SABOTAGING PEACE

CORRUPTION AS A THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Transparency International (TI) is the world's leading non-governmental anti-corruption organisation, addressing corruption and corruption risk in its many forms through a network of more than 100 national chapters worldwide.

Transparency International Defence and Security (TI-DS) works to reduce corruption in defence and security sectors worldwide.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ATT	Arms Trade Treaty
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EU	European Union
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NACP	Ukraine's National Agency on Corruption Prevention
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
SSR	Security Sector Reform
SSR/G	Security Sector Reform and Governance
UN	United Nations
UNCAC	United Nations Convention Against Corruption
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Peace, stability, and security are some of the key priorities for countries as they navigate an increasingly fragmented and violent world. However, the threat that corruption poses to achieving these objectives is frequently overlooked. At best, it is considered a problem only in the aftermath of conflicts and crises, or when evaluating their long-term impact on development and aid.

With the defence and security sector receiving an increase of funding and wielding significant influence and authority – especially in peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding – strong integrity, accountability, and governance standards are essential to ensuring sustainable peace and security internationally.

This report examines the relationship between corruption, conflict, insecurity – and explores how corruption in defence and security sectors distorts and undermines security governance and peace processes. It also highlights the harmful influence of national political elites in obstructing governance reforms often advocated by local civil society organisations and the broader international community. The evidence outlined in this report indicates that defence and security sector-related corruption threatens international peace and security because:

1   It fuels violence and armed conflict.

2   It empowers and enables organised crime groups and violent non-state actors.

3   It contributes to the illicit proliferation and diversion of weapons.

4   It weakens and even undermines post-conflict peacebuilding processes.

The report's case studies, which includes state-building in Afghanistan, illicit networks and arms flow in Mali and Sudan, organised criminal networks in Ecuador and Venezuela, defence procurement in Ukraine, and elite state-capture in Iraq – all illustrate how rampant, unchecked, and often systemic corruption becomes exceedingly difficult to address once it takes root. Making anti-corruption a priority across national policy agendas and peace interventions can create opportunities to enhance human, national, and international security.

Based on the findings of the report, we urge international institutions (UN and regional bodies) alongside national governments to explicitly embed corruption as a threat to international peace and security in concrete actions for change, including:

- Enhancing global coordination and collaboration on tackling corruption in defence and security.

- Strengthening corruption risk assessments and improving military assistance standards.

- Embedding integrity and anti-corruption measures into defence governance and security sector reform processes.

- Strengthening civil society and whistleblower protections in defence and security.

Effectively addressing corruption as a threat to international peace and security requires a collaborative, strategic, and well-resourced approach amongst international donors and institutions, national policymakers, and civil society - one that prioritises urgent reforms, strengthens accountability, and proactively closes systemic gaps.

HEADLINE MESSAGES: A ROADMAP FOR CHANGE

Key recommendations to integrate anti-corruption in the global peace and security agenda

1. **Normative Change:** International Institutions, regional bodies, and national governments to recognise corruption as a threat to international peace and security. Treat corruption as a direct driver and risk multiplier of conflict, violence, and insecurity; and include clear anti-corruption measures in security sector reform and governance (SSR/G) disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, peace missions, post-conflict reconciliation, reconstruction, and stabilisation efforts.

2. **Global Coordination vs Fragmented Efforts:** Establish UN-led capacity (within the Department of Peace Operations, Peacebuilding Support Office, and Development Coordination Office) for tracking and assessing corruption-linked security threats, ensuring data sharing between peacekeeping missions, anti-corruption agencies, and arms control bodies. Countries to assess corruption risks systematically through sector-specific tools, such as the Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI) in conflict prevention and resolution strategies.

3. **Accountable Military Assistance:** Enhance conditionality on military aid to ensure recipient states implement integrity measures before receiving funds or equipment. Strengthening accountability standards for international donors to prevent military aid from reinforcing corrupt networks and promoting better coordination of security assistance policies across stakeholders.

4. **Transparent Arms Transfers:** Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) state parties to conduct transparent, evidence-based corruption risk assessments before approving arms transfers. Decisions should be guided by independent research and data, ensuring a thorough evaluation of defence integrity and corruption oversight capacity.

5. **Improve Security Sector Reform (SSR) Processes:** Depoliticise security institutions to prevent their capture by elites. Prioritise integrity-building initiatives such as ensuring transparency in procurement, personnel management, and financial oversight throughout SSR processes.

6. **Strengthen Whistleblower Protection:** Ensure robust protections for security sector personnel who expose corruption, such as arms diversion or procurement fraud, allowing them to report misconduct without fear of retaliation. Expand international support for investigative journalism, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected regions where corruption is deeply embedded in political and security institutions.

7. **Civil Society Engagement and Civilian Oversight:** Civil society oversight is a crucial check on corruption, yet journalists and activists investigating defence corruption often face harassment, imprisonment, or even assassination. International institutions and national governments should improve access to information laws according to the Tshwane Principles, and empower civil society organisations and journalists to investigate and expose corruption in defence spending, arms transfers, and security governance. Additionally, inclusive governance should be promoted, ensuring marginalised groups have a voice in post-conflict governance structures.

INTRODUCTION

This research examines the relationship between corruption, conflict, and insecurity to show how corruption fuels instability and weakens efforts toward sustainable peace and security. It explores how corruption distorts and undermines security, governance, and peace; while enabling illicit arms trade, arms diversion, and transnational organised crime.

While the relationship between corruption, development, and armed conflict is widely acknowledged, little attention has been given to the mechanisms through which corruption undermines international peace and security.[1] A clear analysis of these mechanisms is crucial as preventing and resolving conflict are becoming ever more difficult in a global climate of rapid militarisation and rising insecurity. The war in Ukraine, instability and rising tensions in the Middle East, Asia-Pacific, and the Sahel have contributed to a steep rise in global military expenditure, reaching $2443 billion in 2023.[2] Historically, higher spending has meant more secrecy, less integrity, and weaker accountability and oversight–all accelerators of corruption.[3]

Currently, civil society space is shrinking across the world, economic inequalities are increasing, and human rights abuses rising.[4] These trends are accompanied by the weakening of key democratic institutions and a rapid erosion of democratic norms. Alongside coups in Myanmar, Chad, and Sudan in 2021, eight successful military coups have taken place in Central and West Africa in the past five years, including in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (two in 2022), Guinea (2021), Niger (2023) and Gabon (2023).

Corruption: A Growing Global Concern

Corruption, or 'the abuse of entrusted power for private gain', erodes trust in governments and institutions and weakens economic and social development.[5] It takes multiple forms and different shapes across various sectors, and has local, national, and transnational dynamics. It is not simply a governance or development issue; it is the driver of a wide range of security concerns, from human rights abuses to armed conflict, from violent extremism to organised crime. Corruption does not only increase risks of conflict and violence; it decreases the ability to mitigate and respond to them.

Recognition of corruption as a global threat gained prominence in the early 2000s during the "War on Terrorism," as nations worldwide began reassessing its impact on security and stability.[6, 7] Not only can corruption increase the risk of conflict - especially state capture - but conflict can also increase the risk of entrenched corruption, which can feed into grievances that sustain conflict.[8,9] By enriching those responsible for instability in the first place, corruption facilitates the continuation of conflict cycles.

The adoption of the UN Convention against Corruption in 2003 marked an important step in the formal recognition of corruption as a threat to international peace and security. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's forward to the convention states that corruption "undermines democracy and the rule of law, leads to violations of human rights, distorts markets, erodes the quality of life and allows organised crime, terrorism and other threats to

1   Roland Paris, 'The Past, Present, and Uncertain Future of Collective Conflict Management: Peacekeeping and Beyond', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17, no. 3 (27 May 2023): 235–57.

2   Nan Tian et al., 'Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2023' (Solna, Sweden: SIPRI, April 2024), https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2023.

3   Amira El-Sayed, 'Global Standards for Responsible Defence Governance' (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2018).

4   CIVICUS, '2024 State of Civil Society Report' (CIVICUS, March 2024), https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2024/state-of-civil-society-report-2024_en.pdf.

5   Transparency International,' What is Corruption?', https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption.

6   Kimberley Thachuk, 'Corruption and International Security', *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2005): 143–52.

7   Mark Pyman et al., 'Corruption as a Threat to Stability and Peace' (Transparency International Deutschland e.V., 2014). https://www.transparency.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Publikationen/2014/Corruption_as_a_Threat_to_Stability_and_Peace_TransparencyDeutschland_2014.pdf; Transparency International Defence & Security, 'The Fifth Column, Understanding the Relationship between Corruption and Conflict' (Transparency International, 2017).

8   USIP, 'Elite Capture and Corruption of Security Sectors' (Washington, D.C.: United State Institute of Peace, February 2023), https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/elite-capture-and-corruption-security-sectors.

9   Jonas Lindberg and Camilla Orjuela, 'Corruption and Conflict: Connections and Consequences in War-Torn Sri Lanka', *Conflict, Security & Development* 11, no. 02 (1 May 2011): 205–33.

human security to flourish".[10] The preambular clauses to the convention note how corruption constitutes a threat to 'the sustainable development of people' and 'the stability and security of societies', recognising corruption as a human rights issue.[11] Further, in 2021 the UN General Assembly held its first special session against corruption and re-acknowledged the security threats posed by corruption.[12,13]

In times of insecurity and political instability, organised crime networks and non-state armed groups, including violent extremist groups, often present themselves as credible alternatives to state authorities. This not only helps them attract support but also further exacerbates social divisions and perpetuates instability.[14]

Is Corruption Good for Peace?

The relationship between corruption, the cessation of conflict, post-conflict reconstruction, and peacebuilding initiatives can be somewhat contested by different stakeholders. Peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction initiatives can increase levels of corruption by generating new opportunities and incentives for corrupt actors or war entrepreneurs to seize the spoils of war and peacebuilding.[15] However, in some cases, turning a blind eye to corruption among political and military adversaries has served as a necessary means to secure peace agreements and a short-term compromise to support key aspects of post-conflict stabilisation.[16]

For instance, corruption (through elite-networks) helped stabilised the post-conflict transition in Nepal, especially by supporting reintegration of ex-combatants and by supporting cooperation between political parties.[17] Yet these short-term compromises can lead to entrenchment of systemic and institutionalised corruption which undermines longer term governance, stability and peacebuilding. Research in this area is also largely gender-blind and fails to consider the structures of violence and impunity that can become embedded in similar trade-offs in the name of 'peace'.

> **The adoption of the UN Convention against Corruption in 2003 marked an important step in the formal recognition of corruption as a threat to international peace and security.**

10   United Nations, 'United Nations Convention against Corruption' (New York: United Nations, 2004), iii, https://www.unodc.org/documents/brussels/UN_Convention_Against_Corruption.pdf

11   Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, adopted by the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 26 August to 4 September 2002. https://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/POI_PD.htm

12   United Nations, 'First-Ever UN General Assembly Special Session against Corruption Begins with Call for Bold Global Action to Tackle Corruption', UNODC, 2 June 2021, //www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/June/first-ever-un-general-assembly-special-session-against-corruption-begins-with-call-for-bold-global-action-to-tackle-corruption.html

13   UN General Assembly, 'Our Common Commitment to Effectively Addressing Challenges and Implementing Measures to Prevent and Combat Corruption and Strengthen International Cooperation' (United Nations, 7 June 2021), 2 https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FRES%2FS-32%2F1&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False

14   Transparency International Defence & Security, 'The Fifth Column, Understanding the Relationship between Corruption and Conflict' (Transparency International, 2017).

15   Philippe Le Billon, 'Corrupting Peace? Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Corruption', *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 3 (1 June 2008): 344–61; Bonnie J. Palifka and Susan Rose-Ackerman, eds., 'Corruption in Postconflict State Building', in *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 316–40; Danny Singh, 'The Causes of Police Corruption and Working towards Prevention in Conflict-Stricken States', *Laws* 11, no. 5 (October 2022): 69.

16   Philippe Le Billon, 'Buying Peace or Fuelling War: The Role of Corruption in Armed Conflicts', *Journal of International Development* 15, no. 4 (May 2003): 413–26; D. Zaum and C. Cheng, *Corruption and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Selling the Peace?* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Yuliya Zabyelina and Jana Arsovska, 'Rediscovering Corruption's Other Side: Bribing for Peace in Post-Conflict Kosovo and Chechnya', *Crime, Law and Social Change* 60, no. 1 (1 August 2013): 1–24; Roberto Belloni and Francesco Strazzari, 'Corruption in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo: A Deal among Friends', *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 5 (28 May 2014): 855–71.

17   'The Stabilising Impacts of Corruption in Nepal's Post-Conflict Transition', *Conflict, Security & Development* 20, no. 1 (2 January 2020): 165–89.

Why focus on the Defence Sector?

The defence sector is often characterised by secrecy and complexity, making it particularly difficult to be held accountable. This lack of transparency, combined with the sector's significant influence and the high stakes involved creates an environment where oversight is limited and corruption risks run high.

Corruption risks in the defence and security sector fall across multiple categories, including defence policymaking and political affairs, defence finances, military operations, leadership and defence personnel management, and defence procurement.[18]

The defence sector is especially vulnerable to corruption due to:

1 High Value Contracts

2 Secrecy

3 Political Connections

4 Niche Expertise

To measure challenges to building institutional resilience in defence sectors across the globe and provide a set of good governance standards to guide practitioners, Transparency International Defence & Security created the Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI).

The Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI) measures institutional resilience to corruption in the defence sector by focusing on both policymaking and public sector governance in national defence establishments. The index is organised into five main risk areas: (1) policymaking and political affairs; (2) finances; (3) personnel management; (4) military operations; (5) procurement. Each indicator is scored based on five levels from 0-100 (0, 25, 50, 75, 100), while indicator scores are aggregated (no weighting) to determine the question, risk area and overall scores. Scores are then assigned a band from A - F, which reflects the level of corruption risk.

Range of Scores

					Corruption Risk
A	83	–	100	Very robust institutional resilience to corruption	Very low
B	67	–	82	Robust institutional resilience to corruption	Low
C	50	–	66	Modest institutional resilience to corruption	Moderate
D	33	–	49	Weak institutional resilience to corruption	High
E	17	–	32	Very weak institutional resilience to corruption	Very high
F	0	–	16	Limited to no institutional resilience to corruption	Critical

Within these risk areas, the GDI identifies 29 corruption risks specific to the defence and security sector. The GDI is further organised into 77 main questions, which are broken down into 212 indicators. In order to provide a broad and comprehensive reflection of these risk areas, the index assesses both legal frameworks (de jure) and implementation (de facto), as well as resources and outcomes.

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18   Transparency International Defence & Security, 'GDI 2020 Global Report: Disruption, Democratic Governance, and Corruption Risks in Defence Institutions' (London: Transparency International Defence & Security, 2021), https://ti-defence.org/gdi/downloads/.

The 2020 GDI found that nearly 30 per cent of countries make no information available on the share of their defence procurement that is conducted through open competition. 55 per cent of top arms importing countries have high to critical corruption risks. Furthermore, 62 per cent of countries in the GDI have high to critical levels of corruption risks across the defence sector.

High corruption risk of top arms importers in the GDI

LOW RISK
MODERATE RISK
HIGH RISK
VERY HIGH RISK

75% of top exporting countries are **low** to **moderate** risk. And they are exporting to...

— EXPORT →

55% of top importing countries that are **high** to **critical** risk

LOW RISK
MODERATE RISK
HIGH RISK
VERY HIGH RISK
CRITICAL RISK

Most of the existing narratives of why and how corruption drives conflict, violence, and instability often relies on evidence from fragile and conflict affected settings, which reinforces the false narrative that corruption is an issue of the global South. Corruption is an issue affecting all countries.

- In the UK, bribery and corruption support the growth of organised crime groups.[19] Money laundering through London in particular poses challenges, although it is unknown how much of this money is linked to corruption.[20]

- EU institutions face corruption scandals, for instance involving members of European Parliament accepting bribes from Qatar.[21]

- Hungary failed to receive EU COVID-10 recovery funds owing to failures to meet anticorruption benchmarks.[22]

This report helps fill that gap and supports a global agenda that acknowledges the relationship between corruption and international peace and security. We show how the link between corruption, nations, and human security should be understood as a multilayered phenomenon which pervades not only to the public and private sectors, but it also encompasses various types of corruption and actors across national and

Top arms exporters are sending weapons to countries with high corruption risk,
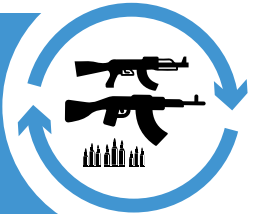
with fragile and conflict-affected states strongly represented in recipient lists.

transnational landscapes. When endemic corruption spreads to the defence and security sector, it does not just waste vital resources. It often interferes with the state's critical capability and capacity to protect its citizens from internal or external security threats. Furthermore, when corruption infiltrates the defence sector, it severely weakens its ability to address security threats. This failure creates serious vulnerabilities, leaving civilians exposed to violence and widespread human rights abuses.

Tackling Corruption as a Peace and Security Issue

Currently, both the US and EU view corruption as a security issue, especially in terms of how Russia and other states "use cash and networks of cronies to hollow out democracies" and generate vulnerabilities throughout economic and political systems.[23] The US has also increasingly acknowledged the role of corruption in instability and conflict and the inability of states to respond to insecurity. Failures in Iraq and Afghanistan have in some part helped to shape these views.

Despite substantial evidence pointing to significant weaknesses in institutional resilience to corruption among global powers, major arms exporters such as China, Brazil, Australia, Germany, and France make no explicit reference to corruption and its impact on national security matters.[24] This is a critical gap not only when it comes to arms transfers, but also when delivering both lethal and non-lethal military aid.

Nevertheless, there are positive examples of how countries formally recognise corruption as a risk to national and global security. For instance, the

19   Susan Hawley, 'Bribery and Corruption: An Unholy Cocktail of Outsider and Insider Threats', RUSI (blog), 7 May 2024, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/bribery-and-corruption-unholy-cocktail-outsider-and-insider-threats

20   Ibid.

21   The Economist, 'Dirty Sponges', *The Economist* (London, United Kingdom: The Economist Intelligence Unit N.A., Incorporated, 14 September 2024).

22   Human Rights Watch, 'World Report 2024: Events Of 2023' (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2024), 229.

23   The Economist, 'Dirty Sponges'.

24   Transparency International Defence & Security, GDI 2020 Global Report: Disruption, Democratic Governance and Corruption Risk in Defence Institutions.', December 2021, https://ti-defence.org/gdi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/02/GDI-Global-Report-v7_17Feb22.pdf.

