

Executive summary

The tobacco industry (TI) has targeted the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) as a lucrative market for its products and business expansion. To protect its business, it has stepped up interference to undermine tobacco control policy. While some governments have made efforts to protect their tobacco control measures, others gave in to industry interference.

The World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) empowers governments through Article 5.3 to protect their tobacco control policies from commercial and other vested interests of the TI. However, Article 5.3 remains underutilized to protect public health.

Several governments accepted input and assistance from the industry, received and endorsed TI charitable contributions, collaborated with the TI and participated in its events, and allowed new tobacco products to be sold in the country. Several governments recognized the TI through awards, portraying it as an exemplary industry. Some of these instances of interference recur from those reported in the EMR TI Interference Index 2021 and 2023, indicating a lack of action to address the problem.

However, some governments demonstrated their commitment to implementing the WHO FCTC by banning or rejecting TI assistance or contributions, including corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and enforcement actions. They disallowed industry representatives from their inter-agency committees on tobacco control and implemented tobacco control measures in a timely manner without giving in to TI delay tactics.

This is the third edition of the Eastern Mediterranean Tobacco Industry Interference Index and covers 11 countries (Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan and Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen). It assesses how countries responded to TI interference by implementing Article 5.3 to protect their tobacco control policies.

This report is based only on publicly available information, and therefore does not adequately capture all evidence of interference that may have occurred. Even then, publicly available information may not be the most up-to-date. Limited government and TI transparency makes it difficult to collect information on industry interference. The rankings applied to countries in this Index should be viewed in light of these limitations.

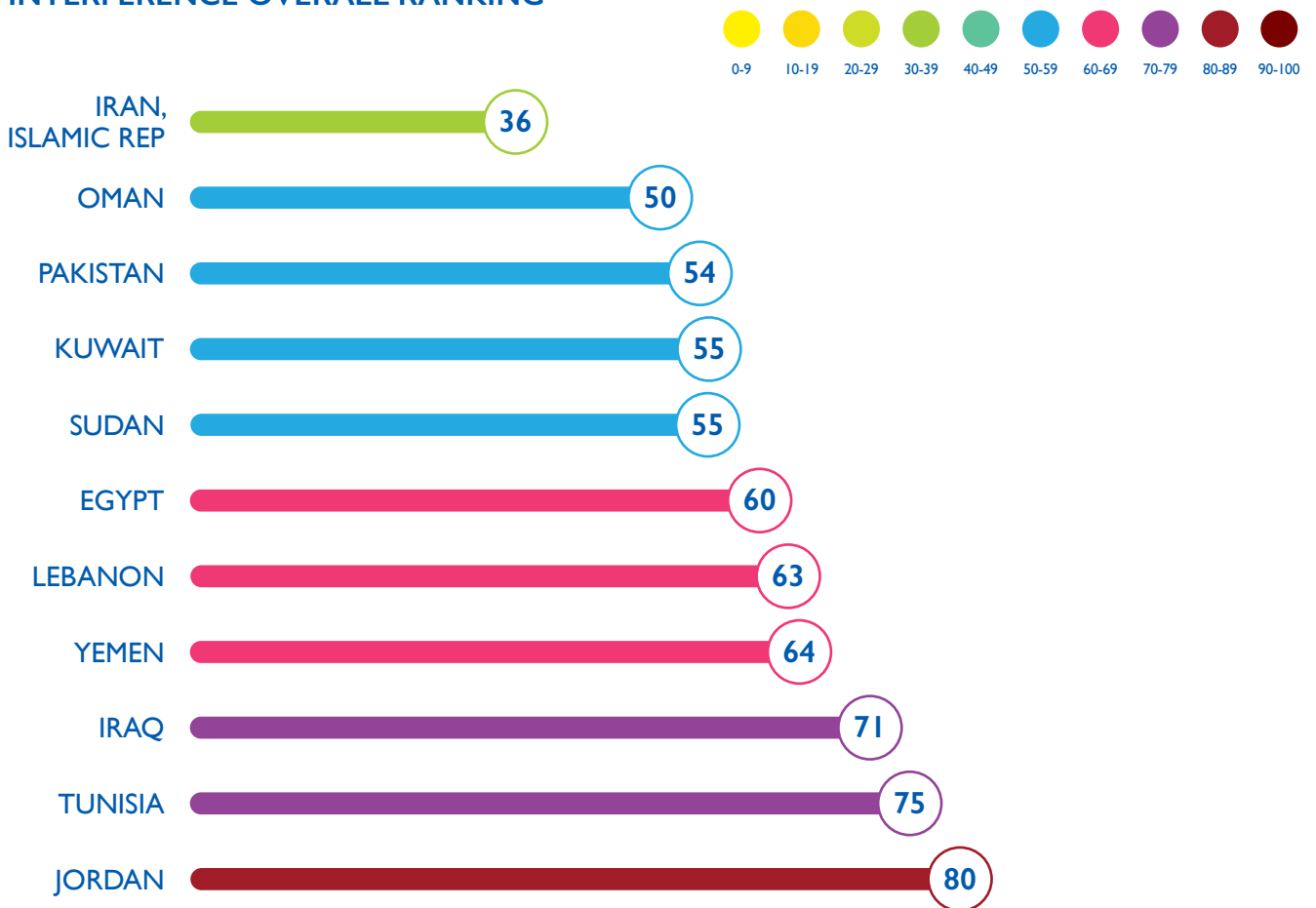
Figure 1 shows the country rankings with Iran achieving the lowest score and least industry interference, compared to Jordan, which shows high interference with the highest score. The other countries also show industry interference to varying degrees and governments continue to succumb to industry lobbying in various ways.

