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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

PeaceTech in a Conflict-Prone Region

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GLOSSARY

AI – Artificial Intelligence

ALLMEP – Alliance for Middle East Peace

CMI – Crisis Management Initiative

DIP – Digital Innovations for Peace

DPPA – Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

EU – European Union

GIS – Geographic Information Systems

GPS – Global Positioning System

IIIM – International Impartial and Independent Mechanism

ISIS / **Da'esh** – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

MENA – Middle East and North Africa

NGO / **NGOs** – Non-Governmental Organization / Non-Governmental Organizations

NDICI – Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument

SMS – Short Message Service

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

UAE – United Arab Emirates

UN – United Nations

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNITAD – United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh

UNITAR-UNOSAT – United Nations Institute for Training and Research - United Nations Satellite Centre

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

AT A GLANCE

The Rise of "Digital Geopolitics"

Digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are no longer peripheral tools in the MENA region, but central instruments of state power.

Regional governments are tightly linking national AI strategies to security and military modernization. This overlap between civilian and military applications has driven a deep securitisation of digital infrastructure, giving rise to intense cyber competition and an uneven distribution of technological capability across states.

The Expanding Frontiers of PeaceTech

Digital technologies for peace are moving beyond a niche agenda to play a vital role in conflict prevention.

AI is significantly enhancing existing peacemaking methodologies through five main avenues: data-driven conflict analytics, social media sentiment monitoring, mobile/SMS inclusion mechanisms, virtual dialogue platforms for negotiators, and AI-supported scenario-making for diplomatic planning.

The Digital Paradox: Control vs. Engagement

The digital space in the MENA region is highly contested, oscillating between top-down state surveillance and grassroots civil society mobilization.

While authoritarian regimes increasingly deploy advanced spyware, social media monitoring, and restrictive legislation for mass control, digital tools simultaneously offer civil society, youth, and marginalised groups vital channels for inclusive advocacy, democratic resilience, and cross-sectarian solidarity.

Structural Barriers and New Digital Risks

There is a clear need to promote PeaceTech more actively among diplomats and security communities across the region.

A MENA Digital Peace Platform could be established to promote MENA PeachTech by bringing together different communities of practice in the broad “peace and security” sector.

INTRODUCTION

Too often dismissed as resistant to change, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is undergoing a far-reaching process of digital transformation that is reshaping economies and communication, as well as social mobilisation and patterns of cooperation and conflict. Governments across the region are actively building "digital power" through national Artificial Intelligence (AI) strategies, digital diplomacy, digital literacy initiatives, and investment in critical digital infrastructure.[1]

MENA states increasingly see digital capabilities as central to economic success, political leverage and international influence. Traditional geopolitical concerns are thus becoming entwined with digital power dynamics, giving rise to what is sometimes described as "digital geopolitics". [2] This includes efforts to expand state power through pervasive surveillance and control, as well as to harness digital capabilities for international competition. In a region where conflict preparedness is seen as unavoidable, digital security and military applications are proliferating.[3]

Against this backdrop, this policy paper examines digital technologies for peace, or PeaceTech, in MENA, with a focus on selected countries in North Africa, the Levant and Iraq, as well as Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula.[4] It argues that persistent conflict across much of the region calls for moving PeaceTech beyond a niche agenda. Drawing on a range of cases, the paper identifies promising applications while highlighting two key priorities: more meaningful engagement with state actors, and stronger interaction between peacebuilding and security communities across the region.

With these concerns in mind, the creation of a MENA Digital Peace Platform could bring together diverse communities of practice, facilitate the exchange of PeaceTech best practices across the region, and support targeted awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives in key areas. More broadly, the Platform would seek to reframe the technology–security nexus, currently heavily oriented towards technologies of war-making, by promoting the integration of the peacebuilding potential of digital technologies into state doctrines, policy practices, and the wider regional security equation.

1 On the promise and limits of digital transformation in the MENA, see M. Zayani and J. F. Khalil, The Digital Double Bind: Change and Stasis in the Middle East, Oxford University Press, 2024.

2 See, among others, Gazmend Huskaj, "Digital Geopolitics: a Review of the Current State", International Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security 18(1), pp. 152-161, 2023.

3 These include, among others, cyber operations, AI-enabled intelligence, electronic warfare, data-driven command-and-control, military platforms operated with limited human intervention, etc.

4 While "technologies for peace" is a long-standing field, for instance satellite imagery for ceasefire monitoring, this paper focuses on the growing field of digital peace-making.

