



## Office of Transition Initiatives

# LEBANON



### OTI MISSION STATEMENT

*To support U.S. foreign policy objectives by helping local partners advance peace and democracy in priority countries in crisis. Seizing critical windows of opportunity, OTI works on the ground to provide fast, flexible short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs.*

### FAST FACTS

Start Date: September 2007  
Budget: \$9.6 million (FY09)

### USAID/OTI

<http://www.usaid.gov> –  
Keyword: OTI

### PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) launched the Lebanon Civic Initiative in September 2007 to support U.S. foreign policy objectives aimed at promoting peace and stability in Lebanon. The program focuses on youth who are often protagonists in conflict but also offer the most potential as voices of peace and agents of change. Through small grants and short-term technical assistance, OTI works with a wide range of civil society partners, particularly nascent organizations, to foster leadership skills among youth, expand their horizons, and empower them to chart their own course.

### ACTIVITIES

**Country Objectives** – OTI's overall goal is to preserve democratic space in the highly polarized Lebanese society and to strengthen the country's fragile civil peace. To assist these efforts, OTI focuses on (1) providing youth with civic engagement opportunities, primarily in the north, the Beqaa, and the country's south, and (2) mitigating tensions in conflict-prone areas, with an emphasis on conflict zones that had recently erupted into violence. As the country prepares for the 2010 municipal elections, the program is capitalizing on opportunities to mobilize youth participation in the democratic process by incorporating civic education and civic engagement initiatives in its activities.

**Youth-Led Civic Activism** – OTI primary partners are nongovernmental organizations, youth groups, and other civil society actors. The program aims to engage at-risk youth in productive activities that expand their horizons, encourage critical thinking, and reduce their vulnerability to political manipulation. Given the plethora of means political parties use to attract youth, OTI supports a wide range of activities, including life skills training, community development, cultural and artistic expression, and vocational training. Most activities incorporate civic education and youth-led civic activism, which contrasts with the top-down approaches inherent in existing political structures by empowering youth to make decisions and to leave a mark in their community.

**Conflict Mitigation** – The widespread presence of small arms and deep polarization along political and sectarian lines create a climate in which political crises often explode into street violence. OTI partners with voices of peace and moderation at the community level to defuse tensions and bring rival groups together around shared goals. These activities have largely focused on areas affected by the May 2008 clashes, as well as Palestinian gatherings, and have taken many forms—from peace festivals to joint advocacy campaigns and community projects involving rival communities.

## COUNTRY SITUATION

**Government Deadlock** – OTI Lebanon ends its second year in an environment reminiscent of the one existing when the program started: political stalemate, sectarian tensions, and a polarized society. In 2008, Lebanon saw civil violence give way to a political deal, while in 2009 the country reaped the benefits of a series of high-level reconciliations, new diplomatic relations with Syria, and the largely peaceful parliamentary elections in June. However, the initial sense of optimism that followed the elections quickly abated, as efforts to form a new government hit an impasse. After three months of negotiations, Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri presented a cabinet proposal that was rejected by the opposition, leading him to resign, only to be reappointed by a parliamentary majority. Despite the crisis, formation of a national-unity government based on a formula that denies absolute majority or veto power to either side is expected. The tipping vote is expected to be in the hands of ministers appointed by President Michel Suleiman. Meanwhile, key national reform issues such as electoral reform, privatization, and anti-corruption measures are at a standstill, as lawmakers negotiate political battles. Though the gaps between the March 8 and March 14 coalitions are wide on many of these issues, the tacit alliance that seems to be emerging between Suleiman and Druze chieftain Walid Jumblatt since his departure from March 14, and possibly House Speaker Nabih Berri, is likely to play a key role in shaping the agenda of the new government.

**Regional Relations** – External factors and Lebanon’s relations with its neighbors continued to have a major impact on domestic politics. Despite the establishment of diplomatic ties with Syria, bilateral relations remained lukewarm as the slow-moving Special Tribunal for Lebanon pursues its investigation into the Hariri assassination. A recent thawing in Saudi-Syrian ties, however, bodes well for internal politics and is seen as a positive development in breaking the government deadlock. Meanwhile, a series of security incidents in southern Lebanon, including the explosion of a suspected Hezbollah weapons cache, have intensified tensions with Israel. Although these incidents have been contained, the explosion highlights the continuing violations of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701.

