CORRUPTION TERMINOLOGY IN THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

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As for most concepts, the Arabic language is rich in terms and phrases related to corruption and its various forms. Although the uses of different terms may vary depending on contexts and geographical specificities, the basic terms referring to corruption or bribe are understood across the Arab countries. In some countries, words with different meanings are used as code words to represent bribes that are mostly small in amount. The following is a selection of the most commonly used terms for corruption, in addition to some code words used in some countries.

- **Fassad** (فساد) is the most literal translation of the word corruption. It is also the most commonly used term to refer to the concept of corruption as used in the discipline of good governance. Just as in the English use of the term, the Arabic use has a much broader connotation than political or administrative corruption; most broadly it means moral corruption or practicing anything that is forbidden by God or religion. The associated verb, *fassouda* (فسّد), is quite commonly used to refer to any process of deterioration, disintegration or rotting.

- **Rashwah** (رشوة) is the literal meaning of bribe. It can be used for petty or grand bribes. Whenever penal codes in Arab countries refer to corruption, it is under this form bribery. A more colloquial translation of the term “bribe” and a synonym of *rashwah* is the term *barreet* (برطيل), which is more commonly used in slang. In Maghreb countries such as Morocco, *rashwah* (رشوة) is used to refer to corruption in order to avoid confusion with the broader connotations of the term *fassad* (فساد). Proponents of this nuance have been increasingly concerned with the use of the anti-corruption slogan by fundamentalist movements to denote the need for stricter implementation of religious teachings. The implications of such use would limit personal privacies by restricting alcohol drinking, gender-mixing and other social patterns considered as corrupting vices by some interpretations of religion.

- **Wasta** (واسطة) is a form of nepotism associated with family and tribe members and quite common in MENA. In its simplest form, it means using a common connection in order to receive undue benefits. While it is used to cut through lines in government agencies, or speed up an administrative process, its most common use is for entry into the job market, namely in the public administration. Although the origins of *wasta* (واسطة) are more positive than its current use, it has become such an endemic problem that many youths cite it as a main reason they consider immigration. Both the term and the use of *wasta* (واسطة) have evolved from the mediation practiced by tribe leaders to resolve conflicts within and among tribes. Mediation, *wassata* (واسطة), which continues to be practiced by elders in tribes and clans, mutated (in spelling and use) at the time of transition from the loose system of tribes to the more institutionalized systems of nation states. In order to secure the allegiance of tribes, state-founders would give their leaders stakes in the government and the administration to distribute to tribe members. Tribal leaders became mediators between the state and their members, which later became their constituents as they transformed to modern politicians.
Bakshish (بخشيش) is a Turkish term that survived the times of the Ottoman Empire, in the lands of its former influence. In its benign form, the term means tip or small financial reward given to waiters or parking attendants. When applied to the administration or the public bureaucracy, it means kickback or small bribe that a civil servant expects in return for performing their duties in a speedier way, in a timely way or at all.

Mahsoubiah (محسوبية) is the general translation for nepotism or cronyism. It refers to a system where powerful politicians or individuals use their positions to further the interests of people who count on them; in return, politicians can “count on” the beneficiaries. The stem of the word is mahsoub (محسوب), which means counted, accounted for or considered on someone’s account.

Mouhabat (محبة) translates into favoritism. The term uses the root of the word love, hobb (حب), which is the same as the verb to love, to prefer or to favor. As the meaning indicates, it refers to the act of favoring someone in treatment, recruitment or promotion based on reasons other than merit.

Hadr (هدار) means waste. At face value, the term is used to refer to waste of public resources; however, it is also commonly used as euphemism for corruption. When public officials want to speak of corruption without being critical or offensive to their colleagues who may be practicing it, they refer to waste rather than corruption to avoid a defensive reaction. Unlike corruption, which implies an intentional act, waste remains vague and largely unintentional.

Kahwa (قهوة) literally means coffee. It is used in Morocco as a code word to say a small bakshish (بخشيش) or tip in return for a “favor”. It is mostly used when the civil servant is asking for the bribe. The implicit meaning is “I want a reward so small it can only buy you a cup of coffee”.

Koussa (كوسى) literally means zucchini. It is a code word in Egypt to refer to corruption or bribery. It may have originated from the tendency to avoid making political accusations openly and be liable to the retaliation of authorities.

Helwayneh (حلوينة) is a little gift or reward given to children on holidays. It literally means small sweets or candies. It is commonly used in Lebanon and Syria as a code word for bakshish (بخشيش) or tip. The use of this term makes the bribe sound less demeaning and harmful than its other synonyms. Although it is used by civil servants requesting a bribe, it is most commonly used as a promise by the citizen if their business was handled “smoothly”; one example is: “I’m saving you a helwayneh (reward) if you finish this transaction before the others.”