

**“REIMAGINING THE MIDDLE EAST”**  
**AJC SEATTLE JUDGE LEARNED HAND DINNER HONORING MATTHEW BERGMAN**  
**OCTOBER 24, 2022**

Thank you for that generous introduction, Chairman Smith. And thank you, AJC Seattle, for inviting me to take part in honoring Matt Bergman – a devoted and accomplished seeker of justice and fairness – with whom I was privileged to travel to the Middle East last month to celebrate the opening of AJC Abu Dhabi: The Sidney Lerner Center for Arab-Jewish Understanding...to mark the second anniversary of the Abraham Accords, that historic agreement that normalized relations between Israel and two Arabian Gulf states...and, more broadly, to continue our pursuit of a similarly noble cause, the cause of Arab-Israeli peace.

This is a cause the American Jewish Committee has been seeking to advance for decades – and will continue to advance under our new CEO, former Congressman Ted Deutch. It has been at the core of my work for the organization since 1991, and it has been fueled by the passion and dedication of thousands of AJC leaders and colleagues who have been advocates for Israel’s security, and its fair treatment in the community of nations, in meetings with elected officials and diplomats and civil society partners...and many of whom have traveled with AJC in the Arab world to explore opportunities to advance peace.

I’m so pleased to count Matt Bergman and Eileen Glasser Wesley and Mark Wesley, and Jim Polack and Rosanne Lapan and Deborah and Doug Rosen among the AJC activists from Seattle who have made this journey. I expect others in this room, perhaps alone or with other organizations, have done so as well – and I know that the expanding circle of Arab-Israeli peace will draw even more of us to the region in the months and years to come.

I’d like to devote my time with you this evening to talk about that expanding circle of Arab-Israeli peace: how we reached the current point, what it means for us and for the people of the region, and where we go from here.

Is it really possible to “reimagine the Middle East,” a region that for most of our lifetimes has been more or less synonymous with conflict, with bloodshed, with despair?

The answer is yes. It will not be easy. It will not be a straight line. I can’t give you the date when a new and peaceful and universally and equitably prosperous Middle East will be achieved.

But I can tell you where it is starting, where it has already emerged. And I can trace a route that, if the Abraham Accords and other regional efforts generate visible, tangible benefits for the people of the region, will lead to a very different, a truly hopeful and transformed, future.

Israel’s recognition by the Arab world as a legitimate entity and a potential partner traces back, of course, to Anwar Sadat’s historic and courageous visit to Israel in November 1977, which led to the Camp David Accords of September 1978 and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of March 1979. It was also in 1979, you’ll recall, that the Shah of Iran was forced into exile – and that once Western-oriented nation devolved into the radical Islamic Republic, sending shockwaves throughout the region.

But it took more than a decade longer, and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the American-led expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, for the next transformative event – the Middle East Peace Conference of October 1991, engineered by the United States, in which Arab states, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Israel met at a convention center in Madrid and laid the groundwork for a new order in the region, for mutual recognition and cooperation to resolve common challenges.

I was privileged to represent AJC at that conference, and at the follow-on conference in Moscow in January 1992 that launched the multilateral phase of the Middle East peace process, and I will tell you that although the mechanisms for regional peace designed and put in place three decades ago were nearly all abandoned in the following years – as Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts foundered, as Iranian aggression surged, and as extremists across the region made accommodation and compromise politically dangerous – the regional challenges remained, and, in fact, grew. And over the course of that period, wise leaders came to the realization that the spirit of cooperation and integration that had been summoned in Madrid had to somehow be recaptured.

What Matt Bergman and I and others saw last month when AJC was last in the Gulf was living proof of that spirit's reawakening.

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, the only country in the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council that has an indigenous Jewish community, we visited – or revisited – the recently restored synagogue in what used to be the Jewish quarter of Manama. Until a few years ago, it was a non-descript, unrecognizable shell of a building, unequipped and almost never used; it is no longer invisible, has been furnished, has a bookcase full of prayer books, bears a sign declaring it the “House of Ten Commandments,” and has a Torah scroll in a handsome ark.

We met with the Dr. Abdullatif Al Zayani, the foreign minister of Bahrain – whose predecessor, Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, who served for 15 years and is a dear friend, is rightly seen as one of the fathers of Gulf normalization with Israel – and we heard about his and King Hamad's vision for expanding trade; tourism; educational, medical, and cultural exchange; and security cooperation with Israel. We also heard about the dangers posed to Bahrain and to Israel by the aggressive, revolutionary regime in Iran – and the promise offered by the Memorandum of Understanding signed earlier this year by the Defense Ministers of Bahrain and Israel.

We had an inspiring roundtable discussion at the Mohamed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa Academy for Diplomatic Studies, the three-year-old training center for Bahraini diplomats, where some 15 novice foreign service officers spoke with us about their hopes, their expectations, for a re-shaped, newly integrated, re-imagined Middle East.

