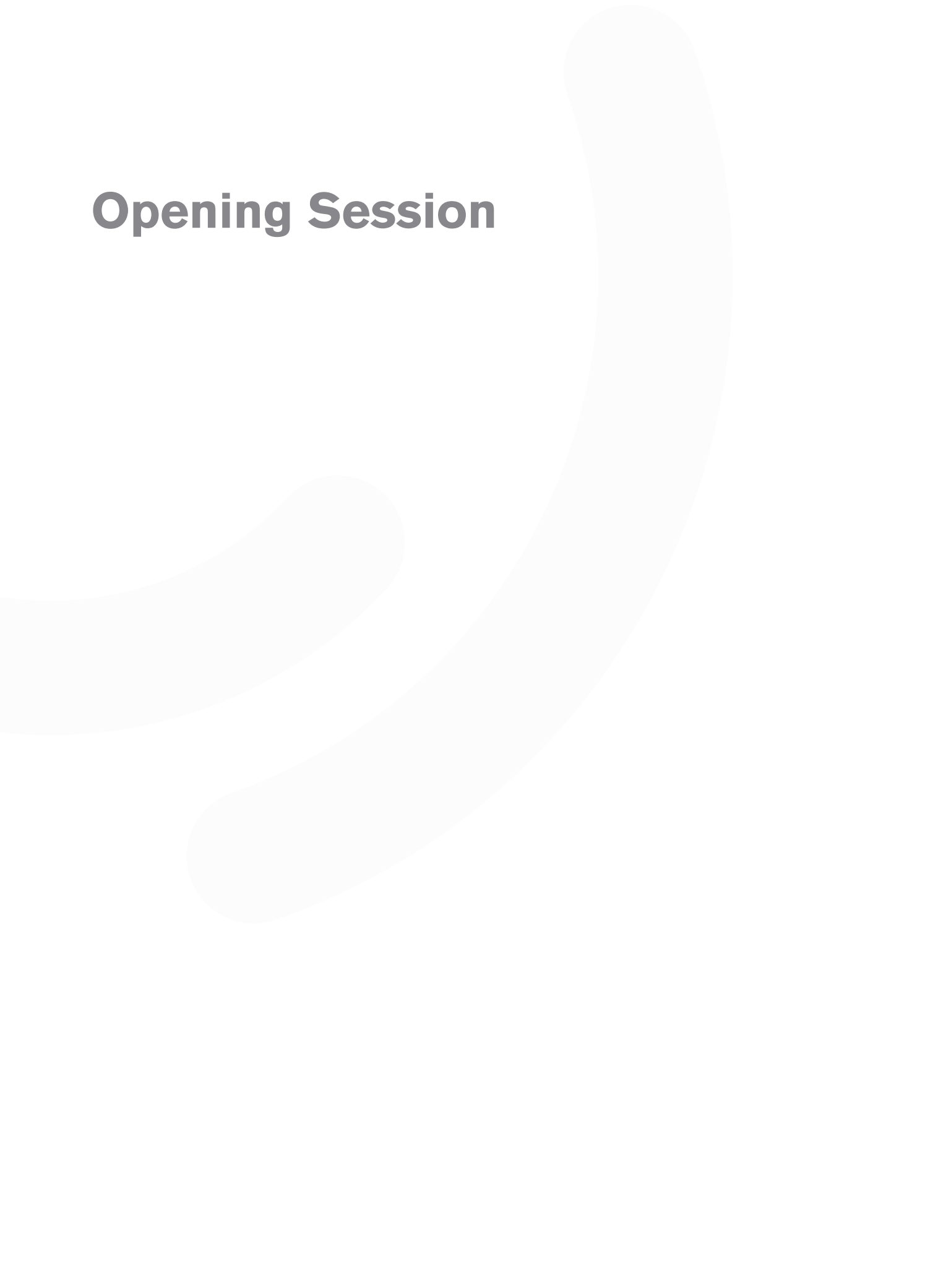![euromesco research dialogue advocacy]

EUROMESCO MULTISTAKEHOLDERS PLATFORM

FOSTERING UNDERSTANDING: COMMUNICATION, PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES IN EURO-MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONS

Brussels, 16 May 2024

Report

Opening Session

Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria, Director, Euro-Mediterranean Policies Department, IEMed, commenced the session by highlighting its significance, transitioning from plenaries to a focused discussion on communication, perceptions, and narratives in Euro-Mediterranean relations. He emphasized the intersection of communication, geopolitics, and the crucial role of multi-stakeholder engagement in the platform.