US National Security Strategy launched in 2022, focuses on the link between corruption and diverse types of 'costly' conflicts, including the fight against terrorism.[25] The policy also provides a brief overview of the methods used by the US government to address corruption challenges on a local and global scale, countering corruption as part of national security planning. Similarly, the UK's Integrated Review Refresh on national security, references corruption as a threat to economic and border security. However, the UK does not make any direct connection to graft within defence institutions or the nexus between corruption and peace.[26]

On a regional level, the perception of corruption and its consequences on international peace and security, is often fragmented. For example, the EU's 2003 Security Strategy fully recognises the threat that corruption poses to good governance.[27] Corruption is mentioned as one of the potential causes of failed states, but without outlining how exactly the Union intends to tackle these challenges. Similarly, the Organization for

Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Security Strategy only introduces the term 'corruption' briefly in relation to 'deepening economic and social disparities'.[28] However, the strategy does not discuss specific or feasible approaches to tackling corruption within the OSCE area.[29] Likewise, even though NATO's Strategic Concept recognises that weak governance enables non-state armed groups and high levels of transparency are essential in arms transfers, 'corruption' is never explicitly used throughout the document.[30]

To address these challenges, this report provides evidence of how neglecting corruption in the defence and security sectors can fuel violence and instability, showcasing the serious threat this poses to peace and security. Critically, it highlights a range of lessons learned in conflict resolution and peace processes, and provides recommendations for multilateral institutions and states to improve and implement effective anticorruption measures, especially linked to the defence and security sector.

25   The White House, 'National Security Strategy', October 2022.

26   Cabinet Office, 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World', 16 May 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world.

27   The Council of the European Union, 'A Secure Europe in a Better World', 8 December 2003.

28   OSCE, 'OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century', 2003.

29   OSCE does, however, had guidelines on SSR which feature a sub-section on corruption. See: OSCE, 'Security Sector Governance and Reform: Guidelines for OSCE Staff', 2022, https://www.osce.org/secretariat/512470.

30   NATO does, however, address the link between security and corruption in other key policy documents. See: NATO, 'Brussels Summit Declaration Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2018)', 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm; NATO, 'Warsaw Summit Communiqué Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2016)', 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

DEFINITIONS

Transparency International defines corruption as 'abuse of entrusted power for private gain'. Within this broad definition, there are different levels of corruption as well as specific types that are relevant to any analysis.

Levels of corruption:

- **Grand corruption:** Corruption at the highest level of government involving abuse of power to benefit the few at the expense of the many. It grossly affects institutional processes, deprives the state of key resources and causes serious and widespread harm to individuals and society.

- **Political corruption:** The use of public office for private gains, including through manipulation of policies, institutions and, rules at high levels of government.

- **Petty corruption:** Low-level bribery and influence peddling.

- **Systemic corruption:** The dominance of informal rules at multiple levels and sectors of society leading to entrenchment of corruption in structures, processes and, institutions in a given context.

Types of corruption:

Bribery: The offer or exchange of money, services or other goods to influence the behaviour and judgement of a person in a position of entrusted power.

Clientelism: Informal exploitative systems of exchanges between more powerful and less powerful groups or individuals.

Collusion: Secretive or illegal agreement between two individuals or entities for an improper purpose, including to deceive, improperly influence another, or limit or distort open competition or bidding processes.

Cronyism: Favourable treatment of friends or associates when distributing resources and/or positions. It is similar to patronage which involves support or sponsorship of a patron, and nepotism, where favourable treatment is extended to family members.

Embezzlement: Misappropriating financial or other resources by a person in an entrusted position of authority.

Extortion: Abuse of entrusted authority through use of threats, coercion or force to obtain money, favours or other goods.

Fraud: An economic crime which involves deceit or false pretences allowing someone to gain unlawfully. It can range from diversion and embezzlement of funds to electoral fraud.

Graft: A form of political corruption which involves intentional diversion of resources intended for public projects to serve private interests. Graft may involve multiple forms of corruption, including bribery and embezzlement.

Types of corruption (continued)

Illicit Financial Flows: Transnational movement of money illegally earned, transferred or used. Illegal earnings may result from corruption, criminal activities, and tax evasion.

Kickbacks: A bribe paid after an undue favour or service was provided.

Kleptocracy: Involves systematic state capture, including capture of state resources. It can entail multiple forms of corruption, but is distinct because it is systematic, seeps into national structures of governance, and typically relies on transnational markets and global networks for management of illicit financial flows.

Racketeering: A type of organised crime and pattern of illegal activities conducted for profit which also typically involves extortion, fraud, bribery and/or violence.

State Capture: Involves repurposing significant parts of the state for personal or group enrichment.

Sexual Corruption: Abuse of entrusted authority to obtain sexual favour in exchange for services or benefits connected to that entrusted authority. It may include sexual extortion, sexual bribery or other forms of corruption where sex constitutes the currency in exchanges.

METHODOLOGY

This report uses mixed methods to allow for the triangulation of multiple perspectives and sources with a broad geographical coverage. The evidence presented comes from the following sources:

1	International indices	2	National frameworks on security and on corruption
3	Expert interviews	4	Focus group discussions
5	Case studies	6	Academic and grey literature

We compared the TI-DS 2020 Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI) to other global indexes to examine how defence corruption correlates with peace and security outcomes. The GDI was chosen for its unique ability to assess corruption risks within defence institutions, leveraging data gathered by in-country experts across a broad range of countries. To better understand defence sector corruption risks and their impact on peace, we also drew on data from the Global Peace Index (GPI), Crisis Group '10 conflicts to watch', as well R2P Monitor, WPS Index data, and the Global Organised Crime Index. Furthermore, we conducted documentary analysis of 18 national security policies and national anti-corruption policies from major arms exporting and importing countries to identify if, and in what way corruption is framed as a peace and security issue.[31] This analysis provided useful insights into how different interpretations on 'peace and security' connect with anti-corruption efforts. It also pointed out gaps in these understandings.

Additionally, we conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with key experts in conflict management, resolution, and peacebuilding.[32] This includes state officials, defence institutions, international organisations, NGOs, and civil society organisations.[33]

We also organised a focus group discussion with twenty participants from an international organisation to validate preliminary results. Participants had experience with multilateral organisations (EU, UN, and AU) and in more than twenty-five countries. We conducted seven case studies on state-building in Afghanistan, drug trafficking in Ecuador and Venezuela, illicit networks in Mali, illicit arms flow in Sudan, elite groups in Iraq, and defence procurement in Ukraine. The case studies were selected based on their relevance to the themes identified from the literature review. Lastly, we conducted a review of the academic and grey literature on security studies, corruption, and conflict management.[34]

Limitations

This report focused on providing case studies and illustrative examples to emphasise the critical need for analysing corruption—particularly in the defence and security sector—within the broader framework of international peace, security, and conflict.

However, it does not provide an exhaustive list or analysis of all countries experiencing corruption in the defence and security sector, nor does it detail all corruption issues related to this sector. Insecurity in each country is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, diverse actors, and context-specific realities. Similarly, while the expert interviews included a significant geographical spread in terms of location and expertise, we do not treat them as fully representative, but instead as unique and partial insights that help build a picture of nuanced understandings of corruption and anticorruption efforts in conflict management, resolution, peacebuilding contexts.

This report also focuses on the role that corruption in defence and security plays in driving armed conflict and violence. A detailed examination of all factors causing insecurity is beyond its scope. Moreover, the analysis of indices has certain limitations regarding timeline comparisons and country coverage. To ensure a fair comparison, the timeframe and country selection were aligned as closely as possible with the 2020 GDI.

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31   The UN Security Council, as the main body for global peace and security, defines threats primarily through armed conflict and aggression. However, states also shape their own security concerns based on national doctrines.

32   Interviews took place between September and December 2024.

33   A hundred and twenty (120) potential participants were identified and contacted through purposive and snowball sampling.

34   For instance from Transparency International, the U4 Anti-corruption Resource Centre, the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, Brookings, United Nations Agencies, Corruption Watch, and other relevant organisations and evidence recorded in reports of Panel of Experts to the UN Security Council.

DEFENCE CORRUPTION: AN OVERLOOKED DRIVER OF VIOLENCE AND ARMED CONFLICT

Despite its crucial role in protecting citizens' security, interests, and livelihoods, the defence and security sector remains largely shielded from public scrutiny and accountability.

When mapping data from the Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI) against various peace and conflict indices, a clear correlation emerges: defence sector corruption fuels violence, undermines peace, increases conflict risks, enables human rights abuses, and drives instability.[35]

1.1 Corruption and the Conditions for Peace

By plotting GDI data against the Global Peace Index (GPI), two clusters emerge, with Tunisia and Turkey as outliers.[36] One group comprises of mostly peaceful states with low levels of corruption risk; whilst the other group has countries that are struggling with either inter- or intrastate conflicts, and high levels of corruption in their defence sectors.

Figure 1: GDI vs GPI

GDI 2020 vs. GPI 2020

Resilience to Corruption

Government Defence Integrity Index 2020

Global Peace Index 2020

Peacefulness Ratings (5 being the least peaceful)

R² = 0.6921

◇ OECD (GDI list)　☐ FCAS (GDI list)　△ Tunisia (non-FCAS)

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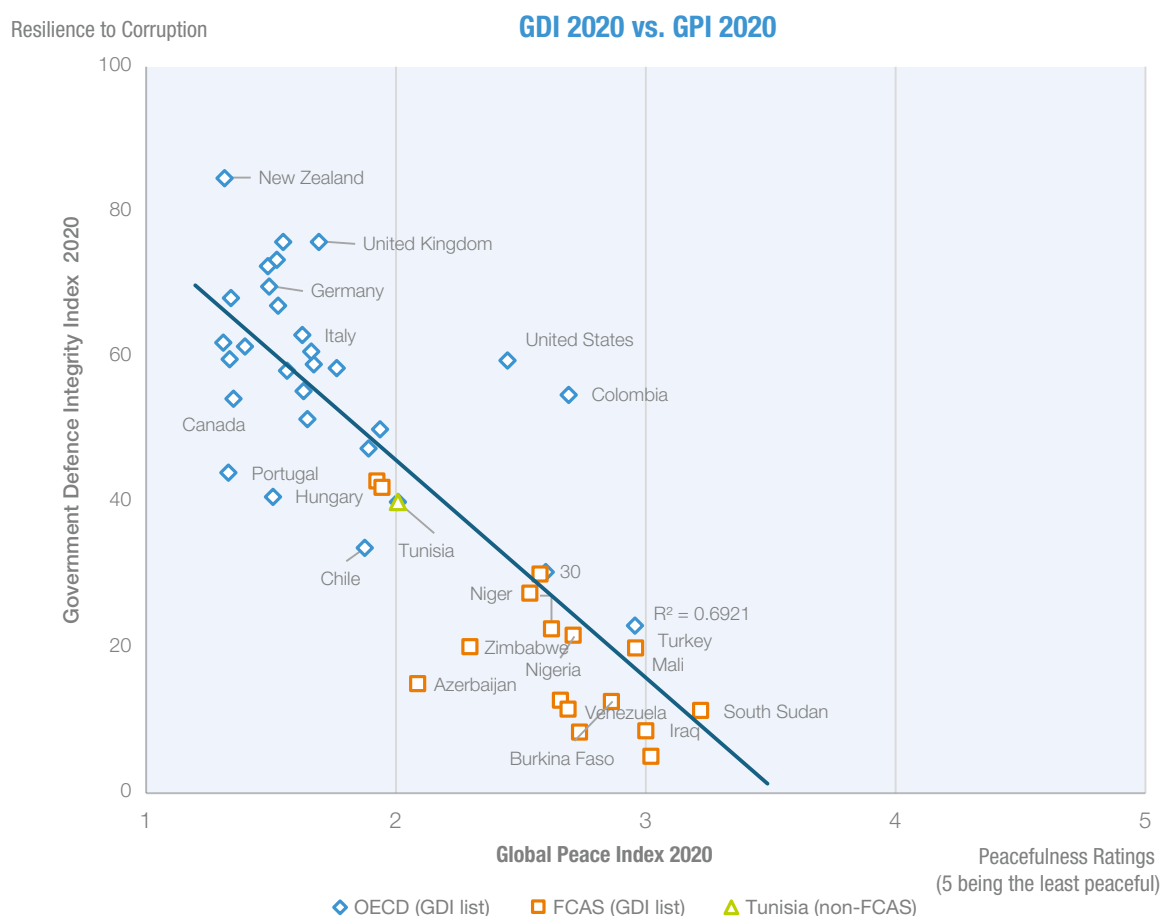
35   Institute for Economics & Peace, 'Peace and Corruption: Lowering Corruption - a Transformative Factor for Peace', 2015.

36   Produced by the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), the GPI is the world's leading measure of global peacefulness, and ranks independent states and territories according to their level of peacefulness.

Comparing this data shows how valuable the GDI is as a risk assessment and early warning tool to detect where defence corruption is more likely to lead to instability. Since 2020, the countries with high to critical levels of corruption risks in the GDI have also been the least peaceful. (Figure 2). Instead, most countries with the lowest risk levels in the GDI were consistently peaceful (no conflict identified in the GPI) (Figure 3).

In addition, amongst the 10 most mentioned countries in The International Crisis Group's annual list of '10 conflicts to watch', all countries but one have critical to very high corruption risks related to their defence sectors, with the most critical risks being around procurement and operations as identified in the GDI (Figure 4).

Figure 2: Countries with highest defence corruption risk (GDI) vs Peacefulness Ratings (GPI)

Countries with highest defence corruption risk (GDI) vs Peacefulness Ratings (GPI) 2020-2024

1 = No conflict

2 = Latent conflict

3 = Explicit threats of violence

4 = Crisis

5 = Severe crisis

Figure 3: Countries with lowest defence corruption risk (GDI) vs Peacefulness Ratings (GPI)

Countries with lowest defence corruption risk (GDI) vs Peacefulness Ratings (GPI) 2020-2024

1 = No conflict

2 = Latent conflict

3 = Explicit threats of violence

4 = Crisis

5 = Severe crisis

Figure 4: GDI vs ICG 10 Conflicts to Watch[37]
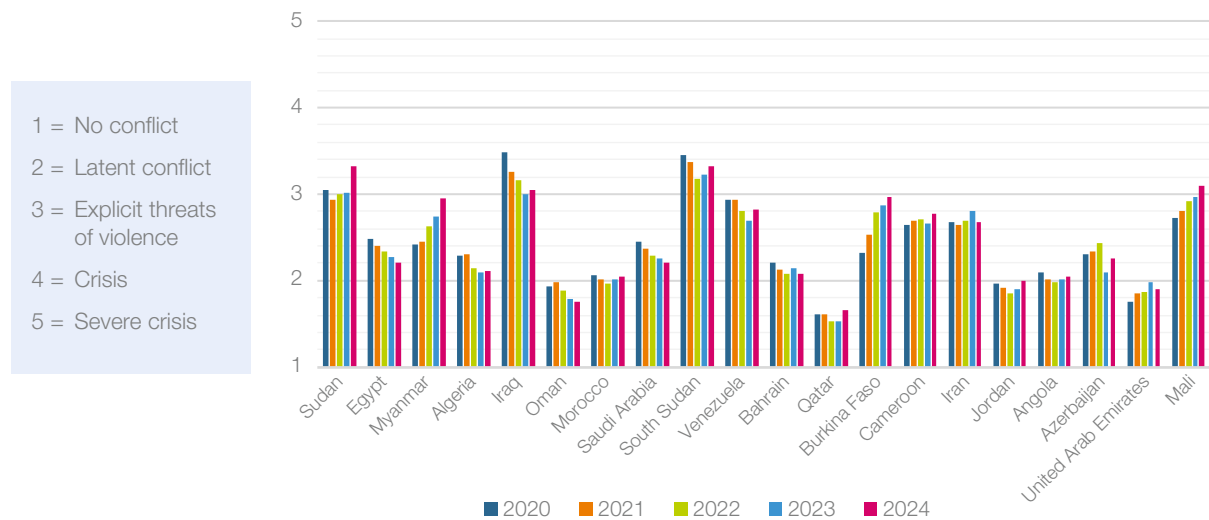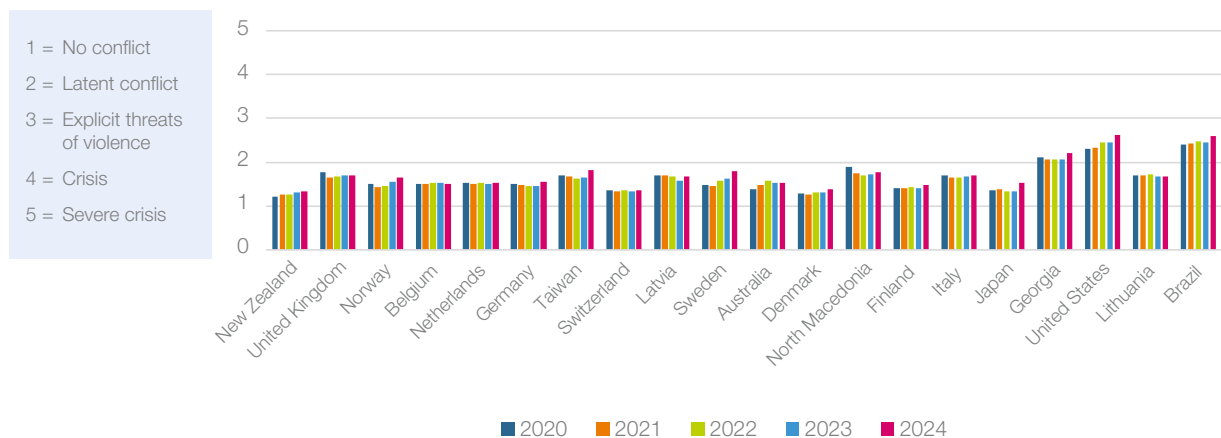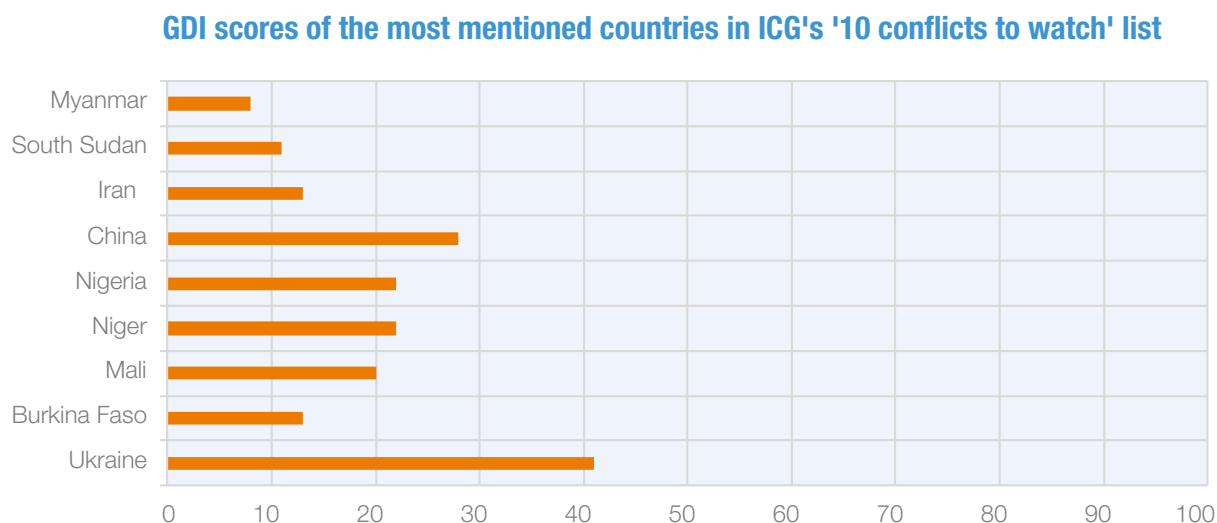
GDI scores of the most mentioned countries in ICG's '10 conflicts to watch' list

These data comparisons show that higher levels of corruption risk in the defence sector are correlated to fragility and a higher likelihood of conflict. The report examines how corruption exacerbates insecurity, and explore the impact of weak defence governance and institutional vulnerability to corruption on peace processes and security reforms.

