

Meeting Report:

# Second meeting of the Women, Peace and Security Working Group in the Arab States/MENA Region

Geneva, Switzerland  
September-October 2024



MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL  
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This report provides a summary of the key findings of the second meeting of the WPS Working Group in the Arab States/MENA Region. The views expressed in this publication emanate from the meeting discussions and do not necessarily represent the views of the convening organizations, including the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

4	Executive Summary
6	Overview of the Second Meeting of the WPS Working Group
9	Identified Key Challenges and Priorities for the WPS Agenda in the Region
10	Outreach and Identification of Key Stakeholders for the White Policy paper
11	External Meetings and Engagement with Geneva-based Stakeholders
11	Summary of Key Meeting Findings and Action Points

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The second meeting of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Working Group for the Arab States was held from September 30<sup>th</sup> to October 2<sup>nd</sup> at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offices in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Working Group, composed of WPS experts—including peacebuilders, policy specialists, researchers, and private sector representatives active in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in conflict-affected countries in the Arab States/MENA region—is led by the WPS Regional Hub at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) and the UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States.

Furthermore, the Working Group greatly benefits from the collaboration of regional and global partners, including the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa (SDI), the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung MENA (FES), the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), Inclusive Peace, and the Embassy of Switzerland to Lebanon and Syria.

The three-day meeting was part of an ongoing series of dialogue sessions focusing on the development of a “WPS White Policy Paper”, which aims to

provide a regional narrative for WPS and actionable recommendations for enhancing the implementation of the agenda in the Region. Furthermore, the white paper’s objective is to integrate regional perspectives from the Arab States into global discussions on women peace and security throughout the 25th anniversary year of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2025. While the nature of the paper will remain dynamic in order to ensure its relevance to the changing contexts in the region, the paper will eventually be widely disseminated with the international community and other regional, national and global stakeholders, throughout the 25th anniversary year of the agenda.

During the meeting, group members from Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, were joined by new members from Sudan to continue discussions on the priorities and challenges for the WPS agenda in the region and to revisit the first draft of the White Policy Paper, developed at [the WPS working group’s inaugural meeting](#) in Amman in June 2024. The group also explored gaps in the implementation of the agenda, proposed targeted and actionable recommendations, and discussed plans for the planned dissemination of the White Paper to the broader international community.



In addition to the closed door dialogue sessions of the working group, the group also participated in sessions and side events of the United Nations Human Rights Council's (HRC) 57<sup>th</sup> annual session and held external meetings with key Geneva-based stakeholders, including representatives from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the

Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). The group and conveners also attended a reception together with member state representatives hosted by the Swedish Permanent Representation in Geneva.

# OVERVIEW OF THE SECOND MEETING OF THE WPS WORKING GROUP



The second meeting of the WPS Working Group in the Arab States —part of an ongoing series— centered around further refining the draft ‘White Policy Paper,’ which was initially developed during the group’s inaugural meeting in Amman in June 2024. The aim of the paper is to provide a coherent regional narrative on WPS along with actionable recommendations for enhancing the implementation of the WPS agenda in the Region. Furthermore, the white paper’s objective is to integrate regional perspectives from the Arab States into global discussions on women, peace and security throughout the 25th anniversary year of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2025. Throughout the three-day meeting, WPS practitioners from Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria discussed priorities, challenges and gaps in the implementation of the WPS agenda in the region, proposed actionable recommendations to address these, and brainstormed on outreach strategies for the white policy paper. The group also engaged in a variety of external meetings,

including with key Geneva-based UN stakeholders and attended sessions and side events of the 57th Annual Session of the UN Human Rights Council. The group also had the opportunity to directly engage with Member State representatives through a reception hosted by the Swedish Permanent Representation in Geneva.

Key issues arising from the group discussions centered around the themes of ensuring enhanced protection and protection mechanisms for women actors, peacebuilders and human rights defenders as an enabler for their meaningful participation in processes; enhancing inclusivity and localization in the implementation of the WPS agenda; and the overall role and contributions of women in conflict and ceasefire negotiations, both at the national and local level given the worsening regional security landscape. Further details on the identified priorities, challenges, gaps and recommendations are provided in the sections below.

# IDENTIFIED KEY CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE WPS AGENDA IN THE REGION



## Revisiting Gaps in and Local Adaptation for the WPS Agenda in the Region

As part of the meeting discussions, the group revisited the region-specific gaps in the WPS agenda that were identified during the previous meeting in Amman. Discussions centered particularly on women's roles in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and post-conflict recovery.

A common challenge identified from many conflict-affected contexts in the region relates to the terminology of the WPS Agenda. Several members of the working group highlighted the need for localization of the agenda and for adapting WPS language and terminology to fit each country's local contexts in order to achieve the agenda's meaningful implementation at the local level. The issuance of fatwas (religious rulings) prohibiting the use of the word "gender" in the region, was raised as an example of a challenge for the advancement of not only the WPS agenda but overall of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. The discussions highlighted that such circumstances require

careful adaptation strategies to build trust at both the local and national levels, particularly between WPS practitioners and religious leaders.

