

USAID/OTI Lebanon Quarterly Report

January - March 2009

Program Description

In 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 the 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

Repercussions of Gaza War on Lebanon – The January conflict in Gaza reverberated in Lebanon, setting off anti-war demonstrations nationwide. As the war intensified, so did concerns that Lebanon could get drawn into the conflict. These fears were heightened when several rocket salvos were launched from southern Lebanon into northern Israel. The Israeli response was swift but limited, and neither side sustained casualties. Palestinian factions are suspected of having launched the attacks, reviving calls for disarming Palestinian groups operating outside Lebanon's official refugee camps.

Conditions within the camps also continue to pose a threat to stability as various Palestinian factions compete for power and influence. The end of the quarter saw the assassination of senior Fatah official Kamal Medhat at the entrance of the Mieh w Mieh refugee camp in the southern city of Saida. Medhat had played a major role in appeasing inter-Palestinian tensions in the aftermath of the Gaza war. His death is seen as a blow to those efforts and could herald growing divisions within Palestinian ranks, heightening the potential for camp-related violence.

Election Campaigning Underway – Campaigns for the June 7 legislative elections are underway. Electoral alliances are taking shape and candidates are being announced for the 128-seat parliament. Christian districts are expected to be the most contested, pitting Christian parties aligned with March 14 against the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) of Michel Aoun, the former general now allied with Hezbollah. In the Metn district of Mount Lebanon, Member of Parliament Michel Murr, a former Aoun ally, announced an electoral deal with ex-president Amin Gemayel of the Phalange Party. The alliance is expected to provoke a fierce electoral battle in which the Armenian vote may be the decisive factor. The country remains deeply divided between the March 14 and March 8 camps, and the next parliamentary majority may be determined by a handful of seats rather than a sweeping victory by either side.

With campaigning in full swing, otherwise routine issues are becoming increasingly politicized as rival parties seek to score points with voters. For example, passage of the 2009 public budget has been delayed by a row between Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri over funding for the Council of the South, a public institution associated with Berri's Amal Movement. One issue that rallied support across party lines was a bill to lower the voting age from 21 to 18. If ratified, the law will not take effect for the June 7 vote but will apply to subsequent elections, including the municipal elections of 2010.

As the political rhetoric heats up, the need to maintain order and security has taken center stage and was the main topic of discussion at the fifth National Dialogue session headed by President Michel Suleiman. Scattered security incidents tied to campaigning include the killing of a young political activist after his participation in a March 14 rally in Beirut.

Relations with Syria – Syria appointed its first-ever ambassador to Lebanon during the quarter, which completes the process of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. The move marks a new chapter in bilateral relations since the withdrawal of Syrian troops after the assassination of Premier Rafiq Hariri. The killing is

under investigation by the Special U.N. Tribunal that opened in The Hague on March 1.

While the debate continues on Syria's role in the assassination, senior U.S. envoys shuttled between Beirut and Damascus, holding the first U.S.-Syria diplomatic talks since Hariri's death. At the same time, the United Kingdom declared its readiness to engage with Hezbollah's political wing in a departure from previous policy that viewed all branches of the group as terrorist. Some Lebanese observers interpret these developments as opening the doors of dialogue with regional players, signaling a move toward revival of the Middle East peace process.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

Increased Emphasis on Civic Education – The spotlight on the parliamentary ballot offers an opportunity to educate youth about the electoral process, with an eye to promoting their participation in the local elections of 2010. Unlike the legislative vote, the municipal elections are less constricted by sectarianism and provide greater room for popular participation. Should the draft law for lowering the voting age to 18 be ratified, it would likely take effect in time for the municipal elections, further opening the space for youth participation.

A strategy review held this quarter concluded that reform-minded youth groups supported by OTI are in a prime place to stimulate community-level democratic discourse. With this in mind, the program has incorporated into its activities a civic education curriculum emphasizing citizen rights and responsibilities, municipal governance, and advocacy to lay the ground for youth participation in the electoral process.

