

From Secret Synagogue to White House, UAE-Israel Ties Burst Out in 2020 By Jonathan H. Ferziger

JERUSALEM -- Standing on the White House lawn in September, watching the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain sign a groundbreaking peace agreement with Israel, I marveled at how once-unthinkable developments arrived this year at warp speed.



Decades of hostility first gave way to secret business and intelligence relationships, which gradually came to public knowledge unofficially and have now burst into the open with the Abraham Accords, promising a whole new range of connections across the Arab-Israeli divide.

I've watched these changes happen over the past several years of traveling between Israel and the UAE. For example, Israelis, Jewish prayer services and kosher food have long been present in the United Arab Emirates. It just wasn't easy to find them.

I found my way to Dubai's once-secret synagogue in 2016 through a WhatsApp message. There was no sign on the entrance to the small residential villa near Jumeirah Beach where weekly Sabbath prayers were held, no helpful website or public Facebook page with contact information for visiting travelers. Just whispers. A friend from Hong Kong told me to call a Belgian colleague who put me in touch with a South African acquaintance who was a leader of the Dubai Jewish community and asked me lots of personal questions before texting me with directions. I am a dual U.S.-Israeli citizen, who was born in New York and worked as a reporter based in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv for almost three decades.

Once inside, I was greeted with intoxicating warmth. After lighting sabbath candles, synagogue members joyfully sang the traditional hymns of the Friday night prayer service and then invited me and other guests for a delicious communal meal prepared in the villa's strictly kosher kitchen. Reflecting Dubai's expat society, I met people around the dining table from London, New York, Antwerp, Capetown, Paris, Melbourne and Tel Aviv. While gracious and inquisitive, they were unanimous about one thing upon learning I was a journalist: Do not write a word about us. Please.

I wasn't surprised and assured them I wouldn't breach their confidence. While Jews have historical roots in many Arab countries, the region became increasingly hostile in the early 20th century, especially with the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948. Along with hundreds of thousands of Arabs fleeing Palestine -- known as the *nakbah* -- similar numbers of Jews were displaced from Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Morocco and elsewhere in the Arab world. Israelis and Arabs fought five wars and endless smaller battles, with animosity building through the generations. While

distant from Israel's border, the UAE and other Gulf states poured financial support into the Palestinian cause and observed an economic and cultural boycott of Israel.



That's why the steps taken this year to open direct ties with Israel were so dramatic. While Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel as far back as 1979 and Jordan followed in 1994, both countries have kept the relationship restrained, engaging at the government level but limiting people-to-people ties. The policy dictated that warmer connections could proceed only when Israelis and Palestinians finally resolve their conflict. Over the past four years, those peace efforts have stalemated.

The UAE decided to do things differently. The Abraham Accords announced in August call for a broad range of ties with Israel, including diplomatic recognition, defense cooperation, business partnerships, scientific research, educational exchanges, religious study, sports and cultural events. Both countries are making efforts to encourage tourism, establishing direct airline routes, negotiating visa-free entry and stressing their desire to cultivate warm relations. Although Palestinians condemned the agreements, Emirati officials insist they haven't abandoned the Palestinians and would like to play a greater role in helping to resolve the wider conflict. Indeed, they made a suspension of Israeli plans to annex almost 30 percent of the West Bank the quid pro quo for the UAE's agreeing to the whole diplomatic package.

The official announcement followed years of unpublicized efforts to forge ties between the UAE and Israel, including the welcoming of Israeli diplomats, business executives and athletes. Dual citizens like me were admitted at the airport with our non-Israeli passports. An intermediate step was inviting Israel last year to set up a pavilion for the Dubai Expo. Another path was paved through interreligious contacts in which the Emirati government preached tolerance toward Judaism and encouraged the local Jewish community to emerge slowly from secrecy. I was given the signal by local Jewish leaders at the end of 2018 that it would be okay to publish a story about the [community](#). Plans were unveiled for the monumental Abrahamic Family House, a multifaith compound in Abu Dhabi that will feature a mosque, a synagogue and a church built alongside one another.



Just two months ago, I traveled as a reporter to Washington and watched with a degree of amazement as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stood beside

U.S. President Donald Trump and [signed the Abraham Accords](#) on Sept. 15 with UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani. On the White House's South Lawn, I talked to politicians, business executives, rabbis, imams and journalists who were ecstatic about the new atmosphere in which they were able to mix openly.

These days, Israelis by the thousands are [booking tours](#) to visit the UAE through Fly Dubai and El Al Israel Airlines. Emirati television reporters take Muslim viewers into the synagogue to learn about Jewish life and the [Armani Kaf](#) restaurant serves kosher *shish taouk* grilled chicken at the base of Dubai's Burj Khalifa skyscraper.

Along with other dramatic political and cultural changes taking place as the UAE celebrates its 49th National Day, such as the November [reform package](#) liberalizing laws governing non-Emiratis, the Abraham Accords are a significant milestone. While the road to a comprehensive regional agreement has proven long and cursed with setbacks, the UAE's efforts to cultivate warm ties with Israelis and the Jewish community offer a glimpse of how peace could transform the Middle East.

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