

***Community-Building in Post-War Lebanon:
A Project to Enhance Ethnic Tolerance and Civic Identity***

Developed by:

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I. Background

The Institute of World Affairs is engaged in a multi-year effort to assist in the peaceful reconciliation and return of displaced villagers to their former homes in the Mt. Lebanon region east of Beirut. Christian and Druze villagers had co-existed peacefully for many years before the Lebanese civil war (1975-91) drove the two communities into armed conflict and eventually led to the expulsion of Christian villagers from the region. The Institute's efforts have focused on the three villages of Breeh, Salima, and Kfarmatta, which were identified by the Lebanese Ministry for the Displaced as particularly difficult cases, given the level of conflict they experienced during the war.

The project was launched in October 1999 under a grant from the US Department of State's Bureau of International Religious Freedom. The initial project outlined the following objectives:

- A. Intra-Community Dialogue: Informal conversations facilitated by IWA and held with key individuals and local leaders within the Christian and Druze communities. The purpose of these conversations is to help local communities develop a unified voice in dealing with issues related to reconciliation and the return of the displaced. Before moving into potentially confrontational inter-communal encounters, it is crucial that each community work to overcome its own internal divisions, learn about and gain confidence in both the facilitators and the process, and learn how to express their frustrations and concerns in constructive, non-confrontational ways.
- B. Community Meetings: Facilitated inter-communal dialogue between Christians and Druze, held under the auspices of the Mayor of Deir Al-Qamar, Mr. Dory Chamoun, and the Minister for the Displaced, Mr. Anwar Al-Khalil. Meetings are intended to elicit local input on ways to deal with local problems, introduce the project to the people of the region, and build trust between the participants.
- C. Community Relations Board: The community relations board (CRB) is envisioned as a stand-alone entity working collaboratively with the Lebanese Ministry for the Displaced and the Municipality of Deir Al-Qamar to: (a) encourage and advance tolerance; (b) serve as a “fire brigade” in situations of incipient conflict; (c) advise local governments on matters pertaining to inter-ethnic relations; (d) facilitate alternative dispute resolution processes at the local level; and (e) serve as a clearinghouse for print, audio-visual, and other resources on community building, conflict resolution and ethnic tolerance. The CRB will be composed of educators, religious and other community leaders, and local NGO officials recognized for their work in inter-communal affairs.
- D. Training: Working in close consultation with in-country partners, IWA staff will conduct trainings in applied dispute resolution for members of the CRB. In accordance with IWA practice, the trainings will be based on local needs, traditions, and practices.

II. Project Status

In the first year of the project, IWA established a regional office in Deir Al-Qamar. An in-country Project Director (Rita Ayoub) and Program Officer (Rania Fayad) were brought on to manage day-to-day operations. Consultations were held with community leaders in the three villages and inter-communal dialogue was begun between Christian and Druze community representatives. Several major meetings were held at the IWA office in which participants from both communities met to discuss their hopes, fears, and common goals for the future. In addition, the project gained the support of several important Lebanese figures, including: **Mr. Anwar Al Khalil**, Minister of the Displaced; **Mr. Khaled Abdel Samad**, Director General of the Ministry; **Mr. Walid Joumblatt**, Druze leader and former Minister of the Displaced; **Mr. Dory Chamoun**, Mayor of Deir Al-Qamar and the Chouf municipality; and Lebanese **President Emile Lahoud**.

During the second year of the project, the Institute further solidified its work in the region and successfully gained the trust and respect of most factions. Local staff worked continuously with leaders at the village, municipal, and national levels to facilitate dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding. The Institute gained the financial support of the **Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs** and the **Canadian Embassy in Beirut**, allowing for expanded outreach work in the villages as well as much-needed office equipment. Although the establishment of a regional Community Relations Board (CRB) remained elusive, the day-to-day work carried out by local staff had a substantial impact within the communities.

Specific project achievements include:

- ?? Facilitated dialogue sessions between local and national leaders on issues of great concern to the Christian and Druze communities, including: the return of displaced Christians; the disposition of various properties that had multiple claimants; and local economic development.
- ?? Training and guidance in conflict resolution techniques for the youth of Salima, allowing participants to conduct ongoing inter-communal meetings and set a positive example for their entire village. This group is currently developing projects that will bring this sense of newfound community to the larger village.

