Civilian Protection and Regional Stability:

Humanitarian Law, Crisis Response, and Strategic Cooperation in the Middle East and Beyond

ILEF Conference Report

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- **Dr. Oliver Fink**, Senior Researcher, *swisspeace*
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Executive Summary

Theme 1: Enforcing International Humanitarian Law in the Middle East

Key insights:

- **Persistent IHL violations:** In the Middle East conflicts, we have seen frequent attacks on civilians, critical infrastructure, and aid workers, yet accountability remains weak due to political vetoes and impunity. Parties often ignore basic IHL norms; there is a vast gap between legal obligations and the reality on the ground.
- **Political paralysis:** UN Security Council gridlock and self-serving national interests undermine enforcement. As Mr. Jamie Williamson, Executive Director of the International Code of Conduct Association (IcoCA), highlighted, SC "is somewhat blocked on a whole range of issues" and political will routinely falls short of "civilian protection" imperatives. This allows state armies and militias to act with impunity.
- **Broad scope of harm:** Violations extend beyond conflict zones. For example, as Dr. Caroline Pellaton, Operations Director of the Geneva Water Hub, highlighted, deliberate contamination or destruction of water supplies in Basra, Syria, and Gaza show that essential civilian resources are weaponized. These systematic breaches exacerbate suffering across multiple conflicts (Syria, Yemen, Gaza) and reinforce a sense that IHL is not optional.
- **Emerging challenges:** The increased use of private military/security contractors (PMCs) in humanitarian operations creates oversight gaps. Many NGOs now rely on armed contractors, but standards and accountability for these actors are underdeveloped, posing new risks.

Top recommendations to solve these issues include sustaining international pressure and speaking out; leveraging legal mechanisms to punish extreme breaches; embedding IHL within armed forces and emphasizing commanders' legal duty to prevent and punish war crimes; insisting that parties allow unimpeded relief; acknowledging and managing the reality of private security contractors in aid operations; and protecting critical infrastructure.

Theme 2: Strategies to Protect Civilians in the Middle East

Key insights:

- **Rhetoric–reality gap:** High-level calls to protect civilians rarely translate into action. As Dr. Pellaton explained, appeals for de-escalation and adherence to IHL sound good but are just lacking on the ground: "[the] gap between law on paper and the reality on the ground is painfully wide." Civilians continue to suffer from widespread impunity and uncontrolled violence, meaning protective promises remain largely theoretical.
- **Dangers of aid delivery:** In Gaza and other war zones, even receiving aid has become hazardous. Aid convoys are being attacked or robbed, making civilians unsafe even when accepting assistance. This unprecedented situation shows that security and relief are deeply intertwined: without protection, humanitarian operations can inadvertently endanger those they aim to help.
- **Operational blind spots:** Many aid organizations do not systematically integrate protection into their programs. Large NGOs often neglect to analyze how relief activities might expose civilians to new risks. This "mainstreaming deficit" means that civilian protection is treated as an add-on rather than a built-in part of humanitarian planning.
- **Civil–military disconnect:** Humanitarian actors and armed forces operate almost in isolation ("two icebergs barely touching"). With little dialogue, militaries plan operations without civilian considerations, while aid groups have minimal influence on military tactics. This gulf hampers any collaborative

effort to safeguard civilians.
- **Cultural and psychological barriers:** Conflict parties often ignore IHL appeals. Their decisions are driven by factors like sacred land claims or honor. As Dr. Oliver Fink, Senior Researcher at Swispeace, excellently put it, a psychological wall of distrust, a "barrier of suspicion, rejection, fear, and deception," remains the biggest obstacle to ending the conflict.

Top recommendations:
1. Negotiate concrete safe zones: Secure specific, time-bound protections such as designated humanitarian corridors, safe passage hours, or limited ceasefires. By framing protection as a series of small, verifiable deals (e.g., agreeing on nightly aid convoys), parties can build trust incrementally. These pragmatic steps turn abstract "civilian protection" into actionable commitments.
2. Frame protection in local moral terms: Tailor messaging to each party's values and religious ethics. Instead of citing abstract international law, appeal to shared cultural or faith-based norms (e.g., sacredness of the land, duty to protect innocents under Islamic law). Messaging that casts protecting civilians as upholding one's own honour or religious duty can resonate more strongly than foreign legal concepts.
3. Train and equip armed forces: Collaborate with militaries and police to reduce civilian harm. Provide training on precision tactics, "no-fire zones," and evacuation protocols to military units. Encourage armies to adopt civilian-harm tracking systems: recording casualties after each engagement can lead troops to adjust tactics and internalize restraint. Over time, these measures help militaries protect their reputation and security by avoiding alienating civilian populations.
4. Empower communities: Place civilians at the center of protection efforts. Regularly ask affected communities what measures they need (early-warning networks, safe routes, local security committees) and help them implement these solutions. Promote dialogue across societal divides (e.g., between rival tribes or sects) so communities can coordinate on basic safety (joint convoys, shared alerts). Train and support trusted local leaders (elders, religious figures, women's groups) to advocate for civilian protection to authorities.
5. Mainstream protection in aid operations: Integrate "do no harm" protocols into all humanitarian projects. For example, before every food distribution or clinic setup, aid agencies should assess security risks and coordinate with others to minimize exposure (by adjusting timings, locations, or markings).
6. Guarantee humanitarian access: Treat access as fundamental to protection. Continually negotiate with warring parties for safe passage of aid and medical evacuations. High-level diplomacy (UN or state envoys) should support on-the-ground cluster coordination and liaisons to keep routes open. Where access is blocked, use international fora and data monitoring to publicize incidents. Always pair aid delivery promises with security demands (escorts, temporary ceasefires around hospitals, liaison channels) so that relief delivery and civilian safety reinforce each other.

Theme 3: Humanitarian Crises Response Coordination in the Middle East

Key insights:

- **Vital role of local responders:** National Red Cross/Red Crescent societies and local NGOs are often the first and most enduring responders. They stay on the ground before, during, and after crises and possess trusted community networks. Unlike many international agencies, they "don't leave when other international actors leave," providing unique access in conflict zones.
- **Severe strain on local staff:** Local aid workers face disproportionate violence and resource shortages. Between 2023 and 2025, humanitarian personnel suffered their deadliest period on record. As Mr. Christopher Rassi, Under Secretary General of the

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), noted, local volunteers often lack basics like protective gear, insurance, medical evacuation options, or mental health support. Many national societies operate underfunded and overstretched, undermining their capacity to save lives.

- **Coordination under pressure:** These local strengths coexist with major challenges. A trend towards militarized or private-sector aid (notably in Gaza) undermines the transparency and neutrality of relief. Coordination efforts risk failure if they do not actively bolster local actors amid violence and resource gaps.

Top recommendations:

1. Empower local organizations: Substantially increase funding, training, and decision-making authority for national societies and local NGOs. Provide *multi-year* support to build institutional capacity (staffing, equipment, logistics) rather than short-term projects. Direct a higher share of international aid budgets to these groups, enabling them to scale up rapidly. Strong local networks dramatically extend the reach and effectiveness of aid.

2. Modernize coordination mechanisms: Reform UN and interagency systems to reduce bureaucratic overhead and center local partners. Revise existing frameworks so that national societies are placed *at the core* of any coordination model. Streamline coordination by using shared data platforms. Embrace digital tools (teleconferencing, real-time mapping) to cut travel costs and speed decision-making. The aim is to make coordination *add value* on the ground instead of consuming resources.

3. Prioritize humanitarian worker safety: Build security and contingency support into every response plan. Allocate budget lines for body armor, satellite phones, insurance, and medical evacuation for local staff. Provide security training and trauma counseling to volunteers. Encourage governments to endorse international declarations on aid-worker protection and integrate them into law.

4. Defend neutrality and humanitarian space: Insist that all relief actors, including new or private ones, adhere to neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Coordination forums should include codes of conduct and joint monitoring of compliance. Local societies and faith-based NGOs, trusted by communities, should lead by example. International and donor agencies must work to protect humanitarian emblems in law and practice (through diplomacy and legal support) so aid workers can operate with community trust.

Theme 4: Effective Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in the Middle East

Key insights:

- **Overlapping crises:** The region faces multiple protracted conflicts (Iraq post-ISIS, Yemen's civil war, Syria's 14-year crisis, Gaza/West Bank hostilities, Lebanon's collapse). These have created massive humanitarian needs (tens of millions requiring aid, millions of refugees and IDPs) and destroyed basic services.

- **Fragile stability:** Chronic underfunding and exclusion fuel instability. Elites marginalize large segments of society, undermining governance and allowing armed groups to persist. Decades of war have affected access to essential services; the panel warned of risks like famine, disease epidemics, and spillover of extremists.

- **Local and faith-based actors:** Community organizations and faith networks are crucial for reconciliation. NGOs and groups like the ACT Alliance deliver culturally sensitive aid in hard-to-reach areas and can help bridge sectarian divides. Faith-based actors often command trust across conflict lines, providing neutral humanitarian and peacebuilding services. Sustainable peacebuilding hinges on fully engaging these grassroots leaders alongside formal diplomacy.

Top recommendations:

1. Integrate mine-action into peace efforts: Treat demining not as an afterthought but as a catalyst for stability. Include mine clearance commitments in ceasefire and peace agreements, and fund clearance programs as strategic investments. Empower local capacity by establishing or strengthening National Mine Action Centers to coordinate these efforts. Early demining, as seen in post-ISIS Mosul, can revive governance and livelihoods, reinforcing trust in peace.

2. Empower community-driven peacebuilders: Channel resources to grassroots and faith-based organizations. Donors and the UN should support local authorities, NGOs, and community networks to lead reconciliation projects. Faith groups and local mediators must be included in official dialogues and planning. For example, fund neighborhood peace committees or joint interfaith initiatives that address shared concerns.

3. Revitalize existing international mechanisms: Rather than creating new bodies, adapt and strengthen current UN missions and frameworks in the region. Leverage agile operations like Sinai's ANSO mission and expand UN policing and advisory teams. For instance, deploy small UN Police or rule-of-law units outside of current hotspots to train local institutions. Update UN mandates (UNIFIL, UNDOF, etc.) to allow more proactive engagement in mediation and capacity-building. The goal is to give the UN fresh leverage as a facilitator of peace.

4. Use neutral technical cooperation: Leverage common humanitarian needs as entry points for cooperation. Focus on practical projects with broad appeal – for example, prioritize joint water management, infrastructure repair, or demining initiatives. Such efforts force adversaries to collaborate on non-ideological issues, gradually building confidence. This also means transferring operational control to local institutions (e.g., funding Syrian or Iraqi NGOs to run clearance teams) so that peace dividends accrue to communities rather than foreign actors.

Theme 5: The Israel–Iran Conflict and U.S. Role

Key insights:

- **Recent conflict shift:** The June 2025 war saw Israel strike Iran's nuclear and military sites, prompting Iran to fire missiles, with the U.S. intervening on Israel's side. Hundreds were killed, and Iran's facilities were heavily damaged. This confrontation underscored Israel's military edge (destroying much of Iran's air defenses) and Iran's vulnerability under sanctions.
- **Iran's dilemma:** The attacks hit during Iran's nuclear negotiations, leading Tehran to harden its stance. Concessions after feeling betrayed would be politically toxic; the conference notes Iran now sees its own bomb as the best deterrent to future strikes. Hardliners have strengthened, making it crucial that any deal allows Iran to claim victory rather than humiliation.
- **U.S. influence and perceptions:** Washington's role is double-edged. Unconditional U.S. backing of Israel has alarmed other regional states, shifting them to view Israeli power as the greater threat. At the same time, U.S. policy is internally divided and "unfocused," with mixed signals on Iran. These dynamics create a security dilemma: Arab states feel exposed by Israel's new freedom of action, even as they remain wary of Iran.
- **Wider regional impact:** Iran's traditional proxies (Hezbollah, Hamas, Shia militias) were weakened in the recent fighting, but still loom as potential flashpoints. Any attempt by Iran to rearm them risks provoking Israel and a broader escalation. Meanwhile, Iran's society is suffering under sanctions-induced collapse (frequent mass protests), affecting its negotiating posture. Any arrangement with Iran will have ripple effects: Gulf states may demand nuclear parity (e.g., Saudi Arabia and

Egypt watching Iran's concessions), raising the stakes for a wider arms race.

Top recommendations:

1. Frame diplomacy as a win for Iran: Structure negotiations so that Iran can plausibly claim significant gains. For example, allow limited uranium enrichment under strict controls. This means Western diplomats should publicly recognize Iran's rights (peaceful nuclear technology, sanctions relief) as part of any deal, enabling Iranian leaders to present concessions as victories rather than capitulations.

2. Balance pressure with incentives: Pair sanctions enforcement with tangible rewards. Maintain core sanctions but link phased relief to verified Iranian steps (e.g., inspections, capping enrichment). In practice, convene EU or intermediary-led talks where, each time Iran meets benchmarks, select sanctions are lifted. This "give-and-take" approach preserves leverage (since Iran urgently needs relief) while keeping dialogue open.

3. Innovate nuclear frameworks: Move beyond zero-enrichment demands. Explore creating a multinational nuclear consortium for Iran's fuel cycle, where enrichment or fuel production is jointly managed by Iran and international partners. The aim is to make Iran's nuclear program an asset under international supervision, which could gain regional buy-in.

4. Engage Iran's proxies politically: Encourage Iran to negotiate de-escalation of its regional militias. This could take the form of dialogues where Iran agrees to halt funding for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas in exchange for those groups' integration into official forces or demobilization. For example, Hezbollah fighters could be gradually folded into Lebanon's army, and Hamas rockets exchanged for political incentives. Third-party mediators should facilitate these talks, offering economic aid or reconstruction support (e.g., to Lebanon) as sweeteners.

5. U.S. as constructive mediator: The U.S. should use its leverage to restrain its allies and re-engage diplomatically. Washington must signal to Israel that while the U.S. guarantees its defense (e.g., supplying Iron Dome or joint patrols), it will also demand de-escalation when necessary. In parallel, the U.S. should make clear it seeks engagement with Iran: for instance, appointing a special envoy or backing IAEA access, showing Iran "we're still willing to talk". This dual approach (deterring further attacks while offering a credible path to a deal) is vital to preventing wider war.

Theme 6: Korean Peninsula Issues (South Korea, USA, North Korea)

Key insights:

- **Heightened nuclear stakes:** North Korea has rapidly advanced its arsenal (ICBM tests, miniaturized warheads) and formed a security partnership with Russia. Pyongyang reportedly has fissile material for dozens of nukes. This raises the risk that a miscalculation could spark a major conflict, as the DPRK's capabilities now threaten even distant targets.
- **Political shifts:** South Korea's volatile politics (recent election of a liberal president seeking dialogue with the North) and the U.S. leadership change (Trump's transactional approach) inject uncertainty into alliance policies. Seoul's domestic focus (economy, China ties) may diverge from Washington's priorities, complicating joint strategy. Meanwhile, China and Russia continue backing Pyongyang economically and diplomatically, even as they publicly engage Seoul and Tokyo in dialogue.
- **Weakened multilateral enforcement:** UN sanctions regimes have been undermined; for example, Russia's veto halted the U.N. panel that monitored DPRK sanctions in 2024. This erosion of oversight emboldens North Korea. U.N. officials warn that communication channels are scant: there have been no high-level ROK–DPRK summits since 2019, and even

the U.S. learned of Seoul's emergency martial law via TV. The lack of direct dialogue or hotlines greatly increases the danger of miscalculation.

Top recommendations:

1. Pursue stable coexistence: Shift goalposts from immediate denuclearization to managed deterrence. Publicly acknowledge that North Korea has nuclear weapons (at least temporarily) and focus on crisis management. Resume strategic dialogues (e.g., a proposed "strategic stability dialogue") to clarify red lines and reduce incentives for preemption. U.S. and Seoul should signal willingness to improve ties and discuss gradual security assurances, while making clear that conflict would be catastrophic.

2. Revive inter-Korean agreements and CBMs: Fully implement and expand past de-escalation measures. Lee Jae-myung's government should restore the 2018 inter-Korean military agreements (no-fly zones, buffer zones) under a trilateral (U.S.–ROK–DPRK) framework. Establish new hotlines at military and political levels, pre-notify major exercises, and consider declaring no-first-use policies publicly.

3. Negotiate arms-control steps: Propose an immediate freeze on North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile tests. In return, the U.S. and allies could suspend large-scale military drills as a goodwill gesture. Begin a phased denuclearization process: for example, dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear complex under international verification, with incremental sanctions relief tied to each step.

4. Re-engage diplomatically on all tracks: Restart high-level talks with Pyongyang. Encourage U.S.–North Korea summits (Trump has signaled willingness) and support Seoul's initiative to reopen dialogue with Pyongyang.

5. Engage China and Russia: Treat Beijing and Moscow as stakeholders in Korean stability. Press China and Russia to enforce UN sanctions (e.g., against DPRK arms shipments). Consider a four-way dialogue (U.S.–ROK–China–Russia) focused on Northeast Asian security issues.

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Theme 1. Enforcing International Humanitarian Law in the Middle East

Introduction and Background

Discussions revealed various stark challenges on the ground. Many Middle Eastern conflicts, both state and non-state actors, have been accused of grave violations of IHL. Attacks on civilians, critical infrastructure, and humanitarian aid workers are not uncommon, yet accountability is elusive: political vetoes at the UN Security Council and unchecked impunity allow these breaches to continue.

This conference identified a persistent compliance deficit. The full respect of international humanitarian law…is simply not being met, and the gap between IHL and reality on the ground is painfully wide.

Experts highlighted multiple drivers of IHL violations. Political paralysis and self-interest undermine IHL enforcement. As Mr. Williamson warned, the UN Security Council is "somewhat blocked on a whole range of issues" and "national interests…take primacy over civilian protection". In this environment, military actors at all levels, both state armies and non-state militias, often operate with impunity. Civil society and humanitarian organizations face immense obstacles to neutralizing violence.

Against this backdrop, the speakers raised concrete examples: contamination of drinking water in Basra (Northeast Syria), weaponization of water by ISIS, and catastrophic damage to Gaza's water infrastructure. Such incidents underscore that violations of IHL extend beyond isolated battlefields to the most vital resources for civilians.

The conference framed a grim reality: entrenched conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Gaza, and elsewhere have produced systematic IHL breaches, yet political and legal mechanisms to punish violators remain weak. The key challenge, as Mr. Koo Kim, Chairperson of the International Law Enforcement Federation (ILEF), put it, is that "weak enforcement means civilians pay the price as actors go unpunished". This section presents the solutions proposed by the speakers to narrow that gap, followed by an examination of remaining blind spots.

Proposed Solutions

Strengthening Political Will and International Accountability

Speakers stressed that **international political pressure** must be sustained to enforce IHL. Mr. Williamson emphasized that, despite UN gridlock, the global community cannot relent: "the political pressure…mustn't end". In particular, Mr. Williamson invoked Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions, which obligates all states to "ensure respect" for IHL. Mr. Williamson urged that countries be reminded of this duty and pressured to hold each other to account: "states must ensure that they fulfill their obligation by ensuring that other states respect international humanitarian law".

- **Revitalize multilateral diplomacy.** In practice, this means using whatever diplomatic forums and alliances are available to condemn violations and demand compliance. Speakers suggested that actors like the ILEF and regional bodies continue openly calling out abuses, even if UN action is blocked. Mr. Williamson noted that bypassing a paralyzed Security Council may require creative coalitions: **civil society, friendly states, and possibly regional organizations** can jointly campaign to keep IHL norms on the agenda.

- **Leverage legal obligations.** Panelists highlighted that IHL obligations are binding

regardless of political convenience. As Mr. Williamson pointed out, the Geneva Conventions require all states to compel respect from others. Translating this into action could involve renewed commitments in forums like the International Court of Justice or special investigative commissions that can bring violators to book. While full enforcement depends on political will, speakers argued that legal norms should be invoked vigorously in statements and negotiations.

- **Sanctions and accountability measures.** Although not detailed extensively in the discussion, the use of international justice mechanisms is inevitable. Mr. Williamson and Dr. Pellaton both highlighted the importance of criminalizing extreme violations (for example, attacks on water infrastructure can be prosecuted as war crimes). In the political sphere, countries should face targeted sanctions mechanisms and travel bans for leaders who order IHL breaches.

Overall, speakers urged a **renewed international unity** in principle and practice. Even if the Middle East conflicts are frozen by politics, the moral imperative remains: to keep public attention on civilian suffering and to remind all actors that IHL is not optional.

Engaging Military Actors and Improving Compliance

A key solution proposed by the panelists is to work directly with military actors on the ground — from high command down to individual soldiers — to embed respect for IHL into operational decisions. Mr. Williamson highlighted three levels of command (strategic, operational, tactical), each offering "pressure points" to influence behavior. The idea is to identify how to pressure, persuade, or educate decision-makers at each level: e.g., generals, field commanders, and soldiers.

- **Dialogue with soldiers.** In combat zones, even front-line troops can become advocates for lawful conduct. Mr. Williamson argued for continued dialogue with soldiers to have them understand that they have discretion in the manner in which they operate. Practical proposals could include embedding IHL specialists within military units, conducting joint workshops, or using respected officers to reinforce that *war is not a free-for-all*. A crucial training point is the duty to disobey illegal orders. As Mr. Williamson emphasized, "they are under an obligation to disobey manifestly illegal orders". Education programs should therefore teach soldiers to recognize, for instance, orders that target civilians or destroy protected infrastructure, so they understand those must be refused.

- **Command responsibility.** Equally important is engaging commanders at all levels. According to Mr. Williamson, "every commander has the responsibility to prevent and punish [war crimes] committed by their subordinates". Enhancing compliance means ensuring that this duty is taken seriously: if unit leaders know they will be held accountable, they have an incentive to enforce discipline. Proposed measures include stress on domestic military justice systems to prosecute commanders who fail to stop abuses, and training commanders on their specific obligations under IHL. The speaker called for "working closely with the military…with the foot soldiers—with all commanders" to embed these norms.

- **Operational-level measures.** Beyond education, practical battlefield constraints can be used as pressure. For example, party- or coalition-wide rules of engagement might be negotiated to include extra precautions for civilian areas. Mr. Williamson hinted at the idea of identifying *leverage*: what resources or partnerships do parties value? Could aid, funding, or

equipment be contingent on certain IHL observance? The concept of pushing on "pressure points" implies exploring such conditionalities.

In summary, this section of the solutions focused on **internalizing IHL within armed forces**. Through training, open communication, and enforcement of command responsibility, the aim is to make legal compliance part of military culture. Mr. Williamson's comments stress that the goal is to reach those "actually delivering the lethal action" with the message that war crimes have consequences.

Securing Humanitarian Access and Protecting Aid Workers

Speakers underscored that respecting IHL also demands ensuring civilians can receive relief, and that aid workers remain safe. Mr. Williamson noted that "when there's an armed conflict…there's unimpeded access to civilian populations in need" must be guaranteed. In practice, this means insisting that parties to conflict allow humanitarian convoys, medical evacuations, and essential services to operate without hindrance.

- **Negotiated safe corridors and assurances.** The panel suggested that international agencies and mediators should press conflict parties to agree on humanitarian corridors and ceasefires for aid delivery. Mr. Williamson explained that if a warring party will not facilitate assistance, "independent humanitarian organizations can step in" according to the Geneva Conventions. Building on this, speakers advocated for clear lines of communication between aid groups and military actors. For example, setting up liaison cells or emergency hotlines can help ensure that alleged violations of access (such as blocked roads or seized convoys) are swiftly raised and addressed.

- **Protection of humanitarian personnel.** A growing challenge in Middle East conflicts has been attacks on NGOs and relief workers. Solutions include:

  Awareness campaigns informing militaries that targeting aid workers is a serious IHL violation (protected by the Geneva Conventions).

  Marking and informing: ensuring that humanitarian vehicles and facilities are clearly identified as civilian, and that coordinates are shared in advance where possible.

  Accountability for attacks: pressing domestic and international courts to investigate any deliberate attacks on relief workers as war crimes.

- **Civilian protection measures.** More broadly, securing civilians in contested areas requires strict adherence to IHL principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions. While not new concepts, insights from Mr. Williamson imply that these principles be enforced through monitoring and immediate dialogue.

  For example, if reports emerge that a military is using indiscriminate weapons in a village, diplomatic actors should immediately intervene. The discussion suggested enlisting neutral observers (UN personnel or third-party monitors) to accompany convoys or verify that sieges are not intentionally imposed.

