

# ANNUAL REPORT

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## 2021



THE SHAIKH GROUP



**THESHAIKHGROUP**

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## FOUNDER & CEO STATEMENT



**Salman Shaikh**  
*Founder and CEO*

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**“With its track record of engagement at the international, regional, national and local levels, TSG is well positioned to continue playing a valuable role in this shifting geopolitical and conflict landscape.”**

Towards the end of 2020, TSG marked its five-year anniversary. Though still a small and nimble organisation, we have grown considerably in that time, particularly over the last year, following the launch of a new **Iraq Dialogue Project** in September 2021. That growth has come at a time of mounting challenges and setbacks for the causes of conflict prevention, management or resolution that have now hit an alarming and foreboding crescendo with the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Traditional approaches to promoting peace had already been challenged in recent years by the shift toward a more competitive, multipolar world, often inhospitable to inclusive – let alone liberal – political settlements. 2021 began with a new US administration touting the potential of assertive, energetic diplomacy as a tool for pushing back against this trend – a message that rang somewhat hollow after the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. The true test will now come as the frontlines of a new world (dis)order take shape and harden. The rules-based order that had been beset by dysfunction since 2003 has now become dangerously unhinged. In the uncertain environment that follows, there will be heightened risks violent conflict, whether driven by emboldened expansionists, economic shocks, or the strains of geopolitical polarisation. And yet, even in the midst of that disorder and division, there will still be no alternative to diplomatic engagement and dialogue – backed up, to be sure, by the sort of firm stance we have seen Western partners rally around – to find pathways back toward de-escalation and lasting calm.

The Middle East context that TSG’s work focuses on will be uniquely exposed to knock-on effects from the conflict in Ukraine, **and the risks of further destabilisation and conflict within the region are likely to grow.** Some regional players’ apparent fence-sitting was a reminder of the outsized impact of geopolitics in their domestic and foreign affairs. Prospects for international cooperation on addressing regional wars will dim, particularly in cases such as Syria where even managing the conflict relies on US-Russian understandings and deconfliction. Heavy reliance on food imports from both Ukraine and Russia will exacerbate ongoing economic and humanitarian crises across several states.

Here too, however, there will be opportunities to build on the trend witnessed over the past year towards greater engagement among regional players themselves – as seen in the relative thaw in ties **between the UAE and Turkey, or Saudi Arabia and Iran.** Those opportunities will increase if there is a successful restoration of the Iran nuclear deal, and the parties

## FOUNDER & CEO STATEMENT

are willing and able to follow up with further dialogue on regional issues. As the war in Ukraine unfolds, renewed public attention on the causes of civilian protection and humanitarian law could and should also translate into renewed political will to look afresh at solutions to the region's ongoing conflicts; a failure to do so will only sharpen what many there see as a case of double standards.

With its track record of engagement at the international, regional, national, and local levels, TSG is well positioned to continue playing a valuable role in this shifting geopolitical and conflict landscape. That role is based on our ability to perform functions that government counterparts are often less well suited to, including working in fragile and conflict-affected situations, establishing channels of communication with civilian and armed actors, and leveraging a reputation for neutrality and confidentiality to **build confidence among key parties from the ground up**. Through our established, trusting relationships with officials from the US, Europe, China, Russia and beyond, we are equally well placed to navigate the new geopolitical field, with the aim of advancing cooperative approaches to conflict management in areas of common interest where still possible.

Our activities over the course of 2021 were again a strong demonstration of this approach. In a fragile environment in **Syria**, we increased our presence on the ground and established a Track 2 process working with local authorities and independent civil society actors to build consensus on steps to establish more inclusive, responsive governance in areas liberated from ISIS.

Our **Dialogue for Regional Mutual Security project** transitioned to a new phase, maintaining informal discussions among 'global power' representatives while seeking to advance initiatives driven by Gulf states on issues including economic cooperation, maritime security, and support for multilateral and bilateral regional dialogue platforms. Finally, after assembling a deeply experienced team of Iraqi researchers and thought-leaders based throughout the country, we launched our **Iraq Dialogue Initiative** hosting initial workshops in Baghdad, Basra, Mosul and Erbil that will, over the next year and beyond, aim to build momentum for reform efforts across the growing divide between the country's ruling elites and its citizens.

