

Report on Meetings on EU-MENA relations

May 6th and 7th, 2024



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Report

On May 6th & 7th 2024, in connection to SIPRI's annual Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted two roundtable discussion sessions with participants from the MENA region, Sweden and other European countries. The idea behind the discussions was to create an occasion for experts from the MENA region visiting Stockholm to meet with people in Sweden working on the region and to engage with Swedish diplomats, other officials, think tanks etc. and for the Swedish audience to get a better understanding of developments in the MENA region.

The roundtable discussions were also an occasion to introduce the Dialogue Institute to visiting analysts, civil society representatives and other experts from the region and to share information on the Institute's work, including on cross regional, intercultural and intergenerational dialogues, WPS, YPS and climate change. In addition, the role of storytelling in changing narratives was discussed, as that had been the theme of the session, arranged by the Institute during the Forum.

Regional developments

The sessions discussed the current regional situation, including how the regional developments affect the relationship between the MENA region and Europe. It also addressed challenges facing the MENA region and how to foster dialogue and collaboration between Europe and the MENA region.

Participants from the MENA region underscored that the recent developments and the ongoing conflict in Gaza have had a significant effect on the region, security wise, politically, economically, and socially. In addition to the direct and indirect effects of the multiple and protracted conflicts in the region, they pointed to numerous other challenges, including the effects of climate change, water scarcity and lack of natural resources, in addition to high economic challenges such as poverty and high unemployment rates. Furthermore, the region's governance deficit remains a major obstacle to progress. In many countries the developments are negative with limited political freedoms, further shrinking civic space, gender inequalities, lack of youth inclusion, and lack of safe spaces for dialogues.

Relations between MENA and Europe

Participants from the region expressed concern over the growing trust gap between the region and Europe. They stated that the gap has widened due to a perceived lack of consistency in the application of international law. Several of the participants pointed to growing negative sentiments amongst people in region vis-à-vis Europe and argued that the trust that had been broken, would be hard to restore. This could risk having far-reaching consequences on the relations. The extent of the effects would depend on the duration of the conflict, its spread and intensity.

The meetings presented an occasion for Swedish diplomats, other officials, as well as analysts to present Swedish positions and to explain the fundamental shifts in European security since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Participants from the region and Europe alike pointed to growing need to understand each other's political contexts and perspectives, to avoid misunderstandings and to enhance relations. The need for *"safe spaces and honest conversations"* were seen as critical in moving forward in addressing the many critical issues facing two regions and beyond. They reminded that Europe and the MENA region are deeply interconnected, that developments in one region affect the other and that many of the issues of crucial importance for the future had to be addressed through dialogue and collaboration. Identifying mutual interests and entry points would be essential for both regions' security and prosperity.

Some of the participants had attended the Institute's session on storytelling during the Stockholm Forum, and commended the Institute for addressing this topic, as storytelling was seen as an important tool in increasing mutual understanding and enhancing human connections. The role of storytelling on environmental issues was specially highlighted.

Some recommendations emerged from the discussions:

- Support dialogues between the MENA region and Europe. Organizations such as the Dialogue Institute can play an important role as platforms for dialogues, enhancing mutual understanding and contributing to policy recommendations.
- Enhance efforts to support opportunities for trade and investment, as trade contributes not only to economic development but also to building connections.
- Identify common entry points to strengthen dialogues in areas of mutual interests, including on security, climate change and environment, trade, and development.
- Invest in art, culture and people-to-people contacts and in methods (such as storytelling) that can help in changing narratives, create stronger mutual understanding, developing empathy, and contributing to dialogue and in the extension to building peaceful societies.

During the fruitful discussions participants expressed their appreciation for the openness and frankness and underlined the need for more such conversations. *"Especially during challenging times safe spaces for honest exchanges is essential to share experiences, to learn from each other and to look for common solutions"*, as one participant put it.