

CHAPTER 11

Lessons from Lebanon, 1982–83

By **Dan Connell**

Humanitarian response sometimes enmeshes an international agency in controversy, as Oxfam America discovered with its work in Lebanon. Dan Connell offers his perspective on Oxfam America's truncated humanitarian effort in Lebanon and how it led him to found Grassroots International.

Introduction

After Israel invaded Lebanon on June 6, 1982, print and broadcast media were awash with disturbing images of civilian victims, as so often happens with a disaster, natural or manmade. But the humanitarian response to this one was slow to get going, chiefly because the politically complicated region lacked the engagement of most mainstream aid agencies at the start of the crisis.

One of the few positioned to deal with the consequences of the war was Oxfam Great Britain (then known as Oxfam UK), whose field staff had long experience in Lebanon and had won the trust of a wide range of local players. The British quickly dispatched disaster specialists to Damascus and key points within Lebanon to assess the spiraling human needs and manage the distribution of assistance, even as they sent out an urgent appeal to sister agencies.

Facing an ebb in fundraising that summer and sensing an opportunity, Oxfam America's development director Oliver Scott urged the agency to jump in. He found support from the overseas program director, Michael Scott (no relation), who had wanted to explore program options in the region anyway. So, with executive committee approval, Oxfam America pledged \$250,000 and launched a major advertising and fundraising appeal. Almost immediately, however, the agency discovered why so many others had stayed away—and why allowing development to lead programs can be dangerous.

The first challenge was finding neutral sources for information and presenting an appeal that reflected political balance. Oxfam America went with the Swiss-based International Committee for the Red Cross for figures on civilian dead and wounded, as the ICRC had decades of experience in such conflicts and extensive staff on the ground. In addition, Oxfam America cited a number of Jewish and Arab organizations as sponsors. But the ads nevertheless provoked immediate outcries from both Jewish and Arab groups offended by their content.

Israel was contesting the ICRC numbers, and a sixteen-page newsletter distributed by pro-Israel groups in the Boston area provided a detailed counterargument to this and talking points for other contentious aspects of the conflict. This armed them with a level of detail that Oxfam America staffers (and local media) lacked when challenged, as they were almost immediately. Meanwhile, one of the Arab sponsors for the Oxfam America ad was the American Lebanese League, a backer of one of the most extreme right-wing Christian militias involved in the conflict whose appearance on Oxfam America's appeal triggered a barrage of phone calls questioning the agency's claims to neutrality.

As a result of these attacks, the decision was quickly taken to hire a short-term consultant to coordinate the effort, which is where I entered the picture. As a journalist with a long, if informal, relationship to Oxfam America and with extensive experience in war zones (mostly Africa), as well as contacts in Lebanon from prior visits, I got the job. I started work on Thursday, July 8.

The next day we established an interdepartmental task force to coordinate the response. Then we brought in a program advisor, Assaf Kfoury, a Lebanese-American academic in the Boston area with strong personal ties to the all-secular humanitarian agencies in Lebanon, as well as to the main progressive political currents, whom I had long trusted for his ability to maneuver within Lebanon's complicated sectarian scene without getting sucked into its vortex. Nine days later I left for Beirut.

This turned into the most difficult and draining consultancy I ever took on – not just because people were shooting at me from all directions as I sought to navigate the chaotic battlefield in Lebanon, but also because the crossfire followed me home, never letting up.

INTO THE LINE OF FIRE

Lebanon, a country roughly the size of Connecticut, is bounded on the west by the Mediterranean, on the east and north by Syria, and on the south by Israel. Its approximately 3 million citizens in 1982 were divided among seventeen recognized "confessional" (religious) groups, the largest of which had their own armed militias answering to warlords who controlled fairly well-defined territorial enclaves.

These confessions were the basis for the state's arcane political system, set up under a 1943 agreement known as the "National Pact" that gave the presidency to the Maronite Christians (favored by the French who controlled the colony between the two world wars), the office of prime minister to the Sunnis (who had ruled during the Ottoman period), and the largely ceremonial position of speaker of parliament to the more populous but long disenfranchised Shi'ites. Seven years into a bitter civil war, Lebanon's second since the 1950s, the state had all but ceased to function.

But that was not all.

The Lebanese shared their land with close to a million refugees and immigrants, more than half of them Palestinians who had either fled Israel in the wars of 1948 and 1967 or Jordan in the 1970 conflict there. Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was headquartered in Beirut and ran the refugee camps as a state-within-a-state; though outside the camps the Palestinians experienced intense discrimination at the hands of the Lebanese and lived for the most part in extreme poverty and insecurity. The PLO, itself deeply divided among its own constituent organizations and armies and chronically inept at governance, had done little to remedy this apart from setting up showcase projects in the larger cities.

Aligning itself with the Muslim and secular National Movement against the predominantly Christian Lebanese Forces in the 1970s, the PLO had plunged headfirst into the civil war. This tangle of overlapping alliances and conflicts provided the context both for Israel's 1982 invasion (its second foray into Lebanon in four years), whose stated goal was the destruction of the PLO once and for all, and for my subsequent humanitarian mission.

