

# “Fighting a Hurricane”: Tobacco Industry Efforts to Counter the Perceived Threat of Islam

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Islamic countries are of key importance to transnational tobacco companies as growing markets with increasing smoking rates. We analyzed internal tobacco industry documents to assess the industry’s response to rising concerns about tobacco use within Islamic countries.

The tobacco industry perceived Islam as a significant threat to its expansion into these emerging markets. To counter these concerns, the industry framed antismoking views in Islamic countries as fundamentalist and fanatical and attempted to recruit Islamic consultants to portray smoking as acceptable. Tobacco industry lawyers also helped develop theological arguments in favor of smoking.

These findings are valuable to researchers and policymakers seeking to implement culturally appropriate measures in Islamic countries under the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. (*Am J Public Health. Published online ahead of print April 16, 2015; e1–e7. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.302494*)

## THE ISLAMIC WORLD HAS

a long history of opposition to tobacco use.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, most Muslims live in countries where smoking prevalence is relatively high and rising.<sup>2–5</sup> Although cigarettes are by far the most common form of smoked tobacco, alternative forms of tobacco use such as kreteks, ghutka, and paan are also common, and there has also been a recent surge in water pipe tobacco smoking.<sup>6,7</sup>

As smoking rates in traditional markets have declined, tobacco companies have shifted attention to low- and middle-income countries, including Islamic countries, attracted by their rising living standards, young populations, and rapid sociopolitical change. Particularly in countries with weak governance, the tobacco industry has sought to weaken the content and scope of regulation and delay its adoption and implementation.<sup>8,9</sup> The industry has long-standing interests in North Africa, particularly Egypt and Algeria (both >90% Muslim), and British American Tobacco (BAT) enjoys rapidly growing markets in predominantly Islamic countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Malaysia.<sup>10</sup>

Islam has a spiritual and legal tradition that provides guidance on smoking to its adherents.<sup>6</sup> Islamic law comprises rules and regulations derived from the Qur’an (or Koran) as the main source, along with Hadith (or Hadeeth), which are the stories of the Prophet Muhammad’s life that elucidate the principles of Islamic law.<sup>11</sup> Although the earliest

fatwa (religious decree) against tobacco was issued in 1602,<sup>12</sup> until the mid-20th century smoking was generally believed to have no adverse health effects, and Muslim jurists thus deemed it neutral. As its harmful effects became better known, jurists proclaimed tobacco use to be *makrooh* (discouraged). In many Islamic countries, the legal and religious status of smoking has shifted to *haram* (prohibited), in accordance with interpretation of parts of the Qur’an that prohibit intoxicating substances and self-harm.

We examined how Islam has sought to limit smoking behavior and how transnational tobacco companies have tried to undermine these efforts directly and indirectly in Islamic countries.

## METHODS

We searched the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library during August 2012 to July 2014 for the keywords “Islam\*,” “Muslim\*” (and “Moslem”), and related terms, such as “halal,” “haram,” and “fatwa.”<sup>13</sup> Additional searches used terms related to specific quotes, individuals, or activities. This produced 10 725 hits, which we examined for relevance to Islamic views and actions concerning tobacco control and to related industry actions. After excluding duplicates and documents unrelated to the research objectives, we analyzed 251 items, of which 70 are cited here.

We organized the documents by date and company and iteratively reviewed them to build a

narrative regarding Islam and the tobacco industry. Then, we analyzed additional primary and secondary sources to contextualize and triangulate industry documents, such as industry publications and Web sites, tobacco control materials, media reports, scholarly journals, and policy documents related to Islamic positions on tobacco use. We also consulted with an advisory group of senior Islamic representatives.

We recognize that Islamic countries are not a homogeneous group; Islam has several denominations, the largest being Sunni and Shia. However, we found no differentiation in industry documents and thus made none in our analysis.

## RESULTS

We found many examples of Islamic opposition to smoking among industry documents.<sup>14–18</sup> For example, in Pakistan in 1984, a newspaper demanded that jihad (religious war) should be waged against smoking.<sup>19</sup> An observer from INFOTAB (International Tobacco Information Center, an organization founded by the tobacco industry to coordinate countermeasures against worldwide public health efforts to control smoking)<sup>20</sup> reported in 1985 that the Malaysian government was being asked by the Malaysian Medical Association and other health and consumer bodies to consider smoking as un-Islamic, “and therefore refrain from supporting tobacco farming and dissociate from all tobacco companies.”<sup>21</sup> A 1995 BAT

memo describes how the industry in Malaysia “is experiencing a very critical situation because of the haram declaration by the National Fatwa Council.”<sup>22</sup>

