London

The first Miss Iraq, Renée Dangoor, was a Baghdadi Jew. She was crowned in 1947. Last year Sarah Idan became the first Iraqi in 45 years to compete in the Miss Universe pageant, held in Las Vegas. There Ms. Idan took a selfie with Miss Israel, Adar Gandelsman, and posted it on Instagram.

“Saddam’s regime taught us that Israel and the U.S. are our enemies, and so we need to be at war with them,” Ms. Idan tells me at an Iraqi restaurant near Regent Park. Ms. Gandelsman sits to her left. The two have reunited to host a fundraiser supporting United Hatzalah of Israel.

The Jerusalem-based organization is the Uber of emergency medicine. It trains, equips and deploys 5,000 volunteers to medical emergencies through a smartphone app. When Israel’s 911 receives a call, a GPS-enabled app dispatches the closest and best-suited volunteer before an ambulance arrives, reducing average response time to 90 seconds.

Volunteers wear orange vests and carry medical bags. They sometimes board motorized “ambucycles,” which can traverse heavy traffic more swiftly than a conventional ambulance. The volunteers are Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Druze: “I have people who pray five times a day and people who might be afraid of them,” says founder Eli Beer, 45. The people whose calls they answer are similarly diverse: a fish vendor in Jerusalem’s Mahane Yehuda Market, a man praying in a mosque in the Arab town of Kfar Qara, a rabbi teaching Torah.

“I’m also working to rebuild the relationship between Jews and Muslims,” Ms. Idan says. “So when I learned how so many Muslims who volunteer with Jews in Israel have started to see the Jews in a completely different light, I had to help.”
The organization’s independence helps it bridge sectarian divides, Mr. Beer says: “I am able to get Arabs and Jews to work together because they all understand that this isn’t the government of Israel—this is the people of Israel.” Muslim volunteers strap on the United Hatzalah jacket adorned with a Star of David, and all distinctions dissipate.

Independence from government is also essential to generating the right incentives. “In a more socialist government like France, you think everything is the government’s responsibility,” Mr. Beer says. “You see your neighbor choking and think, ‘Oh that’s the government’s concern.’” He answers that attitude with a barnyard vulgarity, adding: “That’s your responsibility.”

Mr. Beer came up with the idea as a teenage volunteer for Magen David Adom, Israel’s national emergency service. When he was sent to save a boy choking on a hot dog, his team crawled through traffic for 21 minutes, arriving to find the boy had already died. A doctor living down the street heard the ambulance and futilely rushed to help.

Mr. Beer offered his idea to Magen David Adom but was turned down. “So I used Israel’s best invention—chutzpah.” He bought police scanners, and he and some friends listened to emergency calls and responded on their own. “We didn’t care if it was legal,” he says. “We just wanted to do the right thing.”

Could United Hatzalah serve as a model for reconciliation across the Middle East? Israel’s relations with Arab states have warmed in recent years because they have a common enemy in Tehran. But ordinary citizens have been fed anti-Jewish and anti-Israel sentiment for decades. After her selfie with Ms. Gandelsman, Ms. Idan faced a backlash, including death threats. She and her family now live in Los Angeles.

*Ms. Katz is a former Robert L. Bartley Fellow at the Journal.*