DIGITAL GEOPOLITICS

In the evolving geopolitical landscape of the MENA region, digital technologies – particularly AI, cyber capabilities, and data infrastructures – are no longer peripheral tools but central instruments of state power. Governments across the region increasingly view AI as a multi-purpose capability, positioning it both as a driver of economic transformation and as a strategic asset for national security.

AI strategies are closely tied to security strategies and AI-enabled technologies are becoming integral to military modernisation. The result is a growing securitisation of digital infrastructure, where civilian and military use often overlap. In this context, cybersecurity has long emerged as an arena of capability-building and competition.[5] The region faces a high frequency of cyberattacks, driven by both interstate rivalries and non-state actors, making cyber resilience a strategic priority.

Countries such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, but also Iran, have acquired advanced cyber capabilities, while others lag behind due to limited resources, weak institutional capacity, or dependence on external technology providers, contributing to a fragmented landscape.

In fact, the region is overall marked by an uneven distribution of digital power, with technological capacity emerging as a new axis of geopolitical influence. This axis is shaped above all by the financial strength and state-led investment strategies of the Arab Gulf states, alongside Israel's longstanding advantages in deep-tech innovation, cybersecurity, and advanced research and development.

Beyond the Gulf and Israel, other MENA countries are also strengthening their digital capabilities as part of broader efforts to enhance economic resilience, state capacity, and security preparedness. Egypt is expanding its digital economy to help manage demographic pressures and reinforce institutional capacity, Morocco is positioning digital transformation and AI as strategic tools within its industrial, innovation, and digital sovereignty agenda. Algeria and Tunisia are investing in digital-sector development to build greater technological self-reliance.

In conflict-affected and politically fragile contexts such as Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon, the core conditions required for a secure and competitive AI economy remain difficult to guarantee. In such environments, cyber vulnerabilities are often more acute. In Gaza, there is evidence that Israel has targeted communications (especially internet) infrastructure. Weak institutional capacity, fragmented governance, damaged or outdated infrastructure, and limited regulatory oversight can leave digital systems highly exposed to disruption, manipulation, surveillance, and exploitation.

Recent conflicts in the MENA region underscore the growing nexus between digital capabilities and warfare. Israel's war in Gaza has drawn particular attention to the reported use of AI-enabled systems in surveillance, target development, and operational decision-making, raising serious concerns over accountability, civilian harm, and the speed at which algorithmic tools may intensify violence. This has led critics to describe the conflict as an example of "AI-powered genocide."[6]

The confrontation involving Israel, the United States, and Iran has further highlighted the growing role of AI and advanced digital tools in intelligence fusion, target development, battlefield assessment, and operational coordination. Iran, in turn, has relied on internet restrictions and blackouts to control domestic information flows, limit public scrutiny, and manage internal dissent, while also using cyberattacks as an asymmetric form of retaliation against militarily superior adversaries. In a new development, Gulf-based data centres have reportedly been damaged during the conflict, marking a significant escalation in the targeting of critical infrastructure.

Taken together, these developments show that the digital domain has become inseparable from the region's wider security landscape.

5 James Shires, *The Politics of Cybersecurity in the Middle East* (London: Hurst & Co., 2021).

6 "Automating Genocide: Israel's Use of AI-Driven Warfare," Visualizing Palestine.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT, DIGITAL CONTROL, AND PEACETECH

Across the region, digital tools and AI are increasingly reshaping diplomacy, international assistance, and civil society engagement in concrete ways. [7] Diplomats structurally rely on digital diplomacy, from social media messaging to narrative management, to promote specific foreign policy agendas. National and international agencies increasingly resort to online consultations, digital surveys, and social media campaigns to engage stakeholders who may be difficult to reach through traditional channels, including youth groups, women's organisations, and specific actors in conflict-affected areas. In this sense, digital technologies can broaden participation and make consultations more inclusive.

At the same time, these tools have become instruments of contestation. In conflicts such as Gaza, Syria, Yemen, or the confrontation between Iran and its adversaries, social media platforms are used not only to share information, but also to frame responsibility, mobilise international opinion, discredit opponents, and contest the legitimacy of rival narratives. State actors and proxy groups increasingly use hashtags, coordinated messaging, and manipulated visual content, including AI-generated images and videos, to shape perceptions of events in real time.

