

Report from the 8th online meeting with the WPS Informal Network

“Pathways to Inclusive Peacebuilding: Women’s Role in a Reimagined Syria”

16th January, 2025



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Summary

On January 16th, the [Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa](#) hosted the 8th online meeting of the WPS informal network titled “Pathways to Inclusive Peacebuilding: Women’s Role in a Reimagined Syria”, focusing on the Syrian-led inclusive political transition and the inclusion of women and minorities for justice and long-term stability. The meeting was attended by over 60 participants.

The Institute’s Director, Ann Måwe, moderated the discussion. She emphasized Sweden’s long-term commitment to humanitarian and development efforts in Syria, with a particular focus on gender equality and women’s meaningful participation. She also highlighted Sweden’s election as President of the UN Women Executive Board in 2025, noting this as another opportunity to support women’s empowerment, especially this year marking the 25th anniversary of the WPS agenda and the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Three prominent speakers shared unique perspectives to kick off the discussions:

- *Ms. Abir Haj Ibrahim, co-founder of the Mobaderoon Movement and a Syrian peace activist known for her work in promoting non-violence and peacebuilding in the Middle East.*
- *Ms. Mahwash Shekhy, founding member of Şawîşka (Shawishka), a women’s rights organization in Northeast Syria, and member of the Syrian Women’s Political Movement.*
- *Ms. Kelly Petillo, Programme Manager for Middle East and North Africa at the European Council on Foreign Relations.*

Abir Haj Ibrahim focused on local reconciliation efforts in Syria, highlighting the critical role of women in grassroots peacebuilding, overcoming cultural barriers, and addressing local grievances despite ongoing security threats.

Mahwash Shekhy discussed the contributions of Syrian women, especially Kurdish women, to the revolution, the challenges they face in peacebuilding, and the role of international actors in supporting the participation of women and minorities. She also addressed concerns from other regional powers regarding developments in northeastern Syria.

Kelly Petillo provided the EU’s perspective, noting Europe’s longstanding support for women in Syria, particularly their participation in the Geneva process. She observed a decline in this support under the Astana process and emphasized the need for clear demands on women’s rights with the new interim government.

Key Highlights from the Discussion:

- The urgent need to lift sanctions, rebuild infrastructure, and address the fate of prisoners.
- The importance of decentralizing support across Syria, beyond Damascus.
- Ensuring women’s continued participation in decision-making spaces post-revolution.
- The importance of considerations of gender, religion, and efforts to influence religious practices and interpretations from within to promote greater inclusivity and rights.

Opening remarks and main highlights of the discussion

The Institute's Director, *Ann Måwe*, inaugurated the meeting by welcoming participants to the first session of 2025. She emphasized the significance of the year ahead, marking key anniversaries related to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, including the 25th anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1325 and the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration. Director Ann outlined the Institute's role in fostering dialogue between the MENA region and Europe, especially on peace, security, and inclusive participation. She introduced the theme of the meeting, highlighting the importance of women's inclusion in Syria's political transition and the international community's hopes for a peaceful, Syrian-led, reconciliation process. With three distinguished speakers - Director Ann set the stage for a rich discussion on the challenges and opportunities for women in shaping Syria's future.

Reflecting on her return to Syria after 12 years, *Abir*, expressed both joy for being home and traveling between cities as well as concerns for the uncertainty of the future of Syria. Abir recounted her work in conflict prevention and reconciliation, where she and other women led local peace committees to reduce tensions and foster dialogue between divided communities. She also underscored the critical role of women in creating inclusive dialogue platforms and addressing local grievances, which are vital for national reconciliation. Despite the challenges women face, including cultural barriers and security risks, Abir advocated for the inclusion of women in both formal and informal peace processes, stressing their unique ability to rebuild trust and mediate conflicts at the community level. However, she expressed concern over the potential exclusion of women in future peacebuilding phases and the uncertain space for their participation in the political transition.

From her side, *Mahwash* discussed the pivotal role of women in the Syrian revolution and their ongoing struggle for rights and participation in building a new Syria. She highlighted the harsh realities women have faced over the past decade, including violence, displacement, and economic hardship, yet underscored how Syrian women have remained a cornerstone of resilience and resistance. Mahwash pointed to the significant involvement of women in drafting policy papers, advocating for gender-sensitive constitutional amendments, and developing national action plans for post-conflict recovery. Specifically, in northeastern Syria (Rojava), women have been at the forefront of creating a new social contract, with their active participation in the protection and governance processes. Mahwash called for international support, particularly in terms of economic aid and the lifting of sanctions, to ensure that Syria's rebuilding process is inclusive, with women playing a central role in shaping the political, economic, and social future.

Kelly covered Europe's evolving role in supporting women's inclusion in Syria's political transition. She outlined two phases of European engagement: the first, during the early years of the conflict, when Europe was actively involved in supporting women's participation through funding, diplomatic initiatives, and platforms like the Geneva process; and the second, after the shift to the Astana process. Kelly emphasized that the EU has been vocal about the need for women's participation in the political transition, but also acknowledged challenges, including Europe's weakened credibility in the region

and the risk of competing geopolitical interests undermining the progress. Kelly stressed the importance of having concrete demands for women's rights, clear benchmarks, and inclusive participation which is essential for a sustainable transition in Syria.

