

Reinventing Diplomacy Amidst Uncertainty

August 2020

Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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In this EDA Reflection, Ambassador Al Ulama recounts the challenges she encountered in taking up her new posting in Berlin during the Covid-19 pandemic. She emphasises how, despite the complications, it provided an opportunity for leadership, solidarity, networking and reinvention.

It was early in 2020. I had my new post assigned and my papers ready with a brand-new diplomatic passport for the new destination: the Federal Republic of Germany. I was very excited and counting the days to the travel to Berlin.

In the meantime, BBC - my favourite news channel - was repeatedly broadcasting the spread of a new virus in China and the beginning of lockdown in Wuhan. Honestly, I didn't take the news seriously and thought of it as a "far and away" case that will fade with time. We had been through SARS and MERS with minor disruption in the past.

We now know that that was not the case.

I reached Berlin and had my first meeting with the protocol department of the German foreign ministry in preparation for submitting my letter of credence to President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. I remember we discussed the details of the ceremony and the number of diplomats who could accompany me. I was looking forward to it.

In Arabic we have a saying that goes like this: "the winds blow in directions not favoured by ships". This is exactly

what happened. During that time, Germany, as many countries in the world, announced a complete lockdown. That put a stop to all kinds of face-to-face meetings. I got confined to the residence of the UAE in Berlin and my meeting with the president had to wait for more than three months.

Basically, I was stuck and in limbo. I was the "appointed" but not "accredited" ambassador to Germany. This meant I could not directly solicit meetings and communications with ministers and other high officials. This is indeed the worst situation for an ambassador as it means you are there and not there at the same time! Very confusing and unsettling. Add to that the lockdown and you get a recipe for sloth.

Then I realised I am a diplomat and diplomats don't take no for an answer. Diplomats look for ways to get things done, no matter the conditions.

In the rest of the article I will list lessons learnt from living with constraints in the time of Corona.

1. Leadership and solidarity

Being a diplomat from the UAE has its privileges. As soon as Europe went into lockdown, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC) went into action. We received communications from MoFAIC that comforted us and inquired about our wellbeing.

The cherry on the cake was of course a call from H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was very gracious in asking us individually about our health and about our families back home. Supreme example of diplomacy!

We were also happily surprised when we had a conference call with H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the UAE Vice-President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai. He emphasised the importance of identifying all UAE citizens in our respective countries and help in repatriating them back home.

These calls were like a shot in the arm, that boosted our morale and put us back on track. The message was clear: we are all in this together.

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2. Networking and expanding the circle

The pandemic opened our eyes to new channels in reaching out and doing our job.

We started using the internet to our advantage and unveiled its potential in networking. From the comfort of my living room I started “zooming” with representatives of major associations in Germany, introducing the UAE and the potential for collaboration. At many points we had Berlin, Munich, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Dresden linked together. Some of the panel discussions had more than 60 people in the audience.

In a way, I feel I have emerged from the lockdown stronger with a bigger network and longer mailing lists.

3. Time for reinvention

The lockdown has offered an opportunity for contemplation and self-improvement. In the midst of domestic chores such as washing dishes and doing laundry - my domestic help could not come to Berlin because of travel restrictions - I managed to re-read some of my books and finish reading new ones. I also had ample time to connect with the diplomats at the embassy and discuss the future plan for our work in Germany. One element that prominently factors in our plan is “what if” scenarios.

Despite the lockdown, I felt we had to somehow engage with the society in Germany. We reached out to some humanitarian organisations and offered help and solidarity. We ended up providing over 8,000 masks for needy children during the difficult times. Also, we provided food deliveries to more than two hundred children and their families in areas assigned to migrants in Berlin. Another donation was to support a start-up that provides emergency information in multiple languages, including Arabic, to migrants who need medical support.

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Personally, I took many comforts of modern life for granted prior to the lockdown and the spread of coronavirus. I now know better that the job of a diplomat is to be ready for uncertainty at all times. Diverse conditions should always factor in our work plan.

Eventually, I had the face-to-face meeting with the president. However, the ceremony was low-key and, sadly, no diplomat could accompany me. I had to maintain social distancing and, of course, no shaking hands. Welcome New Normal!

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