

Report:

The Fourth Annual Interactive Conference of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa (SDI)

Shaping Shared Futures: Inclusive Peace and Sustainable Development between Europe and the MENA-region

26-27 November 2025

Introduction

On 26–27 November 2025, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa (SDI) convened its fourth annual interactive conference bringing together some 150 participants from 35 countries in Europe and the MENA-region. Participants included experts, representatives of civil society and the private sector, civil servants and academia.

The conference provided space for structured dialogues on issues of mutual concern for the regions, as well as a confidential space to think creatively about options moving forward.

Through plenary and parallel sessions, participants discussed six themes: EU–MENA relations in light of the EU’s Mediterranean Pact that was launched the same week of the conference; the political transition in Syria, a year after the collapse of the Assad-regime; the green transition in light of the 2025 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30); humanitarian diplomacy in the Middle East; AI and peacebuilding; and opportunities for deepened intercultural dialogue between the regions. This report summarises the key points and recommendations that emerged from each one of the six thematic sessions.

Plenary Session on EU-MENA relations: A reflection on security and institutional developments amidst geopolitical turmoil

The plenary session marked the 30th anniversary of the Barcelona Process and the launch of the EU’s Mediterranean Pact that took place the same week as the conference. Panellists used the opportunity to assess current frameworks for cooperation between Europe and the MENA-region and expectations from the new pact. Panellists addressed the trust gap between Europe and the MENA-region, and what some described as Europe’s inconsistent application of international law and human rights in the MENA-region.

These developments risked undermining Europe’s credibility as a partner. It was further mentioned that the EU risked diminishing its normative influence if it were to retreat from its commitment to international law. Several speakers emphasised that Europe must retain strategic agency by leveraging its own values, frameworks, and partnerships, and not allow its role in the region to be shaped by the agendas of other states. Supporting cultural activities, youth engagement, and civil society, was highlighted as entry points for building trust and cooperation on a people-to-people level. Furthermore, discussions

addressed the need to integrate the Gulf states into institutional frameworks, noting that regional realities necessitated the inclusion of all regional stakeholders.

Recommendations for policy-making in Europe and the MENA-region:

- *Operationalise the EU Pact for the Mediterranean through consultations with regional and local counterparts, instead of through “projectisation” and short-term project approaches.*
- *Integrate Gulf states into institutional Euro-Mediterranean frameworks.*
- *Reaffirm international law and accountability as non-negotiable foundations and maintain a commitment to international law and principled engagement with the region.*
- *Shift from a passive donor role to a strategic security architect by leveraging its institutional and normative strengths.*
- *Invest in people-to-people approaches and protect cultural and artistic spaces.*
- *Strengthen regional institutions and societal resilience through long-term investment in institutions, civil society, and inclusive governance mechanisms.*
- *Diplomatically engage with and build upon existing initiatives, such as the Saudi–French efforts for a two-state solution in Palestine and Israel, and explore other diplomatic initiatives that serve the long-term interests of both regions.*

Plenary session on Peacebuilding in the Age of AI and Digital Transformation

The panel addressed the impact of digital technologies on peacebuilding, acknowledging AI’s potential to enhance early warning systems, data analysis, and coordination among peacebuilding and humanitarian actors. Panellists, however, also raised serious concerns about the potential harm of digital tools, including risks of bias, exclusion, mis- and disinformation.

It was mentioned that AI systems often reflected existing power asymmetries, which for example meant the underrepresentation of Arabic-language data. Responsible AI governance required inclusive, cross-regional cooperation and ethical frameworks that prioritised accountability, transparency, and human rights. Instead of exporting ready-made technological solutions internationally. Panellists advocated mutual learning between Europe and the MENA region to ensure a more sustainable approach.