1.2 Corruption and the Cycle of Violence

Corruption in the defence and security sector fuels a vicious cycle of violence and insecurity. While violence prevention is critical to both national and transnational interests, tackling corruption as a root cause of violence is crucial to preventing it and building lasting peace.

Several global policy frameworks exist to support violence prevention and strengthen peace and security, including the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, the Protection of Civilians framework, and the Responsibility to Protect. However, this report argues that corruption should be considered on par with other key factors in violence prevention and peacebuilding. Anti-corruption measures and good governance of the defence and security sector should be recognised as a core pillar of violence prevention.[38]

1.2.1 The Responsibility to Protect and Human Rights Abuses

The responsibility to protect (R2P), or the state's responsibility to prevent and respond to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity entails violence prevention obligations. Findings from the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect - R2P Monitor indicated that in 2020, six out of the twenty countries with most critical corruption risks in the 2020 GDI either suffered mass atrocities, or were at high risk of them occurring (Figure 5).[39] For example, three countries, China, Azerbaijan, and Nigeria score low on institutional resilience to corruption, raising concerns about imminent atrocities without urgent action. In nine of the ten countries analysed, conditions have remained critical or worsened since 2020 (underscoring the continued relevance of GDI findings despite its five-year research cycle).

Human rights abuses and the extent of defence and security corruption are mutually reinforcing. Weak governance and low institutional resilience directly hinder a state's ability to prevent, respond to, or halt atrocities.[40] In some cases, when high-level corruption and organised crime align with political agendas, corruption can become a driving force behind identity-based violence and human rights abuses.[41] Corruption, organised crime, black-market and war economies – coupled with impunity - also increase the risks of atrocities worldwide.

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37   The analysis covered only 9 years, instead of 10, as no data for 2014 was found. In addition to this, the most mentioned countries are as follows: 9 mentions = Yemen; 8 mentions = Ukraine; 7 = Afghanistan; 6 = the Sahel – which we have divided into country scores in the graph above; 5 = Ethiopia; 4 = Iran; 4 = South Sudan; 4 = Myanmar; 4 = DRC; but not all of them have been assessed by the GDI.

38   Pyman et al., 'Corruption as a Threat to Stability and Peace'.

39   Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, R2P Monitor, 15 November 2020, *Issue 54*. https://www.globalr2p.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/R2P_Monitor_NOV2020_Final.pdf
Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, R2P Monitor, November 2024, 1 December 2024, *Issue 71*. https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/r2p-monitor-issue-71-1-december-2024/

40   United Nations, 'Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention', 2014, 12, https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/framework-analysis-atrocity-crimes.

41   Kate Ferguson, *Architectures of Violence: The Command Structures of Modern Mass Atrocities, from Yugoslavia to Syria* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2020).

Figure 5: GDI vs R2P10 Conflicts to Watch

Country	GDI 2020	R2P 2020 Monitor	R2P 2024 Monitor 2
Venezuela	Critical risk	Current crisis	Current crisis
South Sudan	Critical risk	Serious concern	Imminent risk
Nigeria	Very high risk	Serious concern	Current crisis
Myanmar	Critical risk	Current crisis	Current crisis
Mali	Very high risk	Current crisis	Current crisis
China	Very high risk	Current crisis	Current crisis
Cameroon	Critical risk	Current crisis	Imminent risk
Burkina Faso	Critical risk	Current crisis	Current crisis
Azerbaijan	Critical risk	Serious concern	n/a

1.2.2 Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Tackling defence sector corruption is also relevant for national and international efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence, and to promote gender equality and social inclusion.[42] According to the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, corruption has an adverse impact on human rights, women's rights, and peace and security.[43] The likelihood of sexual violence perpetrated by security forces increases in political systems with higher levels of illicit activities. The risk is further heightened in contexts where financial corruption is deeply entrenched, power is routinely abused, and communities are increasingly divided along ethnic lines.[44]

Combining the 2020 GDI and the 2023/2024 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security Index shows that the same countries grappling with high corruption risks in the defence sector, also put women's inclusion, justice, and security at risk (Figure 6).

> **Anti-corruption measures and good governance of the defence and security sector should be recognised as a core pillar of violence prevention.**

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42   Sabrina White, 'Corruption, the Defence and Security Sector, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence' (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2024), https://ti-defence.org/publications/corruption-defence-security-sector-sexual-gender-based-violence-thought-leadership/.

43   Patricia Donli, 'Intersections between Corruption, Human Rights and Women, Peace and Security: Nigeria Case Study' (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, October 2020), https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/Corruption-Research-Report_Dec-2020-Nigeria.pdf; Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos, Dinah Lakehal, and Anne Campbell, 'Examining the Intersections between Corruption, Human Rights and Women and Peace and Security: Policy Brief' (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, December 2020), https://gnwp.org/corruption/.

44   Christopher K. Butler, Tali Gluch, and Neil J. Mitchell, 'Security Forces and Sexual Violence: A Cross-National Analysis of a Principal—Agent Argument', *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 6 (November 2007): 669–87.

Corruption and conflict go hand in hand, and their coexistence feeds a cycle of violence and insecurity

Figure 6: GDI vs WPS Index[45]

GDI 2020 scores vs WPS index
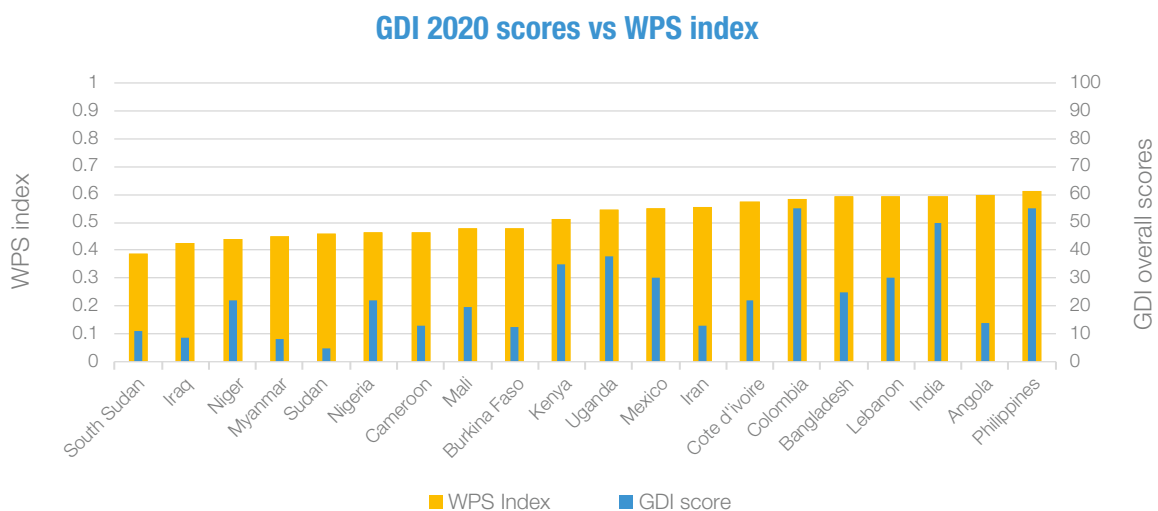
Defence and security sector corruption undermines the prevention and response to gender-based violence.[46] Reports from Burundi and DRC, for example, show that corruption among the security forces leads to under-reporting and disregard of sexual violence.[47] Corruption can also generate or increase hostility against marginalised groups, which in turn increases the risk of violence and human rights abuses.[48]

One key lesson we have learned from global developments in recent decades is that corruption in the defence sector is not only dangerous, but also deeply divisive and wasteful. It damages the ability of states to react effectively to internal or external threats by incapacitating security forces. It breeds divisions by undermining public trust and emboldening armed groups and organised criminal organisations to exploit power vacuums. It diverts massive amounts of resources from public funds and solidifies the veil of secrecy that traditionally guards the sector, thereby perpetrating the vicious cycle of corruption, state weakness, political instability, insecurity, and violence.

45   Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, 'Women, Peace, and Security Index 2023/24: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women' (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2023), https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WPS-Index-full-report.pdf.

46   White, 'Corruption, the Defence and Security Sector, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence'.

47   Eirin Mobekk, 'Gender, Women and Security Sector Reform', *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 2 (1 April 2010): 278–91.

48   Lars-Erik Cederman, Nils B. Weidmann, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, 'Horizontal Inequalities and Ethnonationalist Civil War: A Global Comparison', *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011): 478–95.

DEFENCE CORRUPTION: A SILENT SABOTEUR OF SECURITY GOVERNANCE AND PEACE REFORMS

Security Governance refers to structures, institutions and actors involved in management, oversight and provision of security at national and local levels.[49] Defence sector governance is one aspect of broader security governance, as it relates to the provision of state security.

Security Sector Reform (SSR) is a framework for improving security governance in countries usually recovering from armed conflict.[50] It involves a set of political and technical processes that seek to establish and promote legal norms, legislative mechanisms, accountability structures, and capacity necessary for the provision of security and is thus closely linked to a state's capacity to fulfil human rights obligations.[51]

SSR has been a key component of peacebuilding and conflict resolution interventions over the past three decades. It usually involves the support of national and international partners, for instance through UN Peace Operations or external security assistance.

Corruption in defence and security undermines conflict management efforts through its critical impact on SSR programmes. International efforts for SSR and security assistance have consistently overlooked corruption. Even though the effectiveness of SSR is a deeply political issue, it is closely linked to broader governance struggles.

Effective SSR can support peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. It can also address conflict drivers, including corruption in procurement, arms diversions, state capture, illicit economies, and organised crime. In other words, successful SSR processes can lead to a reduction in direct conflict-related violence and the structural conditions for violence, impunity, and human rights abuses.

2.1 Corruption and Security Governance through a Political Lens

National politics and political economies, play a key role in shaping institutional choices and thus Security Sector Reform and Governance (SSR/G) approaches. In particular, the structure of a political system in a post-conflict and peacebuilding context can enable or constrain corruption. In this way, corruption is a *governance choice* at the national level, aimed at maintaining or increasing power in political settlements, rather than simply a way to pursue individual interests.[52]

However, significant accelerants of corruption, such as large-scale spending in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, constitute some of the key risk factors that will undermine the effectiveness of SSR processes.

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49 DCAF Backgrounder, "Security Sector Governance: Applying the principles of good governance to the security sector", 2015. https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/DCAF_BG_1_Security_Sector_Governance_EN.pdf.

50 MacColman, Leslie. "Security Sector Reform in Theory and Practice: Persistent Challenges and Linkages to Conflict Transformation." International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution 4, no. 1 (2016): 72–89. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26928585.

51 DCAF Backgrounder, "Security Sector Reform: Applying the principles of good governance to the security sector", 2015. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/195671/DCAF_BG_2_Security%20Sector%20Reform.11.15.pdf

52 Louis-Alexandre Berg, Governing Security After War: The Politics of Institutional Change in the Security Sector (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Ineffective SSR can create "weak, unstable or even criminal state structures". Without a clear political process supporting SSR and wider attention to security governance, implementing SSR as mere technical exercises is unlikely to lead to meaningful reforms and sustainable peace.

In a similar manner, internationally supported institution-building may offer avenues for elites to expand political, economic, and military power. War-time elites in post-conflict periods may be incentivised to subvert post-conflict institutions, either individually or in cooperation with the interests of a group. Where these incentives persist, institution-building may actually exacerbate rather than reduce insecurities, heightening the risk of a return to active conflict.[53] For instance, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) highlights how elite capture is deeply tied to security systems in fragile and conflict-affected countries.[54] This is especially prominent in security sector assistance, where elites can draw on this assistance to pursue their own interests. Elites may have also intimate connections to organised crime groups, for instance, which propel not only self-enrichment, but legitimise the instability these groups bring.[55]

Corruption is also a product of "internal political contests" and driven by socio-economic power structures.[56] Corruption may be about individual interests, but it can also be about maintaining political authority as part of political settlements. The structure of a political system in a post-conflict and peacebuilding context can enable or constrain corruption.

Hence, understanding governance dynamics is key to effective SSR, while overlooking their political dimensions weakens their impact. Corruption stems from internal political struggles and socio-economic power structures. As the defence and security sector is central to political authority, corruption can serve to maintain or increase that power within political settlements. Post-conflict political systems are particularly vulnerable to these dynamics, yet SSR processes are often disconnected from anti-corruption efforts. A corrupt or politicised security sector at the personnel level can fuel human rights abuses and impunity, both through individual misconduct and the undermining of institutions like the judiciary.

2.2 Corruption in Financial and Personnel Management

> **SSR agenda has become so problematic, ubiquitous, and picked up by all major international organisations and donors, but the track record of success is poor. SSR is widely acknowledged as a long-term process, yet it often suffers from superficial analysis and limited, short-sighted implementation support, and a consistent neglect of anticorruption measures.[57]**

Predatory, abusive, and corrupt defence and security personnel can undermine trust of the civilian population and the legitimacy of the state as a security provider. Abusive security forces in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have been identified as one factor contributing to recruitment of young people by violent extremist groups.[58] In DRC, police corruption has accompanied human rights abuses, including extortion and violence against civilians, and intimidation of the judiciary.[59] Alongside high-level defence corruption, endemic everyday bribery by security forces risk entrenching corruption and impunity in justice systems, especially for crimes committed by security forces.

Strengthening the integrity of financial and personnel management in SSR efforts is key to reducing defence and security sector corruption risks and their adverse impacts on human and state security. Professionalising high-risk areas such as the administration of salary payments, recruitment, officer appointments, promotion processes, budgeting, and financial management practices are key steps to reduce corruption risks in SSR/G efforts and improving transparency and accountability of the defence and security sector.

53   Milli Lake, 'Building the Rule of War: Postconflict Institutions and the Micro-Dynamics of Conflict in Eastern DR Congo', *International Organization* 71, no. 2 (April 2017): 281–315.

54   USIP, 'Elite Capture and Corruption of Security Sectors'.

55   Ibid.

56   Berg, Governing Security After War: The Politics of Institutional Change in the Security Sector, 237.

57   Interview with the author, defence and security expert, 11 November 2024.

58   Bernardo Venturi and Nana Toure, 'The Great Illusion: Security Sector Reform in the Sahel', *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 54–68.

59   Eirin Mobekk, 'Security Sector Reform and the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Protecting Civilians in the East', *International Peacekeeping* 16, no. 2 (1 April 2009): 273–86.

2.2.1 Salary Payments

Salary payments to military and security personnel are critical aspects that pose high risks of corruption and predatory behaviour. If civil servants and defence and security forces have not been paid for several months, and where there are very low salaries, there are corruption risks that also link to other critical issue areas, including organised crime, ghost soldiers, predatory security forces, human rights abuses and ineffective security provision.[60] Illicit economies also become more attractive when official salaries fall short.

In South Sudan, amid a deepening security and humanitarian crisis, most civil servants have not been paid in nearly a year.[61] Conflict between government and opposition forces, intercommunal violence, and large-scale displacement plague the country. Gross human rights violations, including widespread attacks against civilians, systematic sexual violence against women and girls, the use of child soldiers, and state-sponsored extrajudicial killings are met with impunity.[62] The conflict in Sudan has further worsened the humanitarian situation, shrunken civic space and increased repression of civil society, including through attacks on journalists and human rights defenders.[63]

South Sudan lacks a digitised payroll system for public services, which enabled the existence of ghost soldiers, and delayed or missing salary payments. Salaries and pensions are low, banking access is limited or inexistent outside Juba, and budget delays worsen the problem. The issues with pay alongside long deployments of personnel have exacerbated conditions for security sector's involvement in banditry, criminality, organised crime, and even loaning weapons.[64] This is coupled with a negative public perception of security sector personnel. Political elite military commanders also typically have high living standards which cannot be explained by their low salaries. Indeed, the Sentry have reported the role of the National Security Service in pursuing state capture

(occupying key posts in state institutions) and perpetrating gross human rights abuses.[65]

Furthermore, low salary payments for police, judges, and prison guards drive corruption and often derail cases through the acceptance of small bribes. In one case in Kivu in eastern DRC, police and judiciary reforms in combination with community outreach led to the prosecution of a rapist. However, the prison guards were not paid a living wage and depended on bribes to supplement their income. The rapist was eventually able to bribe his way out of prison and returned to the community.[66] Bribery impeded prosecution of perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence, even in the context of police and judiciary reforms. Evidence suggests that underpayment of police in Liberia and DRC also encouraged corruption and predatory behaviour.[67]

The need to restructure salary systems and ensure personnel are paid adequately is a critical anticorruption measure to limit the possibility of embezzlement, everyday bribery, and predatory security forces.[68] Donor support has also enabled the introduction of anti-corruption measures in national defence and security sectors. The digitisation of the security payroll revealed extensive corruption, including ghost soldiers and fraudulent payments, and highlighted the value of external backing for reform.[69]

Salary payments to military and security personnel are critical aspects that pose high risks of corruption and predatory behaviour.

60   Alix J Boucher et al., 'Mapping and Fighting Corruption in War-Torn States' (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, March 2007), https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Mapping_and_Fighting_Corruption_in_War-Torn_States_1.pdf; Transparency International Defence & Security, 'The Fifth Column, Understanding the Relationship between Corruption and Conflict' (Transparency International, 2017).

61   Sudans Post, 'South Sudan Lawmaker Proposes Plan to Clear 10-Month Salary Arrears', *Sudans Post* (blog), 5 September 2024, https://www.sudanspost.com/south-sudan-lawmaker-proposes-plan-to-clear-10-month-salary-arrears/.

62   Human Rights Watch, 'World Report 2024', 574.

63   Ibid, 576.

64   Focus group discussion.

65   Undercover Activities: Inside the National Security Service's Profitable Playbook', December 2022, https://thesentry.org/reports/undercover-activities/.

66   Pamela DeLargy, 'Sexual Violence and Women's Health in War', in *Women & Wars*, ed. Carol Cohn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 71.

67   Malte Brosig and Norman Sempijja, 'Human Development and Security Sector Reform: The Examples of Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo', *African Security* 11, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 59–83.

68   see for instance: Johanna Mendelson-Forman, 'Security Sector Reform in Haiti', *International Peacekeeping* 13, no. 1 (1 March 2006): 14–27; Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *The Complexity of Violence: A Critical Analysis of Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)*, Sida Working Paper on Gender Based Violence (Stockholm: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), 2010); Danny Singh, 'Challenging Corruption and Clientelism in Post-Conflict and Developing States', *Crime, Law and Social Change* 71, no. 2 (1 March 2019): 197–216; Stephen Emasu and Nouhoum Sangaré, 'Tool 3: Good Financial Governance of Defence and Security Institutions' (DCAF, 2021), https://www.dcaf.ch/tool-3-good-financial-governance-defence-and-security-institutions.

