



## **Strategic Communications for Arab Policy Research Institutes**

### Workshop Summary Report

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July 27, 2012

#### **Overview**

On July 16 and 17, 2012, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) was pleased to welcome approximately 15 participants to a workshop at the American University of Beirut (AUB) on Strategic Communications for Policy Research Institutes in the Arab world. The workshop, the first of its kind to combine training and discussion, was organized by the Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) project at IFI, part of the Research Advocacy and Public Policy-making (RAPP) program.

The purpose of CAPRI project is to bring together Arab think tanks (or Policy Research Institutes- PRIs) to collectively study the role of Arab PRIs and explore how we can enhance their impact in both Arab policy-making and also global foreign policy-making vis-à-vis the Middle East.

Participants joined IFI from Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon. Each participant was the selected communications representative of a policy research institute (PRI).

The aim of the workshop was to combine both training and discussion to result in practical solutions for issues and recommendations related to strategic communications for PRIs in the region. Based on the requests and suggestions of our peers in five gatherings to date, we identified a common interest in strengthening communications and outreach strategies. We believed this would also enhance our collaborations for shared policy impact by PRIs in the Arab world and allow interested Arab PRIs the opportunity to share knowledge, develop skills and capabilities, and explore collaborative activities.

#### **PRIs Vision and Role for Communication**

The first part of the workshop addressed the need to define who PRIs are, their vision, and what they stand for in the Arab region in order to know what they are doing so they can effectively communicate it. The participants found that these questions are still debated and under

discussion internally within most Arab PRIs. Finding a consensus seemed impossible and relied heavily on understanding the policymaking context in each country.

In attempting to articulate their vision, participants highlighted the necessity to clarify a PRI's place within the society between government, media, and the public. It is still unclear, as one participant notes, what the goals of Arab PRIs should be as many people in the Arab region are not familiar with the concept of policy-oriented research and think tanks. Another participant mentioned that the goal should be to connect policymakers to research while another explained that their PRI's goal is to be the main source of policy-relevant research for policymakers. Others said they only aim to "inform and be a reference" for the debate on policy issues.

The next step was to clarify internal communications priorities for planning. This led to a discussion about the links between strategic thinking and strategic planning. It was a necessary conceptual exercise to first make the link between connecting the PRI to society and policymakers. The understanding was that the thinking conceptually about PRIs as entities which lead to the planning of goals and good management helped to formulate the big picture for PRI communications. They then questioned how to translate from one to the other and the importance of having a plan to disseminate information, but the most importantly part of the plan is to know the target audience. Many participants agreed that there can be multiple target audiences depending on the issue, campaign, and strategy.

To conclude, it was agreed that 3 main questions needed to be answered in identifying a PRI's role for organizational and strategic planning necessary for communications:

1. Who are we? (as an institute within the state and within society)
2. What capacity do we have (financial, human, technical resources)
3. What problems are we addressing? – (what are the critical issues to respond to?)

### **Credibility and Target Audience**

Establishing itself as a credible PRI was another main theme of discussion. Once a PRI has internally identified itself within society and developed a strategy based on the above questions, the PRI struggles to be recognized externally and encounters the problem of credibility. Participants shared their frustrations that governments and the public alike largely discounted their role within society even if their recommendations were adopted. In response, it was suggested by one participant that PRIs should limit their research and topics to specific thematic issues in which they could establish themselves as experts. Other respondents questioned how important recognition of impact was if it is occurring nonetheless.

Still, recognition of impact and impact assessment became meaningful in the discussion of how to decide on the target audiences. Given the policymaking context, many of the PRI

communications representatives said they were not sure who to target and often felt like they were targeting too many diverse groups without being sure of which had most impact and how to define this impact. This was also tied to the discussion of “social marketing” and ways to “position the product” of policy-relevant research to specific foci within the society in different ways most accessible to policymakers, media, civil society, and other policy actors. In some cases, participants agreed this would require some “awareness” campaigns, but were careful not to conflate “awareness” with “advocacy” since most participants agreed that PRIs should not do “advocacy”.

