

USAID/OTI Lebanon Annual Summary Report

October 2007 - September 2008

Program Description

In late August 2007, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) launched a three-year program to promote peace and stability in Lebanon through an initial emphasis on cross-confessional dialogue at the community level. After a six-month start-up phase involving action-oriented research, the program – known as the Lebanon Civic Initiative – reoriented its strategy to focus on providing youth with alternatives to political extremism and mitigating tensions in conflict-prone areas. These objectives seek to preserve democratic space in a highly polarized society and to strengthen the country's fragile civil peace.

To further its goals, the program partners with a wide range of civil society players working with youth in marginalized and conflict-prone areas, primarily in the north, Beqaa, and south. OTI's implementing partners in Lebanon are Chemonics International, which manages grants and operations, and Macfadden & Associates, through which OTI's field team is contracted.

Country Situation

Political Deadlock Leads to Armed Conflict – The Lebanon Civic Initiative was launched in the midst of a protracted deadlock between the pro-government "March 14" coalition and the opposition "March 8" alliance. The political impasse led to a seven-month presidential vacuum after the end of Emile Lahoud's term in November 2007. The two sides agreed on a consensus presidential candidate, then-Army Chief Michel Suleiman, but his election was repeatedly postponed as the March 8 alliance insisted on a package deal that would also include granting the opposition veto power in the new Cabinet.

A caretaker government led by the March 14 parliamentary majority assumed power in the interim. In May 2008, the political crisis escalated into armed violence in response to two controversial government decisions – one calling for the firing of the airport security chief and the second for dismantling Hezbollah's internal communications network. Hezbollah-led opposition forces took over western Beirut, blocked roads, and attacked institutions tied to the Future Movement. The violence spread outside the capital, including to the region of Aley, where fierce gun battles erupted between March 8 and March 14 supporters. At least 65 people were killed and more than 200 injured in the worst sectarian violence the country had witnessed since the end of the civil war.

Doha Accord Opens Door to Reconciliation – The fighting came to a halt when the government rescinded the two decisions and the Gulf nation of Qatar brokered a peace deal between the parties. The deal, known as the Doha Accord, called for the immediate election of Suleiman, formation of a national unity government with veto power for the opposition, and adoption of a new electoral law to govern the 2009 parliamentary elections.

The Doha deal created a new sense of optimism, as rival political leaders sat together at the negotiating table for the first time in months. This paved the way for the dismantling of "tent city" – an 18-month opposition sit-in that had paralyzed businesses in downtown Beirut and served as a stark reminder of the political crisis – and to the election of Suleiman on May 25 in a session that was attended by international dignitaries and celebrated across Lebanon. Incumbent Prime Minister Fouad Siniora took on the challenge of forming the new Cabinet, which was announced on July 11 after extensive negotiations on the distribution of ministerial portfolios.

Preparing for Elections and National Dialogue – Parliamentary elections are scheduled for the spring of 2009. Preparing for the elections is a priority challenge the new Cabinet must address. A new election law that was passed in September sets campaign spending regulations and mandates that the election be held on a single day. However, key issues advocated by civil society, such as lowering the voting age from 21 to 18, were left untouched. Also in September, a national dialogue led by President Suleiman was launched. The emphasis, however, was on form rather than content, as debate revolved around participants and the agenda for the talks. Future sessions are expected to tackle contentious issues left unresolved by the Doha Accord, particularly Hezbollah's weapons and its relationship with the State.

Sporadic Violence Continues – Although Lebanon has averted large-scale civil strife over the past year, it continues to grapple with divisive politics that threaten to derail efforts leading toward a more peaceful and

democratic future. Scattered incidents of violence – street clashes, bombings, and political assassinations – have persisted since the Doha deal was brokered. The northern city of Tripoli has seen recurring armed conflict between Sunnis in the Bab el Tebbaneh neighborhood and Alawites in neighboring Jabal Mohsen, as well as attacks by suspected Islamic militants. The Beqaa and Beirut have also witnessed sporadic eruptions of violence, largely pitting pro-government Sunnis against pro-opposition Shiites. In the north and south, Palestinian refugee camps have exploded with violence directed at mainstream Palestinian factions and the Lebanese Army.

