Research Paper

A Theoretical Treatise on the Role of American Think Tanks in US Relations with the Muslim World: An Exploration into the Ideational Structures of American Exceptionalism and Orientalism

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Abstract

As a theoretical treatise, the present article brings to light the applicability of constructivism to the study of think tanks as ideational agents actively participating in the construction of ideational structures that constitute American identity, interests, and policies. It is argued that when discussing think tanks' production of expertise and policy advice on U.S. relations with the Muslim world, American exceptionalism and Orientalism operate as two interconnected ideational structures influencing the process. Based on a constructivist framework, an investigation into the role of think tanks in U.S. foreign policy should not begin at the final stage of policy formation; rather, it is necessary to look into how think tanks influence the process of policy making at the ideational level. As such, the characteristics of U.S. foreign policy toward the Muslim world will remain unchanged as long as there is an ideational commitment to the creed of American exceptionalism; that is to say, as long as American exceptionalism constitutes American identity, American interest, and thus American foreign policy behavior toward the Muslim world. Think tanks, as the special focal points at the intersection of the political realm, the academia, and the media, serve as the hubs of American exceptionalism and Orientalism. As long as this dual creed is continually reproduced in the think tank world, it is logical to conclude that no change is in sight with regard to U.S. foreign policy and American unilateral interventionism in the Muslim world. A break with American exceptionalism and Orientalism in the think tank world, in turn, would signal the beginning of a new era in the operation of American foreign policy.

Keywords: American Exceptionalism, Constructivism, International relations, Muslim world, Orientalism, Think tanks, the United States of America

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1. Introduction

Scholars concur that think tanks, otherwise called policy planning organizations or policy analysis institutes, occupy an increasingly important role in international relations (McGann & Sabatini, 2011; McGann, 2016, 2019a, 2019b, Abelson, 2014). In fact, the recent decades have witnessed an increasing interest among I.R. specialists in studying the role of think tanks in international relations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 401). In the case of the United States, for example, Wiarda (2010, p. 29) argues that "think tanks on many issues are as influential as political parties, interest groups, and other major institutions". That said, others take a stand against portraying a positive image of think tank influence. Rich (2005), for example, does not find the increase in think tank influence commensurate with their exponential growth in number and visibility. Such conflicting assessments in part stem from these scholars' different theoretical convictions, some of whom focus on structural factors while others put greater emphasis on think tanks' agency.

These conflicting views reflect the two main theoretical perspectives regarding think tank influence: elitist and "good governance". Scholars from the elitist camp view think tanks as parts of the power structure serving the interests of the power elite. Those from what Medvetz (2007) calls the "good-governance" perspective, on the other hand, emphasize think tank agency and look for the extent of neutrality and quality policy advice in think tanks. Nevertheless, both perspectives suffer from the limitations imposed by their reductionist approach, thereby impairing our understanding of think tanks.

The present study aims to demonstrate how a constructivist approach to the role of American think tanks in U.S. relations with

the Muslim world would allow researchers to go beyond the two dichotomized, reductionist views of think tanks. As such, the present theoretical treatise pursues two main objectives. First, it attempts to bring to light the applicability of constructivism to the study of think tanks. Second, it aims to shed light on the ideational structures that operate as the basis for American foreign policy think tanks' production of expertise regarding U.S. relations with the Muslim world. With a constructivist theoretical framework, an investigation of the role of think tanks in foreign policy should not begin at the final stage of policy formation; rather, it is important to look into how think tanks influence the policy process at the ideational level through participating in the constitution of American identity, American interests, and, finally, the nation's policies. As will be discussed at length in the proceeding sections, American exceptionalism and Orientalism are two complementary ideational structures that inform the above process. First, an overview of constructivism as an international relations theory is given, followed by a summary of competing perspectives on think tanks. The article then examines a constructivist approach to think tanks' role in international relations, specifically as it relates to U.S. relations with the Muslim world.

2. Constructivism

Taking constructivism as its main theoretical framework, the present article views think tanks as important agents in the construction of identities and interests as a precursor to the construction of policies leading to political action. This section aims at giving a short introduction to theoretical considerations that enable us to see think tanks in this light. Constructivism is

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discussed in relation to traditional rationalist international relations theories such as realism that ignore the role of producing knowledge and ideas in international politics.

Constructivism emerged as an accepted non-rationalist international relations theory in early 1990s due to the inability of traditional rationalist I.R. theories, especially realism, to explain the vast changes in world politics upon the close of the Cold War. "With the emergence of constructivism as an accepted alternative international relations theory, new theoretical grounds were opened for the examination of the role of non-state agency (such as that of think tanks) in creating, changing, or sustaining normative and ideational structures that are instrumental in shaping the identities and interests of states" (Mousavi & Saghaye-Biria, 2015, p. 132).