Birgit Loeser, Head of Division, MENA Regional Affairs, EEAS, underscored the evolving landscape of perceptions and narratives concerning the European Union, from being perceived as a force for good to facing allegations of double standards. She emphasized the EU's commitment to reinforcing partnerships in the Euro-Mediterranean region amidst geopolitical uncertainties and the increasing competition from other global actors like Russia and China. Loeser highlighted the need for strategic communication, dialogue, and joint efforts to counter negative narratives and perceptions.

Sergio Carranza, Senior Advisor for Mediterranean Affairs, Spanish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, European Union, and Cooperation, focused on the challenges posed by misinformation, lack of mutual understanding, and the weaponization of information in the Mediterranean region. He stressed the importance of clear policies and strategic communication to address these challenges. Carranza highlighted the critical role of civil society, particularly youth, in countering misinformation and fostering dialogue. He emphasized the need for a strong Euro-Mediterranean partnership to navigate through ongoing crises and prepare for the future.

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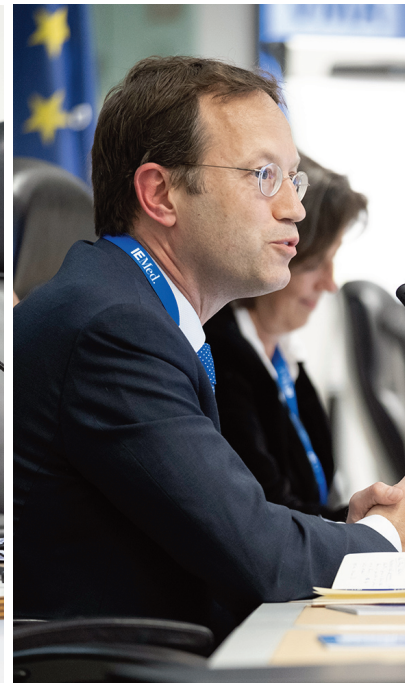
Shifting Narratives: Perspectives on Euro-Mediterranean relations

Haizam
Amirah-Fernández

Haizam Amirah Fernandez, Senior Analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute, began his address by reflecting on the changing dynamics of the Euro-Mediterranean region over the years. He highlighted that the shifts in narratives are not merely rhetorical but are deeply influenced by changing realities and facts on the ground. Amirah Fernandez expressed concern that the situation across the Mediterranean has deteriorated significantly compared to previous years, attributing this decline to unfulfilled promises and commitments by various actors. He emphasized the importance of credibility, likening effective communication to selling a product, which requires not only an attractive package but also a credible message. Amirah Fernandez underscored the significance of acknowledging realities and facts on the ground, cautioning against the consequences of disinformation. He urged for self-awareness and a departure from denial, stressing the need for an honest assessment of current challenges. Amirah Fernandez raised questions about the effectiveness of current approaches and policies, urging policymakers to consider alternative paths to address the pressing issues in the region. He concluded by highlighting the potential catastrophic consequences of failing to address these challenges, particularly in the context of escalating regional tensions.