At the civil society level, growing connectivity and digital literacy among educated urban elites helped enable new forms of youth-driven mobilisation as early as during the 2011 "Arab Spring", making the MENA region one of the earliest and most visible examples of digital technologies being used for political change.[8] Digitally-powered advocacy has also played an important role in recent years in the context of difficult national debates around governance and participation in fractured societies, from Libya to Syria, from Iraq to Yemen.

At the same time, a tradition of state-centric approaches, authoritarian politics, a generational element that sees many leaders in power whose formative experiences precede the digital revolution, mean that the MENA region faces significant challenges in mainstreaming digital innovation for positive change.

In a security-oriented environment, a discernible trend is in fact the growing adoption of digital technologies for mass surveillance and social control. Authorities increasingly rely on social media monitoring, spyware, facial recognition, biometric identification, and expansive cybercrime legislation to track dissent, identify activists, and regulate citizens' online behaviour.[9]

Yet this securitised landscape is not the region's only digital trajectory. Some of the earliest, pre-AI digital peacemaking tools have been piloted in the MENA, making PeaceTech an emerging feature of conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding efforts in the region.[10] Compared to the grassroots-heavy, conflict-resolution focus in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, or the civic technology focus in East Asia, MENA PeaceTech is characterised by the dual reality of innovation – with NGOs and international agencies in the lead – and the persistence of top-down, state-security oriented approaches.

With international funding for peace, development, and democracy promotion under growing pressure globally, MENA peacebuilders increasingly report shrinking resources, shorter project cycles, and reduced support for locally led initiatives. Yet, peacebuilding initiatives in the region continue to draw on partnerships with international actors, from leading international NGOs to the United Nations, the European Union, the development agencies of certain European countries, and US-based NGOs.

Digital applications in the MENA that are directly relevant to peacemaking can be grouped into several categories, including:

7 F. Caba-Maria, "Cyber Diplomacy Theory and Practice in the MENA Region – Case Study on AI," *International Journal of Cyber Diplomacy* (2024): 75–83.

8 Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

9 M. Fatafta, "Transnational Digital Repression in the MENA Region," POMEPS Project/GWU Paper, 2022

10 H. Puig Larrauri and A. Kahl, "Technology for Peacebuilding," *International Journal of Security and Development* (2013): 1–15.

• **Data-driven conflict analytics**, used by UN and other international agencies, humanitarian organisations, think tanks, and increasingly also by relevant national agencies to better map and track conflict dynamics and anticipate potential triggers of violence.

• **Social media sentiment analysis**, used by international organisations, civil society monitors, digital rights organisations, but also security-oriented government agencies to identify divisive narratives in the digital domain, track propaganda and hate speech, and anticipate mobilisation dynamics, particularly during elections, protests, or conflict escalation.

• **Digital inclusion mechanisms**, such as mobile-based surveys, SMS consultations, or online polling platforms, used primarily by UN missions, development agencies, NGOs, and local peacebuilders to involve women, youth, refugees, internally displaced persons, and remote communities in inclusivity-oriented consultation processes.

• **Virtual dialogue platforms**, used by mediators and negotiators to sustain national or local dialogues in conflict-affected settings when institutional channels are deemed insufficient and physical meetings are either impossible or raise significant sensitivities.

• **AI-supported scenario-making and negotiation tools**, used primarily by international mediation support actors and diplomatic teams to test possible conflict trajectories, assess dynamic risks, develop negotiating positions and mediation strategies.

These technologies differ widely in their level of sophistication and their utilisation.

It is reported, for instance, that large private companies operating in the region are increasingly turning to available AI tools to assess geopolitical risk, driven primarily by concerns over predictability and profitability.[11] For their part, foreign services across the MENA are increasingly drawn to AI-supported conflict analysis and AI-enhanced conflict resolution models, both in their day-to-day work and in preparation for diplomatic initiatives or inter-governmental talks. These tools can help diplomats process large volumes of information, monitor shifts in narratives and positions, and study and possibly anticipate the moves of specific stakeholders.

In practice, AI can support early warning systems, negotiation preparation, policy planning, and strategic communication by helping foreign ministries detect patterns that may not be immediately visible through traditional analysis and diplomatic reporting alone. In this sense, digital diplomacy in the MENA is increasingly moving beyond public communication and online engagement to include more sophisticated forms of data-driven and AI-enabled diplomatic practice

Yet, foreign and defence ministries across the MENA region still rarely treat PeaceTech as a distinct policy field or institutional capability. While digital tools are increasingly used, they are often absorbed into broader units dealing with cyber policy, public diplomacy, innovation, or strategic planning. Few ministries appear to have specialised PeaceTech units that bring together diplomats, technologists, data analysts, mediation experts, and regional specialists to apply digital tools to conflict prevention and peacebuilding systematically.

