2015 NEWSLETTER
A Look Back at 2014

My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.

–Desmond Tutu
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**About Us**

**Mission**

We promote peacebuilding, equal citizenship, and human rights in the Middle East by creating common spaces for dialogue and building the capacity of community and civil society groups to be catalysts for peace, with a focus on women and youth.

**Vision**

We envision a transformed Middle East, where political views, ethnicities and religions are woven into a richly diverse culture of peace and dialogue and in which the human rights of all citizens are promoted and respected.

**Values**

The Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue respects the dignity of every human being, values the diversity of cultures in the Middle East, encourages dialogue and understanding as a means of resolving conflict, and perceives justice as the lasting basis of peace.

**Background**

Founded in 2004, the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) represents the collective vision, mission and history of the Urban Rural Mission's work in the MENA region. As such, the program looks back at over twenty years of history of community organizing, leadership training, spiritual reflection, and response to marginalization and dehumanization.

Based in Beirut, Lebanon, with a regional outlook, FDCD responds to humanitarian needs and facilitates encounters and exchange among different sectors of society. In this way, various actors of society become versed in identifying and dismantling stereotypes while gaining a better understanding of the "other." When applying this in their real lives, these individuals help FDCD work towards achieving its overall mission and vision.
Our Work

Citizenship and Human Rights

As an NGO, we build the capacity of community and civil society leaders to promote the human rights and citizenship of marginalized groups, focusing on women and youth. We train young leaders to promote equal citizenship and democratic participation in public life, promote the use of media as an instrument for active peace and human rights, and aim to empower marginalized and economically challenged communities.

Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

It is our firm belief that genuine dialogue is essential for peaceful human coexistence and enables positive change. Addressing deeply rooted divisions and tensions, we have established programs to facilitate dialogue locally, nationally, regionally and internationally among groups from different countries, faiths and cultures. In this way we foster understanding and cooperation and support the development of community and civil society leaders for peace and justice. Adapting our approach according to various situations enables us to reach out to a wide range of actors in society.

Emergency Response

Responding to the growing humanitarian need in the Middle East and North Africa, FDCD works towards attending to the health, social and physical needs of the most vulnerable. Our primary aim is to provide support services that recognize the dignity of these human beings and to treat them in a way that empowers them to live their lives based on the basic and undisputed notions of mutual respect and human rights.

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Farewell to a Partner:

FDCD staff shall miss Birgitte Søgaard Lauta, who has been the regional representative for Danmission in Beirut for the last two years. FDCD staff have found in Birgitte a cooperative partner committed to Danmission and FDCD’s missions and work. With her pleasant personality, she has been more than a coworker, but a friend who has accompanied staff on their activities with a smiling face and her favorite word, which we will never forget: fantastic.
The year 2014 was filled with many high profile news accounts of innocent people in our region murdered merely for their faith or ethnicity. The Middle East and the entire world were appalled by these barbaric acts, which are so antithetic to our region’s culture, religions, and heritage. Unfortunately, these deaths graphically illustrate the tension and fragility of the current affairs in the Arab world, and in many ways lead to despair for the future of our young generations. The Arab world has never witnessed such a mass immigration of its youth, intellectuals, and academics as it has in the last year.

The war in Syria continues as ISIS advances in the region. Up to 2014, the war has caused the deaths of more than 210,000 people, and 8 million have been uprooted from their lands with no sign of a peaceful settlement in the foreseeable future. The Iraqi situation is not much better than that of Syria, especially with the concurrent advancement of ISIS, which has killed many minorities there, as well. Yazidis and other Kurds have been forced out of their homes during severe fighting among the different parties of Iraq, particularly in Kobani, where thousands were rounded up and killed.

This volatile situation in the region caused FDCD to increase its efforts in peacebuilding and reconciliation with a special focus on women, youth and children. Our staff implemented many initiatives for theological students, youth in civil society, and religious leaders to promote peace, justice and reconciliation. In addition, FDCD is responding to the humanitarian situation in Syria, where five million people have become internally displaced. FDCD has continued to operate an emergency aid program to alleviate the suffering of at least 52,000 Syrians who have fled the fighting into safer areas, such as the Qualamoun region between Damascus and Homs. This program encourages Syrians to remain in the country to increase stability, shelters them whenever it is possible, and provides them with food, blankets, heaters, and even medicine when needed. FDCD has recently established an office in Damascus with three staff members representing a new NGO that has been legalized under the name Charity for Sustainable Development. This sister organization of FDCD was founded to assist our overall work in Syria, to be nearer to the people and areas of war, and to support the overall vision of FDCD.

