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US thinktanks give lessons in foreign policy

Brian Whitaker reports on the network of research institutes whose views and TV appearances are supplanting all other experts on Middle Eastern issues

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A little-known fact about Richard Perle, the leading advocate of hardline policies at the Pentagon, is that he once wrote a political thriller. The book, appropriately called *Hard Line*, is set in the days of the cold war with the Soviet Union. Its hero is a male senior official at the Pentagon, working late into the night and battling almost single-handedly to rescue the US from liberal wimps at the state department who want to sign away America's nuclear deterrent in a disarmament deal with the Russians.

Ten years on Mr Perle finds himself cast in the real-life role of his fictional hero - except that the Russians are no longer a threat, so he has to make do with the Iraqis, the Saudis and terrorism in general.

In real life too, Mr Perle is not fighting his battle single-handed. Around him there is a cosy and cleverly-constructed network of Middle East "experts" who share his neo-conservative outlook and who pop up as talking heads on US television, in newspapers, books, testimonies to congressional committees, and at lunchtime gatherings in Washington.

The network centres on research institutes - thinktanks that attempt to influence government policy and are funded by tax-deductible gifts from unidentified donors.

When he is not too busy at the Pentagon, or too busy running Hollinger Digital - part of the group that publishes the Daily Telegraph in Britain - or at board meetings of the Jerusalem



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Post, Mr Perle is "resident fellow" at one of the thinktanks - the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

Mr Perle's close friend and political ally at AEI is David Wurmser, head of its Middle East studies department. Mr Perle helpfully wrote the introduction to Mr Wurmser's book, *Tyranny's Ally: America's Failure to Defeat Saddam Hussein*.

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Mr Wurmser's wife, Meyrav, is co-founder, along with Colonel Yigal Carmon, formerly of Israeli military intelligence - of the Middle East Media Research Institute (Memri), which specialises in translating and distributing articles that show Arabs in a bad light.

She also holds strong views on leftwing Israeli intellectuals, whom she regards as a threat to Israel (see "[Selective Memri](#)", Guardian Unlimited, August 12, 2002).

Ms Wurmser currently runs the Middle East section at another thinktank - the Hudson Institute, where Mr Perle recently joined the board of trustees. In addition, Ms Wurmser belongs to an organisation called the Middle East Forum.

Michael Rubin, a specialist on Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, who recently arrived from yet another thinktank, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, assists Mr Perle and Mr Wurmser at AEI. Mr Rubin also belongs to the Middle East Forum.

Another Middle East scholar at AEI is Laurie Mylroie, author of *Saddam Hussein's Unfinished War Against America*, which expounds a rather daft theory that Iraq was behind the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing.

When the book was published by the AEI, Mr Perle hailed it as "splendid and wholly convincing".

An earlier book on Iraq Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf which Ms Mylroie co-authored with Judith Miller, a New York Times journalist, became the New York Times's No 1 bestseller.

Ms Mylroie and Ms Miller both have connections with the Middle East Forum. Mr Perle, Mr Rubin, Ms Wurmser, Ms Mylroie and Ms Miller are all clients of Eleana Benador, a Peruvian-born linguist who acts as a sort of theatrical agent for experts on the Middle East and terrorism, organising their TV appearances and speaking engagements.

Of the 28 clients on Ms Benador's books, at least nine are connected with the AEI, the Washington Institute and the Middle East Forum.

Although these three privately-funded organisations promote views from only one end of the political spectrum, the amount of exposure that they get with their books, articles and TV appearances is extraordinary.

The Washington Institute, for example, takes the credit for placing up to 90 articles written by its members - mainly "op-ed" pieces - in newspapers during the last year.

Fourteen of those appeared in the Los Angeles Times, nine in New Republic, eight in the Wall Street Journal, eight in the Jerusalem Post, seven in the National Review Online, six in the Daily Telegraph, six in the Washington Post, four in the New York Times and four in the Baltimore Sun. Of the total, 50 were written by Michael Rubin.

Anyone who has tried offering op-ed articles to a major newspaper will appreciate the scale of this achievement.

The media attention bestowed on these thinktanks is not for want of other experts in the field. American universities have about 1,400 full-time faculty members specialising in the Middle East.

Of those, an estimated 400-500 are experts on some aspect of contemporary politics in the region, but their views are rarely sought or heard, either by the media or government.

"I see a parade of people from these institutes coming through as talking heads [on cable TV]. I very seldom see a professor from a university on those shows," says Juan Cole, professor of history at Michigan University, who is a critic of the private institutes.

"Academics [at universities] are involved in analysing what's going on but they're not advocates, so they don't have the same impetus," he said.

"The expertise on the Middle East that exists in the universities is not being utilised, even for basic information."

Of course, very few academics have agents like Eleana Benador to promote their work and very few are based in Washington - which can make arranging TV appearances, or rubbing shoulders with state department officials a bit difficult.

Those who work for US thinktanks are often given university-style titles such as "senior fellow", or "adjunct scholar", but their research is very different from that of universities - it is entirely directed towards shaping government policy.

What nobody outside the thinktanks knows, however, is who pays for this policy-shaping research.

Under US law, large donations given to non-profit, "non-partisan" organisations such as thinktanks must be itemised in their annual "form 990" returns to the tax authorities. But the identity of donors does not need to be made public.