Our dedicated staff in Cyprus, the Middle East and Europe managed to make all this happen despite the unforgiving conditions that Covid imposed,

## FOUNDER & CEO STATEMENT

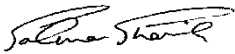
pushing the limits of Zoom, and then coming together in person again when possible. We are also very grateful to our donor partners – **the European Union, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland** – for their continued support for these initiatives, at a time when funding for peacebuilding has often been inconsistent, not least given the pressures of the pandemic.

We hope that going forward, that support will continue and strengthen. Looking ahead into 2022, we know we will face challenges of a new order, as the ripples from Ukraine spread across the world. TSG will stand ready to meet those challenges, maintaining first a focus on our mission to raise the voices those most affected by conflict and advance their proposals for viable, lasting solutions.

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**Salman Shaikh**  
*Founder and CEO*



## SYRIA PROGRAMME

Ten years into the Syrian conflict, the country has settled into a state of de-facto fragmentation. Incumbent forces have cemented their grip within different zones of control – the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the Northeast, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkish-backed groups in the Northwest, and Syrian government forces backed by Russia and Iran in the remainder of the country – even as an economic collapse and the Covid pandemic further worsened humanitarian conditions. Despite the relative calm along these frontlines, risks of renewed instability and conflict remain.

With avenues to a national level political settlement to the conflict all but closed off, TSG’s Syria programme has since 2019 concentrated on this “sub-national” level, through a series of dialogue and mediation activities focused on **Northeast and Northwest Syria**.

These efforts aim to strengthen political understandings on steps to prevent further conflict, build more inclusive and responsive governance, and improve Syrians’ ability to influence international approaches to stabilisation and, ultimately to advancing a political process. In 2021, this work was supported by donors including Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and the European Union.

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## Northeast Track:

The political future of Northeast Syria in particular remains highly uncertain. Continued threats to instability include the possibility of an escalation between the SDF and Turkey, regime attempts to extend its influence and control in the region, and the possibility of ISIS resurgence. Underlying these threats is a continued trust deficit between the NES authorities and local communities, particularly in Arab-majority areas, driven by complaints of corrupt or insufficiently inclusive governance. Faced with these challenges, the SDF-led administration has struggled to attract long-term, direct support from international partners and to meaningfully institutionalise, pluralise and improve its governance and security practices.

TSG’s Northeast Track seeks to support the emergence of more inclusive and responsive local governance and security arrangements in NES, both to strengthen local stability in the short-term and to contribute to improved prospects of securing a sustainable political settlement, at the local and national levels.

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**“In late 2020 TSG established a Track 2 Forum bringing together representatives of the authorities in Northeast Syria alongside independent and civil society figures from Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor – Arab majority areas liberated from ISIS.”**

In late 2020, TSG established a Track 2 Forum bringing together representatives of the authorities in Northeast Syria alongside independent and civil society figures from Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor – Arab majority areas liberated from ISIS. The discussions, which were initially held online and then in-person in Raqqa from September 2021, served first of all to identify community concerns and demands on a range of issues from arbitrary detention and forced conscription, to corruption, a lack of accountability mechanisms and the central concentration of power. Separate Working Groups – focused on governance and security-related issues respectively – were formed, in which participants began to develop more detailed, implementable recommendations, aiming to build on the momentum of reform pledges publicly set out by the authorities at the end of 2020.

Over the course of four rounds of meetings between April and November, these Working Groups elaborated points of divergence and commonality on a range of confidence building and reform measures, tackling issues on which – per the accounts of participants from both local actors and the authorities – open discussion had previously been limited. Though significant progress on meaningful reforms is yet to be made, the recommendations that emerged from the Forum were reported to have helped amplify the voices of pragmatic figures within the authorities and to have influenced decisions on certain steps including, with the regard to mechanisms for improving transparency in cases of arbitrary arrest,



and a reconsidering how to include local actors in the process of revising the Self Administration's governing charter..

This work was in large part made possible through efforts by TSG to expand its presence and network on the ground in Northeast Syria. TSG conducted six field visits since November 2020 until the end of 2021 and established a parallel series of 'Track 3' subsidiary meeting format that engages a wider cross-section of community and civil society actors.

