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Jews, Muslims Work To Keep Local Dialogue Going

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Local Jews and Muslims are working hard to keep their interfaith groups alive and communications open as the Middle East conflict deepens.

So far, leaders say, they are succeeding partly by concentrating on long-term, local goals rather than reacting to day-to-day developments in the region, and partly by keeping a low profile. "From the Muslim side, the whole reason to establish a dialogue group was to . . . prevent hostilities and misunderstandings locally, at the grass-roots level," said Mahmoud Jafri, cochairman of the Muslim-Jewish Dialogue of Greater Boston, in a telephone interview yesterday. "There are people coming out on the streets, demonstrating, taking positions, of course. . . . It would be a travesty for the dialogue to stop."

The group Jafri chairs was founded in 2002 and is believed to be the oldest Muslim-Jewish group in the region, which was formed as the Muslim population in the Boston area grew.

Members of Muslim American Society's Boston chapter and Brookline's Moishe House, a Jewish social-action group, met Sunday for joint study and conversation and came away feeling encouraged.

"In the midst of all the heartbreaking violence in the Middle East, it is possible to feel really powerless," said Margie Klein, a rabbinical student at Hebrew College in Newton who participated in the discussion. "To listen to one another, to see each other as people and study social justice is exciting, and it does not feel powerless. We feel like the young leadership of our communities is building a foundation for Muslims and Jews to work and talk together in the future."

One of the texts studied by the Muslims and Jews all in their 20s and 30s was a quotation of the Prophet Mohammed stating people must work for social justice even if it means holding accountable one's own parents. This, Klein said, led to consideration of what to do with "the burden of hatred that maybe our parents are leaving us."

A Jewish-Palestinian dialogue group organized by the American Jewish Committee also met as planned despite the spiraling violence last Friday. Members talked for about 90 minutes about their feelings as Palestinians and Jews and discussed the situation in the Middle East.

"We were really able to speak in a thoughtful way with each other," said Suzanne Schuller, associate director of the AJC's Greater Boston chapter. "It was a very tough, very painful dialogue for people, and included Palestinians whose families are in Gaza. We were able to successfully have a conversation without anyone interrupting, being confrontational, or being impolite."

But the pleasure over area Muslims' and Jews' abilities to keep talking did not offset their gloom.

"I am not concerned about bridges falling down in America," said Imam **Talal Eid**, who is Muslim chaplain of Massachusetts General Hospital and head of the Quincy-based Islamic Center of New England. "We have strong relations with one another."



"The problem is how to solve this problem in Lebanon. I am Lebanese, and there is far too much bloodshed going on," Eid said. "I feel the same about the deaths of innocent Lebanese and the deaths of innocent Jews in Israel it is time to enforce peace in this area."

Eid, a widely known cleric who has been active in community relations, said he is planning a prayer for peace at Mass. General on Friday.

Rabbi Hillel Levine, a professor of sociology and religion at Boston University, held a seminar in Boston last weekend for specialists in dialogue and negotiation from conflict points around the world.

"We felt our efforts were puny in the face of the breakdown of civil society and state-sponsored terrorism," Levine said.

"We were very depressed. We talked about it, and came to the conclusion that we have a responsibility to bring together people from all sides to explore the depths of these conflicts and our feelings about them."
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