



## Policy Recommendations by U.S. Think Tanks: Sanctions vs. Diplomacy *An Educational analysis of differing strategies proposed by leading think tanks on Iran.*

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**Citation:** Ellias Aghili Dehnavi et al (2024), Policy Recommendations by U.S. Think Tanks: Sanctions vs. Diplomacy *An Educational analysis of differing strategies proposed by leading think tanks on Iran*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(11) 896 - 901, Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i11.8886

### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

In the perception of U. S. brazen hostility towards Iran, influence and ideology have often come into play especially focusing on interpretation of the facts and events. In this, the U.S. think tanks are significant in this regard since they possess great influence in the way events are collected and consolidated as well as policymakers are created. Such institutions often cover such a wide range of doctrines, and if there is no overriding animosity towards hawkish etc., where even a nudge can push the limit to antennas up for looking for solutions on engagement. In this article, we will investigate further, which performed all these functions and characterize the evolution of Iran's policy in regard to the U.S. Through an examination of key players, influential reports, and the broader ideological contexts of specific policies, we intend to show the links between these organizations and how they shape political discourse and actual American foreign policy in one of the most important definitions of geopolitical space in the world finally.

**Keywords:** Think Tanks, Foreign Policy, Conservatives, liberals, pragmatics,agency

### Introduction

*U.S. Think Tanks and Their Global Reach (Touzani et al., 2023)*

In the complicated structure of the foreign politics of the United States, think tanks serve as a most deployable and trained human resource capital as well as political administrators (Wiarda, 2008) These institutions are often made up of people who have been in government or are employed in policy formulation and have the potential to study and interpret current trends around the world including a history of US Iran relations (Zaytsev et al., 2021) Their impact is not only restricted to research and analysis, but also they actively engage in sometimes dominate public debates, counsel decision-makers, and assist in establishing the guiding principles (Klynina & Isaikina, 2023) Upon these principles, the foreign policy of the United States of America would be crafted and implemented (Bolan, 2013)

American think tanks seem to be on different wavelengths and their range is from the liberal to the left of center and even to the right of center, depending on their goals and policies. On the other hand, the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation challenge each other's views on various aspects related to national security and international relations, thus making assumptions of events and 'what will be done' dependent upon ideology. It is critical to understand this ideological spectrum as it offers a range of views that can either help in building bridges, or in driving wedges apart regarding the United States' posture towards Iran. (Dar & Haq, 2023)

The more we examine the role of think tanks, the more their power becomes illustrative as it is more than just an academic institution (Hasan, 2009). Moreover, they often act as brokers linking the academic world with the changing dynamics of policy making. Think tanks apply rigorous methodologies, write reports, policy briefs, and conduct events for those in power and the general population (Singh et al., 2014). Therefore, their ideas are not left unheard. These Ranging from inhibitions by the public to any form of instability. Fears are justified, and thus illustrates the necessity of why the recommendations put forth by these organizations should be taken

into consideration. They are able to attract a vast number of people or even sway public opinion in their favor, making it considerably easy to draw in the necessary support to forward a specific policy (Bhatnagar, 2020) We will seek to achieve this by looking into U.S. think tanks in relation to Iranian policy in the U.S., examining how these institutions assist towards either or both the formulation of strategies and/or the expanding debates on a complicated relationship in world politics. This is Where a relationship and attempts to understand the dynamics of such a relationship between two countries or nations is always fragile. The explanatory power of this relationship course is vast and covers even the ideological aspects that surround this presence.

### **An overview of the literature**

#### *Understanding the evolution of relations between United States and Iran: Brief History*

In order to grasp the contemporary trends in Iran and U.S relations, one must first examine the historical context that has shaped this intricate relationship for decades. The American involvement in Iran's politics goes back to early 1950s (Marsh, 2003), when the CIA supported the coup against the elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh (Ladjevardi, 1983), (Mokhtari, F. (2016). Such a turn of events did not only undermine the Iranian people's rights, but also nurtured within the US administration and within some sections of Iranian people's irrational hatred against each other, and that hatred proliferated in the many decades to come. (Rouhani et al., 2021)

The Iranian revolution of 1979 presented a major paradigm shift when the US imposed Shah of Iran was overthrown and the Islamic Republic led by Khomeini came to be. Such development enabled Iran to emerge as a profound threat to US interests in the Middle East region and ushered the end of diplomatic relations. It was the beginning of the hostage crisis which 52 American diplomats and citizens held hostage for 444 days. Out of such unfortunate happening, outcomes developed and became entrenched a mistrust, which did not die but instead shaped the outlook of the succeeding governments and their policies towards Iran. (Partowazar & Soltani, 2016)

The Iranian nuclear multipliers, alongside the country's backing for some militant groups, have complicated relations over the years. The responses of the United States were from economic sanctions to military operations in the region especially during the Gulf Wars. After 9/11, Iran was again in the spotlight: this was after President Bush labeled the country as a member of the 'Axis of Evil' in 2002. (Dasgupta, 2018)

More recently, 2015 nuclear agreement, called as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was a rare case of diplomatic engagement of the U.S However, the unilateral exit from the deal signed with all the member states brought back old tensions and gave way to a series of confrontations led by military fights and retaliations.

