

USAID/OTI Lebanon Field Report

October - December 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 OTI program, with a 2009 budget of \$4.5 million, 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

This quarter witnessed a flurry of reconciliation efforts between rival political parties, giving way to a cautious calm, especially in the north. However, volatile security conditions in Palestinian refugee camps and fears of election-related violence persist. The unease is coupled with concerns over the possibility of a conflict with Israel. Syrian-Lebanese relations turned a new page as the countries established diplomatic ties, but the ongoing polemic tied to the Hariri Tribunal underscores the precarious nature of the relationship. On the policy front, expectations of major reform before the planned June 2009 parliamentary elections are low, despite modest improvements in the electoral law.

Political Reconciliations – The political scene saw a series of reconciliation overtures between rival political parties as they sought to score points at the polls and position themselves for possible shifts in alliances ahead of parliamentary elections. The most prominent reconciliation meeting brought Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and Future Movement leader Saad Hariri face-to-face in a largely symbolic encounter that aimed to send a conciliatory message to their supporters and appease tensions lingering from the May 2008 clashes, when Hezbollah attacked Future Movement institutions.

The meeting came on the heels of similar encounters between rival parties in various areas of the country. Most notably, reconciliation in Tripoli put an end to months of armed conflict in the city, which had pitted pro-March 14 Sunnis from the Bab El Tebbaneh neighborhood against pro-March 8 Alawites in neighboring Jabal Mohsen. Attention has shifted to intra-Christian reconciliation, as these areas will be the most contested during the elections. This goal, however, remains elusive. Christian leaders in the March 8 camp have, so far, rejected overtures from Lebanese Forces party leader Samir Geagea, who is aligned with March 14.

The most controversial reconciliation moves had a cross-border character. Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, went to Damascus to shake hands with President Bashar Al Assad. Having led a "war of liberation" against the Syrians in the late 1980s, Aoun was one of Syria's greatest foes until Syria withdrew its troops from Lebanon in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination. The visit was decried by the March 14 camp, especially the Christian parties, for undermining state efforts to steer the new relationship with Syria and attempting to portray Aoun as representing Lebanon's Christian community. The visit, which was preceded by a trip to Iran, sent a clear message about the former general's continuing alliance with Hezbollah and its foreign patrons.

Relations with Syria at a Crossroads – During the quarter, Lebanon established diplomatic relations with Syria for the first time, opening a new chapter in the countries' tumultuous relationship. The move was welcomed by all major political leaders as bolstering Lebanese sovereignty, though contentious issues remain unresolved, including border demarcation and the fate of Lebanese citizens held in Syrian jails.

Despite this historic development, the U.N.-sponsored tribunal looking into the 2005 assassination of late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri is set to begin its work in March of 2009. His son and Future Movement leader maintains that Syria was behind the murder, a view shared by many Lebanese. For its part, Syria upped the rhetorical ante by

publicly accusing the Future Movement of funding Sunni extremist groups believed to have carried out terrorist acts in both countries. The party has denied the accusation as an attempt by Syria to cover up its own role in supporting extremism.

Syria pointed to recent bomb attacks that rocked Damascus and Tripoli to bolster its position that both countries face similar threats of terrorism. This argument was not lost on the Lebanese Government, as a number of high-level officials, including Lebanon's interior minister, Ziyad Baroud, and army chief Jean Kahwaji, have visited Damascus to discuss bilateral security cooperation. Though senior Lebanese officials have dismissed fears of a potential encroachment, the unsteady ties with Syria reflect the polarization within Lebanese politics. The March 14 camp is intent on maintaining a healthy distance from Damascus while the March 8 alliance seeks to rush normalization with one of its chief sponsors.

National Dialogue and Electoral Reform – Since it was launched in the last quarter, the National Dialogue headed by President Michel Suleiman has made few inroads. The three sessions held thus far have culminated in competing blueprints for a national defense strategy addressing Hezbollah's weapons and its relationship with the state. Reaching agreement on a strategy acceptable to the main political players appears a distant possibility in the near term.

