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The Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry
Tel Aviv University

The Gulf:
Discovering the Past, Building a Future

The United Arab Emirates. For decades, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has hosted Jewish entrepreneurs, academics, and other professionals from different parts of the world who come to the UAE to do business. Against the backdrop of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and the emigration of most Jews from Arab lands, some of these expatriates kept their Jewish identity secret. Gradually, some Jews came to know each other and formed an informal community that meets for private Shabbat dinners, celebrates Jewish holidays, and shares communal moments of joy and sadness, like the birth of a new child or the death of a loved one.

Even before its normalization agreement with Israel, the UAE made overtures to its small Jewish community. Since late 2018, a synagogue has operated openly in Dubai, although under certain limitations for security purposes and in a manner that will not invite criticism from conservative Muslim circles. A Jewish community center was also inaugurated. In 2019, the UAE announced an initiative to build the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, a joint religious complex including a mosque, a church, and a synagogue. Similar in height and their outer façade, but different in their internal design, the three houses of worship, to be completed by 2022, symbolize harmony alongside diversity among the three monotheistic faiths.[11]

While Emirati Jews have enjoyed an inclusive environment in the UAE and even created a special prayer for the welfare of their host country and the protection of its leaders, they could not have imagined the transformation brought about by the Abraham Accords. Indeed, since the signing of the Accords in September 2020, peaceful relations between Muslims and Jews inside the UAE have flourished and entered a historic new phase.

Hotels in the UAE were instructed to provide kosher food to their Jewish and Israeli guests, citizens of the UAE and Israel celebrated Muslim and Jewish holidays together, including a joint Iftar-Lag BaOmer meal, the UAE's Jewish community expanded rapidly to more than 1,000 members, and the first Jewish school will soon open in Dubai.[12]

The most remarkable development occurred in May 2021 when a Holocaust memorial exhibition entitled "We Remember" was unveiled in the Crossroad of Civilizations Museum in Dubai in the presence of the Israeli and German ambassadors to the UAE.

The UAE, an ethnically and religiously diverse country, is not characterized by a history of racism or antisemitism. Still, the exhibition, the first of its kind in the Arab world, was groundbreaking in several respects from a regional standpoint: (a) it replaced the common Holocaust denial in many Arab societies with a recognition of the horrors experienced by the Jewish people; (b)

11 Andrew Thompson, ed., *Celebrating Tolerance: Religious Diversity in the United Arab Emirates* (Dubai: Motivate, 2019), 63–73; Yoel Guzansky and Ofir Winter, "Apolitical Normalization: A New Approach to Jews in Arab States," INSS Insight 1332, 8 June 2020: https://www.inss.org.il/publication/judaism-in-the-arab-world/.

12 TPS, "First-ever Jewish school to open in Dubai," *Ynet*, 30 November 2020: https://www.ynetnews.com/article/SkRfSqGjD.

it offered an alternative approach of empathy towards the "other," instead of the prevailing zero-sum-game dynamics of "competitive victimhood" between the Israeli and Palestinian national narratives[13]; and (c) it paved the way for a new form of intercultural interaction between Muslims and Jews, based on historical evidence rather than ignorance or political biases.

Visiting the exhibition was an overwhelming experience. It features displays on the persecution of European Jews by Nazi Germany from Kristallnacht to the implementation of the Final Solution, photos and exhibits commemorating the 1.5 million Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust, including Anne Frank, and personal testimonies of Holocaust survivors.[14] Ross Kriel, the president of the UAE's Jewish community, said that the exhibition "reflects a new discourse that is emerging in the UAE, which is rooted in mutual respect and human compassion." He added that "the memory of the Holocaust is emotional and moving but, in this context, it provides a source of hope and reassurance."[15]

Notably, the exhibition pays special tribute to Muslims who saved Jews during the Holocaust. For example, it tells the story of the hundreds of Jews who found refuge in Albania in 1943 and were welcomed by its majority-Muslim population. It also tells the story of Muhammad Hilmi, an Egyptian doctor who was studying in Berlin and rescued several Jews from persecution. He was the first Arab to be recognized by Yad Vashem as "Righteous Among the Nations."[16]

In one corner of the exhibition, the Quranic verse "whoever saves one life, saves the entire world" (5:32) is displayed in Arabic and English. Another exhibit features a statement made by the Emirati foreign minister, 'Abdullah bin Zayid Al Nahyan, who called for "coexistence, tolerance, acceptance of others and respect of all religions and beliefs" during a joint visit with his Israeli counterpart to the Holocaust memorial in Berlin in October 2020.