With the Beirut Airport closed, I flew into Damascus, Syria, where I hired a taxi for the halting, half-day journey across Lebanon. We drove through the Beka'a Valley, clearing dozens of military checkpoints controlled by one or another army or militia on our serpentine route to Beirut, whose western sector was then under the National Movement and its PLO allies and besieged by the Israelis and their Lebanese Forces allies. Heavy fighting alternated with one-day ceasefires, during which it was possible to cross the Green Line from East to West.

I arrived on a relatively quiet day, got out at the last Lebanese militia checkpoint and carried my small shoulder bag across the no-man's land that divided the two sectors, picking up a Lebanese taxi once I turned a corner and got out of the line of fire. The driver took me to the Mayflower Hotel, where low-end journalists and aid agency personnel stayed, along with Yasser Arafat's younger brother Fathi, who headed the Palestine Red Crescent Society. Upscale reporters, UN officials and other high flyers stayed at the Commodore, two blocks and a world away on the far side of the once bustling Hamra Street and its shuttered boutiques. Down the hill was the barricaded entrance to the American University of Beirut. After I checked in, I turned on the TV only to find a "Dynasty" rerun, adding yet another layer of unreality to the dreamlike scene.

I awoke to artillery blasting apart the neighborhood from several directions at once as Israeli jets buzzed the city, breaking the sound barrier almost directly overhead. The sounds were as disorienting in their sudden, enveloping fury as they were terrifying. This was, of course, the point. Hard, though, to know what defensive moves to make – how to put two walls between yourself and the incoming rounds, as you are always advised to do in such situations. Where was it coming from, I wondered in my jet-lagged stupor?

Only one place to go and that was down to the basement, where I joined most of the other residents for the next four hours. Almost as soon as the shooting stopped, everyone began to move at once, darting outside to check on friends and family, buy food and other supplies, or take care of whatever other business they had. It was eerily "normal" and yet not normal at all. But the Lebanese had been coping with this to one degree or another since the country descended into civil war in 1975. The main difference now was the intensity – and the sheer magnitude of the destruction.

ASSESSING THE NEED

Over the next three weeks I traveled back and forth across Beirut and throughout much of the Israeli-occupied south, where fighting had stopped but where the detritus of war was everywhere visible. Damour, already battered during the early years of the civil war, was now a bleak ghost town, reduced to rubble. The historic port of Tyre had suffered an estimated \$75 million in damage to its schools, hospitals, and other social infrastructure. Sidon sustained even more damage, while entire rural villages had been flattened. But the worst effects were to be seen in the Palestinian camps.

Ein el-Hilweh, one of the largest, had been devastated by a mix of aerial bombing and land-based and naval artillery fire. Many buildings left standing during the attack were later dynamited or bulldozed in an apparent effort to force the refugees to leave – stripping the PLO of the sea in which it swam. Some 20,000 Palestinians squatted in the ruins with another 40,000 dispersed in the surrounding area, according to relief officials on the scene, but the Israelis were not allowing them to rebuild or even to set up tents. These numbers, like everything else, were of course heavily contested.

The Israelis and the aid agencies had wildly differing statistics on the dead, the wounded, and the displaced. For their part, Lebanese officials simply left the Palestinians out of their surveys, counting only the casualties and the damage suffered by the country's registered citizens. This reduced most journalists and aid workers to collecting bits and pieces of anecdotal evidence that we could compare with one another's observations. But even this was not easy – when I tried to photograph the damage in Ein el-Hilweh, an Israeli officer chased me out of the camp at gunpoint.

Meanwhile, some relief supplies were arriving for Lebanese civilians under the auspices of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). They came by truck from Israel and were distributed by evangelical Christian organizations (mostly American) with strong ties to Christian Lebanese militias, one of which – Saad Haddad's South Lebanon Army – had controlled a buffer along the border since the Israeli invasion of 1978. The SLA also hosted the "Voice of Hope" radio ministry of George Otis's High Adventure Mission, which was to grow into a global broadcasting operation.

No doubt the food, blankets, and other supplies were appreciated. But the proselytizing that came with them was stirring up a hornet's nest of anger and suspicion toward foreigners among both the Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims of this region that further complicated my ability to move around. Meanwhile, only the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), set up in 1948 to deal with the "temporary" problem of Palestinian refugees, and the ICRC were permitted by the Israelis to distribute aid in the camps.

Yet there were also remarkable emergency efforts underway from within both affected communities – Lebanese and Palestinian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), often working together, whose volunteers were circumventing the many checkpoints to assess need and deliver goods and services in much of the occupied south. Oxfam GB, which had a representative in Sidon then, had links to many of them. I piggybacked on these relationships.

I also carried letters of introduction from several Beirut-based NGOs given to me at Assaf Kfoury's behest after he telephoned them from Boston to endorse OA's work. This helped enormously, as I was passed along the chain from one aid group to another, all of them forced to operate in semi-secrecy for fear their staffs would be detained or worse if discovered by the occupation forces, which were embargoing aid coming south from Beirut. I also had a wad of hundred-dollar bills hidden under my clothes to purchase local goods for urgent needs – an improvisation we had put into place in Boston for just such a circumstance.

