

USAID/OTI West Bank and Gaza Field Report

October 2005

Program Description

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI) program in the West Bank and Gaza, commenced in June 2005, is designed to respond quickly and flexibly to Palestinian priorities. The aim of the program is to promote good governance and youth empowerment.

OTI's objectives are to:

- Increase the ability of Palestinian national and local government to respond to citizen priorities.
- Increase the participation of youths in social, political and economic life.

OTI will provide in-kind grants to local Palestinian entities that:

- Support positive interaction and coordination among local government institutions, the central Palestinian Authority, local communities, and civil society organizations.
- Promote participatory decision-making at the community level.
- Engage Palestinian youths in activities that are constructive and improve their quality of life.
- Facilitate the flow of accurate information from multiple viewpoints.

Working with nongovernmental organizations, informal community groups, media entities, and national and local government officials whenever possible, OTI identifies and supports critical initiatives that move the region along the continuum from conflict to peace. ARD Inc. implements the \$10 million small-grants program and manages OTI offices in Ramallah, Hebron, Nablus, Gaza City, and Jerusalem.

The OTI initiative will complement USAID's longer-term development objectives, with a special emphasis on work with youths and local government. The small-grants program will be closely coordinated with the PA. Small grants will range from \$10,000 to \$100,000 and will address the priority needs identified by local communities. To the end of October 2005, OTI has cleared 33 grants for a total of \$1,741,150.

Country Situation

January elections on schedule – During a Gaza visit in late October, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas emphasized the national importance of planned Palestinian Legislative Council elections and said the elections will not be postponed. There have been suggestions that the elections, currently scheduled for Jan. 25, 2006, might be delayed due to a fluctuating security situation in the West Bank and Gaza. In a letter to the Central Elections Commission, President Abbas called on civil society, grassroots and citizens groups to prepare for the elections and encouraged broad-based participation.

Upsurge in cycle of violence – Following an October suicide bombing in Hadera, Israel, that killed five people and wounded dozens, there were retaliatory attacks between Israeli armed forces and Palestinian militants. Special envoy James Wolfensohn noted that the escalating, continued violence and the inability of Palestinian and Israeli leadership to reach consensus on such vital issues as the Rafah crossing bolstered extremism. The international community, including Egypt and the United States, has called on the parties to respect the cease-fire.

Security force reform – Following a meeting with security chiefs in Ramallah in mid-October, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ahmed Quriea announced that the Authority plans to begin disarming the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades by setting up five training camps and incorporating the Brigades' members into the Authority's security forces. He said that disarmament efforts will begin in the West Bank cities of Ramallah and Nablus, and then move to other areas. Interior Minister Nasser Yousef said the training camps would be operational "within weeks." Al-Aqsa spokesmen in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip said they were confident the movement would agree to the new plan.

Recent polling information – An October public opinion poll overseen by Bir Zeit University's Development Study

Program found that 82% of the people polled support President Abbas' moves to control the problematic security environment; 83% of Gaza residents are in favor of a declared cease-fire; 45% support disarming militant factions; and 76% of the population polled will participate in the January Palestinian Legislative Council elections. The poll also found that in the council elections, just under 47% will vote for Fatah (if it is headed by jailed Fatah leader Marwan Bargouthi), while 24.7% will vote for the Hamas ticket.

USAID/OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

In October, staff continued a focus on start-up issues that included the Office of Transition Initiatives' integration into the USAID Mission, reviews of staffing patterns to further streamline grant development and implementation, and internal discussion on systems and processes. Program staff concentrated on new grant development and submitted 16 grant ideas for review, while continuing with the implementation of earlier cleared grants.

OTI cleared 11 grants in October, totaling just under \$390,000. Eight of these grants supported a focus on enhancing local government responsiveness to citizen-identified priorities. These eight community-impact grants were geographically balanced, with two in the Gaza Strip and two in each of three main geographic areas of the West Bank (north, central and south). Two of the eight grants targeted youth-related activities, with support for a sports club in Khan Younis to purchase badly needed equipment and funding for a local nongovernmental organization in the West Bank to upgrade a heavily used recreational area. The remaining six community-impact grants provided funding for infrastructure-related work, including a school-access project in Nablus and a public lights project in Ramallah.

One of two media-related grants cleared in October is supporting Ramallah municipality efforts to communicate with its constituents about city-wide winter-preparedness projects. The municipality's public outreach campaign will include 30 banners, 1,000 posters and 1,000 booklets that highlight these winter-preparedness and other priority projects. As part of the campaign, the mayor and other municipal officials will participate in media events designed to improve communication between citizens and government authorities. The campaign is helping to show how the municipality is responding to constituent priorities and creating forums in which citizens and local government officials can discuss emerging issues.

