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Chapter

Press Freedom and Corruption in the GCC: Are There Better Future Horizons? An Analytical-Critical Study

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Abstract

This study seeks to provide a critical analysis of press freedom and corruption scores in the six Arab countries under the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as reported by two international nongovernmental organizations 2013–2017: (1) Freedom House (FH) and (2) Transparency International (TI). The researcher noted how some of the reports by these organizations continually connect between press freedom and corruption. The reading might help to improve the GCC states' future performances both in press freedom and fighting against corruption. Readings on press freedom and corruption are now more widely available in many international reports of a number of international organizations. Although standards for measuring the degree of both of them vary in these reports, they often agree on one outcome. Some of these reports have gradually gained prominence in good segments of public opinion and have become the subject of debate among intellectuals and journalists. Governments refrain from commenting on such reports particularly negative ones. However, the impact of such reports on the relevant governmental entities cannot be ignored when it comes to calibrating their practices and activities internationally and comparing them with other institutions in other regional and global countries.

Keywords: press freedom, corruption, GCC, Freedom House (FH), Transparency International (TI)

1. Freedom of the press and corruption

1.1 Background and definitions

"Freedom of expression" has a long history in human civilization, yet it is one of the problematic terms that has emerged in the history of mankind and is still in our contemporary life. The problematic aspect of this term, from my viewpoint, is not related to its intended meaning, but it relates to its interpretations and practices and to the way these practices are opposed to individual and institutional practices and laws. Universally, Article 19 of the United Nations Human Rights Declaration (UNHR) is widely considered as the main principle and reference of press and media freedom. Article 19 defined freedom of expression as: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold

opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" [1].

Terminology wise, freedom of expression is considered as a political, economic, philosophical, and general moral concept with multiple and complex connotations, all of which require a certain level of identification and definition. There is freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of press, freedom of trade, etc. In this context, the Encyclopedia of Politics defines freedom of expression as "the right of any citizen to express his/her opinion in all public matters without any punishment, and it is guaranteed in the most democratic countries. Freedom of expression takes many different forms and frames, from writing to literary, to artistic freedom, thus including freedom of the press and the media" [2].

Definition of freedom of the press depends on the philosophy and concepts of freedom of expression but with more specific practical issues related to the field of media and its practitioners. Dictionary of Media and Communications defines freedom of the press as "freedom to publish anything without censorship before or after. Freedom of the press has been debated since modern printing began in the 1400s. Some governments place limits on this freedom, fearing the power of words to spur people to act against them" [3].

The freedom of the press is an important and debatable issue, and it is considered as one of the main international discourse worldwide today. UNESCO urges all member states to "promote the free flow of ideas by word and image," and since 1993 this international organization proclaimed third of March every year as "World Press Freedom Day" (WPFD) to enhance all developments related to freedom of the press [4].

From the researcher's point of view, the definition by Stevenson of the press freedom is a more rational and balanced one: "Freedom of the press is the right to speak, broadcast, or publish without prior restraint by or permission of the government, but with limited legal accountability after publication for violations of law. It may also encompass legal guarantees of (i) reasonable access to information about government, business, and people, (ii) a right of reply or correction, (iii) a limited right of access to the media, and (iv) some special protections for journalists [5].

The latest UNESCO report entitled "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2017/2018" focused on four main trends worldwide and how these trends affect freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The four trends are [6]:

1. Press and media freedom

2. Press and media pluralism

3. Press and media independency

4. Journalists' safety

In brief, the report confirms that freedom of the press and media is decreasing internationally even with some positive developments on the right of information accessibility. According to the UNESCO report, press pluralism is still limited worldwide, and types and degree of pressure which affect media and press independency were increased internationally [6].

In the course of pursuing freedom or achieving some of its degrees, nations and peoples have fought great battles, and individuals pay high prices. The struggle in this aspect is still open and continuous, because political, social, and cultural

freedoms that were acceptable and satisfactory in a given period will not remain so in another time and in different contexts. A recent study published by Ronning on freedom of expression in Norway, which is classified as "free" in freedom of expression index according to many international reports, indicates that: "Freedom of speech is dependent on tolerance and that is not something that is a given. It is a tenet that must be constantly defended. Freedom of speech is not guaranteed anywhere; it is the result of a constantly on-going struggle" [7].

Freedom of the press and media is an important measure of the level and degree of freedom of opinion and expression in any society. Freedom of the press and the media is usually linked to legislative and legal frameworks, policies governing media work, as well as the actual practices of journalism, newsrooms, and the nature of contents delivered to the audience. Because of that, it is possible to measure the level of freedom of the press and media by analyzing the legislative framework to determine the degree of freedom granted by these legislations to the various media and those who work in them. Also, it is possible to explore the attitudes of media professionals to identify practices and actions that affect negatively or positively the degree of freedom granted to them.

Studies and reports by some international organizations on the freedom of the press are widely available. Although the criteria for measuring the degree of freedom of the press and the media vary in these reports, they often agree on one outcome. Some of these reports have gradually gained prominence in good segments of public opinion and have become the subject of discussion and debate among intellectuals, journalists, and media professionals. Governments refrain from commenting on such reports—especially the negative ones. However, the impact of such reports on the relevant government entities cannot be ignored when it comes to compare their practices and activities internationally with other countries and regions.

As freedom of expression, corruption also is as old as humankind. According to some researchers, corruption was first mentioned or indicated indirectly in the second century BC in the Hammurabi Law [8].

