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# Religious Welfare Organizations, Citizenship, and the State in Lebanon

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**Abstract:**
Religious welfare organizations (RWOs) are considered the leading providers of services in Lebanon, with annual budgets exceeding those of state service ministries. While the religious nature of Lebanese society contributes to one part of the story, other political factors have led to these organizations' emergence: political motivations heavily influence RWOs' development. Thus, the conceptual framework that analyzes RWOs as providing services solely based on religious obligations does not provide a full analysis of their dynamics and importance. Based on interviews conducted in the field, this paper argues that the historical composition of the state, the state's paralysis during the civil war, and its present weakness have led to the growth of these organizations. Also, the locally-adapted and decentralized structure of RWOs has contributed to their development into organizations that have grown more powerful than the state.

**Keywords:** civil society, Lebanon, service provision

## 1    Introduction

Civil society in Lebanon hosts the highest number of active multi-faith non-state organizations in the Arab Middle East. Lebanese religious philanthropy dates to the Ottoman Empire, surviving the formation of the modern state of Lebanon. Religious welfare organizations (RWOS) in Lebanon are the leading providers of the social and humanitarian services that are typically government-provided. The annual budgets of several of these organizations exceed those of state ministries.

Since the Lebanese state does not provide minimum social services for its citizens, civil society associations are stepping in to provide community services and regularly using their public influence for political aims. Harsh economic conditions in Lebanon have enhanced the role of welfare organizations. In addition to the destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure, the reconstruction process has cost the state over $40 billion, putting the country in debt. As a result, the gap between the rich and the poor has undermined the role of the middle class in Lebanon leading to the emigration of most of the younger generation in search of better employment opportunities. Since the early 1990s, the Lebanese government has exerted continuous efforts to improve social indicators through promoting social development; however, little improvement has been made. The latest poverty study conducted in 2008 showed that a minimum of eight percent of the Lebanese population lives under conditions of extreme poverty; moreover, the state is currently passing through an economic crisis that is leading to an increase in the poverty rate.

Furthermore, 28.5% of the population, or around one million citizens, live below the poverty line (Abu Ismail, Laithy, and Hamdan 2008). The economic downturn, in addition to the civil war and the Syrian refugee crisis, has affected the development of religious organizations in Lebanon and their relationship with the state. RWOs have become dominant as a result of Lebanon's unique political system, the sectarian civil war, and the 2006 war, in addition to other political events in the state and the region.

To better understand the role of religious welfare organizations in Lebanon, this paper will attempt to answer the following questions: what is the role of religious welfare organizations in Lebanon? In what ways does Lebanon's political and social environment affect the role and the nature of those organizations?

The argument this paper presents is that the political system of the state paralleled with the locally adapted and the decentralized structure of RWOs in Lebanon have contributed to the development of these organizations; these latter in return have grown more powerful than the state.

To better understand the role of RWOs in Lebanon we should place them within an analytical framework: Part I will introduce this framework through analyzing (a) civil society in the Arab and Lebanese context; (b) the difference between "religion" and "faith" in Lebanon and confessionalism in the Lebanese context; and (c)

understanding of the concept of citizenship. Part II will analyze associations' historical development against the backdrop of Lebanon's political system and its links to society sectarianism; Part III will present the methodology for this study; Part IV will present the study's findings; Part V will discuss and analyze the findings, and Part VI will conclude and present recommendations for future research.

## 2 Part I. Civil Society in Lebanon: Conceptual Framework

In Lebanon, there is debate over the number of organizations functioning in the state, which is mainly due to the absence of a clear definition of organizations in Lebanon (Haddad 2017). An "association," for example, can refer to a religious organization, cooperative, trade union, advocacy agency, or a volunteer organization (Haddad 2017; Bennett 1995). Confusion over the number of functioning organizations is also due to the state's laissez-faire policy vis-à-vis organizations, in addition to the political and social environment in which these associations function.

In response to this lack of data on civil society organizations in Lebanon, their number, and role, this study adopted an exploratory approach. To this end, this research is not based on a theoretical perspective, nor did it develop a specific hypothesis. In this regard, this research brought together three different streams of literature. The first covers the definitions and understanding of the term "civil society" in the Arab and Lebanese contexts; in the second, the research covers the difference between religion and faith in Lebanon and analyzes confessionalism in the Lebanese system; the third covers the concept of citizenship in the Lebanese context.

