

USAID/OTI Lebanon Field Report

April - June 2008

Program Description

In September 2007, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) launched a 3-year program to promote peace and stability in Lebanon through an initial emphasis on cross-confessional dialogue at the community level. After a 6-month start-up phase involving action-oriented research, the program refined its focus to provide youth with alternatives to extremism and mitigate tensions in conflict-prone areas. These objectives further U.S. Government policy goals in Lebanon by preserving democratic space and strengthening the country's fragile civil peace.

In recent years, increasing polarization has led to political deadlock, sporadic violence, and street clashes that brought the country to the brink of another civil war. Lebanese youth are often protagonists in these conflicts, as they provide a fertile recruiting ground for extremist movements, armed militias, and political parties involved in divisive sectarian politics. In marginalized communities historically neglected by government, political forces dominate the social, economic, and educational opportunities available to youth, limiting their choices and constraining the independent space for civic activism. In addition to their vulnerability to radicalization, however, youth offer great potential to act as voices of peace and agents of change – provided their energies are channeled in nonviolent ways and they are empowered to advocate for their needs and aspirations. OTI's flexible approach facilitates partnerships with a wide range of civil society players committed to engaging youth in shaping their own destiny and mitigating tensions in a tense political environment.

With an FY 2008 budget of \$4.8 million, the OTI program – known as the Lebanon Civic Initiative – uses small grants and short-term technical assistance to advance its objectives in collaboration with implementing partners Chemonics International and Macfadden & Associates.

Country Situation

This quarter witnessed a severe escalation of the political crisis into armed street clashes, followed by an Arab-brokered agreement that put an end to the bloodshed and resolved the 7-month presidential vacuum. However, deadlock persists over the formation of a national unity government and sporadic violence continues in conflict hot spots.

May Clashes - Talks of a national dialogue based on an Arab League initiative to end the presidential crisis dominated the discourse during the month of April. Prime Minister Fuad Siniora rejected House Speaker Nabih Berri's calls for dialogue on a package deal, insisting that a presidential vote should take place without conditions. Against this backdrop, the Cabinet issued two decisions on the eve of a May 7 labor union strike that turned into armed clashes between the Hezbollah-led opposition and pro-government forces. The Cabinet decisions called for the dismissal of airport security chief Wafiq Shuqair, a Shiite, and dismantling of Hezbollah's internal communications network. Hezbollah retaliated by orchestrating a swift takeover of western Beirut and attacks on the institutions of Saad Hariri's Future Movement.

Road blockades and deteriorating security conditions led to closure of the Beirut airport and port, effectively paralyzing the city. The fighting quickly spread outside the capital, including to the Beqaa, the north, and the Aley region, where fierce gunfights erupted between supporters of Hezbollah and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party. More than 65 people were killed and 200 injured in the week-long battles, which many feared would turn into full-fledged civil war.

In response to the violence, the government placed the two controversial decisions into the hands of the Lebanese Army, which called for their reversal. The decisions were rescinded following the arrival of an Arab delegation to mediate between the feuding parties. The rescissions brought an end to the violence as gunmen withdrew from the streets and the army deployed to maintain order.

Doha Accord - The small Gulf nation of Qatar convinced Lebanese political leaders to head to the negotiating table in its capital, leading to the May 21 Doha Accord. The deal called for the immediate election of consensus presidential candidate and army chief Michel Suleiman, formation of a national unity government with veto power for the opposition, and adoption of an election law based on the 1960 electoral districts to govern the 2009

parliamentary elections.

Suleiman was elected president on May 25 and immediately initiated consultations to appoint a prime minister. The parliamentary majority renominated Siniora, who was then tasked with forming a new cabinet. The Doha Accord assigned 16 ministers to the majority, 11 to the opposition, and 3 to the president. Negotiations on the government line-up are currently deadlocked over the distribution of key ministries, especially the “sovereign” posts (interior, defense, foreign affairs, and finance). The Free Patriotic Movement’s Michel Aoun notably insists on obtaining one of the sovereign posts and two service-related ministries.

Sporadic Violence - While the Doha agreement averted civil strife, it failed to address the core issues that have polarized the nation for more than 2 years, including the fate of Hezbollah’s weapons, relationships with foreign powers, and Lebanon’s role in the larger Middle East conflict. The aftermath of Doha gave birth to a new impasse since agreement on formation of a new cabinet had yet to be reached as of June 30. As the deadlock continues, sporadic incidents of violence between government and opposition supporters have erupted in Tripoli, the Beqaa, and in or around the Palestinian refugee camps. Local leaders and religious figures have taken modest steps to ease tensions by initiating dialogue and calling for reconciliation. President Suleiman thus begins his 6-year term with a considerable set of challenges, including a government crisis, precarious security situation, and broken intercommunal trust.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

Strategy Reorientation - In this quarter, OTI conducted a strategy review that resulted in new country objectives to guide the program forward. The strategy review team recognized the need to refine the program’s focus after a 6-month start-up phase that provided an opportunity to test various approaches, build relationships with a wide range of organizations, and investigate initial assumptions. OTI determined that the initial focus on cross-confessional dialogue at the community level was unlikely to yield significant impact on national-level issues, as was first assumed, given the lack of traction toward reform of the confessional system that lies at the root of conflict in Lebanon.