In essence, this solution cluster emphasizes that *humanitarian relief is a right under IHL*, and that States and armed groups must facilitate it. The speakers urged governments to honor their obligations, and if necessary, to allow reputable NGOs to bypass obstructive actors.

Regulating Private Security Contractors in Humanitarian Operations

A particularly controversial theme emerged on the role of private security and military contractors. The panelists noted that **the humanitarian sector's reliance on private**

armed companies (such as those involved in the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation) poses risks that must be managed. The underlying solution proposed is to bring these actors into formal accountability structures, rather than ignoring or outright rejecting them.

- **Opening the debate on private contractors.** Mr. Williamson challenged NGOs and governments to acknowledge how ubiquitous these contractors are in conflict zones. He observed that "the vast majority of NGOs and international organizations today use private contractors in armed conflict situations," yet "do not have a discussion as to responsibilities… and accountability". The recommended first step is to convene a broad debate within the humanitarian community: examine current arrangements, set standards, and demand transparency. This might involve joint workshops with aid agencies, military advisors, and even former contractors to outline best practices.

- **Improving vetting and oversight.** Practically, Mr. Williamson's organization, ICoCA, formed after the Iraq conflict, has experience in raising the bar for contractors. Mr. Williamson described mechanisms to "improve the kind of vetting, selection, training, [and] monitoring" of private security contractor (PSC) personnel, and to work with governments "to make sure… enforceable sanction mechanism against those contractors where they were falling short". In the Middle East context, similar approaches could include: strict accreditation processes for any company guarding aid convoys; performance audits; and public blacklisting of firms that commit abuses. Speakers urged that governments hiring such firms must require compliance with IHL as part of contracts.

- **Dialogue over ostracism.** A core point was that simply labeling private contractors "bad" and ignoring them is counterproductive. Mr. Williamson argued that humanitarian actors should be "pragmatic, be open, have the discourse" with these companies. This means arranging meetings (even if informal) with PSC representatives to convey humanitarian concerns, clarify legal obligations, and negotiate rules of engagement. By doing so openly, the sector avoids "cloak and dagger" secrecy and can push for higher standards. The goal is to transform PSCs from a blind spot into a regulated part of the humanitarian system.

- **Preparing for a shifting landscape.** Looking ahead, speakers warned that governments might increasingly outsource aid operations to private actors. While it is still unknown whether new models (like the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation) will become the norm, Mr. Williamson predicted they could be replicated as traditional aid faces funding and access challenges. Thus, rather than dismissing this trend, the solution is to *shape* it. Humanitarians should press for clear legal frameworks around any private aid model, ensuring that IHL principles (neutrality, impartiality) are upheld even in profit-driven or state-led initiatives.

The solution in this section focus **regulating private military/security companies** rather than simply condemning their existence. Concrete steps include establishing accreditation standards, mandating adherence to humanitarian codes, and incorporating PSCs into training and accountability systems. As Mr. Williamson put it, even if these companies are "bad, they are, [so] we should be…be pragmatic… and engage on that model".

Protecting Water and Essential Infrastructure

Dr. Pellaton highlighted that **water and sanitation systems** deserve special protection in Middle East conflicts. She noted that water "is shared equitably and spared from the ravages of war" through specific IHL rules. Key solutions in this area focus on enforcement of those rules and preparedness to preserve access to clean water.

- **Emphasize IHL protections for water.** Dr. Pellaton recalled that IHL explicitly prohibits attacking water facilities or using water as a weapon. Under principles of distinction and proportionality, water treatment plants are ordinarily civilian "objects" that must not be targeted. She urged decision-makers to remember these norms: for instance, labeling dams or wells as protected "objects indispensable to civilian survival". In practice, parties to a conflict should be reminded (through legal advisories and operational planning) that destroying or contaminating water sources can amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity.

- **Accountability for attacks on water.** The panel recommended active measures to deter water infrastructure attacks. One approach is to criminalize destruction of water systems in domestic law, as Dr. Pellaton suggested. If States pass laws making intentional pollution or destruction of essential services a crime, perpetrators (even non-state actors) could be prosecuted nationally. Internationally, speakers noted the importance of referring such cases to the International Criminal Court or special tribunals. The use of fact-finding missions and open-source evidence (satellite imagery, social media) was also identified as essential in documenting violations in real time.

- **Strengthening resilience and preparedness.** Beyond punishment, solutions include making water systems harder to destroy or recover from attack. The Geneva Water Hub's **Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflict**, mentioned by Dr. Pellaton, aims to harness development expertise to reinforce water infrastructure before wars intensify. This could involve pre-conflict training for technicians, stockpiling spare parts, and designing facilities with redundant safety features. The alliance's work — highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's 2025 report on civilian protection — seeks to make combatants aware of the "reverberating effects" when they hit a reservoir or pipeline. These knock-on effects strengthen the legal case for caution, and planners should factor them into targeting decisions.

- **Integrating water protection into military doctrine.** Dr. Pellaton argued for the long-term goal of weaving water protection into the mindset of armed forces. This includes updating military manuals and rules of engagement to include explicit instructions on safeguarding water infrastructure. Military training at all levels should cover the unique status of water as a civilian necessity. For example, troops could be taught to secure key pumping stations when they occupy territory, rather than see them as tactical obstacles.

Through these measures, the panelists proposed to close the gap between the clear law and the harsh reality (e.g. the cholera outbreaks from Yemen's bombed wells, or Gaza's post-strike sewage crises). The solutions combine immediate legal enforcement with long-term education and infrastructure support, ensuring that water remains a protected lifeline even amid war.

Gaps and Blind Spots

Despite the proposed solutions, the panel also acknowledged **significant gaps** and unresolved issues. These omissions help partly explain why enforcing IHL has been so difficult in the region.

- **Political stalemate and the UN impasse.** A principal gap is the lack of practical pathways when the Security Council is deadlocked. Mr. Williamson bluntly noted the Council's paralysis, but the discussion revealed little agreement on how to overcome veto-driven gridlock. While international pressure is urged, the panel did not articulate new mechanisms for compelling recalcitrant states. This remains a blind spot: without UN action, enforcement relies on softer measures, and the transcript contains only general calls for diplomacy and multilateral engagement.

- **Enforcement mechanisms at ground level.** Another gap is the lack of clear, rapid accountability for IHL breaches. The panelists both alluded to impunity but did not specify how to ensure on-the-spot compliance. For example, the idea of soldiers disobeying illegal orders is sound, but what concrete support do they have if they refuse? Similarly, commanders' responsibility is noted, yet the question of who will investigate and punish transgressions in the field was not fully addressed. The suggestion of national-level prosecution for attacking wate is positive, but enforcement depends on authorities' will to act — another classic blind spot.

- **Humanitarian sector "blind spots."** Both the panel hinted that the humanitarian community itself has unacknowledged vulnerabilities. For instance, there is an apparent **blind spot on engaging with private security actors**. Mr. Williamson called it a "blank spot… on the part of the humanitarian sector". Aid organizations are used to negotiating with armed groups, noted, yet they often shy away from talking with PSCs. This reluctance means that, to date, there is no shared standard or best practice on how NGOs should cooperate with or oversee these contractors. This silence is a "major deficit" and further concrete steps to address it are required.

- **Legal ambiguities and adaptation lag.** Dr. Pellaton identified gaps in the legal framework itself. She pointed out that as conflicts "evolve, urbanize, and introduce new technologies…international law must adapt". Currently, there are **ambiguities around long-term effects** (like pollution of water and civilian infrastructure damage) which IHL does not explicitly resolve. There is also "no centralized enforcement mechanism" for IHL, so compliance too often depends on mutable "political will". Although the speakers emphasize norm-building, these systemic weaknesses mean that violations can fall through the cracks.

- **Unanswered questions.** In the Q&A, some issues were acknowledged as uncertain. For example, when asked whether private-sector humanitarian models like the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation could change behavior, Mr. Williamson admitted the answer was "open to speculation". This uncertainty itself is a gap: it remains unclear how to balance the promise of improved efficiency against the risks of corporate control over aid. Similarly, Mr. Omar Ahmed Abenza, Director of Global and Field Programs at the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), raised a question about secret meetings with the GHF, which highlighted a polarizing debate with no easy solution.

These gaps underscore that, alongside actionable solutions, certain **structural and strategic blind spots** persist. Overcoming them will require not just technical fixes but

deeper shifts in practice, culture, and possibly law.

Conclusion

The conference revealed a multifaceted set of strategies to improve enforcement of IHL in the Middle East. Summarizing the discussions: the panelists called for **renewed political determination** (pressuring UN member states to live up to Article 1 obligations); **direct engagement with armed forces** (training soldiers and commanders to abide by IHL rules); **secure humanitarian operations** (ensuring aid can reach civilians safely); **regulation of private contractors** (bringing PSCs into the IHL fold through dialogue and oversight); and **special measures for critical resources** (protecting water and infrastructure via alliances, laws, and military doctrine). Throughout, the emphasis was on combining legal norms with practical measures on the ground, from fact-finding to military manuals. Notably, panelists repeatedly tied these solutions together: for example, both Mr. Williamson and Dr. Pellaton stressed that pressure points must be applied at every level — from international diplomacy to combat units — to make lasting change.

Despite consensus on these approaches, the panel also acknowledged that many questions remain unanswered. However, a common thread emerged: enforcing IHL is not the responsibility of any single entity. It requires **governments, militaries, NGOs, and even private actors** to play their parts. As Mr. Williamson urged, NGOs should no longer refrain from engaging with difficult partners; instead, everyone should be "pragmatic…open" in dialogue and advocacy. As Dr. Pellaton concluded, failing to protect water and civilians is to fail at peace itself.

Way Forward

Building on the speakers' guidance, the path forward involves *both broad and concrete steps*. Below are key recommendations distilled from the conference discussion:

1. Sustain and Intensify Political Engagement. International stakeholders must keep IHL violations in the spotlight. This means organizing joint statements, high-level meetings, and UN- or region-backed resolutions whenever feasible. Activists and diplomats should invoke Geneva Convention obligations continuously, reminding states that the world is watching. (Speakers insisted that "the political component… is essential going forward".)

1. **2. Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms.** National governments and international bodies should criminalize egregious IHL breaches. For example, passing domestic laws against destroying water supplies (as suggested by Dr. Pellaton) would deter such acts. Likewise, evidence of war crimes should be rapidly brought to the ICC or UN commissions. Regular fact-finding and transparent reporting can build cases against violators. The goal is to make impunity increasingly costly for commanders and their sponsors.

2. **3. Integrate IHL into Military Practice.** Armed forces in the region should receive robust IHL training and clear orders. Military manuals and rules of engagement must explicitly forbid unlawful strikes (e.g. on civilian infrastructure) and emphasize the duty to protect civilians. Confidence-building initiatives—such as embedding IHL advisers within armies or conducting joint simulations on civilian protection—can make respect for the law an operational priority. As Mr. Williamson highlighted, education on disobeying illegal orders is critical.

3. **4. Safeguard Humanitarian Action.** Aid agencies and militaries should cooperate to ensure relief reaches all civilians. Governments must grant unimpeded access or allow neutral organizations to do so. Meanwhile, safety protocols for aid workers should be upgraded: clear marking of humanitarian convoys, real-

time incident reporting, and immediate investigations into any attacks on aid personnel. The aim is to prevent any side from using humanitarian workers as pawns.

5. Engage and Regulate Private Actors. Since private security companies are now part of the humanitarian landscape, the sector should treat them as stakeholders in IHL enforcement. This means forming joint committees with PSC representatives to set ethical standards, requiring rigorous vetting of any armed guards, and insisting on contractual IHL compliance. As Mr. Williamson recommended, even if these companies are "bad," NGOs should "have open conversations" with them. Proactively integrating PSCs into humanitarian planning can mitigate risks and help spread best practices across the field.

6. Protect Essential Resources, Especially Water. All parties must recognize that water and sanitation are not "neutral" war spoils but protected civilian lifelines. Combatants should mark these facilities and avoid targeting them. In turn, humanitarians and diplomats should push for red lines against water attacks, backed by specific treaties or enforcement clauses if needed. Investing in resilient water infrastructure (via Dr. Pellaton's Global Alliance and similar initiatives) will reduce the damage of conflict. As the panel underscored, water protection is inseparable from protecting civilians.

7. Monitor and Update Approaches. Finally, practitioners should remain adaptive. The Middle East's conflicts evolve quickly, so enforcement strategies must, too. This includes harnessing new technologies (satellite surveillance, cyber tools for tracking violations), revisiting old assumptions (for instance, the rise of artificial intelligence in targeting), and keeping an eye on emerging trends like privatized warfare. The conference itself exemplified the need for ongoing dialogue: it surfaced blind spots that can now be addressed. Continuously revisiting IHL approaches in light of new evidence and challenges will be crucial.

These recommendations build directly on the panelists' suggestions and cautionary notes. They demand coordination across the international community and sustained commitment by local actors. As Dr. Pellaton speaker warned, failing to act decisively "fail[s] to protect civilians and life". Conversely, if all stakeholders apply the conference's advice — from leveraging diplomacy to reinforcing legal norms at the tactical level — there is hope for narrowing the compliance deficit. The road is difficult, but as the experts affirmed, only through comprehensive effort can the cycle of impunity be broken and humanitarian law truly enforced.

Theme 2. Strategies to Protect Civilians in the Middle East

Background

The panelists emphasized that although protection of civilians is widely invoked in principle, its implementation in Middle East conflicts remains weak. As Dr. Oliver Fink noted, high-level appeals (for de-escalation, strict IHL adherence, and humanitarian access) **"all… sound good,"** but rarely translate into reality. Numerous reports have called for urgent civilian protection, especially in Gaza and elsewhere over the last twenty years. Yet, as Dr. Fink observed, such calls are **"just… lacking, all over in Gaza and… many other places"**. In other words, civilian protection is treated as a right on paper, but the battlefield reality is one of impunity and unmitigated harm.

Humanitarian operations face acute challenges in the Middle East. In Gaza, for instance, delivering aid has become increasingly dangerous. Mr. Abenza highlighted how **"civilians are simply unsafe when they're being delivered aid,"** a phenomenon he described as **"quite a unique"** violation of humanitarian norms. Aid convoys are frequently attacked or held at gunpoint, creating a profound **compliance gap** in adherence to the principles of humanity. This crisis of aid access means that even food, medicine and shelter cannot reach civilians without exposing them to violence. The speakers noted that this is unprecedented in recent humanitarian history, and it underscores how security and relief are deeply intertwined.

A widespread disconnect also exists among stakeholders. Many humanitarian agencies still do not systematically incorporate protection into their relief activities. Mr. Abenza pointed out that even experienced organizations (like MSF) **"would not always see [protection] discussion happening internally"**, meaning they often fail to assess how their own operations might expose civilians to new risks. Donors and NGOs are beginning to push for **"mainstreaming"** of protection – i.e. making protection an integral part of all relief projects – but as of 2025 this is far from universal practice. Compounding this, there is an **engagement gap between humanitarians and security forces**. Mr. Abenza vividly described this as two icebergs barely touching: although there may be occasional contact (one soldier meets one aid worker), **"by no means… has there been a real interaction"** between most soldiers and most humanitarians. This means armed actors often operate in isolation from civilian considerations, and aid agencies lack influence on military planning.

Finally, speakers stressed the cultural and psychological dimensions of conflict. Parties to Middle East conflicts often do not share Western liberal values or even the same moral frameworks. Dr. Fink warned that combatants might not be swayed by appeals to IHL or individual rights – concepts they see as foreign. Instead, their decisions are driven by **"sacredness of the land, religious covenants, [and] spiritual values"**. There is also a deep mistrust: Dr. Fink quoted President Sadat's observation that a psychological wall of suspicion and fear **"constitut[es] 70% of the whole problem"** between Israelis and Arabs. In short, a gap exists between the universal ideals of humanitarianism and the lived worldviews of fighters, which can keep even well-meaning norms from taking hold.

In summary, the background challenges identified include (1) a gap between the rhetoric of civilian protection and its realization, (2) breakdowns in humanitarian access and compliance in places like Gaza, (3) insufficient risk analysis and protection

planning by relief actors, (4) weak civil–military coordination with **“two little icebergs”** of contact, and (5) deep psychological barriers and differing moral frames.

Proposed Solutions

Pragmatic Safe Corridors and Zones (Dr. Fink)

Dr. Fink urged a **pragmatic, piecemeal approach** to civilian protection. He argued that broad calls to protect civilians are too vague to enforce – in his words, the concept is **“too big and all-inclusive… to some extent it’s fluff”**. Instead, he recommended negotiating *specific* measures with conflict parties. For example, he suggested securing designated safe zones or time-bound ceasefires. Such concrete initiatives create **“first examples of collaboration”** that can be tested and expanded if successful.

He cited recent events in support of this: even enemies like Russia and Ukraine have agreed to prisoner exchanges and safe passage for orphans. Likewise, in Gaza he noted that the IDF announced it would open “humanitarian corridors for 8 convoys… to deliver food and medicine” during defined nighttime hours. Dr. Fink argued that these corridors – tied to clear routes and times – show how targeted commitments can start moving protection from theory to practice. If these narrow corridors prove workable, parties may feel safe extending them or opening new ones. Thus, the strategy is to build trust incrementally: first agree on *some* safe transit (for aid or civilians), then leverage that success into broader guarantees.

Moral and Cultural Framing (Dr. Fink and Mr. Abenza)

Both Dr. Fink and Mr. Abenza emphasized that protection messages must be framed in terms that resonate with local values and moral reframing. Dr. Fink warned that mere appeals to Western-style international law often fall flat: if decision-makers do not believe in IHL or individual rights, those arguments have little force. He suggested finding **“narratives… that achieve the same thing, but based on very different values”**. For example, invoking the **“sacredness of the land”**, tribal duty, or religious covenants might persuade some parties to spare civilian areas. He also highlighted research on “moral reframing”: even perpetrators want to see themselves as good, so one can present protection measures as serving the audience’s own moral values. These insights revealed that appealing a moral hook that matches each party’s worldview can be play a great role in protecting civilians.

Mr. Abenza offered a complementary perspective grounded in local norms. He noted that in the Middle East, Islamic teachings and customary law often echo the principle of safeguarding innocents. He stated that **“Islam in the Middle East…and [international humanitarian law]…the basics of not harming vulnerable populations are there”**. In practice, this means building on ethical concepts that people already accept. For example, negotiators or community leaders might emphasize verses from the Quran or hadiths that speak against harming noncombatants. Mr. Abenza specifically recommended not even naming IHL, but simply **assuming commonality** and highlighting shared norms: protect women, children, and religious sites, which both sides claim to cherish.

Combining these insights, protection advocates should *adapt their language* to each context. If a conflict party prides itself on defending holy land, one might say “spare the civilians so that you are worthy guardians of this land.” If honor and loyalty dominate, one might stress the duty of a just leader to protect the weak. As Dr. Fink put it, providing **“a moral rationale fitting to the values of the opposing conflict party”** makes protective measures more persuasive. In practice, both researchers would encourage using religious and cultural symbolism (flags, prayers, elders’ counsel) to

buttress basic humanitarian demands. By doing so, they aim to turn universal protection goals into arguments each side already cares about.

Emotional and Psychological Interventions (Dr. Fink)

A third class of solutions involves directly addressing the **emotional dynamics** of conflict. Dr. Fink emphasized that anger, shame, and especially humiliation are potent motivators of violence in the Middle East. He argued that protecting civilians requires tools to *defuse* these emotions. For instance, strategies might include public apologies for past wrongs, shared mourning rituals, or social media campaigns that humanize the "other." While he did not list specific programs, he referenced psychological research showing that indirect emotion-regulation techniques can work even when direct appeals fail. For example, initiatives that build the disadvantaged side's sense of agency, or that remind an advantaged group of its moral strengths, can gradually reduce hostility.

Importantly, Dr. Fink noted that conflict parties rarely admit wrongdoing, so interventions must avoid direct blame. Instead of telling a combatant "you're committing atrocities," one might say "you are a good and honorable person – please preserve that honor by avoiding civilian casualties." This type of **indirect moral appeal** has shown to be more effective than rational arguments alone. He concluded that explicitly **"targeting relevant emotions has… a higher chance of success"** in changing combatants' behavior.

The significance of this approach was underscored by Dr. Fink's Sadat quote: a psychological barrier of distrust and fear accounts for **"70% of the whole problem"** between Arab and Israeli populations. By addressing that human wall – through dialogue, media, or third-party mediators – efforts can open up the "windows of protection" he described. In short, solutions here involve conflict-sensitive outreach: training negotiators in empathy, funding peace education, and designing narratives that reduce group fears. If combatants see civilians as humans with shared grievances rather than faceless "others," they may be less likely to harm them.

Engaging Armed Actors and Civilian Harm Tracking (Mr. Abenza)

Mr. Abenza detailed practical measures to involve militaries and police forces in protection. First, he described CIVIC's work advising armed actors on **tactical measures** to reduce civilian harm. This includes training military units in precision strike tactics, no-fire zones, and civilian evacuation protocols. The goal is to make minimizing harm a conscious part of planning, not an afterthought. As he said, it's about asking troops to **"look at how they could… minimize civilian harm"** while conducting operations.

Second, CIVIC helped pioneer **civilian harm tracking systems** embedded within armed forces. These are databases maintained by armies or police that record every civilian casualty linked to operations. When a unit sees its own tracking data, it can analyze patterns of harm and adjust tactics. Mr. Abenza highlighted that in some countries, militaries now ask NGOs to review their post-operation reports and help develop mitigation strategies. For example, an army might allow a humanitarian advisor to show officers that a particular strike killed five civilians, leading officers to alter future targeting plans. Such accountability is rare but powerful: as he put it, it's **"less common"** for an army to admit it failed to consider civilians and then commit to improvement. Over time, armed forces can internalize a culture of restraint.

In essence, this solution is to **collaborate with security forces** on operational security. It recognizes that militaries will act when doing so aligns with their interests (e.g. preventing an insurgency). By framing civilian protection as also enhancing a force's long-term security

(fewer hostile civilians) and reputation, advocates can motivate action from within the chain of command. Dr. Fink's idea of appealing to parties' self-image dovetails here: showing soldiers that protecting civilians is consistent with being loyal to their nation or faith. If implemented broadly, these tactics ensure that even highly kinetic military campaigns contain elements devoted to saving lives on the ground.

Community-Based Protection and Dialogue (Mr. Abenza)

Mr. Abenza placed great emphasis on **ground-up solutions**. He explained that effective protection starts with listening to and supporting local communities. CIVIC's standard practice is to **"ask communities what… they need in order to feel protected"**, then help them achieve those solutions. These needs often go beyond food or medicine: they might include safe transit routes, security committees, or legal aid. Once communities voice their priorities, CIVIC provides technical or financial support (or quietly advocates with armed actors on their behalf). For example, if villagers request a local early-warning network, CIVIC might fund radios and training. The key is that communities are **"at the center of the solution"**, not passive recipients.

A related strategy is fostering **"Civilian-to-Civilian" (CIV-CIV) dialogue**. Mr. Abenza explained that aid agencies typically work in isolated "silos," sometimes even treating rival communities separately. He proposed bringing different community groups together to discuss common problems. In Yemen, he cited cases where tribal adversaries were convened jointly by mediators to address basic security concerns. By talking across lines of division (sectarian, ethnic, or political), communities can build empathy and mutually agreed protection measures. For instance, Shia and Sunni villagers might agree on a joint convoy guard or shared notifications about suspicious movements. Mr. Abenza suggested this idea should be tested in the Middle East context, given its "sectarianized" conflicts.

Lastly, he pointed out the importance of **local champions**. Often, respected elders, women leaders, or community activists can press authorities for civilian protection. He recommended identifying and training such champions so they can articulate civilian concerns directly to military or political leaders. These could be imams, teachers, tribal sheikhs or youth coordinators who have credibility. For example, a village head might be coached to present to a patrol commander the number of children missing school due to conflict. By using familiar and trusted voices, the protection message gains legitimacy.

Overall, community-based solutions involve empowering civilians as agents of their own safety. This means not only delivering aid, but also building local structures (committees, warning systems, peer educators) that reinforce protection. It also means breaking down barriers **between** communities so they collaborate on safety. When civilians organize themselves and demand protection, they become part of the solution rather than collateral damage. As Mr. Abenza emphasized, even talking with people about their fears and hopes is itself protective: it signals respect and can reduce panic-driven flight or violence.

Mainstreaming Protection in Humanitarian Aid (Mr. Abenza)

Another crucial solution is ensuring all humanitarian assistance is delivered with protection in mind. Mr. Abenza stressed that aid agencies must **integrate protection standards into their operations**. For example, he argued that beneficiaries should **"feel safe"** throughout aid delivery, meaning that food distributions or clinics should be located and timed to minimize exposure to violence. This might involve coordinating with security forces to secure routes, carefully planning medical camp layouts, or using neutral symbols on aid vehicles to avoid targeting. The aim is that relief efforts do not inadvertently draw fire or create new vulnerabilities.