### 2.1 Civil Society in the Arab World and Lebanese Context

Researchers have proposed several definitions for "civil society" in the Arab world; however, most are based on Western concepts used outside of Arab society (Haddad 2014). To better understand "civil society" in the Arab context, we should go back to the term's origins in Arabic. Three terms define "civil society" in Arabic: (1) *Al mujtama' Ahli (Ahli* referring to "family"); (2) *mujtama' Madani (Madani* meaning "civil"); and (3) *mujtama Taefi* ("religious society"). The main difference between these three has to do with affiliation to these societies: *Al mujtama' Ahli* translates to "kinship," referring to family and tribal affiliations; al *mujtama' Madani* societies stress affiliation to a single civil community; in al *mujtama taefi*, or a "religious society," affiliation is mainly based on religious grounds.

Another distinction can be found in terms of membership. In *al mujtama' Madani* associations, membership is secondary and not related to family ties or location (such as a member's village). Membership is also voluntary and relies on belief in the cause and mission of the organization (Haddad 2014); a mission will target the whole society rather than a specific group. Alternatively, membership to *al mujtama' ahli* associations is not by choice but by birth; these societies usually have diversified activities and focus on one community only but may include different individuals from different sects and confessional belongings. As for the religious societies (al *mujtama taefi*), membership is mainly based on religious affiliation since religion defines these societies' identities, characteristics, core missions, and functions (Haddad 2014). These associations are usually affiliated with a religious body and have a mission statement that refers to religious values. Their financial support may also come from religious sources.

All three types of associations function in Lebanon. *mujtama Ahli* cooperates with the government and may include family and developmental associations; *mujtama Madani* works mainly on advocacy issues, and mujtama taefi constitute over 80% of associations in Lebanon (Haddad 2017; Karam 2006).

*Mujtama ahli* and *taefi* associations share many common traits in terms of their conditions for membership and the services they offer (Haddad 2014). Membership is based on *appartenance primaire*, i. e. involuntary pre-born membership determined by place in terms of birth, family and village. These associations' activities are usually directed toward the immediate community and vary between humanitarian, social, medical, and educational, based on the needs of the community. Services are provided from birth until death.

*Mujtama Madani* associations, on the other hand, are civic in nature. They emerged as part of an active civil society in Lebanon as a result of political and economic stagnation during wartime. Although state sectarianism weakens the role of civil society, *mujtama Madani* associations have successfully built credibility within the Lebanese community.

This discussion has reviewed the different types of associations that are functioning in the Lebanese context and analyzed the importance and role of each of these associations. This paper will mainly focus on religious (*taefi*) organizations and their relationship with the state.

## 2.2    Religion, Confessionalism, and Society in Lebanon

The second stream of literature analyzes the role of religion and religious belonging and the relationship to the political system in the state.

Previous research has estimated that religious organizations in Lebanon account for more than 80% of the local voluntary sector and are considered vital platforms for social and political expression (Jawad 2009; Esposito 2000). It could be argued that the development of religious philanthropy makes sense in Lebanon, given the religious nature of society that specifically requires a duty to help society.

The growth of religious welfare in Lebanon can be directly linked to the religious composition of society. Although the state has not released a popular census since 1932, it is commonly understood that an estimated 60% of the population is Muslim (mainly Sunni, Shia, and Druze), while Christians constitute 25%. Since Christianity and Islam are considered among the five religions in the world that focus on public social welfare and place particular emphasis on the importance of philanthropy and wide distribution of wealth, the emergence of faith-based organizations seems to have been a natural occurrence.

Islam, for example, prescribes three primary philanthropic practices (Haddad 2014). First, there is *zakat*, a religious obligation to pay alms tax at a minimum of 2.5% for all assets (Jawad 2009). The second practice is voluntary alms-giving or *saddaqah*. The third practice, *waqf*, is a religious endowment for public goods (Martin, Chau, and Paterl 2007). This practice appeared later during the Ottoman Empire and is common among both Muslims and Christians. As for Christian communities, it is also a collective religious obligation to help society. Philanthropy is a Christian responsibility and based on the commandments of the church, and individuals are expected to donate a tenth of their wealth to the poor. Given this, it could be argued that the development of religious associations in Lebanon is due directly to people's adherence to religious obligations.

However, a historical overview of the development of RWOs in Lebanon provides a different explanation for their creation, growth, and present importance. The role of religion in Lebanese society only contributes to one part of the story; political factors have also led to RWOs' emergence, and the political motive remains significant in their development. In addition, the theory that RWOs provide services solely due to religious obligations does not provide a complete analysis of these organizations' dynamics nor their influence.

