

11. Juli 2011

www.kas.de/golfstaaten

The Role of Think Tanks in the Gulf Region: Potential, Challenges and Benefits

KAS REGIONAL PROGRAM GULF STATES AND TAWASUL HOST THE "FIRST GCC THINK TANK DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE" IN SALALAH, OMAN

Over thirty experts from more than fifteen countries gathered in the southern Omani city of Salalah on July 7, to discuss potentials, challenges and benefits of Think Tanks in the Gulf Region. Among them were members of the Legislative and State Councils, as well as officials from universities, think tanks, media platforms and human rights organizations. Ambassador Luigi Narbone, Head of the EU Delegation to Riyadh was also present. The event was organized by Tawasul under the leadership of Khaled Al Haribi and by KAS Regional Program Gulf-States. It took place under the auspices of Lamis bint Abdullah Al Taiya, member of the Omani State Council.

The conference included several workshop sessions and a public presentation of the outcomes. The workshop was based on a working paper titled "From Research to Policy: a trajectory to development in the GCC", which was presented by Ahmed Al Mukhaini, an independent researcher on political development and human rights. The event aimed at shedding light on the purpose and objectives of Think Tanks and elaborating on the challenges they face in the region. A blue-print for further developments and a framework of action to synergize sustainable development was outlined based on working group discussions.

The evening session took place under the auspices of Sheikh Salim bin Aufait Al Shanfari, the Head of Dhofar Municipality. Dr. Saad Al Ajmi and Dr. Ibrahim Sharqieh, Deputy Director of Brookings Doha Center,



presented the findings and conclusions of the workshop to a large number of distinguished guests, who reacted with great interest.

In his introductory presentation, Al Mukhaini pointed to the small percentage of think tanks in the Arab world as compared to global figures and emphasized the dire need to enhance the role of Think Tanks as a bridge between governments and the civil society. "Scientific research and decision-making are still worlds apart in the region", he noted, and the time has come to "bridge this gap through a more active role of Think Tanks".

Dr. Suad Sulayman, member of the State Council, underlined the need for a better quality of education in order to create local experts who will be able to commit to in-depth research. The key is, she stated, to "transform research into knowledge" and to "convince decision-makers that progress depends on the active involvement of the people". This, according to her, will only be possible through an increased presence of local experts. Universities should focus more on research methods to overcome the

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

**REGIONALPROGRAMM
GOLF-STAATEN**

11. Juli 2011

www.kas.de/golfstaaten

widespread lack of data and accuracy in the region, especially concerning questions of socio-economic concern. Only through scientifically sound data "can rulers be convinced to listen to the voice of researchers".

Thomas Birringer, KAS Regional Representative to the Gulf-States, emphasized the need to enhance the role of Think Tanks as "a functional bridge between knowledge and power". One of the main challenges, he pointed out, is the fact that frequently those in power believe they have the knowledge, whereas academics often remain within their closed circles – an obstacle that has to be overcome. Moreover, in the age of globalisation, the additional dimension of "knowledge from other nations and cultures needs to be taken into consideration".

Further, the need for the independence and transparency of Think Tanks was discussed. Whereas some participants believed that Think Tanks have to preserve their intellectual autonomy under all circumstances, others pointed out that a free and vibrant market of ideas could promote a constructive mechanism of quality and selection. Competing institutions and advisors, it was argued, naturally improve the quality of research and thus create a sustainable "knowledge market". Moreover, complete independence of Think Tanks is never granted since a research project is always motivated by a specific interest, be it by the sponsor or the researchers themselves. "For this reason", Dr. Mashaal Al Hajeri from Kuwait University School of Law pointed out, "the matter of transparency and the high quality of the research becomes all the more essential".

During the working group session, parameters for the successful operation of Think Tanks were set. Dr. Ettore Greco, Director of the Institute for International Affairs in Rome, suggested as common denominators the quality of the research, its purpose to contribute to policy-making and the openness to external challenges. Moreover, research should be based on a combination of local and international expertise. Additional suggestions for indicators of an operational Think Tank were the number of problems it

has solved successfully, its transparency regarding research methods and objectives, and the reputation and trust it enjoys among scholars, decision-makers and members of civil society organizations.

There was a general consensus that the concept of Think Tanks should become more developed in the region and be brought to the awareness of the public. Moreover, the "culture of fear" of speaking up has to be overcome, Dr. Saad Al Ajmi, Chair of the Advisory Board at International IDEA and former Kuwaiti minister of information and culture, pointed out. Through a change of perspective and a constructive cooperation between the government and research institutions, urgent issues such as socio-economic policies, education, the labor market and political participation can be addressed and solved within the system, avoiding political unrest.

Opportunities were seen in the general wealth the Gulf countries enjoy, and the fact that financial resources for education and in-depth research are largely present. Moreover, the increasing involvement and activity of both young people and women in social and political life was seen as a chance to enhance the variety and competition on the market of ideas. Within this frame, also the great benefits of new technologies and social media, which enhance access to data and international networking, was discussed.

The conference is considered a unique event in the Gulf, the "first, but hopefully not the last of its kind", according to Khaled Al Haribi, Director of Tawasul. Al Haribi pointed out that the region had never seen such a high-profile event about Think Tanks with such a broad international participation. Also the participants expressed their interest in a follow-up event, in which developments and challenges can be discussed further. This would be a first step towards strengthening the role of Think Tanks in the Gulf and towards raising the awareness of their importance for research-based policy-making.