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Speed kills

By JPOST EDITORIAL

02/01/2013

Indeed, road deaths in Israel rose from 314 in 2009 to 352 in 2010, the year after Transportation Minister Israel Katz increased speed limits once before.

When Israel exchanged more than 1,000 terrorists for tank gunner Gilad Schalit in late 2011, the Jewish state demonstrated – after much soul-searching – the principle that the life of every one of its citizens is sacrosanct.

The wantonly reckless decision by Transportation Minister Israel Katz last week to raise posted speed limits on select highways violates this sacrosanct principle.

Katz announced that he had approved raising posted speed limits from 110 to 120 kph on Highway 6 (the Trans-Israel Highway) and selected stretches of Highway 1 (between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv) – with enforcement thresholds 10 kph higher.

The move, which requires approval from the Knesset Finance Committee, was based on a panel's report in 2010 showing that superior infrastructure on multi-lane highways permitted higher speeds.

Based on experience, though, the decision will result in more deaths, and more disabling and crippling injuries, crushed limbs and permanent brain injuries. It will roll back the benefits of countermeasures against excessive and inappropriate speeds.

Indeed, road deaths rose from 314 in 2009 to 352 in 2010, the year after Katz increased speed limits once before.

Everyone knows that speed kills, and that more speed kills more. Studies have shown that a 10 percent increase in the speed of collision impact results in an increase of almost 50 percent in deaths. The cause-effect relationship is as strong as that between smoking and lung cancer.

Raised speed limits induce higher travel speeds – not only on the roads on which the limits are raised, but the so-called spillover has an addictive effect on young drivers.

The results are catastrophic when heavy vehicles are involved, or drivers drink alcohol or are fatigued, talk on cellular phones and drive recklessly.

Professors Elihu Richter and Avi Rivkind of the Hebrew University-Hadassah have repeatedly documented the relationships between higher speed limits and carnage in Israel, and have warned policy-makers and the public of these effects. Or Yarak, the Association for Safer Driving in Israel, has joined them in opposing Katz's decision.

True, in 2012, for the first time since the 1950s, Israel's reported road death toll fell to under 300. But that

is almost 300 deaths too many.

Road injury experts rightly point out that Vision Zero – eradicating the scourge of death and crippling injuries – is achievable through better safety standards for vehicles, improved road design, speed-camera enforcement systems, pedestrianization (converting streets into walkways), better trauma care and a modal shift to public transit.

Advocates of raised speed limits for Israel say that they bring the country into line with European Union trends toward looser restrictions. This argument fails to take into account the superior standards for safer designs of European roads, greater pedestrianization and better working conditions of professional drivers. Israel lags behind on all these fronts.

Higher speeds exponentially increase gasoline consumption and air pollution emissions and produce more wear-and-tear on our roads.

Furthermore, the claims for economic benefits of higher travel speeds are spurious – especially in a tiny country such as ours. Transportation studies have shown that faster speeds in a small country save very little travel time.

The real delays come from traffic jams and congestion.

The core value that guides all government policy is supposed to be protection of the life and security of citizens. Yet one cannot help but notice the indifference of Israel's legal elites, opinion-makers, policy-makers and media to Katz's decision and its lethal consequences.

Should Katz not be held accountable for the inevitable loss of life and limb resulting from a decision that flies in the face of all the evidence? Is it not time to subject the decision-making process concerning speed limits to the level of scrutiny to which we subject trials for new medical procedures in hospitals, as proposed by Richter and his colleagues in a classic paper published in the British Journal of Medical Ethics?

Israel should lead, not follow, Europe in eradicating the epidemic of road deaths. Vision Zero means that in the 21st century, road deaths should be redefined as unacceptable, just as 19th-century England redefined contaminated drinking water as unacceptable.



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