

Forward Thinking

Annual Report 2023



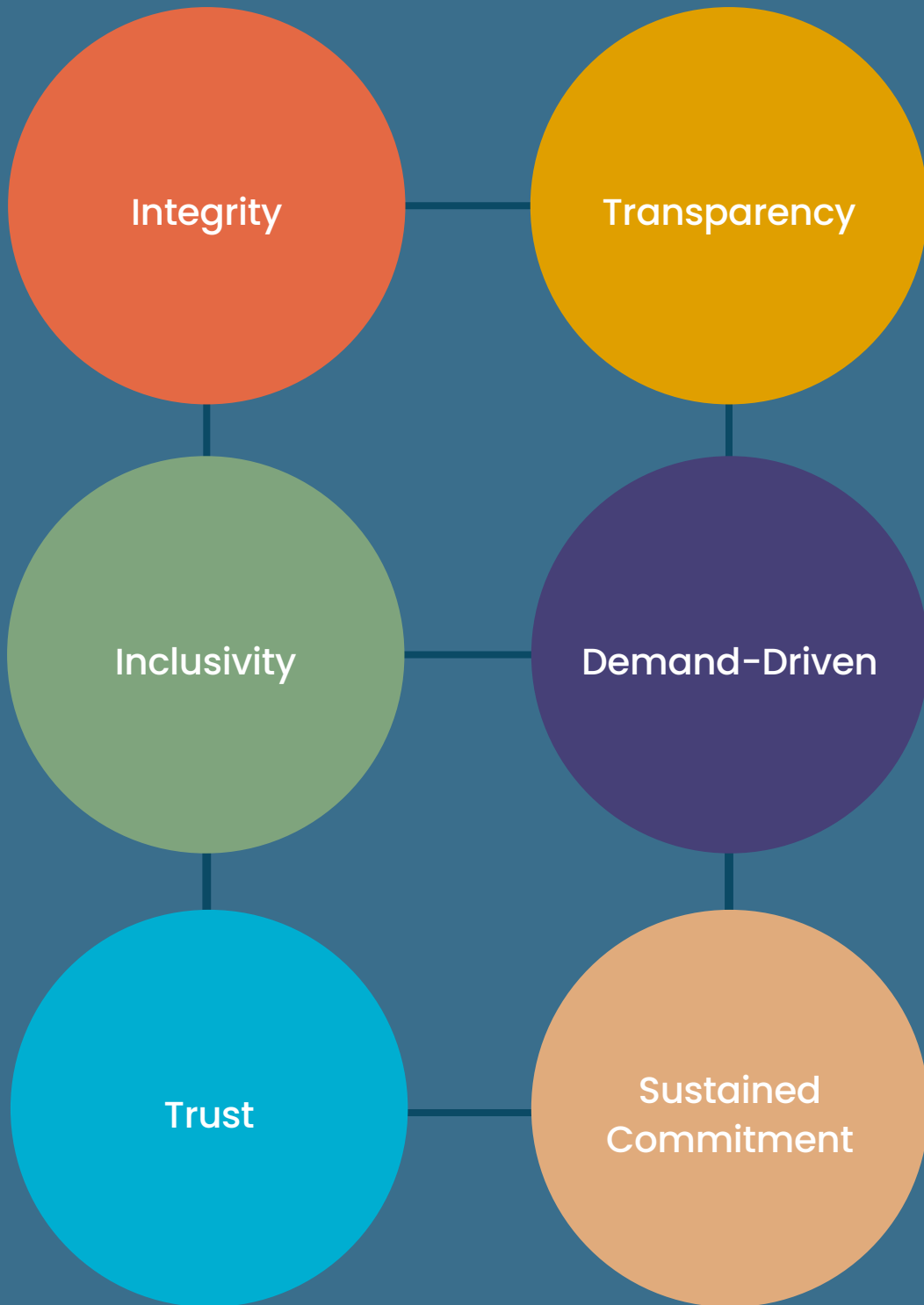
Front Cover Image

Promenade leading up to Imam Ali Shrine
in Najaf, Iraq, November 2022

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Our values



A message from our Chairman



It's probably been the most challenging year for the world and for Forward Thinking since we were founded twenty years ago. Conflict in the Middle East has broken out once again and our team has been working harder than ever to help.

I would like to thank them on behalf of our trustees for their commitment, courage and steadfastness in these difficult times. It's not easy to keep positive when surrounded by so much anger and anguish. We are very grateful for their remarkable work.

I would also like to thank our generous donors for their wonderful support and help for Forward Thinking.

William Sieghart CBE
Chairman

William Sieghart

Risk averse policies can prolong conflict

BY OLIVER MCTERNAN

In early 2022 we became acutely aware of a need to launch a new international initiative to avert an explosion of violence in the Palestinian territories. It was clear to us from our frequent visits and active engagement at the political, civil and academic levels that the status quo was unsustainable.

The Covid lockdown had heightened the sense of isolation, both in the West Bank and Gaza, and the young, in particular, became more acutely aware of the lack of any opportunity in the foreseeable future to fulfil their genuine aspirations to live a life with dignity and freedom.

High unemployment, internal divisions, a lack of political vision, weak and divisive leadership, increased Israeli military incursions, an absence of a peace process, and a perceived international indifference to the reality of their lives, contributed to a significant shift away from the search for a political solution and towards the military option to end the occupation. This was particularly notable among the youth.

In our frequent visits to the Knesset, we became acutely aware that most members were preoccupied with internal domestic matters. An entrenched belief in

the ability of the security forces to contain the threat of widespread violence led to a level of complacency about the clear signs of growing Palestinian unrest. A certainty that the Abraham Accords dispensed with the need for direct talks with the Palestinians added to the complacency. Any discussion on reaching a cross party agreement on a strategic approach to ending occupation of Palestinian territories was not on their agenda. Deep political divisions and the lack of clear leadership also contributed to a political paralysis preventing any real efforts to resolve the Palestinian conflict.

At the international level, particularly in Europe and the Gulf/Middle East, we found a similar paralysis regarding the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Although there was a real awareness of the risk in allowing the conflict to fester on, none of the countries, with which we engaged

directly, were prepared to spend political capital in taking a lead in promoting a mutually acceptable and durable agreement. It also appeared to us that there was little interaction or the sharing of analysis on the conflict between the countries we visited. There was, however, widespread acknowledgment of the need for an 'unofficial' space, where officials from the region and Europe could meet to explore the challenges and opportunities in working together to promote an end to the conflict and sustainable stability in the region. It was recognised, though, that without the active involvement of the United States, such an initiative would have limited impact. In our meetings in Washington we learnt that the US is always extremely reluctant to join any initiative over which they do not have control. Without US engagement other countries were too risk averse to take a lead. We were still exploring ways to overcome this dilemma when the shocking events of the morning of 7th October began to

unfold, and sparked the unparalleled level of violence that we have witnessed over the past one hundred days.

A close friend of mine, the late Rabbi Hugo Gryn, himself a survivor of the horrors of Auschwitz, told me that whenever he was asked 'where was God in Auschwitz', he would respond that the real question should be 'Where was humanity?' That question has haunted me over the past hundred days. The human horror that we are witnessing has, I fear, in the words of a UN official put 'a stain on our common humanity'.

The whole rule based international order and the authority of the United Nations has, in my opinion, been weakened. Despite these new challenges, Forward Thinking will remain committed to engaging and facilitating dialogues aimed at promoting peace and security for both Palestinians and Israelis. We continue to believe that their conflict is not intractable.



Oliver meets with children at the Khota Academy Kindergarten in Gaza.

AUGUST 2023

Palestine: Is a fresh start possible?

BY SIR JEREMY GREENSTOCK

Forward Thinking (FT) has been saying very consistently over the years that if the Palestinian issue was left to rot through neglect the chances of a nasty explosion would continue to rise.

7th October 2023 saw that explosion take place, and at the time of going to press with this Review there is no guarantee that the violence we have been watching for months now will not spill over into the wider region. The costs of this tragic conflict in lives and material on both sides have already far outweighed any previous outbreak of conflict over the Occupied Territories, and yet the price of constructing a durable political settlement to prevent any future recurrence still remains to be paid.

FT has been working for the past two decades to try to help create the conditions for all but the most extreme Palestinians and Israelis to conclude that reconciliation, and recognition of the political and human rights of both peoples, is the only possible basis for lasting peace. We have done this through constant communication with the two sides on the ground, including with representatives of immoderate views; through a series of journeys connecting

them with the Northern Ireland saga so that they could better understand the business of engaging in discussions with the enemy; and through a continuing round of private meetings and debates with outside diplomats to enable both sides to gauge the international realities. In all of this, we have consistently made it clear to Hamas political leaders that, as the victims of the injustice of the occupation, they had to remain capable of claiming the moral high ground if they wanted their international rights realised. A recourse to violence would be fatal to that. But our arguments were diminished in force by the refusal of any Israeli government to commit to a political discussion, which sucked air out of the logic of a non-violent approach. The militant wings in Palestine grew in strength as a result.