### 2.2.1    Religion or Faith in Lebanon?

"As a Lebanese, your religion and sectarian belonging will decide the place you live, the media you follow, and the different occupation you will have. Furthermore, any link between you and the state should pass through your own community" (Khalaf 2010).

Religion, as opposed to faith, was the main component that created the first "cohesion" between different members of communities. Dynamics between communities in Lebanon have not historically been based on the "religious devotion of their members" but on strong particularism.

Abul-Husn describes Lebanese religious groups' cohesion and grouping as ordered around the concept of *asabiya*, defined as a strong bond between members of the same group. This bond is based on group solidarity and the commitment to support other members without questioning the reasons (Abul- Husn 1998). Thus, in Lebanon, different communities do not survive because of their diffusion of religious doctrine, but due to the emergence of the "confessional *asabiya*" (Salam 1994).

*Asabiya* is reflected in Lebanese sectarian division and group solidarity and is actively exhibited by group leaders. Leaders impose desired changes in the social structure of the state by linking them to the safeguarding of "society" or the "sect." Religious belonging is also manipulated by leaders when they assume extreme stances against other religious groups. If leaders or decision-makers realize that they are losing "claim on automatic group loyalty," they begin to underscore differences between groups in order to regain their groups' support, effectively removing opportunities for compromise or collaboration.

In this regard, in Lebanon, one should differentiate between "faith" and "religion." "Religion" is the primary identifier in Lebanese society. Jawad (2009) argues that while *iman* (or "faith") is considered the chief cornerstone of religion, it should be differentiated from *din* ("religion") in Lebanon: Faith is only one aspect of the sectarian identity of society while religion is what constitutes the social order. That is why, in order to highlight the religious factors and their political consequences, organizations established on sectarian identities are considered "religious welfare organizations" and not "faith-based organizations" in this article.

Every confessional group in Lebanon works toward protecting its interests over those of the society as a whole. Sectarian groups, each believing that it belongs to a different culture, stress their dissimilarities. Another major factor contributing to societal sectarianism is that social services are mainly provided by religious organizations. Religious identity in Lebanon is, therefore, crucial when analyzing the sociopolitical situation of

the state, especially given that RWOs are among the most efficient and active emergency relief providers during and after crises (Melki 2000; Harb EL Kak 1996; Nehme 1997).

### 2.2.2 Confessionalism in the Lebanese Context

The difficulty in differentiating between political, civil, and religious society in Lebanon is mainly due to the nature of the state's political system, i. e. the confessional politics that have reduced the gap between the private and the public sectors through the direct representation of confessions in the political system. This system has resulted in politics' reliance on both religious and sectarian realms. Confessionalism, which is a form of power-sharing in a democracy, is defined by Lijphart as a system governing elite bodies designed to stabilize a democracy with fragmented political cultures (Salamey and Payne 2008). It is a form of Consociationalism mainly characterized by four political tenets: (1) a grand coalition; (2) mutual veto power; (3) segmental autonomy; and (4) proportional representation (Lijphart 1977; Salamey and Payne 2008). Consociational democracies mostly exist in plural societies, particularly those that are deeply divided (Rigby 2000). They generally adhere to the ideology that political culture and social structure are empirically related to political stability – hence the need for adequate representation of different and divided communities (Lijphart 1977). Consociational societies are characterized by deeply religious, linguistic, regional, racial/ethnic, and ideological divides; since public loyalty is decided based on these splits, citizens may feel better represented by and affiliated with a particular group and estranged from a unified national identity. A political party in a confessional system would tend to have maximum cohesion under conditions where its electoral clientele is both a historically marginalized minority trying to reclaim its position in society or in a group but also large enough to elect representatives (Burnham 1972).

It is safe to say that Lebanon faces deep divides between religious sects. When the borders of the country were first drawn in 1920, Muslims became the new majority within the boundaries of a state which previously had a Christian majority (Rigby 2000). The first form of confessionalism in Lebanon was the "National Pact," whereby the Maronite President Beshara el Khoury and his Sunni Prime Minister Riad Al Sulh agreed to recognize the fundamental rights of different communities after independence in 1943. Seats in the Chamber of Deputies were distributed in proportion to community size, and the two main senior posts were occupied by a Maronite and a Sunni (Rigby 2000).

