*Published:* January 1, 2000
*Last Updated:* December 21, 2016

# SMOKING IN IRAN

**SMOKING IN IRAN**. Cigarettes were first introduced to Iran in the 1860s, most likely by Russian and Turkish soldiers and merchants stationed in the country. Early adopters of cigarettes were the wealthy, who sought to emulate the affectations of European society, and who had regular interactions with the European expatriate community in Iran's northern cities (Matthee, p. 65). Preference for cigarettes quickly gained a foothold in Iran. In 1869, Tabriz, a center of trade open to both Turkish and Russian influence, was home to an estimated 350 cigarette sellers (Jawādi, p. 227, apud Floor, p. 77). By 1880, the prevalence of cigarette smokers had risen sufficiently both to induce domestic cultivation of cigarette tobacco and to encourage systematic importation of finished foreign cigarettes. Domestic cultivation of cigarette tobacco (*tutun-e sigār*) was initiated in the northern provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran in 1876 (see TOBACCO). An account dating to around 1880 from Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana (I, pp. 262-63, apud Floor, p. 77) notes the importation of ten bales (*langa*) of foreign cigarettes. Iran began producing finished cigarettes shortly thereafter, in order to meet growing domestic demand. Russian investors established a series of manufacturing facilities in Rasht by 1890. According to the accounts of the British consul in Gilan, the output of these facilities were cigarettes "too hot and coarse for European tastes," but "well made and cheap enough," such that "they may find favour among the natives." Given the rise in domestic manufacturing of cigarettes, domestic production of tobacco increased in-step. In 1890, roughly 30,000 *batmans* (99 tons) of domestic tobacco crop were allocated for cigarette production, which equates to roughly one percent of total yield (Floor, p. 57).

According to statistical reviews carried out in 1890, pursuant to the Tobacco Régie (granting of monopoly over production, sale, and export of tobacco to a foreigner; see CONCESSIONS), there were approximately 15,000 regular cigarette smokers in Iran (Floor, p. 57), a figure derived from the production levels of cigarette tobacco, assuming an annual consumption of two *batman*s per smoker (this figure is likely a major underestimation). Over the next decade, with a cheap, quality supply emerging, cigarettes rapidly grew in popularity. In the northern provinces, where most of Iran's population and trade centers were located, cigarettes emerged as the dominant form of tobacco consumption before the turn of the 20th century. By 1906, manufacturing centers had spread beyond Rasht to Mashad, Tabriz, and Tehran, while Gilan remained the primary source of domestic tobacco crop. Domestic production was augmented with continued importation of Russian cigarettes (Floor, pp. 78-79).

By the 1920s, cigarette smoking emerged as the dominant form of tobacco consumption. Practical considerations underpinned this shift. The absolute portability and availability of cigarettes enabled individuals to satisfy their cravings for nicotine outside of the settings required for use of nargileh (*ḡalyān*). Iranians began smoking throughout the day, which in turn intensified their habits, increasing demand for the cigarette form of tobacco even further. Nearly all tobacco gown in Iran was now of the kind required for the production of cigarettes. From this period on, a historical analysis of cigarettes begins to lose traction. Cigarette use had become run-of-the-mill and was no longer novel enough to entice scholars to take notice of the spreading addiction. The medical community was also uninterested, as the negative health consequences associated with cigarettes were yet to be discovered. The subsequent period saw immense growth in the cultivation of cigarette tobacco and the domestic production of cigarettes. Figures from 1940 note the annual yield of tobacco crop reached approximately 13,500 tons, cultivated from 30,000 acres (see DOḴĀNĪYĀT). This represents a 150-fold increase in domestic production of cigarette tobacco in exactly 50 years. In the same year, Iran began producing 12 million cigarettes each day. In 1986, about 30 billion cigarettes were sold in Iran, of which 60 percent, or roughly 18 billion, were produced domestically. This represents an additional 418 percent increase in output in just 46 years. Around this time, the per annum growth rate of production hovered at around 7 percent.

