

## Twenty-two shades of grey – An analysis of alcohol regulations in the Arab world

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**Abstract.** This article compares alcohol regulations across 22 Arab League member countries. We use an explorative, qualitative approach based on official regulations, expert interviews, published articles and a questionnaire to provide a comprehensive and realistic overview of the regulatory and societal landscape, and we derive a prohibition index. Our findings reveal divergent situations and trends in various subregions. Some countries, such as Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, have imposed a total ban on alcohol due to religious principles. Similar but unwritten restrictions apply in conflict-torn countries such as Iraq and Libya. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Lebanon takes a more tolerant approach, with alcohol being generally available. In between, countries like Jordan, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates seek to strike a balance between preserving tradition and catering to open-minded youth and expatriates. We observe that any form of alcohol prohibition inevitably leads to the development of illegal markets that challenge public health, as in the case of migrant workers in Qatar. Despite legal frameworks, taboos and societal shame still play a significant role in shaping alcohol consumption, challenging modernization strategies.

### 1. Introduction

مَثَلُ الْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي وُعدَ الْمُتَّقُونَ فِيهَا أَنْهَارٌ مِنْ مَّاءٍ غَيْرِ آسِنٍ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ لَبَنٍ  
لَمْ يَتَغَيَّرَ طَعْمُهُ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ خَمْرٍ لَذَّةٍ لِلشَّارِبِينَ وَأَنْهَارٌ مِنْ عَسَلٍ مُصَفًّى وَلَهُمْ  
فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ

*This is the Paradise which the godfearing have been promised: rivers of water unstaling, rivers of milk unchanging in flavour, and rivers of wine – a delight to the drinkers, rivers, too, of honey purified; and therein for them is every fruit and forgiveness from their Lord.*  
(Quran 47:15)

Alcohol has been an integral part of human development in religion, culture, and medicine since at least 7000 BC [1]. The development of alcoholic beverages probably started with the unintentional fermentation of ripe fruits [2]. Hunter gatherers likely realized that the appealing colors of ripe fruits lead to the pleasant sense of light-headedness [1], a common pattern observed in fruit-eating animals who are constantly exposed to alcohol [3].

Trade and urbanization then led to the birth of an organized alcohol industry and its regulation. Already the oldest preserved legal texts in the Codex Hamurapi contain

rules related to the quality and authenticity of alcoholic beverages, as well as rules on public consumption.

Depending on cultural, historical and social factors, alcohol regulations have developed in many ways. Differences are especially notable in the Arab world where despite shared historical elements, local regulations reflect various religious traditions, conflict as well recent trends of modernization and westernization.

Religion plays a significant role in a society's attitude towards alcohol. Christianity and Islam are the predominant religions. All Arab countries have a Muslim majority, but some like Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Palestine have sizeable Christian communities [4]. For Christians, wine represents a compound of the Eucharist alongside with bread in which both symbolize the blood and body of Christ [5]. In contrast, many Islamic authorities claim, that different *aya-s* (آيات) in the Quran prohibit the consumption of alcohol [6].

Conflict is another reason for regulatory discrepancies, from colonial interventions to the Arab Spring in 2010 that led to the fall of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, and triggered civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya [7]. In

consequence, some countries lack written policies altogether, whilst laws in others are heavily outdated.

In many countries, cultural norms also affect alcohol consumption. Customs are deeply influenced by honor and shame often outweighing legal regulations [8]. *Al-'ayb* (العيب) is an Arabic term that denotes shameful actions. This concept extends to behaviors that can lead to social ostracism and violence particularly when the family's honor is at stake [9]. Alcohol consumption is thus linked to social embarrassment [10]. Tunisia, for example, is one of the more liberal countries in terms of alcohol regulation. Alcohol is available in many parts of the country for consumption by locals and foreigners. Still, drinking alcohol is seen as a sensitive issue and may present a source of tension, as Tunisians generally lack a proper drinking etiquette [11].

The sensitivities and taboos around alcohol as well as ethical consideration are probably also a reason for the low number of alcohol-related publications conducted in the Arab world [10]. The lack of reliable data makes the regulatory landscape difficult to navigate for stakeholders. Our paper seeks to draw a clearer picture on the regulation of alcohol in the region.