FDCD continues to envision a transformed Middle East, where political views, ethnicities and religions are woven into a richly diverse culture of peace and dialogue and in which the human rights of all citizens are promoted and respected. I praise the work of our board members, staff and volunteers throughout the region who comfort those in need and stand in solidarity with all the victims of the atrocities the Arab world is witnessing. I also take this chance to thank all our partners who have been supporting and accompanying FDCD to fulfill its mission, activity and calling to lead people to justice, peace and reconciliation in a fragmented Arab world.
Masa and May are two young artists living in Damascus enduring the torments of the Syrian crisis like all the others and dedicating their talents to peace building, reconciliation, and amity. They are alumni of Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue workshops and are using the skills they have learned to implement an art program to help children affected by the Syrian Civil War.

Every Syrian individual in every corner around the country has been affected by the ordeals of the crisis in a way or another, but the children are undoubtedly more traumatized than the rest. These children have been suddenly and violently extracted from their homes, away from their families and departed to the unknown. Being away from their schools, friends, and their regular safe environment intensifies their anguish. For the fourth consecutive year, these kids find themselves unable to carry on their daily routine and pursue their education. This situation adds to their vulnerability. The war has settled down in their minds, taking away their childhood, their innocence, and their enthusiasm. The sight of firearms has become commonplace. Nothing is shocking anymore. TV programs and books dedicated to their age group have been invaded by the atrocities of the war. Villains and frightening characters manipulate their minds. War is their favorite game, and gunman are their role models.

Despite the hardships, we are trying our best to deal with the present cruelties, changing the misery into optimism. We are working hard to relieve the suffering of the children and the elderly. Being youthful and energetic helps initiating capacity building in our immediate environment.

We are confronting a great deal of concerns. The janitor in our building, for instance, used to have a beautiful house and garden back in his village. He was living a happy life with his family. Due to the war, they all had to move into a small room under the stairs. During the feast, we organized a series of activities for the kids at the orphanage. I decided to take the janitor's granddaughters along with me thinking that they needed some time out of this suffocating chamber. When we arrived to the orphanage, the girls burst into tears, asking for their mom. We were surprised by such a heartbreaking response, but then we realized that this was nothing more than their way of expressing their fears of losing their mother. The girls have already lost their home, and now they live in that small room in our building. Having left their small but relatively secure place has exposed them again to the notion of abandonment and the anguish of insecurity. So the whole idea of a pleasant outing turned into a frightful experience.

Children of war are experiencing social distress. They are unable to mingle in society, becoming unhealthily attached to their parents out of the fear of loss. At that age, they should be in school, but instead, they stick to their moms all day long. Our primary responsibility is to educate them and lead them to the right track. Schools have become shelters for the internally displaced, but we must find some way to educate these children to help them regain their identity.
Just a few were selected from around 200 applicants to take part in the week-long 2014 International Work and Study Camp at the Evangelical Centre in Dhour Choueir, Lebanon. During a field trip to a mosque, the group was graciously welcomed by real Middle Eastern Muslims in their own environment. “In the mosque, it is relaxed and friendlier than I thought,” a participant said. “People are part of a community.”

Thirty participants aged twenty-two to thirty-one from Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Cambodia, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, and Denmark met to thoughtfully and respectfully discuss faith and politics. Muslims, Christians, men, and women were all represented equally at the camp themed “Promoting Peace through Interreligious Dialogue.” Implemented since 2004, the camp’s goal is for youth to take part in constructive, interpersonal cross-cultural dialogue, which they will promote in their own communities upon returning home.

Camp supporters recognize that worldwide sectarianism contributes to the prevalence of violence. FDCD believes conflicts can be mitigated by encouraging diverse relationships in spite of one’s natural inclination to segregate. The young leaders who participate in the camp are convinced of the benefits of diversity and take with them the motivation to spark inclusive societal cooperation integral to preserving peace in their various countries. After ten years of the International Work and Study Camp, representatives from each year will soon meet to build their contacts, exchange experiences, and establish youth committees to initiate regional peacebuilding networks.
Many Middle Easterners feel disconnected from their countries' governments. Frequently, they are underrepresented in terms of religion, ethnicity, gender, or economic class. Politically marginalized citizens are frequently oppressed and can become cynical. They may not feel any solidarity with compatriots of differing demographics and are more vulnerable to radicalization.

From October 31st to November 3rd 2014, the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue partnered with the Norwegian Embassy to implement a training of trainers to encourage people throughout the Middle East to become involved in active citizenship. Participants hailed from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. They were Muslims and Christians aged 22 to 35 comprised of 13 women and 12 men.