Meanwhile, the fighting continued in Beirut where hundreds of thousands had been rendered homeless and whole neighborhoods uninhabitable by the frequent bombardments from air, land, and sea. Casualties mounted at a rate of several hundred each day of combat. Here, too, the worst damage was in the Palestinian camps, though there was destruction throughout the city. Nearly all the twenty-five hospitals had been hit, water pipes were broken, shops and small factories were demolished, roads had become nearly impassable, communications equipment was wiped out, and schools and municipal facilities had ceased to function as mountains of uncollected garbage accumulated along the streets.

Some images I will carry with me forever: a small boy poking through a smoking stack of trash, presumably for food, as rats scurried by his feet; a man slumped in a chair in a makeshift emergency room at the American University of Beirut with smoke pouring out of his nose from a phosphorus shell that had left a burning fragment deep inside him; an eight-story apartment building in Fakhani reduced to rubble and dust—along with its residents—by an enormous penetration bomb dropped, so the story went, in an attempt to kill Arafat who had reportedly been there an hour earlier.

But there were also the courageous nurses and doctors who labored with little or no sleep in makeshift hospitals set up in underground parking lots two or even three stories down—the only “safe” places in the city. There were the ambulance drivers who raced through the rubble whenever the bombardment let up to retrieve the wounded. And there were the many volunteers from all the city’s “confessional” groups, Muslim and Christian alike, who banded together to deliver food and other goods to the needy, regardless of their personal or political allegiance.

Though the emergency effort in Beirut had far more to deal with on a day-to-day basis than that in the south, it was much better organized and resourced, even with the war and the accompanying siege. A Joint Lebanese/Palestinian Committee of governmental and nongovernmental agencies and relief groups working with the UN, the ICRC and other outside agencies (including Oxfam GB) coordinated the division of labor and the distribution of resources across West Beirut.

Member organizations also ran their own projects, ranging from childcare to trauma counseling, several of which I identified for consideration as partners via Oxfam GB. Prominent among them were the Lebanese Association for Popular Action (known as Amel), a social and medical organization that ran emergency clinics and rehab projects in communities across Lebanon, and the Association Najdeh, a remarkable Palestinian women’s NGO that managed highly participatory self-help projects in the refugee camps.

I left Beirut on August 3 determined to urge Oxfam America to commit to an ongoing program of rehabilitation and development with these and other local organizations. I was also convinced that this would position the agency to educate our constituency about the complex and oft misunderstood social, cultural, and political milieu at a time when nearly all other voices on the region were highly partisan—or simply silent.

ON THE HOME FRONT

Once back, I found myself in the midst of a firestorm as pro-Israel activists in Boston were challenging the negative coverage that country was receiving and bombarding Oxfam America with criticism for our involvement with the Palestinians. One letter began, “Dear Nazis,” and demanded to know why we were supporting “terrorists.” This was clearly not going to be a typical disaster response.

Nevertheless, I did a number of media appearances, including one on ABC-TV’s “Good Morning America” and another on NPR’s “All Things Considered,” and I did a series of interviews with the *Boston Globe*, the Mutual Broadcasting System, ABC radio and others. My Oxfam America handler was communications specialist Chris Cartter, who coached me on how to turn the subject of each exchange back to what we were doing on the ground and on how much help was still needed. He even accompanied me to New York for the ABC interview, though he had to sleep on the floor of my Plaza Hotel room as the network only covered expenses for one person, and Oxfam America had a tight budget for media support. I also flew alone to New York and Washington to meet with major donors and representatives of church groups and leading Jewish and Arab organizations to explain our work and to solicit their views and concerns.

But the criticism we received from outside—and our critics’ daunting command of detail—rattled staffpeople unaccustomed to the vitriol that this region elicited. At the same time, staff and board were split over the issue—and about the basic question of whether Oxfam America should be in the Middle East at all. The debate mainly revolved around criticism of Israel, which some took issue with on its merits while others worried that it would undermine the state’s very legitimacy and ought not to be voiced whatever it did in Lebanon. Still others argued that, unlike Africa, Latin America, or Asia, the Middle East was a prosperous region awash in oil money and did not need or merit Oxfam America’s aid. I was left to both referee this heavily freighted intellectual and emotional conflict and to improvise an acceptable organizational response.

My initial mandate was for a three-month emergency program centered around a general appeal for funds that would be forwarded to Oxfam GB, though I had been privately assured upon my hiring that I would be given the opportunity to make a case for extending the program once back from the field. However, there were early constraints placed on media work, limiting it to support for fundraising, and there was a lid placed on education work, partly due to the nature and duration of the commitment and partly to the controversy that came with it. As the summer wore on, the only publication I was permitted was an op-ed in the *Christian Science Monitor*.

