

CPI 2023 for Middle East & North Africa: Dysfunctional approach to fighting corruption undermines progress

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The loss of momentum in anti-corruption efforts across the Middle East and North Africa is diminishing public trust. At the same time, adopting a reactive, rather than preventative, approach to fighting corruption impairs good governance.

For over a decade, most Arab States have failed to improve their positions on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and 2023 is no exception. This trend is attributed to high levels of political corruption that undermine anti-corruption efforts across the region. Corruption continues to hinder citizens' access to essential services, including health and education, and in many cases, even threatens their right to life.

With only seven years to go to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Arab States struggle to fulfil their commitments to justice and human rights. This is due to the absence of proper infrastructure and national integrity systems. The Arab States have an average score of 34 out of 100, demonstrating the long road ahead in assuring integrity and justice throughout the region.

The top scorers among the Arab States are **United Arab Emirates** (CPI score: 68) and **Qatar** (58), while the lowest are **Libya** (18), **Yemen** (16), **Syria** (13) and **Somalia** (11).

Social and structural instability fuels injustice

Across the region, widespread corruption significantly undermines progress, and many states grapple with deeply rooted social and structural injustice. These prevailing conditions perpetuate various forms of inequality, including disparate access to essential services and resources. This not only exacerbates social inequalities but also severely impedes the pursuit of the SDGs.

The Arab States continue to struggle with a dysfunctional approach to fighting corruption. In previous years, governments have made [promises and devised strategies to fight corruption](#), but new administrations frequently discard these initiatives, leading to a loss of momentum. This inconsistency and lack of continuity in anti-corruption efforts fosters profound distrust between citizens and their governments, which not only undermines political stability but also furthers conflict escalation throughout the region.

Seven of the Arab States are included in the bottom ten scores on this year's CPI, while 80 per cent of the countries live in conflict and witness both social and political instability. According to the [2023 Global Peace Index](#), countries in the Middle East and North Africa remain the least peaceful in the world for the eighth year in a row. **Libya** (18), **Yemen** (16), **Syria** (13) and **Somalia** (11) are clouded by conflict and war, which prevents the development of integrity systems and effective anti-corruption policies and mechanisms.

The continuous state of war in **Yemen** traps the country in a cycle of corruption, making it difficult to manoeuvre its way out with minor reforms. The [war economy](#) has allowed the corrupt to accumulate wealth and escape accountability while millions of people are unable to access emergency aid, health care and other life-saving services. This reality has led to undue influence by armed groups and militias, as well as possibilities of aid manipulation by civil society organisations in the face of extortion.

The Arab States have escalated their defence expenditures in response to numerous conflicts, presenting significant corruption risks. The [Government Defence Integrity Index](#) classifies each Arab State within the "very high" and "critical" categories for corruption susceptibility. High levels of [corruption in the defence sector](#) point to systemic governance issues and a troubling convergence of business and defence interests. Additionally, disproportionate defence spending diverts much-needed funding away from institutions responsible for upholding justice and strengthening anti-corruption efforts.

Egypt (35) has fluctuated around the same score for over a decade and remains among the world's lowest-scoring countries in the [Rule of Law Index](#). Since 2013, the military has had influence over political decision-making, profoundly [undermining the private sector](#) and contributing to the economic crisis. In December, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi [secured his third six-year term](#). His tenure, initiated by the overthrow of elected president Mohamed Morsi in 2013, has been marked by [extensive infrastructure spending](#), which lacks transparency and a robust economic strategy. This approach has led to a substantial increase in national debt.

As the region is experiencing many conflicts, including the ongoing Gaza war, we are witnessing several vulnerabilities in bordering countries. Recent reports show [emerging corruption practices](#), such as the [payment of "fees"](#) on the border for those fleeing the war. Not only does this have serious impacts on the most vulnerable but it adds another layer of injustice and reinforces power imbalances.

Conflict exacerbates already existing systemic inequalities across the region. **Libya** (18), a country with one of the biggest oil reserves in Africa, has been in a [state of conflict](#) for over a decade with no end in sight. Oil is used as a manoeuvring tactic, leaving the country locked in a political standoff and the rich natural resources at risk of exploitation. In **Jordan** (46), despite clear government initiatives attempting to advance good governance, systemic imbalances remain. This reality limits people's access to

equal opportunities, which often rely on [personal connections](#). Therefore, it is crucial to pinpoint the root causes of corruption in order to undermine it.

