



## Think Tanks and the Pathology of Their Performance in Afghanistan (2004-2024)

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### Abstract

Think tanks are institutions and organizations engaged in research, analysis, policy-making, planning, foresight, and future studies in the fields of humanities, social sciences, economics, politics, and even military affairs. Although perspectives on the role of think tanks vary, they primarily focus on identifying problems, prioritizing major programs, conducting research and analysis, presenting new ideas, advising decision-makers, and shaping as well as influencing public opinion. The presence and activities of these institutions in Afghanistan—together with the limited impact of their achievements over the past twenty years—make the need for pathological research and performance assessment more pressing than ever. The main purpose of this study is to identify the functional problems and challenges faced by think tanks in Afghanistan and to provide practical solutions to address them. The central research question is: What have been the functional shortcomings of think tanks in Afghanistan over the past twenty years? The research method is qualitative, with data collected through library research and field interviews. This study is applied in its objective and analytical-descriptive in nature. The findings indicate that domestic think tanks, whether governmental or non-governmental, have faced challenges such as staff and capacity shortages, weak access to information, lack of financial independence, fragile scientific foundations, unstable organizational structures, absence of long-term programs, limited government support, lack of markets for their outputs, dependence on foreign aid, insufficient public trust, and a generally weak culture of utilizing these institutions.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Decision-making, Pathology, Policy-making, Think Tanks.

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## اندیشه‌کده‌ها و آسیب‌شناسی عمل‌گردشان در افغانستان

(۲۰۲۴-۲۰۰۴)



عتیق‌الله رحیمی

### چکیده

اندیشه‌کده‌ها، مؤسسات و سازمان‌هایی هستند که در حوزه‌های علوم انسانی، علوم اجتماعی، اقتصاد، سیاست و حتا امور نظامی به پژوهش، تحلیل، پالیسی‌سازی، برنامه‌ریزی، آینده‌پژوهی و مطالعات آینده می‌پردازند. هرچند دیدگاه‌ها درباره نقش اندیشه‌کده‌ها متفاوت است، عمده‌وظایف آن‌ها شامل شناسایی مسائل، اولویت‌بندی برنامه‌های کلان، انجام پژوهش و تحلیل، ارائه ایده‌های نو، مشاوره به تصمیم‌گیران و شکل‌دهی و تأثیرگذاری بر افکار عمومی است. حضور و فعالیت این نهادها در افغانستان همراه با تأثیر محدود دستاوردهای‌شان در بیست سال گذشته، نیاز به پژوهش‌های آسیب‌شناسانه و ارزیابی عمل‌کرد را بیش از پیش برجسته می‌سازد. هدف اصلی این مطالعه شناسایی کاستی‌ها و چالش‌های عمل‌کردی اندیشه‌کده‌ها در افغانستان و ارائه راه‌کارهای عملی برای رفع آن‌ها بوده است. پرسش محوری پژوهش این است: «اندیشه‌کده‌های افغانستان در بیست سال گذشته با چه نارسایی‌ها و کاستی‌های کارکردی مواجه بوده‌اند؟» روش این پژوهش کیفی است و داده‌ها از طریق مطالعات کتابخانه‌یی و مصاحبه‌های میدانی گردآوری شده‌اند. این پژوهش از نظر هدف کاربردی و از حیث ماهیت توصیفی-تحلیلی است. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که اندیشه‌کده‌های داخلی، اعم از دولتی و غیردولتی، با چالش‌هایی هم‌چون کم‌بود نیروی انسانی و ظرفیت، ضعف دسترسی به اطلاعات، فقدان استقلال مالی، بنیان‌های علمی ضعیف، ناپایداری ساختارهای سازمانی، نبود برنامه‌های بلندمدت، حمایت محدود دولت، فقدان بازار برای عرضه محصولات پژوهشی، وابستگی به کمک‌های خارجی، عدم اعتماد کافی عمومی و فرهنگ ضعیف بهره‌مندی از این نهادها مواجه بوده‌اند.

**واژه‌گان کلیدی:** افغانستان، اندیشه‌کده‌ها، آسیب‌شناسی، تصمیم‌گیری، سیاست‌گذاری.

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## 1. Introduction

Think tanks are institutions that bring together scholars, politicians, political scientists, journalists, strategists, industrial leaders, and sociologists to engage in research, analysis, and forecasting across the fields of humanities, social sciences, economics, politics, and even security studies (Boucher & Royo, 2008: 6).