As time began to run out on the short-term response, I lobbied for an extension—and for consideration of a full-blown Lebanon program. I was supported by Mike Scott, who suggested we tie it together with a promising women’s textile cooperative in the Israeli-occupied West Bank with whose founder and director he was in contact and which, like most of the projects I came back with from Lebanon, received assistance from Oxfam GB. Between this and the partnerships in Lebanon, we would have a modest platform on which to build a regional program.

The tensions within Oxfam America over this came to a head at the September 1982 board meeting, when I presented a sixteen-page “Lebanon Disaster Project Report,” urging an extension of our commitment and outlining what a program might look like in Lebanon and the West Bank. The debate was intense, the questions pointed, the exchanges heated. The result was a hung jury.

The board was sharply divided over a number of questions, from the risks associated with working in this highly charged political environment – there and at home – to whether we had the organizational capacity to do this effectively. And there were one or two who thought we should not be in the Middle East at all. The upshot was a vote to extend the emergency response for another ten months.

For some, this was an affirmation of Oxfam America’s historic commitment not to cream off relief monies in a disaster without strengthening local capacity to cope with the next crisis. For others, it was a commitment to explore future options. (Oxfam America had in 1981 adopted a set of guidelines for a disaster response pledging that its primary commitment of resources would always be to reconstruction and development, reinforcing the agency’s commitment to foster self-reliance.) And for still others, it was simply a way to postpone the final reckoning. But whatever drove it, this limited commitment was carefully defined to focus on rehabilitation and not long-term development, so that a swift exit, if ordered, would be feasible. This would be decided at the December board meeting once we had more to go on. Meanwhile, there would be no education program.

THE INTERREGNUM

During the next phase, I went to Lebanon three times.

The first field trip came in late October and early November, shortly after the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut and after the Sabra and Shatila Camp massacres during which hundreds of Palestinian refugees had been slaughtered by rampaging Lebanese Christian militiamen. The war was officially over but not the carnage.

The Reagan Administration had brokered an agreement between Israel and the PLO that allowed the besieged Palestinian militants to depart Beirut by sea for the northern port of Tripoli from where its members would be scattered throughout the Middle East and North Africa, leaving the Lebanese capital in the hands of international peacekeepers from Italy, France, and the US.

The Palestinians sailed off on September 1 after a raucous “victory” parade through downtown Beirut, taking with them members of more than a dozen other armed rebel movements from across Africa and the Middle East that had maintained weapons procurement offices in this wide-open city only to find themselves trapped when war broke out. Two weeks later, however, Phalange Party leader Beshir Gemayel – a Maronite Christian hardliner chosen as Lebanon’s president in mid-August with backing from both the US and Israel – was assassinated by a Syrian intelligence agent. The Israelis responded by storming into West Beirut to root out PLO guerrillas thought to have been left behind during the withdrawal.

The next day, September 16, Israel’s Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, who commanded the IDF during the invasion, invited Lebanese militiamen to enter the Palestinian camps and purge them of armed elements, an act for which he was later reprimanded by a high-level Israeli commission and temporarily relieved of his post. The first militia unit, carrying an assortment of guns, knives, and hatchets, went in at 6 p.m. and immediately began executing civilians. Estimates of those killed over the next forty-eight hours run from 700-800 to more than 2,000. This was the backdrop for my return.

I flew directly to Beirut this time, toured the city with our local partners, visited projects, interviewed war victims, met with fellow aid workers and international observers, and gathered mountains of data on the scope of the post-conflict needs, all the while striving to take the pulse of this war-weary society and asking as many people as possible: What precisely can we do for you that others cannot?

The Israelis had pulled out of West Beirut by then and the multinational peacekeeping force was back on the streets, but though the remarkably resilient Beirutis were once again rebuilding whatever they could to give the city an appearance of rebirth, the dominant emotion was a thinly disguised fear that the worst could – and almost certainly would – happen at any moment. This gave a frenetic edge to many of our encounters. The pace of life had speeded up, as if it were rush hour, every hour.

And there was no shortage of horror stories to feed this chronic sense of apprehension. Each day young children appeared at neighborhood clinics with limbs blown off after picking up two-inch long, brightly colored metal bomblets – I still have a shiny green one (explosive charge gone) on a bookshelf at home – that had been scattered throughout the city during the fighting. They had rained down from anti-personnel bombs – six-foot pods that opened at low altitude over the city during the fighting. I recall one that had been inscribed, “From Reagan to Begin with love.”

After a week of this, I was joined by Robin Grossman, Oxfam America’s associate development director. After meeting with key informants in Beirut, we went south to tour the Israeli-occupied Lebanese communities and Palestinian camps to assess the situation there. What were the needs? Who was working effectively to meet them? What obstacles did they face? What did local NGOs need that they either did not have or lacked enough of? And what could a small, independent American aid agency do that others could or would not?

Our efforts were made far easier by our association with Oxfam GB, which along with the Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee were the only outside agencies working with Lebanese or Palestinian organizations that were not directly linked to the occupation.

