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It’s been another challenging year in the Middle East for the team at Forward Thinking. Their main areas of operation have been in Israel/Palestine, Tunisia, and in facilitating dialogue between Europe and the Middle East, North Africa and Gulf, where they have been working as hard as ever on the frontline of conflict mediation.

On behalf of all the trustees I would like to congratulate them for their courage, commitment and endeavour in such difficult times and circumstances. I know what a difference they make and how appreciated they are by those they help.

I would also like to thank the governments, trusts and foundations and individual donors for their generous support for our work.

William Sieghart  |  Chairman
The world seems to be growing angrier by the month. Senseless vituperation in American politics, epitomised by the candidature of Donald Trump, gathers increasing popular support. Across Europe growing numbers are turning to political extremes on both the Left and the Right, in protest at the perceived failures of the political elite. At the same time the member states of the European Union refuse to put collective common sense ahead of their subjective national preferences in the refugee and Euro crises. China and Japan continue to snarl at each other over history and mutual distrust. And Russia is determined to make it impossible for a Ukraine that declines to be Russian to be Ukrainian.

If the relatively ordered parts of the world are allowing bitterness to take over, what hope does the Middle East have? Everything appears to be breaking back down to the tribal or local level. Effective government becomes increasingly hard in such circumstances, and poor governance only intensifies the trend towards fragmentation. Where can we start to rebuild?

In my series of commentaries for the Forward Thinking Annual Report I have tried to describe where intensifying competition between the tribes, sects and peoples of the Middle East will drag politics, unless some element of dialogue and compromise takes over. Just to say that sounds like a platitudinous truism. Yet we are heading for a prolonged catastrophe if something does not change.

No long period of global peace in previous history has ended in anything but a disastrous war. Since 1945 there have been some alarming regional conflicts, and the Cold War scared everyone, but a world war has been avoided. International communication, largely through the impact of the United Nations and its well-designed Charter, has continued at a higher level and with more impressive substance than in any previous era. Nevertheless, human competition is gathering momentum relentlessly as historical, cultural, economic and political differences assert themselves in an environment of rising populations and resource scarcity.

Something unprecedented has to happen if this entirely natural process of competing identities is not to turn into serious conflict.

It is too easy to list the places where things have continued to go wrong in the region. Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, often seem to be beyond useful comment. I would rather dwell for a moment on two or three more encouraging stories, to try to draw the lesson that the need for dialogue and compromise is not a platitude, but the only route away from a collapse of normal politics.

The most significant story of 2015 so far is Iran. I used to think that no kind of a deal was going to be possible between the West and Iran unless the negotiations took account of the underlying issues beneath the nuclear programme: Gulf security, Iran’s sense of vulnerability and exclusion and the awful Iranian record in human rights and regional interference. Perhaps that was always going to be too large and complex an agenda to tackle simultaneously. The narrower diplomatic battle between punitive sanctions and Iranian ambition proved the right choice in the end, because of two hard truths. First, a failing economy was a greater threat to the Iranian regime’s hold on power than postponing military nuclear capability; and second, the probable consequences for the West of another Middle East military intervention were too dangerous. The notable achievement of the P5+1 team was to create the necessary pressure on Tehran when their bluff could so readily have been called on the military option.

The positives in this saga are only relative. War has been averted for now. If - if - the deal is properly implemented, Iran’s nuclear programme will be curtailed and monitored long enough for Gulf security and political relationships to be freshly reconstructed. But hatred and suspicion of Iran in large parts of US political opinion has not been dissipated; Iran’s challenge to Israel (and vice-versa) has not disappeared; Sunni-Shia rivalry across the Gulf is as sharp as ever; and proxy wars continue in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and potentially in North Africa and elsewhere.

by Sir Jeremy Greenstock
For me, however, the most significant spin-off from the Iran deal is the indication that persistent diplomatic dialogue can work. More governments in the region and in the West now have a genuine question to consider: is it possible to bring Iran into a stakeholder role for a more stable region? I was never convinced by the evidence that the regime actually intended to weaponise their enriched uranium. The struggle seemed to me to be more about national status and self-defence. A recent visit to Tehran has reminded me of the attachment of many ordinary Iranians to business and commerce, and of the wish of the younger generation in particular - and Iran has a young population - to be connected with a changing and exciting world, west and east. Open up business, education and tourism channels and see what might emerge. Ask questions about mending the awful situations in Iraq, Syria and Yemen and see how Tehran responds.

The need to talk has to apply to Iran’s neighbours as well as to Europe and North America. Saudi-Iranian distrust is huge, exacerbated by the conflicts in Syria and Yemen in particular. But they do not have to be each other’s enemies. Nor can outside powers, even the United States, be the pivot around which their bilateral relationship turns. The evolution of geopolitics since the end of the Cold War has brought the legitimate responsibility for each nation’s future firmly into the hands of its own people. The countries of the Gulf, Arab and Iranian, Shia and Sunni, must now start communicating directly about how to live together peaceably. The mutual incentive to trade and to maintain sustainable channels for hydrocarbon exports should be strong enough to make this argument material. The West no longer has a locus for imposing any kind of order except in support of people’s local choices.

The other non-Arab countries of the region also have a role to play. There was a period, now three or four years back, when Turkey seemed to have good lines of communication across the Middle East and the determination to be business partners of all their neighbours. The advent of the Arab Spring, the collapse of the relationship with Israel and the apparent power obsessions of Mr Erdogan have together reversed that positive position. By prioritising the internal tension with the Kurds over a sensible collective approach to the chaos in Syria, Ankara seems miles from remedying this reversal. Even the relative cohesion of internal Turkish politics appears to have been lost. None of these developments would have been inevitable if the real degree of shared interests in the neighbourhood had been properly assessed and discussed. The silver lining here is that the Turkish electorate appear disinclined to give Mr Erdogan a free hand. A genuine coalition government following the November elections, if that is what the voting produces, could quickly restore Turkey’s more constructive focus on business and the economy.
There has been no good news on Syria. The suffering of the population has been as bad as anything in the Middle East since the Second World War. Russia’s decision to bolster the Assad regime with a substantial military presence could easily prolong the conflict further. Yet there is a distant spot of light here.

The Russian move has exposed the confusion in Western positioning in Syria, as between the need to remove Assad and the need to defeat ISIS. Succeeding on either one of these fronts does nothing to achieve the other. I support those who are calling for dialogue on a new basis, with the Russians and Iranians, amongst others, involved at the table in the search for a solution.

Again, the region should not wait to be led from outside. A determined dialogue between, say, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey could achieve at least as much as the poorly constructed efforts of the UN, the US, Russia and Europe. That could stir others into realising that mending the Syrian catastrophe has to have a higher priority than maintaining the differences between powers that have angered each other, especially the West and Russia. That remains the most likely potential route out of the Syrian debacle; and it could even bring dividends in other areas, such as the conflict in Ukraine.

Then there is Israel. Outsiders have to be hesitant about commenting here, because Israeli society is the only one in the region capable of open and sophisticated debate and most Israelis are properly aware that they have vital strategic decisions to make about their long-term future in such a troubled neighbourhood. But current Israeli policy seems excessively focused on hard power options, as that is where their superiority lies in the medium term. The sum of decisions made over the last decade on Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey have not improved Israel’s regional security. No attempt has been made to encourage people-to-people contacts with the Palestinians, or to explore at the high political level whether there are options for peaceful coexistence with a Hamas-led Gaza. Even with Iran, there is a good argument for testing channels between business and civil society representatives in the two countries, to show that popular support for a hostile relationship might be far weaker than the current assumption. Constantly feeding the narrative of enmity in order to bolster internal political positions or national cohesion will in the end go dramatically wrong if there is no necessary foundation for that enmity.
There is no silver lining in the ISIS threat. Al Qaeda and ISIS are in a different category from governments, because of the absolutist nature of their beliefs and their criminal attachment to violence. ISIS in particular has been tactically clever in taking over ungoverned space where the local populations have either been too weak or too disaffected from central government to resist. Military strikes can limit their expansion, but not remove them. Only a political approach can eradicate the threat, and that has to involve communication with those populations. Neither the Assad regime in Damascus nor the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad have done enough for the communities in ISIS-controlled areas to persuade them to analyse and reject what ISIS is really offering.