The four-fold increase in cigarette sales is due to a series of major shifts in the composition of the cigarette market in Iran that traces back to Iran's modernization in the decades following World War II. Under these conditions, the engagement and influence of the world's major tobacco multinational companies increased significantly, resulting in new methods of production, distribution, and marketing. These developments facilitated an explosion in the number of smokers among the Iranian population, along with the derivative economic impact of their addiction. The new direct involvement of the world's tobacco powerhouses replaced the practice of small-scale importation of foreign brands by individuals operating out of the port of Dubai in the 1970s (Joosens). New methods arose to meet growing Iranian demand, and competition for the Iranian market intensified.

Despite structural changes, the underlying cultural motivations behind the uptake of smoking in Iran have remained fundamentally unchanged from the time of the first importation of cigarettes into Iran. The perceived glamour of smoking has been the tireless engine of addiction in Iran for over a century. The early adopters of cigarettes in the late 19th century were affluent Iranians who wished to project a modern, westernized image. Today, we see the same motivations driving experimentation with cigarettes among Iran's youth. Consider the testimony of the British Consul of Gilan Province, who wrote at the turn of the 19th century that "the cigarette is certainly driving the kalian out of favor. The latter nowadays is only to be seen in the houses of Persians of the old type, Moollahs, and the peasants. In the streets, on the road when traveling, and in the house, one constantly sees a modem Persian making his cigarette or else using a made one" (*Diplomatic and Consular Reports*, 1953, apud Floor, pp. 77-78). A strong, present-day corollary is seen in a 2007 study published in the *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry*. Researchers from Kerman University looked to the motivations of Iranian high-school students who had taken up the habit of smoking. Youth cited a belief that "smoking is in fashion" as the primary reason for their experimentation and continued usage (Ziaaddini, Meymandi, and Zarezadeh, pp. 42-43, and tables 1-2).

Cognizant of these characteristics of the Iranian market, and experienced in the presentation of cigarettes as the fashionable token of the modern man, American and British tobacco companies saw a vital and lucrative market in Iran. In the 1980s, the R. J Reynolds Corporation leveraged its flagship Winston brand to establish a market-leading presence in the Iranian market. The price differential between domestically produced cigarettes and their foreign equivalents was often a major disincentive to uptake by the Iranian public, for whom cigarettes had historically been a cheap commodity. In order to capitalize effectively on the intrinsic appeal of a foreign brand cigarette vis-à-vis fashion, it was necessary to enter the market at a sufficiently low price point. To keep costs low, the company took to smuggling quantities of its own products into Iran, thus avoiding cost-additive tariffs levied by a protectionist Iranian government. An internal Phillip Morris document considers the desirability of smuggling in this light: "Today's taxation of imported cigarettes [in Iran] is dominated by a specific duty of $7.70 per thousand and a Commercial Duty of $2.60 per thousand, which together account for over 90% of the tax burden … While the specific duty structure is favourable, we have demonstrated to the Iranian monopoly that the excessively high level of duty encourages smuggling, estimated at one third of the market and that the optimum duty level is lower" (World Health Organization, 2001, p. 11). In light of such economic pressures, major tobacco multinationals aided and abetted the smuggling of their products as a part of undisclosed and rather cunning corporate strategy.

Using various methods of smuggling, R. J. Reynolds (RJR) had captured 50 percent of the Iranian market by 1994, amounting to 16.4 billion units sold annually. The relatively low-cost access to a foreign brand instantly attracted Iranian smokers. RJR's explosive growth attracted the interest of other international tobacco consortiums. Soon British American Tobacco (BAT) and Phillips Morris International had established their own smuggling routes in order to compete in what the BAT New Business Development Group characterized as a "first priority" market (World Health Organization, 2001, pp. 4-6).

