

Report of the Peer Review Panel
on
the Turkish-American Scientists and Scholars Association
(TASSA)

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November 30, 2009

Main Conclusions

At the time of this review, the Peer Review Panel (PRP) finds TASSA in a state of paralysis and disarray, unable to carry out its basic functions as an organization. The high level enthusiasm and momentum that existed during TASSA's initial years has been lost and the organization is no longer effective. A major restructuring is necessary in order to re-invigorate TASSA. Maintaining the *status quo* is not an option, because TASSA is essentially "bankrupt."

The Panel considers that TASSA needs a fresh start, led by a new team. A new, transition team is necessary (instead of the Board leading the transition) because the responsibility for TASSA's failure rests with the Board. The transition team should take over from the Board as soon as practical, so that reform plans for TASSA can be started without delay.

Rationale

The Panel has reached its conclusion after examining TASSA's programmatic, institutional and financial health. It finds TASSA in poor health in all three aspects.

Programmatic Health. TASSA's "flagship" programmatic activity is its annual conference. It failed to organize a conference in 2009 and has missed critical deadlines for organizing a 2010 conference. Other activities, such as the Visiting Scholars Program and TASSA-TUBITAK Workshops, have suffered from inattention and excessive dependence on one or two individuals, resulting in uneven, sporadic, or diminished performance. Over the past two years, only a very few local events and joint activities with some partner organizations were held; yet, all of these were either individual-based initiatives or undertakings where TASSA's contributions were secondary. The weakness in programmatic health reflected on financial health due to a significant drop in revenues from institutional membership. One bright spot is TASSA's face on the Web, where there has been continuous improvement, although the formation of its editorial board had taken unduly long period of time. Capable of being used as a strategic tool, the Web platform with its myriad of capabilities are not used to their full extent. Occasional communications through the Web platform fail to convey a cohesive and meaningful message from the TASSA leadership and the Board.

Institutional Health. As a membership organization, TASSA's institutional strength depends, in part, on the strength of its **membership base**. Between 2007 and 2009, TASSA's membership base dropped by 77 percent (from 254 to 58.) As a result, under TASSA's current Bylaws, some technical groups lack the minimum size needed to elect representatives to the Board. When

coupled with the fact that participation in annual elections by eligible members also dropped from 39 percent to 29 percent, TASSA's legitimacy as an organization is questionable.

Failure in membership development, which is a function of the Board, is but one example of the failure of TASSA's **Board and system of governance**. Other indicators of Board failure include the following:

- During 2008 and 2009, the Board has had no approved business plan created and presented by the president, with a clear outline of objectives, targets, milestones, and activities. The Board has no approved budget for 2008 and 2009 either. Approval of a business plan and budget is a requirement of the Bylaws to be performed annually.
- Since 2008, there has been complete leadership vacuum in the organization. There has been significant disconnect between the leadership and the Board as evident by the very small number of Forum entries by the President and/or the Executive Director.
- Since 2008, the leadership has demonstrated total disregard of institutional rules and regulations even though there were numerous efforts by some members of the Board and other officials, such as [Auditors](#), pointing out the required actions (with associated timelines) by the leadership.
- Annual General Assembly has not been conducted to present the audited annual activity and financial reports to the membership, another requirement of the Bylaws.
- There is no regular schedule for Board meetings. When they are held, pre-meeting documentation is little or non-existent. The meetings are loosely structured and meeting records are not circulated in a timely manner. As a result, assignments and responsibilities of members are unclear. There is inadequate follow-up of Board decisions.
- Accountability to the membership is not reinforced through frequent interaction with and briefing of members.
- The Board has been lax in discussing and taking action on [Audit Reports](#). This is considered a major failure in any board.
- There is excessive dependence on the President. As a result, when the President does not or is not able to act, TASSA is at a standstill.

- There is no evaluation of the President. There is also no self-evaluation by the Board of its own performance.
- There is no description of Board member duties; no orientation for new members; and no Board rules of procedure.

