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## Tobacco industry

How tobacco firms tried to undermine Muslim countries' smoking ban

Attempts to tackle sales threat by framing criticism of smoking as fundamentalist fanaticism are outlined in cache of documents from 1970s until late 1990s

<http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/apr/20/tobacco-firms-tried-undermine-muslim-countries-smoking-ban>

A man lights a cigarette in front of a roadside tea stall in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Photograph: Andrew Biraj/Corbis

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The tobacco industry attempted to reinterpret Islamic teaching and recruit Islamic scholars in a bid to undermine the prohibition on smoking in many Muslim countries, an investigation has shown.

Evidence from [archived industry documents](#) from the 1970s to the late 1990s shows that tobacco companies were seriously concerned about Islamic teaching. In 1996, an internal document from British American Tobacco warned that, because of the spread of “extremist views” from fundamentalists in countries such as Afghanistan, the industry would have to “prepare to fight a hurricane”.

We had tobacco industry lawyers actually developing theological arguments

**Prof Mark Petticrew**

BAT and other companies, which were losing sales in affluent countries where anti-smoking measures had been introduced, devised strategies to counter this perceived threat to sales in places such as Egypt, Indonesia and Bangladesh, which have large populations of young people who smoke.

The industry was concerned that the [World Health Organisation](#) was encouraging the anti-smoking stance of Islamic leaders. A 1985 report from tobacco firm Philip Morris squarely blamed the WHO. “This ideological development has become a threat to our business because of the interference of the WHO ... The WHO has not only joined forces with Moslem fundamentalists who view smoking as evil, but has gone yet further by

encouraging religious leaders previously not active anti-smokers to take up the cause,” it said.

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A No Smoking sign in Syria Photograph: Alamy

“A Moslem who attacks smoking generally speaking would be a threat to existing government as a ‘fundamentalist’ who wishes to return to sharia law,” says one of the archive documents. It adds: “Our invisible defence must be the individualism which Islam allows its believers ... smoking and other signs of modern living should encourage governments to a point at which it is possible quietly to suggest their benefits.”

It adds: “With Islam we might ask what other aspects of modern living are similarly open to extremist demands for prohibition under strict interpretation of sharia: motion pictures, television, and art depicting the human being? Use of electronic amplification by muezzin calling from a minaret? The education of women?” the document says.

The earliest fatwa against tobacco was in 1602, but many scholars believed smoking cigarettes or taking tobacco in water pipes or other forms was harmless until evidence of the dangers to health began to emerge in the mid 20th century. Jurists pronounced that tobacco use was *makrooh*(discouraged). In many Islamic countries, a harder line was taken, with smoking prohibited on the grounds that the Qur’an does not permit self-harm or intoxication.

The WHO negotiated the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, starting in 1999, in response to what it describes as the “explosive increase in tobacco use”. The convention, which outlines strategies intended to reduce demand, was adopted in 2003.

This is an issue to be handled extremely gingerly and sensitively

### **BAT internal document**

A report in 2000 from the Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (Cora) department at BAT after the first international negotiations said: “It appears that the WHO’s efforts to link religion (specifically Islam) with issues surrounding the use of tobacco are bearing fruit ... We will need to discuss separately how we might understand and manage this aspect in line with the Cora strategy.”

The tobacco industry attempted to re-interpret anti-smoking Islamic teachings. A 1996 BAT memo suggests identifying “a scholar/scholars, preferably at the Al Azhar University in Cairo, who we could then brief and enlist as our authoritative advisers/allies and occasionally spokespersons on the issue.

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Egyptian residents of the Masr el-Gedida district walk under hanged cardboard cigarettes during a “No Smoking Day” in Cairo. Photograph: Khaled Desouki/AFP/Getty Images

“We agreed that such scholars/authority would need to be paired up with an influential Moslem writer/journalist ... such advice would present the most effective and influential opinion able to counter extremist views, which are generally peddled by Islamic fundamentalist preachers largely misinterpreting the Koran ... This is an issue to be handled extremely gingerly and sensitively ... We have to avoid all possibilities of a backlash.”

Tobacco industry lawyers were also involved in this attempt at revision. A presentation from 2000, prepared by the firm Shook, Hardy and Bacon, gave an overview of the background to Islam and smoking, with slides stating that there is no prohibition on smoking in the Qur’an – and that “making rules beyond what Allah has allowed is a sin in itself”.

Prof Mark Peticrew from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who led the research, said he was amazed by what researchers had found in the archives. “‘You couldn’t make it up’ comes to mind,” he said. “The thing that jumps out at me from all this is the fact that we had tobacco industry lawyers actually developing theological arguments. That was pretty surprising.”

A document suggest Philip Morris wanted to try to recruit Islamic scholars at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. A representative of the Canadian Tobacco Manufacturers’ Council “agreed to make exploratory contact”, it says. Peticrew and his team do not know whether they were successful. “We couldn’t find the papers,” he said.

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The tobacco industry is still heavily promoting smoking in countries such as Bangladesh and Egypt, which are predominantly Muslim and have high proportions of smokers.

Its marketing is generally adapted to the “not overly devout”, says the study. The authors call for further research to find out how the industry had approached other faiths.

“The launch of the Faith Against Tobacco national campaign by Tobacco Free Kids and faith leaders in the US, for example, brings together Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other faiths ‘to support proven solutions to reduce smoking’. Understanding efforts by the industry to undermine the efforts of other faith communities brings to light a broader strategy to marginalise tobacco control in diverse communities, and refocuses the problem on tobacco-related health harms,” says the paper.

BAT told the Guardian. “This study, which concerns material written nearly 20 years ago, does not represent the views, policies and position of British American Tobacco. We are a global business that holds itself to strict standards of business conduct and corporate

governance, manufacturing and marketing our products in accordance with domestic and international laws and observing the cultural and religious beliefs in the 200 countries in which we operate.”

Philip Morris did not respond to the Guardian’s request for comment.