

**THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN TURKISH FOREIGN
POLICY DECISION MAKING**

*DEVLET DIŐI KURULUŐLARIN TÜRĐ DIŐ POLİTİKASINDA KARAR ALMA
SÜREÇLERİNDEKİ ROLÜ*

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ABSTRACT

The nation states are in a phase of fast-changing technology environment. The speed of technological transformation is enabling people to reach information whether true or false very quickly. What happens in a certain geography of the world is immediately heard also by people in other parts of the world. In this context, the transformation of information to knowledge, in other words, the production of knowledge is no longer under the sole authority of the nation state. Independent actors and agencies are eager to play a role in this process, too. Those actors and agencies can be defined as non-governmental organizations in broader sense. This paper is based on the field research of the author, conducted in 2012 in Ankara with experts working in different think-tanks. In this study, it has been conducted in-depth interviews with the expertise working in different NGOs regarding their influence and role in Turkish foreign policy decision making process. It was aimed to understand and analyze whether the agencies have a role or not in the process.

Keywords: non-governmental organizations, think-tanks, decision making process, Turkish foreign policy.

ÖZ

Günümüzde ulus devletler, birçok farklı deęişimin ve dönüşümün yanısıra teknolojinin de çok hızlı deęiőtięi bir dönemden geçmektedirler. Bu hızlı deęişim, insanlara bilgiye ulaşma konusunda oldukça geniş imkanlar sağlamaktadır. Dünyanın herhangi bir yerinde yaşanan olaylar, bambaşka coęrafyalarda yaşayan insanlar tarafından da eş zamanlı olarak takip edilebilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bilginin dönüşümü, başka bir ifadeyle bilginin üretilmesi sadece ulus devletlerin kontrolünde olmaktan çıkmıştır. Baęımsız aktörler ve birimler bu dönüşüm ve oluşum sürecinde bir rol oynamaya oldukça isteklidirler. Bu aktörler ve birimler genel olarak devlet dışı kuruluşlar olarak tanımlanabilir. Bu çalışmada esas olarak, farklı devlet dışı kuruluşlarda çalışan uzmanlarla derinlemesine mülakat teknięiyle yapılan görüşmelerden yola çıkarak bu kuruluşların Türk dış politikasındaki karar alma mekanizmalarına herhangi bir katkısı olup olmadığı sorunsalı üzerinde durulmuştur. Böylelikle süreçte herhangi bir katkı veya rollerinin olup olmadığı anlaşılmaya ve anazli edilmeye çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: devlet dışı kuruluşlar, düşünce kuruluşları, Türk dış politikası, karar alma süreçleri

1. INTRODUCTION

The classical understanding of the “state”, its duties, and functions is under heavy criticism and change since the establishment of international organization in the twentieth century. It can be no longer argued that the state and its institutions are the sole source of the power, knowledge, and decision making process. The non-governmental organizations, international economic associations & companies, and think-tanks have been an important part of the state affairs in this century.

The world had met with today’s think-tanks in the nineteenth century. The think-tank sector came into a boom era in the twentieth century in the USA particularly. It is mentioned in his work that there are more than 4500 think-tanks in the world and over 2000 of them are located in the United States of America (McGann, 2002). In Turkey also we saw the increase of think-tanks during late 90s in a relation with the demise of the Cold War system. During the Cold War years, Turkey had a very significant place within the West Bloc lead by the United States of America. In addition to that, Turkey had turned its face to the Western institutions following the declaration of the Republic to become a more developed and civilized country. In that respect, Turkey has taken as example of many developments in the western world. Think-tank culture can be accepted as one of those examples; however, the creation of strong think-tanks in Turkey is not so old. In Turkey, it started just in the late 1990s with the leadership of some academics, retired professors, soldiers, and bureaucrats of different state institutions.

The principal goal of this report is to analyze the impact of the think-tanks in Turkey on the Turkish foreign policy decision making process. Since there are a few literatures on the history, evolution, and services of the think-tanks in Turkey, here it is intended to look closely the relation between the think-tanks and decision making process in Turkish foreign policy.

