From Conflict to Community: NGOs' Role in Northern Lebanon

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"In poverty, we live in weakness; in war, we are empowered."[1] This poignant statement, uttered by a Tripoli resident amidst the city's tumultuous past, encapsulates the paradox experienced by many in Northern Lebanon. Between 2008 and 2014, Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, was frequently paralyzed by violent clashes between the Sunni Muslim neighbourhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh and the Alawite neighbourhood of Jabal Mohsen. These recurring conflicts, deeply rooted in sectarian divisions and intensified by the Syrian Civil War (2011-present), have left enduring scars on the city's social fabric.

Marginalized for decades by the central government, Tripoli has struggled with persistent poverty, high unemployment, and social unrest. The city's reputation as a volatile militant bastion, often referred to in the media as the "Kandahar of Lebanon,"[2] has further stigmatized its residents. This label, tied to the participation of some locals in jihadist groups in Syria, has exacerbated mistrust between the city and Lebanese authorities, who view it as a potential hotspot for extremism.

Against this fraught backdrop, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become pivotal in addressing Tripoli's complex humanitarian and security challenges. This memo examines the work of three Lebanese NGOs—SHIFT, Fighters for Peace, and Peace Labs—operating in the northern region. By analysing their strategies and impact, it explores how these organizations navigate Tripoli's intricate political and security landscape to promote human security and social cohesion.

These NGOs operate on the belief that dialogue remains essential, even in the aftermath of extreme violence. By facilitating conversations among victims, perpetrators, and political leaders, they aim to de-escalate tensions and build a more peaceful future for the city. Their grassroot efforts offer a compelling example of how localized, inclusive initiatives and bottom-up approaches can help rethink security dynamics and decentre

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1   Bilal Al Ayoubi, Padraig O'Malley, and Jean-Paul Chami. "The Roadmap to Reconciliation in Tripoli: Creating an Inclusive Process for Launching a Communal Reconciliation in Tripoli." Forum for Cities in Transition, April 2017, https://citiesintransition.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/the-roadmap-to-reconciliation-in-tripoli_may20171.pdf.

2   The New Arab & Agencies. "Tripoli: From 'Lebanese Kandahar' to home of protest rave." The New Arab, October 24, 2019, www.newarab.com/news/tripoli-lebanese-kandahar-home-protest-rave.

militarisation,[3] countering the entrenched economy of war and the influence of major military corporations.[4]

The Security Context of Tripoli, 2008-2014

Tripoli, Lebanon, is characterized by acute socioeconomic deprivation and historical marginalization, conditions that have facilitated the recruitment of its residents into armed groups. Between 2008 and 2014, the city experienced over twenty rounds of sectarian clashes, further exacerbated by the Syrian Civil War. A 2014 security plan, implemented after a series of terrorist attacks[5] – two deadly bombings at Tripoli's al-Taqwa and Salam mosques, which killed over 40 people – temporarily halted hostilities but failed to address underlying causes.

Tripoli's complex security dynamics are deeply rooted in Lebanon's broader history. The Lebanese Civil War, Syrian occupation, and subsequent reconstruction policies exacerbated national disparities, culminating in key flashpoints like the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the 2008 Beirut clashes. Tripoli became a battleground for sectarian proxies, haunted by events such as the 1985 Bab al Tabbaneh massacre,[6] which continues to hinder reconciliation efforts.

While the 2014 security plan succeeded in temporarily suppressing violence, it did little to tackle the fundamental issues of socioeconomic deprivation, political patronage, and sectarian divisions. The city's impoverished residents, desperate for peace and stability, remained trapped in cycles of insecurity. Responding to this ongoing conflict, two NGOs emerged, including Fighters for Peace (founded in 2014) and SHIFT (2015). Together with Peace Labs (2012) and others, these organizations formed a coalition and launched the "Roadmap to Reconciliation in Tripoli," project, posing a critical question: "What changed in Tripoli one year after the 2014 security plan, and what can NGOs do going forward?"

NGOs and Interviewed Individuals

Fighters for Peace[7] (FFP) is an NGO established by former combatants from various factions of the Lebanese Civil War. Interviews were conducted with three co-founders: Ziad Saab, the current president; Christina Foerch Saab, program manager and international relations officer; and Assaad Chaftari, vice president and Tripoli project

3   See other SALAM memos, particularly Coralie Pison Hindawi, "Exposing the Iceberg: France's Discreet Ties to Israel's Military Sector and Grassroot Activism to Decenter Arms" and Anna Stavrianakis, "The demand for conversion: From "economics versus ethics" to "economics with ethics"."

