

A brief report on a program of (why think tanks matter in times if crises)

Asbar Council (an initiative of Asbar Center) held a virtual program under the title “Why think tanks matter in times of crises?” on Friday, January 29th, with the participation of many research centers and think tanks in Saudi Arabia and many experts and interested people who also joined the event. This coincided with the program launched by the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania the next day of its annual global forum.

Through this program, Asbar Council shed light on the nature of think tanks, the value they add, and why they have become more important than ever before, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a global crisis that has a radical and influential impact on commercial, economic, social and psychological activities, whether in the Kingdom or in the world.

The program activities included holding three sessions. The opening session was initiated by Dr. Fahad Al-Orabi Al-Harhi, chairman of Asbar Center. He welcomed the participants, attendees and followers through the "Zoom" platform, noting the importance of the program held by Asbar Center in coordination with the Think Tanks and Civil Society Program (TTCSP) of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania.

Eng. Osama Kurdi, head of the Supervisory Commission of Asbar Council, stressed that the Council has become a vivid example of introducing the activities associated with civil society institutions. Such activities include searching for the truth without equivocation and not being influenced by opinions that may have specific

purposes, as well as avoiding being influenced by social media. Eng. Kurdi indicated that Asbar Council is distinguished by the great diversity of the issues it raises, whether economic, political, or social, in addition to including about 100 thinkers and researchers interested in public affairs.

The second session was held under the title “The role of think tanks in times of crises,” in which the researcher Mr. Osama Youssef, talked on behalf of Professor Yahya bin Junaid, chairman of the Center for Research and Intercommunication Knowledge. He explained that think tanks and research centers have gained large-scale attention worldwide in recent decades. He indicated that they have emerged with the breakthrough of crises and problems that humanity is experiencing, expecting, or reading their dimensions. He emphasized the strategic value of think tanks and research centers in assisting the decision-maker in developing policies that enable them to urgently encounter obstacles. He pointed out the great role which the research and think tanks play today in shaping the future, by conducting future and development studies, forecasting problems before they occur, and working to remedy situations before potential crises occur.

Dr. Afaf Al-Ansi, head of the Weekly Issue Committee at Asbar Council, referred to what is presented by think tanks, including generating modern ideas, encountering political and administrative challenges in the short and long terms, providing experts as well as reference experiences in various professional areas, and informing the public about issues in a simplified manner through the use of publications and website comments, and helping to encourage and provide a fertile ground for constructive dialogue, and helping in setting the policy agenda. She stressed that the role of think tanks in

normal times is no different from that during crises, pointing out that the nature of crises necessitates that think tanks act quickly, to help and support the decision-maker during crises with political alternatives or quick proposals.

Dr. Majid Al-Turki, chairman of the Center of Information and Arabian and Russian Studies, said that when we discuss the role of research centers in times of crisis, we find that there is a major gap between those centers and decision-makers. There is a gap of conviction and of estimating the outputs of those centers. He spoke about another problem which is that the research centers are still talking to themselves. They work hard, but the circle of return and benefit from their outputs is narrow and does not exceed effective areas, distances, and orbits. The reason for that is lacking professional interest from decision-makers in the role of research centers. He indicated that when a comprehensive nation crisis comes up, the state must sponsor these centers, each in their specialty, to solve this crisis.

Dr. Muhammad Al-Sulami, founder and chairman of the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah), said that the think tanks can estimate many direct solutions without beautification in light of crises. Such solutions can be scientific or practical solutions for the various beneficiaries and decision-makers. The think tanks can provide appropriate visions and benefit from the expertise that these centers have. They can also provide an internal and external network of relations, easy access to specialized experts around the world and at home, and access to outputs and practical solutions to these crises. They can contribute to raising public awareness, especially in times of crisis, by submitting proposals and ideas from outside the

box that help the decision-makers to develop appropriate solutions that would benefit in the best way to deal with these crises.

Dr. Noura Mansouri, Senior research fellow at KAPSARC, King Abdullah Center for Energy Studies, said that despite all the negative effects of the Corona pandemic that the world is experiencing today, it has provided great opportunities for the think tanks based around the world in general, and in the Middle East region in particular. The pandemic helped in expanding their roles within the framework of policy discourse and formulation, as governments, international organizations, and the private sector, for example, are looking for the necessary support to reduce the economic, social, and environmental effects of this pandemic. This is in addition to helping to obtain answers to some important questions about the best ways to get out of this pandemic and rebuild in a better way.

Moderator of the session and member of the Supervisory Board of Asbar Council, Dr. Hana Al-Musslet explained that the think tanks received wide-ranging attention, especially during the last decades of the twentieth century. They became an important alternative in developing countries and exploring prospects. They became an integral part of the development landscape in many countries. They grew to a position in which they have become one of the main players in drawing the political, economic, social, and educational trends of countries and one of the influencing ones.