ISIS is in essence an Iraqi movement that has capitalised on the chaos in Syria. It has to be uprooted in Iraq. The Maliki government up to 2014 did terrible damage to the sense of a shared country which was still alive, just, when US forces left in 2011. Prime Minister Abadi has produced better rhetoric and ideas, but ineffective follow-up. The militias are thus taking over decisions on the ground, and they are not likely to put inter-sectarian compromises above narrower objectives. Ayatollah Sistani has got it right in calling for Iraqis to work together across divides and to put a united country first, but his voice is losing impact. The future of Iraq is very uncertain without a fresh dialogue and some outside help.

So what about Palestine? With so much else going wrong, the most serious regional issue of all seems to have slipped down the order of priorities, even for Arab governments. Israel has found it relatively simple to put hard security first and prolong the occupation. The Palestinians have missed chances for internal reconciliation and placed faction above nation. The human rights and humanitarian situations in the Territories are as bad as they have ever been. And yet the Europeans and Americans continue to subsidise the status quo of the occupation. I see little chance of any improvement in the near term, while other issues command attention. Perhaps the only hope is that a positive domino effect begins from the Iran deal, feeding into the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian situations.

If that appears fanciful, think again about the requirement for unprecedented action to prevent the ultimate conflict. Enemies have to start talking to each other. This is where the work of Forward Thinking has been consistently imaginative and courageous: the effort to create channels of communication must stretch beyond all previous boundaries. That is what the articles in this Report seek to illustrate. Against that background, anger becomes an indulgence for blocked minds and weak spirits. We must all help the Middle East to make the choice for dialogue and compromise.

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Sir Jeremy Greenstock is Chairman of the UN Association in the UK, Chairman of the strategic advisory company Gatehouse Advisory Partners Ltd and Chairman of Lambert Energy Advisory Ltd, the upstream oil and gas specialists. He is also a senior advisor to Forward Thinking.

Sir Jeremy was a career diplomat from 1969 to 2004, developing specialisations in the Middle East, Transatlantic Relations and the United Nations. After retiring from government service, Sir Jeremy directed the Ditchley Foundation from 2004 to 2010 and worked as a Special Adviser to BP during the same period. Currently he is also Co-Chairman of the European Eminent Persons Group on the Middle East.
In the summer of 2012, Forward Thinking was invited by senior Tunisian politicians to explore the possibility of establishing a dialogue between the secular and religious parties, who viewed one another with great mistrust. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the young self-styled rejectionists, who had mobilised the street protests that removed the old regime, already felt that their revolution had been stolen from them by a new emerging ruling class. Our immediate task was to help prevent the process of political polarization from causing an unbridgeable division within the country. Our goal was to foster a culture of dialogue that would allow the newly emerging political parties to address the growing social and economic challenges that risked destabilising the country’s transition to democratic government.

Realising that there could never be complete consensus, our aim was to help the divided parties, through a series of regular facilitated meetings, to find a sufficient level of agreement that would allow them to work together, even in the absence of trust, for the common good of their country. After eighteen months of regular meetings with all the parties, secular and religious, left and right, and the total commitment of our team, Julian Weinberg, Harry Higginson and Tariq Toukabri, to ensure that we were inclusive in our engagement, the process was generally recognised as a success.

The key to this success was the fact that our dialogue was inclusive and pursued at multiple levels. Different stakeholders must be engaged if movement on key issues is to be achieved. This means engaging the party leadership, executive bureau, political bureau, youth and civil society. An agreement achieved between the leadership of parties will have little impact if it is opposed by the majority of mid-level leadership and the grassroots. Accordingly, ensuring that these stakeholders are engaged in the process and feel that their concerns are being listened to is essential.

The role of leadership, however, should not be underestimated, as it’s essential in overcoming ideological and political divides. While stakeholders must be engaged at multiple levels, the senior leadership has a special responsibility to “lead its base” to a place where negotiation and compromise can occur. Without the role played by the leadership of Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes in particular, Tunisia’s transition could have easily taken an alternative path in political deadlock and eventual conflict.

The lessons from the Tunisian dialogue are applicable elsewhere. The principal of inclusivity in particular is critical in preventing and resolving conflicts. A refusal to engage all the relevant parties, either out of the desire to manipulate a process towards a preconceived outcome, or just a simple fear of the unknown, can only lead to failure, as any agreement reached through such a process will undoubtedly fail to endure the test of time. Like any political process, a peace process needs the buy-in, at multiple levels, of people who have real constituency within the opposing factions. To attempt to bypass the inconvenient may achieve a short-lived success, but it will also unquestionably add to the complexities of finding a durable solution.

For too long the international community has approached the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as if it were a ‘technical’ problem that can be resolved by those at the top, making the decisions and providing the resources and know how needed to implement what has been decided. It’s a strategy that fails to reflect the complex entanglement of grievance, belief and ideology that are the root of this conflict. Engaging the elite, whilst ignoring key factions that represent a credible constituency on the ground, is like papering over cracks in the futile hope that the foundations upon which an agreement is based are solid.

People who feel that their very identity, values and beliefs are under threat are not going to be receptive to dictates from above. They need to be recognised and engaged if they are to move beyond the boundaries of their own clan and to discover common ground with opposing factions.

The failure of successive peace initiatives to reach out on the one side to the ultra-religious and ideological right parties in Israel, and on the other side to groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine has led to the present
impasse and the misguided belief that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is intractable.

For the past decade, Forward Thinking has worked with the various political and religious factions who have real constituency within both Israel and the Occupied Territories. Our engagement with the different factions does not mean that we either endorse or support their perspectives, ideologies or beliefs. It is a recognition that all of these groups need to be recognised and engaged in the search for a solution that will prove durable. To ring fence negotiations from the narrative and perspectives of such groups will inevitably lead to the signing of agreements that are at best undeliverable, or at worse likely to lead to deeper divisions and violence.

Conflicts, political or armed, are frequently rooted in a deep sense of grievance or threat to identity, belief or ideology. The fear, and at times hatred, of the other is frequently the driving force that has to be addressed, if there is to be a sufficient shift in mindset to reach a willingness to at least coexist without resorting to violence or coercion. Peace can only be achieved through the commitment of time and a real effort to understand and to articulate the genuine grievances and fears of the other. Moderates may feel iritated by the engagement of those whom they see as extremists or spoilers. But there is no alternative as a successful process requires inclusivity.

Oliver McTernan | Director

Location of all meetings July 2014 - June 2015

Participants at all meetings July 2014 - June 2015

The charts above provide a statistical overview of the work carried out by Forward Thinking across all our programmes over the last twelve months. In total, Forward Thinking organised or participated in a total of 576 meetings in 2014-2015.
The Israeli-Palestinian conflict indicates the ever-growing need for Forward Thinking’s work. The past twelve months have been marked by a continued deterioration in the region and the hopes of achieving a durable peace agreement have been considerably damaged. This was seen, to catastrophic effect, in the escalation of violence over the summer of 2014, with rockets reaching ever further into Israel and an unprecedented level of death and devastation in Gaza. This destruction should have marked a turning point in the conflict, initiating a new atmosphere of Israeli-Palestinian and internal Palestinian cooperation fuelled solely by the humanitarian need to deliver reconstruction, food and shelter to the civilian victims of the war – a human response that is separate, above and beyond, the political wrangling of the conflict. The fact that adequate reconstruction has still not taken place not only illustrates the severity of the current impasse and the depth of divisions throughout, but it marks a new low in the conflict’s recent history.

It is difficult, therefore, to find room for optimism given the events of the past twelve months. The Israeli elections of March 2015 produced a governing coalition that has done little to inspire confidence in the Israeli commitment to the realisation of a two state solution.

Similarly, the apparent ineffectiveness of the Palestinian consensus government, formed in April 2014, has failed to bolster efforts at Palestinian political reconciliation. Instead, a chaotic atmosphere of deepening factional division and fragmentation prevails which, combined with the pressures and subsequent frustrations in Gaza, have served to feed the growth of ISIS-like ideology.