Recommendations for policy-making in Europe and the MENA-region:

- *Promote responsible and ethical AI governance through EU–MENA cooperation grounded in human rights, transparency, and accountability.*
- *Address bias and representation gaps by investing in inclusive, context-sensitive data ecosystems, including Arabic-language datasets.*

- *Strengthen digital literacy and public awareness to counter misinformation and enable critical engagement with AI-driven content.*
- *Adopt a balanced regulatory approach that enables responsible innovation while safeguarding against harm and power concentration.*
- *Strengthen public–private–academic collaboration to advance AI for peace, transparency, and inclusive economic development.*
- *Ensure AI complements human agency, supporting decision-making and dialogue rather than replacing human judgement.*
- *Establish EU–MENA platforms for co-creation and pilot initiatives on responsible AI in peacebuilding and humanitarian contexts.*
- *Promote human-centred AI narratives that foster intercultural understanding.*

Session on the Prospects for an Inclusive Transition in Syria

Discussions on Syria examined the conditions for an inclusive transition process one year after the fall of the Assad regime. The opening panel noted cautious openings in the country, including greater space for freedom of expression, while also highlighting concerns about the centralisation of power. Panellists addressed the transitional government's insufficient efforts to include Syrian society in decision-making processes thus far, as well as what was perceived as the government's focus on securing international legitimacy at the expense of domestic political consolidation.

Sanctions relief was praised but also described as an important instrument to maintain leverage for positive change. In discussions, participants spoke about the need for decentralisation, transparent institutions, and inclusive governance. Participants noted that economic recovery alone could not substitute for political reforms. Large-scale, externally driven investment projects risked exacerbating inequalities if they failed to generate new employment opportunities and strengthen small and medium-sized local enterprises.

Furthermore, European engagement was seen as important in supporting political pluralism, independent media, civil society, and accountability mechanisms. The discussion also underscored the importance of the international community contributing to the institutionalisation of new governmental structures, rather than an excessive focus on President Ahmad al-Sharaa.

Recommendations for policy-making in Europe and the MENA-region:

- *Support Syrian-led efforts to develop an inclusive social contract reflecting the country's political, ethnic, and religious diversity.*
- *Prioritise inclusive governance and decentralisation that strengthens local participation, including by meeting with institutions and figures beyond the presidential palace and the MFA.*
- *Strengthen civil society and independent media as pillars of accountability, pluralism, and public trust.*

- *Avoid premature political legitimisation of the interim government, maintaining principled engagement conditioned on inclusivity, rule of law, and civic space.*
- *Link economic recovery to political inclusion, prioritising jobs, skills development, land protection, and SMEs.*
- *Ensure foreign investment benefits local communities and avoids imposed economic models.*
- *Promote accountability and the rule of law alongside political engagement.*
- *Encourage long-term, institution-focused European engagement, leveraging Europe's strengths in political inclusion, human rights, and institution-building.*

Session on Humanitarian Diplomacy in the MENA-Region & The Role of States and Non-State Actors

The session reflected on the changing nature of humanitarian work in conflicts and the shrinking humanitarian operating space in cases like Gaza, Sudan, and Syria. The opening panel highlighted the growing role of states in facilitating humanitarian access, alongside traditional humanitarian non-state actors. Qatar was cited as one such example.

State engagement could improve access and resource mobilisation, but also raised questions about neutrality, independence, and the politicisation of aid. Realities on the ground in the Middle East illustrated how humanitarian diplomacy required dialogue with all actors, including difficult counterparts. In discussions with participants, the importance of upholding respect for international humanitarian law (IHL) was emphasised.

Participants emphasised that the challenges did not lie in the absence of legal frameworks, but in establishing mechanisms to ensure compliance and accountability. The need to protect humanitarian personnel, monitor violations, and strengthen knowledge of IHL among both state and non-state actors was a recurring theme in the discussion.

Recommendations for policy-making in Europe and the MENA-region:

- *Reaffirm international humanitarian law (IHL) as the non-negotiable foundation of humanitarian diplomacy, with a focus on enforcement and accountability.*
- *Strengthen protection of humanitarian workers, particularly in high-risk and conflict-affected settings.*
- *Clarify the role of states in humanitarian diplomacy, ensuring alignment with neutrality, impartiality, and independence.*
- *Safeguard humanitarian action from political instrumentalisation and negotiation leverage.*
- *Recognise the operational realities of humanitarian access, including engagement with all relevant actors to reach affected populations.*

- *Strengthen accountability and monitoring of IHL violations through systematic documentation and reporting mechanisms.*
- *Invest in IHL knowledge and capacity-building across state actors, armed groups, humanitarian organisations, and the public.*
- *Address credibility gaps and perceived double standards to restore trust in humanitarian norms and international law.*

Session on Comparative Transitions: Different Starting Points, Common Challenges for a Greener Future

The session took place shortly after the conclusion of COP30 and focused on how Europe and the MENA region could advance sustainability despite differing political, economic, and social starting points. The opening panel agreed that technological innovation alone was insufficient, and that the green transition needed to be locally anchored and adapted to existing conditions. Panelists highlighted examples of locally designed initiatives in the MENA region that had proven successful.