**Rising Al Qaida Threat** – Border tensions reached a boiling point when rockets were launched from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, prompting an immediate but limited Israeli retaliation. No casualties were reported by either side, but an Al Qaida-affiliated group—the Battalions of Ziad Jarrah, named after the Lebanese 9/11 hijacker—claimed responsibility for the attack. Al Qaida also claims responsibility for a similar rocket salvo that was launched last January at the height of the Gaza conflict. These incidents, along with the recent conviction of a dozen members of a terrorist cell, have underscored the rising threat of Islamic fundamentalism as Al Qaida has increased its calls for Sunni militants to engage in jihad in Lebanon.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

- 20 October 2009 - Parliament scheduled to convene for ordinary session
- October-December 2009 - Window of opportunity to advocate for electoral reforms that can be passed by Parliament in time for local elections expected to be held in May 2010
- 5 February 2010 - Deadline for finalizing voting lists

## GRANTS SUMMARY

Since September 2007, OTI, through its implementing partner Chemonics International, has funded 117 small grants totaling \$9,925,431. The tables below show funding by quarter for FY09 and grants by sector since the start of the program.

**GRANTS BY QUARTER (FY09)**

Oct – Dec		Jan – Mar	
Grants	Budget	Grants	Budget
11	\$1,112,850	26	\$1,893,352
Apr – Jun		Jul – Sep	
Grants	Budget	Grants	Budget
19	\$1,748,222	9	\$1,240,737

**GRANTS SUMMARY BY SECTOR (since 9/2007)**

Sector	Grants Cleared	Budget for Grants Cleared
Youth Leadership	35	\$3,193,522
Civic Education	23	\$1,515,096
Conflict Mitigation/Resolution	19	\$1,543,684
Media	14	\$1,308,643
Income Generation	9	\$787,990
Culture and Arts	8	\$667,003
Education	4	\$240,604
Community Development	4	\$620,599
Environment/Health & Safety	1	\$48,290
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>\$9,925,431</b>

## HIGHLIGHTS

**Laying Ground for Youth Participation in Municipal Elections** – The OTI Lebanon program is beginning to hit its stride after two years, thanks to a growing pool of committed, civic-minded partners across the country. Youth-led organizations formed or strengthened by OTI are leveraging funds from other sources, carrying out activities on their own initiative, and generating new ideas for follow-on work. These groups are poised to play an active role in the 2010 municipal elections by empowering young people to participate in the democratic process and equipping them with the knowledge to make informed choices. OTI partners are already taking steps to mobilize the electorate by teaching youth about the inner workings of their municipalities, publicizing community needs, and advocating for participatory decision making. In the southern city of Nabatieh, for example, a 100-member youth group is leading a campaign advocating for access to information on the municipal budget. In the western Beqaa, a core group of 45 youths initiated a survey on community needs in a dozen villages and presented the results to mayors and members of parliament. The group now plans to use the findings to stimulate community dialogue and pressure electoral candidates to develop platforms addressing the identified needs. Across the board, program partners are using creative outreach, messaging, and training techniques to impart critical thinking skills to young people, empower them to influence electoral platforms, and encourage them to vote on the basis of issues rather than political or religious affiliation.

