

## **Qadisiyah Smoking Ban Meets Opposition**

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Residents say officials should prioritise services rather than anti-smoking initiative.

A smoking ban in Qadisiyah province has been dismissed as trivial and unrealistic by locals who are now questioning politicians' priorities in an area that suffers a widespread lack of basic services.

The provincial council voted on July 1 to prohibit smoking in any government office or building on the grounds of protecting public health. The new sanction carries a fine of up to 25,000 dinar (21 US dollars) for violators.

"It's not right to have non-smokers exposed to deadly smoke from smokers," said Jabeer al-Jebori, head of the Qadisiyah council. "The resolution will help limit the spread of smoking in the province. Our goal is to have clean air inside government buildings to protect our employees' health."

Jebori added that designated smoking rooms will be set up in government buildings and that "poor people, orphans and [hospital] patients" will be given some leniency on fines.

"A special committee will be formed to take care of the fines for such people," Jebori said.

Critics of the ban feel that authorities in the central Iraqi province have more pressing matters to attend to than enforcing such a ban.

They point to the shortage of electricity, clean water, schools and hospitals for the estimated 1.1 million residents of Qadisiyah province.

"This resolution is propaganda by the local government," said Aeid Ibrahim Hasa, 40, a government employee and non-smoker.

"It doesn't promote the overall public interest; our community is full of smokers. I'm not bothered when my colleagues smoke, so what is the reason for this kind of decision?"

"If the provincial council wanted to help people, it would be better to educate young people before they start smoking and help smokers to quit the habit."

Others say the ban will be nearly impossible to enforce given the popularity of smoking among local men. The World Health Organisation estimated in 2006 that more than 32 per cent of Iraqi men are smokers.

"My boss smokes all the time in his office, and I don't think he will leave his room to have a cigarette because he is the boss. As a result, the people who work for him won't obey the order either. This resolution is bound to fail," said Marzuq Kamil, 50, a provincial government worker.

Even so, some locals and health workers support the ban. Ahlam Aqeel, a 32-year-old housewife, said government offices are sometimes choked with cigarette smoke and the new ban will improve the atmosphere.

"Smoking is one of the main causes of cancer, and it affects non-smokers as well," Hadi al-Baqir, a member of Al-Salam al-Akhdar (Green Peace), a Baghdad-based health and environmental NGO.

"In Iraq, our environment is already so polluted. We don't need to increase the risk by smoking. Bans like these can help, but only if they are implemented seriously."

Council leader Jebori sees the ban as a positive step, noting that anti-smoking initiatives are "a trend in modern nations".

Last year, the Iraqi cabinet proposed a sweeping anti-smoking law that outlawed smoking in public places as well as tobacco advertising. After criticism similar to the sentiments in Qadisiyah province, the draft law was stalled in parliament.

"This ban is shameful for our provincial officials," said Abu Ali, 48, a bus driver in Diwaniya. "They have abandoned our daily needs to discuss smoking. Have they solved any of our problems? Do we have electricity? Is our water clean and clear?"

"When all of that gets done, then it will be the right time to discuss a smoking ban."

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