

## Meetings: the lifeblood of diplomacy

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### Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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***In this EDA Reflection, Ambassador Abushahab observes that the Covid-19 crisis has revealed the advantages of conducting diplomatic meetings online but at the same time it has reinforced the value of in-person meetings. He notes that one consequence of the crisis may be that diplomats will be better placed to harness the complementarity between both types of meetings.***

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing widespread global disruptions across many fields, big and small. From international trade flows to global transport; from the way we socialize to the way we conduct business. No profession has been spared. The craft of diplomacy has not been an exception.

On the one hand, the global remit and unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that diplomacy and diplomats have played a central role in the response. From informing and repatriating our citizens and residents abroad, to coordinating measures with our allies and partners, to conducting humanitarian and health diplomacy, and aligning on steps to safely restart our economies. UAE diplomats had to adjust quickly to meet these new challenges, jointly with our international partners.

On the other hand, diplomats have been deprived of the prime tool of our craft: the meeting. From international summitry to public diplomacy events, from delegation visits to the chance encounter at a reception, meetings are the lifeblood of diplomacy. Meetings allow diplomats to deliver messages, gather valuable intelligence and information, create familiarity and comfort, build long-

term relations, and defend the UAE's foreign policy priorities. Nothing has been quite the same without "the meeting".

Despite these challenges, UAE diplomacy was able to rise swiftly and efficiently to the new occasion. Our diplomats switched seamlessly from human interactions to digital exchanges and refocused their engagement on new issues, such as health diplomacy. We also adjusted our working procedures and methods, to ensure the safety and security of all embassy staff. I think that we surprised many of our counterparts in Europe with the speed in which we adapted to this "new normal".

In my view, we are unlikely to return quickly to the status quo ante. While we may defeat the coronavirus in the coming six to twelve months, some of the changes it has brought about are here to stay; not all of them bad. While it is early days, 'corona diplomacy' has had some distinct advantages.

Online meetings do not require as much time, as meetings in person. In my case, not having to relocate to go to a meeting easily saves me 45 minutes around each appointment. In principle, this can be an advantage, as it allows for more meetings in a day.

Similarly, counterparts have been more available during this time. In Brussels, officials always have one-thousand-and-one things on their plate. With the reduction in meetings during this pandemic, even these notoriously difficult to reach officials are less occupied than before, enabling me to more frequently exchange views with some of my key counterparts.

The online format is also well suited for technical meetings, of which there are plenty in the European Union, for instance in the fields of finance, the environment, or visas. Conducting these meetings on a video platform has many practical and logistical advantages.

Still, if the corona-crisis has shown anything to me, it is the value of traditional diplomacy. Nothing compares to

a face-to-face meeting in order to build relationships, obtain information, or deliver messages. Online diplomacy allows us to carry on our job under these exceptional circumstances; but it leaves us half blind. What we see is the screen in front of us, but not the complex world around it.

In my mind, this has resulted in a few disadvantages when it comes to the craft of diplomacy.

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Firstly, virtual interactions sometimes lack the spontaneity and authenticity of meetings in person. Pre-COVID, meetings would always offer the opportunity to obtain additional intelligence, stumble upon non-related information, build familiarity not only with principals but also support staff, and discreetly raise side-issues even in the most formal circumstances. Not being able to look a person in the eye, or use body language to emphasize a point, impacts the effectiveness of a personal exchange, and as such, reduces the natural efficacy of diplomacy.

Secondly, limitations on social interactions also make it more difficult for us to speak directly to a wider audience and renew relations with our local partners. Events such as thematic receptions and cultural events are opportunities to showcase the spirit and character of the UAE to a wider audience, renew relations, and forge new bonds. Online events are an interesting addition, as they allow us to reach a different type of audience and are not limited by physical presence in a certain venue. But they are no replacement for these.

Thirdly, being unable to attend official events in person also means that much contextual understanding is getting lost. For example, in my role as ambassador to the EU, I have found that I extract some value from attending key sessions of the European Parliament, to observe the dynamics between the speakers, catch the nuance of body language and read the room. Impersonal video-meetings do not provide for this nuance and contextual knowledge.

Fourth, the current circumstances also limit our ability to network. Currently, my diplomats and I are having many online meetings, e-mail exchanges, WhatsApp conversations and phone calls with our counterparts and other partners. These are mostly with people who we already know, who we have met, and who we built a

relationship with. On the basis of this relationship, it is easier to engage these contacts and, for instance, have them agree to a video call. While we do interact with officials who we have not met before, these meetings are rarer, and they are less likely to allow us to build rapport or expand our network.

Finally, I find that online exchanges tend to be more formal and more scripted. There is universal awareness that not everything that is being said online, may stay online. This is making it more difficult to get the "real story" behind the talking points, or the privileged information that interlocutors are more at ease sharing when in a private, secure and informal setting.

In diplomacy, familiarity breeds comfort. Building this comfort online and from a distance is harder. This is especially the case without prior knowledge of the lay of the land and the situation on the ground. The task of diplomats has therefore become more difficult; mine included. Not having half of my team on the ground is another handicap, especially as things are starting to return to normal.

Being at an embassy as a team of diplomats is a unique pressure cooker of undergoing shared experiences, facing shared challenges, and jumping at shared opportunities. It allows us to gain better knowledge of the jurisdiction we are accredited to. But, most importantly, these experiences and enhanced on-the-ground knowledge make us better representatives for the UAE and its interests.

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There is no question that the practice of diplomacy under COVID-19 is changing. Some of these changes are beneficial and will enhance and enrich the way we conduct diplomacy, but we also need to keep an eye on the value of traditional diplomatic interaction. In my view, the current crisis highlights the complementarity of classic diplomacy on the ground and online diplomacy. Being able to play on both fields effectively, will be key to winning the diplomatic game in the future.