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In our very troubled world, the role of conflict mediation is even more paramount. Throughout the pandemic our team have found new ways to engage and bring people and governments together on crucial issues. Thanks to the digital developments that Covid has accelerated, Forward Thinking has managed to be more productive and effective than ever in opening up dialogue and continuing conversations which never existed before.

On behalf of all our trustees, I’d like to thank Oliver McTernan for his courageous leadership and all the Forward Thinking team for their energetic engagement on the front line.

WILLIAM SIEGHART CBE | CHAIRMAN OF FORWARD THINKING
Our Philosophy

Conflict mediation requires addressing attitudinal challenges – entrenched – mindsets, fears and aspirations – that can inhibit moving forward on key disputed issues. Our approach to dialogue rests on six pillars:

- Inclusivity
- Transparency & Confidentiality
- Flexibility & Adaptability
- Sustained Commitment
- Working at Multiple Levels
- Demand-Driven

Meetings and activities participated in:

- 691
  Meetings and activities participated in
- 224
  Middle East Programme
- 359
  Helsinki Policy Forum
- 108
  UK Programme
The context for the solving of the world’s thorniest problems continues to degrade. It is not just the Arab-Israel issue that lacks any substantive proposals for settlement. Kashmir, Cyprus, Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, Libya, Venezuela, the Sahel, Somalia are all places where any momentum towards stability and a better life is hard to identify. Even Climate Change policy is mired down. The Covid pandemic has not caused this deterioration, but it has highlighted it, and sapped the possibility of greater attention being paid to conflict resolution.

The fundamental reason for this disappointing picture is not so surprising. Diplomatic initiatives with scale and power must come from governments, and all governments are struggling to maintain their grip. Human beings like to control their environment, and have the intelligence and the instruments to do so, up to a point. But as a freer and more open world becomes more complex and interactive, the capacity to control diminishes and strategic mistakes become more frequent. If it is so much harder to dominate the core space which governments are expected to care for, the home territory, how much less likely is it that energy and resources can be committed to addressing a more distant challenge.

This polarising trend lies at the heart of the poor relationships between the bigger powers and of the failure of most attempts at the United Nations to generate the kind of compromises needed to resolve regional conflicts.

It also goes part of the way to explain the pressures on President Biden to end American involvement in Afghanistan, the issue capturing attention as I write. More than any event so far in the Biden first term, the precipitate withdrawal from Kabul has revealed the linkage between the Trump and Biden approaches to America’s place in the world: that home is complicated enough without adding abroad to the mix. What is so discomforting about the thinking behind that concept is the failure to recognise that home and abroad are, in the modern world, indivisible. The very factors that make government so difficult in the whirling mix of global interaction also make it essential for leaders to get together across their cultural and political divides to begin to restore some structure to their shared ownership of the whole complex.

Afghanistan is extraordinary for being so significant in modern history when it is a relatively small, poor, land-locked territory that could readily, one would think, be left to its own devices. Central Asia, after all, has played no great part in the development of today’s powers and civilisations, just as Central Africa and Central South America have not. Yet Afghanistan is illuminated by its position as a crossroads between Russia and India, between Iran, Pakistan and China, between the Muslim and the non-Muslim worlds, between the interests of a once-dominant Western civilisation and those of other civilisations that want that dominance put in its place. Watch for the repositioning over the coming period of the various stakeholders in the new Afghan situation. China, Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran are all calculating how they can realign their approaches to the region in the absence of a strong US presence; but none of them actually want to be responsible for the politics of Afghanistan, or to be sucked into the next stage of the country’s evolution.

How does this affect the region closest to Forward Thinking’s nerve-centre, the Middle East, itself a great crossroads? Perhaps the most significant knock-on concerns the perception of the US’s credibility as an ally. Trust in the US was already wobbling as a result of the world’s experience of Obama and Trump, both innately disinclined to see America as the world’s policeman. Afghanistan has reinforced that, both because the Americans had real interests to defend there, in the counter-terrorism area, but still left, and because the manner of their departure was so poorly planned.
Those states which hold hopes of American protection from a larger and threatening neighbour - Ukraine/Russia; Japan and India/China; Taiwan/China; Saudi Arabia/Iran; even NATO/Russia - are writing internal analyses of whether they have to recalculate. China and Russia themselves might be motivated to test the superpower boundaries more aggressively. As for non-state actors, jihadists everywhere will draw oxygen from the US withdrawal and hope that their franchises will grow more appealing as a result.

All of them need to take care. The Iraq and Afghanistan interventions were strategic mistakes by the United States, in the way they were conceived and implemented. Leaving those two countries became challenges that had to be confronted at some point. The way they happened was less than ideal, but the US is not materially weaker in consequence. The doubts surround American decision-making, not American potential. If an adversary raises its head too far above the parapet in future, they cannot assume that Washington will not react. Nonetheless, the presence of the US in areas of instability or potential confrontation has become a matter of greater speculation as a result of Afghanistan; and there are downsides to that.