Amid these ongoing tensions, a flurry of political reconciliation efforts are underway, as the various parties prepare for electoral campaigning and negotiate alliances. This unlikely mix of violence and reconciliation is expected to continue as electoral battles are waged.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

Providing Youth with Alternatives to Political Extremism –

Fostering youth activism. A country of minorities with 18 religious sects, Lebanon generally lacks a citizenship culture because sectarian affiliations often supersede national identity. A history of conflict and weak government institutions have created a fertile ground where political groups can prey on sectarian differences to advance narrow interests over the common good. In some areas, especially those that have been long-neglected by the central government, political movements with radical agendas monopolize discourse and opportunities for youth engagement in their communities. Youth are particularly vulnerable to indoctrination and political radicalization, as the lessons their parents' generation learned from the 15-year civil war have largely escaped them. At the same time, the youth of Lebanon have great potential as agents of change, provided their talents and energies are channeled in a positive direction. OTI seeks to capitalize on that potential by creating independent, democratic spaces for youth-led, collective action outside the sphere of influence of dominant political forces.

Impact Summary: Youth Activism

- Citizenship training instills new attitudes and behaviors among disaffected youth
- Municipalities agree to dedicate resources to development projects proposed by citizens
- Youth-led community opinion polling leads to first-ever community planning meetings between mayors and citizens in four villages of the south

In Baalbeck-Hermel, for example, OTI supported the establishment of an "academy" for civic activism, where more than 100 youths learned how to create their own nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and advocate for peaceful conflict resolution. The academy was a revelation to some participants who had never before had the opportunity to explore issues such as civic responsibility. "It reshaped my personality," said 18-year-old Hima, who added that the experience taught her to move beyond religious divides and seek common ground around shared interests. Working in groups, the youths designed and implemented eight projects that helped them gain confidence and inspired them to try to make a difference in their community. "In the academy experience," said 20-year-old Ali, "I learned that I should and can hold responsibility."

In eight villages in the north and south, OTI helped create youth action and consensus-building teams that took the lead in assessing local needs and developing plans for community improvements. After learning about citizenship values and advocacy, the teams launched their own initiatives, taking on tasks as varied as monitoring municipal decision making, lobbying for the appointment of a police officer, and painting a public mural. The youths rallied support from the larger community and used creative methods to generate extra funds for their projects, such as organizing a basketball tournament. Local decision makers took note of the youths' efforts and, in some cases, responded by improving services. In el Bireh, one of the young activists reported that the municipality has "started taking care of the village a little more: the streets are cleaner and the garbage is getting picked up more often."

Another project modeled constructive citizen-government interactions by helping youths from the north and Beqaa articulate community needs and garner support from their municipalities. The participants took the process to heart. A youth from a conflict-ridden neighborhood in Tripoli said, "I don't want people to pity me, fear me, or look down at me when I tell them I'm from Tebbaneh. I want my region to be peaceful and prosperous... and I want its people to be known for their love of life." The youths gained a newfound sense of empowerment when their proposed projects were adopted by municipal leaders. In Beddawi, the mayor not only approved a project to establish a public library, he also asked donors to expand the project to include a computer center and kids' corner.

Finally, in a mixed Lebanese-Palestinian community near the volatile refugee camp of Ein el Helweh, OTI supported

the formation of a youth neighborhood committee that has organized a children's summer camp and an environmental clean-up campaign. The group's clean-up day was the first of its kind in the community and involved a wide range of local actors, including the Lebanese Army, municipalities, and the Lebanese Red Cross. The day culminated in a festival that was attended by more than 300 people. "We want our neighborhood to become a model for other neighborhoods," said one of the youths. Driven by the recognition they have received as role models in their community, the young leaders are now transferring their skills to peers in another vulnerable community near the Mieh w Mieh refugee camp.

