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The Untapped Potential of City Diplomacy in Peacebuilding in the Mena Region

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ABSTRACT

Cities can play a significant role in international relations and in building bridges between peoples. This paper examines the role of cities and "city diplomacy" in promoting peace in the MENA region, particularly in light of current challenges and the ongoing reality of tension and war. Drawing from Ibn Khaldun, it highlights the significance of cities as cultural and economic hubs capable of fostering trust among diverse populations. With a focus on the rise of mega-cities, the article argues that urban centers hold unique potential for bridging intercultural gaps through "soft" diplomacy. By analyzing sister-city agreements and city networks, the paper argues that cities can shape a new regional narrative of solidarity. Case studies of Abu Dhabi, Essaouira, and Haifa demonstrate how city diplomacy can promote tolerance and multiculturalism. The paper concludes that cities can play a pivotal role in building sustainable regional peace in the MENA region.

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Introduction

Cities, as centers of life, economy, and culture, can play a significant role in international relations and in building bridges between peoples. Ibn Khaldun, in his famous work, "The Muqaddimah," discusses the importance of cultural connections and under- stands the power of cities as enabling spaces and intermediaries that foster harmonious relations between different groups. In light of the current crisis, it seems that the MENA region is in need of this ancient wisdom more than ever.

The Abraham Accords, signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain in 2020, and later joined by Morocco, Sudan, and Kosovo, marked a new and promising phase in the MENA region. These Accords led to the establishment of

significant collaborations in the political, security, and economic spheres, spurring the process of regional integration. However, the regional crisis that began last October has exposed the chal- lenges and limitations of political and economic col- laborations, which have not fully bridged the gaps experienced in the public consciousness across the MENA region. These gaps are not merely a byprod- uct of the current crisis, but are rooted in deep intercultural differences. The persistence of these gaps points to the crucial need for mechanisms and channels of civil, pragmatic, and "soft" cooperation that will strengthen connections between peoples. Through these mechanisms, it will be possible to build trust and establish a broader and deeper foundation among the people of the region, which will help ensure the continuity and sustainability of regional relations, even in times of crisis.1

In this regard, the integration of city diplomacy practices at the municipal level may be the con- necting link between the regional and national agendas and the region's inhabitants, most of whom live in urban areas. The city provides an organized platform for creating connections and partnerships with local, national, regional, and international actors. In the municipal system, there is extensive experience in integrating civil forces as part of urban activities. This includes religious, tribal, or community leaders; community-based organizations; youth, women, and minority groups; educators and trainers; parent associations, and more. However, it seems that cities in the MENA region have yet to recognize their potential for the development of regional and international civil con- nections. The aim of this paper is to examine the unrealized capabilities of cities and local authori- ties to enact change by promoting civil connections between communities, cultures, and religions in the region as part of the peace-building process.

Emerging Regional Urbanism: Mega-Cities and Metropolitan Areas

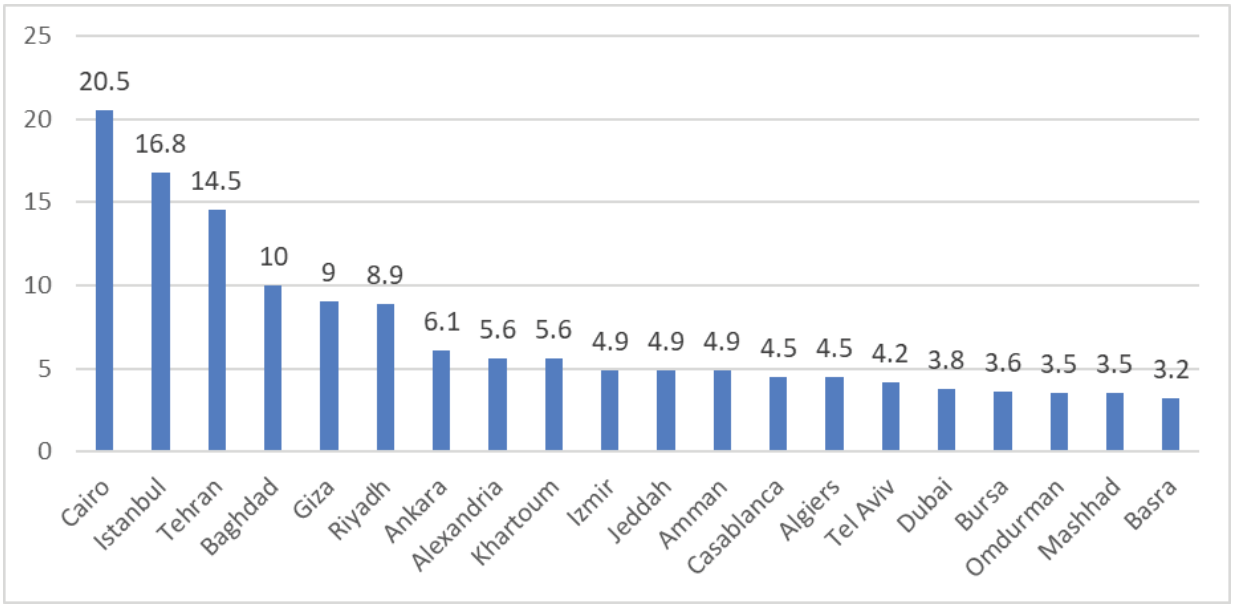
The MENA region has experienced an accelerated process of urbanization in recent decades, with more and more residents moving to large cities. However, urbanism is not new in the MENA region, where the first cities in history emerged about 4,000 years ago. Uruk, Abraham's city in pres- ent-day Iraq, Jericho in the West Bank, and cities such as Memphis and Thebes in Egypt are just a few examples.

