

# **Egypt Steps Up Effort to Snuff Out Smoking – The Wall Street Journal**

## **August 18, 2010**

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In a city where bumming a smoke from a stranger used to be as easy as asking for directions, Sami Amar no longer shares his cigarettes.

"It used to be at work or with friends, you would pull out your pack and pass them around," the 32-year-old fire-alarm technician says. But in the past few weeks, he has cut back from two packs a day of his favorite L&M brand to just one. "Now, all 20 cigarettes are for me."

Long one of the most tobacco-friendly countries in the world, Egypt has launched an ambitious, multipronged antismoking campaign. It combines drastic new taxes with plans to ban all indoor smoking, in phases, in Egypt's big cities.

Egypt is joining a long list of tobacco-infused countries that are clamping down on smoking. France and Italy moved to curb their smokers' habits years ago. Antismoking laws have also cleared the air in British pubs.

More recently, the trend is wafting across the Middle East. Earlier this year, Syria banned smoking in most public places, including parks, and outlawed advertising for tobacco products. Jordan recently banned cigarette-vending machines and billboards in the capital, Amman.

For Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country, the campaign is an especially tall order. The country is ranked one of the top 10 per capita tobacco consumers by the World Lung Foundation, a six-year-old organization affiliated with New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who has clamped down on smoking in that city during his time in office.

To a new Western visitor, Cairo can resemble an Islamic version of the hit television show "Mad Men"—a place where doctors, pharmacists and even some senior Ministry of Health officials commonly smoke on the job. The ministry estimates that 20% of adult Egyptians smoke, consuming about 80 billion cigarettes a year.

To combat the trend, on July 1, the government raised taxes on cigarettes to 40%—and to 100% for the molasses-soaked tobacco that fills the city's bubbling hookah pipes, a fixture of the city's restaurants and sidewalk cafés. And in the Mediterranean coastal city of Alexandria, authorities are about to ban smoking in all closed public spaces.

Critics question the authorities' resolve in actually enforcing the ban, and other Arab cities—including the more regulated city-state of Dubai— have had mixed success enforcing similar bans. Still, it is one of the most draconian antismoking statutes in the Arab world.

It is unlikely that the smoking measures will give rise to a black market in Egypt. Even with higher taxes, cigarettes and tobacco are cheaper in Egypt than they would be coming from overseas. Egypt's limited land borders also pose barriers to an underground market.

"The government wants people to regard smoking as undesirable and unacceptable," says Ehab Attia, head of the environmental health department at the Egyptian Ministry of Health. "The stage we want to reach is where the people themselves ban smoking and refuse to be around it."

Officials acknowledge enforcement will be tough. Smoking in all government buildings was banned in 2007, but most government offices are still smoke-filled warrens. Dr. Attia said the Alexandria Governorate and the Ministry of Justice are on board, and ministry officials expect better results.

"There's more focus and awareness in the government and in society in general about the dangers," he says.

Apart from the health risks, smoking here is a drag on income already strained by inflation and high joblessness. The World Lung Foundation estimates that the average smoker here spends more than 15% of monthly income on tobacco.

By pushing prices out of reach, authorities hope to force people to quit, and eventually save some cash. The new taxes have boosted the cost of Cleopatra, the cheapest local brand, to 75 cents a pack from about 50 cents. High-end Marlboro imports now cost nearly \$2, up from \$1.50.

Compared with prices in the U.S. and Europe, that is still extremely cheap. But it is a significant cost in a country where the average citizen makes less than \$500 a month. Ministry of Health officials say the increased tax revenue will be funneled into the national health-care system.

Ahmed Yassin, who sells chips, candy, soda and cigarettes from his roadside kiosk in the Giza district, home to Cairo's famous pyramids, said he has already noticed a change in buying habits. A Marlboro supply truck stops by three times per week. He used to restock each time. Now, he only needs to replenish his supply once a week.

Despite the loss of income, Mr. Yassin, a devout nonsmoker, applauds the new taxes.

"It's a good thing," he says. "My income will be there either way. If it's not cigarettes, it will be chips and sodas."

Emad Hamdy, an employee at a Toyota dealership, defiantly says he is keeping up his habit. But he knows not everyone will be able to shrug off the taxes.

"I'm still able to afford it. But someone smoking Cleopatra, that price change could hurt a lot," he said.

In Alexandria, which has a population of about four million, authorities say they are serious about a total indoor-smoking ban that takes effect in September. Violators will be subject to fine of about \$9, a princely sum there.

The indoor-smoking ban will eventually be expanded to other Egyptian cities, said Dr. Attia at the Ministry of Health, who added that he hopes to have it in place in every city within four years.

Back in Cairo, at the First Coffee Shop in Giza, customers puff contentedly on midday water pipes. Coffee Shop employee Nader Morsi says the café hasn't raised its prices because it is relying on its old stock of sticky molasses- and apple-flavored tobacco. But the regulars can expect to pay double in the future, and that might mean gut-wrenching decisions for some of his customers, he says.

"There are people," Mr. Morsi says, "who won't be able to sleep without their smoke."

**Source:** [The Wall Street Journal](#)

**Category:** [Legislation & Politics](#)

**Date:** [18 August 2010](#)