There were, however, many Christian evangelicals still operating out of Israel. One such coalition of US and European missionary organizations was distributing a relief package with a New Testament in Arabic, a blanket, a bag of sweets, and a blue Frisbee inscribed with the words “God Loves You” in English. And there were endless streams of curious visitors.

What we heard often from those Lebanese and Palestinians with whom we spoke was that they felt victimized twice – first by the war and then by the parade of gawkers who trailed in the army’s wake. Relief workers surveyed them over and over again on their basic needs. Journalists probed them for their wrenching personal stories. Photographers zipped in and out of the worst affected areas to capture their anguish – and run away with it. The Palestinians had become objects in a human zoo, but they were not seeing results of being on display. Many were angry. At one camp, a troop of young boys threw stones at us when we approached.

The Israeli soldiers operating checkpoints throughout the south were also on edge. Many Lebanese who had resented the PLO for its bullying swagger and had greeted the IDF as liberators now chafed under occupation and were impatient for them to leave. The sight of Israeli tourists shuttling back and forth to Beaufort Castle in convoys of huge commercial buses under armed IDF escort did little to mitigate this.

Meanwhile, IDF units were under orders to prevent reconstruction in the urban refugee settlements and were only allowing UN-supplied tents for the displaced Palestinians. We were often harassed as we sought entry to the camps, which were cordoned off from surrounding Lebanese neighborhoods with rings of razor wire. Inside, conditions were appalling. Ein el-Hilweh in the coastal city of Sidon had only two water taps for some 20,000 people, mostly women and children as many of the men had either fled or, if fingered by hooded informers, had been carted off to prisons farther south or across the border.

What many asked from us was to tell their stories, to make their needs and their aspirations visible in the US, which most believed held the key to long-term stability and peace. This was fueled by perceptions of a deepening American involvement in Lebanon based upon the Reagan administration's very public embrace of the Christian militia-based regime of Amin Gemayel, who had replaced his murdered brother, and by extravagant promises of bilateral aid.

Grossman and I crossed into Israel at the UNIFIL post at Naqoura – the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, established after the 1978 invasion and still there in 2007. We went from there to Tel Aviv where we interviewed Jacobo Timerman – the Argentine journalist jailed by the junta there for his human rights work who had sought refuge in Israel only to find himself in a society he perceived to be as militarized as the one he'd just left (and who wrote *The Longest War: Israel in Lebanon* to protest it) – as well as members of a newly energized Israeli anti-war movement. A day later, we met with Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem involved in parallel and at times linked efforts to promote co-existence between their two peoples. It was a heady time for Israeli peace activists, who claimed to have mobilized 400,000 people for a demonstration in Tel Aviv after the Sabra and Shatila massacre.

We also visited Charles Shamas's innovative coop in the West Bank city of Ramallah, coming away impressed with his deeply personal commitment to make a difference in the lives of the Palestinian women who worked on the project and with his conviction that this could be replicated elsewhere to promote hope and build stability across the region. No doubt we were predisposed to soak up good news, but we both came away truly excited.

BACK IN THE USA

Our exhilaration was short-lived, however. During our absence, support for the Lebanon work within Oxfam America had sharply eroded. The reasons for this were complicated. Among the chief factors were the obvious ones – the politics of the Middle East and the fear of donor losses – but there were also intra- and inter-departmental rivalries and a growing weariness with the demands that this issue placed on the organization. The continuing criticism of what OA did or said – or what people thought we did or said – was taking its toll, and there was a feeling among many not directly engaged by the politics that this was just not worth the cost, whatever the rights and wrongs of it.

We had by this time met and exceeded the funding target of \$250,000. Among the restricted gifts for the Lebanon emergency was a single \$100,000 donation from the Hutterian Brothers – a Christian community in Nyack, New York, that shares Anabaptist roots with the Mennonites – who decided to postpone the construction of a new building so they could put all the cash they had set aside for it into the relief effort. We also received generous support from several small trusts and foundations, along with a number of donations from Lebanese Americans facilitated by Kfoury, but contributions were beginning to fall off.

As they did so, some at Oxfam America were asking if there was a reliable constituency for ongoing work. The answer was not yet clear. Meanwhile, would we lose existing donors if we remained in the Middle East? The large volume of angry mail and phone calls we continued to get indicated that we would, but precisely how many was also not clear, as the authors of this criticism had not been correlated with our donor base, and we did not know whether the threats to cut us off were real or not.

This was also a time of considerable tension within the organization over questions of power and accountability, the extent and kind of staff participation in decision-making, equity for comparable work across departments, the impact of an ongoing restructuring of management-staff relations, and more. Such a turn inward was an almost inevitable consequence of the agency's growth in size and internal complexity and the changes that come with it, but they had been neglected for far too long and had therefore built to an explosive point that would soon lead the staff to unionize.

New issues were coming up as we became increasingly compartmentalized and as structures of authority became both more hierarchical and less transparent – all this in an organization that, like most non-profits – characterized itself as a “family” and that touted its mission as bringing justice to the downtrodden. What about us, some wondered? Aren't we bound by the same principles here? This debate gave all our political disagreements an added undercurrent of emotional intensity, even as it sapped people's will to take on new and unfamiliar challenges. It was not an auspicious time to take on such a complicated and demanding issue as the Middle East, but there was even more going on.