In cities, it's all about the people who live in them. As of 2022, roughly 279 million people in the MENA region live in urban cities, constituting about 60% of the region's total population. The urban popu- lation is expected to reach about 362 million by 2035, with an annual growth rate of 2.2% in cities compared to 1.8% for the overall population in the region.2

This trend is reflected in the MENA region with the emergence of mega-cities, where more than 10 million residents live, such as Cairo (20.5 million),

Istanbul (16.8 million), Tehran (14.5 million), and Baghdad (10 million). In addition, there are metro- politan cities such as Riyadh (8.9 million), Ankara (6.1 million), Casablanca (4.5 million), Tel Aviv (4.2 million), and Dubai (3.8 million), where millions of residents live. In total, the MENA region has about 70 cities with populations exceeding one million.

These cities have become major population cen- ters home to young and dynamic populations, thus evolving into centers of culture, economy, employment, and education. Living in large cities provides access to new markets and exposure to new fields, such as technology, communication, tourism, and financial services. The population size in these cities is a key factor in their devel- opment as knowledge and technology centers, their ability to drive deep local changes, and their ability to address national and global challenges. Mega-cities, alongside other metropolitan areas, have become global centers that enhance the role of cities in driving profound changes at the local, regional, and international levels.3



Graph 1: Mega-Cities and Metropolitan Areas in the MENA region4

Sister-City Agreements and City Networks in the MENA Region

Sister-city agreements, or 'twin city' agreements, are formal bilateral arrangements between two cities, typically based on a memorandum of understanding signed by the mayors of the cit- ies involved. These agreements generally include broad statements of friendship and fraternity as well as agreements on collaborations in areas such as education, culture, tourism, environment, and more.5

The nature of city-to-city connections and their will- ingness and ability to operate in the regional and international arenas varies from country to country and city to city. This variability depends on struc- tural factors such as the size of the country, the type of government, the presence of large urban population centers. It also depends on the degree of independence of city mayors, laws regarding a city's authority to create policy on foreign relations, and the existence of district divisions involved in regional and international development. At the city level, factors such as the city's size, whether it is a capital city, its position as a center for tourism and trade, and its cultural and heritage assets also play a role. However, urban characteristics affect- ing inter-city relations may also vary depending on the purpose of the collaboration.6

NumCountrySister-Cities AgreementsAgreements with MENA Region Cities1Turkey79591(11%) ,2Israel3664(1%) ,3PA16537(22%) ,4Morocco13232(24%) ,5Iran10029(29%) ,6Tunisia10036(36%) ,7Egypt5714(25%) ,8Jordan3812(32%) ,9Algeria318(26%) ,10UAE258(32%) ,Total1809271(15%) ,NumCountrySister-Cities AgreementsAgreements with MENA Region Cities1Turkey79591(11%) ,2Israel3664(1%) ,3PA16537(22%) ,4Morocco13232(24%) ,5Iran10029(29%) ,6Tunisia10036(36%) ,7Egypt5714(25%) ,8Jordan3812(32%) ,9Algeria318(26%) ,10UAE258(32%) ,Total1809271(15%) ,An initial mapping of sister-city agreements signed between cities in the MENA region and beyond pro- vides a general overview and identifies the coun- tries where urban diplomacy is particularly prom- inent. The following table presents the ten leading countries in the region by the number of sister-city agreements signed by their cities.

