Vatican
View from the Vatican
The flags of the United States, Israel, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are projected on a se

The flags of the United States, Israel, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are projected on a section of the walls surrounding Jerusalem's Old City Sept. 15, 2020, as United Arab Emirates and Bahrain sign agreements toward normalizing relations with Israel at a White House ceremony in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Ronen Zvulun)



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One of the signature interreligious achievements of the Francis papacy has been the release of the landmark 2019 document on "Human Fraternity" by the pope and Grand Imam Al-Tayeb of Al-Azhar, leading to a deepening of ties and co-existence between Islamic, Jewish and Christian believers.

But when the Abraham Accords were announced and signed in September 2020 — announcing the historic normalization of relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain — the Vatican remained unusually quiet.

The Accords, which were mediated by the United States, were first announced in the middle of President Donald Trump's 2020 reelection bid and hailed as a major foreign policy breakthrough at the time. The circle has since continued to enlarge to

also include Sudan and Morocco.

While the Accords are primarily geopolitical in purpose, the text is rooted in religion.

Signees recognize that "the Arab and Jewish peoples are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham, and inspired, in that spirit, to foster in the Middle East a reality in which Muslims, Jews, Christians and peoples of all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities live in, and are committed to, a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect."

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Earlier this month, I attended the American Jewish Committee's annual global forum in Tel Aviv, Israel, and throughout the four-day gathering, I was repeatedly reminded of what a significant moment in international relations the Abraham Accords are considered to be. Those sentiments were crystalized when President Joe Biden's current ambassador to Israel, Thomas Nides, went out of his way at the forum to heap praise on the former administration and to stress the Biden administration's goal of expanding the Accords with other countries in the region.

One panel during the forum, however, sought to underscore not just the political benefits of the agreements, but to encourage a deepening of interfaith engagement, as well.

Rabbi David Rosen, who serves as an advisor to the Abrahamic Family House — a newly opened campus in Abu Dhabi that contains a church, mosque and synagogue — said that Israel had been constructed in a way that "allowed and maybe even encouraged religion to become a political commodity instead of a spiritual vision or inspiration."

The Abraham Accords, he noted, provide a chance to rediscover or recommit to a spiritual vision that strengthens interfaith bonds.

Rabbi Noam Marans, who heads interreligious initiatives for the American Jewish Committee, offered a similar perspective, telling me that interfaith relations set the stage for the geopolitical transformation witnessed through the "game-changing Abraham Accords."

"There is an opportunity for interreligious leadership throughout the Middle East and North Africa to utilize religion as a vehicle for sustained and permanent progress that may be less affected by time bound political shifts," he said.

"There is unlimited potential in the Accords' co-sponsorship by the United States, home to a flourishing Jewish-Christian-Muslim interreligious ethic, together with Muslim-majority countries and the one Jewish-majority country, Israel, in seminal places for the birth and emergence of Christianity," Marans continued. "We must seize this opportunity to strengthen the Accords' interreligious foundation as a bedrock upon which its aspirations can be fulfilled."

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>
> — *Rabbi Noam Marans*

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The Rev. Christine Trainor, senior priest of the Anglican Church in Abu Dhabi — who also spoke in Israel about the interfaith dimensions of the Accords — expressed a concern that all of the focus has been on the normalization of diplomatic relations and the economic benefits through new forms of trade and commerce, increased tourism, better educational opportunities and more.

While these aspects of the Accords are laudable, Trainor told me, she also said that it is incumbent upon civil and faith leaders to continue to elevate the Accords' religious and ethical foundations.

"An intentional return and regard for those faith foundations will better keep the Accords from serving economic and security issues only and give them the sacred ground and grit to further religious pluralism, healthy debate, and the chances for authentic, comprehensive and sustainable peace," she said.

Given this enthusiastic support from these religious voices, what then to make of the Vatican's initial reluctance to give the Accords a full-throated backing?

I put the question to Rosen, who said the Vatican was simply being cautious and wanted to see how the Accords might play out among the Palestinians.

Given that Middle East peace has long been at the heart of the Vatican's diplomatic efforts, including a push for a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine, there have been concerns that the Accords would spark outrage over the fact that some Arab states had recognized the independence of Israel, although a notable condition of the deal was for a temporary suspension of plans to annex parts of the Palestinian West Bank.

In recent interviews, the Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, has offered praise for the Accords, saying that while it is important to ensure that Palestinians are not isolated, normalization and reconciliation is a positive development.

And not only that, according to Rosen, who regularly meets with the Holy See officials, "the Vatican would like to see the circle continue to expand."