

Arava and Eilat – From a Vision to Reality:

Demographic changes in the Arava Valley with Additional Water Supply from Aqaba

Samuel E. Willner¹, (M.Sc. Econ.)²

1 Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, Ketura, Hevel Eilat;

2 Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, Haifa University, Haifa

Correspondence: samuel.willner@yahoo.com

Executive Summary

Various development projects are going to take place in the Arava. The strategic plans – both regional and national – are helping the southern region to become economically independent. This requires significant demographic development. The Memorandum of Understanding, which was signed between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority in December 09, 2013, enables major cooperation over water resources.

This article discusses the kind of demographic changes that the proposed new water supply would bring to Israel's southern region through pipelines from the Aqaba desalination plant. One of the major aspects is to integrate both the regional and state wide development plans to the Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael – Jewish National Fund's (KKL-JNF) expertise in sustainable community development and planning by turning the demographic vision into reality. The main question is: How can the water sharing plan change the region by providing major change in the demographics by allowing major commercial and urban projects?

The article gives an overview of the current demographics of the Southern Arava, namely the Hevel Eilat Regional Council and the City of Eilat. The article considers the barriers and solutions in enlarging the population. This will be discussed in the light of regional master plans, to recognize them and debate how they align with the new developments.

Introduction – Israel – The Green Oasis of the Dry Desert Land

Population growth and demographic changes are creating immense challenges to the Middle Eastern nations. Israel has encountered similar challenges, but creativity, innovation and hard work has helped to overcome them. As Ambassador Avi Granot, who serves the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a Deputy Director General, puts it: “There is no justification for lack of food, starvation, or lack of water, it is not an issue; we in Israel have proved that these issues can be solved. It is all about our efforts”¹. In the past decades, prominent Zionist figures, like David Ben-Gurion and Theodor Herzl, dreamed about the making life bloom and prosper in the desert. In their dreams, the settlements of desert, such as the kibbutzim, were green oases in the dry wilderness. They knew that it was not an easy task, but they knew that it was possible.

In Israel, a major task is to settle the dry desert areas of the Negev and the Arava, while providing its residents high quality living, which means, affordable housing, infrastructure and employment opportunities. In the Arava region of the southern Israel, a major limitation to demographic development is the availability of affordable water resources, which in the other regions, has been tackled by building major desalination plants.

1 Personal Interview 20.1.2014, conducted by Samuel Willner

Developing the southern region requires government support. “KKL-JNF has a major role, and it can contribute to all these future projects in the Arava region”, says Barbara Goldstein, the Deputy Director of Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America office in Israel and a member of KKL-JNF Board of Directors². According to Mrs. Goldstein, despite Israel being highly innovative and creative, it should also look for models of living from other arid land areas with similar climates, such as Phoenix and Las Vegas of the United States, to find the most optimum solutions for living.

When materialized, the water agreement signed between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority in December 2013 can become a trigger to major boost in the demographic growth and economic development in the Arava.

Through Strategic Development Plans to Tourist Attractions and High-Tech

“The Arava is the Sun Valley of Renewable Energy”, Udi Gat, Mayor of the Hevel Eilat Regional Council

The southern region of Israel has experienced immense growth since Israel’s independence. Once periphery, Eilat and Hevel Eilat are currently striving to become a hub of renewable energy innovation. However, renewable energy itself is not the answer but rather a piece of the entire puzzle. It all starts from the demographic development which allows the region to reach its vision.

Both the city of Eilat and the regional council of Hevel Eilat have strategic plans to develop the demographics, which require much more potable water. According to the Deputy Mayor of Eilat Eli Lankri³, the city would have to

2 Personal interview 05.04.2014, conducted by Samuel Willner

3 Personal interview, 18.05.2014. Conducted by Samuel Willner

double its annual water supply from the current of 14 MCM (million cubic meters) in order to reach its demographic goal of 150,000 residents by 2030. The water agreement, which would allow water transfer from Aqaba, would permit a great deal of development in the next thirty years. The Hevel Eilat regional council, on the other hand, aims to increase its population from the current level of 3,300 to 11,000 in twenty years. In Hevel Eilat the plan is mainly to increase the existing settlements, but may also include establishing two new communities. “We need to do branding, and if we do this correctly, we are able to attract more people to the region. Yet we have several challenges,” explains Udi Gat⁴, the Mayor of Hevel Eilat.