Table 1. Countries with the Highest Number of Sister-City Agreements in the MENA Region7

At the top of the table, Turkey stands out with a significant lead over other countries in the region, with 795 agreements. This notable figure may indi- cate the implementation of urban diplomacy as a policy driven from a national-governmental level. A deeper examination of the Turkish case reveals that 90% of these agreements were signed after the Helsinki Summit in 1999, primarily with Euro- pean cities. This trend likely reflects the use of

urban diplomacy as part of a long-term national strategy to strengthen civil, economic, and cultural connections between Turkey and various regions in Europe, thus improving Turkey's chances of joining the European Union. This is not the first time Turk- ish cities have been at the forefront of diplomatic activity as a strategy for joining an international organization. In 1958, the city of Konya in Turkey and the city of Torrance in the United States estab- lished a sister-city agreement as part of the Mar- shall Plan and Turkey's accession to NATO.8

Following Turkey are Israel with 366 agreements and Palestine with 165 agreements—two fas- cinating examples of relatively small countries in terms of land

area but with significant urban assets. Israeli and Palestinian cities hold consid- erable religious importance for Jews, Christians, Muslims, and adherents of other religions such as Druze, Bahá'ís, Ahmadis, and others. The heritage and religious assets found in cities like Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth make these Palestinian and Israeli cities significant attractions, encourag- ing many cities worldwide to establish sister-city agreements with them. Additional factors include the presence of active and engaged diasporas, as

seen with Israeli and Palestinian peoples, and the emotional connections that encourage private individuals to initiate city-to-city connections. Fur- thermore, the political significance of these cities acts as a driving force for inter-city collaborations as a means to gain official recognition, symbolic support, and "softer" solidarity.

Next in the table is Morocco, with 132 sister-city agreements, primarily with cities in France (29), Portugal (14), China (10), Spain (10), Palestine (9), and Tunisia (9). This distribution reflects Moroc-

co's strong connections with France, Portugal, and Spain, based on a combination of economic and cultural ties, as well as the presence of relatively large Moroccan diasporas in these countries' cit- ies. Sister-city agreements in Morocco are part of a broader strategy to promote national goals through cultural diplomacy. Morocco invests sig- nificant resources in rehabilitating the kingdom's historic cities and preserving their cultural and her- itage assets. Urban cultural richness, in turn, drives economic development through the organization of numerous cultural events and city festivals, attracting tourists and contributing to Morocco's overall branding and the development of economic and trade relations.

Although sister-city agreements are popular, their ability to advance the new regional order in the MENA region is limited. Their effectiveness in pro- moting tangible outcomes depends on municipal budgets and commitment by city officials. How- ever, as shown in the table, most of these agree- ments tend to preserve the previous regional order, including rivalries, separations, and exclu- sion. Therefore, there is a need for creating a com- prehensive multilateral regional framework that can support the process of rapprochement and generate a broader, more open community of cit- ies backed by supportive budgets and resources.

In addition to bilateral agreements, there are also regional and international city-network organi- zations that promote inter-city cooperation and connections with other entities. Today, more than 300 city-networks operate worldwide, covering a wide range of issues. Notable examples include "United Cities and Local Governments" (UCLG), which brings together about 240,000 local authori- ties and cities from 140 countries;9 the "Global Cov- enant of Mayors for Climate and Energy" (GCoM), including about 13,500 cities and authorities;10 and the "Arab Towns Organization," comprising around 650 cities and authorities.11

However, regional participation in these city-net- work organizations is lacking or inconsistent, with few networks serving countries in the MENA region. Internal divisions within organizations often sepa- rate the Gulf region, the Levant, Turkey, and North Africa. For instance, Israel is often associated with

Europe rather than the MENA region in which it is located. Additionally, not all cities in the MENA region enjoy the independent operational free- dom required to actively participate in such orga- nizations.12