More immediately relevant to Forward Thinking’s work is the deduction we must make about the likelihood of any new US initiative in the Middle East Peace Process. There was little sign of it in the early Biden months, and it must be even less likely now. This makes us all uneasy. The Oslo process is effectively dead. It never developed momentum because the main parties barely believed in it and the implementing mechanisms were too weak to sustain progress. The consequence is huge unrest around Jerusalem, a Palestinian Authority devoid of substance, a complacent and divided Israel seemingly unable to settle its longer-term future, and an international community making the mistake of pushing Palestine down its priority list. It was a significant error for Ramallah to cancel the Palestinian elections scheduled for this year, manifestly nervous of the opportunity for renewal that these would bring, but vulnerable to the explosion of hostile opinion that cancellation has generated.

Forward Thinking is acutely aware of the great gaps that now show in the construction of a settlement, and of the poverty of thinking devoted to filling them. Our vision of what is needed has not changed: the two peoples need their own secure and separate systems on which to base a lasting and peaceful relationship. That is the framework for our work in the region. With that in mind, the past year has noted some significant achievements to keep alive the possibility of dialogue, to nip emerging crises in the bud, to remind politicians of the need to move beyond their comfort zones, to underline the role of women in peace processes, and to prick the consciences of passive policy-makers. FT has not only promoted regular communication with the leading factions on either side, it has also raised the participation and relevance of the Helsinki Policy Forum (bringing Europeans and Middle Easterners together) and, in the UK context, worked for more intelligent handling of the Muslim minority at home. One excellent example of FT’s reach and quiet effect came in the convening of Rabbis in Israel to address the vexed question of Israeli incursions onto the Temple Mount/Haram as Sharif. Recognising the dangerous escalation of Jewish determination to assert a presence there, but unable on their own to bridge the different approaches of different sub-sects of Judaism, a number of Rabbis turned to FT, on the basis of long years of relationship-building in that quarter, to provide a neutral basis for dialogue. The result was a consensual Rabbinical decree requiring Jews not to break the lines laid down against entering the TM/HAS, which has done much to reduce the pressure on that sensitive spot. This was a substantial piece of reconciliation work.

Forward Thinking on its own cannot achieve the scale needed to mend the greatest areas of conflict. Yet it is surprising what the constant insertion of ideas, analyses, meeting-points and warnings can do to preserve the possibility of effective action in the future. The team call it Loitering with Intent. When that intent is intelligently formulated, it has a real chance of making a difference if the mood changes. Testimony to the recognition of larger organisations that this approach is sorely needed is the recent success FT have had in securing grants to keep their operations going.

The global context may be awkward, but Forward Thinking’s capacity to sustain an almost unique relevance from so small a base deserves the admiration of us all.

This article was originally written in September 2021 and reflects events at that time
Middle East Programme
Realising opportunities amidst the challenges

By Jordan Morgan | Middle East Programme Manager

In numbers:

224

meetings and activities - at more than 75% of these events, Forward Thinking was the lead organiser
Introduction

The Middle East Programme has continued to develop an inclusive network of influential religious and secular leaders from across the political spectrum who have an increased awareness of the challenges and potential opportunities that they face in leading their constituencies toward a durable, just and realistic settlement to the conflict.

Contextual Developments

In Palestine, internal political disunity, the ongoing siege of Gaza, the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and Israel’s security driven policies have systematically blocked the development of a unified national Palestinian vision. Policies of non-engagement with certain factions have helped institutionalise internal Palestinian divisions. The Palestinian question has been marginalised in many regional and international corners. Whilst it was rejected by the Palestinians, US-backed Arab-Israeli normalisation has accelerated; however, this process has not been a substitute for a genuine process between Israelis and Palestinians. Around 93% of Palestinians registered to vote in the first planned national Palestinian elections in years. However, elections were indefinitely postponed despite the fact that they represented the greatest chance for Palestinian political reconciliation and reunification.

In Israel, a lack of strategic leadership and four elections in less than two years has helped shrink the space for leaders to develop a long-term vision that extends beyond just dealing with immediate crisis or electioneering. In August 2020, many leading Israeli policy, strategic, and security leaders expressed concern that attempts by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to unilaterally annex parts of the West Bank could lead to uncontainable and unforeseen economic and human costs to both sides. Annexation risked a long-term collapse of security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the breakdown of regional peace deals such as the one between Jordan and Israel peace deal, and tensions could have spilled over, impacting the many countries reeling from years of conflict driven instability and under pressure from Covid-19. The new diverse Israeli government coalition is inclusive of right, left, centrist and, for the first time, a Palestinian-Israeli party. This presents new opportunities and challenges; however, to maintain its fragile stability and protect itself from collapse, the coalition has committed itself to avoid addressing the contentious issues underpinning the conflict.

