The New Kingdom of Forces: Research Institutes in the Middle East

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The Arab Spring substantially strengthened the research institutes in the Arab world. New institutions are being established, while ones that existed prior to this revolutionary period attempt to tailor themselves to the new era, and are now more present in mainstream conferences and in the media. Arab research institutes originally developed in a Middle East of authoritarian regimes, which used them as a tool to gain legitimacy. Today, however, they are rapidly becoming a focal point for developing knowledge regarding democratic and civic values. Their researchers are engaged in explaining, analyzing and tracing the changes in the Middle East, and show increasing curiosity regarding different aspects of Israeli society and politics. This trend should be leveraged in order to develop channels for policy and societal dialogues between Israeli and Arab research institutes.

At the dawn of the Arab democratic era several countries in the Middle Eastern have experienced a series of dramatic events. This continues to change the balance of power inside and between them. These changes require a reassessment of the distribution of power within each country and its impact on the fabric of relationships inside the country, between Middle Eastern countries and between them and the rest of the world.

One of the main characteristics of this new era is the prominence of Arab research institutes or think tanks on the local and international levels. Representatives of those institutes are seen at major events and conferences around the world and in the Middle East. This fact may be an indication of the dramatic change of the Arab countries’ vision of themselves and others. The efforts by Arab scholars to explain, analyze and detect future changes in the Middle East demand we acquaint ourselves with these research institutes and learn about them in depth.

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the think tanks in the Arab world and through them to highlight the emerging potential balance of power in the Arab countries in the wake of the Arab Spring. The article is based on three main sources of information: familiarity with the research literature in the field, the websites of leading Middle East think tanks, and meetings and conversations I had with representatives of Arab institutions at international conferences in the last two years.

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Independent research institutes in the Middle East began to emerge in the shadow of authoritarian regimes and served as instruments for the governments to legitimize their rule. In his global ranking of think tanks for 2011, Dr. James McGann, one of the leading researchers on the subject in the world, listed 6,545 think tanks. 323 of them (5%) were in Middle Eastern countries (excluding Cyprus, although the ranking does include it in the Middle East despite its EU membership). 113 of the Middle Eastern institutes were in non-Arab countries: 54 in Israel, 32 in Iran and 27 in Turkey. This leaves 210 institutes in the Arab world (3% of the institutes in the world), most of which are concentrated in five countries: 34 in Egypt, 29 in Iraq, 28 Palestinian institutes, 18 in Tunisia and 16 in Jordan.

These figures reflect the trend that prevailed in the Arab world until recently and indicate the dictatorships’ lack of support of the research institutes as well as their long-standing oppression of intellectuals and prevention of study and research of domestic, regional or global affairs. The state of research in the Arab world, as reflected by the figures, is very poor. There are huge gaps between it and the rest of the world, both in terms of knowledge and the research and advancement of democratization processes, as was seen in the Arab Spring events beginning at the end of 2010. In the absence of research institutes and civil society organizations, many countries of the Middle East suffer from problems that they were prevented from addressing during the rule of the dictatorships.

Following the Arab Spring we have seen a significant emergence of think tanks, intellectuals and civil society organizations in the Middle East. There has not been a comprehensive mapping of these think tanks yet because many organizations and institutions are still under construction and developing their organizational or research identities. However, we are witnessing a growing need of Arab organizations, institutes and intellectuals to take part in democratization processes and develop the conversation and common knowledge of democratic and civic values. This development can be expected to produce social mobility and help democratize countries that develop their civil societies, think tanks, and political cultures based on democratic values like human rights and pluralism.

The joint initiative by the UN and Kuwait to establish the Arab Planning Institute (API) in 1966 motivated other countries in the region to establish research institutes along the Western model, reflected by their goals, activities and scientific approaches to domestic issues and later to strategic and regional issues as well. In 1980 the Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) was established in Saudi Arabia. The center serves more than 400 Arab cities from 22 countries in the Middle East.

