

WARM PEACE IN THE MAKING – EXAMINING P2P RELATIONS TWO YEARS TO THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

The Abraham Accords have offered a new and different model for regional relations and already shaped a different reality in the region by offering a dynamic of cooperation in just about all fields: business, security, diplomacy, tourism, and People-to-People (P2P) relations. However, there is more than meets the eye when it comes to bridge building between people and cultures following decades of animosity and some of the initial effort to build these bridges had actually backfired. This article seeks to analyze the challenges and opportunities of P2P relations under the framework of the Abraham Accords and to point toward a more constructive path that will enable them to develop and flourish.

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The Abraham Accords, now past their second anniversary, have offered a new and different model for regional relations and, in many ways, have already shaped a different reality in the region. The accords have thus far offered a dynamic of cooperation in just about all fields: business, security, diplomacy, tourism, and People-to-People (P2P) relations. However, there is more than meets the eye behind the headlines and statements on tolerance, and there are still challenges that must be addressed, particularly when it comes to people-to-people (P2P) relations, where our work has only just begun.

The Accords were crafted in a very different spirit than the earlier peace agreements between Israel, Jordan, or Egypt. The Camp David Agreement of 1978 outlined plans to establish normal relations between Egypt and Israel, including diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties. Furthermore, in 1982, a cultural agreement called for the establishment of two academic centers in order to promote cultural exchange between the two countries. Despite the fact that these P2P relations remain essentially nonexistent. Although an Israeli Academic center has been established in Cairo, Egyptian intelligence makes it clear that Egyptians are not welcome there. Similarly, the Egyptian academic center in Tel Aviv remains unopened after 40 years.

A very different energy permeated the multilateral relations that followed the Abraham Accords. In the years since the signing of the agreement, over 127 memorandums have been signed, establishing new connections, trade, and collaboration in various fields. These new ties have resulted in increased trade between Israel and the UAE by \$1.46 billion. In March 2021, the UAE announced the establishment of a \$10 billion investment fund for Israeli companies. In fact, in 2021, trade between Israel and other Abraham Accords members increased by approximately 222 percent, totaling \$900 Million. In 2022, following a free trade agreement, it is expected to cross the \$2 billion mark.¹

Furthermore, several significant collaborations were formed in the field of health, education, tourism, and even people-to-people connections, with plans to foster further collaborations in the fields of academics, culture, and sports. During peak season, over 30 flights per week transport Israelis, Emirates, and Bahrainis across the Gulf (with Qatar opening its gates just in time for the World Cup and Saudi Arabia allowing planes to fly over).

We have witnessed some of these newly formed academic and peer-to-peer relationships during our engagements. We have repeatedly encountered a positive,

¹ Asher Fredman and Robert Greenway, "Abraham Accords' true potential goes far deeper than business ties," in *Jerusalem Post*, 6 January 2022. www.jpost.com/opinion/article-691791

open, and friendly atmosphere at Zoom events, meetings, and visits.

However – and despite the good progress made – we should not assume that positive statements and good economic indicators will be able to overcome a well-established discourse of suspicion and animosity that active detractors of Israeli-Arab relations are still feeding. In order to strengthen their relationship and gain a better understanding of one another, the Abraham Accords partners should also incorporate the lessons learned from previous efforts.

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Despite the warm statements, the relationship between the parties to the Abraham Accords remains primarily on the governmental level. Cultural exchanges, student or other “cultural experience” programs are only in their incubated phase. Some P2P programs that began with much enthusiasm as the accords were signed were eventually rolled back or terminated. Non-profit organizations in Israel were among the first to jump into the Abraham Accords wagon, searching for partners in the Gulf without realizing why their emails were not being answered. Israeli and Jewish organizations established some of the first P2P encounters while inviting delegations from the Gulf to visit the holy land. Dramatic images of white Kandoras in Jerusalem and Temple Mount quickly surfaced.

One Gulf delegation to Jerusalem was instructive on this issue. While Kandoras in Jerusalem spoke to Jewish and Israeli-Jewish audiences, the optics of the visit created unneeded friction with the Palestinians. Likewise, a lack of protocol for coordinating such trips made the Israeli delegations and the organizations that facilitated them unwelcome guests in several Emirati and Bahraini corridors. This mismatch continues, as the majority of the civic society organizations associated with the Accords were founded by Jews and Israelis who were quick to respond to what was seen as a significant validation of their presence in the Middle East. In contrast, their Arab counterparts were still unprepared to move forward, given the situation’s complexities domestically, and they lacked the necessary structures to engage in P2P work.