Tanzi argued that corruption is not a new phenomenon, but it became a more attractive issue than in the past because of several reasons including "increase of democratic governments and free and active media and the growing role of some nongovernmental organizations such as Transparency International in fighting corruption, etc." [9]. The World Bank president James Wolfensohn in 1996 described corruption as "cancer" and defined it as "the abuse of public or corporate office for private gain" [10].

Begovic ([11], p. 2) describes corruption as: "Intentional on-compliance with arms'-length principles aimed at deriving some advantage for oneself or for related individuals from this behavior." Begovic listed three main types of corruption that normally include different levels and areas of corruption, and these are [11]:

1. Corruption for achieving or speeding up materialization of some specific right that the citizen or legal entity is entitled to corruption without theft

2. Corruption that violates the legal rules or a very biased enforcement of the rules

3. "State capture," a corruption that is aimed at changing the rules and regulations into rules and regulations that favor the interests of the corruptor

These main types of corruption from my own perspective are wide and general and under each resides many detailed and small corruption activities. I would argue that studying corruption both in public and private sectors will not be far

from these main types. Media and journalists are normally attracted to reveal and publish about the corruption's activities, reflecting their role as society "watchdog."

Studies from different parts of the world examined the freedom of the press and levels of corruption, and most of them confirmed that the correlation is very strong between the high degree of freedom of the press and the reduction of corruption. A study by Starke et al. analyzed data for 157 countries in 10 years' time (2003–2013) to examine the impact of media freedom, Internet access, and governmental online service delivery on corruption. The study confirmed that free media play a vital role in curbing corruption, but the media role cannot be effective alone [12]. Another study by Mothasedi and Phiri, examined the correlation between mass media and corruption in South Africa and analyzed data of the "Corruption Perception Index" and the "World Press Freedom Index" in the period from 2002 to 2014. The most important conclusion of this study emphasized that "greater press freedom can lead to less corruption in South Africa but not vice versa" [13].

This study focuses on the relationship between the level of freedom of the press and the degree of corruption in six Arab member states and founders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since 1981: the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait. The Council's Primary Law consists of 22 articles, and the objectives stipulated in Article (4) include [14]:

1. To affect coordination, integration, and interconnection between member states in all fields in order to achieve unity between them

2. To deepen and strengthen relations, links, and areas of cooperation now prevailing between their peoples in various fields

3. To formulate similar regulations in various fields

Politically, the six GCC states are royal governments, and some of the ruling families in the region date back to the eighteenth century, as in the case of Oman. In addition, there is no real political opposition in the form of political parties except in the case of Bahrain, which turned into a constitutional monarchy allowing the establishment of the political parties since 2002.

The total population of the GCC states according to the latest statistics for 2018 is approximately 57.455.396 million: the United Arab Emirates (9,682,088), Bahrain (1,637,896), Saudi Arabia (34,140,662), Oman (5001.875), Qatar (2,743,901), and Kuwait (4,248,974) [15].

Media environment in the GCC states is very similar in terms of ownership, policies, and laws regulating media work and the most widespread practices, as well as contents. Governments in the GCC states have their own media outlets, such as newspapers, radio and TV stations, and electronic websites, but these governments also influence privately owned media through a set of rules and procedures that govern policies and content.

1.2 Media as "watchdog"

This study is based on its theoretical framework for understanding and interpreting the relationship between press freedom and corruption on the literatures of the theory of media social responsibility founded in the United States after World War II. The origins of this theory were based on a report by the Commission on the Freedom of the Press in 1947, which emphasized the notion of press freedom and for the first time added the concept of social responsibility, which meant press

is free to report but at the same time it is socially responsible toward individuals, community, and deferent societal powers [16].

The commission, which was headed by Robert M. Hutchins, identified the main requirements to practice a free and responsible press:

1. A truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning

2. A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism

3. The projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society

4. The presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society

5. Full access to the day's intelligence [17]

This theory was an attempt to balance freedom of expression with the interests of society. One of the most important sources in this area is the book by Siebert et al. [18]. The book defined four theories that explain the interrelationships between governments and the press: authoritarianism, liberalism, communism, and social responsibility. The four theories seem clear, but the fundamental distinction remains between liberal and authoritarian theories.

Within the liberal theory, the press and the media are seen as an independent and free institution and should have full authority to inform the public about the activities of the society, government, and the various authorities in the society. In contrast, the press and the media within the authoritarian theory are used to support the political systems, the ruling elites, the authorities, or the various forces in society. Within this theory, the government or the executive authority has the right to decide who can or cannot use the press and other media, and therefore the freedom of the press expands or narrows according to the positions and desires of that authority. The media social responsibility theory represented a middle vision between the two theories of liberalism and authoritarianism. McQuail points out that media social responsibility theory is based on a set of principles, the most important of which are [19]:

1. The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust.

2. News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective, and relevant.

3. The media should provide a forum for ideas.

4. The media should be free but self-regulated.

5. Media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional standards.

6. Under some circumstances, society may need to intervene in the public interest.

Within the theory of social responsibility, an important theoretical concept is developed, namely, the "watchdog," which means that mass media monitors and reports all societal events that are going on in both directions: positively or negatively. Within this concept also, the media and its employees are seen as the "eyes" and "ears" of the audience and communities, and they reported all activities

and events of the society and its various forces with great care, sensitivity, and independence.