In the contemporary world, policymaking and decision-making processes require structured and systematic organization. Rapid global transformations and the growing complexity of development highlight the need for timely policy design and effective decision-making models. Achieving this, however, is impossible without drawing on innovative ideas and the documented expertise of professionals. Within this context, think tanks play a pivotal role. The number of such institutions has grown steadily worldwide. Stephan Boucher and Martin Royo, in their 2008 book *Think Tanks*, estimated their number at 4,500 (Boucher & Royo, 2008: 8). More recent findings, however, published by the Atlantic Council in 2020 based on research conducted at the University of Pennsylvania, suggest that the number has reached 11,175, underscoring the rapid global expansion of these institutions.

In many countries, think tanks operate as academic centers, contract-based research institutions, advocacy organizations, or governmental and semi-governmental bodies, often enjoying significant state support. This raises important questions in the Afghan context: Have think tanks meaningfully developed in Afghanistan? What role have they played in shaping or influencing government decision-making? And what are the major challenges and constraints that limit their effectiveness? This study seeks to address these questions by examining and critically assessing the performance of Afghan think tanks.

The primary objectives of this research is to identify the functional challenges, shortcomings, limitations, and structural barriers that affect Afghan think tanks, and to propose practical and scholarly approaches to overcoming these difficulties. Specifically, the study asks: What operational problems have Afghan think tanks faced over the past two decades? And what factors have contributed to the weakness and limited influence of their activities?

Investigating these issues is of particular importance, as think tanks hold significant potential to identify core national challenges, provide evidence-based recommendations for policymaking, and help guide public opinion. Despite their two decades of presence in Afghanistan, their achievements remain modest, making a systematic assessment of their weaknesses and constraints essential. Such an analysis can pave the way for enhancing their capacity, independence, efficiency, and influence in Afghanistan's policy and development processes.

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It is hypothesized that Afghan think tanks face a wide range of obstacles, including limited human resources, weak access to reliable information, lack of financial independence, insufficient academic capacity, fragile organizational structures, the absence of long-term strategic planning, minimal government support, a weak market for their outputs, dependency on foreign aid, low public trust, and even a weak culture of engaging with such institutions.

The existing literature on think tanks, particularly in Afghanistan and the broader region is limited, with only a few studies addressing their roles in policymaking. Public awareness of think tanks in Afghanistan remains very low, and both their numbers and activities are restricted.

Among the few notable scholarly works in this area are the following: Boucher, Stephan & Royo, Martin (2008). *Think Tanks*. Translated into Persian by Seyed Hamed Raziei. This book provides a critical analysis of the role and position of think tanks in politics and society. The authors argue that think tanks are not neutral research centers but active players in the “battle of ideas,” shaping public discourse, influencing media, and advising policymakers. They note that while think tanks can foster innovation and transparency in policymaking, they are also deeply embedded in networks of political, economic, and ideological interests, which makes their independence relative.<sup>1</sup> Hayat, Khadija (2023). Master’s thesis: *The Role of Think Tanks in the Process of Formulating and Implementing Public Policies in Afghanistan*. This study explores the role of Afghan think tanks in public policymaking. Given the novelty of the subject, the research seeks to establish a foundational scholarly resource. It finds that while think tanks can contribute to problem identification, idea generation, and policy evaluation, their influence depends on state support and public awareness both of which remain weak in Afghanistan.

Harbesch, Emilia (2025). Article: *Knowing Afghanistan: Mediated Knowledge Production*, published in the *Journal of International Relations and Development*. Using Bourdieu’s field theory, the author examines how knowledge about Afghanistan is produced in German think tanks and academic settings. Based on biographical data, 18 in-depth interviews, and a bibliographic review, the study shows that knowledge production is shaped by intermediary fields. It highlights that security-related expertise is rewarded over localized

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<sup>1</sup> The Project for the New American Century (PNAC) was a neoconservative think tank founded in Washington, D.C. in 1997 by William Kristol and Robert Kagan, with the central aim of promoting “American global leadership” and preserving U.S. military preeminence. Through its *Statement of Principles* (1997) and the influential report *Rebuilding America’s Defenses* (2000), PNAC emphasized the need for strengthening U.S. military power, preparing for major geopolitical transformations, and advocating for regime change in states such as Iraq. Among its signatories and members were prominent political figures including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Zalmay Khalilzad, many of whom later assumed key roles in President George W. Bush’s administration. Their involvement linked PNAC directly to the intellectual and strategic foundations of early 21st-century U.S. foreign policy and the Iraq War, although scholars remain divided on the extent of PNAC’s direct influence on White House decision-making

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knowledge, and that even critical research is often validated only when aligned with existing policy agendas. The article stresses the need to examine the social conditions of knowledge production in metropolitan centers, rather than focusing solely on intervention sites, in order to rethink approaches to peacebuilding.

