

# Report on

## Investing in Dialogues for Peace and Sustainable Development in the MENA Region

*The annual conference of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa*

Amman- Jordan, November 27, 2024



**Swedish Dialogue Institute**  
for the Middle East and North Africa

## Executive Summary

On November 27, 2024 the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa conducted its annual conference titled "Investing in Dialogues for Peace and Sustainable Development in the MENA Region". It brought together over 100 participants from the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe including Sweden to foster cross-sectoral collaboration and exchange, with a variety of experts in women and youth peace and security, entrepreneurs, climate activists, and practitioners of intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

The annual conference aimed at fostering effective and inclusive dialogue through various thematic areas and enhances mutual understanding and facilitates open exchanges of ideas, knowledge, and experiences across sectors, genders, regions cultures, and generations.

The conference featured a variety of events, including keynote speeches, panel discussions, interactive sessions and networking events. The panel discussions included distinguished speakers and moderators from the MENA region, and Europe, addressing the topics peace and security, intercultural dialogue, and the green transition. The interactive sessions featured different (methodologies) with one-on-one, small group or plenary discussions.

The first panel discussion titled **Inclusive Pathways to Peace and Security** focused on the critical situation in the region with increased conflicts levels not least in Gaza and Lebanon, and the humanitarian situation on the ground, where women and children are the most effected. The discussions further elaborated on how cross-regional dialogue was more needed than ever and could potentially contribute to conflict prevention and resolution. The important role of women and youth in any efforts for peacebuilding and sustainable development was highlighted and seen as essential for both short and long-term stability.

The second panel discussion titled **Intercultural Dialogue: a tool for building bridges** focused on enhancing mutual understanding, addressing polarized narratives and fostering trust between the MENA region and Europe. Key themes included the trust gaps exacerbated by global and regional crises and the importance of supporting locally driven platforms that boost self-esteem and build a sense of community within the region. The panel also explored the conditions necessary for successful and effective interfaith dialogue, emphasizing principles of meaningful engagement. Practical approaches such as storytelling, moral dramatization, and interfaith engagement were highlighted as valuable tools for bridging divides and fostering shared learning.

The third panel discussion, titled **Green Transition in the Making**, explored how innovation and entrepreneurship can catalyze sustainable growth and drive climate action. It highlighted the critical role of private sector innovation in achieving net-zero targets and underscored the importance of cross-regional and cross-sector collaboration to accelerate the green transition. While COP29 marked progress, significant challenges persist, including a lack of adequate funding and the continued absence of the political agreements needed to fully meet the Paris Agreement's objectives. Economic empowerment also emerged as a key theme, with calls to support

green social entrepreneurs by providing both financial resources and business development tools.

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



## Opening Session

The opening session featured three speeches, beginning with Ms. Ann Måwe, Director of the Dialogue Institute, who provided an overview of the purpose of the conference, the Institute's mission, key objectives, and thematic areas. This was followed by remarks from two distinguished speakers; H.E. Nassif Hitti, former Foreign Minister of Lebanon, who offered insights from a MENA perspective, and H.E. Pierre-Christophe Chatzisavas, Ambassador of the European Union to Jordan, who shared the EU perspective.



In her opening remarks, Director Ann Måwe stressed the urgent need for inclusive dialogue to address conflicts and promote understanding across sectors. Quoting Naguib Mahfouz, she said, "Dialogue is the oxygen of civilization. Without it, we suffocate in our own narrowness." She emphasized that inclusive participation is vital for conflict resolution. Ann also noted that women, youth, and children, who are most affected by conflicts, are often excluded from peacebuilding efforts. The WPS and YPS agendas aim to include them in creating pathways to peace and security. She further highlighted that achieving a green transition to net-zero emissions requires collaboration across governments, the private sector, academia, and civil society. Cross-regional cooperation and intercultural dialogue are crucial for sustainable solutions, fostering mutual understanding and bridging divides caused by misinformation.