Throughout, TSG has regularly briefed like-minded international actors, presenting ideas on how their engagement with the authorities in northeast Syria could incentivise and help advance meaningful progress on internal reforms. It has similarly maintained close engagement with Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government, exploring pathways to de-escalation between Turkey and the SDF, and as to how internal reforms within northeast Syria could serve as confidence building steps toward a more durable arrangement that addresses Ankara's broader security concerns.

## Northwest Track:

Starting in July 2019, TSG convened a series of small workshops in Turkey, Europe and online focused on governance in northwest Syria (principally North Aleppo and Afrin). These conversations tackled challenges related to building a more cohesive, legitimate, and transparent governance structure, capable of serving the needs of local communities, and culminated in a set of recommendations put forward to both Syrian, Turkish and international stakeholders..

In 2021, TSG revisited the proposals emerging from those workshops and conducted renewed consultations with Syrian stakeholders based in or originally from northern Syria (principally the 'Euphrates Shield' areas), including NGO workers, local council members, representatives from internally-displaced persons (IDP) committees, tribal leaders and members of opposition armed groups (AOGs). Those consultations highlighted the persistence of a range of concerns, including around insecurity, a lack of coherent and effective governance institutions, gaps in IDP representation and unemployment.

Based on those consultations, and subsequent engagement with Turkish officials, TSG is designing an initiative that would focus not just on the further elaboration of viable, consensus-driven ideas for addressing some of these local governance challenges, but also on working closely with Turkish authorities to develop buy-in for their implementation.

## Key Achievements

Over the course of 2021, TSG's Syria programme successfully worked toward:

- (1) **Establishing an innovative Northeast Syria Track 2 Forum focused on governance and security arrangements in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor.** That forum provided a neutral space for an open discussion of sensitive issues involving a wider spectrum of civil society voices – including among those otherwise unwilling or unable to directly engage the authorities. It has helped identify clear gaps in terms of both planning and delivery reform and confidence building efforts and put forward proposals that have had a visible impact on shaping those initiatives going forward.
- (2) **Expanding its engagement with local actors across northeast and northwest Syria.** More frequent visits to Northeast Syria and consistent engagement with representatives of civil society and community-based actors and in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor have helped build TSG's reach within and understanding of the concerns of these local communities, reinforcing the work of the Track 2 Forum and allowing for the establishment of a parallel 'Track 3' process. In northwest Syria, renewed engagement with an emphasis on local stakeholders inside in Euphrates Shield areas helped strengthen TSG's understanding of the situation there and hone its strategy for advancing governance reforms.
- (3) **Maintaining strong channels of communications with regional and international actors with a stake in Northeast Syria.** Through these channels, TSG has advanced recommendations for supporting meaningful progress on internal reforms, as well as steps toward de-escalation between the SDF and Turkey and improved stability in the longer term. These activities involved briefings with senior officials in Europe, the US, KRI and Turkey, as well as the establishment of an online briefing format that met regularly through 2021.

## REGIONAL PROGRAMME

Since September 2018, TSG has been running a regional programme centred on its **“Dialogue for Regional Mutual Security”**, taking an “outside-in” approach to regional dialogue, by facilitating a series of consultations among representatives of global powers on pathways for de-escalating regional conflicts. This Track 2 dialogue transitioned to add a “regional dialogue” phase (Phase II) in 2019, with the global power participants starting discussions with senior interlocutors from relevant regional states to discuss and promote the ideas for building regional mutual security thus far developed. More recently, the project has focused on **shifting dynamics within the Gulf region and promoting regional security through cultivating dialogue and cooperation between the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) countries, Iran, and Iraq**, increasing engagement with ‘bridge-building’ actors within region, while also maintaining the global power group discussions.

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**“These activities will aim to serve as confidence-building measures and building blocks for a wider regional dialogue framework in the future.”**

The regional context was upended in the wake of the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan last August. That withdrawal, combined with the shifting priorities of the new US administration and a growing awareness among regional players of the costs and limitations of the brinkmanship of recent years, created opportunities to encourage regional dialogue and cooperation. TSG is seeking to help maintain the positive momentum toward increased engagement, de-escalation, and security cooperation underway in the Gulf region, through a range of Track 2 and Track 1.5 initiatives focused on issues including economic cooperation, maritime security, and support for newly formed regional dialogue platforms. These activities will aim to serve as confidence-building measures and building blocks for a wider regional dialogue framework in the future.