“However what we are missing is to have enough high quality water. If we are able to bring more water to the region, we will be able to bring hundreds of more families. Since drilling from the aquifers is very expensive, it is difficult to bring more water this way. If the proposed water project is done in the southern region, it will solve the water quality issues; it would be a revolution for the agriculture. With more high quality water we can grow more dates, peppers, water melons; everything would be better,” highlights Udi Gat.

According to Eli Lankri additional water supply provided from Aqaba would be a big advantage for Eilat. The city has a plan to build multiple tourist attractions including a water park, a ski park, a golf course, and even casinos. All these development projects require increased water supply.

Finding appropriate industries that would contribute to the regional development is not that simple. “Successful industrial ideas are not easy to find. Therefore what we have to do is take what we have and make it bigger,” explains Udi Gat.

All these projects will be a great contribution to the demographic development

4 Personal interview, 25.04.2014. Conducted by Samuel Willner

of the entire southern region. “We need to bring people to the entire region. Housing is a big issue because we don’t currently have adequate funding sources,” notes Udi Gat. Most of the kibbutzim in the southern Arava have similar challenges in terms of the demographics, and in the next sub chapter two examples are considered: Kibbutz Lotan and Kibbutz Ketura, which both are lively striving communities.

The Cases of Kibbutz Ketura and Lotan

In terms of being competitive, “the small settlements are lacking the economies of scale” remarks Eliza Mayo⁵, who serves the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies as the Director of Development and is a member of Kibbutz Lotan.

As a former Business Manager of Kibbutz Lotan her intuition is that a good business venture can succeed anywhere. In Lotan, the community is already heavily involved in environmental and ecological education and it has been considering plans to develop an eco-hotel.

In order for the region to become more attractive, it would need an upgraded road infrastructure but the current road system is not the most limiting factor in terms of the demographic development. Yet, the public transportation should be more appropriate for travelling long distances.

Similar to Kibbutz Lotan, a major limitation to demographic development in Ketura is the limit of existing housing. According Noach Morris⁶, the Business Manager of Kibbutz Ketura, there are constantly people who are looking for places to live in the Arava. Local industry, such as the AlgaTech,

5 Personal interview, 05.05.2014. Conducted by Samuel Willner

6 Personal interview, 20.04.2014. Conducted by Samuel Willner

which produces high quality algae, is expanding its operations. New ventures will employ more people, which in turn require new housing. When it comes to building new homes, the construction costs are much higher compared to the central parts of Israel due to the transportation costs of construction materials and workers.

High population growth may also face opposition. According to Noach Morris, some of the residents prefer the southern and central Arava to remain scarcely populated, and this creates tension between those people who want to see the region grow demographically and those who prefer preserving the desert. Therefore, the demographic development should be considered in a way that environmental sustainability is taken into account. In this respect, the KKL-JNF has a long track record of environmental projects.

Ketura, just like the other communities, is facing another demographic challenge: the population is aging. “We also need to look after our older residents. Thus, the communities should attract younger residents in order for them to become demographically sustainable. In order for us to find answers to these challenges, we need to think outside the box,” highlights Noach Morris.

The Deputy Director of Hadassah, Israel Barbara Goldstein, has an interesting suggestion. According to her, the southern region should consider establishing a youth village that would teach the youth a sense of purpose of building the land of Israel. For instance, this could be done in a form of experimental agricultural farms and communities. “When these young people grow older maybe they will choose to live in the Arava and the Negev,” envisions Barbara Goldstein.

