

Voices of reason

Arab-Jewish Dialogue promotes tolerance and understanding

By Sharon Chisvin

SEVERAL times a year, thousands of kilometres away from the heart of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Ab Freig and Howard Morry sit down together in a Winnipeg living room to discuss the latest news related to that headline-grabbing Mideast issue.

Freig, a Muslim business consultant who was born and raised in Alexandria, Egypt, and Morry, a Jewish lawyer who was born and raised in Winnipeg, are co-chairmen of the Arab-Jewish Dialogue.

The Arab-Jewish Dialogue (AJD) is a Winnipeg-based non-profit initiative dedicated to encouraging positive relations and respect between local Arabs and Jews. The group was founded by Freig and the late community activist Harold Buchwald about five years ago when they were board members together at the University of Manitoba's Arthur V. Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice. Morry joined them at their founding meeting.

"The group was founded to promote dialogue between the Arabs and Jews living in Canada and to foster better understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Freig says. "The aim was to create great relationships regardless of the conflict."

The AJD has about 16 core members, half Arab and half Jewish. The members meet on a regular basis to debate and discuss current affairs related to the Middle East and to learn from one another. The group also sponsors larger educational events throughout the year for several dozen Winnipeg chapter members and is



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Ab Freig (left) and Howard Morry are part of the Arab-Jewish Dialogue, an initiative dedicated to encouraging good relations between Canadian Arabs and Jews.

in the midst of establishing dialogue groups and chapters across Canada.

All of the group's meetings, discussions and events share the common goal of dispelling misconceptions about Arabs and Jews while simultaneously increasing tolerance, empathy and co-operation between the two demographics. The focus is always on ideas and concerns related to

Middle East politics, geography and history, with an emphasis on Israel and Palestine. The Qur'an, Zionism, the Arab Spring, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia have all been recent topics of discussion.

"We discuss political and social topics to create better understanding of particular issues and religious and current events," says Freig, who

has lived in Canada for more than 30 years.

The goal of the group, he adds, is to make a difference and create a better environment of understanding and tolerance regardless of what side of the issue a particular individual supports.

Members of the group listen to one another and respond to and respect

one another's sentiments and ideas, even if they do not necessarily agree with them. Understanding each other's narratives is key to meaningful dialogue.

"Our members have to agree to a set of core values and beliefs centred around respect, dignity, tolerance and diversity," says Morry, a past president of the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg.

They are asked to accept, among other notions, that "while Canadian Arabs and Jews may disagree from time to time over events in the Middle East, they can and should work together to resolve those differences peacefully."

Most important, Morry adds, they are also asked to accept that the ultimate solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a two-state solution, one that endorses a sovereign, contiguous, democratic Palestinian state side by side with a sovereign, secure, democratic Jewish state.

By fostering mutual respect between Jews and Arabs living in Canada, the AJD is helping to ensure when the situation heats up in the Middle East, as it routinely does, Jews and Arabs here are able to talk about it reasonably, peacefully and without the kind of vitriol that so often erupts in European countries.

Although members of the Arab-Jewish Dialogue know their discussions here are not likely to affect outcomes in Israel and Palestine, they are adamant that any initiative that promotes understanding, religious tolerance and regard for others is an initiative worth pursuing.

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