For the first few days it seemed that the original intention of Hamas's 7th October attack was to capture as many Israeli soldiers as possible to bargain for the

release of Palestinian prisoners in Israel. The deal done over Gilad Shalit in 2012 had wetted Hamas's lips in this respect. The timing was almost certainly related both to the internal divisions within Israel over constitutional reform and to the accelerating pace of normalisation between some Arab states and Israel, which had seemed to leave the Palestinian cause well down the priority list of Arab and outside powers. When the full details emerged of the horrific treatment of Israeli civilians, it became impossible to believe

that this was not an intentional strategy to shock the world into a different perception of Palestine's predicament. The abhorrent nature of the killings, however, has brought Hamas's reputation as low as the moral ground can get. Israel's response was unsurprising, but in its intensity plumbed depths of carelessness for civilian casualties that in itself has damaged Israel's claims to international sympathy. Neither side, therefore, can readily claim moral superiority.

When the fighting stops, a political solution is still needed. Under international law, Israel cannot own the Occupied Territories, nor would occupying Gaza physically create a basis for long-term Israeli security.

Hamas cannot be completely eliminated since part of its leadership resides in other Arab countries, its claim to be the true face of the 'resistance' has popular support, and a vacuum in Gaza would only encourage other extremists. A UN intervention would require troops from other Arab states, who are really reluctant to be involved militarily. Neither Israeli nor Palestinian actions thus indicate a strategic purpose that can see more than one short step ahead. The position might be different if there was a realistic prospect of a new and determined political process, but that is no more visible in early 2024 than it was before 7th October.

What about the risk of spillover into the wider Middle East? Let us look at some of the other elements of a region notorious over the centuries for failing to construct the foundations for lasting stability. The core feature of regional tension over the past two decades has been Iran, whose drive for international status as a champion of Islam and focus on improving its national security position has involved an aggressive approach both to its neighbourhood and to Western influence.

The Sunni-Shia divide across the Gulf has been contained for now, partly because Iran does not possess the freedom of manoeuvre or the sheer power to extend its grip, and partly because the Saudis under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have seen reason to pursue a more pragmatic policy after their own aggressiveness proved unproductive. He has wanted at the same time to take forward normalisation with Israel to strengthen his resistance to Iran and also to lower the tensions with Iran to give priority to his domestic diversification programme. Now his failure to give more attention to Palestine has thrown both approaches off course; but so far Tehran and Riyadh have both understood the wisdom of avoiding escalation. Iran continues to use its proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen for provocative moves against the interests of Israel and its backers but believes it can avoid getting drawn into a serious conflict. I think this situation might last for some time yet, even if the risk of accidents remains high.

After all, this region above any other is governed by events rather than strategy.

Otherwise the states most at risk from the waves of Gazan consequences are those where the leadership has the fewest resources to satisfy the population. Jordan, with its high proportion of Palestinians and faltering economy, badly needs outside assistance to survive in its present form. Egypt, once the undisputed leader of the Arab camp, would be close to default on its debts without huge subventions from the IMF and from the Gulf. These might be less forthcoming if funding is now needed to rebuild Gaza. Syria, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia and Sudan are, for the foreseeable future, semi-failed states. Iraq has greater resources but obstinately weak governance. These materially discontented populations all appear to care more about Palestine than their governments, but leaders do not want to be drawn into war even as they watch the destruction of Gaza. All this contributes to the picture of a region with poor prospects of stable growth into the future.

Are Israelis only truly safe with a two-state solution? That proposition is being strongly advocated at this moment because there seems to be no other route to close the risk of further violence. The whole purpose of the Israeli operation in Gaza was declared by Prime Minister Netanyahu to be the military defeat of Hamas, and thus the restored security of Israel. But the defeat of the motivation for militantism cannot be achieved by military means. There will always be someone else to take up the cause. For all the justified criticism of

Hamas's actions, and the understandable rejection of them as terrorists, those seeking the politically sound protection of Israel's security have to take into account the Palestinian drive, more determined in Hamas than in Fatah minds, for the ending of the occupation, together with the basis in international law for that position.

Here I believe we are getting to the crux of the problem. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Israelis of the mindset of Netanyahu regard the occupation (a word they do not use) as a stage in the annexation of the whole of the territory of mandated Palestine, the right to which is denied by international law. They will not engage in a negotiation for the splitting of the territory in case that damages the ultimate objective. Some Palestinians, of course, have the equal and opposite ambition, to own the whole territory for themselves, in which case a two-state settlement is equally unattractive to them. These have been seen as irreconcilable objectives for decades, and yet the problem has been allowed to fester.

The United States has been complicit in this irresponsibility. President Biden is at least trying to address the issue, now that the results of inaction have been made so manifest. But the real reassessment needs to come from the Israelis. They hold the power to fight or to settle, and their security has been compromised by the poor strategic thinking and the serious tactical mistakes of the recent past.

Forward Thinking's activities over the last two decades have been dedicated to spreading an understanding that things were going wrong; and that perception is coming home to roost in Israeli politics. Perhaps now is the moment for the re-think which FT have been calling for from the start.

Regional Security

BY RT HON ALISTAIR BURT

Most of 2023 reflected a more settled UK in foreign policy terms, keeping the one Prime Minister in place in contrast to 2022, and, for much of the year, the same Foreign Secretary.

The Government's Integrated Review of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Development of 2021 was 'refreshed', leading to a broad welcome that while it kept to its tilt towards the East and perception of risk, not least in the light of Russia and Ukraine, it reflected a more pragmatic approach to partnerships and relationships. Post Brexit Global Britain appeared to have matured into something more realistic in the view of many.

A nagging doubt remained that the Middle East was lower down the agenda than it should have been. Without saying anything as ill-fated as Jake Sullivan's remark in September 2023 that the region "had not been so quiet at any time in the last twenty years" the UK was not alone in looking at the outreach between regional rivals as evidence of a changing, more secure Middle East, focusing on economic stability which would necessarily exclude

the destructive wars which had been the constant background for an ill-served population for far too long.

Any hope that this was the future was shattered on the morning of October 7th 2023 with a horrific terror attack launched from Gaza by Hamas and others. Finding a southern Israel with defences diminished by the transfer of Israeli forces to the West Bank, the attack had the opportunity to deploy extreme violence towards civilians, and the capture of hostages of all ages. Israel's response was entirely predictable. Vowing to eliminate Hamas as a political and military force so that it would never threaten Israel again, PM Netanyahu launched reprisals by bomb, missile and bullet against those who had perpetrated the assault upon Israel's citizens, which, in densely populated Gaza, could not possibly avoid killing Palestinian civilians innocent of any involvement.

The shock waves from October 7th and following have been the most serious in the region for decades...

and destroyed, for now, any of the optimism which had filled the earlier part of the year. The overwhelming sense however is that there is no return to October 6th, and that the rupture is so serious that papering over yet another confrontation between Israel and its enemies in Gaza is impossible. No Arab state is going to rebuild Gaza only for it to be destroyed again. And none are seemingly going to settle for a resolution there which does not take also account of what had been rising tensions on the West Bank and East Jerusalem. A Palestinian issue which had been on the back burner since the end of 2014 in too many capitals was now once again top of the agenda in the region, with the realisation that whilst it was not the only issue in the region, nor was it the declining and 'manageable' one that some had hoped.

The implications of this truth have yet to be reflected in the diplomatic activity to deliver a resolution of the issue, in whatever form is going to be acceptable to the Palestinian people, to Israel and to their neighbours. Both are entitled to justice and security, and neither can have them unless the other is to possess them also.

But the search for this now seems likely to dominate 2024.

Ending the conflict, returning the hostages, and preventing its expansion in other locations is urgent and paramount...

then attention must turn to how the region would look if the issue between Israel and the Palestinians was resolved. Sober reflection will appreciate that issues of Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen will not be resolved simply by attending to the Gaza conflict, and those in-trays demand equally urgent attention. Relationships between western allies of Israel and the region will need attention, as there is deep dismay at what has been seen as unconditional support of Israel.

It has been a devastating revelation of the old adage that you can ignore the Middle East, but it will not ignore you.

Lord David Cameron, the new Foreign Secretary, though an experienced and well-connected senior figure on the international scene, must take the opportunity to use the UK's convening power and connections to make a difference for the better in what will be a pivotal twelve months for the world.

