRACT

Rapid growth in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) demands a transparent policy-making apparatus to meet emerging needs. Government agencies alone may not be able to devise legitimate public policies. The presence of an adequate number of capable think tanks in KSA will add legitimacy to the public policy-making process. Think tanks can provide policy guidance on modern issues like economic growth, resource allocation, job creation, unemployment reduction, financial management, legislation, and human capital development. The Majlis al Shura is a ministerial-level institution in today's KSA and performs in a similar manner to think tanks.

There is an increased demand to help launch independent research centers and provide them with needed support due to accelerated growth. The KSA government seems willing to extend its support to such institutes without governmental intervention and pressures.

The Syrian issue generated a broad-based policy discussion in the United States and was taken as a case study. Many lessons can be drawn from this case that are specific to the local dynamics of KSA, and which can be employed in economics, security, foreign policy, social welfare, advancing national goals, protecting national interests, capturing market share in the global market, attracting foreign direct investment, and so on. Based on these lessons learned, this research proposes a way forward for encouraging the establishment of think tanks in KSA.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AEI	American Enterprise Institute
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CEPS	Centre for European Policy Studies
CSR	corporate social responsibility
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	gross domestic product
GRC	Gulf Research Center
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDSC	Information and Decision Support Center
IGO	inter-governmental organizations
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
ISSI	Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad
KAPSARC	King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center
KAUST	King Abdullah University of Science and Technology
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
NGO	non-governmental organization
NSA	National Security Agency
NSC	National Shipping Company
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PAC	political action committee
P B U H	Peace Be Upon Him
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf
SAG	Saudi Arabian government
SAGIA	Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority
SAPTCO	Saudi Arabian Public Transport Company
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

TI	Transparency International
UK	United Kingdom
UNSC	United Nation Security Council
U.S.	United States
USA	United States of America
WTO	World Trade Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this research is to evaluate the efficacy, requirements, and usefulness of think tanks in the dynamics of KSA politics, in support of decision/policy making. The case study method is adopted in this research where policy recommendations made to U.S. policy makers by U.S. think tanks regarding Syrian issues have been discussed. The complete thesis consists of six chapters in a logical sequence, where each next chapter is linked directly or indirectly with the arguments in the preceding chapter(s).

The thesis starts with discussion of general information regarding the political, legal, and economic framework of Saudi Arabia and leads to a definition of think tanks and their role in decision making; the concept behind think tanks; and their objectives, history, types, emergence, and growth trends. The efficacy, requirements, and usefulness of think tanks in public policy decision making in KSA is discussed and analyzed with regard to their interaction with the government, relationship management, and research processes in support of decision and policy making.

The Syrian issue was selected as a case study due its currency and the wide range of policy debate across the globe. Many think tanks have examined the Syrian issue from one aspect or another. Their respective recommendations were based purely on the findings within their domain of basic research hypothesis and constraints. Each recommended course of action was realistic and applicable within its domain. Think tanks presented best available policy options according to their research to make the job of policy maker easier. Some actions taken on the Syrian issue were portrayed as if key stake holders preferred ad hoc tactical choices rather than a unified strategy with clear objectives.

A major lesson inferred from the Syrian issue is globalization. The need for independent research organizations has increased due to globalization. No

state can remain immune from the changes taking place across the globe. The Syrian issue emerged as an international issue and all leading world powers became indirect stake holders. Lessons learned from the Syrian issue become more relevant to KSA policy making due to the many cultural commonalities between Syria and KSA (e.g., religion, language, locality).

The focus remained on examining what has been accomplished in the field of establishing think tanks in KSA, their possible role in policy making, inherent challenges, possible political responses, underpinning lessons learned from the Syrian issue, and application of these lessons in a systematic fashion.

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I. INTRODUCTION

From an economic as well as a military perspective, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is becoming a regional power in the Middle East. As the birthplace of Islam, Saudi Arabia also enjoys a leadership role in terms of her religious influence in the Muslim world. In terms of the regional economy, the kingdom has a huge income from its vast oil resources and sponsors the poorer developing nations.¹ Government decision making and policy formulation, therefore, require thorough deliberation by experts from many relevant fields that take into account all aspects of the national interest.

Decision making at the national level is a complex process for any government. The impact of a decision will be proportional to the position, or area of responsibility, of the individual making the decision. Decisions made at various levels may affect individuals, families, institutions, communities, the nation itself, or many nations in an alliance. Decision making, therefore, necessitates careful planning, data gathering, and cost-benefit analysis, with respect to public sentiment and economic outcomes. In addition, the impact of decisions must be considered in terms of maintaining influence among friendly countries, addressing environmental concerns, aligning with local and foreign policies, and protecting the prevailing security and political ambitions of the country.

The objective of this research is to evaluate the efficacy, requirements, and usefulness of “think tanks” (i.e., the experts in relevant fields) in the dynamics of KSA politics, with regard to their interaction with the government, as well as relationship management and research processes in support of decision/policy making. To help readers gain a better understanding of the background and an accurate perspective of the research, this thesis begins with an overview of the political, economic, legal, and policy framework of the KSA.

¹ Library of Congress – Federal Research Division Country Profile: Saudi Arabia, September 2006, 16. http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Saudi_Arabia.pdf.

A. POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

The political system in Saudi Arabia is unique and has a tremendous effect on decision making at the strategic level. Decision making and policy formulation, therefore, depend upon all the intricacies of the political dynamics of the country itself and its overwhelmingly Islamic culture.² The importance of informed decision making has increased significantly in the KSA, due to increased public awareness, growth of social media, increased economic activity, and pressing concerns related to security, local youth employment, education issues, and globalization.

The KSA is a major political and economic force in the region. The kingdom holds around 17 percent of the world's proven oil reserves.³ KSA earns a huge income from the export of this resource. Using this vast wealth, KSA sponsors poorer developing Arab nations and maintains her influence in the region.⁴ Furthermore, KSA's traditional Islamic influence has been apparent in the Muslim world by virtue of its custodianship of two of Islam's holiest shrines, Mecca and Medina.

The KSA also maintains very cordial relations with other civilized nations of the world, including the United States and China, due to economic and security interests. Saudi foreign and national policies are based on four major national goals:⁵

- Preserving an Islamic way of life at home and abroad
- Protecting against external threats to national and regional security

² David E. Long et al., *The Governments and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 6th edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011), 108.

³ Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Saudi Arabia/Economy," 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>.

⁴ "Country Profile: Saudi Arabia," 16. http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Saudi_Arabia.pdf.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

- Providing for national economic development and extending economic assistance to those in need throughout the Arab and Muslim world
- Ensuring the survival of the regime

These world powers also want to have a strong relationship with the kingdom because of their dependence on the imported oil. All these factors have added many complex and diverse challenges for decision and policy makers who must cater to all interested parties.

The system of government in KSA is a monarchy in which the monarch must be a direct male descendant of the founder, King Abdul Aziz al Saud (as decreed by King Fahad under a *Basic Law of Government* in 1992).⁶ The declared purpose of the Saudi State is the advancement and protection of Islam, and every law shall be based on the guidance provided by the Quran and Sunnah.⁷

The executive branch consists of the king, prime minister, deputy prime minister, and council of ministers. The king is head of the state, has the executive powers of the prime minister, and those of the commander-in-chief of the military. The king appoints a crown prince to help him with his duties. The crown prince is second in line to the throne.

The king is assisted in the discharge of his official duties as chief executive (prime minister) by the Council of Ministers, also called the cabinet. There are 22 government ministries that are part of the cabinet. Each ministry specializes in a different part of the government, such as foreign affairs, education, and finance.

The country is further divided into 13 provinces. Each province is headed by a governor. Each governor is assisted by a deputy governor to run the government. Each province has its own regional council that advises the

⁶Thomas W. Lippman, *Saudi Arabia on the Edge* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2012), 212.

⁷ Long et al., *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 109–110.

governor.⁸ The provincial government oversees the local offices of the central government and municipal officials. In some provinces, there are public Majlis, where citizens can voice their grievances.

The legislative branch consists of a legislative body, called the Consultative Council (Majlis al Shura). The king is advised by the Consultative Council during the development of new laws, or the amendment of existing ones. The Consultative Council consists of 150 members from all walks of life. The members are appointed by the king initially for four years. This four-year term can be renewed by the king based on a member's performance. The Council is organized into various areas of responsibility, including human rights, security, economics, finance, foreign affairs, public services, transportation and communications, social and health services, culture and information, administration, Islamic affairs, and education committees. The Council has the power to propose new laws or amendments to current regulations in force and debate such proposals without prior approval from the king, as per the revised Consultative Council System's rules.⁹

B. ECONOMIC DYNAMICS

The KSA relies on an oil-based economy with strong government controls over major economic activities. Possessing about 17 percent of the world's proven petroleum reserves, KSA is one the largest exporters of petroleum and petroleum products. KSA also enjoys a leading role in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The petroleum sector accounts for roughly 80 percent of budget revenues, 45 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), and 90 percent of export earnings.¹⁰ Development and growth of the petroleum sector takes center stage in all policy formulation decisions.

⁸ Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia Government, <http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/government/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *CIA Factbook*, Saudi Arabia.

Currently, the kingdom is facing the challenge of diversification of its economy and a reduction in its dependence on the export of oil reserves. As a result, the KSA is encouraging the growth of the private sector in order to attract foreign investment and increase employment opportunities for young Saudi nationals. Major policy focus is on employment of KSA's large youth population, which generally lacks the education and technical skills, a basic private sector employment pre-requisite.¹¹ The KSA has also substantially boosted spending on job training and education. The recent opening of the first coeducational university, The King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), in Thuwal is an indicator of the commitment to and significance of this policy focus. The government has begun establishing six economic centers (cities) in different regions of the country to promote foreign investment, and plans to spend \$373 billion between 2010 and 2014 on social development and infrastructure projects to advance Saudi Arabia's economic development.¹² These economic aspirations of the country will definitely shape the direction of future policy in all fields.

The government of Saudi Arabia is committed to providing all-out support to diversify its economic base. The government has already introduced a number of economic reforms to attract foreign investors to sustain current economic growth, increase foreign investment, and expand employment opportunities. The kingdom has taken steps to create a business-friendly environment where investors feel secure and find enough profitable business opportunities to invest their capital. To encourage a free market economy, the government is denationalizing major state enterprises, instituting regulatory bodies to implement reforms and improving and revising foreign investment and commercial laws. Necessary legislation has been introduced to protect intellectual property rights to nurture and maintain innovation. As part of its effort to attract foreign investment, increase the local industrial infrastructure, and diversify the

¹¹ Long et al., *The Governments and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 103.

¹² *CIA Factbook*, Saudi Arabia.

economy, the KSA also joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2005 after many years of negotiations.¹³

The Saudi government has launched many economic initiatives and has introduced necessary legislation to maintain the current economic growth rate. These initiatives include the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority's (SAGIA) \$64 billion investment in information technology infrastructure development, establishment of King Abdullah Financial City, accession to the WTO, introduction of the Capital Markets Law and Foreign Investment Law and enactment of the GCC Customs Union.¹⁴

C. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned earlier, the basic law of the KSA is Islamic law. The judiciary consists of courts, numerous commissions, and tribunals, which uphold the laws enacted by the king, prime minister, and Consultative Assembly. The judiciary issues its judgments in accordance with the teachings of the Quran and the Sunna. Sharia laws are augmented by laws enacted by the government. The king is responsible for the implementation of judicial rulings. The Justice Ministry is responsible for the discipline of judges.¹⁵

The Basic Law provides for the creation of a Consultative Council. People may approach "The King's court" for any complaint or injustice. Every individual has the right to address the public authorities in all matters affecting him or her. Despite a monarchical system of government, input from all relevant fields such as the Ulema (religious scholars), the Council of Ministers, the Shura, the business community, citizens and the armed forces is solicited prior to the implementation of any decision in the kingdom.