I had come to Oxfam America with an agenda of my own, independent of my wish to see the agency work in the Middle East. With seven years involvement in Eritrea's war for independence from Ethiopia under my belt and with a growing awareness that a terrible famine loomed there, I was equally determined to get Oxfam America involved in Eritrea and had been periodically briefing Oxfam America program staff on the situation there since the late 1970s with this in mind.

Here was a remarkable African movement that was uniting and transforming its ethnically and religiously diverse society even as it fought to liberate it from colonial rule. I had been writing about it since 1976 for both mainstream and left media in the US and Europe – for papers ranging from the *Washington Post*, the *Miami Herald* and the *Boston Globe* to the New York-based *Guardian*, as well as for Reuters, AP, the BBC and numerous others – so I brought to the table not only my passion for the work but also a unique store of knowledge and connections.

The problem was that this, too, was a knotty issue and pushed a different set of emotional and political buttons at OA. The David-and-Goliath aspect had long intrigued me, as had the Eritreans' fierce commitment to self-reliance in the face of the bruising superpower competition that wracked the rest of the Third World, but it was the level and quality of the popular mobilization taking place behind the battle lines and the simultaneous effort to achieve gender and class equality that made Eritrea so interesting. And, I thought then (and continue to think now, despite the brutal reversal underway there since the resumption of war with Ethiopia in the late 1990s), there was much to be learned about how nation-building and “development” work. Nor were there any American aid agencies there.

But, like the Israel/Palestine issue, the Eritrea/Ethiopia war triggered powerful, reflexive responses. For starters, the conflict pitted a leftwing liberation movement against a self-described “socialist” state backed by the Soviet Union. The US, for its part, distrusted the rebels and was staying out of the fray in the hope of eventually displacing the Soviets from Ethiopia and rebuilding its historic alliance with the East African powerhouse. In this view, little Eritrea was expendable.

This was also a time when many on the left argued there were only two camps in the world – the socialists and the imperialists – so when they saw the USSR backing the military junta in Ethiopia, which had dethroned a feudal emperor, redistributed land, and nationalized much of the economy, they took it on faith that the Eritreans were on the wrong side. I had been blasted by the Trotskyite Workers World, for example, as a “tool of imperialism,” willing or not, for writing favorably about the Eritrean movement, and I had engaged in a grueling two-month exchange in print over this with the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett, an erstwhile icon of the Vietnam-War-era left. But the tendency to see the world in dualistic terms (what academics today would term a binary) influenced many post-Vietnam liberals as well, who were loathe to get involved with Eritrea under these circumstances.

Meanwhile, in a through-the-looking-glass refraction of the arguments against criticizing Israel, there were some pan-Africanists who thought it wrong to criticize Ethiopia – wrong to support a liberation movement fighting a black-ruled state while there were yet white ruled states in Africa (South Africa and Namibia). And this was not just any black-ruled state – Ethiopia held mythic status as the only African country not to fall to European conquest (at least not for long) and had been a global symbol of hope for people of color since the end of the nineteenth century.

If the timing for a debate on a program with Palestinians and Lebanese under Israeli occupation was not propitious, wrapping it into one on Eritrea did not help. Still, I thought the rightness of both causes would carry the day, and I wrote memos, cajoled colleagues, and convened countless interdepartmental confabs to make the case. Not surprisingly, my earnestness was itself a drag on this debate as the agency was migrating away from the solidarity-style engagement that I brought to it toward a more “professional” and detached posture on all issues.

By mid-December the writing was on the wall.

As we neared the date for a program department vote on whether to take the Lebanon program to the board for approval and with dissension already evident within this relatively small group for a range of both political and oddly personal reasons, program director Mike Scott invited me to his house for a private discussion. With apologies he told me he had to withdraw support from the Lebanon initiative. It was not going to succeed, he said, given the lineup within the organization, and continuing to push it would only divide the staff and board further. It was time to move on.

Perhaps, he added, the agency could reengage with the Middle East at a future date but not now. Moreover, he planned to propose an outside consultant to assess the options for work in the Horn of Africa and recommend the direction Oxfam America should go in, taking the issue of Eritrea off the table for the time being, too.

The next day, the department split over the issue of staying in Lebanon and declined to recommend extending the program. It never went before the board for consideration.

My options at this point included other work at Oxfam America – there was, for example, a position in the education department – but no prospect that either area of my expertise and experience would become part of the agency’s core program. Faced with this, I decided to leave. But there were still more than seven months to go before the Lebanon work was done. What to do with that time? How to build on this extraordinary experience? How not to let it simply evaporate after all that so many others had endured to bring it to this point?

BIRTH OF AN UNRULY STEP-CHILD

I returned to Beirut in February 1983 to ask local partners just how important it was to have a US link and would they want one if I left Oxfam America to do it elsewhere – or even tried to start up an agency myself. It was a wacky notion – I had no experience running such an organization, no funds and no backers – but I was on fire. In fact, I had no clear idea of what would or should come next – only that this was no time to walk away.

