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CPI 2022 FOR MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: CORRUPTION FUELS ONGOING CONFLICT

The Middle East and North Africa average declined on the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) – hitting a low of 38 out of 100 after years of stagnation.

The region continues to struggle with authoritarianism, with even the leadership changes sparked by the Arab Spring uprisings of over a decade ago ultimately failing to dismantle the power structures that allow those at the top to retain control and hinder political integrity. This has caused pervasive civil unrest – and violent conflict – as people fight for their rights and voices to be heard. The instability and consolidation of power in turn fuels political corruption, feeding the vicious cycle of authoritarianism, corruption and conflict across the Arab world.

The top scorers among the Arab States are the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** (CPI score: 67) and **Qatar** (58). Countries enveloped in conflict **Libya** (17), **Yemen** (16) and **Syria** (13) score the worst.

Cycle of conflict and corruption

Corruption, conflict and security are profoundly intertwined – and nowhere is this more evident than the Middle East and North Africa. As the least peaceful region in the world according to the [Global Peace Index](#), it exemplifies the myriad ways in which corruption and violence fuel each other.

Many states have been built on corrupt systems that empower the few and employ *Wasta* (favouritism) and bribes, stratifying societies and building up grievances that lead to conflicts and bloodshed. In **Libya**, inequality, poverty and corruption inflamed the Arab spring protests. When leaders failed to establish a democratic state after the ousting of the Gaddafi regime, another [civil war erupted between various armed groups](#), with the latest ceasefire in 2020 still failing to curb violence among factions. As the state is incapacitated, [elites battle with each other over the country's rich oil resources](#), and corrupt public officials serve themselves instead of the Libyan population. Especially in the western region and along the southern border, [armed groups flame tensions](#) as the public lead demonstrations calling for better access to basic services. This all fuels further factional strife and ongoing instability. The country has thus been unable to hold elections, and [the UN has claimed](#) key institutional players continue to hinder progress. Until leaders stop this corrupt cycle, the country will be unable to move forward.

Across the region, lack of transparency in state security budgets allows funds to be spent without public input, and even for them to be redirected by corrupt actors. And in a region with so much conflict, such budgets are significant – offering substantial gains for corrupt actors. On [Transparency International's Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index](#), no country in the region ranked better than “high” risk, with most ranking as “very high”. Even in countries not actively engaged in conflict, considerable defence budgets are aimed at others in the region – such as the Gulf countries’ spending in Yemen.

At the bottom of the region (and the world), **Yemen** and **Syria** demonstrate the tragic impact of protracted conflict. In already weak systems suffering conflict, corruption robs the state of resources, further impairing governments' ability to fulfil their mandate of protecting the public and rule of law. This in turn heightens grievances and draws out internal conflicts. Corruption was one of the main criticisms of the government when the civil war began eight years ago. Now the state has collapsed, and the country is facing [the worst humanitarian crisis in the world](#), with two thirds of its population in dire need of food. In Syria, the current regime retains its grip on power, but the government has done little to direct resources to support the people. Twelve years of fighting has collapsed the infrastructure – leaving much of the population without access to clean water, health care and food – and the country is now facing a [cholera outbreak](#).

Country to watch: Jordan

After stagnating for five years, **Jordan** (47) is showing worrying signs with a drop of two points on this year's CPI amidst the government's increased restrictions on civic space and the public's [growing mistrust of the government](#). Using the state of emergency declared in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state has taken more action against [civil society and journalists who criticise its actions](#). Such tight restrictions, hinderance of public oversight and violations of the investigative process have caused [Civicus to downgrade](#) the country from "obstructed" to "repressed".

All of this has fuelled instability in Jordan, which has repercussions beyond its borders. The country has long served as a mediator in the region, reducing tensions between various groups. Now that its scores on the CPI and other indicators are deteriorating, regional and international actors are less likely to trust the country in this role, threatening future attempts to establish and maintain stability.

Repression around the Gulf

Many of the countries comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a political and economic union including the **UAE** (67), **Qatar** (58), **Saudi Arabia** (51), **Bahrain** (44), **Oman** (44) and **Kuwait** (42) are also declining on this year's CPI. After the Arab Spring, the Gulf states have turned to [hyper-nationalism and further repressions of civic space](#). Without channels for civic participation and easy access to information, the public is left out of decision-making and without avenues to drive social change.

