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## **DIIS Brief**

# **Social welfare activism in Jordan: democratisation in disguise?**

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### **Abstract:**

Many Jordanians perceive formal politics in Jordan as illegitimate, corrupt and authoritarian. Thus, when searching for agents of change and reform, we have to look beyond the formal political system. In this regard, recent years have seen an increasing interest in civil society. However, this interest tends to focus on secular organisations and institutions, overlooking religious ones, although these make up a large part of Jordanian civil society. Particularly interesting are the country's many Muslim social welfare organisations, engaged in activities such as education, health care and financial assistance to the poor. This brief asks whether these organisations can be considered potential agents of democratic change or rather as preservers of the status quo. Moreover, do they employ Islam as a means of control or empowerment? Attempting to answer these questions, the brief discusses the organisations' positions on a number of concepts often associated with "democratisation", namely women's rights, participation and pluralism, paying particular attention to the role of Islam.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Many Jordanians view their formal political system as corrupt, illegitimate and authoritarian. They have no confidence that official politics could provide any solutions to the country's problems. When searching for agents of social change and reform in Jordan, we therefore have to look beyond the sphere of directly visible and formal political action. Recent years have seen an increased interest in civil society and the actors inhibiting it, often promoted by Western scholars, policy-makers and practitioners as the true agents of democratisation. However, research on the topic as well as concrete democratisation initiatives tend to focus primarily on secular organisations such as human rights institutions, advocacy organisations and development NGOs, and leave out religiously oriented organisations, often based on preconceived assumptions of religion as inherently undemocratic and conservative. But human rights institutions, advocacy organisations and development NGOs are not the only relevant actors in Jordanian civil society. In fact, they might not even be the most important ones. They are small in number, and while some of them may have strong connections with Western donors, among Jordanians they are often seen as elitist and hence enjoy little support.

Potential agents of change may instead be found among other sectors of civil society. Particularly interesting in this respect are the country's more than 800 social welfare organisations, which are engaged in activities such as education, health care and cash and in-kind assistance to orphans, the sick and poor families. They constitute the largest group of organisations in Jordanian civil society and embrace hundreds of thousands of people, whether as employees, volunteers or beneficiaries. Unlike many of the organisations supported by Western scholars and policy-makers, the majority of these organisations are explicitly religious, albeit to different degrees. In some organisations, Islam permeates everything that is said and done; in others, it is merely something that pops up once in a while. Common to all, however, is the fact that religion functions as an important inspirational and motivational factor.

At first sight, these social welfare organisations seem to epitomize the depoliticised character of Jordanian civil society. According to the law, no civil society organisation is allowed to engage in "fulfilling any political objectives", and those doing so risk severe retaliation. Most social welfare organisations therefore steer clear of explicitly political activities. Yet it could

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<sup>1</sup> This brief is part of a one-year research project on Islam and civil society organisations in Jordan and Egypt, carried out in cooperation with Sara Lei Sparre. The analysis is based on three months of field work in Jordan, including interviews with representatives from civil society organisations, government institutions, universities and newspapers. The project has also produced the DIIS report *Islam and Civil Society: Case Studies from Jordan and Egypt*, available at [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk).

be argued that, despite their apparent apolitical nature, these organisations are in fact highly political. They provide a space for activism and participation, thereby perhaps facilitating change and reform, albeit at other levels and in other ways than the formal political system.

Against this background, this brief asks whether Muslim social welfare organisations should be considered agents of democratic change or preservers of the status quo. Moreover, do they employ Islam as a means of control or empowerment? Attempting to answer these questions, the brief discusses the organisations' positions on a number of concepts often associated with "democratisation", namely women's rights, participation and pluralism, paying particular attention to the role of Islam in this.

### **The role of women in Muslim organisations: empowerment or subordination?**

Female subordination and gender discrimination are often presented as practices inherent to Islam, and many people in the West expect Muslims to be, if not against women's rights, then at least highly critical of them. As a consequence, it is often taken for granted that the battle for gender equality must be fought by the secular women's movement, not by Muslim organisations. However, observation of a number of Muslim social welfare organisations showed a large number of women taking part in these organisations. At least on the surface, this contests the idea of the passive and oppressed Muslim woman. Do these women, through their participation, translate the language of women's rights into a Muslim vocabulary?

Many members of the Jordanian welfare organisations I visited were aware of common prejudices concerning women and Islam. They were very eager to challenge them, explaining to me that Islam and women's rights are not necessarily at odds with each other. Instead, women's rights can be seen as an inherent part of Islam. But practices do not always accord with these discourses. First of all, very few board members and almost no directors are women, and many organisations have a policy of only hiring women who wear headscarves. Also, many of the activities offered in the organisations sustain rather than challenge traditional gender roles. Vocational training focuses on flower arrangements, basket-making and cooking, and lectures address topics such as motherhood, good kitchen hygiene and marriage. Finally, many people's personal opinions conflicted with the overall discourses of women's rights. For instance, while continuously emphasising the rights of women, the (female) director of one organisation said that women's participation as volunteers ought to depend on the support of their husbands.