Electoral reforms have likewise been disappointing. Parliament endorsed a modest package of reforms that fell short of the expectations put forth by civil society. While some improvements were introduced, such as single-day voting and campaign spending regulations, other critical reforms were rejected, including the use of pre-printed ballots to minimize fraud and lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18. As with the National Dialogue, sweeping reform is not expected in the coming months as legislators shift their attention to electoral campaigning.

Security Conditions Characterized by Cautious Calm – While the guns fell silent in Tripoli, the presence of extremist groups in Palestinian refugee camps led to mounting fears of a repeat of the 2007 Nahr El Bared conflict. The country's most populous camp, Ein El Helweh in the southern city of Saida, continued to brew with violence. Security within the camps relies on cooperation between Fatah and Hamas factions, but relations have been tenuous following the split between the two parties in the Palestinian territories. Despite these concerns, Lebanese authorities appeared to progress in their fight against terrorism, making arrests in connection with recent bombings allegedly carried out by Fatah Al Islam, the group behind the Nahr El Bared uprising.

As the quarter drew to a close, Israeli air strikes on Gaza reverberated within Lebanon, sparking a series of demonstrations against the attack and raising fears that Lebanon may be drawn into the conflict. In addition, positive developments are being overshadowed by speculation about the potential for violence and assassinations ahead of the upcoming elections and the Hariri Tribunal.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

Entry into Previously Inaccessible Communities – High-level political reconciliations created a better environment for entering conflict-prone areas that had been inaccessible due to armed violence and raw emotions stemming from the May 2008 clashes. OTI seized the window of opportunity to promote conciliatory measures at the community level by initiating activities in four conflict hot spots: Bab el Tebbaneh-Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli, Aley in Mount Lebanon, Saadnayel-Taalabeya in the Beqaa, and rival neighborhoods in Beirut. In many cases, these efforts were among the rare attempts to directly engage youth and community members. The activities built on previous grants that fostered intercommunal goodwill, with the hope of building bridges of cooperation to transcend sectarian and political loyalties.

Donor Coordination – An overcrowded donor environment and intense competition among civil society actors makes donor coordination especially challenging in Lebanon. Nevertheless, OTI's continued outreach to other donors and United States Government (USG) implementing partners is bearing fruit. A series of meetings with Italian Cooperation, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as USAID and the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL), has led to a productive exchange of ideas, contacts, and expertise as OTI seeks ways to complement and build on other donor initiatives. As a result, a number of concrete programming ideas are being pursued. In addition, OTI has facilitated information-sharing among USG partners, notably by hosting the International Foundation for Electoral Systems' first public briefing on the new electoral law at the request of DRL grantees. OTI also participated in a grants panel that reviewed 136 proposals from youth trained by the International Research & Exchange Board as part of a DRL-funded project. These initiatives are helping to build relationships with donors, demonstrate OTI's commitment to cooperation and leveraging of resources, and identify opportunities to complement longer-term efforts through short-term interventions.

B. Grants Activity Summary

In this quarter, OTI approved 11 grants totaling \$1,318,531.

Grants Cleared

Sector	Grants Cleared Oct - Dec 2008	Estimated Budget for Grants Cleared Oct - Dec 2008	Total Grants Cleared Since Oct 2007	Total Estimated Budget for Grant Cleared Since Oct 2007
Alternative Media	-	-	1	\$67,440
Civic Education	1	\$65,231	14	\$811,723
Culture and Arts	1	\$72,863	4	\$340,562
Direct Conflict Mitigation/Resolution	1	\$109,329	10	\$1,041,355
Income Generation	1	\$93,713	4	\$268,228
Education	1	\$54,465	4	\$145,505
Media	1	\$108,077	10	\$763,007
Other Community Development	1	\$240,000	2	\$479,998
Youth Leadership	4	\$574,853	15	\$1,507,916
Total	11	\$1,318,531	64	\$5,425,734

C. Indicators of Success

Creating Alternatives in Closed Environments – With OTI support, nonpartisan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are offering alternatives for social, cultural, and civic engagement in areas where most youth activities are dominated by political forces. In the southern city of Nabatieh, a group of more than 50 youths formed the Youth Network for Civic Activism, which has organized a variety of activities, including theater expression, folklore, mural painting, and social events. These activities have attracted growing numbers of young people seeking apolitical participatory pursuits. Building on OTI support, the group is now taking steps to establish a permanent youth center.

