



Review of tobacco industry activities in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

An introduction



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Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean



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Design by Punto Grafico

Printing by

Print Right for Advertising

Document WHO-EM/TFI/049/05.08/1000

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Acknowledgements

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean would like to thank the following authors who were responsible for writing the tobacco enquiries in their original form, from 2001 to 2003: Ross Hammond (*Voice of truth*), Luk Joossens (*The cigarette “transit” road to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq: Illicit tobacco trade in the Middle East*) and Amira Howeidy (*The Tobacco industry’s tactics and plans to undermine control efforts in Egypt and North Africa*).

Introduction

For many years, the tobacco industry has vigorously targeted the Middle East in an effort to increase its market share. Its tactics and plans to undermine tobacco control efforts in the region have been widely documented by WHO and its partners, and have also been exposed following the release of the ‘tobacco industry documents’.

These documents form a huge collection of once secret papers from the offices of nine leading cigarette makers that became available to the public for the first time in 1998. The documents were released into the public domain after major cigarette manufacturers settled a series of lawsuits filed by four states in the United States. They provide a window into how these manufacturers targeted the public in unscrupulous ways and concealed vital information about their dangerous products.

The picture that emerges from the tobacco industry documents shows a powerful and influential industry operating with might in the Middle East, where public awareness of health-related issues is often low. We see a highly active and vigilant network of tobacco industry employees and their ‘friends’, contrasting sharply with the laxity demonstrated by the officials and decision-makers in these countries in the development and application of anti-smoking legislation, or in fighting tobacco consumption.

From the Islamic Republic of Iran to North Africa, and including countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the documents collected in this set show a relentless drive by the international cigarette manufactures to increase market share by duping the general public, influencing decision-makers at the highest level, and nurturing and exploiting illegal cigarette smuggling cartels across the Middle East.

It has long been suspected that tobacco manufacturers facilitated the release of cigarettes to smuggling operations as a way of undermining government attempts both to collect revenue and reduce smoking with high taxes. While the major cigarette manufacturers have continued to deny allegations of widespread complicity in smuggling, their behaviour in the courtroom has indicated otherwise. In 2004, Philip Morris moved to end a longstanding and bitter lawsuit with the European Commission over accusations it colluded in a massive tobacco-smuggling racket for many years. Under the settlement, the company agreed to pay out a record US\$ 1 billion—the biggest sum the European Union has ever extracted from a single company. The money will be spent towards anti-smuggling efforts.

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has been working for many years with national, regional and international partners to address tobacco health hazards and to support national tobacco control measures. Yet major success in reducing the rates of morbidity and mortality attributed to tobacco use has remained elusive. This delay is the result of many factors, among the most important of which are the activities of the tobacco industry, activities which, until the release of the tobacco industry documents, had long been denied by the industry itself.

These collected documents present compelling arguments and evidence that the unethical behaviour of the tobacco industry has extended to all levels of society across the Region. Through their offices in the Middle East, tobacco companies have explored many routes to stop governments from adopting effective tobacco control policies. They also monitored closely all activities undertaken by the WHO Regional Office, and sought to oppose consensus-building agreements regarding tobacco control at the regional level.

The conclusions outlined also represent a real challenge for public health. If health professionals and decision-makers are to protect this region from the health threat caused by tobacco use, they must confront the tobacco industry with renewed vigour. They must embrace an alternative to the 10 million deaths that are projected to occur from tobacco-related illnesses in the year 2030 – 70% of which will take place in developing countries alone – and must implement the necessary steps to save populations in the region from such a fate.

Now, more than ever, it is a matter of survival. Protecting the health of future generations cannot be the responsibility of any party other than the legitimate authorities of each nation. Parties whose interests are detrimental to public health should not be allowed to influence it.

The tobacco industry and Islam (excerpted from *Voice of truth*)

Work to develop a system by which Philip Morris can measure trends on the issue of Smoking and Islam. Identify Islamic religious leader who oppose interpretations of the Quran which would ban the use of tobacco and encourage support for these leaders.

