

## Jordan hookah ban sparks public outcry

February 5 2014, by Kamal Taha

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There's no smoke without ire: a ban on water pipes in restaurants and cafes has caused uproar in Jordan where \$1 billion worth of tobacco goes up in smoke every year.

Under a decision based on a 2008 law that was not previously enforced, the [government](#) has announced that by the end of 2014 the licences of more than 5,000 establishments that serve hookahs will be revoked.

Furious smokers and cafe owners say the move will affect their lifestyle and a \$1.5 billion (1.1 billion euro) industry, jeopardising the jobs of 12,000 people.

"This decision will definitely have a negative impact on us and mean thousands of people lose their jobs," said cafe manager Emran Torsha.

His popular Jafra cafe in central Amman serves around 2,000 customers daily, half of them smokers.

"The government should not make decisions this way," Torsha said as dozens of men and women, young and old, smoked [hookah](#) with their drinks and snacks and listened to live music.

"What should we do with customers who come here to escape from life's daily pressures?"

Tourism Minister Nidal Qatamin has urged "a gradual implementation of the ban, taking business interests into consideration".

But Health Minister Ali Hiasat is adamant, vowing that Jordan will be free of [hookah smoking](#) by the end of 2014.

"The government will not go back on this decision," Hiasat says.

## Smokers ignore the ban

Amman began enforcing the anti-smoking law in 2010, two years after it entered the statute books.

But it was still widely ignored—including in [government buildings](#) and in public places such as hospitals and schools.

Under the legislation, convicted violators face up to a month in jail or a fine of between \$21 and \$35 (16 to 26 euros).

Tougher penalties can hit people who smoke in kindergartens: they face imprisonment of up to six months or a maximum fine of \$1,400.

"If the government wants to preserve public health, it should find a solution to vehicle, industrial and waste pollution," Torsha said, adding that Jafra's hookah licence expires in February.

Health experts warn that the many fruity flavours of hookah—also known as narghile, arghila and shisha—can make users forget they are inhaling tobacco.

They also say that since it takes longer to smoke than a cigarette, hookah is even more dangerous.

"What is the substitute for us after the government banned arghila? Where should we go?" asked Wasim Yusef, a 36-year-old employee at a privately owned firm, as he smoked hookah at Jafra with friends.

"Smoking arghila has become a tradition. It's my only entertainment. I think the ban is wrong—it should be reconsidered."

Smoking hookah is both popular and cheap in Jordan, where delivery companies supplying [water pipes](#) have sprung up across the kingdom.

Nearly half the population smokes

Prices for a smoke at cafes and restaurants start from \$4, while a water pipe can be bought for home use from around \$11.

Officials are concerned about the effect of smoking in a country where nearly half of the population of seven million indulge in tobacco.

"Every year, a total of 5,000 cancer cases are registered in Jordan. Around 40 percent of these are related to smoking," said Firas Hawwari of the King Hussein Cancer Centre.

"Fighting smoking has become a strategic decision for Jordan. It should be implemented without any delay."

Faten Hanaia, who heads the Tobacco-Free Jordan society, agreed, calling the ban "a first step towards preventing smoking in all [public places](#), and we know this takes time".

Other countries in the region have banned smoking in public areas, but again many people just ignore the rules.

"I don't understand this government decision," Amal Nasser, a 40-year-old non-smoker, told AFP at a cafe in western Amman.

"I think banning arghila is the least of our worries. There are other priorities. For example, we need pavements, decent roads, parks and

much more.

"How about enforcing the [smoking](#) ban for real in government buildings?" she suggested.

"I don't think there's a pressing demand in Jordan to ban arghila. If people want to blow smoke in other people's faces in an arghila place, let them do it."

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