

# The rabbi in the Gulf

Marc Schneier builds bridges between Jews and Muslims

By Gidi Grinstein

**WITH THE** Middle East in turmoil, Israel and Arab nations in the Arabian Gulf are seeking common ground in attempts to strengthen relations and ultimately establish diplomatic ties. As Israeli politicians venture into Gulf countries or confer with Arab leaders around the world, most recently in Warsaw, for 15 years there has been one man who has consistently built such bridges on behalf of Israel and the Jewish people in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, making the impossible possible.

His name is Rabbi Marc Schneier, now 60, and he has been meeting with kings, emirs and government ministers with an agenda of peace with Israel and reconciliation among Muslims and Jews worldwide.

How does a modern-Orthodox rabbi from the ultra-chic, celebrity-filled Hamptons become the “rabbi in the Gulf?” Marc Schneier’s trademark is a combination of vision, consistency and determination, with a generous dollop of chutzpah. The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding (FFEU), which he founded in 1989, originally focused on bridging the chasm between African Americans and Jews, but for the past 15 years, this organization has become the global address for Muslim-Jewish relations. His outlook

is captured in a book he co-authored with Imam Shamsi Ali titled *Sons of Abraham*, which was written with the support of His Majesty King Mohammed VI, King of Morocco. The book illuminates how its co-authors came to embrace their pluralistic version of faith. The two shared their outlook with audiences not only in the US but also in Muslim countries including Indonesia, Azerbaijan and Qatar.

As the pioneer of Muslim-Jewish relations, Rabbi Schneier has taken a strong stance not just for Israel and on behalf of the Jewish people but also against Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry. He has assumed leadership roles in the annual Season of Twinning of Mosques and Synagogues across the globe; the Muslims Are Speaking Out campaign against antisemitism; the annual meetings of the Gathering of European Muslim and Jewish Leaders (GEMJL) in Paris and Brussels; multiple unity missions to the United States by Muslim and Jewish leaders from Europe, South America and the Southern Hemisphere; and in the North American Summit of Rabbis and Imams held in New York in 2007. His efforts earned him the honor of becoming the first Jewish leader to be named Grand Marshal of the 2017 Muslim Day Parade in New York.

Schneier’s journey in the Gulf began with his participation at the groundbreaking conference hosted by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia when he launched the Kingdom’s interfaith initiative in Madrid in 2009. Subsequently King Abdullah introduced him to King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain, who introduced him to the Emir of Qatar, who introduced him to the royal families of the United Arab Emirates. He now sits on the boards of most of their interfaith centers. In the last decade, he has keynoted the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) and global interreligious conferences in Israel, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Germany, Ukraine, Austria, France, United Kingdom, Belgium, Mexico, Argentina, Spain and Italy.

Schneier’s outspoken support of Israel makes his position unique. Israel is prominent on his agenda, especially when it comes to building strong political, diplomatic, economic and cultural relations between the Jewish state and Arab and Muslim countries. He is particularly proud of his efforts to enlighten Muslim leaders, especially in Gulf countries, about the centrality of the land of Israel to Judaism. “There used to be a tendency to bifurcate Israel and Judaism. They would say, “we



Rabbi Schneier (sixth from left) and his delegation meet with Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev in early March

have nothing against Jews. It's Israelis and Zionists we have a problem with." They now realize that Israel is at the core of the Jewish faith and it is therefore impossible to separate world Jewry and Israel."

Schneier has used his congregational leadership and pulpit at The Hampton Synagogue to host heads of state, politicians, academics and other dignitaries to promote his outlook. That work was rewarded when King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain invited members of his congregation to be the first synagogue mission to visit the Kingdom and meet with the country's indigenous Jewish community. That remarkable trip took place in February 2018 and the delegation's next stop was Israel, where Schneier, interviewed on TV about the unusual trip, predicted that the Gulf and Israel would establish diplomatic relations within two years. He also anticipated that Bahrain would be the first Gulf State to do so.

Indeed, a few months thereafter, King Hamad and the Royal Court of Bahrain appointed Rabbi Schneier as special advisor to the King, not only with regards to its relations with Israel and the Jewish People but also with regards to preserving and growing the local Jewish community. Shortly thereafter, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates also elicited Rabbi Schneier's help in building Jewish life in their countries. His first project was working with Hassan Al-Thawadi, the Secretary General of the 2022 World Cup, to bring kosher food to Qatar for the prestigious games.

One measure of Schneier's influence is that he has managed to maintain cordial relations with both factions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, on one side, and with Qatar, supported by Oman and Kuwait, on the other side. Indeed it seems that the issues of Israel and the relations with the Jewish People now transcend both sides of that rift.

Schneier's experience gives him a unique perspective on the ongoing debate regarding the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the relations of Israel with the Gulf States. In a 2018 Newsweek op-ed, he claimed that "no matter what we do in the Diaspora to improve relations, our two communities will never be able to fully come together as friends and allies while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict grinds on without resolution." This reality is notwithstanding "broad confluence of interests [of

Gulf States] with Israel in stabilizing the Middle East by ending the danger from Iran." He notes that "many Israelis mistakenly believe that Gulf leadership no longer cares about the Palestinians. There is nothing further from the truth."

However, the good news from Israel's perspective is an important change in nuance. Schneier used to hear Gulf leaders say, "Let the Israelis and Palestinians work out their differences and then call us." Now he hears, "Let the Israelis and Palestinians be in discussion — and at the same time we can discuss establishing relations." Undoubtedly, while much progress has been made, finding a solution to the intractable Palestinian issue is essential for the full success of his life's work.

Schneier repeatedly speaks about the genuine desire of Gulf States for interfaith dialogue and activities. He says that the change in their attitude makes it inevitable for future evolution in their positions vis-à-vis Israel and the Jewish people. This newfound interest stems from two existentialist threats: the diminishing demand for oil, which forces them to diversify their economies, and the security threats from Iran in the war between Sunnis and Shi'ites. The Gulf nations know that Israel can help them in both cases. In fact, a number of Gulf leaders were very direct in telling him, "With our wealth and resources and Israel's brain trust and technology, we could build the most powerful region in the world." Furthermore, Gulf States understand that their relations with Israel and the Jewish community are key for better engagement with the Trump administration and the United States Congress, and for credibly establishing their stature as tolerant open societies.

Some of the stories told by Schneier would have been inconceivable a decade or a generation ago. His current roadmap includes opening synagogues and bringing in kosher food as a part of an ongoing effort of bridge-building among the Abrahamic faiths. Recently, as a guest of the United Arab Emirates, he joined UAE leaders in welcoming Pope Francis to the Arabian Peninsula, where the Muslim Council of Elders and Pope Francis convened the Global Conference of Human Fraternity in Abu Dhabi. This was the first visit of any Pope to that region. Rabbi Schneier addressed this forum, after delivering a Shabbat sermon to the Jewish community in Dubai. It was a historic weekend celebrating the official



Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding

recognition of that Jewish community by UAE officials.

Future relations with Israel also have new horizons. Gulf leaders share their overriding interest and genuine desire to make it happen. They hold diplomatic relations to be a win-win, where they benefit from Israel's technology, while Israel benefits from their economic resources. A senior Saudi official put it to him bluntly, "The kingdom knows Israel is an integral part of achieving their 2030 economic plan." Nothing less. ■

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