In May 2021, the world witnessed the impact of a full-scale military confrontation between Israel and Hamas. These events highlighted the centrality of Jerusalem in the conflict and the potential for new unpredictable dynamics emerging after intercommunal violence erupted in mixed Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli cities. It showed that underlying conflict drivers cannot be addressed through military means alone. In the long-term, inclusive political dialogue and negotiations remain the only durable option. However, leaders from all sides need greater support to accomplish this, or they risk reverting back to a ‘business-as-usual’ approach. The status quo entails a focus on containment or conflict management rather than resolution. Without a truly inclusive process to end violence, which can give all human life dignity and sense of identity, the current approach will only lead to further serious violence and shore up problems for leaders later down the line.
Programme Highlights

Israel

In response to the May conflict, the influential Rabbinical Union convened a conference which Forward Thinking helped to facilitate (30th May-1st June 2021). Over seventy senior ultra-Orthodox Rabbinical leaders attended, including Israel’s Chief Safadi Rabbi, Yitzak Yosef. The Chief Rabbi issued a public statement on the prohibition of Jews ascending the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sha rif complex. This was subsequently shared with figures in Jewish Orthodox communities and across the Western and Arab-Muslim world. The statement served as an important reminder for Orthodox Jews of the historic halachic ruling. Moreover, it was greatly appreciated by Muslims globally, as well by Palestinian factions, which helped reduce tensions.

We worked intensively with 15 influential Israeli leaders, including prominent MKs, Israeli journalists from Yisrael Hayom, jurists, and advisors from the Joint List, Likud, and New Hope party. Insights from Northern Ireland’s peace process were shared alongside perspectives on the role of the media, policing in a divided society, and the role of the judicial and legal system. National religious leaders have recognized a need for a new Israeli state-religion framework to address tensions between majority and minority communities and help overcome the religious-secular divide. For progress on the peace issue, they identified that internal Israeli divisions must be healed; in order to achieve this, they argued that they must identify the theoretical and practical areas of theological compromise to do this. This insight emerged from an ongoing dialogue which we have helped to facilitate to help leaders explore other religion and state models. This included a visit to the Netherlands and online engagements with Muslim diplomats and officials from Bosnia and Herzegovina, a majority Muslim democratic country. This has helped break psychological barriers to the group’s wider engagement with the Muslim world. They have also contributed to ongoing group reflections as to how they may reconcile their own legitimate theological beliefs with that of other constituencies, both religious and non-religious, in Israel. These insights have been shared with prominent national religious MKs to promote a wider internal reflection within the national religious community.

We facilitated an online conference to explore historical and contemporary peace agreements and their implications for the Israeli-Arab conflict and broader region (November 2020). The conference was attended by 25 senior Likud MKs, Ministerial Advisors, and officials. In cooperation with the Menachem Begin Heritage Centre, the conference successfully provided a forum whereby delegates could examine some of the many challenges, issues, mistakes, and achievements of past and present peace agreements. At the end of the conference, participants had developed a deeper understanding of the experiences from the Irish, Israel-Egypt, and Israel-Jordan peace processes, as well as the ‘Abraham Accords’. A Likud Foreign affairs advisor who attended said that “it [the conference] gave me an opportunity to leave my very biased opinion to one side, for a few hours, and hear a different point of view. It gave me a lot to think about and I truly enjoyed every moment.”. An internal Likud working group has since been launched. This will work with leading figures from within the party to discuss some of the challenges, obstacles, and potential opportunities towards addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (March 2021).
Occupied Palestinian Territories

The Covid-19 pandemic represented the biggest threat to human life in Palestine. In cooperation with the Sovereign Order of Malta, we convened the first Doctor-to-Doctor initiative in April 2020 with Palestinian doctors and policy makers. The initiative aimed to share the latest medical advancements to promote better Palestinian and Israeli policies to tackle the virus. We facilitated conversations between senior European immunologists, virologists, doctors, and health policy makers with 35 senior doctors from the Palestinian Ministries of Health and medical NGOs. The findings of these meetings helped Palestinians develop best practice, highlighted the importance of personal protective equipment for healthcare workers, and developed Gaza’s quarantine measures which miraculously helped keep Covid-19 out of Gaza until August 2020.

We have worked to build the capacity of cross-factional Palestinian leaders to overcome political divisions. We have also established a Palestinian working group made up of former British Ministers, Ambassadors, Diplomats and Consul Generals. The group provides a space for Palestinian leaders to share their analysis and importantly to explore opportunities in light of current trends. They provide advice as to how our work with Palestinian political leaders should be focused. We also developed and implemented the first negotiation and mediation programme for senior Ministerial officials in Gaza (June-October 2020). 30 senior Ministerial officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy, and Ministry of Labor participated. Those on the course contributed to ongoing discussions on Palestinian unity and reconciliation. The participants were directly exposed to theoretical approaches on addressing conflict, divisions, and power-sharing, thereby improving their knowledge of relevant historical experiences. The programme began with a responsible negotiations course, led by Professor Alain Lempereur. It culminated in mediation training with Pat Hynes, who shared his experiences of mediating during the Irish peace process.

