Inclusive Digital Age: How can AI advance youth and women's agency for peace and security in the MENA region?
A Summary Report of the AI Session

On 13 May 2025, as part of the 2025 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, the *Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa (SDI)* in collaboration with *CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation,* and the *Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs*, organised a panel discussion on AI and its role in peacebuilding, the session brought together practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to explore the role of artificial intelligence in conflict, peacebuilding, and youth and women's inclusion. The discussion included concrete cases from Lebanon, Gaza and Sudan, critical reflections, and participatory debate formats using live polling and audience engagement tools.

The panel discussion was moderated by **Johanna Poutanen**, Head, Youth in Peace making & Digital Peace-making*, CMI*, who was joined by four speakers (in alphabetical order):

- **Atta Khaled** (Palestine), Communication Officer at the *Social Development Forum*
- **Aurore Belfrage** (Sweden), Tech entrepreneur, geopolitical advisor and investor
- **Karma Ekmekji** (Lebanon), Senior Policy Fellow at *the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affair*s at the *American University in Beirut*
- **Reem Abbas** (Sudan), Researcher and writer

The panel was opened by Johanna Poutanen who underscored AI as a double-edged sword and emphasised that while it holds great promise for inclusion, monitoring, and prediction in peacebuilding, its current applications are disproportionately used for warfare. This statement was latter echoed by Atta Khaled. Several speakers, including Khaled and Reem Abbas, highlighted the use of AI in Gaza and Sudan for

surveillance, disinformation, and target identification — raising serious ethical concerns.

To further continue the session, the speakers highlighted examples which were shared on AI tools amplifying women's voices, increasing accessibility, and supporting local ownership. However, almost all speakers stressed that inclusion must be built into the design phase, especially to mitigate bias and disinformation.

Aurore Belfrage highlighted that investors underscored that capital flows shape which AI tools are developed and for what purposes. Without ethical frameworks and inclusive design, she added: "AI risks further concentrating power in the hands of a few".

Participants and panellists alike emphasised the lack of legal regulation, weak digital risk management, and the absence of institutional safeguards, particularly in fragile contexts. Concerns were raised about the absence of inclusive participation in AI governance.

The panellists went on to highlight how women are driven out of digital spaces due to harassment and lack of platform protection, this sentiment was also reflected by a female participant of the audience, as well as another who emphasised that AI has been utilised in harming women. Practical examples include how Sudan demonstrated misinformation and deepfakes are weaponised against women activists, this statement has been brought up by one of the participants and confirmed by Abbas.

Abbas further went on to share cases where low bandwidth, sanctions, and lack of devices limited equitable access to digital tools, exacerbating exclusion in conflict zones like Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon. Highlighting that EDGE (also known as 2.75G), rather than 4G or 5G is the norm in Sudan.

It was highlighted by Khaled that local organisation in Gaza managed to use AI to disseminate accurate information about the humanitarian situation, even amid sporadic internet connectivity. This approach

increased transparency and helped ensure that factual and reliable updates reached the international community.

Karma Ekmekji cautioned that "Algorithms trained on yesterday's inequalities will not build tomorrow's peace", emphasising that ethical considerations must guide efforts to influence capital flows and ensure AI development supports inclusive and peaceful outcomes. She also called for the promotion of "diplopreneurship"—fostering collaboration between diplomacy, innovation, and the private sector to address peacebuilding challenges in creative and impactful ways. Throughout the session, youth participants rejected the assumption that digital culture is preferred over face-to-face engagement. They stressed the need for meaningful inclusion in digital consultations, which are often disconnected from actual decision-making.

Finally, Moderator Johanna Poutanen held an interactive activity in which all participants and attendees alike voted on a number of related statements using green and red cards; this was followed by answering questions on an online platform named *Pol.is* which is used in digitising and analysing democratic process and builds a data analysis of all the material and questions answered.

General conclusions that could be drawn from this discussion were:

- **Invest in ethical, inclusive design**: Include youth and women in the design, development, and governance of AI tools.

- **Bridge the power gap**: Engage funders, tech companies, and governments to redirect AI development towards peace-oriented outcomes.

- **Build digital literacy and protection frameworks**: Equip vulnerable communities with tools to navigate and secure their digital presence.

- **Promote "*diplopreneurship*"**: Encourage collaboration between diplomacy, innovation, and private sector actors to address peacebuilding challenges creatively.

- **Focus on local realities**: Design AI tools with local context in mind, including language access, offline usability, and cultural sensitivity.

The session concluded with strong engagement from both panellists and audience, with consensus around the urgency of redirecting AI tools from militarised uses toward inclusive peacebuilding and development.