

Roundtable dialogue on Intercultural Dialogue

Amman, October 8th and 9th 2023



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive summary

On October 8th and 9th, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted a roundtable dialogue meeting on intercultural dialogue. The participants came from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Sweden, and collectively gathered a broad expertise from academia, civil society, diplomacy, and international organisations.

The purpose of the meeting was to facilitate exchanges between senior experts from the region and Europe, with an aim to explore how moderate forces can be strengthened and how they can contribute to reducing tensions and to enriching ongoing efforts to enhance intercultural dialogue and mutual respect between the MENA region and Europe. The meeting was also intended to contribute concrete ideas and recommendations on how the Dialogue Institute can further work with these issues, in the short as well as long term.

The participants reflected on current main challenges, as well as on possibilities to enrich intercultural dialogues and exchanges, across the Mediterranean. In addition to being aware of the challenges, the group talked about exploring possible positive trends and to take stock of best practices. The importance of promoting enhanced understanding, mutual respect, and intercultural exchanges, within a variety of sectors, was highlighted.

Moreover, participants underscored the importance of continuing ongoing dialogues on a broad range of issues, where Sweden and the Dialogue Institute have built networks, credibility, and trust over time, e.g., on environment, climate change, intergenerational dialogue and on the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), and the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agendas. They also emphasised that dialogue between peoples and cultures is a process that requires time and sustained commitment, acknowledging that substantive change and mutual understanding cannot be achieved in a short time frame.

Detailed report

On the October 8th and 9th, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted a roundtable dialogue meeting on the topic of intercultural dialogue. With participants from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Sweden, collectively gathering a broad expertise from academia, civil society, diplomacy, and international organisations, the meeting aimed at exploring how to enrich ongoing efforts to strengthen intercultural dialogue and mutual respect between the MENA region and Europe.

The meeting was also intended to contribute to development of ideas on how the Dialogue Institute can work further with these issues, in the short as well as long term. The ambition was to come up with concrete proposals for meetings and other activities that could contribute to and complement this work.

Background

The discussions built on previous work in this field, especially in the past decades of Euro-Mediterranean dialogues. The early 21st century was marked by a series of global events that risked fuelling polarisation and causing a rift between societies in the Mediterranean region. To address this issue and build on the [Barcelona declaration](#), a High-Level Group on Intercultural Dialogue was formed (in 2003) by the then President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, to explore the root causes of polarisation between societies, taking into account the impact of conflicts in the Mediterranean and the broader context of economic globalisation, immigration, and issues of “identity”.

The report by the [High-Level Advisory Group](#) stressed the importance of education, skills development, and media in renewing cultural dialogue, as well as the centrality of civil society and investment in youth. A year later, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Euro-Med Member States agreed on setting up the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation (ALF), a network of youth and civil society organisations in the MENA region and Europe with the aim of promoting intercultural- and civil society dialogue in the face of growing mistrust and polarisation.

Sweden has since the 1990's been actively engaged in these dialogue processes, including as an active member of the Anna Lindh Foundation and its national networks. In 1998, the Swedish Government took the initiative to establish the Swedish Institute in Alexandria, now the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa. Since then, Sweden has also been engaging in a deepened dialogue with the Muslim world, notably through its Special envoy to the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation).

Highlights from the discussion

Lessons from the past

The starting point of the meeting was to explore previous decades of dialogue and to reflect on questions such as: *What can we learn from the work that was done two decades ago on the dialogue between people and cultures? What has changed? What is still relevant? What are the current main challenges? How can they be addressed? And which actors should be targeted for such dialogues?*

The long relationship between the MENA region and Europe was highlighted, pointing to historical ties and geographical proximity. The broad contacts between the regions are today demonstrated by economy and trade, technical collaborations, migration, human and cultural exchanges etc.

Dialogues between peoples and cultures across the Mediterranean was underscored, with particular emphasis on education, media, civil society, and youth engagement. It was, however, noted that the high hopes of the Barcelona Process (initiated in 1995) have not yet been met and that previously identified challenges still remain while new ones have appeared.