Lebanon's violent civil war (1975–1990) ended with the Taif Agreement, which continues to represent the confessional system of Lebanon today (Salamey and Payne 2008). There was a 50/50 division of all parliamentary seats as well as first and second-grade civil service jobs amongst Muslims and Christians. This political system was installed as a way to preserve national unity through the accommodation of religious belonging under the umbrella of political representation (Rigby 2000). This was also clearly reflected in society: different confessional groups developed their own welfare and education services, each catering to the needs of its own community (Jaulin 2014).

Today, the confessional system in Lebanon is generally blamed as the reason for weakness and fragmentation of the state (Salamey and Payne 2008).

## 2.3 Citizens or Members of a Community?

The third stream of literature discusses the understanding of citizenship in the Lebanese context.

Citizenship implies membership to a particular state and to a political community that is defined by duties, rights, and identity (Delanty, 1997). Citizenship has traditionally been closely correlated with nationality, which ideally defines the territorial limits of citizenship (Delanty, 1997). However, it is essential to understand that citizenship is not confined solely to a spatial domain of nationality but rather involves multiple layers operating on national, regional, and supranational levels (Leonard, 2007).

On the level of the citizen, citizenship is both a collective and individual identity. The concept of citizenship is discussed more actively in politically volatile societies, where the aim of citizenship and citizenship education is to transform "us versus them" narratives into collective narratives under the banner of national identity (Leonard, 2007). It is common for states in conflict to use notions of universal citizenship to downplay political tensions between various political or ethnic groups (Hussain and Bagguley, 2005).

The concept of "citizenship" in Lebanon has been transformed by communitarian loyalties. Since Lebanon's independence, small elite groups have taken over and fostered their specific clan-based regional forces (Destremau 2000). "The state is merely a political actor among many others, which appropriates for itself resources from the public domain" (Hannoyer 1994). Another obstacle that has allowed membership in one's sect or community to overshadow citizenship has been the "fusion of private and public interest in Lebanon" (Bonne

1995). With this, the distinction between personal life and civic relations has been blurred. The overlap between public and private realms has also facilitated the manifestation of a new structure: patronage and clientelism (Bonne 1995). In terms of their relationship to the state, Lebanese people define themselves both as citizens and members of a particular group simultaneously (Destremau 2000; Thompson 2000).

Citizenship in Lebanon is also threatened by religious identity. A citizen's religious identity is displayed on all official, government-issued identity documents and in personal status laws that govern, for example, marriage, divorce, inheritance, and children's custody. (Mikdashi, 2014). There are 15 personal status laws with their own courts reporting directly to the Council of Ministers. Without a unified civil personal law under which all Lebanese citizens have the same rights, the concept of citizenship is threatened.

Citizenship remains less significant than kinship-based ties, sectarianism, and patronage, and this has contributed to the rise of a political culture of social welfare that divides society more than unites it. With the historical absence of government, Lebanese communities have come to rely primarily on elite religious groups for social assistance, especially in rural areas and abandoned urban zones. These intermediaries have created informal networks and become "forged by relations of personal dependence, which operate on the basis of favors as opposed to rights" (Denoeux 1993; Bonne 1995). These networks have historically been the sole providers of many services, such as electricity, schools, hospitals, housing loans, and family allowances (Denoeux 1993; Harb EL Kak 1996). However, linking the relationship of assistance between political parties and different beneficiaries to electoral politics obscures a more significant relationship that has been built between patrons and their clients (Cammett 2010).

In summary of the preceding discussion, three different themes appear throughout the review of civil society in the Lebanese context and the literature on the relationship between religion and civil society in Lebanon. The first reviews the different types of civil society organizations that exist in Lebanon; the second discusses the importance of religion in the Lebanese context and its effects on the political system in Lebanon, and the third discusses the effect of religion and politics on the idea of citizenship in the Lebanese context.

## 3 Part II. Historical Development of Associations in Lebanon

To understand the role of religious organizations in Lebanon, we need to review the state's political system and the links between politics, sectarianism, and religion.

As argued in Part I, the democratic system governing Lebanon is consociational: it is a system based on power-sharing between different sectarian groups coexisting in one state. All governmental positions are divided between 18 officially recognized religious communities by the state. This consociational democracy was institutionalized in Lebanon by the "National Pact" following independence in 1943. Although the pact united confessional groups in one state, it also divided them by legitimizing sectarian identities. The system also reflected a more "constrained democracy," since citizens "by virtue of belonging to different religious communities enjoy[ed] unequal political rights" (Reinkowski and Saadeh 2007). Instead of adapting to the consociational system, the population adopted the idea of "cohabitation" whereby groups with varying cultures emphasized their differences over their similarities.