Ayubi, Yashar (2020), in his book *Think Tanks: A Contemporary Necessity for Decision-Making Centers*, describes think tanks also known as policy institutes, strategic study centers, or “idea factories” as organizations that provide policy ideas and recommendations on political, commercial, and military matters. These institutions often collaborate with universities and political organizations, with their primary purpose being the production of political analyses and the formulation of effective recommendations for decision-making bodies.

Frassin and Halpermann (2017), in their article *Think Tanks and Policy Strategies: Collaborative Roles in Policy Advisory*, emphasize the critical role of think tanks in national growth and development. According to their analysis, think tanks are deeply involved at various stages of the policymaking process, exerting significant influence. As noted in a publication on ResearchGate, think tanks possess extraordinary research capacities that enable them to generate new policy ideas grounded in scientific evidence.

McGann, James G. (2005), in his article *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the United States*, argues that in the U.S., think tanks play an essential role in both local and national politics, operating independently from government institutions and political parties. He highlights their function as intermediaries between the state and the public, helping to foster trust and strengthen democratic governance.

Weaver, R. Kent (1989), in his influential article *The Changing World of Think Tanks*, further outlines the functions of think tanks, including framing policy issues, providing information to the media, and offering policy advice to government officials. Additional research identifies think tanks as generators of new ideas, evaluators of policy proposals, and even providers of human capital for governments.

From a methodological perspective, the present study is applied in purpose and employs a descriptive-survey design. Given its objectives, the research is fundamentally qualitative in nature. For the theoretical foundations and literature review, a mixed-methods library approach was used, including the examination of books, prior academic studies, scientific articles, electronic libraries, reputable academic websites, and reports from recognized research institutions.

For the fieldwork component, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with officials from the Institute of Diplomacy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Center for Strategic Studies of the Ministry of Foreign

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Affairs, the Regional Studies Center of the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan, the Mahmood Tarzi Think Tank Foundation, and faculty members from the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Kabul University. The field data collection relied primarily on semi-structured questionnaires.

## **2. Theoretical Framework of the Study**

### **2.1. Concepts and Definitions of Think Tanks**

The term “think tank” was originally a military expression in Anglo-American usage, referring to a secure location where army headquarters would plan and review military or wartime strategies. Over time, the expression entered the social sciences and acquired a broader meaning, being referred to as “centers of reflection,” “laboratories of ideas,” “clubs of experts,” “circles of thought,” “forums of visionary scholars,” “generators of ideas,” “expert panels,” and “intellectual societies” (Boucher & Royo, 2008: 44–45).

Think tanks are institutions that conduct research in diverse fields such as public policy, economics, security, culture, and the environment, with the main objective of providing independent analysis and advice to policymakers. They function as a bridge between academia and policymaking, translating research into language accessible to decision-makers (Roberts, 2015: 12).

James McGann defines think tanks as “independent research organizations and institutions that seek to serve the public interest by analyzing political issues” (McGann, 2005: 7). Philippa Sherrington, who studied the growing think tank sector in Europe, describes them as “relatively independent organizations engaged in research across a broad spectrum of public interests, with the main objective of influencing the structure of public policy” (Sherrington, 2015: 22).

Former French President Jacques Chirac, on the fiftieth anniversary of the “Commissariat General du Plan”, defined think tanks as “spaces where all political actors compete over France’s political life” (Boucher & Royo, 2008: 44–45).

The term “think tank” generally refers to research-oriented institutions providing policy analysis and advice, usually operating as non-governmental or semi-governmental entities (Fischer, 2007, p. 18). According to Gomart (2019: 5), a think tank is any organization structured around a permanent team of researchers or experts whose mission is to develop ideas related to both public and private policymaking.

### **2.2. History of Think Tanks**

Think tanks emerged in response to the four historical waves of social and economic crises that transformed the environment of Western countries. Historically, most think tanks were established following major international

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crises that reshaped the global political and strategic landscape. The “Fabian Society”<sup>1</sup>, founded in 1884 in the United Kingdom after the social upheavals following the Industrial Revolution, is recognized as the oldest think tank and has long attracted global attention (Rahimi, 2022: 73).

### 2.2.1. Waves of Think Tanks

**First Generation (1919–1945):**The first generation of think tanks was created to address social and economic problems arising from urbanization and industrialization. These organizations primarily developed in English-speaking countries, especially the United States. Factors contributing to their growth included a strong philanthropic sector, effective financial systems, and federal political structures (Fischer, 2007: 170). Prominent examples include the Fabian Society and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research in the United Kingdom.

**Second Generation (1945–1970):**The second wave of think tanks emerged after World War II, driven by the need for economic and social analysis. During this period, think tanks in the United States grew significantly due to the Cold War and ideological competition. Institutions such as the Hudson Institute and RAND Corporation, often relying on government contracts, played a key role in shaping social policies (Gomart, 2019: 26).

