

Report from Roundtable meeting on the future of EU's Southern Neighbourhood Policy

February 15th, 2024



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive summary

On February 15th, 2024, The Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted a roundtable meeting on the future of the Agenda for the Mediterranean - the EU's Southern Neighbourhood Policy. The aim of the meeting was to contribute to ongoing thinking on the future of union's Southern Neighbourhood policy.

The discussions covered the current state of the MENA region and its relationship with Europe, highlighting the essential role of the Southern Neighbourhood Policy and the interconnectedness between the two regions.

Analysts, practitioners and senior officials from Europe and the MENA region participated, sharing firsthand expertise, reflections, and recommendations. In the reevaluation of the relationships, framework, and policies, they stressed the importance of ensuring prosperity of both regions.

A comprehensive approach was suggested, emphasizing inclusivity and diversity. Engagement in dialogue and listening to the voices of the region were highlighted as crucial. Priorities further included fostering economic partnerships, addressing migration issues, and drawing on insights from successful projects.

Background

The Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa is a governmental agency with a mandate to serve as a platform for contacts and dialogue between Sweden and the countries of Europe on the one hand, and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa on the other. In its activities, the Dialogue Institute addresses issues that are important for the political, economic and social development of the MENA region, or for relations between the countries, or that help increase mutual understanding in the areas of culture and religion.

One of the key areas of work for the Institute is to enhance dialogues between Europe and the Middle East and North Africa region, in particular the EuroMediterranean Partnership. In the past years a number of meetings on this theme have been held, including during the Swedish EU Presidency in 2023.

Ahead of the elections to the European Parliament and the appointment of a new EU Commission in 2024, EuroMeSCo – a network of research centres and think tanks in the Euro-Mediterranean area – is conducting a study on EU's Southern Neighbourhood Policy. A group of senior analysts are preparing policy proposals, options and recommendations for the EU institutions. This includes policy scenarios and consequences that these scenarios could entail.

As a way of contributing to the EuroMeSCo study and building on earlier meetings held by the Dialogue Institute, the meeting organized on February 15th intended to gather firsthand expertise, reflections, and recommendations, from analysts, practitioners and senior officials from Europe and the MENA region.

The aim of the meeting was to contribute to ongoing discussions on the future of the EU's Southern Neighbourhood Policy considering the geopolitical developments and a mutual wish to enhance the relationship between Europe and its Southern Neighbourhood.

Current state of the MENA region and its relationship with Europe

The meeting started with reflections on the current state of the neighbourhood partnership and the relationship between the two regions. The Southern Neighbourhood Policy was emphasized as crucial for both EU and the MENA region and there was a recognition that one of the regions cannot thrive without the wellbeing of the other. The two regions are connected through historical ties and geographic positions, through a variety of cultural connections, academic and entrepreneurial exchanges, as well as through substantial diaspora groups.

While participants observed that the partnership has encountered various challenges over the past decades, they underlined the essential importance of overcoming these challenges and of rethinking the partnership to see how it could be strengthened.

Several participants argued that the MENA-region was still being defined by its “post-uprising era”, contending with numerous socio-economic and security challenges, including high unemployment, social grievances, and a new generation of people excluded from policymaking. One participant argued that the uprisings that shook the region in 2010-2011 should be seen as the start of a process rather than an event, marked by different narratives and perspectives.

Regionally, the number of conflicts in the MENA-region has increased, paralleled by an expanding presence of non-state actors who are assuming increasingly significant roles. Participants argued that the emergence of the new actors, combined with the increased influence of global powers such as Russia and China, and recent energy discoveries, creates a new dynamic in the region and adds complexity to the geopolitical landscape. The Sahel region and the concept of "neighbour of my neighbour" pose additional security and migration challenges. In addition, participants both from the MENA region and from Europe, argued that the developments post October 7th mean that "business as usual" is no longer applicable. They also warned that radicalization is expected to be an increased issue in the coming decades.

The current state of EU-MENA relations was seen as a turning point, and the participants stressed that the Southern Neighbourhood Policy required both re-evaluation and re-imagination. The relationship between the two regions was acknowledged as asymmetrical, with concerns about perceptions of imposition leading to a loss of ownership. For the new generation in the MENA, Europe was said to have lost some of its attraction. Young people are increasingly shifting their focus from Europe towards pursuing opportunities in the Gulf.

Several participants argued that there is a feeling among many people in the MENA-region that Europe has turned its back to the region and no longer see it as priority partner for peace and stability. This would however be a mistake, as the two regions are intimately interconnected and developments in one region will have spillover effects on the other. It was emphasised that the Southern Neighbourhood, in parallel to its engagement with Europe, actively is seeking to diversify its partnerships. The sense of being less prioritised by the EU, has led to a growing tendency to consider China as the new partner.