¹³World Trade Organization, "Members and Observers," http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/org6_e.htm.

¹⁴ Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, DC, Saudi Arabia Government. <http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/government/>.

¹⁵ Carnegie Endowment "Arab Political Systems: Baseline Information and Reforms–Saudi Arabia," <http://carnegieendowment.org/2008/03/06/arab-political-systems-baseline-information-and-reforms/3715>.

King Abdullah has introduced many legal and political reforms in KSA since his accession to the throne on August 1, 2005. Joseph A. Kechichian, in his study “Legal and Political Reforms in Saudi Arabia,” concludes:

In the few years since he acceded to the throne on August 1, 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz has instituted far reaching reforms that, by general recognition, altered the face of the kingdom. Among the significant changes that were introduced were: fundamental reforms concerning judiciary; launching a national dialogue mechanism that allowed Saudi citizens to engage each other in addressing issues that concerned society; holding interfaith dialogues that culminated in July 2008 Madrid conference; establishing a brand new body to select the monarch and his Heir Apparent from among the sons and grandsons of the founder; introducing unprecedented bureaucratic transformations to manage the religious establishment, including the appointment of a new chairman for the Supreme Judicial Council; making changes within the commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice; appointing a woman as Deputy Education Minister and authorizing the women to serve in the Majlis al Shurah ... who sensed the time was long past for a fundamental socio political evolution, in which his own yearnings matched those of his subjects.¹⁶

The Ministry of Justice is responsible for administering the country’s sharia courts. The Minister of Justice is appointed by the king and used to be a de facto chief justice. He is assisted by the eleven members of the Supreme Judicial Council. However, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz approved the reorganization of the Saudi judicial system on October 2, 2007. The Supreme Court’s main function now is to oversee the implementation of sharia as well as laws issued by the king, commercial courts, labor courts, personal status courts, and a fund for training judges. The new rules emphasize the independence of judges and give the Supreme Court the authority over judicial affairs. The Supreme Judicial Council, however, still has the administrative powers of the judiciary, including the election of judges and handling personnel affairs.

¹⁶ Joseph A. Kechichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 212.

Saudi courts are presided over by a qadi. The qadi is bound to make decisions in line with the guidance provided by the Quran or Sunnah. In case no example of any issue can be traced back to the period of the Prophet Muhammad (P B U H), then judges can seek guidance from the Ulema (in the form of Fatwas) or royal decrees issued by the king. Royal decrees are also used to provide regulatory and administrative rules. Special administrative tribunals are also created to resolve commercial and labor issues.¹⁷ Therefore, the real challenge for the judicial branch is serving judgments on modern issues in light of classical Islamic concepts.

As highlighted earlier, there seems to be a political will for the involvement of the public in decision making, economic development, and implementation of legal reforms. The role of the Supreme Judicial Council will be to ensure that justice is served to the public in accordance with the law of the land, and indirect public involvement will be encouraged in policy making in the future. According to David E. Long et al.,

despite all the powers residing in the ruler, he cannot act in the face of contravening consensus; thus, the King must be more than a chief of state and head of government. In order to legitimize government policies, he must also act as the chief consensus maker through consultation, with all those considered as part of the national decision-making process.

Furthermore, Long adds, “On balance, the evolution of public administration in Saudi Arabia has consisted of a gradual shift from the traditional rule of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to a more institutionalized, bureaucratized government.”¹⁸ As part of this shift in public administration, it is time to consider whether “think tanks,” which have long had a valued consultant role in business and government decision making worldwide, could contribute to decisions that will shape policy in the KSA going forward.

¹⁷ Long et al., *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 109–110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111, 115.

D. THINK TANK DEFINED

Various ways have been explored to define and classify “think tanks,” ranging from their politico-institutional location, to the emphasis they place on research, policy advice, and the advocacy role. Each definition of a think tank may suit the preferred area of research, or area of expertise for a certain group of think tanks. The definition for the purpose of this research is adapted from James McGann’s 2007 work, “Survey of Think Tanks: A Summary Report.” According to McGann, a comprehensive definition of think tanks identifies them as entities that are independent of or affiliated with institutions, and which are permanent bodies dedicated to public policy research, analysis and engagement.¹⁹

E. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Decision making in the KSA is centralized. All major decisions are made by the King or high officials of the kingdom within their relevant area of influence. Despite all their wisdom and experience, the need for fact-based input for policy making will always exist. As mentioned earlier, there exists a realization among KSA policy makers that independent think tanks can be a good tool to use during the policy- and decision-making processes at all levels.

Most recently, the Syrian conflict presents a good example for analysis with regard to useful input from the think tanks for U.S. policy makers. U.S. policy makers have received conflicting recommendations with regard to policy options for the U.S. from different think tanks. Difference of opinion justifies the existence of independent think tanks and portrays all aspects of the crisis. Decision makers are in a better position to make informed decisions based on input from intellectuals from these think tanks, as well as from public opinion and information available from official government channels. This author, therefore, intends to use the Syrian conflict as a reference case with regard to the importance, and role of think tanks in the decision-making process.

¹⁹James McGann, *2007 Survey of Think Tanks: A Summary Report*, 11, <http://www.civil-society.oas.org/pages/Findings%20Global%20Survey%20of%20Think%20Tanks.pdf>.

The KSA government and society are opening up, and seem willing to adopt all good things from the West to maintain their ongoing progress and improve the standard of living. A number of initiatives related to public education, public betterment, legal framework, and increased public involvement in the country's development, are indicators that the government is serious about bringing change at the grassroots level. Establishment of independent think tanks and their efficacy in decision making and public policy formulation, is a gray area in the KSA today. This research will, therefore, focus on the efficacy of think tanks in the decision-making and public policy formulation process in the KSA.

Public policy research think tanks have grown rapidly worldwide over the last few decades. The expansion is not limited to the number of think tanks; the scope and impact of their work has also expanded.²⁰ The focus of this thesis will be to research policy options presented by the think tanks for the Syrian issue, to connect those to local scenarios, and to see how think tank networks can help in easy and fast decision making in the public domain. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to evaluate the efficacy of think tanks in the KSA government's decision-making process. The research will provide answers to the following questions:

- What policy options on the Syrian issue have been presented to U.S. decision makers from independent think tanks?
- Were these options helpful in promoting easy and faster decision making? If yes, how can these options be duplicated in KSA to prevent blunders in the decision-making process?
- How are think tanks organized and financed?
- How can think tanks work independently in the face of local politics?
- What are the prospects for think tanks, and how effective will their role be in the KSA policy- and decision-making process?

²⁰ James McGann, *2012 Global Go To Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 14.

F. THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis is organized into six chapters:

- Chapter I gives general information regarding the political, legal, and economic framework of Saudi Arabia. It also includes a definition of think tanks and their role in decision making, the problem statement, and the purpose and goals of the research.
- Chapter II addresses the concept and the objectives of think tanks, their history, types, emergence, and growth trends, and considers famous think tanks.
- Chapter III discusses the process of decision making in the development of public policy in KSA and analyzes the efficacy, requirements, and usefulness of think tanks in a relatively conservative society like KSA, focusing specifically on their interaction with the government, relationship management, and research processes in support of decision and policy making.
- Chapter IV uses the Syrian issue as a focus and highlights the various policy options presented by think tanks and the efficacy of these options in the current economic, political, and global environment.
- Chapter V describes lessons learned from the U.S. experience with regard to the Syrian issue in the local decision-making process and proposes a way forward for encouraging the establishment of think tanks.
- Chapter IV concludes the research.

G. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research is to evaluate the efficacy, requirements, and usefulness of think tanks in the dynamics of KSA politics, specifically their interaction with the government, relationship management, and research processes in support of decision/policy making. A “Scan Globally, Reinvent Locally”²¹ approach will be adopted in the application of lessons learned from the U.S. experience in the national decision/policy-making process, taking the Syrian conflict as a test case.

²¹Joseph Stiglitz, 1999, *Knowledge Infrastructure and the Localization of Knowledge*. [http://www.druckversion.studien-von-zeitfragen.net/Stiglitz%20on%20 Knowledge.htm](http://www.druckversion.studien-von-zeitfragen.net/Stiglitz%20on%20Knowledge.htm).

The case study method will be adopted in this research. Discussion will be based on policy recommendations made to U.S. policy makers by U.S. think tanks regarding Syrian issues. The paper “2012 Global Go to Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice” will be used as a major reference source for this research.

II. THE CONCEPT AND HISTORY OF THINK TANKS

According to the United Nations Development Program 2003 definition, think tanks are, “organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies.”²² In this chapter, it seems logical to bring forward the concept and the objectives of think tanks, their history, types, emergence, and growth trends, as well as some of the famous think tanks in the world. It will be helpful to correlate ideas with these basic concepts later in this paper.

A. CONCEPT AND OBJECTIVES

The term “think tank” originated in the United States during the late nineteenth century as an expression referring to a person’s head or brain. Think tank references can be found in novels, advertisements, and newspaper articles from the 1890s to the 1960s. A shift in the term’s referent, from the brain to a research organization, began in the late 1950s. RAND (deduced from “research and development”) was the first think tank established as a project of the Douglas Aircraft Company in 1945. The major focus of its research was post-World War II military planning. RAND soon became an independent research entity in 1948.²³

In an increasingly complex, interdependent, and information-rich world, governments and individual policymakers face the common problem of bringing expert knowledge to bear in governmental decision making. Policy makers and others interested in the policy-making process require information that is timely, understandable, reliable, accessible, and useful. There are many potential

²²Martin Thunert, *Organization/Structure of Think Tanks* (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University, 2000), 3, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_14157-544-1-30.pdf.

²³ Thomas Medvetz and George Ritzered, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 1, <http://tommedvetz.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/medvetz-10-blackwell.pdf>.

sources for this information, including government agencies, university-based scholars, research centers, for-profit consulting firms, and international agencies. In countries around the world, however, politicians and bureaucrats have increasingly turned to a specialized group of institutions to serve their needs. Think tanks have filled the policymakers' need for information and systematic analysis that is policy relevant.²⁴

A think tank is primarily an extension of social science expertise. With the passage of time (as the number of think tanks started growing), the nature of their efforts, products, and organization also started to vary considerably. The number of think tanks increased from fewer than 70 in the 1960s to more than three hundred in 1970.²⁵ The term 'think tank' originated in U.S. public research organizations, but the phenomenon spread all over the world.

Historically, opinion about the role of think tanks in the policy-making process has remained divided. Proponents believe that think tanks fill an important role in society, as they generate lively public discussion on the most essential public policy issues and set up agendas for intellectual discourse and exchange. Others view think tanks as institutions that are merely subservient to the leading political parties.²⁶ It is worth mentioning that there is no single pattern for a think tank; it is all a matter of the correlation between the function of a think tank, and the context in which the think tank operates. Think tanks are most likely to play key roles in achieving the welfare of the country through their positive influence on the decision-making process. They achieve this influence by

²⁴ Luca Barani and Giuseppe Sciortino, "WP5.1 – The Role of Think Tanks in the Articulation of the European Public Sphere," 2011, Web exclusive, 10, http://eurospheres.org/files/2010/06/WP_5_1_final.pdf.

²⁵ Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam041/2003065392.pdf>.