4   See other SALAM memos, particularly Jennifer Erickson, "US Arms Transfers to the Middle East: Challenges of Change", Sam Perlo-Freeman, "Can the UK kick its addiction to Middle East arms sales?", and Shana Marshall, "The Role of the GCC States in Expanded Weapons Production in the Global South".

5   Layal Dagher. "Il y a dix ans, le double attentat contre les mosquées Taqwa et Salam à Tripoli." L'Orient-Le Jour, 24 Aug. 2023, www.lorientlejour.com/article/1347156/il-y-a-dix-ans-le-double-attentat-contre-les-mosquees-taqwa-et-salam-a-tripoli.html.

6   Mat Nashed. "A conflict revisited: From Bab al-Tabbaneh to Aleppo." The New Arab, www.newarab.com/analysis/conflict-revisited-bab-al-tabbaneh-aleppo.

7   Fighters for Peace website: http://fightersforpeace.org/Home/ResourceCenter.

manager. With a primary target audience of youth[8] and former fighters[9], the organization operates at the national-community level.

SHIFT[10], Social Innovation Hub, is a Tripoli-based community NGO serving as an incubator for innovative initiatives and a service provider. Bilal Al Ayoubi, co-founder and board member, provided insights into community responses to the crisis.

Peace Labs[11] is an NGO that employs a systemic approach to conflict transformation, focusing on root causes and fostering long-term social cohesion. Jean-Paul Chami, the organization's founder and peacebuilding advisor, provided insights into a project implemented two years after the 2014 security plan.

Through interviews with these activists, I aimed to understand the project's underlying rationale, the strategies employed to navigate Tripoli's complex security and political landscape, and the methods employed to engage victims and perpetrators of violence. The project emphasized the value of dialogue and inclusive conversations with all stakeholders, including fighters, local politicians, opinion leaders, and residents. While geographically focused on Tripoli and its surrounding areas, this dialogue extended across various societal levels, creating a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities for community empowerment within a militarized environment. The following sections will detail how these different perspectives contributed to efforts aimed at decentring militarization and arms, offering pathways for community resilience and empowerment in the face of entrenched violence and instability.

The "Roadmap to Reconciliation in Tripoli" Project

In 2016-2017, FFP, SHIFT, Peace Labs, and other organizations collaborated on the "Roadmap to Reconciliation in Tripoli" project. This grassroots initiative aimed to gauge public perceptions of reconciliation and assess the feasibility of a communal reconciliation process. To ensure inclusivity, the project engaged a broad range of perspectives on the

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8   As Ziad (Fighters for Peace) explained: Youth are often exploited by militias and encouraged to take up arms. Our experience with the association's members, many of whom were involved in the civil war, confirms this trend. The average age of our members who carried weapons was between fourteen and nineteen years old, with some as young as twelve. This highlights the vulnerability of youth and their susceptibility to manipulation. They are the fuel for future wars, and their involvement is a serious concern. While those who appear on television or are granted permits are often older, it is the younger individuals, aged fourteen to seventeen, who are most likely to be involved in actual combat. The irony of this situation lies in the fact that these young people are not allowed to vote in Lebanon until they reach the age of twenty-one. Yet, they are considered adults at eighteen and may be armed to protect leaders. This discrepancy demonstrates the inherent flaws in the system, which treats these individuals as adults for military purposes but denies them the right to participate in democratic processes.

9   As Ziad (Fighters for Peace) explained: the focus on former combatants stems from the lack of national reconciliation and the continued veneration of these individuals within their narrow communities. Despite their involvement in the civil war, many former combatants are still considered heroes for their defense of neighborhoods, cities, and villages.

10 SHIFT activities: https://linktr.ee/SHiFT.SIH ; more about SHIFT: https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/shift-social-innovation-hub.

11 Peace Labs website: https://peace-labs.org/.

obstacles to reconciliation, beginning with efforts to test public receptiveness to this sensitive topic.

In the aftermath of the 2014 security plan—which temporarily halted violence but failed to address deeper socioeconomic issues—the project sought to tackle the challenges political leaders had neglected. While politicians pointed to a superficial ceasefire as success, the reality was a fragile truce rather than sustained peace. By focusing on grassroots engagement and community perspectives, the project offered a more inclusive approach to addressing the root causes of instability.

To achieve its goals, the initiative adopted a participatory methodology, incorporating community consultations, expert input, and feedback mechanisms. Engaging stakeholders from conflict-affected neighbourhoods, the project aimed to craft a comprehensive roadmap for reconciliation that reflected the community's genuine needs and aspirations.