**Third Generation (1989–2008):**The third wave followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. This generation was marked by the growth of independent think tanks in both Eastern and developed countries. Think tanks increasingly focused on the social and economic challenges of developing nations (Knill & Tosun, 2011: 120).

**Fourth Generation (2008–Present):**The fourth generation is still in its early stages and aims to exert direct or indirect influence on global governance efforts. These think tanks seek to adapt to new global developments and challenges (Gomart, 2019: 24).

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<sup>1</sup> The Fabian Society was founded in 1882 in England and was the first European think tank to analyze economic and social issues. At a time when English workers were living in extreme poverty, the society was established with the aim of promoting social justice, and in its first manifesto, it focused on the issue of poverty. The 1889 match workers’ strike and the society’s activities led to a merger with the United Trade Union Congress in 1900, resulting in the founding of the Labor Party of England. This party, influenced by the Fabian Society’s ideas, implemented significant reforms such as the health system (1911), minimum wage, workers’ rights, and political changes including the abolition of the House of Lords’ lifetime membership (1917). In the following decades, both the Labor Party and the Fabian Society continued to pursue various social and economic innovations. During Tony Blair’s premiership (1997), despite close cooperation, the Fabian Society maintained its intellectual independence and even criticized certain government policies, including Blair’s taxation measures.

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### 2.2.2. Think Tanks in Asia

In recent decades, think tanks in Asia have become significant actors in public policy, development, and international relations. In Southeast Asia, institutions such as the “Singapore Institute of International Affairs” and the “Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia” have played prominent roles in analyzing foreign policy, security issues, and regional cooperation. These centers are frequently ranked among the top independent think tanks in Asia (SIIA, 2019; University of Pennsylvania, 2021).

In Japan, the “Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA)”, established in 1959, has long been a leading think tank on foreign policy and national security, consistently ranking among the world’s top institutions. Additionally, the “Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI)” in Tokyo functions as the research arm of the Asian Development Bank, focusing on regional development and economics, and was ranked in 2020 as the top government-affiliated think tank globally (ADBI, 2020).

In South Korea, the “Asan Institute for Policy Studies”, founded in 2008, focuses on foreign policy, security, and global governance, and has gained a prominent position among international think tanks (Asan Institute, 2015). In China, the “Center for China and Globalization (CCG)”, established in 2008, has become one of the most influential think tanks in globalization and foreign policy, although its independence from the government remains debated (CCG, 2019).

In South and Southeast Asia, institutions such as the “Institute of Economic Research for ASEAN and East Asia” play a key role in analyzing development, economic, and regional policies. In Taiwan, the “Asia-Taiwan Exchange Foundation”, established in 2018 as the first private think tank focused on ASEAN and South Asia, was recognized as one of the best emerging think tanks in the same year (TAEF, 2018). In Hong Kong, the “Global Institute for Tomorrow (GIFT)”, established in 2006, focuses on Asian approaches to global issues (GIFT, 2016).

Think tanks in many Asian countries emerged after World War II. Prominent organizations include the “Japan Institute of International Affairs”(est. 1959) and the “Singapore Institute of International Affairs”, which largely modeled themselves on U.S. think tanks and were established in the 1960s and 1970s (Stone, 2005). In the 1990s, conscious efforts were made in Jakarta to adapt the American think tank model to local culture and institutional contexts.

### 2.3. Types of Think Tanks

Experts in universities have attempted to classify think tanks much like botanists categorize plants. However, it should be noted that such classifications may not fully capture the overall concept and may sometimes diverge from

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practical realities. According to specialists, think tanks can generally be categorized into four main types:

### **1. University-Based Think Tanks**

In university-based think tanks, there are typically no students involved. Institutions such as the “French Institute of International Relations” in Paris and the “Centre for European Political Studies” in Brussels focus on in-depth academic research and qualitative analysis. The leaders of these organizations are university graduates, most holding doctoral degrees (Boucher & Royo, 2008: 51–52).

### **2. Contract Research Institutes**

These think tanks are similar to university-based ones but differ in funding sources, which come primarily from contracts with governmental bodies or private organizations. For instance, the “RAND Corporation” conducts research projects according to government requests (Boucher & Royo, 2008: 52).

### **3. Advocacy-Oriented Think Tanks**

Advocacy-oriented think tanks produce research in response to clear, specific mandates. Their output is intended for particular groups or institutions, aligning with core values and guiding principles. Like some university-based counterparts, these think tanks prioritize impartial and unbiased methodologies and do not engage in ideological battles. Examples include the “Adam Smith Institute in London”, the “Lisbon Council” in Brussels, the “Heritage Foundation” in Washington, D.C., and the “Transnational Institute” in Amsterdam (Boucher & Royo, 2008: 51–52).

