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Reconciliation in Lebanon

Nicholas Blanford

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Some Lebanese, especially those with a sense of irony, like to share an American traveller's impressions of their homeland on the eastern Mediterranean:

William Thomson noted that Lebanon's religions and sects — there are 18 recognised ones in a country smaller than Connecticut — share a country but little fraternal feeling.

Of the Muslim sects, he wrote, the Sunnis "excommunicate" the Shias, "both hate" the Druze, and all three "detest" the Alawites. As for the Christians, "the Maronites have no particular love for anybody and, in turn, are disliked by all." The Greek Orthodox "cannot endure" the Greek Catholics, and "all despise the Jews."

"They can never form one united people...and will therefore remain weak, incapable of self-government, and exposed to the...oppressions of foreigners", Thomson concluded.

Thomson's comments could be those of a contemporary observation. But he wrote them in 1870 in *The Land and the Book*, an account of his travels as a missionary in the Levant.

Breaking such deeply embedded and historical suspicions is no easy task, but Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) specialising in conflict resolution, has launched a nationwide, grassroots initiative to train schoolteachers in techniques to mediate and resolve classroom disputes among Lebanese youths. Lebanese youth argue and fight over childish issues much the same as other young people all over the world. Additionally, however, the political and religious prejudices of their parents can seep onto the playground, particularly at times of heightened internal tension, perpetuating the legacy of communal mistrust.

The trainers, from Lebanese civil society groups and from groups linked to the SFCG project, are from as religiously and politically diverse backgrounds as the schools to which they are sent. Training was carried out in Cyprus by Valerie Dovey, a South African peace educator who worked in post-apartheid South Africa.

"The way we all communicated with each other was very nice," says Noha Chahine, a trainer who is a teacher at a Beirut school. "It was challenging, but it showed that we all have a common goal despite our different backgrounds."

On a recent morning, Ms. Chahine and her fellow trainer, Tarek Abu Zeinab, held a session for eight women teachers at the public school in Joun, a village with a mixed Shia and Christian population. It's surrounded by olive groves on rolling chalky hills near the port of Sidon. The school has some 200 5-to-13-year-olds. The women — Shias and Christians, reflecting the village—sat attentively at their pupils' desks.

Such skills would be taken for granted in the West, but educational training remains under-funded here.

If the pilot programme proves successful, SFCG hopes to expand it to another 100 schools in the next three years. The NGO also produces a children's television programme called *Kilna Bil Hayy* (All of Us in the Neighbourhood) in which six children—an Armenian, Christian, Druze, Palestinian, Shia, and Sunni — live in the same apartment building.

Broadcast by Lebanon's LBC International channel, the show teaches children to embrace their unity and

In May last year, Lebanon teetered on the edge of civil conflict once more during street fighting that pitted Shia factions against Sunnis and Druze. While peaceful parliamentary elections were held in June, forming a coalition government has been stymied by political squabbles.

“Politics here tends to be divided between anti-West and pro-West, and unfortunately, politicians have cemented those divisions in Lebanon”, says Abu Zeinab, who has several years of experience in Lebanese civil society groups.

“That’s why this type of project is very important,” he concludes. “It brings people from all over Lebanon together. What we teach to the schools is that you are all Lebanese and that you are all one.”

Nicholas Blanford is a correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor. This article is distributed by the Common Ground News Service

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