We launched a successful online programme between European policy makers, Israeli and Palestinian political leaders. During the meetings, participants discussed immediate and ongoing challenges. Leaders from Fatah, the Palestinian Islamic movement, the Israeli Labor, Likud, New Hope, the Joint List and Yisrael Beiteinu parties participated in separate sessions. They informed policy towards the US, Palestinian and Israeli elections, trends within the Israeli and Palestinian political system, Covid-19, and annexation. Over 100 policymakers and officials from Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the EU, UK, and UN have participated, helping to inform and shape policy in real time. Leaders in the region are more informed about European perspectives towards the conflict. A significant breakthrough was developing greater participation of European officials in meetings with leaders from the Palestinian Islamic movements. We created a space for Sinn Fein and European officials to engage with members of the Palestinian Islamic Movement, which created rare breakthroughs in understanding around the common challenges facing the movement at the EU and European level. These meetings have also proved critical in giving leaders from the Palestinian Islamic Movement the opportunity to hear Western perspectives, which they often only hear about “from media articles.”

In the build-up to Palestinians elections, subsequently suspended we developed a programme of work to support Palestinian political factions pre-, during, and post- elections to support a free, fair, and inclusive process. We took steps to organise a group of high-level individuals to observe the process and were equally engaging with Israeli authorities to help ensure a free and fair process. Additionally, we explored ways to support newly elected Government officials. An example of our work was engaging Sinn Fein leaders who met with Palestinian political independents to share their experience of building credible political agendas and overcoming political divisions, which contributed to calls for unified lists.
Helsinki Policy Forum
Dialogue to Action in a Pandemic

By Julian Weinberg, Abigail Storey and Harry Higginson

In numbers:

359 meetings and activities - a 25% increase on the past year despite the Pandemic

At more than 75% of these events, Forward Thinking was the lead organiser

Breakdown of Helsinki Policy Forum meetings by workstream

2 Ministerial Meetings
On two occasions we successfully engaged Ministers in our work; the visit of Adel Al Jubeir to Finland in November 2020 and the Ministers of Health meeting in April 2021

3 Steering Group Meetings
These are the political gatherings that set the agenda for the rest of the programme and which develop the working relationship between participating countries

15 Working Groups
Our activities that seek to develop cooperation and a more common understanding on shared challenges such as Health or the Economy

339 Bilateral meetings and external events
Bilaterals are the foundation of all our work - one on one meetings where we develop relationships and plan activities
Introduction

Covid-19 has exacerbated the Gulf-MENA region’s challenges and exposed the depth of regional inequalities. While countries in the Gulf have coped well with the health crisis, the region’s poorer states have profoundly struggled. As would be expected, medical systems in fragile and conflict-affected countries lacked the capacity to deal with a further crisis and were often unable to manage an organised response. However, middle-income countries have also come under severe strain, particularly as more transmissible variants have begun to spread. The perceived inability of governments to control the virus has badly denting public trust across the region and contributed to growing protests in many countries, most notably Tunisia. The region now faces the challenge of securing and then delivering Covid vaccines, where there are also enormous disparities between states. Some, such as the UAE, have amongst the most advanced vaccine campaigns in the world while states such as Iraq have barely begun vaccinating their population.

However, the most devastating impact of Covid-19 in the Middle East has arguably been in the field of economics. Economies are believed to have shrunk by 8.5% in 2020 as traditional sources of regional growth – oil, tourism, and overseas remittances – have all been badly hit and are only beginning to recover. The pandemic is suspected to have pushed another 8 million people into poverty in the Middle East, bringing the overall total to almost 101 million, which is almost a fifth of the total population. Rising poverty has contributed to growing food insecurity, with almost 52 million people now chronically undernourished, most of them concentrated in conflict-affected countries such as Yemen where 80% of the population urgently require humanitarian assistance.

Hopes at the beginning of the pandemic that the common threat presented by the virus could create the momentum to realise ceasefires in regional conflicts have not been fully realised. Fierce fighting has continued in both Syria and Yemen and diplomatic efforts have appeared stalled in recent months. There has been more progress in Libya, where a new government of national unity and presidential council have been agreed. These represent a breakthrough after almost a decade of civil war and are a significant step towards a sustainable political solution. It is notable that the UN led talks that produced these institutions, adopted an innovative approach, utilising video-technology to ensure all parts of Libyan society – including women, youth groups and civil society – were consulted and engaged. This could provide a potential model for future peace talks to ensure societal support, something that is fundamental for the long-term success of any process.

The example of Libya highlights that despite the challenges of Covid there have also been opportunities. The new approach of the Biden administration has helped prevent a further escalation in regional tensions and while the success of the JCPOA talks is far from certain, the return of the United States to negotiations has been broadly welcomed in the region. The government in Iraq has signalled its desire to play a mediating role between its neighbours and has hosted several rounds of talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Notably the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia has publicly spoken of the Kingdom’s desire for improved relations with Iran, a discourse matched by the new President of Iran who in his inaugural speech called for regional dialogue to resolve crises. These developments may be tentative signs of a new atmosphere in the Gulf-MENA, away from confrontation and towards accommodation.

The Helsinki Policy Forum has supported this shift by providing a confidential space where senior policymakers from across the region can meet and explore ways to de-escalate tensions, build confidence and identify where cooperation might be mutually beneficial. Channels for dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been maintained and strengthened and new relationships formed with figures at the heart of government. Discussions have taken place on Yemen, the stabilisation of Iraq, the political crisis in Tunisia, and the JCPOA negotiations, enabling a real-time exchange of analysis and confidential messages to be passed.