Few Israelis have noticed or acknowledged the differences in pace and style between their country and the Gulf. Moreover, in the rush and excitement, many Israelis may have failed to recognize that the corresponding situation in the Gulf among their Arab counterparts presented a more complex reality. For example, the Emirati and Bahraini ambassadors declined to meet with the civic society delegations that arrived in Israel. The relevant ministries responded similarly to these overtures by sending a lukewarm message regarding the P2P efforts. This was not done for lack of will to encourage or support P2P work but rather as an attempt to navigate and establish a 'protocol' that will put it on the right track. After all, these initiatives were managed as a P2P effort and not under the blessings of the government involved, which put the relevant embassies in an uncomfortable position. Still, two years into this work, this protocol is not yet established.

Another considerable challenge is the asymmetric flow of visitors. In the first four months following the signing of the agreement, 130,000 Israelis flooded into the UAE.² In contrast, only 130 Emirates and Bahrainis made the other way, mainly on official business rather than as tourists. Two years later, these numbers have not significantly changed. On the one hand, it is not surprising that Israelis would take advantage of traveling to one of the few open destinations available to them in the Middle East, as they did previously in Türkiye. Many Israelis seemed to view Dubai as the second promised land, a magical Arab place of acceptance where they could feel at ease – even when they travel without meeting a single Emirati. For the Gulf partners, however, the result was more complex, and they still hesitated to go. The few Gulf visitors who slowly began exploring Tel Aviv started to discover Israeli realities in some less-expected ways. Tourists from the UAE receive a text message from their government welcoming them to Israel while asking them not to cross the green line, enter Palestine, Jerusalem or visit the Temple Mount where some Emiratis were greeted with insults as they made their way to prayer. Two Emiratis were briefly arrested while running from a shooting scene in Tel Aviv last August, mistakenly identified as terror suspects. The numbers follow suit. Israeli Tourism Ministry data show that since only 3,600 tourists from the UAE, Morocco and Bahrain have visited to Israel in the past six months.³

Nor has this been the only roadblock. Despite the good intentions, Israeli security protocols and administrative shortcomings have made the basic process of obtaining a visa difficult for Emiratis and Bahrainis. In contrast to Israelis who can obtain a

² Statement by Israeli Ambassador to the UAE, Eitan Naeh, in Mahmoud Mohamed Barakat, "About 130,000 Israelis visited UAE since normalization," in *Anadolu Post*, 2 January 2021.

³ Hadar Kane, "Abraham Accords Two Years On: Israelis Flock to Dubai, but Where Are the Emirati Tourists?" in *Haaretz*, 15 September 2022, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-15/ty-article/highlight/abraham-accords-two-years-on-israelis-flock-to-dubai-but-where-are-the-emirati-tourists

visa to the UAE, Morocco, or Bahrain through a simple process on the internet, the reverse process involves complex forms and interviews. Colleagues who have attempted to pursue a visa to travel to Israel eventually changed their minds after attempting to navigate this lengthy process until the visa waiver program was introduced at the end of last year. Negative airport experiences were added to that list as some travelers reported humiliation and anxiety rather than a welcoming feeling as their first Israeli experience.

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Even though the average Israeli may enjoy seeing the Israeli flag waved in Dubai and the ability to find Kosher food, few seem to have contemplated what else a “warm peace” can look like and what else needs to be done to enhance P2P relations on both sides. In other words, while P2P ties have continued to develop, they have sometimes fallen out of sync with the official process of the Abraham Accord, and it is still unclear which government entity is supposed to lead that charge.

After being isolated from their Arab neighbors for a long time, Israelis are now eager to explore their cultures. They also wish to extend a warm welcome to the people of the Abraham Accords—but may not have the cultural awareness to do so. As for the Arab side, the past and current public opinion make them more cautious. Some welcome these new spirits of change, others are unhappy but keep it to themselves, and the rest shout their rejections from the rooftops. On all sides, it is essential to remember that there remains a lack of familiarity with the other. Both parties operate differently and are subject to different internal sensitivities.

At a stage where political distrust still exists while a track record of successful and warm peace between Israelis and Arabs does not, it is also vital to ensure that P2P work will be granted with the right sail-wind. History matters, and mutual decades-long demonization cannot be ignored. Attempting to bring these societies together just with the hope that its will “magically work” cannot serve as a working assumption.

P2P relationships have a great deal of value, which suggests that the relevant

government structures should pay attention to them, back them, and support them. In an environment where official government approval is sought for most things, going against the established structures is unlikely to succeed. However, if sustained, civic Society work and P2P relations can serve as the needed bridge between societies in the region and help convey our similarities, differences, cultures and even the everyday habits of conducting life and business. This will enable us to build the partnership we need.

To ensure the success of the Accords, it is crucial to understand that the relationship between societies and the relationship between governments must be developed in tandem. The hope for mutual collaboration and success must be carried and shared by the people—but some caution and wisdom must be applied when building these channels so that they will succeed. These efforts are possible, and indeed critical, to the new chapter of history in our region as we march into the third year of the Abraham Accords.