In this context, Forward Thinking’s work is more important than it has ever been before. We continue to reach across the conflict, facilitating dialogue, communication and high level political mediation with significant constituencies on all sides in order to defuse tension and work toward a more inclusive and comprehensive peace process. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, our intensive engagement with Palestinian political leaders of diverse affiliations – as well as civil society, business and youth leaders – allows us to identify key challenges whilst remaining responsive. In particular, the need for an inclusive Palestinian political body – where factions and independents are able to cooperate not only in ensuring fair representation but in providing essential services – remains a crucial objective toward which Forward Thinking toward is uniquely placed to contribute. Indeed, our continued association with the House of Wisdom Institute for Conflict Resolution and Governance in Gaza, whose establishment Forward Thinking facilitated, remains essential in providing a safe space for dialogue across Palestinian factions.

In Israel, we continue to consolidate and expand engagement with key constituencies. We have adjusted to the results of the Israeli elections in March 2015 with the extension of our network across the Knesset. Furthermore, we have deepened our working relationship with the ultra-Orthodox community whilst developing new ties with the Israeli Russian-speaking community. The involvement of the Northern Ireland experience remains highly valuable in such engagement. Over the past year, we have facilitated visits to Belfast for a group of influential journalists from the ultra-Orthodox community, and for a group of political leaders, advisors, and media figures from the Israeli Russian-speaking community.

These visits form part of a more extensive programme of exposing Israeli constituency leaders and opinion shapers to the varied experiences of unionist and republican figures who played significant roles during the Northern Ireland peace process. This remains a valuable and useful exercise, as the importance of Northern Ireland is that it does not represent a complete and final deal, but rather it is a work in progress, a volatile process, that presents many on-going challenges and solutions in the search for a durable peace.
The provocative insights of British and Irish figures therefore achieve previously unreach levels of exploration and discussion concerning the challenges of the conflict. This importance of sharing the Northern Ireland experience continues to be acknowledged both in the Knesset and further afield. Certainly, in light of the region’s current impasse, the offerings of Northern Ireland could not be more relevant.

There is much to be done to respond to the vast challenges that have either deepened or arisen over the past twelve months, and Forward Thinking remain intensely committed to this task. Over the coming year, we will continue to utilise the unique position afforded to the organisation after over a decade of consistent relationship-building across all sides of the conflict – building upon the work of the Middle East Programme, engaging stakeholders across the conflict, addressing and widening mindsets, promoting inclusiveness and facilitating dialogue.

The charts below provide a statistical overview of the work carried out by Forward Thinking in the Middle East Programme over the last twelve months. In total, Forward Thinking organised or participated in a total of 281 meetings in 2014-2015 that related to the Middle East Programme.
**Diary Highlights**

**July 2014** - Director in Israel and Palestine to evaluate the situation in the light of the conflict within Gaza

In light of the then escalating conflict in Gaza, Oliver McTernan travelled to the region for nine days of meetings with both Israeli and Palestinian figures to evaluate the situation. Oliver initially held discussions with Dr Mahdi Abdul Hadi, the director of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA) to discuss the situation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and gain insights into how events were perceived by the Palestinian community.

Oliver later held meetings within the Knesset, meeting with the Speaker of the Knesset, as well as a cross-party group of MKs some of whom had previously visited Belfast and Dublin at the invitation of Forward Thinking. Oliver also met with senior representatives of the Labour, Yesh Atid and Jewish Home parties. These talks allowed Oliver to evaluate both the political mood in Israel and how the conflict was viewed from an Israeli perspective.

**August 2014** - Forward Thinking visit the Gaza Strip and Israel

The Director and Middle East Programme Manager visited Gaza from the 7th-10th August where they met with some of the victims of the conflict as well as with political, civil society, and academic leaders. They also met with the doctors and managerial staff at Shifa Hospital who were caring for many of the injured, in order to assess the scale of the medical need. They found the extent of the devastation in the towns like Beit Hanoun and Sheja’eya, as in other parts of the Gaza Strip, truly shocking. The visit provided an insight into the great humanitarian challenge that Gaza faced.

Meetings were also held with Israeli officials in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv concerning the escalation in violence and the implications this has for the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the wider Middle East North Africa region.

The devastation experienced by both sides over the course of Operation Protective Edge demonstrates again that there can be no military-based solution to this conflict. Instead, there is an immediate and urgent need to enter into a genuine and inclusive dialogue, which represents an essential first step in the search for a just and durable peace agreement.
**September 2014** - The Director holds meetings in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Nablus, Gaza, and Ramallah,

In early September, the Director, Oliver McTernan, spent the week from the 4th-7th holding meetings throughout Israel and The Palestinian Territories in order to evaluate the situation in the region after the conclusion of Operation Protective Edge.

On arrival in Tel Aviv he met with a group of the SHADES programme fellows which included Israeli officials, American, European and Egyptian diplomats. The discussion primarily focused on Forward Thinking’s approach to conflict resolution and mediation in conflict situations. Later he held a similar meeting with an equivalent group in Ramallah involving Palestinian officials, young entrepreneurs and European diplomats. Meetings were also held in Nablus with senior political figures and with Dr Mahdi Abdul Hadi, the Director of The Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA).

In Jerusalem he met with members of the Knesset before meeting senior Fatah members in Ramallah. Oliver then travelled to Gaza when he engaged with senior political and civil society leaders, before returning to Jerusalem to meet with a number of European and regional ambassadors.

A common theme of discussions was the fragility of the ceasefire and unsustainable nature of the status quo. They also emphasised the potential risk of another round of fighting, particularly as the world’s attention once again drifts away to other challenges in the MENA region.

**September 2014** - A delegation of Ultra-Orthodox media figures visit Belfast and London for meetings

Forward Thinking, supported by the British Embassy in Israel, facilitated a delegation of six senior media figures from the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel to hold meetings in Belfast and London from the 14th-17th September. This visit allowed the delegates to discuss the various experiences of Unionist and Republican religious and political figures and explore the mistakes and achievements of the Northern Ireland Peace Process. Over the past two years, Forward Thinking have brought a number of such delegations to Belfast, which we have found resonates profoundly with many Israelis, regardless of their political affiliation, due to a number of parallels with the challenges that now confront Israel. The value of the Northern Irish experience is that peace remains a “work in progress”, and as such is a rich tool for exploring the challenges of establishing peace; it does not presuppose that there is a single model to be adopted, but rather it illustrates the decisions that did not work, as much as those that did.

In addition to meeting with representatives of political parties, meetings were also held with religious leaders in Belfast, providing a forum for the delegates to explore the roles of politics and religion within a peace process. Furthermore, through meetings with victims of violence and former combatants, the delegation discussed sensitive subjects such as reconciling with the past.

The delegates were then brought to London, met with the Vice Chancellor and senior staff of St Mary’s University Twickenham, as well as trustees of the NGO IDEALS and Lord Hylton in Parliament. These led to a number wide-ranging discussions on key issues, including the relationships between religion, politics and various forms of ‘extremism.’

**September 2014** - Forward Thinking holds meetings with Nabil Shaath, London

On the 24th September Forward Thinking hosted Nabil Shaath, a senior Palestinian official and former Foreign Minister for the Palestinian Authority, at our office in London to discuss the situation in the region following the conflict in Gaza. Also present at the meeting was Sir Vincent Fean, the former British Consul General to Jerusalem. Meetings such as these are an essential part of...
Forward Thinking’s work, strengthening established relationships and providing invaluable insights into the ever-changing political situation in the MENA region.

November 2014 - The Director holds meetings in Israel and the Gaza Strip

Oliver McTernan travelled to Tel Aviv and the Gaza Strip, 30th October - 3rd November, for meetings with senior politicians, academics and members of civil society to explore how the situation in the region was developing several months on from the ceasefire. Oliver spent much of his time on this visit in Gaza, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing Palestinians following the summer’s conflict.

On the surface Gaza appeared calm, but it became rapidly apparent that there existed mounting pressures created by the lack of progress in addressing the post-conflict conditions. It was estimated that over 80,000 homes in Gaza remained in need of urgent repair. Thousands of families were trapped in temporary overcrowded accommodation, which was increasing social tensions. Although the sale of construction materials to residents whose dwellings were damaged had begun, the process was regarded as frustratingly slow. Some citizens complained that they have been allowed to buy only two bags of cement (around 100 kilograms) while needing at least four tons to repair the scale of damage to their homes. Basic infrastructure – electricity, sewage and drinking water – also appeared to be crumbling due to the damage sustained in the war. With winter then approaching, Oliver was informed that there was even a risk of epidemics developing among the population.