### ***Activities late 2020 and 2021***

In the latter part of 2020, anticipating the implications of the U.S. presidential election for foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran and the Middle East, TSG’s Track 2 group of representatives from the United States, Europe, India, China, and Russia met through a series of virtual roundtables to develop proposals for engaging regional actors in a comprehensive process toward reaching new security arrangements in the region.

In 2021, the project continued to explore a variety of mediation dialogue initiatives in consultation with this group of senior experts and former officials from global powers. Throughout the year participants

met to jointly assess macro and regional developments and developed concrete points of advocacy for global and regional capitals. One specific area of focus was that of **maritime security issues in the Gulf**, on which the group put forward a set of recommendations to promote freedom of navigation and security for commercial vessels. Regional interlocutors and experts were consulted extensively in this process. A policy brief was shared with key regional governmental stakeholders and TSG will continue to engage with them to develop this further.

With the renewed focus on shifting dynamics within the order Gulf region, TSG undertook multiple in-person consultation visits to regional capitals and their diplomatic missions in Europe to discuss regional dialogue and security, focusing in particular on what we consider to be “bridge building actors”, including Iraq, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman. These visits, held between June and November, included meetings with foreign ministry and national security officials as well as influential academics, experts, journalists, and members of civil society.

Our regional outreach this year led to a private roundtable held in Doha to exchange ideas with the Foreign Ministry on regional dialogue processes and opportunities for mediation. This included a discussion on the challenges to forming a Gulf regional security architecture, the potential for moving forward with a GCC-Iran dialogue, the Saudi Arabia-Iran talks, and key points of conflict including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. A further private roundtable was held with a UAE-based think tank, Gulf political economic experts and financial advisors at the Dubai 2020 Expo to discuss the challenges to greater Gulf regional economic integration.

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## Key Achievements

Over the course of the end of 2020 and in 2021, TSG's Dialogue for Mutual Security in the Middle East successfully worked toward:

- (1) **Extensive regional engagement, building ties with key players.** Through multiple visits to the region and consultations with the “global powers group” the project has identified key points for advocacy and potential avenues for supporting engagement and dialogue among Gulf actors, Iraq and Iran.
- (2) **Expansion and strengthening of the global power group.** TSG expanded the global power group with the addition of new representation from China. The group sustained high levels of participation even as all mediation activities continued to be held virtually. Participants strengthened shared understandings on core issues in ways that will help guide the next phase of engagement to promote initiatives driven by regional ‘bridge-building’ actors.
- (3) **Substantive results.** Global power participants set out joint recommendations relating to establishing new arrangements for addressing maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Gulf, which were subsequently promoted with relevant parties.
- (4) **Expansion of the DFMS team.** Following a successful transition from Phase I into Phase II, TSG has significantly developed its on-the-ground presence in the Gulf with the appointment of a Senior Political Officer based in Qatar. A Research Analyst has also been appointed to provide research support. In addition, Stephanie Williams joined the team as a Senior Diplomatic Advisor before being appointed by the UN Secretary General as a Special Advisor on Libya.

## IRAQ DIALOGUE INITIATIVE

Having first developed the concept in 2019, TSG finally launched its Iraq Dialogue Initiative in September 2021. The project aims to convene a broad, politically diverse spectrum of Iraqi actors – among political elites, civil society, professionals, and social movements – for **discussions on the roots of Iraq’s socio-economic and governance problems, across the widening divide between citizens and governing elites.**

The approach of the project differs from that taken in the many previous exercises in national or intra-elite dialogue, in maintaining an emphasis on locally-owned spaces for informal discussion led by local coordinators in four different areas – Basra, Baghdad, Mosul and the Kurdistan Region. Those discussions are organised in the form of separate ‘society’ and ‘elite’ working groups, meeting separately in each area, before bringing them together in wider groups.

As the process proceeds these working groups will aim first of all to help build the critical and often under-developed connective tissues between reform-minded actors at the local/regional level, both within and among civil society and governing institutions. Participants will aim to develop consensus-driven proposals for overcoming barriers to reform on specific socio-economic issues, informed not only by the dynamics explored through the process of dialogue, but also by technical research inputs commissioned from Iraqi experts.

