

Regional Strategy for Sweden's  
Development Cooperation with

# the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

2016–2020



REGERINGSKANSLIET

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Cover: Editorial Office, MFA • Printed by: Elanders Grafisk Service 2016

Article no: UD 16.002



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**Government Offices  
of Sweden**

# Regional Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

## 1. Focus

Swedish development cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa will contribute to strengthened democracy, increased respect for human rights and sustainable development that improve the prospects for peace, stability and freedom in the region. The target areas and initiatives the Government has chosen to focus on aim to counteract the fundamental causes of conflict and contribute to favourable developments in the region. The strategy will apply to the period 2016–2020 and will comprise a total of SEK 1.85 billion over the entire strategy period.

The initiatives encompassed by this strategy are expected to contribute to:

### **Strengthened democracy and gender equality, and greater respect for human rights**

- Strengthening the capacity of the region's civil society organisations to effectively demand accountability, shape opinions and cooperate internationally
- Strengthening the capacity of the region's civil society organisations and public institutions to promote gender equality and the rights of women and children in society
- Strengthening the capacity and increasing the transparency of public institutions and improving the conditions for regional cooperation between them
- Strengthening the capacity of the media to encourage democratic development and greater accountability

**Environmental improvement, reduced climate impact and increased resilience to environmental impacts, climate change and natural disasters**

- Improved, sustainable and inclusive administration of transboundary natural resources, with a focus on water resources, renewable energy and food security
- Encouraging investment and innovative solutions in the field of renewable energy and capacity building

**Improved opportunities for regional economic development as a prerequisite for enabling poor people to improve their living conditions**

- Increased economic integration and improved opportunities for countries in the region to participate in free, sustainable and equitable regional trade
- Increased collaboration between countries and social partners in efforts to achieve decent work, with a focus on social dialogue and rights

## **2. Regional context**

Development in large parts of the Middle East and North Africa is marked by conflict or post-conflict conditions, with both protracted refugee situations and large migration flows, lack of respect for human rights and democratic principles and shortcomings in terms of gender equality.

The region has undergone significant societal changes in the last five years, through factors such as popular mobilisation, demonstrations and democratic aspirations – as well as tension and conflict in the wake of revolutions. The positive developments consist of several countries having held free and fair elections and the adoption of new constitutions and laws that better guarantee human rights. The negative developments consist of the return to or development of armed conflicts or political systems that are characterised by authoritarian, patriarchal and totalitarian methods of governance with little and often dwindling political freedom, restricted political participation, particularly for women, and reduced scope for civil society organisations to act. Nevertheless, demographically, politically and economically, the region is very heterogeneous.

In many of these countries, there are armed conflicts and internal tensions that have created major humanitarian requirements, increased poverty and lack of respect for human rights, which are hitting already vulnerable groups in society hard. Increased instability and dysfunctional institutions that lack transparency, expertise and procedures are harmful to trade, sustainable development and employment. Weak conditions for trade, employment and economic development are often related to environment and climate challenges and risk becoming drivers of conflict. The Middle East and North Africa constitute one of the regions most vulnerable to increased temperatures and drought. The impact on climate is increasing and has a detrimental impact on factors such as food security, energy and water.

Regional economic cooperation is not fully developed and lacks the coordination required to facilitate regional and international trade. This is due to factors that include the large geographical size of the region, as well as the countries' differing levels of development and varied

political priorities. Barriers to regional trade include weak regional institutions, deficient trade infrastructure and ineffective border controls. Economic policy in the region focuses primarily on bilateral cooperation. Unemployment contributes to conflict and is a serious development problem, particularly among women and young people, whose working conditions are substandard and characterised by discrimination.

Sweden has had a regional strategy for cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa since 2006. Sweden acts as a bridge builder and contributes to regional cooperation and regional networks. Support for expanded regional cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa is justified on political, economic and social grounds and regional collaboration is necessary to resolve conflicts and prevent people from being forcibly displaced. Increased economic development that reduces poverty is dependent on factors such as access to major markets, cooperation on infrastructure development and improved opportunities for productive employment and decent work. Many problems in the area of the environment are transboundary and require regional solutions, which can encourage regional cooperation.

