



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: \$15.3 million

USAID/OTI

<http://www.usaid.gov> –
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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 as they 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 (NGOs), 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

Parliamentary Elections – The long-anticipated parliamentary elections of June 7, 2009, brought victory to the March 14 coalition, which clinched 71 out of 128 seats, defeating the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance. Despite some irregularities, such as vote-buying, the process was largely peaceful and the overall election results were accepted by all parties. Nabih Berri of the Amal Movement was re-elected as House Speaker, a Shiite post, and Saad Hariri, head of the Future Movement, was appointed as Prime Minister, a Sunni post. Hariri's first task is to form the next government through consultations with the major parties. Negotiations have stalled over the balance of power within the Cabinet and the distribution of ministerial portfolios. Among the key disputes, some March 8 leaders have demanded veto power while others have called for proportional representation based on their bloc's size in parliament. Both propositions were rejected by the March 14 coalition. Despite the clear outcome of the elections, Lebanese society and its parliament remain sharply divided. Whether this will once again lead to deadlock remains to be seen and is likely to be influenced by external factors, such as the state of Saudi-Syrian relations.

Relations with Syria – Lebanon and Syria completed the process of establishing diplomatic ties by opening embassies in their respective capitals. As a new page is turned in relations between the two countries, Syria is coming out of its international isolation and re-emerging as a critical power broker in any regional peace deal. The Obama administration's interest in engaging Syria, a thawing in Damascus-Riyadh relations, and reported Syrian-Israeli talks via Turkish mediation are all factors with repercussions on Lebanese politics. Meanwhile, the Hariri Tribunal's release of the four Lebanese generals detained in connection with the Hariri assassination dealt a blow to the theory that the generals, who were in office during Syrian tutelage, acted in concert with the Syrian regime. Although the verdict is still out on Syria's involvement in the assassination, this development was seen by many as playing in Syria's favor and widening the door to rapprochement.

Violence and Reconciliations – High-level political reconciliations continued with a landmark meeting between Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Druze chieftain Walid Jumblatt of the Progressive Socialist Party. The meeting—their first in three years—captured the overall conciliatory tone in the country post-elections. Despite lip service to dialogue by all major leaders, the situation on the ground remains tense between their respective supporters. Recent violence caused the death of a woman by a stray bullet as clashes erupted between Amal and Future supporters in a mixed Sunni-Shiite Beirut neighborhood. Meanwhile, the Palestinian refugee camps remain a hotbed for violence and extremism, with sporadic gunfights between rival groups and occasional political assassinations, including the killing of a senior Fatah official in April in the southern city of Saida.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Late July 2009 - Expected formation of the new Cabinet
- 12 August 2009 - International Youth Day
- 20 August 2009 - Expected start of Ramadan
- 21 September 2009 - International Day of Peace

GRANTS SUMMARY

Since September 2007, OTI, through its implementing partner Chemonics International, has funded 108 small grants totaling \$8,779,731. Funding by sector is shown in the table below.

| Sector | Grants Cleared April - June 2009 | Budget for Grants Cleared April - June 2009 | Grants Cleared Since October 2007 | Budget for Grants Cleared Since October 2007 |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| Youth Leadership | 11 | \$1,031,727 | 32 | \$2,884,134 |
| Civic Education | 2 | \$141,230 | 21 | \$1,211,353 |
| Income Generation | 1 | \$99,571 | 8 | \$580,234 |
| Education | - | - | 4 | \$245,367 |
| Media | 1 | \$123,753 | 12 | \$989,047 |
| Culture and Arts | 1 | \$167,651 | 8 | \$720,083 |
| Community Development | - | - | 4 | \$620,602 |
| Conflict Mitigation/Resolution | 3 | \$172,838 | 18 | \$1,480,621 |
| Environment/Health & Safety | - | - | 1 | \$48,290 |
| Total | 19 | \$1,736,770 | 108 | \$8,779,731 |

HIGHLIGHTS

Peace Campaign – In a country where political rhetoric fuels sectarian divisions, disseminating messages of peace is a critical part of averting conflict. As Lebanon prepared to commemorate a dark chapter in its history, OTI launched a month-long bus tour marking the start of the civil war and the more recent May 2008 clashes. Civic activists took to the road to spread their message in 34 locations, symbolizing the number of years since the civil war erupted. The activity, organized by local NGO Zico House, served to connect like-minded groups across the country around a common cause. OTI partners welcomed the bus in their communities through peace festivals, film viewings, and dialogue sessions. In many places, the activity helped youth groups cultivate relationships with local government as they worked to facilitate campaign-related activities. In the southern city of Tyre, the mayor joined the crowds in welcoming the bus to his city. For the last stop, some 2,500 youth and civic activists converged on Beirut in a large, peaceful gathering that was especially significant given a tense electoral season. In a letter to Zico House, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman commended the effort for “bringing different NGOs together to spread the culture of peace and coexistence, and to encourage youth to stay away from violence.”