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3 www.arab-api.org/ndx_e.htm
Other institutes have served as platforms for the dissemination of pan-Arab ideas and ideologies or the promotion of the idea of the unification of Arab countries as a reaction to the defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the 1967 war. One of the institutes initiated as a response to that war was the Center for Arab Unity Studies, founded in Beirut in 1975. The center was founded by more than 30 Arab intellectuals who believed that the lack of Arab unity in a joint effort against Israel was the reason for the Arab defeat in the war. Through the institute they sought to advance the idea of Arab unity and activity against the Zionist movement and Western imperialism in the Middle East.

Alongside extensive research activities, the center holds conferences and lectures and grants awards for the promotion of the pan-Arab idea, such as the prestigious prize named after the late Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. The prize is awarded to people who advocate the nationalist ideas of Abdel Nasser, as the person who both conceived and implemented the idea of Arab unity and national renaissance in the East. Furthermore, a large part of the center's activity is devoted to increasing the internal Arab discourse on Western thought and its effects. Likewise, the center also studies the dimensions of Western rule and its characteristics and especially Israeli policy in the occupied territories, while using Arabic translations of the writings of Israeli experts.

The center has published 439 books about Arab, regional and global politics; 224 books about Arab nationalism; and 163 books about economics. The center also publishes the best periodical in the Arab world, *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi* (The Arab Future).

Thus, in 2012, the Middle East Studies Center, founded in Jordan in 1991, announced the first translation into the Arabic language of the Babylonian Talmud, as part of its goal of learning the Jewish narrative and heritage, of which the center claims the Arab world knows but little. The translation project, described as one of the most important projects of the 21st century, is the fruit of the strenuous labor of dozens of researchers from a range of disciplines for some five years and is considered a tremendous breakthrough for the Arab world in terms of knowing the “other” in the region.

One of the leading research institutes of Israeli affairs is in Ramallah. The Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies (MADAR) was founded in 2000 and employs Palestinian researchers from both Israel and the occupied territories. Furthermore, the center has been directed for the last ten years by Palestinian experts from Israel. Dr. Huneida Ghanem, who currently directs the institute, has a Ph.D. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Likewise, the author and literary scholar from Acre, Anton Shalhat, heads the center’s Israeli department. The center focuses on the study and research of Israeli society and politics. The center also focuses on the translation into Arabic of Israeli op-ed pieces and terminology stressing the divisions within Israeli society and government as to a permanent agreement and the founding of a Palestinian state. The center provides an opportunity for Palestinians to learn about Israeli society and politics. It also

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5 www.caus.org.lb/Home/publication_categories.php?OrganizationId=2
7 www.madar-center.org/madar-en.php
serves as a center for the dissemination of information about Israel from a Palestinian perspective, as most of its researchers are Palestinian residents of Israel who know both the Hebrew language and the Israeli context first-hand.

After the revolutions in the Arab world in early 2011 the number of institutes grew drastically. Meanwhile, think tanks from the pre-revolutionary era have initiated drastic changes, both on the organizational and research levels. One of the leading think tanks in the Arab world is Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS) in Egypt.\(^8\) The center was founded in 1968 and focused on studies of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Since 1972 its activity has expanded to include the study of international affairs with an emphasis on the Arab world. The center has published more than 150 books and has a team of more than 35 researchers. It was rated as one of the 50 best research institutes in the world.\(^9\) The institute's publications include weekly, monthly and annual strategic reports covering global, regional and local issues. Since the revolution, the institute has been undergoing significant reorganization. In March 2012 it began its process of restructuring and hiring of new and young staff.\(^10\)

Another example of the change of perception and research agenda is the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (ITES).\(^11\) It was founded in 1993 during the regime of ousted President Zein al-Abidine bin Ali. In 2011, after the first revolution in the Arab world, the institute's homepage was re-launched. It presents a grim picture that for the first time describes the relationship that existed between the dictator and the institute, and how its activity had been curtailed according to the dictator's political and governmental needs. Bin Ali is described as having destroyed the country and paving the way for the people to revolt. This case tells us about the system of oppression the Arab rulers used against research institutes, intellectuals and reformers in the Arab world. The institute redefined its mission following the revolution and focused it on three main goals: 1. **Bread**: nutritional security, social justice and economic solidarity. 2. **Liberty**: civil liberty, participatory democracy, government. 3. **National dignity**: the right to housing, education and work.