Local economists claimed that there was a need for at least 400 trucks of equipment – ranging from concrete to building materials and machinery – every day for the next six months to prevent a humanitarian crisis, but that to date Gaza had been receiving only 75 trucks. With Gazans having been effectively cut off from leaving or entering the territory with the indefinite closure of the Rafah crossing, thousands of students, the sick, and business people were stranded, thus adding to the internal tensions. The economy was also said to be near collapse with the restrictions on exports and imports.

In light of those challenges, Oliver was warned that unless changes occurred soon, the mounting tensions within Gaza would eventually erupt into violence. Others warned of the potential attraction of extremist groups in a context of growing desperation and anger.

November 2014 - The Director and Chairman attend meetings in Israel and Palestine

Upon arrival for a three-day visit 16th-19th November, the Director spent the day in Gaza meeting with local authorities and leaders of civil society to assess efforts to address the post-conflict situation. The situation in Gaza remained fragile due to pressures created by the lack of progress in addressing post conflict conditions. The need to restore basic infrastructure was seen to be particularly acute, with the territory suffering widespread power cuts and struggling to process raw sewage. Individuals Oliver met with felt the situation had been exacerbated by the slow response of the technocratic unity government.

Oliver was subsequently joined by the Chairman of Forward Thinking, William Sieghart, as they travelled to Jerusalem for several meetings. They met with Dr Mahdi Abdul Hadi, the Director of PASSIA, who provided an analysis of the situation in East Jerusalem where, at this time, there had been a marked escalation in tensions in the aftermath of the conflict.

They also met with a leading representative of the Israeli Russian community and later in meetings with MKs from the various political factions including leaders in the opposition, Isaac Herzog and the Deputy speaker Hilik Bar. They also had lengthy discussions with representatives of Jewish Home discussing the party’s understanding of how best to resolve the current conflict.

They later travelled to Ramallah and Nablus, for meetings with senior Palestinian officials and politicians, including the former Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad, General Secretary of the Palestinian National Initiative (PNI) Mustafa Barghouti, and former ministers of the 2006 unity government. From these meetings it became apparent that, underneath a superficial stability, the situation in the region remained volatile, with little sign of the necessary political leadership that is required to avoid a return to conflict.
December 2014 - Forward Thinking hold meetings in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip

The Director and the Middle East Programme Manager travelled to the region to hold meetings with Israeli and Palestinian figures from across the political spectrum, 11th-18th December. Within Gaza, in addition to meetings with senior politicians, they met with youth groups, intellectuals and several community leaders. Discussions focused on the continued deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, which was said to be generating widespread anger and frustration amongst ordinary Gazans.

Forward Thinking also held cross-party meetings in the Knesset on this visit, with members of Likud, Yisrael Beitenu, Hatenua, Shas and Yesh Atid. These provided insights into the then upcoming Israeli elections, set for 17th March 2015, with discussions covering likely results, potential coalitions and party alliances.

Meetings were also held in the West Bank with political leaders, academics and youth groups, which focused on rising tensions in the Territory, as well as Palestinian perspectives on moves by several European states towards formal recognition of Palestine as a state.

February 2015 - The Middle East Manager holds meeting in Israel and Palestine

The Middle East Programme Manager travelled to Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, 22nd-27th of February, to meet with contacts from across the political spectrum and evaluate developments in the region. A central focus of the visit was the then impending Israeli elections and what their implications might be for the Peace Process.

Edward also travelled into Gaza to meet with several Palestinian political and community leaders. The inadequacy of the international community’s efforts to support the rebuilding of Gaza was a common theme in discussions. With tens of thousands of ordinary citizens still displaced from their homes months after the conflict and power cuts of up to 18 hours a day, individuals from across the political spectrum stressed that the status quo was unsustainable.

March 2015 - The Director holds meetings in Singapore at Sanyang Technological University

On 9th March, the Director met with the department head and staff of the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme at the school of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University. Discussions primarily focused around the new global obstacles facing policy makers and the urgent need for a better understanding of the relationship between religion and political/violent activism. Oliver also provided an overview of the current impediments to peace in Israel-Palestine.

April 2015 - Forward Thinking host a delegation of media figures from the Israeli Russian speaking community in Belfast

With the support and assistance of the Skainos Center Forward Thinking organised a series of meetings for a delegation of media figures from the Israeli-Russian community in Belfast, 19th-22nd April. The visit provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on Northern Ireland’s Peace Process – with both its successes and failures in mind – and to identify potential parallels with the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.
Over the course of the visit, delegates engaged with a diverse range of politicians, academics and civil society activists who shared their respective experiences of Northern Ireland’s conflict and subsequent peace. Meetings were held in Stormont with political figures from both Unionist and Nationalist parties with the purpose of discussing the two communities’ narratives on the achievements and mistakes of the peace process, and how they had subsequently sought to address the legacy of the past.

Delegates then met with Irish and British Diplomats to outline the development and role of the governance mechanisms that had provided the structure for peace, as well as the role that a third party can play in a peace process in providing neutral mediation and monitoring.

Other meetings included a roundtable with academics from Queen’s University Belfast where participants discussed the historical roots of the conflict and the necessity of investment in, and focus on, the social peace process alongside the political peace process; meetings with the Police Service of Northern Ireland to examine the challenges presented by the legacy of the conflict and the need to re-establish trust and confidence within communities; and meetings with former combatants and victims of the violence to discuss dealing with the past and moving on from violence. Delegates also took part in a tour of Belfast’s interface peace lines and memorials, enabling participants to draw parallels with their own experiences of divided communities and the entrenchment of fear between communities.

From these diverse meetings, several common themes began to emerge including: the possibility of moving past the conflict and accepting the other and working together; the need to put oneself in another’s shoes to comprehend why violence is happening, and therefore how it can be brought to an end; and the sustained efforts that are required to build peace, but also the enormous dividends it can bring. Indeed, individuals from all quarters of Northern Ireland’s political divides repeatedly stressed that huge achievements can be made in just a few years in even the most intractable of conflicts.

May 2015 - The Director holds meetings in Madrid, Israel and Palestine

Oliver McTernan travelled to Israel and Palestine, 12th-16th May, to gain insights into the situation in the region following Israeli elections and the subsequent formation of a new coalition government within Israel. En-route Oliver held meetings in Madrid with senior members of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Co-operation where he discussed the developing situation in the MENA region.

On the 13th, meetings were held with several members of the Israeli Knesset to discuss the post-election situation and its implications for the Peace Process. Oliver then travelled to Gaza where he met with political and civil society leaders, with whom he discussed the ongoing humanitarian crisis within the Gaza Strip.

June 2015 - Middle East Programme Manager holds meetings in Israel and Palestine

Forward Thinking’s Middle East Programme Manager, Edward Channer, travelled to Israel and Palestine, 15th-19th June, to hold meetings with individuals from across the political spectrum and from a diverse range of backgrounds. These meetings are essential for Forward Thinking to remain informed about developments in the region and to maintain relations with our extensive network of contacts.
The Helsinki Policy Forum was established in February 2014 in response to the unprecedented political, economic and social change taking place in the Middle East, North Africa and Gulf region (MENA-Gulf), the impact of which is also felt throughout Europe. A MENA-Gulf region at peace with itself and its neighbours, and able to meet the needs of its citizens, cannot be established without safe spaces for dialogue in which relationships based on trust can be built across perceived divides. The Helsinki Policy Forum takes inspiration from the role that the Helsinki Accords played, which provided a framework for dialogue and a mechanism for addressing unforeseen crises as they developed during the Cold War. The Helsinki Policy Forum has met three times, hosted by the relevant Ministries of Foreign Affairs: in Helsinki in June 2014; Madrid, October 2014; and Helsinki, March 2015.

Forum meetings focus on sharing analysis and perspectives about key issues and identifying policy recommendations to address them. Over the course of the meetings, seven areas have been identified as priorities, including: addressing regional instability with a focus on Syria and Iraq; the challenge posed by Da’esh (ISIS/ISIL); stabilising Libya; supporting political transition; the concerns of young people; and religion and politics. The Forum, to date, has responded by establishing a space for intra-regional dialogue, supported capacity-building initiatives in the Tunisian political transition, and contributed to the wider public debate through the dissemination of reports and Opinion-Editorial articles written by participants. Below is a summary of analysis shared in the Forum meetings and policy recommendations identified.