The pact has been challenged twice over the last 70 years: first in 1958, when a political crisis erupted in Lebanon due to religious and social tensions, and for a second time in 1975 with the start of the civil war. Over the course of the 15-year war, Lebanon's infrastructure was totally destroyed. The war ended with the signing of the National Reconciliation Accord, which revived the consociational democratic system while introducing reforms at the executive and legislative levels. This reinforced political confessionalism and further institutionalized it by dividing governmental positions along sectarian lines. Moreover, a system of Syrian tutelage was institutionalized. This tutelage lasted until 2005, coming to an end with the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic el Hariri. The July 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon also resulted in severe damage to private and public infrastructure and complete degradation of the economy. Another major event that affected Lebanese society was the Syrian refugee crisis, during which Lebanon became host to over 1 million refugees.

The historical development of associations in Lebanon has been directly affected by the development of the state. Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian (2019) have concluded that association development can be divided into six phases. During each of these phases, RWOs have played a significant role.

The first phase extends from pre-state creation to 1958. The presence of religious associations in Lebanon dates to the mid-nineteenth century (Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian 2019). During the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon witnessed the appearance of Christian missionaries who provided social assistance, healthcare, and established schools, after which Sunni communities established welfare institutions. Early associations in Beirut and Mount Lebanon were religious and confessional in nature and offered charitable services to their constituents (Barakat 1991; Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian 2019). Moreover, the presence of these associations was encouraged by for-

eign missionaries, such as the American Protestant missionaries, who established the Syrian Protestant College (Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian 2019), and the French Jesuits, who established Saint Joseph University in 1875 (The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies 1997). These religious institutions were directed toward providing charity, education, and healthcare. The first local, indigenous religious organizations were established between the 1900s and 1930s. These organizations were established by Christian families who migrated to the capital city, hoping to preserve their sectarian, local identities. During that period, ethnic Armenian refugees established organizations in reaction to the genocide. Moreover, during Beirut's modernization process, indigenous, minority communities (mainly Sunni, Greek Orthodox, and Druze families) established youth organizations to preserve their cultural identity. In 1909 the Ottoman Empire attempted to regulate the expanding role of associations and ward off threats to their imperial rule through the introduction of a liberal law that allowed associations to function while strictly monitoring their political activities. During this phase, religious institutions were formed, such as the Welfare Association by Greek Catholics in 1883 (Federation of Nongovernmental Organizations 1958, p. 16; Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian 2019) and the Makassed Philanthropic Islamic associations in 1878 founded by Sunni Muslims. By the early twentieth century, such associations continued to be established mainly by families migrating to Beirut. These families established sectarian associations; for example, the Armenian community created the Armenian General Benevolent Union in 1906. In 1943 with state independence, institutionalization, and unification, many associations emerged in efforts to maintain the ethnic and confessional identities of communities. In reaction to the process of urbanization and the emergence of new migrants in neighborhoods of Beirut, many Sunni families formed family associations (Johnsons 1997). Moreover, in the 1950s, Lebanon witnessed the rise of more Sunni associations by groups that felt threatened by the social and political developments leading to the 1958 turmoil and uprising in Lebanon.

The second phase in the historical development of Lebanese associations is characterized by reform and development under President Fouad Chebad and extends from 1958 to 1975. This phase is considered a Golden Age as a positive relationship and cooperation between associations and the state developed (Haddad 2017). However, it was during this phase that a third religious movement in Lebanon appeared. The Shiite movement led by Imam Moussa el Sadr considered itself politically and economically oppressed (Flanigan and Abdel-Samad 2009) and "understood the importance of social assistance as a means of amassing popular support" (Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian 2019). New organizations sprung up to provide social and educational assistance.

With the start of the civil war, the third phase in associations' development began. The war made conditions possible for associations to become major players in society and take on the state's role in providing welfare. With the start of the civil war, civil society organizations once again focused on providing relief and services to specific religious groups and families. The confessional division of the war led to the development of religious (mainly Islamic) organizations (Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian 2019). Cammett (2011) states that during the early 1980s, the Shiite community continued developing religious organizations, which provided essential programs and services to communities, including health care, education, garbage collection, and water provision. Other religious communities also developed their own associations. For example, the Druze Foundation was established to provide social and economic services for the Druze community (Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian 2019). During this period, family and neighborhood associations appeared once more, especially now that the country was divided again by confessional and *tribal appartenance.* Furthermore, many geo-sectarian organizations were established to fill the gap of the paralyzed, failed state.

