The remit for this essay is to reflect on the enterprise of policy research—what and who is it for, and why do it at all, especially in the face of political inaction? In this response, the underlying contention is that policy research is indeed an 'enterprise', certainly as conducted in North America and Europe. By this I mean that policy-research operates in a kind of market in which there are both producers and consumers and, at the very least those conducting the research aspire to influence and inform policy-makers or 'practitioners'.

The researchers may be university-based academics or employees of 'think tanks' whose raison d'etre is to produce policy analysis and proposals. Either way, those engaged in the endeavour are not engaged in research for its own sake, but rather, they want to gain the attention of policy-makers, whether these be in government, inter-governmental organisations, NGOs or business. Consequently, the value of policy research depends not only on the quality of the research but also on its relevance and accessibility to policymakers. The latter may thus be considered 'end-users' or the main target audience for the research.

The reflections offered here are derived from over three decades of experience working in two British think tanks—the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies (RUSI) and the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House)—and in academia in the United States and the United Kingdom. I begin here with some initial comments on the three policy papers on aspects of the contemporary Syria crisis, featured in this special issue of *Middle East Law and Governance*.

Building on these initial observations, the article proceeds to address three broad facets of policy research: the assumptions and orientations of the researchers; the factors which determine the impact of their work on the target audience, or more specifically political decision-makers; and thence the potentially closed or circular nature of the rapport between researchers and end-users.

Among the conclusions reached here is that the capacity of policy researchers to make a difference to political decision-making depends on the extent of their understanding of the way in which policy options are formulated, adopted and implemented. In effect, this means the extent to which policy researchers take on board, whether wittingly or not, the findings of academic scholars on the process of policymaking itself.

The Case Studies

The three policy papers tackle different problems or policy challenges brought about by the war in Syria. The paper produced by the BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights (hereinafter, the BADIL report) focuses on the rights and needs of the refugees displaced by the war, including Palestinians. The paper by Rania Al Jazairi of the Council on Middle East Studies at Yale University (hereinafter, the Jazairi study) explores the views of Syrian refugees and

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displaced persons on Transitional Justice in the process of peacebuilding in Syria. The paper by Doris Carrion of Chatham House (hereinafter, the Carrion paper) examines what the refugee crisis means not only for the refugees but also for the Arab host countries, focusing on Jordan in particular.

All three studies bring to bear different types of expertise and contain the findings of field research. The BADIL report is the work of a team of lawyers who provide detailed information on the prevailing laws and legal frameworks in the various Arab host countries which affect the treatment and status of the refugees and how these also relate to refugee rights under International Law. The BADIL report thus identifies a range of specific legal issues for application or redress across different settings.

The Jazairi study builds on pre-existing assessments of what constitute effective Transitional Justice processes in post-conflict societies and comparable settings where regime change has taken place. From that literature Jazairi derives the imperative to consult and involve the people and communities, including refugees, in designing, building and implementing the process of Transitional Justice, peacebuilding and state-building. Her research, based on interviews with refugees and displaced persons, delivers new data on how they see the requirements for the future.

In her study, Carrion provides an assessment of the problems faced by Jordan (and thence other host countries) in dealing with the refugee influx, including aid disbursement. Her work is informed by the findings of interviews with 'practitioners, officials, experts, journalists and activists working on the response to the refugee crisis in Jordan'.[1] In contrast to the BADIL team, Carrion's analysis is not based on the law and refugee rights. In contrast to Jazairi, her work does not involve consultations with the refugees themselves. Instead, her emphasis is on the requirements for maintaining stability in Jordan which, she notes, is in the interests of Western donor countries and governments allied to the Jordanian government.

As this summary indicates, the three case study reports tackle the problem of the Syria crisis from contrasting perspectives, varying from that of international legality, to that of peacebuilding, to that of strategic security. They also focus on different constituencies involved in the crisis. Yet, I would venture, they all appear to be addressing decision-makers at the international level, though the BADIL report is also designed for translation into Arabic, presumably to reach Arab decision-makers and also inform Arab refugees of their rights. In any case, the authors are putting down a marker on the requirements of International Law and sending a message that the rights of refugees should not be ignored. Jazairi's study highlights 'the role and contribution' of the victims of the crisis in devising a viable solution.[2] In doing so,

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[1]Add page reference when page proofs are ready.
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it gives them a voice. Carrion, meanwhile, appears to be telling Western decision-makers how to better protect their interests in regional stability.