²⁶ Rafis Abazov, *The Role of Think Tanks in the Policy-Making Process in Kazakhstan* (New York: Columbia University, 2011), 1, <http://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Abazov%20EPS%20Scholar%20Research%20Brief.pdf>.

producing informed research, building a minimal level of trust and confidence between the government and the public, and designing a forward-looking vision on emerging policy issues of public interest.

The influence of a think tank is exerted not only by publishing a report, but by demonstrating that figures and research quoted in the report are correct and relevant. If this is not the case, a think tank will lose its credibility, and no one, let alone policy makers, will consult them. There is nothing wrong with deriving policy decisions from data put together by a think tank after thorough research; rather, it is an admirable contribution to policy making. The problem with those who are wary of policy makers consulting think tanks may stem from policy makers who have taken a report out of its inherent context and blamed the research for a bad outcome.

It is customary that decision making at higher government levels is based on input received from all relevant government entities. Governments normally want to generate a debate among all intellectuals, media, and public to get more knowledge on the impact any particular decision will have on various segments of society prior to implementation. Rachel Cooper defines a think tank as an organization that conducts research, and engages in advocacy in public policy in areas such as political strategy, social policy, economy, science or technology issues, or industrial or business policies.²⁷

Evidence-based research has become an indispensable tool for political decision making and developing sound policies for progress. In many countries of the world, think tanks are the main producers and users of evidence-based research. Evidence is provided in the format of alternate policy options helping policy makers to make sound and rational decisions. In today's world, think tanks are, therefore, a good source of advice in decision making or policy formulation to satisfy public sentiment, economic concerns, and quality of life targets.

²⁷ Rachel Cooper, "Organizations Shaping Public Policy in Washington, DC," <http://dc.about.com/od/communities/a/Think-Tanks.htm>.

B. HISTORY

The emergence of think tanks in their current form has been a long evolutionary process. This evolutionary phenomenon primarily originated in the U.S., as noted previously. The Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War provided the main policy contexts for the initial growth of these organizations.

The birth of think tanks can be attributed to a number of factors prevailing at those periods in the American history. These factors included the extraordinary power of American business as a social and political force, the concentration of economic capital during the industrial era, and the tendency of American politicians to consult outside experts rather than promote the growth of a government technocracy. The presence of a technocratic social scientific tradition in the United States has paved the way for the growth of think tanks.²⁸

As they evolved, think tanks were referred to as “idea generating factories.” Think tanks boomed due to the high demand for knowledge produced for political and economic decision making. Intellectual knowledge producers came forward to meet this knowledge demand. The most dramatic increase in the number of think tanks was seen after 1970. This proliferation wave was caused by several factors such as new campaign finance laws and the growth of Political Action Committees (PACs), advocacy organizations, and the mass media.²⁹

Think tanks have also multiplied in other countries around the world. According to the “2012 Global Go To Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice,” there was a steep upward trend in the average number of think tanks established each year worldwide from 1971 until 2000. The last decade, however, has seen a decrease in the average number of think tanks established annually worldwide.³⁰

²⁸ Medvetz and Ritzered, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ McGann, *2012 Global Go To Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice*, 17.

There might be economic reasons causing this slowed growth. Additionally, the boom in electronic media and expanding social media pose serious challenges to the existence of many think tanks.

Scholars generally agree that the highly decentralized nature of the American political system, the lack of strict party discipline and the availability of large amounts of funds have greatly contributed to the proliferation of think tanks in the U.S. historically. There also seems, however, to be recent disagreement about what constitutes a think tank. In the context of this paper, think tanks are non-profit, nonpartisan, research-oriented institutes with a primary objective of influencing public opinion and public policy. Their history is best described by Donald E. Abelson in his paper, "Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Historical Perspective."³¹ Although this research is focused on U.S. foreign policy, it gives a useful narrative of think tanks. According to Abelson, the evolutionary history of think tanks can be traced over four generations:

1. The first generation: Think tanks as policy research institutions
2. The second generation: The emergence of government contractors
3. The third generation: The rise of advocacy think tanks
4. The fourth generation: Legacy-based think tanks

C. TYPES OF THINK TANKS

Think tanks have been in existence since the early nineteenth century. Their roles have evolved over that time. R. Kent Weaver calls think tanks "universities without students," "contract research organizations," and advocacy tanks.³² Andrew Rich defines them as independent, non-interest based, non-profit organizations that produce and principally rely on the policy process.³³

³¹ Donald E. Abelson, *Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Historical Perspective*, 2012, <http://guangzhou.usembassy-china.org.cn/uploads/images/QHgRpr9Ar-KtqbseIU05Q/ijpe1102.pdf>.

³² R. Kent Weaver, *The Changing World of Think Tanks* (Beltsville, MD: PS Political Science & Politics, 1989), 566–576, http://www.medientheorie.com/doc/weaver_changing_worlds_of_think_tanks.pdf.

³³ Andrew Rich, 2004, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

Diane Stone identifies think tanks as non-profit organizations engaged in the analysis of public policy issues independent of government, political parties, and interest groups.³⁴

A comprehensive definition accepted as mainstream was tendered by James McGann, who classified them as “entities that are independent or affiliated institutions that are permanent bodies and dedicated to public policy research, analysis and engagement.”³⁵ Entities such as the Russell Sage Foundation (1907), the Bureau of Municipal Research (1907), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1914), the Brookings Institute (1916), and the Royal Institution of International Affairs (1920) are identified as some of the earliest manifestations of think tanks.³⁶

Enrique Mendizabal and Adolfo Garce describe think tanks more broadly by focusing on their functions. According to these authors, the main function of think tanks is to promote evidence-based policies. At the same time, a think tank’s functions may also include legitimizing policies or ideologies, providing a safe space for ideas or debate, developing future cadres of policy makers and politicians, and even channeling funds to political parties or movements.³⁷

Some analysts, like McGann, Weaver, and Smith, have focused on understanding think tanks from an organizational point of view to draw out their origins, functions, and presence within policy processes.³⁸ Stone and Denham, on the other hand, focused their approach on understanding think tanks in much broader terms by identifying and analyzing them as actors enshrined with

³⁴ Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 16, <http://books.google.com/eBooks>.

³⁵ McGann, *2012 Global Go to Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice*, 15.

³⁶ Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*, 1948, http://books.google.com/books?id=NAiLiZUdjqMC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=enshrined&f=false.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

authority to advance certain ideas and policies at specific policy making junctures (e.g., addressing the role of think tanks in proclamation of a new policy).³⁹

Based on these definitions and descriptions, Enrique Mendizabal has organized think tanks in the following ways:⁴⁰

- **Legal structure:** These types are defined in Internal Revenue Code Section 26USC 501(c)(3) as corporations, and any community chest, fund, or foundation, organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, testing or public safety, literary, or educational purposes.
- **Size and focus:** This approach classifies think tanks with respect to their size in relation to other similar institutes and to the basic focus of their research. These classes include large and diversified, large and specialized, small and specialized.
- **Evolutionary stage of development:** Another approach classifies think tanks according to their current evolutionary stage or developmental status. These evolutionary stages include:
 - First = small
 - Second = small to large but more complex projects and
 - Third = larger and policy influence
- **Strategy, funding source and business model:** Classifying think tanks according to their strategy type: independent research, contract work, or advocacy. Furthermore, these organizations can be grouped together on the basis of the balance between research, consultancy/advisory work and advocacy, the source of their arguments (i.e., ideology, values or interests; applied, empirical or synthesis research; or theoretical or academic research), as well as by the manner in which the research agenda is developed (i.e., by senior members of the think tank or by individual researchers); or by the think tank of their funders, their influencing approaches and tactics, and the time horizon for their strategies and affiliation. A think tank's affiliation with any single party or group may raise the issue of independence.

³⁹ Karthik Nachiappan, Enrique Mendizabal and Ajoy Datta, "Think Tanks in East and Southeast Asia Bringing Politics Back into the Picture," 2010, <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/6377.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Enrique Mendizabal, "Think Tanks: Research Findings and Some Common Challenges," 2011, <http://onthinktanks.org/2011/06/02/think-tanks-research-findings-and-some-common-challenges/>.

- **Functional emphasis:** As highlighted earlier, policy makers in government and the private sector always need information that is accurate, reliable, easily accessible, and relevant to the issue at hand. This demand for reliable information that can be used for informed policy making has also helped to nurture the development of independent public policy research organizations. Therefore, think tanks can also be categorized based on their specialization in any area of research.
- **Aim:** Perhaps most relevant to this thesis, think tanks can be classified according to the aim of their research. This author considers think tanks as independent institutions that exist for research and policy advice purposes. However, think tanks do use their research as a means for ideological or partisan advocacy and lobbying purposes. In either case, whether these are research and policy advice-oriented think tanks, or advocacy and lobbying-oriented ones, both have a clear aim to their research.⁴¹
- **Orientation:** The most frequent typology used for think tank classification is based on the institutional aspect of independence (i.e., legal form and status, principles of funding, organization affiliation), which focuses on the characteristic element of autonomy. It should be noted, though, that much of the research literature concerned with defining and classifying think tanks is U.S. oriented. Other typologies, such as orientation and target, are also present in the literature. Think tanks, therefore, can be classified on the basis of their target audiences: executive-oriented, legislation-oriented, and media-oriented.⁴²

D. GROWTH TRENDS

As highlighted earlier, there was a continuous increase in the average number of think tanks established annually worldwide since 1971 (Figure 1). They underwent especially rapid growth after 1970; this growth, however, has been declining since 2000.

⁴¹ Magued Osman and Nesreen El Molla, "The Role of Think Tanks in Affecting People's Behaviours," presented at the *3rd OECD World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy*, Busan, Korea, October 27–30, 2009, 3, <http://www.oecd.org/site/progresskorea/44110495.pdf>.

⁴² Luca Barani and Giuseppe Sciortino, "The Role of Think Tanks in the Articulation of the Europe," 4, http://eurospheres.org/files/2010/06/WP_5_1_final.pdf.

