

65 reasons why Israel tops other countries

By **SHLOMO MAITAL**

04/24/2013 12:11

There are so many areas in which Israel and Israelis excel that even a biased account of them has to impress



Photo by: AM IR COHEN / REUTERS

Former New York City mayor Ed Koch, who died in February, liked to connect with his voters the old-fashioned way. He stood on street corners and at subway entrances, pressed the flesh, and asked, "How'm I doin'?" Perhaps that's why Koch was elected three times. In my 45 years in Israel, I can't remember meeting an Israeli politician who did the same.

Suppose Israel did an Ed Koch. Suppose Israel walked up to me and asked, "How'm I doin'?" Here is my answer. Israel, noisy, impetuous little country, eight million people pretending you are 80 million; you're doing just fine, despite your myriad of critics at home and abroad.

Some of the data I have used comes from a project known as the Better Life Initiative, launched two years ago by experts from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a group of the 34 most developed countries in the world to which Israel belongs. The project seeks to measure well-being more broadly than the standard Gross Domestic Product statistics.

Education: Some 80 percent of Israeli adults aged 25-64 have high-school diplomas, well above the OECD average (74 percent).

OECD experts calculated the proportion of the population that had a college degree or its equivalent. Israel ranks in second place, just behind Canada and ahead of the US (4) and the UK (7).

Two international studies compared reading skills and math and science knowledge among children in 42 countries. For the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) test, Israeli fourth-graders climbed from 31st in 2006 to 18th in 2011. For the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) test, Israeli eighth-graders rose from 24th in the world in 2007 to seventh in 2011 – the biggest jump for any nation.

Former Education minister Gideon Sa'ar noted that Arab sector students showed major gains as well as

the Jewish public.

Health: Israelis' life expectancy at birth is 82, two years higher than that of the OECD average (80) and four years higher than the US (78). Some 81 percent of Israelis reported they are in good health, higher than the OECD average of 70 percent. Israelis are slimmer, too. The obesity rate for Israelis in 2008 was 13.8 percent, compared with 17 percent in the OECD.

Housing: Despite the high price of housing in Israel, for both buyers and renters, Israelis spend on average 22 percent of their disposable income on keeping a roof over the heads, the same as the OECD average. And fully 83 percent of Israelis say they are satisfied with their current housing, slightly lower than the OECD average of 87 percent.

Financial wealth: Believe it or not, Israelis are wealthier than the OECD average.

The average household wealth (financial holdings) in Israel is \$47,750, almost a third higher than the OECD average.

Jobs: Some 60 percent of the Israeli working-age population (15 to 64) has a paid job, less than the 66 percent average of the OECD. But Israeli youth (15-24) have lower unemployment rates; and, overall, Israel's unemployment rate, 6.7 percent in February, was lower than that of the OECD (8 percent).

Social cohesion: In Israel, 56 percent of respondents reported having helped a stranger in the past month, well above the OECD average of 47 percent. And 88 percent of Israelis believe they know someone they could rely on in a time of need, just slightly lower than the OECD average of 91 percent.

Life satisfaction: Israelis were asked to rate their general satisfaction with life on a scale from 0 to 10. Israelis gave life a grade of 7.4, higher than the OECD average of 6.7.

And remarkably, Israelis feel safer. Some 70 percent of Israelis feel safe walking alone at night, slightly higher than the OECD average of 67 percent.

Work-life balance: Israelis work hard.

On average, people in Israel work 1,889 hours a year, 140 hours (more than three weeks' worth) more than the OECD average. Some 19 percent of Israeli workers reported working "very long hours," one of the highest rates in the OECD (9 percent average). Among Israeli men, 29 percent reported working very long hours.

Innovation: It comes as no surprise that the Start-up Nation excels in creativity and innovation. According to the Global Innovation Index, compiled by the leading French business school, INSEAD, Israel is ranked fourth out of 125 nations in "human capital and research," and first in the world in Research and Development. Israel is also ranked first in "quality of scientific research institutions, fourth in the world in "knowledge workers" and sixth in the world in "knowledge creation." According to the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook, Israel was second in the world in entrepreneurship, just behind Taiwan, second in "innovative capacity" (just behind Switzerland), and second in "qualified engineers" and "information technology skills."

Recently, Russia partnered with leading American university MIT to create the Skoltech (Skolkovo Institute of Science & Technology) initiative, which aspires to become a world-class technological university. To prepare the groundwork, MIT surveyed 61 international experts to benchmark other leading science and technology institutes. Their findings: Israel's Technion – Israel Institute of Technology ranked sixth in the world in response to the question, "Which universities created/supported the world's most successful technology innovation ecosystems?" Moreover, for innovation ecosystems operating "despite a challenging environment" (the Mideast is pretty challenging), the Technion ranks first in the world, according to the experts.

Where to be born?: The business weekly, The Economist, in its endless quest to make numbers interesting, tried to measure which country "will provide the best opportunities for a healthy, safe and prosperous life in the years ahead." Remarkably, in 2012, Israel ranked No. 20 (out of 80 nations), just slightly behind the US (16). In the same ranking, in 1988, Israel was only 30th; so it has risen 10 rungs in

24 years, a claim few or no nations can make. What helped Israel somewhat was the “yawn index” – “the degree to which a country might, despite all its virtues, be irredeemably boring.” Life in Israel is many things, but certainly not boring.

I admit that I have unashamedly cherry-picked the good news and avoided the bad. In my defense, I plead that there are more than enough journalists who endlessly harp on the negative, a sin I myself commit all too often.

There are so many areas in which Israel and Israelis excel that this biased account of them has to impress even the doubters.

The truth is it was supremely easy to find many areas in which Israel excels. For those who despise the Jewish state, from anonymous hackers to flaming radical leftists and rank anti-Semites, I have one question: Can your country top this?

The writer is a senior research fellow at the [S. Neaman Institute](#), Technion.