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Positive dialogues

President George W. Bush embarks on historic peace quest, mirroring first steps by local Jewish, Palestinian leaders

Those who live in Israel and the West Bank are under no illusions about the importance of peaceful coexistence — or the bitterness of life without it. Since the current Palestinian uprising began in September 2000, hundreds have died. Israelis feel betrayed by suicide bombers secretly egged on from the top of the Palestinian leadership. Palestinians have come to doubt that Israel will ever allow a viable Palestinian state.

Without even a semblance of dialogue, it seemed this near-war would go on indefinitely, at terrible cost for everyone in the region.

But now hope is back.

Now the president of the United States and his top national security and diplomatic aides are committed to the quest for peace.

Today, in an all-important encounter, moderate Arab leaders will endorse President George W. Bush's vision of a Palestinian state by 2005, and give their blessing to new Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas as a man committed to reining in the suicide bombers. Tomorrow, the president is to meet with Abbas and Israeli leader Ariel Sharon in Aqaba, Jordan, underscoring his personal investiture

in their dialogue. Those talks have been stoked as well by Sharon's willingness to speak for the first time of the need to end Israeli "occupation" of Palestinian lands.

Meantime, Secretary of State Colin Powell promises he and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice "are going to be deeply and personally involved in this," along with a U.S. coordinating team that will be a "24-7 presence to help the two sides talk." This commitment to ease misunderstandings and promote dialogue is a worthy investment in the future.

A more modest but similar project is at work here in Cleveland, where an unusual joint fundraiser tonight will benefit both Israeli and Palestinian medical projects. It is an outgrowth of a fledgling dialogue between Jewish and Palestinian leaders, called Ishmael & Isaac.

Kudos to the main movers of this local effort — Ohio Savings Bank Vice President David Goldberg, Burke Lakefront Airport Commissioner Khalid Bahhur and Samir Muhammed, chief deputy Cuyahoga County recorder — who also understand that small confidence-building measures and frequent contacts remain the wisest path to understanding.