

مركز البيدر للدراسات والتخطيط

Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning



The Experience of Think Tanks in Iraq

Osama Al-Shabib



Summary:

The discussion and research in think tanks, their roles, tasks, and the nature of the impact they have on decision-makers, and the formulation of visions and perceptions in the field of public policies and their adoption or marketing for their implementation are increasing. Discussing think tanks in any political and social environment indicates the presence and appreciation of the values of knowledge, science, and thought in that environment.

The evolution of governance issues in the concept of the contemporary state, along with the complexity of various files and issues in politics, administration, foreign relations, and security and military challenges, is the primary reason for the existence of think tanks. These centers comprise an elite group of researchers and experts in diverse fields. This brief and intensive paper will provide a general introduction to think tanks, the most important factors for their effectiveness, as well as the specific conditions and challenges of think tanks in Iraq. The conclusion will summarize the key findings.



zIntroduction:

The concept of think tanks involves performing a fundamental function that includes engaging the mind in thinking and scientific research to identify a specific problem, explore solutions and alternatives for an issue, or transfer knowledge and expertise to the targeted demographic in political, economic, security, and social fields. This activity typically falls within the realm of public policy for the state and decision-making institutions. Perhaps the most realistic task of think tanks is to act as a bridge or mediator between scientific, academic, and intellectual institutions and their outputs, and between decision-makers and political actors.

The names of these institutions or centers vary (Think Tanks, Thought Houses, Research and Study Institutions, or Expertise Houses...Etc.), and some researchers differentiate between these titles and labels. Discussing these names requires historical and terminological research on each concept and its original source when first used, and the environment in which it was conceived. This is beyond the scope of this brief and concise paper, which focuses on their common functional and practical general purpose.

Discussing think tanks in any cultural, political, and social environment indicates the presence and appreciation of values (knowledge, science, thought, and culture) in that environment and nation. It also signifies the reliance on the scientific method and proper planning in dealing with the issues and challenges facing the state and society across various aspects, such as politics, economics, security, social issues, and more.

The idea of having a thinking and studying mind to consult in decision-making, whether political, economic, or security-related, has ancient roots. It accompanied those who held power and authority, like kings, presidents, and leaders, where in the past, each had one or several advisors to discuss the nature of a problem or find a solution, whether or not they heeded the advice. Due to the evolution of governance and management issues in the concept of the contemporary state, and the complexity of various files and issues in politics, economy, security, and foreign relations, the existence of think tanks, which house an elite group of researchers and experts in various fields, has become an important and necessary matter. They contribute to developing a comprehensive vision for the presented issues, researching,

analyzing, and finding effective solutions, hence their necessity and importance.

Modern think tanks, as some researchers believe, were first established in the 19th century but emerged in their contemporary form in the early 20th century in the United States, Britain, Europe, and other countries. They became particularly prominent after World War II and flourished and evolved especially towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the third millennium. They have spread across various countries, including Arab and Islamic countries, due to political, social, and intellectual changes, and the advancement of technology and communication means.

Factors of Effectiveness and Development of Think Tanks

When examining the history of the emergence of think tanks, along with the experiences of established centers in this field, their inception environments, growth, and prosperity, several key factors contributing to the effectiveness and solidity of these centers are noted. Here, we briefly mention the most important among them:

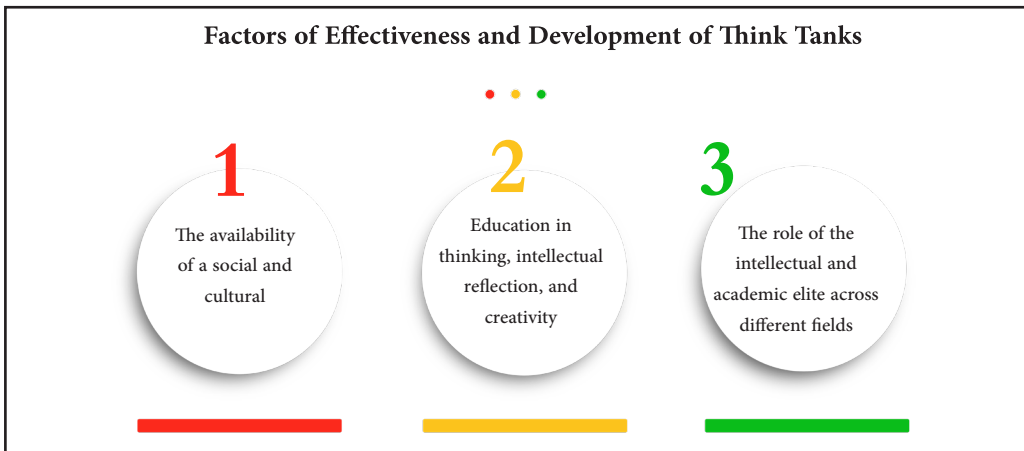
1. The availability of a social and cultural environment that respects and values the principles of science, knowledge, and thought, using them as a compass in planning and decision-making, and rejecting improvisation, personal whims, and unilateral opinions in public policy and governance in general. The experiences of several important and advanced



countries illustrate the role of thought and research institutions in charting the paths of progress or devising solutions to many challenges and ways to overcome them. Conversely, the experiences of countries reliant on a single opinion and based on improvisation and whims in decision-making, especially in critical decisions, show how these nations and their peoples are placed at the end of the civilizational and advanced procession.