With this background, one must note that there has been an evolution in think tanks which have become important in molding US policy towards Iran. These have been for instance centers which study the policy history, opinion leaders, and advocates of certain policy, thus helping decision makers and the masses. This makes it possible to comprehend the historical complexity of the roles of think tanks in the modern Iranian-American relations system. (Kibaroglu, 2006)

### **Discussion**

#### *1-1) Key U.S. Think Tanks Involved in Policy Making on Iran*

At the core of American foreign policy is an impactful and robust public discourse as well as the participation of the decision-makers, and in this regard, several US institutions have the responsibility of providing critical analysis, rational recommendations clashing with the policy programs that are enacted, spin-off these policies and so on. In the context of Anti-Iran policies, a number of set institutions have an exceptional role while providing solid strategies, analysis and policies relevant to anti-Iran (Yazdani & Hussain, 2006). These are especially crucial for comprehending the workings of US interactions and policies ideologically and practically with the Iranian state. (Pollack & Saab, 2017)

The first one is the **Brookings Institution** as one of the renowned organizations with a program specifically devoted to the Middle East. Their scholars engage in comprehensive research, producing reports and arranging events; they focus on Iran's internal politics, its nuclear ambitions and its role within the region. This allows them to put into context the complicated relations between United States and Iran that often leads to the development of quite reasonable solutions, supporting the rational and deterrent policies. (Cohen & Clawson, 1994)

Anti-Iran rhetoric is maintained by another prominent US think tanks, that is American Enterprise Institute (AEI). According to AEI scholars, Iranian aggressions should be met with rigid responses from the US, sanctions or preparedness for military interventions should be proposed. A variety of research topics are targeted at triggering the supportive attitude of the public, as well as the officials, towards a more aggressive approach to impeach Iran. The nuclear ambitions of the Iranian government and the armed groups working in the region are highlighted to underline the threats. (Krasnov & Yurtaev 2016)

The **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace** has been a source of insight and information contributing towards the argumentation. Due to a strong emphasis on diplomatic resolution, the expertise of the Carnegie institutions tends to emphasize engagement rather than confrontation. They have written on the argument of internal change as a means to project Iranian policy engagement, thereby countering the

aggressive strategies. They demonstrate how various factors inside the country control the activities of Iran in order to adopt a sounder and appropriate policy. (Jalalpoor & Sharfi 2017)

Finally, the **Washington Institute for Near East Policy** contributes to the debate as well as informs policy formation about Iran. (Alagöz & Farzam, 2022) Their scholars and clients specialize on how the domestic agenda of Iran's policymakers affect their policies abroad and vice versa, how external factors are likely to affect Tehran's responses. They tend to suggest courses of action that encompass both the use of coercive force as well the use of diplomatic persuasion, so to speak.

All the three think tanks feed into the incoherent and multifarious debate on the Iranian policy-making process in the United States, each offering space for political discourses about engagements with one of the toughest regional actors, as part of the diverse set of diplomatic negotiations. It is important to appreciate their roles and influences in order to understand the challenging bounds of the U.S.-Iran relations.

#### *1-2) The Function of Research and Analysis in the Formulation of Policy*

In United States foreign relations, think tanks also serve as centers of thought and even pressure groups, especially concerning more difficult issues such as Iranian etc. They undertake research and various methods of studying Iran's political, economic and military systems, which then assist policymakers. Comprehensive reports, policy papers and expert opinions compose the analytical framework out of which 'strategic' decisions, are aimed at furthering national interests. These are made in relation to Iran's geopolitical standing and activities from nuclear weapons development to any form of involvement in conflicts with rival parties in the region, such as those currently ongoing in Syria and Lebanon.

Think tanks, nevertheless, also engage in advocacy work after bringing together stakeholders, policy makers, experts and academics through forums and discussions and vice versa. But often, their work is dictated by political beliefs and the need to please funders, which may affect the advice given and statements made. For their part, policymakers, should not ignore the impact of their work as it makes the case for rational policy proposals; rather, it is them who should be more vigilant of the biases imposed so that a sounder and effective foreign policy is developed in relation to the complexities surrounding US-Iranian relations.

