

# USAID/OTI Lebanon Field Report

January - March 2008

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## Program Description

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

The OTI program furthers United States Government (USG) policy goals for Lebanon to support democratic practices, economic prosperity and security, and regional stability. OTI's program promotes 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. 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** - By late March, Lebanon had postponed its presidential election 17 times. Early 2008 saw various attempts from outside powers to negotiate a three-point "package deal" solution that would allow for General Michel Suleiman's election, determine the composition of the cabinet, and draft a new electoral law. While the Arab League proposal garnered some initial enthusiasm in the media, it soon appeared to be ineffective due to disagreement over the allocation of cabinet seats. The opposition continued to insist on receiving a "blocking minority," or one-third of the posts (usually between 24 and 30 slots), that would give it veto power in cabinet decisions. Other analysts speculated that the cabinet debate was a red herring and that the real issues revolved around the interests of the regional powers with historic involvement in Lebanon. By late March, the Speaker of the House announced a "Lebanese dialogue" to explore solutions to the crisis.

Each electoral postponement has been met by questions regarding how long Lebanon can withstand the tension caused by deadlock before triggering larger scale unrest. Further postponements may also affect parliamentary elections scheduled for 2009, as political leaders link the current crisis to a possible boycott or other measures.

**Arab Summit** - After weeks of speculation and discussion regarding Lebanon's participation in the March 29-30 Arab Summit in Damascus, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora announced that Lebanon would not attend. The March 14 coalition government described the boycott as a reaction to Syria's lack of respect for Lebanese sovereignty. It also defended the decision by explaining that as long as the presidency remained vacant in Lebanon so should Lebanon's spot at a heads-of-state summit. The decision was criticized by many of Lebanon's opposition leaders and by Syria, who attributed it to U.S. interference in Lebanese affairs. The summit issued a statement endorsing head of state support for the Arab League initiative, calling for improvement in Lebanese-Syrian relations, and supporting Lebanon's armed forces.

**Sporadic Violence** - January 2008 was a tense month, as two bomb blasts and a clash between the military and protestors reminded the Lebanese people of the tenuous security situation. An explosion on January 25 killed military police officer Wissam Eid, who had been involved in investigations of previous assassination attempts. Earlier in the month, a bomb in the Beirut suburbs appeared to target a U.S. Embassy vehicle, killing three Lebanese citizens.

On January 27, protests that began in a Shiite suburb of Beirut as a response to electricity shortages left seven dead and resulted in a backlash against the army, which had opened fire on the primarily Shia protestors. Many analysts believe the protests were politically manipulated to draw the military into the national political debate and foment

chaos that could later be exploited by political interests.

Given the January tensions, many feared that February 14 demonstrations would bring renewed strife, as competing events - the commemoration of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination and the funeral for Hezbollah leader Imad Mughnieh - were held on the same day. However, these events were largely peaceful, and, in subsequent weeks, many political leaders toned down their rhetoric, stressing that they did not want a return to civil war.

## OTI Highlights

### A. Narrative Summary

During the quarter, OTI shifted focus from start-up efforts to launching activities that promote consensus and mitigate conflict at a community level. OTI is supporting initiatives in three main areas: (1) cross-sectarian youth dialogue and training focused on leadership, conflict resolution, and advocacy; (2) consensus building around development priorities in communities that are experiencing sectarian conflict; and (3) issue-based reform led by civil society organizations that are poised to play a role in any future national changes.

One of the few things that political leaders agree on in Lebanon is that while youth are more receptive to change than the current generation of leaders, they lack the experience and memory of the civil war that provides older leaders with a check on rash behavior. A study on youth opinion in Lebanon conducted in June 2007 by Catholic Relief Services showed that more than 60 percent of young people see themselves first as Lebanese before identifying with a confession or sect. Accordingly, many of OTI's activities are focused on engaging youth in the political process with projects that invoke Lebanon's past as a way to change the future. With OTI support, the Jaber Center will organize 3-day civic education leadership workshops and development projects for youth from different backgrounds drawn from the country's six mohafaza (governorates). In another youth-focused initiative, 05Amam, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) established during the Cedar Revolution of 2005, will form mock municipal councils to teach citizenship skills to secondary students. Also, the Association for Forest and Development Conservation will help a multiparty coalition of youth to advocate for air pollution controls.



A family from the Chabriha Palestinian gathering in the southern city of Tyre stands in front of their home. American Near East Refugee Aid, an OTI partner, is working with Lebanese municipalities and Palestinian NGOs in Tyre to help resolve resource-based conflicts through small-scale infrastructure activities.