-- Philip Morris, 1987

The tobacco industry has always been worried by the influence of Islam in the Middle East, which they feared will be used by health authorities and religious activists to discourage smoking in the region and encourage strict government regulation of industry activities. A 1984 Brown & Williamson (B&W) trip report from Saudi Arabia, for example, states that “The pressure upon smoking is continuous, with Friday sermons being delivered in the mosques stating that smoking is *haram* (outlawed by Islam)”. The author was confident however that “this is only rhetoric and no action will be taken. The rationale for this is that smoking is not as clearly *haram* as alcohol, pork, etc. and will not therefore be banned”.¹ Nevertheless, the industry continued to monitor publications and speeches to ensure that a stricter interpretation of what constituted *haram* did not start to gain currency.²

A draft 1987 Philip Morris (PM) Corporate Affairs Plan meanwhile called for “better argumentation” on the “major issue” of smoking and Islam. One of the company’s strategies was to “work to develop a system by which PM can measure trends on the issue of Smoking and Islam. Identify Islamic religious leaders who oppose interpretations of the Quran which would ban the use of tobacco and encourage support for these leaders”.³ Keen to burnish its image with religious leaders, the company publicized its charitable donations to Islamic institutions, as in 1989 when it obtained “extensive coverage in GCC media for Philip Morris’ corporate contribution to the House of Quran, an Islamic cultural institution in Bahrain”.⁴ The company’s religious sensitivities only went so far, however. A 1991 memo from PM’s Bisharah Baroudi to META Secretary Robin Allen regarding the draft voluntary code for the United Arab Emirates stated that “Philip Morris would prefer to maintain the right to hold special promotions during Ramadan” and proposed instead that companies “give up cinema advertising during the Holy month”.⁵

B&W took this a step further, when, in 1995, they prepared a “creative brief” for an advertising campaign during Ramadan to promote their light brands. They hoped that, instead of quitting during Ramadan, smokers in the Middle East would instead switch to light cigarettes. Having abstained from smoking during daylight hours, the company reasoned,

would make the lower dose of nicotine in a light cigarette more palatable. The advertising campaign would focus on smokers' desire during Ramadan to "cleanse the body" and would take advantage of the fact that other companies reduced their tobacco advertising during this period.

Lights Ramadan creative brief

The Holy Month of Ramadan is a time of fasting, in order to practice self restraint and cleanse the body. It is therefore a time when Muslims try to live a healthier life and it is believed that many people may try to give up smoking.

Smoking during daylight hours is banned until the Iftaar canon goes off around 6:30pm. Therefore smokers will not have had a cigarette for around 14 hours.

This being the case it is reasonable to assume that after such a period of abstinence the tar/nicotine levels of a Lights/U.L.T. brand may be more acceptable to consumers than at normal times. This coupled with a desire to lead a healthier life may provide an opportunity to get smokers to switch.

In addition, during Ramadan the level of support/activity for competitive brands are significantly reduced (both in advertising and at point of sale) allowing us to be more prominent with lesser funds. N.B. As Ramadan is the *Holy Month* it is very important that we are careful not to offend prospective consumers, the trade and importantly the religious authorities.

Finally, when looking at options, we must consider how this can be linked to the light shadow concept. Indeed one option might be to simply tweak the existing creative to allude to Ramadan as being the ideal time to switch to a Lights/U.L.T. brand.

Communication objectives (ATL/BTL):

To build awareness of the Lights category.

To build brand varieties of the Lights category as being the logical and sensible choice.

Role for communications:

Convince full flavour smokers that now (Ramadan) is the ideal time to switch to a U.L.T. brand.

Target audience:

All full flavour cigarette smokers (Arab).

Proposition:

Now (during Ramadan) is the time to switch to Lights.

Support:

Full range of U.K./U.S. Lights brands, i.e. tastes, flavours, price and image.

Creative considerations:

Must enhance existing 'Light Shadow' creative concept.

Proposition:

Now (during Ramadan) is the time to switch to Lights.

Support:

Full range of U.K./U.S. Lights brands, i.e. tastes, flavours, price and image.

Creative considerations:

Must enhance existing 'Light Shadow' creative concept.

Timing:

Immediate

Geography:

All GCC. Therefore must be able to run unbranded in Saudi, i.e. no brand names, nor mention of tar, nicotine, cigarettes etc

References

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- ⁵ Facsimile Transmission UAE Draft Voluntary Code of Cigarette Advertising,” (memo from Baroudi to Allen), 14 July 1991, PM 2501173306-3308



