

Report from roundtable meeting on EU-MENA relations

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Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive summary

Dialogue between people from different walks of life is at the core of the work of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa, as inclusive dialogues, whether cross sectoral, intercultural, or intergenerational, play a pivotal role in achieving peace, security, and sustainable development across regions and societies.

In past years, alongside its other activities, the Dialogue Institute has hosted several dialogues on EU-MENA relations and on intercultural dialogue. As a continuation of this work the Institute hosted a dialogue meeting in roundtable format, in late January 2024 in Amman. A small group of analysts, mainly from the MENA region and some from Europe, were invited to discuss how relations between the MENA region and Europe have been affected by the recent regional developments.

The meeting aimed at contributing to a greater understanding of the new challenges that have arisen in light of the seriously deteriorating situation, and to contribute to the exchange of ideas on shortcomings in current dialogue structures and how these can be bridged.

Throughout the meeting, participants stressed that the relations are at a turning point considering and that there is a growing trust-gap. The participants underlined a need for reflection and for re-evaluation and reimagination of the relationship. At the same time, they stressed that the two regions – Europe and the MENA region – are intimately interconnected and developments in one region affects the other and that we can't afford to turn our back on each other. It is therefore essential to find new, better, and more equal ways for dialogue and collaboration.

This report summarises some of the topics discussed and ideas and recommendations that emerged.

Report

As a continuation of the Dialogue Institute's earlier work on EU-MENA relations and on intercultural dialogue, the Institute hosted a dialogue meeting in roundtable format, in late January 2024. The meeting brought together a small group of analysts, mainly from the MENA region and some from Europe, to under Chatham house rules discuss how relations between the region and Europe have been affected by the recent regional developments.

The meeting was an occasion to think through where the current situation in the region leaves intellectuals and professionals attached to the old, troubled, yet enriching relationship between the Arab world and Europe. The aim was to pool analysis and reflections, taking stock of what is happening and reflecting on how this can help determine where efforts are best vested in the future. It also aimed at contributing to a greater understanding of the new challenges that have arisen, and to developing thinking on shortcomings in current dialogue structures and how these can be bridged. The meeting was carried out in collaboration with [Synaps](#).

The rich and engaged discussion was based on a number of guiding questions, including on existing and possible future spaces for Arab-European dialogues; prospects for inter-Arab dialogue and what shapes such dialogues could take; what a regional agenda could look like; possible allies for developing such agenda; and if a broader Mediterranean space could be a relevant geographic framework as seen from the Arab world, as well as methodological questions on how to engage better and how to conduct advocacy differently.

Throughout the meeting participants stressed that the relations are at a turning point considering recent developments. They pointed to a growing sense in the Arab world that international law is applied selectively, with claims of “Western” double standards, which in turn has led to a growing trust-gap. The participants underlined a need for reflection and for re-evaluation and reimagination of the relationship. At the same time, they stressed that the two regions – Europe and the MENA region – are intimately interconnected and developments in one region effects the other and that we can't afford to turn our back on each other. It is therefore essential to find new, better, and more equal ways to dialogue and collaborate. As one participant put it: *“We are not wedded, we are welded and we couldn't get a divorce even if we would have liked to”*.

Below is a summary of some of the topics discussed and ideas and recommendations that emerged.

Understanding and cross regional cooperation

- **Universal ownership of international law:** Reinforce the concept that international law is a global heritage, not monopolized by any single region or group.
- **Globalization's impact:** Initiate inclusive dialogues on globalization to understand its diverse effects across countries, seeking equitable benefits and acknowledging different national contexts.
- **Clarity in regional partnerships:** Call for a clearer understanding of the European Union's intentions and strategies in the Southern Neighbourhood and foster more aligned objectives.

Dialogue and empathy

- **Fostering empathy through dialogue:** Promote dialogues centered around empathy and trust-building, highlighting the power of soft power in establishing strong relationships, including cross-regional relations.
- **Patience and understanding in dialogue:** Address the need for patience and understanding amidst dialogues in times of crisis, recognizing the regional desires for genuine acknowledgment of their realities.
- **Cultural communication:** Promote the exploration of cultural dimensions as an important corner stone for mutual understanding and intercultural communication.
- **Importance of horizontal relationships:** Advocate for the cultivation of horizontal relationships that prioritize human connections and empathy, reinforcing the human dimension in cross regional affairs.

Regional collaboration and self-reflection

- **Building alliances:** Consider formation of strategic alliances, focusing on identifying compatible segments within societies in the two regions that align with mutual goals for constructive collaboration.
- **Strengthening Arab-Arab dialogue:** Highlight the positive impact of increased Arab-Arab dialogue in defining regional narratives and agendas, emphasizing the importance of homegrown solutions.
- **Regional initiative and responsibility:** Emphasize the MENA region's role in leading change and innovation, advocating for self-driven development and a principled approach rooted in regional values.
- **Internal clarity and self-reflection:** Encourage countries on both shores of the Mediterranean region to engage in self-reflection and to seek internal clarity, prioritizing a principled discourse that is internally developed.

- **More integration in the MENA region itself:** Advocate for increased integration within the MENA region to enhance mobility and economic cooperation and stress the need for robust regional institutions to foster a cohesive discourse on shared challenges and opportunities.