Even in countries where Muslims were not the majority population, we observed anti-tobacco positions. For example, in 1993 the American Muslim Council called on President Bill Clinton to support a \$2 per pack tax,<sup>23</sup> and in 1999 a US coalition of churches and mosques protested promotion by Philip Morris of Marlboro Milds to African American youths.<sup>24</sup>

We also found evidence of industry concerns about the rise in anti-tobacco positions in Islamic countries. For example, a 1979 BAT memo described a negative market outlook in the Middle East over the next 20 years: “*The rise of militant Islam poses serious problems. Smoking, and the consumption of alcohol, are forbidden under this creed.*”<sup>25</sup> In a 1980 speech on “[t]he challenges and constraints facing international business,” the BAT chairman referred to “[t]he resurgence of Islam in alliance with nationalism . . . in many parts of the world” as “transforming the economic environment.”<sup>26</sup> BAT’s 5-year plan (1984–1988) also describes Islamic fundamentalism as having the potential to seriously affect volume sales in Muslim markets.<sup>27</sup>

A 1984 trip report by an employee of US subsidiary Brown & Williamson observes, “The pressure upon smoking [in Saudi Arabia] is continuous, with Friday sermons being delivered in the mosques stating that smoking is ‘Haram’ (outlawed by Islam).”<sup>28</sup> The Brown & Williamson chairman is clear about the perceived threat: “Capping the bad news is a move among the Mullahs to make smoking anti-Islamic behaviour.”<sup>29</sup> By 1996, BAT documents describe “the

Islamic threat” as “a real danger to the industry”:

This is dependent upon the source of the threat, the divisions within Islam and among Moslems and above all the rapidly emerging fundamentalist influence in Islam, as for instance witnessed in Afghanistan, Iran or Algeria. . . . [T]his amounts to us having to prepare to fight a hurricane. The upside of this extremism however is that it is not rooted in Islamic religious tenets/creed. It is mostly the product of individual/sectarian adherence to extremist views which then pass on as basic Islamic religious thought. These fadist moves do nevertheless carry with them a huge following and should they prevail in a political arena in a country, they could lead to tobacco being declared haram—and therefore banned—because it is bad for your health and your pocket. Otherwise Islam views smoking and cigarettes as Makroh (neither good nor bad) and is therefore not roundly condemned.<sup>30</sup>

In 2000 Islamic fundamentalism was again described as a key aspect of the future business environment for BAT for the next 10 years.<sup>31</sup>

### Framing Tobacco Control as Extremism

Transnational tobacco companies sought to counter growing Islamic opposition to tobacco use by depicting supporters as religious extremists and, by extension, tobacco control as another form of extremism. In a further example of this, a 1979 speech by Horace Kornegay, president of the Tobacco Institute, linked the Iranian revolution with the health promotion efforts of US Secretary of Health Joseph Califano (1977–1979):

In 1906, an Iranian Ayatollah decreed that smoking was against Islamic purity. Overnight, cigarettes disappeared from the entire country. In 1977, Ayatollah Califano declared a holy war against tobacco: He is gone, but his mullahs remain and so does

much of his battle plan of segregation and prohibition.<sup>32</sup>

Here, ayatollah is used as a sarcastic reference to Califano’s support for antismoking policies.<sup>33</sup> Mullah is a term used to refer to Islamic clergy or theologians.

A 1981 article in the *Tobacco Observer* also linked Islam explicitly with fanaticism and sadism:

In the early days of tobacco in the Old World, sadism went hand in hand with opposition to smoking, as smokers encountered persecution as brutal as anything meted out to religious dissidents and witches. . . . Throughout the Muslim world fanatical mullahs and ayatollahs ranted against tobacco as one of the “four pillars of the tent of debauchery.”<sup>34</sup>

At the 1982 Conference on Worldwide Smoking Developments, a BAT presenter noted a “hardening of antismoking attitudes . . . from the growth of Islamic fundamentalism.”<sup>35</sup> A 1982 letter observes, “In the more fundamentalist groups . . . smoking is actively discouraged and is frequently the subject of the Friday sermon.”<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, a 1983 report on Nigeria observes that “only the discredited ‘fundamentalists’ have attempted to generate anti-smoking.”<sup>37</sup> BAT visitors to Saudi Arabia in 1991 also criticized “the religious”:

There are spates of activity by the religious against smoking in public places. This is a side of the opposition which is very deep rooted and presents a formidable obstacle to the industry. . . . The religious will interfere in any product promotion.<sup>38</sup>

Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO) is depicted in a 1985 memo as joining forces with Islamic fundamentalists:

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.<sup>39</sup>

The role of Islamic delegates in the negotiation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the first international treaty to be adopted under Article 19 of the WHO Constitution, with the goal “to protect present and future generations from the devastating health, social, environmental and economic consequences of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke,” was a particular concern.<sup>40</sup> A 2000 report from BAT’s Consumer and Regulatory Affairs Department on the first session of the framework convention’s Intergovernmental Negotiating Body notes,

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 [Consumer and Regulatory Affairs Department] strategy.<sup>41</sup>

### Monitoring and Influencing Islamic Scholars and Leaders

Documents suggest that transnational tobacco companies monitored debates on Islam and tobacco and sought out Muslim scholars and religious leaders to support industry interests. Industry monitors attended the 1983 World Conference on Smoking and Health in Winnipeg, Canada.<sup>42</sup> Peter Berger, an American sociologist and RJ Reynolds consultant,<sup>43,44</sup> saw little cause for concern: “Nothing much is to be expected by way of antismoking activities by religious groups.”<sup>45</sup> However, Hans Verkerk, then assistant secretary

general of INFOTAB, was less optimistic:

In the Winnipeg report, a full page was devoted to the Egyptian surgeon's views on smoking and Islam. . . . [T]here is no doubt that the anti-smoking activists are also trying to establish beachheads in religious organisations.<sup>46</sup>

This prompted the industry to establish its own "beachhead," known as Project Winnipeg and involving representatives from Brown & Williamson, Imperial, BAT, and INFOTAB. One of its stated aims was to develop an industry response to Islam.<sup>47</sup> Members of these organizations expressed concern that Islamic antismoking sentiment could lead to "potential spillover" to other countries or religious groups,<sup>48</sup> and in 1985 the Philip Morris Corporate Issues Management Committee discussed a response to

[t]he possibility that religious fundamentalism will have an impact on our profitable Gulf markets. Fundamentalism could have a wider significance than just the Gulf since anti-smoking zeal is not just limited to Islam. . . . Mormons, Catholics, Jews and other sects have expressed strong anti-smoking feelings in the U.S. and a Corporate response to religion and smoking may be worth pursuing.<sup>49</sup>

The industry also monitored regional tobacco control conferences. Abdullah Borek, Middle East Tobacco Association coordinator, circulated the details of the first Arab Anti-Smoking Symposium, held in Jordan in 1988, to BAT, Philip Morris, Gallaher, RJ Reynolds Rothman, and INFOTAB representatives.<sup>50</sup> Borek described his association's role:

to monitor and undermine the work of public health officials in the Middle East, including the Arab Gulf Health Ministers' Conference, the World Health Organization and national tobacco control coalitions.<sup>51</sup>

The Middle East Working Group, operating in Gulf Cooperation Council states, also studied the relationship between Islam and smoking,<sup>52</sup> and in 1986 requested monitoring and intelligence on Islam in the council states plus Iran.<sup>53</sup>

Two Middle East Tobacco Association meetings in 1988 discussed smoking and Islam.<sup>54,55</sup> Abdullah Borek argued,

No particular ruling [about smoking] has been identified as the ultimate position of Islam, but valid opinions viewing smoking as permissible certainly do not receive the exposure they deserve.<sup>55</sup>

He concluded that "the industry cannot enter the arena of religion in defense of its cause and therefore has to live with this problem."<sup>56</sup> In practice, however, the documents suggest otherwise. In 1985 tobacco lobbyist Martin Haley advised Philip Morris to turn any Islamic objections to smoking to the industry's advantage:

A Moslem who attacks smoking generally speaking would be a threat to existing government as a "fundamentalist" who wishes to return to Sharia law. . . . [O]ur invisible defense must be the individualism which Islam allows its believers. . . . [S]moking and other signs of modern living should encourage governments to a point at which it is possible quietly to suggest their benefits. . . . 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?<sup>57</sup>

Philip Morris's 1987 Corporate Affairs Plan identified the need to

work to develop a system . . . [to] measure trends on the issue of Smoking and Islam. Identify Islamic religious leaders who oppose interpretations of the Qur'an which would ban the use of

tobacco and encourage support for these leaders.<sup>47</sup>

The company sought contact with such leaders:

Jacques LaRiviere [Canadian Tobacco Manufacturers' Council] agreed to make exploratory contact with the Islamic Studies Department at Magill [sic] University. Bill Kloefer [senior vice president public relations, Tobacco Institute] said he would consider whether a contact of his in another denominational field could be of help.<sup>58</sup>