69   Interview with the author, Policy Team Leader, OHCHR, 8 November 2024.

🔍 **Case Study**

2.3 Statebuilding in Afghanistan

> **In the early years the sense was that it was too early to address corruption as there were other more pressing priorities. Later on, there was little appetite to address corruption because they [international interveners and donors] thought it was too late.[70]**

Lack of attention to institution-building in defence, lack of a national vision for SSR, short-term commitments on the part of donors, poor buy-in from the Afghan central government, and a short-sighted exit strategy for the United States (US) were some of the key factors contributing to the crumbling of the Afghan forces.[71] The absence of clear and tangible benchmarks to measure progress made it difficult to define progress. No single country or actor had ownership of reform efforts, leading to a piecemeal approach defined by frequent rotation of military and civilian advisors who impeded contextual and institutional knowledge.[72]

The case of Afghanistan demonstrated how widespread corruption among political elites alongside poor attention to anti-corruption measures in security sector reform led to serious insecurity and instability. Nearly $90 billion was allocated to security sector assistance in Afghanistan by the US since 2002, but the security sector collapsed, allowing the Taliban to establish control over the country in 2021.[73] Widespread corruption extended across the entire political system and across the defence and security sector. Political and military leaders drained state, military, and aid budgets for personal gain; and inflated payrolls included ghost soldiers that overstated the strength of security capabilities, while collusion and the drug trade further strengthened the Taliban.[74] Civil society actors raised red flags relating to corruption but were discouraged, if not harrased.[75]

Furthermore, external donors enabled Afghan's corrupt systems in multiple ways. Various anticorruption efforts targeting the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) prior to the 2021 Taliban takeover, were limited by lack of capacity and political will to translate policies into reality. They remained at the operational level and focused on technical fixes, making the approach inherently insufficient and disconnected from addressing the underlying drivers of elite-level corruption and power imbalances.[76]

According to one interviewee the collapse of the Afghan government in 2021 was not a surprise:

> **Allowing corrupt individuals and networks to basically hijack the whole democratisation process and use the defence forces for their own purpose paved the way for collapse. These same individuals and groups were involved in vast human rights abuses, but they were empowered with resources and no accountability.[77]**

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70   Interview with the author, CSO working in Afghanistan, 24 September 2024.

71   SIGAR, 'Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed' (SIGAR, February 2023), https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf; SIGAR, 'Staffing the Mission: Lessons from the U.S. Reconstruction of Afghanistan' (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, November 2024), https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-25-05-LL.pdf.

72   SIGAR, 'Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed'; SIGAR, 'Staffing the Mission: Lessons from the U.S. Reconstruction of Afghanistan'.

73   SIGAR, 'Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed'.

74   SIGAR, 'What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction', August 2021, https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/what-we-need-to-learn/index.html; SIGAR, 'Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed'.

75   Interview with the author, CSO working in Afghanistan, 24 September 2024.

76   SIGAR, 'What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction'.

77   Interview with the author, CSO working in Afghanistan, 24 September 2024.

Corrupt systems within the Afghan government and ANDSF were consistently self-protecting and partially enabled by external donors, with corruption embedded throughout the broader political settlement.[78]

Kabul, Afghanistan (Photo Credit: Mohammad Husaini, Unsplash)

2.4 Lessons to Learn

Corruption risk assessments must be grounded in deep political and contextual analysis. Too often, governance and anti-corruption efforts overlook who stands to gain or lose from political arrangements, particularly in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings. Effective corruption risk assessments require a clear understanding of elite interests, military entrenchment in national systems, and how these dynamics shape governance outcomes.[79,80]

Anti-corruption efforts must go beyond technical fixes to identify and disrupt the socio-political foundations of elite power. Post-conflict contexts create opportunities for power consolidation through corruption. Transitions often allow wartime elites to enrich and entrench themselves. The influx of aid and international engagement frequently fuels this process, creating new incentives for elite capture. Efforts should then be made to identify leverage points to disrupt the socio-economic and political conditions that serve as the foundation for post-war elites to build and sustain power structures, often through corrupted means.

Targeted administrative reforms can reduce corruption in the defence and security sector. Digitalising payroll, improving administrative financial administration, and innovating personnel management in fragile and conflict affected contexts can help reduce corruption risks among military and security personnel. Direct salary payments to bank accounts — bypassing centralised, opaque channels — enable better expenditure tracking and reduce opportunities for theft and ghost soldiers. Strengthening national banking infrastructure is equally critical, along with proactive leadership to manage funding gaps and delayed payments in fiscally constrained environments.

Innovative and transparent donor engagement is essential for effective SSR. Security governance and reform require new thinking, transparency, and honest reflection from donors. Without clear reporting on what works and what does not opportunities to learn and improve are lost.[81] There is also limited research currently that evaluates donor efforts to combat corruption in SSR processes. Greater attention is needed to address flaws in existing toolkits, and this depends on donors and multilateral institutions moving away from self-protective practices and embracing open, evidence-based approaches.

78   SIGAR, 'What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction'; Marika Theros, 'Natural Bedfellows: Corruption, Criminality and the Failure of International Reconstruction. A Case Study of the Kabul Bank', *Conflict, Security & Development* 0, no. 0 (2024): 1–27.

79   Belloni and Strazzari, 'Corruption in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo'.

80   Palifka and Rose-Ackerman, 'Corruption in Postconflict State Building'; Berg, *Governing Security After War*.

81   Interview with the author, David H. Young, Deputy Director of Lessons Learned, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), 19 September 2024.

DEFENCE CORRUPTION: A GATEWAY TO TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISED CRIME

Political and defence corruption, especially amongst political elites, state officials, as well as military and security actors often fuel black markets, illicit economies, and organised crime - which in turn worsen human security and foster violence.

Some corruption networks can be embedded in social, political, and economic structures and institutions: others may be more hidden and clandestine, and built on unique, personal connections - such as people who went to the same military college or prestigious schools, groups of business executives, and members of secret societies.[82] Political elites and state officials can act through and in collusion with private groups who are themselves embedded in transnational corruption networks and marketplaces. Political and social networks form a key part of the resources needed to sustain corrupt systems and are in turn shaped by multiple factors, including market structures, geographies, regulatory environments, and historical and cultural context.[83]

Moreover, transnational criminal and corruption networks adapt quickly, and their evolving nature poses serious challenges to conflict prevention and resolution efforts. They exploit both legal and illicit systems, embedding themselves in power structures, enabling impunity, weakening institutions, and fuelling conditions for social fragmentation and violent conflict.

During active conflict, state officials and non-state armed groups seek to mobilise resources, while 'conflict entrepreneurs' and illicit actors, such as organised crimes groups and traffickers, seek to capitalise on the disruption caused by a conflict. When a conflict ends, these illicit actors may adapt to continue profiting in the post-conflict period.

War economies are typically predatory in nature and can cultivate conditions for exacerbating structural inequalities and vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual forms of corruption.[84] The effects of corruption in these contexts can drive insecurity and instability, worsen inequalities, and provide a fertile ground for the proliferation of illicit and diverted weapons, alongside the growth of criminal networks and violent extremist groups.

3.1 Institutionalised Corruption and Organised Crime

> When the offerings of the state and criminal groups are out of balance, corruption will continue to empower organised crime networks.[85]

Organised crime networks are becoming more sophisticated and increasingly embedded within state institutions and security forces. When former and active members of the defence and security sector form or join criminal groups, they can secure cooperation from state officials, military, and security personnel to allow for the continuation and expansion of illicit activities. Political corruption can also expand black markets, underground economies and organised crime that exacerbates human insecurities and cultivates conditions for violence. This type of institutionalised corruption heightens the risk of state capture, allowing corrupt officials to maintain power, pursue enrichment and amass wealth, while acting with impunity.[86]

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82 Omoregie Charles Osifo, 'A Network Perspective and Hidden Corruption', *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 8, no. 1 (22 February 2018): 115–36.

83 Ágnes Czibik et al., 'Networked Corruption Risks in European Defense Procurement', in *Corruption Networks: Concepts and Applications*, ed. Oscar M. Granados and José R. Nicolás-Carlock (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 67–87.

84 White, 'Corruption, the Defence and Security Sector, and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence'.

85 Interview with the author, Representative from International Crisis Group, 27 November 2024.

86 Harriett Baldwin, 'Strategic and Economic Challenges Posed by Corruption' (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 19 November 2022), https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2022-strategic-and-economic-challenges-posed-corruption-report-baldwin-017-esc.

Elite capture of state institutions also creates hybrid security arrangements, where state officials collaborating with alternative security actors engage in corruption and criminal activity.[87] However, hybrid security relationships can be problematic when they are able to contest state authority. Public sector corruption and wider abuse of power, especially in the state's defence and security sector, can cultivate conditions for hybrid security actors to contest state authority.[88]

Moreover, organised crime networks can accrue political power at a similar level to elected officials. They can penetrate governance institutions at local, regional or national levels, and even hold significant power in official institutions. These can lead to military and security forces aligning with specific criminal or armed groups. For example, in Mexico, security officials have in some cases aligned with gangs for profit, while state officials may even align with gangs to counter political competition.[89] This further entrenches criminal organisations and networks within the state and the wider society.

When former and active members of the defence and security sector form or join criminal groups,

they can secure cooperation from state officials, military, and security personnel to allow for the continuation and expansion of illicit activities.

3.1.1 Corruption-enabled Criminal Networks and Violence

Corruption can also be used by non-state actors who pursue political goals or seek to protect revenues from illicit trades through violent action.[90] A study on illicit financial flows (IFFs) found links between the laundering of criminal funds, human trafficking, corruption of state officials, and weakened resilience to prevent conflict.[91] IFFs from human trafficking and the arms trade fuels human rights abuses and violence, particularly against women.[92]

Furthermore, by examining the symbiotic ties between the security sector and organised crime, for example throughout former Yugoslavian states reveals how corrupt networks emerged, with violence and patronage deeply entrenched in the system.[93]

The conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo expanded space for organised crime, often in collusion with political leadership who built their legitimacy in part on violence.[94] This had implications for the post-conflict period where formal institutions supported by international aid and peace processes are intertwined with informal and sometimes criminal norms and actors. International state builders were not effective in countering these power structures, where corruption and criminality were deeply embedded.[95]

Moreover, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the lack of a multi-stakeholder approach to fighting corruption led to poor outcomes in judicial reforms. There was a lack of a countrywide approach that drew on multiple inter-related sectors.[96] This led to the failure in preventing and responding to the collusion between political elites and organised crime groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.[97]

87   DCAF, 'Hybrid Security: Challenges and Opportunities for Security Sector Reform. Insights from Burkina Faso, Colombia & DRC', 10 July 2023, 3, https://www.dcaf.ch/hybrid-security-challenges-and-opportunities-security-sector-reform.

88   DCAF, 'Hybrid Security'.

89   See: International Crisis Group, 'Mexico', https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/mexico.

90   Luciano Pollichieni, 'A Case of Violent Corruption: JNIM's Insurgency in Mali (2017–2019)', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 7 (3 October 2021): 1092–1116.

91   Alex Cobham, 'The Impacts of Illicit Financial Flows on Peace and Security in Africa', Study for Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa, 2014, https://tanaforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/iscussionillicit_financial_flows_conflict_and_security_in_africal.pdf.

92   Ortrun Merkle and Monica Kirya, 'The Gendered Dimensions of Illicit Financial Flows', U4 Helpdesk Answer (Transparency International, 2019), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20495.

93   Ferguson, *Architectures of Violence*.

94   Belloni and Strazzari, 'Corruption in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo'.

95   Ibid.

96   Divjak and Pugh, 'The Political Economy of Corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina'.

97   Vara Define and Harald Mathisen, 'Corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina-2005', Chr. Michelsen Institute (2005), https://www.cmi.no/file/2100-unamid.

3.2 Illicit Networks and the Security Situation in Mali

In the Sahel, state institutions and officials are implicated in some illicit trafficking networks. The protection of trafficking routes relies both on the control of armed groups and complicity of state officials.[98]

Mali has been grappling with complex security challenges for over a decade.[99] Endemic corruption, especially within armed forces, has contributed to a culture of mistrust. As a result, the Malian political arena transformed into a tool for personal enrichment.[100] The effect of systemic corruption in the defence forces can be seen through reports of low ammunition, faulty weapons, and poorly performing protective gear. Combined with weak leadership in battle, this has resulted in the deaths of thousands of soldiers.[101]

Additionally, corruption has eroded public trust in state institutions, worsening insecurity as accountability of the armed forces remains weak.[102,103] Rampant graft, impunity for senior officials, and a deteriorating security environment have fuelled public disillusionment.[104] The 2012 Tuareg uprising further weakened state control, and alienating northern and central communities.[105] This allowed Jihadist groups to expand their indluence, leading to near-civil war and militant rule in the north after the 2020 and 2021 coups.

Before the coups, Mali relied heavily on foreign security assistance, which was largely focusing on counter-terrorism efforts. Support from the US, France, and the EU was estimated to make up around 75 per cent of the government's total revenue.[106] The foreign assistance, however, focused overwhelmingly on strengthening military capacity, equipping Malian forces with more sophisticated weapons and greater tactical readiness. However, this was at the expense of improving institutional resilience, good governance mechanisms, and safeguards to corruption.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP)'s attempts in combatting corruption and organised crime focused on addressing illicit activities connected to terrorist financing.[107] However, such efforts did not sufficiently take account of how corruption systematically cut across multiple sectors and actors, including at the political level, to support illicit activities and organised crime.[108]

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98   Luca Raineri, 'The Bioeconomy of Sahel Borders: Informal Practices of Revenue and Data Extraction', *Geopolitics* 27, no. 5 (20 October 2022): 1470–91.

99   Louisa Brooke-Holland, 'UN ends peacekeeping force in Mali', House of Commons Library, 3 July 2023, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9827/#:~:text=A%20 decade%2Dlong%20crisis&text=Fresh%20elections%20in%202013%20and,in%20implementing%20the%202015%20accords.

100   Transparency International Defence & Security, Fragile and Conflict Affected States Policy Briefs Series, Country: Mali, January 2025.

101   BBC. 2021. "Mali insurgency: Investigating corruption allegations in the military." https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-57946367, July 26, 2021.

102   Mathias Bak, 'Mali: Overview of Corruption and Anti-Corruption', U4 Helpdesk Answer (Berlin: Transparency International and CMI, 2 June 2020), https://www.u4.no/publications/mali-overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption-2020.

103   Venturi and Toure, 'The Great Illusion'.

104   Afrobarometer's Mali survey in April 2020 showed that 86% of Malian believed their country was headed in the wrong direction, with 74% also seeing corruption as increasing. Trust in institutions and leaders was also low, especially toward the National Assembly (37%) and ruling coalition (38%). These perceptions provided ideal conditions for the coups to take place. Source: Afrobaromater, 'Malians, Though Eager for Change from Failing State and Economy, Still Demand Democracy', https://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad386-malians-though-eager-change-failing-state-and-economy-still-demand-democracy.

105   Boeke, S., & de Valk, G. (2019). The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali: The Diverging Outcomes of Risk and Threat Analyses. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 44(10), 835–854. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1592356.

106   Ena Dion & Emily Cole, 'How International Security Support Contributed to Mali's Coup', *USIP*, September 21, 2020. https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/09/how-international-security-support-contributed-malis-coup

107   Erica Gaston et al., 'Peacekeeping Responses to Transnational Organized Crime and Trafficking: A Case Study of MINUSMA' (New York: United Nations University, 2024).

108   Ibid.

Bamako, Mali - Circa February 2012 © *Thomas Dutour, Shutterstock*

Criminal networks and illicit economies that thrive in Mali are mostly deeply embedded within formal and informal political and security structures. The Malian state has often collaborated with traffickers to suppress revolts and reward allies, granting them access to trafficking routes in return for military support against rebels. Trafficking became a self-reinforcing cycle in which armed groups and drug traffickers supported each other, and where both are "dependent on the corruption and corrosion of state authority".[109]

Over time, there have been numerous cases of defence and security involvement with criminal networks, exposing direct collaboration between the military and organised crime.[110] In 2019, Mali's intelligence chief was arrested for protecting traffickers in exchange for payments from a National Assembly representative linked to drug trafficking.[111] This shows how military involvement in criminal networks has allowed foreign actors to exert influence over the defence sector.

Current efforts to extend the central government's authority to the North will inevitably mean that the government and army seeking agreements with the *grand messieurs* – the region's influential businessmen involved in legal and illegal enterprises. This only serves as further proof of the power such networks hold.[112] As organised criminal activities spread south, this situation presents clear corruption risks for Mali's defence sector and its record of collusion with organised crime elements are the ideal breeding ground for corruption.[113]

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109 Gaston et al., 'Peacekeeping Responses to Transnational Organized Crime and Trafficking: A Case Study of MINUSMA', 6.

110 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC), *After The Storm: Organised Crime Across the Sahel-Sahara Following Upheaval in Libya and Mali*, GI-TOC, Geneva, 2019, p. 13, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/After_the_storm_GI-TOC.pdf.

111 United Nations, 'Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and Renewed Pursuant to Resolution 2484 (2019)', S/2020/785/Rev.1, p. 19, https://undocs.org/S/2020/785/Rev.1.

112 Ivan Briscoe, 'Crime after jihad: Armed groups, the state and illicit business in post-conflict Mali', *Clingendael Institute*, May 2014, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/crime-after-jihad-armed-groups-the-state-and-illicit-business-in-post-conflict-mali/.

113 Maliweb.net, Lutte contre le trafic de drogue au Mali de janvier 2014 à juin 2018: 455 personnes de 13 nationalités ont été interpelées, January 15, 2019, https://www.maliweb.net/societe/lutte-contre-le-trafic-de-drogue-au-mali-de-janvier-2014-a-juin-2018-455-personnes-de-13-nationalites-ont-ete-interpelees-2796832.html.

3.3 Drug Trafficking in Ecuador and Venezuela

In Latin America and the Caribbean, large-scale organised crime, constitutes a prominent threat to the state's monopoly of violence (legal use of force) and provision of security.[114] Organised crime is often linked to pervasive gender-based violence, especially when related to gangs, drug traffickers, and human traffickers.[115] For example, in Ecuador and Venezuela, drug trafficking activities fuelled by corruption and organised crime have been particularly destabilising.

Ecuador has struggled with high-level corruption and the illicit links between government officials, security sector personnel, and organised criminal networks.