One researcher identified some mechanisms by which journalism practices the watchdog role, which includes [20]:

1. Holding institutions accountable

2. Looking after audience interests first and foremost

3. Encouraging interaction and feedback from audience

4. Practicing "watchdog" on itself through an in-house ombudsman or readers' advocate

5. Implementing newsroom ethics codes

6. Separating between editorial and advertising

If the theory of social responsibility is the most appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between freedom of the press and fighting corruption in this study, the question remains: Does journalism and the media in the GCC countries exercise their functions according to this theory? Or do media and journalism in this region work under a different theoretical framework?

2. Methodological framework

2.1 Problem statement

This chapter analyzes the relationship between the degrees of freedom of the press and corruption in six Arab countries, namely, the GCC member states: the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar, according to reports published by two international nongovernmental organizations—Freedom House (FH) and Transparency International (TI). The chapter provides a critical reading on the relationship between press freedom and corruption in the abovementioned countries as reported by the two international organizations in 5 years' time (2013–2017). The researcher did not include 2018 because at the time of writing this study, the Freedom House Report of 2018 had not yet been issued.

The researcher does not aim to achieve new detection or reading and analysis of what is unknown to researchers and interested peoples, but the study is a kind of brainstorming to stir more discussion and positive dialogue in two issues of great importance in the world in general and in the Arab World in particular. The study could also provide practical and effective ideas on how to deal with these two issues in the future to improve the performance of these countries in the freedom of the press and the fight against corruption.

2.2 Research importance

The importance of this study is highly related to the nature of both freedom of the press and corruption that present nowadays an important discourse locally, regionally, and internationally. Both freedom of the press and corruption are leading to serious discussions about their importance in influencing the image of any

state and the efficiency of its various institutions. The critical reading by this study might provide a better understanding of the working mechanisms of international organizations regarding freedom of the press and corruption.

2.3 Research questions

1. What are the degrees of press freedom in the six Arab GCC countries as reported by the FH in the last 5 years (2013–2017)?

2. What are the degrees of corruption in the six Arab GCC countries as reported by the IT in the past 5 years (2013–2017)?

3. What are the main themes and topics of the FH reports on the six Arab GCC countries in the last 5 years (2013–2017)?

4. What is the correlation between press freedom and corruption as reported by the FH and IT in the six Arab GCC countries in the last 5 years (2013–2017)?

2.4 Research methodology

This study depends on qualitative content analysis of the FH reports on freedom of the press in the six Arab GCC countries in the last 5 years (2013–2017). The analysis will identify the issues and topics these reports focused on to provide a close picture of the press freedom in these countries. Before the qualitative analysis, however, statistical indications on press freedom and corruption in the six Arab GCC states will be presented hereafter. The researcher chose the reports of the following international nongovernmental organizations in the areas of press freedom and corruption:

1. Freedom House (FH) [21]

2. Transparency International (TI) [22]

3. Freedom of the press/corruption in the GCC

This section of the study provides answers to the study questions based on a qualitative reading of the reports by two international organizations on press freedom and corruption in the six Arab GCC countries in the last 5 years (2013–2017), as follows:

3.1 Freedom of the press in the GCC

Table 1 shows the scores of the press freedom in the GCC countries in the last 5 years (2013–2017), according to Freedom House reports. The organization normally grants three types of status on press freedom: free, partly free, and not free.

The results in **Table 1** indicate that the press in five GCC countries is classified as not free opposite to only one country: Kuwait which is classified as partially free. Statistically, the results confirm that press in 83% of the GCC countries is not free (five out of six countries) compared to 17% which is partly free (one of six countries). The results reflect the similarity of political, social, and cultural values and principles adopted by these countries. On the political aspect, these countries are inherited rule

states under the rule of certain families. The GCC states are totalitarian regimes despite development efforts that have covered many areas including the establishment of parliaments and representative institutions. However, these development efforts need longer periods of time and ongoing reforms in order to achieve more objectives and goals. Bahrain has represented a different political experience among the countries in the GCC region as it is considered the only Gulf state that allowed the formation of political parties since 2002. However, this exclusivity did not help Bahrain achieve better levels of freedom of press. Freedom House reports for the years 2013–2017 indicate that press freedom in Bahrain is the weakest among the six Arab GCC states. On the other hand, Kuwait has benefited from its political and parliamentary experience and the level of political freedom in achieving a better degree in freedom of the press. Freedom House has classified it as partially free for 5 consecutive years 2013–2017.

From a sociocultural perspective, the GCC societies are described as traditional or conservative societies, despite the Internet-led information revolution that reaches the highest level in the Middle East. The latest Internet statistics for 2017 indicated that the percentage of Internet users in the GCC countries are as follows: UAE (94.82%), Bahrain (95.88%), Saudi Arabia (82.12%), Oman (80.19%), Qatar (95.94%), and Kuwait (98%) [23].

From the researcher's point of view, the GCC societies are currently living in a state of great contradiction between the traditional conservative society with which they have long been associated and the open society through the Internet and the search engines. These societies are also contradicted between how they are living in real and direct realms and practices in the virtual world. These contradictions should be studied by sociologists, media, and cultural experts to understand many transformations occurring in the GCC societies.

