

The Case for a Regulatory Cannabis Enclave in the Resort City of Eilat

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Abstract This commentary advocates a city-based regulation, in which the private growing, commercial sale and personal use of cannabis will be legalized in the resort city of Eilat. Specifically, we argue that due to unique geo-cultural characteristics, this resort city is a suitable place to extend the decriminalization process started in Israel in 2017. Based on the Colorado experience, this commentary highlights the rationale and some guiding principles that can serve as the pivot around which the discussion on Eilat as the first cannabis enclave in Israel should revolve.

Keywords Cannabis enclave · Decentralization · Drug policy · Marijuana · Regulation · Alternative agriculture

This paper is the result of the one-week symposium between Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and the University of Colorado (January 2018) regarding the legalization of recreational cannabis use. Over the course of the week, policy makers, health experts, government officials, and other key people spoke about the health ramifications of legalized recreational cannabis use in Colorado. Inspired by this exchange, it seems fair to believe Israel will follow Colorado and countries around the world to legalize recreational cannabis use. The critical questions, in our opinion, are how and when this process is going to move forward. This paper offers a conceptual direction based on the symposium talks and presents the case for legalizing cannabis in the resort city of Eilat by commercializing the substance and allowing small-scale cultivation for personal use.

Our premise is that legalization is unavoidable. Such legislation reflects a just society where individuals have the right to decide whether to use cannabis, and the government focuses its

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efforts on providing information and enacting regulations to reduce potential harm to citizens for the benefit of society as a whole. This position is based on philosophical and sociological arguments that are beyond the scope of this brief paper. However, interested readers may find the following publications useful (Blumenson and Nilsen 2009; Gettman and Kennedy 2014; Pudney 2010; Room 2014; Shechtman 2012; Wynia 2018). Instead, we offer an appraisal of Colorado and Israeli conditions that may serve to advance possible legalization of cannabis use in Eilat.

Cannabis Use: from “War on Drugs” to Decriminalization and Legalization

We believe Israel should decriminalize cannabis use. It is useful to note that the criminalization of cannabis use in Israel, like many other countries, emanates from a position that illicit drug use and related public safety and health concerns should be addressed by the government. In the USA, which has considerable influence over drug policy in other countries including Israel, concern about cannabis may be traced back to the US Federal Bureau of Narcotics established in 1930 under the direction of Harry Anslinger and subsequently the “War on Drugs” that began in 1971 when the US President Richard Nixon declared drug abuse to be “public enemy number one” and through the Controlled Substances Act. The Act bans the possession, consumption, and distribution of a host of narcotic substances including cannabis. However, in recent years, there has been a policy shift from national to state and even local cannabis regulation based on population values, attitudes, and behavior (Isralowitz 2002; Isralowitz and Myers 2011).

Eilat: Overview and Cannabis Considerations

Eilat is a unique population center of about 50,000 residents (Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) 2017) that is isolated by a desert and borders with Jordan and Egypt; also, it tends to be removed culturally from the rest of the country. In his analysis of the process that led to the image of the city as liminal, Azaryahu (2005) noted that “being situated at the southernmost tip of Israel, the location of Eilat at the geographical margin of Israel was productive of its image as an extraordinary place and sustained its prominence in popular imagination” (p. 117). In the early years of the city, after 1948, it served as a location where criminals were sent for their offense. During the 1960s and the 1970s, it became famous for the presence of hippies who sought to escape the lifestyle of mainstream society. Belhassen (2012) suggests that the prevalence of substance use among hotel employees in the city can be explained in light of this image. Arguably, certain prominent features—the city’s geographic isolation from the rest of the country and its character as a liminal hub in which deviant behavior is tolerated—tend to endorse a stand for cannabis legalization.

Based on Colorado experience, legalization and commercialization of cannabis may lower cannabis use among youth in Eilat. Colorado data show a consistent decline of cannabis use among youth since its legalization with strict regulations and enforcement practices (Ingraham 2017). Another possible reason for the decline of use may be an outcome of drug use prevention programs that are funded by cannabis tax

revenues. A third possible explanation of the decline may be that legalization has made the substance less attractive and daring for risk-taking youth.

We suggest for Eilat five provisions adopted by Colorado that prohibit the following: (1) selling marijuana and alcohol at the same venue; (2) selling food “adulterated” by marijuana in restaurants and at fast food stalls (i.e., falafel or humus); (3) consumption at beaches, clubs, and smoking rooms; (4) cannabis use, like cigarette smoking in places such as restaurants, public transportation stations, and sport arenas; and (5) use for those under the age of 21.

It is possible to provide Eilat with cannabis from local sources such as a medical cannabis farm located 25 km north at Kibbutz Elifaz, regional kibbutzim (i.e., collective settlements), or even by local entrepreneurs in the city. Resulting from a legal status, the Eilat region has the potential of being a major producer of cannabis where diverse agriculture grow models can be promoted (Beus and Dunlap 1990; Lyson 2004) and the economy stimulated through “locally produced” recreational cannabis for use by local residents and tourists (Belhassen et al. 2007).

Discussion and Conclusion

Following the Colorado experience, a mixed model of government regulation and private sector management is proposed. Regulation should cover (1) the THC level; (2) the amount of cannabis that can be purchased; (3) the number of cannabis plants an individual can grow; (4) restrictions for specific professionals such as soldiers, security personnel, and taxi drivers; (5) consumption near children; (6) consumption in public places; and (7) relevant control regulations at Eilat airport and other city checkpoints.

Furthermore, Eilat should adopt a special taxation policy for recreational cannabis and ensure revenues are invested in the local community. In Colorado, recreational cannabis has a 25% state tax in addition to a state sales tax of 2.9%. Also, some Colorado communities have decided to add additional taxes to recreational cannabis. In addition, we suggest some of the tax revenue generated from recreational cannabis be used to bolster a youth prevention program and work opportunities for young people, regulation enforcement oversight, and other community-based initiatives.

To conclude, we believe cannabis use in Israel should be moved forward to a legal and commercial status in Eilat. This suggestion is inspired by the Colorado experience. There are ample reasons for making Eilat a “test case” for legal cannabis use where it can be monitored and evaluated, and eventually moved on elsewhere in the country.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors declare that the article is in compliance with the protection of all human and animal rights.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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