### **4. Political Party-Affiliated Think Tanks**

These think tanks, while affiliated with political parties, maintain operational independence. Their research and analyses are aimed at enhancing the political and social positioning of the respective party. Examples in Germany include the “Friedrich Ebert Foundation”, the “Konrad Adenauer Foundation”, and five other foundations associated with the Christian Democratic Union party. In France, the “Political Innovations Foundation” affiliated with the center-right “Union for a Popular Movement” and the “Jean Jaurès Foundation” affiliated with the Socialist Party fall under this category (Boucher & Royo, 2008: 51–52).

It is important to note that think tanks can also be classified based on ideological orientation, funding sources, research topics, and operational procedures. Some advocacy organizations that are not formally research institutions may still be considered think tanks. In general, think tanks can be categorized according to several characteristics, including:

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**Field of specialization:** General (multi-disciplinary) vs. specialized

**Institutional affiliation:** Independent, university-based, government-affiliated, party-affiliated, corporate/industry-affiliated

**Funding:** Diversified (endowments, grants, organizations, private individuals) vs. dominated by one or a few sources (government, business, party/interest group)

**Agenda-setting:** Determined by the think tank researchers (neutral or independent agenda) vs. determined by commissioning bodies (governmental or private) (Hayat, 2023: 57–63).

#### **2.4. Characteristics of Think Tanks**

Although think tanks share similarities with other research organizations, they possess distinct characteristics that differentiate them from university centers, governmental agencies, and interest groups. Key features include:

**1. Organizational Independence and Sustainability:** Think tanks generally operate as independent entities, separate from public sectors and corporations. This independence allows them to remain relatively neutral in political and governmental debates and to maintain distance from implementing government policies (Fischer, 2006: 183).

**2. Research Agenda Setting:** Think tanks determine their own research topics independently of other institutions. This autonomy enables them to maintain quality according to their established standards and to diversify funding sources (Stone, 1996: 35).

**3. Policy Focus:** These institutions aim to influence policy processes, with research specifically directed at analyzing and evaluating policy issues. This focus distinguishes them from academic research, which tends to be more theoretical (Fischer, 2006: 183).

**4. Public-Oriented Goals:** Think tanks often operate with the goal of raising public awareness and participating in public debates. They strive to represent public interests and emphasize knowledge creation and policy improvement (Ruser, 2016: 185).

**5. Expertise and Professionalism:** Staff members typically possess advanced knowledge and expertise in political and social sciences, often coupled with significant experience in governmental roles. Such expertise enhances the credibility of their research findings and recommendations (Stone, 1996: 35).

**6. Organizational Output:** The primary outputs of think tanks include research analyses and advisory services. These are delivered through various formats

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such as books, articles, newsletters, videos, and media programs. Additionally, think tanks organize seminars and conferences, providing platforms for in.

## 2.5. Functions of Think Tanks

In general, the functions of think tanks include:

- Identifying and clearly defining relevant issues.
- Critically evaluating existing policies and programs.
- Transforming raw ideas into precise and implementable policies.
- Providing platforms for dialogue among stakeholders.
- Identifying and training experts in policymaking.
- Conducting comparative studies and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of policies.
- Introducing skilled personnel to policymakers.
- Interpreting policies for the media and public opinion.
- Localizing policies and conceptual frameworks.
- Building consensus among implementers.
- Conducting foresight and future-oriented studies (Stone, 1996: 35).

## 2.6. Brief Overview of Global Think Tanks

The United States and the United Kingdom are the pioneers and major promoters of think tanks. The United States, with over 2,200 think tanks, ranks first in the world, and it can be argued that the country's global power is directly influenced by the presence of these institutions.

Table 1. Top ten countries worldwide by number of think tanks

Rank	Name of Country	The approximate number of thinking groups	Source
1	United States	2,203	Global Go To Think Tank Index Report (McGann, 2020)
2	China	1,900	MERICs Analysis (2024), indicating rapid growth of analytic think tanks in China
3	India	612	The Times of India
4	United Kingdom	321	Forbes (McCarthy, 2018)
5	Argentina	227	Forbes (McCarthy, 2018)
6	Germany	218	Forbes (McCarthy, 2018)
7	Russia	215	Forbes (McCarthy, 2018)
8	France	203	Forbes (McCarthy, 2018)
9	Japan	128	Forbes (McCarthy, 2018)
10	Italy	114	Forbes (McCarthy, 2018)

The data highlight the rapid global expansion of think tanks, with the United States leading by a wide margin. Other countries, including China and India,

have significantly increased the number of analytic centers in recent years, reflecting their growing role in policy analysis, strategic.

