No Sustainable Peace Without Us: Local Perspectives on Peacebuilding in Middle East and North Africa[1]

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GPPAC

A Network of People
Building Peace

[1] This paper presents the key findings from the MENAPPAC Regional Meeting and sheds the light on the perspectives of local peacebuilders on the ways to strengthen the implementation of sustaining peace in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The trajectory of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) does not respect political or territorial boundaries, as the majority of security challenges are cross-border in nature. Even the slightest increase in violence and humanitarian instability exerts pressure on and leads to further insecurity in the entire region. Therefore, building strong capacities to implement Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace (*leadership, accountability, capacity*) and pursuing coherent and coordinated peacebuilding approaches (*operational and policy coherence*) are of utmost importance in the region.

Peacebuilding and **Sustaining Peace**, as defined in the dual United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions (A/70/262 and S/2016/2282), is "a goal and process [...] aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict". These resolutions set out the role of the United Nations in peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and aim to build its own capacities and support those of national actors. They also shift the starting point of analysis from looking only at the drivers of risk to also understanding the sources of resilience in a society, putting the focus on preventive rather than reactive operations.

Some of the root causes of conflict in the MENA region include the ongoing militarisation of societies, reprisals against peacebuilders and activists, social prejudice and stereotypes, as well as the absence of human security and accountability measures for the implementation of international legal principles and United Nations Security Council resolutions. The current COVID-19 pandemic does accelerate already well-known inequalities in the region. At the same time, reactive national and international responses to violence and the lack of focus on prevention further challenge opportunities for peace.

The work of local peacebuilders in the MENA region focuses on building community capacities for conflict prevention, Early Warning Early Response and building resilience by creating platforms for information exchange, learning, joint analysis and action. Their work does not traditionally fall under a specific international agenda or framework (i.e., sustaining peace, development, women, peace and security) but instead remains cross-cutting and cross-sectoral in practice.

In order to advance Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace in the region, the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture needs a long-term and holistic strategy to upscale its capacities and flexibility in providing necessary support to:

- **Strengthen a people-centered approach to peacebuilding:** The United Nations Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs (UNDPPA) should identify and understand the root causes of conflict and support best-placed actors in preventing conflict and sustaining peace. This includes extending the understanding of peacebuilding beyond programmatic work and engaging with community actors as implementers and experts in their own right.

- **Advance disarmament as a critical aspect of peacebuilding:** Closer partnerships between the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) need to be

developed to ensure needed capacities of national actors to meet the security needs of the people within their societies.

- **Support building transparent, accountable, representative and participatory institutions:** The United Nations funds and programmes should support capacities and space for joint analysis at national levels to prioritise and implement sustainable development goals, including SDG16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies, in an inclusive and participatory manner.
- **Strengthen community engagement:** The United Nations in-country presence should make itself more accessible through targeted community-engagement in the form of consultations, training and learning exchanges, capacity-building for local peacebuilders, including fundraising, financial management, and grant writing and reporting.

1. The United Nations Should Strengthen a People-Centered Approach to Peacebuilding

A people-centered approach to Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace is critical for Peacebuilding and Sustainable Peace requires the broader understanding of what peacebuilding means. It requires the recognition of the needs of people and communities[1] and identification of suitable initiatives to address these needs. In practice, *adopting a people-centered approach means "bringing" global policy frameworks to the field level in a way that makes difference for people in communities.*

Sustaining peace in the MENA region requires addressing the culture of social hierarchy, where elderly men are seen as "capable" and youth and women are seen as "weak" and "immature." The culture of social hierarchy inspires harmful social behaviors such as hate speech and stereotyping by gender, race, immigration status or sexual orientation, further supported through decision-making at all levels. The sustained culture of social hierarchy puts enormous pressure on individuals and often leads to overall diminished human capacities for sustainable peace by causing alienation between groups (especially, refugees and migrants) and the breakdown of social cohesion. At the same time, peacebuilding work in the region, where it exists, does not address the need for behavioral change and social transformation, which impedes peace processes and leads to the ongoing relapse of conflict.

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[1] GPPAC. Human Security. https://www.gppac.net/human-security

Good Practice: Using Art to Promote Peace Education and Peaceful Dialogue

Peace education is a critical element of Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace[2] because it helps the communities to deal with the trauma of war, build dialogue processes for enhanced understanding of "the other," and spread the culture of peace.