This reflects a broader capacity gap. More and more foreign ministries are making efforts to recruit engineers, data scientists, and STEM graduates, but these profiles are still, on the whole, secondary in diplomatic training curricula, which are dominated by law, political science, international relations, and economics.

In the NGO sphere, tech-savvy organisers and mobilizers are proactively experimenting with digital tools for peacemaking. These "peace entrepreneurs" tend to come from young, educated, and internationally connected segments of civil society, and often work through transnational NGO networks rather than formal state channels.[12]

Engagement between PeaceTech experts and military-security communities remains limited at best. As a result, PeaceTech is still insufficiently understood and appreciated in diplomatic and military circles, while digital peacebuilders and cybersecurity experts rarely exchange knowledge, methods, or operational insights in a systematic way. Some of these barriers are, of course, rooted in the distinct mandates and institutional cultures.

It is worth pointing out that AI is enhancing, rather than creating from scratch, digital PeaceTech tools that have been available in the MENA for much longer. For instance, AI is enhancing the use of satellite imagery, by automating the detection of

11 *Research interviews.*

12 Examples of international NGOs and companies working on MENA PeaceTech include Build Up, Centre for the Humanitarian Dialogue, CMI/Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, the Danish Refugee Council, Re:Coded, Search for Common Ground, PeaceTech Lab, Tech4Peace, etc.

ground changes, increasing image resolution, and enabling the processing of vast volumes of data. Conflict data analysis is also AI-enhanced, due to the scope of information that can be gathered, processed and cross-checked from an unprecedented variety of sources.

AI can also enhance digital dialogue platforms – which remain perhaps the earliest and most common form of PeaceTech in the region.[13] Consultative and deliberative processes can be strengthened thanks to, among other features, real time multi-lingual support, chat bot-supported conversations, real time automated synthesis of high volumes of inputs, inclusiveness-oriented stakeholder engagement techniques, automated content filtering against hate speech and disruptive content, etc.[14]

While AI-enhanced tools hold great promise, peacebuilders report that a distinct risk rests with AI-generated data which cannot be easily tracked back to original sources.[15] They also lament built-in biases in AI models and research datasets that are generally produced outside the region. The use of commercial digital platforms raises questions about data sovereignty and protection. The "de-humanisation" of conflicts is also seen as a danger, where in-person interaction and empathy are side-lined by "impersonal" AI approaches.

Moreover, hacking, data theft, and the surveillance of mediators and participants can compromise confidentiality and credibility on a scale entirely different from that of the pre-digital/pre-AI era. Malicious actors may gain access to vast troves of data that can be easily copied, shared, and repurposed for objectives unrelated – or even harmful – to peacebuilding.

13 Among others, M. Wählisch and F. Kufus, "Leveraging AI in Peace Processes: A Framework for Digital Dialogues," *Data & Policy* (2025).

14 See in particular the work done by CMI in this domain.

15 *Research Interviews.*

PRACTICAL PEACETECH

Libya: Digital Mediation amid Fragmentation

With an unsolved civil conflict dating back to 2011, the UN has played a trailblazing PeaceTech role in Libya, offering several Digital Dialogues between 2020-2021 in support of the Libyan Political Dialogue in a highly polarised context marked by regional divisions and a complex mosaic of actors.[16] Platforms were provided by US-based, venture-backed AI tech company Remesh.

Designed to complement, rather than replace, formal mediation, these dialogues tackled sensitive issues such as the role of domestic militias, the distribution of oil revenues, and cooperation between the East and West. In 2021, questions gathered through a digital dialogue with more than 1,000 Libyans were put to candidates for the Government of National Unity. Amplified through social media and live television, the event reportedly reached around 1.7 million people — approximately one quarter of Libya's population at the time.

At the same time, the Digital Dialogues have exposed the limits of technological inclusion. Although broadening public engagement beyond elite negotiation rooms, women were significantly underrepresented. Subsequent adjustments have leveraged AI-enhanced inclusion-oriented techniques. In 2025, a dedicated digital youth platform was launched for Libyans aged 18–35, feeding youth perspectives into the Structured Dialogue process.[17]

Meanwhile, digital tools are being used to promote civic engagement in areas of the country affected by fragmentation and weak state presence. An example is the launch in 2024 of the Ebraz Community Engagement Platform, an initiative of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The platform provides an online space for civil society organisations, local media actors, and peacebuilding stakeholders to connect, share content, and promote civic participation.[18]

For its part, the EU has supported initiatives such as Digital Innovations for Peace (DIP), a co-funded, NGO-implemented regional project focused on countering disinformation, strengthening media and information literacy, supporting quality reporting, and promoting a safer, more resilient digital media environment.[19]

The Libyan context has seen a lively PeaceTech scene, with international agencies and NGOs actively experimenting with tools to promote engagement, empowerment, as well as consensus-building. On the downside, social media manipulation by domestic and foreign actors has notably complicated trust building across the country of late, with disinformation campaigns proliferating in the digital space.