As mentioned in **Table 1**, reports indicate that the level of freedom of the press in the GCC countries is more of a stable status. In a country like Oman, the score of press freedom was 71 in five consecutive reports 2013–2017. The degree of press freedom in Kuwait in 5 years ranged between 59 and 60. On the other hand, there is a situation of negative development in the levels of freedom of the press in most of the Gulf states, according to FH reports in 2013–2017, even if these developments are slight and inconceivable. These states of stability and negative developments in the levels of press freedom in the GCC states can be interpreted by more than one explanation: first, the lack of practical actions is taken by both governments and media professionals in these countries to increase and develop their levels of press freedom, and second, this may also be related to the ignorance of the concerned entities in these countries, governments, or civil society organizations, with these international reports and their observations. Many governmental and private institutions in a number of Arab countries tend to underestimate the importance and usefulness of

No	Country	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	AVG.	Status
1	Bahrain	86	87	87	87	87	87	Not free
2	United Arab Emirates	74	76	76	78	78	76	Not free
3	Saudi Arabia	84	83	83	86	86	84	Not free
4	Oman	71	71	71	71	71	71	Not free
5	Qatar	67	67	67	69	70	68	Not free
6	Kuwait	59	59	59	59	60	59	Partly free

Table 1.
Press freedom scores (2013–2017) in the GCC according to FH (points 0–100), the lowest is more free and the highest is not free.

these reports and sometimes even describe them as conspiracy reports on countries and are used to put more pressure on them.

It should be noted here that the six Arab GCC states that this study focused on belong to a larger political, sociocultural, and geographical framework, namely, the Arab World or the so-called today in many international reports Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Freedom House reports in the last 5 years (2013–2017) covered 17 Arab countries, including the 6 Arab GCC states. Press in only 5 out of 17 countries in this region is classified as "partially free," namely, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan.

It is clear that the levels of freedom of the press in the Arab countries, according to FH reports, are generally weak, as no Arab country has achieved until today the level of "free" press. Although this does not justify the decrease in the press freedom level in the GCC states as indicated in **Table 1**, it is important to understand that the GCC countries are part of the Arab World and share many political, social, economic, and cultural conditions.

But the researcher believes that the conditions of the GCC states, their political experience, economic capabilities, and development projects, are different and could enable them to achieve better levels of freedom of expression in general and freedom of the press in particular.

On the political aspect, the six Arab GCC states established the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 and were the only regional system in the Arab world—after the Arab League, which has a limited number of members and managed to survive until today compared to some other regional councils in the Arab world which were formed but did not last. On the economic aspect, the GCC states have enormous economic potential, as these countries produce almost 32% of the world's oil and export 45% from the total amount worldwide. GCC states represent 30% of the world oil [24]. Both political and economic capabilities of the GCC states have helped to launch large-scale development projects in these countries.

3.2 Corruption in the GCC

Table 2 shows the degrees of corruption in the six GCC Arab as reported by Transparency International in the last 5 years (2013–2017).

Figures in **Table 2** indicate that four out of six Arab GCC states suffer from corruption according to TI in the last 5 years (2013–2017), as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait did not reach even 50 degrees of a scale consisting of 100 degrees in 5 consecutive years; and the best average for these four countries in the last 5 years was 48 points in Saudi Arabia.

While Oman maintained its low level of transparency in the last 5 years' reports, Bahrain and Kuwait fell in 2016 and 2017, and Saudi Arabia's position slightly improved in 2017. It is surprising that reports in the last 5 years as seen in **Table 2** show the low results achieved by Kuwait annually, despite the fact that this country is the only country in this region having more open political and media environment than the others. It is enough to recall many debates and controversial issues raised by the Kuwait's parliament and the Kuwaiti media. This can be further explained by more of a deep analysis of the themes and topics focused on by the TI reports on Kuwait and other GCC countries—as will be done in the next section of the analysis—to understand the whole picture and go beyond these numbers and statistics.

In contrast, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar scored more than 50 points of the total score out of 100 in the last 5 years (2013–2017), with averages that reached 69 for the UAE and 66 for Qatar. More important, the two GCC states achieved advanced positions in the last 2 years' reports of TI.

No	Country	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	AVG.	Status
1	Bahrain	48	49	51	43	36	45	Corrupted
2	United Arab Emirates	69	70	70	66	71	69	Partly corrupted
3	Saudi Arabia	46	49	52	46	49	48	Corrupted
4	Oman	47	45	45	45	44	45	Corrupted
5	Qatar	68	69	71	61	63	66	Partly corrupted
6	Kuwait	43	44	49	41	39	43	Corrupted

The lowest is more corrupted and the highest is not corrupted.

Table 2.
Corruption scores (2013–2017) in the GCC according to TI (points 0–100).

The UAE ranked No. 24 in the 2016 report out of 176 countries covered by the report, and Qatar ranked 31 in the same year. In 2017, the two countries improved their positions globally. The UAE ranked 21 among 180 countries and Qatar ranked 29 in the same report. These are important and encouraging results for other GCC states and even for the Arab countries to benefit from the experience of the two countries and their levels in reducing cases of corruption.

Table 3 shows the ranking of 18 Arab countries in 2016 and 2017 reports by the TI in order to understand the context the GCC countries.

The six Arab GCC countries achieved good levels in combatting corruption compared to other Arab countries, especially in the 2016 report by TI. The 2016 report included 18 Arab countries of which the six Arab GCC countries scored among the top seven Arab countries. Although all the Arab countries in the report, with the exception of UAE and Qatar, scored 50 points out of 100 according to the TI, the GCC states were in a better position than 11 other Arab countries included in that report.

It should be noted that the very weak scores of combatting corruption in countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya (173, 170, 170, respectively) are closely related to the state of war and the long standing of political and social instability. However, other Arab countries are not suffering from wars and living a more stable situation but have lagged behind the world rankings in Transparency International in 2016 report, such as Morocco, which scored 90, Algeria 108, Egypt at the same position, and Lebanon 136 globally.