That said, even the most conservative organisations seem to agree that education is an indisputable right for all girls and women, and an important part of Islam. Many staff members openly criticise Muslims who do not support this, such as certain Salafi groups. Likewise, they constantly challenge those among their beneficiaries who oppose girls' education, often the fathers and uncles, by trying to convince them to let the girls study. A small group of organisations – many of them women's associations – go even further, promoting women's economic and personal independence. In one organisation, female teachers and beneficiaries are engaged in a programme entitled "Women Can", which explicitly teaches women that they can do anything men can do. Another organisation offers health information and vocational training to prostitutes. One of the women, now working as a counsellor to other prostitutes, told me that she was lost before she started participating in the organisation's activities. Now she knows her rights, and she knows what she is capable of. This kind of empowerment is exactly what the director is hoping for. She told me that people often ask her why she does not try to get the girls married off instead of going through all this trouble teaching them to work. But she does not want them to be dependant on a man. She wants them to be independent and self-sufficient. In their promotion of this image of the strong woman, the women in the organisations insist on the relevance of Islam, claiming that Islam is what gives them their power. As one participant puts it: "The religious women that I know say that religion gives them more power, their mind becomes more open, they become more effective".

In sum, while the majority of social welfare organisations promote very traditional gender roles, some do in fact present a new ideal of a strong, active and independent Muslim woman, aware of her own rights. Thereby they challenge prevailing Muslim views of women, as well as Western, predominantly secularist, ideas of a universally valid definition of women's rights.

### **Participation: a good Muslim is an active Muslim**

Traditionally, Jordanian civil society organisations, be they religious or not, have been characterised by hierarchical structures and authoritarian leadership. Do Muslim social welfare organisations reflect this tradition, or are they sites for democratic processes and contested decision-making? Also, does religion facilitate and motivate participatory practices, or does it work as a means of control and reinforcement of authoritarian hierarchies?

It is clear that many Muslim social welfare organisations are structured around rather authoritarian leaders, leaving few possibilities for active involvement and influence by staff and beneficiaries. However, the emergence of an educated middle class has led to more

participatory organisational structures and practices in many civil society organisations. This applies to the Muslim social welfare organisations as well. In particular, the new youth organisations, inspired by the popular Egyptian lay preacher Amr Khaled, are driven by a participatory approach, emphasising discussion and problem-solving as important aspects of the organisations' work. Apart from their involvement in social welfare activities, the young people make an effort to train each other in competences such as public speaking, leadership skills and communication, thereby encouraging active participation. Yet some of the more conservative organisations also offer their staff courses in such participatory practices and skills, empowering them to become more actively involved in the organisation. Many people pointed to their religion as the main reason for their participation. Islam is not about just sitting at home doing nothing, they said. A good Muslim is someone who is engaged in society and tries to achieve something. Furthermore, and on a more practical level, in conservative settings, Islam often becomes a useful tool for women to convince sceptical parents and husbands of the legitimacy of their participation.

Although many organisations make a conscious effort to promote participation among their staff, only a few extend this to their beneficiaries. None of them has any mechanism for the inclusion of beneficiaries in decision-making processes. However, many promote active participation as an important aspect of their educational activities. An example is the Islamic Center Charity Society, which is the charitable wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and one of Jordan's largest organisations. One of their programmes aims at teaching girls to gather information, make plans and solve problems. Another focuses on teaching children how to set goals and to be ambitious. The classes comprise teamwork, discussions and individual assignments, all of which are designed to strengthen skills in argumentation, critical thinking and problem-solving techniques. Furthermore, an increasing number of organisations have introduced microfinance loans and vocational training, reflecting a move from a view of beneficiaries as the passive recipients of aid to an emphasis on empowerment and participation. Staff members often referred to Islam in justifying this change. Many told me the story about the Prophet Muhammad, who instead of money gave a poor man an axe and told him to go and cut wood to sell at the market, the point being that it is better to teach people to become active and independent participants in society than to keep them in a position as passive recipients of charity.

In sum, although many Muslim organisations may be characterised by authoritarian leadership and hierarchical structures, some of them do undoubtedly create sites for genuine democratic participation, and they foster valuable participatory practices and skills, often inspired and motivated by Islamic values.

### **Pluralism, tolerance and inclusion**

Pluralism, tolerance and inclusion are indispensable features of democratic societies. From this perspective, religious organisations are often perceived to be anything but pluralist, including only like-minded actors and excluding those with other views, convictions or beliefs than their own. Do Muslim social welfare organisations fit this stereotype? Do they only address partners, staff and beneficiaries with the same religious beliefs as themselves? Or are they open to the inclusion of non-Muslims?