Programme Achievements

BY JORDAN MORGAN, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMES

Middle East
Programme



Our Year
in Numbers

Number of meetings and activities:

89

Bilaterals

43

Roundtables

137

Total meetings

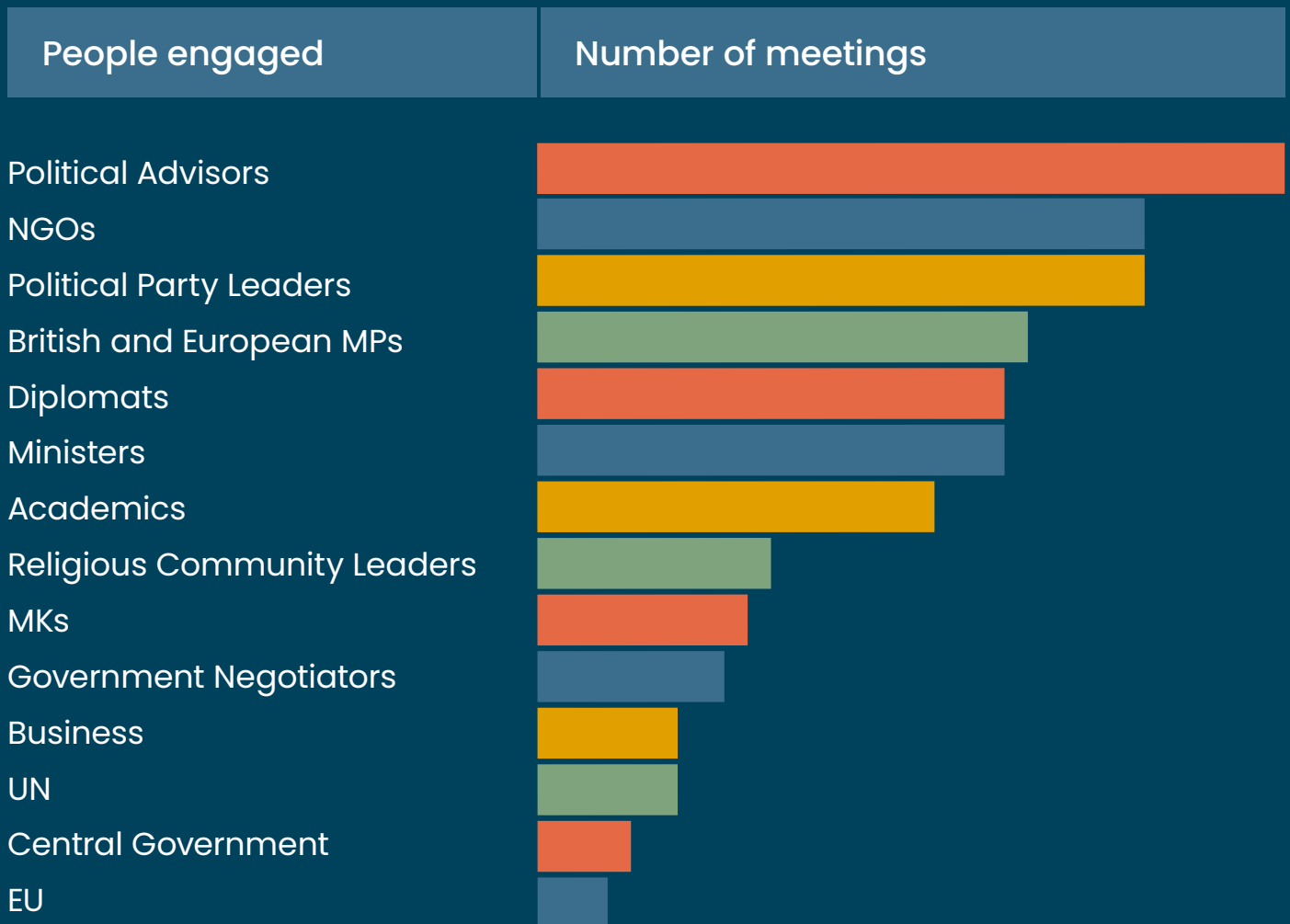
05

Conferences



87%

of meetings were convened or organised by Forward Thinking.



Locations



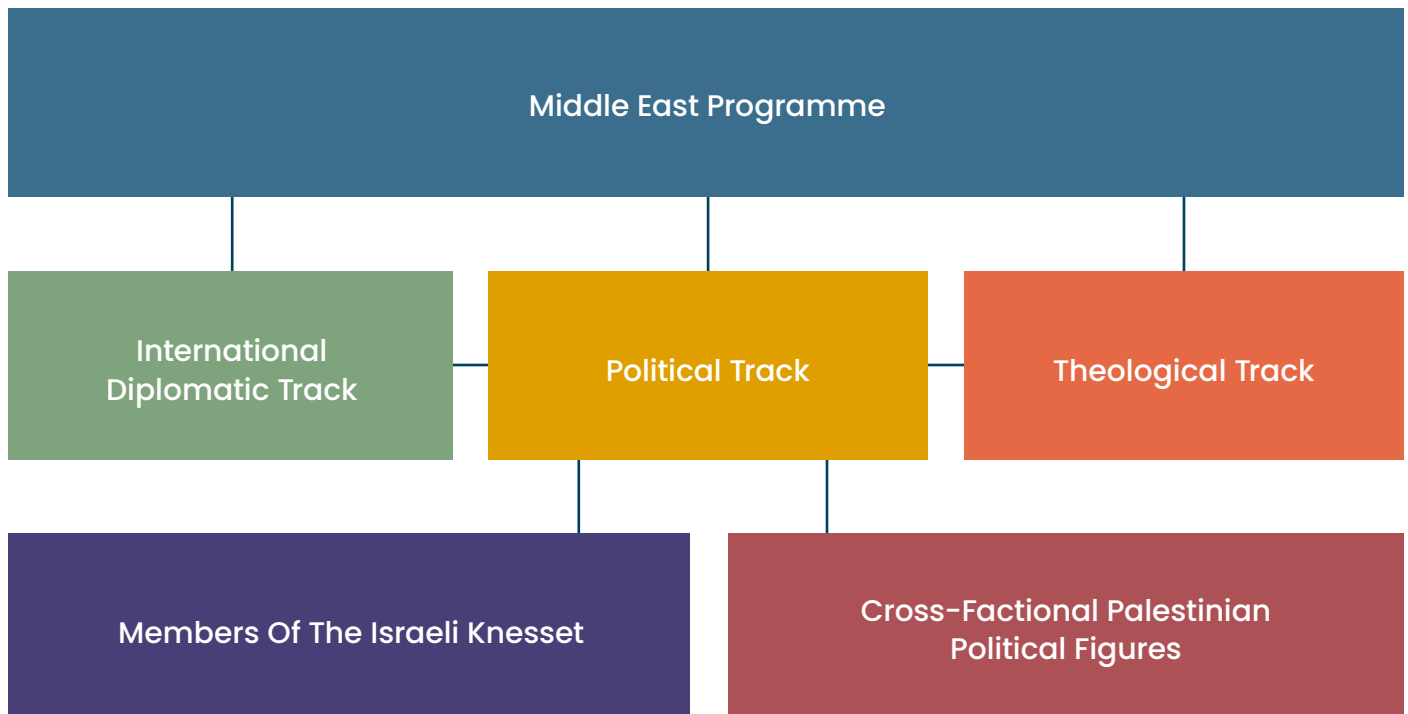
Our Objectives

We aim to promote an inclusive peace process that will lead to a durable agreement to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In our efforts to achieve this we have developed a cross-party/factional network of Israeli and Palestinian political leaders/religious leaders, whose involvement and endorsement is essential to realise this objective.

We work both in Israel and Palestine to develop good working relationships based upon integrity, transparency and trust with those political and religious leaders, who have real constituency among the diverse groups that they represent.

We continue to engage them in a dialogue that aims to identify the challenges and potential opportunities that need to be addressed in order to reach a durable, just, and realistic agreement to end the conflict. We work at the international level, engaging European, US, and Gulf-MENA officials with the aim of identifying the challenges and the opportunities that need to be addressed and explored in the ongoing search for a final resolution to the conflict.



Ongoing Challenges

It has been a difficult and tumultuous year for both Israelis and Palestinians. The attacks launched by Hamas on 7th October, and the subsequent Israeli retaliation have led to an unacceptable loss of human life.

The scale of civilian deaths and the taking of hostages of all ages, unjustifiable under any circumstances, traumatised the whole of Israeli society. The IDF bombardment and ground operations have equally traumatised the Palestinian population of Gaza. The mass displacement of civilians, the destruction of the infrastructure, with the loss of schools and medical facilities, and the acute lack of the basic necessities of life, have led to a scale of human and environmental catastrophe that will take decades to address. The exchange of artillery fire with Hezbollah in South Lebanon, and the attacks by Houthis on shipping in the Red Sea highlights both the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the region and the risk of the conflict escalating to a regional – if not global – level.

The UN Secretary General was correct to say the attacks on October 7th ‘did not take place in a vacuum’. The level of the violence exposed the continuous failure of Israeli policy to address the real sense of grievance felt by Palestinians across the occupied territories. To recognise this is not to justify the violent nature of the attacks that took place on the civilian population of southern Israel.

The combination of a total lack of any political progress towards independence and self-governance with the economic and social impact of the sixteen-year-old

blockade, led many to feel that the military option was the only way forward to achieve their personal and national aspirations. The previous efforts of the moderates within the Palestinian resistance movements to promote a political, as opposed to a military, option to end occupation had been totally undermined by Israeli, European and US rejection of the 2006 election results. The Biden administration efforts to continue with the Trump policy of normalisation between Israel and its Gulf neighbours, seeking without explicitly addressing the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories, led to a greater sense of abandonment.