Nadim Houry, Executive Director of the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), provided insights into shifting narratives in the Arab region. He referred to a research project conducted in 2014, which revealed that the EU was not perceived as a normative force for peace and development by many in the region. Houry attributed this perception to historical actions and policies, including support for autocratic regimes. He emphasized the transactional nature of relations with the EU, where economic support was viewed as instrumental rather than transformative. Houry noted a shift in perceptions post-October 7th, particularly regarding individual EU member states. He highlighted instances where Germany, previously perceived positively, faced backlash due to the perception of complicity in certain policies. Houry cautioned against adopting purely transactional approaches, suggesting a hybrid model that combines development

Nadim Houry

Rawan Damen

efforts with genuine engagement. He emphasized the importance of success stories and effective communication in shaping perceptions positively. Houry also called for a re-evaluation of entry points for engagement, urging a shift away from a singular focus on counter-terrorism and refugee issues. He concluded by advocating for a more creative and inclusive approach to engagement in the region, one that addresses local needs and concerns while leveraging the EU's comparative advantages.

Rawan Damen, Director General of Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), introduced herself as a documentary filmmaker and journalist with over 25 years of experience working in the Arab world. She highlighted ARIJ's extensive involvement in investigative journalism and fact-checking across the region, spanning 17 years. Damen emphasized ARIJ's collaborations with the European Union, various European countries, and Arab fact-checker networks, illustrating a commitment to cross-border cooperation in media and journalism. She provided examples of ARIJ's investigative stories, such as those connecting Libya, Syria, and

Europe, shedding light on complex geopolitical issues. Damen also discussed ARIJ's recent investigation into Uber's privacy policy in Jordan, revealing concerns about audio recordings during trips. Notably, Damen addressed the challenges faced by journalists and fact-checkers in Palestine, particularly in Gaza, where ARIJ has provided essential equipment and support amidst conflict and media restrictions. She raised broader concerns about the credibility of EU media coverage of the Arab world and offered recommendations to address these issues, stressing the importance of building long-term trust and fostering multilingual dialogue.

Abdulatif Sleibi, a Senior Data Analyst at PAX for PEACE, delved into prevailing narratives on social media regarding the European Union. He emphasized the significant impact of events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine on shaping perceptions of the EU in the MENA region. Sleibi highlighted the evolving role of social media as a primary source of information and its influence on views regarding the EU's treatment of its population and its involvement in the MENA

region. He discussed specific instances of protests and government responses, particularly in the Netherlands, underscoring how such events are chronicled and disseminated on social media platforms. Sleibi pointed out the implications of these narratives for EU-MENA relations, highlighting challenges in grassroots engagement and civil society cooperation. He emphasized the need for nuanced approaches to communication and information dissemination in fostering mutual understanding and trust.

Alessandro Accorsi, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group, provided insights into the information challenges facing the MENA region. While acknowledging the region's extensive information problems, including controlled media, censorship, and influence operations, Accorsi argued that disinformation targeting the EU is not the primary issue. He emphasized the need for the EU to address underlying policy failures and inconsistencies in its response to information challenges from the MENA region. Accorsi discussed the complex landscape of information warfare and manipulation, citing examples from conflicts such as Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza.

He highlighted the impact of policy decisions on information environments, stressing the importance of strategic communication aligned with broader diplomatic and humanitarian goals. Accorsi urged policymakers to adopt a more comprehensive approach to information challenges, addressing root causes and building resilience against manipulation and disinformation.

Debate

- **Shada Islam,** Commentator and Political Analyst, highlighted the disparity between the EU's self-perception and its actions, particularly in response to crises like Gaza. She criticized the EU's reluctance to address sensitive issues directly and emphasized the need for a paradigm shift in how Europe engages with its southern neighbours. Islam urged for honesty in confronting biases and prejudices, advocating for a more equitable partnership rooted in mutual respect.

- **Jean Paul Marthoz,** Journalist and Coordinator of the Council of Europe's Press Freedom Report, underscored the importance of viewing press freedom as a universal concern. Marthoz cautioned against complacency within Europe itself, citing instances of press freedom infringements across member states. He urged for unwavering support for independent media and a change of Europe's approach to safeguarding journalistic integrity.

