REGIONAL DISCUSSION PAPER
"ANTI-CORRUPTION, PEACE AND CONFLICT IN THE ARAB REGION"

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Anti-Corruption and Integrity in the Arab Countries (ACIAC)

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Introduction

While anticorruption efforts around the world have expanded, corruption remains a persistent barrier to advancement of effective institutions and the realization of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) worldwide, including in the Arab region. According to Transparency International's latest index, corruption is stagnating or worsening in 148 countries worldwide (Transparency International, 2024). Increasingly, this persistence of corruption is also recognized as a barrier to peace. With corruption contributing to the onset of conflict, its escalation and persistence, and marring efforts to advance post conflict stabilization.

Efforts to reduce corruption and advance peace intersect in various ways, prompting increased scholarly and practitioner attention to their nexus. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, as, for years, scholars and practitioners tended to view corruption as a second-order problem that could only be tackled once violent conflict stabilized. Today there is growing attention to the role that corruption can play in contributing to, exacerbating, or prolonging conflict, as well as greater understanding of how anticorruption activities can support peace, prompting a growing body of research and new practices working to address the two issues with more synergy. Still, anti-corruption practitioners and peace actors still often work through separate channels, with many calling for more knowledge and documentation of how peace and conflict intersect is needed, as well as improved tools and frameworks to address these issues together.

Work that effectively tackles both corruption and conflict in a coordinated and mutually supportive fashion remains nascent. This is complicated by the fact that some studies find that corrupt practices can sometimes have a stabilizing impact in fragile states by allowing unstable parties access to resources in the short run (see, for example, Hanne and Fjelde; Le Billon, 2003). However, the evidence ultimately highlights that this stability is short-lived, and that transparency and accountability are critical to ensuring more peaceful communities and resilient institutions (Maclachlan et al, 2017; Dix et al, 2012). Given the evidence on these dynamics, actions to ensure effective sequencing and coordination of activities to address corruption as a part of stabilization activities, without undermining peace goals, is critical.

This paper offers a framework for considering the nexus between anticorruption, peace, and conflict alongside related recommendations, with a particular focus on the Arab region and UNDP's Regional Project on Anti-Corruption and Integrity in the Arab Countries (ACIC) focal countries, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, Egypt, Somalia, and Yemen.

Though by no means a problem unique to the Arab region, corruption continues to fuel calls for reform from activists who face conflict and instability, and who call for more transparent, effective governance across the Middle East and North Africa. Corruption raises a range of issues of continued relevance and salience to many protracted conflicts that are ongoing in the region as well as shaping the potential for conflict and peace/stabilization in other settings, leading to widespread suffering and intersecting with and contributing to roadblocks that have marred pathways to sustained peace and stability.

Many Arab governments have committed to fighting corruption, for example, in commitments to the UN Convention Against Corruption and in the Arab Anti Corruption Convention, as well as

through notable efforts to improve accountability. These commitments, alongside international and regional commitments to securing Arab states' agendas to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, have helped structure, legitimize, and galvanize actions among national actors and reformers.

Still, grievances about corrupt actors and institutions remain an ongoing concern in the region. Scores for countries in the Middle East and North Africa hover low and have been declining on Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index, and those in states of conflict (Yemen, Libya and Syria) hold the lowest scores (CPI, 2023). These experiences take on particular contours across the Arab region, shaped broadly by the type of context, such as active conflicts (e.g. Yemen, Syria), crisis contexts (e.g. Lebanon) and GCC states (e.g. Saudi Arabia),[1] as well as the particulars of specific national contexts.

Ongoing corruption issues continue to shape conflict dynamics in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, and other states (Bouchabke & Haddad, 2021; Mehchy, 2021; Hill et al, 2013; Rahman and DiMaio, 2020). The intersections between corruption, widening inequalities, economic collapse, and state failure mount concern today in Lebanon, where accountability concerns around public officials fuel mistrust and fragility (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

As critical junctures are arising in conflicts in 2025, including in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Sudan, and Yemen, learning about how best to frame and understand the nexus between conflict and corruption, both its role in conflict prevention and in response and recovery, from an Arab regional lens, remains all the more pertinent. This paper offers a framing of the issues, raising an overview of available evidence to inform work on the conflict-corruption nexus in the region, and offering lessons-learned from a set of illustrative examples and cases to offer related recommendations.

Section I. Framing the nexus: Definitions and Concepts

I. Framing the nexus: Definitions and concepts

Corruption

Corruption broadly refers to "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Transparency International, n.d.). According to Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index launched in February 2025, high rates of corruption persist worldwide, with a global average of 43 points out of 100, and 148 countries remaining stagnant or increasing their levels of corruption, despite ongoing attention to combatting corruption worldwide and across the international community, indicating the persistence of the issue.

Underlining the connections between corruption and conflict and its particular relevance to the Arab region, among countries with the highest rates of corruption, most are fragile and conflict-affected (including from the worst scoring as of TI's 2024 CPI, South Sudan, Somalia,

[1] UNDP typology (reference requested)

Venezuela, Syria, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, and Equatorial Guinea, including several from the Arab region and ACIAC countries).

Noting corruption as an "insidious plague" in 2003, the United Nations under General Assembly resolution 58/4 adopted the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) (and underlined in related agreements including the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combatting Corruption, and the Arab Convention to Fight Corruption). The UNCAC calls, among areas, for combatting corrupt practices including:

- Bribery (offering or soliciting advantages, such as money, loans, fees, rewards, or other advantages, as an inducement for an illegal action)
- Trading in influence (Using influence in government or to authorities to obtain favors or preferential treatment)
- Embezzlement (Using money or assets entrusted them, used for a different purpose than authorized and intended)
- Abuse of functions (Performing or failing to perform an act, in violation of laws, for the purpose of obtaining undue advantage)

These practices can manifest in various practices (including acts such as corrupt payments; nepotism and favoritism in hiring and promotions; misuse or theft of state funds; extortion; and electoral fraud) and on several levels, all of which can be particularly heightened in fragile or post conflict settings where institutions are often weak and nascent. This includes forms of everyday corruption affecting everyday citizens, i.e. transactional corruption, policy and institution level corruption, i.e. policy capture, and entrenched and systemic forms impacting institutional processes such as procurement; and state capture/kleptocracy, i.e. the repurposing of state institutions for personal or group gain.

