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Religion

Christian

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May 29, 2023 by Sarah Schornstein

The House of Abraham: How the Abraham Accords have become the key to Inter-faith diplomacy and What that means for the Future. ^[1]

In September of 2022, the Chabad rabbi of the UAE, Levi Duchman, married the daughter of the Chief Rabbi of Belgium, Lea Hadad, in Dubai. The couple invited friends from all around the world, Jewish friends and family from Israel and the United States, Christians from European nations and Muslim friends from the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran, Morocco and even as far as Singapore and Nigeria. What resulted was a video that went viral on social media. Two orthodox Jewish men dancing and singing in a group of Jews, Christians and Muslims. The New York Times even published an extensive piece describing the wedding, how it came about and why it was so important to the world in that it brought acceptance to the forefront. But to me, it exhibits something even more.



(Image: New York Times)


The Middle East has always been an incredibly complex region regarding religion. There have always been complex divisions between the Jews, the Muslims, the Christians and minority

populations. But ever since the Abraham Accords peace agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Kosovo and Sudan were signed in the Summer of 2020, something feels different in the region. Not only is there a sense of hope on a secular and business standpoint, but also the inter-faith exchange that has been occurring has been unmatched. Since the signing in 2020, people and acts of faith have been the leaders in executing the Accords every single day.

First, the presence of holy spaces has been one of the top facilitators of inter-faith diplomacy. One of the main factors in creating these agreements was the ability for Gulf Muslims to make pilgrimage to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third holiest place in the world for Islam and signifies where it is believed that the prophet Muhammad went to heaven. Muslim people make trips to Al-Aqsa all year round and more than 150,000 Muslims attend Friday night services at the Mosque per year. Because the Gulf nations did not have any relations with Israel, Gulf Muslims were never able to go and visit the mosque, but now with better international relations, efforts have been in place to bring Muslims to the mosque. On the Emirati and Bahraini side, the Emiratis and Bahrainis are taking bold actions to create Jewish spaces throughout their country. The Emirati government has recently built what is known as the Abrahamic House, a plaza that houses a synagogue, church and mosque that was made to symbolize the increased inter-faith relationships of the Middle East. This is supplemented by the only synagogue in Bahrain, giving a home to Jewish visitors and the increased Jewish residents of the Gulf. In Morocco, as there was a vibrant Jewish community there historically, there are many Jewish spaces throughout the country that Jewish travelers have been utilizing again. In fact, the coastal city of Casablanca has twenty active synagogues and four Jewish schools. The increase in holy spaces for Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Abraham Accords countries have been one of the drivers of inter-faith diplomacy in the region.

This has also been occurring through increased educational opportunities. Israel created a Global Impact of the Abraham Accords Conference in Rome, Italy and the Negev Summit in Israel where inter-faith leaders came and discussed the groundworks for inter-faith peace coming through the Agreements. The United States, UAE and Israel came together this year to open the Trilateral Coexistence Working Group for Interfaith engagement. Also, the Emirates and Morocco have been working hard to implement Holocaust remembrance and Jewish history into their educational curricula from an early age so that way their future generations will become more accepting and want to engage with people of different faiths. In Morocco, their Jewish engagement infrastructure has been in connecting with Israeli Moroccans on the cultural level, reaching out to Israeli universities to create initiatives for students to interact and learn about each other's heritages.

Next, the best part: the food! As the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco are Muslim majority countries, their diets are mostly Halal, following the Muslim regulations of food. The Kosher regulations in Judaism and the Halal regulations are very similar in relation to how the meat is prepared, which means what they can and cannot eat, and what must be done before eating. In Israel, all food is required to be Kosher. Therefore, when Orthodox Jewish people travel to the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, and when Gulf Muslims travel to Israel, they are able to eat mostly anything with very few limitations. When Orthodox Jews travel to places without these rules, they have to bring their own cooking equipment or eat only vegetarian or pescatarian to ensure they are following the Kosher rules, but now they don't have to, driving tourism and business between Muslims and Jews from Israel to the Gulf and from the Gulf to Israel.

Though these extraordinary efforts have been made to make the Abraham Accords the face of inter-faith diplomacy, that does not mean everything is perfect. With the years of hatred of Israel and Jewish people in the Gulf and the limitations on travel from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is going to take years for the public opinion to change and for the fruits of this labor to bear. Though over 500,000 Israelis have traveled  to do business in the Gulf, only 1600 Emiratis, 400 Bahrainis and 2,900 Moroccans have traveled to Israel. This is because there is still a feeling that it is wrong to go to Israel. But with the increased dialogue, I believe that in time those opinions will change, and these relationships will be stronger than ever before.

In conclusion, the Abraham Accords have become the main example of inter-faith diplomacy in the world today. Although things are not perfect, with these changes made to education, economics and actions by the top, the relationships will be the first real step to Middle East peace.