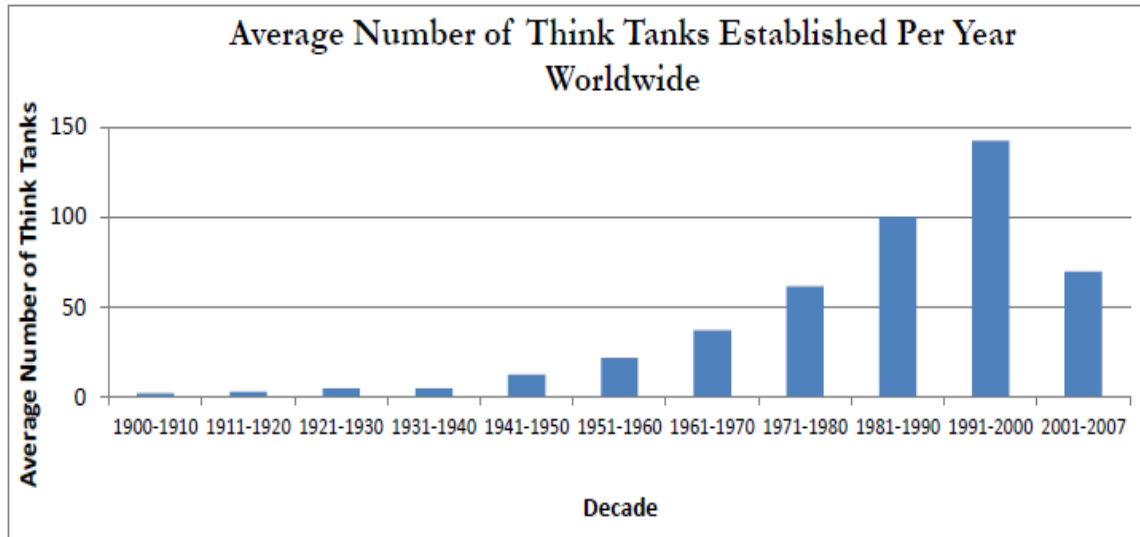


Figure 1. Number of Think Tanks Established Annually Worldwide⁴³

The major reasons for the current decline in think tank growth, as highlighted by McGannare, are the following:

- Political and regulatory environments hostile to think tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in many countries
- Decreased funding by public and private donors for policy research
- Public and private donors moving to short-term, project-specific funding instead of investing in ideas and institutions
- Underdeveloped institutional capacity and the inability to adapt to change
- Increased competition from advocacy organizations, for-profit consulting firms, law firms, and 24/7 electronic media
- Institutions have served their purpose and have discontinued their operations

The current trend will continue due to the increased role of electronic media and social media. The apparent decrease in funding from public donors and the private sector makes sense. Government and private organizations have wanted the input of think tanks to make informed decisions. However, 24/7 electronic media and social media are very effective, accessible, and inexpensive

⁴³Mc Gann, 2012 *Global To to Think Tank Report*, 17.

tools that can be used to judge public sentiment on given issues. Government as well as private business gives due consideration during policy or strategy formulation to the knowledge gained from social media. Although governments have other official information channels, they take into account the feedback received through social media. NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden's case is a relevant example of social media influence. The U.S. government response was very calculated against Snowden, due to wide discussion in the social media. The U.S. may be an exception as its population is well matured, but social media effectiveness seems very prominent in under-developed and developing countries. All major events of the "Arab Spring" were fueled by effective use of social media. Also, this phenomenon was validated during the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign. Political parties use social media tools to change the public opinion in their own favor.

The electronic media is also filling the advocacy role once held by think tanks. Regular talk shows with participants from various areas of research generate healthy discussions and all aspects of a popular topic are deliberated at length. Pros and cons for possible policy options are highlighted. Public participation is also encouraged through live calls. Policy makers may deduce the best policy option in light of public feeling or intellectuals' opinions extracted through these media programs. Policy makers need to bear in mind that policy based on public opinion may suit political aspirations but may not be the best available option.

While think tanks continue to be concentrated in the U.S. and Western Europe, several factors driving the growth of think tanks in other areas of the world are considered in the following subsections.⁴⁴

E. GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is defining new business needs and driving the flow of technology, resources, knowledge, people, values, and ideas. The knowledge-

⁴⁴ Mc Gann, *2012 Global Go to Think Tanks Report*, 18–20.

based economy is causing competition among knowledge-based institutions worldwide for the best ideas and people to remain relevant in the marketplace.

F. GROWTH OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

As the world emerges as a global village, more people and institutions are becoming relevant to each other. Multinational companies and nation states have intertwined interests around the globe. This phenomenon has given rise to state and non-state actors, such as NGOs and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs). This growth of international actors has created a demand for the establishment of think tanks around the world. Multinational firms are willing to pay for detailed research across the globe to safeguard their interests. For example, Hank Moore alone has advised more than 5,000 client organizations worldwide, including 100 of the Fortune 500.⁴⁵ Hank Moore is a Futurist and Corporate Strategist™ with his trademarked concept, The Business Tree™.

G. DEMOCRATIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER

Democracy is being accepted as a role model for good governance across the globe. Increased public involvement in policy making, decentralization of power, and transparency has increased the demand for independent analysis of public policies and the creation of a new set of non-governmental think tanks. State, county, and city governments in the U.S. are examples of decentralization of power.

H. DEMANDS FOR INDEPENDENT INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS

As highlighted earlier, the role of government in public policy is being limited due to increased public involvement in the democratic process. This paradigm shift creates a demand for knowledge-based institutions, like think tanks, to provide independent information and analysis.

⁴⁵Hank Moore, "The Big Picture of Business – Think Tanks to Strategize," 2011, <http://www.strategydriven.com/2011/06/03/the-big-picture-of-business-think-tanks-to-strategize/>.

I. INCREASED COMPLEXITY OF POLICY ISSUES

Governments are facing the challenges of globalization, terrorism, technical diversity, complex problems, and a knowledge-based economy across the world. Government policy makers are not subject matter experts on all these fronts. Many complex issues require a certain degree of expertise to understand how to employ dynamics and policy options, and how to deal with their associated consequences. This compels policy makers to seek outside advice. At the same time, governments are under increased pressure to improve economic and bureaucratic performance. Governments, especially in the U.S., historically have sought guidance from think tanks to assist them in quick and effective policy making.

J. NEW TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION AND THE RATE OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

Technology is changing at a very fast rate to satisfy customer needs in diverse fields. Better, cheaper, and faster technology has provided many opportunities to individuals and small organizations to operate and publicize their work. The Internet, social networks, cloud computing, and handheld computers have helped individuals to conduct research and circulate their findings globally at negligible cost. Organizations use websites and social networks to share their agendas and findings. These technological advancements have dramatically increased the timeliness, reach, and impact of research and commentary. These technological innovations have also empowered individual researchers operating outside the umbrella of any knowledge-based institutions like universities and think tanks.

K. INCREASINGLY OPEN DEBATE ABOUT GOVERNMENT DECISION MAKING

Governments do not have a decision-making monopoly any more, due to increased awareness and individual empowerment. Major policy issues are openly debated in the press and electronic media. The general public, interest

groups, and advocacy institutions, are less likely to accept government information and rationales, creating a demand for more independent sources of analysis. Global policy and advocacy networks have increased the power and influence of these organizations.

L. GLOBAL STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT

The free market economy is creating new opportunities for developing countries and posing certain challenges for developed countries. Developing countries are capturing the medium technology sectors due to lower wage rates and increased access to world markets. A continual structural adjustment is going on across the world to sustain current business market share and to further interests. This phenomenon has created a competitive environment. Intense competition from developing countries and emerging economies has placed intense competitive pressures on the manufacturing, service, and high-tech sectors, areas that traditionally have been dominated by developed countries. Ongoing economic crises are also creating challenges to the free economic order. These continuing economic challenges and associated fiscal constraints demand the immediate attention of policy makers. These problems are being reflected in local politics, and such problems put policy makers in a situation where they have to choose among the difficult choices of cutting entitlements, raising taxes, and imposing budget cuts. Making these tough decisions does not come easy for politicians who must face re-election.

M. FAMOUS THINK TANKS

In his “2012 Global Go To Think Tanks Report and Policy Advice,” McGann classified think tanks in various categories. These categories are based on the world level, regional level, and specific areas of research and special achievements. There were 6,603 think tanks in the world in 2012, the distribution of which is shown in Figure 2.

Region	No. of TT's	percent of Total
Africa	554	8.4
Asia	1,194	18
Europe	1,836	27.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	721	11
Middle East and North Africa	339	5.1
North America	1,919	29.1
Oceania	40	0.6
Total	6,603	100

Figure 2. Number of Think Tanks in the World in 2012⁴⁶

The Brookings Institute (United States) was declared Think Tank of the Year in 2012. The top 100 non-U.S. think tanks in the world are listed in the McGann report. The top 10 of these are the following:⁴⁷

- Chatham House (United Kingdom)
- Bruegel (Belgium)
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (Sweden)
- Amnesty International (United Kingdom)
- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) (China)
- International Crisis Group (ICG) (Belgium)
- International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (United Kingdom)
- Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) (Belgium)
- European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) (United Kingdom)
- Transparency International (TI) (Germany)

N. CONCLUSION

Think tanks are policy institutions that provide expertise and analytical services to various clients. These institutions are geared to address complex political, social, and economic issues from a policy perspective. Over several decades, think tanks have attained the competency to provide new ideas, creative political solutions, and policy recommendations to a broad range of

⁴⁶ Mc Gann, *2012 Global Go to Think Tank Report*, 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 42–44.

customers, both public and private. It is customary with U.S. political parties, government institutions, and policy makers to use the expertise of think tanks as a policy-making tool. Electronic media and social media are poised to substitute for the think tank's advocacy and policy advice role. Political parties may use electronic and social media to further their point of view. Conversely, input received from electronic and social media may dictate the political aspirations of the general public. However, deriving the best policy options is still a specialized field, and think tanks have maintained their role in that field on the basis of expert research.

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III. POTENTIAL ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN DECISION MAKING IN THE KSA

The KSA is a rapidly growing country. New institutions and structures are being introduced to foster a free-market economy and accommodate newer policy demands. The government officials and staff have never dealt with a free-market economy in the past nor have they any multi-party political experience due to the monarchical system in the KSA. These institutions, therefore, essentially do not have the appropriate in-house expertise on many issues related to the rapid developmental changes occurring in the country. As a result, the KSA may need to turn to external channels, including individual public-policy analysts and various research centers, to acquire policy formulation expertise. Encouraging the development of think tanks in KSA is, hence, an obvious choice for informed decision making on complex economic, legal, and social issues never experienced before in the kingdom.

A. DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN KSA

By setting himself on fire, Muhammad Bouazizi spurred a determined demonstration by the young people in Tunisia and forced President Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia in disgrace. This spirit of revolution in Tunisia soon spread throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Enormous public demonstrations forced regime change in Egypt. The situation in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and especially in Syria, is very fragile and not likely to be resolved soon.

These massive public demonstrations, dubbed the “Arab Spring,” have significantly changed the political dynamics in the region and have added new dimensions to public decision-making processes. Devising public policy at the national level in any country in the Middle East will be driven by this changed political environment. Although Saudi Arabia has been the least affected country

during the Arab Spring, the KSA is not an exception. KSA authorities have to bear in mind this changed regional political environment during any future decision making.

Political, social, and economic institutions cannot mature in any state without public participation in decision making and the rule of law. There are many examples in the past where rulers put themselves above the law and made unilateral decisions without public support. However, this type of governance may not continue any longer, due to the strong influence of social media, the Internet, and advanced technology. “Tweets were sent. Dictators were toppled,” is an historic fact in the region.⁴⁸ All rulers, especially King Abdullah of KSA, are very well aware of these dynamics. King Abdullah’s initiatives in education, empowerment of women, interfaith dialogue, local elections, legal reforms, and increased employment opportunities for local youth are indicators that public policies in the future will be in accordance with public sentiment. Among others, David E. Long points out,

the advent of the information technology revolution has increased exponentially the need to expand the number of citizens participating directly in the decision making process. Evolutionary reform is vital, but to maintain legitimacy, it is more likely to reflect the teachings of Islam than those of Thomas Jefferson.⁴⁹

In the KSA, all government decision-making processes must be within the bounds of Islamic law. Within Islam, there is a prescribed and systematic way of making decisions. The basic sources of guidance are the Quran and Sunnah. According to Islamic teachings, which form the statutory law of the land in KSA, Fatwa (decree) and Ijma (consensus) are two preliminary concepts by which to make decisions. Fatwa can be issued by any qualified Islamic scholar (Aalam e din) considering a current issue in light of the teachings of Islam and correlating it with decisions made by the Prophet Muhammad (P B U H). In case no clear

⁴⁸ Abbas Kadhim, *Governance in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 176.

⁴⁹ Long et al., *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 113.

guidance is available, religious scholars may develop a consensus on any particular issue and may issue instructions (not contradictory to the basic teachings of Islam) to the general public for adoption or rejection. Any such instructions resulting from the Ijma of religious scholars become part of Islamic Sharia and, thus, legitimate for common Muslims to act upon.