The **UAE** remains the highest scorer in the region, but has begun to show worrying signs of decline. While its government has taken steps [to increase efficiency in public administration](#), there is still little transparency, and mechanisms to protect against corruption and other abuses are lacking. Citizens are afraid to criticise the government due to harsh restrictions, and media often self-censors to avoid crackdowns. This makes it difficult for citizens to get information on the ruling family's activities, as well as government processes. Lamentably, a [series of rights restricting legal reforms](#) by the government begun in late 2021 have only made the situation worse.

Qatar, another top-scorer in the region, has seen an even steeper drop, falling from 64 to 58 at its lowest point ever. The country has been in the international spotlight for hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022, [drawing criticism](#) for alleged bribery in the award

process, inhumane working conditions on building sites and discrimination against minority groups. But corruption risks in Qatar go far beyond this event, as public access to relevant information on state procurement and government budgeting is [highly restricted](#). While petty corruption offenses are regularly punished, independent mechanisms to detect and prevent systemic corruption are [severely lacking](#). Anti-corruption legislation may also be abused to target critics and whistleblowers, who have no protection from government repression, as [the case of Abdullah Ibhais demonstrates](#). After exposing abuses against migrant workers in Qatar, the former employee of the World Cup organising committee was given a prison sentence for alleged bribery and misuse of funds. While his sentence was reduced to three years, his family raised [allegations of torture](#) in late 2022.

Country to watch: Lebanon

Lebanon (24) has been caught in a spiral of economic, political and social disasters since its financial sector imploded as a result of overspending and corruption in 2019, exacerbated by the devastating Beirut port explosion of the following year. The [state has been unable](#) to pay civil servants and soldiers, or to provide basic services like healthcare, water, food and electricity. This is particularly alarming as four in five citizens have been dragged into poverty during the crisis, while inflation further skyrocketed in 2022. The country's banks, complicit in funnelling the wealth of powerful Lebanese abroad, have been drawing [the anger of protesters](#) unable to access their savings. To make things worse, the country has been [without a functioning government](#) since the end of October, further delaying crucial reforms to improve economic and monetary governance.

Corruption is at the centre of many of these crises. State employees siphon money from procurement processes intended to rebuild, while other officials avoid accountability on many counts, even for the port explosion for which there is [evidence suggesting they knew of the risks](#). A 2020 anti-corruption law took important steps to correct some of these issues, but it's still insufficient. Gaps remain in transparency in appointments for the anti-corruption commission and the subsequent public procurement law passed in 2021.

Rampant corruption, paired with the dire economic situation will only deepen the distrust in politics and the social tensions tearing apart the country. Existing conflicts will worsen without decisive political reforms to reign in corruption and alleviate the impact of the crises.

Country to watch: Tunisia

Tunisia (40) dropped by four points since last year as the country continues down a path toward authoritarianism. President Kais Saied, striving to concentrate power in the hands of the executive, [fired dozens of judges](#) under the pretext of an anti-corruption purge and put the judicial system under his authority – ignoring Administrative Court decisions attempting to reverse his actions. The National Anti-Corruption Authority, shut down in 2021, has still not resumed work, leaving whistleblowers with nowhere to turn. The government has also attacked and intimidated civil society organisations and journalists publicly, contributing to social distrust and tensions.

In July, [protesters rose up](#) in response to Saied's abuses ahead of a vote scheduled to approve a new constitution that would significantly expand executive powers. But the president took it as an opportunity to further consolidate power, arresting protesters, dismissing the prime minister and freezing the parliament. Amidst widespread boycott of the election, the new constitution was voted on by just over 30 per cent of the population.

Parliamentary elections were held in December, in a period marked by further rising tensions and strikes. As even more organisations and activists encouraged a boycott of the elections, considering them a threat to democracy, just [11.2 per cent of voters turned out](#). The new parliament will be extremely weak and unable to tackle critical issues to support democracy and anti-corruption efforts.

Desperate need for reform

To stop the cycle of violence and corruption, leaders across the Middle East and North Africa must reverse the trend of authoritarianism and open space for all people to participate in decision-making. State institutions must exist to combat corruption and provide support for those most in need, rather than siphoning off public resources to consolidate power for the elite few. After years of stagnation, this year's deCPI decrease must be a wake-up call to take on urgent reforms and protect fundamental rights and freedoms across the region.