## 2.7. Prominent Think Tanks Worldwide

Several leading think tanks have played significant roles in shaping public policy, economic development, and international relations globally:

1. **Brookings Institution:** Established in 1927 and based in Washington, D.C., Brookings is one of the top U.S. think tanks, focusing on economic development and public policy. Through reputable research programs, books, and articles, it exerts substantial political influence, with an annual budget of approximately \$40 million (Busher & Rouvière, 2008: 34-35).

2. **Heritage Foundation:** Founded in 1973, this is the largest conservative think tank in the United States, promoting public policies based on free-market principles and limited government. It publishes the annual Index of Economic Freedom.

3. **Council on Foreign Relations (CFR):** Established in 1921, CFR is a centrist think tank specializing in international affairs. It publishes "Foreign Affairs" magazine and, while apparently non-partisan, exhibits some left-leaning tendencies. Its annual budget is approximately \$3.5 million.

4. **Cato Institute:** Founded in 1974, Cato promotes libertarian views, opposes foreign intervention, and supports civil liberties worldwide, with an annual budget of \$14 million.

5. **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS):** Established in 1962, CSIS focuses on defense, international relations, and strategic analysis. Influential scholars such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Arthur Schlesinger have been associated with the center. Its annual budget is approximately \$17 million.

6. **American Enterprise Institute (AEI):** Founded in 1943, AEI focuses on economics, foreign policy, defense, and cultural research, promoting a free society, limited government, and private-sector engagement. Its annual budget is \$20 million.

7. **RAND Corporation:** Established in 1948, RAND is a nonprofit think tank specializing in defense and global policy research. It has played a key role in nuclear deterrence doctrine and Cold War strategies.

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**8. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:** Founded in 1910, this nonprofit organization is active in peace negotiations, human rights, and U.S. foreign policy, with an annual budget of \$20 million.

**9. Atlantic Council:** Founded in 1961, this non-partisan think tank focuses on political, economic, and military relations between North America and Europe.

**10. Hoover Institution:** Established in 1914 and based at Stanford University, Hoover is a research institute with a significant impact on U.S. public policy.

**11. Civil Institute:** Founded in 1968, it focuses on urban policy, social policy, and microeconomic research, with an annual budget of \$80 million (Busher & Rouvière, 2008: 34-35).

In France, prominent think tanks include Facing Europe, Strategic Research Foundation, French Institute of International Relations, Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations, Montaigne Institute, Europe Now, and République des Idées.

In Europe, Germany and the United Kingdom host the largest number of think tanks. According to Martin Torrent, German think tanks can be categorized into five types: research institutes, institutions focusing on foreign policy, security, and peace promotion, think tanks addressing social, environmental, and scientific issues, private think tanks, and small specialized institutes (Gholipour, 2017: 412).

### 3. Results

The findings of this study are divided into two parts based on the nature of the data. The first part presents the documentary findings or secondary data, while the second part is dedicated to field data or primary data.

#### 3.1. Afghan Think Tanks and Their Performance Challenges

Over the past twenty years, between 2004 and 2024, two types of think tanks have been active in Afghanistan. The first type consists of entirely domestic think tanks established by Afghans. The second type includes foreign think tanks that had offices or representations in Afghanistan.

According to available statistics, 46 think tanks were active in Afghanistan during this period, ranking 136th globally. To avoid prolonging the discussion, only their names are mentioned: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Aga Khan Foundation, Asia Foundation, Afghanistan Strategic Studies Center, Regional Studies Center of the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan, Mahmoud Tarzi Think Tank, Fikr Association, International Security and Development Council, Rural Development Institute of Afghanistan, Afghan Legal and Economic Studies Institute, Afghanistan Analysts Network, Gup-e-Kab, Afghan

Women Network, Morning and War Studies Center, Transparency Watch Organization, Afghanistan Public Policy Studies Center, Heart of Asia Society, and National Policy Research Center (Hayat, 1402: 75–80).

### 3.1.1. Challenges and Obstacles to Think Tank Performance

The findings indicate that the performance of think tanks in Afghanistan has been affected by numerous challenges and limitations, which directly reduced their effectiveness:

**Government interference:** Involvement of government officials in the activities of think tanks and insufficient support for them.

**Lack of supportive policies:** Absence of effective policy frameworks to support think tank activities.

**Limited access to information:** Insufficient data and information necessary for research and analysis.

**Restrictions on publishing findings:** Limitations on disseminating research results.

**Budget constraints:** Financial problems and limited resources to conduct activities.

**Weak external collaboration:** Limited cooperation with other think tanks and international institutions.

**Insufficient capacity building:** Lack of necessary skills and capabilities to conduct effective research and influence policies.