Corruption in the Arab Region

Corruption is an ongoing concern in the Arab World. In 2009, the World Bank reported some 60% of public officials interviewed from the region felt that the private sector in their countries was rent-seeking and corrupt (World Bank, 2009). And concerns about corruption fueled the Arab Uprisings sparked in the early 2010s, also playing a role in more recent protests in Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan in 2019.

According to *Arab Barometer* data in 2021a majority of citizens—ranging from 89 percent in Tunisia and Lebanon to 61 percent in Morocco—believed that corruption is prevalent in state agencies to a large or medium extent (Kayyali, 2021). Declining numbers of Arab respondents believed that governments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are effectively combating it (Ibid).

Figure 1: Corruption and Conflict in ACIAC Countries

ACIAC Country	CPI 2024 Score	CPI Ranking	ACLED Score
Tunisia	39	92	Low/Inactive
Egypt	30	130	Low/Inactive
Iraq	26	140	High
Lebanon	22	154	Extreme

Yemen	13	173	High
Somalia	9	179	High
Palestine	(Not measured)	(Not measured)	Extreme

All ACIAC countries, with the exception of Syria, are parties to the UNCAC Treaty, and many Arab countries have sought to align national legislation with UNCAC and other international standards on corruption, and according to Beschel et al, 2024, "the underlying legal framework for tackling corruption [in parts of the MENA region] not particularly deficient," suggesting it is in implementing rather than legislating that anticorruption activities are most needed.

Defining Conflict

Conflict lacks an agreed definition, and with the emergence of violent nonstate actors and modern forms of instability, has a variety of meanings in literature and practice. The term broadly refers to the state of declared war or de-facto violent clashes between actors (UNDRR). "Conflict" often relates to the wider concept and terminology of "fragile and conflict-affected states" (FCAS) which lacks consensus in definitions but is sometimes used to refer to the "fundamental failure of the state to perform functions necessary to meet citizens' basic needs and expectations (McIntosh and Buckley, 2015).

The OECD remarks that, while conflict-affected contexts tend to be "fragile," the bulk of fragile contexts are not in a state of war. Fragility however increases the risks of conflict or crisis (OECD, 2025).

Conflict in the Arab Region

According to the Geneva Academy, the Middle East and North Africa is the most conflict-affected region, where more than 45 armed conflicts are currently taking place (Geneva Academy, 2024) although Africa remains the region with the most state-based conflicts (PRIO, 2024). Conflict-related death tolls are among the highest in several MENA settings, including Syria, Somalia, Sudan, and Palestine (ACLED).

Both globally and in the Arab region, countries with greater government effectiveness and higher GDPs per capita tend to be better at combatting corruption. Countries struggling with war and fragility tend to do worse in both the Arab region and elsewhere, which is a particular problem given the prevalence of conflict-afflicted countries in the Arab region (Beschel et al, 2024).

Framing the Nexus

Corruption and conflict intersect in a variety of ways, and these pathways, and how they relate to the Arab region and ACIAC countries in particular, are explored more deeply in this report.

Studies on the corruption-conflict nexus find that corruption and conflict interact in multiple and dynamic ways, such that the two areas can operate as a "vicious cycle," with corrupt activities enabling conflict and undermining peace, and violence, instability and conflict enabling corrupt activities (Jackson et al, 2022). Fraud that diverts humanitarian aid, for example, can sow mistrust and undermine peace. Shifts in patterns of corruption can themselves fuel conflict, while

incentives and rewards for corrupt actors to profit in the short run from efforts to stabilize conflict must be carefully monitored and understood to support those who aim to build and maintain lasting peace (Le Billon, 2003; Lindberg and Orjuela, 2011). Evidence on the connections between corruption, trust in government, and the empowerment of armed groups indicates the centrality of a nexus approach, and the need for reforms to work across multiple entry points to better address conflict's root causes (Toly, 2021).

The incentives that support corrupt activities require addressing to avoid exacerbating conflict dynamics, a risk sometimes referred to as a "negative peace" (Scharbatke-Church, 2017) (for example, where ad hoc police reforms in the Central African Republic were seen to promote corruption).

Corruption can become deeply entrenched within political systems and can last with particular perniciousness in conflict and post conflict settings, due to a number of factors that can incentivize elites that can become heightened in times of economic collapse, weak institutions and governance, and other symptoms of conflict.

In general, five "logics" (George and Malesky, 2025) can help explain corruptions persistence and require close attention to developing solutions, especially in conflict settings. These include:

Figure 2: Corruption logics, and their entrenchment in conflict

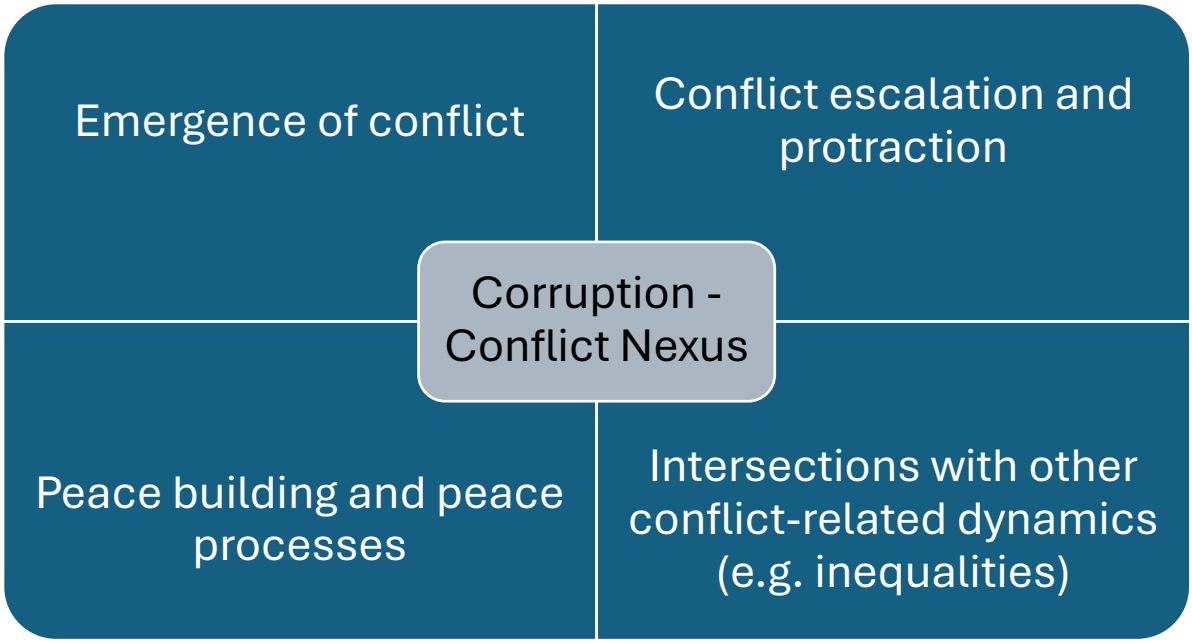
Direct personal benefit from corruption: Politicians or bureaucrats can benefit directly from corruption via bribes and kickbacks, which can become particularly valuable and feasible in fragile settings with weak institutions, making it difficult to break these cycles without replacing lost income or otherwise offering greater returns elsewhere (Fisman & Golden, 2017).
Entrenched interests: Political actors may owe their power to their ability to distribute corrupt rents to other elites. Such dynamics explain why power-sharing can breed corruption in post-conflict settings, where leaders may entrench one another's power and avoid destabilizing counter-movements by sharing the illicit rents. For example, a study of several post-conflict negotiated settlements between 1996-2010, including, among others, Bosnia, the Philippines, and Northern Ireland, found that power-sharing cabinets substantively increased corruption, particularly in settings with natural resource rents (see Haass & Ottmann, 2017).
State capture: A politician may be controlled (or "captured") by powerful economic actors who are resistant to anti-corruption reforms that challenge their profit or status. State capture can arise when a state's institutions are weak in post conflict settings (Hellman, Jones, & Kauffman, 2000).
Bureaucratic agency: Leaders who may sincerely wish to advance reform can be thwarted when powerful bureaucratic subordinates benefit from the status quo. This sometimes explains why bureaucrats and low-level officials have diverged from the wishes of government through bribe-taking, also heightened in settings of institutional breakdown and economic collapse in fragile settings (Ortner & Chassing, 2018, Zheng & Xiao, 2020).
Capacity: In some settings, a leader may be interested in anti-corruption reform but they lack the financial resources, technical know-how, bandwidth, or political capital

to combat sophisticated actors that are benefitting from the status quo, often serving as a blockage to corruption reform in fragile or post-conflict states when capacity levels can be particularly low and competing interests high. (Ackerman 2008, Zaum and Cheng 2011).

Broadly, four "pathways" can help explain how corruption can conflict, offering a framework through which reformers could consider advancing solutions and considering actions.

Though not exhaustive, this mapping of different pathways offers a set of lenses through which anticorruption and peace actors might frame their work, through a deeper analysis of pathways and potential protective and preventive activities that are further explored in Sections II and III.

Figure 3: Corruption-Conflict Nexus Pathways: A Framework



Section II. Exploring the nexus: How do corruption and conflict intersect?

This section reviews these "pathways" (Figure 3) through which one can consider with connections between corruption and conflict, with particular attention to these dynamics in the Arab region and within ACIAC focal countries.

a. Conditions for conflict and the emergence of conflict

Pathway description: Corruption within governments, institutions, or communities can contribute to the emergence of conflicts. Corrupt practices such as embezzlement, bribery, or

nepotism have fueled grievances and led to social unrest, political instability, and armed conflict.

Studies have illustrated a link between corrupt practices, endemic corruption, and fragility and violence. A large quantitative study, for example, from Mauro in 1995 found that corruption is positively correlated with political instability (Mauro, 1995), and another found stong links in specific between corruption and the onset of ethnic civil wars (Neudorfer and Theuerkauf, 2014). Such studies suggest a number of reasons for these links:

- Corruption can increase grievances and demands for political change. In particular, corruption can negatively impact investment and economic growth, increasing economic grievances. It can also distort the political decision-making process and exacerbate political and economic inequalities between ethnic groups, fueling tensions that drive civil conflict.
- Corruption can elevate the benefits of state capture, such that lucrative rents from the state and its ruling elite become prizes that groups compete over.
- Political corruption can undermine institutions, including processes of political changeover such as elections and conflict resolution mechanisms, delegitimizing political leadership and further weakening the state.

Box. Global example: Corruption and the Outbreak of Civil War in South Sudan, 2013

Corruption played a role in the onset of civil war in **South Sudan** in 2013. In early period of independence in 2011, South Sudan's ruling elite began diverting oil revenues, alongside budgets from other ministries, to finance patronage networks via defense sector spending to cover salaries of 230,000 soldiers and militia members, swelling the country's defense budget. This fragile arrangement kept loyalty and in turn stability in the short run. But by 2012 the country's oil revenues were challenged, reducing the ability of the Salva Kiir government to buy loyalty from opponents. Soonafter, devastating civil war broke out with wide scale humanitarian consequences (Maclachlan, 2018).

Within the Arab region, corruption's role in contributing to the conditions for conflict and driving the onset of conflict remains a critical aspect of an understating of ongoing regional violence.