The Institute's Advisory Committee member and former Foreign Minister of Lebanon, H.E. Nassif Hitti, shared important remarks about the value of dialogue and cooperation in the MENA region. Hitti underscored that in the MENA-region, where diversity is both a strength and a challenge, open dialogue and collaboration are essential for addressing shared concerns and unlocking collective potential. Hitti mentioned that the EU-MENA cooperation needs to extend beyond official levels, particularly through cultural dialogue to improve mutual understanding. According to Hitti, this cultural exchange is vital for addressing rising ideologies of hatred and rejection of others. Ultimately, a comprehensive approach, including democratic participation and dialogue, is essential for addressing challenges and achieving lasting peace.



The Ambassador of the European Union to Jordan H.E. Pierre-Christophe Chatzisavas, made contributions on strengthening EU-MENA partnerships. In his speech, H.E. Pierre spoke on the challenges and opportunities in fostering cooperation between the two regions, particularly in areas like economic

development and regional security. He outlined the importance of a unified, collaborative approach to address the shared issues that both Europe and the MENA region face. A key focus of his remarks was on the EU's role in supporting sustainable peace in the MENA region. H.E Pierre spoke on HRVP Josep Borrell's visit to Jordan, and reiterated Borrell's message of an immediate ceasefire, the release of hostages and prisoners, the need for a two-state solution, and the need for all EU member states to accept the ICC's arrest warrant decision.

**Main topics of discussions**

The annual conference featured three panel discussion sessions designed to enhance mutual understanding and facilitate open exchange of ideas, knowledge and experiences.

*A) Inclusive pathways to peace and security*

“We do not want a piece of the cake, we want to change the recipe of the cake” as stated by a participant

Participants extensively discussed regional developments, including ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Ukraine. They emphasized that achieving peace and security in the MENA region requires addressing underlying issues such as occupation, apartheid, and the root causes of conflicts, alongside a clear implementation plan. On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a panelist argued that the two-state solution was increasingly viewed as unrealistic, as the key parties no longer felt bound by past agreements and failed to share a common vision for peace. Instead, advocated for a rights-based approach, recognizing both Palestinians and Israelis with equal political, cultural, and human rights, focusing that equal rights are essential for sustainable peace.

The discussion also spotlighted on the importance of dialogue in the difficult circumstances facing the MENA region as one participant indicated” *Dialogue is essential for de-escalation, trust-building, and fostering peace*”. It was highlighted that dialogue should be relationship-based, with empathy at its core, and the focus must be on creating inclusive environments for dialogue where decisions are owned by all involved parties. It was also mentioned that while state-to-state dialogue can be challenging, people-to-people and civil society-to-civil society (CSO) interactions hold great potential and are necessary for meaningful and inclusive dialogues and discussions which requires funding and support to ensure its success.



Discussions also included how this regional development affects the relationship between the MENA region and Europe and how to foster dialogue and collaboration between the two regions. Participants from the MENA region expressed concerns about the widening trust gap between the region and Europe. They attributed this gap to a

perceived inconsistency in the application of international law. They warned that this could have significant long-term consequences on the relations. Participants from Europe stressed the importance of EU-MENA relations to be consistent in its approaches to international law. In order to be a relevant and credible partner including trade agreements.

Dialogue and empathy dominated the discussion as both are essential for building strong, sustainable relationships across regions. To foster empathy, it is important to promote dialogues that focus on trust-building and to highlight the value of soft power in establishing meaningful connections. In times of crisis, patience and understanding are crucial in these dialogues, recognizing the importance of acknowledging and respecting the regional realities and aspirations of different communities. It is vital to advocate for the development of horizontal relationships that prioritize human connections and empathy, ensuring that the human dimension is at the forefront of cross-regional interactions.

From a youth perspective, optimism is hard to maintain as global conflicts continue to escalate. However, young people are at the forefront of peacebuilding, advocating for human rights, documenting violations, and working innovatively to promote equity. Despite facing challenges such as exclusion from decision-making and shrinking civic spaces, youth are adaptable and are finding new ways to engage in conflict resolution. Women, too, have an essential role to play in transforming dialogue. Rather than merely seeking a share of existing power structures, women call for a reconceptualizing of systems based on values like empathy and compassion. They advocate for a feminist approach to diplomacy and peacebuilding.