**Security issues:** The presence of insecurity in the country affecting think tank activities.

**Professional challenges:** Lack of professional skills among staff, negatively affecting the think tank processes.

### 3.1.2. Gaps in the Role of Think Tanks in Policy-Making

In addition to the above challenges, the findings show that the role of think tanks in the policy-making process in Afghanistan has been limited, with significant gaps, including:

- Lack of a regular and systematic mechanism for utilizing research.
- Low awareness among decision-makers about scientific findings.
- Corruption within the previous system and non-transparent policies.
- Lack of coordination among institutions and organizations.
- Individualism and government policies that hinder the utilization of think tank capacities.
- Failure to institutionalize a culture of using scientific and research findings in decision-making.

These findings demonstrate that alongside the activities of think tanks, it is crucial to design supportive frameworks and policies and to enhance domestic

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capacities to improve their performance and influence in political and social decision-making processes in Afghanistan.

### 3.2. Field Findings

The researcher conducted interviews with officials and personnel affiliated with several Afghan think tanks, including the Afghanistan Strategic Studies Center, the Regional Studies Center, faculty members of the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Mahmoud Tarzi Think Tank, and the National Policy Research Center. The analysis of the findings is presented as follows:

- The interviewees considered the main objectives of think tanks in Afghanistan to be the development of specialists, provision of scientific and locally adapted solutions, knowledge production, scientific analysis, and monitoring and lobbying for government policies;
  - The majority of interviewees denied the existence of Afghan think tanks in their true sense, while some believed that these scientific and cultural centers had achieved certain accomplishments;
  - According to the respondents, the main factors behind the formation of think tanks in Afghanistan were economic motives and income generation, foreign aid, societal needs, and the demands of the elite class;
  - Most participants believed that Afghan think tanks lacked the competence, capacity, and capability to make national policy decisions;
  - Overall, they agreed that these centers had little influence over international decisions and policies and, at the national level, their impact was very limited, sometimes even contrary to national interests;
  - The most significant challenges to the performance of these centers were identified as financial constraints, shortage of human resources, limited access to information, lack of government support, distrust from the public and the government, dependence on foreign assistance, and absence of a market for ideas;
  - The primary structural and managerial weaknesses were noted as the lack of long-term planning, limited capacities, shortage of experienced researchers, absence of organizational structures, and weak coordination among different think tanks;
  - The financial situation, particularly for non-governmental centers, was considered highly unstable, dependent on foreign aid, and limited;
  - The intellectual and research capacities of these centers were seen as minimal, and to strengthen their effectiveness, it was suggested to provide opportunities for genuine scientific and research-oriented personalities and to establish national scientific networks;
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- To improve the performance of these centers, the respondents recommended utilizing local and specialized personnel, implementing long-term programs, maintaining scientific independence, strengthening internal capacities, ensuring financial independence, aligning with urgent policy goals, and adhering to impartiality;
- They also suggested that enhancing the use of intellectual products from these centers, receiving government support, establishing a proper management framework, expanding cooperation with scientific institutions, and promoting a culture of using these intellectual outputs would improve efficiency, transparency, and overall impact.

#### 4. Discussion

In the past two decades, think tanks in Afghanistan have operated as entities attempting to influence the policy-making process. These think tanks are divided into domestic and foreign categories. Despite the presence of 46 think tanks in Afghanistan, their impact on public policy remains extremely limited.

The findings of this research are in stark contrast with studies conducted by Stephen Boshier and Martin Royo, Yashar Ayubi, Halpmen Frassin, James J. McGinn, and Arnt Wever, as the think tanks discussed in their research were among the most influential and impactful globally, significantly shaping issues, decisions, policies, mindsets, values, priorities, and even government agendas. Conversely, in Afghanistan, the activities and performance of think tanks have been weak and marginal in political, economic, military, social, and even cultural domains. Therefore, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Khadija Hayat.

The findings indicate that several major challenges affect the performance of Afghan think tanks:

- **Government interference:** Intervention by government officials in the activities of think tanks and insufficient support prevent these organizations from achieving meaningful impact.
  - **Lack of supportive policies:** The absence of effective supportive policies creates serious limitations in their operational capacity.
  - **Limited access to information:** A lack of necessary data for research and analysis remains a major problem.
  - **Restrictions on dissemination:** Limitations in publishing research findings hinder the transfer of knowledge and information to society.
  - **Budget constraints:** Financial difficulties and insufficient resources directly affect both the quality and quantity of think tank outputs.
  - **Weak external connections:** Limited collaboration with international organizations prevents these think tanks from benefiting from global expertise and resources.
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- **Insufficient capacity-building:** A lack of the necessary infrastructure and human resources for effective research and policy influence is another significant challenge.
- **Security issues:** Insecurity in the country, particularly under the previous regime, directly impacted think tank activities.
- **Professional challenges:** A lack of professional skills among government personnel negatively affects the processes and interactions of think tanks.

