



Report from Iftar and Panel Discussion on the Role of Faith in Peacebuilding and Development

On March 19th, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa organised a panel discussion on the role of faith in peacebuilding and development which was held in its residence. The discussion sought to explore how faith traditions, across different backgrounds, can contribute to bridge divides, and foster resilience in societies facing complex challenges. The panel was followed by an iftar gathering to bring together a wider group of partners, religious leaders, as well as peace and development practitioners for continued conversations on the topic.

The panel discussion was moderated by Ann Måwe, Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute, who was joined by five panellists:

Dr. Amer Al Hafi (Royal Institute for Religious Studies).

Dr. Anna Hjälml (Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem).

Eng. Marwan Al Faouri (Global Forum for Moderation).

Dr. Renee Hattar (Royal Institute for Religious Studies).

Dr. Amer Bani Amer (Al Hayat Center, RASED).

The panel was opened by Director Måwe who underscored the importance of meeting across different faiths to discuss its potentials, and its challenges, especially in times of increasing polarisation and conflict levels in both Europe and the MENA-region.

Kicking off the panel, each speaker shared their reflections on what faith means to them, all elaborating on their personal relationship to faith, displaying the topics' diversity and depth. A round of question was then initiated where each panellist elaborated on their reflections.

Dr. Al Hafi emphasized the importance of openness to other religions. He argued that each religion is part of a collective heritage and urged us to study religion widely and objectively, even if it is a difficult task.

Dr. Hjälms described how students from different religions study theology jointly in Sweden, underscoring the importance of critical thinking and countering singular world views.

Eng. Al Faouri stated that religion is a system of values that guides humanity toward goodness, identity, and belonging while promoting justice, peace, and cultural understanding.

Dr. Hattar put emphasis towards the potential of religious music to diffuse lines of differences, arguing that music forces us to listen attentively and can have a healing effect. Music was also appointed as a way to reach young people to bridge differences and create understanding more effectively.

Dr. Bani Amer highlighted the potential of religion to serve as a moral framework to build just and cohesive societies. However, he also observed that religion is being misused to deepen divisions, especially online, in ways which hinders inclusive participation, particularly for women.

The Director then opened the floor for a Q&A. The questions posed prompted for an open discussion on topics including western political discourse, violent extremism, and the interplay between faith-based frameworks and governance systems. From the panel discussion and Q&A, a few key challenges and recommendation include (but are not limited to):

Key Challenges

- The use of religion to reinforce political agendas or deepen social divisions.
- The lack of cohesion and shared understanding within diverse faith traditions.
- Religion being instrumentalized as a tool for exclusion or control.
- The lack of spaces for youth-led dialogue within religious frameworks.

Key recommendations

- Separate politics from religion to prevent misuse and preserve the integrity of both.
- Empower institutions and organizations to cultivate inclusive and cohesive communities.
- Utilize music as a universal medium to foster dialogue, active listening, and understanding beyond religious and cultural boundaries.

- Provide training for preachers to ensure messages of tolerance, justice, and inclusion, and educate the public on religious values of peace and coexistence.
- Encourage collaboration between civil society actors and religious leaders to address societal issues and nurture rooted solutions.
- Counter divisive narratives and actively combat hate speech, especially on social media platforms.
- Create open and safe spaces for youth to engage in dialogue across different religious backgrounds.
- Foster sustained dialogue on faith's role in society and its interaction with other spheres.

Conclusion

The event showcased diverse perspectives on the role of faith in peacebuilding, making clear that the topic held vast potentials for further discussion and reflection.