In the early 2000s, due to a mixture of internal struggles as well as external factors such as the expansion of cocaine production in Colombia, and the growing presence of transnational criminal groups in the region, Ecuador started playing a key transit role in the trafficking of cocaine from Colombia to North America. In the midst of a surge in the presence of street gangs and violence, corruption took hold of state officials and security forces.[116,117] Traffickers developed sophisticated corruption networks that infiltrated all levels of government and the security sector.[118]

In March 2024, Ecuador's Attorney General presented evidence in what began a process of unveiling the largest criminal case against corruption and drug trafficking in the country. Known as the Metastasis case, it has implicated more than 50 defendants, including from government, the judiciary, and military and security forces, that formed a deeply entrenched corruption network which enabled and sustained the drug economy.[119]

Drug trafficking networks allegedly paid bribes to officials to sustain their criminal empire and have continued to do so even from state prisons.[120] Reports of violent deaths in Ecuador's prisons, driven by clashes between drug trafficking gangs, persisted. Incidents included rape, assaults, and torture of female inmates, often carried out with the complicity of prison authorities, highlighting deep-seated issues within the country's criminal justice system.[121] Security officials have also provided information to cartel members in prison to hide trails of their illicit activities, while judiciary officials provided lenient prosecution and sentencing. In exchange, mafias help fund political campaigns, pay bribes, and offer other benefits.[122] Navy personnel are also accused of supplying arms to some of Ecuador's most violent gangs, smuggling drugs at sea, and selling information to criminal groups in Colombia.[123] Despite these challenges, anti-corruption efforts in the country have successfully led to the conviction of 11 individuals by October 2024, and judiciary processes are ongoing.[124]

Quito, Ecuador (Photo Credit: Mauricio Muñoz, Unsplash)

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114   Stathis N. Kalyvas, 'How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 8 (1 December 2015): 1517–40.

115   Cory Smith, 'Addressing the Sex and Gender-Based Violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador Fueling the U.S. Border Crisis' (Notre Dame, IN: Pulte Institute for Global Development, 2020).

116   James Bargent, 'Ecuador: A Cocaine Superhighway to the US and Europe', InSight Crime, 30 October 2019, http://insightcrime.org/investigations/ecuador-a-cocaine-superhighway-to-the-us-and-europe/.

117   Anastasia Austin, 'From Gangs to Gatekeepers: Criminal Capital in Durán', InSight Crime, 26 September 2024, http://insightcrime.org/investigations/from-gangs-gatekeepers-criminal-capital-duran/.

118   Bargent, 'Ecuador: A Cocaine Superhighway to the US and Europe'.

119   Gavin Voss, 'Metastasis Case Exposes Ecuador's Corruption Cancer', InSight Crime, 21 March 2024, http://insightcrime.org/news/metastasis-case-exposes-ecuadors-corruption-cancer/.

120   James Bargent, 'The Prison Mafias: Ecuador's Criminal Axis', InSight Crime, 4 December 2024, http://insightcrime.org/investigations/prison-mafias-ecuadors-criminal-axis/.

121   United States Department of State, '2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ecuador', 2023, https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ecuador/.

122   Bargent, 'The Prison Mafias: Ecuador's Criminal Axis'.

123   Chris Dalby, 'Ecuador's Navy Grappling With Mounting Evidence of Criminal Collusion', InSight Crime, 26 January 2023, http://insightcrime.org/news/ecuador-navy-grappling-mounting-evidence-criminal-collusion/.

124   International Crisis Group, 'CrisisWatch: October Trends and November Alerts 2024', 31 October 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/october-trends-and-november-alerts-2024.

In Venezuela, significant influence of the military in the political and economic sphere has fuelled drug trafficking, violence, and instability.[125,126] Weak civilian oversight and the lack of transparency in arms acquisitions and financial management have allowed corruption to flourish.[127]

Starting as a standard practice under President Hugo Chavez's regime, drug trafficking networks have expanded into the nation's military, political, and criminal spheres.[128,129] Security forces accepted bribes, and in some cases, leveraged alliances with guerrilla groups and other criminal actors to engage in cocaine trafficking directly.[130] At the same time, some drug cartels allegedly provide political support to state and municipal politicians in exchange for services, such as facilitating administrative means to allow trafficking, and to "ensure impunity for favoured traffickers".[131]

More recently, high-ranking members of the military and security forces, including the incumbent president of Venezuela, Maduro, have been accused of allegedly participating in and directing the drug trade through a group known as the 'Cartel of the Suns'.[132,133] Investigations suggest unlike traditional drug cartels, it operates as a fluid and loose network of trafficking groups embedded within the Venezuelan security forces - facilitated, protected, and sometimes directed by political actors.[134] This network in particular allegedly emerged as a compromise for President Maduro to secure the support of the military at a time when its personnel were not receiving sufficient salaries.[135]

Caracas, Venezuela (Photo Credit: Bona Lee, Unsplash)

125 Transparencia Venezuela, 'Presencia Militar en el Estado Venezolano' (Transparencia Venezuela, November 2021), https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Presencia-Militar-en-el-Estado-Venezolano.pdf.

126 Harriet Marsden, 'Inside Venezuela's Oil Corruption Scandal', *The Week*, 16 May 2023, https://theweek.com/news/world-news/americas/960824/venezuelas-oil-corruption-scandal; Diana Roy and Amelia Cheatham, 'Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 31 July 2024, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/venezuela-crisis.

127 Transparencia Venezuela, 'Presencia Militar en el Estado Venezolano'; Ara Marcen Naval, 'Militarisation, Corruption, and Democracy in Venezuela', *Transparency International Defence & Security* (blog), 1 August 2024, https://ti-defence.org/venezuela-elections-2024-military-corruption-democracy/.

128 Transparencia Venezuela, 'Drug Trafficking in Venezuela 2024: An Expanding Business that Brings Profits to the Power Elite', March 2025. https://transparenciave.org/economias-ilicitas/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Drug-Trafficking-in-Venezuela-2024.-Transparencia-Venezuela-en-el-exilio.pdf

129 Insight Crime, 'Cartel of the Suns', InSight Crime, 14 May 2022, http://insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/cartel-de-los-soles-profile/.

130 Ibid.

131 Venezuela Investigative Unit, 'Venezuela's Cocaine Revolution' (Insight Crime, April 2022), 36, http://insightcrime.org/investigations/beyond-the-cartel-of-the-suns/.

132 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Nicolás Maduro Moros, 10 January 2025, https://www.state.gov/nicolas-maduro-moros/.

133 U.S. Department of Justice Archives, Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Venezuelan Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Criminal Charges, 26 March 2020, https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/nicol-s-maduro-moros-and-14-current-and-former-venezuelan-officials-charged-narco-terrorism

134 Venezuela Investigative Unit, 'Venezuela's Cocaine Revolution'.

135 Ibid.

WEAPONS OF INFLUENCE: CORRUPTION RISKS IN DEFENCE PROCUREMENT AND THE GLOBAL ARMS TRADE

The global arms trade is especially vulnerable to corruption, and corruption in this area can fuel armed conflict, violence, and instability by weakening security provision, strengthening dangerous groups, and further exacerbating violence. The arms trade offers enormous profit potential, while conflict creates conducive conditions for heightened corruption. Corruption in the arms trade takes multiple forms, including grand corruption affecting institutional processes, kleptocratic political capture of entire institutions, embezzlement, bribery, extortion, undue influence, preferential treatment, and the abuse of power. When various forms of corruption emerge in procurement processes and unauthorised arms transfers, the outcome is often increased insecurity and instability.

The global arms trade is also often marked by complex and opaque bureaucratic and financial systems that hinder accountability and oversight.[136] Both legal and illegal arms transfer often involve a web of global actors, whose interactions can facilitate corruption. Illicit munitions flows frequently exploit legitimate trade channels, blurring the line between lawful and unlawful exchanges. Additionally, corrupt networks are highly adaptable, often circumventing new regulations aimed at improving transparency. This highlights the need for flexible, evidence-driven policies that can keep pace with evolving tactics and address corruption risks across both formal and informal arms markets.

4.1 Corruption-related Arms Diversion and Transnational Organised Crime

The illicit arms trade is a major driver of transnational organised crime, often enabled by corruption and collusion between criminal networks and government officials, including in the defence sector.[137] Arms imports are further understood as a factor leading to increased corruption and political exclusion that contribute to violent extremist activity.[138] The globalisation of military production, the immense proliferation of small arms, and the porousness of national borders make efforts to control conflict spillovers through the restriction of arms flows ineffective and difficult.

Institutional weaknesses in military procurement provide entry points for organised crime, particularly through arms diversion. Corruption-related arms diversions involve the redirection or misappropriation of arms, ammunitions, parts and components, and military equipment to an otherwise unauthorised or prohibited end user; where the end use is a direct result from the intentional abuse of entrusted power for private gain.[139]

Corruption risks tied to arms diversions include weak oversight on bribery, poor stockpile management, politicised or unfair military and police promotions, and unregulated private security actors.[140]

> **Procurement, of defence equipment and services, is a major area that has always been very vulnerable to corruption.[141]**

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136 Sam Perlo-Freeman, 'Chapter 7: Corruption in the Arms Trade', 2020, https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/edcoll/9781789900989/9781789900989.00015.xml.

137 Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado, 'Arms Trafficking and Organized Crime', Policy Brief (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, August 2022), https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/arms-trafficking-and-organized-crime/.

138 Daniel Auer and Daniel Meierrieks, 'Merchants of Death: Arms Imports and Terrorism', *European Economic Review* 137 (1 August 2021): 103813.

139 Transparency International Defence & Security, 'Dangerously Diluted: Corruption's Role in Fueling Arms Diversion', 26 June 2024, https://ti-defence.org/publications/corruption-role-arms-diversion/.

140 Ibid.

141 Interview with the author, Defence expert, 20 November 2024.

> ## The globalisation of military production, the immense proliferation of small arms, and the porousness of national borders make efforts to control conflict spillovers through the restriction of arms flows ineffective and difficult.
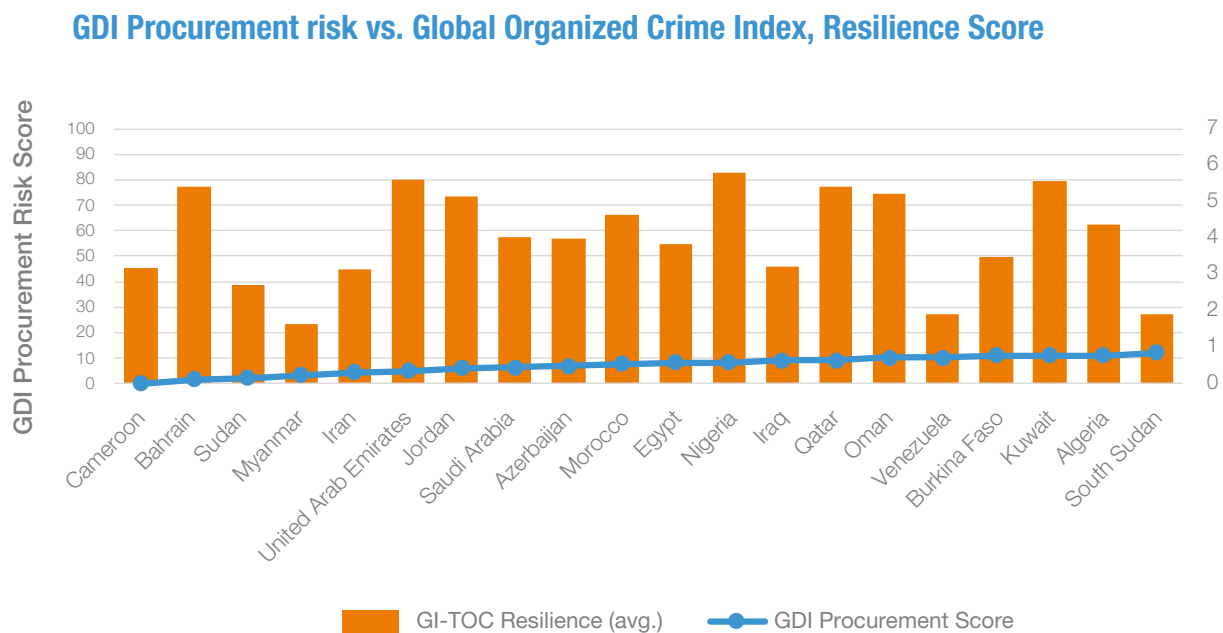
Transparency International Defence & Security has identified 27 types of corruption-fuelled arms diversion throughout a weapon's lifecycle across 67 countries globally, including collusion between high level public officials and arms traffickers, embezzlement of disarmament and stockpile management funds, and undue influence allowing high-risk or illicit sales.[142]

Unsurprisingly, countries facing significant procurement risks in the Government Defence Integrity (GDI) index also ranked low in their 'resilience' to organised crime in the Global Organised Crime Index (Figure 7).[143]

The GDI monitors and analyses global arms transfers, providing exporting countries with a tool to assess corruption risks in recipient states. Many weapons are sent to countries lacking institutional safeguards against corruption — a trend consistent across top arms exporters in 2019–2023 (Figure 8).

If not mitigated, corruption in the arms trade would further exacerbate and contribute to human rights abuses, illicit trafficking, and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions.

Figure 7: GDI procurement risk vs Global Organised Crime Index

GDI Procurement risk vs. Global Organized Crime Index, Resilience Score

GI-TOC Resilience (avg.)   GDI Procurement Score

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142 'Under the Radar: Corruption's Role in Fueling Arms Diversion' (Transparency International Defence & Security, Forthcoming 2025).

143 Global Organized Crime Index is based on three key elements: 1) The scope, scale and impact of 15 criminal markets; 2) The structure and influence of five criminal actor types; 3) The existence and capacity of countries to be resilient to organized crime, measured across 12 resilience building block. All countries in the Index are assigned a criminality score, which comprises two subcomponents: criminal markets and criminal actors. More details here: https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Global-organized-crime-index-2023-web-compressed-compressed.pdf --- Countries are also assigned a resilience score in an effort to assess the level at which states have established the appropriate legal, political and strategic frameworks to address organized crime. The assessment of the 12 resilience indicators is centred on the issues of whether resilience measures or frameworks exist and whether these are effective in counteracting criminality in compliance with international human rights standards. The indicators are as follows: R1. Political leadership and governance R2. Government transparency and accountability R3. International cooperation R4. National policies and laws R5. Judicial system and detention R6. Law enforcement R7. Territorial integrity R8. Anti-money laundering R9. Economic regulatory capacity R10. Victim and witness support R11. Prevention R12. Non-state actors.

Figure 8: Top arms exporters and their GDI score

Top 5 arms exporters 2019-2023	GDI score	Top 1st importer	GDI score 1st importer	Top 2nd importer	GDI score 2nd importer	Top 3rd importer	GDI score 3rd importer
U.S.	Moderate risk (60)	Saudi Arabia	Critical risk (11)	Japan	Moderate risk (60)	Qatar	Critical risk (12)
France	Moderate risk (50)	India	Moderate risk (50)	Qatar	Critical risk (12)	Egypt	Critical risk (6)
Russia	Very high risk (32)	India	Moderate risk (50)	China	Very high risk (28)	Egypt	Critical risk (6)
China	Very high risk (28)	Pakistan	No GDI data	Bangladesh	Very high risk (28)	Thailand	Very high risk (27)
Germany	Low risk (70)	Egypt	Critical risk (6)	Ukraine	High risk (41)	Israel	Moderate risk (52)

Corruption risks are also often clustered around specific buyers, more so in larger military procurement markets when significant political power is at play, and major arms deals are perceived to have strategic political relevance to exporting governments.[144,145]

In the UK, oversight mechanisms failed to prevent authorised bribery payments aimed at maintaining relations with Saudi Arabia.[146] The UK government was implicated in corruption allegations through authorising nearly £10 million in bribes to a Saudi Arabian prince and other officials linked to defence contracts involving sales of British weapons through major British defence contractor BAE Systems.[147]

Similarly, Nigeria's 2015 arms procurement scandal saw $2.1 billion—meant to equip the military against Boko Haram—embezzled by senior officials and diverted for

political purposes, including funding then-President Goodluck Jonathan's re-election campaign. As a result, the military were left ill-equipped to respond effectively to security threats posed by Boko Haram.[148]

To respond to the evolving challenges and highly adaptable corrupt networks in the global arms trade, the European Union (EU), for instance has reduced single-bidder contract awards by half since adopting Directive 2009/81/EC.[149] This is also an attempt to harmonise procurement rules among member states and limits security-related exemptions.[150] However, the directive does not address growing corruption risks around non-open procedures, such as direct awards or invitation-only awards. As a result, corrupt actors may continue to exploit legal loopholes by steering contracts toward favoured firms.[151]

144 Czibik et al., *State Capture and Defence Procurement in the EU*.

145 Perlo-Freeman, 'Chapter 7: Corruption in the Arms Trade'.

146 Jonathan Ames and David Brown, 'Calls for Inquiry into Claims Government Backed Bribes to Saudis', 6 March 2024, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/calls-for-inquiry-into-claims-government-backed-bribes-to-saudis-xt9dvv77t; David Pegg and Rob Evans, 'MoD Paid Millions into Saudi Account amid BAE Corruption Scandal', *The Guardian*, 8 March 2024, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/08/mod-paid-millions-into-saudi-account-amid-bae-corruption-scandal.

147 Alistair Gray and Suzi Ring, 'Ex-MoD Employee Sentenced to 30 Months in UK Prison in Saudi Corruption Case', *Financial Times*, 12 April 2024, sec. Serious Fraud Office UK, https://www.ft.com/content/cdab71f0-e74b-4a4c-9636-4ec607b9d983.

148 S. Perlo-Freeman, 'Nigeria's Armsgate Scandal", 2020, https://corruption-tracker.org/case/nigerias-armsgate-scandal.

149 'Directive 2009/81/EC', 216 OJ L § (2009), http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2009/81/oj/eng.