Lebanese and Palestinian aid workers, human rights advocates, and NGO reps were emphatic: Stay involved. The United States is the key to what is happening here now. We need a bridge. Whatever money you can send will be helpful, but European agencies are stepping up, so funding is not the central issue. It’s the voice that matters – we need the American people to hear us, to know us. Stay connected and tell our story.

On return to Boston, I began to talk with others at Oxfam America about doing just that. I found ready reception from Chris Cartter, the communications specialist who shared my anger at what he and I both took to be a betrayal and who was ready to leave with me to keep the work going. I also found a fire burning in program advisor Assaf Kfoury, who was both outraged that Lebanon would be so abruptly abandoned and chagrined over the fact that he had leaned heavily on his extended family, friends, and political contacts to donate to Oxfam America, rather than to Lebanese charities, in order to break down the community’s historical isolation. As many disempowered minorities have discovered, though, inclusion can be ephemeral in stressful times – especially when the levers of access are outside one’s control.

I also found receptiveness among people I knew through other political work – including several prominent activists frustrated at their growing isolation at a time of declining political engagement throughout the society in the early 1980s. A core of us began to toss around the idea of creating a multi-issue organization to bridge the chasm between traditional political solidarity and mass-appeal humanitarian work, a left development agency that would use its connections to lived experience in crisis areas to do information and advocacy work targeted at the media and the public, filling the niche that OA was inadvertently opening as it grew in national influence and moved toward the center. Out of this conversation was born a “People-to-People Project for Social Change” or, as Mike Scott dubbed it, P2.

Cartter and I would be the new agency's only paid staff members. The board would consist of Kfoury, long-time Palestine rights advocate Nubar Hovsepian, American Friends Service Committee Middle East director and future head of Americans for Peace Now Gail Pressberg, Eritrea rights advocate and future drafter of independent Eritrea's constitution Bereket Habte Selassie, and South African poet and anti-apartheid activist Dennis Brutus. We would start with programs in Lebanon and Eritrea and build from there, we decided. We would expand our Palestinian program to the West Bank and Gaza and add South Africa and the Philippines as soon as we had the resources.

For much of the rest of my time at Oxfam America, I commuted to Philadelphia to work with AFSC on an assessment of the human rights situation in Lebanon, which they later published, while I worked to put together the infrastructure of a new non-profit aid agency, whose name evolved into Grassroots International by the time we incorporated on May 1. Though we did not officially open our doors in a one-room sublet in Cambridge's Central Square until August 1, Cartter and I sent out our first funding request to potential institutional donors – a famine emergency appeal for Eritrea and northern Ethiopia – in early June. And Oxfam America gave us the restricted funds left from the Lebanon fundraising campaign – \$5,000 – to get our doors open.

Meanwhile, I went back to Lebanon in April to wrap up Oxfam America's relationships there, announce the imminent formation of Grassroots, and gather data for the AFSC report. A few days after I left the tense city to return to Boston, suicide bombers blew up the American Embassy, killing sixty-three people, including a freelance journalist and friend whom I had contracted to follow up on the field research for Oxfam America. She happened to be in the building when the van carrying 2,000 pounds of explosives detonated. I never knew whether she had been there on Oxfam's behalf, but her death haunts me still.

This was all the more poignant as my last public act on behalf of the Oxfam America program was an op-ed I wrote for the *Washington Post* titled "For Lebanon's Poor: No Relief" that appeared on March 11 and was reprinted in the *International Herald Tribune*. In it, I warned that the emergency was not over and that "as a guarantor of the peace process, the United States will be increasingly held responsible for new violence." I closed by saying: "The US government and private US aid agencies have a disproportionate influence on the situation in Lebanon. The question now is whether this influence will be used for good or ill. The history of Lebanon argues that there is no middle ground on these issues. If not dealt with today, they will be answered for tomorrow."

REFLECTIONS

Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon had a profound and lasting impact on the politics of both countries, and the ripple effects were felt throughout the region and beyond. As the first explicitly offensive Israeli military campaign waged outside its borders, the war provided major impetus to a heretofore anemic peace movement inside Israel. It also opened the Jewish state to criticism from many of its friends and allies for the first time, especially for its complicity in the brutal massacres at Sabra and Shatila, after which Peace Now filled the streets of Tel Aviv with tens of thousands of Israelis protesting the invasion and its aftermath.

The conflict also sparked a radical realignment within Lebanon and unleashed the long suppressed majority Shi'ites as a force, first under the leadership of traditional politicians and then under the newly formed Party of God, or Hezbollah, which was helped by Iran, also a new player on the scene then. At the same time, the weakening of the PLO and the dispersal of its leadership and troops led to major shifts within the Palestinian national movement, as the West Bank and Gaza took center stage for the first time and as the two-state solution to the conflict gained significant traction.