This unprecedented outlook was rooted in new ontological perspectives that, according to Richard Price and Chris Reus-Smit (1998), were "an outgrowth" of critical international theory. Critical theorists rejected the philosophical foundations of both neorealist and neoliberal rationalists on the ontological, epistemological and normative levels. Ontologically, they questioned the claim that political actors, be they states, non-state actors, or individuals, were atomistic egoists whose identities and interests were formed prior to social interaction. Epistemologically, they questioned the positivism inherent in rationalist international theories and asked for interpretive modes of theorizing and research. Normatively, they rejected the idea that knowledge, in general, and social science, in particular, were value-free and argued that all knowledge is subjective and based on values and interests (Reus-Smit, 2005, pp. 193-194).

Constructivism moved beyond the meta-theoretical approach of critical theorists to "an empirically-informed analysis of world

politics" (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998). In other words, constructivists built on the ontological assumptions of critical theorists to investigate aspects of world politics that were either ignored or were anomalous to neo-realism and neo-liberalism. Most notably for this study, adopting a constructivist approach to the investigation of international relations "increases our sensitivity to domestic political factors, especially to the notion that within each national actor different interpretations of the national interest compete for the shaping of international agendas as well as international practices" (Adler, 1992, p. 104).

According to Adler (2002), constructivism in international relations has to be understood at three levels. First, constructivism takes a "metaphysical stance" toward the nature of social knowledge; that is, it considers all knowledge to be socially constructed. As such, it could be seen as a "paradigm of paradigms" (Adler, 2002, p. 96). Secondly, it is a social theory for analyzing the role of knowledge and knowledgeable agents in producing social reality. Thirdly, it is a theoretical and empirical approach or perspective in international relations theory (Adler, 2002, p. 96). As Guzzini (2000, p. 147) states, "constructivism is epistemologically about the social construction of knowledge and ontologically about the construction of social reality."

At the ontological level, constructivism is based on three basic assumptions. First, "normative or ideational structures" are seen to be as important as material structures and to have a powerful effect on social and political action (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 197). These structures include socially constituted values, beliefs, and ideas that shape the identities of political actors. Wendt, for example, argues that "material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are

embedded" (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). The second constructivist proposition states that it is crucial to pay attention to the socially constructed identities of political actors as these identities in turn shape their interests and political actions. This assumption is in conflict with the neo-realist and neo-liberal assumption that interests are exogenously determined, which in turn constrains the conceptualization of society to a strategic domain for the pursuit of preexisting interests. For constructivists, instead, society is where identities and interests are formed. The third constructivist assumption accounts for the interdependence and mutually constituted nature of structures and agents. In Reus-Smit's (2005, p. 197) words, constructivists are "structurationists, as emphasizing the impact of non-material structures on identities and interests but, just as importantly, the role of practices in maintaining and transforming those structures". According to constructivists, "both processes of change and continuity are based on agency which is, in turn, influenced by social, spatial, and historical context. In other words, agency and structure are "mutually constituted" (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 3). Normative and ideational structures are seen as shaping actors' identities and interests in three ways: "imagination, communication, and constraint" (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 198). They limit the realm of what is deemed possible, affect how actors communicate their intentions and justify their actions, and work as constraints on political actors' behaviors.

To summarize, on the level of ontological assumptions, constructivists have three main differences with rationalists. They see states and other political actors as "deeply social" rather than "atomistic egoists". It is argued that actors' identities are a product of the social environment and the institutionalized norms, values, and ideas emanating from it. Second, interests are seen as

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byproducts of social interactions and thus "endogenous" to them, rather than the realist depiction of interests as "exogenously determined". Interests are constructed socially and are not to be treated as a preexisting given. Third, society is seen as a "constitutive" rather than a "strategic" realm. As such, society is "the site that generates actors as knowledgeable social and political agents" (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 199). In the words of Finnemore and Sikkink (2001, p. 394), "unlike proponents of materialist and utilitarian theories, constructivists cannot take identities and interests for granted, and understanding the processes by which they originate and change has been a big part of the constructivist research program".

According to Reus-Smit, there are three strands of constructivism: "systemic, unit-level, and holistic" (Reus-Smit, 2005). Systemic constructivism focuses on the interaction of states as unitary subjects and the co-construction of norms, identities, and interests that occur among them. Thus, the scope of the study under this form of constructivism is the same as that of realism, namely the international system with the distinction that it sees the system as an international society of states. The works of Alexander Wendt (1992, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2003) are in line with this form of constructivism.