Health remained a notable focus of our work in 2021, culminating in a high-level online meeting of Health Ministers to discuss Covid-19. The meeting was hosted by H.E. Krista Kiuru, Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services of Finland, and attended by representatives from: Iran, Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, the UAE, United Kingdom, as well as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, COVAX, the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, the Sovereign Order of Malta, and WHO EMRO. It was the first time that several Ministers had shared the same platform and provided a timely opportunity for them to exchange ideas on how to strengthen the Europe and the Gulf-MENA region’s defences against pandemics. In the coming year we will continue to explore how health can provide a platform for cooperation and potential confidence building between Middle Eastern states.

"Hopes at the beginning of the pandemic that the common threat presented by the virus could create the momentum to realise ceasefires in regional conflicts have not been fully realised"
Throughout the year the Steering Group of the Helsinki Policy Forum continued to meet to exchange analysis on regional crises and to identify where there may be opportunities to reduce tensions and develop cooperation.

**Steering Group Meetings**

Throughout the year the Steering Group of the Helsinki Policy Forum continued to meet to exchange analysis on regional crises and to identify where there may be opportunities to reduce tensions and develop cooperation.

In November 2020 the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, Adel Al Jubeir travelled to Finland to address the Helsinki Policy Forum. This marked the first visit of a Saudi Minister of State to Finland and provided an opportunity to hear the Saudi perspective on dynamics in the Gulf-MENA region. During discussions the need to meet the aspirations of the region’s youth for economic security was particularly emphasised. Given the size of the region’s youth population (in Saudi Arabia alone, 70% of the population are under the age of 30), this will be a sizable challenge for policymakers. It was suggested that this creates a powerful incentive to try and resolve crises as soon as possible, so that a greater proportion of resources could be focused on promoting sustainable economic development.

In February and April of 2021, further meetings of the Steering Group were held online. These brought together senior foreign ministry officials from across Europe and the Gulf-MENA region. Both meetings focused on shared challenges and explored where there could be opportunities for Europe and the Gulf-MENA region to cooperate more closely, deepening both their own ties and building support for the multilateral order.

It was suggested that in the long-term the two regions should seek to ease rivalries between the superpowers of the USA and China and advocate a global vision of pragmatic cooperation that avoids ideology, particularly around shared challenges such as pandemics, and climate change.

Finally in May 2021, a physical meeting of the Steering Group was convened in Helsinki. Participants identified signs of a tentative détente in the region, welcoming the talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Baghdad. Analysis was exchanged on recent developments within the region, including the ongoing negotiations over the JCPOA; the humanitarian situation in Syria; and the outbreak violence in Israel-Palestine. Long-term challenges were explored, such as improving pandemic preparedness and how to address mounting water insecurity across the region. Plans were also developed for the Forum’s activities in the second half of 2021 that will support efforts to build trust, address misperceptions and reduce regional tensions.
Covid-19 Response and development of Health Working Group

In the second half of 2020 we continued to facilitate our Dr-to-Dr initiative – an online platform developed in cooperation with the Order of Malta to provide health experts an opportunity to exchange insights on Covid-19. Over 150 health experts from Australia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Germany, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, the United Kingdom and Yemen and the World Health Organisation participated in its meetings.

The process helped doctors keep up to date with the scientific community’s rapidly changing understanding of the virus, its transmission, and the best approaches for managing Covid 19 patients. It also served as a space where countries with initially fewer cases- especially in the Middle East– could learn from the experience of other countries in Europe who had faced the emergency at an earlier stage. In March 2021 a comprehensive report was released to make the key insights from the process publicly available as a resource that doctors could access and refer to.

A key recommendation from policymakers in the Forum as well as the Dr-to-Dr process was to try and develop a health policy dialogue in the MENA region between government officials, that was perceived to be absent due to political tensions. The Helsinki Policy Forum was uniquely positioned to respond to this request and on the 19th of April we convened an online meeting on how to improve cooperation in addressing Covid-19 and enhance preparations for future pandemics.

The meeting was hosted by H.E. Krista Kiuru, Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services of Finland, and attended by high-level representatives from Europe and the Gulf-MENA region, as well as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, COVAX, the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness, the Sovereign Order of Malta, and WHO EMRO. Participants identified clear recommendations to improve pandemic preparedness. These included strengthening vaccine supply chains and distribution hubs, improving early warning systems and investing more into viral research. While acknowledging the important work of COVAX, participants emphasised that greater levels of solidarity were required to ensure there is equity in vaccine distribution. Not only is this a moral imperative but it will help to ensure the whole world is protected against resurgent waves of Covid-19 and the emergence of new and dangerous variants. Looking ahead, participants emphasised that Covid-19 must represent a turning point, in which global public health is treated as a priority by governments and placed at the heart of the international system.