In the MENA region, **young people have been leading the movement to promote peace.** Given that the majority of the population have lost faith in the political structures and institutions, they have channeled their activism through art. They chose art because it crosses barriers and transcends discrimination, ensuring a supportive environment for behavioral change. In the region, the artistic and cultural events provide open and empowering spaces to meet and get to know others and share experiences and knowledge while building common understanding of the critical peace concepts.

Young people's leadership should be recognised and their initiatives supported. First, enabling artistic and aesthetic expressions led by young people is an important way to provide an outlet for trauma for those dealing with conflict, as well as a tool to build inclusion and acceptance in a multi-community setting. Second, doing so would increase the visibility and recognition of the role of youth in peacebuilding and lead to their meaningful engagement in political life, including through the creation of national youth committees and councils.[3] Finally, elevating the contributions of young people will positively strengthen opportunities for peace in the long-term.

A people-centered approach to Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace in the MENA region requires the United Nations to 1) expand its understanding of the definition of peacebuilding to include behavioral change and other approaches that support social cohesion at the community level (*at the UN Headquarters level*) and 2) provide adequate support for building capacities and enabling environments for innovative and catalytic peacebuilding community initiatives (*at the regional and country level*).

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[2] GPPAC. Peace Education. https://www.gppac.net/peace-education
[3] Youth Political Participation in Jordan: A Middle East Success Story: NDI. (2016). https://www.ndi.org/Youth_Political_Participation_Jordan

2. The United Nations Should Advance Disarmament as a Critical Pillar of Peacebuilding

The Secretary-General's Agenda for Disarmament[4] defines disarmament as a tool to help mitigate the impacts of armed conflict when it occurs, as well as a means to prevent or put an end to it. The contribution of disarmament to peacebuilding is critical. Disarmament helps advance development, peace, and human rights.

The Arab world presents only 5 percent of the world population.[5] At the same time, the region accounts for 36 percent of the world's arms trade, and five of the top ten arms-importing countries also belong to this region.[6] Subsequently, the excessive flows of arms play an important and supporting role in sustaining and exacerbating conflicts, accounting for immense suffering and the absence of a proper foundation for sustaining peace. First, *the sense of insecurity* due to the ongoing instability in the region fuels the need for and legitimacy of strengthening defense capabilities both of the nation states as well as individuals within communities. Second, further inquiry into the *gendered impact of arms* provides a useful framework for the transformation of the world's approach to sustaining peace by exposing the harms of the mere presence of arms in communities that always incite the need to use them.

Good Practice: National Commission for the Prohibition of Weapons in Qatar[7]

One of the commitments of the State of Qatar to advance its disarmament obligations under international law was the creation of the National Committee for the Prohibition of Weapons, established in 2004. The Committee continues to advise the competent governmental bodies in all matters related to arms embargoes in order to achieve the objectives contained in the relevant international conventions to which the State of Qatar has acceded. The Doha Regional Centre for Training on the Conventions on Weapons of Mass Destruction, established in 2012 in cooperation with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), is also providing training services at national, regional and international levels on Weapons of Mass Destruction-related conventions.

Just as the notion of peacebuilding has evolved beyond the post-conflict activity, the objectives and language of disarmament need to evolve to incorporate the objectives of Peacebuilding and Sustainable Peace. The United Nations has a vital supporting role to ensure this evolution.

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[4] UN. (2018). Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament.
https://www.un.org/disarmament/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/sg-disarmament-agenda-pubs-page.pdf
[5] UN. (2019). The Revision of World Population Prospects. https://population.un.org/wpp/
[6] (2020). Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019. Retrieved from:
https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019.pdf
[7] Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2018). Qatar Calls for Intensifying Efforts of Disarmament and Proliferation of Weapons. https://mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/2018/10/12/qatar-calls-for-intensifying-efforts-of-disarmament-and-proliferation-of-weapons

Closer partnerships between the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) need to be developed to ensure needed capacities of national actors to implement its disarmament obligations and stop conflicts from arising or prevent their exacerbation. This includes 1) promoting disarmament as a critical peacebuilding priority; 2) supporting capacities of Member States to regulate arms and establish early warning mechanisms; 3) ensuring that security sector reform (SSR) and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes as components of peace processes and not a post-agreement undertaking.

3. The United Nations Should Support Building Transparent, Accountable, Representative and Participatory Institutions

As recognised by the dual resolutions on peacebuilding and sustaining peace (A70/262 and S/RES/2282), sustainable development is critical to sustaining peace, and vice versa. Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides a platform for integrating peacebuilding into national development plans and cooperation frameworks, ensuring that resources are allocated to efforts dedicated to addressing risks and sustaining peace. Building strong societies and institutions, combating corruption, reducing inequality and vulnerabilities are all components critical for advancing Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace at the national level.