However, Mr. Abenza warned that many organizations still lack formal protection protocols. As he observed from his MSF experience, frontline teams often do not routinely ask, **"What risks might our relief project pose to civilians?"**. To close this gap, he called for systematic training of humanitarian staff on IHL and protection. Agencies should build dedicated protection officers and conduct regular risk assessments. Donors can reinforce this by requiring protection strategies in all funded projects.

The concept of **"mainstreaming"** protection means it becomes as standard as, say, water or food in program design. It also entails constant monitoring: for example, if an aid convoy is attacked, the response should include changing procedures, not just moving on. By institutionalizing protection principles (e.g. "Do No Harm" analyses, community consent protocols), humanitarian actors can preempt many dangers. In practice, this solution manifests as joint planning sessions (between aid and security teams), mobile complaint mechanisms for civilians, and internal audits of protection compliance. Over time, this approach would help ensure that the act of providing assistance itself does not endanger the very people it aims to help.

Securing Humanitarian Access (Mr. Abenza)

Closely related to mainstreaming is the strategy of **guaranteeing access** for aid. Mr. Abenza described humanitarian access as a **"transversal need… the umbrella hiding all of the other protection needs"**. In essence, if agencies cannot reach civilians due to blockades or insecurity, nothing else can be done to protect those people. Therefore, one solution is constant negotiation with conflict parties to open or keep supply routes safe. This involves mobilizing high-level diplomacy (e.g. UN or neutral states engaging frontline commanders) as well as day-to-day coordination through UN-led clusters or humanitarian liaisons.

A concrete step is to embed protection arguments into access negotiations. Mr. Abenza noted that some colleagues focused solely on aid quantity, but he insisted that **access itself is fundamental to all future protective work**. For example, negotiators might frame a ceasefire not just in terms of food delivery but as a break from violence where civilians can recover. They might also secure commitments like "night ceasefires" to allow safe passage at certain hours. In cases where access is wholly blocked, advocates should raise the issue in international forums and media to pressure combatants. As one Q&A participant mentioned, there are data platforms like ACLED that track incidents, but there is **"no one consolidated place"** for all reports – highlighting how even the technical underpinnings of access (information on where violence is occurring) are fragmented.

In practical terms, securing access means making it a priority alongside food and medicine itself. For example, humanitarian convoys might be escorted by agreed-upon monitors from neutral organizations. Or negotiators might demand temporary local ceasefires around hospitals. Mr. Abenza's account suggests that advocates should always accompany aid pledges with protection demands: safe spaces to operate, guarantees from local commanders, and clear communication channels. This way, relief delivery and protection become mutually reinforcing tasks.

Advocacy and Policy Measures (Mr. Abenza)

Beyond field-level actions, the speakers highlighted **advocacy and policy** levers to protect civilians. One key target is arms control. Mr. Abenza described how CIVIC helped form an international coalition that successfully **blocked major arms transfers** that were likely to kill civilians. For instance, a Spanish parliamentary movement formally halted weapons exports to Israel, and an NGO coalition helped stop a shipment of two-ton

munitions destined for Lebanon. These campaigns show that pressuring governments to withhold offensive weapons can be an effective strategy. Citizens and NGOs can lobby legislators, use media exposés, or file lawsuits to shape export decisions. Mr. Abenza noted that such advocacy **"counts"** – it can literally save lives by denying dangerous tools to warring parties.

Another advocacy angle concerns the education of security forces, and this was highlighted under theme 1. During the panel Q&A, a participant asked about emphasizing **ethics rather than just legal frameworks** for soldiers. The panelists agreed this is important. Mr. Abenza suggested promoting humanitarian principles in recruitment and training for police and military, in a style that appeals to their moral duty. The idea is to complement international law with ethical case studies, veterans' testimonies, or honor codes that valorize civilian protection. For example, armies might give medals for exceptional restraint or create moral leadership seminars. This relates to Dr. Fink's point that appealing to soldiers' sense of honor could extend "hearts and minds" beyond what legal training alone can achieve.

Finally, Mr. Abenza stressed reframing protection as integral to peace. He concluded that civilians denied protection are likelier to fuel future violence, whereas **"protecting civilians means people… are less inclined to violence, and… more space for peace-building initiatives"**. This is itself an advocacy message: governments and funders should see protection not as a diversion of resources but as a conflict-prevention investment. U.N. and NGO advocacy campaigns can highlight this link by citing cases (in Syria, Libya, etc.) where civil insecurity bred extremism, versus examples where protection led to reduced conflict.

In summary, the policy-level solutions involve leveraging political and legal instruments: arms embargoes, diplomatic pressure, ethical training requirements, and public messaging that connects civilian safety with national security interests. These measures do not directly erect shelters or corridors, but they create an enabling environment in which grassroots and operational strategies can succeed.

Identified Gaps

The speakers also highlighted important **gaps** in existing protection strategies:

- **Conceptual Vagueness:** Dr. Fink warned that "civilian protection" is often so broad it becomes empty rhetoric. He said the term can be *"too big and all-inclusive… to some extent it's fluff,"* because parties can claim they uphold civilian safety without concrete action. This lack of specificity allows combatants to avoid accountability: if no clear standard is set, every party insists it is doing enough. Hence a gap exists between the noble language of protection and any enforceable commitment on the ground.

- **Implementation Shortfall:** There is a perennial gap between policy statements and practice. Despite repeated international appeals, actual mitigation of harm remains low. As Dr. Fink noted, calls to protect civilians may proliferate, but on the ground **"it's just… lacking"**. The result is civilian suffering continues unmitigated. In short, the gap lies in enforcement: existing laws and resolutions are not backed by credible deterrents or consistent pressure, so violations go unpunished.

- **Mainstreaming Deficit:** Mr. Abenza pointed to a gap in humanitarian operations: too many aid projects still ignore protection. He estimated that a **"majority… of humanitarian workers"** are not proactively assessing how their relief efforts might endanger populations. Without formal protocols or a protective mindset, organizations may inadvertently expose civilians (for example, by gathering

crowds at risky distribution points). Thus, protection is sometimes an afterthought, rather than built into planning. Bridging this gap requires institutional change in the aid sector, which is still incomplete as of 2025.

- **Civil–Military Disconnect:** As noted, there is a **"massive gap"** between the humanitarian world and security forces. In effect, NGOs and soldiers operate in parallel universes with minimal contact. This gulf means that human right concerns rarely inform battlefield tactics, and militaries do not receive on-the-ground feedback about civilian needs. The metaphor of "two icebergs touching" captures this: superficial contact fails to yield joint strategies. Overcoming this gap is challenging, as it requires building trust between groups that have different mandates and worldviews.

- **Data and Monitoring Gaps:** Although not a central focus of the speakers' recommendations, the Q&A acknowledged a gap in information systems. Dr. Pellaton noted that while data projects like ACLED track incidents, **"there is no one consolidated place"** for comprehensive civilian harm reports. Mr. Abenza's own harm-tracking initiative partially addresses this, but currently available data is fragmented and often classified. This gap hinders rapid response and informed advocacy. Without timely, accurate data on civilian casualties, it is harder to adjust tactics or hold violators accountable.

- **Psychological and Cultural Divide:** Implicitly, a critical gap is the divide between humanitarian ideals and the lived realities of conflict parties. As mentioned, armed groups often do not accept external moral frameworks. Dr. Fink observed a **"morality shifting"** in conflict (where loyalty or authority can eclipse values like care and fairness). This means messages that appeal to one side's morals may conflict with the other's worldview. The panelist recognized that bridging this psychological gap is extremely difficult. It requires not just policy changes but long-term efforts in education, media, and intercultural dialogue – areas where current strategies are still wanting.

- **Long-Term Strategy vs. Short-Term Action:** Both speakers hinted that most efforts prioritize immediate relief, with less focus on sustaining protection over the long haul. Mr. Abenza reminded the audience that failing to protect civilians today will sow future violence. Yet, in practice, many interventions are reactive. The gap here is strategic continuity: plans often end when an emergency does, rather than evolving into peacebuilding. This leaves communities vulnerable once headlines fade, highlighting a need for sustained engagement.

Each of these gaps – from vague policy language to fractured civil-military relations – points to areas needing innovation. The panelists' solutions attempt to address them (e.g. harm-tracking fills a data gap, moral framing narrows ideological divides), but the gaps themselves remain significant challenges.

Conclusion

The panel underscored that protecting civilians in the Middle East demands **multilayered, coordinated strategies**. Dr. Fink's insights remind us that even well-intentioned protection mandates can fail if they aren't made concrete and resonant to local actors. His focus on psychological and moral factors highlights the **human dimension**: wars are fought by people, and appealing to their beliefs and emotions can create space for protection that pure legalism cannot. Meanwhile, Mr. Abenza's field-based recommendations show that practical tools (like harm-tracking and community consultations) and high-level advocacy (such as arms embargoes) must work hand-in-hand.

Together, these contributions suggest a core principle: civilian protection cannot be treated as an abstract goal detached from context. It requires blending **tactical measures** (safe corridors, military training, aid escorts) with **strategic mindsets** (cultural framing, emotional engagement, inclusive governance). Importantly, they both reinforced the link between protection and peace: safeguarding civilians today builds trust and reduces incentives for revenge tomorrow. As Mr. Abenza aptly noted, when people feel secure, they are **"less inclined to violence, and… more space for peace-building initiatives"**.

No single actor or approach can suffice. Instead, success will come from integrating the proposals: militaries adopting restraint (per Mr. Abenza and Dr. Fink), NGOs systematically listening to locals (Mr. Abenza), mediators deploying moral arguments (Dr. Fink), and donors prioritizing protection programming. By bridging the identified gaps – through training, dialogue, data sharing, and joint planning – stakeholders can begin to turn the panel's vision into reality. In the complex Middle East context, even incremental advances (like a few safe convoys or a pilot village dialogue) can save lives and build momentum. The path forward is hard, but as the speakers argued, **it is essential for a more stable future in the region**.

Way Forward

Building on the panel's insights, stakeholders should pursue the following steps:

- **Pilot and Expand Safe Corridors:** Facilitate and rigorously evaluate negotiated safe zones or humanitarian corridors. Document best practices from recent Gaza corridor efforts and adapt them to new settings. Use mediators to replicate those time-bound, monitored passages whenever ceasefires allow.

- **Tailor Messaging to Local Values:** Train negotiators, diplomats, and aid workers in cultural intelligence. Craft protection appeals using local religious and cultural idioms. Engage influential clerics, elders or community figures to publicly endorse civilian safety, reinforcing that such protection aligns with shared beliefs.

- **Integrate Protection into Training:** Mandate that all military, police, and humanitarian personnel receive training on civilian protection – both legal rules and ethical imperatives. For soldiers, include ethics modules on duty of care; for NGOs, incorporate conflict psychology and risk mapping into project design. Regular drills and simulations (scenario-based exercises) can institutionalize this knowledge.

- **Implement and Share Harm-Tracking Systems:** Encourage more armed forces to adopt CIVIC-style civilian harm databases. Provide funding and technical support for armies and police to record and analyze collateral damage. Share anonymized data (with appropriate safeguards) among protection actors to identify hotspots and common challenges.

- **Empower Community Protection:** Scale up programs that let civilians lead. This includes establishing local protection committees, funding community early-warning networks, and convening regular safety meetings. Support **CIV-CIV dialogues** so that rival communities can address shared threats together. Ensure community input shapes all protection and aid plans (e.g., through participatory assessments).

- **Strengthen Civil–Military Coordination:** Institutionalize liaison roles between NGOs and security forces. For example, appoint protection officers in military units and make NGO coordination meetings routine. Joint workshops or field exercises can build mutual understanding. When possible, embed humanitarian advisors in military

planning cells, as has been done in some peacekeeping missions.

- **Mainstream Protection in Aid Funding:** Donors should require all relief programs to include protection strategies. This can take the form of mandatory protection impact assessments or budget lines for protection activities (e.g. legal aid or shelter upgrades). Peer-review audits and learning workshops can help agencies share lessons on doing no harm.

- **Advocate on Policy and Arms Control:** Maintain pressure on governments to halt arms exports tied to conflict zones. Public campaigns should be informed by data (e.g. civilian casualty reports). Engage parliamentarians and international bodies with field evidence of harm. Simultaneously, work with defense establishments to include protective ethics in doctrine and encourage military honor codes.

- **Invest in Data and Technology:** Develop integrated platforms for tracking civilian harm and humanitarian needs. Support initiatives like ACLED or OCHA to expand their scope and accessibility. Use satellite imagery and crowdsourcing (e.g. mobile reporting apps) to monitor conflict zones. Reliable data will inform all other efforts, from advocacy to operational planning.

- **Support Psychological Peacebuilding:** Fund programs that address trauma and intergroup perceptions (e.g. dialogue circles, storytelling projects, educational campaigns). Collaborate with psychologists to evaluate which approaches (peace messaging, art therapy, joint community projects) actually reduce hostility over time.

Each of these steps involves coordination across the humanitarian, military, and political spheres. By systematically implementing them – and continuously learning from real-world experience – stakeholders can begin to close the protection gaps. As the panelists emphasized, even small **"windows of protection"** opened today can lead to safer environments and lay foundations for longer-term peace.

Theme 3. Humanitarian Crises Response Coordination in the Middle East

Background Information

The session was explicitly oriented toward enhancing collaboration: how coordination between UN agencies, NGOs, and local authorities can improve relief delivery in dynamic and high-risk environments. In this context, Christopher Mr. Rassi emphasized that the current humanitarian landscape — both in the Middle East and globally — underscores **the critical importance of coordination among all actors**. The crises in Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere demand unprecedented cooperation.

Mr. Rassi outlined the **central role of local humanitarian actors**, especially the Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies, which operate in 191 countries under the IFRC umbrella. These national societies are often "at the forefront of humanitarian responses" before, during, and after crises. Unlike international relief organizations that may scale back or withdraw, national societies **remain on the ground throughout**. Mr. Rassi stressed that they "don't leave when other international actors leave"; they often have deep community trust and established networks that international teams must rely on.

For example, Mr. Rassi explained that in the ongoing conflict, the *Palestine Red Crescent Society* has kept hospitals and clinics running "despite the immense challenges" in Gaza and the West Bank. He described this continuity of medical services under fire as "amazing" given the intensity of the fighting.

Similarly, in Iran, the *Iranian Red Crescent* carried out search-and-rescue operations during a recent escalation of hostilities. In Morocco — far from the Middle East, the panelist highlighted that the *Moroccan Red Crescent* remains "a major role in response" almost two years after the devastating September 2023 earthquake. Mr. Rassi personally observed coordination efforts in Morocco immediately after the earthquake, noting the society's work to **protect and rescue civilians and help them recover** in an "extremely critical context".

Back in the Middle East, Mr. Rassi cited *Lebanon* as a model of sustained local response capacity. The *Lebanese Red Cross* has built unique access into conflict-affected areas over many years. Its coordination mechanisms allow it to operate "safely, unhindered, and [to] access everyone in a country when many other actors cannot". This longstanding network was forged during Lebanon's civil war, when the Lebanese Red Cross earned nationwide respect by strictly adhering to humanitarian principles. Today, that trust enables it to move the wounded across lines of control — a feat no other organization achieves in Lebanon.

These examples illustrate both the **value and challenge** of local response capacity. On one hand, national societies have unparalleled reach: the *Egyptian Red Crescent*, for instance, is able to operate along the North Sinai border with Gaza precisely "because of who they are, because of their relationships" with local authorities. Local auxiliaries like these have built-in networks, logistical channels, and community trust that make them effective first responders. As Mr. Rassi observed, local societies have "vast networks already in existence… whether it's branches, sub-organizations, people all over" that position them to reach vulnerable populations.

On the other hand, Mr. Rassi highlighted **formidable challenges** confronting those same local responders. Notably, aid workers in the region have faced increasing violence. Between 2023 and 2025 the IFRC network endured its "deadliest period" ever for

humanitarian personnel. In 2024 alone, 32 Red Cross/Red Crescent staff and volunteers were killed worldwide, more than in any previous year. The Palestine and Sudanese Red Crescent societies together accounted for over 80% of those fatalities. Even outside the Middle East, Mr. Rassi pointed out losses in Algeria, the DRC, Ethiopia, Iran, Israel, and Syria, underscoring that aid workers are under threat "in their own local communities". Tragically, by mid-2025 another 17 IFRC personnel had been killed, reflecting "a disproportionate attack on local humanitarians".

Beyond security, local responders face **resource and support gaps**. Mr. Rassi noted that aid volunteers often "lack adequate support systems, including protective gear, insurance… [and] legal and mental health support". Unlike international staff, many cannot evacuate for medical care or rest without endangering relief efforts. Operational funding is also an issue: despite numerous pledges to support local actors, real financial flows have lagged. "Progress in funding local actors… has been very slow," he warned. In short, while local societies have the operational reach and access to communities, they often lack sufficient **funding, capacity-building, and protection** to carry out their critical work.

Furthermore, Mr. Rassi cautioned that **coordination itself is under strain**. He mentioned the emergence of privatized, security-led aid distribution models (notably in Gaza) as a worrying development. Such shifts can undercut transparent coordination and the neutrality of assistance. In this volatile context, he stressed that humanitarian coordination must explicitly focus on including and protecting local actors. When parties to a conflict ignore the protective value of emblems and attack aid workers in sight of their uniforms, the entire coordination framework is tested. As Mr. Rassi put it, humanitarians "wear emblems… to send a sign to combatants, 'don't shoot — we're not part of this fight'," yet this protection is "less and less the reality today". The breaches in respect for humanitarian space highlight the coordination challenges in active warzones.

In summary, the conference underscored that coordination — the deliberate alignment of planning and action among governments, UN clusters, NGOs, and local responders — is more vital than ever. Mr. Rassi's remarks painted a picture of both tremendous local capability and crippling vulnerability. Coordination can **expand the reach and impact of relief**, as he noted, but only if it tangibly backs local responders with funding, support, and protection. Without addressing the difficulties — conflict violence, under-resourcing, and eroding humanitarian safeguards — coordination efforts risk being outpaced by the crises they aim to mitigate.

Proposed Solutions

Based on Mr. Rassi's remarks, several concrete solutions emerge. These fall into related themes: empowering local responders, reforming coordination mechanisms, protecting personnel, upholding humanitarian principles, and leveraging innovation. Each of these areas was highlighted as essential for improving humanitarian response coordination in the Middle East and beyond.

Empowering Local Humanitarian Actors

A **top priority** is to strengthen and empower national societies and other local actors, who are the linchpins of any effective response. As Mr. Rassi emphasized, we must increase the **capacity and resources** of local organizations. This means more than just one-off projects; it requires *"long-term institutional support"* that builds local decision-making and operational capability. In his words, action should focus on "capacity strengthening around… everything that supports decision-making, everything that supports [their] ability to act on the ground".

For example, if a national Red Crescent society needs more field medical training, ambulances, communications systems, or management skills to run a large operation in Gaza or Syria, donors and partners must help provide it.

One concrete step is to **increase funding and resources** directly to local agencies. Mr. Rassi explained that despite many pledges to localize aid, "progress in funding local actors… has been very slow". Donors and international NGOs should commit a higher proportion of relief budgets to national societies, not just through pass-through grants but via predictable, multi-year support. By putting more money and logistical aid in local hands, governments can magnify the humanitarian reach. As Mr. Rassi pointed out, "operational reach, scale, and impact can be increased through coordination with local actors". Investing in local responders multiplies the effectiveness of every dollar spent because these actors already have trusted networks and existing infrastructure.

Empowering local actors also means **meaningful inclusion in coordination structures**. Mr. Rassi urged that local organizations be given a strong voice and seat at the table in all humanitarian decision forums. He stated: *"We must support meaningful representation of local actors in humanitarian coordination and decision-making mechanisms, and that includes… global, regional, national and even… local [levels]."* In practice, this could mean national society chiefs co-chairing cluster coordination meetings, or local NGO coalitions serving on advisory boards of international aid programs. Real partnerships with locals require "mutual respect…shared responsibility, trust, and accountability," as Mr. Rassi noted. When local agencies co-design the response, plans will better fit cultural contexts and community needs, and resources will flow where they are most effective.

For example, the Egyptian Red Crescent's authorized presence in North Sinai illustrates why local involvement pays off. Mr. Rassi explained that because of its status and relationships, it "is able to work and operate" along the Gaza border, aiding both Egyptians and Palestinians. Such access is possible only when authorities trust the local society. The Lebanese Red Cross example likewise shows how decades of local coordination enabled unprecedented access: it alone can ferry wounded across conflict lines. Strengthening local actors means enabling more of these success stories elsewhere.

In summary, the conference concluded that the solution is not to bypass local responders but to **reinforce them**. As Mr. Rassi put it, national societies *"are the ones delivering on the ground, always"*. International partners must accordingly play a supportive role: providing funding, training, equipment, and advice, rather than overriding local initiatives. If local networks are fully supported, coordination between organizations will naturally improve, because national societies can serve as reliable anchors for joint planning and implementation.

Modernizing Coordination Mechanisms

Closely related to empowering locals is reforming how agencies coordinate overall. Mr. Rassi and the other panelists recognized that traditional coordination frameworks — whether within the Red Cross Movement or across the UN-driven cluster system — need modernization to reflect today's realities. Mr. Mr. Rassi noted that even the Red Cross movement itself revised its internal agreement as recently as 2022 to clarify roles, but the principle applies to the whole sector. The key innovation is to **put local actors "at the center"** of any coordination model.

In practice, this means rethinking the UN cluster mechanism and other interagency forums. During the Q&A, Mr. Rassi explained that now is an opportunity "to rethink what

coordination looks like between [different] agencies" under resource constraints. He argued that international coordination structures must evolve to ensure local agencies are not marginal but have real influence. In his words, we must ensure that local humanitarians "have a much stronger seat at the table" — not only to "have a voice…during a particular conflict," but to help "participate in the evolution of the sector". This implies reforms such as including national society representatives on inter-cluster coordination teams, or establishing formal roles for local NGOs in inter-agency appeals and strategy teams.

Another dimension is efficiency. Mr. Rassi warned against "top-heavy coordination mechanisms" that consume donor funds without delivering aid to affected people. He urged that most humanitarian resources be used "on the ground to support those that are providing… assistance", rather than on bureaucratic meetings and overhead. This critique suggests solutions like streamlining coordination bodies, using digital platforms to reduce travel, or joint needs assessments to avoid duplication. The goal is to make sure that coordination *adds* value rather than draining resources. As donors and communities hold agencies accountable, Mr. Rassi noted, the drive for efficiency must accelerate ongoing reforms.

Within the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement itself, Mr. Rassi highlighted an important change. The *Seville Agreement* (the formal understanding among ICRC, IFRC, and national societies) was updated to emphasize exactly that point: "we can have coordination mechanisms for international actors all we want. What's really important is to put the local humanitarian actors… at the center". By setting this precedent, the Movement commits to making national societies, not international headquarters, but the focal point of action. This principle should guide wider humanitarian coordination. For example, in future crises the UN and donors might adopt a similar charter obligating foreign agencies to defer leadership to local responders once the emergency phase is managed.

In short, the solution here is **modernized, inclusive coordination frameworks**. This includes shared decision-making arrangements, clear role delineation, and joint accountability. The speaker recommended "real partnerships" in coordination that formalize local input and allow for innovation. No specific new global model was laid out, but Mr. Rassi's call for sector-wide reevaluation of coordination signals that existing approaches — like the cluster system — must be adapted to ensure that local actors are empowered and that resources directly support relief efforts rather than unnecessary overhead.

Protecting Humanitarian Workers

A third solution area is *protecting* the people on the front lines. Mr. Rassi emphasized that any coordination of relief must explicitly prioritize the **safety and security of humanitarian personnel**, especially local volunteers. He stated flatly: *"We must prioritize the protection of local humanitarians, and donors and humanitarian organizations must invest in safety and security of these local humanitarians as well."* This means allocating funds not only for food and medicine, but also for protective gear, security training, and contingency planning. In concrete terms, aid programs should include budget lines for body armor, satellite phones, secure vehicles, and medical evacuation insurance for local staff — items the speaker noted are frequently missing.

At the policy level, Mr. Rassi praised emerging initiatives like the *Declaration on the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel*, championed by Australia and other states. Such diplomatic efforts are vital: a formal declaration can reaffirm that attacks on aid workers are unacceptable and should be condemned. The conference recommended that more governments endorse and implement such

declarations, translating them into pressure on combatants to respect humanitarian emblems.