From this meeting, participants agreed to a Health Working Group that will regularly convene Ministry of Health officials to discuss responses to Covid-19 on a regular basis. This is a significant development and represents a practical example of inter-state cooperation within the Gulf-MENA region. The Health Working Group has already begun to meet on a regular basis and is taking forward several of the recommendations identified in prior meetings.

Women’s Parliamentary Network

The Women’s Parliamentary Network (WPN) was established in 2018 at the request women leaders involved in the HPF who felt there was a pressing need for a space where women parliamentarians from the Gulf-MENA region could engage counterparts from other parts of the world. The network acts as a mechanism where parliamentarians exchange insights on how to address shared policy challenges and can work together to ensure a more gender sensitive approach to policymaking. Over the past year, the WPN focused on two issues that have been greatly exacerbated by Covid-19 – domestic violence and the economic inclusion of women. The Gulf-MENA region has the lowest levels of female labour force participation in the world, with the World Bank estimating that nine of the bottom ten countries globally are based in the MENA region. The economic recession sparked by the pandemic has made this significantly worse, as many women worked in sectors, such as tourism, that were particularly exposed to Covid and have found themselves made unemployed.
This challenge is not unique to the Middle East, and it is well documented that around the world women are the “first to be fired and last to be rehired” during a downturn. In July 2021, the WPN met to discuss these issues and to identify steps that could ensure women are included in economic recovery plans. In addition to identifying immediate steps, participants agreed they need to advocate for new ways of thinking about the economy. Economic models that view public health, education, and childcare as ‘costs’ in comparison with infrastructure and transport as ‘investments’ need to be abandoned. Instead, governments and international financial institutions must take a people-centred approach that emphasises the need for human capital. This would mean that when financial downturns, public health and education would continue to be prioritised, rather than reduced or cut.

Domestic violence has been described as the “shadow pandemic” with one in three women worldwide experiencing physical or sexual violence during their lifetime, mostly from an intimate partner. Disturbingly, there is unambiguous evidence that since the beginning of the pandemic all types of violence against women have increased sharply in virtually every part of the globe.

In October 2020, the WPN convened a meeting to explore how different countries are attempting to address the rise of domestic violence. A keynote speech was provided by the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Theresa May, who shared with the group the main provisions of a new Domestic Abuse Bill that is progressing through the British Parliament. Participants were particularly interested in provisions that would require alleged abusers to leave the home while an investigation is ongoing (in contrast to current prevailing norm where generally victims must leave their homes) and explored if it could be applied in their own contexts. Subsequent discussions were organised on the situations in Jordan (December 2020) and Iraq (June 2021) which allowed detailed examinations of the current legislative frameworks in both countries and how they might be strengthened. In Iraq, where there are currently no laws around domestic violence, participants exchanged ideas on how best to build a domestic coalition in favour of reform.

The WPN will continue to take forward these issues in the second half of 2021, with a physical meeting planned to take place in Helsinki.
Introduction

Our year ended with Tunisia arguably facing its greatest crisis since the Revolution. On the 25th of July, the President of Tunisia, Kais Saied, announced the suspension of parliament, dismissed the Prime Minister, lifted the immunity of MPs, and announced he was assuming executive authority. He subsequently removed other members of the government, most notably the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Justice and declared a month-long curfew.

Supporters of the President claim he has acted in line with Article 80 of the constitution, which allows the President to assume exceptional powers if the country faces a state of imminent danger. The President has argued that the economic situation and health crisis created by Covid-19 represents such a state of emergency. However, others contest this and argue that important aspects of Article 80 have been ignored, specifically sections requiring the Speaker of Parliament and Prime Minister to be consulted first and for Parliament to enter a continuous session. Yet because Tunisia has not established its Constitutional Court, these questions cannot be definitively settled.

Tunisia’s transition has been plunged into a period of profound uncertainty with no clear path out of the current crisis. The President’s actions appear to have significant public support and he has so far ignored calls for dialogue from political parties, arguing there can be no return to the status quo. However, with the country’s politicians divided, there is a real risk that Tunisia’s deep-seated economic and social challenges will grow worse.

The country urgently needs mechanisms that bring political leaders and national stakeholders together in a democratic spirit and which renews the Tunisian ingenuity for consensus and compromise, to find solutions to national challenges and find ways to realise to long-term sustainable economic growth for the benefit of all. Inclusive dialogue – not unilateral action – will be the only way the country can move forward in a sustainable manner.

Prior to the events of July, we had been continuing our efforts to support Tunisia’s democracy at different levels. We were in active discussions with senior policymakers over how to support their ongoing efforts at economic reforms, drawing on successful models utilised by other countries facing similar challenges. In June we held an online workshop between the Speaker of the Parliament, Rached Ghannouchi, and European parliamentarians, reflecting on the situation in Tunisia. The central message from the meeting was that while the country had made enormous strides in securing political freedoms, far more needed to be done to meet the social and economic aspirations of Tunisians.

However, most of our work in Tunisia in the past year focused on supporting the professional development of a cohort of young (18-40 year old) activists. Working with leading individuals from politics, civil society and business, we held regular online workshops over a six-month period in a process called the Tunisia Young Leaders Programme. In these workshops’ participants had an opportunity to work with experts from a range of different backgrounds. The aim of all activities was to provide the group with practical insights into essential skills that they could then apply to their own work.