A central recommendation emphasized the critical role of enhancing human security to achieve long-term stability. This theme resonated across discussions with participants from all factions. Efforts to enhance human security were understood to involve rehabilitating former fighters from Jabal Mohsen and Bab al Tabbaneh, facilitating their reintegration into society, and providing psychosocial support to address trauma and mental health issues. Improved access to quality healthcare, especially for vulnerable communities, was also identified as essential, alongside initiatives to strengthen food security, such as urban agriculture and food banks. Addressing educational challenges emerged as another priority, including interventions to reduce dropout rates, engage dropouts in alternative education pathways, enhance public school services, increase parental involvement, and link education to job opportunities. Additionally, creating employment opportunities through vocational training programs and offering legal aid and advocacy to address issues of injustice and victimization were recognized as key areas for intervention.

The project also highlighted the potential role of political parties in advancing human security. It recommended establishing dialogue roundtables that would involve diverse stakeholders, including politicians, students, labor unions, academics, business leaders, and religious leaders. Such initiatives aimed to foster cooperation and build a more cohesive community.

Implementing the Project: Fostering Trust and Neutralizing Opposition

This section examines the strategic approaches employed by SHIFT, FFP, and Peace Labs to engage individuals and mitigate the divisive influence of political actors. The project team skillfully mobilized a wide range of stakeholders, including former combatants, community members, and political figures. Leveraging SHIFT's extensive local network, the team effectively disseminated information about the project, creating spaces for communal dialogue and conducting in-depth interviews.

Engaging Political Actors

A crucial component of the project's success was its ability to engage with political actors at various levels of influence. By articulating clear objectives centered on peace and reconciliation, and emphasizing alignment with the security plan, the team sought to preempt opposition from political figures. The word "peace" was deemed a powerful tool to disarm potential opposition, as no one could easily position themselves against such a noble cause. Transparency and neutrality were integral to building credibility and fostering cooperation.

The project team encountered varying degrees of interest and support among political stakeholders. While some individuals were initially reticent or sceptical, open dialogue helped address concerns and build trust. Reassurances that the project neither sought to challenge existing leadership nor pursued political ambitions were instrumental in gaining support. Instead, the initiative emphasized its singular focus on fostering peace and improving the well-being of the city and its residents.

Building Trust with Former Combatants

Engaging former combatants posed a significant challenge for the project team, as many felt victimized by security forces and the broader system. Trust issues and specific demands, such as meeting in their own areas, further complicated this effort. To overcome these barriers, the team adopted a multifaceted approach. They relied on trusted intermediaries, including politicians and community leaders, to facilitate introductions. These gatekeepers, often known to SHIFT, played a crucial role in gaining the trust and cooperation of the combatants. Over time, as these politicians endorsed the initiative, combatants gradually agreed to participate in the community conversations.

A critical element of these conversations was ensuring they were held in safe spaces, such as former battle lines or the combatants' homes, where participants felt comfortable and secure. By accommodating these preferences, the team demonstrated respect for the combatants' concerns and built trust.

The team also showed empathy and understanding, recognizing former combatants' need to share their perspectives. As Bilal (SHIFT) explained, many former combatants felt marginalized and unheard by society after the cessation of hostilities – an experience common in post-conflict settings. . Providing a safe and supportive environment allowed these individuals to articulate their experiences, enabling the team to establish trust and facilitate open dialogue.

The Role of Community Engagement

The project team also recognized the importance of community engagement in fostering peace and reconciliation. By leveraging the extensive network of the local community organization, SHIFT, the team effectively disseminated information about the project and facilitated opportunities for communal dialogue and in-depth interviews. These sessions

played a critical role in building trust and understanding between facilitators and participants.

To ensure neutrality and inclusivity, Bilal (SHIFT) proposed that all facilitators be Christians, as they were perceived as impartial intermediaries by both Sunni and Alawite communities. The sessions were structured like a "show," with each facilitator playing a distinct role tailored to their expertise. Jean-Paul (Peace Labs) focused on engaging youth and women, while Assaad (Fighters for Peace), himself a former combatant, worked with fighters. Assaad's background equipped him with a deep understanding of combatants' body language, trust-testing tactics, and power dynamics, enabling him to build rapport and credibility.

The "show" approach went beyond traditional focus groups. While a list of guiding questions was used to prompt discussion—primarily about the community's needs following the clashes—the emphasis was on active listening rather than merely collecting data for analysis. According to Jean-Paul (Peace Labs), the sessions prioritized understanding participants' perspectives and experiences, even if all the questions couldn't be addressed due to time constraints. This dynamic structure fostered open dialogue, where all participants, including the interviewers, could engage meaningfully with one another.