Two broad observations are in order here. First, the policy recommendations, whether implicit or explicit, in the three papers are not incompatible but are also not obviously in harmony. They speak to different constituencies and policy sectors and will be deemed either useful or authoritative accordingly. Second, they are not equally actionable.

In her paper Jazairi notes that those Syrians she consulted do not want international actors to take charge of the transition to a peaceful Syria. They gave her their views on what they would like to see in a new Syrian constitution, but differed markedly on whether Islam should feature in that constitution or not. Her findings beg the question: who will hold the ring while the Syrians themselves discuss and agree on a new constitution and by what process will this be achieved? Thus, decision-makers, whether external or internal to post-war Syria, will find it difficult to identify action points in her study.

Turning to the BADIL report, implicit in this is an expectation that the decision-makers being addressed are those with the capacity to uphold the law. Yet their imperative to do so would appear to rest on an obligation to place refugee rights and international legality above other interests and, as the BADIL report notes, some governments, notably that of Israel, have thus far refused to honour such obligations. Absent acquiescence with the import of the BADIL message, the report can only serve as a reference point for those seeking to remind or challenge decision-makers on refugee rights. The thrust of the report comports with BADIL's role as an advocate for and defender of refugees and their rights.

As the academic literature on refugees and forced migration documents, governmental decision-makers in North America, Europe and the Middle East increasingly regard implementation of post-World War Two international law on refugees as a challenge they cannot meet in the face of new security concerns and adverse public opinion.[3] In view of this the Comprehensive Action Plan (CAP) proposed by BADIL, which calls on Western governments to enable Syrian and Palestinian refugees to find refuge in their countries in much larger numbers than they have countenanced hitherto, is ethically and legally compelling, but probably only to those decision-makers already inclined to address problems in that vein as opposed to narrow self-interest.

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[3] See for example: The Syria Crisis: Displacement and Protection *Forced Migration Review* Issue 47 September 2014 http://www.fmreview.org/en/syria/syria.pdf; and T. Luck (2013) *Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon* Brussels: International Crisis Group.

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By contrast, Carrion's paper weaves into her analysis a set of policy recommendations designed to appeal to Western decision-makers who have already identified the stability of Jordan as one of their policy goals. If followed, her recommendations would accord equal attention to Jordanian society and views as to Syrian refugees and their views. The fact that all her interviews were with people in the policy sector in one way or another reinforces the angle taken in her report. This is not to say, however, that Carrion's recommendations will necessarily achieve more traction with policymakers than the other two reports. That will depend on who reads it and what purpose it can serve for the reader, and this takes us to some more general reflections on policy research in the context of political inaction.

Defining 'the Problem'

As noted above, policy research is undertaken by individuals and groups typically located in academia, think tanks and NGOs. How these researchers define the problems they investigate therefore has a bearing on the analysis they produce. To illustrate, in the case of Syrian refugees, the problem may be defined as the failure of the Syrian state, the remedy for which is the reconstruction of the Syrian state. In which case, the research conducted by Jazairi provides valuable insights on the priorities of the Syrian people who can be expected to rebuild the Syrian political system and governance in the aftermath of war. Underpinning such research is a broader body of work on the role and contribution that the members of a society can be expected to make in state-reconstruction, the relative success and sustainability of which will depend on their sense of ownership and engagement in the process.

Alternatively the core problem may be understood as the refugees themselves, their numbers, locations, conditions, needs and legal status and rights. Researchers such as those at BADIL are able to draw on a considerable body of pre-existing research and legal documentation and precedence on which to base the policy imperatives they identify and advocate. The phenomenon of refugees and forced migration is not new, though in the Syrian case the problem is of greater magnitude than has been witnessed since the Second World War. It may be assumed however, that those researchers who have worked in the field of refugee studies and refugee law, will define both the problem and the remedies in accordance with their expertise and in relation to precedence. They will also prioritise what is most beneficial for the refugees themselves, within the parameters of the law, as opposed to the preferences and judgements of host country governments, people traffickers, and/or the main fighting groups inside Syria.

Yet other researchers, among them Carrion in this instance, may choose to focus on the challenges that the Syrian refugees pose to regional stability and thence the governments and political systems in the states neighbouring Syria, such as Jordan. The requirements for their survival will no doubt differ somewhat from the priorities of

the refugees themselves or the preferences of the Syrian people for the future of
their state and society.

