

Assaf: Beware the dangers of hookah

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BY [AREF ASSAF](#)

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SMOKING hookah has become a [Paterson](#) pastime. Hookah bars are the new hotspots in town. I would venture to say there are more hookah bars than any other type of business in "Little Arabia," the Middle Eastern enclave stretching along South Main Street in [Paterson](#) and [Clifton](#). The attraction can be partly explained because of hookah's novelty and partly because some of the bars permit underage smoking.

In a front page article, The Record and Herald News graphically highlighted the legal and social implications of these hookah lounges. The piece also alludes to serious criminal infractions and potential health concerns. The unprecedented growth of these bars is sadly defining the Middle Eastern community in [Paterson](#) and enabling further negative criticism of Arab culture. This is even though there is nothing Arab about hookah; it's an Indian invention and the majority of Arabs disapprove of its practice.

The 2006 NJ Smoke Free Act provides exemptions for outdoor smoking when certain conditions are present and additional permits are obtained from the local health department. Such exceptions were often based on linking hookah to the cultural heritage of the community.

But hookah smoking, if left unhindered, promises to spiral uncontrollably, consuming valuable police manpower, town resources and ultimately the peace of the surrounding neighborhoods. We all know that some unscrupulous owners look the other way as far as age requirements and smoking locations are concerned. We also know that some smokers add illegal or dangerous substances to the tobacco to enhance the experience.

The threat becomes more pronounced when underage smokers are permitted to smoke because of the falsehoods concerning its harmless effects.

According to a 2005 study by the World Health Organization, "The water pipe smoker may inhale as much smoke during one session as a cigarette smoker would inhale consuming 100 or more cigarettes."

The FDA clearly states that hookah tobacco is not safe. Hookah tobacco, the vast majority of which is imported, is either poorly labeled or has its contents unspecified. New Jersey is also losing the 30 percent tobacco tax to which it is entitled.

Most alarming are the rumors that certain permits are issued even though requirements have not been met. I visited several lounges and with my untrained eye I could document many visible violations related to ventilation, fire exits and true and complete separation between the outdoor area where smoking is permitted and the dining area where no smoking is allowed.

Having patronized the food section of these establishments, I often wondered how the health department would have allowed dangerous electrical wiring and unsanitary conditions to exist for so long in the smoking areas.

Over the past two decades, South [Paterson](#), with its thriving and unique Middle Eastern shops and restaurants, has become a gateway for Arabs and Muslims from the tri-state area. The city of [Paterson](#), working with community and business leaders, should steer the area toward further expansion.

We salute the efforts of [Paterson](#) Councilman Andre Sayegh, who is seeking to curtail the spread of these establishments and to ensure the full enforcement of the law. I urge the community to support Sayegh's efforts. Let's support businesses that provide tangible benefits to society.

I love my freedom, lest anyone have doubt. Adult smokers should be free to smoke hookah. My objection to hookah is not about people making personal choices but about the societal impact of such choices. True, the smoker may get very sick or even face death. But the cumulative cost to society in terms of medical costs and lost productivity is enormous. And when we add clear violations of established laws and restrictions, all of us are responsible to devise an appropriate policy.

Personally, as a past smoker of hookah, who ended up with quintuple bypass surgery, I think smoking — all smoking — should be banned. As an American of Arab descent, hookah smoking is something I can live without.

Aref Assaf is president of American-Arab Forum, a [Paterson](#)-based think tank specializing in Arab and Muslim affairs.

http://www.northjersey.com/news/opinions/227486751_Assaf_Beware_the_dangers_of_hookah.html?page=all