



JOSHUA GUNTER | THE PLAIN DEALER

Burke Lakefront Airport Commissioner Khalid Bahhur, left, inspects medical supplies destined for an Arab hospital in East Jerusalem along with Dr. Lee Ponsky, center, founder and president of MedWish, and Ponsky's uncle, banker David Goldberg.

JOURNEY

FROM B1

Group takes aid, hope to Mideast

The group is drawing some attention in Israel and in Palestinian communities partly because they are not coming empty-handed.

Ishmael & Isaac raised \$130,000 from local Jewish and Arab-Americans at its inaugural dinner June 3 at the InterContinental Hotel. It later collected medical supplies with the help of MedWish, a Cleveland-based aid agency that collects surplus medical supplies and ships them to needier parts of the world.

Mission members plan to deliver the bulk of the cash and supplies to an Arab hospital in East Jerusalem to help it build a pediatric unit. Some aid will also go to an Israeli ambulance corps that rushes to scenes of terrorist attacks.

In addition to aid, the group is carrying some influence and maybe the weight of history.

Leaders of Ishmael & Isaac, named for the sons of Abraham who fathered the Jewish and Arab peoples, say theirs is the only Jewish-Palestinian peace group outside Israel.

Its leadership includes David Goldberg, co-chairman of Ohio Savings Bank in Cleveland.

His brother, Robert Goldberg, is scheduled to be installed in Jerusalem on Monday as chairman of the board of United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization for all of the Jewish Community Federations in North America. From that position, Robert Goldberg will lead what many consider the most influential Jewish organization on the continent.

The mission team also includes Samir Mohammad, the Cuyahoga County deputy recorder. Like Bahhur, Mohammad was born in the West Bank and has family and friends in Palestinian communities. Both men are widely respected in Cleveland's sizable Arab-American community.

With those connections, the group has secured meetings with Palestinian leaders — excluding Yasser Arafat, whose legitimacy the Jewish members of the team will not acknowledge. "It sends a message when you meet with Arafat," David Goldberg said.

The team also has meetings scheduled with top Israeli government officials, hospital executives, community leaders, and with the U.S. ambassador in Tel Aviv.

Still, they say they are most

honored to have met and befriended the people with whom they are traveling.

David Goldberg, a civic leader in Cleveland's Jewish community, said he has heard some criticism for his close ties with Palestinians. But the cutting remarks are nothing like the anger and resentment his Palestinian colleagues could face in the Holy Land for working publicly with Jews, he said. "They play by harder rules," he added.

He called Mohammad and Bahhur courageous.

Mohammad shrugged to hear it. He came to Cleveland as a child from the West Bank town of El Bireh, where his parents still own a home. He grew up with a strong Palestinian identity, but he also met and befriended Cleveland Jews.

He said he hopes to take some of them along when he visits family in Ramallah next week.

"Someone's got to make a move," Mohammad said. "We can't keep it at a stalemate. We're doing something that makes sense and that should be noncontroversial," bringing aid to a hospital. "I may be sticking my neck out," he said, "but my Jewish partners are sticking their necks out, too."

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Walking hand-in-hand into the fire

Palestinian-Jewish group takes aid, hope to Mideast

ROBERT L. SMITH
Plain Dealer Reporter

As a fog of fear and despair deepens in the Holy Land, a group of Palestinians and Jews from Cleveland is preparing to enter the storm with a message of hope.

A 14-person mission team from Ishmael & Isaac, the Palestinian-Jewish dialogue group that emerged here over the summer, plans to leave today for Jerusalem and from there walk into a world of troubles.

Their humble aims sound bold in historical context. By visiting hospitals, neighborhood centers and Israeli and Palestinian leaders, they say they will demonstrate what they have learned in Cleveland — that Arabs and Jews share common

ideals. "I personally got sick and tired, as a Jew, of people thinking that Arabs and Jews can't get together," said mission member Anita Gray, a fund-raising consultant to nonprofit groups in Cleveland. "I know there are good people on both sides." Her traveling companion, Khalid Bahhur, the Palestinian-born commissioner of Burke Lakefront Airport, thinks their message of coexistence will resonate on both sides of the religious divide. "We're the silent majority," Bahhur said.

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