“Life on a kibbutz is balancing between urban and small community living”, tells Sarit Maagan-Rosenfeld⁷ who heads the absorption committee of Kibbutz

7 Personal interview, 04.05.2014. Conducted by Samuel Willner

Ketura. According to her, people who come to live in the desert of the Arava Valley are many times looking for a feeling of community life. “They want to be part of a community contributing to the bigger structure”. Yet some of the people are concerned that they cannot find appropriate jobs from the region or they feel that they would have to make compromises in terms of their professional career. This limits the population growth.

From International Trade and Shipping to High-tech, and Renewable Energy Initiatives – The Sun Valley of Arava

The Deputy Mayor of Eilat Eli Lankri is confident about the city’s development prospects. Eilat’s demographic development requires national plan to upgrade the entire southern region: turning it into a ‘Southern Gate’ of import and export: connecting Europe to Asia and Africa, and being a strategic land bridge that could compete with the Suez Canal as a transport route. The whole ‘Southern Gate’ project is part of the government’s national development plan and it is set to be constructed in ten years.

The new port would free considerable land areas for residential and commercial development as it would be located in the northern part of the city. According to Elli Lankri, the project would provide a robust financial anchor for the entire city.

The development of Eilat is highlighted in three simultaneous stages: the first stage where the ‘Southern Gate’ is constructed and where the new port connected to the planned Eilat rail link. “We believe that the port itself would provide employment for at least 500-600 more people than what the current port is employing”, explains Eli Lankri.

The second development stage would allow for building new hotels and other tourist attractions, which would employ additionally thousands of people. The

third stage would concentrate on promoting the city as a high-tech hub. All these ventures also require development of water resources.

The southern region of Israel has multiple challenges which go side by side with the incredible development opportunities. According to the Deputy Mayor of Eilat, in order for the city to improve its demographic situation, the emphasis in the urban planning is to have more sources of employment outside tourism. Part of this demographic plan is to promote renewable energy and other high-tech initiatives together with the regional council of Hevel Eilat. The Eilat-Eilat Renewable Energy Initiative was initiated few years ago for this purpose.

In order to promote the high-tech sector in the city of Eilat, a major effort has been put in to upgrading and developing the University of Eilat. According to Eli Lankri, one of the problems limiting the development of high-tech in the region is the lack of professionals, such as engineers. The municipality is currently working together with the local high schools to prepare the youth for the university. Part of the development plan is to establish cooperation with international universities, of which the most recent one is the cooperation agreement with the University of Lausanne in France. “This is a very important partnership for the university in Eilat” explains Eli Lankri.

“We need to become a place of high quality living. We need to be economically independent, and thus be a better place to live,” concludes Eli Lankri.

Conclusions

Major part of Israel’s future competitive edge will rely on its ability to nurture creativity and innovation. The Arava region can become a hub of international tourism, logistics, innovation and knowhow, research and development – the ‘Sun Valley of Israel’.

However, one of the most important aspects is to have a comprehensive strategic plan that would take into account sustainable community development. In these demographic plans the government together with the local municipalities, businesses and KKL-JNF should emphasize the value of high-quality living, and long-term economic independency.

Without a shadow of a doubt, when the regional and government plans start to materialize the southern region will experience immense success and prosperity. The welfare will spread throughout the entire Arava Valley all the way to the Dead Sea. All these innovative projects will employ thousands of people by changing the whole demographics while increasing the competitive edge of the region. The future of the entire Arava looks bright. However, as the Deputy Mayor of Eilat puts it, much of the future success of region depends on the geopolitical situation.

“If it will be quiet and stable in the south the future looks very bright. If the geopolitical situation is stable then we can make it, because we have immense development potential; not just in tourism but also in other fields; in fields we have not yet fully explored.”

This whole process is a positive cycle and will bring more prosperity. The desert will become green; full of life. It is like the dry riverbeds which after a spring rain will become flourishing, beautiful full of life – for the ‘sabres’, for the new and old immigrants, young and old – for the future of Israel. This is where the KKL-JNF comes into the picture: With its long history of building the State of Israel, it can transfer the demographic vision into reality. As Theodor Herzl once said in 1902, “If you will it, it is no dream”⁸.

8 From the book ‘Altneuland – Old New Land’ by Theodor Herzl in 1902