## B) Intercultural dialogue: a tool for building bridges

“In order for me to write poetry that isn't political, I must listen to the birds and in order to hear the birds the warplanes must be silent” a participant quoted from a poem by Marwan Makhoul

Given the recent developments and the critical timing in the MENA region, the discussion addressed the historical ties and geographical proximity between the MENA region and Europe, as the two regions are interconnected. Participants pointed out that conflicts and crisis in one region can have far-reaching consequences, highlighting the need for ongoing dialogue to address these challenges. It was also noted that the global political climate—particularly the relationship between Europe and the Middle East—currently presents obstacles to building trust.



The discussions tackled the polarized narratives that often fuel mistrust between the two regions. Participants stressed the importance of understanding these narratives, as assumptions and biases can undermine even the best intentions. The conversation underscored how deeply ingrained biases often shape our communications, which can hinder genuine cultural exchange. Additionally, the issue of double standards in the West was

highlighted, with participants pointing out how Western policies and media coverage can often portray one side as justified while condemning the other, further deepening divisions and complicating efforts for mutual understanding.

While new technologies have positively connected people, one-sided media has also fueled growing mistrust and the spread of misinformation. The importance of fostering enhanced understanding, mutual respect, and collaboration across various sectors was also emphasized. This led the conversation to focus on exploring ways to enrich intercultural and interfaith dialogues as well as enhancing exchanges between the MENA region and Europe.

The personal and collective costs of intercultural dialogue were highlighted, with participants noting that while dialogue can transform lives, its true value is difficult to quantify. Trust and transparency, particularly in donor-recipient relationships involving financial support or networks, were identified as essential components for meaningful dialogue, giving an example on the recent cuts of funding to CSOs for political reasons.

The challenge of reaching those who most need dialogue was highlighted, particularly in situations with significant power imbalances. One suggested approach was to focus dialogue around shared projects and common goals, such as storytelling, which can cultivate empathy and attentiveness. Poetry and art were also proposed as tools for humanizing complex issues, helping individuals emotionally connect to others' struggles while confronting the dehumanizing effects of ineffective policies.

It was emphasized that intercultural dialogue thrives when it is based on practical collaboration. Rather than engaging in abstract discussions, it was advocated to work together on tangible projects to build trust and mutual understanding. The potential of moral dramatization was also discussed—sharing stories of both horror and beauty from war-affected areas—as a powerful way to humanize experiences and evoke empathy.

The role of interfaith dialogue in bridging divides, particularly in the diverse MENA region, was underscored, with a focus on the importance of religious literacy in fostering understanding. Interfaith dialogue was also seen as crucial in helping individuals cope with suffering, particularly in post-war situations, where safe spaces are needed to express pain and hope.

The conversation concluded that it is important to escalate tensions and finding pathways to constructive dialogue between the MENA region and Europe. It was acknowledged that such dialogue is a long-term process requiring sustained commitment, as meaningful change and mutual understanding cannot be achieved quickly in such circumstances. There was a reminder that dialogue is essential—without it, the alternative risks further division and conflict.

### *C) Green transition in the making*

*“Climate change might multiply threats” as a participant stated*

The discussions focused on the challenges and opportunities surrounding the green transition in the MENA region, exploring how it could foster economic and social development, enhance social responsibility, and involve various stakeholders, including governments, private sectors, civil society organizations (CSOs), and international organizations (INGOs).



There was an emphasis on the importance of cross-border collaboration, highlighting the synergy between MENA and Europe, especially in leveraging Europe's green energy technologies and the MENA region's potential in renewable resources like solar and wind energy. The need for investment, regulatory frameworks, and technology transfer was central to the conversation, as well as the creation of a carbon market

between Europe and MENA, which could provide significant economic benefits, including job creation.

Another critical point was the role of the private sector in driving the green transition. Reducing dependence on fossil fuels, whether in net energy-importing or -exporting countries, presents clear incentives for green energy transition. However, funding



remains a major barrier, and the region struggles to attract sufficient green investments, with MENA receiving lower funding compared to other regions.