### 3. Activities

Sweden's development cooperation in the region will be based on and characterised by a rights perspective and by poor people's perspective on development. The rights perspective involves human rights and democracy being regarded as fundamental to development. Such an approach means that individuals and groups that are discriminated against, excluded and marginalised are made visible prior to each initiative. This is done because people have to be able to enjoy their rights and freedoms such as freedom of opinion and freedom of religion, regardless of their gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion or other belief, sexual orientation or transgender identity or expression. Poor people's perspective on development involves proceeding from the situation, needs, circumstances and priorities of poor women, men and children in efforts to reduce poverty and promote equitable and sustainable development.

Activities will contribute to the development of regional networks, to the sharing of knowledge and experiences, to shaping opinion and to increased accountability, as well as to the development of more effective regional cooperation and collaboration and more effective organisations. In the long term, increased collaboration can contribute to economic, environmental and climatic development and trade, social justice, gender equality, democracy and human rights, as well as the sustainable management of water resources, the food supply, renewable energy and improved prospects for people's livelihoods.

Women, children and young people are especially prioritised in the implementation of activities. In the broader regional context, the choice of partners and forms of cooperation are determined by the activities' focus, current context and potential to provide long-term results.

Development cooperation within the scope of this strategy can be considered in twelve of the countries in the region<sup>1</sup>. The basic premise of the activities will be regional added value. The context is characterised by

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<sup>1</sup>Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

a great deal of uncertainty, with significant risks and challenges to the implementation and follow-up of activities. There must be a readiness to deal with unforeseen and sometimes rapid changes. This requires a flexible approach with regard to opportunities for regional and sometimes national cooperation and modalities that are simultaneously adapted to both short-term and long-term planning. It is important to analyse how the activities can contribute to strengthening the resilience of society to frequent crises and expected challenges such as climate change and negative environmental impact. Sida is being given the opportunity to assess when country-specific initiatives are appropriate to fulfilling the strategy's objectives.

Support for the development of central national institutions and strategic organisations has to complement regional initiatives. Synergies between the different areas in the strategy are to be sought. Synergies with other Swedish strategies are also to be sought, primarily the Regional Strategy for the Syria Crisis, the Results Strategy for Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey and the Strategy for Special Initiatives for Human Rights and Democratisation. Synergies and coordination with development assistance provided by the EU and UN will be sought and Sweden will work towards a well-functioning and unanimous UN at country level, in line with good aid effectiveness. Sida will ensure that there is a comprehensive view of all the support provided by Sweden to a country or region during the implementation of this work. The three areas encompassed by the strategy are mutually reinforcing. There are ongoing humanitarian initiatives in several countries in the region and potential synergies with these should be considered. However, this should be done in a way that ensures the distinctive nature of the humanitarian assistance and does not undermine its principles.

Swedish development cooperation will be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable, as well as gender equal. A holistic view of the challenges, needs and conditions of people and society is the foundation of development cooperation. The guiding principle is that

economic, social and environmental conditions and processes are to be interpreted and managed in an integrated context. Gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment and rights are goals in themselves, as well as prerequisites for and expedients of sustainable global development. Violence and armed conflict are one of the greatest barriers to economic and social development and development cooperation is an important aspect of conflict prevention. Favourable economic development and a more equal distribution contributes, by extension, to increased employment and improved prospects for people's livelihoods, which can contribute to increased economic and social participation and decreased marginalisation of vulnerable groups. An important prerequisite for inclusive economic development is the prospects of the countries involved ensuring that its citizens have access to productive employment and decent work.

Sustainable use of natural resources creates resilient ecosystems and preserves biodiversity, which is significant, for example, for agriculture and consequently the incomes of small-scale farmers, as well as for mitigating natural disasters and droughts. In addition, sustainable management of chemicals and waste is central to poor people's access to clean water, possibility of farming sustainably and good health. An improved environment and reduced climate impact contributes to stronger resilience, increased opportunities for people to improve their living conditions and could lead to improved prospects of enjoying human rights.

An environmental and climate perspective, a gender equality perspective and a conflict perspective will therefore be systematically integrated into Swedish development cooperation in the region. A children's rights perspective will also be integrated systematically.

The overarching risks to activities include the worsened security situation, increased violent radicalisation and international and internal conflicts. Other evident risks may be a lack of political will, lack of appropriate and inclusive decision-making structures and corruption.

### **Strengthened democracy and gender equality, and greater respect for human rights**

In the field of democracy, human rights and gender equality, activities will focus on the prerequisites for democratic development in which civil society plays an important part. Consequently, strengthening civil society has a high priority. Strengthening democracy and respect for human rights require the promotion of civil society organisations that can conduct advocacy work, demand accountability and shape opinion. This can be done by supporting the development of civil society capacity in terms of its organisation, internal democracy and working practices, the development of regional cooperation, collaboration and networking.