Systemic constructivism suffers from the drawback of a lack of attention to domestic sources of state and interest. As Reus-Smit (2005) puts it, Wendt makes a distinction between the corporate and social identities of the state: the former is shaped at the domestic level while the latter is a product of systemic interaction at the international level. Whereas systemic constructivism merely focuses on the social identity of states, unit-level constructivism attends to the domestic determinants of states' identities and

interests. Holistic constructivism is a bridge between the other two forms of constructivism, including both systemic and domestic factors into its theorizing and analysis. Given that in this article, think tanks are viewed as domestic sources of ideational structures, systemic constructivism does not constitute an apt framework suitable for the purpose of this study.

3. Constructivism and Competing Theories of Think Tank Influence

Most studies centering on think tanks fit two theoretical perspectives: "good governance" and elitist. Scholars from the elitist camp view think tanks as organizations serving the interests of the capitalist elite. Those from the "good governance" perspective look for the extent of neutrality and quality policy advice in think tanks. Both perspectives suffer from the limitations imposed by their reductionist approach, impairing our understanding of think tanks. Scholars with an elitist perspective take an instrumentalist, structural approach to the study of think tanks and view them as part of the American power structure. According to these scholars, think tanks are "elite organizations well positioned to influence public policy" and "frequently serve as talent pools for upcoming presidential administrations to draw on and where high level policymakers often take up residence after leaving office" (Abelson, 2002, p. 50). In a sense, think tanks perform a "revolving door" function for the governing system where elites continually join and leave administrations. For these scholars, think tanks function as instruments of the ruling elite (Medvetz, 2007). According to the elitist conceptualization of think tanks, elites in universities, foundations, and policy-planning organizations (such as think tanks) work as intermediaries between

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the corporate elite and the government (Domhoff, 2009; Dye, 2001, 2002).

Dye and Zeigler (2003, p. 426) propose an "elite model of the public policy-making process," in which policy making happens in a system that links corporate and personal wealth with foundations, universities, and policy-planning groups (think tanks). According to this model, first proposed in an article entitled "Oligarchic tendencies in national policy-making: the role of the private policy-planning organizations," policy-planning groups, or think tanks, denote the "central coordinating points in the policy-making process" where action takes place and policy is debated and formulated (Dye, 1978, p. 428). The policy-planning groups (think tanks) receive "seed money" from foundations, universities, corporations, and government agencies to develop ideas for policy formation. This model suggests that policy-planning is a guided process rather than a merely independent intellectual activity. A significant function of think tanks is "to build consensus among corporate, financial, media, civic, intellectual, and government leaders around major policy directions" (Dye, 1978, p. 432).

On a similar note, Domhoff (2002) finds the network of think tanks "the policy planning network" to quote his exact words. In his view, think tanks serve as the apparatus for developing "policy consensus" to cater to the common interests of the corporate community. In addition to providing the necessary funds for research, the leaders of the corporate community influence think tanks in three other ways. They sit on policy-planning organizations' boards of directors and boards of trustees, controlling "the general directions" of the daily occurrences in these organizations. They are additionally involved in the selection of think tank personnel. Moreover, they might provide free legal

and accounting services to the people working at these think tanks. Finally, they might get involved in certain activities associated with more prominent organizations, such as participating in seminars and fundraising events. Giving centrality to the issue of money flow, Domhaff (2002, p. 72) envisions the policy planning process as a process that flows down from the corporate community (that is, the upper class) to foundations, universities, think tanks, policy discussion groups, commission task forces, and finally the government.

While Domhoff and Dye (1987) emphasize the financial link between the corporate community and think tanks, Abelson (2006) puts emphasis on American think tanks' high levels of access to and influence on different layers of the United States government. Advocacy think tanks' rise to prominence, among which Abelson specifically names the Heritage Foundation and the Institute for Policy Studies, has in effect blurred the line between policy research and policy advocacy. The policies proposed by the policy-planning organizations are then transferred to the media and the relevant executive and legislative bodies. The media set the agenda for policy making and frame the issue as a "problem". While this stage of policy making is not delineated in the present study, it is important to note that mainstream mass communication theories, including Bennett's indexing model and Entman's cascading activation model, posit that news coverage and framing of issues is elitist in nature (Bennett, 1990; Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2008; Entman, 2004). The official policy-making process is also marked by "bargaining, competition, persuasion, and compromise over policy issues" (Entman, 2004, p. 200). Such bargaining is more intense at the domestic level. The president has more leeway to "pursue elite recommendations in foreign and military policy

areas without extensive accommodation of congressional and interest-group pressures" (Dye, 2016, p. 173).