- ?? Informal dialogue sessions and back-channel negotiations, facilitated by the Institute, have increased inter-communal understanding in the villages of Breeh and Kfarmatta, bringing both sides closer to mutually acceptable ideas about the general requirements of reconciliation. Prior to IWA's intervention, such inter-communal dialogue was nonexistent.
- ?? The issue of reconciliation in difficult villages such as Salima, Breeh, and Kfarmatta has been kept high on the agenda of public officials.
- ?? By establishing itself as a respected neutral third party, IWA has created a 'safe space' for both sides to voice their feelings and grievances.
- ?? With the help of the Institute, numerous public declarations of support for reconciliation – as well as expressions of regret over events of the past – have been made, breaking the code of silence that has existed for over 20 years.

The official reconciliation process continues to move forward in Lebanon, and it is hoped that the displaced residents will return to all three villages. With that eventuality in mind, the Institute is looking at various ways to expand the scope of its work in the region. This includes efforts to: a) create an effective, sustainable Community Relations Board; b) develop environmental conservation projects such as tree plantings, the creation of a Peace Park, and work with the Cedar Chouf Society; c) develop vocational training programs for village residents, providing economic incentive to return; d) empower women from both Christian and Druze communities; e) construct athletic centers in select villages; and f) partner with development NGOs to assist with village enhancement projects.

III. Regional Implications

It was an idea – an idea that meant something not only to the Lebanese but to the entire Arab world. While today just the word “Beirut” evokes images of hell on earth, for years Beirut represented...something quite different, something almost gentle: the idea of coexistence and the spirit of tolerance, the idea that diverse religious communities – Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, and Druze – could live together, and even thrive, in one city and one country without having to abandon altogether their individual identities.

-Thomas L. Friedman,
From Beirut to Jerusalem

The Institute’s efforts in the Mt. Lebanon region, while concentrating on the Christian–Druze conflict, have implications far outside of the immediate area and can potentially play an important role in inter-communal understanding throughout Lebanon and the entire Middle East. For decades, Lebanon was known as the “Switzerland of the Middle East,” a country of rich diversity where people of many different faiths and ethnicities learned to live together in harmony and prosperity. Despite occasional outbreaks of sectarian violence, a delicate political and social balance was maintained, making Lebanon a powerful role model for other Arab nations struggling to cope with their own internal diversity. While it would be inaccurate to depict pre-civil war Lebanon as an idyllic haven of ethnic tolerance, diverse groups were, nonetheless, able to create a national identity that extended beyond any single religious or tribal identity. In a region that is all too often torn apart by just these sorts of conflicts, Lebanon provided concrete proof that coexistence and tolerance are indeed possible.

Within this complex social tapestry, the Christian–Druze relationship is often viewed by the Lebanese as a barometer measuring the state of ethnic tensions within the country as a whole. Reconciliation between these two groups is often depicted as the foundation upon which broader national healing can take place. During his historic visit to Deir Al-Qamar in August 2001, Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir declared, “Let our coexistence here be an

example to the whole of the country as it attempts to live in peace and prosperity.”¹ For this reason, it is of vital importance – for Lebanon’s political stability as well as its national psyche – that some form of meaningful reconciliation be achieved between Christian and Druze communities. Reconciliation would have effects far beyond the small villages of the Mt. Lebanon region. A return to tolerance and coexistence in these communities would provide a powerful example for the entire nation.

The challenges of coexistence are by no means unique to Lebanon. Egypt struggles to maintain harmony between the many religious groups within its borders. Israeli Arabs and Jews live in largely segregated communities, obscuring any common vision for their state and increasing the possibility of violent conflict. In states such as Jordan, Syria, and Turkey, dominant ethnic and religious groups monopolize the reigns of power, creating disaffection and discord within minority populations. A healthy Lebanon, where different religious and ethnic groups are again able to coexist within the same state, would provide a powerful model for the entire Middle East – an example that national diversity is an asset to be cherished, not simply another problem to be contained.

IV. Future Activities

IWA firmly believes that in order for inter-communal dialogue to lead to meaningful reconciliation, communities must learn to work together for a common goal. Talk and discussion are important in establishing trust and community, but the effort cannot end there. Groups must be shown that peaceful coexistence leads to tangible benefits within their communities. As the IWA-Lebanon project enters its third year, the Institute is looking to develop projects that, a) promote greater interaction between groups, b) provide practical skills to village residents, and c) create sustainable infrastructure within the villages. These projects are designed to supplement – not replace – existing dialogue initiatives. The goal is to help create sustainable local communities and provide the fertile soil necessary for reconciliation efforts to take root. All projects will be based, to the greatest extent possible, on local skills, local leadership, and local needs.