Initially, cigarettes were smuggled by a variety of routes in order to avoid getting caught by customs officials. A BAT review of the smuggling routes of its competitors noted that "All imported product enters the market via Dubai to the southern ports of Iran or through Turkey ex Cyprus. From there it is transported by bus or truck to large secure warehouses on the outskirts of major cities. As this activity is considered smuggling little is known of distribution thereafter, however, all brands, notably Winston and Marlboro, are clearly visible at point of sale" (World Health Organization, 2001, pp. 7-9). Only recently has the Iranian government eased importation restrictions in order to stem smuggling and recoup some revenues. But the effect of the smuggling binge is engrained.

Iranians today favor the taste and reputability of foreign brands, of which there are twenty-nine in distribution, including Kent, Pall-Mall, Three Stars, Pine, and Magna. Marlboro is the most popular international brand of the moment (2011). While British American Tobacco still operates in Iran, R. J. Reynolds has scaled back, with Japan Tobacco Company and other players filling the void left by it. The state-owned Iranian Tobacco Company (Šerkat-e Doḵāniāt-e Irān), which controls all domestically manufactured product, holds a 38 percent market share, leaving foreign tobacco brands with a healthy 62 percent share—a reversal of the market composition in the late 1980s. The principle brands of the Iranian Tobacco Company are Bahman, Tir, Farvardin, Homā, Zar, Ošnu, Mehr, and 98. The packaging of these brands ranges from traditional, quite simple packaging, typified by the exclusive use of Persian, low graphic quality, and unadorned cartons, to imitations of international brands, which present the brand in English, with high quality graphics, and adorned cartons. Most notably, the Mehr brand has adopted a red and white reproduction of the design of Marlboro, which is so specific as to use the same typeface. Beyond imitations, some foreign brands are reproduced in Iran under license, such as Winston International, which is among the most popular of the domestic brands.

Driving the expansion of the marketplace, Iranians are also simply smoking at much higher levels. The sale of cigarettes in Iran reached 45 billion units in 2003, and continued to grow at a rate of 1 percent each year, with some estimates suggesting that the annual unit sales reached 50 billion in 2010 (Joossens). This corresponds to an estimated smoking prevalence of between 10.6 percent and 24 percent. Men tend to smoke at significantly higher rates than women, but the greatest growth in uptake can be seen in the female population (Mosavi-Jarrahi et al., pp. 66-69). The rates of prevalence are roughly equivalent in urban and rural settings, 11.8 percent and 11.9 percent respectively by one estimate (Massarat and Tahaghoghi-Mehrizi, p. 79, Table 2). While estimates may vary, there is academic consensus that prevalence is increasing.

The growth in prevalence is underpinned by demographic trends. Considering the advent of smoking as a popular phenomenon in Iran, which dates back to the 1920s, one may conclude that roughly three generations have since matured. Looking to comparative rates of experimentation among these generations, we see a dominant historical trend. A 2004 study from the Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences examined the smoking habits of a cross section of the Iranian population across various age groups. Their findings indicate that recent generations of Iranians are experimenting with cigarettes more frequently and at younger ages. The birth cohort born around 1930 saw rates of experimentation of around 33 percent for men, and 21 percent for women. For those born around 1960, those rates rose to 39 percent for men, and 24 percent for women. By the time those born around 1975 had reached twenty years of age, the rates of experimentation reached 49 percent for men, and 40 percent for women (Mosavi-Jarrahi et al., pp. 66-69). In a country where two-thirds of the population is below the age of thirty, and where recent data shows that 80.6 percent of current smokers had their first experiment before the age of fifteen, such data foretells a further growth in the prevalence of smokers (Ziaaddini, Meymandi, and Zarezadeh, p. 42).