### **Index (-es) Analysis**

#### *1-1) Case Studies: Think Tanks which have Determined Major Iran Policy Making processes*

Think tanks are crucial in the evolution of U.S. foreign activities especially in highly complex and often heated debates around Iran. These institutions have not only informed policymakers through providing research, making strategic argumentations and publishing powerful materials but also shaped the general public debates and perceptions on issues of concern. This impact can be examined by looking at a few case studies, depicting how think tanks were involved in making major decisions on Iran as an earmark of their work.

For instance, the range of analysis and policy recommendations developed by **the Brookings Institution** is very vast and intricate. For instance, the Brookings scholars wrote a number of reports prior to the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal and addressed the sanctions and military option with respect to (then) current political situation. As a result, more voices began pushing for a reasoned approach towards the Iranian issue through diplomacy, which in turn started changing public opinions and movements within Congress. Their positioning on the academic impartiality and structural division of their business among two parties provided them with a bipartisan appeal which ultimately enabled them to advance the central tenets of the understanding.

Another important actor is the **Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)**, which largely grew concerned over Iran and emphasized the implementation of a solid sanctions policy and dealing with Tehran's regional ambitions with a degree of confrontation. FDD through its wide array of scholarship and advocacy has altered the perception of Iranian role in the Middle East, especially with regard to the interests of the US and its military and political engagement with the regional actors. In their beliefs and when speaking to the public, their approach has managed to persuade many to adopt a stronger approach which in turn influenced decisions made at Congress and in the executive branch.

#### *1-2) Foundations of Ideology: Neo-Conservatives and Realists*

In the United States' policy towards Iran there is the two contending ideologies of neo-conservatism and realism which have influenced the American foreign policies for decades. This has become the focus for many scholars and especially those who work for think-tanks and are aimed at advocating for particular policies towards Iran. (Terpstra, 2014)

One of the most defining factors of neo-conservatives that many have recognized was their very strong anti-communism sentiment. Post the Vietnam war, there was a strong call among US politicians for establishing a socialist state worldwide which was met with backlash from neo-cons who were strong advocates for American interventionism and expansion. Initially, neo-cons believed that promoting democracy and Human rights in other nations would strengthen America's political outreach, however, over time the belief in American exceptionalism resulted in the idea that Americans are entitled to create a more democratic state at all costs. As for Iran, the demonization of the Iranian regime was heavily used to gain support, first to establish sanctions then isolation and finally full military intervention. The Invasion of Iraq was an example of neoconservative policies in full force, who argued the change in regime would inevitably lead to an increase in freedom and democracy not just in Iraq but in a unified Middle East. (Rathbun, 2008)

On the contrary, it is the realists who have dominated the perspective that there is almost a case to be made focusing on the balance of power and national interest rather than ideologies. From their assumptions, realist

think tanks argue that effective policy should avoid the bold pursuit of democracy and instead seek to create and maintain stability and security. Their interpretation has been that the United States could work with Iran and there was plenty of room for constructive engagements with Iran even if the US does not share certain values with the Iranian government. This argument gained traction following the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2015 which was seen by the realists as a requisite towards limiting Iran nuclear ambitions while avoiding military confrontation. (Shumilin & Shumilina, 2021)

This ideological divide can therefore explain the existing debate over sanctions and foreign interventions within U.S. foreign policy making. Even though some neoconservative think tanks tend to push a realist paradigm, dissent is loud enough with those that contend engagement with Iran does more harm than good (McLean & Whang, 2014). On the other hand, US realism tends to largely dismiss the regime change strategies pushed by neoconservatives that they see as destructive and too aggressive for longevity of US interests. (Davydov & Kislitsyn, 2018).

As think tanks have become prominent in American policy-making regarding Iran, it is vital to also comprehend the ideological basis of their suggestions. This also explains public opinion as well as the making of policy and thereby displaying the multi-faceted and sometimes challenging relationship developed by the US and Iran.

### *1-3) the Effect of Lobbying and Advocacy on Iran Policy*

Iran's lobbying and advocacy serves core functions in determining the US policy on the Iranian question, as it fills a void between the social movements, the policy elites and the inner workings of Washington. Bringing Down the Warlords: Restructuring the Think Tanks in the United States. A number of think tanks in the US not only endorse particular advocacy but also undertake analysis and critiquing of policies which have implications for US Iranian interactions.