¹ <http://www.cwnews.com/browse/2001/08/16129.htm>

Continuation of Existing Dialogue Projects

Because difficulties in inter-communal dialogue remain one of the greatest challenges to reconciliation, in-country staff will continue their existing efforts at mixed group dialogue sessions. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- ?? Christian–Druze Youth Dialogue Workshops, building on the highly successful mixed group interactions in Salima, where youth from both communities are taking active leadership roles in the reconciliation process. The Lebanese Ministry for the Displaced has asked the Institute to provide similar guidance and training in three additional villages within the region.
- ?? Village Leadership Dialogue, focusing primarily on the villages of Breeh and Kfarmatta, where tensions and lingering animosity among local leaders continue to hamper reconciliation efforts. As conditions improve, IWA hopes to convene reconciliation conferences that provide semi-official forums to discuss issues related to the return of the displaced.
- ?? Formation of a Community Relations Board empowering local representatives, trained in conflict resolution techniques, to handle inter-communal disputes at the local level.
- ?? Increased media outreach to build awareness for both the project and the reconciliation process in general.

Community Development Projects

As the reconciliation process moves forward, and as local conditions permit, the Institute seeks to implement new projects designed to capitalize on improved inter-communal relations. Currently, the Institute is seeking funding for the following major projects:

- ?? Youth Environmental Conservation Project: Working in close partnership with the Chouf Cedar Society – Lebanon’s largest nature conservancy – IWA-Lebanon is developing a project to bring mixed groups of young people together for extended environmental conservation and awareness training in Lebanon’s ancient cedar preserves. This training will lead to the development

of environmental projects within the villages, conservation work at the Reserve, and possible part-time employment for some participants. The project consists of the following elements:

- An *introductory workshop*, designed to introduce local residents to the project, discuss goals and objectives, and recruit potential participants.
- Two *participant training programs*, each approximately 10 days in length, will prepare participants for environmental conservation work in both the Reserve and in their home villages. Working in mixed groups, each session will be composed of approximately 20 Christian and Druze participants.

In addition to Salima, Breeh, and Kfarmatta, IWA hopes to draw participants from several religiously integrated villages that border on the Reserve.

?? Vocational Training Program: Many former residents are reluctant to return to their former villages because of the perceived lack of economic opportunity. To address this need, the Institute is looking for ways to provide useful and relevant skills training for village residents. Training would focus on construction skills – such as electrical work, plumbing, painting, tile work, and so on – that are badly needed in rebuilding village homes and civic centers. This training will provide tangible incentives for former residents to return and help rebuild their communities.

The lack of adequate housing and economic incentive has been a major roadblock in reintegrating formerly mixed villages. Although Salima completed the official reconciliation process in April 2000, few residents have returned because, in the words of one retired Christian judge, “there were no homes and no money.”² This reluctance (or inability) to return creates significant discord with the existing Druze residents, who accuse the displaced of being only interested in collecting their government compensation, and not in rebuilding an integrated village community.

² *The Daily Star*, April 5, 2000. See http://archive.dailystar.com.lb/feb/2000/April00/05_04_00/N11.HTM

The vocational skills training will be conducted in the villages by local tradesmen and professional experts. Specific instructional topics will be determined on a case-by-case basis, dependent on the needs and interests of the local village.

Future Projects Under Consideration

In addition to the above projects, the Institute is always exploring new possibilities for future activities that promote interaction, understanding, and sustainable peacebuilding. Some projects currently under consideration include:

- ?? Youth athletic centers: Local leaders have shown considerable interest in the development of athletic centers that provide young people in the villages a place to come together for inter-communal events and healthy athletic competition.
- ?? Skills training for women: Often excluded from ‘official’ reconciliation discussions, women nonetheless play a vital role in village life. The Institute is looking at micro-enterprise training that would help provide women with increased financial independence and social mobility. Training would be conducted in mixed Christian–Druze groups, thus creating an alternate channel for reconciliation efforts.
- ?? Computer resource centers: Internet access has opened up a world of new possibilities for many Lebanese. In Beirut, many residents have come to depend on Internet cafes that provide convenient, low cost access to the World Wide Web. Although many villages are only a short drive from major urban centers, the perceived isolation has kept many former residents from returning to their former homes. Providing computer resource centers would lessen this sense of isolation, provide on-line economic opportunities as well as local employment, and encourage displaced residents to return.
- ?? Distance learning program: Operating out of the local University in Deir Al-Qamar, this program would provide educational opportunities not normally available in remote areas and tie into other IWA distance learning initiatives.