Mr. Rassi also stressed the importance of public advocacy and accountability. He urged humanitarian agencies to *"speak out consistently"* about attacks and to "call to action" for their cessation. For example, the IFRC has established a "Red Family Fund" to support families of killed or injured personnel. While this is mainly a humanitarian gesture, it also serves to draw international attention to the issue of aid worker safety. He argued that beyond funding, organizations should publicly demand an end to targeting aid workers. These actions create political pressure on warring parties and send a message that violence against humanitarians carries consequences.

Finally, coordination itself must include protection strategies. When planning joint operations, agencies should exchange security intelligence and coordinate movement to minimize risk. This could involve shared safe routes, convoy escorts (where feasible), and common security briefs. The speaker's account of repeated losses in Gaza, Sudan, and other conflict zones underscores the tragic gap: *"Humanitarians are there to help, and should not have to risk their lives to do so. … Parties to conflicts… must do more to protect civilians and stop attacks on humanitarian personnel."* In practical terms, donors can insist that any funded project includes a risk assessment and safety measures for staff. They can also fund specialized programs for trauma counseling and legal aid for volunteers. These measures will not eliminate risk, but they address the glaring gap identified: local responders currently work under-protected, and robust coordination must change that.

Upholding Humanitarian Principles and Access

A core theme was the defense of humanitarian principles — neutrality, impartiality, and independence — as the foundation for access and trust. Mr. Rassi argued that **coordination is meaningless if affected communities and authorities do not trust the aid providers**. Unlike many foreign actors, local organizations by definition have deeper community ties, but they must continuously earn trust by demonstrating neutrality.

To this end, Mr. Rassi insisted that aid be delivered by "skilled, neutral, and trusted organizations". He pointed out that local Red Cross/Red Crescent societies typically enjoy a reputation for impartiality and know the context. By contrast, the emergence of military-led or for-profit aid schemes can undermine the perception of neutrality. Therefore, the solution is to ensure that all actors involved in the response adhere strictly to humanitarian law and principles. Coordination forums should include ethical guidance and joint monitoring of principle adherence.

For example, the case of the Lebanese Red Cross showed that principled action builds respect: by *"adhere[ing] to humanitarian principles"* through decades of conflict, they won a country-wide consensus on their role as the neutral ambulance service. This trust means Lebanese combatants allow them to cross front lines. Similarly, Mr. Rassi noted, the Palestinian Red Crescent in Gaza continues providing aid precisely because it is perceived as impartial to all Palestinians. Maintaining this perception is critical; coordination meetings should involve discussions on how to communicate neutrality to combatants, for instance through visibility of emblems (even as these are increasingly ignored).

Mr. Rassi also highlighted the need to **defend the humanitarian space**. He called on humanitarian organizations and their donors to work together to protect the legal and practical space for aid: "We must continue to defend and protect the space for principled humanitarian work, and the role of local humanitarian actors in that space". In practice, this can take the form of joint statements, legal actions, and diplomatic engagement when access is denied. Coordination mechanisms

themselves should include legal advisors or observers who monitor access constraints.

In terms of solutions, coordination can explicitly include *principle-based training* for all responders (local and international) and mandate strict codes of conduct. While this is not a new idea, its implementation could be reinforced through coordinated policies. For instance, the UN and donor agencies could require that partner organizations, including local ones, sign onto a principles charter as a condition for cooperation. Ensuring that local staff are supported when they come under pressure for maintaining neutrality is also critical (again tying back to protection).

In summary, protecting the humanitarian space and ensuring access requires not just force protection (addressed above) but a **commitment to neutrality and trust-building**. Mr. Rassi's comments remind us that effective coordination depends on *"the importance of trust and access, because it's earned"*. The solution is to keep local actors, who already have earned trust, at the core of operations, while also educating all partners about maintaining that trustworthiness in the field.

Leveraging Technology and Innovation Responsibly

Finally, the panel advocated for **smart use of technology and innovation**, balanced by human relationships. Mr. Rassi acknowledged that emerging tools — including AI, data analytics, and digital communications — offer great opportunities to **improve crisis response and save lives**. For example, remote mapping, AI-driven logistics planning, or real-time coordination apps can make relief more efficient. The solution here is to *invest in digital technology and innovation* as part of coordination strategies: developing common platforms for sharing needs assessments, disease surveillance, or displacement tracking, for instance.

However, Mr. Rassi cautioned that technology cannot replace on-the-ground trust. He explained, *"The humanitarian sector knows well that technology cannot replace the need for trusted human relationships, so we have to balance that."* In other words, while technology can augment operations, it is no substitute for the local networks and human volunteers who actually deliver aid. Therefore, solutions must combine high-tech tools with support to local actors. As he concluded, **"we also have to place local humanitarians at the center"** even as we adopt technology, ensuring they have the resources and access they need. For example, digital tools should be developed *in cooperation with* local societies and adapted to local context (language, culture, technical capacity), rather than imposed top-down.

Mr. Rassi also addressed potential risks of technology. In the Q&A, he urged open dialogue on the unintended consequences of innovations. He recounted participation in meetings with major AI developers and emphasized the need to *"bring the examples of where technological innovation is having that harmful effect"* and to "share ideas about how to improve them". The solution is to include safeguards, ethical guidelines, and multi-stakeholder forums to govern new technologies. Humanitarian coordination bodies could partner with tech firms and legal experts to develop standards for AI use (e.g. privacy in data collection, preventing cyber-attacks on aid systems).

In practice, this means that while agencies pilot new tech (drones for delivery, AI for needs prediction, mobile banking for cash grants), they should simultaneously train local staff in digital literacy and risk management. It also means raising awareness among donors about not relying exclusively on high-tech solutions; community engagement must accompany data-driven approaches. By proactively managing the risks (as Mr. Rassi suggests) and maintaining a human-centered approach,

innovation becomes a solution rather than a threat.

Summary of Solutions: In all, the conference discussion highlighted that solutions revolve around *empowerment, inclusion, protection, principles, and innovation*. Key recommended actions include: scaling up funding and training for local national societies; ensuring those societies have real leadership roles in coordination forums; reforming global coordination (like UN clusters) to be more local-centric and less bureaucratic; investing in the safety and welfare of humanitarian workers; defending neutrality to maintain access; and adopting new technologies with rigorous safeguards and community trust. As Mr. Rassi put it, the future of effective response coordination depends on putting *"local humanitarians at the center"*, with adequate support, while harnessing innovation wisely.

Identified Gaps

Despite these novel proposals, several gaps in knowledge and capacity remain. The panel's remarks and the discussion make clear that certain challenges are not yet fully addressed. These gaps include:

- **Insufficient Funding and Localization:** Mr. Rassi explicitly noted that, although international donors frequently pledge to support local responders, **actual funding remains inadequate**. He observed that "progress in funding local actors… has been very slow". This gap means many national societies do not have stable budgets for preparedness or for scaling up when crises strike. The lack of direct funding streams to local organizations impedes their capacity to lead relief efforts.

- **Protection and Support Deficiencies:** As noted, local aid workers often *"lack adequate support systems, including protective gear, insurance… legal and mental health support"*. This gap was highlighted by Mr. Rassi, who described how volunteers wear the Red Cross/Crescent emblem as their only protective "shield", often unsuccessfully. The explicit gap is the absence of robust security measures tailored to local staff. Despite naming the problem and advocating for investment in safety, concrete mechanisms (e.g. specialized training programs, centralized security resources) are required. This suggests an area needing further development.

- **Underrepresentation in Decision-Making:** While the speaker stressed the need for local representation, implicitly the current reality is that **local actors are underrepresented in key coordination structures**. For example, most UN coordination clusters are led by UN agencies with limited roles for national societies or local NGOs. The lack of local voices on international decision-making bodies is an implicit gap. Though Mr. Rassi championed inclusive mechanisms, it is a gap that those mechanisms do not yet exist everywhere or consistently. Policymakers must create concrete platforms (e.g., seats on executive boards or cluster leadership) for local responders.

- **Coordination Model Uncertainty:** The sector is still grappling with how to restructure coordination under resource constraints. The Q&A revealed no definitive new model, only the recognition that the current situation is unsustainable: Mr. Rassi acknowledged "it's a difficult period of time" for the sector and that many agencies are just beginning to revisit coordination frameworks. The exact shape of a more efficient, inclusive model remains undefined. This gap means that agencies need clearer guidance and innovation on coordination methods. Pilot projects or new agreements (beyond the Red Cross Movement's example) may be required but have not yet been elaborated.

- **Technology and Ethics:** Mr. Rassi's response to a question about AI and technology in warfare was telling: he deferred to ICRC colleagues and pointed to existing initiatives, but did not provide a concrete strategy himself. This suggests a **knowledge gap** among humanitarian agencies regarding the governance of emerging technologies. While acknowledging the issues, the speaker left open the question of exactly which laws, policies, or ethical frameworks will guide the use of AI in conflict settings. In other words, there is no clear consensus on how to *regulate or oversee* the use of powerful new tech by state and non-state actors in humanitarian contexts. This gap calls for legal experts and humanitarians to collaborate on norms and guidelines.

- **Mental Health and Volunteer Care:** Although Mr. Rassi mentioned "mental health support" and family support funds, it is implicit that comprehensive care for traumatized aid workers is underdeveloped. The Red Family Fund is a step, but the broader system for psychosocial support, medical leave, and career continuation for local humanitarians remains a gap. Many local volunteers are not yet fully covered by institutional arrangements found in larger NGOs (e.g. paid leave, counseling).

- **Security Restrictions and Access Blockades:** An implicit gap alluded to is the increasing difficulty of access in places like Gaza. Mr. Rassi noted that humanitarian access is critical and being tested, but did not spell out solutions for negotiating or overcoming blockades. This suggests a need for stronger diplomatic advocacy or innovative corridor agreements, which was not fully articulated.

- **Coordination with Military Actors:** The question raised the issue of privatized/security models of aid, implying a gap in how humanitarian organizations coordinate with military or security forces providing aid. The speaker did not offer specific measures to manage this trend, indicating a blind spot in current coordination protocols.

In summary, the gaps revolve around **operational funding, protection infrastructure, inclusive governance, tech governance, and support services**. Many of these gaps were highlighted by Mr. Rassi's comments (e.g., slow funding, inadequate safety gear) or by his inability to fully address emerging issues (tech ethics). These gaps will need dedicated attention by policymakers and humanitarian organizations to implement the solutions described above effectively.

Conclusion

The conference made clear that effective humanitarian response in the Middle East hinges on **coordinated action that elevates local actors**. Mr. Rassi's insights underscore that local Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, as well as other national NGOs, are often the most capable and trusted responders in crisis situations. They have proven this in Gaza, Lebanon, Morocco, and elsewhere. The evidence from these examples is unequivocal: when local actors are supported, relief operations reach further and save more lives.

At the same time, this local backbone of the response is gravely stretched. Volunteers and staff are overworked, underprotected, and underfunded. Attacks on aid workers — counter to international law and norms — pose the most immediate existential threat to coordination. As Mr. Rassi bluntly observed, humanitarian emblems that once deterred violence now offer little guarantee of safety. Without reversing this trend, coordination efforts will falter.

The conference emphasized that **coordination cannot be just lip service**. It must translate into tangible measures: shifting resources to

local responders, integrating them into planning, and reforming systems that currently prioritize international agency interests. This includes reimagining the cluster system and other platforms to ensure that every voice at the table is relevant to the operational reality on the ground.

Overall, the key messages are:

- *Local responders must be empowered*. They should be fully resourced, trained, and involved in all planning stages.
- *Protection of aid workers is non-negotiable*. Donors and governments must make security for humanitarians a core part of relief strategy.
- *Humanitarian principles must guide coordination*. Neutrality and impartiality, upheld by all, are the currency of trust.
- *Innovation must serve people*. Technology should augment, not replace, human networks and should be used carefully under ethical oversight.

As the Mr. Koo Kim noted, the vulnerability of local actors has been "chronic" and is now being thrust into the spotlight. This new attention offers an opportunity. The direction set by Mr. Rassi's remarks points toward a coordinated response framework that is more inclusive, efficient, and principled. It is now up to policymakers, donors, and humanitarian organizations to turn those insights into action.

Way Forward

To translate these conclusions into concrete progress, the following steps are recommended for decision-makers and humanitarian leaders:

1. **Increase Direct Funding to National Societies and Local NGOs.** Agencies and donors should allocate a fixed percentage of humanitarian budgets to local actors (e.g. via the Grand Bargain localization targets). These funds must be reliable and flexible, supporting not only emergency projects but also organizational development. For instance, donors can establish multi-year grants to Red Crescent societies with provisions for reporting local community impact, rather than short-term contracts.
2. **Establish Inclusive Coordination Governance.** All major coordination bodies (UN clusters, inter-agency task forces, national emergency committees) should formalize local representation. This could mean designating seats for national society leaders or local NGO consortia on coordination boards. The ICRC/IFRC Seville Agreement provides a model: it clarified that national societies lead on domestic humanitarian action. Similar agreements or memoranda of understanding could be developed in each crisis context, clearly defining roles and preventing overlap between international and local actors.
3. **Invest in Humanitarian Worker Safety and Support.** Donors and governments should fund specialized safety equipment (helmets, vests, vehicles) and training for field staff of national societies. Coordination plans must include mutual security arrangements: for example, shared convoys or communication networks for alerts. At the international policy level, states should endorse the forthcoming *Declaration on the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel*, as Mr. Rassi noted this is "critical and very important". Governments should also prosecute violations of humanitarian law to deter attacks on aid workers.
4. **Prioritize Psychosocial and Legal Support for Volunteers.** Organizations should build on initiatives like the IFRC "Red Family Fund" by creating systematic programs for volunteer welfare. This includes mental health counseling, trauma training, and insurance coverage. Legal aid services should be available for aid workers

detained or threatened. These support structures should be coordinated so that all agencies in a crisis agree to share resources (e.g. rotating counselors, pooled emergency medical funds).

5. **Strengthen Humanitarian Principles Training.** Coordination bodies should include ethics reviews and principle-awareness in their planning. Joint training workshops can ensure all actors (local and international) understand neutrality and impartiality. When communities and combatants see a unified, principled approach, trust in the coordinated response is reinforced. Messaging campaigns may also be needed to remind parties in conflict that aiding civilians is not a hostile act.
6. **Leverage Technology in Partnership with Local Actors.** Any new technological tools (e.g. data dashboards, AI mapping, logistics apps) should be co-developed with local societies. This ensures relevance and builds local capacity to use the tools. At the same time, stakeholders (NGOs, tech firms, regulators) should convene forums to establish ethical guidelines for technology in conflict. Mr. Rassi's call for "open discussions" means inviting humanitarian representatives into AI and security conferences, so that guidelines reflect humanitarian values.
7. **Promote Accountability and Learning.** Regular joint reviews should be conducted to assess how well coordination works. This includes analyzing resource flows: Mr. Rassi warned against "top-heavy coordination" spending, so audits can ensure the majority of funds reach field operations. Lessons from each crisis should be documented and shared widely (perhaps through ILEF and similar networks) so that improvements are continuous.
8. **Advocate for Policy Change.** Finally, humanitarian organizations should engage with governments to change policies that hinder coordination. For example, cross-border aid rules may need revision, or airspace and border clearances should be streamlined for convoys. Advocacy can also target national regulations: encouraging host countries to formally integrate national societies into disaster response laws.

In all these steps, the central theme — **coordination with local partners as equals** — must remain paramount. As Mr. Rassi emphasized, achieving effective coordination means building trust through concrete action: funding local leaders, protecting their work, and respecting the principles that earn them trust in the first place. If policymakers and humanitarian agencies commit to these solutions, the coordination of crisis response in the Middle East can become not only more efficient but fundamentally more just and sustainable.

Theme 4. Effective Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in the Middle East

Background Information

The panel explored *grassroots and bottom-up mechanisms for peace and reconciliation in the Middle East*. Mr. Doheon Kim, Executive Administrator of the International Law Enforcement Federation (ILEF), set the tone by highlighting that "long-term peace means starting at the grassroots" and noted that top-down plans "have often faltered due to misalignments with local realities". The session aimed to highlight "grassroots strategies for peace, local leadership, community dialogue, and post-conflict development". Three practitioners – Ambassador Tobias Privitelli, Director of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD); Ms. Sara Savva, Deputy Director General of ACT Alliance; and Ms. Annika Hilding Norberg, Head of Peace Operations and Peacebuilding at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) – framed the key issues and data, drawing on recent experiences in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, and Israel.

The speakers brought to light a **complex tapestry of overlapping crises** across the Middle East. Ms. Savva reviewed each country's situation:

In **Iraq**, more than five years after ISIS's territorial defeat, "millions in Iraq remain in need of humanitarian assistance," with large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who "are unable to return to their areas of origin due to insecurity, destroyed infrastructure, and land disputes".

In **Yemen**, years of fighting "between the internationally recognized government, Houthi forces, and other armed actors" have created "one of the world's largest humanitarian crises," with over *21 million people requiring assistance*.

In **Palestine/Israel**, the conflict remains "a central flashpoint… marked by recurring cycles of violence, civilian casualties, [and] political deadlock," and **Gaza** faces acute humanitarian needs due to blockades and repeated escalations. **Lebanon** is in a "multifaceted crisis" of political paralysis and economic collapse, with "over 1.5 million Syrian refugees," a devalued currency, high unemployment, and deteriorating public services.

Syria – fourteen years into civil war – has *16.5 million* people needing aid, 90% of them below the poverty line. The country suffers "widespread insecurity, including sectarian violence… lawlessness [and] regional spillovers," with collapsed sanitation and utilities, and **ISIS** re-emerging with roughly 3,000 fighters and prison breaks. Observers note Syria's weak judiciary (often dominated by religious figures) and a transitional government that "fails to represent all communities".

These humanitarian statistics and real-world examples underscored the severity of these challenges. Ambassador Privitelli highlighted **explosive ordnance** threats: since a change of power in Syria, the UN Mine Action Service recorded *1,251 victims in eight months* (about 500 killed, 700 injured), with one-third of casualties being children. He estimated *15.4 million* Syrians (roughly two-thirds of the population) living "under the threat of explosive ordnance contamination". These hazards are not abstract: they have prevented farmers from returning to fields, closed schools, and blocked refugees from going home. In Mosul (Iraq), for instance, the High Court building was found "riddled with IEDs and booby traps," requiring specialized clearance before justice could be restored. Similar contamination in **Yemen** and **Iraq** has blocked humanitarian and economic corridors. Ms. Savva also cited UN figures: *21*

million in Yemen needing aid, *1.5 million* Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and Syria's *16.5 million* needing assistance.

Beyond country-specific crises, **regional cross-cutting challenges** were identified. Chronic underfunding and donor fatigue plague responses, and centralized power structures have "marginalize[d] large segments of society." Armed group activity and unresolved conflicts continue to undermine stability. Essential services have been destroyed by years of war, limiting recovery and return prospects, and contributing to displacement and economic disruption. Ms. Savva warned that without sustained support, the region faces catastrophic risks: "famine-like conditions could emerge within months," disease outbreaks could spiral, millions of children could drop out of school, and poverty would become entrenched. Armed groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates could exploit power vacuums, spreading conflict across borders. In short, panelists agreed that *"we need a genuine, inclusive peace process that emerges when these actors work together"*.

In this dire context, the **roles of international and local actors** were also outlined. The UN and donor governments can provide an overarching coordination framework, facilitate high-level negotiations, uphold humanitarian law, and mobilize funding when the political will exists. The UN's cluster coordination has ensured emergency relief delivery in all affected countries. Ms. Savva explained that NGOs and faith-based organizations "remain vital in reaching communities directly, [especially] in hard-to-reach areas". The ACT Alliance (a faith-based NGO network) was cited as an example of culturally sensitive, community-rooted assistance across the region. Faith-based groups play unique roles: promoting social cohesion and reconciliation, bridging divides in fragmented societies, and offering neutral assistance trusted by all sides. Ms. Savva stressed that strengthening the capacity and inclusiveness of these grassroots and faith-based actors is *"essential for sustainable peace"*.

Key Issues Identified:
Iraq: Ongoing fragility post-ISIS; millions need aid; IDPs can't return (insecurity, infrastructure damage, land disputes).
Yemen: War causing one of world's worst crises; 21M need assistance; infrastructure and economy decimated.
Palestine/Israel: Recurring violence and deadlock; Gaza's humanitarian needs acute (blockades, escalations).
Lebanon: Economic collapse and political paralysis; 1.5M refugees; hyperinflation, unemployment, failing services.
Syria: 14-year conflict; 16.5M need aid (90% in poverty); widespread insecurity, collapsed infrastructure, weak governance.
Cross-Region: Chronic underfunding, elite marginalization, armed groups, broken services, displacement.

Humanitarian Data: Over *1,200 mine/ERW casualties* in recent months in Syria; *15.4 million Syrians* (≈2/3 population) at explosive ordnance risk; *21 million* Yemenis require aid; *16.5 million* Syrians need assistance; *1.5 million* Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Solutions to the Challenges

The panelists offered **concrete approaches** and strategies to address these challenges, grounded in grassroots action. Each solution was supported by a panelist's experience.

Humanitarian Mine Action as a Peace Catalyst

Ambassador Privitelli argued that **mine action should be treated not as an afterthought, but as a catalyst for peacebuilding**. Contrary to the common view that mine clearance only happens after peace, he insisted *"Mine action is not a consequence of peace, it can be a catalyst of peace"*. He gave three key ways mine action contributes to peace:

- **Enabling stability and rule of law.** After ISIS was driven from Mosul, the city's High Court was found booby-trapped with IEDs. Only thorough clearance (through UNDP support) *"allowed [us] to reopen the building and to restore a functioning justice"*. This example shows how demining can make it possible to revive state institutions and rule of law in liberated areas.

- **Facilitating the return of refugees and IDPs.** Ambassador Privitelli noted that landmines often *"remain the main obstacle"* preventing millions from returning home. In Yemen and Iraq, clearance of mined corridors is essential for basic humanitarian access. For instance, oil field access in Iraq is prioritized for clearance so that economic activity (and thus stability) can resume. By clearing roads and farmland, mine action "open[s] the most elementary humanitarian corridors" and enables families to rebuild their lives.

- **Building confidence (confidence-building measures).** Joint mine-clearance projects can foster cooperation between former adversaries. Ambassador Privitelli pointed to historical examples: the Peru-Ecuador border and Serbia-Croatia joint clearance efforts have served as rare but powerful trust-building exercises. He even cited the Colombia Peace Agreement's emphasis on clearing mines, and argued the same concept "could be relevant for a potential ceasefire in Ukraine" (though Ukraine lies outside this region, the principle is analogous). He specifically recommended *"exchanging maps between militaries"* to pinpoint contamination zones, an approach that could be applied in Middle Eastern ceasefires to build transparency and trust.

Ambassador Privitelli concluded with **three strategic techniques** for policymakers:

1. **Integrate mine action early.** *"Mine action should be moved upstream in peace processes,"* he said, meaning it should be included in negotiations and agreements from the start. Treating demining as a precondition for recovery acknowledges its importance for stability.

2. **Fund mine action as strategic investment.** Funding it yields high returns: cleared land unlocks multi-million-dollar infrastructure projects and helps build a local mine-action sector. Ambassador Privitelli noted that donors should view mine action as *"a strategic investment in stability, since the returns can be exponential"*.

3. **Leverage the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.** He observed that mine action is "a very practical example of the humanitarian development and peace nexus". It protects civilians (humanitarian), restores productive land (development), and yields a clear peace dividend by enabling normal life to resume. By ensuring mine action is *"part of the architecture of peace agreements"*, the community not only saves lives but can dramatically shorten the time to post-conflict normalcy.

These recommendations underscore that practical technical tasks like demining have broad peacebuilding impact. The discussion implies several action points: integrate mine action into ceasefires (he noted UN Security Council Resolution 2365 explicitly calls for this integration, train and equip local demining teams, and finance long-term clearance programs.

Empowering Local and Faith-Based Actors

Ms. Savva emphasized **inclusive, bottom-up peacebuilding driven by local actors and communities**. She stressed that top-down diplomacy alone is insufficient; it must

"address local grievances, empower communities, and rebuild trust". Her solution framework focused on the roles of the UN, NGOs, and local authorities:

- **Inclusive community-driven strategies.** Ms. Savva repeatedly highlighted that long-term peace requires *"an inclusive bottom-up approach"*. In practice, this means engaging grassroots communities and local leaders in designing and implementing peace initiatives. While she didn't list step-by-step actions, she painted a picture of empowerment: faith-based and community organizations are *"trusted by the community from all sides"*, acting neutrally to ensure *"everyone in need gets assistance"*. She argued these groups have *"proven grassroots delivery with high-level advocacy"*, able to address climate, gender, migration, and other issues that rebuild livelihoods. Strengthening their capacity and ensuring inclusiveness is *"essential for sustainable peace"*.