## 2. Methodology

An explorative qualitative approach was used to study the regulations of the 22 Arab League countries selected: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, , the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen. Measures were classified in line with the categories presented in the annual Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health of the World Health Organization (WHO) [12].

The WHO's Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health, as well as the Global Information System on Alcohol and Health were also used as a starting point to retrieve data on regulations. However, we found that data was sometimes insufficient and incorrect. We therefore conducted our own in-depth analysis of national laws and policies related to alcohol as well as national data on imports, exports, and sales as far as they were available.

In addition to official documents, expert interviews, market and media reports, social media posts were used to either fill gaps related to outdated and absent regulations or to compare the statutory provisions with the actual situation. Informal discussions were also conducted during the annual ProWein trade fair in Düsseldorf. In April 2025, a questionnaire was distributed via social media. Forty-five valid responses were recorded, with responses coming from Bahrain, Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Findings were mostly consistent between the various sources, i.e. qualitative interviews, media reports and the questionnaire and patterns could be identified. The WHO categorization allowed to aggregate complex individual measures into practicable scores as well as an overall

“prohibition index” that could serve as a starting point for subsequent analysis. Scores and the overall index were used to produce maps for graphical representation.

## 3. Results

Stretching from North Africa to Western Asia, the Arab world is a region with dissimilar economic development, political stability, and safety. Alcohol regulations exemplify these differences.

The following subsections give an overview of our findings related to the rules on alcohol availability (3.1), monopolies, excise taxes and licensing systems (3.2), alcohol consumption (3.3.) as well as the overall prohibition index (3.4).

### 3.1. Rules on alcohol availability

According to the WHO, only four out of the twenty-two countries have a written national policy on alcohol. However, their regulations are either incomplete or outdated. In Lebanon, some laws on alcohol date back to the 1980s and have seen only minor updates over the following years. Newer regulations—such as those on alcohol advertising introduced in 2000—have also become outdated.

Six countries impose a total ban on alcohol: Libya, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen (Figure 1a). However, some countries not mentioned by the WHO (the published reports retain gaps or ambiguities in the data collection) have banned or are currently banning alcohol due to political instability or religion. These countries include Iraq and Kuwait (Table 1). While Kuwait has imposed a ban on alcohol since 1960, Iraq has only proceeded to do so in November of 2024. Both countries have proceeded with the ban due to religious ideologies.

Uncertainty remains in the Syrian Arab Republic, as the new regime has shown signs of a tendency to limit alcohol consumption, such as through the closure of bars. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, alcohol is influenced by religious norms. In the West Bank, alcohol is available and consumed by Palestinian Christians. In Gaza, alcohol is not readily available due to stricter Islamic laws and overall chaos. The UAE shows a mixed picture as each emirate enforces its own independent alcohol laws: alcohol consumption is allowed only in 4 out of 7 emirates and completely banned in Sharjah.

Public drinking, excluding hotels and licensed venues, is only openly allowed and legal in Lebanon (Figure 1b). The remaining countries allow the consumption of alcohol in specific venues that are usually licensed or in specific areas that are either touristic or predominately Christian. Countries that allow alcohol in licensed venues but ban public drinking and drunkenness include Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Tunisia, and the UAE. It is worth noting that the sale of alcohol in most of these countries is only allowed for non-Muslim

individuals. Alcohol availability during religious holidays such as Ramadan or on Fridays is halted or limited.

**Table 1.** Regulations on public drinking.

	Alcohol Ban	Public Drinking		
		Legal to buy in	Legal to consume in	Who can consume
<b>Algeria</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, licensed locations	Everyone*
<b>Bahrain</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, licensed locations	Everyone
<b>Comoros</b>	No	Licensed locations	Licensed locations	Everyone*
<b>Djibouti</b>	No			Everyone
<b>Egypt</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, Licensed locations	Everyone*
<b>Iraq</b>	Yes	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Jordan</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, Licensed locations	Everyone
<b>Kuwait</b>	Yes	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Lebanon</b>	No	Licensed locations	Public, Private, various locations	Everyone
<b>Libya</b>	Yes	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Mauritania</b>	Yes	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Morocco</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, Licensed locations	Everyone*
<b>Occupied Palestinian Territories</b>	No	Limited locations	Private, limited locations	Everyone**
<b>Oman</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, Licensed locations	Non-Muslims
<b>Qatar</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, Licensed locations	Non-Muslims
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	Yes	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Somalia</b>	Yes	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Sudan</b>	Yes	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Syrian Arab Republic</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, Licensed locations	Everyone
<b>Tunisia</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, Licensed locations	Everyone
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	No	Licensed locations	Private, Licensed locations	Non-Muslims/Everyone***
<b>Yemen</b>	Yes	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban

\*Not consumed by the population due to religious beliefs.

