

Report from panel discussion on EU-MENA relations

Amman, January 30th, 2024



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive summary

As part of its work on EU-MENA relations and on intercultural dialogue, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted an interactive panel discussion on January 30th, 2024, with senior experts from academia, civil society, and diplomacy, from the MENA region and from Europe.

Key take aways from the discussion included the need for enhancing intercultural dialogue and promoting intersectoral contacts between Europe and the MENA-region. The importance of a long-term vision in cross-regional policymaking was highlighted as well as the necessity to ensure inclusivity in decision-making and the importance of sustaining engagement with civil society.

Report

As part of its work on EU-MENA relations and on intercultural dialogue, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted an interactive panel discussion on January 30th, 2024, as part of an annual Swedish rapporteur meeting, gathering diplomats from Sweden's diplomatic missions in the region and Europe.

The panel consisted of senior experts from academia, civil society, and diplomacy, including Pierre-Christophe Chatzisavas (EU ambassador to Jordan), Mohamed El Dahshan (economic analyst from Egypt), Zine Ghebouli (analyst and researcher from Algeria), Eva Haddad (professor in intercultural communication from Jordan), Peter Harling (founder and director of Synaps), Zahra' Langi (gender expert from Libya) and Taha Yousfi (analyst from Tunisia). It was moderated by the Institute's director Charlotta Sparre.

The session was building on the Institute's work to enhance cooperation and promote mutual understanding between Europe and the MENA region, and the discussions centred around the current state of EU-MENA relations and possible ways forward for enhanced cooperation.

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Some of the key elements raised by panelists included:

- A recognition that recent crises, including COVID-19, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and most recently the Gaza war, have seriously impacted the region, politically and security wise as well as economically.
- A reminder that the countries in the MENA region are very diverse and that regional and global crises have impacted each country differently and each context faces its own challenges. Some panelists pointed to the emergence of non-state actors in the region and said that this is posing additional challenges to an already complex geopolitical situation.
- The centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was underscored. Several panelists said that the EU-MENA relations has been negatively affected in recent months, as a consequence of a growing perception in the region of "double standards and selective application of international law".
- A couple of panelists also brought up the question of European arms sales to the region and expressed concern that this has contributed to a dangerous militarization of the region and they argued for more restrictive policies.
- Other participants expressed concern over the worrying human rights situation in the region and pointed to the evermore shrinking civic space and the difficult conditions for civil society to survive, including funding challenges. The defunding of some human rights organisations in the region was mentioned and seen as a worrying trend that had further exacerbated the situation for civil society. Representatives from the MENA region stressed that diverse funding opportunities from partners beyond the West will be crucial.
- European migration policies were also mentioned, and concern was expressed at tendencies to "sub-contracting immigration to authoritarian rulers".
- Connected to the above, several panelists argued that Europe had lost its moral credibility when it comes to promotion of human rights and freedom of expression and had made human rights organisations in the region "even more lonely and exposed".

To address the challenges in the EU MENA relations, the panelists - both from the MENA region and from Europe - stressed the importance of self-reflection and of enhanced dialogues at all levels and across all sectors. In addition to dialogues on political and economic matters, migration, environment etc. the importance of intercultural dialogue was highlighted.

The panelists also underscored the need for a long-term vision in cross-regional policymaking, as well as the necessity to ensure inclusivity in decision-making and of sustaining an active engagement with civil society. Some said that the development of a long-term vision also needs to imagine and start planning for a post-war phase.

Several of the panelists pointed to the cross-regional cooperation as a largely “European driven and Eurocentric”. They called for stronger and more genuine partnerships and collaborations “with a real co-ownership” and they encouraged more EU decision-makers to “familiarize themselves more with the real context of MENA before making policies about the Southern Neighbourhood”.

A couple of the analysts from the region underlined the growing potential within the MENA region to be “producers of knowledge” and reminded Europeans to look more actively on how to support more locally driven agendas and solutions. Community-based diplomacy and using the current crises to restore an equal relationship were also encouraged.

Furthermore, the panelists underlined the value of people-to-people exchanges, such as cultural collaborations and educational exchanges, with a call to further expand the Erasmus Mundus+ and other existing programmes. They also put a strong emphasis on intergenerational dialogue and of working more actively on youth inclusion. This was seen as essential in light of the very high number of youths in the region who wish to leave their countries to seek a better future elsewhere.



Attentive audience of Swedish diplomats listening to an engaging with the panelists.