In a 2017 report, which also included 18 Arab countries, Kuwait and Bahrain fell to eighth and ninth places among other Arab countries, although their global ranking is generally weak. Kuwait ranked 85 and Bahrain ranked 103 globally. It should be mentioned here that these negative indicators of corruption in the Arab countries are only stated to understand the context in which the six Arab GCC countries belong to, but not to justify the poor scores achieved by most GCC countries internationally. According to TI reports, the best Arab experiences are the UAE and Qatar, which belong to the GCC states and share with the rest of the countries of this region many characteristics and political, economic, social, and cultural conditions. Therefore, there is nothing to prevent other Gulf countries from achieving better scores in the fight against corruption in the international context.

3.3 Main themes and topics in the GCC press freedom reports

Analysis in this section will reveal the main themes and topics that were highlighted by the FH reports on the Arab GCC countries in the last 5 years (2013–2017). **Table 4** summarizes the main themes and topics addressed by these reports in each country in this region.

No	Country	2016 rank	2017 rank
1	United Arab Emirates	24	21
2	Qatar	31	29
3	Saudi Arabia	57	57
4	Jordan	62	59
5	Oman	64	68
6	Bahrain	70	103
7	Kuwait	75	85
8	Tunisia	75	74
9	Morocco	90	81
10	Algeria	108	112
11	Egypt	108	117
12	Lebanon	136	143
13	Mauretania	142	143
14	Iraq	166	169
15	Libya	170	171
16	Sudan	170	175
17	Yemen	170	175
18	Syria	173	178

Table 3.
Arab countries' corruption ranks (2016–2017) according to TI.

FH reports in the last 5 years (2013–2017) addressed many themes and topics of press freedom in the six Arab GCC states. Most of these themes and topics were similar with few exceptions. Similar topics include:

1. Criticism of Islam, rulers, ruling families, and governments and carrying out of acts that threaten national security

2. Physical and psychological violence and arrests of journalists and bloggers who criticize governments and ruling regimes

3. Control of local and international publications

4. Control of the private media

5. Intensified Internet censorship

The abovementioned themes were repeated in the FH reports on freedom of the press in the six Arab GCC states over the past 5 years (2013–2017). FH reports focused on specific cases that occurred in these countries when referring, for example, to the arrest or torture of journalists in this country or that. Examples of cases of censorship and control of the media in the GCC states were also reported. FH considered the control of governments in these countries or ruling families or individuals who have direct relationships with these systems as evidence of control over the media, even if they are privately owned.

FH reports on press freedom in the GCC states indicate that the Internet provides important options for accessing information and exchanging views on many issues and that the spread and penetration of the Internet in these countries are

No	Country	Main topics and themes
1	Bahrain	1. Violent repression against journalists and bloggers (beatings, arrest, and torture) 2. Imprisonment for publishing criticism of Islam or the king and inciting nine actions that undermine state security 3. Censor and prevent the distribution of local and foreign publications 4. Close newspapers through court proceedings 5. Ban books and films, block websites, and prosecute individuals 6. Shutting down the opposition publications 7. Internet heavily monitored 8. Restricting international media 9. Significant control over private publications
2	United Arab Emirates	1. Arresting activists and bloggers 2. Limiting media environment 3. Censor both domestic and foreign publications prior to distribution 4. Prohibits criticism of the government, rulers and ruling families, and friendly foreign governments 5. Intensifying censorship on stories by foreign journalists, 6. Online censorship is extensive 7. Local journalists suffered from warnings and threats if they push the limits of permissible media coverage 8. Noncitizen journalists face dismissal and deportation 9. Most media outlets are either government owned or have close government affiliations
3	Saudi Arabia	1. Prohibits publishing materials that harm national security 2. Jurisdiction over the media was transferred from the court system to the Ministry of Culture and Information 3. Banning of news that contradicts Sharia (Islamic law), undermines national security, promotes foreign interests, or slanders religious leaders 4. Monitors and blocks websites 5. Physical harassment of journalists 6. Difficulty covering the local news 7. All daily newspapers are privately owned but controlled by individuals affiliated with the royal family 8. Controls news and information 9. Arrests of regime critics
4	Oman	1. Censored and subdued media environment 2. Journalists can be fined or imprisoned for voicing criticism of the Sultan or printing material that leads to "public discord, violates the security of the state, or abuses a person's dignity or rights 3. Activists and bloggers were fined and sentenced 4. Journalists are required to obtain licenses to practice 5. Censor any material regarded as politically, culturally, or sexually offensive in both domestic and foreign media 6. Blacklisted several authors and specific books that were deemed controversial 7. Self-censorship is widespread 8. Considerable control over the Internet 9. Blocks websites deemed sexually offensive or politically controversial
5	Qatar	1. Journalists are subject to prosecution for criticizing government, the ruling family, or Islam 2. All publications are subject to government licensing 3. Censor domestic and foreign publications 4. Online content is censored 5. Self-censorship is reportedly widespread 6. Ignoring some important local events and accidents 7. Local reporters often receive warnings and threats 8. Noncitizen journalists receive termination, deportation, and imprisonment 9. Seven newspapers are owned by members of the ruling family or their business associates

No	Country	Main topics and themes
6	Kuwait	1. Shutdowns of opposition media outlets and Twitter microblog accounts 2. Forbids criticism of the Emir, the disclosure of secret or private information, and statements calling for the overthrow of the regime 3. Penalties for criticizing Islam 4. All publishers are required to obtain an operating license from the Ministry of Information 5. Monitor Internet communications for defamation and security threats 6. Screens all imported media for morally offensive content 7. Controls the publication and distribution of all materials classified as informational

Table 4.
Topics and themes of the press freedom in the GCC according to FH (2013–2017).

high, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. However, the Internet, according to the FH reports, is subject to "constant," "tight," and "intensive" control and censorship. FH generally uses these provisions in many reports without presenting specific cases or examples. When attempting to bring the picture closer to such censorship, it cites cases of cybercriminals or activists who have been arrested or charged as a result of publishing in the media or disseminating info through social media.

