

About Forward Thinking

Forward Thinking is a UK registered charity with over 20 years of experience in the field of conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and political dialogue. At the heart of all our work is the belief that addressing the human dimension of conflict is essential if meaningful progress is to be made, and this can only be achieved through inclusive dialogue. Through such dialogue with key individuals with political and religious influence, we believe it is possible to gradually shift mindsets and thereby create the context in which negotiations can succeed, and lives can be saved.

Our **Middle East Programme** engages leaders with political and religious constituency across divides to promote inclusive dialogues and a durable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finding an inclusive solution requires engagement with communities in both Israel and Palestine that have historically been marginalised from the peace process because they are perceived to be 'hardliners'. In Palestine, this includes Islamist groups and some independents, while in Israel, it refers to the religious and political right. We believe that if these communities are not engaged, they will have little incentive to see peace succeed and may become spoilers to the process. Accordingly, we create opportunities for leading figures from within these different communities to be exposed to alternative thinking and explore other experiences of conflict and peacebuilding. Through this work, we seek to inform and influence their approach and understanding of their own conflict and create an environment that is more conducive to a long-term, durable settlement.

Our **Helsinki Policy Forum** convenes and facilitates regular diplomatic dialogue at a broader regional level. We bring together official representatives and experts from the Gulf-MENA region and Europe to enable participants to identify shared challenges and opportunities, to work towards better understanding, and to develop practical initiatives to address common problems. The Forum is composed of three working groups: the Energy, Environment, and Economy Working Group, which focuses on addressing shared economic and environmental challenges, such as threats created by climate change; the Health Working Group allows health officials to share insights regarding health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (for which the HWG was established) and the impacts of climate change on health; and the Women Parliamentarian Network, which brings together women leaders to discuss common issues, exchange insights, and bolster regional cooperation.

Our **UK Programme** provides a space for diverse British Muslim communities, organisations, and individuals to engage in a meaningful dialogue aimed at informing the British establishment and challenging policies that currently exclude them from national life.

Although these are separate programmes, they are complementary and mutually reinforcing. A durable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian cannot be achieved without broader regional stability, and vice versa. Therefore, our work with foreign ministries in the Helsinki Policy Forum compliments our Middle East Programme. Furthermore, engaging British Muslim communities has helped us establish credibility with diverse faith-based organisations in the MENA region who may have been suspicious of engaging 'western' NGOs. Similarly, our work in pursuit of a secure Middle East and a durable, inclusive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict bolsters our credibility – and boosts trust – with marginalised Muslim communities in the UK.

Unfortunately, the Middle East remains the most conflict-affected region in the world. Every decade since the end of the Second World War has seen at least one inter-state conflict. The current Israeli-Palestinian conflict has seen a tragic loss of civilian life, both Israeli and Palestinian, and risks drawing the rest of the region into all-out war. The effects of climate change, such as water scarcity, are also producing the conditions for an escalation of regional tensions.

Across all our activities, we are guided by six core principles:

Integrity – integrity is essential to build trust. We aim therefore to reflect truthfully and objectively the issues as communicated to us or perceived by others.

Transparency and confidentiality – working in an environment with limited or zero trust, we aim to provide safe spaces to enable frank dialogue. Each partner knows exactly whom we engage with on the other side of the conflict.

Inclusivity – effective conflict resolution requires that all those with significant constituency, who are willing to enter into dialogue, must be engaged. Working with those who already recognise the need for peace can only take you so far – communities that start from a place of suspicion or even hostility must also be included in any meaningful process in order to achieve change.

Responding to expressed needs – it is essential that we respond to the needs identified by key protagonists in a conflict. Any effective programme requires flexibility in light of those changing needs.

Working at multiple levels – while senior political figures are vital, other groups (such as religious leaders, women activists, and youth groups) are necessary to create a broader constituency for change. Political leaders need to feel support and, when necessary, pressure for change from the grassroots, if they are to take the risks that are required to realise peace.

Sustained commitment – challenging entrenched perspectives requires sustained engagement over a significant period of time.

Over the course of our 20 years of activity, we have established a genuinely unique network that spans the political and geographic diversity of the Middle East. Because of the trust we have built, across all the different pillars of our work, we are able to develop innovative initiatives which we believe can make a significant contribution to a more stable Gulf-MENA region, Europe, and United Kingdom.

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