The Power of Dialogue and Transformation

Jean-Paul (Peace Labs) highlighted the significance of the "show," emphasizing its role as a platform for participants to express themselves and find healing through attentive listening. He explained that the collaborative approach—multiple peacebuilders employing shared language in distinct ways—was far more persuasive than the efforts of any single individual. Jean-Paul further clarified that the project was not a research initiative but a transformative process. When participants became emotional or hesitant to continue, he shifted his role from researcher to mediator or peacebuilder, creating a safe environment that allowed for small but meaningful personal transformations through empathetic listening.

It is important to underline that participants often expressed frustration with previous initiatives, perceiving them as exploitative attempts to simply collect information and profit from their experiences. Recognizing this distrust, the project team introduced re-engagement with the interviewees, through validation sessions.

Immediate Benefits and Long-Term Impact

The project yielded notable benefits upon implementation. First, the communal sessions provided participants with a vital platform to articulate their concerns and feel genuinely heard. Second, the project stood out by sharing its results with interviewees through validation sessions, which reassured them and affirmed their perspectives. These sessions also reassured participants and fostered a sense of solidarity as they discovered that the

other groups faced similar challenges. Third, the project's findings were shared with national and international organizations and donors, prompting them to consider these insights as a framework for their programs in the north. Finally, the project outcomes were transformed into tangible programs and advocacy campaigns. Notably, the initiative inspired the creation of a theatre group and specialized programs for individuals with disabilities.

In summary, the peacebuilding project left a significant mark on both its participants and the broader community. Participants found relief and validation in sharing their experiences and being truly heard, fostering a deeper understanding of shared challenges and encouraging empathy and solidarity. The dissemination of project findings to national and international organizations spurred the creation of new programs and advocacy initiatives, extending the project's impact. Moreover, participants were empowered to take on active roles as agents of change, contributing to community development and advocacy efforts. Many leveraged their involvement in the project to further their careers and contribute to positive change. And in the aftermath of the project, both SHIFT and FFP integrated these insights into their ongoing work, using the findings as a foundation for future initiatives.

SHIFT and Fighters for Peace: Current Projects

As noted earlier, both SHIFT and FFP were established in response to the Tripoli clashes, while Peace Labs had been active in Lebanon since 2012. After the conclusion of the "Roadmap to Reconciliation in Tripoli" project, Peace Labs expanded its operations to other regions in Lebanon, pursuing new initiatives aligned with its strategic objectives. Meanwhile, SHIFT and FFP adopted different approaches to build on the project's outcomes. SHIFT continued engaging willing participants in Tripoli, using the project's methodologies to address ongoing local challenges. FFP, by contrast, embraced a community-based model and applied it to other regions across the country, broadening the reach of its peacebuilding work.

SHIFT's Empowering Approach to Community-Driven Change

SHIFT's post-project approach emphasized ongoing support and empowerment, enabling participants to transition from passive recipients of aid to active agents of change. Participants were encouraged to form groups and were provided with training, advocacy support, and access to funding opportunities. This model allowed participants to address their challenges proactively. One standout initiative is the basketball team "El Haraka Baraka," created for people who were disabled during the clashes. By supporting such participant-led projects, SHIFT positioned itself as a facilitator rather than a directive force.

Several participants experienced notable growth during their involvement with SHIFT. Some utilized the organization's incubator to develop their ideas and projects, while others joined the SHIFT team, advancing from coordinator roles to management positions. One

notable success story is an individual who, with SHIFT's backing, secured a position at an international organization.

Ultimately, SHIFT's goal was also to transform former combatants into constructive contributors to their communities. Through education, training, and community service opportunities, SHIFT sought to help these individuals shift their mindset and reject violence. As Bilal explained, a redefinition of their roles in society could lead to profound changes in their mentalities over time. Within a decade, many are likely to no longer be willing to bear arms, seeking alternative paths for their lives and communities.

Fighters for Peace: Community-Based Efforts to Counter Extremism

Inspired by their visit to Northern Ireland and the reconciliation project in Tripoli, Fighters for Peace (FFP) shifted their focus to community-level initiatives targeting areas at heightened risk of polarization, extremism, or violence. The organisation aimed to bring these communities together and support them in grassroots reconciliation processes[12]. They sought to engage community members, including former fighters, as early warning systems to identify and address potential clashes, sectarian tensions, or acts of violence against Syrians and refugees.

Meanwhile, FFP maintained its engagement in Tripoli, primarily focusing on youth and former combatants. As noted by Assaad, each new FFP project included activities in Tripoli. Ziad elaborated that following the "Roadmap to Reconciliation" project, FFP implemented an eight-month initiative to train approximately 400 youth in conflict resolution and mediation techniques.

