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Muslims, Christians decry Mideast violence

BY: *MARILYN H. KARFELD*, Senior Staff Reporter

County's Israel Bonds protested

On July 21, about 150 members of the Muslim and Arab Christian communities and their supporters gathered downtown at the Cuyahoga County Administration Building to condemn Israel's bombing in Lebanon and to urge Hamas, Hezbollah and Israel to agree to a cease-fire.

Rally participants also protested the county's investment in "Israeli War Bonds" and then marched to the Federal Building.

Last spring, in a move little heralded outside the Jewish community, Cuyahoga County purchased \$5 million in Israel Bonds.

The county should have considered the potential political fallout before buying the bonds, says Julia Shearson, director of the Cleveland office of the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).

"Certain segments of Cuyahoga County are in agony over what is happening with civilian casualties in Lebanon and the potential for (Israel's) reinvasion of Lebanon," says Shearson. "Lebanese-Americans are crying."



Israelis stand outside a destroyed building in Bat Galim neighborhood of Haifa, Tuesday, July 18. Hezbollah has continued to fire rockets at northern Israel.

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Israel Bonds are used to pay for infrastructure, not military equipment, Shearson acknowledges. But, “It’s hard to know where the money is going,” she says. Moreover, the funds invested in Israel could better be used to fix crumbling roads and bridges in Cuyahoga County.

Israel Bonds are used to pay for infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, not military equipment, Shearson acknowledges. But, “It’s hard to know where the money is going,” she says. Moreover, the funds invested in Israel could better be used to fix crumbling roads and bridges in Cuyahoga County.

The group has scheduled a smaller rally with the same message Friday afternoon (July 28) at the county building.

Through protests and rallies, talking points and meetings, each party to the conflict in the Middle East has preached to its own adherents as it looks for media coverage to reach the larger general community.

This week, the CJN spoke to individuals concerned about violence in the Middle East whose voices don’t typically find an audience in the Jewish community.

Bryan Fry, justice coordinator for the Congregation of St. Joseph, a religious order of Roman Catholic sisters on Rocky River Drive, attended the July 21 rally to protest the county’s purchasing bonds that may indirectly fund West Bank settlements.

Noting that he grew up “enamored of the concept of kibbutzim and socialism of Israel and extremely sympathetic to Israel,” Fry, 58, finds his sympathy wavering with the “reality of (Israel’s) human rights injustices.” The US failure to bring the warring parties in the Middle East to the negotiating table concerns him.

Hamas’s kidnapping of an Israeli soldier just outside the Gaza border and Hezbollah’s snatching of two Israeli soldiers are “not unprovoked attacks on Israel,” Fry claims, brushing off questions about suicide bombings targeting Israeli civilians.

The US position expressed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice most disturbs him. The US wants “to allow time for Israel to continue to destroy Hezbollah, an utterly immoral position, with innocent

lives killed in the process.”

Don Bryant of Concerned Citizens for a Just Peace in the Middle East also works with the Interfaith Council on the issue. As an organizer of last week’s rally, he says he only recently learned about the county’s investment in Israel Bonds.

“Since the governments aren’t giving us peace, it’s the people who need to secure it,” he says. He advocates a cease-fire and a dialogue with the local Jewish community “to see if we can have peace here in Cleveland.”

Bassam Khawam, a Lebanese Christian and the director of the Arab-American Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS-OHIO), says Israel should realize that the problem cannot be resolved through force and killing civilians but only through negotiation.

Hezbollah, created in response to Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and occupation of the southern border region for the next 18 years, played a big role in driving Israel out of Lebanon, says Khawam. “We consider them a resistance force.”

No one disputes that every country has the right to defend itself, Khawam concedes, but he decries the force of Israel’s response. “If somebody slaps you on the face, I don’t think you have the right to pick up a gun and shoot him.”

He calls on Israel to produce evidence, even one photo, showing Hezbollah rockets hidden near people’s homes. “It sounds good to justify collateral damage to civilians, but I have not seen proof.”

Daniel Pipes, founder and director of the Middle East Forum, a think tank, was likewise mystified why Israel hasn’t produced such evidence. In Cleveland to address an Israel Bonds event, Pipes told the CJNI, “There’s no doubt that missiles are stashed in all sorts of civilian places. I don’t know why Israel hasn’t provided any photos. There’s a lot about the campaign on the Israel side that I don’t quite understand.”

Pipes is a longtime vocal critic of CAIR, a sponsor of last week's Cleveland rally, and calls it "an alarming extremist organization" that fronts for Hamas and Hezbollah. CAIR employees and the group's funders have ties to the extreme left and the extreme right and advocate a Muslim supremacist point of view, Pipes says.

"The proper topic (to report on) shouldn't be whether it's a good idea for municipalities to buy bonds. The topic should be CAIR and whether CAIR receives \$50 million in funding from the United Arab Emirates."

The US should be focusing on Syria, not on an international military force in the region, adds Pipes. Rather than hoping that the Lebanese government takes control of southern Lebanon, which Pipes says will not happen, the US should hold Syria responsible.

"The arms, the guidance, the money, all come via Syria," he says.

Samir Mohammad, national co-chair of Cleveland-based Ishmael & Isaac, which has worked on joint Israeli-Palestinian humanitarian projects here and in the West Bank and Israel, says the group plans to raise money to aid victims on all sides.

Ishmael & Isaac hopes to take out a full page ad in the Plain Dealer in the next few days, signed by leaders from the Jewish, Arab Christian and Arab Muslim communities, calling for humanitarian donations. "The fundraising is secondary," says Anita Gray, Ishmael & Isaac national president. More important is the symbolic act of the three communities working together.

Mohammad notes that it's the little things that add up to major complaints and radicalize the moderates. Israel, he says, is "guilty of discriminating" against Arab-American citizens. For instance, at this writing, his parents, American citizens, are in Jordan awaiting a flight home to the US.

His parents typically go back and forth to the West

Bank several times during the year. In total they stay in the West Bank for less than three months, the period of time stipulated in their visa.

This year, once they left the West Bank the first time, they were unable to return for 12 months, Israeli authorities at Ben Gurion Airport told them. They were held at the airport and then flown to Amman.

The same thing has happened to 80 or 90 Cleveland-area Arab-American families this year, Mohammad claims. Although Palestinian-Americans have complained to their congressman and senators, the US says it cannot act against the Israeli administrative policy.

“I’d like to know who from the Jewish community traveling on an American passport was not allowed to go back and forth several times within a year,” says Mohammad.

The Lebanese Christian and Muslim communities in Cleveland are split over the crisis in Lebanon, say some community leaders, who insisted on speaking anonymously.

Some Lebanese would like to see Hezbollah out of the picture. Others praise it for standing up to Israel. There are those angry with both Hezbollah and the Jewish state. Additional Israeli attacks may destroy Hezbollah, but a more extreme group may spring up to replace it, they warn.

The conflict in the Middle East is much wider than the relationship of one state and its neighbors, says CAIR’s Shearson. “If the US wants to win the hearts and minds of the Arab and Muslim world, it needs to be a balanced and fair player in the region.”

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