Meanwhile the existing institutes entered a process of revision and reconstruction to incorporate new and young experts in research projects they were previously unable to conduct freely. For instance, an expert at a leading think tank in Egypt told me the following: “Now we have a much harder job that requires tremendous efforts: to study and investigate domestic issues which we were forbidden to deal with during the Mubarak regime, such as corruption and the quality of public services in Egypt.”\(^12\) The researcher said they have what to learn from the Israeli experience and therefore his institute is showing interest in Israeli science, technology, society and politics.

The biggest research and study project was instituted in Egypt in 2011: Zewail City of Science and Technology – Egypt’s National Project for Scientific Renaissance. The

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\(^8\) [http://acpss.ahram.org.eg/eng/ahram/2004/7/5/abot0.htm](http://acpss.ahram.org.eg/eng/ahram/2004/7/5/abot0.htm)

\(^9\) McGann, Ibid., p. 34. The figure does not include research institutes in the US.

\(^10\) From a meeting with a senior researcher at the Al-Ahram Center.


\(^12\) From a meeting with a senior researcher at the Al-Ahram Center.
foundations of the project were laid during the Mubarak regime in 2000, and in 2011 the first phase of the project was launched. It is named after Prof. Ahmed Zewail, who won the 1999 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Zewail City was given 113,000 m² in the first phase. It conducts extensive research in seven research institutes in science, economics and international relations.

The development of the think tanks led to the establishment of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. The center was founded in 2011 and is headed by Dr. Azmi Bishara, who runs its offices from Qatar. The center’s staff includes 50 researchers and translators, in addition to policy analysts and writers of position papers and articles that are published on its website and presented at conferences. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the institute's focuses of research and among the writers on the subject are Palestinian researchers and intellectuals from Israel. The center also focuses on social and historic research and the study of applied policy.

New think tanks specialize in different subjects, with most of the new institutes being oriented towards democracy and the development of civil society. For instance, the Vision Institute for Civil Society Studies was founded in Jordan in 2010. It focuses on the connection between civil society organizations in Jordan and the Arab world. In 2011 the center issued a current manual on think tanks in the Arab world. The 88-page manual contains a comprehensive analysis of the research institutes in the Arab world before the Arab Spring and offers options for cooperation between Arab organizations, think tanks and intellectuals by joining the Network of Democrats in the Arab World. The network was created in 2006 in the UK and began enlisting members so that Arab civil society organizations, think tanks and intellectuals could work together to promote democracy and human and civil rights in the Arab world. Today the network provides consulting and guidance services and probably also financial support to more than 30 organizations and think tanks in the Arab world. Dozens of the organizations and institutes in the network are new, having been established after 2010. As part of the network's activity, it launched the Arab Spring Center, which defined its goals as studying phenomena connected to the Arab Spring in the Arab world and their connection to the regional and global system.

Think tanks are the basis for information and the promotion of democratic discourse in countries still experiencing bloody struggles between their citizens and governments. For example, the Syrian Institute for Studies and Research seeks to promote a future democratic and civil discourse between the people of Syria in the era after the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime. The institute operates outside of Syria but presents the writings and publications of exiled Syrian intellectuals, lecturers and researchers.