Concerns about rampant corruption spurred protest movements across the region from 2011 onward known as the "Arab uprisings." But just five years into the spread of political movements that ushered in several new governments, corruption levels across the region had risen, with Transparency International reporting in 2016 that almost one in three people in MENA said they'd paid a bribe to access basic services including medicine, education, and water. Polling data revealing widespread corruption including ongoing petty corruption for accessing services was particularly shocking in Lebanon and Yemen, two contexts where violent conflict persists today.

Box: Exploring Corruption's role in creating conditions for conflict: Yemen & Lebanon

In **Yemen**, corruption is significant aspect of the complex story that drove the bloody war that is ongoing today that can help illustrate corruption's role in driving conflict. The conflict was initially triggered by power shifts that occurred in the wake of protests during the Arab uprisings, which spoke out against the corrupt rule of then- President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Elite factions and powerful military actors announced support for the opposition dismantling the previous elite structure, while resultant political ruptures led to the emergence of power vacuums, which armed actors and networks were able to exploit (McKernan 2021). Tensions and ongoing corruption exploitation evolved into a full-scale conflict in 2014, and the later Internationally Recognised Government of Yemen (IRGY) was plagued by in-fighting and minimal institutional capacity, and ongoing turmoil in the South exploited by Jihadi groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Ongoing competition and conflict in Yemen is fueled in part by "capital flight" that led up to the outbreak of violence in 2013 – as a major source of the world's illicit capital outflows in the period leading up to war, these flows that facilitate corruption damaged potential to build strong institutions and invest in the domestic economy (Hill et al, 2013). Yemen still ranks as one of the worst scoring countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (173/180). The country's war economy has "intensified existing corruption challenges" and "created avenues for illicit wealth accumulation for new powerbrokers and previously less powerful networks" (Bak, 2023).

In **Lebanon**, corruption also drove spiraling conflict. One specific and ongoing concern in Lebanon has been political corruption. Electoral practices including vote buying have resulted in ongoing deficit in national legitimacy of elected rulers. Lack of trust government is visible across government institutions, indeed in 2015 a report found less than 15% of those polled fully trusted the judiciary (El Dekkene, 2015). Investigations of corruption included cases such as: Embezzlement in the telecom industry by officials; Fraud leading to a garbage crisis; Corrupt procurement procedures in public health and environment (Maleeb, 2018). Recent years of violent conflict have seen economic and political conditions deteriorate in part as a result of the corrupt environment creating further conditions for instability. In October 2019, large scale protests called for the toppling of corruption in the country and responded to economic fallout. The promise of government reforms, stunted by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, failed to respond to grievances that heightened after an explosion at the Port of Beirut in 2020 seen as the result of government negligence. As economic conditions worsened, the government struggled with ongoing fallout and instability and, more recently, violence spilling over from the crisis in Gaza. Corruption was at the heart of many of the conditions that fueled unrest, and defined state failure in its economy and institutions making grievances rise and fester, fueling violence.

b. Conflict escalation and corruption's role in worsening violence

Pathway description: Corruption networks can exploit power vacuums, weak governance structures, and illicit economies, sustaining or escalating conflict. Corrupt actors can obstruct

and profit from funds deployed for the purposes of humanitarian relief and development in conflict, making conflict persist. Corruption can also help in sustaining armed groups and financing conflict activities, further obstructing effort to advance stability and development.

In already weak systems suffering from conflict, corruption takes from state 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 (Transparency International, 2024).

Countries that are experiencing active civil war or that face ongoing sectarian violence may lack financial or political capital to develop robust accountability mechanisms. Where accountability instruments may exist, they often become unenforceable in emergency contexts (Maxwell et al., 2012). Arab countries that rank at the bottom of transparency metrics, including Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, are all fragile or conflict-prone, where heightened violence makes it difficult for civil servants to advance transparent and accountable institutions (Beschel et al, 2024).

The cycles mutually fueling cycles of corruption and violence are visible in accounts of the spirals of conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, where international interventions at times drove further corruption. In the case of Afghanistan, "Widespread corruption and state capture by criminal networks undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government, reduced its effectiveness and created a source of resentment for its own population…In the words of Ryan Crocker, former United States Ambassador to Afghanistan: "*The ultimate point of failure for our efforts…wasn't an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption.*" (Washington Post, 2016) (Machlachlan, 2018).

After action reviews have since determined that international efforts such as ISAF exacerbated corruption risks by failing to investigate the absorptive capacity in target countries, where warlords and corrupt officials ultimately profited. Improved risk assessments and mitigation strategies could have picked up on where assistance arrangements might benefit corrupt networks, ultimately combatting the risks of heightened corruption

Those countries experiencing conflict and fragility can also become sites of further corruption from humanitarian finance flows into the area, providing further spoils of war that corrupt actors can coopt and weaponize, profiting from further violence in turn. Humanitarian organizations in fragile settings such as Syria and Lebanon have had to take the lead and scale up rapidly in the face of rapidly escalating conflicts, lacking "proper strategic plans for the disbursement of funds and the management of projects" (Bouchabke and Haddad, 2021).

Corruption risks in different types of emergencies include well documented risks of the diversion of aid to support warring parties, a major concern for humanitarian aid actually prolonging or worsening conflict (Collinson, 2003; Duffield, 2000; Keen, 1994). This has prompted a variety of efforts to prioritize and promote anticorruption in humanitarian action, with examples of promising practices and frameworks for this including:

- The Collective Commitment to Enhance Accountability and Transparency in Emergencies (CREATE) led by Transparency International (Grunewald et al., 2017)

working to provide humanitarian actors with recommendations to enhance transparency and accountability in their operations.
- UNICEF's United Nations Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers (HACT), which aims to manage financial risks related to transferring cash to partners.
- UNHCR's Refugee Assistance Information System (RAIS), a tool to try to mitigate many duplication and corruption risks.
- World Food Program's monitoring mechanism, which includes spot checks and random interviews with beneficiaries.