Addressing challenges and future planning

- **Navigating extremes and establishing boundaries:** Discuss the challenges of identifying boundaries amidst polarizing forces, promoting a balanced approach that avoids extremism, while allowing for differing views to be expressed and respected. Advocating for nuanced understanding that recognizes the complexity of issues without attributing them to radical viewpoints.
- **The importance of nuance and personal detachment:** Advocate for nuanced dialogues and create spaces where personal biases can be put aside.
- **Vision for the future and post-war planning:** Create time and space to develop a vision for the future, especially in planning for the aftermath of crucial/major events, to address potential weaknesses and take preventative measures.

Youth engagement, rights, and social issues

- **Youth empowerment and responsibility:** Acknowledge different generations perspectives, including the youth's perspective on older and past generations. Emphasize all generations' joint responsibility in building a stable and prosperous future.
- **Advocacy for rights:** Encourage a respectful and informed conversation on rights and on freedom of speech, recognizing the importance of both regions in championing these issues proactively.
- **Social insurances including pensions, health care:** Advocate for a social contract with integrating social insurance, including health care and pensions.
- **Mental health awareness:** Recognize the significance of addressing mental health issues, especially in times of change and uncertainty, including through support to organizations taking such measures.

Funding, legal, and organizational support

- **Ethics and transparency in funding:** Stress the importance of maintaining integrity and open dialogue in funding relationships, ensuring that financial support does not compromise freedom of expression.
- **Diversification and risk management in funding:** Advocate for diversifying funding sources to reduce dependencies and address potential risks associated with specific donors.

- **Legal expertise in contract-based agreements/negotiations:** Highlight the necessity of legal advisory for organizations engaging in contract-based agreements, ensuring informed and protected decisions.
- **Locally rooted and financed initiatives:** Support the development of initiatives that are locally financed and rooted, highlighting their long-term sustainability over inconsistent external funding.

Diplomacy and mutual understanding

- **Value of context-aware diplomacy:** Emphasize the importance that diplomats and intermediaries are knowledgeable about regional, national, and local contexts, so they can play a role in facilitating better understanding and reducing tensions.
- **Common challenges and bonds between EU and MENA:** Recognize the shared challenges faced by the EU and the MENA region, while acknowledging that despite difficulties, the relationship is enduring and essential for mutual development. This highlighted a need for both regions to address their respective internal issues while maintaining a strong cross-regional bond.
- **The role of diaspora:** Acknowledge the significant contribution of the diaspora as cross-regional bridges and their potential in leveraging their unique positions.

Some concrete outcomes and recommendations

To conduct advocacy differently:

- Rebalance advocacy trips, meetings, and interviews between “North” and “South”, including the Gulf.
- Reorient advocacy trips to support more progressive Western governments.
- Support progressive officials based in the region, and the up-and-coming.
- Engage more with Western associations, cultural institutions, independent media, “influencers”, opposition parties, and less with governments.
- Treat the “North” as a research topic and a region in crisis, and not solely as an audience.
- Agree on a clear agenda before advocacy meetings and avoid those that have none.
- Invest more in prepping for trips, by brainstorming constraints, dilemmas, opportunities, local allies.
- Invest in legal proficiency in relation to international law.
- Think in terms of alliances rather than bilateral relationships.
- Use relative strength to speak out for, protect, and promote weaker organizations.

In shaping a stronger regional position:

- Double down on sense of purpose and clarity of mission, even at the expense of short-term funding opportunities.
- Uphold consistent standards within the region itself, outside of crises involving Israel.
- Devote more time and space to formal or informal inter-Arab fora, to discuss commonalities, in Arabic, and without excluding Arab officials.
- Reinvest the region's own margins: remote areas, marginalized groups, "flyover countries", and its many diasporas.
- Connect or reconnect with local forms of activism, even those that are conservative, patriarchal, or seemingly parochial.
- Include regional migrations, notably unskilled and skilled labour, as a factor of cohesion and exchange.
- Explore new forms of Western-facing action, such as litigation and "lawfare", which also requires better documentation.
- Challenge and excise Western concepts that don't make sense locally.

For healthier contractual relationships:

- Cut back on any waste to increase resilience, independence, and negotiating power.
- Invest in professionalization to reduce any unnecessary liabilities.
- Discuss funding trade-offs openly with colleagues.
- Discuss constraints more openly with funding partners too.
- Implement systematic "due diligence" applied to funding partners, to ensure politics align or at least are compatible.
- Publish a partnership policy laying out values, goals, and legal guidelines.
- Publish an M&E policy encompassing funding process and reporting, not just activities, and leveraging the concepts of accountability and learning to push for change.
- Apply anticorruption, antiharassment, and other policies to funding partners, not just staff, suppliers, and implementing partners.
- Communicate disagreements formally, in writing, in ways that can be relayed up the decision-making chain.
- Review the legality of standard contracts, with help from pro bono lawyers.
- Review the legality of defunding measures, with help from pro bono lawyers.
- Push for more inclusion, in budget structures, of lines explicitly dedicated to contingencies, taxes, social security, insurances, fundamental benefits like maternity leave.

In terms of funding opportunities:

- Invest in mental health awareness and support, including residencies for recovering activists.
- Develop multi-country projects that foster regional learning and alliances.
- Fund the pooling of resources between organizations, such as software or policies or training modules or a vetted roster of organizational development consultants.
- Assist activist organizations in navigating liabilities, and fund organizations being defunded arbitrarily.
- Support more innovative activism, involving social movements, community work, local fundraising, and connections with the diasporas.