

**Report from the Launch of the Mutual Mentorship Programme 2026 (MMP26)**  
*A platform to enhance EU-MENA Cooperation through cross-regional learning & exchange*

On March 4, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa (SDI) hosted an online session to launch the second edition of its Mutual Mentorship Programme (MMP) – *Between Europe and the MENA Regions and Across Generations*. The session, titled “*A Platform to Enhance EU–MENA Cooperation through Cross-Regional Learning and Exchange*,” brought together the programme’s 50 newly selected participants and focused on current dynamics in EU–MENA relations, including key opportunities and challenges shaping cooperation between the regions.

**Ann Måwe**, Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute, opened the session by highlighting the importance of people-to-people dialogue in the context of ongoing global and regional challenges. She encouraged participants to engage actively, build trust, and foster mutual understanding. Lead Program Officer, **Omran Khasawneh**, then introduced the concept of the program and provided participants with an overview of its structure, activities and proceedings (see attachment 1).

### **Interactive Introductions**

As part of the session, participants took part in an interactive introduction exercise in which each mentor introduced their paired counterpart (see attachment 2). The activity helped participants become familiar with one another’s backgrounds, experiences, and areas of expertise. Participants highlighted the MMP as an important platform for connecting individuals across regions, sectors, and generations while fostering dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding between Europe and the MENA region.

### **Panel Discussion**

A panel discussion titled “*EU–MENA in Focus: Opportunities and Challenges for Euro-Mediterranean and EU–GCC Cooperation*” further explored the session’s theme. Moderated by the Director, the panel brought together the following speakers:

- **Dr. Noha El-Mikawy**, Dean of the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (GAPP), American University in Cairo
- **Patrick Costello**, Senior Advisor, Kofi Annan Foundation
- **Dr. Ahmad Sager**, Vice President, Gulf Research Center
- **Salma Badda**, President, Mediterranean Youth Council and former MMP 2025 & **Fotini Zarogianni**, Research Officer, Anna Lindh Foundation and former MMP 2025

Each speaker shared insightful and thoughtful perspectives on the key challenges and opportunities shaping Euro-Mediterranean and EU–GCC relations. The discussion

explored ways to advance EU–MENA dialogue and deepen regional collaboration in the current geopolitical context.

### **Key Recommendations from the panel discussion**

While approaching the subject from different perspectives, all speakers highlighted EU–MENA interdependence and called for increased cooperation between the regions. Key recommendations included (but were not limited to):

- Recognize shared challenges and work jointly towards solutions. As both Europe and the MENA region face conflicts and instability in their respective neighborhoods, identifying common interests can help strengthen cooperation and collective responses.
- Strengthen trust through sustained dialogue and people-to-people exchanges across governments, civil society, youth, academia, and the private sector.
- Enhance participation of civil society, youth, professionals, and diaspora communities in policy and decision-making.
- Leverage diaspora networks as bridge-builders for cooperation and knowledge exchange.
- Address root causes of migration through long-term economic and social development, inclusion, and stability.
- Support the growing diplomatic and mediation role of GCC countries in regional and international affairs.
- Expand EU–GCC cooperation in key areas such as food security, water management, and artificial intelligence.
- Sustain EU engagement in the MENA region through trade, humanitarian support, and development assistance.

### **Open discussion**

Following the panel, participants engaged in an interactive exchange with the speakers, raising questions and sharing insights. The conversation provided an opportunity to explore factors shaping cooperation between Europe and the MENA region. Participants emphasized the importance of understanding the different historical experiences and political realities that influence perspectives across the two regions, noting that effective partnerships require sustained dialogue and mutual learning.

The session was further enriched by contributions from former MMP participants, who shared reflections on their experiences in the programme and highlighted the value of mentorship, peer exchange, and long-term professional networks in strengthening cross-regional connections. As Dr. Noha El-Mikawy noted, *“Today, we need to carve out space for hope and perseverance in order to find solutions amidst the darkness. This programme (MMP) does that.”*

### **Concluding Remarks**

Looking ahead, the next MMP online session will be held on April 26<sup>th</sup> with theme of AI for good and storytelling. In advance, the pairs are requested to hold their second bilateral meeting. At this next online session further information about the in-person meeting in May in Stockholm will be provided.