



Arab Reform Initiative

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Models for Successful MENA Anti-corruption Strategies

→ Brent McCann



An Iraqi woman carries a candle and placard reading in Arabic "Corruption is killing us" during a gathering near the Tigris river in Baghdad, to honour the victims of the overloaded ferry that sank a day earlier in Mosul, March 2019. © EPA



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This paper describes successful anticorruption strategies with the ambition of providing a strategic ‘roadmap’ for civil society organizations (CSOs) to inspire anticorruption change particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).¹ This paper will chronicle anticorruption success stories, whereby certain elements or whole models could be extrapolated and repurposed to decrease corruption within the MENA. While certain countries within the Global North are best-practice examples of comprehensive anticorruption strategies and programs, particularly the Scandinavian countries, this paper focuses on countries with a current or recent history of systemic corruption issues, who were able to mitigate these issues in-full or in-part based on top-down and bottom-up approaches. These examples seem better suited to provide useful anticorruption models for the MENA, given the magnitude and prevalence of corruption and despotic governance structures. As Quah (2013) postulates, there is a limit to what highly corrupt countries can learn from states with far lower levels of corruption.² That said, none of the case studies included in this paper have governance structures where absolute power is held in the hands of such few political decision makers, as is found within certain countries in the MENA.

This paper will conclude with recommendations for CSOs based on the case studies and overall research conducted for this paper. The case studies illustrate a few core points. First, some form of political-will is vital to success. That said, it is not necessary for abundant political-will to be found ubiquitously throughout the political system.³ Political-will is also not stagnant. Deficient political-will can be altered by way of public pressure. Second, environment plays an important role in stimulating action to disrupt deeply entrenched positions of power, attitudes, and practices. These favorable environments are often the result of ‘jolts’ (see Hoffman, A. J. 1999, Oliver, C., 1992, Castro, A. & Ansari, S., 2017, Walsh, 1981), suddenly imposed events that stimulate a critical mass of citizen discontent, while decreasing government power and increasing citizen agency. Third, a successful strategy for utilizing and collaborating with traditional and social media sources is vital to developing environments favorable to change. Fourth, top-down strategies, particularly anticorruption authorities (ACAs), can find success even in environments where corruption is widespread and entrenched, and where private and public interests act against anticorruption efforts. ACAs have been most successful when they possess high levels of autonomy and resources.



CSOs play a vital role in raising public awareness and changing attitudes and behaviors, holding public and private figures accountable, conducting research and analysis, educating and training, and cooperating with public officials to build strategies and legislation that combat corruption. The task is challenging, as corruption is complex and multifactorial, deeply entrenched, and major players often actively work against their efforts.⁴ Successes or failures must be viewed with the understanding that corruption does not evaporate overnight. Change occurs slowly. Broadly, anticorruption CSOs should seek to lay the foundation for change, and to stand ready to act when the environment is favorable.

Finally, the greatest limiter of anticorruption efforts is authoritarianism, specifically political systems that intentionally obstruct CSOs, limit freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and transparency. This is an affliction found in many states within the MENA. Particular concern within this paper is paid to this reality.

Definition of Corruption

Corruption is a complex issue with two predominant challenges. First, it is a broad and ambiguous topic, and definitions are varied. To that point, corruption has been defined simply as “know it when you see it.”⁵ The challenge of defining corruption stems from the wide assortment of acts viewed as corrupt, but also the localized nature of corruption. For example, a quid pro quo payment from an Emirate politician to an oil executive, certain lobbying efforts in the US, and motor vehicle-related bribes to Kenyan police, may be viewed different in different societies i.e. everyday business transactions as opposed to acts of corruption. Globally, there are heterogeneous notions of what is public good, what is harm, and what is corruption. This ambiguity underscores a particular challenge to decreasing corruption’s prevalence. How does one decrease something that is not universally defined the same?

Second, corruption is difficult to quantify. Corruption often occurs privately, away from prying eyes, and in opaque manners to escape detection. This reality makes it challenging to analyze the sum total and impact, important when trying to build strategies to combat corruption. There are multiple international NGOs,



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academics, and research organizations that endeavor to quantify its impact through various metrics and methodologies.⁶ Transparency International (TI) for example, uses a perception metric as the basis for their indexes.⁷)



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About the author

Brent McCann

Brent McCann is a consultant at Camber Collective. He worked as a research consultant and an intern at the Arab Reform Initiative. He holds an MA from Sciences Po. Paris.

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contact@arab-reform.net



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