150 Czibik et al., *State Capture and Defence Procurement in the EU*.

151 Czibik et al., 'Networked Corruption Risks in European Defense Procurement'.

Figure 9: GDI vs Arms Transfers

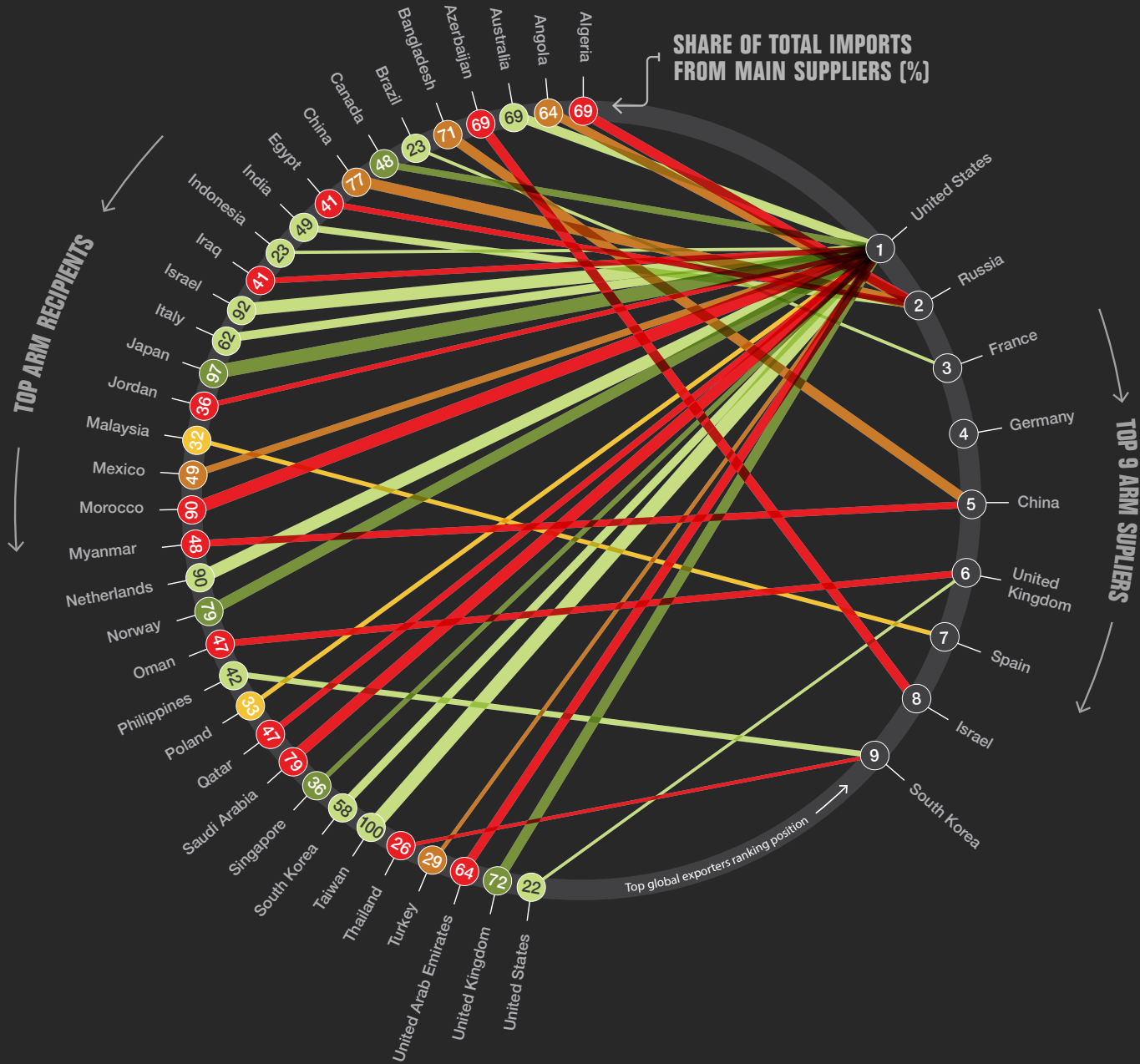# CORRUPTION RISK IN DEFENCE PROCUREMENT
2020 GOVERNMENT DEFENCE INTEGRITY INDEX (GDI)

Level of corruption risk in defence procurement for Top Arms Importers, indicating main supplier and % share of imports from that supplier. Arms transfers rankings and shares determined by SIPRI based on analysis of averages in arms transfers for the 5-year period 2016-2020 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute).

DEFENCE PROCUREMENT

Is procurement in the defence sector subject to proper controls over complex components of the procurement cycle, such as purchases, subcontractors, brokers, financing packages, and offsets programmes? Does the system exhibit appropriate levels of transparency and oversight, especially regarding procurement requirements, tender boards, and anti-collusion controls?

- 🔵 A: Very low corruption risk
- 🟢 B: Low corruption risk
- 🟡 C: Moderate corruption risk
- 🟡 D: High corruption risk
- 🟠 E: Very high corruption risk
- 🔴 F: Critical corruption risk

SHARE OF TOTAL IMPORTS FROM MAIN SUPPLIERS (%)

TOP ARM RECIPIENTS

TOP 9 ARM SUPLIERS

Top global exporters ranking position

🔍 **Case Study**

4.2 The War in Sudan and Illicit Arms Flow

The war in Sudan between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has exposed deep-rooted defence sector corruption and the entwinement of the military in the political sphere. The conflict is also currently fuelling one of the world's largest internal displacement crises, where 10.7 million people have fled the conflict, and acute food insecurity led by the use of food as a weapon of war.[152]

Sudan is an example of how dangerous arms exports are to a country with high levels of corruption risks in the defence sector. The illicit flow of arms to Sudan, despite the existence of a UN mandated arms embargo, has contributed to the current humanitarian crisis, and the 2021 coup d'etat and 2023 civil war.[153] Foreign-made weapons have found their way into Sudan through illicit arms transfers, diversions, smuggling and organised crime networks, and the complicity of states.[154] RSF Forces are also implicated in engaging in corruption to support human trafficking and other illicit activities.[155]

There have been allegations that the RSF is supported by arms from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and mercenaries from Russia — two countries with strong interests in Sudan's gold resources.[156,157] Despite evidence suggesting the UAE broke the arms embargo to supply weapons to Sudan, the country denied all allegations.[158,159] The US has also sanctioned RSF-owned companies in UAE for violating the arms embargo and formally declared that the RSF has committed genocide. The SAF is purportedly supported by Egypt and there are speculations that Iran is also offering support.[160] Additionally, Russia's war in Ukraine is in part allegedly funded by Sudanese gold.[161]

Corrupt conflict-related networks are seeping into Chad and the wider Sahel region as organised crime and violent extremist groups are maintaining illicit war economies and perpetrating armed conflict[162] The spillover of the conflict and prevalence of corruption the arms trade is likely to continue undermining peace and security in the region.

Kids playing in Khartoum, Sudan © Ammar Nassir, Unsplash

152 Human Rights Watch, 'Sudan Conflict Fuels World's Largest Internal Displacement', 31 January 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/31/sudan-conflict-fuels-worlds-largest-internal-displacement.

153 Amnesty International, 'New Weapons Fuelling the Sudan Conflict: Expanding Existing Arms Embargo across Sudan to Protect Civilians' (London: Amnesty International Ltd, 2024), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2024/07/new-weapons-fuelling-the-sudan-conflict/.

154 Human Rights Watch, 'Fanning the Flames: Sudanese Warring Parties' Access to New Foreign-Made Weapons and Equipment', 9 September 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/09/fanning-flames.

155 Africa Organised Crime Index, 'Criminality in Sudan - The Organized Crime Index | ENACT', The Organized Crime Index, 2023, https://africa.ocindex.net.

156 Genocide Watch. "UAE, RSF Gold Mines Fund Genocide in Sudan." Genocide Watch, 20 March 2025. https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/uae-rsf-gold-mines-fund-genocide-in-sudan.

157 Krauss, Clifford. "Sudan's Gold Rush at the Heart of Civil War." *The New York Times*, 11 December 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/11/world/africa/sudan-gold-rush-heart-civil-war.html.

158 Amnesty International, 'New Weapons Fuelling the Sudan Conflict: Expanding Existing Arms Embargo across Sudan to Protect Civilians'; UN Security Council, 'Letter Dated 15 January 2024 from the Panel of Experts on the Sudan Addressed to the President of the Security Council' (United Nations, 15 January 2024), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4039195?ln=en&v=pdf.

159 Al Jazeera, 'UAE Denies Sending Weapons to Sudan's RSF: Report', *Al Jazeera*, 24 January 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/24/uae-denies-sending-weapons-to-sudans-rsf-paramilitary-report.

160 CIVICUS, '2024 State of Civil Society Report', 19.

161 Dame Rosalind Marsden, 'Sudan's Forgotten War: A New Diplomatic Push Is Needed', *Chatham House* (blog), 14 March 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/sudans-forgotten-war-new-diplomatic-push-needed.

162 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 'In the Wake of the Sudan Conflict, Fuel and Arms Smuggling Spike in Chad and the Broader Sahel.', August 2023, https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-008/01-in-the-wake-of-the-sudan-conflict-fuel-and-arms-smuggling-spike.html.

4.3 Enhancing Defence Governance and Aid Delivery to Ukraine

The Ukrainian government has strived to promote integrity and anti-corruption during the full scale-Russian invasion—especially as large volumes of military aid flow into the country. However, donors need to better address corruption risks in both aid delivery and defence procurement, as it limits the overall effectiveness of their assistance. These risks can disrupt supply chains, prevent critical equipment from reaching the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), and ultimately provide strategic advantage to Russia by weakening Ukraine's defence readiness.[163]

Corruption Risks and National Reform Efforts

Ukraine has a long, turbulent history of corruption, often shaped by Russian destabilisation efforts.[164] Looting from the Yanukovich era (2010-2014) significantly damaged military preparedness and capacity.[165] Chronic underfunding, opaque processes in tenders and asset disposal allowed bribery and embezzlement in defence procurement to thrive.[166] Deeply rooted informal links between the government and the military industrial complex also led to mishandling of essential supplies.[167] Following years of neglect and endemic corruption, in March 2014, the Ukrainian army was hollowed out - understaffed and ill-equipped - to withstand the Russian-backed separatist movement.[168]

Kyiv, Ukraine, 2022 © Eugenia Pankiv, Unsplash

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163 Interview with the author, Anticorruption expert, 27 November 2024.

164 James Rupert, 'Ukraine: How to Oppose Russia's Weaponization of Corruption', United States Institute of Peace, 9 June 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/ukraine-how-oppose-russias-weaponization-corruption.

165 Sanctions Watch, 'Sanctions Watch, Civil Forum for Asset Recovery (Cifar): Viktor Yanukovych', Sanctionswatch Cifar EU, 28 May 2021, https://sanctionswatch.cifar.eu/viktor-yanukovych.

166 Joseph L Derdzinski and Valeriya Klymenko, eds., *Almanac on Security Sector Governance in Ukraine*, Biblioteka Razumkov Centre (Geneva-Kiev: Razumkov Centre, DCAF, 2013); Sarah Chayes, 'How Corruption Guts Militaries: The Ukraine Case Study', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 May 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2014/05/how-corruption-guts-militaries-the-ukraine-case-study?lang=en; Andriy Zagorodnyuk et al., 'Is Ukraine's Reformed Military Ready to Repel a New Russian Invasion?', *Atlantic Council* (blog), 23 December 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-ukraines-reformed-military-ready-to-repel-a-new-russian-invasion/; Kateryna Odarchenko and Oleksandr Poznii, 'Ukrainians See Corruption as a Key Issue Even during the War | Wilson Center', 31 July 2024, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukrainians-see-corruption-key-issue-even-during-war.

167 Simon Shuster, 'Corruption Still Plagues Ukraine as West Pumps in Aid', TIME, 1 April 2014, https://time.com/45253/ukraine-corruption-tymoshenko-kiev/; Наші Гроші, 'Оточення Начальника Генштабу Отримало 84-Мільйонний Підряд Від Міноборони', Наші Гроші, 2 September 2014, https://nashigroshi.org/2014/09/02/otochennya-nachalnyka-henshtabu-otrymalo-84-miljonnyj-pidryad-vid-minoborony/; NAKO, Transparency International Defence & Security, and Transparency International Ukraine, 'Making the System Work: Enhancing Security Assistance For Ukraine - Transparency International Defence & Security', 2017, https://ti-defence.org/publications/making-system-work-enhancing-security-assistance-ukraine/.

168 Sarah Chayes, 'How Corruption Guts Militaries'; Margerete Klein, 'Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions – Advantages and Challenges', April 2015; Oksana Huss and Svitlana Musiiaka, 'Accomplishing the Impossible: How Ukraine Advanced Anti-Corruption Reforms in Defense & Security', *Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy* (blog), 2 May 2022, https://www.corruptionjusticeandlegitimacy.org/post/accomplishing-the-impossible-how-ukraine-advanced-anti-corruption-reforms-in-defense-security.

Since then, Ukraine has devoted enormous attention and resources to addressing corruption, especially in the defence sector.[169] Enabled by civil society activism, reforms have extended to almost every aspect of the security sector, including the corporatisation of the defence industry conglomerate - Ukroboronprom in 2021.[170,171,172]

In 2023, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) established the Reforms Support Office aimed to bolster transparency in procuring non-lethal supplies and adhere more closely to NATO's transparency standards.[173,174] The 2018 Law on National Security further strengthened democratic control of the defence sector by enhancing scrutiny on major defence and security decisions.[175]

The Ongoing Challenge of Tackling Corruption Risks

Despite these efforts, alongside support from NATO, US, and European countries to building stronger governance standard and controls in Ukraine's defence sector, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, has reintroduced major corruption risks, particularly around defence procurement and delivery of military assistance.[176] The shock at the start of the war unleashed a frenzy for securing weapons as billions of dollars, including money coming from aid, were poured into a secretive arms market. This distortion allowed intermediaries, even those actively investigated for corruption, to exploit intrinsic institutional weaknesses in the sector.[177]

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169   Huss and Svitlana Musiiaka, 'Accomplishing the Impossible'.

170   Referring to the ongoing process of transforming the previously fully state-owned Ukroboronprom into a joint-stock company, called 'Ukrainian Defense Industry'.

171   Some of the key bodies established to secure the fight against corruption include: The National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) - founded in 2015 to investigate cases of corruption in high profile officials; the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (NACP) – created in 2016 to monitor civil servant income and expenditure; the National Asset Recovery and Management Agency in 2016; the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC) in 2018 to protect individuals, society, and the state from grand corruption and related crimes; and the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) that has been operating since 2015 but became an independent legal entity in 2023. Efforts during the invasion continue: the National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2021–2025, was adopted in 2022, and in March 2023 a State Anti-corruption Programme was adopted by the government as an action plan for that strategy.

172   Olena Tregub, 'Ukrainian Activism for Transparency and Accountability: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back', United States Institute of Peace, 28 May 2019, https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/05/ukrainian-activism-transparency-and-accountability-two-steps-forward-one-step; Matthew Steadman and Mia Paukovic, 'Progress [Un]Made - Defence Governance in Central and Eastern Europe', Transparency International Defence & Security, 2020, https://ti-defence.org/publications/defence-sector-corruption-governance-central-eastern-europe-cee/; NAKO, 'The Draft of Gender Equality Strategy Published', NAKO, 8 September 2021, https://nako.org.ua/en/news/the-draft-of-gender-equality-strategy-published; NAKO, 'A Historic Step: SC Ukroboronprom Officially Ceased to Exist. What to Expect Now?', 29 June 2023, https://nako.org.ua/en/news/eksperti-zmodelyuvali-5-nastupnix-krokiv-transformaciyi-ukroboronpromu-nako; Deborah Sanders, 'Ukraine's Third Wave of Military Reform 2016–2022 – Building a Military Able to Defend Ukraine against the Russian Invasion', *Defense & Security Analysis* 39, no. 3 (3 July 2023): 312–28; Oleksandr Kalitenko, 'Anti-Corruption Reform in Ukraine After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion', *2023*, Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, Report Series on Ukrainian Domestic Affairs, no. No. 9 (13 June 2023).

173   Also known as the Office for Support of Changes (OSC). Source: Ukraine MoD News, 'The Ministry of Defence involves non-governmental organizations in the development of defense policies', 9 September 2024.

174   Politico, 'Defense Minister Reznikov under Fire as Corruption Probes Rock Ukraine', POLITICO, 23 January 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/defense-minister-reznikov-ukraine-corruption-probe-war-russia-zelenskyy/; Stanislav Pohorilov, 'Ministry of Defence Launches Office for Support of Changes: First Reform Will Be in Public Procurement', Ukrainska Pravda, 25 April 2023, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/04/25/7399318/; Josh Rudolph, 'The Best Defense Is Good Governance', 2024.

175   Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 'Ukraine's New Law on National Security: Key Facts to Know', Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 22 June 2018, https://uacrisis.org/en/67656-ukraine-s-new-law-national-security-key-facts; Verkhovna Rada Council, 'The Law of Ukraine, About the National Security of Ukraine', Verkhovna Rada Council, 21 June 2018, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2469-19#Text; Zagorodnyuk et al., 'Is Ukraine's Reformed Military Ready to Repel a New Russian Invasion?'; NAKO, 'NAKO's Analysis of DL №4210 on Democratic Civilian Control over the Army', NAKO, 22 March 2023, https://nako.org.ua/en/research/analiz-drugogo-citannya-zakonoprojektu-4210.

176   Nick Fenton and Andrew Lohsen, 'Corruption and Private Sector Investment in Ukraine's Reconstruction', 11 August 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/corruption-and-private-sector-investment-ukraines-reconstruction.

177   Justin Scheck and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, 'Zelensky Called Him a Criminal. Now Ukraine Calls Him for Guns and Ammo.', *The New York Times*, 12 August 2023, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/12/world/europe/ukraine-arms-dealer-serhiy-pashinsky.html; Justin Scheck and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, 'In Ukraine, a U.S. Arms Dealer Is Making a Fortune and Testing Limits', The New York Times, 9 September 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/09/world/europe/ukraine-military-arms-dealer-pentagon.html.

As supply chains lengthened through middlemen who sought to maximise profit, offering prices increased sevenfold.[178] Lack of transparency in procurement procedures meant that the purchased equipment's quality remained unchecked, or was never delivered, while supplies were being bought at highly inflated prices.[179]

This combination of risk factors, including the newly imposed martial law, in conjunction with the race against time to procure specific equipment and limited oversight resources, resulted in several cases of embezzlement implicating high-ranking defence officials.[180]

It is, however, important to recognise that despite these challenges and following NATO-set standards, the Ukrainian government still managed to launch Supervisory Boards for both – the DPA and the State Logistics Operator (DOT).[181] Other anti-corruption mechanisms were also put in place in the meantime. Examples include the establishment of the Public Anticorruption Council working under the MoD, as well as expanding the mandate of Prozorro to include non-classified defence supplies.[182]

International Efforts and the Critical Need for Stronger Donor Support

Security assistance to Ukraine takes various forms and involves a broad range of international actors. Some donors have explicitly prioritised strengthening Ukraine's defence governance. NATO, has supported reforms in defence procurement system, promoting best practices for effectiveness, accountability, and transparency.[183] Through its Building Integrity (BI) programme, Ukraine's National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) implemented the 2019 NATO recommendations to work on corruption risks related to Ukraine's defence sector.[184,185] Additionally, as part of NATO's Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP), a joint Strategic Defence Procurement Review was conducted in 2024 to align Ukraine's defence procurement standards with Euro-Atlantic best practices.[186] These efforts have proved generally effective at mitigating defence sector corruption and fostering good governance, but institutional weaknesses remain in scrutiny across tenders by allied countries, including contract awarding.[187]

178 Harry Yorke, 'Ukraine: Arms Prices Are Soaring, We Need £800 Billion to Beat Putin', The Times, 16 June 2024, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/defence/article/why-are-arms-dealers-hiking-prices-for-ukraine-92hqdtlx2.

179 Economic Security Bureau of Ukraine (ESBU), 'ESBU Notified 6 Officials of the Ukroboronprom Enterprise of Suspicion of Embezzlement of over UAH 5.4 Million of Budget Funds | Economic Security Bureau of Ukraine', Economic Security Bureau of Ukraine (ESBU), 3 January 2023, https://esbu.gov.ua/en/news/esbu-notified-6-officials-of-the-ukroboronprom-enterprise-of-suspicion-of-embezzlement-of-over-uah-54-million-of-budget-funds; Josh Pennington, Jonny Hallam, and Tim Lister, 'Zelensky Replaces Ukrainian Defense Minister, Citing Need for "New Approaches"', CNN, 4 September 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/03/europe/ukraine-zelensky-fires-defense-minister-reznikov-intl-hnk/index.html; Scheck and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, 'In Ukraine, a U.S. Arms Dealer Is Making a Fortune and Testing Limits -'; Maria Kostenko, Alex Stambaugh, and Christian Edwards, 'Ukraine Says It Uncovered $40 Million Corruption Scheme in Weapons Procurement', CNN, 28 January 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/28/europe/ukraine-weapons-procurement-corruption-shell-intl/index.html.