Entry into New Areas – The program continued to expand its reach through partnerships with new groups and entry into new communities. In the south, activities started in the district capital of Bint Jbeil and work was intensified around the Ein El Helwah refugee camp, where volatile conditions make youths particularly vulnerable to violence and extremism. OTI also launched its first activity in western Beqaa, with a focus on villages thought to be susceptible to extremist movements on the rise in the region.

In the north, OTI is one of the few donors working simultaneously with the rival Tripoli neighborhoods of Bab El Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, localities that have seen frequent armed clashes. Using a gradual approach, OTI partners have begun to initiate joint activities between youth from both neighborhoods, a prospect that was viewed as inconceivable a few months ago given the level of animosity and raw emotions on both sides. For example, youth from the two neighborhoods were involved in filming documentaries about their lives and are preparing to paint peace murals along a public stairway linking the two communities.

Donor Coordination – OTI participated in the USAID Mission's strategy development session to provide input into the Mission's five-year strategy, identify ways to leverage OTI's work in long-term programming, and explore possible handover options. OTI also participated in a panel review of 70 proposals for funding through the U.S. Embassy's small-grants program as part of efforts to ensure the complementarity of U.S. Government assistance to civil society organizations.

B. Grants Activity Summary

In this quarter, OTI approved 25 grants totaling \$1,945,712.

Grants Cleared

Sector	Grants Cleared Jan - Mar 2009	Estimated Budget for Grants Cleared Jan - Mar 2009	Total Grants Cleared Since Oct 2007	Total Estimated Budget for Grant Cleared Since Oct 2007
Youth Leadership	7	\$566,858	21	\$1,866,850
Civic Education	6	\$374,020	19	\$1,071,307
Income Generation	4	\$276,923	7	\$478,886
Education	2	\$186,597	4	\$245,367

Media	2	\$182,159	11	\$863,714
Culture and Arts	2	\$163,074	7	\$574,605
Community Development	1	\$101,082	4	\$620,602
Conflict Mitigation/Resolution	1	\$94,999	15	\$1,319,609
Environment/Health & Safety	-	-	1	\$48,290
Total	25	\$1,945,712	89	\$7,089,230

C. Indicators of Success

Catalyzing Youth-led Civic Activism – In a country where youth are often left out of decision-making processes, OTI-funded initiatives help to redefine citizen-government relationships and empower young people to shape local agendas. In villages across the Tyre district, an OTI partner has imparted leadership skills to 150 youths who went on to form local clubs in their communities. In each village, club members learned to assess needs, articulate youth priorities, and advocate for change.

In Toura, club members forged a collaborative relationship with the municipality and leveraged local government resources to create a public park. The municipality donated a 600 square-meter piece of land and matching funds. In addition, the municipality provided office space and computers for IT training and hosted a number of community events organized by the club, including a peace festival and a sports competition. Clubs in other areas were able to increase membership, generate community support, and gain the respect of local leaders, who facilitated their work and responded positively to their advocacy efforts. Overall, the youth clubs have implemented community improvement projects benefiting an estimated 30,000 people.

In the Beqaa, a recognized nonpartisan nongovernmental organization (NGO), Creadel, has trained a core group of 30 young men and women in participatory democracy. The trainees went on to mobilize youth in seven villages through a series of community activities, including movie screenings, tree planting, and theater plays. Motivated by positive community response, the young activists have formed an independent group, the Youth Gathering of Northern Beqaa. The group organized a roundtable discussion—focused on development in the Beqaa and attended by a dozen NGOs—where it called for greater youth participation in municipal development plans. The activity, through which a well-established NGO has incubated a new youth-run organization, confirms youth interest in civic engagement. In addition, the newly formed group was able to bring together Sunni and Shiite youth to discuss common needs despite sectarian polarization between the two communities, signaling its potential to foster change in the region.