This sustained growth is perpetuated by both the affordability of cigarettes and a general lack of awareness as to the health effects of smoking. A 2006 report from the Iranian National Research Institute of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease assessed the daily cost of smoking by looking at a cross section of the population in Tehran. They determined a minimum daily expenditure of 100 rials, a maximum of 63,000 rials, and an average daily expenditure of 4,680 rials, or USD 0.48 by the concurrent exchange rate. Although the average seems like a low figure, it costs a mere USD 0.46 to buy a pack of the local brand, and USD 0.96 dollars to buy a pack of Marlboros or the equivalent international brand (Guindon, Tobin, and Yach, p. 37). The average male smoker consumes roughly ten cigarettes each day, and the average female smoker about six (Kazemi, p. 37). Trends indicate that cigarettes are getting substantially cheaper: over the past decade the local and international brands have seen price reductions of 9 percent and 9.06 percent, respectively (Guindon, Tobin, and Yach, p. 37). Low prices make cigarettes more available and promote consumption, greatly increasing the overall social cost of addiction.

A 2002 government estimate placed the smoking-related mortality at 50,000 deaths per year, with a concurrent forecast suggesting a mortality rate as high as 200,000 a year within ten years (Poureslami, p. 95). Ultimately, there is a greater institutional and cultural awareness about the dangers of smoking, though Iran still lags much of the world in both regards. Research suggests that 82 percent of smokers have attempted to quit, but only 44.7 percent of men and 26.3 percent of women have a stated desire to quit at the time of questioning. The average number of quitting attempts is estimated at roughly five attempts for male smokers, and roughly three attempts for female smokers (Ziaaddini, Meymandi, and Zarezadeh, p. 44). Best-practice methods of counseling and pharmacological aid to promote smoking cessation are not as of yet available in Iran, which renders attempts at quitting difficult to initiate and sustain.

In light of the intensification of the public health crisis, the Iranian government has taken steps to mitigate the increasing prevalence of smoking. In 2007 the Iranian parliament ratified the Iranian Comprehensive National Tobacco Control Law, which went into effect in the same year, establishing smoking bans in hotels, restaurants, teahouses, and other public buildings. Such bans are important, when one considers that about 60 percent of Iranian youth are first introduced to smoking in public areas (Ziaaddini, Meymandi, and Zarezadeh, p. 44). A 2008 revision of the law introduced requirements for warning labels that cover "50 percent of both the front and back of all cigarette packages and incorporate graphic, full-color images of diseases caused by smoking" (Figure 1, Figure 2). In addition, comprehensive prohibitions on the advertising of tobacco products, and on the use of terms such as "mild" and "light" to describe tobacco products, established Iran's first controls on the direct and indirect advertising of tobacco products. The combination of these reforms has brought Iran's regulatory practices in line with the guidelines of the WHO Framework Convention of Tobacco Control, ensuring that smokers are warned of the dangers of their habit (World Health Organization, 2009, p. 57).

There still remain significant challenges to a true curtailing of addiction. Iran has yet to stem the tide of cigarette smuggling. The proportion of illicit cigarettes in the Iranian market is estimated to be between 14 and 22.5 percent. A well-designed 2009 study by researchers at Iran's Tobacco Control and Prevention Research center found that 20.9 percent of all cigarettes on the market were illicit. In years when domestic supply has faltered, that figure has risen as high as 74 percent (Heydari et al., p. 381). The Iranian government levies a 7 percent import duty and a 5.13 percent *ad valorem* tax on cigarettes that are legally offered for sale. When value-added tax is included, the total tax share as a percentage of the retail price is 19.16 percent, a mere fraction of the international standards that hover closer to 70 percent of retail price (World Health Organization, 2009, p. 78). While the 2007 Tobacco Control Law established the framework for tax increases, the market is yet to see a fundamentally new tax structure materialize. Without the ability to extract robust revenues from the sale of tobacco products Iran will remain unable to fund successful anti-tobacco campaigns, nor can it raise the costs to the smoker who maintains his/her addiction.

Since the 1960s when cigarettes were introduced into Iran, Iranians have experimented with it at an ever younger age and with greater frequency. Little suggests the trend is set to change. Isolating the problem as a modern phenomenon does a disservice, for while the realization of smoking public health consequences may have only materialized in recent years, the drive to smoke is a matter of historical significance and a product of tragic intransigence.

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