Using Bourdieu's concept of *field*, Medvetz (2007, 2012) proposes a sociological conceptualization of think tanks and the structural constraints that the agency of the "*hybrid*" *policy experts* they house. He defines think tanks by their "*structural hybridity*" or their emergence from the four social *fields* of academia, politics, business, and journalism. Despite possible differences in outlook and style, elites from these four fields come together in pursuit of common political objectives. The result, however, is not objective expertise. Rather, "far from an equal partnership, this project required a set of knowledge producers willing to subordinate their intellectual production to the established rules of the political field and the priorities of their sponsors" (Medvetz, 2007, p. 1). Competition among think tank policy experts and other producers of such expertise in related fields over the means producing policy-relevant knowledge and their growing dependence on "holders of political and economic sources of power for material support and symbolic legitimation" imposes restraints on the quality of think tank research. As Medvetz posits, "products of their junctural location in social space, policy experts submit to multiple forms of censorship imposed by the political field by adapting their research to fit the established form, content, and temporal cycles of political discourse" (Medvetz, 2007, p. 2).

Another group of scholars, including Heclo (1978) and Stone (1996), view think tanks as public policy institutes that by virtue of their expertise are invited to participate in the process of policy-making. Clearly, in these conceptualizations, more weight is given to agency than structure. These scholars refer to think tanks as epistemic communities. Stone (1996, p. 36), for example, dismisses

the idea that think tanks are part of the power elite and instead conceptualizes them as communities of politically motivated intellectuals attempting to use their expertise to influence a policy area narrow in scope. Based on the pluralist view, think tanks provide the space for the formation of epistemic communities defined as networks of experts with shared normative beliefs and shared understanding of issues and possible solutions (Haas, 1992, p. 3). In other words, while Stone and like-minded scholars emphasize the agency of individual think tank experts, elite theorists stress the importance of the structural factors that reduce the role of think tanks to serving the ruling elite.

Critics find the pluralist tradition deficient in explaining the reason as to why think tanks fare better at influencing the policy-making process than do other non-governmental organizations and certain interest groups. Moreover, examining think tanks from a pluralist perspective does not explain why some think tanks are more successful at exerting an influence over policy making. "Think tanks may indeed be part of the chorus, but they possess distinctive attributes that enable them to stand out", Abelson (2006, p. 102) notes.

While elitist and pluralist scholars both acknowledge that think tanks have the ability to influence the process of policy making, proponents of the theory of statism believe in the autonomy of the state in its decision making. Scholars such as Stephen Krasner and Theda Skocpol see think tanks and other interest groups' attempt at having an effect over the process of policy making as a form of restraint and resistance that the government is able to overcome (Abelson, 2006). Taking this view would lead one to posit that only those think tanks to which the government wishes to turn for advice have a realistic chance with regard to influencing policy outcomes.

The statist model, however, does not take into account the complexity of think tank activity in the policy-making process.

Perhaps the most important deficiency of all three approaches to the study of think tank influence is looking for the signs of such influence at the policy level. What constructivism as a theory has to offer is changing the level of analysis to the ideational stage of policy formation; that is, the ideational framework through which American people, in general, and elites, in particular, view the world. The question to be tackled is, what role do think tanks play in shaping the ideational factors that constitute U.S. identity, interests, and policies in its relations with the Muslim world?

4. A Constructivist approach to the study of think tanks

A significant contribution of constructivism to the study of think tanks is their emphasis on the mutual constitution of agency and structure. In other words, while they do pay attention to the constraints that material and symbolic structures of power place on think tank agency, they do see room for think tanks to affect these structures through the production of knowledge and ideas. In a sense, constructivism brings the study of think tank influence to a new playing field. The emphasis on the significance of normative and ideational structures affecting international relations adds to the importance of think tanks' work in politics.

International relations research on "the political effects of experts and specialized knowledge" increased in the 1980s and early 1990s, resulting in a research program on the role and influence of "epistemic communities" in international relations. Of these research, some looked at the subject from a constructivist

perspective (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 401). Constructivist scholars argued that as epistemic communities "deploy their knowledge, these epistemic communities often disseminate new norms and understandings along with technical expertise" and thus "act as powerful mechanisms of social construction" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 401). Adler (1992), for example, studied how the works of RAND Corporation on arms control using game theory influenced U.S. arms control strategists who then transferred them to their Russian counterparts, laying the grounds for a deterrence framework in which mutually assured destruction (MAD) was deemed rational. Adler (1992, p. 106) emphasizes the importance of examining the role of national epistemic communities in this regard:

> They may be able to affect international political processes and outcomes by binding present and future decision makers to a set of concepts and meanings that amount to a new interpretation of reality and also by becoming actors in the process of political selection of their own ideas.