- **Clear roles for international actors.** Ms. Savva outlined how UN and donors should function: providing an overarching coordination framework, facilitating high-level negotiations, enforcing international law, and mobilizing funding when political decisions allow. The UN's cluster coordination system was cited as proof that *"emergency relief… should be delivered efficiently"*. This means reinforcing existing UN coordination mechanisms in each country to ensure aid reaches communities effectively.

- **Leveraging faith-based networks.** A key part of Ms. Savva's solution is to **leverage faith-based organizations** for peacebuilding. She noted that faith-based networks scattered across the Middle East uniquely facilitate dialogue and reconciliation. These groups operate in highly challenging environments; they provide culturally sensitive assistance (through the ACT Alliance) and advocate for humanitarian access and civilian protection. By trusting local knowledge and religious legitimacy, they can bridge sectarian divides. Ms. Savva implied that supporting and coordinating with these networks – for example by including them in peace dialogues or funding their programs – would bolster grassroots cohesion.

In summary, Ms. Savva's solutions center on **empowering local, community-led actors within a supportive international framework**. The UN and donors maintain the backbone (coordination, funding, law) while NGOs and faith groups deliver innovative on-the-ground services. Local authorities then anchor these efforts through ownership and accountability. This tripartite model – UN, NGOs/faith groups, and local communities – should operate in an integrated manner. Ms. Savva's comments suggest action steps like increasing funding for grassroots projects, ensuring local representation in peace committees, and enhancing communication between UN clusters and community organizations.

Strengthening and Revitalizing International Mechanisms

Ms. Hilding Norberg focused on the **strategic role of international actors (especially the UN)** in supporting grassroots peace efforts. She proposed a *three-pronged strategy* and offered multiple solutions:

1. **Revitalize existing UN capacities in the Middle East.** Instead of creating new missions, she advised leveraging *"the diverse mosaic of existing UN mechanisms"*. She pointed to specialized entities like ANSO (the first UN peacekeeping mission), UNIFIL, UNDOF, UNESCO (ANSCO?), UNCOL, UNIFIL, the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), and UNRWA, each with agile, context-specific tools. Many have mandates and trust built over decades, with multi-country scope and P5 support. For example, ANSO

(the Sinai mission) is lauded as agile and regionally mandated, having helped set up 14 new missions worldwide. Ms. Hilding Norberg's key message: *"It's time for us to revisit, revitalize, and give the UN a new chance to do what it's supposed to be doing, because it is still the most universal actor"*.

2. **Address the UN police gap.** Within this strategy, she highlighted *"a key gap"*: the limited presence of UN police (UNPOL) units. UNPOL is typically focused on capacity-building for local law enforcement and civilian protection. Currently it is active only in Cyprus (UNFICYP), Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), and South Sudan (UNMISS), with minimal engagement elsewhere. Ms. Hilding Norberg proposed *"to expand UNPOL's footprint across the region"*. This does not necessarily mean new large missions, but could involve advisory and non-mission frameworks where UNPOL works alongside UNDP and human rights offices. Strengthening UNPOL and deploying smaller, agile teams would enhance the UN's ability to train local institutions and build community trust.

3. **Co-design peace initiatives with local actors.** Ms. Hilding Norberg insisted that to be effective and sustainable, peace efforts must be designed *"with local actors, not merely for them"*. She cited the UN Police Strategic Guidance Framework (SGF) – a compilation of global best practices – as an example. Norway is supporting its review to incorporate insights from host countries in the Middle East. This participatory approach would allow affected communities to shift from being "security consumers" to "global security contributors". In practice, this means international agencies should actively consult local police, civil society, and community leaders when updating doctrines or planning operations. Co-design can involve joint training programs, community-oriented policing strategies, and sharing decision-making in peace planning.

4. **Connect the local to the global (build global-local linkages).** Repeatedly, panelists stressed **trust** as critical. Ms. Hilding Norberg proposed that law enforcement and peace actors in the Middle East be connected to global platforms of knowledge. By linking grassroots initiatives with forums in "International Geneva" – which gather experts on climate, trade, migration, technology, and other systemic conflict drivers – local stakeholders can access best practices. She envisioned "communities of practice" where, for example, Lebanese or Iraqi police officers and local peacebuilders participate in multi-disciplinary dialogues in Geneva to co-create knowledge. Such global-local exchanges help address root causes (like water scarcity or economic shocks) that transcend borders, ensuring local programs are informed by global research and vice versa. As she put it, *"Local actors become active contributors to international peace and security"* when engaged in these networks.

Ms. Hilding Norberg's conclusion distilled these ideas into an overarching strategy: **revitalize existing UN/peace frameworks**, **empower local partners as co-creators**, and **integrate grassroots initiatives into global systems**. The panel emphasized the need for small, agile, and coordinated efforts – rather than large monolithic missions – to foster long-term stability. Her recommendations suggest steps like reviewing mandates of current UN missions, expanding UNPOL training programs in the region, revising guidance frameworks to include local input, and creating formal pathways for local voices to engage with Geneva-based diplomacy. By "strengthen[ing] and adapt[ing] the current UN mechanism[s]",

international actors can more effectively support grassroots peace initiatives.

Practical Cooperation on Technical Issues

In the Q&A, panelists further illustrated the idea of building peace through **pragmatic, technical collaboration**, even in polarized settings. Ms. Hilding Norberg suggested focusing on neutral, practical issues (like mine action) that *"concern everyone"*. For example, she concurred with Ambassador Privitelli that mine clearance is not just "a technical practical issue" but an *"engine for developing cooperation on common issues"*. By prioritizing cooperation on shared needs (e.g. demining, water management, infrastructure), even adversarial communities can find common ground for dialogue.

Ambassador Privitelli confirmed that local involvement is crucial. His organization's goal is to *"support the local sector"* in mine action, transferring operations to local NGOs and companies. However, he acknowledged that **donors remain hesitant to fund local actors directly**. To overcome this, Ambassador Privitelli recommends establishing National Mine Action Centers (with direct government backing) that can coordinate and receive funding independently. He revealed that Syria has requested help to *"elaborate…the establishment of a National Mine Action Center"* – the first of its kind in that country. This solution builds local institutional capacity and ensures sustainability of mine-clearance efforts.

An example from another context (Mauritania, West Africa) was cited to illustrate grassroots peacebuilding through resource management. Dr. Pellaton described working with refugees and local authorities on **water access** to prevent conflict. By engaging refugee communities and local leaders to identify water needs, they ensure "access to water does not become an issue of tension". While not Middle East-specific, the approach – using shared resource projects to unite stakeholders – exemplifies how community dialogue on practical issues can diffuse conflict and build trust.

These practical examples suggest **solutions** such as:

- Use technical cooperation (e.g., mine clearance, water projects) as neutral ground for collaboration, avoiding politicized agendas[58][31].
- Strengthen local institutions (National Mine Action Centers, community water committees) so that operations are locally led.
- Encourage donor flexibility to channel funds through local partners (while addressing due diligence concerns).

Such bottom-up, issue-specific strategies can be integrated into broader peace plans, turning shared needs into stepping stones for reconciliation.

Identified Gaps

Panelists also **acknowledged gaps and limitations** in current peacebuilding efforts. These included **resource gaps, institutional shortfalls, and trust deficits**:

- **Under-resourced local actors and institutions.** Ambassador Privitelli noted that while local NGOs and companies are key to lasting mine action, donors are "relatively skeptical" about funding them directly. This skepticism is a gap: without direct financing, local capacity remains weak. The absence of a national mine action center in Syria until now (as implied by the request for help to establish one) shows that institutional infrastructure is lacking.

- **Chronic underfunding.** Ms. Savva pointed out that regional humanitarian responses suffer *"chronic underfunding"*, forcing competition among crises. She warned of a

major gap between needs and resources, which could leave crises unaddressed. If donor support lags, the region could face famine and disease outbreaks.

- **Limited UN presence in key areas.** Ms. Hilding Norberg identified "the limited presence of UN police" in much of the Middle East as a significant gap. UN policing and advisory teams, which are central to security sector reform, are virtually absent outside Cyprus and a few missions. This law enforcement gap hinders community trust and local capacity building.

- **Global-local disconnect.** The speakers implicitly noted a **lack of strong linkages between grassroots initiatives and global policy**. Ms. Hilding Norberg stressed the need to bridge this gap by connecting local actors to Geneva's expertise, implying that such linkages are currently weak or absent. Without these channels, local insights don't inform international strategy, and local actors miss out on global best practices.

- **Designing with versus for local communities.** Ms. Hilding Norberg and others repeatedly emphasized *co-design with local actors*. The flip side is that many existing programs are designed without local input, a gap in process. Ms. Savva also hinted at elite-driven systems that "marginalize large segments of society" – an institutional exclusion of grassroots voices.

- **Trust and polarization.** In Q&A, an attendee asked how to involve local actors where populations are deeply polarized (e.g. Israel-Gaza). The lack of a clear model for reconciling such divides was itself a gap. Ms. Hilding Norberg suggested focusing on neutral technical issues (mine action), but implicitly conceded that political rapprochement remains elusive. This underscores a gap in confidence-building: communities often distrust each other and the state, making bottom-up dialogue difficult without first identifying shared concerns.

In summary, the discussion highlighted **gaps in funding, resources, and structures** that can undermine grassroots peacebuilding. Under-resourced NGOs, a dearth of local institutional frameworks, and limited UN field presence were repeatedly noted. These gaps suggest the need for stronger investment in local capacity and better integration of local voices into the peace architecture.

Conclusion

The conference underscored that **effective Middle East peacebuilding depends on synchronizing grassroots action with international support**. Key takeaways include:

- **Peace must be built from the ground up.** Top-down plans alone have fallen short; community-driven approaches are essential. Empowering local leaders, faith groups, and NGOs can address the unique grievances in each country and rebuild trust among divided populations.

- **Coordination among actors is critical.** The UN (through coordination, law, and funding), NGOs/faith-based networks (through community outreach), and local authorities (through legitimacy and ownership) must play complementary roles. As Ms. Savva summarized, the new UN provides the political and financial backbone, NGOs and faith-based organizations deliver on the ground, and local authorities anchor efforts within communities.

- **Technical interventions can catalyze peace.** Practical efforts like mine clearance, water management, or infrastructure projects have outsized peacebuilding effects. Ambassador Privitelli's idea to integrate mine action

"upstream" shows how addressing even technical issues early can unlock stability and refugee returns. These projects serve as confidence-building measures across conflict lines.

- **Existing frameworks should be revitalized.** Ms. Hilding Norberg's advocacy for using and strengthening current UN missions – not creating new ones – points to efficiency. Small, agile teams (e.g. UNPOL advisers) tailored to each context are favored over large interventions. By reassessing mandates and deploying underutilized resources (like UNPOL), the UN can be more responsive.

- **Gaps must be addressed.** The speakers candidly noted obstacles: underfunded humanitarian responses, marginalized communities, skepticism towards local NGOs, and limited law enforcement support. Acknowledging these gaps – and resolving them through funding, institutional development, and inclusive planning – is a necessary step toward lasting peace.

Overall, the conference conveyed that **peace in the Middle East will not emerge from one-size-fits-all blueprints, but from a mosaic of local efforts, international support, and innovative cooperation**. As Ms. Hilding Norberg put it, an *"integrated approach, grounded in cooperation, mutual respect, and strategic investment"* can enable international actors and grassroots initiatives to support peace together in lasting ways.

Way Forward

Building on the conference discussions, actionable next steps include:

- **Integrate mine action into peace negotiations.** Implement UNSC Resolution 2365 by including mine-clearance provisions in ceasefire and peace agreements. Donors and negotiators should recognize demining as a *"precondition for recovery and stability"*.

- **Establish and fund local institutions.** Support the creation of **National Mine Action Centers** and similar bodies in affected countries (as requested by Syrian authorities). Provide seed funding and technical assistance so these centers can operate independently (perhaps under a Prime Minister's office) to coordinate clearance.

- **Strengthen UN police and advisory teams.** Follow Ms. Hilding Norberg's advice to **expand UNPOL's presence** across the region. Deploy specialized law-enforcement advisers and trainers to countries like Iraq, Libya, or Yemen, under existing UNDP or human rights missions. This can help build trust in local policing and protect civilians.

- **Co-design projects with communities.** International agencies (UN, donors, NGOs) should embed local representatives in the planning process for peace initiatives. For example, update the UN Police Strategic Guidance Framework (SGF) by incorporating feedback from Middle Eastern host countries. Ensure local NGOs, tribal leaders, women's groups, and youth representatives have seats at the table in project design and governance.

- **Leverage faith-based networks.** Recognizing their unique role, donors should channel more resources to faith-based organizations that foster dialogue and relief. Faith communities can convene inter-communal discussions, and NGOs can partner with mosques, churches, and community centers to deliver aid. Strengthening these networks (through training, inclusive governance, and funding) will build social cohesion.

- **Connect local actors to global forums.** Create formal linkages for Middle Eastern

civil society and police to participate in Geneva-based or other international platforms. For instance, sponsor delegations of local peacebuilders and law-enforcement officers to attend conferences on climate, migration, or technology, enabling them to share local insights and gain global expertise. This two-way exchange will make global policies more grounded and local practices more innovative.

- **Focus on neutral, technical cooperation.** Identify and invest in non-political, needs-driven projects (water sanitation, infrastructure repair, demining) that require collaboration across conflict lines. For example, replicate the Mauritania water-project approach by bringing together community members from different sides to address shared resource challenges. These low-profile initiatives can build trust incrementally.
- **Address funding and coordination gaps.** Donors should commit to multi-year funding packages for humanitarian and development programs in the region to reduce chronic underfunding. They should also be flexible in granting to vetted local NGOs, overcoming the "skepticism" noted by Ambassador Privitelli. Simultaneously, UN agencies must ensure the cluster coordination system adapts to support long-term recovery, not just emergency relief.
- **Encourage research and knowledge sharing.** Support mechanisms like the Challenges Forum and Geneva Peacebuilding Platform (mentioned by Ms. Hilding Norberg) to continue developing concepts and sharing best practices. For example, research findings on effective mine action (to be presented at an upcoming Geneva Peace Week) should be disseminated widely among practitioners and policymakers.
- **Facilitate inclusive dialogue.** Even in polarized environments (e.g. Israel-Gaza), seek out technical areas or civil society spaces where dialogue can occur. For instance, mine-action debriefings or reconstruction workshops involving Israelis, Gazans, and international experts could seed cooperation. As Ms. Hilding Norberg suggested, focusing on shared human concerns (like safety from landmines) can gradually overcome political impasses.

By pursuing these steps – grounded in the panel's insights and supported by the cited examples – international and local stakeholders can move forward together. The conference made clear that no single actor can build peace alone; success will require strategic investment, mutual learning, and coordination at **all levels**. If implemented, these recommendations can help translate the ILEF's grassroots vision into concrete progress toward lasting peace in the Middle East.

Theme 5. The Current Israel-Iran Conflict, the Role of the US, and the Ripple Effect Emanating from this Conflict

Background and Context

The ILEF conference took place in the aftermath of a brief but intense Israel–Iran war in mid-June 2025. In that 12-day conflict, Israel launched widespread air strikes on Iranian nuclear and military sites, killing key scientists and commanders. Iran responded with hundreds of missiles, and the United States itself intervened on June 22 with "bunker-buster" strikes on Iran's Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan nuclear facilities. A fragile ceasefire, brokered by the U.S. on June 24, froze the fighting. By most accounts, hundreds of Iranians and scores of Israelis were killed, thousands were displaced, and Iran's nuclear program and military infrastructure suffered heavy damage (at least 610 Iranians and 28 Israelis were reported killed). These events dramatically shifted the regional balance and set the scene for the panel discussion.

In this context, the panelists emphasized that both sides now face acute dilemmas. **Iran's leadership** finds itself "between a rock and a hard place". As Dr. Dina Esfandiary, Middle East Geoeconomics Lead at Bloomberg, explained, Iran was engaged in nuclear negotiations when the strikes began, so Tehran feels that it makes no sense "we were engaged in talks, but you're bombing us to get us to return to the negotiating table". Iran's negotiators believe that giving in after an attack would set a dangerous precedent: any time Iran avoids talks, it could be attacked into submission. Thus, in Iranian public opinion and elite circles, concessions must be presented as victories, not capitulation. Importantly, the conflict itself reinforced the notion that a nuclear deterrent might have prevented the attack: *"if we had developed the bomb back then, nobody would have dared attack us on this 12-day war"*. This has emboldened hardliners and fractured the pro-deal consensus that existed before the war. Prior to June 2025, many Iranian technocrats wanted to lift sanctions and rejoin the international community (as they did under the 2015 JCPOA); after the war, however, nationalism and security fears are higher and negotiating from "a position of weakness" is seen as unacceptable. So, Iran's challenge is to re-engage diplomatically while allowing its leaders to save face at home – a very sensitive balancing act.

On the **U.S. side**, the panelists noted confusion and mixed signals. Dr. Esfandiary described America as "the master puppeteer" in the Middle East whose policy was currently unfocused. She warned that Washington largely misreads Tehran's psychology (with experienced Iran specialists having been sidelined from U.S. policymaking). At the same time, U.S. public opinion and politics are fractured: even among President Trump's base, a split has emerged over whether the strikes on Iran were wise. Meanwhile, Trump's administration has unequivocally backed Israel, essentially giving Prime Minister Netanyahu "carte blanche" to pursue military campaigns in Gaza and beyond. This unchecked support worries other Arab states. As Dr. Esfandiary pointed out, several Gulf and Levant countries now view Israel's unchecked power as *"the number one problem in the region"*, a shift from previously seeing Iran as the primary threat. Arab capitals are uneasy about Israel's deepening strike capabilities and U.S. backing for them. These regional dynamics – fear of Israeli overreach combined with longstanding distrust of Iran – create a perilous security dilemma.

Meanwhile, the **military balance** between Iran and Israel remains heavily tilted toward Israel, largely due to sanctions. Dr. Farzan Sabet, Senior Researcher at the Geneva Graduate

Institute, noted that Iran has endured one of the most comprehensive sanctions regimes in modern history, causing economic damage equivalent to a full-scale war. He cited research estimating that sanctions over the past 10–15 years inflicted "macroeconomic effects comparable to the effects of the Iran-Iraq War" (a full eight-year conflict) – on the order of a trillion dollars in losses. Those sanctions not only shrank Iran's economy (and military budgets) but also crippled its access to advanced technology. For example, while Iran's short-range missiles remain quite precise, its medium-range missiles (which threaten Israel) lack the quality and stealth to reliably hit buried or defended Israeli targets. Conversely, Israel's U.S.-supplied arsenal proved devastating: during the 12-day war it reportedly *"destroy[ed] a lot of Iran's launchers… a lot of the missiles themselves"* and even struck hardened targets like underground command centers. One estimate cited by Dr. Sabet was that Israel *"decapitated the military leadership of Iran"*, destroying over 50% of its missile launchers and 80% of its air-defense network. In effect, Israel achieved near-air-superiority over central Iran during the conflict. These facts underscore how decades of sanctions and embargoes left Iran's conventional military vulnerable, whereas Israel's forces remain highly capable.

Beyond the state militaries, **Iran's regional proxies and allied militias** have also been seriously weakened. The panelists observed that Syria's Assad regime, which relies on Iran, has been destabilized; Hezbollah (Iran's Lebanese proxy) has been "seriously degraded" as a fighting force; and even Hamas has lost much of the military capability it had before the war. Iran's network of "acts of resistance" (shia militias in Iraq, Houthi rebels in Yemen, etc.) remains intact on paper, but has been largely paralyzed since the outbreak of direct conflict. Each attempt Iran makes to rearm these proxies (for example by smuggling weapons via the Arabian Sea or Africa) now risks provoking Israeli interdiction or retaliation. Dr. Sabet warned that Israel *"might be willing to interpret attacks by the acts of resistance against it as coming from Tehran, and therefore retaliate directly back in Tehran"*. In summary, the battlefield and proxy landscape heavily favors Israel, but also raises the danger of broader, uncontrolled escalation as Iran struggles to rebuild and rearm indirectly.

Finally, several **broader issues** were highlighted. Sanctions have taken a severe toll on Iran's society: deep inflation, unemployment, infrastructure failures, water and power shortages, and frequent anti-regime protests. Dr. Sabet explained that in the last 16 years Iran saw nationwide protests roughly every four years (2009, 2017–18, 2019, and 2022), each episode larger and more violent than the last. This growing domestic discontent means the Iranian regime's tolerance for hardship is eroding. On the nuclear front, Iran's **breakout time** has lengthened – rather than the 3–6 months estimated before the war, analysts now think a bomb could take 1–3 years to build– but this is still worrisome. If Iran did race for a weapon, Dr. Sabet cautioned, that would likely trigger a **proliferation cascade** in the Middle East, as neighbors like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Turkey would seek similar capabilities. In fact, Saudi Arabia was said to be *"waiting to see what Iran is able to obtain in negotiations"* so it can demand the same in its own nuclear talks. These ripple effects underscore that any resolution (or failure) in the Iran-Israel conflict will send shockwaves through the region.

In summary, the panel painted a picture of a highly volatile environment. Iran is battered but unwilling to give up key nuclear ambitions, Israel is militarily dominant but emboldened to act beyond previous limits, and the U.S. has both the power to steer events and a credibility gap. The panel concurred that **peace and diplomacy remain indispensable** to prevent further escalation. The key challenges identified were how to resume credible negotiations in the wake of war, how to address Iran's nuclear program realistically, how to use

sanctions and incentives wisely, how to manage the ideological and proxy conflicts without more fighting, and how the U.S. can best wield its influence. These are the issues that the subsequent discussion of solutions will tackle.

Proposed Solutions

Drawing directly from the experts' remarks, several solution pathways emerged. Each involves concrete policy approaches or mechanisms to de-escalate conflict and address root problems. We organize these by theme, reflecting the solutions outlined by the speakers.

Framing Diplomacy as "Winning"

A central insight from Dr. Esfandiary was that Iran must be able to present any deal to its public as a victory. In practice, this means Western negotiators (the U.S. and Europe) **must allow Iran to "sell the concessions it's going to make as a win"**. As Dr. Esfandiary explained: *"If it can't sell it as a win, then those voices inside Iran that are calling for no deal are just gonna get louder and louder"*. Thus, solutions should include tangible gains for Iran — especially on the nuclear issue — to counterbalance the perception of being punished.

Concretely, Dr. Esfandiary pointed to the *enrichment issue* as the easiest way to do this. Before the war, negotiations stalled over whether Iran could retain any enrichment of uranium on its soil. She argued: *"one easy way to [sell a deal] is the enrichment issue... we're going to be able to have some measure of enrichment on Iranian soil. I think with Tehran, it's key."*. Allowing limited enrichment (for peaceful use) would give Iranian leaders something tangible to claim. It would enable them to argue that *"they have demonstrated that they are willing to make significant concessions on the rest of their program"* while still preserving a core national interest.

In practice, negotiators can package concessions (such as sanctions relief, recognition of Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology, or economic investments) into a deal that Iranian media would describe as a "win" for Iran's dignity and technology base. Crucially, Dr. Esfandiary noted, Iran's recent concessions show they are *"still willing to talk"* and can be persuaded by diplomatic signals. The solution framework, therefore, is a carefully calibrated negotiation: the U.S. and allies should publicly acknowledge Iran's valid concerns and craft terms so that Iran's leadership can credibly assert success. This might involve symmetric gestures (e.g. Western officials emphasizing Iran's role as a nuclear state within limits), creative verification steps, and a communication strategy to offset nationalist backlash.

Balancing Sanctions with Engagement

Both experts emphasized that while **sanctions** must remain on the table, they alone are insufficient to compel Iran to comply. Dr. Sabet argued that sanctions relief must be paired with dialogue and incentives. He pointed out that Iran's crippling sanctions regime has imposed *"dead weight losses... comparable to the effects of the Iran-Iraq War"*. These economic losses (over a trillion dollars in effect) made the economy "far less resilient" and fuelled repeated public uprisings. Sanctions clearly weaken Iran, but Dr. Sabet warned that pressure without negotiation cannot by itself secure a deal: *"you cannot use purely sanctions leverage and pure coercion in order to get what you want in negotiations; there has to be a give and take"*.