Within the Arab region and among ACIAC focal countries, corruption that pre-existed many ongoing, bloody, and protracted conflicts has worsened in conflict economies, contributing to a vicious cycle in which corruption has politically and economically profited warlords while the drivers of violence are heightened and fragility of the state worsened.

Box: Corruption and conflict escalation

In **Iraq**, a corrupt political economy heightened with the influx of international aid flows after 2003. Funds and support from a U.S.-led coalition and a new Iraqi government, with the backing of various international donors, to the tune of over $74 billion in international aid, was marred by corruption across sectors that significantly undermined efforts to pull the country from fragility and conflict (Dhingra and Alshamary, 2023). Accounts suggest that corruption in army recruitment and promotions, alongside corrupt practice such as theft of weapons and supplies, weakened the army's ability to thwart the rise of ISIS/Daesh (MacLachlan, 2018).

In **Syria**, state capture and other forms of corruption plagued the country's economy in the years before the outbreak of civil war in 2011. These corrupt features have worsened as war escalated and in turn may have fueled the prolonging of war for more than fourteen years. Features that both reflected and fueled the prolonging and worsening of conflict include "systemic diversion of international aid, illicit trade including drug and arms smuggling, human trafficking, and exploitation of volatile exchange rates" (Resimic, 2024, 1). The civil war "created new opportunities for corruption, benefitting the Assad administration and its associates, including foreign allies, who…benefit from opaque trade deals and government contracts" (Ibid, 9). Among the many and multifaceted features of corruption that drove further instability and violence, the war's displacement of regions including SNA controlled areas led to looting of property, which became a valuable source of funding for factions who distributed buildings to fighters (Tsurkov, 2022). Deep forms of corruption across sectors, including the health and justice systems, meant corrupt practices touched near every part of daily life, deepening disparities. The potential for stabilization in Syria's 2025 transitional process remains to be seen, as the new authorities promise "anti-corruption crackdown," launching a committee to investigate and dismantle corrupt networks (The New Arab, 2025), a daunting task which many remain concerned about. The success of efforts to address corruption could have substantial implications for prospects for postconflict reconstruction and peace.

c. Peace building and peace processes

Pathway description: Corruption has played a role in slow-rolling and undermining the effectiveness of peace processes, hindering efforts to establish rule of law, and further perpetuating cycles of violence.

In the past, corruption has sometimes been viewed as a necessary and tolerable feature of peace processes (what's known as "buying peace"). As an example, in Mozambique, the international community assisted and paid the party and militant group RENAMO to join a peace process in the 1990s, securing it gains in the arrangements that followed. This contributed to prolonged corruption in the post conflict administration and ultimately undermined peace. Overall, studies indicate that financial incentives to "buy peace" can help bring combatant leaders to the peace table, but often undermine peace goals in the long run (Le Billon, 2003).

Peacekeeping missions may be particularly ripe for focused action, including to address a range of risks facing peacekeeping missions, such as bribery, theft and natural resource exploitations. Building anticorruption practices and standards into field procurement, operation withdrawal practices, and other areas remain areas of urgent need for sustaining the likelihood of the success of peacekeeping.

Within the Arab region and ACIAC focal countries, corruption has remained an ongoing concern in relation to attempted peace processes, and efforts to integrate anticorruption into holistic peace processes remains a promising area for mutually enforcing progress.

For example, surveys in 2023 found corruption to be a top concern for **Palestinians**, a potential factor contributing to instability pre-dating the current conflict, as destruction now ravages Gaza (Arab Barometer, 2024). In **Libya**, peace processes have been threatened by vote-buying allegations, with allegations of bribes between $150,000-$200,000 for votes (Middle East Eye, 2021). These prominent corruption concerns both reflect and drive instability in these settings, highlighting the importance of continued investment in transparency as a feature of peace brokering and peace building actions to come.

Despite the connections between peace and transparency, there remain gaps in explicit recognition of corruption built into peace activities, leading advocates to call for enhancing and more firmly embedding commitments, guidance, and good practices in the international architecture and conflict-specific actors working to broker and sustain peace. Over recent decades, between 1990 and 2023, anti-corruption provisions appeared in 140 peace agreements as part of 62 peace processes (Forster, 2024).

Promising cases that incorporated good governance and anticorruption explicitly into peace negotiations include negotiations that took place in El Salvador, Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Papua New Guinea, and Liberia, to varying degrees of implementation (Spector, 2011). As academic Bertram Spector writes, "A flawed or incomplete negotiation or implementation process can set the stage for renewed conflict. Dealing effectively with integrity issues and future governance practices is essential" (Ibid).

Box. Corruption undermining peace

Peacebuilding efforts have been undermined in **Somalia** by a corrupt environment (Ahmed, 2024), highlighting the centrality of a joined-up approach to combatting corruption and advancing peace and stability. The country, embroiled in ongoing waves of civil war and violence following a military junta in the 1980s, has long suffered from high rates of corruption, with, and remains one of the most corrupt countries in the world (ranking 179 out of 180 according to TI's 2024 CPI). In the history of the country's conflict, a corrupt and entrenched patronage system undermined transitional governance and past peace attempts, significantly undermining the legitimacy, for example, of the country's Transition Federal Government (TFG) which departed in 2012, as well as serving as a key factor undermining a highly contested election in 2017, with ongoing implications for Somalia's national government today as the country has faced ongoing fragility alongside continued extreme reports of corruption, including upticks in al-Shabaab fighters targeting civilians, and humanitarian crisis conditions in 2023. Somalia's government has invested in an anti-corruption strategy and new legislation aimed at combatting corruption, but persistent corruption remains a major concern alongside ongoing fragility.