FH repeatedly emphasized that themes of "criticism of Islam, regimes, governments, and threats to national security" are affecting press freedom in these countries. The researcher believes that criticizing Islam to achieve better levels of press freedom is out of context or at least does not reflect a good and deep understanding of how the states and societies in this region are structured. In these countries Islam is a comprehensive life system and an essential component in the national constitutions. Furthermore, the sociocultural framework in these societies often does not accept the reference to the Islamic religion in a negative or critical manner, and those who dare to do so are heavily attacked by official institutions, societies, and even ordinary individuals. Islam is a very sensitive and restricted theme in this region and cannot be compared easily with other themes. Societies and individuals in this region, in my point of view, can be more flexible and tolerant when criticizing ruling families, governments, regimes, etc., but not Islam or Islamic Law.

Reports by FH also criticized some administrative procedures related to media and press institutions as well as to professional practices in this field. FH considered pursuing license to practice journalism from official bodies as an obstacle to freedom of the press. However, such procedures have taken their legal validity from laws issued in these countries, and therefore their implementation is not considered an offense. Civil society associations and individuals could criticize these frameworks and call to change or improve them, but it would not be possible to accept a violation of explicit legal provisions on the grounds that this would establish better press freedom.

The FH reports on the GCC states in the last 5 years, 2013–2017, focused on themes related to specific countries in this region. For example, reports mentioned "self-censorship" in Oman and Qatar and how this kind of censorship negatively affects the freedom of the press. In practicing this kind of censorship, journalists and media establishments avoid addressing many issues because they are very sensitive and might impact negatively both on journalists and their institutions.

The FH reports have also mentioned how the press and media coverage sometimes ignore coverage of some local events and even some geographical areas like in Saudi Arabia and Qatar because of written or oral directives. Reports indicated the phenomenon of harassment of foreign journalists in Qatar and the UAE by subjecting their news stories and articles to intensive supervision. Punishments

for those who are not obeying rules and directives include termination of contracts and sometimes deportation from the country without proper procedures. However, these reports sometimes refer to one single event or avoid referring to any particular names or events in which foreign journalists have been punished without appropriate procedures, thus referring to this subject in a general form that lacks more evidence, which are not available in these reports.

One of the topics in which these reports singled out a country was Saudi Arabia in the issue of transformation of media accountability from courts to the Ministry of Culture and Information, in a way that negatively affects press freedom. The researcher believes that the opposite is happening in many countries worldwide, including some Arab countries that transformed the administrative accountability to the court system. In the court system, journalists and media establishments should feel more confident because the judiciary institution is more independent and trusted. In contrast, the administrative accountability is conducted by official entities supervising media and journalism establishments. Administrative accountability is not in journalists and media's favor because it is most likely affected by the conflict of interests between different institutions especially the public sector.

The researcher noted that the content of FH reports on freedom of the press in the GCC states in the last 5 years, 2013–2017, is repeated, and some of these reports of successive years are identically similar, and the differences were minor between them year after year. The reports focus on the elements and frameworks of legal, environment, political, and economic systems and address the topics under each of these frameworks and related observations. Repeatedly, FH considers that the legal framework governing media and press in these countries negatively affects freedom of the press. FH successive reports also indicate that the practices of the executive bodies in these countries within the political framework are another factor affecting press freedom. The researcher believes that focusing on specific issues and referring to them repeatedly year after year may help the concerned countries deal easily with them. Countries and related institutions can read and analyze these reports and take appropriate action to improve the level of freedom of the press. States may also provide clarifications and "corrections," if they are available, on some information provided by FH reports.

In its reports on freedom of the press in the last 5 years (2013–2017), FH has classified Kuwaiti press as "partially free," with only four Arab countries, namely, Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco, and Jordan. FH reported a number of positive signs on press freedom in Kuwait, as follows [25]:

1. Censorship in practice does not regularly interfere with or restrict access to news.
2. Kuwaiti media are more critical and outspoken than many others in the region.
3. More in-depth reporting and a greater diversity of opinions appear in newspapers.
4. Atmosphere of increased governmental intolerance toward critical reporting is evident.
5. International news is widely available, and a number of foreign media outlets maintain bureaus in Kuwait.
6. All Arabic and English language newspapers are privately owned, largely independent, and diverse in their reporting.
7. Private media have relatively transparent ownership and their own press houses.

These positive signs on press freedom in Kuwait in the last 5 years' (2013–2017) reports by FH are very important in many respects. First, Kuwait shares many political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics with other GCC states, which can therefore use these positive signs to achieve better scores on the scale of the world press freedom.

Second, the researcher also found that some of the positive signs made by FH reports on press freedom in Kuwait have a suitable and similar ground in other GCC states. The private sector in these countries owns the largest proportion of daily newspapers, so these newspapers can imitate the Kuwaiti press practices and methodology in dealing with public affairs issues in more independent and objective ways. Institutions that supervise media and press institutions in these countries can also be encouraged to benefit from the positive indicators reported by the FH on the Kuwaiti press to improve the levels of press freedom in the rest of the GCC countries.