Key findings

- Countries such as **Kuwait, Oman, Sudan** or **Yemen**, did not accept assistance from the TI on enforcement, conducting raids on tobacco smuggling or enforcing smoke-free policies or no sales to minors.
- **Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman**, and **Tunisia** do not receive financial contributions from the TI.
- **Most countries** have either banned tobacco-related corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities (Iran, Lebanon and Sudan) or have severely restricted them. However, several governments accepted, endorsed, or promoted tobacco-related CSR activities, facilitating a positive relationship with the industry.
- None of the countries allow the TI into their inter-agency committees on tobacco control, but the industry in **Jordan, Sudan** and **Yemen** had a seat in the national standardization agency and used this platform to exert influence on tobacco control policy and its implementation.
- **Iran** has a policy on disclosure and management of conflicts of interest for persons involved in tobacco control policies. Most countries do not have a program in place to consistently raise awareness about TI interference.
- The governments of **Lebanon** and **Tunisia** gave in to industry pushback on tax increases and lowered taxes to facilitate the success of their state-owned enterprise and heated tobacco products respectively.
- The TI in the region continued to receive benefits to expand or improve its productivity, or protect its business. The benefits included endorsement of a tobacco factory in **Iraq**, being allowed to manufacture tobacco inside duty-free zones in **Jordan** and **Pakistan**, and receiving investment privileges in **Yemen**. Other ways the industry benefited included delays in implementing tobacco control measures, such as applying excise duties in **Kuwait**, pictorial health warnings on tobacco packs in **Tunisia**, and track-and-trace measures in **Pakistan**.
- Senior officials from **six governments** endorsed the TI and engaged in unnecessary interactions, including visiting its manufacturing facilities or recognizing it through awards. Senior officials in **Iraq** and **Lebanon**, and **Tunisian** members of parliament visited their state-owned tobacco enterprise, while a minister in **Yemen** participated in a tobacco product launch. **Egypt's** Minister of Finance recognized the Eastern Company as the "Best Performing EGX Listed Company", and **Pakistan's** Prime Minister awarded a tobacco company for being the "Second Highest Taxpayer."
- Governments allowed their diplomatic missions to endorse the TI. The **Japanese** Embassy in **Egypt** and **Lebanon** was lobbied by Japan Tobacco International (JTI) to promote its business. The Japanese Ambassador to **Egypt** met with JTI at the inauguration of its new office in Cairo and discussed future investment opportunities to strengthen its presence in the country.
- Lack of transparency between government officials and the TI remains a problem across the region. Publicly available information is limited. **No country** has a registry of TI lobbyists or those who represent its interests.
- There is a revolving door of recent former public officials joining the TI or vice versa in **Jordan, Pakistan**, and **Tunisia**.

FIGURE I: TOBACCO INDUSTRY INTERFERENCE OVERALL RANKING

The lower the score, the better the ranking



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The tobacco industry remains fundamentally resistant to change and has become increasingly bold in its efforts to interfere with government policies aimed at protecting public health. The tobacco industry must be held accountable for the significant harm it has caused and continues to cause to public health. It's therefore the responsibility of public authorities to regulate this industry rigorously to safeguard population health. If we are truly committed to protecting our youth and future generations, we must work towards gradually phasing out this industry.

- Dr Jawad Al-Lawati, Senior Consultant, Tobacco Control Programme, Ministry of Health, Oman

Recommendations

Governments can better protect their tobacco control policies by adopting the following:

1. Inform and create awareness among all branches of government about the need to protect tobacco control policies from commercial and other vested interests of the TI, as required under Article 5.3.
2. Adopt a clear procedure for government officials when interacting with the TI that ensures transparency. This can be a code of conduct for all public officials to guide interactions with the industry, which should be limited to only when strictly necessary. Expand the current code for members of the tobacco control committee to cover the whole of government and close any loopholes.
3. Denormalize and ban tobacco-related CSR contributions as recommended in the Article 5.3 Guidelines and the Article 13 Guidelines.
4. Exclude the TI as a stakeholder at all levels of health policy development. Terminate any existing collaboration with the TI on training programs or law enforcement activities.
5. Address conflicts of interest and apply policy coherence across all sectors. Issue a policy to avoid any preferential treatment for state-owned TI.
6. Adopt a procedure for disclosing records of all interactions with the TI and its representatives.

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Yes, the tobacco industry may have deep pockets and an arsenal of tricks. But you have something infinitely stronger: the truth, the evidence and the moral conviction that your cause is just. Use this evidence, combine it with your expertise, your integrity and your resilience to fortify good governance and transparency in tobacco control.

- H.R.H. Princess Dina Mired, Jordan