In **Libya**, ongoing illicit economies linked to armed groups and political actors continue to stymie efforts to advance peace including by stymying efforts at building government institutions and related UN-driven activities. Profits from these economies fund armed groups and drive pushback against stabilization efforts and drive conflicts between groups. Both petty and large-scale corruption continue to stymie efforts to drive security and rule of law (Herbert et al, 2023). The UN's peace effort, under the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), has been encouraged via the Security Council to insert explicit language around the role of illicit economies undermining peace, and to take a more active role in anticorruption including in efforts to disincentivize armed group involvement in organized crime, as a critical feature of future peace efforts (Ibid).

d. Intersections with other dynamics

Pathway description: Corruption's intersection with other dynamics, including food insecurity and poverty, weak institutions, climate stress, and social inequality, can variously deepen the influence of these problems that can themselves undermine peace, acting as a threat multiplier.

Corruption's impacts on poverty and social inequality are variously documented in studies, and raise concern given the linkages between these factors and the onset and escalation of conflict. For example, corruption is linked to reduced government revenues, lower public expenditure on supportive services such as health and education, and lower quality infrastructure (Tanzi and Davvoodi, 1997). Inequality itself can also facilitate corruption, as desperation can fuel higher and more prominent fees for basic needs. In Latin American cities, police officers' perceptions of wealth have influenced how they solicit bribes (Fried, Lagunes and Venkataramni, 2010).

Corruption is also linked to gender inequality and other forms of social exclusion through a variety of pathways. Some connect gender to the broader effects of corruption on services, for example, as women are more likely to take on gendered care burdens, they can be more exposed to corruption across health care, education, and social services. Other challenges and crimes, including sextortion (or demands for sexual favors) is a form of corruption that can especially impact women and girls, driving various negative impacts including lowered school rates among girls (Leach et al, 2014). All of these concerns can become heightened in conflict settings, where service delivery is challenged and where women's vulnerabilities and the risks of sexual violence also becomes heightened.

Poverty, inequality and other impacts on social cohesion variously shape the structural drivers of conflict (Marks, 2016), and as corruption can feed off of and exacerbate these dynamics. The connected ways in which they shape one another requires close attention to design optimal programs to address these linked concerns.

In the Arab region, where women's political representation is lowest among world regions (though it has been improving) and where corruption remains high, there is work to link low rates of female representation in parliament to high rates of corruption. This is in part due to evidence on the correlation between higher participation of women in the economic and political sphere and lower corruption (Jaidane-Mazigh et al, 2022). While women are not intrinsically less corrupt than men, they can suffer in particular ways from corruption and tend to prioritize services such as education and healthcare in decision-making roles. A variety of pathways suggest that reduced inequality can help break existing patrimonial and clientelist networks that have entrenched corrupt practices across the Arab world. A gendered perspective can thus offer an important avenue for ongoing consideration in the Arab region.

In **Egypt**, corruption in the country's bread supply remains an ongoing concern. Bread shortages led to public outcry, including among women, that contributed to the ousting of then-President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. In Egypt, food insecurity remains a concern for at least 20% of the population living on less than one dollar a day, a segment of the population for which bread remains a primary source of nutrition (about one third of caloric intake). The country's subsidized wheat program suffers from corrupt losses – with an estimated 7 million Egyptian pounds worth of subsidies lost in corruption annually. Corruption in this supply chain continues to threaten instability and economic precarity in the country, which remain concerning factors that can drive conflict (Day and Hoang).

Section III. Acting on the Nexus: Experiences from Practice and Arab Regional Lesson-Learning

"And yet, the linkages between corruption and insecurity have not become an integral part of key security-related debates and plans. Even when corruption is acknowledged as a strategic challenge, this recognition is rarely translated into specific guidelines and tools that could protect international engagement from corruption risk." – Karolina Maclachlan, 2018

Given the links reviewed in this report between corruption and conflict, there is urgent interest in actions to work at the intersection of corruption and conflict. This section reviews some of these promising practices, with a particular focus on the Arab region and ACIAC countries.

Best practices indicate that, given the logics of corruption (introduced on p. 4) optimal interventions will be most likely to succeed when incentives for transparency and accountability and the benefits these can bring to elites and leaders are aligned with reform attempts. Some elites and leaders may benefit from corruption and may need to see gains from other reforms that otherwise will benefit them to reform. Some elites and leaders may want to reduce corruption and may even have advanced sincere attempts but can be stymied when other incentives drive ongoing corrupt practices among their ranks. Elites and leaders and those in their offices may, however, benefit, for example, from efficiency and budgetary gains that may come from reducing leakage for government agencies from corruption. Interventions such as e-government programs that digitize payment processes and help advance data collection and transparency can benefit those leaders who can benefit from increased payment flows to their offices, a promising practice, for example, that helped reduce corruption in Vietnam (Malesky et al, 2023).

Bringing good practices from the anticorruption field to fragile and conflict-affected settings requires a conflict- and context- sensitivity to the corruption and conflict dynamics of a particular environment. In particular, this requires an understanding of the incentives shaping corrupt actors across a conflict landscape, including the activities of government actors, security forces, licit and illicit economies, and armed groups, and identifying windows of opportunity around which they may benefit more broadly from reform alongside the institutionalization of transparency and accountability within and across the landscape of peace efforts.

Data and transparency efforts

Data collection and reporting to advance transparency can be critical for anticorruption but can prove particularly daunting in conflict-affected settings where institutions are failing or weak and capacity is particularly challenged. In the Arab region, only six countries hold ‘Right to Information laws’ – Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen. Though they do not guarantee implementation, such frameworks can offer a starting point to expanding transparency, and thus could be expanded across the region. Three countries – Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia- are also members of the Open Budget Partnership, that works to improve accountability in national budget processes.

Reporting on corruption rates and practices more specifically can be exceedingly difficult in conflict-affected Arab states. National anticorruption agencies in Iraq, Jordan, and Kuwait have helped advance knowledge through comprehensive annual reporting practices. Expanding and improving quality data reporting, including through capacity building exercises, can support governments and citizens to address problems and measure performance in conjunction with ongoing metrics including efforts in line with the SDGs on sustainable and accountable institutions.