"The main theoretical question of international politics, which goes to the core of the epistemic communities approach", according to Adler and Haas (1992, p. 371), is "where do expectations come from?" Adler and Haas aim to show that "expectations in international politics come from interpretive processes involving political and cultural structures, as well as from institutions "'dedicated to defining and modifying values and the meaning of action'" (p. 371). They postulate that epistemic communities play an instrumental role in the first two steps of what they call "policy evolution," namely "policy innovation" and "policy diffusion". The next two steps of the policy process are "selection" and "persistence":

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> We can view foreign policy as a process by which intellectual innovations (which epistemic communities help produce) are carried by domestic and international organizations (in which epistemic communities may reside) and are selected by political processes to become the basis of new or transformed national interests. Likewise, under specified conditions, we can view international politics as the process by which the innovations of epistemic communities are diffused nationally, transnationally, and internationally to become the basis of new or changed international practices and institutions and the emerging attributes of a new world order. (Adler & Haas, 1992, p. 373)

The first step in the policy evolution process, namely policy innovation, is of particular interest to the present study. According to Adler and Haas (1992, p. 375), exerting influence on policy innovation involves three processes: "(1) framing the range of political controversy surrounding an issue, (2) defining state interests, and (3) setting standards". In other words, the identification of national interests is a derivative of how issues are framed.

4. 1. 1. American Exceptionalism and American Orientalism

As ideational actors, it is necessary to arrive at a theoretical framework regarding the ideational structure of American think tanks most influential in the formation of American foreign policy. In line with scholars in the field, the present study argues that American exceptionalism and Orientalism are the main ideational structures shaping U.S. relations with Islam and the Muslim world. Moreover, the issue of U.S. relations with the Muslim world is one of the strategic areas of think tank activity both in the United States and around the world.

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In this study, the construction of U.S. identity in relation to Islam will be discussed in terms of the two concepts of American Orientalism and American exceptionalism. As such, the constitutive nature of structure and agency is examined at the ideational level rather than the material level. American Orientalism and American exceptionalism are viewed as ideational structures that have been found to operate in American foreign policy discourse and American identity. How these elements play in the construction of U.S. identity is undeniably viewed as dynamic and fluid rather than fixed and static. Understanding this dynamism and the differences and similarities among think tanks in this regard is of immense significance.

Scholars in international relations have built on Edward Said's (1994) seminal critique of Orientalism as a basis for the critical analysis of U.S. hegemony and identity politics (Nayak & Malone, 2009, p. 254). Orientalism is a particular form of Eurocentrism which has served as the dominant ideological framework in Western relations with the rest of the world and especially the Islamic world (Said, 1994, 1997; Hippler, Lueg & Friese, 1995; Lawrence 1998; Karim 2003; Sayyid 2003). From a constructivist perspective, it could be maintained that Orientalism functions as an ideational structure against which scholarship on U.S. relations with the Islamic world and discussions of U.S. foreign policy issues related to Islam play out. As such, Orientalism facilitates the ascendance of discourses that perpetuate it and constraints calls for change. As Klotz and Lynch (2007, p. 24) note, in constructivism, structures are derived from stable meanings. Thus, Orientalism as a system of meanings and implications gives rise to an ideational structure that facilitates American dominance in the Muslim world through an essentializing inferiorization and otherization.

As the present study suggests, with Orientalism operating as the main ideational structure at work in major American foreign policy think tanks, these policy planning organizations play a role in fixing of the meaning of the Orient, its cultures, and peoples as inferior, creating a body of knowledge that translates into unequal power relations. With American exceptionalism as the main ideational structure for American self-presentation, the Orient (and Islam for that matter) is constructed as the United States' alter ego. The binary world created is necessary for the perpetuation and fixation of the identity of the United States and everything American as superior.

More than being "a play of meanings and ideas," Orientalism has real effects on the behavior of both the United States and the Oriental Others it helps to construct. As constructivist I.R. scholars posit, "the more we act toward an entity as if it has a particular representation or meaning, the more that entity can take on that representation" (Doty, 1996; Wendt, 1992 in Nayak & Malone, 2009, p. 256). In other words, the more the Orient becomes the subject of such representations through Western actions, the more it will act in line with those representations. A self-feeding cycle ensues. Therefore, American Orientalism becomes the basis for the construction of the identities of the United States and its Others and, more importantly, serves as the basis of real-world practice. Nayak & Malone (2009, pp. 256-257) summarize the effects of American Orientalism on US's international behavior:

> The American variant of Orientalism allows for an analysis of the discursive deployments in which (1) the United States assumes and relies upon an ontological distinction between the United States and Others; (2) the United States employs authoritative epistemological claims and representations about Others' bodies, habits, beliefs,

feelings, and political sensibilities, thereby justifying interventions, sanctions, and other actions within, across, and outside its borders; and (3) U.S. foreign policy relies on a rationalist methodology consisting of finding "evidence," such as reports and fact-finding missions, of foregone conclusions about the Other and the United States need to assert its position.