Regarding the current situation, participants pointed to a situation of “hyper complexity” of, on the one hand, increased interdependence, and interconnectivity, and on the other, a challenging security situation in many countries, as well as a tough economic and financial situation, combined with the effects of the pandemic and of climate change. In addition, the growing inequalities, within and between societies, have contributed to increased polarisation and the rise of populism. While new technologies have had a positive effect by connecting people, participants highlighted a parallel negative trend of social media contributing to growing mistrust vis-à-vis “the other”, as well as to the spread of misinformation and disinformation including through traditional media.

In stressing the central importance both of de-escalation of tensions that are building up and of finding ways forward for a constructive dialogue between the MENA region and Europe, a senior diplomat said: *“We are all embedded in power conflicts, and we are all feeling threatened. The old diplomacy of words is no longer enough, we need to collectively develop a better mutual respect and understanding, at all levels of society.”*

Perception of the other

The group expressed concern over what one participant described as *“increased polarisation and decreased understanding”*, underlining that this is a challenge within countries and regions, as well as between countries and regions. This trend was said to include intensified mistrust also between religious groups, at times manifesting itself as acts of disrespect or discrimination.

Participants expressed concern over negative narratives towards “the other”, arising amongst people in both regions. They commented that it is central for all parties to practice self-reflection and to look at and acknowledge one’s own known and unknown biases, mistakes etc. Participants argued for enhancing dialogues that include reflections on one’s own narrative, as well as that of others, putting empathy and authenticity at the centre of the dialogue.

In the discussions, the importance of breaking simplified stereotypes was stressed, as was the recognition of the diversity within the societies in the MENA region as well as in Europe. This concerned everything from ethnic, religious, and cultural identities to differences in e.g., economic and social structures. It was mentioned that the attitudes towards “the other” differs broadly based on economic and social background. Moreover, it was pointed out that perceptions of “the other” are often fuelled by misinformation or by disinformation campaigns on e.g., social media that actively aims to polarise public opinion. Participants highlighted that it is therefore important to work on media literacy and trainings, including on critical thinking and source criticism. They also mentioned that media can potentially play a positive role in informing and empowering society and that it, through good practices, can contribute to cross-cultural reporting and to shaping perceptions in the EuroMed region.

Participants from the region also pointed out that the perception of Europe in the MENA region had changed in a negative direction over the past years, because of perceived double-standards in Europe’s strong engagement on Ukraine in comparison to a diminishing engagement in the MENA region. Increasingly, a rule-based world order and international law were seen as concepts that the “West” applies selectively. While recognising that Russia’s illegal aggression of Ukraine has had a profound effect on European security, participants recalled that the effect of the war stretches beyond the borders of Europe. Broken trade routes, higher energy and food prices, lagging economic recovery and lower development spending were mentioned as some of the elements that had impacted the countries in the MENA region.

The negative narrative of Europe, it was stated, was further fuelled by Russia’s increased soft diplomacy work in the region, including through anti-European disinformation campaigns that had increased drastically in the region over the past few years.

The shrinking civic space and importance of inclusiveness

Pointing to a broader trend of democratic decline and rising authoritarianism which has been observed across the globe, several participants expressed concern over the shrinking civic space in the region. The past decade's developments of increased insecurity and conflicts, combined with economic hardship, have strengthened autocratic leaders, and led to a widespread perception that *"democracy did not deliver"*. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the situation and resulted in a diminished civic space for society at large and for the civil society in particular.

This shrinking civic space had made it more difficult – and for many also more dangerous – to engage in dialogues within countries, within the region and between the region and Europe. Several participants underlined the importance of awareness, sensitivity, and responsibility for this reality, when preparing and organising meetings. The participants also pointed to a lack of safe spaces for exchange in the region, as well as between the two regions. They stressed that building trust is key and said that the Dialogue Institute could play an important role in being such a safe convening space and facilitator.

The participants highlighted the importance of inclusiveness in dialogues, bringing together people from different walks of life, different backgrounds, gender, age groups etc. It is important to take the most vulnerable into consideration when talking about dialogue and make sure that women always are included. It was also stressed that engagement with faith-based organisations and religious actors is essential, or as one participant put it *"Engaging with religious establishments is not an option, it is a must – for better or for worse"*. The participants further underscored the importance of connecting interreligious- and intercultural dialogue, as well as including secular, civic, intellectual, and grass roots actors in dialogues with a religious or cultural focus.