LaRiviere was also a member of the Social Acceptability Working Party of the tobacco industry's International Committee on Smoking Issues (later to become INFOTAB); he led industry attempts to infiltrate the Winnipeg conference.<sup>59</sup> The purpose of such contact was to obtain an alternative Islamic ruling on smoking.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, the industry sought to "[i]dentify Islamic religious leaders who oppose interpretations of the Qur'an which would ban the use of tobacco and encourage support for these leaders."<sup>47</sup> This formed part of a Philip Morris memo, *Establishing Authoritative Resources and Credibility in Islam* (the original document is unavailable).<sup>60</sup> In 1987 tobacco lobbyist Martin Haley recommended to Philip Morris that a panel of scholars in various Islamic disciplines (e.g., experts in eighth- and ninth-century poetry) be approached to write material for "articles, books, and television cassettes" for use in government broadcasting.<sup>57,61</sup>

The industry also worked to prevent publication of Islamic antismoking literature. A 1987 letter to Michael Leach (BAT) from industry consultant Bedros Kazandjian states,

I have, on several occasions, stopped official Government booklets being published as

a means of informing the people about the relationship between smoking and certain verses of the Koran. . . . [O]nce the religious aspect is conveyed to the public at large it will be very difficult to reverse the situation with any means.<sup>62</sup>

Kazandjian has been described elsewhere as using high-level contacts in WHO to counter moves to strengthen health warnings, lower tar and nicotine levels, and increase taxes.<sup>62-64</sup>

Monitoring continued in 1994. The Middle East Tobacco Association agreed that "all threats should be countered and nothing conceded without a fight"<sup>65</sup> and continued monitoring with an action plan against a possible antismoking campaign during Ramadan in 1995.<sup>66</sup> In 1996 BAT sought to recruit a Muslim scholar to act as a consultant:

[Identify] 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. We agreed that such scholars/authority would need to be paired up with an influential Moslem writer/journalist. . . . [S]uch 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.<sup>30</sup>

The role of tobacco industry lawyers in vetting scientific research and making funding decisions has been described previously.<sup>67-69</sup> We found evidence that during this period they were also involved in interpreting the Qur'an. A presentation from 2000 prepared by the industry law 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.”<sup>70</sup>

### Adapting Products and Marketing to Address Islamic Concerns

The tobacco industry was aware of Islamic concerns about the nature of its products and their marketing.<sup>71</sup> One concern was ensuring that ingredients were halal (permissible) as prescribed by Muslim law.<sup>72</sup> BAT also considered neutralizing the smell of tobacco, specifically in response to Muslim sensitivities,<sup>73</sup> and developing Listerine (mouthwash)-flavored cigarettes, which it thought would appeal to Muslims.<sup>74</sup> The response of Islamic and other groups to labeling of genetically modified tobacco was also a concern to the industry.<sup>75</sup>

Perceptions of such concerns influenced the marketing of tobacco products. For example, the logo on Pall Mall cigarettes bearing the Latin phrase *in hoc signo vinces* (by this sign shall you conquer) was altered because of concerns about reactions in Islamic countries. The phrase is associated with the Emperor Constantine before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, when he saw the sign of Jesus Christ, the  $\chi$ - $\rho$  symbol, in the sky, telling him he would triumph over his enemies. The phrase has also been adopted by the English Defence League, a right-wing organization that claims to “oppose the creeping Islamisation of our country.”<sup>76</sup> An internal BAT e-mail notes of the Latin phrase, “This sentence might endanger the brand in Moslem country like Indonesia . . . if they find out the meaning/history of this sentence.”<sup>77</sup>

Overall, transnational tobacco companies have adapted their marketing to appeal to “not overtly devout” Muslims.<sup>78</sup> Marketing to women has been more complex. In 1996 the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee objected to the portrayal of Muslim women in a Virginia Slims advertisement in major women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* on the grounds that it portrayed Muslim women as submissive chattels.<sup>79</sup> In Islamic countries in the Middle East and Asia, rapid social change has led transnational tobacco companies to draw on themes related to liberty and independence to market to women (Figure 1), reminiscent of traditional marketing campaigns during the 20th century.<sup>80</sup> The marketing to women of tobacco products other than cigarettes is a particular concern. For example, water pipe smoking has increased in many countries with large Muslim populations, and greater tolerance is shown for women smoking water pipes than using other tobacco products.<sup>81,82</sup>