Vocational Training Linked to Employment Opportunities – In northern Lebanon, poverty and sectarian politics create a mix that leaves youth vulnerable to political manipulation. OTI initiatives seek to break this cycle of dependency by expanding the career horizons of at-risk youth and equipping them with skills to chart their own course. An OTI grantee in Tripoli used vocational training based on local market needs to engage youth from Bab El Tebbaneh, an economically deprived conflict zone. The NGO partnered with private companies to deliver training in AutoCAD, an engineering software, and household appliance repair. The training was offered in parallel with workshops on work ethics, conflict resolution, and communication skills, and despite high attrition rates at the start of the project, the 50 youths who graduated have found jobs or are interning with local businesses.

Further north, a vocational training program run by the Women's Charity League trained 100 youths from several villages and towns of Akkar. Training sessions were conducted at local businesses, allowing participants to learn by doing and to establish connections with potential employers. The courses were complemented with workshops on interviewing techniques, communications, and volunteerism in collaboration with other NGOs. The trainees showcased their skills at a graduation ceremony attended by 600 people, demonstrating the importance of such activities in the target communities. Half of the participants have since obtained jobs and others are earning income from freelance work.

Youth as Voices of Peace –Recognizing that young people do not always respond to traditional conflict resolution approaches, OTI partners have reached out to youth with peace messages in new, creative ways. The Permanent Peace Movement (PPM), a conflict resolution NGO founded by university students at the height of the Lebanese civil war, tapped into the growing popularity of rap music to turn up-and-coming artists into peace advocates. After learning how to use art as an advocacy tool, a diverse group of 20 young artists produced an album, Peace Beats, of

which more than 1,000 copies have been distributed. The rappers captured the attention of the national media and have organized their own events—including street performances, small concerts, and peace rallies—since the grant ended, modeling peaceful self-expression to young people across the country.

For the youth-led group Nahnou, theater was the vehicle for fostering dialogue between Sunni, Shiite, and Christian youth from Beirut conflict zones affected by recent sectarian violence. Nahnou received more than 200 applications from youths interested in attending its workshops. The workshops could only accommodate 75 participants, but this number exceeded the group's original target of 50. Since holding the workshops and organizing conferences on dialogue, Nahnou has been approached by a major television channel to partner on a TV program for youth and has obtained official registration as an NGO, boosting its credibility as a civil society player.

Another fledgling youth group, Common Effort, is using interactive games and role playing to impart conflict resolution skills to high school students in conflict-prone areas around the country. The activity builds on a prior OTI grant to the group and engages young activists in transferring their skills to other youths. Common Effort has used its OTI-funded project as a platform to network and generate more interest in its conflict resolution activities by participating in UNESCO-sponsored Global Youth Service Days.

More than 85 young men and women gathered in Nabatieh to debate the role of youth in elections at an OTI-funded forum organized by Shu'on Janoubia, an independent media organization with roots in South Lebanon. The event provided the youths, who live in a closed political environment that leaves them with few avenues to make their voices heard, with a rare opportunity to exchange views. Participants expressed a desire to see more independent candidates run for office and greater youth participation in local governance.

Prior to the forum, a core group of youths attended a workshop where they were introduced to the subject matter and received training in communication skills, setting the stage for their active participation in the debate. The event was one in a series of seven debates on youth issues held across the south and in Beirut's southern suburbs.



Program Appraisal

In the 18 months since the program was launched, OTI has forged partnerships with a growing pool of youth organizations that are fostering nonpartisan civic engagement in communities across the country. OTI's increased emphasis on civic education is empowering these groups to play an active role in local decision making, often for the first time. OTI continues to facilitate linkages between partners to connect like-minded groups and individuals, many of whom are collaborating on activities, exchanging ideas, and sharing expertise.

The youth organizations supported by OTI are gaining recognition in their communities and in the media, amplifying the impact of their work. At the individual grant level, these organizations continue to attract extensive media coverage on their activities and successes. The program is now investigating ways to make more strategic use of the media by exploring new programming options with mainstream, alternative, and new media.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

Over the next three months, OTI plans to develop a capacity-building program for nascent groups, adopt recommendations from the media review, and initiate a peace campaign tied to commemoration of the Lebanese civil war, using it as a platform for uniting diverse partners around a common theme.