

# Jordan to enforce smoking ban despite public fury

January 25 2014, by Jamal Halaby

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In this Thursday, Jan. 23, 2014 photo, customers smoke water pipes at a coffee shop in Amman, Jordan. In Jordan, a country where smoking is so popular that motorists can be seen puffing away on miniature water pipes in traffic, the kingdom's government now wants to enforce a Western-style smoking ban in restaurants, cafes and other public places. (AP Photo/Mohammad Hannon)

In Jordan, a country where smoking is so popular that motorists can be seen puffing away on miniature water pipes in traffic, the kingdom's

government now wants to enforce a Western-style smoking ban in restaurants, cafes and other public places.

The ban, coming from a law passed in 2008 but not full enforced, also would see the government revoke the licenses of all 6,000 [coffee shops](#) that serve shisha by the end of this year.

But business owners and smokers are criticizing the push, saying it goes against the culture of a country where [smoking](#) is seen as an attractive sign of manhood and elderly Bedouins roll their own cigarettes in public.

"We are caught between a rock and a hard place whereby the government is trying to force a closure of our businesses," said Mazen Alsaleh, who owns 14 coffee and [hookah](#) shops around the country. "I am not defending the hookah or smoking, but we must defend our investments."

The pastime of smoking shisha—also known as nargile, hubbly bubbly, hookah or by other names across the Middle East—is engrained in Jordanian culture from the time of the Ottoman Empire. Mourners receive cigarettes at wakes, while delivery companies only supplying hookahs have sprouted across the country.

The World Health Organization estimated last year that nearly half of Jordan's men smoke tobacco on a daily basis, while a third of young men do. Women smoke at a much lower rate.

While smoking is culturally embraced, it's also aided by low-cost cigarettes. A pack of local cigarettes sells at \$2, while foreign tobacco is slightly more expensive. Last year, local tobacco manufacturers reduced their prices by up to 15 percent to compete with cheap cigarettes smuggled in from neighboring Syria. Health Ministry statistics show that Jordanians spend the equivalent of \$1 billion annually on tobacco.

Health Minister Ali Hyasat, who is spearheading the effort to enforce the [smoking ban](#), said the measure was meant to "save lives, not businesses."



In this Thursday, Jan. 23, 2014 photo, a customer smokes a water pipe at a coffee shop in Amman, Jordan. In Jordan, a country where smoking is so popular that motorists can be seen puffing away on miniature water pipes in traffic, the kingdom's government now wants to enforce a Western-style smoking ban in restaurants, cafes and other public places. (AP Photo/Mohammad Hannon)

"This is costing us lives, as our records show that many Jordanians die of cancer directly linked to smoking each year, and more than \$1 billion annually on health care programs to treat smokers," Hyasat told The Associated Press.

Enforcing the law started gradually in 2009, with shopping malls and Amman's Queen Alia International Airport first enacting the ban, followed by fast food restaurants. The law also bans smoking in hospitals, schools, cinemas, libraries, museums, government buildings, public transportation and other places to be determined by the [health minister](#).

The law also prohibits selling tobacco to those under the age of 18, but shop owners have rarely abided by the law. Violators are subject to imprisonment for up to one month or a fine of up to \$35.

Across the Middle East, there are similar indoor smoking bans in place in Lebanon and some Arab Gulf countries. The United Arab Emirates, the home of Dubai, tightened its own smoking ban earlier this week. Israel has a smoking ban as well. But often, such rules simply get ignored.

The new push to enforce Jordan's law in its entirety by December has many angry.

"Why is the government infringing on our privacy?" asked social worker Haneen Ramahi, 34. "Smoking is a matter of a personal choice. If I decide to kill myself, I'm free to do that."

College senior Mohammad Zeghayer, 21, said he will not abide by the law.

"I will continue smoking in restaurants and coffee shops and police can arrest me, I don't care," Zeghayer said.

Firas Hawari, a specialist at Jordan's main cancer center, said doctors have seen an increase in both the number of smokers and the diseases resulting from smoking in recent years. He said that smoking is

responsible for 25 percent of cancer cases among males in Jordan, including lung, head, neck and bladder cancers, as well as the majority of chronic diseases and high blood pressure.

Yet cigarettes are available at grocery stores, coffee shops and street kiosks. In smoke-filled coffee shops, minors are usually part of the clientele, sharing a water pipe. In some households, it is socially acceptable for minors to light the hookah for their parents.

Alsaleh, the hookah shop owner, said he was considering filing a lawsuit to try and stop the ban. Others say they'll ignore it.

Meanwhile, some of the worst smoking offenders can be found lighting up under the dome of Jordan's parliament—the same lawmakers who passed the bill in the first place.

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