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CPI 2021 FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION ENDANGERS DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

With an average score of 39 out of 100 for the fourth consecutive year, states across the Middle East and North Africa are struggling to achieve tangible results against corruption. No country has registered a significant improvement on the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in the last decade.

Systemic political misconduct and private interests overtaking the common good have allowed the region – already devastated by multiple long-running conflicts – to be further ravaged by corruption and human rights abuses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **United Arab Emirates** (CPI score: 69) and **Qatar** (63) are the top performers in the region while war-torn **Libya** (17), **Yemen** (16) and **Syria** (13) score the worst.

POLITICAL CORRUPTION RAMPANT

Almost a decade after the Arab Spring protests swept through the region, political corruption is still hampering the fight against corruption and progress towards democracy.

Tunisia (CPI score: 44), which sparked that series of protests in early 2011, has become an unfortunate example of how democratic gains can be lost. The promising democracy that followed a 31-year dictatorship has recently been plunged back into uncertainty. The elected President Kaïs Saïed has [seized control over the legislative branch](#), extending Tunisia's months-long parliamentary "freeze". Other worrisome measures include the [placement of the agency's head under house arrest](#), which [weaken the existing accountability mechanisms](#) and raise concerns about the fate of whistleblowers who report corruption.

JORDAN FAILS TO IMPROVE

Owing largely to political corruption and inefficient government policies, **Jordan** (49) has been stuck at the same score for five years. A high turnover in governmental and ministerial positions – [four cabinet reshuffles in 2021 alone](#) – has made fighting corruption difficult, with each new government setting its own priorities instead of building on the work of its predecessors. Civil society organisations have suffered with the [government working to restrict their efforts](#). This short-sighted approach has contributed to a lack of sustainable reforms in Jordan. [Little separation of power between the executive and parliament](#) also aids corruption, as does the stalling of democratic reforms that have been promised for years.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government [reportedly misused](#) safety measures to violate freedoms of assembly and speech. The [2019 cybersecurity law](#) was a crucial tool

for limiting these rights and restricting access to information. The government has even resorted to arresting and imprisoning journalists for criticising the state's pandemic response.

LEBANON'S COLLAPSING SCORE

In **Lebanon** (24), high levels of political corruption have [caused multiple crises](#), including the tragic explosion in the capital's port in 2020. Even before this tragedy, continuous [protests since October 2019](#) were calling for systemic reforms. In the wake of the Beirut blast, Lebanon sunk into economic collapse and political instability, going [without a government for a 13-month period](#). Widespread protests by Lebanese citizens against political corruption and the economic meltdown were met with [persecution and harsh suppression of basic rights by the authorities](#), even as the Lebanese political class failed to address the unfolding crises. Unsurprisingly, Lebanon has declined, dropping 6 points (from 30) on the CPI since 2012.

Several laws passed in the last two years are nowhere near being enforced. Lebanon also has major deficiencies in public procurement processes and financial transparency. In June 2021, attempting to restore confidence in the government after the Beirut blast, the parliament adopted a new public procurement law. It has [disturbing loopholes](#) that allow information, conflicts of interests and company owners to remain hidden, among other gaps such as not accounting for the role of civil society organisations.

Out of all the offshore companies revealed in the Pandora Papers leaks, Lebanese politicians and businesspeople owned the greatest number of them – [a whopping 346 companies](#). Although the leaks named several public and politically exposed figures, no investigation has been undertaken by the Lebanese authorities.

WIDESPREAD WASTE

Corrupt use of personal connections – known as “wasta” – reinforces inequality across the region. According to Transparency International's [2019 Global Corruption Barometer](#), one in five citizens in the Arab states paid a bribe and more than one in three used personal connections to receive essential public services such as education and healthcare.

In **Iraq** (21), efforts to dismantle systemic corruption are hampered by a [power-sharing governance system that has been weakened by sectarianism](#). This has led to their institutions being staffed by officials appointed because of sectarian allegiance and connections rather than competence. Such institutions naturally demonstrate little public accountability and are instead driven by each group's political positions and power.

CIVIC FREEDOMS UNDER ATTACK

Jordan wasn't the only Arab state where civic space and access to information recently deteriorated. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this trend.

In **Morocco** (39), an [emergency law](#) not only deprived citizens of their freedoms of movement, assembly and speech, but was also used as legal cover for targeting government critics and human rights defenders speaking up about (mis)management of the country's pandemic response.

Egypt (33) was one of the worst offenders of the year, with [authorities punishing dissent](#) and detaining journalists, politicians and activists. Protests were met with a brutal response, including the unlawful use of force and mass arrests. Freedoms of assembly and speech remain severely restricted in the country.

TROUBLE IN TOP-PERFORMING COUNTRIES

The **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** (69) and **Qatar** (63) may be the region's top-performing countries, but both have weathered major transnational scandals. The [Pandora Papers](#) investigations revealed the use of offshore accounts by the Emir of Qatar and the country's former prime minister, alongside the UAE's vice president and prime minister. The Financial Action Task Force has highlighted gaps in both [Qatar's](#) and [UAE's anti-money laundering frameworks](#) and their shortcomings at uncovering the people behind anonymous companies. These have cemented the countries' reputations as hotspots for dirty money.

Qatar and the UAE's records on human rights and freedom of expression have been dismal. In January 2020, the Qatari government passed a [vaguely worded law](#) penalising a broad range of speech and publishing activities. And more than 25 people [remain imprisoned](#) in the UAE for peaceful political protest and dissent, including lawyers, academics and human rights defenders.

Meanwhile, a [sponsorship system in the region called "kafala"](#) grants employers disproportionate power over migrant workers, including residency status and the ability to file criminal charges. This system is [considered to foster corruption](#) since the immense power placed in employers' hands leads to instantaneous and often unlawful changes of rules of contracts. This leaves already vulnerable workers in danger of being extorted. In the run-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, migrant workers employed on stadium construction sites have gone [for months without pay](#). They are not allowed to form or join unions, and often live and work in [crowded and unsanitary conditions](#).

Anti-corruption successes among the top-performing Gulf countries so far have depended on administrative simplicity. However, stagnation has set in during the last decade, showing the limits of a top-down approach that doesn't involve civil society or a free press. Furthermore, neither public institutions nor the judiciary are independent, and the law does not apply equally to everyone. Corruption here is exposed through international investigations, not scrutiny from within the country.

THE WAY FORWARD

Corruption in the Middle East and North Africa is systemic, with deep roots in both institutions and everyday life. From top-level political corruption to wasta to severe

human rights abuses, a range of issues must be addressed to empower citizens and free them from corruption.

Governments should start with cultivating solid democratic principles that allow for accountability by committing to reforms, building strong and independent institutions, and respecting the division of powers. They must also protect civic space, the media and whistleblowers, so that all parts of society can collectively join the fight against corruption.