### **Framing Communications for Arab PRIs**

It was debated whether it is a strategic advantage, core competence, or distinctive capability. Participants argued for each of these points. One argument for strategic advantage is that designing the right communications strategy and tools gives one organization a strategic advantage over others. However, other participants were quick to rebut this point on that grounds that PRIs should not be competing with each other and such a framework for analysis of PRIs and their communications strategies is thus flawed. An argument for strategic communications as a core competency suggested that without communication, the research and work of a PRI would have no impact and thus is essential to the success of a PRI. The respondent arguing for strategic communications as a distinctive capability explained that while successful and effective communications is the goal of many PRIs, it is achieved by few and we need to take into consideration the PRIs that may not be good at communications but still doing quality relevant work.

Once there was a conceptual framing of the PRI and a framing of strategic communications for PRIs, the moderator shifted to a more specific contextualization of communications strategies for PRIs in the Arab region. Participants questioned whether these strategies should rely heavily on the level of democracy, transparency, and political freedoms in the specific country which led to a larger discussion on whether the concept of think tanks altogether could exist without democracy. There was no consensus on a specific top-down or bottom-up formula because that required an analysis of stakeholders, a mapping of the policymaking processes and context, and relationship to other policy actors on an issue-specific basis.

It was agreed that the dissemination of policy research should nevertheless, despite the level of democracy, be disseminated to a larger and more public audience than only policymakers – closing the gap between research, policymaking, and the public. However, it was pointed out that this becomes a seeming impossibility when the nature of one PRI’s work was only to produce evidence-based research as objectively as possible and share the results and discuss with governments who are commissioning and largely funding their work. These are the quasi-governmental (QUANGOS) or government-organized (GONGOS) PRIs.

## Recommendations and Lessons Learned

Finally, working groups came together to discuss a case study example of a communications strategy and develop recommendations and lessons learned. The results of those discussions by participants are divided in the three following sections:

### *Arab PRIs Regional Communications*

1. Increase collaboration between PRIs on technical and strategic issues- for example create a virtual forum for discussion, questions-answers, and practical information-sharing
2. Organize web conferences for smaller, more localized, issues
3. Collaborate and exchange ideas on effective strategies for editing, design, printing, etc..
4. Focus on social networking between PRIs as well to more easily exchange and share information on what they are working on and disseminating
5. Build on the CAPRI database of PRIs for networking
6. Design a central mechanism to channel thinking from outside the Arab region to within, and from within to without
7. Establish a “code of conduct” for PRI communications in the Arab world – work out values specific to communications and media relations in the region
8. Collectively discuss and try to agree on PRI “positioning” for within Arab societies (relationship to state and public)

### *PRI Strategic Communications – “Do” and “Don’t”*

Do	Don’t
Know your audience- and know what they need to know	Don’t just engage international audiences, communicate with local as well
Know how to interact with local media	Don’t Limit ourselves to technical
Use Social Media- to extract as well as disseminate information	Don’t compete with other PRIs
Publish in local language	Don’t use negative slogans/images in communications
Measure the impact of communications, on different audiences since some mediums work better with some more than others- one easy way is through impact logs, google analytics and website statistics	Don’t engage only with like-minded groups and individuals
Internally clarify PRI role and mandate before	Don’t try to “specialize” in too many fields and

designing communications strategy	topics, focus on a few
Ensure the involvement of PRI communications manager in the early formulation of PRI research projects	Don't expect social media to be a good indicator of impact/influence, especially in reaching decision-makers
Maintain a degree of neutrality and objectivity	
As much as possible, build personal relationships	

*Other Lessons learned*

1. Communications is a two-way process, a dialogue not a monologue
2. Involve stakeholders in designing the communications strategies
3. Define opponents and beneficiaries to help select target audience
4. Make your institute part of the policymaking community- requires understanding the policymaking process and actors first
5. Speak with an understandable language- “translation” of scholarly/academic language for policymakers and the public

**Conclusions**

Communications for PRIs in the Arab world, as with PRIs in general, relies heavily on an understanding of the PRI's role and targets within the policymaking process. PRIs should involve strategic communications planning in the early stages of program and project development to ensure that the desired outcomes and impact of policy research is achieved. The various types of PRIs that exist throughout the Arab world are operating at a range of communications capacities and have lack clarity on the impact of their work. They believe that working together and helping each other at least to examine shared issues relevant to communications would be a great asset and the CAPRI project could be a pioneer facilitator for this type of collaboration in the future.