The project is conceived as long-term endeavour that should play out over a period of at least three years, as these working groups (at the local and, gradually, the national level) develop into innovative, inclusive forums for both fostering debate and creating connections that can help key stakeholders find viable pathways for advancing reforms.

The initiative is led by a dedicated Iraq country team, headed by Renad Mansour (Director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House) and Sajad Jiyad (Fellow at the Century Foundation, Managing Director of Bridge), alongside local facilitators with a track record of deep and longstanding engagement with the relevant networks in each of the four different regions. It is funded by the German government, for an initial phase up to September 2022.

The project got off to a promising start in the second half of 2021. Initial meetings of the separate 'elite' and 'society groups' were successfully held in each area in November 2021. The discussions helped prove the viability and potential value of the process. All participants welcomed the **novel format of the dialogue working groups**, which they saw as diverging from the dialogue methodologies many of them had become accustomed to in Iraq since 2003. Individuals in each group were quick to recognise this model as a useful mechanism through which to test or build support for reform initiatives they are already working on, or – as in the case of newly elected independent MPs to – build networks that could be critical to success in their roles. Participants began to identify priority socio-economic issues in their respective areas – ranging from youth unemployment, education and health reform, media freedoms and the relationship between central and local government – that could be the focus for future meetings as the process moves forward through 2022.

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## Key Achievements

Since the start of implementation in September 2021, the Iraq Dialogue Initiative has successfully:

- (1) Established viable 'society and elite working groups' in each of Baghdad, Basra, Mosul and the KRI,** based on a process of rigorous stakeholder mapping, participant selection and engagement by the local TSG facilitators in each area. Individuals within each group have come forward as ready to own and drive the process moving forward.
- (2) Hosted initial working group discussions in each area that provided a 'proof of concept' for the project moving forward.** Working group meetings confirmed the central importance of the widening gap and lack of trust between citizens and political elites, and the potential role of dialogue – if conducted in quiet, locally owned spaces with targeted goals – in addressing critical issues. The discussions also demonstrated the value, as described by participants themselves, of building the connective tissue among reformists within both governing circles and among societal movements, as a key step in advancing their efforts.
- (3) Secured agreement in each group on gradually working toward joint meetings of elite and societal actors.** The extent of mistrust and disillusionment across these divides, however, means that this step will take time and sensitive management. Each group began to identify priority society-economic issues that could serve as useful entry-points for collective discussions moving forward.



## OUR TEAM



**SALMAN SHAIKH**  
FOUNDER & CEO  
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**YANNIS PALLIKARIS**  
CHIEF OPERATING  
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**SAMUEL PLUMBLY**  
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**WILLIAM SMITH**  
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**JOHN BELL**  
ADVISOR  
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**STEPHANIE WILLIAMS**  
SENIOR DIPLOMATIC  
ADVISOR & PROJECT  
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**ANNA JACOBS**  
SENIOR POLITICAL OFFICER  
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**EMMA LOWDEN**  
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**Haid Haid**  
ADVISOR



**REEM SALAH**  
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**RENAD MANSOUR**  
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## OUR TEAM



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EXECUTIVE ADMIN.  
ASSISTANT & VISUAL  
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**NIKOS VASILEIADIS**  
FINANCIAL MANAGER  
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**ELENI FASOULA**  
FINANCIAL CONTROLLER  
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## OUR ADVISORY BOARD

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“WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK OUR ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS FOR THE INVALUABLE GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT THEY HAVE OFFERED THROUGH THE CHALLENGES OF THE PAST YEAR. WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO NOW MEET AGAIN IN PERSON, WE LOOK FORWARD TO REVITALISING THE BOARD ONCE MORE. AFTER RECENT DEPARTURES, THIS INCLUDES A PROCESS NOW UNDERWAY TO ADD NEW MEMBERS TO ENSURE AN INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE BOARD.”



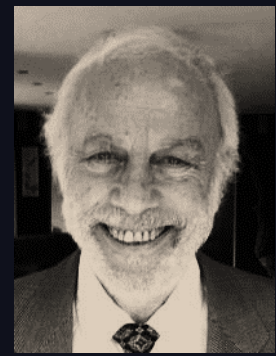
**MICHEL DUCLOS**  
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**THE SHAIKH GROUP**

**2020-2021**





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