Anticorruption commitments, especially in connection with peace agendas

Expanding attention to anticorruption agendas, especially in connection with peace agendas, is critical. Currently, corruption remains a periphery issue in many peace agendas, with advocates calling for bringing explicit support for corruption more firmly into peace activities. Given global and regional commitments to anti-corruption, including the UNCAC, the Arab Convention, the SDGs, and other existing frameworks can help reformers bring corruption agendas into formal political spaces and dialogues, drawing on existing state commitments.

Box. Leveraging the Arab Anti-Corruption Convention

The Arab Anti-Corruption Convention, signed in 2010 by all members of the Arab League except Somalia, aims to "prevent and combat all forms of corruption; recover assets; and uphold the values of integrity, transparency, accountability and the rule of law. The Convention also seeks to engage civil society in relevant efforts to prevent and combat corruption by raising awareness of its negative impact on individuals and communities."

The Convention offers a fruitful anchoring point for advocacy across Arab countries to boost and advance commitments to transparency and accountability. It has helped develop a regionally owned and relevant set of principles that denote shared goals and commitments across Arab states. Its implementation remains a critical agenda for anticorruption advocates and peace advocates given high corruption rates lingering in the years since the convention's introduction.

Elevating these commitments as a piece of a wider peace and conflict-prevention and response agenda in the region could help ensure corruptions linkages to conflict are made more visible and rooted in Arab states' existing agendas and regional perspectives.

Anticorruption bodies and agencies

Resourcing for anticorruption agencies can help support peace goals. The Arab region's anticorruption agencies, which have mixed effects, tend to be less resourced and less staffed than global counterparts – with some MENA countries spending around $2.08 per capita on anticorruption agencies, while those in other settings spend three times as much (Beschel et al, 2024). In the Arab region, Kuwait's anticorruption agency is particularly highly resourced. Usually viewed as a technocratic piece of the anticorruption agenda rather than integral to conflict prevention and reconstruction, building in support for the set up and resourcing of such institutions especially in settings where financing for these institutions appears otherwise limited, could prove a productive part of wider efforts to advance peace, given the links between corruption and conflict.

Box. Anticorruption bodies and commissions

A number of anticorruption institutions formed since 2011 in **Tunisia**, including the Truth and Dignity Commission, the Authority for Good Governance and the Fight Against Corruption, the National Instance of Good Governance (INLUCC) and the Ministry of Governance and the Fight Against Corruption. Anticorruption advocates lament that many of these bodies have been under resourced and unable to deliver firm anticorruption outcomes – for example, UNLUCC saw 1729 corruption related complaints in 2016, but of these only 94 went on to prosecution (Kelly, 2019). Further resourcing and capacity building for anticorruption bodies is needed.

Strengthening civil society watchdog organizations in Tunisia, such as I Watch, Tounsa, Al-Bawsala, and the network OpenGovt.tn can help maintain advocacy, although these organizations have faced intimidation (Lee-Jones, 2008) and require increased support and protection especially in contexts of fragility when such organizations face increased challenges.

In **Lebanon**, an Anti-Corruption Commission formed in 2013 helped to complement several existing anticorruption laws. It has powers to investigate potential cases. The Commission's composition of six members and its selection process "partly limits interference in that process from the country's political elites, whether in parliament or in the cabinet," helping safeguard against elite capture. Still, the commission' financial future remains a key concern, especially given the economic collapse in Lebanon limiting any available state funding and reliance on foreign donors (Merhej, 2021). Best practices indicate that adequate financial and human resourcing are critical to anticorruption bodies' success, thus highlighting the critical challenge for resourcing such bodies to promote stabilization.

Anticorruption commitments and programming into peace deals and peace keeping

Conflict actors lament that corruption remains a fringe area of focus in peace efforts. Advocates call for the institutionalization of anticorruption actions and commitments more firmly into peace agendas.

Promising practices for engaging anticorruption more centrally within peace efforts include the incorporation of anti-corruption provisions in peace agreements, an aspect that has been only part of 36% of all peace agreements between 1990 and 2023 (). Anti-corruption provisions can be incorporated not only in agreements, but also into other actions, including:

- Pre-negotiation
- Ceasefire arrangements
- Implementation
- Renewal agreements

Particularly, ceasefires – which rarely include anti-corruption provisions – may offer ripe space for confidence building between conflicting parties, particularly if they involve commitments to third-party transparency initiatives. For example, the Extractive Industries Transparency

Initiative standards were built into peace processes in Myanmar that are aiming to build in more focus on the connections between transparency and stability. Incorporating anti-corruption across entry points for peace activities may help improve the likelihood of success.

Box. NATO lesson learning on institutionalizing anticorruption within missions

NATO's efforts in anticorruption began in its Building Integrity (BI) programme, which focused on analyzing corruption risks in defence sectors and helping design national anti-corruption programmes. Still, as explored in this report, the Alliance's work including its missions in Iraq and Afghanistan did not address corruption sufficiently. In Afghanistan, ISAF did not begin to address corruption issues until 2007, and it only became a line of engagement in the mission's operations plan in 2012. To combat these shortcomings, anticorruption has been more firmly institutionalized and expanded within NATO's agenda with the dawn of the BI policy. This policy aims to build efforts to prevent and counter corruption into the Alliance's key tasks: from collective defence to crisis response to cooperative security and helped prompt a BI Action Plan.

Third party engagement on anticorruption to promote stabilization

Third parties may include international organizations, such as the World Bank or the IMF, UN organizations of missions, or NGOs and even media, all of which may offer opportunities for bridging peace and transparency agendas. For example, in South Sudan, conflict parties agreed to join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative aiming to enable international actors to monitor petroleum and mining industries as part of peace efforts. As mentioned earlier, third party engagement can help build trust to enhance the sustainability of ceasefires. Third parties can also help monitor particular vulnerable communities and groups, such as women and displaced persons.