The political and societal rifts within Israel over the proposed judicial reforms, aimed at reducing government accountability, have further complicated the ability of Israeli political leaders to foresee the risks of their current military response and a lack of a clear policy towards their ongoing occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

All of this presents new challenges to us in our efforts to promote an inclusive process. We remain committed to facilitating an ongoing dialogue that engages all parties with real constituency on both sides of this conflict aimed at promoting a durable and peaceful outcome to the conflict.



When negotiations and mediation fail, the most vulnerable bear the consequences.

The sharing of experiences is a crucial aspect of Forward Thinking's work: our engagement with South African and Irish political actors has taught us that even during the darkest times, when peace is inconceivable, opportunities for progress can still be found. Without an immediate and permanent ceasefire, the release of the remaining hostages, and a genuine effort to initiate an inclusive dialogue leading to a peace process, the risk of ongoing violence and the further loss of human life is extremely high.

There is no unilateral or military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An immediate and permanent ceasefire is needed.

Programme Highlights

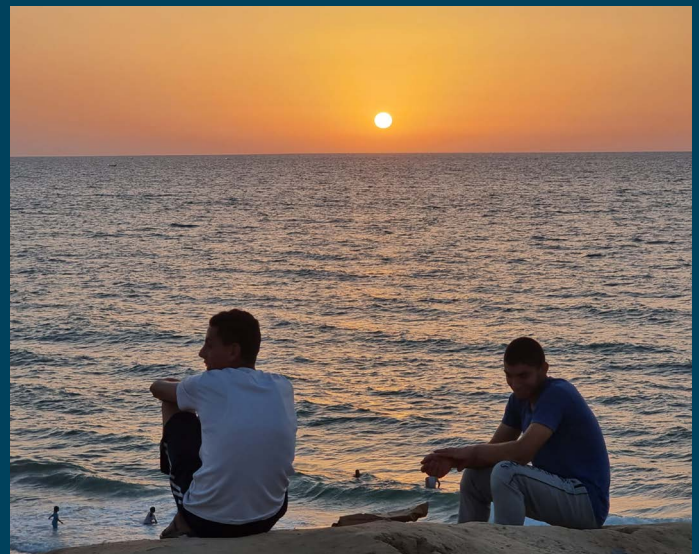
Visits to the occupied Palestinian territories

We made positive progress in a number of key areas throughout the year.

In Gaza, we delivered conferences and roundtables on conflict resolution, the Irish peace process, and the implications of the Russia-Ukraine war for Palestine and the region.



A discussion with leaders of the student union at the Islamic University in Gaza. FEBRUARY 2023



Two boys watch the sunset from the beach in Gaza. AUGUST 2023

Young students who had never had opportunities to hear from outsiders in their isolation in Gaza discussed Palestinian reconciliation and unity. We worked with their lecturers and professors to instigate the beginnings of a revitalised Conflict Resolution MA. We successfully developed with the Harvard Graduate School for Education

and National University of Ireland, Maynooth, an education initiative to train the next generation of Palestinian educators. We discussed with young journalists ways of effectively presenting the Palestinian narrative to an international audience.

Sharing the South African experience of conflict resolution

We convened a group of Palestinian intellectuals from Gaza to meet with senior South African figures involved in the transition from apartheid to constitutional democracy. Speakers included

negotiators Roelf Meyer and Mohammed Bhabha (In Transformation Initiative), as well as senior African National Congress (ANC) ambassadors, department heads, and community organisers.

Themes included who were the ANC, the development of the ANC's vision for a 'non-racial, non-sexist, democratic society', and their Freedom Charter. Discussions also focused on strategy, leadership, negotiation, balancing the military and political wings of the ANC, and how the organisation countered international indifference to the struggles faced by those living under apartheid.



Ambassadors Jerry Matjila and Welile Nhlapo with South African negotiator Roelf Meyer.

SEPTEMBER 2023

Forward Thinking Online

Our Forward Thinking Online series continued to bring our European diplomatic and political network into online discussions with important regional figures to share insights and inform the policy of foreign ministries in real time. Speakers included Dr Mustafa Barghouti (leader of the Palestinian National Initiative), MK Aida Touma-Suleiman (Hadash), Ariel Bulshtein (former advisor to Benjamin Netanyahu), Faruk Loğoğlu (former Turkish Ambassador to the United States), and Ambassador Ahmet Yıldız (Justice and Development Party, Türkiye).



The Old City, Jerusalem

Maintaining the Israeli network

We have maintained our deep level of credibility, access, and trust with Knesset Members, ministers, chiefs of staff and advisors from almost all the Israeli Coalition and Opposition parties.

Many of these leaders have previously journeyed to Northern Ireland with Forward Thinking as part of the Irish Peace Process Programme.



Meeting with Tom Nides, former US Ambassador to Israel.

AUGUST 2023



Oliver and Jordan meet with MK Gideon Sa'ar, leader of New Hope.

AUGUST 2023

Working with religious leaders

We facilitated spaces for Jewish, Islamic, and Christian scholars to share their perspectives on arguments for a theological underpinning to a peace process. We engaged Sunni and Salafi scholars in Gaza, as well as national religious and ultra-Orthodox rabbis in Israel, including the Sephardi Chief Rabbi. Shia, Sunni, Salafi, Catholic, Protestant, Methodist, and Evangelical leaders from Iraq, Northern Ireland, the Vatican, the US, and the UK were also included. Together, we discussed the role of Abrahamic faith leadership in promoting the conditions at a political level for ending violence, the different perspectives towards the Holy sites in Jerusalem, and the need for greater religious literacy amongst Western secular diplomats and politicians.

These themes were further explored during a conference of 22 Muslim, Jewish, and Christian leaders at St George's House, Windsor. The conference was the first visit made by the Chief Rabbi outside

of Israel at the invitation of an external NGO. Participants spoke frankly about the rise of religious populism, religious sites becoming flashpoints for violence, and the Status Quo of the Temple Mount/Haram Al Sharif site.



Meeting with Salafi scholars in Gaza.

AUGUST 2023



Meeting with the Chief Sephardi Rabbi.

JULY 2023

International conferences

Oliver and Jordan attended the commemoration events of Sheikh Hakim in Najaf, Iraq. They gave lectures on the impact of the Ukraine war on the Middle East, Islamophobia in Europe, and held discussions on Iraq's role in promoting sustainable regional stability. They visited the holiest sites in Shi'ism, the Imam Ali

Mosque, and the Great Mosque of Kufa. They met members of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani's team to explore the role of religion in peacebuilding, as well as academics, political and religious leaders to discuss the rebuilding of Iraq, post-Daesh.



Oliver moderates a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

JANUARY 2023

We attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, meeting a number of foreign ministers, ministers, and business leaders. We participated in talks on how to rejuvenate the Palestinian economy, the failure of the Oslo Peace Process, and Oliver chaired a session on how to drive momentum towards a sustainable peace process.

We travelled to Shusha to discuss the situation relating to Nagorno-Karabakh, given growing instability. Whilst there, Oliver spoke about the role of new media in influencing perceptions of one another and the obstacles it creates in resolving violent conflict during the Shusha Global Media Forum.

In Istanbul, at the invitation of the Turkish government, we facilitated sessions and spoke on panels at several conferences. At the inaugural Istanbul Security Forum, Oliver moderated a panel exploring how rapid developments and new capabilities of AI systems will impact the future of conflict. Jordan discussed the deteriorating situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the potential for the conflict to become a religiously sustained one, and the inadequate responses of the international legal system. He argued that political courage and vision is necessary to avoid a new cycle of

killing, forewarning the conference that there would be an uncontrolled eruption of violence if current policies did not change.

We also attended the International Strategic Communication (Stratcom) summit, where Jordan moderated a panel on disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda.

The aim of disinformation is to undermine our notion of truth, and this is pernicious and dangerous in democracies as it breaks down trust. Oliver participated in a panel on truth in the age of disinformation.



Jordan chairs a panel on hybrid threats at the Stratcom Summit in Istanbul.

NOVEMBER 2023

The War in Gaza

Following the 7th October attacks, we condemned the indiscriminate killing of civilians and the taking of hostages as morally indefensible. We equally condemned the high loss of life and total destruction of several neighbourhoods, homes, hospitals, schools, churches, and mosques in Gaza. Our primary objective is always to prevent the loss of human life. We continually emphasise the need for a permanent ceasefire and an end of the conflict.

In our visits to Israel and Palestine we came to realise the deep emotional trauma experienced by both societies. Without a ceasefire and the return of

hostages, there is a risk that this trauma will become entrenched.

In Doha, we engaged key Qatari negotiators to discuss the challenges they face in their efforts to secure the release of the hostages and Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails. In Cairo we met our Egyptian partners along with Gazan evacuees to discuss the impact of the war in Gaza and the immediate challenges that need to be addressed. One of the outcomes of this meeting was an Egyptian commitment to set up field hospitals in Gaza. In Amman, we discussed the Jordanian perspective and the religious undertones of the conflict in relation to the Temple Mount/Haram Al Sharif site with foreign ministry officials.