In this paper, I begin with the literature review for the question, and then come the methodology part. There are some sub-heading under the methodology section namely the research technique and sources, structure of the interviews, the sample, and finally the identity of the researcher. After that part, I will be analyzing the interviews and finish with the conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

My research question in this qualitative research course was “the role of the non-governmental organizations in the Turkish foreign policy decision making process”. There is a wide range of definition regarding the non-governmental organizations. For instance, think-tank is defined as independent, non-interest based, non-profit, political organizations that produce and primarily rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policy making process (Rich, 2005). Another definition is that “think-tanks” are “non-profit, nonpartisan (which does not mean non-ideological), research-oriented institutes among whose primary objectives is to influence public opinion and public policy (Abelson, 2002: 9).

I searched for the general history of the think-tanks in the world in general and in Turkey in particular. Although Turkey has a short history regarding think-tanks, the number is promising in the long run. I will be looking at the relation between think-tanks and foreign policy decision making process in Turkey. The historical development of think-tanks in Turkey and how they evolved since the establishment will be an important part of my literature review. During the literature search, I mostly came across with the products of think-tanks in Turkey. One of them was the SETA Report (SETA Report: 2010). It was a valuable work since it was prepared by the sectorial people themselves. Another research work for this aim was the master thesis written by Aziz Aydın. He analyzes the establishment and evolution of think-tanks in Turkey in his thesis (Aydın: 2006) supervised by Prof. Dr. Hüseyin Bağcı. The relation of the think-tanks and Turkish foreign policy lies at the heart of this research question. Therefore, the crucial work of art in the realm of Turkish foreign policy has been scanned also.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the methodology part, research technique and sources, structure of interviews, sample, researcher’s identity, and research design are going to be presented in order to clarify how and where the data is collected.

Research Technique and Sources

I have used the Qualitative Research Technique (King, Keohane,&Verba: 1994) during my filed work since I was in need of deeper material related to the topic and it was a kind of decision making process issue so that it would not be meaningful to use quantitative research technique. Before going to the filed, I created a

research design which would be very helpful for me in accordance with the advices of my professors from the department. It would be a field work and I would be having data collection via in-depth interviews.

In addition to the secondary sources like online articles, the web sites of related think-tanks; the main source of this report comes from the in-depth interviews conducted with eight people in the second and third weeks of May 2012 in Ankara. My primary resources will be the in-depth interviews and the secondary resources will be the reports and articles of my participants related to my research question.

Structure of Interviews

The whole interviews were completed in two week-time in Ankara since the participants were all living in Ankara. For the first three of them, I went to their offices and the remaining two were invited to my place. I asked, in every interview, for their permission to use a tape recorder and all participants said it would be no problem. Although I has used tape recorder, I kept taking notes to show them the importance that I gave to the field work. I realized after starting the talk that they were joyful because of my taking notes what they had said. Each interview took an average of 40 minutes.

Sample

I have completed my field with the sample of eight people from three different think-tanks based in Ankara. I talked to three different think-tanks in two weeks' time including those eight researchers. They were working as researchers and experts and each of them was the chair of a regional department in their respective think-tank and has had a different field of expertise and academic interest.

The group of the participants was all male; ages were between 35 and 45. All participants had their master degrees from different field especially from international relations and political science. Three of them were also holding Ph.d degrees from the almost same disciplines and remaining five were on their Ph.d thesis stage. All of the participants were Turkish citizens. They were all working in the think-tanks and were expert in their fields which are very much concerned with Turkish foreign policy.

Identity of the Researcher

I am a Ph.D graduate from the department of Area Studies Ph.D Program at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. I got my bachelor degree from the International Relations department and then completed my master study in Asian Studies program in the same university. As I expected from the beginning of the interviews, I did not have any serious difficulty during the talks since I am not a foreigner to the topic or outsider. Since I have a similar educational background there was not a communicational problem related to the research itself during the in-depth interviews.

Research Design

As mentioned before, the interviews were taken as ground for the design after I completed a basic literature survey. I have put my questionnaire in the appendix part and it composes of two parts. In the first part, there are the general questions for the participants to mention about his educational and professional background details.