Over time, FFP's commitment to community engagement and presence in schools and universities have established a reputation of trustworthiness and credibility. This reputation has enabled FFP to play a proactive role in preventing crises. For example, after high-risk incidents such as those occurring in April[13], FFP was approached by schools, media outlets, and local communities for assistance. In response, the organisation provided public statements, facilitated dialogue, and offered sessions in schools and communities where former enemies shared their personal stories of transformation, sparking discussions among participants.

FFP's community engagement initiatives include a wide range of activities such as dialogue sessions, playback theatre, exhibitions, youth camps, and specialized training for both youth and former combatants. A recent highlight was their use of the "X Games," developed by the INSIDE-OUT team in Germany. This simulation educates participants on

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12 Prior to this year, FFP had successfully facilitated two grassroots reconciliation initiatives between Druze and Maronite communities in the Chouf region.

13 On April 9, 2024, Pascal Sleiman head of the Lebanese Forces' Jbeil (Byblos) district office, was abducted and murdered in the Byblos region of Lebanon. His body was discovered in Syria approximately 36 hours later, igniting widespread outrage among the Christian community in Lebanon. As a result, Syrian refugees, who had sought refuge from the ongoing Syrian civil war, faced a surge of hostility and violence from the Lebanese Christian population for several days.

the radicalization process, offering an immersive experience of the tactics employed by extremist groups. As Christina noted, the game has proven highly effective in raising awareness among young people, equipping them to recognize and resist the dangers of extremism. Through these combined activities, FFP aims to provide comprehensive support to communities, empowering them to foster peace and reconciliation while building resilience against polarization and violence.

Conclusion

The following exchange between Bilal and a former combatant from Jabal Mohsen offers a glimpse into the challenges of fostering peace in a deeply divided and militarized city:

> **Former Combatant from Jabal Mohsen:** *"You are crazy people! With all the money you've invested in these buildings and equipment, do you know when the fighting might start again? What will happen then? In just two minutes, everything will disappear."*

> **Bilal:** *"Maybe we are crazy, but I'm confident that if we work together, you'll be the first one here to protect these buildings. If you truly believe that this place is for you, you have a place here. You won't let it burn."*

> **Former Combatant from Jabal Mohsen:** *"Yeah, but the others will attack."*

This dialogue underscores the deep-seated mistrust, fear, and uncertainty that peacebuilders must navigate in a city scarred by years of conflict and political/militia interferences. Yet, it also highlights a critical insight: the key to enduring peace may reside in the power of collaboration and a shared sense of ownership in the community's future.

SHIFT, Fighters for Peace, and Peace Labs leveraged their expertise, team profiles, and skills to address the intertwined security and socioeconomic challenges of Tripoli. Their initiatives exemplified how grassroots efforts can contribute to peace and reconciliation even in the most polarized environments. By fostering trust with all stakeholders and neutralizing political influence, the project team was able to mitigate violence and provide a platform for victims and perpetrators to share their experiences.

By sharing the results with participants in the validation session, the team conveyed a powerful message: their voices were heard, their needs acknowledged, and their perspectives documented and shared with decision-makers at local, national, and international levels. The project's success hinged on three foundational elements: "building trust," "active listening," and "open dialogue".

As discussed throughout this memo, dialogue is instrumental in combating violence and decentring arms and militarization, particularly at the local level. It creates spaces where multiple stakeholders – including civil society organizations, NGOs, social movements,

and activists – can engage in meaningful exchanges. These dialogues can bridge divides between groups, as they discuss their perspectives and share them with other stakeholders, including security forces, political parties, and local leaders. Discussions can also occur at multiple levels simultaneously. However, for dialogue to succeed, it requires a certain level of "maturity" among stakeholders: an acknowledgment of its value, coupled with the patience to build inclusive, sustainable communication channels. Starting at the local level, such efforts can serve as a model for other militarized contexts, demonstrating how trust, inclusivity, and communication can pave the way for broader peacebuilding initiatives.

Hala Abi Saleh

Hala Abi Saleh, a PhD candidate at the Catholic University of Louvain (Université Catholique de Louvain), specializes in the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Through the lens of middle power theory, her doctoral research analyzes these policies and explores their impact on the regional and international orders of the Middle East. Beyond academia, Hala brings over 10 years of valuable experience working with Lebanese NGOs, coordinating regional and national research projects. Her research interests lie in critical theories of International Relations and interpretive research methods. Her publications address a variety of critical Middle Eastern issues, including gender equality, feminist foreign policy, oil governance, and the wartime experiences of women in the region.

PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of "security" in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade's advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.