The KSA inaugurated a Majlis al Shura (Consultative Assembly) in 1993. In Arabic, Shura means “Consultation with people of knowledge and expertise and specialists.” The Majlis al Shura consisted of 150 members in 2005. Members are appointed for four-year terms and meet in closed sessions at least every two weeks. Members include businessman, technocrats, journalists, Islamic scholars, and professional soldiers. These members are nominated from all regions of the country. The Majlis al Shura is responsible for suggesting new regulatory decrees and reviewing and evaluating foreign and domestic policies.⁵⁰ The Majlis al Shura can be viewed as a think tank in the academic sense as it consists of subject matter experts and is entrusted with revision of public policy. A real challenge for the Majlis al Shura will be modernization without secularization (i.e., rendering policy guidelines without compromising Islamic ideology).

B. POTENTIAL ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The decision makers in KSA should have no trouble finding information about public response to the government’s current initiatives or new areas of concern. A tremendous amount of data is publicly and instantly available on line. However, arranging that data in an effective format makes it relevant and easily understandable for decision making is challenging. Many for-profit consultant firms and government institutions exist worldwide to perform this job for decision makers. Many countries in the region, like Pakistan and Egypt, already have such institutions to render advice to their governments’ decision makers on

⁵⁰ Long et al., *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 112.

issues of national importance. The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), Islamabad Policy Research Institute, Institute of Regional Studies, Institute of Policy Studies, and Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) of Egypt are a few examples of such institutes in the region.

ISSI contributes significantly towards providing in-depth understanding and objective analysis on regional and global strategic issues affecting international peace and security. ISSI has published a number of reports, such as “Pakistan-India Dialogue: Quest for Peace” and “Jammu and Kashmir Dispute: Models for Resolution.” ISSI also organizes events and seminars on regional security issues (e.g., The International Day of UN Peacekeepers) in Islamabad in collaboration with the UN Information Centre.⁵¹ The IDSC has adopted an issue-based management approach in the design and delivery of decision support systems. During the last two decades, IDSC’s main focus has been on the use of decision support systems in organizational contexts. The institute has also provided guidance in organizational planning and attaining a competitive advantage or managing clients’ portfolios. The IDSC has demonstrated the use of decision support systems by the government of Egypt in streamlining the decision-making process and improving allocation of limited means for socio-economic development purposes.⁵² The KSA can greatly benefit from such regional organizations or provide active support for establishment of its own such organizations in the KSA.

The increased need for information for any decision making demands an increased role of think tanks in the policy-making process. According to Karthik Nachiappan et al., think tanks have occupied an important role in the policy-development process.⁵³ McGann has also declared think tanks to be public

⁵¹ Peace Direct, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 2014, <http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/pakistan/peacebuilding-organisations/issi/>.

⁵² Sherif Kamel, *DSS to Support Socio-Economic Development in Egypt*, 1997, 1, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.98.4315&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

⁵³ Karthik Nachiappan et al., *Think Tanks in East and Southeast Asia: Bringing Politics Back into the Picture*, Overseas Development Institute, 5, <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/6377.pdf>.

policy research, analysis, and engagement organizations. Think tanks play a vital role in the political and policy arenas at the local and national level in the United States.⁵⁴ Although KSA's political system is different from that of the U.S., they both face the challenges related to economic growth management, better allocation of resources to support and sustain growth, job creation and reduction of unemployment, financial management, legislation in modern fields, and human capital development. Think tanks can play a vital role by providing requisite policy guidance in these specific areas.

The practice of consulting a think tank will be relatively new in the KSA. However, there is a precedent of similar arrangement known as the Majlis al Shura, which existed in Hijaz when it was annexed by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. The king wanted to extend the Majlis al Shura into a national institution, but could not do so due to resistance from Najdi religious authorities who considered it incompatible with Sharia.⁵⁵ However, the Majlis al Shura is a ministerial level institution in today's KSA. This fact implies that current political leadership has the vision that informed decision making is mandatory for effective policies, and experts' input will add objectivity, clarity, and legitimacy to the policy. The Majlis al Shura has proved an effective channel of communication between the people and the government. Furthermore, the Majlis al Shura has been instrumental in the legislative process and has proposed many bills so far. A few of the tasks accomplished by the Majlis Al-Shura during the current year include:⁵⁶

- Concluded debate on the draft of the bill on the Islamic litigation system in the kingdom. The new bill revises court procedures and is intended to make the law clearer for all parties in the litigation process.

⁵⁴ McGann, *Think Tanks and Public Policy Advice in U.S.* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2005), 3, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_7042-1522-1-30.pdf?050810140452.

⁵⁵ Long, 2011, *The Governments and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 112.

⁵⁶ Saudi Embassy, 2013, *The Consultative Council's Contribution to National Development*. <http://www.saudiembassy.net/files/PDF/Publications/Magazine/2000-Fall/Consult.htm>.

- Endorsed the agreement reached by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for defining their maritime borders.
- Approved the bill extending welfare to the disabled.
- Approved regulations for the formation of consultative bodies for workers at major institutions and establishments.
- Endorsed a bill allowing non-Saudis to own real estate in all cities of the kingdom except Makkah (Mecca) and Madinah (Medina).
- Reviewed the annual report of the Ministry of Communications and recommended completion of the national transportation strategy, giving greater attention to safety measures on the roads. The council also recommended selling the government's share in transportation companies, including the Saudi Arabian Public Transport Company (SAPTCO) and the National Shipping Company (NSC).

Current ongoing major activities in the business, defense, government, and education sector prove that Saudi Arabia is willing to accept expert opinion from specialists around the globe. The emergence of the petroleum sector, development of infra-structure, modernization of the armed forces, and establishment of research universities were all based on guidance from leading global business firms in each sector and from government institutions of developed friendly nations like the U.S. These programs were initiated and funded by the government. KSA has benefited from the experts without discrimination based on their faith, nationality, or geographic positioning. These indicators suggest that think tanks will have a greater role in public policy formulation in the future. As that role increases, the Majlis al Shura may trim or amend a think tank's policy recommendations to merge with Islamic teachings; the broader policy contours will be maintained intact on any modern governmental subject. In other words, the Majlis al Shura will be translating the global thoughts into local norms.

The Majlis al Shura has contributed to the kingdom's development and to the improved standard of living of its people. Without a doubt, the Majlis al Shura has been successful so far in effectively addressing issues arising from time to time. It has created specialized committees for Organization and Administration,

Education, Culture and Information, Islamic Affairs, Services and Public Utilities, Health, Social Affairs and the Environment, Foreign Affairs, Security Affairs, Economic Affairs, Financial Affairs, and Transportation and Telecommunications. These committees consist of experts in their field. Any issue requiring legislation is referred to its respective committee. The committee evaluates the matter in its totality and records its recommendations, which are then put forward to the entire Majlis membership for voting. The recommendations must be approved by a majority vote.

Because of continuous hard work and prudent recommendations by the Majlis, the Saudi Arabia Government (SAG) has improved its image internationally. The legal, regulatory, and accounting systems are considered transparent and consistent with international norms by the international community. Transparency International's 2012 "Corruption Perceptions Index" ranked Saudi Arabia 57th out of 178 countries. This ranking testifies to the public's trust in the SAG's ability to manage public funds and the economy as a whole. Moreover, the Majlis has been able to increase awareness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Saudi Arabia.⁵⁷

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has liberalized licensing requirements for foreign investment in financial services. In addition, foreign equity limits in financial institutions have been increased from 40 percent to 60 percent, to attract more foreign investment. The SAG has granted operating licenses to eleven foreign banks such as BNP Paribas, Deutsche Bank, Emirates Bank, Gulf International Bank, J.P. Morgan, Muscat Bank, National Bank of Bahrain, National Bank of Kuwait, National Bank of Pakistan, State Bank of India and T.C. Ziraat Bankasi A.S.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ U.S. Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs Report, 2012, *Investment Climate Statement - Saudi Arabia*, <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/rls/othr/ics/2012/191229.htm>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

C. EFFICACY ANALYSIS

According to the “Global Go To Think Tanks Report on G20 Think Tanks,”⁵⁹ Saudi Arabia has only four think tanks out of 6,603 worldwide. On the other hand, when looking at the top 150 think tanks in the world, including the United States, the Gulf Research Centre (GRC) is also among the Middle East think tanks at the top of this list. It indicates that, despite the limited number of think tanks in the KSA, their performance with respect to impact on policy making is improving as this was the primary evaluation criteria for inclusion in the top ranking. This result is very encouraging as compared to the 2011 report. It was reported then that Saudi Arabia has historically been and continues to be notably absent from the rankings. None of the think tanks from KSA has enjoyed recognition within the global categories.⁶⁰

It is evident that the KSA did not have a wealth of these organizations to tap into in the past, but such organizations are starting to emerge — because government and business are receptive to them, and KSA now has the home-grown talent available to staff such organizations.

Mohammed Alsaif, in his article, “The Need for More Saudi Think Tanks,” emphasized the need for policy research institutes in the following words:

In fact, now more than ever before we are truly in need of more of these policy research institutions. New accelerating developments in the Saudi legislative framework, and the increasing dependency on the newly appointed Shura Council, are putting increased pressure on the government to help launch such independent centers and provide them with needed support. And with hundreds of Saudi postgraduates who have studied abroad in various specialties, the Kingdom has a wealth of people to choose from to become members of local think tanks.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Mc Gann, *2012 Global Go to Think Tank Report*, 38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶¹ Mohammed Alsaif, “*The Need for More Saudi Think Tanks*,” *Arab News*, July 6, 2013, <http://www.arabnews.com/need-more-saudi-%E2%80%9Cthink-tanks%E2%80%9D>.

The King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center (KAPSARC) is an independent, non-profit institution that focuses on research in energy economics, policy, technology, and the environment. The idea of KAPSARC was conceived in 2007, and it has been working since 2010.⁶² Establishment of such centers in the kingdom is an indicator that top leadership and society are aware of the need for such institutions. Dr. Muhammad Saggaf, president of KAPSARC, confirmed during an interview that KAPSARC is an independent scientific research organization focused on the subjects of petroleum, environment, and climate.⁶³ The government also seems willing to extend its support to such institutes without governmental intervention and pressures. This environment will encourage the establishment of additional research centers in KSA, and those in turn will facilitate informed decision making in the country.

One aspect that needs further discussion, and which is directly related to the efficacy of think tanks in the KSA, is the analysis of the Arab Spring from a different perspective. Two very basic questions arise: how is it that most of the country's top leadership was not aware of the public sentiment? Why was there a lack of effective policy advice from government office bearers? Both questions seem relevant here.

All government officials in developing countries send "All OK" reports to top management to show their efficiency. These top officials are not well connected with the masses and, therefore, are unaware of their real problems and resulting sentiments. When anything goes very seriously wrong and beyond their expectations, these officials resort to the use of force against citizens, and convey to higher authorities that a few miscreants are trying to create this situation. In the case of all countries affected by the Arab Spring, it seems the only input channel to rulers was the official channel, and very little input from independent research sources made it to the rulers. As a result, the rulers could

⁶² KAPSARC, History website, <http://www.kapsarc.org/kapsarc/about/AboutKAPSARC>.

⁶³ CERA Week 2012, Interview with Dr. Muhammad Saggaf, President, KAPSARC, <http://www.kapsarc.org/kapsarc/videogallery/CERAWeek2012InterviewwithDrMuhammadSaggaf>.

not fully appreciate the situation on the ground and ultimately had to yield to the enormous public pressure.