In my in-depth interviews, I asked my participants about their think-tanks establishment aims, goals and agendas. They informed me about their inner decision making structure and how they work and create their reports etc.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

In my first part of questionnaire, the focus was primarily on the inner structure of the think-tanks. The questions were concerned to get answers for the technical issues like how many people work in the institution, what the establishment goals were in the beginning, what the inner decision making process was like etc.

Three think-tanks have an average of 20 people working in them and most of the researchers have at least a master degree. One of those think-tanks was among the oldest ones in Turkey and the cadre composes of retired professors, bureaucrats, high-rank soldiers etc. However, another one is established in 2004 and has a younger group of researchers.

In each of the interviews, the participants informed me about their educational backgrounds, and what their exact position in the think-tank was. The people I have talked to were expert on Russia, Far East, America, and security and energy policies. They have much work of art in their spheres.

Almost with each participant, we began with a general talk over the recent developments in Turkish foreign policy in addition to the Justice and Development Party's active foreign policy initiatives. The first participant summarized the corner stones of the Turkish foreign policy and then moved to the decision making and think-tank relation. The last Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu was regarded to change the face of Turkish foreign policy in terms of conducting a more dynamic relation in the world. In every interview, researchers mentioned their happiness that Turkey was now playing a more active foreign policy in the region. This automatically increased the need of expert people and knowledge for concerned area like Africa and Far East. It attracted academics in universities and they started to be more engaged with the think-tanks.

There are some points that were spoken out by all participants. One of them was the fact that the think-tanks in Turkey have some kind of role on foreign policy decision making not directly but especially via media. A direct influence has not come out yet according to them. Another point was that think-tanks in Turkey were not producing or offering great changes in foreign policy sphere but either supporting the general framework of Turkish foreign policy or not. The cooperation is still limited for most of the researchers.

When I moved to the second part of the questions, I tried to get deeper information for think-tanks relations with state institutions. The most intensive work comes out with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They organize common conferences, workshops, and exchange information. However, there comes a problem and it is the politicization. One of my participants argued that it is hard for think-tanks to think differently from the governments. In practical terms

Patterns of Change

The first participant argued that the 1990s were the years lived under the complexity of relations. There were not so much think-tanks in Turkey in 90s; only ASAM¹ was being well-known. However, maybe due to the fact that its main sponsor – ULKER – stopped supporting it in financial terms it had to dissolve itself in 2004. The new think-tanks followed the way of ASAM and today the number cannot be underestimated.

When Turkey starts to discuss a neighborhood problem or a world event, the issue becomes a part of think-tanks' agendas. It is also possible to see not only political issues to be dealt with by the think-tanks but also economic ones are worked. An example given by the participant was that last year an airline company asked for a report about a country where the company had planned to open a new agency. Another example was a security project asked to one of my interviewed think-tanks by the Governor of Istanbul.

Researchers also told me that the "feedback" mechanism increased the sympathy of public to the think-tanks since they can criticize the products of think-tanks. Moreover, I realized a point that was pretty much referred during the talks: transitivity. My field notes showed me that most of the participants mention about the transitivity issue and how it was limited in Turkish think-tank culture. As compared to the USA, it is restricted in Turkey to pass from university to think-tank or from think-tank to ministries. That obviously affects the flow of knowledge among those centers.

Self-Perception

The participants of the research mentioned that their think-tanks' establishment aim was to generate scientific knowledge in the intersection of the national and international issues and deliver that knowledge via their technical capabilities and media channels. When I first heard such a perception and goal from the participants I was very surprised because I would not expect an approach which is very likely to hear from European or American researchers.

Most of the participants told that the think-tanks were not state-perception free. It is meant that you cannot declare to the opposite of general accepted perceptions. A serious problem in the sector is believed to have information pollution. In this situation, there is a few scientific knowledge produced by the experts and is delivered to the public. Here solution can be to uncover scientific and objective knowledge rather than the conspiracy theories.

When I asked the inner decision making process I was told that it is the job of each independent center itself. If a report is asked to one of the desks then they prepare it all together in the group and then published or send to the place.

¹ ASAM (Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi) was established in 1999 and had to stop its activities and existence due to financial problems in 2004.