We were the honored guests at a reception hosted by the United States Ambassador to Bahrain, Steve Bondy, whom Matt addressed on our behalf, and who used our visit as an occasion to remind some 50 Bahraini officials, civil society representatives, and diplomats from other countries of the priority given to the Abraham Accords by the U.S. government – and, importantly, the commitment of the American people, whom our delegation represented, to peace and prosperity in the Middle East.

Before we left Bahrain, we spent several hours at NAVCENT, a vast military base that is the headquarters of the naval arm of the U.S. Armed Forces Central Command, where sailors and officers of Israel now drill and operate alongside counterparts from across the Arab world, and we heard about the

emerging security architecture of the region, in which Israel is playing an increasing – although not always visible – role.

Following our two days in Bahrain, Matt and Eileen and Mark and I and some 80 AJC colleagues spent most of a week in the United Arab Emirates – where, again, the spirit of cooperation I first encountered more than 30 years ago in the Madrid peace conference was on full display.

We learned from the Minister of State for Foreign Trade, Dr. Thani Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, of the UAE projections for rapidly increasing trade with Israel – already at some \$1.6 billion this year and projected to reach \$2.5 billion before year's end, with the expectation it will grow to the eye-popping figure of \$10 billion in five years.

We learned from the Israeli ambassador to the UAE, the Israeli Consul General in Dubai, and the United States Chargé d'Affaires about the routine and expanding cooperation across a wide range of sectors – and about the trilateral U.S.-UAE-Israel working groups in the process of being launched to encourage sharing of agro-tech, water management, and food security practices, and to foster interreligious understanding.

In the offices of one of the two main sovereign wealth funds, we learned of the appetite for new UAE investments in Israel – on top of a \$1 billion investment in Israel's natural gas exploitation and an ambitious program to underwrite the construction of a solar energy farm in Jordan that will supply electricity to Israel in exchange for additional volumes of drinking water from a desalination plant to be built on Israel's Mediterranean coast.

We met with young Emirati lawmakers – members of the country's Federal National Council – and with young Emirati diplomats in training, in small-group discussions at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, and came away with the same thrilling sense of possibility, of the dawning of a new era of solidarity, of interdependence, that crossed the old, impassable lines between nations and faiths.

We received in-depth briefings on the plans for the UAE's nearly completed Abrahamic Family House, a complex that will embrace adjoining and majestic houses of worship – a mosque, a church, and the Moses Ben Maimon synagogue – and is set to officially open early next year. The UAE's commitment to interfaith understanding and cooperation, and its intensive efforts to reach out to...to welcome...Jews is bracing, and a defining characteristic of the reign of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the country's president.

At a gala dinner we hosted for 200 guests at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, we featured a conversation between then-CEO David Harris, who fashioned AJC into a global Jewish advocacy force over the course of his 32-year tenure, and the diplomatic academy's director, Nickolay Mladenov. We were welcomed by a senior Emirati official, the Federal National Council's foreign affairs committee chairman, Dr. Ali Al Nuaimi, who praised AJC for our contributions to peace. But for me the highlight of the evening was the presentation of an AJC award to a far-too-little-known Israeli diplomat, Ambassador Bruce Kashdan, who for more than 30 years traveled quietly across the Arab and Muslim-majority world, opening doors and opening minds to the prospect of engagement with the Jewish state. And he's still doing it.

Bruce Kashdan not only represented his country but counseled me and my AJC colleagues throughout this long period; at times, there were things that an American civil society organization could do that a diplomat could not – certain doors that we could help open. Collaborating with him, in the cause of expanding the circle of peace, has been the professional privilege of a lifetime.

This long journey has not been without disappointments and frustrations. To resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one – but by no means the only or central – challenge facing the Middle East, a spirit of mutual recognition and the realization that compromises will need to be made will be necessary – and that spirit and that realization have been in short supply. That has been a source of bitter disappointment, and it has fueled hopelessness and violence.

But the Abraham Accords and now an accompanying process, the so-called Negev Forum, also led by the United States, offer the possibility of progress.

Arab leaders who sympathize with the Palestinian people but have lost patience with fractured and dysfunctional Palestinian leadership need to engage – and be given reasons and incentives to engage – in a constructive way in the resolution of that conflict. After years – decades – of demonizing and isolating Israel, Arab leaders who forge relationships with Israel can create a new dynamic for peace, influencing the course of eventual negotiations and contributing resources that facilitate and reward Israeli-Palestinian interdependence.

The Middle East that AJC has been re-imagining over the last 30 years – alongside brave and visionary Arab, Israeli, and U.S. diplomats, and U.S. lawmakers – is coming into being. With Morocco's decision, three months after the Abraham Accords' signing, to re-establish and upgrade the Kingdom's relationship with Israel, a relationship based not only on strategic considerations but on two millennia of Jewish history in that land, and with Sudan edging toward normalization...and with Saudi Arabia taking preliminary steps, as well, Israel's full integration into its neighborhood is no longer a pipedream. It is happening, and we all are helping to make it happen.

Thank you for the role you are playing, with your presence here tonight, in supporting this important project – the realization of a re-imagined Middle East. And, Matt, thank you, again, for your devotion to this cause. My AJC colleagues and I look forward to your continued partnership and leadership.