The situation in KSA was very normal when compared to other affected countries during the Arab Spring. It seems that Saudi leadership has been more connected with its citizens. Although Saudi Arabia was the least affected by this turmoil, King Abdullah has announced various appeasement packages for the general public, especially targeted for youth. All these measures were well calculated and very effective at keeping the unrest outside of KSA borders. Although it indicates that the policy-making process is effective and has a connection with the public, the need for independent think tanks has emerged as being more critical than ever before. In this case, if the king does not get realistic input from the official channels or perhaps if the official channels fail to appreciate the situation correctly, independent research centers will prove to be a very effective tool for getting a second opinion on the issue.

D. CONCLUSION

The regional political environment in the Middle East has changed dramatically after the massive demonstrations of the Arab Spring. The decision-making process involved in devising public policy at the national level in any Middle East country will be driven by this changed political environment. KSA authorities have to bear in mind this changed regional political environment during their decision making process in the future. Acknowledging the increased awareness of the citizens due to vibrant electronic and social media, the KSA government needs to synchronize its policy decisions with public sentiment to ensure political stability in the country. Encouraging the development of think tanks in KSA is, hence, an obvious choice for informed decision making.

IV. THE SYRIAN ISSUE—A CASE STUDY

Think tanks fill a critical gap between the academic world, knowledge generation in the academic environment and the government, and the implementation of academic knowledge to real-world situations. Think tanks' prime input, therefore, is to help connect the two worlds of ideas and action.

The history of think tanks goes hand-in-hand with the rise of the United States to a global leadership role. Think tanks first began to appear a century ago as part of a movement to professionalize government. They assumed the mandate to advance the public interest by providing government officials with impartial, policy-relevant advice. The Institute for Government Research (1916), and the Brookings Institute (1927) can be cited as examples. Think tanks have played an effective role in policy making ever since. Think tanks have affected American policy makers in five distinct ways, especially with regard to foreign policy: by generating original ideas and options for policy, by supplying a ready pool of experts for employment in government, by offering venues for high-level discussions, by educating U.S. citizens about the world, and by supplementing official efforts to mediate and resolve conflict.⁶⁴

The Syrian issue has been selected as a case study for two reasons. The first reason is that this issue is still current and drawing a lot of attention worldwide. The second equally important reason is that this issue generated a broad policy discussion within U.S. government institutions, the international community, and independent research centers all over the world.

An important aspect of the case relevant to this paper is that recommendations from various think tanks were very different or even conflicting with regard to policy options, especially for the U.S. This situation can be seen both optimistically and pessimistically. One may argue that conflicting

⁶⁴ Richard N. Haass, *Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Policy-Maker's Perspective*, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/sp/rem/15506.htm>.

recommendations confused the policy makers from adopting any clear course of action on policy. Apparently conflicting recommendations have actually provided more options from which the U.S. decision makers may choose.

Each independent research center has examined the whole issue within the constraints of their research, thus focusing on specific areas relevant to their research, while ignoring other dimensions. Their respective recommendations were, therefore, purely based on the findings of the research within the domain of basic research hypothesis and constraints. Each recommended course of action is realistic within its defined domain.

Government institutions see the policy options from various differing perspectives encompassing all surrounding realities. The decision factors may include available resource considerations, budget conditions, synchronization with other policy initiatives, cost-benefit analyses or lessons learned from any particular experience in the past with similar “on ground” realities, readiness level of defense forces, morale, international environment, state-level agreements, future consequences, different possible scenarios and their outcomes, legalities, and so on. Once all these apparently conflicting aspects are evaluated in accordance with their relevance and assigned weight, the resulting decision is more informed and legitimate. Policy makers feel confident of their decisions, due to the legitimacy, transparency, and objectivity surrounding these decisions.

A. A SNAPSHOT OF THE SYRIAN ISSUE

The Syrian civil war is an ongoing armed conflict, and is linked with the wider Middle Eastern protest movement known as the Arab Spring. Syrian government loyalist forces are fighting combined opposition forces seeking to oust the Assad regime. Protesters have demanded the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad and an end to Alawite rule in the country.

The protests evolved into an armed opposition after deployment of the Syrian Army to suppress the uprising. Opposition forces consisted of defected soldiers and civilian volunteers. The Arab League, United States, European

Union, and other countries condemned the use of violence against the protesters. The U.S., European Union, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, and many other nations of the world are supporting (morally and economically) opposition forces, while Russia, China, and Iran are supporting the regime.

The Assad family and many of its fellow Alawites have been in power for decades, and are not willing to quit easily. Many Alawites control businesses in Syria, and have financial leverage. Alawites perceive armed opposition as a threat to their hegemony in the country. Despite an estimated 70,000 deaths (a total that is steadily increasing), Assad and his followers are not willing to surrender.⁶⁵ Rather, fears of redistribution of wealth and power have pushed Assad's loyalists to converge upon the common goal of survival, resulting in a broadly cohesive, ultra-nationalist, and mostly Alawite force. On the other hand, the opposition is divided, and as the civil war is prolonged, rebels are indulging in brutal actions similar to those of the regime. Opposition fighters are killing regime soldiers and supporters and have resorted to crimes like kidnapping to raise funds.⁶⁶ The international community has a divided opinion due to these excesses being committed by both sides.

The conflict started two years ago when peaceful demonstrations began against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. However, this conflict has resulted in widespread violence. Many civilians have been forced to take refuge in neighboring countries like Jordan. Moreover, the conflict has turned into a Shia-Sunni proxy war. Iran and Iraq are openly supporting the regime while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey are providing every possible support to the rebels. Hezbollah, under the influence of Iran, is also being blamed for providing fighters for the regime. Syria's current situation has created a convenient opportunity for hardliners like Al Qaeda to market their ideology. U.S. law

⁶⁵Doug Bandow, "Syria: The Only Red Line Should Be to Stay Out," Cato Institute, 2013, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/syria-only-red-line-should-be-stay-out>.

⁶⁶ Doug Bandow, "Stay Out of Other Nations' Civil Wars," *American Spectator* (Online) March 27, 2013, 1, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/stay-out-other-nations-civil-wars?gclid=CJrToLWqwbgCFatj7AoduX0Aqw>.

makers, the public, and many other international stakeholders, fear that Al Qaeda has its operatives within the ranks of the rebels. Any all-out support to the rebels may strengthen these hardline elements, and they might assume the helm after Assad's dismissal. At the same time, doing nothing means allowing these elements to enhance their influence among the rebels, and allowing Assad to continue the repression of innocent people. This added complexity of the Syrian issue has become a significant challenge for the world's leaders.

Another dimension that makes the Syrian issue more complicated than any other in history is the division among permanent United Nation Security Council (UNSC) members. In the case of Libya, the UNSC was able to pass a resolution where NATO air power was used against Qaddafi. In the Syrian conflict, Russia and China have aligned themselves with Assad's regime, which has limited diplomatic as well as legally authorized military options to end the crisis.⁶⁷

The U.S. had to take a very cautious approach on the Syrian issue due to its complexity and intertwined policy objectives. There is a difference of opinion between the White House, the general public, and Congress. The latter has prevented the Obama administration from spending money on U.S. military operations in Syria without consulting Congress. This partisan division among lawmakers in the U.S. has created confusion among lawmakers of other allied nations. When U.S. President Obama announced his intention to authorize targeted operations in Syria against Assad due to the regime's apparent use of chemical weapons, many allied nations like Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), other European nations, and Asian countries voiced their opposition to this option. The U.S. president seemed alone in his objective; he lacked the support of Congress, the UN, and the international community.

⁶⁷Donette Murray, "Military Action But Not as We Know it: Libya, Syria and the Making of an Obama Doctrine," Routledge, *Contemporary Politics* 2, no. 2 (2013), 146, 153, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2013.785827>.

U.S. policy focus has been to isolate Russia, China, and Iran diplomatically. Meanwhile, the U.S. has supported rebels with weapons and training. The U.S. has also reportedly deployed members of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Force in Jordan. There are conflicting reports about the exact numbers of troops that have been deployed toward the Jordanian border with Syria. So far, the U.S. policy in Syria has been a summation of ad hoc tactical choices rather than a unified strategy with clear objectives.

B. POLICY OPTIONS PROPOSED BY THINK TANKS

Think tanks have their ideology and may present a discourse that best suits the agenda of a particular political party. However, despite ideological bondage, to protect their integrity think tanks develop recommendations built on fact-based evidence and thorough research in the subject under consideration. On the other hand, it is not any secret that think tanks are often connected ideologically to a particular point of view in the U.S., including the CATO Institute (conservative), the American Enterprise Institute (conservative) and Brookings (liberal). Major funding for CATO and Brookings comes from Democrats, while the American Enterprise Institute's major funding is from the Republicans.⁶⁸ The argument here is that think tanks do bring policy options based on research that makes the job of policy making easier and informed as compared to a situation where policy makers are not served with any input of any kind.

One point needs to be clarified. The purpose of using the Syrian issue here as a case study is not to compare the political arrangements on the ground in the U.S. and the KSA, nor is it to compare how think tanks are organized in both countries. Political arrangements are definitely different in both countries; think tanks' input, however, definitely provides a good policy making tool. As previously discussed, political leadership in the KSA is well cognizant of this fact and encourages the establishment of think tanks in the KSA. The aim of this

⁶⁸Danielle Kurtzleben, "Think Tank Employees Tend To Support Democrats," U.S. News & World Report, March 3, 2011, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2011/03/03/think-tank-employees-tend-to-support-democrats>.

thesis is to focus on the impact of these organizations in the U.S. system, using the Syrian case, and then conclude by pointing out the benefits to KSA of having an active discourse on national security policy choices.

The Syrian conflict is a very complex issue and there might not be a straight right or wrong policy answer. Moreover, one policy option may best suit one national goal but contradict the other. All leading U.S. think tanks have come up with some policy recommendations for U.S. law makers. Policy options brought forward by leading think tanks with differing political leaning are summarized below:

1. CATO Institute

The Cato Institute was founded in 1977 as a non-profit public policy research foundation. The Institute's stated mission is to broaden the parameters of public policy debate to allow consideration of the traditional American principles of limited government, individual liberty, free markets, and peace. The Institute also strives to achieve greater involvement of the public in questions of policy and the proper role of government. CATO has a reputation of maintaining a libertarian approach. CATO does not accept any government funding or endowments to maintain its independence.⁶⁹

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. In his article, "Should America Enter Syria's Hell?" he concluded, "Syria is a tragedy. But it is not America's tragedy. Legislators should reject war with Syria."⁷⁰ On the Syrian issue, CATO bears the view that the U.S. should stay out of this conflict, as Americans have nothing at stake directly that warrants going to war. War should be the last resort and should only be employed for interests that are very vital to national security. The major argument is that there is no impartial intervention. Once you enter into a complex conflict like Syria, you are in fact taking the side of

⁶⁹ CATO Official website, <http://www.cato.org>.