Access to civic information, critical journalism and channels for freedom of expression and debate is essential to the democratic development of society. It is a priority to contribute to the development of a more independent quality media whose role in society is to scrutinise and hold to account. This should be encouraged by supporting capacity development in the media sector, including investigative journalism, as well as institutional development, regional networking and the safety of journalists.

The focus will be on the development of regional actors that can conduct advocacy work and coordinate and support local organisations. Support for public and political institutions will be included, with the aim of strengthening the rule of law and increasing respect for human rights. It is important to contribute to strengthening institutions' capacity and to increasing the transparency of, for example, election processes, anti-corruption and women and girls' rights. The focus of gender equality efforts will be on rights for all. In their capacity as key agents of change men and boys should be included in the initiatives.

Given the lack of qualified regional organisations, support can be channelled through their international counterparts.

Women and children's rights will be made visible and strengthened, attitudes will be changed and the level of knowledge increased in all

social groups. This can be advanced through advocacy work and capacity development in cooperation with regional and local civil society organisations.

Based on existing conditions in each country, democratic institutions will be supported through multilateral organisations, but where possible, in countries where the transition to democracy is most advanced, also through direct support to national and local institutions.

### **Environmental improvement, reduced climate impact and increased resilience to environmental impacts, climate change and natural disasters**

Swedish support within this results area will contribute to improving cooperation concerning, and sustainable management, of transboundary natural resources. This may involve cooperation between institutions and actors in the field of the environment and climate. Activities that can be supported should aim to strengthen resilience with respect to regional water resources and food security, especially given the effects of climate change in the region.

Water is a source of regional conflict. Swedish initiatives will contribute to facilitating dialogue and constructive cooperation concerning cross-border water resources. Environmental and water cooperation can also lead to other forms of cooperation and political rapprochement. Gender equality aspects must be included clearly with the aim of seeing both women and men as stakeholders and users within both household water use and agriculture.

During the strategy period, the existing water resource portfolio will be increasingly linked to other work relating to the environment, climate, resilience and transboundary natural resources.

The region has great potential in terms of renewable energy. Accordingly, Swedish initiatives in this area should contribute to the increased use, production and development of renewable energy such as solar and wind-power. The distribution of and access to energy resources are unequal and contribute to reinforcing existing societal structures. Improved access to

energy at the local level creates the conditions in which marginalised groups can improve their living conditions and for women's employment and economic empowerment.

Sweden intends to contribute to encouraging capacity building and innovative solutions for and investment in improved food supply, environmental technology and renewable energy. This makes society more resilient and reduces its environmental and climate impact.

#### **Improved opportunities for regional economic development as a prerequisite for enabling poor people to improve their living conditions**

A fundamental prerequisite for inclusive economic development is better opportunities for countries to participate in free, sustainable and equitable trade. Initiatives in this area can be implemented not only through deeper cooperation within existing structures, but also through the development of new forms of regional cooperation related to, for example, trade procedures and trade in services. Initiatives that promote increased cooperation between countries and help to strengthen existing regional structures will be included, as will support that contributes to an increased understanding of the link between economic development and democratic processes.

Activities will contribute to reinforcing the capacity of existing regional economic institutions and networks. A strong sense of ownership is fundamental. Greater importance will be placed on getting countries to cooperate in order to achieve a collective approach to trade and economic integration and a more developed regional market. Activities will also contribute to reinforcing the capacity to implement international and regional trade agreements based on the WTO regulations.

Increased collaboration between countries and social partners or the equivalent to achieve decent working conditions and rights in the labour market will be supported. Activities will also contribute to improved understanding of and reinforced capacity to meet the needs created by increased sustainability requirements.

Initiatives that contribute to improving dialogue with social partners or the equivalent may be included. Improving the conditions for regional trade in services is one way to provide greater opportunities for, in particular, women entrepreneurs and businesspeople. Activities and dialogue concerning a more efficient and equitable labour market can also be supported, when necessary, at the national and local level.

The forms used for follow-up appear in the Government's guidelines for strategies. All initiatives within the scope of the strategy will be monitored continually. Evaluations will be regarded as an integral aspect of continuous monitoring and will be implemented when necessary. Various methods will be used to follow up results, with both qualitative and quantitative results information. Efforts should be made to achieve a balance between short-term and long-term results in the portfolio of initiatives in order to ensure that the aid contributes to equitable and sustainable development in Sweden's partner countries.