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1. IFI launched a program in 2007 to study all aspects of the relationships among three critical dimensions of policy-making in the Arab World: a) the policy-making processes themselves and how decisions are made in different countries; b) the producers of research and knowledge in the region, mainly academic centers and think tanks; c) the linkage between knowledge and policy-making, which is the advocacy process. Research on all three of these areas is ongoing at IFI-AUB and with partners around the region. All knowledge generated is being shared with other colleagues in the research and policy community.

2. The heart of our analysis of think tanks and how they influence policy-making is the project we call CAPRI – the Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes – which has been operational for almost three years. It includes regular workshops, meetings, interviews, lectures, conferences and research papers that explore the following issues that are central to the work of PRI’s (the term we use for think tanks): relationships among PRIs, governments, donors, and civil society organizations; the self-defined aims and goals of PRIs; the sectors they choose to work in, and how they make those decisions; funding of PRIs and the influence of donors; strategic communications and dissemination to various target audiences; languages used in research, activities and dissemination; how PRIs interact with policy-makers and government institutions; how PRIs measure their influence or impact; why they feel their impact is significant or limited; how they set research
agendas; how they have responded to the Arab uprisings and continued transformations; how PRIs “translate knowledge” to make technical research more easily available to policy-makers, media and others; potential cooperation among PRIs in the Arab world.

3. Our initial conclusions from this ongoing research are that: a) PRIs and policy-makers have very little interaction on a regular basis and know almost nothing of each other’s needs and capabilities; therefore PRIs have very limited impact on policy-making to date; b) PRIs have little credibility in the eyes of policy-makers because the PRIs tend to change the focus of their activities regularly and rarely develop deep expertise which is required for the credibility and visibility that would generate impact on policy-makers; c) PRIs generally do not maintain research areas for years at a time, partly due to the agendas of foreign donors, and partly due to constraints within their own countries; d) The lack of accountability of Arab officials in policy-making limits their need to call on the expertise of indigenous research centers and PRIs.

4. Funding is a major constraint on the work of Arab PRIs, and it influences the sectors they work in, the quality and breadth of their work, their independence, and perceptions of them among others in the region and abroad.

5. Other constraints on PRI activities are due to legal or political controls by governments, the size and quality of the staff, and the lack of demand for their work among policy-makers.

6. There is also often a lack of clarity of the roles of PRIs in the region, among six broad categories of action: a) generating knowledge and research, b) analyzing existing data; c) promoting public debate and influencing policy agendas, especially via the mass media and public activities; d) directly interacting with and trying to influence policy-makers; e) acting as a repository of knowledge for research, data and analysis that can be used in the future; f) identifying exactly who are the main target audiences, and the languages and means to be used to reach them.

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