Vocational training. In some areas of Lebanon, political movements use a web of services and income-generating opportunities to attract young people who have few economic options. These systems perpetuate patron-client relationships between vulnerable youth and the political institutions that exploit service provision to recruit and indoctrinate followers. OTI seeks to break this cycle of dependency by equipping at-risk youth with marketable skills that can help them expand their career horizons and empower them to chart their own course.

In Akkar, Lebanon's most impoverished region, OTI funded small-scale infrastructure rehabilitation projects to establish community centers that offer demand-driven vocational training. Participants learned essential skills that have inspired them to pursue goals that previously seemed unattainable. For 18-year-old Mireille, gaining computer proficiency is a first step toward fulfilling her dream of working in a laboratory. Barriaa, 26, said her new sewing skills will help her enhance the economic well-being of her family. Another trainee, 27-year-old Elie, was prompted to return to his village from Beirut to explore the new economic opportunities available to him. The communities plan to sustain the centers once OTI funding is expended. In one village, youth groups are working with a local NGO to devise fundraising strategies, and in another, the municipality will partly cover the center's operating costs.

OTI has also launched a career development project targeting unemployed youth in five Akkar villages. The project will allow the youths to hone their vocational skills in local businesses. In the northern Beqaa, the program is helping to establish the first youth center in the village of Chmistar, which will provide training in English, information technology, and art design. And in the southern city of Tyre, youths involved in establishing an online presence for an independent cultural organization attended a series of Web design workshops that has put them on the path to pursuing career options in information technology.

Palestinian gatherings. Lebanon is home to an estimated 400,000 Palestinians who live in refugee camps and informal "gatherings" outside camp boundaries. While relief agencies deliver a range of services inside the camps, the needs of people in the gatherings have gone largely neglected by cash-strapped municipalities, contributing to instability. The 2007 conflict in Naher el Bared illustrated how conditions in and around the refugee camps can create a fertile ground for extremist groups and pose a threat to national security. OTI seeks to reduce pressure in the gatherings by promoting Lebanese-Palestinian cooperation and improved relationships with municipal authorities.

In the area surrounding Naher el Bared, OTI is supporting efforts to establish a public park that will serve as a neutral meeting point for Lebanese and Palestinian communities. The project will also deliver a needed economic boost by providing income-generating opportunities. Although rehabilitation work has not yet begun, the activity has already increased cooperation between the two communities. A joint planning committee has been established, and the project has garnered support from the municipality, which has donated land worth an estimated \$1 million. Furthermore, in the area around the el Beddawi camp near Tripoli, another grant has brought Lebanese and Palestinian youth together for conflict resolution workshops and team-building activities. The grant succeeded in breaking stereotypes and changing attitudes.

In the gatherings near Tyre, a series of small-scale infrastructure rehabilitation projects have delivered tangible benefits while building goodwill between Lebanese and Palestinian communities. Projects have included improving an electric network, paving walkways, and creating playgrounds for children. The projects were selected through participatory assessments during which residents learned to articulate and advocate for their needs. The

Impact Summary: Vocational Training

- Skills training opens doors to new economic opportunities independent of dominant political forces
- First youth center in Chmistar established with OTI support
- Community centers rehabilitated by OTI provide neutral space for skills building and youth networking

Impact Summary: Palestinian Gatherings

- Small infrastructure rehabilitation projects foster Lebanese-Palestinian cooperation
- Youth trained with OTI support form their own committees to continue development projects in conflict areas near Palestinian camps
- Municipalities show willingness to contribute resources in response to greater civic responsibility

improvements helped foster a common sense of civic responsibility and led to the formation of neighborhood watch groups and the enlistment of local scouts to maintain project infrastructure. Likewise, a group of youths near the politically charged Ein el Helweh camp modeled Lebanese-Palestinian cooperation by working together to improve their community.