\*\*In the West Bank, restricted in Gaza.

\*\*\*Depending on the Emirate.

Licensed locations: shops, restaurants, bars and venues.



**Figure 1a.** Alcohol availability between total ban and widely available.



**Figure 1b.** Public consumption of alcohol between illegal and legal.

### 3.2. Monopolies, excise taxes and licenses

Alcohol monopolies, government-controlled systems, manage the alcohol supply chain and serve as models to control or reduce alcohol consumption and related harm. According to the WHO, seven countries have an alcohol monopoly. Our findings show that not all of these countries mentioned in the report operate a monopoly, but some other countries do (Table 2). Although the Comoros once maintained a monopoly on alcohol imports through Shemir Kamoula, this has since been lifted by the government. In the Syrian Arab Republic all monopolies previously held by the government (alcohol included) have collapsed with the fall of the Assad regime.

Alcohol monopolies in the Arab world can be organized into three categories: state controlled, semi-state controlled, and private sector driven.

In Qatar, the Qatar Distribution Company (QDC), controlled by the state, is the sole licensed importer, distributor and retailer of alcoholic beverages. The company is responsible for issuing permits to different establishments for the sale of alcohol and individual permits for private distribution. We contacted the QDC requesting a meeting to obtain additional information; however, no response has been received to date.

Furthermore, some monopolies are state-controlled through exclusive licenses granted to private companies, such as the MMI, a subsidiary of the government-linked Emirates group in Dubai in the UAE. Another monopoly operates in the UAE through African + Eastern, which,

however, is privately owned. We contacted the African + Eastern but received no answer to date. This allows the UAE to keep a tight grip through regulation and the businesses allowed to operate in this space are carefully monitored.

Private sector-driven monopolies are active in Egypt and Iraq but differ greatly. In Egypt Al-Ahram Beverages Company (ABC), owned by the brewing giant Heineken, dominates the alcohol production and distribution market. ABC produces and distributes all local brands of beer, wine, and spirits and imports international brands. The alcohol monopoly in Iraq is primarily run by Turkish companies that control over 90% of the market. Production plants have been set up near the Iraqi border in Turkey to facilitate the supply and distribution. This monopoly is threatened as Iraq has opted towards the ban of alcohol leading to great losses for the suppliers.

Excise taxes are imposed by governments on the sale and/or production of alcoholic beverages, aiming to generate public revenue and reduce alcohol consumption by making drinks more expensive. They are based on the volume or alcohol content. In the Arab world, excise taxes often exceed the actual price of the alcoholic beverages. Algeria, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Syria and the UAE impose an excise tax on alcohol. In particular, the Comoros, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Qatar and the UAE stand out with their high taxes ranging between 50% and 200%. Djibouti collects the highest excise tax on alcohol, called the “special tax on alcohol (TSA)”: 200%. Egypt has an excise tax of 150% on alcoholic beverages, Oman and Qatar both tax their alcohol at 100% with Qatar naming it the “sin tax”. The UAE follows with an excise of 50% on alcoholic products.

Some Arab countries complement their complex alcohol structures with alcohol licensing systems to regulate who can legally sell, purchase, or consume alcoholic beverages. Only Qatar, Oman and Dubai in the UAE require licenses for personal consumption of alcohol. In Qatar, licenses are issued by the QDC, with monthly limits on alcohol purchases. The licenses depend on a minimum monthly income, age (above 21) and religion. Non-Muslims are not entitled to a license. In Oman, licenses go through the Royal Oman Police with similar requirements to Qatar. However, the monthly alcohol purchase limit is capped at 10% of the individual’s income.