In light of this conclusion, the program adopted two new country objectives: (1) provide youth with alternatives to extremism and political radicalization, especially in marginalized areas of the north, south, and Beqaa, and (2) mitigate tensions in conflict-prone areas. These objectives are consistent with U.S. foreign policy goals, address growing threats facing Lebanon, and are more suitable to the short-term, high-impact activities characteristic of OTI programming. They also provide a focused framework for grant development and expansion of the program’s geographic reach to areas outside the capital, particularly strongholds of extremist movements and conflict hot spots that often explode into violence as the political environment worsens.

Response to May Clashes – The strategy review was initiated shortly before the May clashes and completed soon thereafter, providing an immediate opportunity to fine-tune programmatic approaches under the new country objectives. In response to the May events, the OTI team reached out to its partners to rapidly assess the impact of the violence on their work and identify new programming opportunities. As a result, the Maharat Foundation, one of OTI’s early partners, amended its planned activities to include monitoring of news coverage during the May events and production of a documentary highlighting biases, to be used as a training tool with media professionals. Although the media are a natural ally in mitigating tensions, Lebanese journalists are subject to tremendous pressures to “take sides” and often end up fueling discord by acting as mouthpieces for feuding parties. Maharat’s efforts seek to empower media professionals to resist those pressures and maintain journalistic objectivity in times of crisis.

Another partner, Youth for Tolerance, a nascent nongovernmental organization (NGO), is producing a series of TV spots decrying the dangers of sectarian divisions as well as a booklet carrying the same message, which will be distributed to students on highly polarized university campuses. A grant to Shu’un Janoubiya, an independent magazine covering southern affairs, funded the first national conference on the Doha Accord, generating debate on the impact of the agreement on Lebanon’s future. In addition, a grant under development will seek to initiate reconciliation efforts in the Aley region.

Leveraging Previous Work – As part of its start-up strategy, OTI worked through international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) to gain access to local organizations and an entry point into certain communities. Efforts are now being made to leverage the INGO grants by building on their achievements and directly engaging their local partners. In the north, for example, the International Medical Corps teamed with the local NGO Secours Populaire Libanais (SPL) to rehabilitate community centers in marginalized areas such as Halba, which was the scene of a massacre during the May clashes. OTI is now working directly with SPL to develop youth-oriented programs in the

rehabilitated centers, including conflict resolution training, cultural and artistic activities, and seminars on peace-related concepts.

As during the start-up phase, action-oriented research continues to be used as a means to support implementation of the new country objectives. This is achieved not only through project-level monitoring to evaluate approaches and improve programming but also through grants to organizations specializing in practical research to feed into rolling assessments. Ongoing research examines the appeal of extremist movements in the north and opportunities for conflict mitigation in the volatile Tripoli neighborhoods of Bab Al Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen.

Fostering NGO Linkages – Lebanon's civil society sector is fragmented and highly competitive, making it difficult for NGO-driven reform efforts to gain ground. OTI seizes opportunities to foster NGO linkages in support of its country objectives by connecting NGOs to one another and providing incentives for cooperation. Grants to two local training providers – the International Management Training Institute (IMTI), an offshoot of YMCA Lebanon, and Rootspace, a nascent IT-oriented NGO – offer a series of training workshops on topics of interest to NGOs, such as fundraising, media relations, community mobilization, and new-media tools for public outreach. The workshops target OTI's current and potential partners, as well as other U.S. Government-funded NGOs, providing opportunities for interaction, the exchange of ideas, and networking.

In the same vein, OTI encourages NGO collaboration with the private sector as a means of leveraging resources. With guidance from OTI, grantee Baldati was able to secure private sector sponsorship of its Web site, which provides a virtual space for connecting village-level civic activists. As part of efforts to impart citizenship values to youth, 05 Amam, an NGO born out of the 2005 Cedar Revolution, is teaching students how to raise funds for community activities through outreach to local businesses. Another grant connects the media-oriented NGO Maharat with the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation to pilot a new TV show targeting youth.

B. Grant Activity

In this quarter, OTI approved 19 grants for a total of \$1,362,545.