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13 www.zewailcity.edu.eg/
14 http://english.dohainstitute.org
15 The website is under construction at the following address: http://www.vicss.org.jo/
16 http://videomaroc.net/ndaworld/joomla_en/
17 www.ndaworld.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=85&Itemid=268
18 www.arabsi.org/
19 www.dirasat.ws
Many of the new and old institutes in the Arab world work together with other institutes in the Arab world or on the international level. One of the most prominent among them is the Arab Reform Initiative, an organization that combines the activity of 16 leading research institutes in the Arab world. The organization promotes democracy, transparency and civil and social justice in the Arab world. It also promotes cooperation between Arab and international research institutes on security affairs and issues of governmental control mechanisms in the Arab countries in the era of the Arab Spring.

This trend of the development of research institutes in the Arab world in the new age is a vital source for the emergence of a dialogue between the countries of the region, and especially between Israel and the Arab countries, for the following reasons:

Important political science theorists such as John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber consider civil organizations, based on the active participation of citizens, to be bodies that support and strengthen democracy. The number of research institutes in the Arab world is growing steadily, as is their influence on shaping the domestic Arab discourse. This is a result of the democratization and freedom of the Arab world following the wave of protests and revolutions, in which the research institutes have great importance and a key role in shaping the internal and external discourse.

We have detected a change in the attitude of the research institutes towards Israel. The interest and desire to learn about Israel's society, politics and technology have become an important axis in the work of the Arab institutes in the Middle East.

New institutes that developed since 2011, and old institutes undergoing reorganization, reflect an emerging trend in the Arab world: the promotion of democratization processes, the development of civil society, fundamental changes in research approaches, increasing interest in science and technology and a more open and liberal attitude towards Middle Eastern countries, including Israel. This can be seen in the new conversation coming out of the institutes towards Israel, which is considered a technological superpower and democratic country that advances its citizens and cares about their rights as citizens and human beings.

There is no question that the contribution of the research institutes is growing as a result of the interest and intention in the Arab world to see a drastic change in daily life. As a result there is a new willingness to accept recommendations and conclusions generated by research institutes that were previously controlled by the state and served the regime more than the citizens.

The volume of research in the Arab institutes and its quality are both increasing as a result of the many issues that opened to public discussion following the waves of protest. I can see in these institutions noteworthy efforts to redefine their goals and activities and to incorporate young forces and new experts, who constitute a powerful

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20 www.arab-reform.net/arab-securitocracies-and-security-sector-reform
force in the Arab world today. The willingness to cooperate with Israeli researchers has also become part of the discourse in the Arab world. At a conference in Morocco under the auspices of Syracuse University from the state of New York I met more than 20 Arab researchers, some of whom supported or even suggested conducting joint research with Israeli research institutes and intellectuals.

In summary, in an age of change the ability of a person or institution to be open, creative and practical are considered vital qualities for the development of dialogue and the exchange of information and knowledge management. In the case of the research institutes in the Arab world, this task appears to be of particular importance and a powerful source for far-reaching change in the area. To date there have not been comprehensive in-depth studies of the research institutes in the Arab world. These institutes have been surveyed and mapped but there has not been an in-depth effort to learn about the intellectual streams to which they belong; the level of their researchers' expertise, education and experience; their annual budgets or mapping of their overall activities to assess the volume of their activity in quantitative terms; their target audiences; the connection of those institutes with Western institutes, and their connections with the decision-makers in their respective countries. Furthermore, the orientation towards Israel of the experts in the Arab research institutes is also worthy of study. This effort might cast light on dark corners and make a real contribution at a time of change and the appearance of new opportunities on the horizon.

From the perspective of developing dialogue between the think tanks in the Middle East to support and promote democracy, and strengthening our connection to our environment, we identify tremendous potential for the integration and contribution of Israeli intellectuals and experts in the new processes in the Middle East. One of the main routes for such integration is the development of relations between think tanks in Israel and in the Arab world, with the relations centering on the exchange of knowledge and use of new methods tailored to different target populations to promote democracy and civil society in the area for a more promising and democratic present and future in this region.