



The Role of Think Tanks in Israeli Decision-Making



Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay

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Prof. Dr. Walid Abd al-Hay*

Introduction

Think tanks are research centers seeking to study political, social, economic, technical and environmental phenomena in order to provide advice and guide government decisions or the decisions of civil society bodies. They may be financially and administratively independent and not affiliated with any party, or they may be linked to official bodies or parties as well as to private and public universities. These centers act as a point of cooperation between “academics and experts,” and between decision-making bodies at different levels and in various fields.

Think tanks have spread in most countries of the world, and their number in 2007 reached a total of 5,035 in 169 countries, then rose to 11,175 in 2020, an annual increase rate of 472 think tanks.¹ As for the Middle East, there were 373 think tanks in the Arab region, including occupied Palestine, in 2020, constituting 3.33% of the world think tanks, the lowest among the regions of the world. Israel ranks second in the Middle East region after Iran with 78 think tanks compared to 87 in Iran and 53 in Turkey, which means that Israel includes 20.9% of think tanks of the region although its average population to the total population of the region is less than 1.3%.²



* An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.



First: Think Tanks in Israel

Think tanks in Israel can be divided into three types based on their affiliation:³

1. Academic Think Tanks

These are affiliated with Israeli universities, and they include:

- a. Tel Aviv University
 - Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
- b. The Hebrew University
 - Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace
- c. Ben-Gurion University
 - The Chaim Herzog Center for Middle East Studies and Diplomacy
 - The Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism
- d. Bar-Ilan University
 - The Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Studies
- e. University of Haifa
 - The Jewish Arab Center
 - The Golan Research Institute

2. Government Think Tanks

These are affiliated with official institutions such as the ministry of foreign affairs, the security forces and the Knesset:

- Knesset Research and Information Centre (RIC)
- Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center
- The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policy (Mitvim)



3. Non-Governmental Think Tanks

- Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem
- Israeli Center for Democracy
- Israel Institute for Strategic Studies
- Israel Council on Foreign Relations (ICFR)
- The Center for the Renewal of Israeli Democracy (Molad)
- Adva Center
- Reut Institute
- Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA)
- The International Institute for Counter Terrorism
- Israel Center for Social and Economic Progress
- Institute for National Security Studies
- Taub Center for Social Policy Studies
- Arava Institute for Environmental Studies
- Center for Agricultural Economic Research
- Faculty of Biotechnology and Food Engineering
- Maurice Falk Institute for Economic Research
- Israel Democracy Institute
- Jewish People Policy Institute
- Jerusalem Institute for Market Studies (JIMS)
- Kohelet Policy Forum
- Israel-Palestine: Creative Regional Initiatives
- Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership
- Samuel Neaman Institute for Advanced Studies in Science and Technology



Second: The Ranking of Israeli Think Tanks Regionally and Globally

Notwithstanding the criticism it is faced with, the ranking of think tanks released by the University of Pennsylvania shows the following:⁴

- ▶ 1. The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) ranked first among the 78 Israeli think tanks, the 109th globally among the rest of the think tanks (11,175 think tanks), and the first among the 373 think tanks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It also ranked 12th globally among defense and national security think tanks, and 86th globally in the field of foreign policy and international affairs.
- ▶ 2. On the regional level, Israeli think tanks ranked as follows:
 - 2 think tanks ranked within the top ten.
 - 8 think tanks ranked from 11 to 50.
 - 8 think tanks ranked from 51 to 100.
 - 60 think tanks ranked from 101 to 373.
- ▶ 3. Israeli think tanks that ranked the highest globally in the field of foreign policy and international affairs were the INSS (86th), the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policy (Mitvim) (130th), and Kohelet Policy Forum (154th).
- ▶ 4. In the field of social policy, Israel Center for Social and Economic Progress ranked 15th in the world.

Third: Israeli Researchers' Evaluation of the Weight of Think Tanks

The weight of think tanks in the Israeli decision-making seems to be a subject of contention among Israeli researchers as there are two trends:⁵

The First Trend

A number of heads of think tanks, especially non-governmental ones, tend to acknowledge a modest contribution of think tanks in formulating government decision, and they believe that the weight of the most important among these think tanks in Israel is not comparable to the weight of their US counterparts in this respect. They assert that Israeli think tanks have abundance in book production (about 800 annually) to help cover their financial needs or to achieve academic motives only. But these studies are not read by political officials, which makes their impact on decision-making limited. Israeli researchers consider that the weak role of think tanks in formulating Israeli policies are due to the following factors:

- ▶ 1. The Israeli political system is parliamentary. Thus, parties control decision-making, and the party representatives in the Knesset are forced to abide by their parties' directions, which makes it futile for Israeli MK's to seek outside advice.
- ▶ 2. The proportional electoral system in force in Israel weakens the chances of electing intellectual elites with an independent and renewed opinion. The formation of coalition governments places the interests of smaller parties (such as small religious parties) among the priorities of the largest party to ensure that they join the coalition. Thus, there is no need for think tanks as the priority is for forming the government more than for its policies.
- ▶ 3. The degree of openness of the Israeli political system in strategic decisions makes the scope of intervention of think tanks minor. For example, think tanks had no role in former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to withdraw from Gaza Strip, despite the decision's strategic dimension. Perhaps the model of the forum called "Golda [Meir]'s kitchen" in the Israeli decision-making process reflects the limited circle of decision-makers. "Mystery" also is dominant in Israeli policies, consequently the margin of seeking help from those outside the decision-making circle becomes narrower, especially since the military and security forces that control the strategic decision tend to limit the number of decision-making bodies, for fear of leaking information or getting undesired sides engaged. In addition, the predominance of the



Ariel Sharon



Golda Meir



security and military nature in Israeli strategic policy decisions limits the chances of knowing what is happening in the “kitchen cabinet,” while the chances are broader in the case of decisions of a service nature.⁶

- ▶ 4. Israeli think tanks cannot be compared to their counterparts in other countries in terms of financial capabilities, which makes them less efficient and less effective. For example, an official in one of the oldest think tanks in Israel, the Van Leer Institute, indicates that one of the Institute’s endowments amounts to \$6.5 million, which is a large number in Israel but is negligible if compared to think tanks in other countries, especially in the US or Europe. Besides, the aid by government or businessmen to Israeli think tanks is not encouraging enough.
- ▶ 5. The tax system in Israel, unlike many countries of the world, does not exempt think tanks from tax, nor does it exempt donors from taxes, even when some of their revenues go to think tanks. Moreover, the Israeli society is not used to providing grants to institutions such as think tanks, especially since the prevailing impression in the society is that their weight in decision-making is weak. While this discourages the public or companies from providing financial support to Israeli think tanks, it opens the way for US donors to exploit their need for financial support, as happened with the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, which prompts Israeli think tanks to be affiliated with universities so they are turned into semi-official institutions.
- ▶ 6. The affiliation of think tanks with universities makes their research orientations more inclined to the academic dimension than to applied or daily policies, which makes their productions less attractive to decision-makers.
- ▶ 7. A significant proportion of the staff in think tanks have previously served in the military and security institutions and maintain personal ties with officials in these institutions. Hence, consultation takes place among them as individuals rather than as a collective action between the think tank and the institution.
- ▶ 8. Some sectors, especially the military, have specialized research cells to develop analysis and alternatives, which makes them less in need of think tanks, not to mention that they possess sensitive information that think tanks do not possess.



Shalem Center



The Second Trend

Supporters of this trend claim that the perspective above is inaccurate. They believe that the role of think tanks in Israeli decision-making, especially in the security and defense field, which is the main concern of decision-makers and society, is greater than it seems to be. This trend is based on the following arguments:

There are think tanks affiliated with official institutions and universities. Official institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Knesset and the security forces, are an essential part of decision-making by virtue of their function and position in the decision-making process. As for think tanks affiliated with universities, it is sufficient to point out the following:⁷

- ▶ 1. Some universities, including their think tanks, receive financial support from military and security institutions in return for the studies they provide to these bodies.
- ▶ 2. Ilan Pappé, former professor in Israeli universities, estimates that half of the professors in Israeli universities work with the security forces,⁸ which means that there is a link between decision-makers and think tanks, but it is surrounded by secrecy.



Ilan Pappé



Yossi Beilin

- ▶ 3. Yossi Beilin, who has held several ministerial positions and was one of the most prominent leaders in the Israeli Labor Party, says that the Oslo Accords would not have been possible without think tanks which had a role in this respect. This means that think tanks and research centers also play a role, but behind the scenes.
- ▶ 4. Some workers at the Global Research in International Affairs Center (GLORIA) of the Interdisciplinary Center of Herzliya, assert that the Israeli parties do not seek the help of think tanks, but those who request it are civil servants and some



officials, unlike the situation in Britain where parties, such as the Labour Party and the Conservative Party (UK), have think tanks associated with them. GLORIA has developed the political debate on strategic issues, because it brings together perspectives from all sides and disciplines, and it has become a point of interest for Israeli politicians since the beginning of 2000. This think tank has even become one of the circles of influence in determining the political directions of the government, especially in strategic and future aspects.

