

Israeli Drug Policy and Harm Reduction

The official Israeli drug policy greatly corresponds to that of the United States. As is the case with other conservative governments, Israeli policy is characterized by an official “zero tolerance” with marijuana defined as a Schedule I drug. The result of such a policy, which is evident in any conservative establishment, is that the actual messages that go out to the public are a mixture of semi-truths, lies, and myths as well as utter policy mistakes even when the truth is involved.

Thus, heads of the Anti-Drug Authority (ADA) are noted to have said: “...but alcohol and nicotine are not drugs...” (Mr. Haim Messing, Executive Director of the ADA, on a radio debate in November 2002); the chief scientist of the authority, Dr. Rachel Bar-Hamburger, gave, on public radio, a recipe for making Datura tea, and just last week the ADA’s web-site gave a detailed price list of the major illicit drugs throughout the country.

On the bright side, the courts and the legal system, which are required to deal with the “criminals” using drugs, are displaying a remarkably practical approach. Unlike the US where prison space is not a problem, no such “luxury” is currently available in Israel (though initial attempts to privatize prisons are already underway). The Israeli judicial system cannot offer space for pot or other drug users, or even small-time growers, and alternatives are constantly being sought. At the same time, judges are begging, and in certain cases, instructing public prosecutors to “consider whether it is appropriate to submit criminal charges against offenders without a criminal record, where simple possession is involved, so as to clear the court’s diary for more serious cases...” (Justice Moshe Alter, Acco Magistrates Court, December 2004). In addition, just before his appointment to the Supreme Court, former Attorney General, Elyakim Rubinstein, issued official guidelines for first time offenders of cannabis use. These guidelines give the option of writing an “administrative warning” in an offender’s criminal record instead of criminal proceedings. This does not, however, solve the problem of what happens to offenders on subsequent occasions, when according to the guidelines, this warning should be taken into consideration and thus exacerbates the next judgment against the offender.

We can easily see the establishment’s confusion and inability to put forward a coherent and comprehensive

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drug policy. This failure has a dire effect on drug use and abuse and is demonstrated by a steady increase in drug use spanning all ages in Israel. Naturally, this use/misuse is not accompanied by any form of reliable information, which aggravates the dangers inherent in uninformed use of drugs.

The emergence of the Green Leaf Party, which actively promotes legalization of cannabis and a change of drug policy to harm reduction, combined with the adoption of this point of view by a number of members of the Israeli Knesset (equivalent to Congress), has had a positive effect on the public debate. Harm reduction is being openly discussed. A Harm Reduction Forum has been formed by MK Roman Bronfman of the Democratic Choice Party, with notable members such as Dr. Rafael

Mechoulam, Dr. Stanley Einstein, Dr. Hanan Frank, Dr. Yossef Agasi, Mr. Boaz Wachtel and others. This forum, with the substantial academic clout provided by its members, is putting forward documents of a new nature. Of special note is a booklet reviewing nine drugs, following the DanceSafe model, which is being examined by the Tel Aviv Municipal Anti-Drug Office, headed by a progressive official, Mr. Benny Avrahami. It is hoped that this may be the first cooperation between the forum with the “establishment.” Another paper, on heroin-related policy, has also been prepared by the forum.

The treatment of heroin addicts suffers from a similarly confused and incoherent policy. Several months ago, at the request of a property owner, the Tel Aviv municipality together with extensive police force “deported” 120 heroin addicts from their south Tel-Aviv squat in a sad display of wasted public funds. Yet even as this was done, it was fully accepted by nearly all parties, that upon being dropped off in one of four destinations throughout Israel, they would all restart their journey back to the big city. This assumption was later confirmed by a number of social workers. It is interesting to point out that conversations with the ADA revealed that there was no federal support for this action. It would appear that with hard drugs, such as heroin, ADA

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has acknowledged the inevitable—that drug use has to be treated, at most, as an illness, and that the criminal justice system has nothing to contribute to this end. This more enlightened approach sadly still stands in stark contrast with their approach to “party drugs” or cannabis.

I would conclude that the Israeli prohibition ethos on drug use, misuse, and abuse fails time and time again to get a clear and comprehensive mes-

sage across. The messages that are put forward span from ridiculous (such as the TV ad campaign that showed a joint turning into a syringe) to outright stupid and, from the

ADA's point of view, counterproductive (showing people laughing and dancing at a rave and then warning about the dangers of ecstasy use).

When the author has requested to inform young Israelis traveling to the Far East and South America (where drug experimentation is the norm for young travelers) of the methods to reduce the harm associated with use of LSD, ecstasy, psilocybin, and other substances, the response from government officials has been “but if we do that then we condone the use...”

In conclusion, Israel is not the place where great hope for the progressive drug policy movement can be expected. However, the existence of a public debate is noteworthy. Legitimacy for a view opposing that of the establishment is slowly gaining ground and will undoubtedly have an impact on the future of drug policy in Israel.

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After a productive meeting with Anti-Drug Authority officials, MAPS researchers and staff stop to mark the moment. From the left: John Halpern, M.D., Rick Doblin, Ph.D., Michael Mithoefer, M.D., June May Ruse, Psy.D., and Jose Carlos Bouso. Photo courtesy of John Halpern.