In the Beqaa, OTI partners have organized some of the few activities not sponsored by political parties. These activities have included youth camps, skills training, and communal projects and have exposed youth to civic values, nurtured leadership skills, and allowed participants to discover new interests and talents that they can continue to develop on their own. As a related benefit of OTI's support, the organizations that implemented these activities, many of them newly formed, have enhanced their standing in the community and can now draw on a larger volunteer base to plan and implement additional activities.

In Hermel, an OTI grantee has turned a rubble-strewn patch of land into a public park, creating a neutral gathering place for young people. The rehabilitation effort attracted youths from many backgrounds and involved removing all political symbols and signs from the area and building sports fields. The youth-run park management committee, which was formed under the grant, has organized exhibitions, festivals, and environmental cleanup campaigns and has received support from hundreds of residents.

Fostering Youth Dialogue on National Issues – Despite a highly competitive and fragmented civil society environment, an OTI activity brought together 20 local NGOs for a three-day youth dialogue in parallel with the National Dialogue led by President Suleiman. The event gave young leaders a platform to make their voices heard, producing a joint declaration and framework for action on issues that have now been eclipsed by divisive politics.

Young people also took center stage in a series of "Hyde Park" debates aired on the leading Lebanese TV channel,

LBCI. The debates tackled sensitive issues such as political extremism, government accountability, and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Participants openly expressed their views and posed questions live on the set in a rare opportunity to directly address political leaders. LBCI estimates that each show reached more than 750,000 viewers. Additional regional debates are in the works.

These efforts to promote dialogue have encouraged youth participation in the national discourse, provided a vehicle for networking among OTI partners, and increased the visibility of youth organizations that have the potential to play a role in shaping a civil society agenda.

Bolstering Emergent Youth Groups – Many of OTI's partners are nascent youth-led organizations with a wealth of ideas and enthusiasm but limited access to resources. In a country where political and confessional divisions have seeped into the civil society sector, youth groups driven by nonsectarian civic values offer promise as future drivers of reform.

OTI support has provided a launching pad for two fledgling organizations—Youth for Tolerance (Y4T) and the Lebanese Civic Media Initiative (LCMI)—by helping them turn their ideas into action, expand their reach, and establish themselves as civil society players. LCMI has launched a youth-driven campaign against online incitement, gaining extensive media exposure and growing numbers of volunteers. For its part, Y4T has produced TV spots on the dangers of sectarian divisions and secured free air time on major channels, capturing the attention of youth around the country. The group has since gone beyond the grant's original scope by taking its campaign to university campuses. Both LCMI and Y4T have leveraged support from other donors as a result of the experience gained through their partnership with OTI.

Mitigating Tensions in Palestinian Gatherings – OTI-funded activities in Palestinian gatherings—areas near refugee camps and under the purview of Lebanese municipalities—are contributing to conflict mitigation and engaging marginalized youth in efforts to make a positive difference in their communities. In Tyre, OTI supported a series of small-scale infrastructure improvements that evolved through participatory processes. These projects ranged from improving electricity networks to creating children's playgrounds. The youths felt particularly empowered by the tangible outcomes of the process, as they reflected their own ideas and priorities.

In a mixed Lebanese-Palestinian neighborhood near the Ein El Helweh camp, a hotbed for extremism, an OTI partner enlisted a group of youths in organizing community improvement activities, including environmental cleanup campaigns and children's festivals. Their efforts made a mark on an underserved community deeply affected by poverty and conflict and demonstrated how pooling local talents and resources could lead to positive change. The group then took the initiative to reach out to youth in a neighboring area plagued by similar problems. Local community leaders and residents have come to see these young people as positive role models, and the youths have expressed interest in assisting other OTI partners with community outreach and activities in the Ein El Helweh area.

