

Report from Advisory Committee Meeting

Amman, 21-23 November 2023



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive summary

The annual in-person meeting of the Advisory Committee of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa was held in Amman on November 21st to 23rd.

The Committee's role is to advise the Institute in its activities and the purpose of this meeting was to assess past activities and to share recommendations for the upcoming year, considering effective ways to navigate the current situation and the developments in the region. The discussions centred around challenges and opportunities for dialogue in the context of the critical developments in the region. Topics included exploring incentives for dialogue; fostering dialogue between Europe and the MENA region; and strategizing on how to establish the groundwork for more tangible initiatives when the political circumstances become more favourable.

The Advisory Committee stressed the crucial role of dialogue initiatives in promoting open communication and bridge-building and highlighted the significant challenges posed by recent developments in the region, emphasizing the importance of a nuanced approach to dialogue efforts. Concerns were expressed about the impact of recent events on humanitarian and security issues and worries were raised about a growing trust-gap in EU-MENA relations. Safeguarding moderate voices through engagement was highlighted, as well as the need of adapting dialogue strategies to address emerging issues, promote regional stability, and contribute to sustainable peace.

Detailed report

From November 21 to 23, the annual in-person meeting of the Advisory Committee of the Swedish Dialogue Institute was held in Amman. The primary purpose of the meeting was to discuss the work and activities the Institute conducted during the past year and gather reflections and recommendations for future priorities. The meeting also constituted an opportunity for the Institute to gather valuable insights from the Advisory Committee on how to navigate dialogue initiatives considering the situation and the critical developments in the MENA region.

Most of the members of the Advisory Committee part took in the two-day meeting in Amman, as well as in the round table conference that took place in connection to the visit of the Advisory Committee. During their visit to Amman, the Committee also paid a visit to [Tiraz centre](#).

In connection to the meeting, the chair of the Advisory Committee, Dr. Omar Razzaz, who participated via link in one of the sessions, announced that he wished to step down from his position.



Key take aways from the meeting

Recent development and prospects for dialogue

The Advisory Committee underscored that recent developments in the region have introduced significant challenges for dialogue work and that the situation demands a nuanced approach to fostering understanding and collaboration. The participants argued that increased tensions have displayed the crucial importance of dialogue initiatives, emphasizing the need for platforms that encourage open communication and bridge-building. The necessity of adapting strategies to address emerging issues, promote regional stability, and contribute to sustainable peace was underscored.

Members of the Committee expressed a deep concern over the developments in the region and the critical impact it has on all levels – political, security, as well humanitarian, economic and social levels. Some participants pointed to a decline in the adherence to principles, especially in terms of human rights and international law. The discussion extended to encompass the entire region and participants emphasized the need to consider the aftermath of the crisis and the changing dynamics in the region, predicting risks for increased polarization and extremism.

Participants stressed the importance of learning from history, maintaining hope, and not succumbing to divisive narratives. The need of engagement with moderate voices within dialogue work was underscored to preserve and maintain relationships. The role of polarization as a political strategy was acknowledged, leading to potential repressive measures by governments in the region.

Increased rifts and fear of shrinking civic spaces

Concerns were raised about the fragile state of the relationship between the MENA-region and Europe and some participants expressed worries about a potential further deterioration in the relationship between the two regions. Participants stressed that the increased polarization considering the current situation has fuelled existing divides between and within societies and regions. Continued efforts to promote mutual understanding and to build bridges between and within regions was underscored as fundamental to avoid further divisions.

Criticism was directed by some participants at the UN for failures in various conflicts, including Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Palestine, prompting some to question the possibility of UN reform. An intergenerational rift, including on the issue of Palestine and Israel, was noted as a concerning factor.

Some participants noted with worry the increased fear of speaking up, including in societies in Europe, and expressed concerns about the potential damage to democracy and social peace. Universities were stated to play a crucial role in facilitating political discussions, but concerns were raised that the preservations of free speech within these institutions have diminished.

Reflections and recommendations on the Institute's work

The Advisory Committee expressed satisfaction upon witnessing the tangible outcomes of the Dialogue Institute's endeavours during 2023. Appreciating the progress achieved, they commended the Institute for its work. The Committee members acknowledged the fruitful results as a testament to the Institute's commitments to foster dialogue in across the MENA region, between the MENA region and Europe regions, as well as across its different thematic areas of work.

In particular, the Advisory Committee achievements on the Institute's work on intergenerational dialogue and commended the Institute for its significant strides in promoting meaningful dialogue and enhanced understanding between different generations. The Committee praised the [Connecting Generations - a guidance note on Intergenerational Dialogue](#) underscored the potential that the guidance note can have as a methodology tool, inspiring to bridging generational gaps and fostering a collaborative environment.

The advisory committee provided a series of strategic recommendations for the Dialogue Institute's future initiatives:

- The Committee emphasised that the Institute should continue to serve as a facilitator, underscoring its role as a convening space. Further collaboration with other institutions was encouraged, including civil society organisations, international organisations and think tanks.
- The Committee underlined the importance of fostering open, honest, and frank dialogues and to aim in these dialogues to give room to explore alternative approaches.
- In response to the developments in the MENA region since the autumn of 2023, the Committee recommended a shift towards a more political focus. While social and sustainable issues remained important, a strategy for security and politics, with an emphasis on regional security, was advised.
- The Committee encouraged the identification of possible hotspots and potential ways for the Institute to contribute to addressing operational issues. Transformation of analyses into actionable initiatives was emphasized, with caution regarding potential minefields and a focus on utilizing human factors to build peace.

- Recommendations for upcoming activities included prioritizing work on cross-regional dialogues between the MENA region and Europe, including intercultural dialogue and engagement with different diaspora groups.
- In addition, the Institute was encouraged to continue work on established thematic areas such as gender quality and intergenerational dialogue, including continued work on the agendas for Women, Peace, and Security and on Youth, Peace, and Security.
- The Committee commended the Institute for its collaborative work with other organizations and recommended further developing this, including through engagement and partnership in important global forums such as the Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development.
- The Institute was advised to continue its efforts to include diverse voices in its activities and to look at possibilities to enhance involvement of private sector actors including entrepreneurs, cultural actors, political youth wings, etc.
- On communication, the Committee members gave some concrete feedback, including recommendations to make the Institute's website more user-friendly.
- The members of the Committee expressed their continued interest in taking part and supporting the Institute's activities (meetings, conferences etc.). Some of the members proposed to hold more regular online meetings around different themes.