Attendees participated in activities and discussions on the topics of individual and collective identity, affiliation, citizenship, the social contract, and conflict resolution relating to identity, belonging, and gender. Participants learned the value of diversity in government and universal human rights. They practiced facilitating discussions, so that they will be prepared to lead similar workshops in their own countries after they tailor the content to their unique context. Now these trainers are equipped to teach their fellow citizens to peacefully interact with the sociopolitical structures in their countries to effect positive social change.

Leaders for Interreligious Understanding
by: Maher Btaiche, FDCD Program Coordinator

- Lebanese, Syrians, Egyptians, and Danish
- Participants Have Launched Several Local Initiatives

Now, we are able to break the walls of silence and face the world with a new peaceful perspective. We are Leaders for Interreligious Dialogue, a group of young Lebanese, Syrians, Egyptians and Danish youth gathered to discuss and dialogue on peace, political integration and conflict transformation through two different workshops and an online course.

This project envisions religious diversity as a social fact that can be managed by young leaders to promote positive change. Participants from religion, media, communications and other sectors understand the importance of social cohesion and peacebuilding within and among pluralistic societies.

All the participants from the four countries launched several local initiatives to promote social integration and the importance of dialogue and religious understanding. Based on the commitment of the graduated leaders, this project will aim to deepen the knowledge of the alumni in the topic of extremism and propose more interactive tools to reach a wider variety of people in the next phase during 2015.
The Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue and Danmission hosted a group of Syrian experts, religious, and civil society leaders at the Magleas Center in Denmark from December 8-11, 2014. "The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding in Syria" was the topic of the summit. Goals comprised addressing the current misuse of religion in Syria and throughout the Middle East, developing general perspective and diverse viewpoints to encourage ecumenism, and enhancing conviviality, reconciliation, and trust by the religious leaders in their institutions, platforms, and civil societies.

Following two days of presentations and discussions, participants agreed on what steps to take next. First, they committed to work together to appeal for a ceasefire in Syria to stop the violence and expel all foreign militants from the country. Second, the leaders decided to adopt transparent and inclusive dialogue among all Syrian political and social forces. They believe this is the only unique solution to the Syrian crisis. Third, they will conduct seminars to encourage active citizenship. Fourth, they have decided to implement dialogue programs among the followers of all religions, especially youth. Fifth, they will publish a document to be distributed by religious leaders to denounce violence, extremism, and the acts of the extremist organizations in the name of religion. Sixth, they will create local security networks to rebuild confidence to eliminate the barriers of fear and handle humanitarian issues. Lastly, they committed to enhance the role of women.

All participants expressed their deep thanks and appreciation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, FDCD, and Danmission for this initiative and considered it a great step towards an integrated project to build peace and reconciliation in Syria.

Syrian Emergency Aid

Nearly 4 years into the Syrian Civil War, 200,000 are dead, over 3 million have become refugees, 5 million are internally displaced (IDPs), and no one sees an end in sight. New militias form frequently, and over 20,000 foreign fighters have joined from over 50 different countries around the world.

In spite of such hopeless circumstances, the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue continues to aid the most vulnerable Syrians. FDCD supported over 52,000 peaceful Syrians in 2014 with food parcels, hygiene products, housing, winterization items, medical assistance, psychosocial support, and school kits. Concentrating on IDPs, FDCD has also begun serving some host community members. This decision was welcomed by impoverished locals, and it has improved their relationships with guest IDPs.

Late 2013 was marred by violent rebel occupation of many towns where FDCD concentrates relief efforts in the Qalamoun area between Damascus and Homs in western Syria. Following intervention by government forces to drive out the rebels, the situation became relatively calm in 2014.

An important policy of FDCD’s aid program is that it indiscriminately serves all those in need without regard to religion or ethnicity. Consequently, townspeople are in strong solidarity. This unity was tested when rebels attempted to burn a church in the Qalamoun area in late 2013. Resident Muslims stood up for their Christian friends and successfully protected the church from destruction.

The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding in Syria

Organizing peace advocacy

The Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue and Danmission hosted a group of Syrian experts, religious, and civil society leaders at the Magleas Center in Denmark from December 8-11, 2014. "The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding in Syria" was the topic of the summit. Goals comprised addressing the current misuse of religion in Syria and throughout the Middle East, developing general perspective and diverse viewpoints to encourage ecumenism, and enhancing conviviality, reconciliation, and trust by the religious leaders in their institutions, platforms, and civil societies.

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“I have the feeling as if we have known each other for years, but actually we only met yesterday!”

In statements such as these, participants expressed their thoughts after the first day at the workshop entitled Youth Encounter – Building Inclusive Societies, which was held in Broumana, Lebanon between 26 and 31 May 2014 organized by FDCD in cooperation with Mobaderoon Network and with the support of the Arab Initiative of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Danmission.