3.4 Relationship between press freedom and corruption in the GCC states

The correlation between press freedom and corruption in GCC states was measured by using two techniques, statistical and un-statistical ones. **Table 5** presents—statistically—the Pearson correlation coefficients between press freedom and corruption for each country. It is very clear that no significant correlation is found between the two variables for all countries, except for Qatar. For Oman, the correlation cannot be computed as one of the variables has constant values (press freedom).

The absence of a statistical strong correlation coefficient between the two variables, as shown in **Table 5** between the degrees of freedom of the press and level of corruption in the GCC states, can be due to multiple reasons. First, the set of data under analysis is small, covering only 5 years, considering that statistical analysis is more effective with a big set of data. Second, the similarities obtained by countries in this study and the frequency of the same result year after year, whether in the field of freedom of the press or in the field of corruption, do not help to detect a strong or clear correlation coefficient between the variables. The most prominent example of this is Oman, in which correlation between the two variables cannot be detected statistically because it has obtained a score of 71 in the freedom of the press for 5 consecutive years.

But the indicators provided by the two international organizations on freedom of the press and corruption indicate that there are un-statistical correlations between the two variables freedom of the press and corruption in three out of six countries in this region. **Table 6** summarizes, un-statistically, the relationship between press freedom and corruption in the six Arab GCC countries, according to two international organizations, FH and TI, in the last 5 years (2013–2017).

According to the figures in **Table 6**, the six Arab GCC states can be divided into three main categories:

1. Countries in which the correlation between the decline in press freedom and high levels of corruption has been consistent (Oman, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia)

2. Countries in which the correlation between the decline in press freedom and low levels of corruption has been contradicted (UAE and Qatar)

3. Countries in which the relationship between the medium level of freedom of the press and the high level of corruption (Kuwait) has been contradicted

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Oman represent the worst case in the region, although it is a normal and predictable situation, because it reflects a kind of consistency between press freedom decline, and corruption levels rise according to international reports. In these countries, the press is not allowed to play its role in fighting corruption. It is not possible to claim that the press is a decisive factor in reducing levels of corruption. Media and press involvement in fighting corruption can send very important messages to the public about how serious and transparent these countries are in dealing with various corruption issues.

The countries of the second category, namely, the UAE and Qatar, represent an incomprehensible contradiction between the decline in press freedom and the decline in levels of corruption. This contradiction can be interpreted in many ways. This contradiction shows that there is no correlation between press freedom and the rise or fall of corruption levels and therefore the two issues should not be linked. Although this interpretation is important, it does not seem logic in comparison to situations around the world, where the relationship is always inverse between the high degree of press freedom and low levels of corruption. In addition, TI corruption reports focus on media as one of the main themes in corruption, whether it concerns the media itself or the role of these media in dealing with corruption issues.

The third category of the GCC states, represented only by Kuwait, also shows another contradictory relationship between freedom of the press and levels of corruption. FH categorized Kuwaiti press as "partially free," but corruption levels, according to TI reports, are very high internationally. This discrepancy between the degree of freedom of the press and the level of corruption may reflect the absence of a relationship between both issues. It might also reflect a kind of disability to invest Kuwait's success in the field of press freedom in fighting corruption and confronting it, especially since the Kuwaiti press has a stronger and better influence than other Arab GCC countries.

In general, the researcher believes that the GCC countries in the second and third categories that posed a kind of contradictory relationship between freedom of the press and the levels of corruption are important examples that should be supported and benefited from. Countries' experiences that have achieved advanced regional and international levels in the fight against corruption, namely, the UAE and Qatar, should be used and imitated by other GCC states in order to improve their stance in fighting against corruption. Meanwhile, UAE and Qatar should be encouraged to improve their performance of press freedom regionally and internationally. Kuwait is the only GCC state that has achieved better press freedom, so other GCC countries should benefit from this experience and make use of many important positive signs on press freedom in Kuwait as mentioned above, to improve press freedom in all GCC states. Nevertheless, Kuwait should also improve its situation in fighting against corruption regionally and internationally.

No.	Country	Correlation coefficient	Sig.
1	Bahrain	−0.241	0.696
2	UAE	−0.186	0.764
3	Saudi Arabia	−0.512	0.378
4	Oman	NA	NA
5	Qatar	−0.880*	0.049
6	Kuwait	−0.623	0.262

**Indicates the correlation is significant at 0.05 significant level.*

Table 5.
Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Press Freedom and Corruption Scores (2013-2017) in the GCC according to FH and TI.

No	Country	Press freedom						Corruption					
		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Status	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Status
1	Bahrain	86	87	87	87	87	Not free	48	49	51	43	36	Corrupted
2	UAE	74	76	76	78	78	Not free	69	70	70	66	71	Partly corrupted
3	Saudi Arabia	84	83	83	86	86	Not free	46	49	52	46	49	Corrupted
4	Oman	71	71	71	71	71	Not free	47	45	45	45	44	Corrupted
5	Qatar	67	67	67	69	70	Not free	68	69	71	61	63	Partly corrupted
6	Kuwait	59	59	59	59	60	Partly free	43	44	49	41	39	Corrupted

Table 6.
Relationship between press freedom and corruption scores (2013–2017) in the GCC according to FH and TI.