Regarding the role of governments, the importance of political consistency, clear regulatory frameworks, and long-term visions was emphasized to attract green investments and build public trust. In discussions with participants, opportunities for cooperation between Europe and the MENA region to advance the green transition were highlighted. Europe's technological experience could be combined with the MENA region's newly acquired expertise in renewable energy. There were also opportunities to strengthen cooperation among governments, the private sector, civil society, and research institutions. At the same time, several participants warned of the risks of dependency between Europe and the MENA region and emphasized the need to diversify supply chains and strengthen regional production capacities within the MENA region.

Recommendations for policy-making in Europe and the MENA-region:

- *Ground green transitions in social realities, ensuring policies respond to local needs related to water, livelihoods, and social acceptance.*
- *Prioritise locally designed, community-driven initiatives that build trust and demonstrate tangible benefits.*
- *Ensure policy consistency and regulatory stability to attract sustainable investment and long-term confidence.*
- *Strengthen EU–MENA cooperation on the green transition, leveraging Europe's expertise and the region's renewable potential and workforce.*
- *Avoid new dependencies in green supply chains by diversifying sources and investing in regional production and recycling capacities.*
- *Align economic incentives with sustainability goals, treating sustainability as a competitive advantage while addressing greenwashing risks.*
- *Strengthen public–private and cross-sector collaboration across government, business, civil society, academia, and communities.*

- *Invest in education, skills, and knowledge-sharing to enable inclusive participation and close capacity gaps.*
- *Promote decentralised decision-making, ensuring local voices shape national and cross-border energy and climate policies.*

Session on Intercultural Dialogue through Culture, Heritage, and Creative Expression

The session on intercultural dialogue highlighted the role of cultural institutions, museums, film, and community heritage in fostering empathy and social cohesion. While museums were sometimes perceived as elitist or inaccessible, they were described as uniquely placed arenas for cultural exchange and storytelling.

Participants also discussed the need to facilitate the return of cultural artefacts to their countries of origin. Cinema was also highlighted as a powerful medium for dialogue, as it bypassed formal political discourse and allowed audiences to engage with complex realities. The need for improved representation within the film industry was further emphasized, alongside calls for increased film collaboration and co-production across the EU–MENA region.

The panel also commended acts of cultural solidarity, including artistic engagement that gave voice to victims of torture and explores universal human experiences such as displacement, belonging, loss, and the departure and arrival of happiness.

Recommendations for policy-making in Europe and the MENA-region:

- *Strengthen cultural spaces as platforms for dialogue, ensuring inclusive access and community-oriented programming.*
- *Advance the authenticity of cultural institutions, including via critical reflection of narratives and restitution where appropriate.*
- *Invest in film as a tool for intercultural understanding.*
- *Improve representation and cross-regional collaboration in the EU–MENA film sector through co-productions and joint funding.*
- *Protect artistic expression and cultural solidarity, particularly initiatives amplifying marginalized and displaced voices.*
- *Prioritise people-to-people approaches that build trust through sustained local engagement.*

Conclusions and Next Steps

Taken together, the discussions and recommendations from the conference underscore the need for a renewed, principled, and people-centred approach to EU–MENA relations at a time of profound geopolitical, technological, and societal transformation. Across all thematic sessions, participants emphasised that sustainable cooperation cannot be built through short-term, technocratic, or externally imposed solutions, but requires long-term investment in inclusive institutions, international law, accountability, and local agency.

Whether addressing political transitions, humanitarian diplomacy, the green transition, or the governance of emerging technologies, trust-building, legitimacy, and credibility were identified as fundamentals for effective engagement. The conference reaffirmed the value of dialogue as both a method and an outcome, highlighting the importance of sustained, cross-regional partnerships that combine strategic interests with normative commitments.

Moving forward, translating these insights into coherent, inclusive, and action-oriented policies will be essential to advancing stability, resilience, and prosperity across Europe and the MENA region. The Institute hopes that these takeaways will help inform and boost the work of the conference participants across their respective regions and sectors; it will also continue to work on incorporating these takeaways in its programming for the coming year.