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A Restored Synagogue in an Unlikely Place

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While the controversy surrounding the proposed Muslim Community Center and Mosque at Ground Zero continues on in the U.S., another site of worship has been restored and opened in the most unlikely place—Beirut, Lebanon. The Magen Avraham Synagogue in Beirut's Wadi Abu Jmil district reopened this past week after nearly three decades of being closed due to significant damage during the Lebanese civil war.

Ironically, the Synagogue was destroyed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as they sought to route the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Beirut in 1982. The restoration project is the culmination of a project founded in 2006 by the Lebanese Jewish Community Council, and was estimated to cost approximately \$1 million USD. Funding for the restoration has come from prominent members of the Lebanese Jewish community, both in Lebanon and abroad, as well as a pledge of \$150,000 from Solidere SAL the private company created by former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri to rebuild downtown Beirut following the civil war.

The restoration began last year after receiving the green light from a broad spectrum of political, religious and community leaders in Lebanon. The plan even gained support from Hezbollah, despite the organizations refusal to accept the existence of Israel and its devastating war against it in 2006. Hussein Rahal, a spokesman for Hezbollah, stated "We respect the Jewish religion just like we do Christianity... The Jews have always lived among us. We have an issue with Israel's occupation of land." Despite the steady decrease of Lebanon's Jewish community, with a great number emigrating due to the numerous conflicts in the region, Judaism is one of Lebanon's 17 officially recognized faiths and benefits from the same laws that protect the other religious communities.

The restoration of the Synagogue and the recognition of Judaism as a protected religious community is both intriguing and positive for a number of factors. Despite the fact that Lebanon has often found itself on the brink of conflict, both within its borders between the different political-religious communities and externally against Israel, the restoration of the Synagogue demonstrates a different side of Lebanon that is not normally portrayed. This news hearkens back to the pre-civil war and conflict-ridden image of Lebanon when the nation stood for tolerance and was an example of the diversity in the Middle East.

Though Lebanese identity is often defined by religious sect, which in turn influences political leanings, the one issue that has been illustrated by the recent developments is that despite perpetual political conflict the nation can come together and find consensus on a single issue, religious diversity. The restoration of the Synagogue will not solve the nation's domestic or regional issues but it does provide a positive step that can serve as an ideal public diplomacy model by encouraging religious tolerance and diversity. Although the Synagogue restoration took place in an Arab nation in the Middle East, its significance is relevant to the current

political climate in the United States and can serve as an example to be emulated.

John Nahas recently graduated from the Master of Public Diplomacy Program at USC. While in the program John served as the President of the Association of Public Diplomacy Scholars and was a Senior Editor for Public Diplomacy Magazine. He also interned at the Carnegie Endowment's Middle East Center in Beirut, Lebanon.