Coordinated and integrated priority action to implement SDGs is particularly important for peacebuilding in the context of the MENA region, where the refugee crisis requires national governments to adjust their national priorities to reflect the context of humanitarian crises, diverting attention from development and other "less urgent" priorities. Many countries, including Lebanon and Jordan, experience an over-exhaustion of their resources. Sustaining peace, in this context, requires substantial, and often missing, financial and human capacities for planning, appropriate infrastructure, basic services and economic opportunities in order to benefit both refugees and host communities and help build social cohesion.

Good Practice: Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies for All [8]

Currently present in Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco, the programmes funded by the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) support the implementation of integrated approaches to address socio-economic and security challenges in the region. The Trust Fund creates inclusive platforms for dialogue between the national governments, the United Nations system, and local peacebuilders to identify needs, develop programmes, and strengthen monitoring and evaluation of respective work. In Lebanon,[9] the programme to restore community centers and create hubs of economic and social activity helped improve the

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[8] United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security. Human Security. https://www.un.org/humansecurity/
[9] UNTFHS. Lebanon. https://www.un.org/humansecurity/country/lebanon/

livelihoods of the broader community as well as contributed to greater social harmony between refugees and host communities.

Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace requires strengthened action on part of the United Nations to support capacities for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a particular emphasis on the 'peace goals'.[10] This requires scaling-up strategic and operational partnerships between local peacebuilders, the United Nations, donors, and national actors to form a clearly articulated, overarching vision for how to sustain peace and development in the country. The UN in-country presence can facilitate opportunities to share learning and develop integrated context analysis towards the development of mutually reinforcing United Nations cooperation frameworks and national development plans.

4. The United Nations Should Strengthen Community Engagement

At the global level, there is a strong normative recognition of the need for strengthened and systematised engagement with local peacebuilders, including women and youth groups, and local communities at large.[11] When on the ground analysis and national priorities lead the localisation of global policy frameworks, their implementation tends to be more effective due to the inclusive national ownership, ranging from government authorities to community leaders.

However, local realities in which peacebuilders in the MENA region operate present a number of challenges for facilitating the localisation of global frameworks like Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace. First, *the United Nations remains inaccessible* for local peacebuilders in situations where they have not previously engaged with the organisation. There remains the lack of awareness of the international frameworks on peacebuilding. The normative differences between the language used by local peacebuilders and the United Nations actors create constraints for building strong and operational partnerships and finding common ground. The lack of transparency about the United Nations processes and modes of engagement impact the perception of the United Nations relevance in many contexts. Second, *the space for local peacebuilding work continues to shrink*. Peacebuilders are arrested for participation in peaceful protests and expressing their positions online; funding restrictions prevent many local strategic and impactful initiatives[12]; lack of justice and opportunities for redress continue to challenge social cohesion and mutual trust within societies.

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[10] GPPAC. (2019). Peaceful societies – the orphaned SDG target?. https://gppac.net/publications/peaceful-societies-orphaned-sdg-target
[11] UN. (2018). The Secretary-General's report on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace (S/2018/43). https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/report-secretary-general-peacebuilding-and-sustaining-peace
[12] This has been particularly exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Good Practice: the UN System-Wide Community Engagement Guidelines

Following the Secretary-General's call for the United Nations' improved engagement with civil society at the local level in his 2018 report on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, a joint UN–civil society working group developed the UN system-wide Community-Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace to support United Nations field presences in developing country-specific community-engagement strategies on peacebuilding and sustaining peace while providing operational guidance to United Nations field presences on how to more effectively engage with civil society actors at the local level in peacebuilding and sustaining peace. This serves as a tool for the United Nations system, as well as for civil society, to ensure more relevant, strategic and catalytic peacebuilding strategies.

In order for Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace to make a difference at the field level, the United Nations needs to scale up its efforts to meaningfully engage with communities and local peacebuilders. For the UN in-country presence, this should start with mapping of relevant peacebuilding actors and making a consolidated effort to develop relationships with them by means of consultations, workshops, learning exchange, capacity-building. Further, this should be supported through the establishment of more consistent, sustained and transparent modalities with diverse civil society in policy and programming. This can be achieved through the creation of joint UN-civil society standing bodies or informal working groups to contribute to coherence and coordination and can be implemented at both the Headquarters and field level.