- 5. There is an overlap between official decision-making personnel and those working in think tanks, as some ministers used to work in think tanks, while some who work in think tanks are former ministers or officials in security agencies. This can be illustrated with the following examples:
- a. The former director of the INSS, Amos Yadlin, was a general in the Israeli army and head of the Military Intelligence (Aman), as was his deputy at the Institute, Udi Dekel. The current director is Manuel Trajtenberg who served as head of different government economic bodies and also chaired the Planning Committee of the Higher Education Council. Currently, among the INSS staff are former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, former President of the Supreme Court of Israel Dorit Beinisch, and Meir Ben-Shabbat, who has served as national security adviser to the prime minister and was involved in formulating the Abraham Accords. There are also Mark Regev, who has served as senior public relations and international media adviser to the Prime Minister and as Israel's ambassador to London, in addition to Haggay Etkes who represented Israel at the International Monetary Fund.
 - b. David Kimche was deputy director of the Mossad and occupied a number of senior positions, especially in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while Daniel Ayalon was deputy foreign minister, and they both worked for the Israeli Council on Foreign Relations.
 - c. Gidi Grinstein served as a coordinator for the Israeli delegation during the Israeli negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, and he works at the Reut Institute.
 - d. The director of the JCPA, Dore Gold, was the representative of Israel at the United Nations. Other JCPA staff include Alan Baker, who was Israel's ambassador to Canada, Freddy Eytan served as Israel's



ambassador to Mauritania and Zvi Mazel was Israel's ambassador to Sweden.

- e. Researcher Martin Sherman is a former officer in the Israeli army who worked at the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies.
- f. The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies was originally the brainchild of the first head of the Mossad, Reuven Shiloah, in 1959, which resulted in the establishment of the Reuven Shiloah Institute later merged with Tel Aviv University in 1966.

Fourth: The Weight of Think Tanks in the Israeli Political Decision

Israeli researchers assert that the effectiveness of think tanks increasingly influences decisions based on a number of indicators, such as:⁹

- ▶ 1. The amount of publications and seminars that affect the societal culture, on the one hand, and the decision-makers, on the other hand.
- ▶ 2. The relationship of the heads of think tanks with decision makers, especially those related to strategic decisions, such as defense or security affairs. This enhances the interdependence between the theoretical and applied dimensions and may enhance the financial resources for the think tank.

Some researchers object to the above claiming that if the study from the think tank is long, the decision-maker is more likely not to read it. Also, the “discourse” presented by the decision-maker may be motivated by attracting the voter, which sometimes triggers the irony of academics. In addition, the public may not be equipped with cognitive mechanisms to assimilate the content of academic studies produced by think tanks, and we rarely find statements from those working in these institutions regarding providing counsel to decision-makers.



Fifth: Standards for Measuring the Role of Think Tanks in Decision-Making

Based on a previous study on the role of think tanks in the decision-making process, the writer found that the methodology most indicative of the weight of think tanks is that based on analyzing the content of their literature, especially recommendations, then comparing the literature with the political behavior of the state as reflected in its decisions.¹⁰ High congruence, over multiple time periods and within different international interactions, is an indication of a clear influence, provided that this literature is for the most important or advanced think tanks in the international, regional or local ranking. There are studies¹¹ on the impact of think tanks that have adopted this methodology of measuring the relationship between the orientations of studies issued by think tanks and government policies, then comparing the degree of congruence between the two issues. This methodology was applied to the INSS,¹² where the examination of the Institute's intellectual production showed that it has suggested the main outlines of the Israeli defense and security policies, and these studies corresponded with the state policies embraced after they were published. For example, in the field of conflict management with specific regional powers, the INSS studies considered these powers as dangers to Israeli security, which is evident in the field of studies of Hamas, Hizbullah and Iran. When comparing the central ideas of these studies and their conformity with Israeli policies during Israel's wars on Lebanon in 2006 and on Hamas in 2008/2009 and 2014, and also with the government's strategic orientations towards Iran, high congruence is detected between these policies and those studies.

Also, studying the biographies of most of the founders or directors of Israeli think tanks indicates that they are graduates of American universities or have worked with US research institutions, especially Jewish ones. This might explain the harmony between the Israeli government's relation with the US and the orientations of these researchers in these think tanks.¹³

Conclusion

- 1. It seems that the intertwined relation between workers in think tanks and the official and semi-official state institutions is higher than the prevailing impression. This is due to the obvious overlap in the think tanks' budgets, on one hand, and government support they receive in one way or another, on the other hand. Also, the background of the staff in these institutions as state



employees, especially in the military and security institutions and foreign affairs, must be taken into consideration.

- ▶ 2. The degree of congruence between the recommendations of the higher-ranking Israeli think tanks and the state's strategic policies is clearly high despite the fact that these institutions belong to different political movements.



- ▶ 3. A high percentage of those working in Israeli think tanks identify in their studies with the methods and conclusions of their American counterparts, just as the policies of the two countries identify with each other.

Based on the foregoing, we recommend that policy and decision-making bodies in the Arab countries and the Palestinian resistance forces pay special attention to these think tanks, especially those in top international ranking and those which specialize in issues that concern the Palestinian resistance and represent its strategic interests such as the studies of INSS, the Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, and the International Institute for Counter Terrorism.



Endnotes

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