180 Economic Security Bureau of Ukraine (ESBU), 'ESBU Notified 6 Officials of the Ukroboronprom Enterprise of Suspicion of Embezzlement of over UAH 5.4 Million of Budget Funds | Economic Security Bureau of Ukraine'; Lilia Rzheutska, 'Ukraine Struggles to Curb Corruption in Its Military', DW, 17 July 2023, https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-military-recruiters-dismissed-after-bribery-scandals/a-66561801; Olga Voitovych, 'Ukraine Arrests Senior Defense Ministry Official Accused of Embezzling $40 Million', CNN, 23 December 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/23/europe/ukraine-defense-ministry-official-detained-embezzlement-intl/index.html; Kostenko, Alex Stambaugh, and Christian Edwards, 'Ukraine Says It Uncovered $40 Million Corruption Scheme in Weapons Procurement'.

181 Daria Kaleniuk, 'NATO's Recommendation for Ukraine: Immediately Appoint Supervisory Boards at DPA and DOT', Anticorruption Action Centre (blog), 20 August 2024, https://antac.org.ua/en/news/nato-s-recommendation-for-ukraine-immediately-appoint-supervisory-boards-at-dpa-and-dot/.

182 Mykola Tkachenko, 'Transparency has returned to defense procurement: what will it change?', Економічна правда, 12 May 2023, https://epravda.com.ua/columns/2023/05/12/700050/; Volodymyr Datsenko, 'What Info Is Secret in Defense Procurement Not Related to Weapons? - Transparency International Ukraine', TI-Ukraine (blog), 9 February 2023, https://ti-ukraine.org/en/blogs/what-info-is-secret-in-defense-procurement-not-related-to-weapons/; NAKO, 'How Does the Public Anti-Corruption Council under the Ministry of Defence Work?', 25 December 2024, https://nako.org.ua/en/news/yak-pracyuje-antikorupciina-rada-pri-minoboroni.

183 Claire Mills, 'Military Assistance to Ukraine since the Russian Invasion. House of Commons Library.', 24 September 2024.

184 National Agency on Corruption Prevention, 'NACP Joins Expert Consultations on Reforming the Defense Procurement System According to NATO Standards', National Agency on Corruption Prevention, 10 May 2024, https://nazk.gov.ua/en/nacp-joins-expert-consultations-on-reforming-the-defense-procurement-system-according-to-nato-standards/.

185 NACP, 'NACP Presents Research and Recommendations to Eliminate Corruption Risks in Centralized Logistics Procurement for the Armed Forces of Ukraine', 15 November 2024, https://nazk.gov.ua/en/nacp-presents-research-and-recommendations-to-eliminate-corruption-risks-in-centralized-logistics-procurement-for-the-armed-forces-of-ukraine/.

186 NATO, 'Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine', NATO (blog), 18 December 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_231639.htm.

187 Transparency International Defence & Security. 'GDI 2020 Global Report: Disruption, Democratic Governance and Corruption Risk in Defence Institutions.', December 2021, https://ti-defence.org/gdi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/02/GDI-Global-Report-v7_17Feb22.pdf.

Bilateral partners, including the UK, US, and Norway have supported Ukraine's governance reforms for over a decade. The US has backed key initiatives, such as establishing robust asset disclosure systems, launching a whistleblower portal, reinforcing the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, and promoting greater transparency and integrity in reconstruction efforts.[188] At the same time, aid provided by the UK has also reinforced anti-corruption work of the NACP and Ukraine's effort to strengthen oversight, transparency, and accountability controls within the MoD.

In addition, a recent joint initiative — Pro-Integrity — launched by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), sought to boost transparency across institutions. Yet, its future focus on the defence sector remains uncertain, particularly given the termination of USAID programmes.[189,190]

Looking Forward

Despite significant capacity pressures due to Russian aggression, Ukraine continues to make progress in its anti-corruption efforts. Unresolved corruption risks still remain and threaten to undermine these gains. Weak oversight in defence procurement can disrupt supply chains, divert critical equipment, and leave frontline units with low-quality or undelivered supplies.[191] This not only wastes scarce resources but also erodes trust in authorities, damages troop morale, and weakens Ukraine's overall position in the conflict—potentially offsetting the impact of international military assistance.[192]

Donor coordination also remains a challenge. Overlapping mandates, fragmented planning, and limited communication between donor-funded actors have created inefficiencies and left gaps in both supply delivery and oversight.[193] Key support is needed in the two new procurement agencies - the State Logistics Operator (DOT) and the Defense Procurement Agency (DPA) – to mitigate existing capacity constraints.

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188 The White House Factsheet: U.S. Achievements in the Global Fight Against Corruption. October 16, 2024.

189 DAI, 'USAID and UKAid Anti-Corruption Initiative Launches in Ukraine', DAI, 2 July 2024, https://www.dai.com/news/usaid-and-ukaid-anti-corruption-initiative-pro-integrity-launches-in-ukraine.

190 Bernd Debusmann Jr, 'More than 80% of USAID programmes 'officially ending'', BBC News, 10 March 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdx2401vn5ro.

191 NAKO, 'First Aid Kits and Tourniquets of Poor Quality on the Front Line: How Can the State Solve This Issue?', 4 August 2023, https://nako.org.ua/en/news/neyakisni-aptecki-ta-turniketi-na-peredovii-yak-derzavi-virisiti-cyu-problemu; Olga Voitovych, 'Ukraine Arrests Senior Defense Ministry Official Accused of Embezzling $40 Million'; Kostenko, Alex Stambaugh, and Christian Edwards, 'Ukraine Says It Uncovered $40 Million Corruption Scheme in Weapons Procurement'.

192 Charles Recknagel and Merhat Sharipzhan, 'Volunteers Try To Get Supplies To Ukraine's Forces', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 6 June 2014, sec. Ukraine, https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-army-equipment-donations/25413169.html.

193 Interview with the author, Anticorruption expert, 27 November 2024.

4.4 Embedding Anti-Corruption Standards in Arms Transfers and Military Aid

The illicit arms trade poses a persistent threat to international peace and security, as recognised by the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and other global instruments. The ATT urges States Parties to assess corruption risks in arms transfers and share information to strengthen transparency and accountability.[194] Yet corruption remains a key enabler – facilitating arms diversion and trafficking, while sustaining organised crime, and fuelling armed conflict.[195]

Large amounts of military spending also constitute strong incentives for corruption in countries where institutional checks and balances are limited or lacking. Military aid is similarly vulnerable. Without context-specific planning and oversight - cases of ghost soldiers, fund diversion, and embezzlement may further undermine morale and burden fragile institutions.[196]

Corrupt defence officials in exporting and importing countries, arms manufacturers, and security personnel often exploit opaque systems to profit from illicit deals utilising bribery, collusion, and even procurement fraud. This can lead to arms diversion, inflated contracts, and weakened institutions. Illicit arms flows, sustained by corrupt networks can undermine good governance, entrench war economies, empower armed groups, and contribute to sexual and gender-based violence.[197] They also obstruct peace processes and weaken state authority—especially when the defence sector is complicit in sustaining illicit networks.

To counter these risks, countries must enhance cooperation to trace and disrupt financial and trade flows linked to corruption, including sharing financial intelligence, seizing illicit assets, and enforcing transparency in arms transfers.[198] In other words, upholding the ATT's principles is essential to safeguard the defence sector and prevent weapons from fuelling violence and human rights abuses.

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194   'Under the Radar: Corruption's Role in Fueling Arms Diversion' (Transparency International Defence & Security, Forthcoming 2025).

195   Á. Czibik et al., *State Capture and Defence Procurement in the EU* (Budapest, Hungary: Government Transparency Institute, 2020); Czibik et al., 'Networked Corruption Risks in European Defense Procurement'; Colby Goodman, 'Blissfully Blind: The New US Push for Defence Industrial Collaboration with Partner Countries and Its Corruption Risks' (Transparency International Defence & Security, 11 April 2024), https://ti-defence.org/publications/blissfully-blind-us-defence-contract-offsets-partner-countries/; Michael Ofori-Mensah, Tom Shipley, and Denitsa Zhelyazkova, 'Trojan Horse Tactics: Unmasking the Imperative for Transparency in Military Spending' (Transparency International Defence & Security, 24 April 2024), https://ti-defence.org/publications/trojan-horse-tactics-transparency-military-spending-corruption-risk/.

196   Interview with the author, David H. Young, Deputy Director of Lessons Learned, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), 19 September 2024.

197   Vanessa Farr, Henri Myrttinen, and Albrecht Schnabel, eds., *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impacts of Small Arms and Light Weapons* (Tokyo ; New York: United Nations University Press, 2009); Transparency International, 'The Fifth Column, Understanding the Relationship between Corruption and Conflict'; del Mercado, 'Arms Trafficking and Organized Crime'.

198   International Crisis Group, 'Watch List 2024 – Autumn Update', 15 October 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/watch-list-2024-autumn-update.

THE MISSING 'PEACE': CORRUPTION'S IMPACT ON PEACEBUILDING

> Anticorruption is often seen as an activity that happens later in international interventions, after institution building is underway. But we need to bring corruption in at the same time, and tailor these measures to each specific context.[199]

Corruption can obstruct peace in both the short and long term by shaping how political power and resources are being distributed.[200,201] Such post-conflict political settlements frequently involve the redistribution of resources to co-opt key stakeholders to pacify and prevent them from becoming spoilers or joining non-state armed groups.

One common approach is to integrate and award former combatants prominent positions in the security forces. While this may support short-term stability, it also risks deepening tensions — particularly in heavily militarised environments where civilian oversight is weak. Ex-combatants may feel pressured to maintain ties with militarised networks to secure influence, while civilians may mistrust former fighters in positions of authority.[202] These tensions can reinforce the very ethnic and social divisions that contributed to conflict, and open new pathways for corruption. In such contexts, corruption often acts as a 'compensation mechanism' that reinforces and reproduces power imbalances that undermine state legitimacy, governance, and generate insecurities.[203]

Efforts to reform the security sector in post-conflict settings are frequently hindered by corruption. Security sector reform (SSR) initiatives have increasingly been criticised for their failures to appropriately respond to context-specific political realities or to connect meaningfully with governance, human rights, and anti-corruption frameworks.[204] As a result, they may inadvertently reinforce corrupt power structures rather than dismantle them.

Corruption also enables wartime elites to entrench their economic and political dominance in the post-conflict order.[205] When peacebuilding processes are exclusionary, especially towards women and minority groups, they risk perpetuating patronage systems and inequalities that enable corruption, including in the defence and security sector. Failure to include local communities, including women and minorities, from participation in political processes can derail peace efforts, entrench insecurity, and weaken prospects for an inclusive and accountable governance practice.[206]

199 Interview with the author, Upasana Garoo, DCAF, 26 September 2024.

200 Mark Pyman et al., 'Corruption as a Threat to Stability and Peace' (Transparency International Deutschland e.V., 2014).

201 Louis-Alexandre Berg, Governing Security After War: The Politics of Institutional Change in the Security Sector (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).

202 Parry, J., & Aymerich, O. (2022). Reintegration of ex-combatants in a militarized society. Peacebuilding, 11(1), 20–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2042982.

203 Belloni and Strazzari, 'Corruption in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo'.

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205 Transparency International Defence & Security, 'The Fifth Column, Understanding the Relationship between Corruption and Conflict'.

206 Annika Björkdahl, 'A Gender-Just Peace? Exploring the Post-Dayton Peace Process in Bosnia', Peace & Change 37, no. 2 (2012): 286–317; Shahra Razavi, 'Governing the Economy for Gender Equality? Challenges of Regulation', in Feminist Strategies in International Governance, ed. Gülay Caglar, Elisabeth Prügl, and Susanne Zwingel (Routledge, 2013), 217–32; Sahla Aroussi, Women, Peace, and Security: Repositioning Gender in Peace Agreements, 1st ed. (Intersentia, 2015); Robert Egnell, 'Gender Perspectives and Military Effectiveness: Implementing UNSCR 1325 and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security', PRISM 6, no. 1 (2016): 72–89.

5.1 Peace Processes

Peace processes can create opportunities for corruption when they fail to impose checks on power of old elites, preserve wartime loyalties, or reinforce clientelist systems.[207,208] In post-conflict settings, weak oversight, and entrenched networks often obstruct efforts to dismantle wartime ties between state officials, ex-combatants, and organised crime. Power-sharing arrangements may further entrench corrupt practices. Similarly, economic recovery strategies that centralise power or promote liberalisation without anti-corruption safeguards risk deepening inequality and fuelling long-term instability.

In Angola and Sierra Leone, armed factions continued exploiting diamond revenues to procure weapons even after peace agreements were signed.[209]

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Dayton Peace Accords led to competition between ethnic and political groups for access to illicit gain and entrenched governance challenges in the long term as elites grasped for their authority in power-sharing institutions.[210,211] In Burundi, measures to prevent the outbreak of violence through power sharing between Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups was not able to lead to "a set of clear and well-enforced rules or limit patronage and self-dealing".[212] Moreover, strategies to rebuild the economy by centralising power in a few elites, as well as "open-ended free market" approaches not accompanied by basic government capacity to promote and prioritise anti-corruption, can generate and fuel corruption.

Political settlements often shape long-term security governance, yet the very arrangements that secure authority may constrain opportunities for reform. The security sector becomes a key battleground, where decisions reflect political bargains rather than the public interest, especially where the military dominates political and economic life.

Integrating former combatants into national forces also carries corruption risks. Some ex-rebel leaders pursue personal enrichment through resource extraction or illicit economies. As one interview participant noted, "As long as they are inside the system, they can do what they want and earn extra money. If you start with anti-corruption measures and limit their income, they may actually rebel again".[213]

Still, even under military rule - where comprehensive security sector reform (SSR) may be unfeasible - targeted efforts to strengthen integrity, budget transparency, and financial accountability can improve security outcomes and lay the groundwork for broader reforms.

5.2 Post-conflict Security and Defence Governance

Maintaining engagement on security and defence governance remains crucial to preserve hard-won progress and protect existing channels for dialogue, particularly as negotiations for peace agreements or constitutional restoration unfold. In South Sudan, political corruption is also often linked to the armed forces, and those involved in corruption can intentionally block SSR processes.[214]
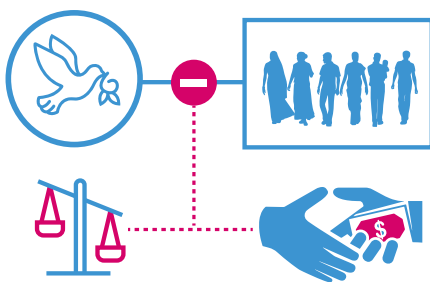
When peacebuilding processes are exclusionary, especially towards women and minority groups, they risk perpetuating patronage systems and inequalities that enable corruption, including in the defence and security sector.

207 Palifka and Rose-Ackerman, 'Corruption in Postconflict State Building'.

208 Boris Divjak and Michael Pugh, 'The Political Economy of Corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 3 (1 June 2008): 373–86.

209 Neil Cooper, 'Conflict Goods: The Challenges for Peacekeeping and Conflict Prevention', *International Peacekeeping* 8, no,3 (2001): 21-38.

210 Divjak and Pugh, 'The Political Economy of Corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina'.

211 Berg, *Governing Security After War*, 238.

212 Palifka and Rose-Ackerman, 'Corruption in Postconflict State Building', 334.

213 Interview with the author, multilateral peace operations expert, 12 November 2024.

214 OHCHR, 'South Sudan's Fragile Peace Prospects Rest on Addressing the Impunity and Corruption that Drive Human Rights Violations, Experts tell UN General Assembly', (30 October 2024). https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/south-sudans-fragile-peace-prospects-rest-addressing-impunity-and-corruption

There are attempts to empower line ministries, the judiciary, the parliament, and civil society to support systems of oversight. However, in a post-conflict context where the military still holds significant power and exercises control over the state, such efforts face considerable challenges and are often difficult to achieve.

At the same time, disrupting systemic corruption can be destabilising. Defence and security sector corruption is most often part of a broader systemic issue linked to the overall political economy of a regime. Post-conflict settings can allow for wartime leaders who capitalised on war economies to have access to international assistance programmes, including at the local level.[215] Bribery and grand corruption are pervasive in international business transactions, arms trade, and natural resource extraction.[216] Yet, few peace agreements, if any, pay attention to the management of natural resources, which further enables corrupt officials to seek personal enrichment. For example, at the end of the conflict in Angola in early 2000s, resources were diverted from state coffers to private pockets, with over $4.22 billion[217] from oil-revenues being left unaccounted for.[218,219]

In other cases, elites may appear to cooperate with pro-governance reforms yet systematically dismantle them to pursue their own aims and hold on political power. Corruption can remain a key issue even where anti-corruption frameworks are adopted in post-conflict contexts. Anti-corruption can be used as a political tactic to oust opponents through corruption allegations. Such a politically driven strategy has been applied in Niger,[220] shaped elections in Paraguay alongside disinformation campaigns,[221] and used "as instruments of political retribution" in Armenia.[222]

Justice and security systems are inherently interconnected, and improvements in either sector are not effective if they are not mutually reinforcing. At the national level, SSR/G donors tend to empower the executive branch to a greater extent than the judiciary and legislative branches of government in post-conflict contexts. This translates into interventions that are weak

in their transformative potential.[223] However, a weak and non-independent judiciary especially adversely hampers anti-corruption efforts in SSR processes, including efforts to mitigate the influence of organised crime in the defence and security sector as impunity increases.

Even where good governance and anti-corruption policies exist, justice sector corruption and a lack of sanctions serve as poor deterrents for perpetrators of corruption and other forms of abuse of power. Furthermore, as law enforcement capabilities improve and lead to more arrests, the judiciary's inability to process cases in a timely manner can create an impression of impunity if criminals are not promptly convicted. This creates a climate of widespread lack of accountability and undermines any reform or governance processes in the security sector. Without effective justice mechanisms, meaningful reform efforts become exceedingly difficult.

215 Belloni and Strazzari, 'Corruption in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo'.

216 Ellen Gutterman and Mathis Lohaus, 'What Is the "Anti-Corruption" Norm in Global Politics?', in *Corruption and Norms*, ed. Ina Kubbe and Annika Engelbert (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 241–68.

217 Arvind Ganesan, 'Some Transparency, No Accountability' (Human Rights Watch, 12 January 2004), https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/01/12/some-transparency-no-accountability/use-oil-revenue-angola-and-its-impact-human.

218 Arvind Ganesan, 'Some Transparency, No Accountability' (Human Rights Watch, 12 January 2004), https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/01/12/some-transparency-no-accountability/use-oil-revenue-angola-and-its-impact-human.