Engaging Youth in the Electoral Process – While the complex political and sectarian dynamics of the national elections leave little room for citizen engagement, the focus on elections offered ample awareness-raising opportunities. Shu'on Janoubia, a media-oriented NGO and OTI partner, organized a series of public debates targeting youth in seven cities and villages of South Lebanon as well as Beirut's southern suburbs. The debates directly engaged close to 600 youths and reached many more through media coverage. Young people debated their role in national and local elections and their expectations of elected officials. The events gave youth in closed political environments a rare opportunity to make their voices heard and to interact with public figures, including mayors, members of parliament, and civil society leaders. In the Dahieh suburbs, Minister of State Ibrahim Shamseddine opened the debate by calling on youth to play an active role in the democratic process and challenging them to be critical consumers of political and media speak.

In the northern city of Tripoli, OTI partner Shabab El Balad organized four candidate debates focusing on issues of interest to youth. This marked the only opportunity for young people in Tripoli to directly question candidates about their stance on contentious issues and their plans for responding to youth priorities. Shabab El Balad also staged a shadow election where nearly 2,500 youths, and potential new voters, cast a ballot. In other areas, OTI partners capitalized on the national spotlight on elections to educate youth about the democratic process. In the Beqaa town of Chmostar, a nascent organization engaged 25 youth leaders in facilitating discussions on electoral reform in local high schools. Across the country, OTI connected its partners to domestic election observation missions, leading many young activists to volunteer as election observers.

Youth as Change Agents in Conflict Zones – Young people are especially vulnerable to violence in conflict-prone areas. In these places, OTI works with local groups to involve youth in peace-building activities. In the southern city of Saida, OTI partners are working with vulnerable Lebanese and Palestinian youth from the conflict-prone areas near Ein El Helweh, Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camp. One youth-led group was formed with OTI support under a previous grant and has gone on to reach out to youth in additional neighborhoods through training workshops on conflict resolution, peace festivals, and community development initiatives. Another more well-established NGO used OTI support to establish a youth wing and train a core group of 50 young volunteers, who then engaged another 500 youths in community improvement and peace-building projects. These activities are providing at-risk youth with nonviolent outlets for self-expression in areas plagued by poverty and violence while alleviating longstanding tensions between Lebanese and Palestinian communities.

In the Beqaa village of Nabha, young people attending citizenship classes in an OTI-funded youth center initiated a dialogue on conflict issues affecting their village, where sectarian conflicts have prevented a municipality from being formed. The participants crafted a campaign to bring the community together by painting the village square, replacing political slogans with messages of unity, and rehabilitating a common wall that separates the local mosque and church. Both Muslim and Christian villagers expressed their appreciation for the youth-initiated efforts and, as a result, constructive dialogue has begun. In other conflict-prone areas, a youth organization established with OTI support led workshops for 500 students in 12 high schools, using young trainers and interactive games to teach peace-building concepts. Young people from diverse sectarian backgrounds then worked together on advocacy and community projects, including a media campaign on citizenship and an exchange program between students from Shiite and Sunni villages. The experience helped foster a shared sense of identity among the participants, who came to see themselves as peacemakers and as a symbol of the united Lebanon they aspire to create.

PROGRAM APPRAISAL

The recent parliamentary elections, during which all political parties made a concerted effort to target Lebanese youth in their campaigns, illustrated the extent to which young people are subject to political manipulation and sectarian rhetoric. This proclivity on the part of the parties has confirmed the continued relevance of the program's focus on youth, given their potential to act as change agents.

Fostering civic activism at the local level has engaged youth in activities that are making a difference in their communities. The activities are imparting civic values, critical-thinking skills, and leadership abilities and are grooming youth to be active citizens. As Lebanon prepares for next year's municipal elections, these young people are poised to play a critical role in mobilizing citizen participation in the democratic process. Recognizing this potential, the USAID Mission in Lebanon is in discussions with OTI on ways to capitalize on this opportunity through possible extension of the program.



OTI/Lebanon

Before and after pictures of the "Stairs of Hope," a public stairwell separating the rival communities of Bab El Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli after a nascent organization engaged youth from both neighborhoods to assist with its rehabilitation.

NEXT STEPS

OTI priorities for the next quarter include the following:

- Launch a capacity-building program for nascent organizations;
- Launch innovative media activities that respond to a recent media review;
- Capitalize on school recess and cultural/social holidays (e.g., Ramadan and the International Day of Youth) as platforms for partner networking and youth summer activities;
- Continue to refine criteria for municipal elections-related work based on municipal mapping activity and lessons learned from prior grants;
- Explore potential synergies and exchange knowledge with other donors involved in municipal work;
- Use polling/surveys to examine citizen knowledge and attitudes toward local government to inform future programming.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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