### Addressing Regional Instability

The countries of the MENA-Gulf region face a number of common challenges, including terrorism and extremism, disenfranchised youth, the need for economic growth and the rise of sectarianism. However, as opposed to engaging in dialogue on shared concerns, regional powers are currently locked in conflict that fosters an environment of suspicion of one another’s intentions. Participants in the Forum recommended the development of mechanisms that could help resolve differences between states, including fostering dialogue between the region’s most influential countries – Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Between them, these countries possess the influence and resources to make a considerable contribution to stabilising the region if they are able to come to cooperation on common challenges.

### The Challenge Posed by Da’esh (ISIS/ISIL)

Da’esh must be understood as a symptom of the MENA-Gulf region’s wider challenges and as a loose coalition of disaffected Sunni factions, bound together by shared grievances. Any military strategy will be unsuccessful in the absence of broader political, religious and economic strategies to address the root causes underlying Da’esh’s rise. European countries have responsibility for the role its citizens have played in the movement. In response, greater cooperation must be established between the region’s leading powers - Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey - supported by the international community, through informal meetings that could lead to confidence-building mechanisms that, in turn, could lead to the establishment of...
a contact group, for example. European countries should place renewed emphasis on the meaningful integration of immigrant communities in their societies.

**Stabilising Libya**

The situation in Libya is fluid and deteriorating with an urgent need to find an inclusive path to prevent current divisions from becoming entrenched. Preventing the current violence from developing into civil war and bridging political divisions are common interests shared by leading Libyan groups and the international community.

Libya will struggle to overcome the threat posed by Da’esh and the migration crisis if it remains divided. Libya needs to be insulated from becoming a front in a proxy war, and meetings between key international actors with vested interests in stabilising Libya should be convened to co-ordinate actions that support mediation efforts. The Tunisian experience, where leaders came to see the need for consensual legitimacy as a compliment to electoral legitimacy in overcoming the post-revolution crisis, was identified as potentially having positive lessons for Libya, as the country also needed to approach reconciliation on an inclusive basis.

**Concerns of Young People**

With 60% of the population of the MENA-Gulf region under 35-years-old, widespread youth apathy and frustration represents a ticking time bomb. Conversely, there is also an enormous pool of young people who, with the right opportunities and structures, could unleash rapid growth and prosperity. Average unemployment amongst young people, regionally, is between 11-30%.

Over the next 15 years, the MENA-Gulf must create 100 million jobs just to maintain current unemployment rates, which translates to a need for an estimated 10% GDP growth rate. Relying solely on foreign direct investment will not be enough judging by past experiences.

Intra-regional trade accounts for 6-9% of total trade in the Arab world, compared to 55-66% in the EU, and 11-23% in South America. While southern Mediterranean countries still have relatively young and educated populations facing a lack of job opportunities, Europe has an aging population and declining population growth rate. Some have estimated that approximately 11.8 million temporary migrants will be needed to fill the job void within the EU in 2020.
Addressing concerns of young people will require a holistic approach including improved education, greater political participation, and meaningful economic opportunities. Inclusive economic growth requires the international community to support Small and Medium Enterprises, to provide micro-credit opportunities for small businesses, women and young entrepreneurs, and to equip ordinary people to create their own jobs instead of relying on the state. The rule of law must be perceived as legitimate by all segments of society, rather than being applied unequally and infrequently, as it is perceived. Further economic measures that could be considered include: technical advice, reforms and economic planning such as reducing tariffs, debt relief and investment, encouraging labour mobility through steps such as mutual recognition of university degrees, encouraging intra-regional trade integration and raising exports as a means of creating jobs.

**Religion and Politics – religious literacy and foreign policy**

Globally, religion and religious parties play an increasingly important role in international relations and for many people across the world, religious and spiritual values inform the living of their daily lives. This is particularly the case in the MENA-Gulf region. However, political and social sciences – the intellectual backdrop of western diplomacy – have often been accused of ignoring the religious dimension in their approach and analysis of political challenges, or misrepresenting it, thereby only addressing issues with a religious element through a security prism. It was recommended that there is a need to promote greater religious literacy amongst western policy-makers and foreign policy officials to equip them with the skills, knowledge and sensitivities to engage with such groups effectively.

Over the next year the Forum will continue to develop the space for dialogue as a basis for initiatives to address identified challenges.
October 2014 - The second meeting of the Helsinki Policy Forum, Madrid

The second meeting of the Helsinki Policy Forum was held from the 21st-23rd October 2014 in Madrid, hosted by Casa Arabe and the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The Forum brought together a number of parliamentarians and political leaders, high-level government officials and senior economists, from across the European-MENA/Gulf region to discuss the common challenges they face, with the aim of providing a space where participants could devise better informed policy making and initiatives that address areas of shared concerns. At the meeting, participants were drawn from Bahrain, Britain, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sweden and Tunisia.

Discussions focused primarily on two particularly pressing challenges: the rise of ISIS and its implications for the region, and the ongoing crisis in Libya. Through dialogue, participants attempted to develop a more comprehensive understanding of these challenges and, based on this analysis, formulate appropriate policy responses that might begin to address these issues.

March 2015 - Third meeting of the Helsinki Policy Forum, Helsinki

The third meeting of the Helsinki Policy Forum was held from the 17th-19th March, in Helsinki with the support of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The Helsinki Policy Forum again brought together senior parliamentarians/political leaders, government officials, and financial experts from across the Western and Muslim and Arab worlds, providing a space and a network for an open, informed and confidential dialogue on the political and economic challenges and opportunities that face the MENA/Gulf region, and their potential impact on international relationships.

Discussions at this meeting of the Forum focused on analysing developments within the MENA region, identifying the key challenges (at both the macro level and within specific countries such as Tunisia and Libya) and then exploring how they might be addressed. In particular, participants were asked to think about several questions: what are the areas where improved cooperation between MENA-Gulf countries would contribute to bringing more stability to the MENA-Gulf region? What are the minimum requirements for improved co-operation between the leading countries of the region? Is it possible to identify areas where the European countries could support such cooperation? Are there areas where European support could be counter-productive?

In addition to the formal meeting of the Forum, several participants were asked to participate in an event organised by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. This included Amel Azzouz, (Secretary of State to the Minister of Development, Investment and International Cooperation of Tunisia); Dr Sajjadpour (Advisor in Strategies, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Iran); Osman Faruk Logoglu, (Member of Parliament, Republican People’s Party, Turkey); and Amr El Shobaki (former member of parliament and Head of the Arab European unit in Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Egypt). Discussions at this event centred on the theme: Challenges and Opportunities in the Middle East’s Transformation.
As part of our ongoing engagement with Egyptian politicians and business leaders, this year we held a series of meetings exploring the experience of political transition in Northern Ireland. Between September 2012 and July 2013 we were convening inclusive roundtable dialogue meetings in Egypt supporting leaders to find sufficient consensus on key areas of the economy to enable the country to move forward. Due to the political situation in the country following the removal of President Mohammad Morsi from power in July 2013, it has not been possible to hold such meetings in Egypt. We have since remained in contact with many of the participants in the process and they urged us to continue the dialogue where possible.

Meetings were held with members of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin, enabling participants to listen to and discuss the Unionist and Republican perspectives on the successes, challenges and failures of Northern Ireland’s own transition. Several themes were explored, including, how the parties in Northern Ireland were able to move from almost thirty years of armed conflict into an inclusive political process, the role of religion in the conflict, and how the issues of transitional justice and reconciliation with the past continue to pose challenges to Northern Ireland’s political process. A tour of the city was also given, visiting Unionist and Republican communities so that participants could see first hand the “peace walls” that remain in place, and other legacies of the conflict. For the second meeting we brought Irish politicians, one from Sinn Fein, the other from the Democratic Unionist Party, to Istanbul to meet with Egyptian political leaders.

Of particular interest to both groups, given the situation in Egypt, was the Irish experience of both how their conflict spiralled from a political struggle into an armed struggle, and then transformed back into a political struggle. There was great concern for the situation in Egypt and fear that such a cycle of events could lie ahead for the country. Thus there was a corresponding interest in exploring how such a sequence of events could be avoided in Egypt and a political resolution to the crisis achieved.