The proposed solution, then, is a **mixed strategy of sanctions relief tied to diplomatic progress**. For example, phased lifting of sanctions in exchange for verified nuclear and security commitments would create mutual incentives. Dr. Sabet cited evidence that Iran *"has shown itself to be insufficient for successful negotiations"* when only economic pressure is applied. Instead, he suggests

linking sanctions relief to mediation efforts, a concept under study at institutions like Peace Hub. In practical terms, this means working closely with intermediaries (e.g., EU partners) to design packages: if Iran meets benchmarks (e.g. admitting inspectors, capping enrichment), targeted sanctions should be eased accordingly. Conversely, renewed sanctions could signal bad faith, but should not be raised so high as to leave no breathing room for diplomacy.

By adopting this balanced approach, the U.S./EU would preserve leverage (Iran urgently needs relief) while also demonstrating willingness to reward cooperation. In effect, sanctions become part of a carrot-and-stick deal rather than a one-sided battering. The panelists implicitly endorsed this ethos: Dr. Esfandiary noted that Iran *"allowed meetings with the IAEA"* post-war to *"show…we're still willing to talk"*, which opens space for concessions. Thus, the solution encourages *responsive sanctions policy*: tightening when Iran blatantly violates terms, but relaxing when it makes verifiable gestures toward compliance.

Constructing a New Nuclear Framework

Tied to the preceding solution, the panel discussed **innovative nuclear arrangements** beyond the zero-enrichment demands of the past. Dr. Sabet pointed out that rigid demands (e.g. forcing Iran to forego all enrichment) have historically *"not proven very successful"*. Instead, recent smaller deals have given Iran some degree of peaceful nuclear capacity in return for sanctions relief. Building on this pragmatism, he mentioned a new concept: a multinational **"consortium arrangement"** for Iran's fuel cycle.

Under this proposal, elements of uranium enrichment or fuel production would be jointly managed by Iran and international partners. As Dr. Sabet described it: such a consortium would "place greater monitoring and restrictions on Iran's ability" while garnering "more regional… buy-in". For example, Iran might be allowed a small enrichment plant on site, but with foreign inspectors on hand and a role for neighboring states. In return, Iran would benefit from guaranteed access to reactor fuel and the prestige of a domestic nuclear program. The panel did not detail the exact structure, but this idea acknowledges Iran's insistence on some nuclear technology and seeks to integrate it into a transparent, collective framework.

While Dr. Sabet deferred deeper Q&A discussion of the consortium, its mention signals that solutions should be creative rather than all-or-nothing. The panelist noted that *"there's some interest in Iran"* in such a plan. If pursued, one solution is to prepare a negotiated prototype: e.g. allow Iran one centrifuge cascade under international supervision, or host some Iranian R&D abroad in consortium labs. Any new nuclear agreement should explicitly codify what enrichment (if any) Iran can have and provide rigorous oversight. The key is to treat Iran's nuclear program as an asset to be managed, not a black box to be shut down at all costs. This can address Iran's desire for energy autonomy while protecting proliferation risks.

Engaging Non-State Proxies

Another set of solutions addressed Iran's regional proxies (Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraqi militias, Houthis, etc.). The panel observed that these groups have been both a strategic asset for Iran and a trigger for conflict. Dr. Sabet offered a clear non-military strategy: **dialogue, disarmament, or integration**. He said the best option is for these non-state actors *"first to enter dialogue with [the Iranian government] and to eventually move towards either their disarmament or integration into existing armed forces of their countries"*. In practice, this could involve negotiations in which Iran agrees to suspend military aid in exchange for gradual demobilization of these militias. For example, Hezbollah fighters might be integrated into

Lebanon's official army, and Hamas rockets traded for political assurances.

This solution is motivated by Iran's own admitted interest in halting proxy warfare: continuing to fund proxy militias has become costly and risks further isolating Iran. However, the panel noted that Iran currently resists relinquishing these tools. Dr. Sabet pointed out that Tehran recently signaled continued support – for instance, the new Iranian National Security chief's visit to Lebanon was seen as "trying to block the disarmament process". Therefore, a solution would be to involve neutral third parties or negotiations to make the process less threatening. The U.S. or UN could host talks where proxies and sponsors discuss security guarantees. External economic incentives (reconstruction aid to Lebanon, for example) might sweeten the deal.

If successful, proxy de-escalation would remove a major flashpoint. As Dr. Sabet warned, Iran's depleted proxies still *"remain a flashpoint and could be a trigger for future rounds of escalation"*. By contrast, integrating or disarming them (ideally voluntarily, with Iranian cooperation) would diffuse tensions. The essence of this solution is to shift conflict channels from indirect war to political negotiation, respecting the security concerns on all sides.

The United States as Mediator and Shield

Both experts underscored a vital role for the U.S. in the way forward. Dr. Esfandiary emphasized that America must finally *use* its influence constructively. She warned that if the U.S. does not *"crack down"* on Israeli military actions when necessary, the Gaza campaign and potential strikes against Iran will continue unchecked. In other words, a key solution is for Washington to restrain its ally Israel when regional stability demands it. Similarly, the U.S. should leverage its position to reassure other states: Dr. Esfandiary argued that the U.S. must "attain… some of its own objectives" and help "get a deal with Iran" to prevent broader wars.

Practically, this means the U.S. should balance its commitments. On one hand, it continues military aid and defense of Israel; on the other, it must engage Iran diplomatically without using force as the first tool. Dr. Esfandiary noted the irony that the U.S. used strikes to derail talks (giving Iran the message that bargaining strength comes from force). A solution is to adopt a policy where hard power is backed by clear diplomatic incentives – showing Iran *"what the U.S. can achieve"* through negotiation, not just aggression. For example, after the initial strikes, the U.S. could appoint a special envoy to restart talks, as a show of good faith.

Additionally, the U.S. should continue to help contain the conflict by providing air defense to Israel (as it did) and by patrolling key waterways against Iranian attacks. But it should also publicly reaffirm that it supports negotiation and a two-state vision (if appropriate). Essentially, the U.S. solution role is to be the "master puppeteer" in a constructive sense: orchestrating a diplomatic resolution while deterring further escalation by either side.

Addressing Regional and Ideological Fears

Finally, solutions must consider the wider regional ripple effect. One implicit solution is to involve other regional powers in any deal. For instance, Saudi Arabia and Egypt should be consulted about what limits they expect on Iran's program, since Dr. Sabet noted they will only accept terms they perceive as fair (e.g. *"demanding the same"* nuclear capabilities if Iran gets enrichment). A solution could be a multilateral Middle East nonproliferation forum where Gulf states agree in writing not to pursue nuclear weapons if Iran abides by its side of a treaty.

On the ideological divide, the panelists stressed that no military solution can change minds. They hinted that **people-to-people** and diplomatic engagement is needed. For example, Dr. Esfandiary's analysis rests on the

idea that Iran's public sentiment matters; thus, solution efforts should include public diplomacy (exchange programs, cultural outreach, neutral mediators) to reduce mutual fear and hatred over time. While the panel did not enumerate such programs, the repeated refrain of the session – *"peace and diplomacy remain indispensable"* – suggests that long-term resolution requires changing perceptions as well as policies.

In summary, the solutions discussed combine pragmatic negotiation tactics with strategic leverage. They call for **granting Iran limited wins (e.g. controlled enrichment), tying sanctions to concrete steps, building innovative nuclear oversight (consortium), negotiating the phase-out of proxies, and having the U.S. credibly mediate these steps**. For instance, Dr. Esfandiary directly stated that allowing Iran to claim victory is *"the first"* key to a resolution, and Dr. Sabet insisted that sanctions must be accompanied by meaningful engagement (*"give and take"*). Together, these sub-strategies form a roadmap for de-escalating the current crisis.

Identified Gaps

The panelists touched on many issues, but some gaps in the discussion were noted, either explicitly or implicitly:

- **Deferred Topics**: Dr. Sabet briefly mentioned the nuclear fuel consortium concept but immediately said he would address it only if there was time (*"I can address [it] in the Q&A if there's interest"*). This indicates that innovative proposals like the consortium were not fully fleshed out in the session, highlighting a need for future conferences on the same.

- **Multilateral and UN Roles**: The panel focused on bilateral (U.S.-Iran) and regional dynamics, with little mention of international organizations beyond the IAEA or the role of the United Nations. For instance, no speaker discussed UN Security Council mechanisms or broader multinational peacekeeping options in this conflict. However, solutions provided in the preceding themes can greatly impact this conflict.

- **Psychological and Ideological Reconciliation**: Although the ideological divide between Iran's revolutionary regime and Israel's security doctrine was the session's theme, concrete solutions for overcoming ideological enmity were not detailed. The talk emphasized pragmatic steps (sanctions, diplomacy, proxies) but did not elaborate how to bridge underlying narratives or public distrust. This implicit gap points to a need for additional track-2 dialogues, educational exchanges, or religious dialogue that were beyond the panel's remit.

- **Absence of Other External Powers**: The panel did not cover roles for other major external actors like Russia or China, even though they influence the region. Similarly, while Saudi and Gulf concerns were mentioned in passing, their potential roles as mediators or back-channel negotiators were not developed. This narrow focus on U.S., EU, and Iran leaves unaddressed how a fully regional solution might engage all stakeholders.

In short, the discussion provided many concrete policy approaches but naturally could not exhaust every aspect. The identified gaps point to areas where further research or dialogue is needed.

Conclusion

The ILEF session highlighted a consensus that **continued conflict between Israel and Iran is dangerous for the region**, and only a combination of diplomacy and strategic policies can stabilize the situation. Key findings from the experts include:

- **Iran's Complex Position**: Iran is simultaneously pressured and defiant. Technocrats prefer reintegration, but they must navigate a political landscape hardened by war. Any deal must allow Iranian leaders to claim success (especially on enrichment) to avoid internal backlash.

- **U.S. Strategic Role**: The United States remains the pivotal external actor. Both panel explained America's inconsistent strategy – heavy military support for Israel without a clear diplomatic counterbalance. The U.S. can enable de-escalation by understanding Iranian perspectives better and using its influence to both encourage talks and restrain allies.

- **Limitations of Sanctions Alone**: Sanctions have undeniably weakened Iran, but as Dr. Sabet stressed, coercion without compromise will not yield compliance. Iran's economy and society are suffering (comparable to wartime devastation), yet protests and unrest show limits to sanctions' effectiveness. Sustainable solutions require pairing sanctions with offers of dialogue and relief.

- **Nuclear Negotiations Require Flexibility**: The panel agreed that maximalist demands (e.g. zero enrichment) are unrealistic. Past agreements succeeded by allowing Iran limited peaceful nuclear capacity. The current environment may permit inventive solutions (consortiums) that were previously on the table. Any renewed deal must carefully calibrate what Iran keeps versus what the international community monitors, to prevent proliferation while accommodating Iran's security concerns.

- **Proxy Militias as Flashpoints**: Iran's network of allied militias has been severely degraded in the war, which paradoxically both reduces and complicates Iranian influence. These groups could still ignite wider war unless addressed. The speakers suggested bringing proxies into the political fold or negotiating their demilitarization as a means of defusing this threat.

- **Regional Ripple Effects**: A final insight is that the Israel–Iran conflict feeds into a larger Middle East security dilemma. Arab states' fear of Israel's unchecked power and their own latent nuclear ambitions (e.g. Saudi "waiting to see" Iran's outcome) means that resolutions or escalations here will have cascading impacts. Any solution must thus be mindful of these wider dynamics, even if the session focused primarily on the immediate conflict.

In conclusion, the session underscored that **no easy fix exists**. Insights from the panelists suggests that without careful diplomacy, the status quo – periodic exchanges of fire, regional tensions, and domestic Iranian unrest – will persist, and possibly worsen by year's end. Conversely, a negotiated path requires patience and ingenuity. The recommended measures – from reputationally-palatable concessions and phased sanctions relief to non-military management of proxies – collectively chart a course for de-escalation.

Way Forward

Building on the discussion, the way forward involves implementing the strategies distilled above and remaining vigilant to new developments:

- **Immediate Diplomatic Engagement**: The United States and Europe should formally resume nuclear talks with Iran, emphasizing respect for Iranian concerns. These talks must include public language (and possibly private understandings) that any agreement constitutes a diplomatic success for Iran. As a practical step, the snap-back sanctions mechanism (set to expire in October) should be extended or revived in conjunction with negotiations, as both speakers expected would happen. This extension would buy time for the talks to produce results.

- **Public Framing**: Western leaders should communicate deals as mutual victories – for example, by jointly announcing terms that celebrate Iran's "peaceful nuclear rights" being recognized under strict limits. They should also be prepared to let Iran publicly label any compromises (such as a small enrichment facility) as a national achievement, to help moderate hard-liners back home.

- **Regional Inclusion**: The way forward must bring Gulf allies into the loop. The U.S. can convene Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and MENA security dialogues in parallel to the U.S.–Iran talks, assuring neighbors that their security concerns (such as proliferation and missile threats) will be addressed in any settlement. For instance, Saudis and Emiratis could be offered security guarantees or access to peaceful nuclear technology commensurate with Iran's concessions, reducing the incentive for a regional arms race.

- **Proxy Negotiations**: Track-2 dialogues should begin between Iran and countries like Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen on the future of their militias. These talks, possibly mediated by neutral parties (UN or NGOs), would lay out roadmaps for how groups like Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi Shiite militias could gradually reduce hostilities in exchange for political inclusion or development aid. Simultaneously, the U.S. and Israel should commit to accepting limited de-escalation agreements (rather than striking Iranian forces immediately) to give such dialogue a chance to work.

- **Social and Economic Engagement**: Given Iran's economic hardships, the international community (EU, UN agencies) should prepare reconstruction and humanitarian packages that could be offered once a credible deal is in place. This addresses a point Dr. Sabet made: Iran's **vulnerability** to internal crises (water shortages, power cuts, protests) offers leverage, but also an opportunity for positive incentives. Easing civilian suffering through improved trade (food, medicine, infrastructure) would make peace tangible to ordinary Iranians.

- **Long-term Confidence-Building**: Finally, efforts should be made to narrow the ideological gap. For example, unofficial cultural exchanges, academic collaborations, and people-to-people programs between Iranian and Israeli or Arab societies could be launched, even if at low levels initially. These initiatives – though not mentioned in the panel – follow the spirit of "peace and diplomacy" being indispensable and could pay dividends in reducing mutual demonization over time.

In summary, the way forward is multifaceted: it requires **negotiation and communication (domestic and international), conditional sanctions relief, creative nuclear safeguards, proxy de-escalation, and inclusive diplomacy**. The panelists have provided a roadmap grounded in realism: compromise is hard but necessary, and only a broad strategy that addresses military, political, and psychological dimensions can hope to break the cycle of conflict. With this strategy, the U.S. and its partners can help steer the Israel–Iran confrontation toward stability, preventing further regional spillover.

Theme 6. Geopolitical Issues Between South Korea, the USA, and North Korea: Context and Conflict Resolution

A Report by Koo Kim

Background Information

The Korean Peninsula remains one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints, shaped by the 1950–53 Korean War armistice and decades of interstate rivalry. South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK) and North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) technically remain at war, and their relationship has oscillated between détente and confrontation. Historically, the United States has played a central role as South Korea's security guarantor, while China and Russia have served as North Korea's patrons. This historical legacy underpins current tensions, even as new developments in 2024–2025 are reshaping the strategic context.

Leadership Transitions – South Korea (2025) and United States (2025)

In a dramatic turn, South Korea held a snap presidential election on June 3, 2025. This event was triggered when President Yoon Suk Yeol imposed nationwide martial law in early December 2024, a move later struck down by the Constitutional Court and leading to his impeachment[1]. The acting leadership emphasized continuity of the U.S. alliance during the interim[2], but domestic turmoil raised questions about Seoul's foreign policy orientation. The election returned **Lee Jae-myung** of the liberal Democratic Party to the presidency[3]. Lee has pledged to "revive the economy" and pursue peace with North Korea "through dialogue and strength"[4]. Compared to Yoon's staunch pro-U.S. approach, Lee campaigned on a more nuanced approach: earlier he had questioned the alliance's constraints and was critical of Japan rapprochement, though he has since affirmed alliance importance[5][6]. Washington and Tokyo remain cautious: U.S. officials note Lee's electoral rhetoric raised concerns about consistency with ally positions[7].

Meanwhile, in **January 2025**, former U.S. President **Donald Trump** returned to the White House. Trump's prior North Korea summitry (2018–2019) was a hallmark of his first term, but it yielded no denuclearization. Analysts now stress that Trump faces a far more **emboldened North Korea** and a changed regional calculus[8]. Trump signaled openness to further engagement, indicating he would welcome messages from Kim Jong Un[9]. His agenda (trade, troop costs, great-power competition) suggests he may view the U.S.–ROK alliance in transactional terms, leaving South Korean leaders uncertain of U.S. commitments[10].

North Korea's Missile and Nuclear Advancements

Pyongyang has accelerated its weapons programs. In October 2024, North Korea conducted its longest-ever ICBM test: a Hwasong-17 flown lofted for **87 minutes**, far beyond prior flights[11]. South Korean analysts reported that Pyongyang is readying a **seventh nuclear test** and developing new long-range missiles capable of reaching the U.S. mainland[12]. These advances are facilitated by DPRK–Russia military cooperation: after a June 2024 summit, Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin signed a *"comprehensive strategic partnership"* treaty (with mutual-defense commitments)[13]. U.S. and allied intelligence assessed that North Korea has already supplied Russia with large shipments of ammunition, missiles, and over **3 million rounds** of artillery to aid Moscow's Ukraine war[13][14]. North Korean officials openly

defend these ties, calling them a sovereign right under the treaty[15][16].

Pyongyang has also dramatically increased missile tests and exports. In early 2025 it tested multiple advanced short-range ballistic missiles, some based on Soviet designs used in Ukraine[17][18]. The regime boasts of warhead miniaturization and deployable tactical nukes. In August 2025, the U.S. and ROK held joint exercises (Ulchi Freedom Shield), prompting Kim to denounce them as war games and call for a **"rapid" expansion of our nuclear armament**[19][20]. Independent reports estimate North Korea now possesses fissile material for **90 nuclear warheads**, with around 50 already assembled[21]. In sum, DPRK military modernization and its strategic partnership with Russia (and tacit Chinese support) have raised the stakes in East Asia.

Trilateral and Great-Power Dynamics

China and Russia have become increasingly assertive in Northeast Asia. Beijing remains North Korea's largest trading partner and still upholds a mutual-defense treaty with Pyongyang. On the 75th anniversary of relations (July 2024), China and North Korea pledged to deepen cooperation[22]. However, China also hosted trilateral talks to balance regional tensions: in March 2025, the foreign ministers of Japan, China, and South Korea met in Tokyo, agreeing to prepare a formal summit[23]. Seoul and Tokyo used the meeting to press Beijing to press Pyongyang on denuclearization and to halt illegal DPRK–Russia military cooperation[24].

Even so, **divisions endure**. Japanese and Korean officials remain wary of China's broader behaviors (Taiwan provocations, backing Russia)[25], while Beijing criticizes U.S. military presence as destabilizing. South Korea under Yoon had sought a closer China dialogue (ending a chill in relations) and cooperation on issues like North Korea and Russia, but under Lee there may be renewed emphasis on shared values with Washington. Thus, the **trilateral landscape** is fluid, with SK seeking to balance ties with Washington, Beijing, and Tokyo depending on leadership.

United Nations and International Perspectives

The international community has repeatedly highlighted Korean Peninsula risks. The U.N. Security Council has passed numerous resolutions sanctioning Pyongyang's nuclear tests and missile launches. However, in March 2024, Russia vetoed the annual renewal of the U.N. Panel of Experts monitoring sanctions enforcement[26]. This effectively disbanded the panel (mandate lapsed April 2024), undermining the U.N.'s oversight[26][27]. U.N. officials and diplomats warn that continued DPRK atomic advancement – especially absent credible verification – heightens the **risk of unintended escalation or conflict**. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres has cautioned in past crises, the Peninsula's volatility "multiplying" the risk of confrontation through miscalculation, compounded by "dangerous narratives" and a lack of communication channels[28]. U.N. statements have urged restoration of inter-Korean dialogue and military-to-military hotlines as essential de-escalation measures. At the same time, U.N. human rights bodies continue to decry North Korea's humanitarian crisis, though denuclearization and security issues have dominated diplomatic agendas.

In summary, **the background context** is one of heightened strategic competition: North Korea is rapidly enhancing its nuclear and missile capabilities (backed by Russia), South Korea has just undergone a major political turnover, and the U.S. has a new (and unpredictable) administration under Trump. Great-power rivalries (U.S.-China, U.S.-Russia) permeate the peninsula, and alliance dynamics (U.S.–ROK, ROK–Japan) are being tested. These conditions set the stage for both increased tensions and potential new approaches to crisis management.

Proposed Solutions

Policymakers and analysts have advanced a range of proposals to reduce Korean Peninsula tensions. These can be grouped under **coexistence and risk reduction strategies**, **arms control frameworks**, **diplomatic and multilateral engagement**, and **humanitarian/information integration**. Each category builds on past ideas (Sunshine Policy, arms control talks, etc.) but adapts to current realities. Recent expert commentary offers practical insights on refining these solutions:

- **Stable Coexistence and Risk-Reduction Framework:** Many experts argue that rigid focus on *complete denuclearization* is unrealistic and counterproductive[29][30]. Instead, they recommend adopting **stable coexistence** as a strategic goal. This means acknowledging North Korea's nuclear status (at least temporarily), emphasizing crisis management, and reducing incentives for preemption. Under this approach, **deterrence remains critical**, but policies would explicitly aim to lower incentives for nuclear use. For example, Washington could **formally signal intent to improve relations** with Pyongyang – as President Trump has intimated – and pursue confidence-building measures (CBMs) to invite reciprocity[31]. Seoul and Washington would stress to North Korea that engagement (economic and diplomatic) can mitigate perceived threats. Allied leaders would also communicate clearly to Pyongyang that war would be catastrophic, reinforcing their commitment to collective defense while distinguishing between deterrence (impeding aggression) and provocation.

Risk reduction also calls for reviving inter-Korean military de-escalation agreements. President Lee has already ordered partial, phased **restoration of 2018 border agreements** to suspend some military activities at the DMZ[32]. A next step would be to **resume the 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA)** fully – which covered no-fly zones and buffer measures – under a trilateral umbrella[33]. Parallel ROK–DPRK and U.S.–DPRK talks should define new CBMs (e.g. military hotlines, pre-notification of major exercises, and Korea-wide no-first-use clarifications). As one Carnegie analysis notes, Washington should push for a **"strategic stability dialogue"** with North Korea (modeled on U.S.–Russia/China talks) to build mutual understanding of doctrines and reduce misperceptions[34]. Overall, the goal is to transform a **"dangerous coexistence"** into a managed one by institutionalizing communication and restraint[29][28].

- **Arms Control and Security Agreements:** Concrete arms limitations can visibly reduce threats. Experts recommend an **immediate moratorium on major weapons tests** by Pyongyang: freezing all nuclear and long-range missile tests would be a starting point[35]. In exchange, the U.S. and allies could suspend large-scale joint exercises and slow deployment of new U.S. systems as a goodwill gesture. Subsequent negotiations would address related issues (e.g. North Korea's use of satellite-launch technology[35]). Complementarily, dismantling **Yongbyon reactor facilities** (uranium enrichment and reprocessing) has long been a denuclearization prerequisite[36]. A phased approach could see Yongbyon in particular shut down under verification, leading to partial sanctions relief. The Carnegie study envisages a reciprocal **sanctions-relief package** tied to DPRK actions, structured in time-limited tranches with snap-back provisions[37][38]. In practice, this might restart delivery of humanitarian or civilian imports (food, fuel, medicine) and limited trade that directly benefits the population.

Conventional-arms measures are also key. Renewed **military-to-military contacts** could

manage incidents. Seoul and Washington might propose a "senior-level" dialogue between the DPRK's military and the U.S. Department of Defense[39] – an extraordinary step given hostility, but one that experts say could mitigate crisis risk by improving understanding of each side's red lines. Likewise, the U.S. could encourage trilateral talks involving Pyongyang to extend the ROK–DPRK CMA into a broader arms control framework[40]. Even bilateral ROK–DPRK agreements (no-troop movements near borders, DMZ surveillance limits) should be revived. Finally, any new arms-control regime should clarify NATO-like security guarantees: for example, reaffirming publicly that a nuclear attack by North Korea would trigger a "swift, overwhelming" response from the U.S.–ROK alliance[41].