Tunisia: Youth-Led Digital Activism amid Shrinking Political Space

Tunisians were early pioneers in using social media for civic mobilisation in the early 2010s, during a participatory revolution that generated high expectations for democratic transformation and inclusive growth. While subsequent developments have called that legacy into question, Tunisia's vibrant digital community continues to support democratic resilience through civic-tech initiatives that counter harmful narratives, promote non-violent online communication, advance peace messaging, and help keep the information space open amid shrinking political space.

Tunisian "peace labs" have seen a prominent role for female activists and have featured training sessions as well as digital dialogues that promote intergroup trust-building, including on issues such as radicalization and terrorism.[20] These platforms blend technology and facilitation, demonstrating that online engagement can complement traditional mediation.

16 C. Irwin et al., "Using Artificial Intelligence in Peacemaking: The Libya Experience" (paper presented at the WAPOR 74th Annual Conference, 2-6 November 2021). UNSMIL was supported by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) Innovation cell.

17 "UNSMIL Launches Digital Youth Platform to Support the Structured Dialogue Process," United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 10 November 2025.

18 Funded by Italy and the UN Trust Fund for Human Security, this initiative is developed in partnership with ACTED and BBC Media Action.

19 "The Digital Innovations for Peace (DIP) Project Concludes After 3 Years," EuMedBridge.

20 "Peace Lab Project Report," SlideShare.

The already cited EU-supported Digital Innovations for Peace initiative has engaged Tunisian youth, media professionals, civic actors and digital entrepreneurs through training, networking, hackathons and campaigns focused on media literacy, fact-checking, social cohesion and countering harmful online narratives. Concrete examples included as Rajeh, a Tunisian Arabic-language podcast platform using storytelling to teach youngsters how to recognize misinformation.

On the government side, authorities have relied on participatory online consultations, especially at the local level. However, digital power is also increasingly being used for social control. And while the Tunisian digital space remains relatively lively, this cannot compensate for public and traditional media spaces being progressively restricted.

Egypt: Digital Civic Space emerging despite repression

Egypt is investing heavily in digital transformation. Yet, the security-oriented approach of the Egyptian authorities translates into significant limitations on online expression, digital organising, and civil society's use of cyberspace for inclusion and empowerment.

Against this backdrop, digital technologies supporting women and vulnerable groups offer some qualified hope. One prominent example is HarassMap, which has used mobile, SMS, web-based, and social-media reporting to enable people to anonymously report and map incidents of sexual harassment. Although not explicitly designed as a conflict-prevention tool, HarassMap contributes to "everyday" peacebuilding by making gender-based violence more visible, challenging social tolerance of harassment, and supporting women's safer participation in public spaces.

Other initiatives illustrate similar possibilities. Speak Up Egypt has mobilised online platforms to support survivors of sexual violence and advocate for stronger legal and social responses. Digital legal-aid initiatives have also sought to connect vulnerable and marginalised groups, including women, with legal information and professional support. These examples show how relatively low-cost digital tools can help people report abuse, find support networks, document patterns of harm, and amplify voices that might otherwise remain marginalised.

Lebanon: Maintaining Cross-Sectarian Bridges

In Lebanon, digital technologies and AI are increasingly being used as tools for peacebuilding, reconciliation, and more inclusive governance. Their promise lies in three main areas: widening citizen engagement beyond established political elites, improving data-driven conflict analysis, and supporting social cohesion across sectarian and communal divides. However, Lebanon also illustrates the limits of peaceTech in a context marked by political fragmentation, economic crisis, weak institutions, disinformation, and periodic escalation of violence.

UN actors have used monitoring systems to analyse social tensions, including through the UNDP–UNHCR Tensions Monitoring System, which collects and analyses data to inform more conflict-sensitive programming and early warning. In parallel, the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon has explored monitoring traditional and social media, including hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric, to detect changes in the conflict environment. These approaches are not a substitute for political engagement, but they can help peacebuilding actors identify emerging risks, misinformation trends, and localised tensions before they escalate.