A large colorful mural, created by Israeli and Emirati artists, graces the museum courtyard. It shows two young men, an Emirati and an Israeli, chatting and drinking coffee together against the backdrop of a Dubai sunset. Above them is the word "cousins" in Arabic and Hebrew.

The museum's founder, Ahmad 'Ubayd al-Mansuri, served as a parliament member from 2011 to 2015 and established the museum in 2012 as a private enterprise in a building provided by the authorities. Most of the items exhibited are from his personal collection, and the museum's target audience includes tourists and local school children.

The museum could not have provided a platform for its empathetic messages without the blessing of the Emirati authorities. In recent decades, the UAE made a strategic decision to become a center of freedom of religion, pluralism, and multiculturalism and make "tolerance"

13 For example: Nurit Shnabel et al., "Overcoming Competitive Victimhood and Facilitating Forgiveness Through Re-Categorization into a Common Victim or Perpetrator Identity," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2013), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.04.007.

14 Author's visit to Dubai, May 2021.

15 Dan Lavie and ILH Staff, "As Global Antisemitism Rises, Dubai Museum Debuts Holocaust Exhibit," *Israel Hayom*, 27 May 2021: https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/05/27/as-global-antisemitism-rises-dubai-museum-debuts-holocaust-exhibit/.

16 Zeena Saifi and Celine Alkhald, "This is the first ever Holocaust exhibition to open in the Arab world," *CNN*, 8 June 2021: https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/crossroads-of-civilizations-museum-dubai/index.html.

a fundamental national value. In 2017, it established a ministry of tolerance, and 2019 was declared the "year of tolerance."

The opening of the Holocaust exhibition in Dubai is part of a profound cultural and ideological shift that has taken place in the UAE in recent years and whose continued expansion may support peace-building efforts across the Middle East. The criticism of the exhibition in the UAE and the Arab world was surprisingly restrained, focusing mainly on the timing of its opening, which occurred shortly after the outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas in May 2021.[17] Hopefully, this indicates that the discussion of the Holocaust in Arab societies has become open and legitimate while Holocaust denial is in retreat.[18]

Policy Recommendations

1. **Learn from Dubai's museum.** Israeli and international Holocaust museums, such as Yad Vashem, should learn how to educate Arab audiences about the Holocaust from Dubai's museum. As long as the Jewish genocide is framed as a human tragedy rather than a component of Israel's national narrative, Arabs will be more open to hearing about it, recognizing its credibility, and identifying with its victims' suffering and bravery.
2. **Offer practical support.** Israeli and international Holocaust museums and schools for Holocaust studies should offer Dubai's museum practical support. These museums and schools can donate exhibits, invite Emirati instructors and teachers for training in Holocaust studies, help the UAE build a customized curriculum, and provide the museum with teaching materials in Arabic, such as translated documentaries about the Holocaust.
3. **Engage Arab partners.** The Israeli Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Jewish organizations should engage with Arab partners in their fight against racism and antisemitism. Historically, Jews and Arabs were regarded as Semitic peoples, and Hebrew and Arabic are Semitic languages. These shared historical, cultural, and religious roots, acknowledged as part of the Abraham Accords' spirit, may lead both sides to embrace a common moral stance.
4. **Official and unofficial visits.** Israeli officials and Israeli and Jewish tourists should be encouraged to visit the Crossroad of Civilizations Museum to promote its activities, demonstrating their support of the Emiratis' initiative and shared commitment to educating Emiratis about the horrors of the Holocaust.

–*Dr. Ofir Winter*

Bahrain. The visibility of Jews in Bahrain's public space has become more prominent since the Gulf kingdom became a signatory to the Abraham Accords. The country's leadership has been instrumental in this, actively participating in fostering public Jewish life in the country.

17 See, for example, a tweet by Emirati academic, Rafia Ghubash: https://mobile.twitter.com/drrafeah/status/1398230006615130113.

18 Robert Satloff, "The Crumbling Walls of Arab Holocaust Denial," WINEP Policy Analysis, 8 April 2021: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/crumbling-walls-arab-holocaust-denial.

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