New media. Emerging Web-based technologies are rapidly becoming an important vehicle for change around the world; however, these technologies are not being fully employed in Lebanon despite widespread Internet use by the country's youth. The proliferation of Internet cafes and the growing number of Lebanese joining social utility sites such as Facebook attest to the high level of interest in the new technologies, but to date, the trend has been largely individualistic and fragmented, with few efforts to leverage the power of new media to mobilize constituencies of change. Accordingly, given the highly politicized nature of Lebanon's traditional media industry, OTI is seeking to harness the potential of new media to provide a conduit for independent expression, social action, and networking.

Impact Summary: New Media

- Civic activists leverage power of new media to deliver social messages
- First new media exhibit in Lebanon made possible by OTI support
- OTI-funded workshops lead to weekly radio program on social media
- Youth in Tyre create independent virtual space free of political interference

Through training and one-on-one consulting, a newly formed NGO is helping civic activists capitalize on new media technologies to create new spaces for communication and dialogue. The NGO held workshops in and around Beirut that highlighted the links between technology and social activism. The activity generated attention from traditional media outlets, including a radio program that now hosts a weekly show about social media. Trainees went on to apply their skills in a number of ways, including creating blogs and incorporating social media elements in existing projects.

OTI also helped an artists association launch the first new media exhibit in Lebanon, providing a platform for young artists who combine computer technology and the arts to deliver social messages. The exhibit fused conflict, politics, and history into digital art. Said one attendee, "The works make you think how futile politics and war can be, how they can impact our lives." The exhibit itself was affected by conflict, as its opening was postponed because of the May violence. In addition to provoking self-reflection at a time when emotions ran high, the event provided a launching pad for the artists, two of whom were selected to present their works at an international art exhibition in Paris.

In Tyre, OTI partnered with a cultural organization to cultivate freedom of thought and expression. Participating youths have developed a Web site that provides an independent virtual space in a city where the most popular Web sites are affiliated with dominant political forces. The youths have also launched a film club that shows socially relevant films followed by open discussions, providing the community with a regular opportunity for dialogue and networking.

Another local partner has established an e-academy that trains village-level activists on how to use the Web to organize activities, encourage dialogue, and connect individuals with shared interests. The Web-based social network, www.baldati.com, has approximately 2,500 members, including 500 coordinators who plan and publicize events in their villages.

Mitigating Tensions in Conflict-Prone Areas –

Conflict resolution at the local level. Issues at the core of conflict in Lebanon are structural and deeply ingrained, as they are tied to the confessional system that permeates most aspects of Lebanese life. Nevertheless, there is national consensus on the need to avoid a return to civil war, and sporadic violence is often met with reconciliation efforts by peace advocates. High-level political reconciliation initiatives in the post-Doha environment and ahead of elections have also created an opening for bolstering peace-building efforts so the spirit of reconciliation can trickle down to the people. OTI seeks to seize opportunities to strengthen voices of peace by supporting initiatives that inspire thoughtful dialogue, facilitate intercommunal interactions, and contribute to peace building.

Impact Summary: Conflict Resolution

- Youth affected by May 2008 clashes initiate joint peace-building activities
- Conflict resolution training fosters critical thinking among youth vulnerable to political manipulation
- First-ever conflict resolution workshop between rival villages in the south helps resolve an intra-village conflict
- Cooperation on preserving shared natural resource sets mechanism for inter-village

In the south, a series of conflict resolution workshops conveyed communication, negotiation, and mediation techniques to municipal leaders, community activists, and youth. One workshop united residents of the Christian village of Maghdousheh with Shiite neighbors from Anqoun, two areas with a long history of conflict and mistrust. The workshop planted the seeds for continued dialogue between the communities and helped resolve an internal conflict in one of the villages. The activity also trained youth to think critically about the polarized rhetoric that they hear. In the words of one 17-year-old participant, "At least we know now when we listen to a politician if he is playing on our emotions or not; we have the tools, we can study his position and don't take what he says for granted."