Just how complex it can be to arrive at a definition of the problem to be addressed in
policy research is illustrated in the contemporary debate inside Europe about how to
handle migration in the Mediterranean. Those most concerned with saving the lives
of people making the hazardous journey across the sea in overcrowded boats
commandeered by people-smugglers find themselves at odds with European officials
and politicians wary of popular opposition in their respective countries to
accommodating waves of foreign migrants into their societies and economies.[4]
Security and intelligence services also have their concerns about the potential for
would-be terrorists to smuggle themselves into Europe to pursue a cause antithetical
to the prevailing political and social order. [5]

*Consequently, to put it crudely, there is no such thing as objective policy research,
only more or less thorough and authoritative research based on evidence that has
been systematically collected in ways that may be defined as scientific in so far as
the methodologies used are replicable and thence checkable by other researchers.*
As this contention implies, not all policy research is of equal quality and value. The
level of expertise and experience of the researchers will make a difference, as too
their training and qualifications. Familiarity with a particular issue or society or
language may not necessarily equip a person to produce a credible or substantive
piece of research. The distinction between informed opinion and scholarly research
derives from the application of theory and adoption of recognised methodologies that
are required of researchers in academia.

Such requirements also mean that a thorough and authoritative piece of policy
research is more likely to be narrowly focused than broad and eclectic—which takes
us back to the point about defining the problem to be addressed. Scholarly
researchers will focus on problems which they have the capacity to analyse, be it a
legal issue or a psychological phenomenon or a collection of economic factors. All
such problems and others have political dimensions. In other words to define the
problem is also and always to import a certain politics and normative dimension into
the enterprise of policy research.

For their part, political decision-makers will tend to gravitate toward reliance on
research which suits their own political orientation and preferences. Rather than

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[4] See for example, Duncan Robinson, Stefan Wagstyl, Anne-Sylvaine Chassany,
'EU shows little sympathy for gripes over asylum seekers' *Financial Times*, 4 August
2015; and Stephanie Kirchgaessner, 'Hundreds feared dead as migrant boat sinks
off Libya', *The Guardian*, 6 August 2015.
[5] See 'Illegal migration clearly linked with terror threat: Hungary PM', *Reuters*, 25
July 2015; and Nick Squires, 'Italy accused of bringing in Islamist 'terrorists" after
Christians thrown into sea', *Telegraph*, 6 August 2015.

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trawling the whole array of policy research available, a task that is likely too time consuming for busy politicians and their aides in any case, decision-makers are more likely to home in on those sources which they know already and/or which serve their immediate purposes.

Feeding the Establishment

As the foregoing implies, in order to gain attention and influence, policy researchers need to market their wares to their intended target audiences, the decision-makers, and this function is generally performed and organised by the institutions in which they work, be these universities, think tanks or NGOs. In this context reputation and pedigree count. A research team based at an Ivy League university or Oxbridge or the Russell Group of universities in the UK will have more credibility than one based at a less prestigious establishment. Similarly, there are league tables of think tanks and NGOs which serve as a guide to the relative quality of the research they produce. Obviously, however, there is an inherent danger in the whole operation of such a system, in so far as the reputation and prestige of an organisation does not guarantee quality research output.

A body of scholarship pioneered by the philosophers Michel Foucault[6] and Jurgen Habermas[7] alerts us to the way in which knowledge is produced across the establishment in contemporary Western societies. The emergence of 'experts' conducting policy-related research, using scientific methodologies, has produced a strata of society to which political decision-makers have become beholden for the validation of their policy choices.

Also, the appearance of independence and freedom of thought in civil society institutions is not necessarily anything more than an appearance. Scholars and institutions are recognized, rewarded and acclaimed to the extent that they conform with prevailing values and the interests of those who fund them. By adopting and crediting the work of certain scholars and institutions, political decision-makers have the power to enhance reputations and thence increase the access to funding of those favoured. Success breeds success, but only according to the narrow criteria of prevailing political norms and wealth accumulation.

The funders of universities include governments, alumni and corporations. Their ruling bodies must balance protection of their independence with the necessities of maintaining economic viability. Think tanks similarly need to pay their bills to stay in business. Some therefore align themselves with different political philosophies

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[6] See in particular Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power' in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (new York: Pantheon Books, 1980) pp.109-133.
[7] Specifically Jurgen Habermas 'The Scientisation of Politics and Public Opinion' in Jurgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970) pp.62-80.

