Establishing a Research and Information Center at the Knesset (The Israeli Parliament)

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Preface

The Research and Information Center (RIC) at the Israeli Parliament was established in 2000 as a part of a major reform initiated by the Speaker of the House aimed at re-structuring processes and building a technologically intensive organization.
Previous attempts made during the 80s and the 90s to establish research capabilities in the Knesset failed either because of internal organizational conflicts or due to the lack of institutional resources and commitment.

The 2000 attempt to establish the RIC was successful mainly because the following success factors were achieved:

- The use of external agents (outsourcing) to perform the first stage of the foundation of the RIC as a turnkey project.

- Building the new organization using practices of hi-tech markets, rather than conventional public sector practices.

- Building a flexible cross-unit teaming scheme to bring together the right skills for faster and better solutions for the clients.

- Implementing a new management role to ensure excellence in process execution. (Managers are also skilled practitioners in the specialty of their unit and perform independent research of their own as well as managing their unit).

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- Staffing policy - managers and a few of the "professional leaders" are experienced multi-disciplinarians, while the majority of the team are enthusiastic, dedicated, exceptional young university graduates who have recently completed their masters degree with outstanding achievements (however no previous experience was required).

This paper presents the *raison d'être* for setting up the Research and Information Center and describes the method and resources that went into its establishment.

It should be emphasized that this is a concise document that highlights the essential points. Additional details will be supplied to anyone interested

.**This paper deals with the following topics**:

- Background information with respect to the Knesset;

- The presentation of the problem;

- Characterization of "the operational necessity";

- Presentation of the organizational solution;

- Mission, Goals and Services;

- The basic principles for implementation, operation, and organization;

- Conclusions.

Background

The Knesset is the house of representatives and the legislative institution of Israel in a single chamber system. Its 120 members (MKs) are normally elected every 4 years as candidates of political parties' lists.

The main functions of the Knesset are legislation, supervision of the government and ministries, and the representation of public opinion.

The main executive arms of the Knesset are the Plenary (Plenum) and the committees. Most of the Parliamentary legislative work is done within the committees.

There are 12 permanent committees (Finance Committee, Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee, Labor, Social Welfare & Health Committee, etc), ad-hoc committees for special subjects and committees of enquiry set up by the Parliament in order to look into matters of national importance.

The Knesset is an "intensive legislator" and deals, on an average yearly basis, with hundreds of proposed government bills, committee bills and private member bills. Most of them pass through preliminary reading and deliberation before proceeding into the advanced legislation stages (first, second and third reading before approval by the plenary).

The Knesset support units, which provide professional aid to the legislative process, were (until 2000) the legal department, the library (Including a very small reference unit), the Knesset archive and the computer - M.I.S. unit – **neither research nor in-depth information services were available in house**.

Presentation of the Problem

Since the election of the First Knesset in 1949, significant erosion has taken place in its status and in its ability to fulfill its functions – especially in contrast with the enriched resources of the various bodies of the executive branch and the increased authority of the State Comptroller.

A detailed analysis of the processes that have led to this lack of balance between the authorities appears elsewhere. However the bottom line is that the legislative authority was short of the resources and especially infrastructures needed to undertake objective research as compared to a strong government "armed" with up-to-date resources.

The resources available to the Knesset: the library, the limited staff of the committees – whose main occupation is operating technical services and coordinating the activity of the Committees – the computer unit that focuses on technical matters (mainly hardware and software infrastructures), and the legal department. All these were unable, within the framework of the traditional structure, to provide an appropriate response to the Knesset's requirements in carrying out its functions, as described above.

Of course, it may be argued that the option of reforming the existing institutions of the Knesset - the library, legal department, etc, was a feasible solution in order to resolve the problem. However, in addition to the natural resistance to change, which is to be found in any long-standing public-sector organizations, such as the Knesset, there was an aspiration to "broadcast" a significant change. Therefore, as will be elaborated below, it was decided to establish a totally new body.