Meeting with Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority Mohammad Shtayyeh in Ramallah.

NOVEMBER 2023

Questions were raised during our visits about the post-conflict administration of Gaza. We emphasised the need for an inclusive political process, as any imposed solution that excludes important Palestinian actors will not have the approval necessary for long-term peace.

Coverage of the conflict has been vulnerable to both misinformation and disinformation. We have tried to provide an accurate and balanced analysis of the conflict through numerous national and international TV and radio interviews since 7th October.



Oliver appearing as a guest commentator on Al Araby.

OCTOBER 2023

We have met with British Members of Parliament since the beginning of the conflict to provide our insights and emphasise the need for a ceasefire. Several politicians that we met have

publicly announced their support for a ceasefire to enable humanitarian aid to enter Gaza and to facilitate the release of hostages.



Children playing at the German Electronic Kindergarten in Rafah, Gaza.

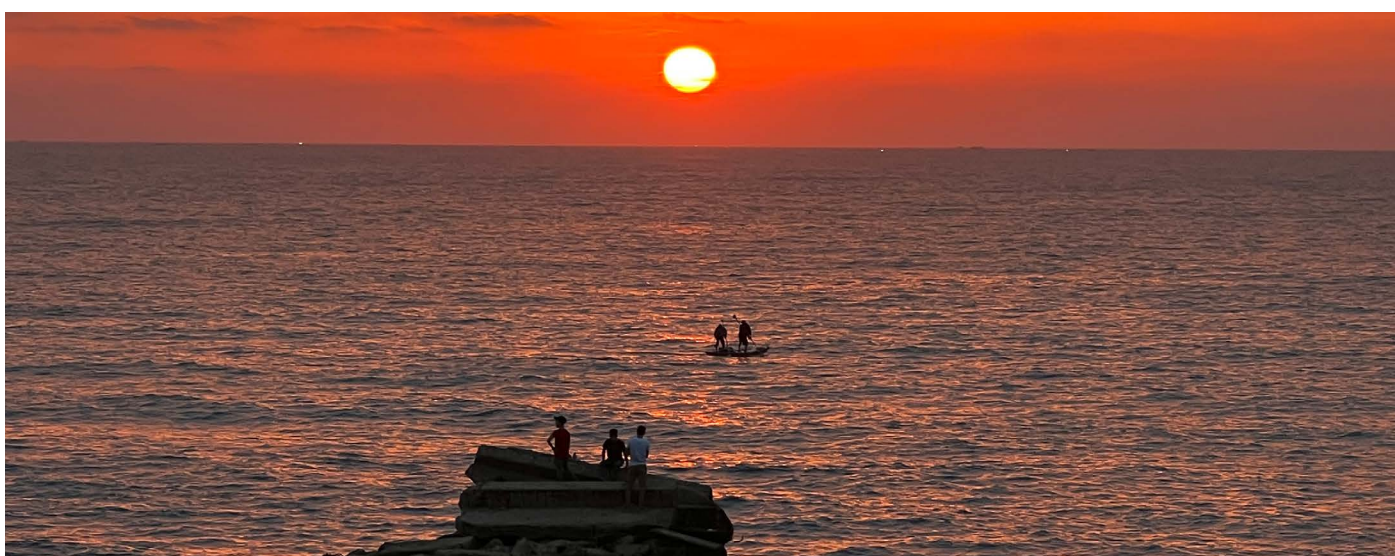
AUGUST 2023

In Gaza, we visited two nurseries that provided spaces for children to play and learn. Prior to the escalation of the conflict, around 543,000 children were identified to be in need of mental health support due to the experience of occupation. These facilities are therefore of essential importance to allow healthy child development and education.

The vitality and happiness of the children in the kindergartens was inspiring. Now, as the conflict continues,

it is these children who are tragically suffering the most.

More than 10,000 children have been killed, and around 24,000 orphaned. Many are suffering life-changing injuries, as over 1,000 children have had one or both legs amputated, often without anaesthesia. It is imperative that the fighting stops to prevent further loss of children's lives, and to prevent permanently traumatising the generations to come.



Young Gazans watch the sunset.

