

Towards an Increased Role for the Knesset in Foreign Affairs

Summary of a Knesset event held by the Mitvim Institute and the Caucus for Strengthening Israel's Foreign Service

September 2018

On May 22, 2018, the Mitvim Institute and the Caucus for Strengthening Israel's Foreign Service held a joint event at the Knesset on how to increase the role of the Knesset in Foreign Affairs. The discussion was based on research conducted at the Mitvim Institute by former Member of Knesset (MK) Nitzan Horowitz. It highlighted the need to establish a separate committee in the Knesset for foreign affairs; to emphasize the importance of parliamentary diplomacy and increase public awareness of this; and to encourage the Knesset to develop an independent agenda on foreign affairs.

Speakers included MK Isaac Herzog (Head of the Opposition, Zionist Union), MK Nachman Shai (Chair of the Caucus for Strengthening Israel's Foreign Service, Zionist Union), former MK Nitzan Horowitz (Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute), Dr. Nimrod Goren (Head of the Mitvim Institute), MK Haim Jelin (Yesh Atid), Yaakov Livne (The Israeli Association for Diplomacy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – MFA), Shai Cohen (Diplomatic Advisor to the Knesset, MFA), MK Aliza Lavie (Yesh Atid), MK Michal Biran (Zionist Union), Dr. Ronen Hoffman (Former MK and Chair of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Public Diplomacy sub-committee) and Dafna Kaplansky (International Affairs Coordinator, the Knesset's International Affairs Division). This document summarizes the main points of the discussion but does not necessarily reflect a consensus among the participants.

A. Situation Report: Knesset Activities in Foreign Affairs

In consistence with the findings of Nitzan Horowitz's research, the discussion highlighted a fundamental flaw in the activities of the Knesset and its members: the almost complete absence of their involvement in foreign affairs. According to the speakers, MKs lack a basic perception that foreign affairs constitute an integral part of their activities and responsibilities. The fact that the public does not attribute great importance to foreign affairs activities by MKs translates directly into a lack of parliamentary activity. Politicians believe that they do not gain any extra points from their constituency by dealing with foreign affairs.

Many parliaments around the world have a separate committee for foreign affairs. This is usually considered one of the most prestigious committees, with legislators aspiring to serve on it. In Israel, there exists a joint Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee which deals almost exclusively with security topics. The security issues push aside any discussions of foreign affairs that are not bound up with pressing security concerns. In addition, the doors of the committee are closed to the public, and usually also to Foreign Ministry personnel, even during discussions of topics that explicitly concern foreign affairs. The Knesset has no separate foreign affairs committee, which is tasked with promoting the discussion of foreign topics and overseeing the work of the Foreign Ministry and foreign affairs system. As a result, the Knesset's supervision of Israel's foreign policy is almost non-existent.

In recent years, the Speaker of the Knesset has endeavored to broaden the Knesset's international activities. The Knesset's International Affairs Division is developing new fields of content that aim to encourage and support diplomatic activity by MKs, advance cooperation between the Knesset and other parliaments, increase the activities of inter-parliamentary friendship groups, and make the Knesset a partner in international initiatives (on topics such as transparency, immigration, development aims, and international terror).

B. The Importance of the Knesset's Involvement in Foreign Affairs

In many countries there is increasing awareness regarding the importance of parliamentary involvement in foreign affairs and the growing centrality of parliamentary diplomacy. Legislatures around the globe are occupied with global issues that do not necessarily have a direct link to their states' internal politics. In the framework of modern diplomacy, foreign affairs are no longer the sole preserve of foreign ministries, and members of parliament – as well as citizens, NGOs, and businesses – can play a role in this endeavour. Almost every topic on the Knesset's agenda has some kind of interface with the world of foreign relations.

We must not view the MFA as making up the entire face of the Israeli Foreign Service. Not only the government can affect the country's foreign relations; rather, the Knesset too has a role to play in this. When involved in foreign affairs, MKs are not obligated to represent government policy: in fact, they can present to the world the range of views that exists among the Israel public regarding such topics. In a democratic country, it is good that MKs endorse stances which are not dictated by the MFA, and that they are capable of criticizing and supervising the government's work in foreign affairs. This is part of the separation of powers. At the same time, MKs can benefit greatly from the background materials and guides prepared by the MFA – as well as by NGOs which deal with foreign affairs – prior to foreign travel and meetings with international counterparts.

The call to strengthen the Knesset's activities in the field of foreign affairs becomes even more significant considering the weakness of the Israeli MFA, which manifests in its organizational situation, the lack of a full-time foreign minister, the division of its authorities, its absence from the center of decision making, and the dominance of the security establishment over the Foreign Service. The Knesset has at its disposal a number of effective tools which can aid its activities in the field of foreign affairs. The Knesset's Diplomatic Advisor and International Affairs Division already play an important role, yet many MKs do not know how to work with them. The Knesset's Research and Information Center is a potential source of knowledge for MKs regarding foreign affairs but is very rarely asked to conduct studies on such topics. Likewise, MKs participate regularly in international fora, including some at which representatives of Arab states are also present. This creates opportunities for MKs to engage in meaningful regional policy dialogue, and not just focus on explaining Israel's positions, as they usually tend to do in international fora.

C. What Can Be Done to Improve the Situation?

- Advancing public discourse which recognizes the importance of foreign affairs topics. The lack of public awareness regarding this reduces the political benefits that MKs can reap from involvement in foreign affairs and therefore reduces their motivation to pursue this avenue of activity.

- Instilling among MKs and Knesset personnel the importance of the Knesset's activities in the field of foreign affairs, the understanding that participating in parliamentary diplomacy constitutes part of their job definition, and encouraging them to increase their activities in this domain.
- Separating the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and establishing a distinct committee for foreign affairs. Until such a step is implemented, it is necessary to establish a minimal limit for discussions on foreign affairs in the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, to invite representatives of the Foreign Service to appear before the committee, and to ensure increased transparency of the committee's work on issues related to Israel's foreign relations.
- Increasing the participation of MFA personnel in Knesset discussions of foreign affairs topics – in the plenary sessions, committees, and caucuses – and in the decision-making processes. An improved interface between the MFA and MKs will also bear fruit in the professionalization of MKs' activities in parliamentary diplomacy and will advance the Knesset's activities in the field of foreign affairs.
- Providing MKs with better guidance and tools for their activities in the field of foreign affairs: this can include language instruction, translation and pronunciation services, and policy advice.
- Encouraging MKs to submit parliamentary questions and agenda suggestions in the field of foreign affairs, and to initiate discussions on foreign affairs topics in the relevant Knesset committees, thus ensuring that these issues become a fixture of the Knesset's daily agenda.
- Instituting a procedure that requires the Knesset's Research and Information Center to publish at least one study concerned with foreign affairs during each Knesset session. If MKs do not submit requests for such a study, the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee will be asked to do so.
- Ensuring freedom of action for MKs on foreign affairs topics, even when their views do not accord with those of the government, and emphasizing the legitimacy of voicing different opinions and promoting diverse political aims vis-à-vis international counterparts.
- Strengthening links between parliaments and inter-parliamentary friendship groups, as well as between sister parties around the world.
- Advancing the legislation of the Foreign Service Law. For decades, attempts have been underway to pass such a law, but without success. The phrasing of such a law will need to address the fundamental problems that the Israeli Foreign Service encounters, and to relate to the Knesset's role in foreign affairs.