interaction in rival Beqaa communities

Following the May 2008 clashes, a nascent organization supported by OTI brought together high school graduates from rival communities to help them forge bonds of mutual respect. After attending a summer camp and conflict resolution workshops, the graduates initiated joint activities aimed at defusing tensions in their communities. Youths from Kayfoun, a Shiite village that had experienced deadly fighting with the neighboring Druze village of Aley, engaged other camp participants and 50 local residents in an appeal for nonviolence. The group toured both villages, visited the notorious hill on which most of the fighting had occurred, and presented local officials with a declaration of peace, along with a Lebanese flag signed by all the participants. The graduates organized similar activities in other conflict hot spots and plan to team up for nonviolence campaigns at the university level.

In the Beqaa, an environmental activity is providing the impetus for bringing the rival communities of Anjar and Kfar Zabad together over a shared natural resource – the region's last wetland area. Youth from both areas have formed environmental groups to preserve the wetland and collaborate on cleanup campaigns. The OTI-supported project also brokered a draft memorandum-of-understanding between the two municipalities, a positive sign for expanded inter-village cooperation. Another partner staged a series of festivals to mitigate tensions and rebuild trust among Beqaa communities affected by the recent violence. Youth facilitators modeled cross-sectarian teamwork as they collaborated to organize the events. In a show of regional cohesion, more than 2,000 people attended the festival in Ras Baalbeck, a Christian village situated between the predominantly Shiite towns of Baalbeck and Hermel.

Using the arts to mitigate conflict. When Lebanon emerged from the ashes of its devastating 15-year civil war, there was no concerted effort to embark on a national reconciliation process or to preserve a collective memory of the conflict. As a result, multiple narratives of the war persist within different sectarian communities, perpetuating old grievances and hatreds that resurface during political crises. Among the variety of means OTI uses to promote conflict mitigation, the arts offer innovative ways to harness local talents, create social outlets for disaffected youth, and contribute to building on the lessons of the past for a more peaceful future.

Impact Summary: Arts-Based Conflict Mitigation

- First-of-its-kind art installation provides platform for public apologies from former combatants
- Young artists pool their talents to disseminate peace messages
- Youth involved in the May 2008 clashes come together to conceive and perform community plays
- Local theater groups formed with OTI support bring community issues to national audiences

For the annual commemoration of Lebanon's civil war, OTI funded a public art installation that grabbed local and international headlines. The two-week installation of rows upon rows of toilet seats created a powerful visual statement and provided a platform for public apologies from former combatants and spontaneous testimonials from victims of war. "From 1975 to 1990, the Lebanese people used to hide from the bombings in their toilets, where there were no glass windows," said artist Nada Sehnaoui. "Now, we hear war drums and we may be killing each other again. This is why I am raising the question: have we not had enough?" Civil society activists converged on the site to hold debates on the dangers of sectarian divisions, and musicians took to the stage to perform peace songs.

In addition, a nascent youth group toured the streets of Beirut and Saida to debut an original song calling on the Lebanese to "take a stand" for peace. The song was later featured in an international music festival and used in NGO-sponsored children's activities, inspiring the group to pursue efforts to deliver their message to a wider audience. Another activity engaged hip-hop artists as "messengers of peace," culminating in a concert marking the International Day of Peace.

For a local arts center, theater offered the means to generate debate on social issues. The initiative also provided an opportunity to engage youth in productive activities, some of whom were involved in the May clashes just weeks earlier. For the activity, four village theater groups were formed, and each group conceived, organized, and staged a performance at a major theater house in Beirut. Local media coverage was extremely positive, crediting the activity for a revival of the cultural scene in the capital and for bringing community concerns to the forefront. The impact was equally important on the groups' villages. In the words of one participant, "In place of going to politics or doing nothing, we are being creative – writing, acting, and performing."