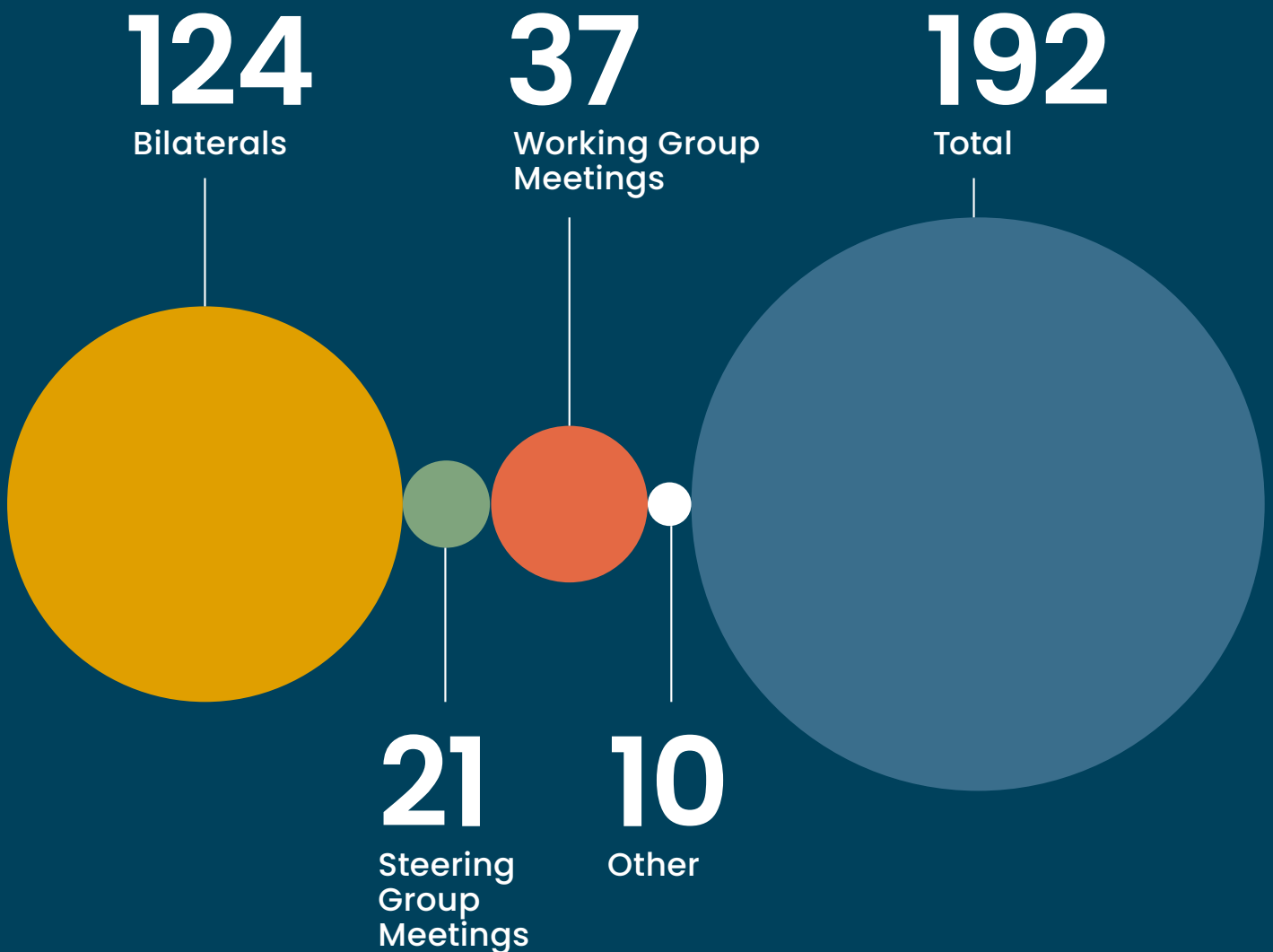
AUGUST 2023

Helsinki Policy Forum

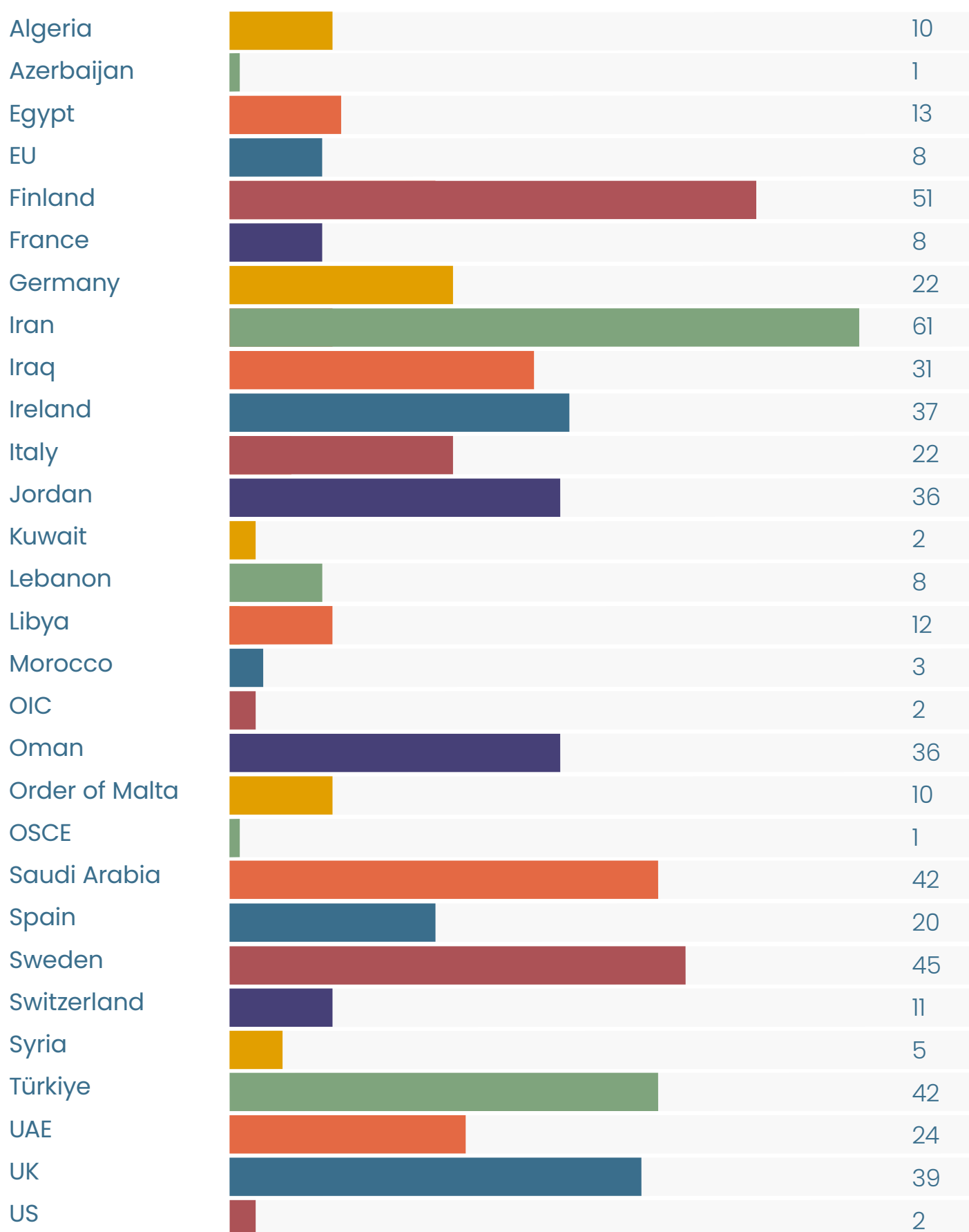


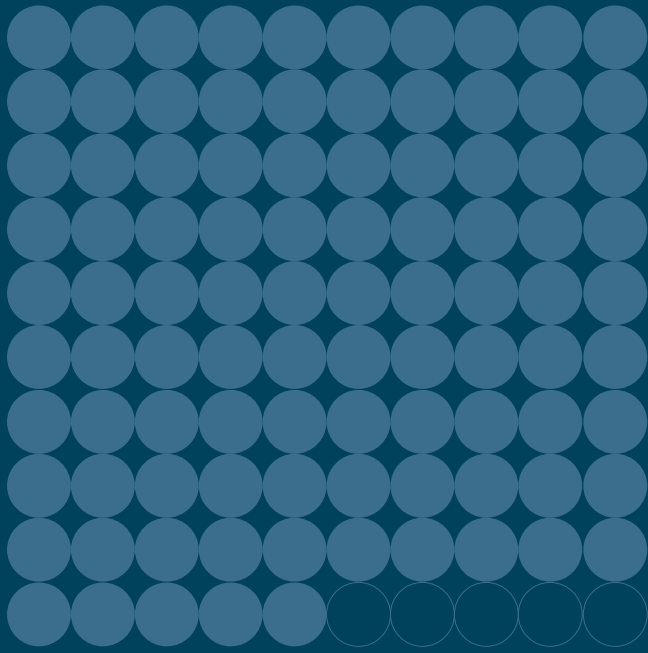
Our Year in Numbers

Number of meetings and activities (in-person and online):



Participants in HPF Meetings by Country

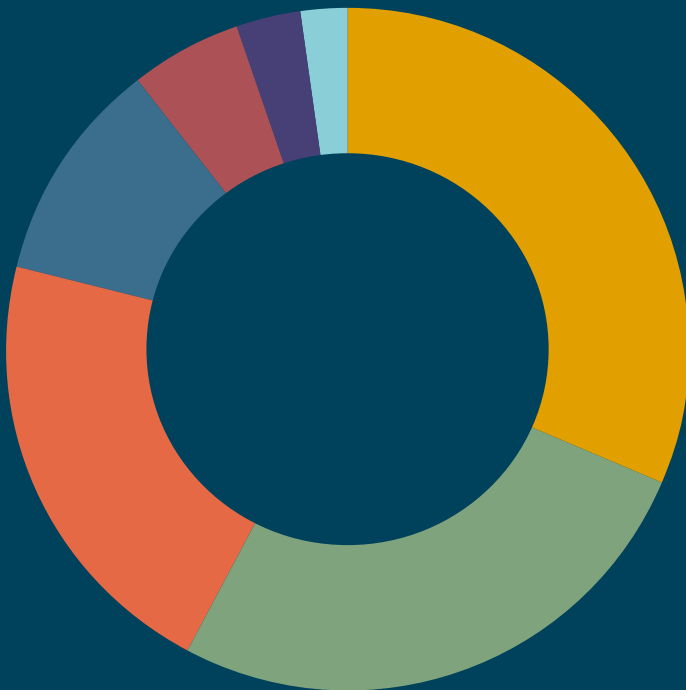




95%

of meetings were convened by Forward Thinking.

PARTICIPANTS



The Helsinki Policy Forum (HPF) has continued to provide an informal ‘unofficial’ space for senior political leaders, government officials and economic, health and environmental experts from Europe and the Gulf-MENA region to meet. In doing so, the HPF maintains an important channel for dialogue, particularly in times of escalating tensions. The aim is to reduce the risk of conflict and to identify opportunities to address shared political, economic, and environmental challenges.

Foreign Ministries

MPs

NGOs/Academics

Embassies

Health Ministries

United Nations

Environment Ministries



Regional Developments

The restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March signalled a period of transition for the Gulf-MENA region.

Following the announcement of the deal, regional HPF members shared their optimism for the development of united and determined efforts to de-escalate tensions. As recognised by Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the agreement is neither likely to solve all outstanding issues between the two countries, nor lead to the imminent resolution of regional conflicts. However, Gulf-MENA states believe it was a sustainable rather than a merely transactional agreement that will prove transformative through promoting a re-balancing of relationships between regional countries, despite the challenges posed by the ongoing war in Gaza.

The May appointment of Luigi Di Maio as the first EU Special Representative for the Gulf provides an important new channel for cooperation between the EU and the Gulf-MENA region to develop. However, a great deal of engagement must continue to take place to realise the EUSR’s mandate; shared challenges require shared solutions.

Programme Highlights

Steering Group

We held four in-person Steering Group meetings this year. An increasing need for greater cooperation between Europe and the Gulf-MENA region was apparent throughout the year and the Helsinki Policy Forum enabled representatives from different countries to discuss a range of challenges informing high-level policy in real time:

Perspectives being shared by the Saudi representative at the December Steering Group meeting.

DECEMBER 2023



In July, we bridged gaps in understanding between the region and the EU, including those that developed after the release of the joint EU “Strategic Partnership with the Gulf” paper, which many from the region felt did not sufficiently incorporate their diverse perspectives. To do this we successfully engaged the EUSR Luigi Di Maio within the Steering Group meetings to hear directly from Steering Group members. EUSR Di Maio shared notable outcomes from the EU-GCC ministerial

meeting, which took place the day prior to the October Steering Group meeting and three days after Hamas’ offensive against Israel. Feedback was shared from the October Co-Chairs’ Statement and Gulf-MENA participants commented that the EU showed a new seriousness about working with them for a more sustainable future. Members were focused on finding an immediate cessation of the violence to prevent further loss of life and a potential spillover of conflict into the wider region.

Meetings provided an important opportunity for Saudi and Iranian officials to directly and openly engage with each other to de-escalate regional tensions. In July, the meeting provided the opportunity to examine the progress made to build cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran following the

March resumption of diplomatic ties, and the implications of such developments for the region. We identified practical initiatives both could work together on through our Working Groups, to tackle climate change and climate-related health challenges.

Insights heard from the Iranian participant at the December Steering Group meeting.

DECEMBER 2023



The Iranian representative described the Forum as a necessary and ‘valuable’ space in supporting efforts to build confidence. The representation of both Germany and Iran at the meeting at a time of high political tensions between the two countries highlighted the trust they have in the HPF team’s efforts, and the value participants believe the Forum provides.

