

USAID/OTI Lebanon Field Report

October - December 2007

Program Description

In September 2007, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) launched a 3-year program in Lebanon to diffuse tensions and create avenues for citizens to build consensus on community issues. As Lebanon grapples with political deadlock, increasing polarization has created a volatile environment that threatens the country's already fragile civil peace. In recent years, Lebanon has faced many challenges, including economic downturn, constitutional crises, the eroding legitimacy of confessional politics, and the summer 2006 war with Israel. USAID/OTI's flexible approach will enhance the U.S. Government's ability to support Lebanese consensus-building measures in a fluid political environment.

The OTI program will further U.S. Government policy goals for Lebanon to support democratic practices, economic prosperity and security, and regional stability. OTI's program will promote cross-confessional interactions that serve to mitigate conflict at the local level, promote new leadership by involving youth in community decision making, and equip the country's active but fragmented civil society to be a more effective proponent of reform.

OTI/Lebanon's implementing partners are Chemonics International Inc. and Macfadden & Associates Inc., and the total FY 2008 budget is \$4,800,000. The OTI program provides small grants and short-term technical assistance to achieve its objectives in Lebanon.

Country Situation

Presidential Succession Crisis - As the new year begins, there is no end in sight to the political deadlock that has left Lebanon without a president since Emile Lahoud's term ended on November 22, 2007. The election of a consensus candidate has been a pervasive priority since the withdrawal of Hezbollah ministers from the National Unity Cabinet in December 2006. The withdrawal has left the current government without critical support to define policy. During the past few months, Parliament was scheduled to vote on a candidate on 11 occasions; however, all of these votes were postponed due to lack of agreement between the government's supporters (the March 14 coalition) and the March 8 opposition coalition. While Lebanon's Constitution allows for an election by simple parliamentary majority, the March 14 coalition has, thus far, sought to elect a president by a two-thirds majority vote to ensure opposition support and popular legitimacy.

The issues surrounding the debate are as opaque and controversial as Lebanon's regional politics. The presidency is reserved for a Maronite Christian, but current allegiances cut across confessional (sectarian) lines, as one of the most popular Maronite politicians, Michel Aoun, is allied with the Shia-led March 8 opposition, which includes among its members both Hezbollah and the Amal party led by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri.

In early December, there seemed to be widespread agreement on the selection of Army Commander Michel Suleiman; he appeared to be a tenable Maronite candidate with opposition support. However, after protracted discussions on the constitutional amendment required for Suleiman's nomination, agreement once again fizzled. Many speculate that the talks fell apart around the issue of allocation of critical ministries: opposition leaders are demanding 11 of the 30 cabinet posts. Others blame neighboring states and patrons for the impasse, claiming these neighbors will withhold support and disrupt the process until they can extract concessions from the United States and Europe on other issues. Both opposition and ruling coalitions are pointing fingers, claiming the other side has deliberately derailed the process.

Sporadic Violence - A car bomb killed Brigadier General Francois al-Hajj, the Lebanese Army's Chief of Operations. It was the ninth attack against a senior policymaker since Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's 2005 assassination and the second attack of the fall. Al-Hajj was the officer tapped to replace Army Commander Michel Suleiman if his nomination for president was successful. While some blamed Syria for the attack, others noted that there is no evidence to support the allegation. Observers continue to speculate on whether al-Hajj's assassination was retribution for the army's role in rooting out extremist movements in the Nahr-el-Bared refugee camp or if it was directly related to Suleiman's presidential nomination.

Since al-Hajj's assassination, there have been few reports of violence related to national politics. However, many

observers fear that increasing animosity and estrangement among Lebanon's sects could draw youth into militias and create a tinderbox that has the potential to erupt without warning.

U.N. Investigative Commission - The International Independent Investigative Commission, established pursuant to U.N. Resolution 1595 to investigate the Hariri assassination, continues to provoke controversial reactions in Lebanon. In November, outgoing Chief Prosecutor Serge Brammertz submitted his final report, citing "significant progress" on the investigation without naming any names or indicating any direction of the investigation. The commission has been criticized by anti-Syrians for not publicly naming the Syrian regime as a key suspect, while pro-Syrian commentators have labeled the investigation a political tool manipulated by western interests. A Special Tribunal (established by U.N. Resolution 1757 in May 2007) is expected to begin operations in The Hague in 2008. The tribunal will review the Hariri murder and any other connected political assassinations that occurred between October 2004 and December 2005.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

OTI launched its program in Lebanon in September 2007 and dedicated the first quarter of the new fiscal year to program start-up. Initial activities included hiring staff, opening an office in Beirut, developing an understanding of local dynamics, and broadening the assessment initiated by OTI in April 2007. Project roll-out was expected to take approximately 3 months to allow OTI and its implementing partners to conduct a deep review of key issues, identify possible local partners, and evaluate the changing political environment. Given the country's middle income status, wide donor support, and profound political problems, the OTI/Lebanon team invested significant time in exploring issues that have traction in Lebanese society but have not been well-funded.

