

SDI Advisory Committee Meeting Report

30 June 2026

Introduction

On June 30th, 2026, SDI convened its first Advisory Committee meeting (AdCom) with members of the mandate period 2026-2028. A total of 14 members out of 15 possible attended. The purpose of the meeting was partly to introduce the AdCom members to SDI and to each other, and partly to discuss SDI's strategic direction in the coming year, including SDI's annual dialogue forum in November. This report summarizes key takeaways from the discussions as well as the envisioned next steps for the AdCom.

Priority Topics for Advancing EU-MENA Relations

In the first round of discussions, AdCom members introduced themselves and reflected on what in their view were priority topics when it came to advancing EU-MENA relations. Overall, the reflections centered on the need to strengthen EU-MENA cooperation in response to a rapidly evolving regional landscape triggered by a chain of regional developments in the past few years, culminating in the war between the US, Israel and Iran this spring. Members highlighted the potential emergence of a new regional order driven by shifting alliances, the growing role of the Gulf states, and uncertainty surrounding regional security. Several members noted that this presented an opportunity to deepen dialogue on future security arrangements, and regional integration, while expanding EU engagement with Gulf partners. Reflections also pointed to the need for continued attention to Gulf-Levant relations, Iran-Arab dynamics and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Syria was identified as another priority, with participants stressing the importance of supporting an inclusive reconstruction process, transitional justice, and long-term stability without compromising on human rights.

Other topics that were highlighted included the green transition where members highlighted opportunities for joint investment in renewable energy and economic diversification, while recognizing the strategic importance of energy security. Digital transformation and the ethical use of artificial intelligence were also identified as relevant topics, alongside the issue of youth unemployment in the MENA-region.

Furthermore, members emphasised that stronger EU-MENA relations should be grounded in human security and societal engagement. Building trust between governments and societies, supporting youth and civil society participation, strengthening people-to-people and diaspora links, and promoting intercultural dialogue were all identified as priorities. Members also recommended an integrated approach that connects these various different issues within future EU-MENA dialogue.

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Feedback on SDI's Program Priorities & Activities

In groups, members discussed ideas for SDI program priorities and activities. Discussions emphasized that SDI should build on its strength as a convening platform while strengthening the link between dialogue, knowledge production, and policy impact. Rather than organizing dialogue as an end, SDI was encouraged to ensure that its activities produce tangible outputs. There was also support for expanding partnerships with organizations that have complementary expertise to increase policy relevance, avoid duplication, and strengthen implementation.

Several thematic priorities emerged for SDI's future programming, shedding further light on issues that had been mentioned by members in their introductions. Discussions highlighted regional connectivity, trade corridors, and economic integration; the emergence of new regional security frameworks; Europe's evolving role as a political and security actor in the MENA region; Syria's reconstruction and governance; AI governance and digital transformation; climate change and sustainable development; transitional justice; and evolving relations between Iran, the Gulf, Israel, and Lebanon. Across these themes, members stressed the importance of integrating cross-cutting priorities such as women's and youth inclusion. AdCom members also expressed their willingness to play a more active role by supporting outreach, identifying partners, and serving as speakers, moderators, and facilitators.

Recommendations for SDI's Fifth Annual Dialogue Forum in November 2026

In group discussions, AdCom members recommended making SDI's Annual Dialogue Forum more policy-oriented and action-focused by increasing the participation of decision-makers and linking discussions to concrete policy outcomes.

In terms of format, it was encouraged that SDI build on successful interactive elements from previous conferences, including one-to-one meetings and small-group discussions. Members highlighted the value of these smaller dialogue formats, noting that it created space for deeper engagement among participants. They recommended reintroducing similar formats to encourage more meaningful dialogue beyond traditional panel discussions. Moreover, suggestions included showcasing outcomes from the Mutual Mentorship Programme (MMP) for a more results-based focus.

In terms of content, the topics raised by AdCom members included relations between Iran and Arab states following recent regional escalations, Israeli elections and their impact on the region, the future of Syria, Iran's impact on Lebanon, climate change, inclusive participation, and Europe's future role in the MENA region as a security actor.

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Linked to this, one of the groups proposed a session on EU–MENA relations in light of the expected launch of new EU-Middle East strategy.

Furthermore, groups proposed organising a session on the role of AI in post-conflict recovery and reconstruction with a possible focus on Syria and Lebanon, as well as to address the issues of disarmament, transitional justice, and the political economy of reconstruction in the Arab region. Cultural dialogue was also proposed as an important dimension, potentially through an exhibition, film montage, gallery collaboration, or other artistic formats exploring healing, trauma, and lived experiences. Several members also suggested that resilience could serve as an overarching theme, providing a framework to connect economic, political, social, and environmental dimensions.

Next Steps for the AdCom

In her closing remarks, Director Ann Måwe thanked the members for their contributions and noted that the recommendations would feed into SDI's planning in the months ahead. She recalled that the AdCom usually meets twice a year, once online in the spring and once in the autumn in connection with SDI's Annual Forum that is scheduled to take place November 17 this year, followed by an AdCom meeting on November 18. Members were encouraged to follow SDI's updates on social media and to use the AdCom chat group as a space for communication and exchange. SDI also noted that it may reach out to members throughout the year to contribute to activities based on their areas of expertise.