The second media grant is providing further support to an on-going initiative to create two press centers for the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and Gaza, as well as a mobile press unit. During October, there continued to be rapid progress on the press facilities, and, under the direction of an OTI technical adviser, it is likely that the Ramallah facility will be completed by mid-November and the Gaza center by mid-December.

The final October grant is supporting efforts by the USAID West Bank and Gaza Mission to stand up an Action Plan Support Unit. In light of the Israeli disengagement from Gaza and parts of the West Bank, critical windows of opportunity have emerged in the past six weeks. USAID is taking a lead in initiating an immediate, short-term strategy for delivering targeted assistance to address citizen priorities. The strategy's desired effect is reflective of a U.S. Government priority to support moderate, reform-oriented democratic candidates in the upcoming local and national Palestinian elections in December and January. To achieve the objective, USAID assistance is focused on responding to citizen priorities in collaboration with Palestinian Authority representatives in targeted communities across all sectors. Also, USAID is putting in place a support structure to help the Palestinian Authority in communicating with Palestinians about past and present donor assistance in the West Bank and Gaza.

B. Grants Activity Summary

Focus Area	Grants Cleared in October 2005	Estimated Budget for Cleared Grants October 2005	Total Grants Cleared Since June 2005	Total Estimated Budget for Cleared Grants Since June 2005
Transparency/Good Governance	1	\$ 23,299	2	\$ 36,185
Community Impact Activities	8	\$270,576	21	\$ 669,352
Media	2	\$ 94,945	10	\$1,035,613

Total	11	\$388,820	33	\$1,741,150
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C. Indicators of Success

As part of its strategy to help local government entities respond better to the needs of their constituencies, OTI/West Bank and Gaza is aiding Nablus municipality in improving essential public services. OTI is supplying technical assistance and materials necessary to complete mapping and put up new street signs and house numbers in the old city of Nablus, a flashpoint during the five-year Intifada and still a place where there are frequent clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian gunmen. The initiative represents a collaborative effort between the municipality, a local emergency committee and An Najah University to assist local ambulances, policemen and firefighters to better navigate the maze of old city streets, reducing the time for emergency responders to react to residents' calls for help. By providing tangible indications of progress after years of deteriorating public services, this grant will contribute to building confidence in the capacity of local moderate leaders to address citizen priorities.

In town hall meetings in September that included OTI staff, residents of historic Bethlehem sought the revitalization of Star Street before the beginning of the tourist season. The meeting involved a candid exchange of opinions and ideas among residents and Palestinian Authority representatives, in which one resident summarized the situation: "We've heard many promises, but [the government] did not move...not even one inch." OTI is responding quickly to this prioritized project, plus a complementary grant is under development for a Holiday Market for local artisans and craftspeople on Star Street. The market will provide a rare opportunity for the artisans to sell their products.

D. Program Appraisal

Program start-up continued in October - the most active month to date in terms of the number and diversity of new grants. The OTI country representative spent much of her time working with the Mission on developing the Action Plan Support Unit, while also helping to oversee two technical advisers - one who was contracted to manage the Palestinian Authority press facility initiative and one who was hired to help OTI's implementing partner, ARD, refine grant development systems.

Security incidents during October continued to impact OTI's ability to develop and implement grants, with the violence surrounding the Hadera suicide bombing negatively affecting staff movement at the end of the month. Despite this constraint, OTI program staff members from both the West Bank and Gaza were able to meet in Jerusalem on Oct. 27 for a full-day discussion that focused on strategy issues and grant development. This day-long workshop was the first full program meeting in more than six weeks due to travel restrictions that prevented national staff from traveling out of Gaza or into Jerusalem. It is anticipated that travel constraints will continue to challenge grant development and the oversight of this program.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

In November, OTI/West Bank and Gaza will:

- Support the implementation of USAID's action plan for the West Bank and Gaza, an immediate, short-term strategy developed in the wake of disengagement.
- Continue to focus on new grant development, with particular attention to citizen priorities, including non-violence, traditional celebrations surrounding religious holidays, and creation of immediate economic opportunities.
- Closely oversee the implementation of the Palestinian Authority strategic communications grants, plus continue to look at other media-related programming opportunities
- Maintain deep engagement with implementing-partner staff on needed systems and processes related to grant development, implementation and evaluation.