The AEI, which deals with many other issues besides the Middle East, had assets of \$35.8m (£23.2m) and an income of \$24.5m in 2000, according to its most recent tax return.

It received seven donations of \$1m or above in cash or shares, the highest being \$3.35m.

The Washington Institute, which deals only with Middle East policy, had assets of \$11.2m and an income of \$4.1m in 2000. The institute says its donors are identifiable because they are also its trustees, but the list of trustees contains 239 names which makes it impossible to distinguish large benefactors from small ones.

The smaller Middle East Forum had an income of less than \$1.5m in 2000, with the largest single donation amounting to \$355,000.

In terms of their ability to influence policy, thinktanks have several advantages over universities. To begin with they can hire staff without committee procedures, which allows them to build up teams of researchers that share a similar political orientation.

They can also publish books themselves without going through the academic refereeing processes required by university publishers. And they usually site themselves in Washington, close to government and the media.

Apart from influencing policy on the Middle East, the Washington Institute and the Middle East Forum recently launched a campaign to discredit university departments that specialise in the region.

After September 11, when various government agencies realised there was a shortage of Americans who could speak Arabic, there were moves to beef up the relevant university departments.

But Martin Kramer, of the Washington Institute, Middle East Forum and former director of the Moshe Dayan Centre at Tel Aviv university, had other ideas.

He produced a vitriolic book *Ivory Towers on Sand*, which criticised Middle East departments of universities in the US.

His book was published by the Washington Institute and warmly reviewed in the *Weekly Standard*, whose editor, William Kristol, was a member of the Middle East Forum along with Mr Kramer.

"Kramer has performed a crucial service by exposing intellectual rot in a scholarly field of capital importance to national wellbeing," the review said.

The Washington Institute is considered the most influential of the Middle East thinktanks, and the one that the state department takes most seriously. Its director is the former US diplomat, Dennis Ross.

Besides publishing books and placing newspaper articles, the

institute has a number of other activities that for legal purposes do not constitute lobbying, since this would change its tax status.

It holds lunches and seminars, typically about three times a week, where ideas are exchanged and political networking takes place. It has also given testimony to congressional committees nine times in the last five years.

Every four years, it convenes a "bipartisan blue-ribbon commission" known as the Presidential study group, which presents a blueprint for Middle East policy to the newly-elected president.

The institute makes no secret of its extensive links with Israel, which currently include the presence of two scholars from the Israeli armed forces.

Israel is an ally and the connection is so well known that officials and politicians take it into account when dealing with the institute. But it would surely be a different matter if the ally concerned were a country such as Egypt, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.

Apart from occasional lapses, such as the publication of Mr Kramer's book, the Washington Institute typically represents the considered, sober voice of American-Israeli conservatism.

The Middle East Forum is its strident voice - two different tones, but mostly the same people.

Three prominent figures from the Washington Institute - Robert Satloff (director of policy), Patrick Clawson (director of research) and Mr Rubin (prolific writer, currently at AEI) - also belong to the forum.

Daniel Pipes, the bearded \$100,000-a-year head of the forum is listed as an "associate" at the institute, while Mr Kramer, editor of the forum's journal, is a "visiting fellow".

Mr Pipes became the bete noire of US Muslim organisations after writing an article for the National Review in 1990 that referred to "massive immigration of brown-skinned peoples cooking strange foods and not exactly maintaining Germanic standards of hygiene".

Since he usually complains vigorously when the words are quoted outside their original context, readers are invited to view the full article at www.danielpipes.org. He is also noted for his combative performances on the Fox News channel, where he has an interesting business relationship. Search for his name on the Fox News website and, along with transcripts of his TV interviews, an advert appears saying "Daniel Pipes is available thru Barber & Associates, America's leading resource for business, international and technology speakers since 1977".

The Middle East Forum issues two regular publications, the Middle East Quarterly and the Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, the latter published jointly with the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon.

The Middle East Quarterly describes itself as "a bold, insightful, and controversial publication".

Among the insights in its latest issue is an article on weapons of mass destruction that says Syria "has more destructive capabilities" than Iraq, or Iran.

The Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, which is sent out by email free of charge - but can never-the-less afford to pay its contributors - specialises in covering the seamy side of Lebanese and Syrian politics. The ever-active Mr Rubin is on its editorial board.

The Middle East Forum also targets universities through its campus speakers Bureau - that in adopting the line of Mr Kramer's book, seeks to correct "inaccurate Middle Eastern curricula in American education", by addressing "biases" and "basic errors" and providing "better information" than students can get from the many "irresponsible" professors that it believes lurk in US universities.

At a time when much of the world is confused by what it sees as an increasingly bizarre set of policies on the Middle East coming from Washington, to understand the neat little network outlined above may make such policies a little more explicable.

Of course these people and organisations are not the only ones trying to influence US policy on the Middle East. There are others who try to influence it too - in different directions.

However, this particular network is operating in a political climate that is currently especially receptive to its ideas.

It is also well funded by its anonymous benefactors and is well organised. Ideas sown by one element are watered and nurtured by the others.

Whatever outsiders may think about this, worldly-wise Americans see no cause for disquiet. It's just a coterie of like-minded chums going about their normal business, and an everyday story of political life in Washington.

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