This involves preparing in-depth reports, submitting expert testimonies and maintaining contact with stakeholders, which aids promoting the specific policy proposals to the relevant lawmakers. They often join hands with an advocacy group and utilize their research together with the understanding of the case and apply it to the interests of their constituents. This partnership can magnify the inequalities of those who are pushing for more assertive policies toward Iran on the bases of national interests or those who do not support such views for diplomatic peace and trade relations.

Importantly, lobbying also has an economic aspect as considerable resources which are spent on either advocating or opposing certain policies. It is the case that organizations concerned with Iranian issues, advocating for sanctions or opposing military intervention, utilize lobbying in order to gain public perception and legislative support. Their actions mirror larger conflicts of ideologies within America, demonstrating the interplay between foreign relations and domestic politics. (Peksen & Peterson, 2022)

Gathering such insights on Iran's regime renders the role of these think tanks and advocacy groups with respect to Iran's policy more apparent. They participate in not just creating the narrative surrounding U.S. – Iran relationship, but they also outline the limits of discourse which in the end, mold the decisions defining U.S. involvement with Iran. One particular note, therefore, is necessary for a complete picture of the intricacies underlying U.S.-Iran relations; namely, the various elements that shape final policies.<sup>1</sup>

### *1-4) Collaboration between Think Tanks and government institutions*

The relationships developed between think tanks and government institutions can greatly influence U.S. policies regarding Iran (through advocacy and research) which then translates into strategy making. Such think tanks which usually have specialists on areas such as foreign policy, economics and regional studies become very helpful to government officials in understanding Iranian politics and how it affects the U.S. (Wiarda, 2008b)

In a way that informs policymakers, think tanks have provided means through which they can understand Iran's geopolitical environment by writing regular briefings, policy papers and progress reports. Some of these organizations are Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and others, which provide an opportunity for the policy makers to borrow ideas that have been borrowed by the scholars from the discussions held in forums organized by these institutions. (Fischer, 1991)

Additionally, these collaborations may take the form of particular enterprises or task groups designed for the resolution of challenges like nuclear threat, terrorism, regional security threats and more. This means with the help of think tank scholars, government agencies are able to strengthen their analyzing skills and avoid having only reactive approaches towards Iran.

There is no need to forget about the importance of this relationship, since think tanks also seek assistance from the government in order to enhance their research, so that their analyses can have some relevance and practicality. This mutualistic collaboration enables a more integrated and rational framework with respect to the U.S. Iran policy in which political theory is supplemented with political practice. Basically, the interplay

<sup>1</sup> D. Rix delves into the mechanisms through which Congress, think tanks, and lobbying groups, such as the Israel lobby, influence U.S. foreign policy towards Iran

between government departments and think tanks is one of the fundamentals of American policymaking, especially in relation to the foreign issues which are complex and delicate, such as that of Iran. (Wu, 2018)

#### 1.5) Future Perspectives: The Role of Think Tanks in the Conduct of the Foreign Policy of the USA

Participation of think tanks in the U.S. foreign policy formation about Iran, among other factors, is said to be changing due to geopolitical shifts like new block formation, new technological advances and optimizations. Moreover, the knowledge of data and more increasingly artificial intelligence would allow these institutions to refine policy recommendations so as to have articulation of several formulations and policies. On the other hand, how US-Iran relations could be construed in this case is likely to have changed due to the advent of social media and other digital platforms. This have allowed think tanks to promote new ideas about their areas of interest through podcasts, webinars and other various forms of interactive content.

Moreover, think tanks have developed a greater emphasis on cooperation in view of the increasing intricacy in U.S. relations with Iran. Collaborations with universities, local communities, and the diaspora and foreign think tanks render them to be more capable of cutting across the ideological spectrum and policy approaches. With growing multipolarity in the world, such influence is likely to extend into the areas of cyber security, space exploration and environmental politics which are all viewed as integral components of foreign relations and, indeed, of domestic security. Taking into consideration the changes and innovations which are characteristic of this age, it can be fairly expected that the role of think tanks in establishing policies about U.S.-Iran relations and the Middle East region in general cannot be overstated.

### Conclusion

In the end, U.S. think tanks are crucial in formulating policy on Iran as they also act as center stage for research, discussions and public debate. Such centers of focus are characterized by prevailing ideological bias, funding dependency and geopolitical situational context. In accordance with their two sided role of being sponsors and analyzers, these organizations also do the investigations in depth while trying to balance out various aspects which were made worse by counter narratives and even divisions. For purposes of effective policy making, it is important for the members of the government to try on purpose to counter the opinion of the think tank's point of view which creates a broader and sophisticated spectrum instead of a black and white situation. Located within a sensitive and complicated field of international politics, think tanks can endorse productive practices that balance and help out the relationship between Iran and the United States of America which eventually leads to economic growth and security.

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