



## A vision for lasting peace within a generation

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Jewish News sits down with Eli Bar-On, head of MENA2050, to discuss his organisation's hopes for the future of the Middle East and North Africa.



**There are two diametrically opposed ways of looking at the future of the Middle East. In one, regional wars continue and escalate, a powder keg that risks igniting a global conflict. In the other, serious steps towards peace and**



**reconciliation allow different nations to come together with mutual respect, sharing knowledge and expertise to make the region better for all.**

Eli Bar-On, chief executive of MENA 2050 [Middle East, North Africa], clearly believes that the second option is not just preferable but is possible. The organisation he leads has an ambitious aim; to create a stable and peaceful region through cooperation in a multitude of areas, including climate action, energy transition and food agriculture. As its name would suggest, it includes representatives, he tells me, from every single country in the Middle East and North Africa.

As we meet, Iranian missiles are falling in Tel Aviv. One could say there might be better times to discuss a peaceful future for the Middle East.



Eli Bar-On



He is certainly correct that even leaving politics to the side, the MENA region has challenges enough.

“We identified that the region is one of the least integrated regions in the world”, Bar-On says. One side effect of this is that “we don’t have all the mechanisms that will allow us...to look into trends and trajectories of things happening and deal with them as a region.”

A key example of that is the threat of climate change.

“It [MENA] is a hot spot”, Bar-On says, going on to note that climate change is likely to “affect the Middle East and North Africa region more than it will the rest of the world. And yet, we don’t have any working group of people from the region saying, ‘what do we do about it?’ Climate change doesn’t have borders. How do we deal with that scarcity of water?”

“It’s one of the areas in the world in which you have a problem of water across the region. Why don’t we have a working group to look into it and say, ‘what are the best practices to save water? What are the technologies to desalinate? Can we have regional hubs of desalination that will make it easier?’

“So, we at MENA2050 said, let’s bring a group of exceptional individuals from across the region, to create working groups in all these areas that will look into policy issues, but also come up with ideas for great projects that can change reality on the ground and prepare the region for the next generation.”



Attendees at this recent MENA2050 meeting

Although Bar-On is Israeli, the organisation's executive committee contains Palestinians, Jordanians and Bahrainis, as well as representatives from Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. The UK board of the organisation includes Dr Najah Al Otaibe, A Saudi researcher and journalist, who joined a couple of years ago.

"I was impressed by the idea of bringing moderate Middle East experts together on one platform to further dialogue and understanding on many issues facing the world", she says.

"There are currently very few organisations who are well-connected with home-grown experts from various regions. MENA2050 has opened up opportunities for many of the Arab and Israeli analysts and researchers to have conversations with each other. This used to be limited, due to political conflicts and lack of diplomatic relations."



Dr Najah Al Otaibe with Eli Bar-On

Bar-On tells me that the idea for the initiative came before the Abraham Accords were signed in 2020, but that the actual meetings had begun in early 2021, “with a small group of people from different countries in the region.

Today, he says, it’s a network of hundreds of individuals, from every Arab country as well as Israel, Turkey and Iran.

I ask whether the events of 7 October and Israel’s subsequent response have affected relationships.

“Interestingly enough, after October 7, not only has the group not ceased to operate, but rather the number of new members joining the group has only accelerated”, Bar-On responds. “To me, this proved the concept that people want to put politics



aside, and they want to engage with each other and work together towards a better future for everyone.”

He gives an example of one of their recent projects.

“We’ve established groups to deal with climate action, water scarcity, food security, and energy transition. Three weeks ago, for instance, we brought 40 individuals, members of MENA 2050, [including] four former ministers, scientists, diplomats and businesspeople, to discuss food security and water scarcity in the region. It was an interesting group of both Israelis and Palestinians, but also people from many other countries in the region, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Tunisia, Bahrain. A very diverse group.

“And they discussed all sorts of projects we want to promote now, for instance, creating a regional R&D (Research and Development) agency. Currently, you have local agencies. Israel, of course, has excelled in R&D... but we said, what happens if we aggregate resources and create a regional agency to do things on a regional level? We could synergize the capabilities of every country...we looked into many different things. There’s a wonderful food rescue program in Israel, and we were discussing a project to use the Israeli experience, the know-how of how to sell food, how to collect food from farmers, from restaurants, from hotels, etc, and use it across the region. I’m very proud.”

Bar-On also discusses the organisation’s plan to establish a Regional Leadership Academy, with London as a possible place to convene it.

“The idea is to bring the young superstars of the region from across the region, – young people we identify as potential leaders. They could be political leaders, leaders in academia, in science, in journalism...we will engage with them on all these different areas that we cover – AI, climate, healthcare, etc – and build a growing group of regional leaders who are already networked between themselves. So in a



way, they will push for regional integration because they are already part of such a strong group, and will promote all these values that MENA2050 has been pushing forward, stabilizing the region through more regional cooperation, development and integration.”



Eli Bar-On with Benjamin Haddad, French Minister Delegate for European Affairs

While the primary aim of the MENA2050 project – the date is meant to symbolise the possibility of such change succeeding within a generation – is to promote regional integration, as an Israeli, Bar-On also clearly hopes that it enables Israelis build strong relationships with many countries – including those that many of their families originate from.

“Most Israelis now have roots in the Arab and Muslim world”, he says, describing how his parents were from Baghdad, coming to Israel in the early 1950s when Jews were effectively expelled by the Iraqi government – “they left the country after 26



centuries of Jewish life, with a passage certificate stamped in Arabic saying they are not allowed to return to Iraq.

“I grew up in a home where Arab culture was very present. My parents were speaking Hebrew to me, but they were speaking Arabic to my grandparents. And my grandparents would speak Arabic to me, would listen to Arabic music, watch Arabic films. The food was Arabic. This is the story of many other Israelis.”

In fact, Bar-On notes that Israel actually has a far more diverse population originating from Arab countries than most Arab countries do themselves – “people coming from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, India, Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Turkey, Iran – across the Middle East and North Africa region. It’s why the image of Israel by some people in the region as a European extension, or European enclave in the region is wrong.”

At the same time, however, he feels that Israel, due both to history and necessity, “in many ways functions as an island state.

“We have borders with four countries, plus the Palestinians. Yet, more than 99% of Israelis will leave the country by going to Ben Gurion Airport to take a flight.

“It could be the ultimate bridge state – not only geographically, but culturally, technologically, and in many other ways. Israel has a lot to give to the region, and a lot to get.”

He is under no illusions about the situation in Israel and Gaza. He describes Israelis as “traumatised” and the “grief and sadness” of Palestinians. In terms of the wider Middle East however, he says he is “very encouraged by the messages...from many, many different leaders in the region”, who he describes as “pragmatic.

“I think they’ve been reasonable throughout the conflict”, he says.



“They give me a basis to hope that once the war is over, we will have many pragmatic interlocutors across the region. I think also in Washington, you have an American president that has expressed his will to contribute to the peaceful development in the region. He already did it in 2020 with the Abraham Accords, and has already said he will be working to expand this process of regional integration.

“So I think that though now we’re in the depths of sorrow and sadness and despair, there are many positive signs that we will come out of it. The State of Israel in particular, in the region in general, will be in a much better position in the near future.”