Meanwhile, in October 1983 and in early 1984, the USS New Jersey unleashed its massive 406mm guns on the Lebanese mainland in what Navy officials characterized as the largest shore bombardment since the Korean War. Many Lebanese saw this as evidence the US had sided with the Christian right and Israel in the ongoing Lebanese civil war, and the images of Israeli and American bombardment that were broadcast throughout the Arab world heightened regional resentment against both countries. Osama bin Laden later claimed that the sight of our Lebanon bombardment was one of the factors that radicalized him.

Within Oxfam America, both the hasty entry and the abrupt departure from Lebanon had an unsettling effect on an already tense workplace, surfacing differences in organizational philosophy and style as much as politics. This was the first time the agency had leapt into action during a crisis and found itself taking flak from partisans on both sides. Oxfam America had built its constituency during a series of major disasters and conflicts – Bangladesh, Central America, Cambodia – through which it attracted thousands of donors for emergency relief and then converted many into supporters of long-term development. For the first time, this did not happen – at least not to any lasting extent once the program shut down – and that upset many in the organization. But the manner in which the decisions had been taken – at the front end and at the close – set off demands for greater accountability and transparency in decision-making and an end to back-room deals among and between favored staff and top management.

And, of course, the closure of the program led to the formation of Grassroots International, which has ever since maintained a sort of push-pull relationship with its step-parent. More Oxfam America staffers (and a few board members) have since 1983 found a new home at Grassroots, one – Kevin Murray – as its executive director – and members of both organizations have consulted with each other on programmatic issues and often attended each other's events. I even returned to do a short-term consultancy on the Horn of Africa program in the late 1990s, and top Oxfam America officials have made significant contributions at Grassroots retreats and strategic planning sessions, as the two organizations found common ground in their outlooks and a useful division of labor in their respective programs and public postures.

But it is clear in hindsight that the problems that surfaced throughout the Lebanon program had more to do with the location and nature of the conflict itself and the baggage that everyone brought to the table than with organizational issues, and that has not changed. The Middle East was the most fraught region of the world in which Oxfam America might work – and it has only become more so since 1983. Oxfam America was simply not equipped then to cope with it – nor prepared to invest the time and resources to make itself so.

It takes an enormous amount of time, energy, and organizational resources to work on the Middle East if one is involved with Palestinian issues and is thereby thrust into a position where one has got to challenge Israel on its actions toward them. And there will inevitably be a direct cost for doing so – in withdrawn donations as well as expended internal resources – that is not compensated for by increases in support from other quarters.

Grassroots learned this in the spring of 1985 when a prominent, controversial, and combative Boston lawyer with a taste for publicity showed up one day with two other strong supporters of Israel and threatened to undermine our anti-famine work with the Massachusetts Democratic Party – we were jointly running a “Donkey Project” to purchase pack animals to transport relief supplies within Eritrean and Ethiopian war zones – if we were overly critical of Israel. The delegation produced a file of leaflets Grassroots had signed onto with groups they disapproved of, as well as a summary of remarks I had made on the Lebanon crisis to a Quaker group in Cambridge several weeks earlier to reinforce their concern.

This was, to say the least, unnerving, but we stood firm behind the principle that we would criticize whoever put civilians at risk – Israel, Syria, the PLO or anyone else. And we continued to do so as events on the ground called for, even though it may have prevented us from organizing similar campaigns with other state parties.

But if an organization is ambivalent or, worse, divided, as Oxfam America was in the early 1980s, this sort of persistence will be impossible, as the cost is spread among many who are not behind it and as they inevitably (and not unreasonably) demand to know why this should be the case when they did not sign onto it.

Clearly, a lot more effort ought to have gone into consensus-building within the staff and then within the board as the 1982 emergency program was first unfolding, though it may be that the intervention was doomed from the start due to unbridgeable differences. In that case, a lot of people here and there were misled, a lot of energy squandered, and a legacy of bad will created that might have been avoided if there had been more clarity at the outset.

Having said all this, however, I am also convinced that those who come to work at any NGO with a set of beliefs and principles built around social justice need to accept that it is not just another job; that they may find themselves in uncomfortable situations with one or another issue; that they take on an obligation to learn about such issues when they sign on that first day, challenging their own inbuilt prejudices and standing up to outside pressures (institutional or even family) when pushed to do so; and that they are bound by this undertaking to accept the possibility of personal discomfort, even material consequences, when the organization’s core values are tested. This just comes with the territory.

In that vein, I continue to believe that as a leading secular aid agency committed to a rights-based development philosophy, Oxfam America has an obligation to be in the worst areas, the most difficult crises, the most divisive conflicts – and to use its standing in the community to promote justice at every available opportunity, as well as to provide effective on-the-ground aid.

Perhaps Oxfam America needs a Grassroots International to break the ground now and then, even to run interference at certain points, but it needs also to do the advance planning on areas where it is not yet involved, to get up to speed when such a challenge as this presents itself, and then to commit the resources and demonstrate the staying power needed to fulfill its vision of building “a world in which all people shall know freedom to achieve their fullest potential and to live secure from the dangers of hunger, deprivation, and oppression” – without any exceptions.