⁷⁰ Doug Bandow, "Should America Enter Syria's Hell?" Cato Institute, 2013, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/should-america-enter-syrias-hell>.

one stakeholder in the crisis. If the U.S. decides to become part of the conflict, Americans will turn into targets. Entering a war against a Muslim nation in the Middle East is bound to create more enemies for America. U.S. involvement in this conflict will encourage future terrorists as killing innocent people creates such an environment. It does not matter whether Americans believe their actions to be justified. Those on the receiving end of U.S. weapons would believe otherwise.⁷¹

The examples of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Lebanon are cited in support of Bandow's argument. U.S. intervention in these countries could not generate the results that were promised to the public. CATO is, therefore, a proponent of the "do nothing" policy option on the Syrian issue.⁷²

2. Brookings Institute

The Brookings Institute is one of the oldest think tanks in the United States. Brookings is organized into three major research areas: Foreign Policy Studies, Economic Studies, and Governance Studies. Moreover, Brookings' organizational structure also includes several research centers, focused on areas such as the Middle East or functional issues such as education policy. Brookings is one of those few think tanks that have large endowments and accept little or no official funding. The Brookings Institute's policy advice is taken very seriously by U.S. policy makers, due to its vast experience and expertise.⁷³

There seems to be a difference of opinion between analysts within Brookings on the preferred policy option for the U.S. in the case of the Syrian conflict. Some are supporting the argument for arming the rebels, but others cite it as a mistake due to the rebel's probable links with Al Qaeda. In her testimony on April 19, 2012 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee regarding

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Bandow, "Syria: The Only Red Line Should Be To Stay Out," <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/syria-only-red-line-should-be-stay-out>.

⁷³ Brookings Institute History, <http://www.brookings.edu/about/history>.

options for U.S. policy in Syria, Tamara Cofman Wittes aligned herself with Brookings. She is a Senior Fellow at Brookings and is currently Director, Saban Center for Middle East Policy. The key policy options recommended in her testimony are summarized below:⁷⁴

- International diplomacy must focus to bring a political transition and the establishment of a government accountable to the Syrian people.
- The role of Russia remains crucial, and the time has come for a clear decision.
- The United States shall continue militarization of rebels by working with other governments, especially Syria's neighbors in the region.
- The United States and other governments shall scale up their support for the political development of the Syrian opposition.
- The United States must keep coercive options open to create pressure on Assad and his allies that will give diplomacy its best chance of success.

Michael E. O'Hanlon, Director of Research on Foreign Policy at Brookings, agrees that most soldiers as well as civilians do not support military action in Syria.⁷⁵

3. American Enterprise Institute

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) for Public Policy Research was founded in 1943. AEI is dedicated to preserving and strengthening the foundations of freedom through research, open debate, and publications. Although AEI claims to be a nonpartisan institute having no institutional positions on pending legislation or other policy questions, it has a reputation of holding neoconservative Republican views.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Tamara Cofman Wittes, "Options for U.S. Policy in Syria," Testimony on April 19, 2012 before Senate Foreign Relations Committee regarding options for U.S. Policy in Syria, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2012/04/19-syria-wittes>.

⁷⁵ Michael E. O'Hanlon, "No Military Consensus on Syria," Brookings Institute, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/09/12-syria-military-use-of-force-ohanlon>.

⁷⁶ AEI, "AEI's Organization and Purposes," <http://www.aei.org>.

The Institute is a proponent of supporting the rebels financially, politically, and militarily. Messrs. Lieberman and Kyl, both former U.S. senators, are co-chairmen of AEI's American Internationalism Project. They co-authored "Inaction on Syria Threatens U.S. Security." Their recommended course of action includes military strikes, asserting that doing nothing will cause considerable damage to U.S. credibility at the international level. This will send a wrong message to long-standing allies like Japan and South Korea that Washington can no longer be counted on to stand with them against threats from North Korea and China. Moreover, opposing a limited intervention in Syria may result in more devastating wars that will break out if America is seen as withdrawing from the world. In any case, these larger and more costly conflicts will pull the U.S. into them.⁷⁷

AEI recommends taking assistance from allied countries to isolate "bad guys" among the ranks of rebels. In a speech hosted by AEI, Senator John McCain went so far as to call for action even without UN approval. He cited the example of Bosnia where the U.S., along with allied nations called a "coalition of the willing," took unilateral military action without any UN backing.⁷⁸ Although these were the personal views of Senator McCain, it can still be inferred that AEI as an institution holds similar views due its political leaning towards Republicans.

C. IMPACT ON U.S. POLICY

It can be deduced very easily from the preceding discussion that various think tanks have offered varying policy options to U.S. decision makers. Three leading think tanks proposed diverging policy options; still, these recommendations were valid according to the perspective from which they were analyzed. It is the responsibility of the leadership to choose the course of action that will have the best outcome, or at least a course of action that will have the least damaging outcome depending upon the analyzed scenarios. Policy makers

⁷⁷ Jon Kyl and Joseph Lieberman, "Inaction on Syria Threatens U.S. Security," 2013, <http://www.aei.org/article/foreign-and-defense-policy/inaction-on-syria-threatens-us-security/>.

⁷⁸ "Sen. McCain Discusses Situation in Syria," *C-SPAN*, Washington, DC, June 18, 2012, <http://www.c-span.org/Events/Sen-McCain-Discusses-Situation-in-Syria/10737431630-1/>.

then have the choice to select a mixture of diplomatic, economic, and coercive tools in accordance with the situation on the ground.

The U.S. government has shown a very cautious approach on the Syrian issue, based on the recommendations from these independent organizations and assessments of government agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In fact, the United States has no attractive policy options in Syria. The option being exercised by the U.S. so far is to apply diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime while indirectly providing limited support to rebel groups.

The primary policy constraint for the U.S. is that the world is not the same as it was back in the 1990s. The Russian position now is much different than it was two decades ago, and Chinese involvement cannot be ignored altogether. Any action without UN backing and agreement of all permanent UNSC members will not bring peace to the world. Rather it would likely spread discontent. In the Syrian conflict, Russia is not the only stakeholder; there are many indirect stakeholders, such as Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel, China, Iran, and Lebanon. Any policy approach aimed at resolving the conflict without trying to alter the world order seems the best policy under the prevailing circumstances.

The major U.S.-stated concerns regarding the ongoing Syrian conflict are limiting regional instability, limiting civilian casualties, containing Iran, preventing the development of terrorist safe havens on Syrian territory, and prohibiting the use and proliferation of chemical and biological weapons. Apparently, no clear end state of the conflict is in sight. The best policy option is a negotiated transition to a power-sharing government. However, this policy does not seem possible, as the United Nations negotiations process did not produce any consensus.

There are many UN-stated U.S. interests also tied with this Syrian issue. Henry Alfred Kissinger is considered an influential public figure. He has the experience of serving as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State to Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Dr. Kissinger is considered an

authority on Middle East issues. He has expressed the view that peace as per the U.S. strategy is not possible in the Middle East without the support of Egypt and Syria. He has recommended keeping these two countries in the American camp.⁷⁹ A faction in Middle East media is arguing that U.S. intervention in Syria is in fact intended to bring a pro-U.S. government in Syria. Regime change was planned via religious rites. The U.S. has supported the rebels and is now using the use of chemical weapons as an excuse to justify her armed involvement in the issue.

Use of chemical weapons against the civilian population is taken very seriously by the UN, as well as the international community. Although the U.S. has claimed that Assad has used chemical gas against his people, it is not yet ready to share any evidence with the international community. The U.S. could not assemble the political support for military action against Syria without UN authorization even from its historic European allies (except France). Moreover, an overwhelming majority of the U.S public does not support the use of force against Syria, despite their belief that Assad has gassed his people. According to CNN/ORC International poll results, more than seven out of ten say such a strike would not achieve significant goals for the United States, and it is not in the national interest for the country to get involved in Syria's civil war.⁸⁰

It may also be relevant to analyze the contents of a think-tank study released in 1966 called the "Report from Iron Mountain." The self-proclaimed purpose of the study was to explore various ways to "stabilize society." The major conclusion of the report was that war has been the only reliable means to achieve stability. During times of war, people show more passion and loyalty to the nation's leaders; However, during times of peace, people become resentful of high taxes, shortages, and bureaucratic intervention. When they become

⁷⁹ Itamar Rabinovich, "Damascus, Jerusalem, and Washington: The Syrian-Israeli Relationship as a U.S. Policy Issue," 2009, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2009/03/syria-israel-rabinovich>.

⁸⁰ Paul Steinhauser and John Helton, "CNN poll: Public against Syria Strike Resolution," *CNN*, September 9, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/09/politics/syria-poll-main/index.html>.

disrespectful of their leaders, they become dangerous. It is a perception that the U.S. search for war theatres is intended to help boost its economy due to its vast defense industrial setup. Congress members also support such activism, as many people in their respective constituencies are employed by these defense industries, and politicians who are concerned about re-election do not like their constituents to lose these jobs.⁸¹

The U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Israel would like to weaken Iran and her close associate Hezbollah by keeping them bleeding as the conflict goes on. However, this objective is not synchronized with other objectives of minimizing civilian casualties and preventing the conflict from spreading across Syrian borders. Similarly, indirect support to rebels, by providing weapons and training, does not ensure that supplied weapons will not be transferred to hardliner Jihadists. U.S. armed involvement by sending troops to fight along with rebels is also not a viable option due to the U.S. forces' commitment in Afghanistan. Hence, it is very difficult to identify and pick any best policy option. The beauty is that think tanks have analyzed all the options and their expected outcomes in light of U.S. strategic interests. Policy makers have a very clear view of the situation and can weigh various available policy options in light of the political costs related to rival public sentiment and other pros and cons.

President Barak Obama's request for the deferment of a Congressional vote on the resolution for air strikes against Syria indicates a willingness to afford diplomacy another chance. It also suggests that the U.S. administration has yielded to public demands of staying away from the Syrian civil war.

D. CONCLUSION

The Syrian issue was selected as a case study due its timeliness and the variety of available policy options for U.S. policy makers. Each think tank has examined the whole issue from a specific dimension. Their respective

⁸¹ Edward Griffin, "The Report from Iron Mountain," (2002), 1-2, http://www.freedomforceinternational.org/pdf/Report_from_Iron_Mountain.pdf.

recommendations were based purely on the findings within their domain of basic research hypotheses and constraints. Each recommended course of action is realistic within its domain but may not be the single best fit for all strategic interests. The job of think tanks is to present the best available policy options according to their research to make the job of policy making easier. Prioritization of options as a final policy to achieve the desired end state is then the responsibility of policy makers.

American interests in Syria are in conflict with one another. Accordingly, think tanks have brought forward various policy options; policymakers, however, have to prioritize the options in order to achieve a desired policy outcome. Apparently, policy makers have not succeeded in prioritizing U.S. interests in Syria due to the difference of opinion between the White House and Congress. Actions taken so far on the Syrian issue represent ad hoc tactical choices rather than a unified strategy with a clear objective. At the same time, a range of policy recommendations is void of any course of action to mitigate the risks associated with implementation of each option. The Syrian issue demands a forceful unified U.S. policy to achieve a long-lasting solution, according to the wishes of the majority of the local population. The policy development process is a specialized field and needs input from subject matter experts in their respective fields to address all possible aspects of an issue. The Syrian case also involves several policy development aspects, and proceedings so far have generated many lessons for other nations. Some of the lessons learned and the proposed way forward for the KSA will be discussed in Chapter V.

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V. LESSONS LEARNED AND A WAY FORWARD

The public policy-making process begins with understanding of people's needs. Based on an analysis of potential public needs, the policy makers should determine the impact or effectiveness of all available options within bounds of local dynamics, sensitivities, core values, assumptions, interpretations, approaches possessed by individuals, and national priorities. Public policy shall be directed to effectively cater to people's needs, and result in achieving the goals of the public's welfare. The input of think tanks adds clarity and objectivity to policy making, due to the better understanding of public needs that such input provides.

