Jewish-Arab dialogue:
“The wish is to see Canada get back to the world of peace building”

By BERNIE BELLAN

Before Jews and Arabs can have any sort of a meaningful dialogue, they have to agree on a set of common values: “Respect, dignity, tolerance, and diversity.”

That was how Howard Morry described the fundamental challenge facing the group of Arabs and Jews that has been meeting informally in Winnipeg for the past five years (and which has already been documented by Myron Love in two previous issues of this paper), known as the “Arab-Jewish dialogue”.

For the first time, however, on March 7, members of the group appeared together in public to discuss how the group came together and what it hopes to achieve.

The setting was the University of Winnipeg, as four members of the Arab-Jewish dialogue group sat together on a podium. They were: Ab Frieg and Osama Abou-Zeid, both Egyptian-born businessmen who have made Winnipeg their home; along with Howard Morry and Jim Carr.

Morry explained that the group of Arabs and Jews started with ten members. The original mentor for the group was Harold Buchwald, Frieg noted.

While membership in the group is by invitation only, it is not an exclusive club. At the present time, although there aren’t any women involved as yet, members on the Arab side, in addition to Frieg and Abou-Zeid, include individuals from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, and women are certainly welcome to join on either side.

Given the controversial connotation that entering into a dialogue with Jews would inevitably have among many Arabs here, however, Frieg admitted that extending invitations to other Arabs to join the group is something that has to be done with an eye toward keeping out individuals whose temperament might not lend itself toward this type of meaningful dialogue.

As the panelists expressed their views during the course of the evening, it was apparent that, if it were up to the four men on the panel, achieving peace between Israelis and Palestinians would be a relatively straightforward affair.

As Howard Morry put it, “What are you told not to talk about when you’re with strangers? ‘Politics and religion.’”

“What do we talk about when we get together? ‘Politics and religion.’”

Yet, not everything has always been peace and light when the members of the group have got together. Morry admitted that the lowest point came during Operation Cast Lead (Israel’s incursion into Gaza in late 2008 or, as the Arab members of the group would have it, Israel’s “invasion” of Gaza). “For the Arab members of the group there was something really personal going on,” Morry explained.

“I said to the Arab members: ‘I really want you to know how sorry we are for the loss of life,’” he said.

“That was a breakthrough,” Morry noted.

Ab Frieg gave an illustration how perceptions vary so dramatically between Arabs and Jews. He related how, upon reading of Harold Buchwald’s death in the paper, he was surprised to see Buchwald described as a “Zionist”.

Frieg said that his friends said to him: “He was a Zionist! But we’re liars!”

Similarly, Osama Abou-Zeid told how, as a young boy growing up in Egypt in the 1950s, the one phrase that was constantly repeated when the name “Israel” came up was: “Israel should be buried in the sea!”

It wasn’t until he came to Canada in 1974 (after having fought in the 1973 Yom Kippur War) that he had his first encounters with Jews (other than at a distance on the battlefield).

“You find your lawyer is a Jew, your doctor is a Jew...you begin to have personal interaction with them...the best way to dialogue is to break bread with your Jewish friends.”

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Peace building
(Cont. from page 2.)
Zionism as an example.
"The Arabs say it was a great colonization force. For me Zionism was represented by the little blue box in my home growing up."
Yet, Carr noted, the members of the Arab-Jewish dialogue have reached a consensus as to what will be required in a peace treaty between Israelis and Palestinians, including: "A contiguous Palestinian state" established within pre-1967 borders, living alongside a "contiguous Israeli state"; a Palestinian state that will be allowed to declare its capital could be located, including the possibility of Arab Jerusalem; and some form of compensation for Palestinian refugees, although without an explicit right of return.
Ironically, Freg noted that the group has moved far ahead of the current Canadian government when it comes to acknowledging realities in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
"Our wish is to see Canada get back to the world of peace building," Freg said.
"Canada has taken one side. In the past Canada did not. Canada has the ability to take leadership and bring the parties together. It can play a significant role...I'm very disappointed that it (the Israel-Palestine issue) has become a politicized issue."
Howard Morry, however, was more cautious in arguing against foreign involvement in the peace-making process: "Israel's perception is that whenever the international community gets involved, it works less to their advantage. It's called the 'Israel factor'. It's called the 'international factor'. The international community feels it can look after its own security. Israel feels it hasn't been accepted in the region. Everything that has happened falls into the pattern of steps being taken to delegitimize Israel...The view is that Israel is the colonial occupier of the area."
Morry admitted that there's not a lot of room to bring those two perceptions together.
If there's anything in particular that can be taken from this groundbreaking Arab-Jewish dialogue here in Winnipeg, it is the hope that what had been going on in Atlanta can be emulated in other cities across North America.
Howard Morry observed that: "This is 'ground zero' for a Jewish-Arab dialogue. There are no other groups like this in Canada or the U.S." As the panelists reiterated, coming together in dialogue does not necessarily mean acceptance of the other side's position. What it does require is an understanding that Arabs and Jews have two different narratives: of history. In Morry's words, "Within the group it is possible to bring the two sides together. We, as Jews, can accept that Arabs were colonized and resisted that colonization, while Israel is a return to Zion of the Jewish people. The two views are not inherently in conflict."
"When agreement comes, it will be when both sides accept each other's narratives," Morry said, in conclusion.