An important characteristic of Orientalist discourse is its reliance on binary language (Said, 1994, p. 2). According to Said, Orientalism, as a style of thought, is a dichotomous Western worldview based on "an ontological and epistemological distinction" between the so-called Orient and the West. Sardar (1999, p. 131) argues that such a dichotomy is "the life force of Western self-identification." In addition to using a dichotomous language, Orientalism uses an essentialist discourse, universalizing certain traits and characteristics in their association with the Orient and the Islamic world. Said considers the numerous writers, novelists, journalists, philosophers, political theorists, historians, economists, and imperial administrators, who have accepted the basic Oriental/Occidental distinction as the foundation for their work concerning the Orient, as Orientalists.

According to Macfie (2013), Orientalism has come to signify an ideology justifying and accounting for Western imperialism. In discussing Orientalism in a globalized world, Sa'di (2020) finds that while the concept has undergone changes with respect to "emphases, concerns and methodologies," Orientalist objectives seem to have remained largely intact among the general public in the West and the Western scholarly elites. What needs to be observed in think tanks' active production of expertise on U.S. relations with the Muslim world is how Orientalism is employed as an ideational structure to dichotomize, essentialize and create hierarchies with respect to a superior United States and its inferior

Orients. At times, this inferiorization and otherizing is directed against Muslims living in the United States as is evident in Ali et al.'s (2011) and Duss, et al.'s (2015) study of an Islamophobic network of US-based foundations, think tank policy experts, and politicians. Attempting to fixate the meaning of the Oriental Other within these think tanks helps perpetuate an Orientalistic understanding of Islam and Muslims in general and consequently affects the foreign policy sphere. In other words, at times, American Orientalism, as an ideational structure, targets Islam and Muslims within but with international repercussions (Bald, 2015).

Nayak and Malone (2009, p. 253) argue that "critical International Relations (IR) scholars must consider American Orientalism in tandem with American Exceptionalism in order to better understand U.S. identity, foreign policy-making, and hegemony". They argue that "American Orientalism is a style of thought that gets grounding through American Exceptionalism, a particular and specific form of Orientalism intended to produce 'America'" (Nayak & Malone, 2009, p. 254). American exceptionalism consists of three main components: that America is a superior nation, that it has a historical mission to reform the world, and that the United States shall rise to power but never decline (Restad, 2015, p. 225). Thus, the institutionalization of American exceptionalism is a specific form of American nationalism that affects U.S. relations with the rest of the world and specifically the Muslim World.

Investigating American think tank experts' construction of the meaning of the Middle East as an influential factor in their policy analysis and recommendations, Bardauskaite (2017) interviewed 14 experts from the following institutions, ten of whom had previously served in governmental positions:

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1. Brookings Institution (2 experts)
2. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2 experts)
3. American Enterprise Institute (1 expert)
4. Council on Foreign Relations (1 expert)
5. Washington Institute for Near East Policy (1 expert)
6. Hudson Institute (1 expert)
7. United States Institute for Peace (1 expert)
8. Stimson Center (1 expert)
9. CATO Institute (1 expert)
10. Woodrow Wilson Center (1 expert)
11. Center for American Progress (1 expert)
12. Foundation of Defense of Democracies

Her findings indicate that "What is the Middle East?" in these experts' mindset was directly related to "What is the United States of America?" and the potential answers for it. "The Middle East is perceived [as a] primitive, dangerous, poor and parochial Other and, therefore, as an opposition of the modern, safe, prosperous and universal United States of America" (Bardauskaite, 2017, p. 106). In essence, mutually constituting Orientalism and American exceptionalism, the theories put forth by these think tank experts otherize the Middle East through its inferiorization and securitization as a dangerous, Islamic entity in direct opposition to the universally superior United States of America.

In articulating American policy regarding such diverse issues as counter-terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, human rights, democracy promotion, nation building, and even instigating the reform of Islam, think tanks have become one of the venues for the perpetuation of the fixated ideational structures of Orientalism and American exceptionalism. Even when multilateralism is promoted,

the two ideational structures remain at play. The multilateral approach of America leading a global liberal order could be conceptualized as "imperial multiculturalism" (De Genova, 2010); that is, America leading the world to pursue its hegemonic interests globally in terms of broad policies enumerated above. In this, the United States is, in essence, creating a global police state. The unilateral approach is undeniably a more blatant manifestation of Orientalism and American exceptionalism aiming to achieve primacy in the world (Genova, 2010). As is discussed below, an analysis of think tank activity regarding U.S. policy in the Muslim world could be theoretically conceptualized as employing variants of the two ideational structures.