**Table 2.** Monopolies, excise tax and permits for private consumption.

	Monopoly	Excise tax	Permit for private consumption
<b>Algeria</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Bahrain</b>	No	N/A	No
<b>Comoros</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Djibouti</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Egypt</b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Iraq</b>	Yes*	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Jordan</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Kuwait</b>	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Lebanon</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Libya</b>	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Mauritania</b>	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Morocco</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Oman</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Qatar</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Somalia</b>	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Sudan</b>	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban
<b>Syrian Arab Republic</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Tunisia</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	Yes	Yes	Depends
<b>Yemen</b>	Total Ban	Total Ban	Total Ban

No data available for the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

\*Prior to the alcohol ban.



**Figure 2.** Abundance of points of sale between monopolies and perfect competition (i.e. neither monopoly nor alcohol ban).

### 3.3. Alcohol consumption

Alcohol consumption in the Arab world is challenging to determine due to the taboo around the subject, a lack of control and limited and unreliable data collection. Alcohol consumption is therefore under-recorded or inaccurate in

most cases. However, the WHO still reports on alcohol consumption, calculating the Adult Per-capita Consumption (APC) in liters of pure alcohol per person aged 15 years and older per year. The APC includes both recorded consumption (sold through official channels) and unrecorded consumption (alcohol produced, distributed and consumed outside official channels).

Alcohol consumption differs significantly between countries (Table 3). Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen record negligible levels, below 0.1 liters, of alcohol. The lower levels are reported for the countries imposing a ban on alcohol. The highest consumption level is reported in the UAE at 2.5 liters, likely due to the high population of foreigners that live in the Emirates notably in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

**Table 3.** Total alcohol consumption per-capita (APC) extracted from the WHO Global Status Report (2024).

	<b>Total APC (L/adult/year)</b>	<b>Population (million)*</b>
<b>Algeria</b>	0.6	46.1
<b>Bahrain</b>	1.6	1.5
<b>Comoros</b>	0.2	0.8
<b>Djibouti</b>	0.4	1.1
<b>Egypt</b>	0.1	114.5
<b>Iraq</b>	0.2	45.0
<b>Jordan</b>	0.3	11.4
<b>Kuwait</b>	<0.1	4.8
<b>Lebanon</b>	1.5	5.7
<b>Libya</b>	<0.1	7.3
<b>Mauritania</b>	<0.1	5.0
<b>Morocco</b>	0.5	37.7
<b>Occupied Palestinian Territories</b>	N/A	5.1
<b>Oman</b>	0.9	5.0
<b>Qatar</b>	1.2	2.6
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	<0.1	33.2
<b>Somalia</b>	<0.1	18.3
<b>Sudan</b>	<0.1	50.0
<b>Syrian Arab Republic</b>	0.1	23.5
<b>Tunisia</b>	2.2	12.2
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	2.5	10.4
<b>Yemen</b>	<0.1	39.3

\*World bank data, 2023



**Figure 3.** Alcohol consumption per capita (APC).

### 3.4. Prohibition index

Based on the qualitative and quantitative data we calculated a prohibition index. The parameters included alcohol availability, points of sale, and alcohol consumption (yearly consumption and public consumption). The total score allows the determination of the country's degree of prohibition.

Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen impose a total prohibition on alcohol. Lebanon is the most liberal country of the Arab world with minimal restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol, wide availability in shops and restaurants and a generally tolerant attitude towards drinking. Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco and the UAE offer a balance between restriction and permission, with alcohol regulations that offer the possibility of purchase through licensed venues, while maintaining certain legal and cultural boundaries.



**Figure 4.** Prohibition index: prohibition or liberalization.

## 4. Discussion

In the following sub-sections, we discuss our findings in three perspectives: effects of regulation on market structures and product ranges, effects on public health and safety, and finally effects on the political economy.

### 4.1. Market Structures and Product Ranges

Regulation inevitably affects market structure and availability of products. Only some mediterranean countries produce relevant quantities of alcohol. In all other countries, alcohol is either produced illegally or

imported with heavy tariffs. Tariffs, as well as regulatory complexity and uncertainty, create fixed and variable trade costs that affect both the extensive and intensive margins of firm exports. They reduce the number of competitors in the market as well as the varieties available to consumers [13]. Smaller exporters are especially affected.