While OTI has directly addressed sectarian biases through training for youth, it has also used common concerns or a vision to address these issues in communities with entrenched confessional conflicts. In Shia and Christian farming communities in the South, villagers are coming together to increase their incomes through the use of new olive oil bottling techniques that the Scientific Research Foundation will introduce through an OTI grant. In the North, where there are fewer active civil society organizations, Mercy Corps and the International Medical Corps will use OTI funds to help local community groups create income-generation opportunities for disenfranchised groups and develop sports and extracurricular activities for at-risk youth.

While the overall political situation remains bleak, Lebanese civil society organizations are continuing to find openings to promote issue-based reform. OTI is supporting several of these efforts, including an electoral reform project led by the well-respected Lebanese Physically Handicapped Union. The project will map access for the disabled to polling stations in a select electoral district and help raise public awareness on electoral reform by addressing a noncontroversial and easy-to-understand issue. In addition, OTI is supporting the Maharat Foundation, a media-focused NGO, in its effort to tackle the biases and limitations of Lebanon's confessionally based media by working to develop an ethics code with editors and journalists. Finally, OTI is providing support to Baldati, an e-dialogue project that is reaching out to Lebanon's Web-savvy population by promoting successful reform and dialogue efforts on its Web portal, which connects several hundred villages in Lebanon.

### B. Grant Activity

In the second quarter, OTI approved 13 grants for a total of \$1,264,629. The following table details grants cleared during the quarter and since program inception.

Sector	Grants Cleared Jan – Mar 2008	Estimated Budget for Grants Cleared March 2008	Total Grants Cleared since Oct 2007	Total Estimated Budget for Grants Cleared since Oct 2007
Alternative Media			1	\$67,440
Civic Education	3	\$141,430	4	\$386,337
Culture and Arts	1	\$44,650	1	\$44,650
Direct Conflict Mitigation/Resolution	3	\$340,715	3	\$340,715
Income Generation	1	\$55,844	1	\$55,844
Media	2	\$160,171	2	\$160,171
Other Community Development	1	\$240,000	1	\$240,000
Youth Leadership	2	\$281,819	2	\$281,819
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>\$1,264,629</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>\$1,576,976</b>

### C. Indicators of Success

**Capitalizing on Past Momentum** - Following the infusion of significant donor resources since the July 2006 war with Israel, Lebanon is experiencing a number of common post-conflict distortions, including competition and fragmentation within the country's very active civil society. OTI/Lebanon has attempted to mitigate these distortions by identifying gaps, supporting groups that have developed a local constituency, and promoting work in coalitions. OTI has sought out and partnered with a number of Lebanese NGOs that have previously received U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) funding through U.S. NGOs and that were seeking funds to implement programs on their own. For example, OTI's support to the Jaber Center is allowing this former OFDA grantee to expand on activities it conducted with Mercy Corps and to establish itself in a new region. OTI is also coordinating closely with other USG-funded entities to leverage resources to benefit local partners.

**Community Participation** - Despite Lebanon's small size and educated population, constant political tension and deadlock have undermined citizen participation in politics, even in local government affairs. OTI has sought to mobilize community participation in local government as a way of encouraging consensus on issues where the entire community has a stake. This approach is bearing fruit through two current projects. The first project, an effort involving Catholic Relief Services and the Development for People and Nature Association, has promoted the development of consensus teams of concerned citizens in mixed communities throughout the South. These teams seek to engage the public in the process of setting municipal priorities. As one citizen from the village of Tebnin remarked, "This is the first project of its kind, where citizens are also involved in the planning and decision making." The second project is going forward in the mixed Palestinian and Lebanese neighborhoods near the southern city of Tyre, where unemployment, lack of basic services, and poverty have created a volatile mix. OTI-supported activities by the American Near East Refugee Association and the Association for the Development of Rural Capacities are using community participation methodologies to help resolve disputes over resources. In the gathering (an unsanctioned, informally established community) of Hey Al-Muassiseh, which borders the Burj As-Shamali refugee camp, villagers who have long been at odds with the municipality are working with it to rehabilitate their electrical network.

### Program Appraisal

During the quarter, OTI supported a broad spectrum of activities to gauge which issues have the greatest traction, which methodologies are most effective, and where program resources might have a catalytic impact. Program impact is tied to Lebanon's political polarization and national-level gridlock, and unfortunately, the current national-level political situation makes it difficult to address national policy issues that cut across confessional divides, such as electoral reform and public utilities equity. Many Lebanese report that it is more difficult now to work across

confessions than at any time since the country's civil war.

Given these challenges, OTI intends to review its objectives and focus areas in the next quarter and determine whether narrowing its geographic reach and/or concentrating on a particular set of community-level problems might increase impact.

### **Next Steps/Immediate Priorities**

In the next 3 months, OTI/Lebanon expects to expand its activities in the Tripoli, Akkar, and northern Bekkaa areas, which have not previously received significant donor assistance (with the exception of the Nahr El Bared and Beddawi camp areas).