Tunisia Programme
Confronting new challenges a decade on from the Arab Spring

By Harry Higginson and Julian Weinberg
Given the ongoing political turmoil in Tunisia, a significant proportion of the sessions focused on the challenge of working with others; how to build political coalitions; and manage biases. Expert speakers from Northern Ireland proved particularly helpful for the group, as they were share lessons from their own experience of having to cooperate with individuals from a radically different political tradition to achieve change.

The programme also provided the group opportunities to engage with Tunisian policymakers – including Parliamentarians, former Ministers, and senior civil servants. These allowed participants to share their ideas directly with policymakers and gain first-hand experience of delivering arguments concisely and persuasively.

Despite their political differences, participants proved able to set aside their disagreements to listen to the perspective of others and, later in the project, work together. In this way, sessions helped to reinforce key democratic norms and built amongst the group a microcosm of the political culture they hoped to see reflected in Tunisia as a whole - one where differences can either be accommodated or dealt with respectfully.

Finally, we were deeply saddened at the death of Mehrezia Labidi in January, who will be best remembered for her historic role in the Tunisian transition following the 2011 revolution. As the deputy speaker of the National Constituent Assembly (2011-2014), she had the honour of being the highest elected women in the Arab world. During those critical years, Mehrezia played a key role in guiding debates on Tunisia’s new constitution to a successful conclusion. The result was a document widely hailed as one of the most progressive constitutions in the Middle East and North Africa. After 2014 she continued to work as a Member of Parliament and in 2015, she was made honorary president of Religions for Peace, out of recognition for tireless work supporting the role of religious leaders in resolving conflict. Above all she remained a tireless champion for democracy and an inspiration to many around the world. She will be sorely missed.
As the pandemic continued, Muslim communities with whom Forward Thinking works have continued to face a number of significant challenges, and relations between communities and the establishment in the UK have been often characterised by a lack of trust. However, our engagement, particularly with youth, has highlighted clear opportunities and an ongoing willingness among those with whom we work to create positive change.

Islamophobia remains a key concern and, according to police-recorded crime figures, just under half of religious hate crime from 2020 to 2021 in England and Wales were carried out against Muslims. Political parties have also been accused of Islamophobia. A report from the Labour Muslim Network found that more than half of Muslim members of the Labour party do not trust Keir Starmer to tackle Islamophobia, and one in four members had experienced Islamophobia within the party. The Singh report exposed Islamophobia within the Conservative party, however, was also criticised for failing to acknowledge the true extent of institutional racism.

Islamophobia is not a challenge unique to the UK. Growing anti-Muslim discourse in France, a vote to ban the burqa in Switzerland, and a recent attack on a researcher examining Islamophobia in Austria are all seen to be signals of a continued shift toward a European society that is intolerant of Muslims.

These and other issues have exposed and exacerbated an absence of confidence among many Muslim communities in the UK Establishment. Building constructive relationships and dialogue between them remains a unique challenge, however we have continued to be responsive to needs articulated by diverse Muslim community representatives, to maintain and strengthen our relationships with diverse community representatives and have developed new relationships with parliamentarians and other decision-makers. As we have continued to deliver activities primarily online, we have focused on three key areas of work:

- Developing the skills, knowledge, and awareness of Muslim youth to enable effective engagement in political and public life
- Facilitating dialogue with state institutions on issues that impact Muslim communities in the UK
- Building understandings and seek to address the root causes of discrimination toward Muslims, including through situating Islamophobia in the UK within a European context

Activities

Over the course of the year, we have held over 100 meetings, including 86 bilateral meetings and 22 roundtables (2 international, 1 regional, 19 national). Although the majority of our meetings have been held online, we have been able to engage with contacts across the UK and abroad, in particular with those in the North West, Yorkshire and Humberside, London, and the East Midlands.
**Pathways into Politics**

Through our ‘Pathways into Politics’ programme we have developed the political literacy, leadership, and communication skills of young British Muslims through regular engagement with political figures from a range of backgrounds.

In December 2020, whilst maintaining ongoing engagement with the first cohort of participants, we recruited a new cohort of 30 young British Muslims to take part in the programme. We held an introductory online conference on 10-11 February 2021, with guest speakers joining for various workshops across the two days.

Speakers included: Amro Hussain, Director of the APPG on Freedom of Religion or Belief; Afzal Khan, MP for Manchester Gorton; Dominic Grieve QC, former MP for Beaconsfield and former Attorney General; Hauwa Shehu, Chair of the CPS Muslim Network; and Amna Abdullatif, Labour Councillor for Ardwick. During the interactive sessions, participants explored issues relating to local, national, and international politics. Speakers also gave advice on networking, public speaking, and leadership.

Participants reported that engagement with a diverse range of speakers was inspiring and exemplified that there is no single way in which to be engaged with political and public life. The group also valued hearing directly from Muslims involved in politics and learning more about their experiences. Following the conference, we have held several follow-up workshops to further the skills development of the participants.