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and/or parties. NGOs may rely more heavily on individual donations than corporate sponsors, but thereby represent themselves as the champions of specific causes and interests, be these the rights of political detainees, poor people in the developing world, or refugees, for example.

Meanwhile, gone are the days when academics could define their own research priorities, assuming these ever existed. To illustrate, in the UK, university researchers are expected to demonstrate the relevance of their work to 'practitioners' outside academia. Thus, under the Research Excellence Framework or REF, by which the government determines how much financial support to disburse to scholars working in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, academics are obliged to demonstrate the 'impact' of their research findings on decision-makers outside academia, be these in the government, private or NGO sectors. This requirement means that researchers must show that decisions were made or actions taken that would not have been, had the decision-makers or actors remained ignorant of the researcher's findings.

The thinking behind the REF is that British tax-payers need to know that scarce public resources are well spent. One of the consequences of the system is therefore that those researchers with the best access to and rapport with non-academic decision-makers are deemed more valuable to society and may be better rewarded than those pursuing a research agenda dictated by more purely scholastic considerations. The danger, in fact, is that the problems identified for examination by scholars have more to do with what policy-makers identify as *their* problems than more ontological considerations.

In the think tank world, researchers set out deliberately to address problems faced by policymakers. What distinguishes their work from that of academics dedicated to advancing scholarship in their respective fields of study is their ideological orientation or the cause they exist to champion. Thus NGOs whose remit is to highlight the plight of prisoners of conscience (Amnesty International for example) or children living in poverty (Save the Children for example) or refugees (as in the case of BADIL) will produce policy research which makes such prisoners, or children, or refugees the main object of concern.

In Germany each of the main political parties have their own think tanks or *Schtiftungen* which analyse problems and produce options or recommendations which accord with the defining philosophies or ideologies of their parent parties. In the United States, alternating Republican and Democratic administrations have the power to select political appointees to positions in the government, subject to Congressional approval. Consequently, when out of office, these parties disburse their potential appointees to the think tank industry to spend their time out of office undertaking research to shape their policy agendas once returned to office. Democrats will typically see the Brookings Institution as their natural home between

periods in office, while Republicans will more likely occupy research positions in the American Enterprise Institute or the Heritage Foundation.

In the UK the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) was founded as the sister organisation of the American Council on Foreign Relations. The intention was to provide an environment in which government officials could meet with scholars and other experts to conduct free-ranging debates on policy issues, off-the-record, the better to inform their policy choices. However, much of the prestige and influence of the institute, as too the Council, derives from its perceived access to government officials and politicians and its capacity to serve as a platform for senior political figures, both national and foreign, when they wish to make key policy statements.

My personal observation here, based on my experience of thirteen years working at Chatham House, is that foreign diplomats serving in London frequently saw the usefulness of the institute to themselves *not* in its independence from the British government of the day and 'Whitehall', particularly the Foreign Office, but rather in its closeness to these official bodies. These diplomats frequented the institute's meetings in order to gain insights on government thinking and access to government officials. Over time, the members of the institute, which include multi-national corporations as well as embassies and individuals, value the organisation for its 'convening power' almost more than as a source of research. It is a place where they can gain access to decision-makers in various fields in hopes of influencing them and gathering information.

In any case, to the extent that both British and American academics are increasingly expected to produce 'policy-relevant' research, they are headed in the same direction as already pioneered by the think tanks. Academics can gain insights from access to 'the real world' through interactions and discussions with 'practitioners', but may also gradually lose their relative independence of thought.

The End-Users of Policy Research

As indicated above, the end-users of research undertaken in the think tanks include not only political parties and politicians, but also corporations. In my assessment, the process by which this occurs is not well understood outside the think tanks. On the one hand, corporate members of such think tanks use them as venues to gain access to government officials and thence to plant ideas and even lobby. On the other hand, the corporate members are encouraged to pool funds to enable researchers to undertake studies on issues of concern to them, which may include political risk analysis in various countries and regions, or, for example, prognoses for

developments in the energy sector or the Eurozone. By the accounting device of collective funding, no single corporate sponsor can actually buy or dictate research findings, but they can exercise influence over the direction and focus of research projects.

As university academics respond to the imperative to demonstrate the impact of their research, they frequently assume that one route by which to induce policymakers to adopt their research findings is via the think tanks. However, as indicated above, the process by which policy research reaches the attention of practitioners is not straightforward. Academic research which is not dedicated to influencing policy holds the key to understanding how decision-making actually works.

