

The Tobacco Industry Influence in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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The documentary evidence of tobacco industry collusion in the Middle East begins in the late 1970s, when multinational tobacco companies met regularly to discuss pending regulations and to plot joint strategy. The Middle East Working Group (MEWG), which later became the Middle East Tobacco Association (META), comprised all of the major tobacco multinational operating in the Middle East, and was formed in order to “promote and defend” the interests of these companies in the region. These companies carefully monitored and sought to undermine their opponents in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, including the Arab Gulf Health Ministers’ Conference, the World Health Organization and national tobacco control coalitions.

- By the mid-1980s, the companies had set up “a major network of information sources and resources through which to lobby the appropriate officials” in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).
- The tobacco industry documents show that the companies enlisted prominent political figures in Middle East to provide information and lobby for them.
- The tobacco industry spent a great deal of time in the Eastern Mediterranean Region cultivating the media, which they viewed as indispensable to their ability to communicate to both policymakers and the public.
- In country after country, the companies engaged in concerted campaigns to defeat ad ban proposals or water them down. This often involved the use of third parties to lobby policymakers, including the International Advertisers’ Association, distributors and friendly media owners.
- Throughout the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the tobacco industry fought government attempts to restrict smoking in public places through covert lobbying, public relations campaigns, issuing “pseudo-scientific” studies on the topic, planting stories in the media, organizing briefings for journalists, infiltrating scientific meetings and other measures to ensure the continued “social acceptability” of smoking.
- The tobacco industry also vigorously fought GCC government efforts to regulate the manufacture of tobacco products, including attempts to mandate lower tar and nicotine levels, controls and restriction on certain cigarette additives, and stronger health warning labels. At every step, the industry fought proposed government regulations and sought to replace local testing methods with their own by overtly and covertly lobbying officials in both government and national and regional standards organization.
- Finally, the tobacco industry worked tirelessly to defeat proposals to increase tobacco taxes. Through the covert lobbying of policymakers and the manipulation of the media, the tobacco industry was able to delay these taxes increase.