City Diplomacy, Cultural Relations, and Peacebuilding

The development of city diplomacy is directly related to a city's pursuit of peace and reconcili- ation. After World War II, the desire to avoid the repetition of conflict encouraged the establishment of diplomatic ties at the inter-city level. Personal connections between citizens were intended to contribute to international understanding, pro- mote reconciliation, and soften the harsh poli- tics between states in the international system. Thus, in the wake of World War II, sister-city agree- ments were primarily established between cit- ies in Germany, France, Poland, and the Soviet Union. In some cases, city connections even led to the establishment of official national diplomatic relations. Since then, city diplomacy has proven effective in building bridges, breaking down bar- riers, changing perceptions in conflict zones, and developing peaceful relations.13 This trend contin- ued through the Cold War, as cities sought ways to break through the "Iron Curtain" and promote cooperation with cities on the other side. An exam- ple of this is the network established between cit- ies in the United States and Eastern Europe, which facilitated cultural, economic, and social collabora- tions that transcended official political tensions.14

Since then, city diplomacy has evolved as cities and local authorities have adopted diplomatic mecha- nisms traditionally prevalent at the state level to establish and maintain international relations. City diplomacy enables cities to focus on local inter- ests, global issues, and challenges directly affect- ing their residents' lives. This approach gives cities a direct impact on issues such as climate change, economic development, migration, and fostering intercultural solidarity. City diplomacy can be

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seen as a subcategory of "parallel diplomacy," where non-state actors also engage in promoting inter- national relations.15

City diplomacy combines intercultural and inter- faith diplomacy to promote cultural relations between cities and to foster interfaith moder- ation and tolerance among different communi- ties. It also includes economic diplomacy aimed at attracting foreign investments, promoting tourism, and strengthening local economic infrastructure through international partnerships. Additionally, humanitarian urban diplomacy addresses the pro- vision of humanitarian aid, support for refugees, and management of crises and emergencies at both urban and intercity levels. These and other aspects highlight the crucial role cities can play in advancing people-to-people relations, peacebuild- ing, and sustainable regional and international cooperation.16

Cities as Catalysts for a New Regional Narrative

To ensure the realization of the vision of the Abra- ham Accords, it is necessary to integrate the strengthening of political, security, economic, and people-to-people connections. Cities must play a role in shaping and spreading a regional narrative of solidarity while quashing notions of conflict and separation. The elements for this new narrative are already present in the region and its historical leg- acy, which is showered with examples of interfaith coexistence between Muslims, Jews, Christians, and adherents of other religions.

Peace is not merely an agreement signed between leaders. It is the result of a set of values embodied in a gradual and sustainable process of change and implementation. Shared culture constitutes an important source of "soft power" in the develop- ment of international relations. It enables the cre- ation of trust, the dismantling of tensions, the pro- motion of shared values and emotional language, and a motivation for action. Cultural connections enable the articulation of a strategic narrative that can strengthen collaborations and enhance resil- ience against obstacles and challenges along the way.

A city is much more than its physical structures, buildings, and streets that shape its form. The significance of the city lies in its ability to develop,

express, and disseminate core values that can serve as a foundation for the new regional narra- tive. These values include tolerance, multicultur- alism, interfaith moderation, respect for others, solidarity, and strong belief in peace. Cities with diverse ethnic and religious populations, or cities with a rich history and legacy, can become a com- munity network of cities, thereby amplifying their multicultural narrative as a central motif in foster- ing the long-awaited regional peace.

The following section includes the case studies of three cities from across the region that have grown to become lighthouses of tolerance, multicultural- ism, and interfaith moderation—Abu Dhabi, Ess- aouira, and Haifa. Each has its own context and characteristics, but share common ground in the values they have chosen to embed in their respec- tive city narratives. Each represents a significant light, yet the untapped potential lies in their col- laboration as part of a regional city-network for the future of the region.

Abu Dhabi, UAE –

From Economic Migration to Multiculturalism

The capital of the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, has experienced a significant demographic shift in recent decades, transforming it into a prominent multicultural and interfaith city in the MENA region. Since the discovery of oil in the 1960s, the city has become a major destination for migrants from Asia and the Muslim world, contributing to a rich variety of cultures, languages, and religions. Abu Dhabi recognized that the traditional national nar- rative based on a single Emirati identity no longer suited the new reality of diverse society. Instead, they adopted a new national story emphasizing cultural diversity as a primary asset.

Abu Dhabi's new model offers a potential solution for sustainable migrant management while main- taining a sense of belonging based on individual contributions to city development, rather than eth- nic identity. The sense of personal security and the separation between economy and politics contrib- ute to Abu Dhabi's success as a new urban model.