I refer here to a body of work known as 'Foreign Policy Analysis' or FPA.[8] Scholars engaged in FPA are primarily interested in developing and testing theories about how foreign policy is made. They challenge the claims of the so-called Realist and Liberal schools of International Relations which treat states as unitary rational actors, maximizing their interests and either competing for power or promoting cooperation between states for mutual benefit. Instead, FPA proceeds from the assumption that policy is the outcome of processes and interactions taking place inside states and other bodies active on the world stage. The findings of FPA mirror those of management studies that focus on the corporate sector. Individuals involved in devising policy not only have egos and career ambitions, which influence their choices and judgements, but are also shaped by their personal experiences, their understanding of history and their capacity to command respect and loyalty. Studies on the psychological drivers of decision-making and group behaviour also reveal the tendency of individuals to conform and to fear or resist change. In situations where coordination is required between different departments or agencies, bargaining may occur. Corporate culture and standard operating procedures will also impede innovation and risk taking.

Aside from what is going on inside organisations, there are also other factors influencing policymaking, such as public opinion and the media. In recent years competition to 'frame the narrative', pitting against one another social media, the traditional media, officialdom, PR companies and special interests or lobbies, is acknowledged. Yet the tendency is still to assume that decisions are made based on gathering and evaluating information in a rational process. Policy researchers, be they academics or those working in the think tanks and lobbies should know better than to assume their research will be taken purely on some objective criteria of merit. Yet all too often the way policy research is prepared, presented and promoted assumes that logical, well-substantiated arguments will win the day.

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[8]See for example Chris Alders and Amnon Aran *Foreign Policy Analysis* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012); and Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Conclusions

There are a number of points to make to conclude this reflection on 'the enterprise of policy research—what and who is it for, and why do it at all, especially in the face of political inaction?' First, as demonstrated above, the production of policy research is an enterprise or business in the sense that both the producers (researchers) and the consumers (the political decision-makers) have roles in determining the value of the research produced. The decision-makers are too busy to scour the full range of policy advice available and so only pick up on and adopt that which they find useful for their own purposes. By the same token, the researchers will labour in vain if they do not make their work both accessible and appealing to those they wish to reach and influence.

Second, it is thus the relationship between the producers and the consumers which determines the value of a particular piece of research, not either of them in isolation. The researchers will identify problems and conduct their studies in accordance with their area of expertise and experience, but unless the way they frame the issues and present their findings chime with the values and preferences of the political decision-makers, their work will be ignored and thence not be found valuable. Framing and take-up determine value, not some objective criteria or standard. Thus it is, that the claim is advanced here that the researchers and decision-makers operate in a kind of closed circle to mutual benefit. That said, the more 'scientific' and authoritative a piece of research appears to be, the more both the political decision-makers and the researchers will be able to claim that it is the objectivity and evidential basis of the work that guides them, not passion or self-promotion.

Third, judgements about the relative quality of a piece of research are influenced by the relative prestige and authority of the source—and these are assets accrued disproportionately by those think tanks and universities which can boast a pedigree reinforced by the amount of funding they are able to attract. Yet fourth, the loyalty and generosity of research funders or think tank supporters, among which the corporate sector is prominent, are likely to be determined as much by the 'convening power' of an institution as by its research agenda and output. Think tanks in particular have mastered the technique of enabling sponsors (be they foreign diplomats, politicians or corporate executives) to mingle across sectors, solicit information and engage in informal lobbying.

Finally, on the question: 'why do policy research at all, especially in the face of political action?' the answer is clear. For the researcher the enterprise of policy research represents an opportunity to deploy their skills, enjoy intellectual stimulation, rub shoulders with people in power and gain attention. When met with political inaction, they can either deduce they are insufficiently accomplished at packaging their work for their target audience, or else content themselves with using

their perch on the margins of political power to advance their understanding of how political power is exercised.

As for the inaction of the political decision-makers, their problem is the nature of politics itself in contemporary Western democracies, wherein keeping the electorate on side, managing the media, observing party and parliamentary rules and conventions and calculating how best to manage relations with colleagues are more than enough to keep them busy. Meanwhile, as they know but dare not concede, power is by no means concentrated in the hands of politicians—it is spread across the corporate and financial sectors, channelled around social media, wielded by non-state actors with guns and missiles, and challenged by organised crime. In so far as policy research, however rigorous and 'scientific', is focused on flattering political decision-makers with capacities to act that they no longer enjoy, it may inform them but cannot deliver them from their travails.