In line with Nayak and Malone (2009), Beshara (2019, p. 50) argues that the discourse and practice of counter-terrorism is well conceptualized as an Orientalist discourse, which gains ground through American exceptionalism. As Beshara argues, what lies at the heart of this discourse is an emphasis on freedom as an individualistic Western value. Based on this conceptualization, emancipation of oppressed races and cultures happens through Western saviorship, and, as such, it does not result in emancipation from the dominance of Western hegemonic powers. He adds that rather than addressing the actual implications of liberty, the concept of liberation best captures the struggles of the racialized, colonized peoples who have endured the harmful consequences of Western dominance for centuries (Beshara, 2019, p. 52). In this context, both terrorism and counterterrorism are manifestations of colonial and post-colonial violence that need to be understood as a legacy of Western colonialism (Beshara, 2019).

A main debate in major foreign policy think tanks revolves around the link between Islam and terrorism (Saghaye-Biria, 2020).

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At one extreme, the likes of Dennis Ross and Robert Satloff (see for example Berger, Hadley, Jeffrey, Ross, & Satloff, 2015) of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy argue that the ideology of Islamism is the root cause of terrorism and as a result should be viewed as enemy number one. At the opposite end, other scholars affiliated with Brookings Institution, namely Shadi Hamid and William McCants (2017), argue that Islamism has wide public appeal in the Muslim world and thus remains a durable force in the region's political scene. According to this strand of think tank activity, the task lies in fostering ties with moderate Islamists who reject violent terrorism. In both discourses, what remains missing is an assessment of the role of Western colonialim and post-colonial hegemony in the Muslim world and the rise of terrorism. Also missing is a critical assessment of an American counter-terrorism strategy and behavior that employs torture, terrorism, and occupation. As Ameli (1395 [2016 A.D.]) contends, American exceptionalism has turned into a theory that confers on the United States the right to attack, occupy, and exert economic sanctions on other countries. In other words, by securing this unwritten right, America is practicing "exemptionalism" from internationally sanctioned behavior (Ruggie, 2009).

Another area of U.S. foreign policy that sheds light on the institutionalization of Orientalism and American exceptionalism is the country's foreign policy regarding "universal" human rights. Ever since the Vietnam debacle, the United States has crafted "human rights into a new language of power designed to promote American foreign policy" (Peck 2011, p. 5). While claiming to lead the world toward universalizing human rights, the United States government has historically both exempted itself from adhering to the norms, laws, and standards of international human rights. In

fact, these norms have been weaponized by the country to pressure adversaries (Saghaye-Biria, 2018). As a result, the United States uses the so-called universal international regime of human rights to perpetuate a 'hierarchical colonizers' model of the world, defining the West as natural and the rest as barbarians and savages in need of being saved from their inferior status" (Saghaye-Biria, 2018, p. 62), while at the same time exceptionalizing itself and its allies such as the Zionist regime from abiding by the standards.

Women's rights in the Muslim world has been a site of cultural contention in this regard and has at times, as in the case of the Afghanistan War of 2001, been used to disguise the intention of U.S. military interventions as humanitarian. Refusing to acknowledge the prevalence of such violence in the United States, the United States reifies an image of itself as "an exceptional savior" in terms of violence against women, dismissing other non-Western (especially Muslim) cultures as "problematic savages" (Gentry, 2015, p. 362). Here again we see American exceptionalism and Orientalism at play. The solutions provided by think tank experts to this so-called problematic savagery ranges from hard-core to liberal Islamophobia. Think tank debates regarding hijab is illustrative. An example of the hardcore approach is seen in Cheryl Benard's (2004) report for the RAND Corporation entitled "Civil Democratic Islam" in which she finds hijab to be a "minefield" and the only sure way to overcome it to rest in the outright reformation of Islam (p. 58).

The liberal Islamophobia variant as seen in Shadi Hamid's (2016) article in the Brookings Institution website entitled 'The right to choose to wear (or not) hijab' finds the solution to hijab in liberalizing Muslim societies so that women would have a choice regarding wearing the hijab. What remains unsaid in both

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approaches is the prevalence of sexualization in liberal societies where either hardcore Islamophobia forbids Muslims to practice hijab or a choice is given to women to adopt the practice. A discussion of sexualization, objectification, and sexual violence agaisnt women in the United States and other liberal societies is altogether absent from the discourse. More importantly, the effects of the weaponization of such sexualization directed at Muslim women is not discussed at all. The idea that hijab is a social system to keep society free of sexualization and women free of self-objectification is non-existent in these think tank debatdes.