A small group of liberal Muslim organisations, such as the new youth organisations, explicitly promotes diversity. Among their employees and volunteers are not only very conservative and very liberal Muslims, but also Christians and non-religious people. In more conservative organisations, volunteers and employees are most often practising Muslims; all women wear headscarves, a few wear face veils, and the men usually have beards. However, only a few directors openly stated that they prefer to hire practising Muslims. When it comes to their beneficiaries, all organisations – be they liberal or conservative – reflect very pluralist attitudes, at least in theory. They all strongly emphasise that they include both Muslims and non-Muslims in their work. Likewise, they claim not to carry out missionary activities. However, some scholars assert that there are organisations that make their assistance conditional on the beneficiaries' religiosity, withholding financial aid if they do not show up for religious lessons or if female beneficiaries refuse to wear headscarves. This assertion is supported by a staff member of one organisation, who told me that, since the director does not want to give money to people who do not wear headscarves, they all do so.

In contrast to this ambiguous picture regarding beneficiaries and members, in the selection of their cooperation partners all Muslim social welfare organisations show a high degree of inclusion. Even the most conservative organisations seem to be open to cooperation with Christian, secular, and Western organisations. One example is the ten-year cooperation between UNICEF and a number of Muslim organisations, aimed at developing a model for community empowerment. According to all parties, this cooperation was extremely instructive. A representative from the Islamic Center Charity Society explained to me that people in his organisation used to refuse working or even meeting with unveiled women, but their cooperation with UNICEF had made them rethink this attitude. Today, the Islamic Center Charity Society cooperates with both secular and Christian organisations. While there is still a relatively large proportion of the Muslim organisations that do not cooperate with secular and Christian organisations, this seems to be due to practical obstacles and a lack of connections rather than religiously motivated aversion. When asked, many emphasised their

willingness to work with all kinds of organisations should the possibility arise. Some explicitly explained this attitude as a natural consequence of their religiosity. Just as the Prophet Muhammad and his followers cooperated with and learned from other peoples and religions, so should Muslim organisations cooperate with and learn from other organisations. In sum, the exclusivist tendency to include only Muslims as staff and beneficiaries in the organisations is therefore contrasted by openness with regard to potential partner organisations.

## **Conclusion**

Many people in Jordan have no trust in the formal political system and they do not see it as a relevant tool for change. Potential agents of democratic change must therefore be found outside this system, for instance among the large group of religious organisations engaged in social welfare activities. This brief examined some of these organisations, asking whether they may in fact promote processes of democratisation and what role their religiosity plays in this. A number of conclusions may be drawn from this analysis.

First of all, there is no doubt that many Muslim social welfare organisations in Jordan are traditionalist and perhaps even reactionary. They preserve authoritarian structures, maintain discriminatory gender roles and follow exclusivist practices, often justifying these with reference to Islam. As such, they create little if any space for genuine participation and social engagement. However, a few organisations demonstrate qualitatively new discourses and practices. Among these are certain women's associations, the new youth organisations and certain factions within the Islamic Centre Charity Society. They present an ideal of a strong and independent Muslim woman. They promote democratic practices and the skills necessary to participate in democracy. And they are tolerant of different views, convictions and beliefs than their own. In introducing new pluralistic practices and discourses such as these, some Muslim social welfare organisations contribute to processes of democratisation, albeit for a Western observer in rather unfamiliar ways. They are not renouncing their own religiosity by turning towards secular conceptions of democracy. Instead, they are reinterpreting their own Islamic values, as well as the concepts of women's rights, participation and pluralism. As such, they are simultaneously reforming notions of democracy and their religion.

Secondly, the analysis of the Muslim social welfare organisations tells us something about religiosity at a more general level. There is no evidence to suggest that the religiosity of the Muslim social welfare organisations as such can be characterised in simple terms as having either a positive or a negative influence on processes of democratisation. In some

organisations, Islam is used as a tool for control and reinforcement of hierarchies; in others it facilitates empowerment and democratic participation. Thus, religion sometimes exerts a negative influence, and sometimes a positive influence on processes of democratisation. In other words, religiosity is an ambiguous characteristic, and it makes little, if any, sense to categorise civil society organisations based on preconceived assumptions of the significance of their religiosity. Instead, we have to ask in what ways they are religious, thereby opening up for a more nuanced understanding of religious actors.

Thirdly, and on a more concrete level, such openings might lead to new partnerships between Muslim social welfare organisations and Western policy makers and practitioners. In their attempts to promote and support processes of democratisation in the Middle East, many focus almost exclusively on secular human rights institutions, advocacy organisations and development NGOs. However, when searching for agents of democratic change, Muslim social welfare organisations cannot be overlooked. As has been demonstrated in the above, some of them are obvious candidates for cooperation – not because they are religious, but because they are religious in ways that allow for and perhaps even encourage processes of democratisation.

### **Further reading**

Clark, Janine (2004). *Islam, Charity and Activism. Middle Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Harmsen, Egbert (forthcoming). *Islam, Civil Society and Social Work. Muslim Voluntary Welfare Associations in Jordan between Patronage and Empowerment*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

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Wiktorowicz, Quintan (2001). *The Management of Islamic Activism. Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan*, State University of New York Press, Albany.