219 Palifka and Rose-Ackerman, 'Corruption in Postconflict State Building'.

220 Jannik Schritt, 'Janus-Faced Presidents: Extroverted and Introverted Politics in Oil-Age Niger', *Review of African Political Economy* 48, no. 169 (3 July 2021): 420–41.

221 CIVICUS, '2024 State of Civil Society Report' (CIVICUS, March 2024), https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2024/state-of-civil-society-report-2024_en.pdf.

222 Richard Giragosian, 'Challenges in Armenia's Fight against Organized Crime and Corruption', *Global Initiative* (blog), 30 July 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armenia-organized-crime-corruption-ocindex/.

223 Interview with the author, Policy Team Leader, OHCHR, 8 November 2024

5.3 Iraq and its Elite Groups

The ethno-sectarian power-sharing system established in Iraq after 2003 also demonstrates how formal anti-corruption measures are 'captured' by elite networks that allowed political parties to dominate and weaken state institutions.[224] Despite multiple investments and short-term gains in governance, accountability and anti-corruption, reforms failed to translate into longer term transformations. The lack of successful reforms can be explained by the generally poor understanding of the influence political elites and their network held, completely downplaying their capacity to pursue personal interests.

There has been a wide range of external donor support to help building the capacity of government and civil society to advance accountability mandates and improve accountability mechanisms. A system of governance to support accountability was established in principle through various oversight bodies, but it has not been able to implement checks and balances on the post-2003 Iraqi elite, which has implications for the political will needed to advance reforms.[225] The Integrity Commission (est. 2004) saw few investigated cases making its way to court (only around 25 per cent) and even fewer reaching a verdict.[226] The Integrity Committee of the primary legislative body is also subject to claims of abuse, including its use to attack political opponents.[227]

Elite groups subverted Iraqi institutions "through a networked strategy of influence and coercion".[228] They have pushed to influence and control public opinion through various channels, including the media, think tanks, and public discourse. Following the appointment of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani as prime minister in 2022, numerous people were arrested for their involvement in a corruption scandal linked to the missing $2.5bn from the government's tax authority during the previous administration. Some of this tax money was also recovered. Yet these gains were short-lived as many individuals were released from jail after only a few weeks, asset freezes were lifted, and impunity continued for Iraqi elites.

Street view of a bazaar in Iraq © Md Mahdi, Unsplash

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224 Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, 'Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq', Research Paper (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, June 2021), https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/politically-sanctioned-corruption-and-barriers-reform-iraq/02-post-2003-iraqi-state

225 For instance, the Integrity Committee of the primary legislative body, the Council of Representatives in Iraq's parliament.

226 Renad Mansour, 'Tackling Iraq's Unaccountable State: A Networked Approach to Mobilizing Reformers', Research Paper (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, December 2023), 23, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/tackling-iraqs-unaccountable-state.

227 Sarwar Mohammed Abdullah, 'Corruption Protection: Fractionalization and the Corruption of Anti-Corruption Efforts in Iraq after 2003', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 3 (27 May 2019): 358–74; Mansour, 'Tackling Iraq's Unaccountable State: A Networked Approach to Mobilizing Reformers'.

228 Mansour, 'Tackling Iraq's Unaccountable State: A Networked Approach to Mobilizing Reformers', 43.

UN vehicle in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo © Safi Erneste, Pexels

5.4 Corruption as the Missing Piece in Peacebuilding

To achieve sustainable post-conflict peace settlements, anti-corruption should be integral at all stages of any reform and governance processes. Large-scale spending and unmonitored aid frequently acts as a major driver of corruption. Conflict entrepreneurs, organised crime groups, political elites, and others will have access to new opportunities for personal enrichment and pursuit of political interests. Without corresponding oversight and measures to guard against corruption, the risks increase, undermining the effectiveness of the defence and security sector.

Given the military's historical role as the primary instrument of unconstitutional power transfers, defence sector governance reforms must be elevated to the highest priority for the UN and other international partners. Inaction on military reform threatens to undermine any security sector transformation agenda.

Ambitions for defence and security sector governance should also be long-term and accompanied by multi-year funding that allows for sufficient long-term planning. Separating the military from political power is critical to reducing the risks of military rule and the related

corruption risks. Strengthening core organisational governance processes within the security sector, which are the foundation for transparent and accountable armed forces, is also essential. This involves recruitment, appointments, and human resources. Developing professional systems for a career track and security, including requirements for training, promotions, pay raises, and the core elements of human resources are critical areas to support conditions for reforms and institutionalisation of anti-corruption measures. Professional systems can also help reduce the possibility of favouritism along ethnic or political lines in recruitment and promotion.

External donors may not be able to play a lead role in anticorruption changes, but through focussed efforts in capacity-building they can help cultivate conditions for longer term progress.[229] However, it is crucial to be reminded of the importance of the effective management of political pressures in conflict-affected contexts upon the implementation of governance reforms. Understanding that these pressures emerge not just from individual interests, but but also from powerful actors who seek to consolidate and secure their political influence, authority, and share of resources – as they themselves are often embedded in those networks. Indeed, how "political leaders and security officials manage these pressures can mean the difference between effective, professional, and well-governed security forces and those oriented toward political or private gain".[230]

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229   Martin Ronceray and Katja Sergejeff, 'No Time like the Present to Fight Corruption: Innovative Practice for a Wicked Development Problem', Discussion Paper (ECDPM, February 2023).

230   *Governing Security After War*, 231.

CONCLUSION

Addressing corruption as a threat to international peace and security requires collaboration, and no single actor can achieve this alone. A strategic, well-resourced, and multifaceted approach to accountable governance and anti-corruption is essential - whilst international donors, national policymakers, and civil society work through multiple entry points to address the interconnected and cross-cutting challenges they might face in curbing corruption meaningfully to promote sustainable peace and security.

Throughout the report, we mapped out the vicious cycle and relationship between corruption, conflict, violence, and insecurity. There is also strong evidence and lessons learned across security governance and peace processes worldwide, on how corruption in defence and security sectors distorts and undermines critical pathways to peace. The report also highlighted how entrenched criminal and elite networks, and the absence of meaningful civilian oversight, often obstruct governance reforms.

The Path Forward

Effective strategies to promote anti-corruption require a much better understanding of how organised and network elements shape conditions for various forms of corruption to occur in-country and transnationally. There is no one-size-fits-all approach — what works in one context may not be effective in another.

1 Primarily, any model, agreements, or strategy for peace should integrate effective anti-corruption measures that are tailored to the political, social, and cultural realities on the ground. This involves a meaningful assessment of the roles played by political elites, security forces, and external actors — as well as the pressure and influence they exert to resist (or support) governance and accountability-related reforms.[231] As seen in the case studies of Afghanistan and Iraq, efforts should also be made to identify leverage points to disrupt the socio-economic and political conditions that serve as the foundation for post-war elites to build and sustain power structures.

2 Secondly, mapping national markets — including illicit markets and arms trade networks — can help policymakers and practitioners better identify where corruption risks are concentrated within specific sectors.[232] Risk clusters can vary in each context, depending on the market structure, regulatory environment, and historical and cultural context. This can then support targeting of anti-corruption strategies into especially vulnerable areas and/or prioritising addressing clustered corruption risks that exacerbate the potential for state capture, including capture of the security sector.[233] Addressing the knowledge gaps is crucial for developing more effective, holistic strategies to combat corruption in the arms trade and mitigate its detrimental effects on conflict prevention and resolution.

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231 Belloni and Strazzari, 'Corruption in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo'.

232 Czibik et al., 'Networked Corruption Risks in European Defense Procurement'.

233 Ibid.

The Path Forward *(Continued)*

3   Thirdly, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder coordination can improve understandings of accountability and good governance, and support building blocks to reform. Anticorruption efforts cannot be siloed into specific aspects of certain sectors but should be seen as a cross-cutting issue area. Cross-cutting approaches which mainstream anticorruption through whole of society and government approaches are key. The links between anti-corruption and human rights, business, gender equality and social inclusion and sustainable development are beginning to be made at the multilateral level.[234,235,236]

This also include engaging with the justice and security needs of different groups, including women, men, and sexual and gender minorities as they are essential to formulate nuanced understandings and responses to security concerns and reinforcing building blocks for reform.[237] For example, addressing human trafficking and uncovering related illicit financial flows is often easiest at the level of victims. This makes those working directly with victims crucial partners in combating both human trafficking and illicit finance.[238]

4   Finally, improving conditions for good governance relies critically on having robust civic spaces and civilian oversight, on top of ensuring the right incentives for political leaders to pursue public interests, an independent media, and multi-stakeholder collaborations. In conflict and post-conflict settings, where opportunities to reshape institutions are especially strong in the latter, reforms that embrace multiple forms of accountability, especially by incorporating local voices in governance interventions, are more likely to succeed and gain broader support.

Challenging elite groups who subvert national institutions through networked strategies of influence and coercion can also be counterbalanced by empowering networks of reformists in and outside of government, allocate adequate resources for them to work with the media and civil society to amplify reform messages. Where there is state capture or systemic corruption in some parts of government, some of the reforms also rely on navigating complex political and economic realities through strong local knowledge and relationships.

234 Human Rights Council, 'Connecting the Business and Human Rights and the Anti-Corruption Agendas' (United Nations, 17 June 2020), https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F44%2F43&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False.

235 Oya Dursun-Özkanca, *The Nexus Between Security Sector Governance/Reform and Sustainable Development Goal-16: An Examination of Conceptual Linkages and Policy Recommendations* (DCAF, 2021).

236 UNODC, 'The Time Is Now: Addressing the Gender Dimensions of Corruption' (Vienna: United Nations, 2020), https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/2020/THE_TIME_IS_NOW_2020_12_08.pdf.

237 Henri Myrttinen, 'Tool 1: Security Sector Governance, Security Sector Reform and Gender', in *Gender and Security Toolkit* (Geneva: DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN Women, 2019).

238 FATF-APG, 'Financial Flows from Human Trafficking', FATF Report (Paris: The Financial Action Task Froce, July 2018), 20, https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Methodsandtrends/Human-trafficking.html.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Effectively addressing corruption as a threat to international peace and security requires a collaborative, strategic, and well-resourced approach that acknowledges the severity of the issue, whilst also implementing concrete reforms to strengthen governance and accountability across the defence and security sector. The following recommendations provide a comprehensive roadmap for international institutions, multilateral stakeholders, and national governments to embed anti-corruption in the global peace and security agenda.

GLOBAL ACTORS – INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND STATES

1   Recognise Corruption as a Threat to International Peace and Security

Corruption in the defence and security sector is not merely a governance issue - it is a direct driver of conflict, violence, and insecurity. The solution is an international normative change that is rooted in tailored action. International institutions (UN and regional bodies) and national governments could explicitly recognise corruption as a threat to international peace and security by:

- Establishing the norm of corruption as a threat to international peace and security to allow for much-needed multi-layered, multi-sectoral, and integrated solutions.

- Treating corruption as a risk multiplier of violence and armed conflict, and thus as a key threat to peace and security rather than a secondary concern.

- Integrating anti-corruption measures in global peace and security frameworks. This includes establishing clear anti-corruption benchmarks and including anti-corruption measures in security sector reform and governance (SSR/G), disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, peace missions, post-conflict reconciliation, reconstruction, and stabilisation efforts.

- Ensuring that UN Security Council mandates and UN Peacebuilding Commission recommendations prioritise corruption risks as a key factor in conflict prevention and reduction strategies – integrating them into strategic guidance and decision-making.

Why this matters?

Corruption fosters impunity, weakens governance, and creates environments where non-state armed groups and organised crime organisations flourish. Failure to address these threats systematically increases state fragility, democratic backsliding, and human rights abuses.

2   Strengthen Global Coordination and Collaboration on Tackling Corruption in Defence and Security

International action against corruption in defence and security sectors remains fragmented. If anti-corruption measures are not integrated from the outset, international interventions risk fuelling instability rather than resolving it. A more coordinated approach requires:

- Integrating anti-corruption measures in existing approaches and frameworks, such as UN peace operation mandates and post-conflict settlements. Integrity and transparency safeguards could be included in peacebuilding interventions to ensure post-conflict power-sharing does not entrench corrupt networks.

- Assessing corruption risks systematically through the Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI) in conflict prevention and through peacebuilding funds. Strengthening accountability measures and monitoring resource allocations in post-conflict reconstruction strategies to prevent the perpetuation of war economies, vested interests, corrupt networks, and criminal organisations.

- Mandating relevant UN instruments to include a sub-section on defence and security corruption in their reporting, including by the Secretary-General, the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34), the Panels of Experts, and peacekeeping and special political missions.

- Establishing a UN-led capacity within the Department of Peace Operations to track corruption-linked security threats, facilitating real-time data sharing between peacekeeping missions, anti-corruption agencies, and arms control bodies for more effective response and coordination. Integrating corruption risk assessments into the UN Peacebuilding Commission purview, strengthening its thematic analytical capacity accordingly, and facilitating its increased cooperation with ECOSOC and regional organisations to include anti-corruption measures and approaches into development and security policies and recommendations.

Why this matters?

Corruption in defence and security is a global challenge that requires a global response. Without international coordination and enforcement, corrupt actors can continue exploit gaps in governance, fuel conflicts, undermine conflict resolution and the credibility of international efforts.

CROSS-NATIONAL AND NATIONAL ACTORS

3   **Strengthen Corruption Risk Assessments and Improve Military Assistance Standards**

Current UN and multilateral mechanisms lack the ability to effectively integrate corruption risk assessments into arms transfers, security assistance, and conflict prevention strategies – undermining their impact and effectiveness. Rather than creating new structures, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) framework, and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) processes could be strengthened by:

- Embedding corruption risk assessments in arms transfer and security sector governance frameworks, ensuring that high-risk transactions and patterns of misconduct are more easily prevented, identified, and addressed.

- Supporting capacity-building for national and international institutions to strengthen risk assessment methodologies, ensuring that procurement officials and oversight bodies have the tools and expertise to detect and mitigate corruption risks in real time.

- Strengthening conditionality on military assistance to ensure that receiving states implement integrity measures before funds and equipment are disbursed. Hold international donors accountable for ensuring that military aid does not reinforce corrupt networks and coordinate security assistance policies to prevent donor fragmentation.

- Strengthening collaboration among UN bodies, regional security organisations, and national defence institutions to improve information-sharing on corruption risks in defence and security sectors. Leveraging UNCAC peer review processes and ATT consultations to foster cross-country learning and enhance policy alignment. Encouraging UN members states and ATT state parties to conduct transparent, evidence-based corruption risk assessments before approving arms transfers, military assistance, or security cooperation programs.

- Facilitating cross-regional exchange of good practices, enabling states to learn from successful anti-corruption practices in security governance, procurement integrity, and conflict-sensitive arms control policies - before integrating lessons learned into multilateral fora, including ATT and UNCAC.

Why this matters?

Corruption in arms transfers enables illicit arms flow, fuels violent conflicts, and weakens national security. In many conflict-affected states, corrupt defence contracts result in overpriced, ineffective, or missing military equipment, putting both civilians and soldiers at risk. By strengthening multilateral cooperation and leveraging existing frameworks for risk assessment, countries can gain a deeper understanding of corruption risks in defence and security - enabling more effective mitigation and response.

4 Embedding Integrity into Defence Governance and Integrating Anti-Corruption Measures into Security Sector Reform (SSR) Processes

Most SSR programmes prioritise operational capacity over governance and integrity, overlooking critical safeguards against corruption. This often leads to an ineffective, ill-trained, and under-equipped security force - where military aid is lost to briberies and embezzlement. To counter this:

- SSR programs could prioritise integrity-building alongside the modernisation of forces - ensuring transparency in procurement, personnel management, and financial oversight. Donors and international partners could condition SSR funding on anti-corruption safeguards and evidence-based accountability.

- Security institutions ought to be depoliticised in order to prevent their capture by elites who seek to use them as tools of patronage or repression.

Why this matters?

International security assistance programs often prioritise short-term stability over long-term governance reforms, leading to corruption risks that ultimately undermine security. SSR processes that allow military and police forces to remain predatory, ineffective, or complicit in organised crime are doomed to fail. An integrity-first approach to SSR can instead build sustainable security institutions that are accountable to citizens and conflict-affected communities rather than to captive elites and vested interests.

5 Strengthen Civil Society and Whistleblower Protections in the Defence and Security Sector

Civil society oversight is a powerful check on corruption, yet journalists and activists who investigate defence corruption often face harassment, imprisonment, or even assassination. International organisations and national governments can support a stronger national and cross-national civil society by:

- Improving access to information laws according to the Tshwane Principles, and empowering civil society organisations and journalists to investigate and expose corruption in defence spending, arms transfers, and security governance.[239]

- Ensuring whistleblower protections for security sector personnel, and enabling those who witness corruption—such as illegal arms diversion or procurement fraud—to report it without fear of retaliation.

- Expanding international support for investigative journalism, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected regions where corruption is entrenched in political and security institutions.

- Promoting inclusive governance by ensuring marginalised groups have a meaningful voice in post-conflict decision-making and governance structures.

Why this matters?

Without robust and independent civilian oversight, military spending and operations become opaque, and the defence and security sector turn into a vehicle for corruption rather than fulfilling their primary mission of ensuring national security and safeguarding the population.

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239 Stephanie Trapnell, Yi Kang Choo, 'Unlocking Access: Balancing National Security and Transparency in Defence' (Transparency International Defence & Security, December 2024).

ANNEX: NATIONAL SECURITY AND ANTI-CORRUPTION POLICIES REVIEWED

Country	National Security Policy	National Anti-Corruption Policy
India	In Development	Prevention of corruption Act (2018)
Saudi Arabia	Vision 2030 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) 2016	None found
Germany	Defence Policy Guideline (2023)	Anti-corruption and Integrity in German Development policy (2012)
Ukraine	Defence Policy of Ukraine (2021)	Anti-Corruption Strategy for 2021-2025(2020)
China	China's Military Policy (2015)	Criminal Law of the Peoples Republic of China (2009)
Brazil	Brazil National Defense Strategy (2008)	None found
Indonesia	Indonesian Defence White Paper (2015)	National Strategy for corruption prevention and eradication 2012-2025 (2012)
Nigeria	National Security Strategy (2019)	National Anti-corruption Strategy (2017)
France	The French White Paper on Defence and National Security (2013)	French Anticorruption Agencies Guidelines (2020)
South Africa	Department of Security Strategic plan for 2020-2025(2020)	National Anti-corruption Strategy 2020-2030 (2020)
Japan	Defense of Japan (2023)	Penal code, Criminal Code and other Legislations
Pakistan	National Security Policy of Pakistan (2022)	National Anti-corruption Strategy Pakistan (2002)

Country	National Security Policy	National Anti-Corruption Policy
Australia	National Defence Strategic Review (2023)	National Anti-corruption Act (2022)
Sweden	National Security Strategy (2024)	Not found
Italy	Not found	Three year corruption prevention plan 2023-2025
Israel	Israel's National Security Doctrine (2019)	State of Palestine National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2015)
Qatar	Not found	Not found
South Korea	National Security Strategy (2023)	Act on the Prevention of Corruption and the Establishment and Management of the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission 2019