

## Corruption costs flight of SR3 trillion worth Saudi funds

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Saudi funds worth SR3 trillion (\$ 800 billion) have gone out of the Kingdom as a result of administrative corruption, according to Majed Garoub, a legal consultant and chairman of the lawyers committee at the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Garoub did not say over what period of time this figure is derived.

He made this disclosure while commending the significance of the national strategy for combating corruption, which was approved by the Council of Ministers last Monday. The Cabinet also set up an authority to monitor implementation of the strategy.

Garoub called for greater administrative and financial controls and establishment of a separate ministry for administration.

"We are also in need of a constitutional court to ensure that our rules and regulations are suitable and legitimate," he added. There are different forms of administrative corruption, such as bribery, use of influence or wasta (personal connections) and embezzlement of public money.

"We are losing billions of riyals every year as a result of corruption," said Amri Al-Kholi, professor of law at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah.

While passing the anti-graft bill, the Cabinet urged all government departments to combat corruption by carrying out their duties in accordance with the law, reducing and facilitating administrative procedures and holding all officials, irrespective of their positions, accountable.

The National Authority for Combating Corruption will be under the direct supervision of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah, who has declared a war on corruption and bureaucratic practices ever since he ascended the Saudi throne in August 2005.

The head of the authority will be appointed by a royal decree and will have a ministerial rank, informed sources said, adding that all officials including ministers would be held responsible for dishonest practices. Salim Al-Qahtani, a Shoura Council member, said state-owned companies like Saudi Basic Industries Corp. (SABIC), Aramco and Saudi Electricity Co. would also be questioned in case of malpractices.

"The decision to establish a national authority for fighting corruption is not only an acknowledgement of corruption in the country but also an affirmation of the government's resolve to fight it," Muhammad Al-Qahtani, professor of economy at the Institute of Diplomatic Studies, told Al-Watan Arabic daily.

Qahtani said the decline in government services, especially in the health and education sectors as well as the spread of poverty prove that public money is not spent in a proper manner. He said administrative corruption was taking place secretly, adding that all officials involved in graft cases must be questioned. Saudi Arabia holds a remote 78th position among 160 countries in terms of transparency. "Using government position to realize personal interests is one of the definitions for administrative corruption," Qahtani said. He also spoke about violations in government contracts and stealing of public land and other properties.

Referring to malpractices taking places in government purchases, Qahtani asked why the products purchased for government departments are priced five times higher than their market value. "This is a dangerous but widely seen practice," he added. Some studies show that government officials take bribes because of low salaries. "But nobody should be allowed to accept bribes. If customs officials and border guards take bribes for doing favors it will have dangerous consequences," he added.