The findings show that the role of think tanks in Afghan policy-making is minimal, with numerous gaps, including the absence of organized mechanisms, prevalent corruption, and a lack of institutionalized culture for using scientific findings.

Field research further indicates that Afghan think tanks lack the competence and capacity to influence policy-making. Factors such as dependence on foreign aid and mistrust from the public and government negatively affect their performance.

To improve the effectiveness of think tanks in Afghanistan, the following measures are recommended:

- **Utilization of local and specialized personnel:** Recruiting and employing local, skilled professionals can enhance the quality of work.
- **Establishment of long-term programs:** Think tanks should develop long-term strategies for their activities.
- **Strengthening internal capacity:** Building the necessary infrastructure for research and policy influence is essential.
- **Financial independence:** Securing independent funding sources can increase the legitimacy and impact of think tanks.
- **Promotion of a culture of evidence-based policy:** Creating appropriate platforms for the utilization of research findings in public policy-making is crucial.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study, entitled “Think Tanks and the pathology of Their Performance in Afghanistan”, provides an in-depth analysis of the performance of think tanks in the public policy-making process. Given the novelty of this topic and the lack of reliable scientific sources in this area, this research serves as a scholarly resource to better understand the role, challenges, and limitations of think tanks in Afghanistan.

The main objective of this study was to assess and identify the challenges, shortcomings, limitations, and obstacles affecting the performance of think tanks in Afghanistan, as well as to propose scientific and practical approaches to address these issues. The primary hypothesis of the study indicated that, in

general, 75% of respondents believe that the aforementioned challenges are fundamental factors hindering effective public policy analysis in Afghanistan.

The central hypothesis of this research was that think tanks in Afghanistan face a variety of problems and challenges, including insufficient human resources and capacity, limited access to information, lack of financial independence, weak scientific foundations, inadequate organizational structures, absence of long-term strategic planning, limited governmental support, lack of a market for disseminating their outputs, dependence on foreign aid, insufficient trust, and a weak culture of utilizing these institutions. The research findings confirmed this hypothesis.

The findings indicate that think tanks play an important role in various areas of policy-making. Their role may include formulating new policies, improving policy implementation, and evaluating policy outcomes. However, their impact is significantly constrained due to multiple factors. Key challenges affecting the performance of think tanks include:

**Government interference:** Continuous intervention by government officials in the activities of think tanks and insufficient support prevents these institutions from exercising meaningful influence.

**Lack of effective supportive policies:** The absence of clear and effective policies to support think tank activities creates serious operational limitations.

**Limited access to information and restrictions on dissemination:** Insufficient access to necessary data for research, along with constraints on publishing research findings, hinders the transfer of knowledge to society.

**Financial limitations:** Financial difficulties and dependence on foreign resources directly affect the quality and quantity of think tank activities.

**Dependence on support and awareness:** The progress and effectiveness of think tanks rely on the level of awareness and support for their activities. In Afghanistan, this support is limited due to structural and cultural issues. Respondents highlighted a lack of public and governmental trust in think tanks, negatively affecting their influence.

**Gaps in policy-making:** The study reveals significant gaps in public policy that prevent effective influence by think tanks. These include the absence of organized mechanisms for their inclusion in policy processes, prevalent corruption, and the lack of an institutionalized culture of utilizing scientific findings.

Field findings also indicate that many interviewees express dissatisfaction with the performance of think tanks and point to their lack of competence and capacity in national decision-making. The majority believe that think tanks in Afghanistan are incapable of effective decision-making and policy formulation and have minimal influence in the national arena.

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## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, improving the performance of think tanks in Afghanistan and increasing their impact on public policy requires fundamental changes in support structures, financing, and institutionalizing a culture of using scientific knowledge. These changes and recommendations should include:

1. Strengthening internal capacities: Establishing and enhancing the necessary capacities to conduct effective research and influence policy-making.
2. Government support and independent funding: Securing independent financial resources and creating supportive frameworks from the government and international institutions.
3. Increasing public awareness: Promoting a culture of utilizing scientific findings and creating platforms for effective collaboration with international and local institutions.
4. Developing organized mechanisms: Establishing regular mechanisms for the inclusion of think tanks in public policy-making processes.
5. Structured organization, professionalism, and program-oriented approach: Ensuring think tanks operate with clear structures, expertise-driven frameworks, and program-focused planning.

Only through implementing these changes can the potential capacities of think tanks be effectively utilized and their influence on policy-making processes improved. This research can serve as an initial step toward further identifying and analyzing the role of think tanks in Afghanistan and proposing effective solutions in this domain.

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