One step forward, two steps back

Across the region, there is a [desire to move forward](#) in the fight against corruption, yet many obstacles stand in the way. The stagnation in many Arab States points to issues related to implementation and sustained commitment to anti-corruption measures.

There are some similarities in the ways **Lebanon** (24) and **Iraq** (23) tackle corruption, as many efforts are undermined by [weak political structures](#) and an ongoing lack of will to build adequate integrity systems (for more detail on Lebanon, see box below). In December, Iraq held its [first local elections in over a decade](#). However, this was overshadowed by the sectarian divisions in the country influencing the political structures, as seen when one of the main political parties boycotted the election altogether.

Tunisia (40) is a nation confronting significant democratic challenges. In 2023, the country underwent a pivotal event – the election of a new parliament – with the [lowest voter turnout in the country's history](#), at a mere 11 per cent. This election, under the presidency of Kais Saied, further highlighted the deepening political crisis. Saied, who [seized control of the judiciary](#) and suspended the then-existing parliament in July 2021, continued to consolidate his power, raising concerns over the checks and balances essential for a functioning democracy. The Anti-Corruption Commission, once a beacon of post-revolutionary democratic progress in Tunisia, was [notably undermined](#). Its closure dealt a severe blow to accountability and transparency and endangered the safety of whistleblowers and anti-corruption activists.

The Tunisian government's intensified [crackdown on human rights](#) further compounded these issues. Freedom of speech and assembly were curtailed, civic space shrank under increased surveillance and legal prosecutions of dissenters escalated. These developments signalled a worrying departure from the democratic ideals of the Tunisian Revolution, drawing both domestic and international concern for the future trajectory of the country's democratic and human rights landscape.

Country to watch: Kuwait – One step forward

This year, **Kuwait** (46) obtained its highest score on the CPI since 2015 and paved the way toward more robust commitments to fighting corruption on a national level. In September, the National Assembly voted on a [new government roadmap](#) to improve development performance and achieve economic reform, the first of its kind in the country's history. The roadmap has notably focused on enhancing transparency and good governance principles. Despite the inclusion of some legislative changes, there

remains a need to refine the legal framework further, focusing on conflict of interest, foreign bribery law, the right to information and the establishment of the electoral commission.

While reflecting on the anti-corruption momentum building in the country, Kuwait Transparency Society issued [11 requirements](#) to ensure effective and transparent implementation of the national roadmap. Most notably, our national chapter emphasised the need for civil society to work freely and without any restrictions, the establishment of good governance structures in the government sector and increased transparency in public procurement.

Country to watch: Lebanon –Two steps back

Throughout the years, **Lebanon** (24) has been a significant decliner in the CPI, having dropped six points since 2012. Despite calls from civil society urging the government to take corruption seriously, the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion in 2020 has left the country without a clear path forward to establish a robust national integrity system.

Lebanon has been without an elected president and a functioning government for over a year, leaving the country in a [political vacuum](#) and relying on the international community's support to survive. Although there have been efforts to tackle corruption – including the [National Anti-Corruption Commission](#) – this institution has nowhere to go without proper governance structures.

Amid the [end of mandate of the central bank chief](#), the country's economic state has been in a downward spiral. This crisis has severely limited access to minimum essential services, including health care and education. Transparency International Lebanon's [Lollar campaign](#) aimed to shed light on the ongoing economic crisis, revealing the failures of the banking system and its impact on civilians. Despite all efforts, the situation has only become more dire. Meanwhile, human rights abuses continue to escalate, and Lebanon's political instability and ongoing economic crisis are worsening every day. But all hope is not lost. As a result of [our national chapter's advocacy](#), there have been improvements in the use of beneficial ownership data in public procurement to prevent corruption and fraud.

Anti-corruption laws require a reality check

Across the region, the current anti-corruption strategies are primarily reactive rather than preventative. Many countries that drafted laws and policies have failed to systematically mainstream anti-corruption measures with effective enforcement and prevention mechanisms. Simply increasing investigations and incarcerating corrupt individuals is not enough to address systemic issues; a holistic approach is needed to fix these flawed systems.

Incoming governments are often hindered by pre-existing, corrupt systems, which limit their ability to tackle the root causes of corruption. To bring about real change in the Arab States, a reality check is needed – a comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying causes of corruption and prioritises prevention instead of building on systems with deeply corrupt foundations. Governments cannot claim to be successful in the fight against corruption unless all sectors of society – primarily civil society, media and private sector – can adequately participate in the process.