- **Diplomatic Engagement and Multi-Track Talks:** Re-engagement through diplomacy is indispensable. Track-One diplomacy should resume at several levels. A **U.S.–North Korea summit** (or series of summits) could relaunch stalled denuclearization talks, as Trump has indicated willingness to meet Kim again[9]. In parallel, South Korea under Lee aims to reopen dialogue with Pyongyang. Lee has already taken symbolic steps – e.g. suspending loudspeaker broadcasts along the DMZ[42] – to set a positive tone. These official initiatives should be complemented by intensified **track-two diplomacy**: unofficial dialogues involving former diplomats, academics, and civil society. For instance, South Korean and U.S. think tanks might expand back-channel consultations with North Korean counterparts. Carnegie notes that improving people-to-people ties can reduce hostility[30][43]. Seoul and Washington could reinstate or enlarge NGO programs that involve North Korean specialists in limited settings (past examples include inter-Korean Red Cross or family reunions). The U.N. and multilateral institutions could help convene working groups on specific issues (health, environment, agriculture) to build small trust dividends.

Finally, engaging China and Russia as stakeholders is essential. Although adversarial on many fronts, Beijing and Moscow can influence Pyongyang. Policymakers should press China to enforce sanctions and use diplomatic leverage; indeed, SK and Japan's 2025 summit explicitly asked China to dissuade North Korea[24]. The U.S. might seek a four-way meeting (U.S.–ROK–China–Russia) focusing on Northeast Asia security – even if only to lay out concerns. Encouragingly, China has expressed interest in broader talks (e.g. expanding RCEP, engaging on economic issues)[44], which may provide openings for parallel security discussions.

- **Humanitarian and Civil-Society Initiatives:** Parallel to security deals, addressing humanitarian issues can both alleviate suffering and open dialogue. The Lee government and international partners should **loosen certain restrictions** to encourage engagement: for example, expanding North Korean visa quotas or allowing greater travel for DPRK diplomats[45]. Renewed programs could include joint projects on agriculture, health, climate, or infrastructure[46]. Establishing a neutral Korean family reunion mechanism or POW/MIA accounting (as suggested by analysts[47]) would resonate domestically in both Koreas and humanize the conflict. The U.S. could sponsor North Korean exchanges in academia or culture, signaling goodwill. Importantly, civil society channels can keep lines open even when official relations are frozen. NGOs from South Korea, Japan, and U.S. could coordinate aid delivery (food, medicine) under international monitoring, leveraging U.N. agencies to ensure compliance. Over time, as the 1975 Helsinki Accords showed, linking modest human-rights commitments to broader détente (without demanding

impossible upfront changes) can build confidence[48].

In sum, the literature emphasizes a **portfolio approach** to conflict resolution: blend deterrence with engagement, combine security guarantees with arms limitations, and integrate humanitarian dialogue with diplomatic talks. The guiding principle is to reduce risk at every level: avoid escalation triggers, manage each flashpoint through dialogue, and foster interdependence. Contemporary experts stress that flexibility and reciprocity (rather than all-or-nothing demands) are crucial[29][30].

Remaining Gaps and Challenges

Despite proposed solutions, significant gaps persist in the ROK–U.S.–DPRK dynamic. These gaps arise from political, military, and societal frictions that have widened recently:

- **Diplomatic and Communication Failures:** Official dialogue channels remain largely dormant. The breakdown of multilateral monitoring (UN Panel) and the absence of U.S.–DPRK working-level talks mean that *many issues go unaddressed*. North Korea's foreign ministry continues to condemn external reports and eschew transparency[49], deepening mistrust. Critically, **communication channels have been severed or underutilized**. The 2024 Korean political crisis illustrated this: when President Yoon abruptly declared martial law in December 2024 to block protests, **allied officials were blindsided**. As U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Campbell noted, U.S. counterparts (even foreign ministry and White House aides) learned of Yoon's decision on TV[50]. This bilateral communication gap undermined confidence. Similarly, North and South Korean leaders lack a direct hotline or sustained summitry: aside from historic family events, there has been no high-level ROK–DPRK summit since 2019. In this vacuum, miscalculations become more likely. As UN experts warned (even back in 2017), "unintended escalation or miscalculation" is a grave risk without reliable channels[28].

- **Deterrence and Alliance Coordination Gaps:** The U.S.–ROK alliance remains the cornerstone of deterrence, but its posture is contested. President Trump's transactional style (pressuring allies on burden-sharing and trade) has sown uncertainties. South Korean diplomats now must manage a **"rock solid" alliance image** even as domestic politics shifted under Lee[51][52]. Within Seoul, there is debate: conservatives favor continued integration with U.S. missile defenses and strong trilateral drills with Japan, whereas progressives emphasize more autonomy and wariness of provoking Pyongyang[5][6]. New ROK foreign policy analyses note that Lee's Democratic Party views the alliance pragmatically, not as an ideological constraint[6]. The challenge is aligning an incoming administration's priorities (economic inequality, ties with China) with alliance demands (military readiness, Japan cooperation). Any misstep – for example, a gap between ROK promises and U.S. expectations – could weaken credibility.

On the deterrence front, there is also disagreement over capabilities. South Koreans have begun debates on whether to develop their own nuclear deterrent or expand conventional forces given the North's growing arsenal. Washington's commitment to extended deterrence is occasionally questioned by Korean policymakers. Ensuring that U.S. nuclear and conventional guarantees remain **credible and consistent** is essential, yet divergent domestic pressures in both countries create strategic friction. For example, if Seoul hesitates to host additional U.S. assets (e.g. THAAD antimissile batteries) or if Washington signals a willingness to disengage, North Korea might misinterpret this as weakness. Maintaining clear, mutual

understanding of alliance strategy is thus still a work in progress.

- **Regional Security Cooperation Gaps:** Broader security architecture in Northeast Asia has frayed. Formal frameworks like the Six-Party Talks (which collapsed after 2008) and even less formal consultation (like joint declarations) are absent. The failure to replace the UN sanctions Panel with an equally robust mechanism (multilateral sanctions monitoring teams have limited mandate) illustrates how global governance gaps leave sanctions and arms controls partially unenforced[26][49]. Within East Asia, trust deficits among major actors complicate cooperation: Tokyo and Seoul still have unresolved historical tensions, and Beijing–Seoul relations fluctuate with U.S.-China rivalry. Even cooperative groupings (e.g. the annual U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral security dialogue) have run into strains over China policy and burden-sharing. North Korea exploits these fissures: for instance, Pyongyang's U.N. veto of its human rights condemnation in June 2024 demonstrated Moscow and Beijing's willingness to block even basic multilateral action[53]. The net result is a fragmented security environment with **no single institution** able to manage nuclear tensions or prevent misstep escalations. Reviving or reinventing an inclusive security consultative forum – perhaps under ASEAN Regional Forum or a revived Six-Party framework – remains an unmet need.

- **Humanitarian and Civil Society Gaps:** On the human level, North Korea remains highly isolated. Apart from brief exceptions, NGO and cultural exchanges are extremely limited. Sanctions and pandemic-era border closures have choked off humanitarian aid and ordinary contact. The gap between North Korea's dire humanitarian situation (widespread food insecurity, natural disasters) and international assistance efforts is large. Even within Korea, scant communication exists: family reunions are irregular and symbolic at best. North Korean defectors and activists argue that more bottom-up engagement is needed, but South Korea's policy often prioritizes security over direct aid. Without robust civil-society linkages, neither reconciliation nor normalization efforts can cement. Moreover, North Korea's attempts to broadcast propaganda (e.g. loudspeakers, leaflet balloons) create asymmetric information flows rather than genuine dialogue.

In short, **critical gaps** remain in every domain. Diplomatic channels are scant, alliances are under strain, multilateral mechanisms are eroding, and people-to-people ties are negligible. Recent events have introduced new dimensions: the internal political shock in South Korea highlighted alliance coordination problems[50], and the U.S. leadership change adds uncertainty to joint planning. At the same time, North Korea's cooperation with Russia on Ukraine has brought global war dynamics into the Peninsula, raising fears that a local incident could be magnified by great-power entanglements. These challenges underscore that even the best-intentioned policy proposals face implementation hurdles.

Comparative Policy Positions

Policy Area	North Korea (DPRK)	South Korea – Outgoing (Yoon Suk Yeol)	South Korea – (Lee Jae-myung)
Nuclear Weapons	Pursues expanding nuclear arsenal (preemptive doctrine); no denuclearization	Supports complete denuclearization of DPRK; maintains strong deterrence (hosts US nukes)[57†L172-L181]	Accepts DPRK nukes de facto; focuses on coexistence and risk reduction[29]
Missile Program	Continues testing & exports (including to Russia); seeks ICBM capability[11]	Condemns DPRK launches; advocates sanctions enforcement and missile defense cooperation	Likely to strongly condemn tests, but may seek dialogue to freeze testing[35]
US Alliance	Views U.S.-ROK alliance as hostile ("empire"); leverages tensions to justify build-up	Deeply pro-US alliance; has called it "foundation" of SK security; strengthened trilateral ties[5][52]	Publicly affirms US alliance (needed for credibility) but emphasizes ROK's strategic autonomy[5][6]
Inter-Korean Engagement	Demands withdrawal of US forces; offers conditional talks (e.g. recognition, aid)	Offered incentives for dialogue if DPRK halts provocations; supported sanctions for violations	Promises renewed dialogue and conditional economic cooperation; hinted at restoring 2018 agreements[32][4]
Relations with China/Russia	Strategic partners (mutual defense treaty with Russia; shared ideology with China)[13]	Attempts balanced ties: engaged China economically, criticized its NK ties; aligned with US on China concerns[25]	Views China as important neighbor; may pursue economic diplomacy with Beijing; expects Chinese help on NK; seeks pragmatic relations with Russia (but critical of NK-Russia arms trade)
Japan Policy	Anti-Japan propaganda; historically allied with Japan's adversaries	Cooperated closely with Japan on security; favored resolving bilateral trade/historical disputes	More cautious on trilateral cooperation with Japan due to domestic nationalist sentiment; nevertheless pledged security cooperation[5]
Economic Sanctions	Illicitly evades sanctions (missile exports, cyber theft, labor exports)[54]	Enforced sanctions regime; in dialogue with allies on interdiction efforts[55]	Likely to maintain UN sanctions but may advocate humanitarian exceptions; open to negotiated sanctions relief if reciprocity achieved[37][38]
Humanitarian Policy	Rejects outside aid/demands rewards (e.g. troops return, recognition); uses food aid as bargaining chip	Supports humanitarian aid through U.N. channels; emphasizes human rights in DPRK & DPRK migrant issues	Promotes humanitarian engagement cautiously; likely to separate humanitarian aid from political demands; might restart inter-Korean social projects

Recent Timeline of Key Developments

Date	Event
Mar 28, 2024	Russia vetoes UN Security Council resolution renewing sanctions panel. Dismantles Panel of Experts by April[26].
June 19, 2024	Putin visits Pyongyang; Russia–North Korea "strategic partnership" treaty signed with mutual defense clause[13].
Oct 30, 2024	DPRK test-launches new ICBM; record 87-min flight time (latest Hwasong-17), raising new threat fears[11].
Nov 7, 2024	U.S. Presidential election: Donald Trump elected (announces desire for talks with Kim).
Dec 3, 2024	South Korean President Yoon declares martial law (later rescinded); U.S. allies caught off guard[50].
Dec 2024	Putin proposes Seoul help mediate Ukraine; Yoon complains North fired missiles to protest U.S.–ROK drills; ROK–Japan–US condemn DPRK–Russia arms trade[56][14].
Jan 3, 2025	Acting SK President Choi Sang-mok (Conservative) reaffirms firm US–Japan alliance amid domestic crisis[2].
Jan 20, 2025	Donald Trump inaugurated as U.S. President (emphasizing deal-making approach and willingness to engage with Kim).
March 22, 2025	First ROK–Japan–China foreign minister meeting since 2023 in Tokyo. Agreed on trilateral summit prep; Seoul urges Beijing to pressure Pyongyang; SK–Japan condemn DPRK–Russia cooperation[24].
May 8, 2025	DPRK fires multiple short-range ballistic missiles off east coast (testing missiles for export); SK/Japan/U.S. condemn as UNSC violation[17][57].
June 3, 2025	South Korea holds snap presidential election; Liberal candidate Lee Jae-myung wins in a landslide[3].
June 11, 2025	U.S. Secretary of State says Trump would welcome messages to Kim; Lee announces halting loudspeaker broadcasts as goodwill gesture[9][42].
June 12, 2025	DPRK denounces UN sanctions-monitoring report on Russia ties as "hostile" – admits deploying troops to Ukraine[49].
Aug 18, 2025	President Lee orders phased implementation of existing inter-Korean military agreements (including partial resumption of 2018 pact)[32].
Aug 18–28, 2025	U.S.–ROK joint exercises (Ulchi Freedom Shield) take place; DPRK's Kim calls for "rapid" nuclear buildup in response[19][20]. Also reports of NK building a third destroyer and testing new missiles[58].
2025 (Planned)	Trump and Lee to meet in Washington (agenda: alliance, NK issues); ROK–US–Japan alliance marks 75th anniversary (scheduled Sept 2025); possible ROK–China security dialogue.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The evolving dynamics on the Korean Peninsula call for a **multi-pronged, calibrated policy** by the United States, South Korea, and allies. As this analysis shows, pressures are mounting: North Korea's arsenal grows, alliances are tested, and great-power rivalries complicate regional security. Looking ahead, policymakers should consider the following course of action:

- **Maintain Alliance Cohesion:** The U.S.–ROK alliance must remain **rock-solid** and adaptive. Washington should publicly reaffirm security guarantees (e.g. nuclear umbrella) to deter North Korean aggression, while addressing South Korean concerns (troop costs, trade grievances) to shore up support[51]. The new Lee administration should make clear that alliance commitments transcend partisan shifts. Regular high-level consultations (including with Japan) can ensure a united front. At the same time, leadership should review combined deterrence posture – balancing assurance with encouragement of Seoul's own defense modernization (e.g. advanced missiles, cybersecurity). Close coordination on missile defenses, intelligence sharing, and crisis planning (scenario war games, evacuation plans) will reduce misinterpretation of exercises or redeployments. Any modification of U.S. force posture (troop levels, assets rotation) should be carefully synchronized with Seoul to avoid misperceptions.

- **Expand Multi-Track Diplomacy:** Engagement cannot rely solely on official summits. Track-two and track-three dialogues (scholars, retired officials, business leaders) should be expanded. For example, an inter-Korean business council or NGO consortium (under civil-society umbrellas) could resume limited cross-border projects in areas like agriculture or energy. The U.S. and ROK should support academic exchanges with DPRK-affiliated scholars (e.g. technology, climate change experts) under third-country auspices. These informal channels often keep lines open when official diplomacy is frozen. Furthermore, peace-building initiatives involving foreign interlocutors (e.g. UN, EU, ASEAN) could complement bilateral efforts. Encouraging track-two meetings on humanitarian or technical issues can build trust incrementally.

- **Calibrate Deterrence and Crisis Management:** While dialogue is pursued, deterrence must be credible. Military exercises and U.S. deployments should be calibrated to signal readiness without provoking. For instance, routine defensive drills might be kept transparent, and large-force demonstrations limited during diplomatic overtures. Officials should announce clear redlines (as in the 2023 Washington Declaration of alliance nuclear response[41]) to enhance deterrence stability. Simultaneously, establishing a permanent hotline (perhaps a revived U.S.–DPRK military liaison) would improve crisis communication. The goal is to **"disassociate" peaceful dialogue channels from military crisis responses**, ensuring that political problems do not automatically escalate to force.

- **Engage China and Russia Constructively:** Pyongyang's clients can be leveraged to moderate DPRK behavior. The U.S. and ROK should negotiate with Beijing on practical steps: China could tighten enforcement of sanctions (especially coal and fuel bans) and pressure Kim's regime to curb missile exports. The ROK may offer economic incentives (e.g. participation in Chinese-led development projects) to persuade Beijing to prioritize denuclearization. For Russia, given its existing DPRK treaty, the U.S. and allies should impose clear costs for further military cooperation (e.g. additional financial sanctions on Russian entities

aiding Pyongyang). Yet, open channels with Moscow should remain for the sake of regional stability (even if tense on Ukraine), because emergency communication between Washington and Moscow can help defuse any crisis that might involve North Korea. In multilateral forums (UN, IAEA), the ROK and U.S. should find common cause with China and Russia on issues like pandemic response or climate, building some reciprocity that might spill over into security talks.

- **Incentivize Compliance through Smart Engagement:** Any long-term solution likely involves some normalization incentives. Policymakers should articulate a **vision of security and prosperity** that could follow if North Korea behaves. This might include offering a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War, exchanges in education and technology, and a gradual lifting of economic isolation. Trump's willingness to "get along" with Kim may afford an opening – but it must be matched by clear benchmarks. For example, even as Washington acknowledges a nuclear North, it could insist on progressive steps: freeze tests, allow verification inspections, release foreign detainees, or support limited humanitarian aid. Each concession by Pyongyang should be met with phased rewards (sanctions relief, official recognition, investment). Lee's government can play a key mediating role, proposing joint development projects (tourism in Kaesong, infrastructure upgrades) that directly improve North Korean welfare.

- **Strengthen Regional Security Architecture:** In parallel, Seoul and Washington should seek to revive **regional consultative mechanisms**. A periodic Northeast Asia security summit (involving all six parties or their proxies) could restore a forum for dialogue. Alternatively, integration of Korea issues into broader Indo-Pacific or ASEAN platforms could keep them on the agenda. At minimum, resuming the U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral security consultations and upgrading them to ministerial or summit level (as planned) will send a strong message of allied unity. Such coordination should explicitly address contingencies (e.g. accidents at sea, cyberattacks) with joint protocols.

- **Focus on Humanitarian and Normative Engagement:** Beyond hard politics, the international community must remember the humanitarian dimension. UN agencies and NGOs should be invited to resume aid programs that comply with security exemptions. Cultural and sports exchanges (already useful during past peace spells) could be expanded to maintain people-to-people linkages. The ROK government should consider appointing a high-level envoy for inter-Korean cultural projects, ensuring that these remain priorities. Drawing on the Helsinki Accords model, the U.S. and allies could hold periodic human-rights dialogues with DPRK – not as a precondition for talks, but as a parallel track, perhaps under UN auspices. By including human security in the overall strategy, the peninsula conflict is treated in a holistic manner that integrates public goodwill into geopolitical policy.

In conclusion, resolving the multifaceted tensions on the Korean Peninsula requires **unity of purpose** among South Korea, the United States, and allied partners. The new political transitions present both challenges and opportunities. A coordinated strategy emphasizing **diplomatic flexibility, robust deterrence, and inclusive dialogue** is paramount. In practice, this means: - *Alliance cohesion*: Sync Seoul and Washington's policies so that the ROK–U.S. partnership remains the unquestioned backbone of regional security[2][51]. - *Multi-track engagement*: Combine high-level summits with grassroots outreach to avoid total diplomatic freezes. - *Deterrence calibration*: Maintain

credible defenses and clear redlines, but avoid provocative moves when negotiating peace. - *Regional integration*: Work with China and Russia (as well as Japan and others) to present a united front that nudges Pyongyang toward dialogue. - *Risk reduction*: Reestablish hotlines, cease-fire agreements, and arms control measures to prevent miscalculation.

If these steps are pursued diligently, the alliance can **lower the risk of conflict** while gradually drawing North Korea into a more stable regional order. As Carnegie analysts argue, the U.S. and its allies have a narrow window to shift strategy from confrontation to coexistence[29]. By doing so, they would not only enhance Korean Peninsula security, but also contribute to broader East Asian stability. In diplomacy as in deterrence, patience combined with resolve and a clear vision for peace is the surest path forward.

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Conclusion Remarks

Introduction

This conference report paints a sobering picture of the Middle East today: entrenched conflicts, mass civilian suffering, and fraying respect for international law. As Mr. Ramesh Rajasingham, UN Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, warned, the region's "human landscape… is marked by profound changes" and "our collective response" has never been more critical. Wars in Gaza, Yemen, Syria and elsewhere have produced systematic breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights, while political and institutional paralysis often allows those violations to go unchecked. Civilians bear the cost: thousands have been killed or wounded, health systems devastated, and basic services like water and food torn apart. For example, Mr. Rajasingham noted that *"the United Nations estimates over 61,000 killed in Gaza… more than 1,200 [in Israel] including 250 abducted hostages,"* and that one in three Gazans now endures days without food. In this urgent context, the conference tackled interlocking challenges – enforcing IHL, protecting civilians, coordinating relief, and resolving conflicts – from the Middle East to even the Korean Peninsula. Synthesizing the insights provided by the panelists, this section highlights key findings, identifies remaining gaps, and charts a way forward for collective action.

Overview

Enforcing International Humanitarian Law in the Middle East

The conference underscored a grim reality: long-running wars in Syria, Yemen, Gaza and elsewhere have produced *"systematic IHL breaches"* yet legal accountability remains weak. Killings of civilians, attacks on hospitals and contamination of water supplies have become commonplace. One panelist bluntly observed that "weak enforcement means civilians pay the price as actors go unpunished". In Basra and Gaza, deliberate bombings of water plants and pipelines have catalyzed cholera outbreaks and acute shortages; these violations extend beyond battlefields to "critical resources" for civilian survival. Meanwhile, armed groups and state forces alike often ignore IHL: humanitarian convoys are stopped, aid workers attacked, and combatants routinely flout the laws of war. Compounding this, political deadlock – notably UN Security Council paralysis – has prevented robust enforcement. Even urgent public calls for accountability often meet a "veto-driven gridlock".

The panel proposed multi-faceted solutions. At the top level, they urged sustained international pressure and accountability. All states have an Article 1 duty to *"ensure respect"* for IHL, and friendly governments or coalitions should continually invoke this obligation. For example, Mr. Williamson stressed that despite UN inaction, *"the political pressure… mustn't end"*. Diplomatic forums and civil society should call out violators, leveraging legal norms even if the Security Council is deadlocked. Panelists suggested creative coalitions of states and NGOs to keep IHL on the agenda, including reinvigorating treaties and commissions (e.g. special investigations or ICJ cases) to bring war criminals to justice. Sanctions and legal prosecutions were recommended for extreme breaches: for instance, domestic laws should criminalize deliberate attacks on hospitals or water systems, and evidence (satellite imagery, open-source data) should be used to build war-crime cases.

Crucially, panelists stressed *embedding IHL within armed forces*. Engagement at every military level – from foot soldiers to top commanders – is needed so that legal rules guide battlefield decisions. This includes regular training and dialogue: units could host

IHL officers, run workshops, and reinforce the duty to refuse *"manifestly illegal orders"*. As Mr. Williamson noted, soldiers must understand that they have discretion in how they fight, and that targeting civilians or essential infrastructure is categorically forbidden. Commanders must also be reminded of their obligations: *"every commander has the responsibility to prevent and punish [war crimes] committed by their subordinates"*. Strengthening military justice systems and ensuring that commanders are held to account can create powerful incentives for compliance.

Finally, the panel highlighted humanitarian access and infrastructure protection. Parties must guarantee safe corridors for aid and medical evacuations. If combatants deny access, international mediators can pressure compliance: according to the Geneva Conventions, relief agencies *"can step in"* when parties obstruct aid. Concrete measures included negotiating time-limited safe passages, sharing convoy routes, or establishing emergency hotlines between warring sides and relief organizations. Aid workers themselves require protection: militaries should be informed that targeting Red Cross/Crescent staff is a serious IHL violation. Proposals ranged from clear marking of humanitarian vehicles to diplomatic condemnation and legal action against attackers. Protecting civilians also means safeguarding essential services. Dr. Pellaton emphasized that water plants and pipelines are *"objects indispensable to civilian survival"* and must not be targeted. Solutions include highlighting IHL's explicit bans on attacking water, creating domestic laws against water warfare, and integrating water protection into military doctrine. By combining immediate legal enforcement with long-term training and infrastructure resilience (e.g. redundant water systems), the aim is to keep water – and other lifelines – *"protected even amid war"*.

Strategies to Protect Civilians in the Middle East

Panelists agreed that civilian protection must be proactive, not just a byproduct of conflict. In practice, however, "laws on paper" often fail on the ground. Civilians are frequently caught between opposing forces, with limited safe spaces. The experts identified key challenges: humanitarian aid convoys and shelters are being struck (e.g. Gaza attack on UN facilities), and local communities lack trust in traditional protection actors. As Mr. Abenza pointed out, when aid teams deliver supplies *"the beneficiaries should feel…safe"* – yet too often they do not. Moreover, protection work is not yet fully **mainstreamed** into military and aid programs. Mr. Abenza described a *"mainstreaming deficit"*: units rarely consult NGOs on protection, and aid projects may overlook security (oversight like civilian-impact tracking is uncommon). Cultural and emotional factors compound the problem: Dr. Fink emphasized that combatants' decisions are driven by shame, anger and perceived humiliation. Without addressing these motivations, even the best rules may not prevent harm. For example, generals in the region often believe that war crimes "don't hurt" their cause, reflecting deep social mindsets that legal arguments alone cannot overcome.