The city not only implements multiculturalism within its domain, but also promotes it through- out the region and the world. Examples include the "Abrahamic Family House," an interfaith com- plex that encourages dialogue among Abrahamic religions, and "Hedayah Center," focusing on com- bating extremism and promoting tolerance. The international conferences hosted by Abu Dhabi, such as the "Abu Dhabi Peace Forum" and "Global Forum on Tolerance," demonstrate its impact as a global center for promoting multiculturalism.

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Essaouira, Morocco – Cultural Diplomacy as a Growth Engine

Located on Morocco's Atlantic coast, Essaouria is a notable example of multiculturalism, tolerance, and interfaith moderation. The city has turned its cultural assets into an economic growth engine, pri- marily through numerous cultural events such as the Atlantic Andalusian and the Gnaoua Festivals, which enrich cultural life and fuel the local econ- omy through tourism. The festivals have increased the number of visitors to the city and led to the cre- ation of new jobs. The city's Jewish heritage and its broader multicultural story are reinforced by proj- ects such as "Bayt Dakira," which was inaugurated by HM King Mohammed VI and with the initiative of the King's advisor Andre Azoulay who is also a proud native of Essaouira.17

The strategic decision to invest in the creation of dynamic and living cultural spaces, rather than merely a museum, was a pivotal choice. Today, Essaouira, which was once home to nearly 20,000 members of a vibrant Jewish community, has almost no Jews left. However, Essaouira, and Morocco as a whole, have successfully integrated Jewish culture as an integral part of the Moroccan identity. This blend of tangible and intangible cul- tural recognition has become a significant draw for the Moroccan Jewish diaspora worldwide, who frequently visit as a gesture of longing and con- nection.18

Haifa, Israel – Coexistence and Shared Life Amid Crisis

Haifa, the Israeli port city, was already a multicul- tural city during the British Mandate, where eco- nomic development and prosperity went hand in hand with migration. The city became a cultural center where artists, writers, and religious leaders from all parts of the MENA region met, with figures like Umm Kulthum and Mahmoud Darwish leaving a significant mark. The then-mayor, Hassan Shukri, ensured a status quo among the city's diverse resi- dents, helping to develop coexistence and the well- known legacy of Haifa since then as a lighthouse of tolerance and interfaith.

The current crisis in the MENA region has not diminished solidarity and coexistence within the city; rather, it has strengthened the sense of part- nership among Jewish and Arab-Palestinian resi- dents. In April 2024, Mayor Yona Yahav announced a program to teach Arabic to all students start- ing from the second grade onward to enhance shared life in the city. Additional initiatives include interfaith meetings and events such as the special conference hosted by Haifa University on religion and diplomacy, which featured participation from diverse religious and community leaders from Haifa, as well as local and international experts, researchers, and practitioners. These efforts underscore the city's commitment to coexistence and illustrate Haifa's renewed role as a beacon of tolerance, diversity, and unity across the region.19

Integrating Cities for a New MENA Region

The MENA region, with its broad range of cultural, religious, and ethnic identities, requires a new approach that places civil and cultural connections on the regional agenda. Cities in the MENA region, with their unique advantage of serving as spaces for intercultural and interfaith encounters, can act as a driving force in advancing regional integration and fostering peace. By creating inter-city collabo- rations with an emphasis on intercultural connec- tions, a regional inter-city bridge can be developed, strengthening and complementing existing polit-

ical and economic channels of collaborations and helping to promote mutual understanding among peoples. As the region faces complex political chal- lenges, establishing a regional inter-city framework and effective cooperation mechanisms will trans- late the potential inherent in cities into tangible achievements. This will lay the required foundation for a sustainable regional order where inhabitants live in peace, prosperity, and well-being.

In reflecting on the untapped potential of city diplo- macy in the MENA region, it is insightful to draw from the historical perspectives of Ibn Khaldun. In his seminal work, "Al-Muqaddimah," Khaldun emphasized the pivotal role of cities in shaping and influencing societal and political dynamics. Histor- ically, cities were not merely centers of adminis- tration, but key players in fostering trade, culture,

and diplomacy. Their strategic importance was undeniable as they served as hubs for interaction and engagement.

However, as global affairs evolved, the prominence of cities in international diplomacy diminished, overshadowed by state-centric approaches and geopolitics. Today, we witness a resurgence of city diplomacy, with cities reasserting their roles on the global stage. This revival underscores the sig- nificant potential that cities hold in peacebuilding and regional stability. As urban centers continue to emerge as influential players in diplomacy, their historical significance, as noted by Khaldun, reaf- firms the vital role they can play in

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fostering inter- national cooperation and addressing local, regional and global challenges.

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