Many of the participants expressed a clear desire to focus on international politics and conflict resolution in their learning; to respond to this need, we developed a conflict resolution network for young people engaged in the UK Programme with an interest in global affairs. Speakers have included Sir Tom Phillips, Former British Ambassador to Israel and Saudi Arabia; Stephanie Williams, Deputy Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya for Political Affairs; Pat Hynes, Former adviser to Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern; and Dalal Iriqat, Assistant Professor and Vice President of International Relations at the Arab American University Palestine.

**Islamophobia in Europe**

Whilst our engagement focuses on specific issues in the UK context, we understand that, if we are to carry out our work effectively, the root causes for the broader marginalisation of Muslims in public life must be understood and addressed. Without this, we can work to create change on individual issues but will continue to be constrained by societal attitudes that influence discrimination toward Muslims. We are therefore seeking to understand how Islamophobia operates in a global context and create spaces for dialogue across regions.

On 21 January 2021, Forward Thinking held an online roundtable with Dr Yasemin El-Menouar to discuss this issue. Yasemin provided an introductory briefing on current trends regarding Islamophobia in Europe, examining similarities and differences between the UK and other European countries. Community members and Establishment figures provided their insights and discussed potential ways of moving forward. Following the roundtable, requests were made by participants for further discussions relating to this issue, and we have held several bilateral meetings with community and Establishment contacts to explore how this initiative will be developed.
Independent Review of Prevent

Since the announcement of the Independent Review of Prevent in January 2019, Forward Thinking has sought to raise the perspectives of diverse Muslim communities regarding both the Review and the Prevent strategy as a whole. We have convened meetings with diverse Muslim communities from across the UK and facilitated discussion between these communities and the Independent Review team. Various developments during the process led to a decline in trust and an impression among many community representatives that direct engagement with the Review was no longer constructive.

Our work in this area has been significant, and community members have been eager to ensure that, in absence of direct engagement with the Review process, their insights were not lost. We have engaged with Parliamentarians and other relevant decision makers to ensure that the perspectives of Muslim communities are considered within analysis and policymaking relating to the Independent Review of Prevent, and that the reasons for a reluctance to engage with the Review are fully understood.

Crown Prosecution Service

We have deepened our engagement with senior figures within the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to support their engagement with diverse British Muslim communities. We attend regular CPS Community Accountability Forum meetings to convey community perspectives, and have met with the CPS North West and CPS Yorkshire and Humberside to explore how we can support their work.
“Pathways into Politics has been a truly unique experience, and I’ve loved engaging with all of the speakers so far, especially those from similar backgrounds who have shared their trials and tips. I’ve discovered so many new ways to get involved with politics and conflict resolution outside of traditional pathways, such as through community initiatives and APPGs. The programme has been meticulously tailored to suit our personal interests, which I absolutely love, and I would definitely recommend it to all!”

Sana Chaudhry, Pathways into Politics Participant
# Finances

Statement of financial activities for the year ended 31 July 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unrestricted funds 2021</th>
<th>Restricted funds 2021</th>
<th>Total funds 2021</th>
<th>Total funds 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incoming resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incoming resources from generated funds:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voluntary income</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private donations</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>62,600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grants</td>
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<td>500,824</td>
<td>524,204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other incoming resources</strong></td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total incoming resources</strong></td>
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<td>500,824</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resources expended</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Expenditure on:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Charitable activities</td>
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<td>507,572</td>
<td>544,495</td>
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<td>Governance costs</td>
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<td>2,400</td>
<td>62,048</td>
<td>34,614</td>
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<td><strong>Total resources expended</strong></td>
<td>(96,345)</td>
<td>(509,972)</td>
<td>(603,543)</td>
<td>(633,188)</td>
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<td><strong>Net incoming resources before other recognised gains</strong></td>
<td>(33,745)</td>
<td>(9,148)</td>
<td>(40,119)</td>
<td>(8,007)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other recognised gains</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Net movement in funds</strong></td>
<td>(33,745)</td>
<td>(9,148)</td>
<td>(40,119)</td>
<td>(8,007)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reconciliation of funds</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total funds brought forward</td>
<td>72,758</td>
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<td>498,620</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transfers between funds</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td><strong>Total funds carried forward</strong></td>
<td>39,013</td>
<td>408,707</td>
<td>447,720</td>
<td>490,613</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were no recognised gains or losses for 2021 other than those included in the statement of financial activities.

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

Oliver McTernan
Director

Julian Weinberg
Political Dialogues Director

Harry Higginson
Operations Director

Jordan Morgan
Middle East Programme Manager

Tom Baker
Administrator

Maisie Cook
UK Programme Officer

David Lee
Israel Programme Manager

Alice Copland
UK Programme Assistant

Nia Clark
Middle East Programme Assistant

Abigail Storey
Political Dialogues Programme Assistant

Maya Hilmi
Intern 2020-21

Francis Campbell

Chris Donnelly

Justin Dowley

Jeremy Greenstock

Dympna Hayes

Michael Holland

William Sieghart (Chairman)

Trustees