Digital tools are also being used in reconciliation and memory work. UN-supported initiatives such as "Dealing with the Past: Memory for the Future" have focused on fostering cross-community dialogue, healing, and peacebuilding in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War.[21] While these initiatives are not primarily technology projects, digital documentation, online storytelling, multimedia materials, and virtual dissemination can help preserve memories of the war, make testimonies accessible to younger generations, and challenge selective or sectarian narratives of the past. Such work is especially important in Lebanon, where the absence of a shared national narrative about the civil war continues to affect political trust and intercommunal relations.

Digital activism has also provided an outlet for cross-sectarian mobilisation, particularly during the 2019 protest movement. Online platforms,

21 "Dealing with the Past: Memory for the Future," UN Peacebuilding Fund, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa.

messaging apps, and self-organised digital communities helped protesters coordinate demonstrations, circulate reform messages, document abuses, and mobilise around anti-corruption and accountability agendas. These spaces temporarily enabled forms of civic solidarity that cut across sectarian lines and challenged traditional party structures. At the same time, they were vulnerable to fragmentation, surveillance, harassment, and the limits of translating online mobilisation into sustained institutional change.

Syria: Inclusive Recovery and Reconstruction

Syria has been a PeaceTech laboratory both during the long civil war and since the fall of the Assad regime in 2024.

Sentry Syria, developed by Hala Systems, offered an innovative AI-driven early warning system operating between 2017-2024 in northwestern Syria.[22] Combining acoustic sensors, AI algorithms, but also physical observers, the system was able to anticipate airstrikes with a ca. 10-minute advance notice. Alerts were disseminated through multiple channels, including social media and local radio. Independent verification indicated a significant reduction in casualty rates in the affected areas.

During the bloody years of civil strife, Syrian citizens increasingly turned to tech tools to survive repression.[23] Against this backdrop, "conflict transformation" company Build Up has focused on empowering Syrian activists to use digital tools for civic resistance, social cohesion, and conflict monitoring.[24] Around 2020, Build Up developed an open-source social media analysis application named Phoenix Platform, which uses simple AI-assisted tools to monitor public discourse, identify polarizing narratives, and design data-driven trust-building initiatives.[25] Earlier still, Build Up and the British Council helped launch PeaceLens, a youth-led initiative that created "Channel 3", a digital platform for Syrian youth focused on the search for common ground.[26]

In the post-conflict phase, consultative and deliberative AI is being deployed by various NGO actors to facilitate so-called "hyper-local" mediation, i.e. the use of digital tools, social media, and location-based data to engage directly with small communities (such as neighbourhoods, cities, or districts) rather than focusing solely on national or regional levels.[27] AI applications are also being tested in the fields of economic recovery and reconstruction, including with the goal of creating "smart" reconstruction blueprints.

AI-enhanced systems can simulate different development schemes, prioritising sustainable and equitable rebuilding.[28] UN bodies such as UNESCO and UNITAR-UNOSAT utilise high-resolution satellite imagery processed by automated machine-learning models to run comprehensive structural and cultural damage assessments. This was used to create baseline reconstruction blueprints for historical centres like the ancient city of Aleppo.

When it comes to accountability and transitional justice, projects like the Syrian Archive and the UN's International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) use AI and machine learning to process user-generated content with a view to enhancing evidence sorting.[29]

Syrian activists engaged in the post-Assad transition have cautioned that some digitally supported initiatives promoted by the new authorities may be more performative than participatory, forming part of a broader effort to secure international legitimacy. There is a broad agreement that, while peaceTech is expanding channels for civic engagement, evidence-gathering, and agenda-setting, it cannot by itself resolve the uncertainty surrounding Syria's institutional reform process.

Iraq: Supporting Post-Isis Stabilisation

In Iraq, digital tools are deployed to manage the transition from hot conflict to long-term post-Isis stabilisation. Digital tools are being used to monitor and when possible, de-escalate sectarian and other flashpoints.

22 Artificial Intelligence Tools for the Syria Context.

23 Abdullah Okaily, "Inside the Tech Systems that Kept Syria Running under the Assad Regime," *Wired Middle East*, March 2026.

24 "Innovative Peacebuilding in Syria," Build Up.

25 "Phoenix," Build Up.

26 "Life in Syria Through a Peace Lens," Build Up.