2. Education in thinking, intellectual reflection, and creativity, and the educational curricula at the primary, secondary, and higher levels play a significant role in fostering intellectual independence, encouraging opinion and analysis, and supporting researchers and thinkers in producing substantial work. In this context, universities and reputable academic institutions provide a fertile environment for generating ideas, research, and genuine studies.

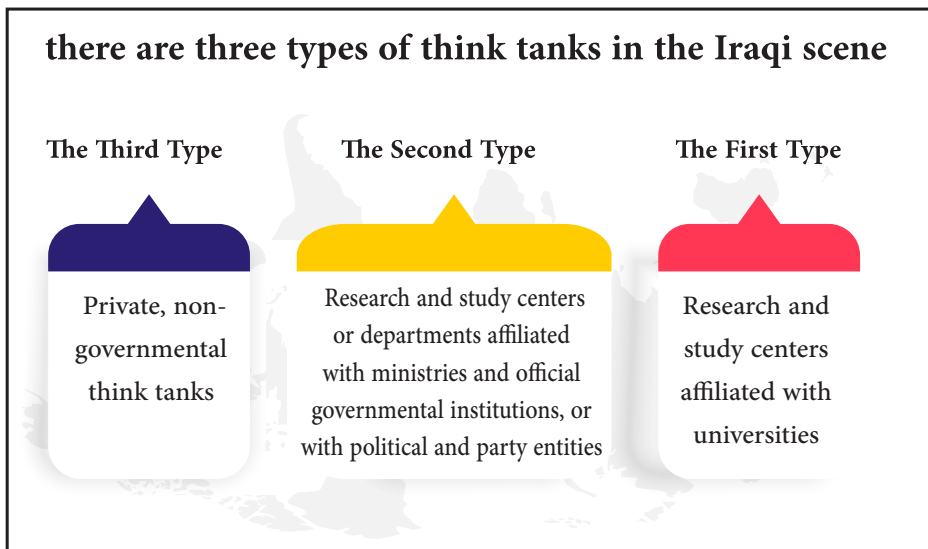
3. The role of the intellectual and academic elite across different fields, and their active presence in society—taking their real role in influencing and shaping public opinion and determining the general directions of society and decision-makers—is based on their knowledge of their function in political, social, economic, and cultural life.



There are undoubtedly other factors that can be explored within this framework, but our aim was to highlight the fundamental points that represent the pillars in establishing these centers and their development and prosperity.

Think Tanks in Iraq: Their Limitations and Challenges

The discussion in Iraq about think tanks certainly begins after the change in 2003, following the end of the era of dictatorship, single-party rule, and unilateral opinions. This change led to a wide opening for the expression of freedoms, ideas, and opinions, and the social, political, and scientific life opening up to the world. Through general observation, the present scene can be described based on an overview built on observation and general follow-up. We note that there are three types of think tanks in the Iraqi scene:



- **The First Type:** Research and study centers affiliated with universities; there is hardly any university lacking a center or institute for research or studies.
- **The Second Type:** Research and study centers or departments affiliated with ministries and official governmental institutions, or with political and party entities, which are also numerous.
- **The Third Type:** Private, non-governmental think tanks. Their number is not small over these two decades, amounting to dozens or hundreds. They are officially classified under the title of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with approximately six thousand NGOs registered in the Department of Non-Governmental Organizations across various

fields and specialties, including think tanks.

Each of these three types requires an explanation and analysis of its reality, performance, and the opportunities and challenges each face. However, what we wish to discuss briefly here is the third type (private, non-governmental think tanks), which is the focus of this paper. Upon general observation and reflection, we see that think tanks of the third type can be classified into three main categories:

First: Think tanks that consist of a single person with no activity, producing neither intellectual nor research output nor engaging in practical activities such as workshops, seminars, or conferences. They exist in name only, serving as mere media titles and formalities.

Second: Think tanks with some activity and scientific output but, in their essence and general direction, are closer to being public relations centers, political forums, and media platforms rather than genuine think tanks. This suggests that many of the tools and methods they employ are aimed at objectives quite different from the traditional goals of think tanks and research institutions.