Characterization of the "Operational Necessity"

In order to provide an operative response to the problems - status and image (i.e., operational capabilities and the capacity for control and supervision of government and ministries), there was a need for a far-reaching basic reform, which could recreate the appropriate balance between the Knesset and the other governing branches.

This reform, in the areas of research and information, included the need for a <u>research</u> and <u>information</u> center that would serve the Knesset members and committees as a central resource in the process of legislation, supervision over the executive branch, and the debates on various national issues such as: policy, society and economy. In addition, it would allow the general public direct access to the variety of activities that take place in the Knesset.

As a response to these needs, the setting up of a research and information center to supply the following infrastructures and services to the Knesset members and committees had become "**a must**":

- **Following "legislation files"** - preparation and supply of information relevant to the proposed bills, collecting and "packaging" it as available information to accompany the legislative process, while providing tools to locate and collect comparative and complementary information from legal and other data bases, and from other parliaments;

- **Preparation of "subject files"** - the preparation, collection, classification and the creation of channels for access to information on issues that are on the Knesset's agenda, and are dealt with in the Knesset Committees. The creation of access and processing tools for information available in legal, economic, commercial, academic and media electronic databases;

- **Research and analysis services** - the implementation of independent studies and surveys – either self-initiated or at the request of Knesset members and committees, or studies and surveys by outside entities (research institutes, universities, etc) on issues the Knesset is dealing with, as well as the performance of objective evaluation, supervision and examination of information that is

presented to Knesset members and committees by outside organizations or individuals, that frequently represent specific interests;

- **Information services** - assistance to Knesset members in the location of information, and the provision of guidance connected with the operation of data retrieval systems and the location of information, including the Internet, databases etc. This type of service has traditionally been provided, on a very limited scale, by the library;

- **Promoting information as a resource** - assimilation of the use of information systems, taking initiatives to publicize and strengthen the RIC as a central institution for research and information in the Knesset, the establishment of a professional reputation for the RIC as a central and objective source of information.

The Organizational Solution

Despite the vital necessity as well as the fact that all surveys and studies conducted in the Knesset in the past, as of the early 90s, indicated the need for the introduction of advanced information technologies and the creation of an information center - until the year 2000 there were no practical results.

The reasons for this, as mentioned above, were varied: the absence of sufficient organizational commitment, prolonged institutional processes, bureaucracy, etc.

Therefore, after examining the alternatives for possible ways of realizing the plan, a "fast track solution" was chosen. In other words, the establishment of a skeleton framework of the RIC (the RIC core), which would constitute the founding team, and would formulate the detailed plan, work methods, procedures, mutual relations with the existing bodies in the Knesset and outside of it, up to the point where the new organizational framework would start running smoothly.

Using this method of "Reverse Engineering" ("We shall first act, ... and then listen…") gives a better chance of realizing and integrating an information system and research methods, and of rapidly and effectively strengthening the work of the Knesset committees by using this methodology, and at the same time, implementing an orderly and planned move, while receiving assistance from existing bodies according to their area of expertise and their contribution to the services of the RIC.

Mission, Goals and Service ("Products")

The central *raison d'être* of establishing the RIC has been **to construct the information and research infrastructure required by the Knesset to fulfill its tasks, and to supply the information and research services to the users, and thus to constitute an additional resource and "power multiplier" to balance the status of the Knesset *vis-à-vis* the other authorities**.

The product and service line provided by the RIC includes the following:

- Follow-up on "legislation files";

- The preparation of "subject files" for Committees;

- Information for the general public;

- Research services;

- The provision of information from data bases;

- The preparation of background material for debates in the plenum;

- The preparation of short memoranda;

- The preparation of surveys on requested topics;

- The preparation of research and analysis papers;

- Contacts with external experts and advisors;

- The organization of seminars and workshops on information topics;

- Activities to increase awareness among users in the Knesset;

- Support and training of users in the Knesset in the operation of tools and methods for locating and retrieving information.

