

## Online Dinner Diplomacy!

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***While online tools facilitated diplomatic engagement under lockdown, this EDA Reflection stresses that it is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. It points out that the real-world is where we have chance encounters with important new contacts. Spontaneous conversation, rather than scheduled video calls, is where we might pick up interesting ideas and important information.***

I have hosted many dinners in my time in London. But the one I organised for a group of British politicians last month was a new kind of challenge. Normally I need to think about whether the group around the table will fit together well: can they find a common theme of discussion, will I be helping people make new relationships, are there any rivalries or personal clashes that I need to avoid? The menu, the placement – all these things matter. In the era of COVID, they don't, or not in the same way.

Because of Covid19, it had to be virtual. My team and I were in uncharted territory. How do you cater when guests are scattered across the country? How would the conversation flow, given Zoom does not allow for the side-chats and parallel discussions that are the normal part of any group meal. Would the whole thing feel like just another video conference call that we all spend our time on these days?

I shouldn't have worried. If anything the novelty factor of a virtual dinner added to the occasion.

We got round the catering problem by offering to send food to the homes of the Members of Parliament. Most

### Pandemic Diplomacy Series

preferred to cook their own, so we donated the amount saved to a brilliant charity that sends meals to health workers dealing with Covid19.

I detected a degree of awkwardness from some at eating in front of an iPad screen. I was also conscious that, for some guests at home with their families, we were cutting into their important evening meal time. Nonetheless, the conversation flowed freely and a good time was had by all. One of the MPs even put up a UAE flag as his background and dressed up in a dinner jacket for the occasion! This certainly helped break the ice.

It also highlighted how people think about what to wear, and which books to have on their shelves, in this new age of Zoom. After some experimentation, I generally go for a suit with no tie. It's a small thing, but it can feel strange to be too formally attired whilst sitting at home, particularly when most of my interlocutors forgo the traditional neckwear.

Another lesson I took from this was that labelling our video call as a dinner party – despite the slight awkwardness of eating in front of a camera – had the benefit of making it more informal. Virtual meetings tend in my experience to be shorter and more focussed than face-to-face meetings, with less opportunity to get to know people at a personal level. An informal event, over a meal, gives more time for social engagement.

The dinner was just one example of how the Covid19 crisis has forced everyone to change the way they work. Meetings with government officials, politicians and business figures are out. So too is fact-finding travel outside the capital. No longer can my team and I meet in person. That has been particularly tough given how busy the embassy in London has been helping to repatriate our citizens and coordinating the return of British citizens with the UK government.

So all embassies are exploring how technology can help us, and coming up with some interesting solutions. I attended a "virtual iftar" hosted by the US ambassador to London. Very tactfully, Ambassador Johnson made

this very brief, so that everyone could go and eat with their families rather than in front of their laptops. But again the symbolism of having a virtual meal made it a more informal occasion, with no need for an agenda or specific objective.

I do however also welcome the focussed, time-efficient nature of virtual meetings of the more formal kind, too. Travel time is eliminated, which in a crowded city like London means I can fit in many more meetings to a day. And on the whole, it is easier getting a virtual meeting with parliamentarians and Ministers than it was getting the old-fashioned, physical kind. But I come at these meetings with a clear agenda and without expecting much chit-chat.

Besides the events that I have organised, I've learned from others in which I've been a participant.

Our own Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been running a programme called the Online Cultural Marathon Symposium. I was honoured to have participated in the first one of these. It involved having a fascinating live conversation with Roxane Zand, a senior figure at Sotheby's. Combined with other virtual encounters across the world during a 24-hour period, it formed a day-long expression of UAE empathy and outreach to the cultural institutions that have suffered, much more than diplomacy, from the current crisis.

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In London the mission was fortunate to have a very active UK-UAE friendship organisation called the Emirates Society, with which the embassy works closely. Under its dynamic new chairman, former Middle East minister the Right Honourable Alistair Burt, the society has already run several very successful online events.

One of these was a fascinating conversation between Alistair and HE Omar Ghobash about faith, tolerance and a whole lot besides. It obviously helped to have literary star like Omar. The technology worked seamlessly. Sitting in his study in Bedfordshire, Alistair was able to moderate the Q&A session, calling on members of the society from all over the world, including famous writers and Members of Parliament.

The success of this webinar highlighted one of the few silver linings of the current emergency. There is a large audience of people stuck at home who are hungry for stimulating online events and content. All the more so if it gives them some escape from the relentless churn of Covid-19 news. And, getting speakers from the UAE (or anywhere else in the world) is easier than ever.

Speaking of content, we are doing a lot more on social media. Every day we aim to have interesting and engaging material on the Twitter accounts of both the embassy and my own personal account. With our usual activities curtailed, we need to make the best possible use of the digital tools available to us.

For all the wonders of technology, it's a poor substitute to the face-to-face work of traditional diplomacy.

We can gather people for Zoom calls. But I would rather have the chance to properly break bread with politicians. Or to mingle with members of the Emirates Society, before and after one of their events. We are social creatures. The real-world is where we have chance encounters with important new contacts. Spontaneous conversation, rather than scheduled video calls, is where we might pick up interesting ideas and important information.

So, I am hoping for the world to get back to normal as soon as possible. I am itching to complete the next leg of my plan to cycle the length of the British Isles, which is all about expanding our knowledge of the UK outside London, and telling the story of the UAE to as wide a cross-section of the population as possible.

It won't be a simple return to the status quo, however.

We will continue with many of our new ways of working. We will hold traditional diplomatic events, but will no doubt also stream them for the benefit of those who can't be present. Our social media work will only increase. And, who knows, perhaps I'll tune in to a Zoom call live from my bicycle saddle in the Scottish Highlands!

Dinners, however, will be best kept to the dining room.