Expertise

In Turkish think-tanks similar to other ones around the world there is a division of expertise. The inner structure is defined and separated along this line. To exemplify, in one of the think-tanks whose three researchers I have conducted in-depth interviews has several centers within it. It is usually called to be an umbrella organization that carries out several types of studies through different research centers. There are centers or desks for Asia-Pacific, European, Eurasian, Middle East, America, Energy studies in many think-tanks located in Ankara. In each center, there is an average of 5 researcher expert on the related field.

They mentioned they have close relations especially with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but pointed out that the MFA is not shaping its overall decision making process in the light of think-tanks arguments or proposals.

5. RELATIONS IN THE FIELD

Before going to the field and arranging all meetings, I had thought that the participants would not allocate enough time for the interviews and would not take me seriously. However, things were quite smooth and worry-free. I had reached my first participant through a close friend working in a think-tank based in Ankara. At the beginning, I told her about my research and asked for her help to contact some people if available for the interviews. She called me back in a few days and informed me the first meeting was scheduled.

We arranged an available time for the first participant and I went to his office with my questionnaire. When I entered the building, I was impressed by the design and the useful structure of the building itself. It was a four-floor, new, and light place. He welcomed me and asked me take a seat at the opposite of his desk. It was my first interview in the field and as everyone said in this sector, I will never forget the first interview although there was not something strange or troubled.

In the first minutes of the interview, I introduced myself and gave detailed information about my field research, the research question and its aim. The research question itself seemed very attractive to the participant and we began with the first part of the questionnaire. In that part, he was asked the educational background and personal work definition in the respective institution. My first participant had his MA and Ph.D degrees from a British university; therefore, he made valuable comparisons between British and Turkish think-tanks during the interview. It was a very lively talk during which we could talk about the details of think-tank culture and working system in detail and also Turkish foreign policy pretty much.

The next two interviews took place in the offices of the participants again. After completing our questionnaire, I was kindly asked to stay for the lunch break in the think-tanks. It was a warm environment and I met many people during the lunch times. The last two interviews were conducted in my office at METU. Since it is a more familiar place to me I was certainly more comfortable during the talks.

6. CONCLUSION

The increasing trend all over the world shows us that the state has to be in cooperation with non-governmental organizations as much as possible to be. In general, my participants share the idea that the think-tanks in Turkey are very newly emerged, not has a deep and long history of tradition as closely working with the state institutions.

In this study, I tried to show the relations of the think-tanks with state intuitions and whether they have any role on the Turkish foreign policy decision making process. The situation is actually promising as compared to that of ten years ago. The democratic governments are aware of the need of taking support of all social groups, organizations and etc. since foreign policy is perceived to be an elitist issue, the NGOs and think-tanks are certainly helping governments to share the foreign policy agenda with the society in an easier and smoother manner.

The think-tanks that I met considered themselves as influential actors in media by informing society through their interviews, talks, reports and conferences. In addition to society, as one of the participants mentioned they could see their views' projections in the state administrators' speeches. It shows that the decision makers take into consideration the views of think-tanks.

However, they also agree that following the end of Cold War period, according to my participants think-tanks have increased their role and activities within the country due to the increasing emphasis on the democratization issue. I think that the Turkish think-tanks are still on the way of "learning this job" as one of the participants also emphasized. It actually has two reasons: first one is that the think-tank culture is still

developing and not completely finished. Second one is that to be a part of decision making in foreign policy area is not an easy affair in a country like Turkey because of the fact that Turkey has a very centralized administration mainly coming from its political historical background.

Although it is still too much for the think-tanks to get over, the progress is improving and promising for the Turkish think-tanks to be more active in Turkish foreign policy decision making process in the future.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

Initial Questions

1. Can you talk about your educational background?
2. What is your position in this think-tank?
3. What are the establishment goals of your think-tank?
4. Can you mention about your institution's activities?
5. Can you describe the inner decision making structure?
6. How many people work in here?
7. On which areas researchers are expert?

Decision making process in Turkish foreign policy

1. How do you evaluate your relations with Ministry of Foreign Affairs?
2. What is your institution's overall perception for Turkish foreign policy?
3. Do you conduct regular meetings?
4. How do you evaluate your relations with other ministries' foreign relations departments?
5. What kind of a role should think-tanks have on decision making process?
6. How kind of a role do think-tanks have on decision making process?