Our meetings were also important for countering the impact of inflammatory actions such as the issue of Qu’ran burning in Sweden, which damaged relationships between Europe and the region and had the potential to undermine positive progress by offending the Islamic world.

At the request of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Finland, H.E. Pekka Haavisto, we facilitated a youth climate

workshop in March. Discussions were focused on strengthening the inclusion of young people in peace and security policymaking (in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2250), and decision-making processes to tackle climate change. Young people have historically been excluded from discussions on policymaking in these areas and thus the meeting provided them with an important opportunity to share practical suggestions on how to ensure these decision-making processes are more inclusive. This meeting led to the establishment of the Nordic Youth, Peace and Security Coalition. Coordination of this Coalition was taken up by one of the participants in the March meeting, who also now coordinates the Finnish 2250-Network on behalf of the UN Youth of Finland.

**'Empowering Youth to Respond to Global Challenges'
Meeting in Helsinki in March.**

MARCH 2023



Energy, Environment and Economy (EEE) Working Group

The Energy, Environment and Economy (EEE) Working Group continues to bring together senior government officials and relevant experts from the Gulf-MENA region and Europe to develop practical cooperation and mechanisms to address the shared threats created by climate change.

The Working Group has focused this year on building inter-state cooperation for tackling desertification and sand and dust storms in the Gulf-MENA region. On this issue, we responded to requests for support from the head of the Iranian parliament's environmental faction and supported the idea of the development of a regional parliamentary agency equipped with the technical expertise to enhance early-warning capabilities and to develop better legislative responses.

**Iranian and Saudi officials meeting together
at the EEE Working Group meeting in Muscat.**

OCTOBER 2023



The EEE Working Group met in Muscat in October to share insights into the root causes and impacts of water scarcity, desertification, and sand and dust storms. The meeting provided an important opportunity to identify ways in which efforts amongst European and Gulf-MENA countries to address these challenges

can be integrated. Recommendations were made to set up a fund to support the establishment of research and monitoring centres in the Gulf-MENA region to address sand and dust storms, and to increase investment in water management systems to mitigate the risks of water scarcity.

Health Working Group

The Health Working Group has continued to convene health policymakers and experts from the Gulf-MENA region and Europe to share analysis and deepen cooperative efforts to tackle common challenges.

In August, we convened a meeting between health experts from Saudi Arabia and Iran. During the meeting, the Saudi participant revealed the difficulties that health experts face in meeting with each other outside official government spaces and thus highlighted the importance of the unofficial space facilitated by Forward Thinking through the Health Working Group. This has been echoed by a French health specialist, who emphasised that there are limited opportunities for

regional and European health officials to convene other than in Health Working Group meetings.

The Health Working Group met in Muscat, Oman, in October to identify practical initiatives that could be developed to tackle the health impacts of climate change and to strengthen pandemic preparedness. Consensus amongst members was reached that to tackle climate-related health challenges, greater multi-sector collaboration should be developed. It was emphasised that experts from health, environmental and economic ministries must develop cooperative initiatives to address shared threats to human health and the natural world.



Health Working Group Meeting in Muscat.

OCTOBER 2023

Women Parliamentarian Network

The impacts of the climate crisis, domestic abuse, economic exclusion and the marginalisation of women from the political decision-making process transcends national and regional boundaries. Women parliamentarians in Europe and the Gulf-MENA continue to face similar challenges which pose a threat to a global sustainable future.

Throughout the year, the Women Parliamentarian Network (WPN) has provided a space for women

parliamentarians from the Gulf-MENA region and Europe to share insights and lessons to enable them to address human, environmental, economic, and social challenges at a policy and practical level within their own parliaments. An Advisory Board representing the trans-regional, cultural, and religious diversity of the Network was established this year and met several times online to identify the ongoing needs of the WPN and to guide its strategic direction.



WPN Meeting in Turku.

The WPN convened in Turku, Finland, to develop shared responses and legislation to tackle the climate crisis and to address the online abuse of women parliamentarians. The need to set up training schemes to ensure that women are equipped with the necessary skills to tackle gender gaps in the labour market and to be included in the green economic transition was highlighted. Consensus was reached on the importance of developing mechanisms within political parties to report the online abuse of women parliamentarians and to hold culpable individuals to account.

In June, we were requested to bring a delegation of women parliamentarians to the 5th Annual Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Focal Point Network Meeting, hosted by the US State Department, Romania, and UN Women. WPN members spoke on a panel on the role parliamentarians can play to ensure that peace and security is obtained for women. Alice Copland discussed the ways in which the WPN has connected legislators across regional and cultural boundaries on a panel.

Members of the WPN met with health and childcare experts at St George's House, Windsor, in December. Discussion on the first day of the meeting was focused on developing cooperation to minimise the disproportionate impacts of climate change on the lives of women and to strengthen women's participation in climate decision-making processes. A few months prior to the meeting, a Kuwaiti member of the WPN shared

that she was the only parliamentarian raising environmental issues in the parliament and therefore that the Network is a vital space to identify ways to tackle the climate crisis. On the second day of the meeting, insights were shared on how parliamentarians in the Gulf-MENA region and Europe can establish high-quality, affordable, and accessible childcare services to support women's economic participation.



Cecily Bayliss chairing the WPN meeting at St George's House, Windsor.

DECEMBER 2023

Participation in the WPN is growing and we aim to engage more parliamentarians, relevant experts, and government officials from the Gulf-MENA region and Europe in 2024. One Turkish parliamentarian credited the discussions had at the WPN June 2022 meeting as inspiration for her drafting a motion submitted to the European

Parliamentary Assembly on these challenges. She is now the rapporteur for the motion and has questioned representatives from 46 countries on these issues. She will request feedback from the WPN once a draft paper has been produced.



Iraqi participant discussing the impact of climate change on the lives of women in Iraq.

DECEMBER 2023

UK Programme



Our Year in Numbers

Number of meetings and activities:

19

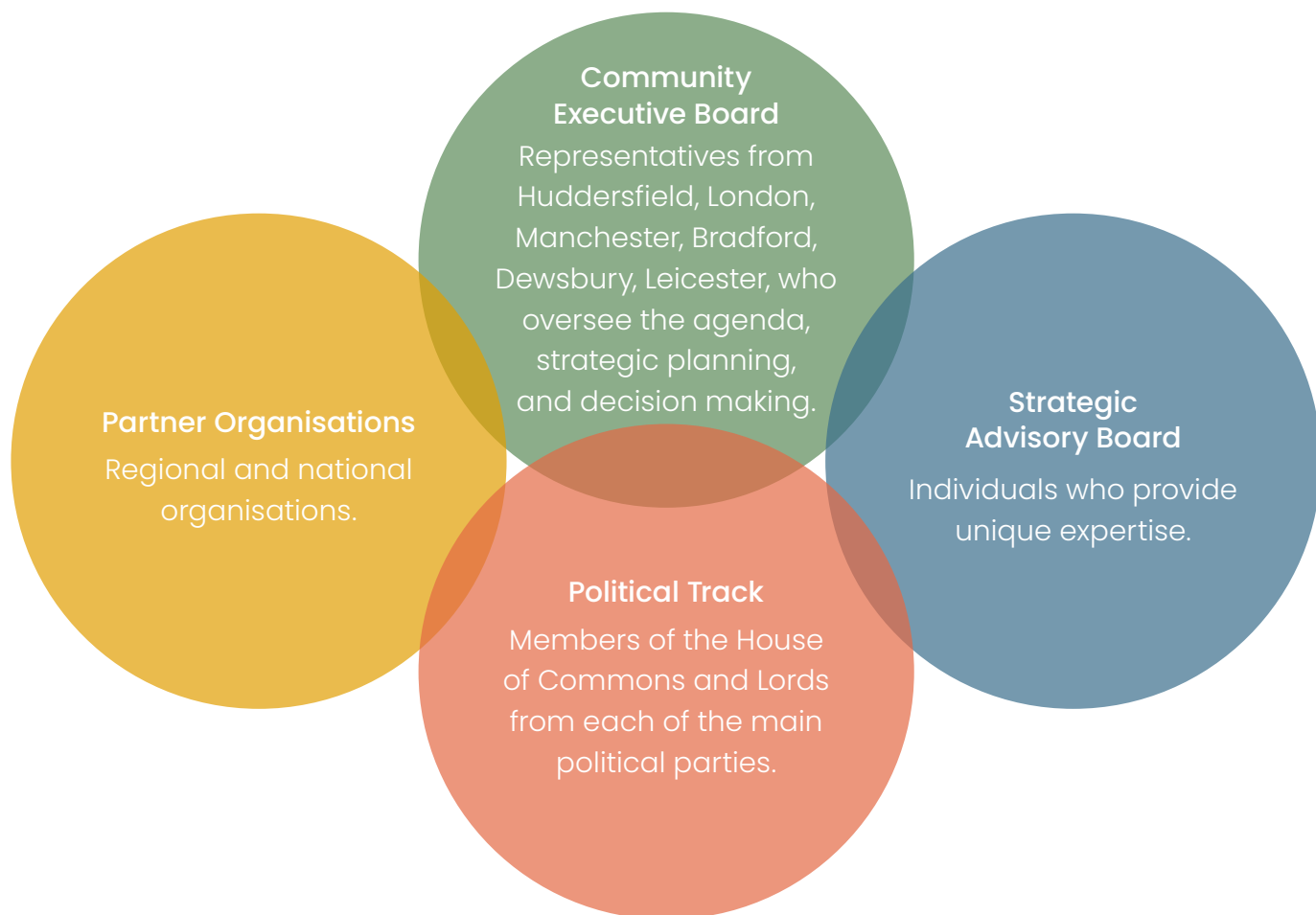
Bilaterals

31

Total meetings

12

Roundtables



Ongoing Challenges

The work of the UK Programme remains ever important. Muslim communities we engage are experiencing marginalisation and Islamophobia, challenges that undermine social cohesion in the country and therefore need to be addressed.