Third-party involvement in anti-corruption efforts in strategic points in peace brokering may offer a promising space for further action. **Libya**'s 2015 Political Agreement provided for collaboration with "independent international experts" – an effort that requires ongoing attention and strengthening to leverage the potential for third parties to help drive anticorruption and peace.

Training, capacity building, and institutional support for postconflict institution building

Anticorruption program implementation often requires a combination of tools, including the institutionalization or reform of anti-corruption bodies, strengthened networks between financial institutions, oversight bodies, and judiciaries, and improved power of justice systems and checks and balances between government branches.

Commitments to transparency are an important first step, though they require backing to ensure rhetoric is met with a variety of tools for implementation. For example, **Yemen**'s 2014 National Dialogue Conference Outcomes Document proffered important rhetorical commitment but requires further institutionalization across peace efforts.

'...the law shall provide guarantees to access information by citizens, [civil society organisations] and the media, use of such information and to perform a role in monitoring and enhancing aspects of transparency in public policies, administrative actions, especially those related to finance to enable citizens, political parties and stakeholders [to perform] their role in the process of control and accountability.' (Yemen)

Work to ensure the professionalization of civil service can serve as another important step. In **Iraq**, agreements have aimed to tackle the capture and politicization of state institutions through programs to verify civil servant backgrounds (Forster, 2024).

The training of civil service is also critical as countries navigate stages of postconflict reconstruction, which require "well-structured institutions need to be backed up by a trained and professional civil service, public administration standards, and audit control mechanisms that keep government decisions and actions transparent and accountable to the public" (Spector, 2011).

E-governance and transparency in postconflict reconstruction

E-governance that digitizes services and places them online can be beneficial both for transparency and service delivery, although implementing these practices in fragile settings that are under resourced and where digital access is often limited can make this strategy challenging. Studies have found that fragile settings can benefit from e-governance in post conflict reconstruction (Kim and Zoughbi, 2008).

Implementing e-governance interventions in conflict-affected Arab states. They require technical and financial resources. Internet use also ranges from 20% to 80% across the MENA region (ITU), with a gender gap in favor of men in many countries, as well as gaps in rural access in almost every country.

Box. E-government in Tunisia

Tunisia is facing declining trust in its public institutions. Once ranking 23rd globally in the World Economic Forum in terms of public institutions, it fell by 2019 to 73rd (falling behind neighboring Morocco and Jordan). Barriers in public service delivery include a complex and inefficient service delivery system, lack of public sector capacity, and inequitable digital access.

E-government offers a promising practice to help connected peace and security goals alongside its benefits for reducing corruption. Tunisia began processes to embed e-governance in some sectors, including a digital ID program launched in 2015, as well as a new GovTech project with support from the World Bank to help digitize a range of services.

A number of interventions have helped improve services, for example, in online enrollments for schools and a new "Evax" vaccination program. These outcomes have helped improve service delivery alongside transparency which may contribute to wider goals to advance security and stabilization.

Section IV. Conclusions and Future Research

The linkages between anticorruption and peace in the Arab world offer a variety of critical examples of the importance of action at the nexus of these issue in order to advance the region's stated goals and commitments. In the Arab region, and indeed globally, work at the nexus of anti-corruption and stabilization will be critical to realizing wider agendas to advance the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which aims to end poverty and ensure lives of dignity for all, calls on a need to fight corruption, to reduce illicit financial flows, and to recover of stolen assets. The rewards of movement forward on these goals could be far-reaching, contributing to peace through a range of pathways.

This report began by reviewing the prevalence of corruption in the Arab region and its connection to the logics of corruption, and then reviewed the range of ways that corruption and conflict intersect. Corruption and conflict indeed hold multiple points of connectivity, serving as threat multipliers across a number of pathways, including by way of corruption shaping:

a. Conditions for conflict and the emergence of conflict
b. Conflict escalation and protraction
c. Peace brokering, peace keeping, and peace building
d. Wider intersections with the structural drivers of conflict

The report then reviewed the range of areas where actions to address the corruption-conflict nexus can be advanced, with examples from the Arab region and ACIAC countries. This section highlighted the importance of:

- Anticorruption commitments
- Data and transparency efforts
- Anticorruption bodies and agencies
- Third party engagement
- Training, capacity building, and post conflict reconstruction
- E-governance programs

Future research should continue to collect good practices and lessons learned around these pathways and spaces for action on the corruption-conflict nexus. In particular, regional lesson learning and sharing of good practices can help build up Arab regional learning and knowledge to advance commitments to the Arab Anti-Corruption Convention, the UN Convention Against Corruption, the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

A particularly ripe area of future research, given the status of conflicts and corruption in the region, is how to expand gender-sensitive approaches to work at the corruption-conflict nexus. As mentioned in this report, corruption in conflict, as well as during post-conflict recovery, can have unequal impacts on women and other vulnerable groups (Transparency International 2019). Conflict exacerbates the discriminatory and disproportionate impact of corruption on women, girls and other marginalized population groups, and corruption and inequality, in turn, can exacerbate conflict. With the approach of the 25th anniversary of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in October 2025, there is an urgent need to connect efforts to advance transparency, peace, and equality across the region. Women's positions in the Arab world have seen important gains in the region, although as of February 2025, women still hold only 16.7% of parliamentary seats (IPU). The potential for women leaders to support and drive reform, to bring gender sensitivity across peace and anti-corruption programming, remain areas ripe for further research and practitioner focus.

Integrating other conflict-related agendas—such as youth, peace, and security, along with work on the climate-conflict nexus—more closely with anti-corruption efforts in conflict settings can foster more effective initiatives. By bridging these areas and exploring more joined up ways of working, partners engaged in conflict settings can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the structural drivers of conflict and explore how inclusivity and sustainability contribute to connected goals of transparency and peace.

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