One participant argued for developing a culture of dialogue, based on the "3D principles":

- Democratisation – dialogues that strive to be inclusive,
- Decentralisation – dialogues that "go beyond the privileged few" and "outside of the capitals".
- Diversification – dialogues on a diversity of topics of concern for people and society.

Another participant pointed to previous dialogue attempts often having focused on institutionalised, instead of humanised dialogues. He called for reimagining dialogues, recognising the centrality of "relation building" and "confidence building". The need to identify priority issues that require dialogue was also stressed.

Investment in young people and in education and culture

Repeatedly during the meeting participants emphasised the importance of investing in young people in the region. Due to the lack of socio-economic and political opportunities and the region, many young people are looking for job opportunities overseas and therefore the societies in the region risk brain drain, thereby losing their “thought elites”. Lack of inclusion, marginalisation, high unemployment, and growing social unrest also risk leading to radicalisation. Participants stressed the vital importance of giving young people hope and belief in the future and providing youth with tools and opportunities to be included at all levels of society – politically, economically, socially, and culturally.

Several participants underlined that education plays a key role in “*the investment in the future*” and stressed that it is crucial that this lifelong learning begins early, with consistent support from educational institutions. They recalled that education is also a gateway to understanding cultural diversity and different perspectives, emphasising the need for educational exchanges within and between the MENA region and Europe to encourage dialogue and deepen cultural understanding. Such people-to-people policies should be at the core of the relations between Europe and the MENA region, highlighting the importance of soft power. By integrating Mediterranean languages, comparative studies of religion and cultures, and interactive experiences into the curriculum, education becomes a holistic journey.

The participants also highlighted the central role of cultural exchanges. Art, literature, music, film, food, etc. were mentioned as important cultural bridges. Through cultural expressions, people develop better understanding of their own society, as well as that of others. These human encounters can help break stereotypes, help identify areas of commonalities, and help foster respect for pluralism and diversity. In connection with this, several participants stressed the role of the diaspora as potential actors for the transfer of values, knowledge, and understanding.

Ideas and ways forward

The discussion resulted in the following ideas and recommendations:

❖ Convening and facilitating role:

- There is a need for safe and conducive spaces for dialogue and the Dialogue Institute was encouraged to continue to play a convening and facilitating role.

- ❖ **Collaboration between different organisations:**
 - There are many organisations and initiatives, but sometimes a lack of synergies between them. The Institute was encouraged to continue to enhance the cooperation with other organisations, including the Anna Lindh Foundation, and to look for synergy and complementarity.

- ❖ **Engagement with diaspora:**
 - The diaspora in both Europe and the MENA region could be seen as potential bridge builders. The Institute was encouraged to explore possible initiatives within different fields, where diaspora communities can contribute to exchanges strengthening the contacts, connectivity, and knowledge between the regions.

- ❖ **Contributing to exchanges:**
 - There is a need to engage in trust-based initiatives on different levels, including exchanges between students, civil society, cultural actors, faith-based organisations, journalists, media, etc between Europe and MENA. The Institute was encouraged to explore possible initiatives and collaboration with others in enhancing such exchanges.

- ❖ **Promoting a broader participation within intercultural dialogue:**
 - To further the impact of intercultural dialogue, it is advisable to link intercultural and interreligious dialogue, as well as to engage secular and civic actors in such dialogue. An intercultural perspective should also be applied in all forms of dialogue, regardless of the subject matter.

- ❖ **Challenging negative narratives and developing best practices:**
 - There is a risk of negative narratives on all sides, contributing to a sense of hopelessness. At the same time, lots of good initiatives have been taken over the years and have yielded results. The Institute was encouraged to look at best practices and elaborate from there. It was also encouraged to look at the “power of storytelling” and to work on media literacy, together with other organisations (e.g. ALF).

- ❖ **Continuing ongoing dialogues and investing in long-term networks:**
 - There is a strong need in the MENA region and between the region and Europe for platforms for dialogue on a diverse range of topics. The Institute was encouraged to continue and deepen its work within already established areas, such as the intergenerational dialogue, climate change, and Women, Peace, and Security. A strong emphasis was also put on continuity over time to build trust and to be able to contribute to transformative developments.