Democracy promotion is also viewed through the lense of Orientlaism and American exceptionalism. At least two strands of thought are extractble from think tank activity in this regard. One views democracy solely in terms of Western values, regards democratization impossible without nation-building, and thus sees Islamism and democracy as totally incompatible. Others, while defining democracy as a process and acknowledging the possiblity of illiberal democracies, recommend that the United States promote the imposition of secular systems of governance in which moderate Islamists also play a role. Thus, despite the democratic features of the Islamic Republic, it is not deemed worthy of strategic engagement with mutual respect. Despite their differences, the two strands of think tank activity regarding Islamism and democracy promotion share several important features. Otherizing Islamism in Orientalist terms and advocating reforms based on American exceptionalism, they refuse to find legitimacy in a system of governance based on Islamic principles that remains unaffected by the Western influence (Saghaye-Biria, 2020).

Restad operationalizes “American national identity” in the

context of foreign policy as a "belief in American exceptionalism" (Restad, 2015, p. 14). He explicates how American exceptionalism meaningfully defines American identity because, regardless of its debatable objective validity, the belief in American exceptionalism has been "a powerful, persistent, and popular myth throughout American history". It is this belief that, according to Restad, "constitutes, informs, and shapes U.S. foreign policy". The belief permeates American life in various domains, such as the general public, the media, the government officials, the political experts, and the academia.

Restad finds the conventional division of American identity into exemplary and missionary and U.S. foreign policy traditions into isolationist and internationalist incomplete and inaccurate. He argues that because American exceptionalism is the main building block of American identity, American "national interest" is constituted around the idea of the United States as exceptional in practice. Such a conceptualization of American identity and "national interest" as exceptional has historically pushed U.S. foreign policy in the direction of "unilateral internationalism/ interventionism" as opposed to "multilateral internationalism" (Restad, 2015, p. 14). While Restad does note that American exceptionalism is not "one monolithic idea" and that it has been affected by "context, historic time, or individual interpretations" (Restad, 2015, p. 15), he observes that the belief "has been strong and persistent throughout American history, and has had an enduring impact on foreign policy, notwithstanding the validity of its underlying assumptions" (Restad, 2015, p. 18).

Of course, identities are not necessarily stable, and they can become subjects of contestation and negotiation. To the extent that these representations "are sheltered from or survive despite

contestation, they demonstrate the power of elite discourses in 'fixing' group identities" (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p. 70). Major American foreign policy think tanks participate in the perpetuation of the United States' hegemonic relationship with the Muslim world in part by sheltering American exceptionalism and American Orientalism from contestation and negotiation.

The role of think tanks in affirming and fixating the ideational structures of American exceptionalism and Orientalism with respect to U.S. foreign policy in the Muslim world is all the more important given the fact that one of the pillars of American exceptionalism, that is, the invincibility of U.S. power, is in serious question. Signs of America's decline have started to create cracks in the belief in the exceptional nature of the United States (Bacevich, 2008; Layne, 2012; Gilmore & Rowling, 2018; Cambanis, 2020). What remains to be seen is the response given by major American foreign policy think tanks when confronting the calls for "the end of American exceptionalism."

5. Conclusion

As was explicated in this theoretical treatise, given the special place American foreign policy think tanks occupy in the production of ideas regarding U.S. relations with the Muslim world; constructivism offers a useful theoretical approach to the study of think tanks and foreign policy. In this framework, it is suggested that research into think tank influence concerning U.S. relations with the Global South in general and the Muslim world in particular take into account the two ideational structures of American exceptionalism and Orientalism. These related ideational structures inform how think tanks participate in the construction of American identity, national interest, and foreign policy.

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The characteristics of U.S. foreign policy toward the Muslim world will remain unchanged as long as there is an ideational commitment to the creed of American exceptionalism; that is to say, as long as American exceptionalism constitutes American identity, American interest, and thus American foreign policy behavior. Think tanks, as the special hubs at the intersection of the political realm, the academia, and the media, serve as the focal points of American exceptionalism and Orientalism. As long as this dual creed is continually reconstructed in the think tank world, it is logical to conclude that no change is in sight with regard to U.S. foreign policy and American unilateral interventionism. A break with American exceptionalism and Orientalism in the think tank world, in turn, would signal the dawn of a new era in the practice of American foreign policy. What remains to be studied is when and how this cornerstone of American identity, national interest, and foreign policy cracks from within, and the world of think tanks is the best place for scholars to observe the potential transformations in this regard.

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