Sector	Grants Cleared Apr – Jun 2008	Estimated Budget for Grants Cleared Apr – Jun 2008	Total Grants Cleared since Oct 2007	Total Estimated Budget for Grants Cleared since Oct 2007
Alternative Media			1	\$67,440
Civic Education	5	\$202,335	9	\$588,672
Culture and Arts	2	\$224,888	3	\$269,538
Direct Conflict Mitigation/Resolution	4	\$431,003	6	\$526,718
Environment/Health/Safety			1	\$245,000
Income Generation			1	\$55,844
Education	1	\$13,568	1	\$13,568
Media	4	\$310,071	6	\$497,980
Other Community Development			1	\$240,000
Youth Leadership	3	\$180,680	5	\$462,499
Total	19	\$1,362,545	34	\$2,967,259

C. Indicators of Success

Catalyzing Youth Activism – OTI grants aimed at fostering youth activism are beginning to pay dividends. Youth action teams formed by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and local NGO Nahwa Al-Muwatiniya are advocating youth

needs to municipal leaders and have initiated projects in four northern villages. In the south, CRS and another local NGO established four consensus teams of community activists, local leaders, and youth who have organized “ideas fairs” and selected projects to improve conditions in their villages.

Working in the country’s six governorates, the Jaber Cultural and Social Center trained more than 180 youths on citizenship values, democratic concepts, and conflict resolution. The youths then conceived, planned, and implemented small community projects reflecting these principles. Jaber’s trainers and organizers observed changes in attitudes and behaviors among the youths. A 20-year-old participant, Saadeddin Al Kurdi, said the training and youth-led activities “empowered us with the ideas and skills to pass the message of tolerance on to others.” An important outcome of the project is the formation of six youth clubs around the country.

OTI is pursuing ways to capitalize on the skills and enthusiasm of the youths trained by CRS and Jaber. A grant under development with an NGO network in Nabatieh will incorporate members of the CRS consensus teams and the Jaber youth club into its activity design and implementation effort. In addition, several Jaber activists are now involved in implementing a grant to Beyond, a newly established NGO that will use a roaming cinema to promote nonviolence among youth.

OTI also supports nascent youth-led NGOs that lack sufficient capacity to be eligible for other donor funding, including Nehna Kelna, No Sectarianism, Youth for Tolerance, IndyAct, and Common Effort. OTI-funded activities have helped energize these reform-minded groups, expand their reach, and generate follow-on ideas. It is hoped that the skills gained through their collaboration with OTI will enable them to act as agents of change well into the future.

Using the Media to Amplify Results - Grantees are increasingly making use of traditional and unconventional media to publicize their work and achievements. Through a targeted media campaign, the Lebanese Association for Human Rights was able to reach at least 500,000 people (more than five times its original target of 100,000) with its effort to publicize an art installation commemorating the April 13 anniversary of the start of the Lebanese civil war. In addition, with support from OTI, the Lebanese Artists Association launched the first new-media exhibit in the country, showcasing works with sociopolitical messages. Other grantees have generated positive coverage of their efforts in the local press and will soon benefit from a training workshop on image building and media relations through a grant to local training provider IMTI.



Program Appraisal

The strategy reorientation that took place at the end of the quarter is already bearing fruit, as it is providing a more clearly defined focus to guide grant development, partner outreach and selection, and expansion of the program’s geographic reach.

OTI succeeded in engaging a higher number of local NGOs in June and met its higher grant-making target for the month. An ongoing challenge for the program is to help organizations identify short-term programmatic opportunities given the widespread local perception that Lebanon’s current problems are deeply entrenched. OTI also faces difficulties in widening its pool of local partners given that access to certain communities is constrained by anti-American sentiment and reluctance to receive U.S. Government funds. The program is responding to these challenges by increasing staff to facilitate scaling up, revising the staffing plan to maximize efficiencies, and capitalizing on strategic partners with a strong base of support in their communities.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

A former combatant (center) issues a public apology for his role in forcing people to hide in their bathrooms – where they could find a degree of safety from explosions and breaking glass – during the 15-year Lebanese civil war. The testimonial was part of the opening ceremony of an OTI-funded installation created by Lebanese artist Nada Sehnaoui in collaboration with the Lebanese Human Rights Association. Posing the question “Haven’t 15 years of hiding in the toilets been enough?,” the 2-week installation featuring 600 toilets reminded many Lebanese of a dark chapter in their history as they commemorated the civil war and warned against the dangers of sectarian tensions.

The rows upon rows of toilets created the visual illusion of a cemetery and provided a public space for open debates and artistic expression around the theme of nonviolence.

In the next 3 months, OTI Lebanon expects to expand its activities in the north, the Beqaa, and the south. Engagement of community-based activists will also be explored to facilitate identification of partners, grant development, and monitoring in these areas.