- Experts commented that the EU's perception in North Africa, particularly Algeria, is marred by a gap between rhetoric and policy implementation, largely due to a reactive rather than strategic approach. Immediate responses to crises, like stabilization and democracy promotion, are not integrated into a long-term plan. Effective communication and substantial dialogue involving governments, civil societies, and the diaspora on both sides of the Mediterranean were emphasized.

- The question of how researchers could play a role in dispelling misconceptions and raising awareness about critical issues was raised. Experts emphasized the role of narratives in shaping perceptions and advocated for stronger communication tools to convey the complexities of European debates effectively; as well as leveraging Europe's historical ties, trade relations, and human connections could transform the current crisis into an opportunity.

- On the issue of Iran and its influence, parallels were drawn between European silence on certain issues (Iranian protests) and the erosion of credibility. The need for a fundamental shift in Europe's approach to Iran was underlined, warning of the consequences of neglecting critical geopolitical concerns.

- European policy regarding Gaza was addressed, highlighting inconsistencies and shortcomings in the EU's response to recent crises. They lamented the loss of trust in European institutions and called for a reassessment of Europe's social contract, particularly considering recent events in Gaza and broader societal shifts.

- One participant stressed the role of narratives in shaping perceptions of the EU, citing examples from Georgia and Belarus. They highlighted ongoing crises, such as the Belarus border situation, as illustrative cases for understanding the impact of disinformation and narrative manipulation within the EU's borders.

Transformative Communication Strategies for strengthened Euro-Mediterranean relations

Joumana Brihi, Team Leader, EU Neighbours South, discussed the role and challenges of the EU Neighbours South programme, which is managed by DG NEAR in Brussels and works with the ten delegations of the Southern Neighbourhood. She began by highlighting the significance of opinion polls conducted over the past 11 years to assess perceptions and attitudes towards the European Union in the region. Brihi emphasized that, despite the shifting perceptions, the EU remains one of the largest donors of support to the Southern Neighbourhood, and this is recognized by the people in the region. However, Brihi acknowledged a significant decline in positive perceptions of the EU. She pointed out that while positive perceptions have decreased, many of these perceptions have shifted to neutral rather than negative. This highlights the complexity and variability in perceptions across different countries. Brihi noted the need to revisit the EU's communication objectives, emphasizing the importance of understanding the audience and their specific contexts. She argued that people often forget negative experiences when they see the positive impacts of the EU's support in their lives. Despite the challenges during the Gaza war, the Jeel Connect network, a network managed

by EU Neighbours South created to help raise awareness about the EU's contribution to a better future for young people across the Southern Neighbourhood, has remained active and continues to engage in positive communication about the EU's support. Brihi concluded by stressing the importance of crisis communication, stating that the EU needs a consistent and coherent response during crises. She highlighted the issue of multiple voices creating confusion and the necessity for a unified communication strategy, particularly when reacting to the Gaza war and migration issues.

Luis Miguel Bueno, EU Regional Media Officer - Spokesperson in Arabic for the MENA Region, European External Action Service (EEAS), shared his experience of communicating on behalf of the EU in Arabic. Bueno explained that his role became especially challenging during the Ukraine crisis, where he had to address complex issues in Arabic media, often facing hostile questions related to the EU's policies in Palestine, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. Bueno discussed the communication challenges during the Gaza conflict, where inconsistent messaging from different EU officials made it difficult to maintain a coherent stance in media appearances. He emphasized the importance of three key strategies: explain, engage, and explore. **Explain:** Bueno highlighted the complexity of the EU and the need to make its structures and decisions understandable to Arab audiences. He noted that even within the EU, many people are not fully aware of its functions, and this gap is even wider in the MENA region. **Engage:** Bueno stressed the importance of stepping out of the comfort zone to engage directly with journalists and the public, emphasizing the value of direct interaction in bridging understanding. **Explore:** Bueno advocated for innovative communication strategies, such as

using social media and learning local dialects to connect with people on a personal level. In turn, receiving positive responses for their informal and relatable approach. Lastly, Bueno introduced a fourth strategy, **empathy,** underscoring the need to understand and acknowledge the perspectives and experiences of the audience. He emphasized that effective communication requires being aware of the media landscape and the prevailing sentiments in the region.