The challenges facing young people, their aspirations and concerns has been a key factor in the change felt across the Arab world since 2011. In light of this, and that the course of events in Egypt since 2013 has resulted in a number of young activists finding themselves leaving their country out of concern for their personal safety, we also convened, in Istanbul, a meeting of influential young Egyptian activists from across the political spectrum, as well as civil society activists focused on human rights. Such young leaders complained that they fear for all their work in documenting alleged human rights abuses as well as their political activism, given the international community was felt to be failing to uphold human rights vis-à-vis Egypt. They also highlighted their concern that young activists were rarely engaged by international NGOs.

Throughout our engagement Egyptian participants had often welcomed or requested the idea of sharing in the experiences of other countries that had been through transitions. In light of this, we decided to hold two separate meetings focused on sharing the experience of Northern Irish politicians.

The meeting brought a group of Egyptian political and business leaders to Belfast for meetings with Northern Irish politicians, academics and NGOs. The purpose of this visit was to allow the delegates to hold in-depth discussions on the conflict in Northern Ireland, its eventual Peace Process, and its relevance, if any, to Egypt today.
A primary concern they had regarding the situation in Egypt was the possibility of increased violence across the country if there was not an opening of political space.

Reflecting on discussions, Egyptian delegates, whether younger or older, suggested that there were several core issues from Northern Ireland, which paralleled the challenges they now faced in their own transition. There was a recognition that even those conflicts that appear intractable can be resolved provided there is a willingness on both sides to make the difficult decisions and compromises necessary to establish peace. However, violence, once unleashed, can produce a cycle of revenge that makes compromise more difficult. Several participants expressed concern that Egypt was now on a precipice that could escalate into widespread violence, as in Northern Ireland, which could then potentially last decades. Despite progress made in Northern Ireland it was clear that numerous challenges remained and that the legacies of the conflict run deep, necessitating commitment and time - possibly several generations - to overcome.

The willingness and ability of Northern Irish politicians to sit together and build a consensus on what was best for the economy and the country was seen as a considerable achievement by Egyptian delegates who expressed their surprise at the politicians’ levels of “anger and agony when they talked about the other… yet they moved on.” Reflecting on the visit it was commented that the visible divisions in Belfast were a stark warning of the effect of long-term divisions - and a symbol of what they wished to avoid in Egypt.

The chart below provides a statistical overview of the work carried out by Forward Thinking in the Egypt Programme over the last twelve months. In total, Forward Thinking organised or participated in a total of 48 meetings that related to the Egypt Programme in 2014-2015.
Diary Highlights

December 2014 - Delegation of Egyptian political and business leaders visit Belfast for meetings

Forward Thinking, with the support of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, brought a delegation of Egyptian political and business leaders to Belfast for meetings with Northern Irish politicians, academics and NGOs, 2nd-4th December. The purpose of this visit was to allow the delegates to hold in depth discussions on the conflict in Northern Ireland, its eventual Peace Process, and to explore its relevance, if any, to the situation within Egypt today.

Meetings were held with senior figures from Northern Ireland’s leading political parties, including: members of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin. This allowed participants to listen to and debate Unionist and Republican perspectives on the successes, challenges and failures of Northern Ireland’s transition.

Discussions focused on several themes, including, but not limited to, how the parties in Northern Ireland were able to move from almost thirty years of armed conflict into an inclusive political process; the role of religion in the conflict; and how the issues of transitional justice and other historical legacies continue to pose difficulties to Northern Ireland’s political process. Participants debated extensively to what extent these issues paralleled developments within Egypt today and if there were any lessons that could be drawn to help prevent a further deterioration in Egypt’s political scene.

In addition to meetings with politicians, the delegation also met with Queen’s University Belfast’s Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice, where a robust discussion took place on the different challenges that face countries emerging from conflict. Finally, the delegates were given a tour of Belfast and the so-called peace walls, which several delegates remarked stood as a powerful symbol of the long term costs of conflict.

December 2014 - Forward Thinking host roundtable in Istanbul, “Reflecting on the Northern Irish transition: Moving from Conflict to Governance”

Forward Thinking organised a meeting in Istanbul, 19th December, which brought together members of the Northern Irish Assembly and British Parliamentarians together with a number of senior Egyptian opposition politicians. The meeting explored the situation in the Middle East through the lens of the Northern Irish experience of political transition, focusing on the complications of moving from conflict to peace, and subsequently sharing power in an atmosphere where trust is limited.
Forward Thinking has managed an internal Tunisian dialogue (the Tunisian Political Pluralism Dialogue Process – TPPDP) that brought together senior political and civil society actors from across the country’s political spectrum with the aim of preventing the growth in political polarization; supporting politicians in their search for sufficient consensus on potentially divisive issues; helping to foster a culture of dialogue; and supporting the establishment of effective government that could eventually address Tunisia’s long term challenges.

With the support of the European Union Instrument for Stability and Swiss Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (FDFA), we travelled on an approximately monthly basis to Tunisia to hold roundtable workshops with representatives from leading political parties, members of the judiciary, youth political activists and key civil society actors, until the project’s funding concluded in December 2014, following successful parliamentary and presidential elections.

Particularly in the latter half of the project, we witnessed an increased willingness amongst participants to seek common ground on practical issues despite their fundamental ideological differences. Whereas at the beginning of this process, there were deep divides and little, if any, trust between individuals from different political affiliations, as these attitudinal divisions were challenged through structured and sustained dialogue at multiple levels, there was a notable shift in the dialogue towards discussing and resolving technical challenges. Accordingly, in 2014, discussions in the roundtables explored issues such as: how to address the country’s underlying economic weaknesses; how to reform the media to ensure it is free but responsible; how to meet the aspirations of a disaffected and frustrated youth; and how the concept of partnership government (whether through a formal coalition; a national salvation government; or with the support of a “loyal opposition”) might be implemented in Tunisia.

Once dates for elections were set in mid 2014, discussions focused extensively on how to ensure all parties would have confidence in the transparency and fairness of the electoral process. Participants involved in the process expressed a keen interest in exploring how other countries in transition had managed the challenge of holding elections in an atmosphere of low trust. Therefore, in September 2014, we brought over two Members of Northern Ireland’s Legislative Assembly to discuss the successes and failures of their transition, and particularly how parties in Northern Ireland had sought to address the challenges of governing in coalition together, in spite of the legacies of conflict, and whether this experience contained any potential lessons for Tunisia.

We believe that the TPPDP met many of the goals that were set at the beginning of the project and made an important contribution to the country’s transition. During this period diverse parties, many with a history of antagonistic relations, were able to forge agreement on key elements of the transitional process, thereby preventing a breakdown in the political process in contrast to other Arab Spring states. These achievements were made possible only through an emerging consensus amongst politicians that, going forward, there is a need for an inclusive political process and the continuation of collaboration between parties. Political parties are developing discourses that recognise the diversity of political expression and activism within the country and are moving away from previous rhetoric that called for the exclusion of certain political actors. The fact that the government of Habib Essid contains ministers from both Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda represents a level of co-operation between the country’s two largest parties that would have been unthinkable when we began our work in Tunisia.

The TPPDP helped facilitate these positive developments by providing a confidential space for senior politicians to hold robust debates, acknowledge their concerns, listen to the perspectives of others and develop the trust that was essential for the success of the Tunisian transition. The impact of the action was acknowledged by two of Tunisia’s leading
2014 saw Tunisia successfully hold parliamentary and presidential elections, a key milestone in the country’s transition to democracy. Source: Amine Gharbi. Licensed under Creative Commons.

politicians, Beji Caid Essebsi (former leader of Nidaa Tounes and now President of Tunisia) and Rached Ghannouchi (President of Ennahda).

During his opening remarks at our January 2014 roundtable, Beiji Caid Essebsi commented that “Forward Thinking have mastered the true art of dialogue.” Likewise, in a letter to the European Union in July 2014 Sheikh Rashid Ghanoushi stated, “Over the past two years we have developed a good working relationship with Forward Thinking and trust their expertise, neutrality and independence. These qualities, combined with their strong relations with other parties and international organisations, gives us confidence that they are ideally placed for managing a process of political dialogue.”

