

Local Jews, Palestinians join hands for healing

ROBERT L. SMITH
Plain Dealer Reporter

To bridge a canyon of mistrust, a group of local Palestinians and Jews took small steps. They formed a team. They chose a biblically correct name. They set a modest goal.

Ishmael & Isaac, an unprecedented blending of Palestinian and Jewish leadership in Greater Cleveland, hopes to raise money for medical care in the Holy Land at a fund-raiser tomorrow night.

They think the very act of cooperation could make a statement that resonates around the world. "I don't want to say it's high-risk, but this has never been done before," said David Goldberg, vice president of the Ohio Savings Bank and a leader in the Cleveland Jewish community.

"It's overdue. It's something that should have happened years ago," said Khalid Bahhur, the Palestinian-born commissioner of Burke Lakefront Airport.

SEE LOCAL | A7

LOCAL

FROM A1

Joining hands for healing

They and other group leaders speak of healing wounds and sharing values. They said they do not expect to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, take a position on the latest peace plan, or even discuss it. They hope instead to recognize what they hold in common: a shared history, ties to the Holy Land, sympathy for those suffering as refugees and as victims of terrorism.

Tomorrow night's gathering at The InterContinental Hotel will benefit an ambulance corps in Israel and a Palestinian hospital in East Jerusalem. About 400 people are expected, both Arabs and Jews, many of whom have family in the Holy Land or who fled the violence and despair there.

"We chose something that nobody could possibly object to," Goldberg said. "This is a first, important step in showing our communities can work together."

History lends a sense of caution to the effort.

Past attempts at forming a Palestinian-Jewish dialogue group in Cleveland always fell apart, the discussion poisoned by fresh violence in the Middle East or complicated by ties to existing organizations and their agendas.

Also, the degree of separation between Palestinians and Jews made any teamwork unlikely.

Goldberg, a member of one of Cleveland's leading Jewish families, did not meet Samir Muhammed, a member of one of Cleveland's leading Palestinian families, until just last spring.

Both men attended the May appearance of Hassan Abdel Rahman at the City Club of Cleveland. Rahman, the Palestinian Liberation Organization's ambassador to America, held separate meetings with local Pal-

estinian and Jewish groups.

Later, he introduced Bahhur and Muhammed, the deputy Cuyahoga County recorder, to Robert Goldberg, president of Ohio Savings Bank. Goldberg, in turn, introduced the pair to his younger brother, David, and something happened.

They exchanged phone numbers. Breakfast meetings followed. They went to an Indians game. "The other side, they're good people," said Bahhur, who hails from the Palestinian town of El Bireh and owns a home there. "They're like us, to be honest."

A steering committee sought to shape a dialogue group that rested on shared values. They named the group for the sons of Abraham, key figures in the founding of both the Islamic and Jewish faiths.

They made sure they had no ties to any established Jewish or Arab organizations, and they agreed to avoid controversial subjects, for a while, anyway.

Despite modest plans, group members say they can play a crucial role in the peace movement.

Cleveland's Jewish community, 80,000 strong, is widely considered one of the most active pro-Israel communities in America. The region's Palestinian community, 20,000 and growing, may be the second- or third-largest in the nation.

Cleveland Jews and Palestinians share an intimate knowledge of the Mideast conflict, but also view it from a calming distance, some say. Plus, they step into the breach at an opportune time.

The so-called road map for peace, a phase-by-phase route to ending the hostility within two years, calls for introducing concepts of civil society between Palestinians and Israelis.

Maybe, group members say, that civility could start in Cleveland.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:
rsmith@plaind.com. 216-999-4024

Fund-raiser to benefit emergency services

The inaugural Ishmael & Isaac event will raise money for a new pediatric unit at East Jerusalem's Augusta Victoria Hospital and the Magen David Adom, Israel's nonsectarian emergency medical service.

The event begins at 6 p.m. tomorrow at the InterContinental

Hotel, 9810 Carnegie Ave.

The event is invitation-only. Contributions may be sent to Ishmael & Isaac, Ohio Savings Plaza Suite 200, 1801 East Ninth St., Cleveland 44114. For more information, call Laura Goldberg, 216-588-1123, or e-mail ishmaelandsaac@aol.com.