Community representatives and individuals continue to feel unrepresented by the main political parties in the UK, who they see as failing to take their concerns seriously. As religious discrimination is becoming more severe, a significant number of young Muslims no longer feel they belong in Britain and are consequently leaving the country.

In March, the government decided to ignore the demands of more than 200 civil society organisations, including Amnesty International, Liberty, Runnymede Trust,

Child Rights International Network, as well as community leaders and academics to reject a controversial review of the Prevent programme, part of its counter-terrorism strategy. Instead, the Home Office accepted all 34 recommendations in the review conducted by their appointee.

Many of those with whom we work did not feel the review was fully independent, with many of the communities that participated feeling that their perspectives were not sufficiently taken into consideration.

Programme Highlights

The UK Programme has continued to facilitate important channels for dialogue between diverse representatives from British Muslim communities and the Establishment (including parliamentarians, government, non-governmental institutions, and the media) in an aim to promote the inclusion of diverse British Muslim communities in civic and political life.

We took a delegation of key Muslim community representatives, parliamentarians, and experts to Northern Ireland to examine how communities and authorities in Northern Ireland have developed programmes to deal with paramilitarism, radicalisation and terrorism. Participants met with

academics, ex-combatants, youth workers, police officers, MLAs, clergy, and members of the Education Authority and the Ministry of Justice, to explore what lessons can be applied in England in efforts to develop alternative models to the government's counter-terrorism strategy, Prevent.

Delegation of Muslim community representatives to Northern Ireland.



In March, we facilitated a roundtable discussion with Muslim community representatives from London and the Northwest of England to identify how to broaden existing discussions on the challenges faced by Muslim communities in the UK. These dialogues ensure that community perspectives are fed upwards on a range of important issues in the absence of other channels to do so. Participants emphasised the value of our unique role in facilitating dialogue between communities and the Establishment and expressed support for our work in developing the political literacy and access to political life of young British Muslims through our Pathways into Politics programme and the Youth Policy Network.

We convened an online meeting in August with Muslim community groups from London, Manchester and Leicester to discuss challenges they are facing and ways in which these could be

addressed. Participants shared a sense that Islamophobia is becoming increasingly pervasive within the British media and politics and that they are discriminated against on grounds of both religious identity and race. It was raised that Prevent has been used to restrict Muslim religious leaders and organisations from speaking out about the challenges their communities face.

Online meetings with the Youth Policy Network provided an opportunity to discuss how the Network can ensure the next generation of young Muslims do not face the same challenges that they have confronted. The group want to explore further how they can communicate their experiences to the wider community.

APPG on Mediation and Conflict Resolution

In December, Forward Thinking coordinated the establishment of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on International Mediation and Conflict Resolution and will act as a Secretariat. The cross-party group of parliamentarians is co-chaired by MP Sir Jeffrey Donaldson (Democratic Unionist Party) and Baroness

Patricia Morris of Bolton (Conservative). The purpose of the group is to facilitate the provision of a balanced insight for UK parliamentarians into the causes of particular conflicts, and to assist them in understanding the role and benefits of international mediation in resolving and preventing global conflicts.

REFLECTIONS FROM
NEW TEAM MEMBERS

Cecily Bayliss

PROGRAMME OFFICER



It has been nearly a year since I joined Forward Thinking on the Helsinki Policy Forum. Working in a region where political developments often rapidly unfold is certainly challenging at times. However, the opportunities I have had over the last year to develop relationships with a wide selection of members of our international network and to be involved in multiple aspects of our work has been an incredibly rewarding experience.

The fast-paced environment in which we work became clear from my first day; just a week after starting, we travelled to Helsinki for our March Steering Group meeting. I learnt a huge amount in these couple of days, having been able to see the in-person facilitation work that we do between regional and European officials so early on in my time here.

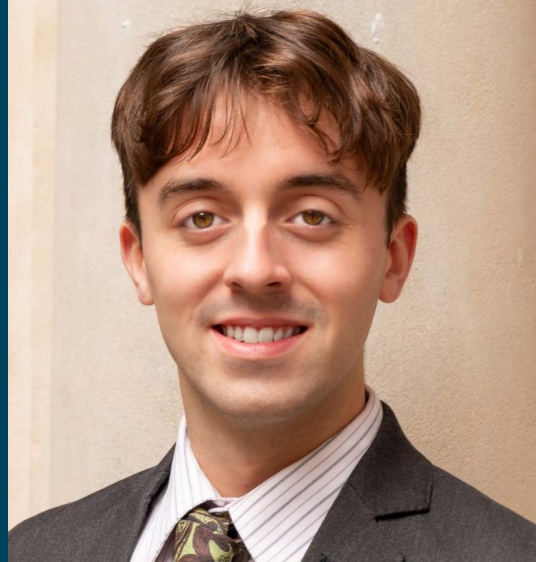
The work I have done on our Women Parliamentarian Network (WPN) is a particular highlight of my first year. It was an amazing opportunity to chair my first meeting at such an inspiring

location as St George's House, Windsor, when the Network met in-person in December. The numerous practical recommendations made by members as to how the Network should move forward has made me extremely excited and optimistic about the WPN's work in 2024.

Despite the devastating events that have unfolded in the latter half of 2023, I am really looking forward to working with an organisation that is at the forefront of efforts to secure a more peaceful year ahead for the Gulf-MENA region.

Harry Weeks

PROGRAMME OFFICER



I joined Forward Thinking in July as part of the Middle East Programme. In a short space of time, I feel that I have been able to build my knowledge and abilities much faster than I ever could have expected. Working with a small team gives me a strong sense of involvement and ample opportunities to learn from my colleagues.

Travelling and meeting a diverse range of people have catalysed this learning process. The visit of a senior group of Palestinian leaders and academics to South Africa was one such instance – it was the first out-of-country event that I participated in and provided me with a real sense of accomplishment and an appreciation for the importance of our work.

These processes of development are both professional and personal. Our work is fundamentally about people and understanding people's needs. Building my professional expertise has a positive impact on my confidence in how I interact

with others and the world around me, and how I navigate potentially difficult situations.

I feel inspired in my role to continue developing relationships with our network and to keep searching for and facilitating opportunities for progress to be made, despite how bleak the current prospects for peace may appear. The terrible events of the last few months have had a deep and troubling effect on many of the people I have met during my time at Forward Thinking, but I am grateful to be in this privileged position where I can work to try to deliver real change and help people.

Finances

Statement of financial activities for the year-ended 31st July 2023

	Unrestricted funds 2023	Restricted funds 2023	Total funds 2023	Total funds 2022
	£	£	£	£
Incoming resources				
Incoming resources from generated funds:				
<i>Voluntary income</i>				
Private donations	10,629	-	10,629	16,613
Grants	25,000	537,196	562,196	606,664
Other incoming resources	-	-	-	-
Total incoming resources	<u>35,629</u>	<u>537,196</u>	<u>572,825</u>	<u>623,277</u>
Resources expended				
Expenditure on:				
Charitable activities	-	630,807	630,807	744,978
Governance costs	<u>70,761</u>	-	<u>70,761</u>	<u>69,874</u>
Total resources expended	<u>(70,761)</u>	<u>(630,807)</u>	<u>(701,568)</u>	<u>(814,852)</u>
Net incoming resources before other recognised gains	(35,133)	(93,611)	(128,744)	(191,575)
Other recognised gains	-	-	-	-
Net movement in funds	(35,133)	(93,611)	(128,744)	(191,575)
Reconciliation of funds				
Total funds brought forward	36,704	219,441	256,145	477,720
Transfers between funds	-	-	-	-
Total funds carried forward	<u>1,571</u>	<u>125,830</u>	<u>127,401</u>	<u>256,145</u>

There were no recognised gains or losses for 2023 other than those included in the statement of financial activities.

There were no acquisitions or discontinued operations during the current year.

We would like to thank all of our funders and individual donors, without whom our work over the past year would not have been possible.

These include

PHILIP KING CHARITABLE TRUST

PEARS FOUNDATION

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IRISH DEPARTMENT
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Help us to break down walls through mediation and dialogue.

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