### DISCUSSION

The documents we reviewed suggest that the tobacco industry perceived Islamic opposition to smoking as a threat to its business from the 1970s onward. Among the tactics used to counter this perceived threat was the framing of Islamic objections to tobacco use as extremism and of tobacco control advocates more generally as extremists. The industry monitored debates on Islam and tobacco and recruited Islamic scholars and leaders as consultants to help temper messages to believers and ultimately to portray smoking as acceptable. Through consultants and tobacco lawyers, the industry sought to reinterpret

the Qu'ran to suit its needs. David Kessler, former US Food and Drug Administration commissioner, has described such efforts as evidence that “[t]his is an industry that actually thought it could buy almost anybody.”<sup>83</sup>

These tactics are consistent with previous actions by the industry to undermine science and policy on, for example, secondhand smoke, marketing restrictions, and the negotiation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.<sup>84–86</sup> For example, the tactics used by the industry to influence the convention have included stressing the need for flexibility, demonizing the opposition as extremists, claiming that tobacco control infringes on freedom of expression, and targeting politicians and policymakers.<sup>87</sup> The recruitment of Islamic consultants parallels the well-documented industry strategy of employing scientists to act as a front for industry messages.<sup>88–90</sup> This appears to bear similarities to Project Whitecoat, through which Philip Morris created and maintained a scientific

controversy on secondhand smoke by recruiting academic scientists to conduct and disseminate tobacco industry-funded research.<sup>91</sup> However, we noted some differences. Although the role of lawyers in the tobacco industry is well documented,<sup>70</sup> their apparent role in interpreting the Qu'ran, and even developing a theological argument in favor of smoking, is less well known but clearly delineated in the documents we analyzed.

Our findings have several implications for tobacco control among Islamic populations. First, the development of faith-based interventions against smoking on Islamic grounds must be both evidence based and culturally appropriate.<sup>92</sup> This analysis shows that the tobacco industry has used differences in opinion within the Islamic community to argue that prohibitions are merely the position of extremists. WHO and other tobacco control advocates must counter this framing of the issue. The WHO Consultation on Litigation and Public Inquiries as Public Health Tools for Tobacco



Source. Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.<sup>80</sup>

FIGURE 1—Gauloises “Freedom Always” campaign, Qatar.

Control also considered the use of Islamic law to advance tobacco control and the implications of declarations by Islamic scholars that smoking is haram.<sup>93</sup> The WHO Consultation noted that these scholarly opinions have implications for restricting smoking in public places as well as for the advertising and marketing of tobacco products and have a role in litigation, because the flexibility of Islamic law offers opportunities for success.<sup>93</sup>

Industry efforts to frame tobacco control as extremism have facilitated the association of smoking with the values of liberation and independence. This has been especially effective in the context of rapid sociopolitical change across the Islamic world. For example, tobacco companies have sought to market tobacco use as an expression of freedom, especially among women.<sup>94,95</sup> Tobacco control advocates must counter such associations with clear health messages and warnings about tobacco industry tactics. Counteradvertising that communicates the impact of addiction on personal choice and the long-term effects of tobacco-related diseases on personal freedom and independence is needed to change the positive associations being created between smoking and social change.

Collaborative approaches with other religions may offer opportunities for strengthening tobacco control efforts. Our analysis shows that transnational tobacco companies are particularly concerned about the effects of religious doctrine on markets. Positions shared by multiple faith communities on the harmful effects of tobacco use on health shift the focus away from individual religious beliefs.

We examined efforts by tobacco companies to counter tobacco control activities in Islamic countries, which represent an

increasing share of tobacco industry business, and among Muslims, whose numbers are growing in the United States, Europe, and Africa.<sup>96</sup> Uncovering the tobacco industry's perceptions of, and response to, Islam in all of these regions is of practical value to public health researchers and policymakers. Further research to examine how the industry has responded to other faiths is also required. The Faith Against Tobacco national campaign by Tobacco Free Kids and faith leaders in the United States, for example, brings together Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and other faiths "to support proven solutions to reduce smoking."<sup>97</sup> Elucidating tobacco industry tactics to undermine the efforts of other faith communities brings to light a broader strategy to marginalize tobacco control in diverse communities and refocuses the problem on tobacco-related health harms. ■

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This article was accepted November 24, 2014.

#### Contributors

M. Petticrew developed the idea for the study in collaboration with the other authors. M. Petticrew and H. Ali led the consultation with the advisory group. All

authors interpreted the data, wrote the article, and approved the final version.

#### Acknowledgments

Kelley Lee is supported by the National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health (grant R01-CA091021).

We are very grateful to our advisory group for their time and input.

#### Human Participant Protection

No institutional review board approval was needed because all data were obtained from secondary sources.

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