Traditional media. Although Lebanon is one of the few Arab countries to enjoy a high degree of press freedom, local media organizations lack sufficient independence from political forces. Media ownership is often in the hands of individuals with clear political leanings, and journalists are subjected to tremendous pressures to take sides. Coverage of the May 2008 clashes illustrates this point, as many reports inflamed passions with biased and incendiary treatment of events. At the same time, traditional media offers significant opportunities to spread messages of peace and provide citizens with wide-reaching platforms to make their voices heard. Accordingly, in addition to its work with new media and emerging Web-based technologies, OTI is working with conventional media outlets to amplify program impact, foster responsible journalism, and promote media objectivity.

As part of these efforts, OTI has partnered with a media watchdog group that has generated one of the few honest debates about the role of the media in fueling tensions. The organization has also launched and piloted the first Arabic-language manual on the media's role as a voice of peace in times of conflict. Practicing journalists and media students alike participated in training workshops and roundtable discussions on objectivity, professionalism, and media ethics. In response to the May clashes, the grantee produced the first-of-its-kind documentary analyzing media biases in coverage of the conflict. The film was unveiled at a national conference attended by the Minister of Information, media executives, and civil society leaders. The ensuing debate generated ideas on media reform and set the stage for advocacy campaigns. OTI's partnership with another media organization also scored a first by hosting the only national conference on the implications of the Doha Accord.

OTI also funded the production of a pilot TV show titled "Youth Speak Out." The show uses an open platform to debate controversial topics such as political manipulation and propaganda directed at youth. Based on the success of the pilot, senior managers of a leading Lebanese TV channel have approved the production of 16 episodes, which will begin airing in early 2009. OTI also funded the first in a series of televised "Hyde Park" debates. The series has provided youth and civic activists with a rare opportunity to interact directly with government representatives live on the set. An upcoming episode will be filmed in Tripoli and will address the factors that drive youth to join radical movements.

B. Grant Activity

Grants Cleared by Quarter

Quarter	Grants Cleared	Budget for Grants Cleared
10/2007 – 12/2007	2	\$312,347
1/2008 – 3/2008	13	\$1,264,010
4/2008 – 6/2008	18	\$1,295,251
7/2008 – 9/2008	20	\$1,229,781
Grants Cleared Since Oct. 2007	53	\$4,101,389

Grants Cleared by Sector (October 2007 - September 2008)

Sector	Grants Cleared	Budget for Grants Cleared
Civic Education	13	\$746,490
Youth Leadership	11	\$928,922
Media	9	\$653,259
Direct Conflict Mitigation/Resolution	9	\$932,026
Culture and Arts	3	\$267,699

Education	3	\$91,040
Income Generation	3	\$174,515
Other Community Development	1	\$239,998
Alternative Media	1	\$67,440
Total	53	\$4,101,389

C. Indicators of Success

INGO Grants Leveraged to Build Local Partnerships – During the initial phase of program implementation, OTI partnered with a few international NGOs (INGOs) to facilitate entry into certain communities, gain a deeper understanding of local dynamics, and build relationships with local organizations. These grants allowed well-established INGOs to spur the formation of new youth groups in villages of the north, Beqaa, and south. For example, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) worked with youth and community leaders in eight villages, creating a pool of civic activists who can be mobilized for future activities. In Nabatiyeh, youth that were trained under OTI's grant to CRS are now actively involved in a youth network established under another grant to a local organization. OTI is also in discussions with one of CRS's local partners to initiate a new activity in a volatile area with few active NGOs.

In addition to creating opportunities to build local partnerships, the INGO grants have allowed Lebanese organizations to broaden their reach and establish a presence in new communities. In the northern city of Halba, for example, an OTI grant to the International Medical Corps (IMC) created a mentoring relationship between IMC and a local organization seeking to expand its traditional area of operations in the south. The local NGO now has a fully equipped center in Halba and is building on the capacities gained through its partnership with IMC to deliver vocational and conflict resolution training to marginalized youth.