## Effective Communication and Increased Inclusivity in WPS Efforts

Throughout the discussions, the working group members also emphasized the importance of having WPS experts who know how to communicate the agenda effectively. This is necessary to avoid associating the WPS agenda with other normative frameworks that may encounter greater resistance to their implementation, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Although the WPS agenda and CEDAW are normatively connected, strong emphasis on this connection could be counterproductive in certain contexts.

A shared priority among group members was the need to build alliances with men, especially male leaders, to achieve a broader impact on WPS work and to avoid operating in silos. Group members highlighted the importance of using more inclusive language, for



example, in invitations to WPS related meetings and events, noting that if an event title includes the word “women”, a significant number of men may feel less inclined to participate. In contrast, framings in line with “inclusive peace” could encourage wider involvement.

Additionally, group members noted that young people, particularly young women, are often underrepresented in WPS discussions, despite playing crucial roles in peace efforts across the region. As such, prioritizing youth empowerment through leadership opportunities and raising awareness of young women’s rights were identified as essential for ensuring their full participation in the peacebuilding process.

### [Networking and Equitable Resource Distribution](#)

Another key priority raised by group members was the importance of building networks with NGOs and civil society organizations to enhance the sharing of resources and to ensure a more equitable distribution of funds and capacity-building training opportunities. This would help prevent the centralization of resources and expertise within specific organizations or individuals and enhance the localization of the agenda’s implementation.

### [Protection a Key Priority in the Region](#)

The protection aspect of the WPS agenda was also stressed throughout the meeting days. Several group members reiterated the need for the agenda to address the situation of women living under occupation. Additionally, calls were made for the

WPS agenda to consider the impact of militarization and arms proliferation on women’s protection and participation. Participants also emphasized the importance of providing psychosocial support for WPS and human rights actors, as well as for victims of armed conflicts. Finally, the group highlighted the necessity of establishing databases to document sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict related sexual violence, inflicted on various members of society, including women, as a prerequisite for future transitional justice and targeted protection efforts.

### [Needs of Women Refugees and IDPs](#)

Throughout the discussions, working group members highlighted that women refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) face unique vulnerabilities, including gender-based violence and exclusion from most decision-making processes due to their status. To address this gap, group members emphasized that the WPS agenda must ensure that the experiences and voices of refugee and IDP women are not sidelined and that the implementation of the agenda in the region is tailored and responsive to their needs. For example, the implementation of the Protection -pillar of the WPS agenda needs to better incorporate the protection needs of women refugees and IDPs, for instance by ensuring the provision of psychosocial support services. Furthermore, participants highlighted that the displacement of educated women, particularly professionals, due to conflict is often overlooked. This displacement has long-term implications for post-conflict recovery efforts, as these skilled individuals are forced into exile.



# OUTREACH AND IDENTIFICATION OF **OF KEY** **STAKEHOLDERS FOR THE WHITE** **POLICY PAPER**



As part of the meeting, the Working Group also identified key national, regional and global stakeholders for the dissemination of the white policy paper and for the coordination of the group's outreach in the lead up to the 25th anniversary of the WPS Agenda, in 2025. The main objective of the working group and the paper is to establish a coherent regional narrative for WPS in the Arab States/MENA region and to ensure this narrative is integrated into and influences global policy spaces and decision-making on peace and security, and WPS specifically. To achieve this, the group discussed the need for outreach and engagement with a variety of stakeholders, including regional organizations, such as the League of Arab States, embassies of countries

currently serving on or set to join the UN Security Council, regional think tanks, business chambers, religious leaders, key government ministries in each country, and other Working Groups on WPS from the Global South.

By engaging these diverse stakeholders, the group aims to build strategic alliances that amplify regional perspectives, as detailed in the White Policy Paper, on the implementation of the WPS agenda. This collaborative effort aims to not only contribute to global discussions on (women) peace and security but also help ensure that voices and needs from the region shape the future direction of the WPS agenda.

# EXTERNAL MEETINGS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH GENEVA-BASED STAKEHOLDERS



To advance the objective of the WPS Working Group in amplifying women's voices from the region within the international community, a reception for the group was organized by the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa together with the Swedish Permanent Representation in Geneva and hosted by the Swedish Permanent Representative, Ambassador Magnus Hellgren. The reception provided a unique opportunity for the working group members to engage

with a variety of stakeholders, such as representatives of Member States, including those from countries currently serving on, or soon to join, the UN Security Council, as well as representatives of UN Agencies and Offices, including UN Women's Deputy Executive Director, Ms. Kirsi Madi, and representatives of Geneva-based peace and security think tanks. The reception allowed the working group to draw international attention to the development of the white paper,



discuss its initial findings and recommendations, and engage in initial advocacy for the integration of the group's efforts into global WPS discussions.