The panel proposed a mix of ground-level and systemic solutions. **Local engagement** is essential: protection programs must listen to communities and support grassroots initiatives. CIVIC's approach – asking civilians "what they need to feel protected" – showed that solutions often begin with building local warning systems, community patrols, or peer educator networks. Empowering such initiatives helps people act as their own first line of defense and fosters trust between divided groups. At the same time, **safe zones and corridors** were highlighted. Dr. Fink recommended negotiating discrete, monitored *"windows of protection"*: for instance,

temporary truces in specific areas or humanitarian corridors with international observers. These incremental measures, even if limited, can save lives and build confidence for broader agreements.

Training and advocacy are also key. Militaries and armed groups should receive realistic training on civilian harm and cultural context. Mr. Abenza suggested that armies systematically record civilian casualties ("harm-tracking") and then adapt tactics accordingly. Humanitarian agencies, in turn, must integrate protection into every project – from budgeting for security escorts to including local elders in planning. Messaging must be framed in local values: Dr. Fink urged negotiators and preachers to highlight how IHL aligns with community morals (e.g. Islamic teachings against harming innocents). Personal appeals and apologies can humanize the "enemy" and break cycles of retribution. Both panelists noted that ultimately *"safeguarding civilians today builds trust and reduces incentives for revenge tomorrow"*, linking protection efforts directly to future peace.

In summary, no single strategy suffices. Protection requires *"multilayered, coordinated strategies"*. Practical steps (safe corridors, training, protection gear) must be blended with strategic shifts (cultural framing, inclusive governance). Politicians should recognize civilian safety as a core security interest – as Mr. Abenza argued, they must see that protecting civilians is inseparable from national stability. By integrating military restraint, NGO-community collaboration, and cultural diplomacy, the aim is to create tangible zones of safety even amidst war.

Humanitarian Crises Response Coordination in the Middle East

The conference revealed the pressing need to improve how aid flows to people in crisis. In Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen and beyond, **local responders** – especially Red Cross/Red Crescent societies – are the backbone of relief. These national societies remain on the ground when foreigners withdraw, and often have the trust and networks to reach civilians under fire. Yet local volunteers face staggering threats. The IFRC noted this is the *"deadliest period"* ever for aid workers in the region: dozens of national staff killed annually (80% of global aid-worker fatalities are from Palestine and Sudan). Local volunteers also suffer from **resource shortfalls**: many lack protective gear, insurance or medical evacutions, and real funding has lagged despite pledges. At the same time, new private or military-led aid models (e.g. the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation) have emerged. While potentially efficient, such models risk undermining neutrality and transparent coordination. This volatile environment – aid workers under fire, limited funds, and eroding humanitarian norms – means that traditional coordination systems struggle to deliver aid effectively.

The panelists distilled several core solutions, all centered on **empowering local actors** and reforming coordination. A foremost priority is *directly investing* in national societies and grassroots NGOs. Mr. Rassi emphasized the need for *"long-term institutional support"* and multi-year funding for local responders. He noted that despite pledges, "progress in funding local actors... has been very slow". Concrete steps include allocating a fixed percentage of relief budgets to local groups (not just pass-through grants). By putting more money and logistical aid in local hands, governments can greatly magnify their impact: Mr. Rassi observed that operational reach and scale *"can be increased through coordination with local actors"*. Capacity-building (ambulances, training, communications) for Red Crescent societies was also urged, so they can run massive operations in crises like Gaza or Syria.

Equally important is **inclusive governance**. Local organizations must have a *seat at the table* in all coordination bodies. For example, national society chiefs or NGO coalitions could

co-chair UN cluster meetings or join appeals committees. Mr. Rassi insisted that global humanitarian forums – from field coordination cells up to international appeals – integrate local representatives at every level. He pointed out that the revised Seville Agreement (Red Cross Movement's internal deal) now enshrines putting local actors *"at the center"* of action. The same principle should guide UN and donor coordination: reform the UN cluster system so that local voices are not marginalized. Streamlining bureaucracy was another theme: donors should demand that more resources reach the field, not endless meetings. This may mean shared data platforms, joint assessments, and lighter coordination layers – all to ensure *"coordination adds value"* rather than draining funds.

Protection of aid workers was a third pillar. Mr. Rassi flatly stated: *"We must prioritize the protection of local humanitarians… and invest in safety and security of these local humanitarians"*. This means budgeting for helmets, vests, communications, and medevac insurance for local staff – items often missing. Emerging diplomatic initiatives (e.g. an Australian-led declaration on aid-worker protection) were praised; such instruments can reaffirm that attacks on humanitarians are unacceptable. Agencies were urged to document and speak out about each attack: Mr. Rassi noted that even humanitarian family funds (like IFRC's Red Family Fund) can draw attention to the issue. Coordination itself should build in security: joint security briefs, shared convoys, or liaison teams can reduce risk. These measures respond to the critical gap identified: today, *"humanitarians are there to help, and should not have to risk their lives to do so"*.

Finally, coordination must uphold core **humanitarian principles** and embrace technology. Mr. Rassi stressed that neutrality and impartiality are the *"currency of trust"*. His solution was to ensure all responders – local and international – commit to a shared code of conduct. For example, displaying the Red Cross emblem (even if increasingly ignored by combatants) and joint principle-based trainings can reinforce credibility. Technology also offers promise: data analytics, AI for logistics, and digital apps can improve efficiency. But these must be introduced thoughtfully: as Mr. Rassi noted, tech *"cannot replace the need for trusted human relationships"*. Thus, new platforms should be co-developed with local partners, and ethical safeguards must be in place.

Effective Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in the Middle East

Panelists highlighted that peace must be built from the bottom up to be lasting. They painted a *"multifaceted tapestry"* of crises: millions remain displaced in Iraq and Syria; over 21 million Yemenis need aid; Lebanon teeters on collapse with 1.5 million refugees; and Gaza/Israel endure recurring cycles of violence. Services have been shattered by years of war: 90% of Syrians live below the poverty line and water/sanitation systems have collapsed, while ISIS and other armed groups lurk. Experts warned that without inclusive peace processes, the region risks famine, epidemics, and renewed extremism. In this context, emphasis fell on grassroots action: rebuilding trust and stability hinges on local communities, faith networks, and pragmatic initiatives – not only on summits in capitals.

The solutions proposed reinforced **local ownership**. Mine action was cited as a powerful peace catalyst: Ambassador Privitelli argued that clearing landmines does more than enable returns – it *"builds confidence"* between former foes. He recommended integrating demining into peace deals and funding it as strategic development: cleared land unlocks infrastructure projects and strengthens state institutions (as seen when demining Mosul's courthouse allowed justice to resume). Such projects can also serve as confidence-building measures (e.g. joint

clearance by Iran and Israel could demonstrate trust).

Empowering **faith-based and community organizations** was another key theme. Ms. Savva argued that inclusive, bottom-up approaches are essential for sustainable peace. NGOs, religious networks (like the ACT Alliance), and local councils often carry community trust in deeply divided societies. Her framework assigned roles: international actors (UN, donors) maintain coordination and funding; grassroots NGOs and faith groups deliver culturally sensitive aid; and local authorities provide oversight and legitimacy. For example, the Palestinian Red Crescent and Lebanese Red Cross each operate across lines of conflict precisely because they are seen as neutral and homegrown. Strengthening such networks – through training, funding, and formal inclusion in peace dialogues – can address grievances and rebuild social bonds. Ms. Savva emphasized that these community actors are *"trusted by the community from all sides"* and can tackle cross-cutting issues like gender, climate, and migration at the local level.

Complementing these, speakers called for **revitalizing international mechanisms** with a local focus. Ms. Hilding Norberg proposed leveraging existing UN and regional frameworks instead of creating new bureaucracies. She urged updating peacekeeping mandates to empower local stakeholders: for instance, expanding UN police training and adapting UN mission guidelines to include local input. Her vision was to connect grassroots with *"International Geneva"* – convening networks of local police, water managers, and civil society to exchange best practices on conflict drivers. Technical cooperation projects exemplify this: Ms. Hilding Norberg and the other panelists noted that neutral issues (like mine clearance or joint water management) can be engines for dialogue. They recommended creating National Mine Action Centers and local water committees so that these initiatives are locally owned, while international donors provide flexible support.

Summing up, the conference emphasized synchronizing *"grassroots action with international support"*. Peacebuilding, they concluded, requires small, agile efforts targeting shared needs (water, infrastructure) to gradually knit communities back together. This means shifting from top-down mandates to genuine partnerships: listening to local priorities, investing in local institutions (NGOs, local councils, mine centers), and embedding community voices in global fora. Only by empowering people on the ground and bridging the gap to diplomatic processes can stability prevail.

The Israel–Iran Conflict and Its Ripple Effects

The panel also looked at the flare-up of conflict between Israel and Iran (June 2025) and its wider repercussions. It examined the immediate *"volatile environment"* post-war. In that 12-day war, Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities killed hundreds of scientists and disabled much of Iran's missile network. Iran's missile retaliation caused dozens of Israeli casualties. The conflict laid bare sharp strategic imbalances: decades of sanctions have left Iran's conventional arsenal crippled, while U.S. arms have given Israel near-air-superiority over Iran. Regionally, proxies were shaken: Syria's government and Hezbollah in Lebanon were notably weakened. Domestically, the war hardened Iran's stance. Many Iranians feel betrayed – *"we were engaged in talks, but you're bombing us to get us back to the negotiating table"*. The experience has strengthened hardliners; Iranian leaders now insist on framing any concessions as victories, not capitulation. On the U.S. side, policy confusion reigns. As Dr. Esfandiary quipped, America is the *"master puppeteer"* in the region but currently unfocused. U.S. support for Israel's actions has alarmed Gulf states, who now fear Israel more than Iran. Overall, panelists agreed that *"peace*

and diplomacy remain indispensable" to prevent further escalation.

Their proposed solutions were pragmatic and focused on negotiation. A core insight was to help Iran *"sell"* any deal as a win. Western diplomats were advised to allow Iran limited victories – notably on uranium enrichment – so that Iranian leaders can claim success. Dr. Esfandiary put it bluntly: *"If [Iran] can't sell it as a win, then those voices inside Iran… are just gonna get louder"*. For example, pre-war talks faltered over enrichment; she argued that a new agreement should permit *some* peaceful enrichment on Iranian soil. Combined with sanctions relief or economic incentives, this tangible concession would let Iran portray any agreement as dignified. At the same time, sanctions themselves should not be abandoned, but *relieved reciprocally*. Dr. Sabet emphasized a balanced "give and take": continued pressure on Iran *must* be paired with dialogue and phased rewards. He argued that pure coercion won't succeed and that targeted sanctions relief tied to verifiable nuclear commitments can keep negotiations alive.

Building on that, panelists outlined innovative nuclear frameworks. Rather than demanding all-or-nothing denuclearization, one idea was a *nuclear fuel consortium*. Under this, Iran could operate a limited enrichment facility under international supervision, with regional stakeholders (perhaps Gulf neighbors) involved. Such a consortium would guarantee Iran access to reactor fuel while subjecting its program to transparency. Dr. Sabet noted that Iran itself showed interest in this concept and that it treats the nuclear issue *"as an asset to be managed"* rather than a binary conflict.

Addressing Iran's proxies was another major theme. Instead of military strikes, experts urged dialogue and incentives to rein in groups like Hezbollah, Hamas and allied militias. Dr. Sabet proposed formal negotiations in which Iran would agree to halt funding of these proxies in exchange for their gradual integration into official forces or political structures in their host countries. For example, Hezbollah fighters could join Lebanon's army, and some Hamas rockets could be traded for prisoner releases or reconstruction aid. The goal is to *"shift conflict channels from indirect war to political negotiation"*. This process would likely require neutral mediation (by the U.S. or UN) and incentives like international aid to make disarmament less threatening to Iran. If proxies stand down, a major flashpoint is removed; as one panelist warned, *"Iran's depleted proxies still remain a flashpoint and could be a trigger for future rounds of escalation"*.

The United States itself was highlighted as a key actor. Panelists agreed America must use its influence to restrain escalation and bring parties to the table. Dr. Esfandiary cautioned that if the U.S. fails to *"crack down"* on its ally Israel's overreach, conflicts will continue unchecked. In practice, this means Washington should publicly balance its commitments: continue defending Israel (e.g. providing missile defense as done), but also actively engage Iran through diplomacy rather than force. Proposals included appointing a U.S. special envoy for Iran to signal readiness to negotiate, and even using elements of deterrence (like continued military aid) to empower diplomacy. Thus the U.S. would act as the *"master puppeteer"* once more – not by pulling the trigger, but by orchestrating peace talks while deterring further attacks.

Finally, the panel emphasized the broader regional implications. Any settlement must involve neighboring states' concerns: Gulf countries and Egypt will only accept an Iran deal if they perceive it as fair. One idea was a Middle East non-proliferation forum in which Saudi Arabia, UAE and others pledge to forgo their own nuclear ambitions if Iran complies with terms. Addressing ideological divides was also noted: public diplomacy, exchanges, and track-2 dialogues are needed to slowly change hostile narratives on both sides. As Mr. Rajasingham reiterated, *"strict adherence to IHL and international human rights law must be*

non-negotiable and matched with good-faith policies". In summary, panels urged *pragmatism*: grant Iran limited diplomatic victories, tie sanctions relief to concrete steps, reconfigure the nuclear framework, negotiate proxies' roles, and have the U.S. diplomatically shepherd these processes.

Geopolitical Issues: South Korea, USA, and North Korea

The final theme stepped outside the Middle East to examine the Korean Peninsula, underscoring how global power politics intersect with conflict. As Mr Koo Kim explained, the context is fraught: a recent snap election brought a somewhat reformist government to South Korea, the U.S. has a new transactional administration under Donald Trump, and North Korea has dramatically accelerated its weapons programs. Pyongyang has tested its longest-range missiles and is reportedly stockpiling dozens of nuclear warheads. Moreover, North Korea has forged a close strategic partnership with Russia, supplying arms to Russia's war in Ukraine. Great-power competition complicates everything: China and Russia support North Korea to varying degrees, even as China occasionally leans on Pyongyang to restrain itself. Regional security forums have eroded (e.g. the UN panel monitoring sanctions was disbanded in 2024), and inter-Korean ties are virtually frozen. Altogether, the peninsula is a high-stakes flashpoint with scarce communication channels or trust.

Panelists synthesized a range of well-established proposals adapted to these new realities. **Coexistence and de-escalation** were key principles: experts argue it is unrealistic to insist on immediate denuclearization. Instead, strategies should aim for managed deterrence and crisis stability. For example, North Korea could be tacitly acknowledged as a de facto nuclear state (if it halts testing), so that conflict dynamics shift from surprise aggression to planned dialogue. South Korea's new government has already begun softening the military standoff (e.g. suspending loudspeaker broadcasts at the DMZ) to lower tensions. The idea is to transform "dangerous coexistence" into a stabilized one through confidence-building measures (hotlines, military protocols, transparency dialogues).

Another priority is **arms control reciprocity**. Kim recommended immediate freezes on North Korean nuclear and ICBM tests, in exchange for U.S.–ROK curbs on large-scale exercises. Talks could then tackle dismantling key facilities like the Yongbyon reactor in phased steps, tied to phased sanctions relief. The goal is a calibrated quid-pro-quo, where each side steps back incrementally. Leaders also advocated clarifying extended deterrence publicly: e.g. Washington reaffirming that any DPRK attack would trigger an "overwhelming response" by the alliance.

Diplomacy itself must be reinvigorated at all levels. Track-One efforts (e.g. summits between U.S.–DPRK or ROK–DPRK leaders) were encouraged, given indications that Pyongyang remains open to dialogue. Simultaneously, track-Two and civil society channels can lay groundwork: NGOs, academics, and former officials should resume back-channel meetings, family reunions, cultural exchanges and issue-focused working groups (on health, environment, etc.). These build trust even when official talks stall. Involving China and Russia was also deemed essential. Allies should press Beijing and Moscow to enforce sanctions and perhaps convene broader security talks (e.g. a four-way US-ROK-China-Russia dialogue). Encouragingly, China has signaled interest in economic discussions that might open doors to parallel security engagement.

Finally, panelists highlighted **humanitarian and civil-society initiatives** as conflict-reducing measures. South Korea and partners could ease people-to-people restrictions: increase visa quotas for North Koreans, allow diplomatic travel, and support joint agricultural or health projects. Simple steps like regularly

convening Korean family reunions, or setting up a neutral mechanism for missing persons, can have huge symbolic value. NGOs from the region might coordinate monitored aid deliveries under UN supervision – reminiscent of the Helsinki Accords model where modest human-rights concessions accompanied détente. These confidence-building moves would signal goodwill and help "humanize the conflict" on both sides.

In summary, the panel advocated a **portfolio approach**: coexistence frameworks and arms-control freezes, coupled with robust diplomacy and parallel humanitarian engagement. As one panelist put it, there are *no easy fixes*; only a comprehensive, patient strategy can prevent new wars. The overarching message – echoed by Mr. Rajasingham's call for a *"political declaration on the use of explosive weapons… to minimize harm"* – is that only through negotiation and careful management can the region avoid an even larger conflagration.

Gaps and the Way Forward

Despite these diverse solutions the conference revealed significant gaps that must be bridged. Politically, **international stalemates** persist. The Security Council's paralysis was repeatedly cited as a major blind spot: with vetoes blocking action, new mechanisms or coalitions are needed to enforce IHL and protection norms. Mr. Rajasingham stressed the need for continuing *"high-level meetings"* and UN resolutions to uphold law, but panelists noted no clear path to override entrenched gridlock. Similarly, ideological and communication gaps remain unaddressed. The Iran–Israel session pointed out that underlying enmities and nationalism were not solved by technical deals alone – a gap also noted by Mr. Rajasingham, who called for sustained public diplomacy to change *"dangerous narratives"* over time. On the Korean Peninsula, critical gaps identified include severed communication channels (ROK–DPRK hotlines, U.S.–DPRK talks) and fraying alliance coordination. These fissures heighten miscalculation risks, as one panelist warned against *"unintended escalation"* absent reliable dialogue.

Operationally, the **resource gap** looms large. Hundreds of millions remain underfunded: Mr. Rajasingham noted that last year *"46% of the UN's budget came from the US"* and current appeals are critically short. Panelists similarly observed chronic underfunding at every level. In the humanitarian sector, local NGOs lack stable budgets and volunteers lack insurance or safety gear. Many conference recommendations — increasing direct funding to national societies and guaranteeing multi-year local grants — underscore this gap. On peacebuilding, experts pointed out *"chronic underfunding"* in regional responses, noting that without new investment the threat of famine or disease looms. And militarily, arms-control and verification mechanisms have withered: the UN panel on DPRK sanctions lapsed due to veto, and no successor body exists to police missile proliferation.

Coordination and inclusion are further gaps. Even where funds exist, aid distribution can be inefficient. Mr. Rajasingham warned of *"bureaucratic measures"* and *"top-heavy coordination spending"* diverting resources. The report echoes this: many cluster and UN mechanisms have limited local input, leaving key decisions in distant capitals. Cultural and knowledge gaps remain too. For example, humanitarian organizations have yet to devise best practices for engaging with private security firms – a *"major deficit"* highlighted in theme 1. Likewise, technology governance is unsettled: panelists admitted they lack clear guidelines on AI/tech in war. Finally, trust and polarization within societies create stubborn gaps. Neither panel proposed full solutions for deep sectarian divides. The peacebuilding panel recognized that in places like Israel-Gaza, *"the lack of a clear model for reconciling such divides"* is itself a gap, requiring patience and creativity.

Bridging these gaps points the way forward. Mr. Rajasingham and the other panelists alike called for **concrete, coordinated actions**. Key among these is **financial commitment and local engagement**. Donors should meet multi-year funding pledges and earmark a fixed share of budgets to local NGOs and Red Cross societies. For example, they could establish multi-year grants to national Red Cross societies with reporting on community impact. In tandem, coordination bodies at all levels must formalize local representation: UN clusters, national task forces, and even peace committees should reserve seats for local leaders. Aligning with this, governments must invest in humanitarian worker safety and support. Donors can fund protective equipment and training for volunteers, and formally endorse international declarations condemning attacks on aid workers. They should also fund psychosocial and legal support programs (building on IFRC's Red Family Fund) to care for affected staff.

Policy and institutional reforms are also needed. Military and police forces in the region should receive joint training on IHL and civilian protection, reinforcing the *"duty of care"* and erecting joint liaison structures with NGOs. Coordination mechanisms (like the UN cluster system) should be streamlined and adapted to today's crises. Panelists recommended efficiency drives: digitizing meetings, conducting joint assessments, and shifting focus from overhead to field delivery. As Mr. Rajasingham put it, coordination must *"translate into tangible measures"* such as integrating local responders into planning and reforming systems that currently favor international agencies. On the political front, continuous advocacy is vital: global leaders should keep civilian protection on the agenda, whether by renewing Security Council mandates or launching global initiatives. Mr. Rajasingham noted positive developments like the UN Security Council's Resolution 2730 (2023) and an ICRC-Brazil initiative to galvanize IHL support, but stressed that such efforts need full commitment (e.g. universal endorsement of a political declaration on explosive weapons).

In summary, closing the gaps requires coordinated effort: **operationally**, by funding and equipping local responders and adapting coordination; **legally**, by renewing political will and holding violators accountable; and **socially**, by addressing trust deficits through community engagement. As the report emphasizes, even small steps – a handful of safe convoys, an opening conversation between estranged parties – *"can save lives and build momentum"*. Mr. Rajasingham echoed this urgency: *"All parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid, unimpeded passage of impartial humanitarian relief"*, and any assistance plan *"must be matched with unfettered access"* to basic goods. The way forward demands that these insights be turned into action before crises outpace our capacities.

Conclusion

The panelists converged on a clear message: **civilians and the rule of law must be at the heart of any strategy for the region**. Each theme reinforced this imperative. For IHL enforcement, the takeaway: a *"multifaceted set of strategies"* is needed – renewing political resolve, engaging armed forces at all levels, safeguarding humanitarian operations, regulating new actors like security contractors, and explicitly protecting vital services such as water and electricity. In Dr. Fink and Mr. Abenza's session, the key insight was that civilian protection must never be abstract; it requires blending tactical tools (safe corridors, training, casualty tracking) with strategic engagement of hearts and minds. Effective coordination hinges on empowerment of local responders: as the report concludes, supporting national Red Cross/Crescent societies and grassroots NGOs amplifies the reach of every aid dollar. Peacebuilding demands synchronization of grassroots and

international efforts, using practical cooperation on shared needs (mines, water) as stepping stones to reconciliation. And in the Israel–Iran context, panels agreed that *"peace and diplomacy remain indispensable"* – practical deals must be crafted so that all parties, especially populations hardened by war, can see a path to a winning outcome.

Mr. Rajasingham's remarks tie all this together with moral force. He highlighted *"lack of respect for international humanitarian law"* and a *"crisis of compliance"*, underlining that this failure is ultimately measured in human suffering. Mr. Rajasingham insisted that *"strict adherence to IHL and international human rights law must be non-negotiable"* – a call that echoes the conference's emphasis on legal norms. Importantly, he concluded with a stark reminder that resonates across themes: *"Peace is the ultimate solution"* to civilian harm.

As ILEF reflects on these insights, the path forward is clear. It involves **multiple layers of action**: applying international pressure and law, reforming military and humanitarian practices, enabling local communities, and never losing sight of the civilians caught in the crossfire. The conference's collective wisdom was that *"no single actor or approach can suffice"*. Rather, governments, UN bodies, militaries, NGOs, and communities must all do their part in a concerted way. Enforcing humanitarian law, protecting the innocent, coordinating aid, and building peace are not optional – they are imperatives grounded in our shared humanity. By following the recommended steps (increased funding, inclusive coordination, protection of responders and civilians, and so forth) and by heeding Mr. Rajasingham's call for unwavering commitment, the international community can turn these conclusions into reality. Only then can the region move beyond cycles of violence towards a future where *"people feel secure"* and there truly is *"more space for peace-building"*.

Empowering Global Law Enforcement Leadership

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