Out of more than 180 applicants, 30 young Syrians from various locations, including Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and Damascus, participated in the workshop. Trainers from South Africa and Denmark created a comfortable atmosphere to discuss and express feelings, thoughts, and ideas. The workshop had three main objectives: to build a motivated and organized group, to share a deeper understanding of the situation in Syria and finally, to develop strategies for building inclusive Syrian communities.

The fact that most participants came from organized political backgrounds posed a greater challenge for all involved in the process to build trust and cohesion in the group. FDCD staff assessed that at the start of the workshop, the majority of participants were more motivated by their personal political agendas than by empathy and compassion for those of all groups suffering in their country.

Building trust amongst interest groups in the midst of violent conflict has many challenges, such as the pain and associated trauma of wounds so close to the surface. The attendees frankly discussed the situation in Syria, causing some to argue heatedly or burst into tears.

After participants vented their frustrations, they listened to each other’s stories and empathized with each other’s fears. These sessions encouraged attendees to recognize the common humanity of one another. This opened the door for unique dialogue helpful for a deeper understanding of the crisis.

Attitudes toward one another began to change. “I can see clearly that the Syrian Society is being built correctly,” a participant said. “You can recognize the good people only during the hard times, and I assure there are plenty of them here in this workshop.”

The workshop was a good instrument in healing wounds inflicted by the war, and it gave youth hope and courage for the future. A participant commented, “We are working on rebuilding our society. This is our commitment to discuss strategies and initiatives to address the crisis in Syria.”

At the end of the workshop, the participants were asked to think of initiatives to be implemented in Syria in order to promote peace as an alternative to violence and exclusion. Proposals included sport and peacebuilding, a documentary entitled *I am a Human and Not an IDP*, and an initiative to empower women to play an active role in their communities.
Lebanon has long suffered from infamous terrorism, civil war, political instability, and religious sectarianism. Despite this history and current threats, it is currently relatively safe inside the country. FDCD is taking advantage of this tentative security to help build lasting peace with "Lebanon, a Better Image." Phonometically "albee," meaning "my heart" in Arabic, LBI is a holistic project offering forums for participants to share visions of how Lebanese society should evolve to encourage peaceful cooperation.

LBI builds on previous FDCD peace programs by involving past participants—young female and male leaders representing different career fields, political parties, religions, and regions. LBI activities consist of workshops and multimedia productions. The first workshop took place October 17th to 19th in Braumana, Lebanon. Speakers trained 29 attendees on how to start their own capacity building initiatives to promote peace.

Another LBI activity focuses on 17 and 18-year-old Christian and Muslim residents of Jezzine, an infamously war-torn area of southcentral Lebanon. In November, FDCD hosted 12 of these youth for a day of hiking and peacebuilding. Additionally, a peace song was produced to spread the message of peace among other young adults. Also, an iPhone and Android app, Apeace, is also being developed to reach out to young people. The app will be used as a platform to discuss and promote peace.

Peacebuilding in a Lebanese Context

Peacebuilding in a Lebanese Context is an interfaith initiative of the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue. Its goal is to train seminary students of different religions to have deeper understanding of important concepts on conflict prevention in order to actively contribute to a long-term peacebuilding strategy in Lebanon. FDCD held 2 interfaith events in 2014 as part of the program.

The first event, entitled “Dialogue and Iftar,” was held in July during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Two Muslim and one Christian local religious leaders spoke to the audience of seminarians. The speeches advocated the idea that knowledge of those who are different builds bridges that bring different groups together and discourages fundamentalism. Following the talks, the Christians joined the Muslim participants as they broke their fast with a light meal, called Iftar.

“Dialogue in the Face of Extremism” was the name of the second event, held on December 13th. Two sessions took place throughout the day entitled “The Value of Human and Religious Diversity” and “Is it Possible to Dialogue with Extremists?” One highlight of the day occurred when a speaker asserted that terrorism does not have a religion. Terrorists can claim to be Christian or Muslim, but actually they are neither and do not represent any religion.
The Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue knows that some people do not like to attend conferences. Therefore, FDCD explores different ways to promote peace. One of these initiatives is Cycle for Peace, cosponsored by the Lebanese Cycling Federation and the United Nations. Cycle for Peace brings together diverse participants with one common interest: a love for cycling. The United Nations declared April 6th as the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace, and this is the day that 400 people gathered in Beirut, Lebanon for the 2014 event. This number increased from just 72 participants in 2013. The daylong event culminated when participants young and old, male and female, Muslim and Christian, signed their names together on the Lebanese flag as a symbol of unity and peace.

“I am a 45-year-old mother, feeling so bad because of the security situation. I decided to bring my family and cycle for peace while being confident that this small sports activity can deliver a message of peace in Lebanon.”
Connect with FDCD

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