Didier Lagae, Founder and Executive Chairman, MARCO (Communication and Branding Agency), emphasized the importance of effective communication in highlighting the positive aspects of the European Union's efforts. He noted that while communicating EU policies, it is crucial to avoid whitewashing and instead focus on the genuine good being done. Lagae stressed the significance of engaging with the public on an emotional level, rather than relying solely on facts and figures. He ar-

gued that communication should target specific audiences with tailored messages, using visual storytelling and short, impactful videos to resonate, especially with younger generations. He highlighted the need for cultural sensitivity and adapting messages to different environments. He also pointed out the importance of involving audiences in storytelling and celebrating successes, using testimonials, and engaging formats to convey the EU's impact effectively. Lagae concluded by underscoring the need to move beyond mere facts and figures, aiming to reach the hearts and minds of people. He advocated for a partnership approach in communication, where listening and participation are key, and stressed the necessity of digital outreach and culturally adapted messaging to enhance the EU's credibility and influence.

Saja Mortada, Manager of the Arab Fact-Checkers Network (AFCN) under ARIJ, discussed the challenges and successes of fact-checking in the Arab world. With a background in investigative Journalism and expertise in AI and Journalism, Mortada highlighted the rapid growth of AFCN since its founding in 2020, now comprising 40 organisations and over 250 fact-checkers in 12 Arab countries. She emphasized the importance of pre-publication fact-checking, which many media organisations neglect, leading to widespread misinformation, especially during crises like the Gaza conflict. Mortada detailed AFCN's collaborative efforts, such as the international fact-checking group on Gaza, which included 60 organisations from over 40 countries. This collaboration ensured accurate information dissemination in multiple languages, combating misinformation on social media and mainstream media. Mortada also discussed AFCN's project on climate change, highlighting a joint fact-checking initiative during COP28. This collaboration between Arab and European fact-checkers produced reports in Arabic and English, demonstrating the need for

continued cross-border cooperation on various issues, including environment, politics, and social issues.

Isabel Pardillos, Head of Communication and Public Affairs, Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), focused on shaping perceptions of Euro-Mediterranean relations through cooperation initiatives by the UfM. She highlighted the organisation's unique governance structure, which ensures equal participation from all member states, avoiding a donor-recipient dynamic .Pardillos shared several successful communication strategies including: the Day of the Mediterranean, an annual event promoting unity and mutual understanding; Mediterranean Capitals of Culture and Dialogue, an initiative designating one city from the north and one from the south to foster cultural and economic ties; Climate Change Communication, supported by the MedECC network, providing clear, scientifically backed information on climate impacts in

the region ; and human interest stories, emphasizing personal success stories to connect better with the public, promoting tangible benefits of cooperation. She underscored the importance of positive narratives and simplifying complex issues to foster hope and unity in Euro-Mediterranean relations. Additionally, Pardillos advocated for a joint communication strategy with the EU, emphasizing shared goals and perspectives to influence perceptions effectively.

Debate

- The audience voiced concerns over perceived biases in French media and officials' language regarding the Gaza conflict, criticizing the differential treatment in labelling the 7 October event as terrorism while avoiding a clear classification of subsequent Israeli actions. This raised questions about the consistency of language and its implications for public perception.

- When addressing communicating in the MENA region, experts stressed the challenge of reaching a broader Arab audience beyond traditional elites and proposed utilizing cultural channels such as sports and music to engage with youth culture and future opinion leaders.

- The importance of historical context in shaping media narratives and public perceptions was highlighted as well as concerns about the effectiveness of current strategies in removing false information, particularly in the context of sensitive conflicts like Gaza, where misinformation can have severe consequence.

- Leveraging the European diaspora from the Arab region was underlined as a strategic asset for communication as diaspora communities can offer unique perspectives and serve as effective channels for communication, potentially reaching broader audiences and fostering understanding.