The Panel is aware that TASSA is a voluntary organization and that each member of the Board has undertaken the responsibility on a *pro-bono* basis. However, this does not imply that lesser standards of governance should apply. Accountability, legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness need to be sought from any board, voluntary or not. Sacrificing these principles of governance weakens the organization (as is the case here) and seriously hampers its potential to accomplish its mission.

TASSA's institutional health is also affected by its **organizational structure**. Modeled after a similar organization established by the Korean scientist and scholar community in the United States, TASSA's structure is quite complex, with several elective committees and an intricate mechanism connecting them. In previous elections, TASSA has found it difficult to attract candidates for the various positions. This has become even more challenging under a shrinking membership base. What TASSA needs is a simpler, more flexible structure that is less "person-dependent."

Finally, TASSA's institutional health is affected by the weakness of its **administrative support structure**. Here, the basic issue is TASSA's inability (financially) to secure a stable and sustained administrative support for its operations. TASSA has never had a full-time executive director. As a result, TASSA operations are carried out mainly by the President and the members of the Board, with the exception of the first Executive Director who actively fulfilled his responsibilities. Unlike many other non-profit boards, the TASSA Board is more a "working board" than a "supervisory board" (because there is no "management" to supervise.) This means that the members of the Board are also tasked to carry out administrative tasks (for which they may or may not be qualified or competent.)

Financial Health. In 2008, TASSA's total revenues amounted to \$110,000, as against expenses of \$151,000, with the difference covered from savings from earlier years. Its major source of

revenue consists of sponsorships and institutional memberships (amounting to at least 67 percent of all revenues during 2006-2008.) Membership fees constitute less than 15 percent. Its major expense item is the annual conference (amounting to at least 82 percent of all expenses during the same period.) In 2008, the annual conference cost \$106,000. The revenue generated specifically for the conference amounted to \$56,000 (through registration fees and sponsorships).

In the Panel's judgment, TASSA's financial base is too small to carry out the type of operation foreseen in its vision (building a sustainable science bridge between Turkey and the U.S.) The cost of the annual conference depletes practically all of TASSA's resources, leaving little for other activities and for administrative support. It is also clear that expansion of revenues would need to depend on other sources than membership fees.

Recommendations

1. TASSA should be restructured to enable it to perform at a higher level and to overcome its weaknesses as an organization.
2. The reform of TASSA should be led by a Transition Team appointed by the membership.
3. The Transition Team should consist of: (a) two "founders," i.e., those people who actively contributed to the establishment and 1st Annual Conference of TASSA; (b) two current members; (c) two institutional sponsors; (d) two current Board members, and (e) one outside expert familiar with scientist organizations (not necessarily of Turkish origin). If asked, the Panel can assist in recruiting the Team that can be proposed to the membership for endorsement. If asked, the Panel can also assist in drafting the terms of reference of the Team.
4. The Transition Team should represent TASSA until the reformed organization is in place.
5. The Transition Team should review/revise TASSA's original vision, governance framework and financing modality and propose a reform package for endorsement by a Stakeholder Assembly.
6. The new TASSA structures should take over from the Transition Team once the reforms are endorsed by the Stakeholder Assembly.
7. The Transition Team would identify the participants to the Stakeholder Assembly from among active and interested Turkish-American scientists and scholars in North America.
8. The current Board of TASSA should relinquish its duties and transfer responsibility to the Transition Team once its composition is endorsed by the current membership.
9. The Board should share this report with the members and other stakeholders expediently to keep them informed of the current situation.

Annex

Terms-of-Reference of the Peer Review Panel

TASSA Board appointed a peer review panel made up of internal and external experts and charged this group with the following:

- Minimally, review the governance structure, operational efficiency and effectiveness, authority-responsibility-accountability of various governance bodies of TASSA
- Identify TASSA's major strengths and weaknesses and recommend actions for improving its performance
- Complete the review, and submit its findings and recommendations to the Board by the end of November 2009.

Members of the Peer Review Panel

Mustafa Akkoyunlu (until November 2009)
Alkan Donmez
Cemal Ekin
Suleyman Gokoglu
Selcuk Ozgediz
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