

The 2009 arrest of Brigadier General Hassan Makhlof, who as head of the Syrian Customs Administration was responsible for fighting corruption, came as a double shock to Syrians. The arrest of a high-ranking official is not an unusual occurrence in Syria, as it happens from time to time. In fact, several ministers and a deputy prime minister have been arrested. Former Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Zoubi committed suicide in 2000 when police came to his house to issue a judicial notice asking him to appear before a judge to respond to allegations of corruption. All those arrested, however, are usually released after a limited time in prison.

What was new and shocking about Makhlof's case is the sheer size of the alleged corruption. Media reports estimate that the value of the cash and properties seized in the case at millions of dollars. This includes 137 properties owned by Makhlof or a member of his family. A single room at his villa is alleged to have been filled with cash. Authorities suspect that he ordered border roads to be left unguarded during certain times to allow smugglers driving trucks full of merchandise to enter the country without paying customs. Despite his February 2009 arrest, he has not been tried in court as of May 2010 and has not made any public statement about the case.

There were even more shocking stories. According to reports by the Kuwaiti daily Alrai, Makhlof permitted the entry of certain foreign vehicles in the belief that they were transporting food, but they were actually transporting equipment to be used in the assassination of a Hezbollah officer in Syria, Imad Mughniyah (who was assassinated in February 2008). The Syrian government allegedly considered the mistake to be a breach of national security, and it was thought by many that had Makhlof not allowed this breach to occur, he would have probably been able to continue in his job for many more years.

The Makhlof case contributes to a popular belief in Syria that corruption is only forbidden if it conflicts with national security needs. Aside from that, everything else is permitted as long as it is done in an "orderly" manner. This attitude leads to rampant corruption throughout Syria and its institutions.

Many Syrians believe that corruption is intentionally allowed to spread through all segments of society, in public and private institutions, in civil society organizations and even in religious institutions, as a political strategy to

prevent the emergence of a credible and respected opposition to the current regime.

It is believed that a “corruption file” exists on many citizens in Syria or, at least, on its elite, because Syrians have to deal with corruption in order to live a normal life under lawful rights. As long as a person does not talk about politics, his or her corruption practices are overlooked. But, when anyone makes politically sensitive protests or moves, the “corruption file” can be opened to the public and the individual sent to prison.

### The mafia of corruption

Syrians started to informally refer to groups that control certain sectors as the “Mafia of Corruption” in November 1987 when Ali Taraboulsi, the Minister of Industry, used the term “Smuggling Mafia” in parliament. The use of the “fighting corruption” slogan has since appeared in speeches by the president, the prime minister, and many other officials, but at the same time the perception of corruption and corrupt officials has increased exponentially.

This is evident in Transparency International’s ranking, in which Syria keeps sinking year after year, reaching a ranking of 147 out of 180 countries in 2008. This makes Syria the third most perceived as corrupt of the Arab League, second only after Iraq and Sudan. In the latest Global Competitiveness Report (2009), Syria rates 94 out of 133 countries, competing with Mauritania for last place among Arab countries.

This is not surprising considering that, oftentimes, officials overseeing the implementation of the policies and programs related to the fight against corruption are themselves accused of corruption, as in Makhoul’s case. There is also a common perception among the public that regulatory bodies and courts are often more corrupt than those subject to its monitoring and penalties. This perception is partially based on the number of judges and members of parliament who have been arrested.

In this context, the anti-corruption campaign is usually a matter of political speech followed by no follow-up action. In February 2005, Prime Minister Mohammad Naji al-Otari wrote a memo to all ministers that asked them to detail in writing their suggestions on how to fight corruption, how to address it in government institutions, which resources would be required, and what decisions the government should take to combat it. The result: few responses were

received and most consisted of suggestions that dealt with minor corruption issues.

A May 2006 statement by Naji al-Otari to journalists of *Al-Thawra*, the government-owned newspaper, reveals how little progress that memo had produced a year later: “Corruption exists, but we should not criticize ourselves a lot. Corruption exists in every administration... The government is doing all it can, but the journalists attacked the decision about Article 137, which allows the government to fire government employees without legal action ... unfortunately there are those who defend the existence of corruption.”

On January 2006, Osama Adi, member of the leadership of the ruling Baath Party, said in the 12th meeting of the labor unions that the impact of corruption and the need for stronger legal tools to use against corrupt officials are discussed in almost every single party meeting. “They [corrupt officials] are now masters in conducting their business without leaving any legal evidence and have their own culture of corruption,” he said. He also mentioned that the party leadership in Syria had formed a committee to study possible ways to fight corruption, especially when high profile names are involved, because “the corrupt do not care about the interests of our country.” However, no details about the committee or the results of its work are known.

A lack of transparency in the election process is part of the problem, as members of parliament are directly included in the National Progressive Front list that was created by the ruling Baath Party (which has the majority of the seats) and must also pay to receive support from influential political figures.

#### The role of the Syrian media

Media outlets in many countries are a haven for victims of corruption. In Syria, however, strong censorship is exercised on all media, including websites. All news stories are examined carefully by security agencies for approval before publication.

The case of Maen Akel, a journalist for *Al-Thawra*, is a clear example of what can happen to journalists who try to dig deeper. He was finishing an investigative report about corruption in the pharmaceutical industry in Syria when security forces arrested him at his office in November 2009 and confiscated all his documents. Though he was not working on a political story, he was held for three months by security forces without an arrest warrant. Nor was he

brought to court to face specific charges. He was expelled from his job without being given a reason, which is contrary to the rules of the law. It also was suggested that he never work in journalism again.

Many believe that only when all the public figures have been corrupted would political activities be encouraged and a law for political parties would be passed. Then, a “corruption file” for everyone will be available to be used against anyone who is “crossing the line,” with the result that they will be expelled from participation in the political sphere. Besides, special benefits are always a powerful tool to buy the elite’s loyalty to the ruling party.

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