The conversation also touched on the essential role of civil society in advocating for green transition, pushing for policy commitments, and bridging the gap between governments and the private sector. The absence of political will in some areas, especially regarding financial commitments to climate change agreements, was a notable concern. Additionally, the rising involvement of youth, women as well as other minorities and the need for greater knowledge-sharing between the Global North and South were emphasized, along with the call for stronger accountability in international climate agreements like the Paris Agreement.

There was a strong support for expanding the EU Green Deal to include the MENA region. However, participants stressed that this should not focus on mega-projects and large-scale investments instead the focus should be on smaller community-oriented projects that benefit local population and foster sustainable development.

Ultimately, it was agreed that a successful green transition in the MENA region requires a multi-faceted approach, including robust regulatory frameworks, investment in human capital, attracting green investments, and fostering political stability.

### **The Interactive Sessions**

The annual conference featured three interactive sessions designed to connect individuals, foster knowledge exchange, and promote mutual understanding.

The **first interactive session** took place in a group work format, focusing on four key thematic areas: gender equality, youth inclusion, EU-MENA relations, and green transition. Participants were grouped based on their areas of expertise. During the session, participants engaged in discussions about how to jointly support peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts, as well as what defines effective cooperation and dialogue between the EU and MENA region connected to the aforementioned thematic areas.



The **second interactive session** was conducted using mobile phones and the platform Mentimeter.com. Participants were invited to respond to a prompt on the meaning of soft power. Their responses sparked a broader discussion on how soft power contributes to mutual understanding and effective communication. Participants shared personal examples and experiences, offering insights into how soft power plays a key role in building relationships and fostering dialogue. Some participants defined soft power as a tool of influence, emphasizing the importance of leaders who actively listen to their communities. Others highlighted how the sharing of stories and creating meaningful exchanges can amplify soft power. Active listening was identified as a crucial aspect of leadership, as it allows leaders to connect with people, build trust, and facilitate more inclusive decision-making.

The **third interactive activity** was structured as a one-on-one dialogue, with participants pre-paired with peers from different countries, generations, or sectors. This initiative focused on mutual mentorship, fostering meaningful exchanges and networking opportunities. The goal was to share lessons learned across diverse experiences, building connections, and laying the groundwork for future collaborations.

According to the participants, the experience was highly interesting, especially in a) bridging the generational gaps and fostering a better understanding between different age groups. b) meeting people from the same conference for the first time proved helpful in expanding connections and networking. C) cross-regional dialogue is crucial, though it often involves defending personal narratives rather than fostering genuine conversation across sectors and generations.

*Main take aways and insights from the interactive sessions:*

**a) Gender Equality**

- **Invest in multilevel forums** specifically for women peacebuilders as a distinct sector, not merged with other sectors.
- **Protect women peacebuilders**, as they often operate in unsafe environments within conflict zones.
- **Involve women in peacebuilding** for their technical expertise and capacity to address root causes of conflict.
- **End the silo approach** by linking political participation with women, peace, and security issues.
- **Address intersectionality** by ensuring that diverse and marginalized voices are included in decision-making processes.
- **Critique the use of feminist terminology**, which can limit how ideas are addressed and decisions are made, advocating for a more inclusive approach.
- **Increase women's participation** across all sectors—economics, politics, society, and education—while challenging existing structures to ensure proper representation.
- **Promote the diversity of ideas**, fostering broader inclusion and women's contributions to knowledge production in peacebuilding.
- **Treat Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) as context-sensitive**, not a Western-imposed policy, recognizing the limitations of certain terminology and policies.
- **Support equal engagement of women**, particularly in knowledge production, as a key aspect of peacebuilding.



**b) Youth inclusion**

- **Advocacy and awareness:** Use platforms and skills to raise awareness through storytelling, public speaking, and highlighting the importance of peace operations and positive roles in peacebuilding.
- **Collaboration with peacebuilding organizations:** Support conflict resolution, facilitate dialogue, and engage communities by promoting mutual respect and finding common ground.