However, despite the considerable progress that has been made since 2012, particularly in the political sphere, numerous challenges remain that will test the country’s fledgling democratic culture. Delivering economic growth; addressing the growing security crisis while respecting human rights and restoring public confidence in national institutions, are just some of the issues that Tunisia’s political elite must now deliver on, to consolidate the achievements of the past three years. Indeed, we believe there is a particularly urgent need to incorporate young political activists into mainstream political life. With around 40% of the population under 30, Tunisia’s burgeoning democracy can only succeed with the active participation of young people in the political process. This makes the current apathy and disconnect many youth feel towards the political class deeply concerning. The sense of anger and disappointment many young people feel towards their political elite was a common theme of the TPPDP and, we believe, if unaddressed it risks threatening the progress Tunisia has made. Accordingly, following the conclusion of the TPPDP, we are now exploring developing a programme that works with young Tunisian activists, supporting their transition from protest to participation, increasing their capacity for engagement with the political system and developing their leadership skills.

We were also greatly saddened this year by the sudden death of Mokhtar Yahyaoui. Mokhtar was a highly respected Tunisian judge, human rights campaigner and secular, independent, political activist. We came to know Mokhtar, in 2011, when we organised a visit to London to meet with Parliament and the British media for him and Hamedi Jebali, then secretary general of Ennahdha, who was to become Prime Minister later that year. It was to be an important indication of the potential of the Tunisian transition
to come, that the apparent secular-religious divide in the country could be bridged in the national interest. We came to greatly value his advice and analysis, meeting with him regularly on our subsequent visits to Tunisia. We would like to again express our sincere condolences to his family, friends and wider country. We hope that in his death, his values and advocacy will not be lost, but live on as part of the new Tunisia.

The chart below provides a statistical overview of the work carried out by Forward Thinking in the Tunisia Programme over the last twelve months. In total, Forward Thinking organised or participated in a total of 114 meetings that related to the Tunisia Programme in 2014-2015.
July 2014 - Forward Thinking hold meetings in Kairouan and Tunis

On the week beginning 7th July Forward Thinking travelled to Tunisia to take part in roundtable workshops in Kairouan and Tunis. Forward Thinking had been invited by participants involved in the Tunisian Political Pluralism Dialogue Process (TPPDP) to observe the workshop in Kairouan, which brought together civil society activists from across the political spectrum. The purpose of the meeting was to try and devise a common platform for activists, regardless of their political affiliation, to come together to promote the economic development of the region. Over the course of these discussions, the participants agreed to put aside their differences to collaborate on several projects, such as supporting the establishment of an organisation to help train local women in the creation of handicrafts.

Whilst in Kairouan, Forward Thinking were given a tour of the city, where they met with local initiatives attempting to re-establish tourism. Those meetings helped reveal some of the difficulties facing the interior of the country but also highlighted how civil society has grown and developed since 2011 to try and respond to some of those challenges.

As part of the TPPDP, Forward Thinking convened a cross-party workshop in Tunis that brought together senior politicians to discuss some of the challenges posed by the then forthcoming elections. During discussions it was recognised that elections faced several challenges, particularly the risk of low voter turn-out that could undermine confidence in the process. All parties agreed there was a vital need to enhance efforts to register voters, with concerns raised that the period for registration would close in two weeks and that the registration of new voters had thus far proven disappointing.

August 2014 - Forward Thinking hold Roundtables in Tunisia

Forward Thinking held a series of roundtable meetings, 26th-29th August, with both senior politicians and young political activists in order to discuss the situation in the country ahead of presidential and legislative elections. The meetings brought together a diverse range of representatives, including figures from: Al Islah, CPR Ennahda, Ettakatol Joumhouri, Nidaa Tounes, the Popular Front, the student union UGET, rejectionist youth leaders and members of civil society.

These roundtables came ahead of the deadline for parties to submit their electoral lists for the forthcoming elections on October 26th. Discussions at the meetings therefore focused on the elections but the threat from terrorism and its potential ability to disrupt the country were also discussed extensively, with participants from across the political spectrum expressing concern that the threat from extremist organisations appeared to be growing.

While participants expressed their hopes that the elections would take place successfully, they also acknowledged that the greatest challenge would be managing tensions in the post-election period. Youth leaders in particular expressed their frustration at the lack of economic development in the country and questioned if the political elite would be able to achieve the necessary growth to start tackling the large number of long-term unemployed.
**September 2014 - Forward Thinking host roundtable workshop on the theme “Exploring the challenges of coalition government – lessons from transition”, in collaboration with ITES and the Tunisian Presidency**

On 19th September, Forward Thinking convened a roundtable workshop, supported by the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (ITES) and opened by the then President of Tunisia, H.E. Moncef Marzouki, reflecting on the challenges posed by Tunisia’s transition, and democratic transitions more generally. The meeting was well attended and included representatives from across Tunisia’s political spectrum, including secular, Salafi and Islamist political leaders. Also present at the meeting were two Members of the Northern Irish Legislative Assembly (MLAs), one from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and another from Sinn Féin. These individuals were present to share Northern Ireland’s experience of political transition, the successes and failures of their efforts to build effective coalition government after decades of conflict, and to discuss its possible relevance to Tunisia today.

At the roundtable, participants discussed some of the key lessons from the transition to date and how these can help Tunisia’s political elite as they continue to grapple with enormous political, social and economic challenges confronting the country. A particular theme for the meeting was around the challenges of forming, and maintaining, coalition government; power sharing and managing political differences between parties that have opposing ideologies and conflicting visions for society.

**October 2014 - Forward Thinking hold bilateral meetings and roundtable in Tunisia**

Ahead of the, then imminent, parliamentary elections, Forward Thinking visited Tunisia, 6th-9th October, to hold bilateral meetings with representatives of the country’s leading political forces, including: The Destourian Movement, Ennahda, Ettaktol, Nidaa Tounes and the Popular Front. These individuals provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges facing the country, and the urgent priorities for the new government, regardless of who emerged as the largest party, in the post-election period.

All reiterated the necessity of supporting the ISIE (Tunisia’s electoral authority) at this time, to ensure transparent and fair elections whose results could not be contested.

In addition to those bilateral meetings, we at Forward Thinking also convened a small roundtable workshop between youth activists and the European Union Delegation to Tunisia. This meeting provided a valuable space for discussions about the role of the international community in Tunisia, and for the representatives of the EU to listen to the concerns of young people about the transitional process.

**November 2014 - Forward Thinking hold meetings in Tunisia following Parliamentary and Presidential Elections**

Forward Thinking travelled to Tunisia following the parliamentary and first-round presidential elections, to hold the final series of bilateral meetings and roundtable workshops of the TPPDP, 23rd-28th November. These meetings brought together key participants who had participated in our dialogue process. During the course of this visit we held three roundtable meetings: one with newly elected members of parliament, a second with a group of youth leaders, and a final roundtable with senior political leaders from across the political spectrum. The overwhelming sentiment from political leaders was that the electoral process to date had been a marked success. The fact that both parliamentary elections and the first round of presidential elections were inclusive, and results largely uncontested, was felt to represent a significant milestone in Tunisia’s transition. However, it was also acknowledged that this achievement should not be overstated and that numerous challenges remained that could still disrupt the political situation. There was a particular worry that tensions could increase over the course of the second round of the presidential elections, primarily if the candidates adopted a negative discourse rather than campaigning on the basis of their different visions and programmes for the country.

Additionally, all agreed that even if stability in the political sphere was maintained, the country still faced a number of pressing challenges that would severely test the new government and that would define the next phase of the transition.
April 2015 - Meeting between Tunisian youth activists and the Canadian Ambassador to Tunisia, Tunis

A diverse group of young Tunisian political activists met with the Ambassador of Canada to Tunisia, H.E. Sébastien Beaulieu, for discussions at the Canadian Embassy on 9th April. The meeting was organised by Tareq Toukabri, Forward Thinking’s consultant in Tunisia, and involved a number of individuals that were actively involved in our Tunisian Political Pluralism Dialogue process (TPPDP) from 2013-2014.

The meeting provided an important opportunity for young, politically active, Tunisians to share their perspectives on the situation within their country with a representative of the international community, and for them to highlight some of the specific difficulties and worries of their generation.