Challenges for the Southern Neighbourhood policy

The participants highlighted several challenges regarding the future trajectory of the Southern Neighbourhood Policy. It was argued that the impact of COVID-19 exposed flaws in the concept of globalization. Businesses are now concerned not only with reducing costs but also with the availability of resources and trade routes.

Participants underscored that the Ukraine war has presented a significant shift in global politics and complicated geopolitical dynamics. Most participants also argued that the war in Gaza has been a turning point that has resulted in a crisis of trust. Participants from the MENA region (and some from Europe) compared European governments'

reactions to the two conflict situations as “strikingly different” and accused Europe and the western world of double standards, arguing that ideologies, principles, and values are no longer evenly and stringently applicable.

The undermining of trust between the regions was feared to contribute to risks for radicalisation and extremism. Radicalisation was identified as a multifaceted issue that potentially could emerge in both traditional and new forms. The funding challenges for UNWRA was seen as a further potential factor contributing to a possible escalation of societal tensions and a source of radicalisation.

Additional challenges identified for the future of the partnership encompass trade, energy, migration, and issues related to illegal border activities such as drug and arms trafficking. Challenges related to investment security, bureaucracy, and corruption were acknowledged as hindrances to trade and foreign investment in the region.

Ways forward to enhance the Southern Neighbourhood Policy

Considering the challenges outlined above, the participants underlined that the only way forward would be increased efforts to rebuild trust, through strengthened and enhanced dialogue and collaboration. They stressed that the Southern Neighbourhood Policy is crucial for the prosperity of both the EU and the MENA region but that there is a strong need to revisit the frameworks and policies.

The participants identified the following several key points and recommendations going forward:

- **Reassessment and re-evaluation:** The participants argued that a comprehensive approach is needed, and advocated for new thinking, reassessment, and re-evaluation of the framework. The path forward should involve developing better understanding of interests, possibilities, and limitations. It was seen as necessary to adopt an inclusive approach and foster “honest mutual understanding”. New regional and local dimensions that have emerged since the latest reevaluation should be considered, while incorporating adaptability and diversity. Participants suggested avoiding a Eurocentric approach and engaging in candid conversations with member states. Participants proposed upholding the core principles linked to well-being, cooperation, security, and prosperity, while drawing insights from successful projects. Utilising complementary organisations such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), were recommended.
- **Dialogue and Inclusivity:** The participants highlighted that the political dialogue between the regions must be democratised and address practical matters, such as applicability and diversity. Engagement in track II diplomacy was suggested, underlining the importance of informal conversations. Several participants brought up the importance of engaging in dialogue and listening to the diverse voices within the region, extending beyond government officials and those in positions of authority to include the broader population and civil society actors.

Some participants also underlined that individuals on the ground often possess a nuanced understanding of the distinctive challenges confronting their communities, which may be overlooked in other perspectives. Political consultations should hence be conducted with both governmental entities and the general population to tackle regional issues in a realistic and sustainable way. Engaging the youth and teenagers was seen as crucial, as well as including the diaspora in policy consultations. The participants further stressed the need for deepened regional and inter-regional exchanges.

- **Economic Partnerships and Trade:** The importance of forward-looking economic policies was stressed. Suggestions included making trade and investment between the regions easier and addressing issues that hinder economic development such as corruption, bureaucracy, and poor infrastructure. Broader inter-regional cooperation was encouraged, and the participants further advocated for making trade and investment more inclusive, to look beyond capitals and include small and medium size enterprises and youth-led startups. Continued and deepened cooperating on issues related to energy, maritime, climate, water, and food sectors between Europe and the MENA region was encouraged. Economic partnerships were seen as incentives for political dialogue and participants emphasized the importance of a long-term vision and using both human and financial resources effectively.
- **Migration Policies:** Acknowledging the inevitability of migration, the participants stressed the importance of making it more sustainable through better legal migration policies and multilateral cooperation. The need to combat poverty, work on sustainable social and economic development, and address issues such as governance, employment, education, and inequalities, as well as environment and climate, was highlighted as main areas to address the root causes of migration.
- **Geographical extension:** Some participants argued that there is a need of extending the horizon when speaking about Euro-Med relations and engage more also with the “neighbours of the neighbours”. As example they pointed to a need to take the impact of the Sahel on North Africa into consideration, including in areas such as migration, economy, and climate. Furthermore, the significant role that the Gulf region and Turkey is playing in the region, needs to be recognised.
- **Strategic communication:** Throughout the meeting the participants stressed the importance of communication and tonality. They underlined that to rebuild trust key elements should be a nuanced tone and long-term visionary communication, along with understanding social dynamics and co-creating solutions. The EU's potential soft power (including higher education) and diplomacy were underscored and was highlighted as something to protect further develop. Some participants suggested that the EU should develop a communication strategy, focusing on what the EU is good at instead of attempting to replicate competitors' strategies.