27 Eskandar Ataallah, "The Digital Aftermath of a War: Algorithmic Mediation and Building Peace in Post-Assad Syria," *Peace Policy*, 23 February 2026.

28 C. Khazaal, "Rebuilding Gaza and Syria: The Role of Artificial Intelligence," *Middle East Entrepreneur*, December 2025.

29 Syrian Archive homepage.

UNDP and USAID social media monitoring has used AI-powered Natural Language Processing tools tuned to Iraqi dialects. The latter scan platforms like Facebook and Telegram to identify surges in "inflammatory language" or "misinformation" before they trigger physical violence. Various local NGOs have experimented with chat bots, or Peace Bots, that provide youth with non-biased information on civil rights and conflict resolution, bypassing partisan media silos.

When it comes to documenting atrocities and addressing past crimes, AI has been a "heavy lifter" in processing the massive evidence left behind by ISIS. UNITAD (UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh) has used AI-driven platforms to analyse millions of call records, GPS data, and internal ISIS documents.[30] The AI identifies patterns of command and control, linking specific individuals to massacres much faster than human investigators.

Disputes over land ownership - often following the displacement of Yazidi, Christian, and Shabak communities - are also a major driver of post-conflict instability in Iraq. The UN-Habitat's Digital Land Registry has used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and high-resolution satellite imagery to map and digitise property claims in Sinjar and Mosul.[31] By creating a transparent, digital "paper trail" of ownership, these tools reduce the likelihood of armed groups seizing land and fuel for communal conflict.

The EU has been active through partnerships with UNDP, for instance by supporting youth-driven digital economic innovation. Through its Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), the EU has also funded youth digital activism and youth engagement in peacebuilding.

Yemen: Engaging Underrepresented Groups

In Yemen, several UN-supported digital-peacebuilding initiatives have emerged in the context of a long and underreported civil war.

In 2020–21, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen piloted AI-powered digital consultations using platforms like Remesh to engage hundreds of civil society representatives – particularly women – on ceasefire and peace priorities, feeding those insights into mediation planning.[32] The DPPA Innovation Cell has developed a "social-listening" tool and supported online live interactive discussions for Yemeni Arabic speakers, enabling participants at once to engage in real-time online dialogue.[33]

Recent work with computational sense-making has provided structured analysis of Yemen's political perspectives across governorates.[34] In 2025, for instance, CMI used a customized WhatsApp chatbot and AI-powered qualitative analysis tool in Yemen.[35] The approach collected Yemeni Arabic voice/text responses, used OpenAI transcription/translation services, and applied the T3C "Talk to the City" sensemaking tool to identify themes across political vision, implementation obstacles, and youth participation. CMI reports participation across 18 governorates and 36.76% female participation.

Such initiatives have broadened engagement of traditionally under-heard groups (especially women) in Yemen, offering mediators data-driven insight into local priorities. Yet, uneven internet access in many parts of the country (7.7% internet penetration) and scarce internet literacy overall compound risks of surveillance and growing concerns around disinformation and intimidation campaigns.

Palestine: Networks of Resilience

AI-powered applications, particularly during the 2023-2025 Gaza war and its aftermath, are bifurcated between military AI systems

30 "UNITAD and Iraq Strengthen Justice Through Groundbreaking Digitization and Preservation of Da'esh-Related Materials," ReliefWeb.

31 "Transitioning to E-Land Governance in Iraq," United Nations Iraq.

32 M. Arana-Catania et al., "Supporting Peace Negotiations in the Yemen War Through Machine Learning," *Data & Policy* 4 (2022).

33 *Multi-Year Appeal: 2024 Annual Report*, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), 2025.

34 F. Kufus, "AI-facilitated Consultation in Yemen," TODA Peace Institute Report no. 291, 31 March 2026.

35 "Amplifying Youth Voices in Conflict Zones: AI for Inclusive Dialogue in Yemen," Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), 4 June 2025.

accelerating conflict and PeaceTech initiatives attempting to support reconciliation.[36]

The Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), an NGO coalition, collaborated with Remesh to conduct AI-assisted community dialogues following the events of October 7. This initiative brought together a large number of Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders to identify shared values, such as the desire for safety. The project has used large language models (LLMs) to find common ground in real time.[37]

Tech2Peace, a rare case of Israeli-Palestinian NGO collaboration, combines technology training with dialogue workshops that bring together participants from various communities, illustrating how digital cooperation can build empathy amid entrenched conflict.[38]

These cases demonstrate that technology's impact on peace depends less on the tools themselves and more on the ownership of the platforms and the agendas of specific NGO actors.

