Project Aizdahar
Lebanon
International House of New York
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Final Report

Project Summary
Project Aizdahar encouraged a peaceful future for a divided community in Akkar, Lebanon, by developing outdoor skills, leadership, and friendships between 250 Syrian and Lebanese children of diverse religious backgrounds in a 6-day summer camp.

Project Description
Lebanon is a notoriously fractured country and we found that divisions permeate humanitarian aid in the country as well. For the most part, nonprofit organizations either work with Syrian or with Lebanese communities, but rarely both together. Despite differences in socioeconomics and culture, we felt that many needs are shared between communities living in Lebanon. Furthermore, we believe that the lack of emphasis on shared issues in aid work is detrimental to community cohesion.

Thus, we pursued a Davis Project for Peace that brought together children from different communities to participate in a summer camp in the northernmost region of the country. In Akkar, tension between Syrian and Lebanese communities remains high. Due to the war in Syria, many Syrians have been living in tent camps for over ten years with little hope for integration into the community, access to basic human needs, or educational opportunities for their children. An estimated 88% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living below the extreme poverty line. This has led to a significant number of Syrian refugee children as young as 10 needing to work, further eroding their human rights. Lebanese communities have also suffered, with a long history of Syrian occupation in the region and the recent economic crisis. We chose to work in Akkar not only because it is the most religiously diverse region of Lebanon, but also because it is the poorest region. As a result, many of the nationwide issues are exacerbated in the towns we worked with.

We were able to accommodate 250 children in a six-day camp in the high mountains of Michmich. The children came from the nearby towns of Kousha, B’erzla, Rahbe, and Michmich. Many of the youth leaders stayed over at our campsite, sleeping underneath the stars and dancing around campfires at night.

For the first two days, we worked with teenage youth leaders (15-18 years old), running activities related to the environment, art, faith, and leadership. The following two days, we brought younger day campers (11-15 years old) to Michmich for a day camp to participate in dance, music, teambuilding games, sports, and a cross-country adventure. With the younger kids, we had a summer camp theme of "The Young Wizard Tournament of Akkar." Kids worked together to save a group of camp staff who had been 'cursed' by an evil wizard. The youth leaders took active roles in managing teams of children, organizing games, and preparing lunch. After the portion of the camp with the younger kids had concluded, we continued with another day of activities for the youth leaders. In breakout groups, they worked to produce a film, create an art installation, and discuss passages of the Quran and the Bible. On our last day, our youth leaders took a long hike from the town of Michmich to Wadi al Jahim. In the hot summer climate, it was a strenuous task, but it fostered a sense of camaraderie amongst the youth.

Lastly, in order to implement this project, we worked with Relief and Reconciliation International (R&R). R&R is a non-profit based in Akkar that combines peacebuilding with humanitarian aid. Their programs work on education, psychosocial support, and emergency response for Syrian and Lebanese communities in Akkar. We were also joined by local community partners and volunteers. They were incredible leaders that embodied the values of interreligious dialogue, democratic decision-making, and solidarity as they served as mentors to the youth. Their support and active partnership was invaluable and this project would not have been possible without the 30+ supervisors who joined us for camp.
Reflection

Peace is a reconciliation of differences. Most individuals we met in Akkar have been touched directly by violence and have legitimate grievances with those who hold identities different from their own. Peace is a difficult, constant process of recognizing our similarities and the humanity of the other.

Working in an unstable region required flexibility with our goals. One obstacle that we encountered was community violence between two towns where our summer camp was set to occur. The day before our summer camp, shooting broke out between the towns of Michmich and Fneideq due to gang violence and the military had to intervene, shutting down the only road that led up to our campsite location. Due to this threat of violence, the Alawite children who were registered to attend pulled out of the summer camp the next morning, when camp was scheduled to begin. We faced additional challenges in recruiting girls to participate in the sleepover at camp. Culturally, it was difficult to ask girls to sleep outside of the home and in the end, most of our overnight campers were boys. Despite this, we had girls participate every day and organized transportation every morning and evening. In light of both of these obstacles, we recognized that peace-building is a long term task and every step forward matters, no matter how small.

Project Aizdahar contributed to peace at the individual level because it enabled youth of different religious and socioeconomic backgrounds to enjoy the outdoors and build friendships with each other, when they otherwise would not have interacted or had the opportunity to attend summer camp. Particularly amongst youth leaders, who are now connected digitally, we hope that these inter-village friendships will continue and proliferate. In the long term, we believe that personal relationships between individuals can have a meaningful impact on the overall stability of Akkar, especially in the case of violence between villages.

Personal Statements

“I am grateful to have led a Davis Project for Peace and to have met such kind and resilient individuals living in the north of Lebanon. Completing this project has taught me something universal about how we bridge divided communities: it must start at the individual level. I am optimistic that the friendships formed at our summer camp will contribute meaningfully to a more peaceful relationship between Syrians, Lebanese, Sunnis, and Maronites in the towns of Kousha, Rahbe, Michmich, and B’erzla.” - Audrey Kost

“Studying migration crises in the abstract often produces meaningful ideas, but working directly with those affected provided us a new glimpse of the personal and organizational challenges that come with sustainable, ethical, and community-focused aid in unstable environments.” - Emily Atieh