

Lebanon's cannabis heartland, Bekaa, hopes for legalization

July 27 2018, by Bassem Mroue



In this Monday, July 23, 2018, photo, a man removes dirt and dry leaves in a cannabis field in the village of Yammoune, 25 kilometers (about 15 miles) northwest of the town of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. In the fields of this quiet village surrounded by mountains, men and women work on removing dirt and dry leaves around cannabis plants from which many people in this eastern region make a living. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

In the fields of this quiet village surrounded by mountains, men and

women work clearing dirt and dry leaves from around cannabis plants, a major source of livelihoods in this impoverished corner of Lebanon,

The fertile Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon has long been notorious as one of the world's major narcotics-growing regions, producing some of the finest quality [cannabis](#), mostly processed into hashish. Today, the country is the third biggest producer in the world after Morocco and Afghanistan, according to the U.N.

But the valley's residents have rarely felt the benefits. Now they are hoping their work will soon become legal after decades of crackdowns and raids.

This week, a draft bill was introduced in parliament that would allow cultivation and use of cannabis for medical purposes.

The idea has fueled dreams of Lebanon raking in hundreds of millions of dollars in sales and exports, a desperately needed source of income for a country weighed down by low growth, high unemployment and one of the heaviest debt burdens in the world.

The legal industry will also create jobs and bring order in the Bekaa, a region notorious for lawlessness, proponents say.

"I want to find a solution for what's going on," said legislator Antoine Habchi, who sent the bill to parliament. The aim is to "allow farmers to live with dignity."



In this Monday, July 23, 2018, photo, a general views shows a part of the Bekaa valley from the village of Deir al Ahmar, 12 kilometers (about 7 miles) northwest of the town of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. In the fields of this quiet village surrounded by mountains, men and women work on removing dirt and dry leaves around cannabis plants from which many people in this eastern region make a living. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Habchi, who hails from cannabis-growing part of the Bekaa region, said the bill would bring economic returns and would include provisions to prevent and treat addiction.

Under the bill, cultivation would be tightly controlled. Private pharmaceutical companies would provide seeds and seedlings to farmers and during harvest plants would be counted to make sure nothing had been diverted. The size of fields would be regulated.

It will likely take months for the bill to go through discussions before it

can come to a vote. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri last week informed U.S. ambassador Elizabeth Richard that the legislature was working on the draft bill. In the past, the United States has provided aid for counter-narcotics efforts in Lebanon, trying to stem the trade.

The move is not without controversy.

The northern parts of the Bekaa Valley where cannabis is widely grown is under the influence of the militant group Hezbollah, which opposes the use and production of all types of drugs. The group and its allies dominate parliament; it has not said whether it would try to stop the bill.

The United States has repeatedly accused Hezbollah of drug trafficking, charges that the group strongly denies.



In this Wednesday, July 25, 2018, photo, Lebanese Lawmaker Antoine Habche from the Christian Lebanese Forces party speaks during an interview with the

Associated Press in Beirut, Lebanon. In the fields of this quiet village surrounded by mountains, men and women work on removing dirt and dry leaves around cannabis plants from which many people in this eastern region make a living. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Legalization seems to have gained traction in Lebanon after global consulting firm McKinsey & Co. included it among its suggestions in a government-commissioned study on ways to boost Lebanon's economy.

Still, economists are split on the benefits.

Louis Hobeika, an economist at Lebanon's Notre-Dame University, warned that cannabis profits won't go to state coffers or citizens but will be devoured by the widespread corruption among the ruling elite.

"This is a move that aims to finance the political mafia in Lebanon," he said.

Habchi disagrees, saying farmers and workers would finally have their rights in the trade. Traditionally, drug dealers benefit most, imposing a purchase price on farmers then selling the product for high higher prices.

The Bekaa became notorious for the drug trade during the 1975-1990 civil war, producing some \$500 million a year in opium and cannabis. After the war, authorities launched crackdowns on the fields and encouraged alternative crops like potatoes, tomatoes and apples.



In this Monday, July 23, 2018, photo, a masked worker removes dirt and dry leaves in a cannabis field in the village of Yammoune, 25 kilometers (about 15 miles) northwest of the town of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. In the fields of this quiet village surrounded by mountains, men and women work on removing dirt and dry leaves around cannabis plants from which many people in this eastern region make a living. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Cannabis planting bloomed once more after Syria's civil war erupted in 2011 and Lebanese authorities shifted attention to other security concerns.

Driving through villages in the Baalbek and Hermel regions in eastern Lebanon, cannabis can be seen planted on the side of roads and in gardens. At some cases, security force's checkpoints are only a few hundred meters (yards) away. There are more than 40,000 arrest warrants against locals in the Bekaa Valley, many drug-related.

Most often, authorities prefer to turn a blind eye.

Well armed residents are ready to fend off any force trying to destroy their fields. When security forces move in to destroy fields with bulldozers and trucks, they can come under barrages of automatic weapons fire or even rocket-propelled grenades.

On Monday, troops surrounded a compound in the village of Hamoudiyeh run by a notorious drug dealer, Ali Zeyd Ismail, who had dozens of warrants against him. An hours-long battle left eight people dead, including Ismail, who was known as Lebanon's Escobar after the late top Colombian drug trafficker Pablo Escobar.

Hashish is also smuggled out of the country. Hardly a week passes without authorities saying that they busted drugs at the airport or seaports.



In this Monday, July 23, 2018, photo, masked workers remove dirt and dry leaves in a cannabis field in the village of Yammoune, 25 kilometers (about 15 miles) northwest of the town of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. In the fields of this quiet village surrounded by mountains, men and women work on removing dirt and dry leaves around cannabis plants from which many people in this eastern region make a living. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Legalization could turn that into a legal export market. Several countries in Europe and South America, as well as Australia and Canada allow imports of [medical cannabis](#). Canada and the Netherlands dominate exports. Several U.S. states allow medical or recreational cannabis, but importing is illegal.

In the Bekaa, farmers welcome legalization, saying it would bring badly needed jobs.

"Let them deal with it the way they deal with tobacco," said Mayez Shreif, referring to a state-run company that monopolizes tobacco purchases from farmers. He spoke one morning this week as he ate fruit and drank coffee in a garden near cannabis fields.

The 65-year-old Shreif has worked for decades at cannabis plantations in Yammoune. The area's dry weather, its elevation above sea level and its local springs come together to make some of the finest product in the world.

Residents have tried planting apples, tomatoes and potatoes, but most often lost money, he said. Growing potatoes costs 15 times as much as cannabis and earns far less. With cannabis, the farmer just puts seeds and water and it grows, he said.

In Yammoune, a Syrian who has worked for seven years in cannabis fields said his Lebanese boss pays him \$500 a month, seven times the average salary in Syria. He asked that his name not be used for fear of reprisals from authorities.

"Hashish keeps me employed for much of the year," he said.



In this Monday, July 23, 2018, photo, Mayez Shrief, 65, who has planted cannabis for decades checks a cannabis field as he speaks with The Associated Press in the village of Yammoune, 25 kilometers (about 15 miles) northwest of the town of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. In the fields of this quiet village surrounded by mountains, men and women work on removing dirt and dry leaves around cannabis plants from which many people in this eastern region make a living. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)



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