For the purpose of fulfilling its functions, the organizational structure of the RIC is based on an administration, and four professional bodies for the supply of the services:

- A department for information services;

- A department for research services and external relations with academia and non-partisan professionals;

- An economic department;

- A department for infrastructures and technologies.

Basic Principles of Implementation, Operation and Organization

The principles below constitute the foundation upon which the RIC was based. Some of these were implemented at the outset; some have evolved since the RIC started to operate, while others will have to be examined periodically, and undergo updating and adaptation to the changing technological environment.

- The RIC was established as a totally new organizational framework;

- The RIC was created in stages. The core group, that served as the founding team, later became responsible for continuing the organization and implementation processes;

- The nucleus (the core group) that started the project as an outsourcing entity has become an integral part of the Knesset system (Insourcing), and is assisted by formerly existing frameworks (the library, archive, computer unit, legal department, etc.);

- The RIC uses external services for ad-hoc, specific subjects that require skills that are not available within the Knesset. (Such as preparing and operating technical infrastructures, obtaining external information, performance of certain field studies and surveys, etc.);

- The RIC engages mainly in the fields of information and research, while providing, on a limited scale, services for follow-up of the legislation process and committee work;

- The main stages in the implementation of the organizational process for the creation of the RIC were as follows:

Stage 1 (1-3/2000)   Staffing the establishment team (core group).
Stage 2 (1-6/2000)   Preparation of a detailed action plan by the establishment team for the first period of operation, and the design of procedures and work methods.
Stage 3 (3-6/2000)   Running in - experimental operation, and proving the applicability to the users chosen to serve as experimental "clients".
Stage 4 (7/2000)   Starting full-scale operations.

In order to operate effectively and economically, while providing a high level of service for urgent needs and the preservation of resources for the implementation of in-depth tasks and surveys, the RIC implemented an operational methodology based on three levels of support teams:

First Level Support Most of the staff of the information department within the RI.C is allocated to the committees and the type of first level support provided by them is responding quickly to daily requests with tight deadlines. The requests for information and background material come mainly from chairmen of the committees and from individual members and are related to committee sessions and to plenum debates.

Second Level Support The second level support is based on a few group leaders and professional specialists who provide peer-to-peer consulting to the members of the first level support and provide, in addition, in-depth analysis that varies according to the subject under investigation. The second level support specializes in the fields that are most common to the parliamentary agenda: economics, business and public policy, education, social affairs and international comparative analysis.

Third Level Support Specialists, and highly-skilled individuals, or research institutions, in subject areas that are less common in the daily operations at the Knesset, such as medicine, electronics, earthquakes, etc. The third level support individuals are recruited on an ad-hoc basis mainly from academia or from private research institutions, if there is no conflict of interests.

The three levels of support are organized in a matrix structure model that ensures cost efficient operations and quality assurance.
The vertical dimension comprises the researchers and information officers that are assigned to support the committees and the individual MKs.
The horizontal dimension comprises the group leaders and the area specialists who provide skills in specific fields.
The axis dimension of the model is the implementation of inter-organizational integration and coordination, which is the responsibility of the managing team.

Conclusions

Having considered different alternatives for the establishment of research & information capabilities in the Israeli parliament the establishing team has found that the best approach was the "Fast Track" procedure and "Reverse Engineering" methodology.

Although this approach was somewhat unconventional in the parliamentary environment and sometimes even controversial, in retrospect this approach provided solid ground for research and information services to the Israeli Parliament.

The RIC now employs 44 individuals (50% of them are employed in part-time positions): researchers, information officers and administrative staff. Since June 2000 it has produced over 1,000 studies to support and enhance the legislation process and is now ready to deal with the many challenges ahead.

The RIC "tailor made" model for Israel is based on the circumstances, organizational and cultural

environment of the Israeli parliament but can serve as an example for evaluation of its applicability (or parts of it) to other parliaments.

תסנכה

The Knesset

RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CENTRE

עדימו רקחמ זכרמ