- **Education and empowerment:** Promote peacebuilding education, peer learning, and support or initiate projects that focus on conflict resolution, tolerance, and understanding among youth and communities.
- **Long-term peace:** Partner with NGOs focusing on education for peace, as they can be effective in fostering lasting peace.
- **Capacity building:** Organize workshops and seminars to teach peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and empower individuals to take action.
- **Visibility:** Use platforms to increase the visibility of peacebuilding efforts and support long-term peace initiatives

### *c) EU-MENA relations*

- **Support for peacebuilding and conflict resolution:** Focus on strategies to foster trust between governments and citizens, recognizing the dramatic changes in the MENA region and the need for reframed dialogue.
- **New Middle East strategies:** Engage and include youth in decision-making processes, with governments showing commitment to youth participation in policy and dialogue.
- **Independent media and honest brokers:** Foster independent media, challenge established gatekeepers, and employ neutral parties to mediate for long-term solutions.
- **Regionalization and localization:** Focus on local needs and diversity challenges, with a foundation in democracy and human rights, and define human rights conditionality in the current climate.
- **Role of NGOs and civil society:** Promote inclusivity in policymaking, support human rights, and advocate against cuts in funding to maintain essential initiatives.
- **Defining peace:** Start discussions based on democracy and human rights, consult civil society, and hold governments accountable to avoid future conflicts.
- **Cooperation within the region:** Enhance cooperation within MENA, including the Gulf countries, and discuss the role of religion in promoting dialogue and adaptation.
- **Culture's role:** Use culture to open honest conversations, challenge dominant narratives, and redefine concepts, moving beyond a Eurocentric approach.
- **Building trust and counteracting hatred:** Focus on practical steps to establish cultural dialogue, social cohesion, and common ground principles, creating programs like person-to-person initiatives to foster understanding.
- **Migration and refugee challenges:** Address migration issues with honest self-reflection, counter harmful narratives, and work towards a shared vision for a future based on strategic dialogue and cooperation.



### *Defining EU-MENA Cooperation and Dialogue:*

- **Common Ground:** Establish shared values and interests, defining terms for a mutually beneficial relationship.
- **Cooperation Mentality:** Approach dialogue with a focus on collaboration, not dependency, aiming to develop projects that benefit local communities.
- **Expansion of Green Deal:** Consider extending the Green Deal to the MENA region to foster cooperation and support sustainable development.

- **Clear Objectives:** Set clear, common goals and define what these objectives mean in the context of EU-MENA cooperation.

#### *d) Green transition*

- **Strengthen EU-MENA relations in the green transition:** enhance the role of the private sector in MENA; This can be achieved by fostering deeper collaboration between both regions, sharing knowledge and resources, and creating a conducive environment for private sector growth in sustainability. Key strategies include attracting EU investments, supporting green trade agreements, building capacity within MENA's private sector through training and innovation hubs, and improving access to financing.
- **Strengthen government-private sector collaboration** in the green transition to drive innovation, share resources, and align policies that support sustainable practices and net-zero goals.
- **Foster public-private partnerships** to scale up clean energy projects, green technologies, and sustainable infrastructure development.
- **Accountability and Equity:** Build spaces for accountability, ensuring that governments, companies, and individuals are held responsible for their actions. Promote equity by treating everyone equally.
- **Climate Transition Awareness:** Raise awareness about climate change as a multi-layered threat and support a just green transition. Address "greenwashing" in the private sector and enforce regulations to ensure accountability.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Support entrepreneurship, particularly in green sectors, to prevent conflict through economic opportunities.
- **Acknowledge Climate Change:** Recognize climate change as a major threat and prioritize policies that benefit local communities and territories, leading to reduced conflict and migration.
- **Consequences and Evaluation:** Evaluate the consequences of actions and their repetitive cycles to reach optimal solutions.

#### **Media Coverage**

- [The Swedish Institute for Dialogue concludes its third regional conference in Amman](#)
- [The Swedish Dialogue Institute for MENA concludes its third annual conference](#)
- Almamlaka TV