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# CORRUPTION'S THREAT TO SECURITY: A CALL FOR PROACTIVE MEASURES

*Submission by Transparency International Defence & Security to the 10th Session of the UNCAC Conference of the States Parties.*

## CORRUPTION IS A FUNDAMENTAL THREAT TO PEACE AND SECURITY

Corruption undermines and threatens human, national, and international security, peace, and stability. It breaks down trust between governments and their citizens, fuels economic turmoil, political crises, and funds violence, at the same time as it weakens institutional resilience to respond to security threats.<sup>1</sup> Out of the ten lowest-ranking countries in the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI),<sup>2</sup> four are amongst the lowest-ranking countries in the Global Peace Index (GPI) 2023,<sup>3</sup> and all of them exhibit low to very low levels of peace.

The security threat posed by corruption is one of the reasons why the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) was established: The preamble of the UNCAC voices concern about the “seriousness of problems and threats posed by corruption to the stability and security of societies”. Corruption is destabilising in conflict and post-conflict contexts:<sup>4</sup> in post-conflict settings with high levels of corruption and weak governance, the risk of a relapse to conflict doubles<sup>5</sup>. Even in stable settings, widespread corruption doubles the chances of a political settlement collapsing into armed conflict.<sup>6</sup>

The world has come a long way towards understanding the threat that corruption poses to security, as highlighted by the UN Security Council when it met in 2018 to discuss the nexus between corruption and conflict.<sup>7</sup> But this understanding is not yet cemented internationally, and does not reliably translate into anti-corruption being made an urgent and critical requirement by governments and multilateral organisations concerned with national and international security.

Anti-corruption endeavours frequently take a back seat to traditional security priorities. For instance, peace accords prioritise the prevention of renewed armed conflict above all else, sometimes sidelining robust anti-corruption measures. This oversight poses a significant risk as unchecked corruption, left unaddressed for the sake of immediate cessation of armed violence, can become a breeding ground for future conflict. Predatory economies that emerge in contexts with high risks of corruption can also undermine long-term stability and human security,<sup>8</sup> as well as perpetuate conditions conducive to further corruption.

This presents a critical concern that requires the attention of the States Parties to the UNCAC. It poses a direct threat to the principles upheld by the UNCAC. By emphasising the need to integrate anti-corruption into peace and security agendas, the UNCAC can significantly contribute to fostering

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<sup>1</sup> Transparency International (2019): [Corruption and the crisis of democracy: the link between corruption and the weakening of democratic institutions](#); Transparency International (2021): [Defying exclusion: stories and insights on the links between discrimination and corruption](#).

<sup>2</sup> Transparency International: [‘Corruption Perceptions Index 2022’](#).

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace (2023): [‘Global Peace Index 2023’](#).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations (2020): [‘The UN common position to address global corruption - towards UNGASS 2021’](#).

<sup>5</sup> World Bank (2023): [‘Corruption in Fragile, Conflict and Violent Settings: False dilemmas and inadequate toolbox?’](#).

<sup>6</sup> Chatham House (2023): [‘Rethinking political settlements in the Middle East and North Africa’](#).

<sup>7</sup> UN Security Council (2018). [Corruption and Conflict](#), S/PV.8346.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Rose-Ackerman and Bonnie J. Palifka (2016). [‘Organised crime, corruption, and money laundering’](#); Transparency International Defence & Security (2017): [‘The Fifth Column: Understanding the Relationship Between Corruption and Conflict’](#).

lasting stability, promoting secure and equitable societies, and safeguarding against the devastation of conflict fuelled by corruption.

To address the most significant global challenges, States Parties must acknowledge the pervasive nature of corruption as a systemic and pressing threat to human, national, and international security.

## FOCUS ON DEFENCE AND SECURITY: A UNIQUE SECTOR

Within this landscape, the defence and security sector is particularly vulnerable, and too often overlooked. Weak governance and corruption pose an aggravated threat when they infiltrate the very institutions responsible for delivering effective security provision. The defence sector is vulnerable to grand corruption and state capture, which can generate inherently unstable states prone to organised crime and at risk of conflict and violence<sup>9</sup>. Corrupt practices such as diversion of weapons and ammunition can unleash a vicious cycle of insecurity on a local, national and international level.<sup>10</sup> Proliferation of non-state armed groups is supported by the phenomenon of ‘ghost soldiers’, and in some cases, deep public anger at pervasive government corruption.<sup>11</sup> Accountable and well-governed security forces and defence sectors that are free from corruption are key to facing some of the biggest global threats today.

