

## Practising Crisis Diplomacy

June 2020

### Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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***Highlighting the UAE's message of inclusion even during a period of crisis, this EDA Reflection points out several innovative measures undertaken by the embassy in Washington, including arranging Emiratis and Americans to share a meal via Zoom and discuss Ramadan practices and other cultural traditions.***

Diplomacy is by definition an interactive profession. It requires an ability to talk and listen, to teach and learn, and to observe and act wisely. As the UAE Ambassador in Washington, DC, I engage with US officials and audiences from morning to night. In a flash, coronavirus upended the status quo and forced a complete recalibration of how diplomacy is conducted in an era of physical isolation. What has emerged is a new form of diplomacy, one that is nimble but dynamic enough to create opportunity in the face of uncertainty.

Diplomats at our Embassy will always hear me say the UAE has a remarkable story to tell. At every opportunity, I cheerlead for the progress we have achieved over the years and for the tolerant Emirati society we are building together. We are a country that embraces modernity, while valuing tradition and religion. At social gatherings, we proudly speak about a nation brimming with creativity and collaboration across cultures and faiths, between men and women, amongst Emiratis and non-Emiratis. Our diplomacy is built on the ethos of these UAE fundamental values, one that builds relations based on common values, such as inclusion and tolerance.

The onset of this global pandemic forced the Embassy to reconsider how we project our priorities, albeit using different means. The UAE still has an important story to

tell audiences around the world, even during this period of home confinement and social distancing.

First though, we were faced with a clear crisis that required a response. This emergency superseded all other priorities. International borders were closing down. Airlines were cancelling flights. Emiratis were dispersed throughout the US and the world, and they needed our help. Embassies needed to embark upon a massive repatriation effort of UAE nationals back to the homeland.

Before the outbreak, there were approximately 4,236 UAE nationals in the US. The Embassy, along with various government organizations and our national carriers, Emirates and Etihad Airways, were able to organize special repatriation flights for Emiratis and UAE residents. Today, thousands of Emiratis have successfully returned home. We also worked with the US Mission to the UAE to repatriate 733 American citizens back to the US. In the midst of this effort, I met with Secretary of State Pompeo and made clear that we would assist all US citizens seeking repatriation.

Led by our Deputy Chief of Mission Shaima Gargash and her team, we established a war room operation at the Embassy and at our consulates in New York, Massachusetts, Texas, and California. Our diplomats who normally meet with officials at the State Department or US Congress instead worked to arrange accommodations and travel plans for our citizens. We established a dedicated website and hotlines to provide critical information and expedite the repatriation process. Our social media channels included constant updates to provide important information for our travelers and their families.

After weeks of late and near sleepless nights, we fulfilled our mission and successfully repatriated a large percentage of Emiratis who were able to travel home. This crisis, like no other crises we had experienced before, showcased our diplomats' skillsets, creativity, flexibility and teamwork to overcome unexpected challenges.

As this undertaking was completed, we pivoted back to telling the UAE story but quickly realized we needed to adapt and utilize digital tools to project our message to American audiences. This meant focusing our attention on the Embassy's social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other channels. The increase in volume of relevant and timely content on the official Embassy social media accounts has led to a significant jump in social media engagement, notably on Twitter. Since the Embassy turned to relying on virtual activities, the Embassy's Twitter account gained over 3,000 followers, which is significantly higher than the average monthly increase of 500–1,000 new followers.

The Embassy has worked swiftly to ensure that the content on the Embassy's online properties is appropriate and sensitive to the current moment. With regard to COVID-19 in particular, we have posted new material to highlight the UAE's strong response. In recent weeks, we have launched new webpages that highlight virtual arts and culture experiences in the UAE, as well as opportunities to make virtual connections between Emiratis and Americans in the emerging realm of "esports."

We have also adopted a virtual approach to programming. Our busy calendar of events and activities with partners has evolved to suit an online environment. While we may be apart, digital channels offer us opportunities to connect more, not less.

Along those lines, I have participated in virtual discussions with partners to discuss how we are working with the international community to address the pandemic, and how we can recover together once the crisis passes. In my job as a diplomat, I have sought to highlight the UAE's aggressive public health response, our collaboration with international partners and our commitment to ensuring a strong recovery. These are messages I have highlighted in various virtual contexts, including discussions with members of Young Professionals in Foreign Policy, the Emirates Diplomatic Academy (EDA), the US-UAE Business Council, a virtual interfaith gathering, and an interview with the Washington, DC news publication The Hill.

## **The UAE still has an important story to tell audiences around the world, even during this period of home confinement and social distancing.**

During the holy month of Ramadan, a targeted programme of content and activities continued to highlight the UAE's message of inclusion. This included virtual 'iftars from afar' – where Emiratis and Americans shared a meal via Zoom and discussed Ramadan practices and other cultural traditions. An interfaith iftar the Embassy hosted along with Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh, the UAE Permanent Representative to the United Nations, and Minister of Culture and Knowledge

Development Noura Al Kaabi, was a meaningful event where spiritual leaders from the UAE and US, spanning religions and faiths, gathered to offer words of prayer. During these challenging times, this hour of uplift was both powerful and inspirational for our nearly 400-person audience.

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While the UAE continues to adapt to this new reality, we must also support our friends around the world. As aid shipments totaling over 556 metric tons have gone overseas to more than 49 countries, we have meticulously tracked this information and developed a series of factsheets documenting this humanitarian assistance. In the US, the UAE has donated coronavirus test kits to the American government. We are partnering with the state of Nevada to roll-out high-volume testing. We are supporting the Children's National Hospital in Washington, DC which launched a drive-up/walk-up clinic test location for young people. Also, we are working with charitable organizations in the US capital region, providing meals to health care workers and groceries to underserved communities. It is our duty to support our neighbors. When this period is over, the UAE will be able to proudly declare that we stepped up to meet this historic challenge.

Conducting diplomacy is as vital now as ever before. The work continues even as the world stops. We must think creatively and test the boundaries of our protocol-focused profession to keep building bridges with our counterparts in the American government and with the wider public. We do so with confidence and pride, knowing that we are doing our part to help write the next chapter in the UAE's remarkable story.