High prices and other prohibitive measures also usually set incentives to increase the alcohol content of products in both legal and black markets [14]. As a result, spirit production and consumption tend to be higher compared to beer and wine [15]. However, recent developments have opened new market niches. For example, the market for dealcoholized beer and wines appears to be growing. In Saudi Arabia, the market for non-alcoholic beverages, valued at USD 9.3 billion in 2021, is projected to reach USD 13.3 billion by 2028 [16]. In Dubai and Abu Dhabi, domestic breweries and distilleries are being set up in line with economic differentiation strategies.

Moreover, the rise of local brands, especially in response to political and social movements, is reshaping market dynamics. For instance, as a reaction to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, consumers have been boycotting major western beverage brands. In Egypt, Coca-Cola's sales have plummeted, while local brand V7 tripled its exports [17].

## 4.2. Effects on Public Health and Safety

At first glance, the restrictive approaches of many Arab countries appear to follow the increasingly strict WHO recommendations on alcohol consumption. However, from an economic perspective certain measures can be ineffective and sometimes even lead to negative public health outcomes. For example, high rates of alcohol-related diseases and fatalities are reported among migrant workers in Qatar [18], as consumption licenses require a high minimum income and illegal production is rampant. For migrant workers who live under financial stress and harsh working environment, public health consequences are significant and reveal a critical health disparity. Prohibition is also known to increase black market activity [19], hardcore vs. moderate drug use [20] and violent crime [21]. For example, in Libya, cartels have been thriving since 2011, with elaborate smuggling routes from neighboring countries or local and unsafe production [22]. Historic experience from the US suggests that public health benefits could be achieved by less restrictive policies. [23].

## 4.3. Black Market and Political Economy

Prohibition often affects government corruption rates [14]. High tariffs and taxes are a considerable source of income. Several Gulf countries operate with import monopolies which do not appear to follow transparent and non-discriminatory procurement criteria.

Restrictions also create a black market with significant margins. For example, one questionnaire respondent from Kuwait quoted a black market price for Black label

whiskey of 80 to 90 Kuwaiti dinar, i.e. €229 to €258. In Europe the same bottle of Black Label can be legally purchased for €24 including taxes. Another respondent from Kuwait quoted a price of 10 to 15 Kuwaiti dinar for a bottle arak (€28 to €43) which would cost as little as €5.5 in Lebanon.

The religious dimension adds another layer of complexity. Religious prohibition strengthens the diffusion of religious norms and increases the political bargaining power of religious clerics [24]. Religiously motivated laws serve as a political tool for regimes to assert their credentials and maintain their support among conservative groups. This in turn creates challenges for modernization in line with societal trends, for example Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 [25].

Even in theo- and autocratic countries, however, a pragmatic approach is often inevitable to balance religious doctrines with economic and social realities. Many Arab countries exhibit a paradoxical tolerance where prohibition coexists with clandestine drinking and a proliferous black market. Prohibition drives drinking out of sight rather than eliminating it. In states with partial restrictions such as Qatar or Egypt alcohol is legally sold in designated zones to non-Muslims, yet many Muslims partake informally showing a gap between public conformity and private behavior. Even Saudi Arabia recently opened its first liquor store in 70 years, serving exclusively non-Muslim diplomats [26].

## 5. Conclusion

The Arab world offers a kaleidoscope of regulatory approaches to alcohol regulation that reflects the region's turbulent history and present. Taboos and community shame often override written laws further highlighting the complexity of implementing policies related to religious diversity, youth demographics, expatriate demands and political instability. The region thus provides a natural laboratory for examining the economic effects of prohibition as well as political dynamics.

Our explorative study provides a first systematic comparison of alcohol regulations and societal attitudes across the 22 Arab League members. By juxtaposing official documents, with interviews, media and questionnaire data, we have demonstrated the complexity of alcohol policy in the region. Different regulatory clusters are observed: (1) complete prohibition driven by religious principles and political instability; (2) balanced availability between traditions and norms with economic interest and pluralism; and (3) liberal availability with a widely accessible market. The prohibition index quantifies policy differences.

Restrictive policies influence market structures and product portfolios. In many cases they are inadvertently fueling a black market, where illicit production and smuggling of alcohol thrive and pose major public health and safety challenges. This calls for smarter and more tailored policies to balance various policy objectives and

stakeholder interests in the framework of broader modernization and investment strategies.

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