The third session of the program was held under the title “The role of think tanks in countering the Corona pandemic,” in which Dr. Ahmed Al-Askar, Executive Director of King Abdullah International Medical Research Center (KAIMARC), reviewed the center's role and contributions during the Corona crisis, and the research is provided in

medical studies related to the pandemic, its causes and methods of transmission, as well as methods of diagnosis, prevention measures, and clinical practices to provide and develop appropriate vaccines and drugs. Dr. Al-Askar indicated that KAIMARC has more than 150 research projects, 150 scientific papers, and 10 existing patents related to Coronavirus and other diseases.

Eng. Elias Abdul Karim from the Corona Observatory for the non-profit sector in stimulating social solidarity in the crisis, highlighted the experience of the observatory in monitoring the initiatives provided by charities or donor institutions and endowments to counter the Corona pandemic. He indicated that the establishment of the observatory came to confirm that everyone has a role in containing this crisis and alleviating its effects and support for government efforts. He revealed that the observatory was able to monitor 939 initiatives submitted by non-profit sector organizations with a value of more than a half-billion riyals, the number of beneficiaries of which reached more than 46,000. He indicated that the activities of the observatory cover a range of priority areas such as the relief field, the social field, the educational field, the awareness field, the service field, the health field, and the accommodation field.

Dr. Abdul Aziz bin Saqr, chairman of the Gulf Research Center, pointed out that many research centers had to change and postpone many programs in line with the developments imposed by the pandemic. The corresponding focus has been on studies dealing with the impact of the pandemic on the region from different angles including the economic and the energy dimensions. He noted that the Gulf Center played an important role in supporting efforts to address the pandemic by conducting social, political, economic,

defense or security studies away from the medical and scientific aspects. He explained that these studies would have mitigated these negative effects on the economy, health, and education, noting that many research centers were able to keep up with the changes imposed by the pandemic. Such changes included the technical developments that accompanied this stage and were among the most prominent features of this period. The research centers succeeded in communicating their voice and they record the workshops through the various virtual platforms.

Dr. Abdullah Hamid Al-Din, head of the editorial unit and a senior researcher at the King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies, touched upon the experience of the King Faisal Center in dealing with the Corona crisis and the change the Center witnessed to adapt to the epidemic. The concerned change included the research patterns, target audience, focus on practical matters, forecasts, and analyses that would mitigate these negative impacts on the economy, health, and education.

Dr. Fahad Al-Orabi Al-Harthi, chairman of Asbar Center for Research and Studies, shed light on the experience of Asbar Center, as one of the think tanks, and its affiliated initiatives. He stressed the role played by the Center in countering the crisis of the Corona pandemic, pointing to the organization by Asbar and the initiatives affiliated to it (whether through Asbar Council, or Asbar World Forum) many activities and events that include critical analytical monitoring of the world's current situation and looking ahead to its foreseeable future. The Center's efforts were mainly concentrated on shedding light on the factors, effects, and repercussions of this pandemic.

Al-Harthi explained that Asbar World Forum has made considerable efforts in researching and analyzing the factors and consequences of the Coronavirus. It implemented 9 webinars in which 44 experts and specialists spoke from the Kingdom and worldwide. Other significant scientific agencies participated including UNESCO and King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) and others. The Forum also issued (18) reports in both Arabic and English, detailing the results of these webinars. Besides, the Forum, during its fifth-round (Future of the Future), devoted a number of its activities to discussing this crisis and foreseeing the world's future towards it, with the participation of a group of experts and specialists locally and internationally.

Dr. Fahd Al-Orabi Al-Harthi addressed the efforts made by Asbar Council in tackling the Corona pandemic with its various dimensions, repercussions, and economic, social, and political impacts on Saudi society. The effort, according to Al-Harthi, has been bolstered with the participation of 100 members of Saudi intellectual and educated elites interested in public affairs. Al-Harthi pointed out that the Council issued a lengthy report in Arabic and English entitled (Saudi Arabia and the Repercussions of the Corona Pandemic). The report reviewed the Council's discussions on the Coronavirus, which were held with the participation of many experts, specialists, and academics, who shed light on the repercussions of the pandemic on Saudi society. He also talked about the measures that have been taken to adapt to the new situation created by the Pandemic. Asbar Council also allocated a section in its 68th monthly report for October 2020 about the Corona crisis, under the title (What if Corona Continued for Another Year?) with the participation of distinguished elite of the Kingdom's thinkers in various fields. Besides, Asbar Council has recently organized a virtual webinar entitled: "Corona

Vaccine between Science and Knowledge.” The webinar sheds light on the nature of the vaccine, its importance, efficacy, and effectiveness in addition to the observed side effects, as well as the false rumors about it.

Moderator of the session, Mr. Fahd Al-Ahmari, Secretary-General of Asbar Council, pointed out that despite all the negative effects of the pandemic, it provided institutions with a great opportunity to enhance cooperation in the research field between research centers in the region. However, he stressed the importance of each center having a specific agenda and anticipating the future reflected in its role, interests, specializations, capabilities of existing researchers, and the public.

It is noteworthy that the organization by Asbar Council for this program comes as a continuation of cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania represented by the Think Tanks and Civil Society Program (TTCSP) as one of the think tanks entrusted with contributing to decision-making in the field of public policies in various fields.