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Israeli Dr. Alona Raucher Sternfel, left, pulls a device away from the hands of Iraqi boy Hedi held by his father during an examination at the Red Crescent hospital in Amman, Jordan on Tuesday, Oct. 9, 2007. Three Israeli doctors on Tuesday screened 40 Iraqi children suffering from heart disease in a rare instance of direct cooperation between the Jewish state and the Arab country. The doctors said they hoped their actions will improve relations between the two Mideast nations and ease tensions between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. (AP Photo/Nader Daoud)



## Israeli Doctors Treat Iraqi Patients

By JAMAL HALABY – Oct 9, 2007

AMMAN, Jordan (AP) — Israeli doctors screened 40 Iraqi children suffering from heart disease Tuesday — a rare case of direct cooperation between the Jewish state and the Arab country.

The doctors said they hoped their work would help improve relations between the two Mideast nations and ease tensions between Israel and the rest of the Arab world.

Dr. Sion Hour, director of the pediatric intensive care unit at Wolfson Medical Center in Holon, Israel, said he thought "ties and friendship" were being built through his work in Jordan with the Iraqi children

"Our only previous exchanges with the Iraqis are the Scud missiles," he said, referring to the missiles Iraq, under former dictator Saddam Hussein, fired on Israel during the 1991 Gulf War.

"But the Iraqis we met here have been very receptive and cooperative, which makes me believe that the animosity and war aren't between the people," he said as he and two colleagues screened the Iraqi children, who ranged in age from a few months to 14 years old.

Following the U.S.-led war that ousted Saddam in 2003, diplomats discussed the possibility of improved relations between Israel and Iraq, which fought two wars with the Jewish state since its foundation in 1948.

But in 2004, then Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi vowed that Iraq would not break Arab ranks and sign a separate peace deal with Israel. Jordan and Egypt are the only two Arab countries to have signed peace treaties with Israel.

The Iraqi children and their parents gathered at an outpatient clinic in the Red Crescent Hospital in the Jordanian capital, Amman. Most of the families were Sunni Muslims of Kurdish origin who live in northern Iraq. Also among them were three Sunni families who live in Baghdad.

Inside the clinic, some children were lying in beds, hooked to heart monitoring machines as doctors examined them. Children played with toys in a reception area and cut paper Valentine hearts.

One child screened Tuesday was 4-year-old Mustafa, who Hour, said was diagnosed with crossed arteries and would need two surgeries in Israel soon to unfold them before they harden.

Mustafa's mother, a Kurdish woman who identified herself only as Suzanne

because she feared reprisals from militants in Iraq, said traveling to Israel made her "anxious. Not because I'm going to a country considered an enemy of Iraq, but because I'm afraid of retribution by Iraqi militants, by the terrorists back home."

"I'm afraid and it's not easy for me at all, but I'm willing to take the risk to save my beloved son's life," she said as she caressed Mustafa.

"Israel is a good country. It's a country that has mercy on other people," she added.

Abu Ahmed, 36, a taxi driver from the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk, said his 12-year-old daughter, Basita, underwent a successful surgery in Israel last year.

"The Israeli doctors, bless their hearts, stitched a notch in her heart," he said. "They told me today that she recovered completely, and I'm grateful to them and their country for helping us out."

"They (Israelis) are not our enemies," he said. "They helped me a lot and didn't make me feel like they were enemies. Many Muslims have a wrong idea about Israelis."

The heart program is sponsored by Save a Child's Heart, a humanitarian organization founded in Israel in 1996. Logistical support is provided by the Jerusalem-based Christian group, Shevet Achim. Surgery is carried out at Israel's Wolfson Medical Center, and funding comes from private sources, including Christian charity groups and individuals.

In four years, 35 Iraqis have received surgery through the program, including 18 children who traveled from Iraq to Jordan for screening in January. It was not immediately clear how many of the children screened Tuesday would be taken to Israel for treatment.

But Dr. Akiva Tamir, a pediatric cardiologist at Wolfson, said he screened at least four children Tuesday who were too sick to be treated.

Save A Child's Heart provides heart surgery for children from developing nations regardless of their race, ethnicity or religion. It has treated more than 1,700 children from 28 countries, including Ethiopia, Zanzibar, Rwanda, Moldova, Vietnam and China.

The group said nearly half the children it has treated were Arabs, including Palestinians, Jordanians and Iraqis.