

Tobacco industry activities in the Eastern  
Mediterranean Region

**Tactics and plans to undermine  
tobacco control**



World Health Organization  
Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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Tactics and plans to undermine tobacco control  
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Infiltrating parliament...

Lobbying the king's entourage in Morocco...

Monitoring and attempting to influence anti-tobacco activities...

Establishing strong contacts with officials and influential figures...

Manipulating the media and advertising associations...

Conducting regular surveys...

These are some of the tactics the tobacco industry has used to undermine tobacco control efforts in Egypt and North Africa.

One of the ongoing objectives in the documents of the tobacco company Philip Morris (PM), reiterated frequently, is to “minimize the adverse effects of anti-smoking activity.” The strategy outlined in the company’s 1981 5-year plan for Egypt was to “carefully monitor all developments on this issue and cooperate with the rest of the industry to determine effective counter action. Public relations activities will be increased.”

## **Monitoring**

The industry does not hesitate to draw a link between restrictions on tobacco marketing and its impact (in their view) on the media. A clear example of this is a 1994 PM letter to the Minister of Industry of Egypt attempting to pre-empt the bill to ban all forms of tobacco advertising. If this happens, it said, “a significant number of Egyptian daily, weekly, and monthly publications will face bleak futures, and may even be forced to close if they are deprived of such revenues. Those that do survive will face extremely tight budgets. The prospects for the continuation of a vibrant press in Egypt will vanish without substantial government subsidies to compensate for the loss of tobacco advertising revenue.”

In Egypt, the industry assumed that since “approximately 90% of the media available is owned by the public sector”, the then draft anti-smoking law would not be implemented fully, as the media requires “maximum support in advertising funds to survive and compensate for operating losses.”

According to the PM 5-year plan for 1995–1999, the company expected to generate 75% of its volume outside North America in 1997. Of this, 9% was projected to be generated from Turkey, the Middle East and Africa, representing an increase since 1991, when this region’s volume was just 6%.

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**Note:** The references for all quotations in this summary publication can be found in *The tobacco industry’s tactics and plans to undermine tobacco control efforts in Egypt and North Africa*, Cairo, Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 2003, on which it is based.

The Egyptian market is extremely attractive, states a 1981 PM market research report, for the following reasons:

- The market is virtually 100% blended.
- Consumption is projected to grow at 7% to a level of 51 billion by 1986 (and 73 billion by 1991).
- Volume growth will come largely from brands that are already established on the market, namely Marlboro and Merit.
- With no local leaf growing, quality, taste characteristics and profit margins are guaranteed.
- There is presently no solidly entrenched international competition that could hinder PM's growth potential.

In Egypt, as in some other Middle Eastern countries, the government continues to be a mega producer of cigarettes. Egypt's state monopoly, the Eastern Tobacco Company (ETC), is the largest manufacturer in the Middle East, producing 0.7% of the world's total cigarette output.

Despite the national efforts to enact strong anti-smoking legislation, a contradiction exists in the government's attitude to cigarette consumption. Full page newspaper advertisements featuring national officials and top ETC management are occasionally featured in the press, accompanied by staggering ETC revenue figures highlighting its role in the Egyptian economy.

This situation creates a conflict of interest that inspires questions regarding the government's commitment to a stringent, long-term anti-smoking campaign.

It is not surprising that all international tobacco companies, especially PM, which enjoys the second largest market share in the region after the national monopolies, are keen to maintain good relations with these state monopolies. Moreover, these national monopolies are the best allies for international tobacco companies. Ideal as these alliances seem, given the common goals of both local and international tobacco companies, they constitute an obstacle for the latter's ambitions for expansion in these countries.

The tobacco industry formed the Middle East Working Group (MEWG), which later became the Middle East Tobacco Association (META), "to promote and defend" the companies' interests, carefully monitoring and seeking to undermine the work of public health officials in the Middle East.

They enlisted prominent political figures, including a Member of Parliament in Egypt, a former Assistant Secretary General of the Arab League and an Undersecretary for Health in Kuwait.

The Egyptian Member of Parliament assured MEWG that no draft law related to industry and trade could pass parliament without his parliamentary committee's input. Rothman

provided him with a scientific paper to use while arguing in the tobacco industry's favour.

When laws restricting tobacco advertising and mandating health warnings eventually passed, the tobacco companies used their representatives—powerful local businessmen—to help get “postponement ... of the implementation.”

It was also suggested that the MEWG coordinator go out and try to see what can be done to “improve the situation.”

The picture that emerges is of a very powerful and influential international tobacco industry operating with might in countries where health-related laws are viewed, and in many cases applied, lightly.

We see a highly active network of tobacco industry employees and their “friends” maintaining constant vigilance in a way that sharply contrasts with the lax attitude shown by the national officials and decision makers towards the development of anti-smoking legislation and towards fighting tobacco consumption.

The tobacco industry was secure that “it would not be the first time in Egypt that the implementation of a law is postponed for a long time, or only partially implemented.”

PM, for one, did not seem too threatened; according to its own documents, “smoking and health is not an issue with the general population and the medical profession does not consider it a priority; it is more a popular concern with local politicians.”

### **The tobacco industry's power politics**

Faced with more advertising bans, the tobacco industry set out to “defeat the proposed ban”, or “as a fall-back, to ensure that advertising freedoms ceded are kept to a minimum.”

In terms of influencing officials and key decision makers, the action plan suggested approaching figures, such as the Minister of Information, “whose intervention against the proposed bill will be sought.”

Other efforts were made to reach the Ministers of Health and of Industry, “with a view to get technical discussions regarding the implementation going and thereby also achieving a delay.”

The industry was prepared to take its lobbying all the way to the ministerial level, tax authorities, and even the International Monetary Fund in Washington.

The tobacco industry denied that there was evidence that linked advertising to the negative ramifications of smoking. It claimed to only target adults. It boasted of

advertising's importance to the economy, and promised to regulate itself. It offered to launch anti-smoking campaigns for youth.

All of these statements can be viewed with some cynicism, since the tobacco industry was simultaneously conducting surveys and running promotional campaigns clearly aimed at exploring a younger market.

The tobacco industry also attempted to slant scientific conferences on smoking-related issues in its favour by planting and promoting speakers sympathetic to its cause.

Careful monitoring of the media was simultaneously in place when famous Egyptian columnist Salah Montasser, in an article of 29 November 1992, accused US tobacco companies of adding "some kind of drug to cigarettes marketed in the third world that causes smokers to become addicted to cigarettes", PM's Mark Durst asked ETC chairman Mohamed Sadek to "inform the writer of the article, the editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahram*, as well as the relevant authorities, that none of that is true."

After years of unsuccessful attempts to ban tobacco advertising completely, the Egyptian parliament finally adopted Law 85, which amends and complements tobacco control Law 52 of 1981 and bans all kinds of tobacco advertising.

### **What are the tobacco industry documents?**

The 1998 settlement of tobacco litigation in the American State of Minnesota resulted in over 40 million pages of internal tobacco industry documents becoming available.

The major cigarette companies included are Philip Morris (PM), RJ Reynolds (RJR) and British American Tobacco (BAT).

While there are omissions from the collections, and access to the documents of some companies is problematic, these collections do form a unique opportunity to look at the internal workings of a tobacco company.

For the most part the documents end in 1995, and the bulk of the collection dates from the mid-1970s through the mid-1990s. The materials presented in this report are drawn exclusively from these document collections.

For more information, please consult *The tobacco industry documents: What they are, what they tell us, and how to search them* (available at <http://www.emro.who.int/tfi/TobaccoIndustry-English.pdf>).