Several factors contribute to the unique nature of corruption in the defence sector:

- **Enormous public spending:** With global defence spending at over \$2 trillion annually,<sup>12</sup> the scale of public resources involved heightens the stakes in combating corruption.
- **Secrecy for national security:** Little to no data is published on defence operations in many contexts, making it challenging to scrutinise procurement, budgets, and income streams.
- **Economic implications:** Governments serve as both the primary regulators and customers of the defence industry.
- **Centralisation of functions:** Defence institutions are typically centralised, reducing opportunities for oversight at lower levels of government.
- **Close industry-government relationships:** The sector's technical complexity implicates a close relationship between governments and the private sector, which can lead to undue influence.
- **Global role of governments:** Governments are often closely involved in the arms trade, foreign interventions, and the spillover of conflicts into regional instability. Defence and foreign policy can be difficult to disentangle, leading to conflicts of interest.

Defence sectors globally are not resilient enough to corruption risk. Transparency International Defence & Security's Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI)<sup>13</sup> found that 62 per cent of countries assessed have high to critical levels of corruption risk across the defence sector. This covers both fragile and conflict-affected states as well those considered stable contexts. Particularly concerning:

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<sup>9</sup> Transparency International Defence & Security (2017): [‘The Fifth Column: Understanding the Relationship Between Corruption and Conflict’](#).

<sup>10</sup> Mark Sedra and Geoff Burt (2016). [‘Integrating SSR and SALW Programming’](#); Rachel Stohl and Shannon Dick (2021): [‘Diversion and the Arms Trade Treaty: identifying good practice and opportunities for progress’](#), Stimson. Saferworld (2022): [‘Preventing and mitigating the risk of arms diversion in Africa’](#).

<sup>11</sup> GI-TOC & ACLED (2023): [‘Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin \(JNIM\)’](#); UNDP (2023): [‘Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement’](#); Transparency International Defence & Security (2017).

<sup>12</sup> SIPRI (2023): [‘Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022’](#).

<sup>13</sup> Transparency International Defence & Security (2020): [‘Government Defence Integrity Index 2020’](#).

some of the biggest defence spenders<sup>14</sup> show some of the highest degrees of corruption risk in defence.

Despite the high stakes, inadequate attention is paid to addressing corruption in defence and security. Established anti-corruption and transparency standards often make exceptions for information and decision-making relating to national security. This exceptionalism has allowed defence actors to bypass the standards that govern other sectors.

## UNCAC OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS CORRUPTION AS A SECURITY THREAT

**To address these issues, we urge the UNCAC States Parties to take the following steps:**

- Commit to approaching anti-corruption as an essential component of security and stability;
- Affirm that corruption poses a significant threat to security, encompassing various dimensions, including economic, political, social, and environmental, and underscores the need to recognise and address this threat comprehensively for sustainable peace;
- Recognise that short-term security priorities must not override anti-corruption objectives, as this will undermine long-term security; and reflect this acknowledgment in resolutions, reports, and the work of the UNCAC Secretariat and its partners;
- Consider and address corruption in all international, national, and human security strategies and approaches;
- Include an agenda item on policy solutions to address corruption strategically as a security threat within the framework of the UNCAC at future sessions of the Conference of the States Parties to UNCAC, in order to review progress and share best practices in addressing this critical issue, and for this to be included as an agenda item in a meeting of the Implementation Review Group.

**We further encourage the UNCAC States Parties to:**

- Prioritise anti-corruption efforts in their security, defence, foreign policy, human rights and development agendas, and seek alignment of such agendas, to ensure a holistic and sustainable approach to combating corruption;
- Request the UNCAC Secretariat to develop comprehensive guidance on implementing the UNCAC within the defence and security sector. The UNCAC Secretariat should offer increased support to countries in implementing anti-corruption reforms in these sectors.

**In addition, we call on the UNCAC States Parties to consider the following recommendations at national level:**

- Address anti-corruption as a priority within defence and security decision-making. Develop and implement national action plans on corruption in the defence and security sectors, including strengthening their legal and institutional frameworks, enhancing transparency and accountability, and promoting public participation in decision-making processes;
- Share information and experiences related to the impact of corruption on national security and the measures taken to mitigate its effects, and to engage in regular dialogue and cooperation with relevant regional and international organisations to address this issue effectively;
- Provide adequate resources and support to anti-corruption agencies and other institutions responsible for preventing and combating corruption in the defence and security sectors.

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<sup>14</sup> SIPRI (2023): 'Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022'.