International agencies such as UNDP are also active in Palestine. UNDP has partnered with CulturePulse, a Slovakia-based AI company specialising in AI simulations to forecast societal shifts in conflict zones, to develop computational models of causal dynamics around the conflict.[39] This technology can be used to test and enhance peace-building interventions through digital simulations.

On the other hand, a growing number of security and military AI applications are being deployed to exacerbate conflict dynamics. During the Gaza war, the AI system "The Gospel" generated potential targets – such as residential buildings and public infrastructure – believed to be used by militants. Real time decisions and questionable algorithms have been cited as a cause for the high volume of destruction in Gaza. The AI system Lavender has been used to reportedly mark individuals as potential targets for assassination. Available research suggests the application marked thousands of Palestinians with limited human verification.[40]

Investigative reports have highlighted extensive AI usage by the Israeli military in the post ceasefire phase, creating a "digital occupation" that directly impacts the humanitarian situation. Facial recognition technologies like Blue Wolf and Red Wolf are used to collect biometric data from Palestinians at checkpoints. According to critics, they have contributed creating a "digital prison".[41]

36 A. Konya et al., "Using Collective Dialogues and AI to Find Common Ground between Israeli and Palestinian Peacebuilders," 2025.

37 "ALLMEP Hosts AI-Assisted Community Dialogues with Peacebuilders in Groundbreaking New AI Pulse Research," Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP).

38 Tech2Peace homepage

39 D. Black, "UN Using AI to Help Solve the Israel-Palestine Conflict," *Cybernews*, November 2023.

40 M. N. Schmitt, "The Gospel, Lavender, and the Law of Armed Conflict," *Lieber Institute West Point (Israel–Hamas 2024 Symposium)*, 2024.

41 See the perspective of Amnesty International.

MAINSTREAMING PEACETECH THROUGH PEACE ARCHITECTURES

While digital peace tools are being piloted across the MENA region, PeaceTech remains, for now, a vibrant yet niche field whose potential is still underappreciated and underutilised.

This is true even for experienced peacebuilding professionals, many of whom either continue to prioritise traditional approaches or express concern about a wide range of inherent or unintended risks of ongoing PeaceTech initiatives.

There is also a clear need to promote PeaceTech more actively among diplomats and security communities across the region, with a focus on demonstrating the added value of concrete, practical applications.

Considering the specific challenges of the MENA context, one notable gap is the limited integration of PeaceTech into formal conflict management and resolution initiatives. These processes tend to remain largely state-dominated, with traditional diplomatic formats and leader-to-leader contacts often taking precedence over more inclusive, participatory, and innovative forms of dialogue.[42]

With these concerns in mind, a MENA Digital Peace Platform could be established to promote MENA PeachTech by bringing together different communities of practice in the broad "peace and security" sector. Conceived as a light and primarily digital institutional mechanism, the platform would provide a dedicated space for exchanging information, lessons learned, and best practices among both NGO and governmental experts around PeaceTech initiatives across specific MENA contexts — a function that is currently missing.

Relevant UN entities, starting with the Innovation Cell of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, could partner with interested NGOs to launch the platform. Its design must guarantee the independence of all participants while enforcing strict safeguards for data protection and confidential information. Each MENA state would independently decide how to participate. Additionally, regional tech leaders, from Gulf countries to international companies, could support dedicated capacity-building programs offered by the platform.

Over time, the Platform could contribute to strengthening the region's still fragile peace architecture, while helping to embed PeaceTech within it. Its specific objectives could include: developing an inclusive, technology-oriented MENA peace and security network bringing together not only security experts, but also peacebuilders and mediators; supporting regional consortia of researchers and practitioners working on AI-enabled early-warning methodologies; developing conflict-relevant datasets and technology-enabled tools for conflict management and resolution that are tailored to the region's specific dynamics and, wherever possible, draw on locally trained AI; and providing PeaceTech-informed inputs to relevant consultations and deliberations in multilateral fora, including the United Nations, the African Union, the League of Arab States, and the European Union.

On a broader strategic level, the Platform could be leveraged to encourage a much needed shift from competition to cooperation in the MENA, articulating the technology-security nexus in such a way that the peace potential of digital technologies is better accounted for in the national strategies of individual countries and in multilateral initiatives around the peace and security agenda.

42 Ariel I. Ahram, "In Search of a Middle East and North Africa Peace System," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 11, no. 2 (2024): 168–191.



www.peaceagency.org