April 2015 - Forward Thinking hold bilateral meetings in Tunisia

The Political Dialogues Director, Julian Weinberg, and Project Officer, Harry Higginson, travelled to Tunisia to hold bilateral meetings with senior politicians, youth activists and representatives from the international community. The visit, 24th-29th April, was Forward Thinking’s first since the conclusion of the Tunisian Political Pluralism Dialogue Project (TPPDP) in November 2014 and provided a valuable opportunity to discuss the developments that had occurred in Tunisia in this period.

Meetings were held with a diverse group of individuals, including parliamentarians, trade unionists, representatives of the business community, activists from civil society and politicians from many of Tunisia’s leading parties, providing a holistic overview of the political situation. Meetings were also held with several Government Ministers that had participated in the TPPDP, including Amel Azzouz (Secretary of State for International Cooperation), Mahmoud Ben Romdhane (Minister of Transport) and Zied Ladhari (Minister for Vocational Training and Employment), with discussions focusing on the challenges facing the country and the need for continued international support within Tunisia.

In addition to bilateral meetings, Forward Thinking also held a small roundtable with youth activists from across the political spectrum to explore how young Tunisians viewed events in the country following elections and the creation of the Habib Essid government. Many of the activists spoke of their frustrations at a perceived lack of progress, particularly in the economic sphere, since the 2011 Revolution and their anger at the continued marginalisation of younger Tunisians within politics.
While Forward Thinking’s resources are predominantly focused on our work in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), we remain active in the UK through our continued engagement with British Muslim communities, and through organising meetings for our contacts from the MENA region when they visit London.

This year saw Forward Thinking organise meetings on behalf of a diverse range of individuals from Egypt, the Gulf, Iran, Israel, Libya, Palestine and Tunisia. These meetings took many different forms, including: private briefings at Forward Thinking’s offices, interviews with journalists from some of the UK’s leading media outlets, discussions with Forward Thinking’s Fellows and small roundtables with parliamentarians, academics and representatives of the international community. We view such meetings as invaluable, both as a means of remaining informed on regional developments and in maintaining and broadening our unique network of contacts. Such meetings also provide an opportunity to establish dialogue and relationships between diverse individuals from the UK and MENA region, helping to overcome misconceptions and identify areas of shared concern.

Despite the conclusion of our UK programme in 2013, we continue to maintain close ties with representatives from British Muslim communities. In the wake of the emergence of ISIS and its impact upon British Muslim communities (in particular, British Muslim youth who are being targeted and recruited), we held a number of roundtable workshops within parliament in early 2015 with Muslim community leaders, parliamentarians, experts and diplomats in order to examine this issue. These meetings identified an urgent need to address the phenomenon through close engagement with community leaders and youth, and by helping to inform policy-makers in the UK of the crucial yet under-represented issues affecting Muslim communities. At the request of several participants involved in these meetings, we are currently exploring how we can develop these initial workshops into a more formal programme that will regularly bring community leaders together with representatives of the British Establishment to explore how to effectively respond to the challenges posed by extremism.

**Diary Highlights**

**January 2015 - Forward Thinking host roundtable exploring the implications of the Charlie Hebdo attacks for Europe and the MENA Region**

In the aftermath of the attacks on the offices of Charlie Hebdo, Forward Thinking convened a roundtable focused on developing a deeper understanding of the attacks, their implications for Europe and the MENA region, and to begin a conversation on appropriate policy responses. The 29th January meeting brought together a group of senior policy makers, economic experts, political leaders from the UK and the MENA/Gulf region, journalists and representatives from the British Muslim community.

Discussions concentrated on how to substantively engage with the Muslim world in addressing the jihadi evolution, both at home and abroad, and how to build a deeper understanding of the socio-economic, political and religious drivers of extremism. It was generally accepted that greater engagement and cooperation with UK and European Muslim communities, as well as the wider Muslim world, was central to the development of meaningful and effective strategies to deal with the causal factors behind the Paris attacks and the ISIS phenomenon.
March 2015 - Forward Thinking host roundtable: “The impact of the ISIS phenomenon and recent developments in the MENA region on British Muslim communities”

On 25th March Forward Thinking convened a roundtable discussion exploring the impact of the ISIS phenomenon and, more broadly, recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, on British Muslim communities. The meeting was an open discussion, bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds, including: representatives from the British Muslim community, members of civil society, the media, parliamentarians, and representatives from the international community, to explore the underlying challenges, potential consequences and appropriate responses. Several themes were explored in particular depth, including trying to grasp the motives behind young people leaving the UK to fight in Iraq and Syria; debates on current British policies to prevent extremism and the impact of British foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa upon Muslim communities.

March 2015 - Forward Thinking host Dr Ahmad Iravani

Forward Thinking hosted Dr Ahmad Iravani, an Iranian scholar, when he visited London. Dr Iravani is president of the Center for the Study of Islam and the Middle East, and a Fellow at The Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America. Dr Iravani is also an Ayatollah, receiving the highest possible degree in Islamic Studies (Ijtihad), and the First Kharej Degree (equal to a Ph.D.) in Islamic Studies, from the Islamic University in Qom. A roundtable was organised at Forward Thinking’s office with members of the international community based in London, where discussions focused on recent developments within Iran, the wider issue of regional stability, and the challenges posed by the growth of sectarianism. A meeting was also organised at St Mary’s University where Dr Iravani met with several faculty members for a wide-ranging conversation on issues including: the relationship between religion and politics, secularism, and relations between the West and the Muslim World.
## OUR FINANCES

*Forward Thinking in 2014 – 2015*

### Statement of financial activities for the year ended 31 July 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unrestricted funds 2015</th>
<th>Restricted funds 2015</th>
<th>Total funds 2015</th>
<th>Total funds 2014</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>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary Income:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Donations</td>
<td>93,200</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>93,200</td>
<td>141,002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Grants</td>
<td>88,936</td>
<td>121,748</td>
<td>210,684</td>
<td>385,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Investment Income:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest Received</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Incoming Resources</td>
<td>1,688</td>
<td>1,398</td>
<td>3,086</td>
<td>10,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Incoming Resources</strong></td>
<td><strong>197,824</strong></td>
<td><strong>123,146</strong></td>
<td><strong>320,970</strong></td>
<td><strong>529,276</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources Expended</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of generating funds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charitable activities</td>
<td>232,005</td>
<td>251,870</td>
<td>483,875</td>
<td>492,305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance costs</td>
<td>30,975</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>30,975</td>
<td>41,321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Resources Expended</strong></td>
<td><strong>262,980</strong></td>
<td><strong>(128,724)</strong></td>
<td><strong>514,850</strong></td>
<td><strong>533,626</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Net incoming resources before other recognised gains:</strong></td>
<td><strong>(65,156)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(128,724)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(193,880)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(4,350)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other recognised gains:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Movement in Funds</td>
<td>(65,156)</td>
<td>(128,724)</td>
<td>(193,880)</td>
<td>(4,350)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reconciliation of Funds</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total funds brought forward</td>
<td>163,970</td>
<td>175,895</td>
<td>339,865</td>
<td>344,215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total funds carried forward:</strong></td>
<td><strong>98,814</strong></td>
<td><strong>47,171</strong></td>
<td><strong>145,985</strong></td>
<td><strong>339,865</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were no recognised gains or losses for 2015 other than those included in the statement of financial activities.
There were no acquisitions or discontinued operations during the current year.
OUR STAFF

Oliver McTernan
Director

Julian Weinberg
Political Dialogues Director

Edward Channer
Middle East Programme Manager

Harry Higginson
Project Officer

Nadia Logab
Isobel Scott-Barrett
Consultants over the year

Tarek Toukabri
Tunisia Consultant

Francis Campbell
Chris Donnelly
Michael Holland
Lord Raymond Hylton
Baroness Helena Kennedy
William Sieghart (Chairman)

Trustees

Sir Jeremy Greenstock
Advisor
CELEBRATIONS AT FORWARD THINKING

2014 - 2015 was a particularly important year for two members of Forward Thinking, with both Edward Channer and Harry Higginson marrying their respective partners.

Edward was married to Ms Alice Merlotte on the 23rd of August at the Queen’s House, Greenwich.

Harry was married to Dr Sydney Calkin on the 20th July in Edinburgh.

Everyone at Forward Thinking would like to wish the two couples every happiness as they start their married lives together.