Overall situation in Syria with a focus on women

"Any transitional phase takes time, but only through dialogue, inclusivity of various groups, and reconciliation can the mission be accomplished" a participant stated

With a mix of happiness, hope, fear, and uncertainty about the future, participants shared and reflected on the numerous challenges Syria is facing, including poverty, inadequate healthcare, poor infrastructure, and lack of essential services. They also highlighted human rights issues, such as prisoners being declared dead, issues of sexual violence, honor killings, and the treatment of women and children, especially in the context of released women prisoners. Participants emphasized that change cannot happen overnight, and patience is essential to sustaining the achievements.

According to participants, the collapse of the Assad regime has had a profound impact specifically on feminist women's rights organizations both in exile and within Syria, disrupting their operations, governance, communication, and financial systems. Participants indicated that Syria is currently navigating a critical phase, where internal efforts are essential. Also, international support must be tailored to the country's specific needs. A particular concern was the inclusion of women in the political process and the need to create spaces for them to address their fears.

Participants also shared various experiences, exchanging lessons learned from a region full with conflicts and struggles where reconciliation emerged as a critical issue, especially between different religious groups, while stressing that without prioritizing reconciliation, efforts to rebuild would fail. Inclusive participation in the process was highlighted as vital indicating that the centralization of efforts in Damascus has marginalized other regions, limiting opportunities for broader engagement and support.

Recalling the recent visit of the German Minister of Foreign Affairs to Syria, where a handshake between her and the Syria's de facto leader did not take place opened up the discussion between participants on the implications of this gesture and mentioned the intersection of religion and gender in the region highlighting the role of religious leaders in advancing gender equality. They underscored respecting women's rights, and respecting international human rights treaties that serves as a guiding framework for the work.

Syrian women-led organizations

Discussions touched on various aspects of women's participation in Syria's political process, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict and international support. Participants also highlighted the vital role of women-led organizations, which have been instrumental in reducing violence and supporting communities through conflict zones to more stable areas.

The absence of collaborative spaces for women's organizations to connect, exchange experiences, and learn from each other was emphasized. Building trust and encouraging dialogue were identified as essential, yet challenging, particularly due to the long-standing history of conflict and repression that has hindered cooperation.

Participants mentioned that the international community's desire for quick solutions clashes with the reality of the situation and women's organizations feel that their needs and desired outcomes are not adequately consulted or considered.

Participants emphasized that support for Syrian people and civil society should not be based on political conditions connected to the current interim government and called for recognition of Syria's diverse communities. They also pointed out the importance of acknowledging the diversity within Syria, such as the Kurdish population in the northeast.

European Support to Syria and women led-organizations

"Why am I here today? Why am I taking part in this session? Because the Swedish government, through SIDA and other international and European organizations, play a crucial role in supporting women-led civil society organizations. It has a long-standing commitment to advancing gender equality and ensuring women's participation." a participant stated

European support, especially from Sweden and the European Commission, was underscored as vital for strengthening women-led civil society organizations by offering core funding, conflict-sensitive strategies, and promoting ownership of women-led initiatives. However, participants stressed the need for the continued support to ensure that Syrian women's contributions are acknowledged at the political level and that they are empowered to monitor and influence their communities.

Participants emphasized the urgency of a critical and unconditional strategy from European countries to support Syria's reconstruction and development. They argued that in times of emergency, such as rebuilding Syria's infrastructure, support should not be conditional. For instance, the rebuilding of hospitals, schools, and street lighting in rural areas should not be held up by political conditions. The focus should be on providing practical support for security and basic services, while political conditions related to governance and inclusion should be handled separately.

The discussion concluded with a call for greater international support, particularly from the EU and US, to empower civil society organizations (CSOs) in Syria's peacebuilding efforts. Lifting sanctions was also seen as essential to facilitating Syria's transition. Participants emphasized the importance of achieving an inclusive and sustainable peace, with a strong focus on ensuring women's rights and political participation are central to the transition process.

Main key take aways:

- **Patience and long-term commitment:** It's acknowledged that rebuilding trust, systems, and dialogue will take time. There was a focus on being patient and understanding that change cannot happen immediately after decades of repression.
- **Engagement with new government entities:** Efforts are being made to engage in large discussions in Damascus, particularly with the new or interim government entities. This could provide more space for women's organizations to contribute to the post-conflict reconstruction and justice processes.
- **Respect, learning, and collaboration:** There is a need to respect each other's experiences, learn from one another, and create spaces for mutual exchange and collaboration between women's organizations in both Syria and exile.
- **Building trust and dialogue:** Emphasizing the importance of fostering trust and creating spaces for dialogue among women's organizations to work together effectively and support one another in the transition process.

In summary, the challenges faced by women's organizations in Syria and exile are significant, but with patience, engagement, respect, and a commitment to long-term collaboration and justice, solutions are possible. The focus is on building trust, creating space for dialogue, and ensuring that women's voices are included in the future rebuilding of Syria. The support of the international community for women and women-led organizations is essential throughout the political transition phase.