

America's Middle East Policy Think Tanks: What Went Wrong?

US Think Tanks and the Crisis of Confidence

America's Middle East foreign policy think tanks are experiencing a monumental crisis of confidence. Citizens and the news media are clamoring for ever more information and insight into the region. However, think tank luminaries formerly hailed as Iraq or Middle East policy experts on broadcast news networks suddenly have few answers. Many have simply fled the media circuit. With think tank research frameworks backing America's new preemptive military strategy increasingly resembling a hopeless dot-com fantasy, the process of American foreign policy formulation itself is facing increased scrutiny. **As Americans look nervously at postwar Iraq, looming confrontations with Syria and Iran, and staggering Israeli-Palestinian peace process, never before has solid, credible and relevant research about the region been so desperately needed.**

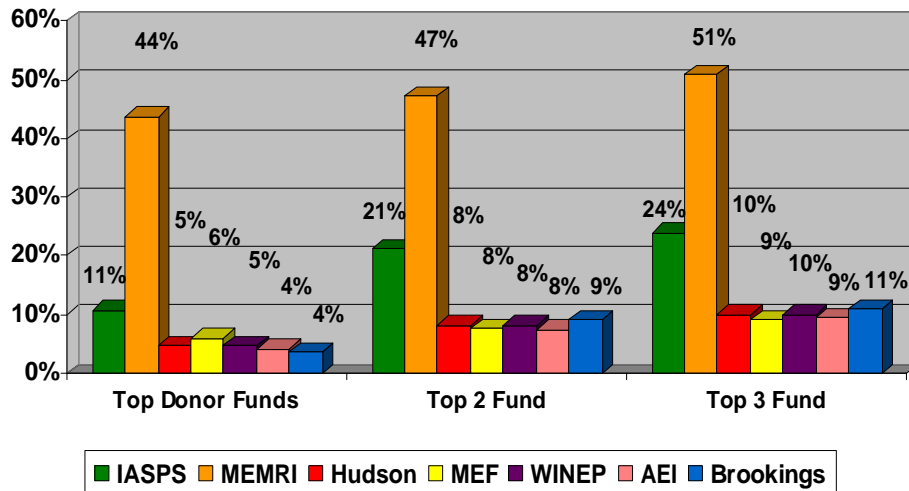
IRMEP has identified three core failures of America's foreign policy think tanks: research funding that is too highly concentrated, lack of peer review by credible, knowledgeable and independent outsiders; and highly reactive, tactically driven research agendas with little strategic focus. Adequately addressing these shortcomings will improve the quality of think tank research and contribute to future US foreign policy success in the region.

Dangerously Concentrated: Middle East Policy Research Funding

The following provides a snapshot of donor concentration levels. (Exhibit 1)

Exhibit 1: Funding Concentration: Top Three Donors

(Internal Revenue Service and IRMEP 2003)



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Exhibit 1 includes data from IRS 990 forms filed by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Hudson Institute, Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Middle East Forum (MEF), and the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASPS).

Building trust and a “glass wall” between large customers (donors) and analysts is now indispensable for research organizations, from Wall Street to Massachusetts Avenue. IRMEP recommends that the top three donors of any policy research institute fund no more than 2% of any trailing four year public donations. Breadth, rather than depth, of funding generates credibility that the research represents broader interests rather than those of a small handful of anonymous financial backers. The Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASPS), with offices in Washington D.C. and Jerusalem, though not technically an American think tank, writes extensively about “American interests”. However, with only three donors providing 24% of trailing four year income, IASPS is the second most poorly positioned of the group. IASPS should immediately strive to correct this by raising funds from a much larger universe of supporters.

The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) faces similar challenges. Although MEMRI influences US policy by targeted distribution of selectively translated news to policy makers, it could have more impact with a commercial subscription based news service business model. This would allow MEMRI to charge a fee to each news recipient and thus translate a much broader range of Middle East news. The discipline of the market would also reveal whether MEMRI’s recipients value the material MEMRI selects for translation. In the year 2000, three donors accounted for over 58% of MEMRI’s income.

While the larger Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute do not file separate IRS forms for their Middle East research centers, they too should carefully monitor for unhealthy levels of funding concentration. **From a cash flow standpoint, heavy reliance on huge gifts from a single entrepreneur at the Brookings Saban Center may leave it without the more stable cash flow and credibility a more broadly based membership can generate.**

Independent Peer Review: The Crucible of Quality

Pre-publication critical review by outside peers is essential for leading academic publishers such as Harvard Business School Publishing and specialist scientific journals. Although even established authors spend many extra hours performing additional research to cover the inevitable gaps revealed in the process, in the end peer review provides a reliable crucible for forging new ideas.

In spite of academic references to their researchers as “scholars” and “fellows”, the Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute function more like “black boxes” with self referential feedback loops. The lack of robust review by readily available outside experts has caused a steady but marked erosion in the quality and value of their research. In arenas as complex and volatile as the Middle East, lack of consultation with a range of outside subject area experts who have done primary research in academia, the diplomatic ranks and the business world in foreign countries becomes glaringly obvious when policies are actually put into practice only to fail.

IRMEP recommends that Middle East policy think tanks routinely circulate their research for review by at least 100 independent outside specialists before publishing and promoting policy in the name of “American interests”. Major policy works should undergo at least 500 independent reviews. Though painful and time consuming, the quality improvements justify the delays and costs.

The Research Agenda: Focus on the Important, not just the Urgent

American Middle East think tank research agendas have become overly reactive and focused on urgencies of the moment. Although research examining the tactics of terrorism and tactics of defense are valued, deeper research addressing the more important core causes and solutions remains to be done. **IRMEP suggests the following “mid course” correction to think tanks that wish to elevate their relevance over the medium term.**

Exhibit #2
Current and Suggested Research Agenda
(Source: IRMEP 2003)

Current Research	Suggested Research
Tactics of Terror	Causes of Terror. Long term strategic solutions.
Arab Islamism	Arab Islamism and American Zionism
Reconstruction Opportunities in Iraq	Development, Trade and Business Opportunities in the Arab Middle East
Circumventing the UN	Productive US engagement with existing NGOs, NGO performance improvement

Summary

By addressing their own shortcomings, American foreign policy think tanks may once again stride the high ground of credibility and relevance. Focusing on the “big three” issues is a first step although improvements in recruitment, hiring, workforce diversity and board composition must also be made. Although painful, the implementation of diversified funding strategies, peer review, and improved research agendas will help American policy research again become effective, relevant and useful for policymakers and the American people.

Contacts and Further Reading

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