GCC countries with good performances and best practices in press freedom (Kuwait) and regional and international records in fighting against corruption (UAE and Qatar) can be viewed favorably with the hope that the freedom of the press and the fight against corruption in the GCC region can be improved in the future. To achieve this task, both legislative frameworks and practical actions should be considered and implemented in both areas: press freedom and fighting against corruption, thus benefiting from successful experiences and best practices regionally and internationally.

4. Results and discussion

The results of this study confirmed the weakness of the freedom enjoyed by the mass media in GCC countries except for Kuwait, where media is classified in a number of international reports, including the FH report as "partially free," while the media in the rest of the GCC countries classify as "not free" over successive years.

The weakness of freedom of the mass media in this region is linked to a number of reasons, perhaps dominated by the control of political systems over the media through the laws and regulations. Political systems also directly or indirectly finance and own mass media institutions. These mechanisms of control by political regimes in the GCC countries are also applied by many regimes in the rest of the Arab countries and many third world countries as well. By applying these mechanisms of control, governments want to be sure to use media in achieving their goals and interests and avoid any kind of interference by the media against policies and programs approved by these governments.

The political systems in the GCC states recognize that ensuring better or greater freedom of mass media can transform the media into an independent and influential force on many policies and decisions relevant to people and communities. From a political and organizational point of view, many of the mass media in the GCC states remained official and governmental, even if they were private in terms of ownership. Mass media outlets in this region are linked to the governments and political systems in mutually beneficial interests. They control the mass media to avoid criticism or at least ensure media "silence" and "neutrality." On the other hand, the mass media has always benefited from the financial support provided by governments and political systems in many different forms, including periodic subsidies,

advertisements, subscriptions, and tax exemptions. Accordingly, the freedom of the press in GCC states and elsewhere in many Arab countries is always weak.

As the fight against different types of corruption through the media needs a better and stronger level of freedom, the media failed to play its role in fighting corruption or reported it to the public except in exceptional cases passed through to achieve certain agendas or goals: political, social, or for sending some international messages abroad. To illustrate this, one can argue that although there are high levels of corruption in many GCC countries, as reported by TI, corruption cases are absent and rarely raised in many mass media in the region. The researcher believes that the weakness of the role played by mass media in fighting against corruption is linked to a traditional vision in these countries that confrontations against corruption must be held in closed rooms and take its way to the institutions of justice rather than become a public opinion issue through the media. This vision reflects the attitude toward mass media outlets, which are seen in these countries as means and tools of development. According to this traditional view, authoritarian theory is the most suitable framework by which to interpret media practice in the region.

Mass media in the GCC states were—and still are—a force controlled by the political systems in these countries. The researcher argues that if the media continues to practice its duties under the full control of the political systems, it will be very difficult to predict future positive changes in the media environment, policies, and content in this region. Mass media institutions are always in need of high degrees of independence and freedom to enable them to objectively consider and report on various authorities within the community, including the executive authority. The question that can be raised here is how the traditional mass media in the GCC countries can consider and deal with issues of corruption independently, as the media in this region follows the executive authorities or are under its control. Moreover, the issues of corruption are linked to authorities, institutions, and individuals, so another question is how mass media can take independent positions from these authorities while it's practicing its role under the control of these authorities.

The researcher argues that the low ratings of the freedom of the mass media in most GCC states, according to FH reports, have led—and will always be—to high levels of corruption in these countries as confirmed by TI reports. The political systems and governments in these countries decided not to use media outlets in combating corruption. The decision is mainly political and media in this region always obey the controlling power. In order to change that situation, there must be structural changes of the mass media environments in these countries. There must be also some important and powerful initiatives from the mass media institutions to practice and play their roles as independent powers.

The new media, particularly social media, carry better future hopes to practice pressure on two directions. In the first direction, these networks can operate as a pressure force on traditional mass media to deal with some sensitive and mostly avoided issues such as corruption. In the second direction, the new media can put some pressure on governments to take more vigorous measures in dealing with corruption and involve the public in such issues. Although there are no scientific studies—as far as the researcher is aware—which confirm such analogy, the researcher believes that through follow-up and continuous direct observation, social media in this region is putting real pressures in the two directions referred to above.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study confirmed the correlation between the low levels of freedom of the press and the high level of corruption in most GCC countries, namely,

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. But the study also pointed a contradictory result between the degrees of freedom of press and levels of corruption in some of these countries. While the press and the media in countries such as the UAE and Qatar are classified as "not free" according to FH reports, the two countries have advanced global ranks in the fight against corruption as reported by TI. This result on one hand can be seen as proof that there is no kind of correlation between the freedom of the press and fighting against corruption. On the other hand, this result may be used positively to encourage the two countries to improve their level of freedom of the press to enhance their international positions in the fight against corruption.

Another contradictory finding in this study also was related to the freedom of the press in Kuwait, which according to FH is classified as "partly free," while the level of corruption is very high compared to other GCC countries. Kuwait is ranked fifth in the level of corruption among the six GCC states.

Based on these results, it is necessary to think in the future of more analytical studies on the relationship between the media systems in the GCC countries and corruption. There is also a need for a comparative analysis of the degree of attention given by the media in the GCC countries to the corruption issues and the type of cases covered. Moreover, studies are needed on the investigative journalism in these countries and types of the issues that are exposed in this kind of journalism that can contribute to the fight against corruption.

Issues of corruption should also be considered in the future as they are reported and portrayed by social media in this region. Such studies, however, will provide more information and better understanding on the relationship between the freedom of the press and corruption in the GCC states and clarify whether there will be better future horizons for the relationship between freedom of the press and the fight against corruption in this region.

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