**Recreational Alternatives as Entry Points for Civic Activism** – In many communities where OTI works, political parties and other groups in society sponsor activities such as scouting programs to attract and indoctrinate youth. OTI partners offer recreational alternatives—often the only apolitical activities for youth—that also provide entry points for civic engagement. In Bint Jbeil, a city in the deep south, an OTI partner engaged more than 200 youths in IT training, sports, and community events during school and university holidays and then gradually introduced civic education activities. Inspired by what they learned, some of the participants formed a shadow municipality to shed light on municipal roles and responsibilities, which is a bold and novel concept in the area. In Teirfilsay, a southern village coveted by political parties as a natural setting for youth camps, a nascent youth organization supported by OTI managed an 8-day summer camp for 50 children, launched a series of sports competitions, and rehabilitated the village's public park, earning it a reputation as the area's only independent civic group. In the Beqaa village of Chmostar, an OTI partner built on a prior grant to engage youth from neighboring villages in a month-long summer camp for 40 youth leaders, 120 children, and their families. By nurturing youth development and cultivating nonpartisan spaces for self-expression, learning, and civic engagement, these groups have generated sufficient momentum and community respect to sustain themselves without OTI funding.

**Amplifying the Voices of Peace** – In a country where political crises can quickly turn into violence, OTI works in conflict hot spots to engage youth as peace builders and make them less vulnerable to political manipulation. When traditional conflict mitigation approaches are not effective, program partners use innovative ways to reach youth. For example, in conflict zones in Beirut, one group drew young people from rival neighborhoods for street basketball tournaments. The events combined sports and conflict resolution training, and matches were characterized by a spirit of sportsmanship, which contrasts sharply with the politicized nature of sports in Lebanon, where many games end in sectarian violence. In poverty-stricken hot spots of the North, OTI partners have incorporated conflict mitigation instruction into vocational training activities that have increased the earning potential of 250 youths from underprivileged areas of Tripoli and Akkar. While higher incomes provide the most immediate benefit from this assistance, participants were also exposed to conflict resolution concepts that challenged their preconceived notions of “the other.” In addition, in the rival Tripoli neighborhoods of Bab El Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, several OTI partners were able to bring youth together for joint trainings, cultural events, and community initiatives—small steps that were unfathomable just months ago.

**New Media as Platform for Networking** – Given the sheer number of OTI partners across Lebanon, connecting like-minded groups is a constant challenge. Accordingly, the program seeks to capitalize on new media and critical events as platforms for networking and outreach. For example, OTI grantee SMEx used a combination of online



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A young man waves the Lebanese flag at a Baalbeck marathon that was part of an OTI grant involving 1,920 high school students.

and traditional learning methods to train 50 civil society activists who are now teaching others how to use tools such as blogs and Twitter. The workshops and online learning center fostered collaboration across regions and institutions and motivated participants to incorporate social media in their work. Other grantees are launching youth-led alternative media efforts that involve partners across the country in producing multimedia content to deliver social messages, make youth voices heard, and challenge the politicized nature of the mainstream media. These interactions are encouraging networks to form organically despite the absence of a tradition of coalition building in the country's fragmented civil society sector.

## PROGRAM APPRAISAL

Despite operational challenges, including anti-U.S. sentiment and resistance to U.S. Government funding, OTI has a growing pool of competent partners around the country that have firmly established themselves as civil society players. The program has also been able to enter new, often closed or conflict-prone communities where there is no other donor presence, laying the groundwork for possible longer-term U.S. assistance. In addition, strategic investments in targeted capacity-building initiatives are bearing fruit as key partners continue to increase their abilities, resources, and level of sophistication in designing and implementing youth empowerment programs.

After two years of extensive community-level work in hundreds of villages, OTI is now in a unique position to mobilize youth involvement in the political process leading up to the next municipal elections. The political stalemate over formation of a new cabinet, as well as the complex regional and international factors at play, has underscored the limited room that exists for popular participation in national-level politics. However, OTI partners are already making headway in shaping local agendas, raising awareness of municipal roles and responsibilities, and positioning themselves to play an active role before, during, and after the 2010 local elections.



OTI/Lebanon

Youth in Aitaroun mark Global Youth Day with a cleanup campaign that spanned four villages in the deep south.

## NEXT STEPS

OTI priorities for the next quarter include the following:

- Refine and intensify programming related to municipal elections;
- Develop a standard curriculum related to local governance and municipal elections, and deliver training to partner organizations;
- Launch a national poll to examine youth knowledge and attitudes toward local government; and
- Jump-start cross-regional activities to raise awareness, build capacity, and offer avenues for youth involvement in local governance and municipal elections.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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