OTI is also seeking to leverage its partnerships with INGOs to address issues that cannot be effectively tackled by local organizations because of limited capacity or lack of access. These efforts are focused in conflict-ridden areas where the capabilities and credibility of INGOs with prior emergency response experience provide an entry point for OTI.

Assisting Nascent Organizations – OTI support to nascent youth organizations, which are often ineligible for other donor funding, has provided them with the impetus to broaden their reach, test new ideas, and channel their energies and enthusiasm into collective action.

For example, OTI is the first donor to work with Silat Wassel, a Tripoli-based organization founded this year, and is assisting with its registration as an NGO. OTI's grant is allowing Silat Wassel to experiment with the use of the arts as a tool for conflict resolution and peace building in an area that has seen recurring violence over the past year. In addition, OTI support to the youth group IndyAct has allowed the Beirut-based NGO to expand beyond the capital for the first time in an effort to create a nationwide network of environmental activists. And in Nabatiyeh, an OTI activity has spurred the formation of a network that brings together youths from nine different groups. The groups were created or supported by previous donor programs, including two prior OTI grants.

Leveraging Resources – OTI has successfully leveraged donor and community resources to maximize the impact of its activities. These resources have included land and facilities supplied by private- and public-sector organizations, donations of TV air time, and contributions from donor agencies to support the implementation of community-based activities.

For example, a centrally located piece of land was privately donated to establish a public park in Hermel. The park will be free of partisan banners and interference, thus creating an independent space where youth will be able to recreate, play sports, and earn income by selling locally produced handicrafts. Similarly, an OTI activity north of Tripoli secured the donation of a seaside piece of land from the national and local government. The site, which is worth \$1 million, will be used by Lebanese and Palestinian communities as a public park and neutral place of interaction. In the south, a group of civic activists trained through an OTI grant conceived, designed, and proposed a community development project that involves rehabilitating their town's public garden. The group has secured additional funds from contingents of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon to turn their vision into action.

Through its work with media organizations, OTI was also able to leverage expensive TV air time for youth debates

and the dissemination of peace messages. Likewise, a nascent OTI-supported youth organization has launched a pro-peace awareness campaign that includes a series of TV spots that are airing without charge on major TV channels.

Successful Piloting – Several OTI grants have catalyzed spin-off or follow-on initiatives that have the potential to sustain efforts to create change. The program's first grant, which engaged CRS in forming consensus-building teams in the south, paved the way for a nationwide expansion of the model through a longer-term project funded by the U.S. Department of State. In another example, a grant to a local NGO near the Ein el Helweh refugee camp resulted in the formation of a youth-led neighborhood committee that has gained standing in the community.

Media Coverage – Substantial media coverage has allowed OTI and its partners to amplify impact and engage broader audiences. More than 80 articles on OTI's activities have been published, and ongoing projects with media institutions are providing opportunities for youth and civic activists to expand their reach.

Program Appraisal

In its first year of implementation, OTI successfully shifted its initial program focus based on evolving conditions, lessons learned from the start-up phase, and the outcome of strategic reviews. Programming staff quickly adapted by expanding the breadth and depth of activities outside the capital, and a management review provided the impetus for streamlining of grant procedures and better integration of grant-making and project development functions.

Since its inception, the program has faced a number of operational challenges, including anti-American sentiment, resistance to U.S. Government funding, and security constraints. OTI continues to navigate these complexities through concerted efforts to expand its pool of partners and rolling assessments of political developments and emerging issues.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

Priorities in the coming months include the following:

- Explore possible windows of opportunity tied to the national dialogue.
- Expand stakeholder consultations to generate new ideas.
- Make more systematic use of the media to publicize civil society achievements.
- Build linkages among partners and activities for greater scope and scale.
- Deepen monitoring and evaluation processes, through cluster evaluations, to inform grant development.
- Complete hiring of field officers to assist with monitoring of activities in each target region.