In areas surrounding the Beddawi camp near Tripoli, a nascent youth organization brought together Palestinian and Lebanese youths for recreational activities and conflict resolution workshops. This was the first youth project involving both communities since the Nahr El Bared conflict. Participants and their families credit the youth-led organization with helping to rebuild intercommunal trust and engaging vulnerable youth in productive endeavors. Encouraged by positive community response, the NGO has initiated additional activities on its own and was able to leverage UNDP funding for upcoming youth projects.

Catalyzing Follow-on and Spin-off Initiatives – OTI support has enabled a variety of partners to test new ideas and approaches, paving the way for follow-on initiatives. An OTI grant allowed Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to pilot its consensus-building approach in select communities, providing the foundation for a long-term DRL funded program. CRS has since expanded its work into additional areas and built on lessons learned from the OTI-funded activity.

A grant awarded early on to the Lebanese Physically Handicapped Union (LPHU) is now being replicated at the national level in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and IFES. Owing to the interest generated by their work in Beirut, LPHU is in the process of mapping polling station access for people with disabilities nationwide, with a view to introducing improvements before the parliamentary elections of 2009.

Through a grant to RootSpace, OTI's foray into the new media field has incubated a spin-off entity called Social Media Exchange. With OTI support, RootSpace introduced close to 250 civil society activists to social media tools such as blogging, digital fundraising, and Facebook activism. The training material and workshops helped to educate NGOs on ways to leverage Web-based technologies for social change, leading several activists to incorporate these techniques into their existing programs. Social Media Exchange has now spun off from RootSpace as an organization solely dedicated to promoting the use of social media.

Youths active with the League of Independent Activists (IndyAct), a youth-led organization, brainstorm in preparation for an advocacy campaign. With OTI support, IndyAct trained groups of young people from four communities on how to become active citizens. Known as IndyYouth, the participants planned and executed advocacy campaigns from A to Z. They addressed decision makers on climate change policy, organized street performances on the theme of nonviolence, and distributed supplies to underprivileged schools.

IndyAct's approach of targeting 10- to 18-year-olds fostered peer learning as the older youths came to serve as role models for the younger teens. OTI support helped the Beirut-based NGO expand its reach, not only outside the capital but also beyond Lebanon's borders. Using the training materials and techniques developed with OTI funding, IndyAct is now transferring its approach to NGOs interested in replicating the experience in Jordan and Egypt.



Program Appraisal

OTI continued to widen its pool of partners and geographic reach during the quarter, initiating new activities in the north, Beqaa, and south. Several completed activities have paved the way for follow-on grants that capitalize on existing partnerships to broaden reach, replicate successful approaches, and enter new communities. In addition, a number of grants have provided opportunities for networking partners and youth leaders with a view to building scope and scale. Linkages facilitated by OTI have led partners to cooperate in implementing activities of mutual interest, sharing expertise, and leveraging resources.

Since the strategic retargeting in June, a sufficient volume of grants had been completed to allow for two independent cluster evaluations during the quarter. One examined a series of youth camps in the Beqaa while the second assessed grants to nascent youth organizations. In both cases, the studies complemented individual grant evaluations through a deeper examination of interconnected activities. The cluster approach has proven to be a useful tool in assessing and articulating the combined impact of related activities, shedding light on success factors and providing a basis to improve future programming.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

In the next three months, OTI plans to conduct a program performance review, followed by a strategy review, to take stock of work to date and appraise the program's direction. In addition, a cluster evaluation of media-related grants will be initiated, possibly followed by a review of conflict mitigation and/or vocational training activities should they be deemed far enough along to be assessed in the coming quarter.

In accordance with regional action plans, other priorities include recruiting a field officer for the north; studying opportunities to fill gaps in donor assistance to Nahr El Bared; expanding activities in central/west Beqaa, the deep south, and around Ein El Helweh; and planning for peace campaigns in connection with commemorations of the civil war and the May 2008 clashes.