While in Geneva, the WPS Working Group also had the opportunity to attend sessions and side events of the 57th Session of the Human Rights Council, focusing on the Council's annual discussion on the integration of a gender perspective throughout the work of the Council and that of its mechanisms, as well as side events on conflict-related human rights violations and reproductive violence. These engagements allowed

the group to engage in global knowledge sharing on these issues, share their experiences from the region and connect with key human rights stakeholders. Moreover, during the meeting days the working group also had the opportunity to engage and advocate with the United Nations Geneva-based agencies and offices by holding external meetings with representatives from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), and the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR).

# SUMMARY OF KEY MEETING FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section summarizes the key meeting findings and some of the recommendations that were put forward by the group members during the WPS Working Group's second meeting in Geneva. A full list of actionable recommendations emanating from the group will be detailed in the white policy paper, which is currently being developed by the group.

## [I. WPS language and terminology needs to be adapted to local contexts in the region](#)

- There is a need to adapt tailored WPS terminology in Arabic that reflects the local, cultural, and social realities of each country. This includes creating a regional WPS dictionary to ensure terminology resonates with local communities to increase acceptance and effectiveness.
- WPS actors in the region should enhance collaboration with local religious and political leaders to ensure cultural sensitivities in the implementation of the WPS agenda and to build trust at both the local and national levels.

## [II. Women's meaningful participation, including in the security sector needs to be ensured](#)

- More national, regional and international advocacy is needed to support the meaningful inclusion of women in national security sectors and UN peacekeeping missions in the region, in order to leverage their critical role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.
- WPS actors in the region should focus on building alliances with political and religious leaders, as well as other national decision-makers, to lower barriers to women's inclusion and leadership in security-related roles.
- National, regional and international actors need to ensure women's participation in ceasefire negotiations in the region by implementing diverse negotiation modalities and committing early to include women in peace processes rather than limiting their involvement to specific "women issues".

- The inclusion of women refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) in decision-making processes needs to be strengthened across the region.

## [III. Communication on the WPS agenda needs to be strengthened and mainstreamed](#)

- WPS actors need to be provided with trainings on how to effectively communicate on the WPS agenda, to navigate potentially challenging associations between the agenda and other normative gender equality frameworks, such as CEDAW, while still highlighting their normative connections.
- WPS Actors in the region should seek to foster alliances with men and male leaders to broaden support and to avoid isolation of WPS efforts. The use of inclusive language can help attract wider involvement, including from men.

## [IV. Regional coalitions and networks on WPS need to be established and supported](#)

- More Regional coalitions on WPS need to be established to encourage joint advocacy efforts in the Region and to promote regional collaboration and solidarity and to ensure that local voices influence regional and global WPS discussions.
- International and regional actors engaged in advancing the WPS agenda should support the formation of networks of NGOs and civil society organizations to ensure equitable access to resources and capacity-building opportunities, and to prevent the centralization of funds and expertise in a few organizations.

## [V. Women's protection, particularly in conflict contexts in the region, needs to be ensured](#)

- The WPS Agenda needs to address the protection needs of women living under occupation and strengthen the linkages between the impacts of militarization and arms proliferation and women's security and participation.



- Gender-based violence clusters at the local level should be created to provide coordinated responses and support for survivors, ensuring targeted interventions for those most affected by conflict and violence.

- WPS Frameworks need to address Gender-based violence more explicitly and the participation of women affected by sexual violence needs to be included in peace and security dialogues.

- International, regional and national actors engaged in the implementation of the agenda in the region need to focus efforts on developing short-, medium-, and long-term protection strategies that address both physical and psychological safety concerns for women peace actors, ensuring their participation in conflict prevention and resolution.

- The protection needs of women refugees and IDPs need to be met, including by providing psychosocial support to address their unique challenges.

#### [VI. More long-term resources for WPS initiatives are needed to ensure sustainability of results](#)

- Donors and funders of the WPS agenda need to enhance the longevity of WPS projects and funding

through the provision of multi-year sustained financial and organizational support for WPS initiatives, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

- WPS actors in the region need to be supported to secure partnerships with donors and other relevant stakeholders to maintain momentum and avoid disruption of essential programs.

- Collaboration between organizations working on WPS needs to be enhanced and fostered to reduce competition for funding and promote innovation in WPS strategies. Furthermore, donors and funders should support culturally sensitive approaches to the implementation of WPS the agenda in the region.

#### [VII. Databases for documentation and accountability need to be established in the region](#)

- Comprehensive databases for documenting incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, and conflict related sexual violence need to be created, to serve as a foundation for future transitional justice and accountability efforts. Furthermore, these databases need to be accessible and robust enough to inform legal processes and advocacy for the protection and rights of women, as well as other marginalized groups.

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