Third: The third category, which is the least common, includes think tanks that have established their own identity and engage in varied intellectual activities. They make serious efforts in the field and are advancing towards meeting the rigorous and recognized standards required to be truly considered think tanks. They contribute, in one way or another, to research, monitoring, analysis, and the stimulation of thought in their respective fields. Moreover, they work on establishing connections with academic and intellectual elites and decision-makers.

This third category embodies a new experience in Iraq with its positives and negatives. Various opportunities have been available to it, such as freedom of opinion, publishing, research, and cultural and intellectual activity. However, at the same time, this type (the third category) faces challenges and obstacles that cannot be overlooked. These challenges are numerous, but the most prominent can be highlighted as follows:

1. The absence of legal legislation defining the identity of think tanks, regulating their work, structure, goals, and ways to support and motivate them. Think tanks have different identities and roles from non-governmental organizations, even though they share some goals

and means.

2. Financial aspects and funding, one of the most significant obstacles facing think tanks. Effective and productive centers cannot be imagined without appropriate financial support to achieve general goals. This support, if available, should not restrict their work or divert them from their objective and scientific goals.

3. In Iraq, there exists a broad expanse of freedom. However, the ever-changing and intricate realities, coupled with political and security challenges, as well as national and sectarian societal divisions, give rise to numerous sensitivities and precautions. These factors often inhibit the possibility of open, scientific, and objective discourse, necessitating a careful consideration of these complexities and sensitivities.

4. The weakness of official interaction and cooperation in general (decision-makers) has various manifestations. Many actions and practices suggest a lack of awareness of the importance of having think tanks in political and social life.

5. The observations made in point (4) stem from a widespread lack of public understanding regarding the importance and function of think tanks, as well as the value of their conceptual contributions, research, and knowledge activities in shaping state public policies and societal development. This context also suggests a shortage of researchers and genuine experts across various fields and issues, encompassing political, economic, and social aspects. This does not imply a lack of formal (academic) specialization, which may be readily available and abundant. Furthermore, there is a noticeable deficiency in research skills and a lack of rigorous effort in writing, research, and analysis in numerous studies submitted for publication.

Undoubtedly, each of the points highlighted above necessitates a deeper comprehension, description, and analysis to fully understand its implications. However, our aim was to provide a concise, focused reference, rather than an exhaustive and comprehensive exploration, which is more fitting for the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

To summarize, we can distill several key ideas and points in this context:

- Think tanks embody a fresh and burgeoning experience in Iraq post-2003. They are currently navigating through stages of growth, crystallization, and refinement, necessitating more time, patience, and persistence to amass experience and learn from other established models. This learning process involves adapting tools and methods that align with the social and political climate in which they operate.

- Despite facing numerous challenges and hurdles, think tanks have the potential to carve out opportunities for themselves and exert their influence through the high-quality ideas, studies, and insightful opinions they bring to the table. This involves addressing both practical and theoretical areas and issues of significance. Realizing this potential undoubtedly requires time, the accumulation of experience, and the application of rigorous scientific and knowledge-based efforts.

- The importance of coordination among active centers sharing common overarching goals cannot be overstated. Establishing a shared framework that respects the uniqueness of each center, its field, and its objectives, is vital for achieving mutual benefits and goals for think tanks. Among these goals, the need for legal regulation that delineates the roles, goals, and functions of think tanks stands out. Additionally, efforts should be made to establish a financial fund to support these centers. This fund should be financed by the state and the general budget, not the government, with clear and competitive guidelines and criteria.

It's worth noting that the aim of this paper and its contents is to stimulate further research and comprehensive analysis of the role of think tanks in Iraq. Engaging in discussions and presenting evaluative opinions are undoubtedly crucial for enhancing the work of these centers and enriching their role across various fields and domains.

About center

Al-Baydar Center for Studies and Planning is a non-governmental and non-profit organization established in 2015 and registered with the NGO directorate in the general secretariat of the council of ministers in Baghdad.

The center seeks to contribute to developing the state and its institutions, by proposing ideas and practical solutions to the main problems and challenges facing the state, including improving public sector management, policies, and strategic planning, using reliable data and best practices. The center engages the relevant authorities in the state with regular meetings to support this objective and utilizes the support of international organizations dedicated to assisting Iraq's development. The center also seeks to support economic reforms, and sustainable development and provide technical assistance to the public and private sectors. The center also seeks to support the development of the private sector to provide job opportunities for citizens through training and upskilling, in a way that reduces dependence on government institutions and contributes to supporting and diversifying the country's economy.

The center aims to utilize the vast amount of potential in Iraq's human resources by organizing programs to prepare and develop promising young people, including leaders capable of proposing, adopting and implementing visions and future plans that advance society and preserve its value-system based on the commitment to a high moral standard and rejection of all types of corruption.

All rights reserved to Al-Baydar Center for Studies and Planning

www.baidarcenter.org

info@baidarcenter.org