B. Grant Activity

During the quarter, OTI approved two grants for a total of \$312,347. OTI provided a grant of \$244,907 to international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to support community consensus building and cross-confessional interaction among youth in rural areas throughout Lebanon. This project will build on the partnerships and momentum CRS generated through its USAID-funded relief and reconstruction work following the 2006 war. CRS will work through two widely respected local NGOs, the Development for People and Nature Association (DPNA) and Nahwa al Muwatiniyya (NA'M). NA'M will focus on youth leadership training while DPNA will help stakeholders come together in several culturally mixed municipalities in the north and south to identify and implement a number of small-scale community development projects.

OTI's second grant, a \$67,440 project awarded to Lebanese research company Information International, will produce a conflict mapping study of Northern Lebanon. The grantee will use polls, focus groups, and field research to elicit information on the nature, dynamics, and patterns of conflict in village clusters throughout the seven northern states (qada). While there exist widely accepted views of the causes of community conflict in Lebanon, there has been little formal investigation or public discussion of the issues. OTI will use this information to inform its programmatic interventions.

C. Indicators of Success

Lebanese civil society, despite being able to draw on a tremendous pool of talent, remains fragmented and individualistic. Organizations openly discuss problems arising from lack of coordination while wryly noting a cultural disinterest in collaboration. Civil society's ability to constructively influence the national agenda is stifled by its indifference to cooperative action. Lack of coordination not only results in duplication but also limits the effectiveness of NGOs working to encourage policy reform and democratic change. Many observers note that Lebanese civil society could have an extremely positive impact on the nation's political stalemate if it were able to act in unison. Donor organizations offer a self-critique regarding coordination, pointing out that the donor community's record on coordination mirrors civil society's in that donors rarely share information or work jointly to promote shared objectives.

OTI is working to encourage a different modus operandi in Lebanon's civil society, providing incentives for local groups to partner with each other and seeking to fund projects jointly with other donors. OTI has connected NGOs with similar ideas to explore possible collaborations (several are under discussion) and has offered larger grants and organizational support to groups that want to work together. While some of the initial partnerships may materialize because of funding prospects, OTI expects that a number of the groups will see the benefits of collaboration and will continue working together on other initiatives.

In addition, OTI has solicited input from a range of donors and is seeking to fund follow-on or complementary activities. For example, the program is working on grant concepts with a number of entities that initially received Middle East Partnership Initiative Funds or grants from USAID or the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Labor and Human Rights. OTI expects to expand coordination in the future and work in concert with U.N. and E.U. democracy and governance programs.

Program Appraisal

The OTI/Lebanon project was designed to be rolled out slowly, giving staff an opportunity to gain a better understanding of issues and actors and allowing for fine tuning of program strategy. In Lebanon, political polarization and gridlock at the national level present tremendous challenges for any local or international group interested in encouraging dialogue and consensus building. Until there is a viable national government, the prospect of reform is remote. Action on any national policy issues that cut across confessional divides, such as electoral reform or public utilities equity, is on hold.

Many Lebanese report that it is now more difficult to work across confessional lines than at any time since the country's civil war. In addition, anti-U.S. sentiment has increased in Lebanon following the summer 2006 war with Israel. So while many organizations remain enthusiastic about working with the U.S. Government, some of the nascent, nonsectarian groups working on reform issues are not interested in partnering with USAID. Given these circumstances, OTI's initial strategy - which is to identify opportunities at the local level, where sensitivities are less acute, and mitigate conflict through consensus building - is realistic and appropriate.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

Over the next 3 months, OTI/Lebanon intends to continue its intensive stakeholder and donor consultations. The program also plans to launch activities in a number of sectors. The program has identified a dozen activities (10 proposed by Lebanese NGOs and 2 by international NGOs) that it expects to support in early 2008. These activities include projects to facilitate an environmental dialogue across sectarian lines, to mitigate conflict in impoverished communities near Palestinian camps, and to develop online community and social messaging forums through a new-media competition. By supporting a broad spectrum of activities, OTI will be better able to gauge which issues have traction, which methodologies are most effective, and where program resources might have a catalytic impact.