Another important aspect of any public policy is to understand what is country specific, and what is universal. Any policy targeting various cultures locally or internationally explores local values, sentiments, sensations, family relations, friendships, language, religion, social values, races, age groups, sex, general public knowledge, habits, practices, and much more. The best policy combines all the best facets of people's behavior, local customs, and the local environment. Any policy shall, therefore, be viewed through the lenses of the general public. Ideal policy has the characteristic of being realistic and actable. In order to convince the public to act as desired under the influence of a public policy, policy makers have to stimulate the appeal and assure people that adherence to policy will result in their welfare.

A. LESSONS LEARNED FROM SYRIAN CASE STUDY

Lessons learned from the Syrian issue become more relevant to KSA policy making as there are many cultural commonalities between Syria and KSA (e.g., religion, language, locality). Moreover, the Syrian issue bears many inherent policy facets and challenges. Nation states consider internal political pressures and policy options before taking sides in the international arena. These policy challenges may not necessarily include dealing with violent rebels in a

nation state, but can be economical, security, foreign policy, social welfare, advancing national goals, protecting national interests, capturing market share in the global market, attracting foreign direct investment, and so on.

In the Syria example, independent think tanks in the U.S. provided a platform for public discussion. Various policy options forwarded by think tanks were very valid in their own context and were based on facts. Through think tank discussions, policy makers became well aware of all possible scenarios and their possible outcomes. The policy followed by the U.S. administration on the Syrian conflict was, in fact, a mixture of various recommendations from independent think tanks and feedback from government agencies. President Barak Obama's decision to use the diplomatic channel instead of force has earned recognition and has set the example for other nation states to follow.

The KSA is a rapidly progressing country and needs to keep policies aligned with government development objectives and prevailing market situations in the world. Establishment of the Majlis al Shura, consisting of experts from all walks of life, was a step in the right direction. Encouragement of establishing think tanks outside of the government umbrella will provide additional legitimacy and transparency to government policy. Think tanks will also help the government to keep its policies on the right track in all fields. These organizations will call a spade a spade, at least within their own perspective. Their recommendations will definitely not be legally binding for the government, but public discussion may bring additional pros and cons of the policy to the notice of the government. Hence, an adequate number of independent think tanks will be helpful to bridge the gap between public aspirations and government policies.

The need for independent research organizations has increased, due to globalization. No state can remain immune from the changes that are taking place across the globe. The Syrian issue emerged as an international issue and all leading world powers became indirect stake holders. The globalization lesson is equally applicable to policy making in any public domain. Multinational firms continuously remain on watch for safe investment opportunities. The KSA

government's acceptance of independent research organizations will be a source of encouragement for international organizations (especially multinational investment firms) to invest or start their businesses in KSA. The ever-increasing number of foreign-qualified Saudis, and the establishment of new universities and research centers, highlights SAG openness to new ideas. These firms normally base their decisions on the analysis of market research. The presence of independent research organizations can be a credible source for these multinational firms to get country-specific information. Availability of credible information from independent sources may convince larger numbers of multinational firms to invest in KSA.

KSA's monarchy system of government may appear stable, but the regime remains vulnerable to political instability. The current wave of political unrest in the whole region is a sign of the changed political environment. Public expectations with regard to the government's performance are increasing due to enhanced awareness through media channels and the Internet. The government desperately needs some independent research apparatus to remain aware of ground realities and public sentiments in this information era. It is, therefore, in the interest of the regime and public to accept and support establishment of independent research think tanks. Active involvement of think tanks in the Syrian issue generated plenty of policy options for the U.S. government.

B. THINK TANKS IN LIGHT OF ISLAMIC TEACHINGS

Saudi Arabia is a hard-core religious country and seeks legal guidance from the Quran and Sunnah to run the government. Being the religious leader of the Muslim world, only those ideas that are religiously acceptable to the public may get the due attention of the regime. The idea of encouraging establishment of think tanks in Saudi Arabia needs analysis in light of Islamic teaching. Some discussion of think tanks in light of Islamic teachings will be useful here. Although the concept of think tanks in the modern scientific sense is not available in

Islamic teaching,⁸² however, Islam does have the concept of “shura,” which means consultation. In fact, this concept is very similar to getting guidance from think tanks in the day-to-day decision-making process by the rulers. The salient points of Islamic teachings in this regard are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

Shura comes from an Arabic word shara meaning to extract honey from hives, according to classical Arabic dictionaries. The commonly accepted meaning of shura is consultations and deliberations. There is an analogy between the meanings of shara and shura. Shura brings forth the ideas and opinions from people’s minds in a way that is analogous to the extraction of honey from the hives. The second aspect of the analogy hints towards the benefits or importance of shura in Muslim life. It points out that good ideas and opinions are as sweet as honey. Taking advice from people of wisdom is a pious act in accordance with the teachings of Islam and resembles the role of think tanks in the policy-making process.⁸³

Shura is the process of making decisions by consultations and deliberations, among those who have interest in the matter, on which decision is to be taken, or others who can help them to reach such a decision.⁸⁴ In any matter for which no clear guidance is available in the Quran or Sunnah, Muslims are allowed to go for Jammah or Ijma, meaning unification or agreement. If scholars of any time agree on any issue, that is called Ijma and becomes an Islamic code for common people to follow. Institutionalization of the shura process resembles a think tank’s organization. Shura is a well-defined aspect of the Islamic way of life and its adoption in a religious life is encouraged. The

⁸² Adam Hani Walker, “Shura Mutual Consultation,” <http://www.alislam.org/topics/khilafat/Shura.pdf>.

⁸³ Mulana Muhammad Shafee, *Maarif-ul-Quraan* (Karachi, Pakistan: Ahmad Printing Corporation, 1991), 706.

⁸⁴ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qura’n*, 8thed. (Beltsville, MD: Amna Publications, 1996), Surah 42:37. Note: 4577(7).

Quran has a complete chapter (surah) 42 on the subject of al Shura (consultation). In light of the teaching of the Quran,

(وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ)

Those who harken to their Lord, and establish regular prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation; who spend out of what we bestow on them for sustenance,⁸⁵

(فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ)

So pass over (their faults) and ask (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs of (the moment). When thou hast taken a decision put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).⁸⁶

Consultation is a complete subject in Islam, and has been explained by the Prophet Muhammad (P B U H) to his followers. As Allah has commanded his prophet to consult his companions for decisions making, all rulers are also responsible to consult wise men in the decision-making process. The establishment of the Majlis al Shura was also conceptualized from this guidance and has become an important government agency for public policy advice in KSA. Favorable ingredients are present in KSA for the establishment and growth of think tanks from ideological and religious perspectives.

C. WAY FORWARD

The KSA government is cognizant of the need to have more scientific research and thought institutions to enhance public discourse, and contribute to international dialogue. Basic preparatory work in this regard has already been completed and many universities and research institutions have been established.⁸⁷ This effort, however, is not enough to meet future challenges,

⁸⁵ Ibid., Surah, 42:36.

⁸⁶ Ibid., Surah, 3:159.

⁸⁷ Hisham Akhonbay, *Saudi Arabia's Energy Policy: A Disciplined Approach to Forward Looking Policy Making* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2012), http://csis.org/files/publication/120831_Akhonbay_SaudiArabiaEnergy_Web.pdf.

especially in the policy-making domain. Following are some of the recommended actions to be taken to persuade leading think tanks to establish their local offices in KSA to have firsthand social and cultural knowledge for provision of genuine input to multinational customers:

- The government may arrange an international symposium and invite delegates of leading think tanks. The Ministry of Economy and Planning may take the lead on this, and give presentations on research opportunities available in KSA.
- The government shall create the necessary legal framework to safeguard the interests, and independence of leading research institutions.
- The government may launch an incentive program for research organizations to participate in local research ventures. A mechanism and criteria for giving incentives shall be evolved based on the achievements of local research institutions. This shall include government institutions as well as private institutions. The incentives shall be tied to acceptance of research papers by internationally recognized organizations or their publication in leading international journals. This will create an environment of competition and a sense of achievement for the organizations. Moreover, firms will have the requisite resources to continue their research and development projects.
- The government shall further refine intellectual property laws to foster innovation and a sense of ownership for individual researchers, panels, and institutions.
- The establishment of government universities like KAUST and initiations of research programs under these universities is a step in the right direction. The government may ask its constituent organizations to identify small-to-medium-level research topics and forward them to these universities. Universities will then assign these projects to undergraduate students. Medium-level projects shall be ongoing projects where the next group shall take over from the point where the previous group left off.
- The establishment of KAPSARC is a good sign, as this indicates that the global community has the trust in local policies and government legacy. The government shall generously support the establishment and subsequent sustenance of these institutions.

- Government agencies especially involved in economic, financial, legal, services, and manufacturing policy-making processes shall send their delegates to foreign countries to enhance their capability base and create associations with famous research organizations.

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VI. CONCLUSION

KSA is a major political and economic force in the Middle East. The kingdom holds around 17 percent of the world's proven oil reserves. KSA's traditional Islamic influence is apparent in the Muslim world due to its custodianship of two of Islam's holiest shrines, Mecca and Medina. KSA locals are proud of their Islamic identification and remain committed to Islamic values.

Think tanks can provide requisite guidance to SAG policy makers to assess, and address, the ever diversifying and expanding needs of the kingdom, due to accelerated progress. The presence of an adequate number of capable think tanks in KSA will add legitimacy to the public policy-making process.

Public policy at the national level in the Middle East will be driven by the changed political environment after the Arab Spring. Moreover, information technology has increased the need for citizens to participate directly in the decision-making process. Although all government decision making must be within the bounds of Islamic law, modernization without secularization is permissible. In fact, a major challenge for any advisory body in KSA is rendering policy guidelines on modern issues without compromising Islamic ideology.

The increased need for information for decision making, demands an increased role of think tanks in the policy-making process. Think tanks can provide policy guidance on issues like economic growth management, better resource allocation to support and sustain growth, job creation, reduction of unemployment, financial management, legislation in modern fields, and human capital development. The practice of consulting a think tank is relatively new in the KSA; however, there exists a precedent of similar arrangement known as the Majlis al Shura. The Majlis al Shura is a ministerial-level institution in today's KSA, and has created specialized committees for Organization and Administration, Education, Culture and Information, Islamic Affairs, Services and

Public Utilities, Health, Social Affairs and the Environment, Foreign Affairs, Security Affairs, Economic Affairs, Financial Affairs, Transportation, and Telecommunications.

Accelerating developments in the various fields suggests that the Majlis al Shura alone may not provide the requisite policy guidance in all fields. There is increased demand to help launch independent research centers, and provide them with needed support. The kingdom has a wealth of people to become members of these research centers due to the availability of many foreign-qualified Saudi postgraduates. The KSA government seems willing to extend its support to such institutes without governmental intervention and pressures.

The Syrian issue was selected as a case study, due to its currency and global attention. The Syrian issue generated a broad policy discussion within U.S. government institutions, the international community, and independent research centers all over the world. Many lessons can be drawn for this case study that are specific to the local dynamics of KSA. Lessons learned from the Syrian issue become more relevant to KSA policy making, as there are many cultural commonalities between Syria and KSA (e.g., religion, language, locality). The Syrian issue has many inherent policy facets and challenges that can be employed in economics, security, foreign policy, social welfare, advancing national goals, protecting national interests, capturing market share in the global market, and attracting foreign direct investment. Based on these lessons learned, a way forward was proposed in Chapter V.

The focus of this research was to examine what has been accomplished in the field of establishing think tanks in KSA, their possible role in policy making, challenges, possible political responses, underpinning lessons learned from the Syrian issue, and application of these lessons in a systematic fashion.

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