

Title: Combating Extremism in the Middle East Through Defense of Christianity

- 1) **Name of Organization:** Apostolate of Our Lady of Hope/St. Rafka Mission of Hope and Mercy
- 2) **Organization Address:** 2459 S. Chase Lane, Lakewood, CO 80227
- 3) **Status:** Not-for-profit
- 4) **Industry Affiliation:** none
- 5) **Biographies of Participants:**
 - a. Fr. Andre YS Mahanna, President and Founder: see attached biography
 - b. Dr. Susan Childress, organization officer: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/susan-boackle-childress>
 - c. Mr. Gregory Huston, organization officer: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/gregoryalanhuston/>
- 6) **Has your organization ever partnered with the U.S. government?** Our organization has not partnered in a formal way with the U.S. government, but Fr. Mahanna has been actively involved in educational efforts with elected officials on the topic of religious freedom.
- 7) **What stage is your partnership business plan?** New program
- 8) **Proposal:**
 - a. **Problem Statement:** Christianity is currently the most persecuted religion world-wide, particularly in the Middle East. Historically, Christianity has been a moderating force in the region, advancing human rights, driving social progress, bridging relationships with the West and providing a counter force to extremism. With the recent rise of Islamic ultra-fundamentalism, the Christian population is rapidly diminishing. Lebanon is the largest Christian nation in the Middle East and is currently at the center of this conflict. The country has been a model for peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims because of the significant Christian presence and integration of Christian values into society. However, war in neighboring countries has driven 1.5 million refugees into this nation of only 4 million. Most of these refugees are Muslim, threatening the delicate religious balance. Further, this large influx of refugees has contributed to deteriorating economic conditions. The current national unemployment rate is 46%, and the school system is overwhelmed. Arab nations infuse capital to selectively support the Muslim population, but no such assistance is available to the Christians. This places further strain on the local Christian population. With other Middle Eastern Christian communities, such as those in Syria and Iraq, facing extinction, the loss of a Christian presence in Lebanon would have devastating geopolitical consequences for the U.S. and the world. Previous strategies to counter Islamic ultra-fundamentalism have focused on military, economic and political solutions,

but our proposal offers a religious solution through preservation and expansion of Christian communities.

- b. **Idea:** Our organization proposes partnerships to bolster the local and refugee Christian populations in Lebanon to defend the Christian presence in the region. This directly addresses President Trump's priorities of promoting religious freedom and countering terrorism. The problem of Islamic extremism is fundamentally a religious one, so we strategize a religious solution. As stated above, Christianity in the Middle East has had a moderating impact. Therefore, expanding the influence of Christianity would have a stabilizing effect. Because Christianity is a religion that teaches tolerance, peace and inclusivity, it would promote religious freedom. Through evangelization, the message of respect for human life would counter the pervasive message of hate. Lebanon has historically served as proof of this concept. Also, Christianity has a global presence, so our strategy is scalable to other regions of the world. Specifically, our plan focuses on providing support to particular local municipalities in Lebanon. Religious groups are distributed regionally within the country, so the municipalities are best able to address the needs of the population and also serve as a vehicle by which more targeted assistance could be provided to those underserved Christian communities. However, our plan is non-discriminatory as all residents in the municipalities would benefit. We envision partnerships that encourage direct collaboration between U.S. and Lebanese municipalities, support education, and stimulate economic development. The result will be a strengthening of the Christian presence in Lebanon to serve as a nidus for the expansion of a moderating force in the Middle East.
- c. **Resource Requirements:** Our organization has an existing structure of governance with financial and legal accountability safeguards in place, both in the U.S. and Lebanon. Our workforce is primarily comprised of volunteers passionate about the cause of religious freedom. Therefore, the feasibility of our proposal is excellent, provided proper mentorship and collaboration from stakeholders. We estimate an operating budget of \$650,000 and have a number of fundraising campaigns in place. This estimate is extrapolated from our previously successful educational and awareness projects. We also anticipate requiring specialized accounting and legal support given the international reach of the proposed project.
- d. **Best Potential Partners:** To encourage collaboration between U.S. and Lebanese municipalities, we propose partnering with an organization such as Sister Cities International to learn how best to develop relationships between municipalities. We envision U.S. city mayors offering mentorship in such areas as attracting investment, fostering a business-friendly climate, and support for education. In exchange, the Lebanese city mayors can offer strategies for improving pluralism in a multi-religious society and enhancing local security in this era of extremist threats. Further, these collaborations have the potential to facilitate cooperation from local U.S. religious organizations to provide support for faith-based education in Lebanon, thus ensuring the preservation of values consistent with those of the U.S. To promote economic development in Lebanese Christian communities, we also propose partnering with business organizations to encourage investment. As previously discussed, Lebanon currently suffers from high unemployment, and this disproportionately affects

recent university graduates, many of whom are trained in STEM fields and in business and finance. Therefore, there is an untapped educated labor force that could attract U.S. business interests. Finally, we propose partnering with finance experts to strategize development of microfinance programs to encourage entrepreneurial opportunities in Lebanon. Entrepreneurial pursuits are culturally valued in Lebanon, and the local communities need only access to resources. Additionally, available research suggests that even the refugee population is a viable credit market.

- e. **Ideal End State:** Success for this project is defined as the establishment of initial relationships between a limited group of municipalities in the U.S. and Lebanon, the identification of mentors from the U.S. business community to propose strategies for attracting investment to targeted municipalities in Lebanon and the development of a framework for a microfinance program. The potential impact of this program is substantial as a model strategy for improving stability in the Middle East. The innovation potential is high as it represents a unique approach to combating extremism.