For the third central religious community in Lebanon, the Shiite, the development of religious organizations was a more recent phenomenon. Starting in the 1980s, the Shia community started to develop political and religious organizations that became highly efficient in their programs. Although Christian institutions were established earlier, Muslim organizations were more public and better organized than their Christian counterparts. As religious associations began to fulfill the needs of communities in the total absence of the state, these services reinforced societal fragmentation. They also diminished the idea of citizenship (Haddad 2017) and assisted the development of political autonomies (Haddad 2017; Karam 2006); thus, religious associations became strong players "masking the role of the state" (Haddad 2017). The paralysis of the state also opened opportunities for various religious, political parties to win citizen support by providing absent services through their RWOs (Fawaz 2000). Between 1975 and 1991, a large number of political groups entered the lives of residents in the southern suburbs of Beirut (e. g. Amal Shiite Party, Progressive Socialist Druze Party) and provided services to communities at some point.

The fourth phase in the historical development of associations in Lebanon extends from 1990 until 2005. By the end of the war in 1990, religious and sectarian associations were the leading providers of state services. The development of these associations continued even after the end of the war (Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 1997). According to Bennett (1995, pp. 124–5), one of the five categories of associations that functioned in the state were politically influential, religious, charitable organizations that provided welfare and social services to members of their own communities. The second type of functional association was the confessional

organizations formed to serve communities through relief, medical, and educational assistance in addition to sheltering the displaced. It is important to note that in the post-war era, Muslim religious parties and organizations worked on maintaining and strengthening their welfare organizations while the Christian parties did not. Christian parties have not been as successful in establishing their own social and medical institutions, and their religious organizations are more fragmented (with the exception of the Catholic Schools' system). Islamic RWOs provide a multitude of services, including health care, education, drinking water provision, garbage collection, among others.

A turning point in Lebanon's history came in 2005 with the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, which sparked a popular uprising that led to the withdrawal of the Syrian Army. During that time, Lebanese society witnessed the development of associations that were of a *Madani* ("civic") nature. These associations can first be characterized by their activities and objectives. Activities extend to previously neglected areas, such as human rights issues, civil liberties and democracy, and ecological concerns. The importance of these associations is their focus on the post-war national construction of collective identity; they surfaced as an attempt to find new common ground and a political consensus to renew national, social ties. Furthermore, the relationship that was established between actors in Lebanese civil society and their international counterparts allowed for the transfer of technology and "know-how" in various fields (Karam 2000).

The second characteristic that sets these new associations apart is organizational. Instead of a typical vertical, hierarchical structure, these associations adopt a more flexible horizontal structure. Compared to other associations that are focused on socioeconomic development, these new associations seem to operate on significantly smaller budgets (an average of $20 thousand annually as compared to more than $10 million for major developmental NGOs). Since they work ad hoc, these associations are able to minimize their number of employees (limited to the management of the secretariat). They rely on volunteers specialized in specific areas. This type of internal organization and management structure has strengthened these associations' positions vis-à-vis donors and public institutions (such as ministries).

Third, these civic associations can be distinguished from others by their activists and members, the majority of whom are between the ages of 22 and 40. Karam (2000) argues that most members of this group are middle class. There are a large number of university students and liberal professionals (e. g. lawyers, engineers, journalists) (Karam 2000).

The novelty of this type of association lies in the fact that its internal horizontal structure supports non-violent activism and calls for change.

These organizations can also be characterized by their trans-regional and cross-community memberships and support for non-confessional and non-ideological causes. Although there are still very few, these new types of associations are capable of affecting the wider Lebanese public sphere through, and potentially catalyzing, a broader social movement. However, they currently face many obstacles in fulfilling their objectives, which are mainly the limitations of state laws and the state's political system.

Lastly, Israel's war on Lebanon in 2006 and the Syrian refugee crisis have led to the beginning of a new phase in the historical development of Lebanon's associations characterized by the renewed strengthening of Lebanese religious organizations. During the 2006 war, RWOs again stepped in to provide necessary services and were able to gain even more influence than the political parties (Shalaby et al. 2010). By the end of the conflict, cleavages between different political parties and their supporters had been made more profound, leading the state to neglect social reform and allowing confessional leaders to provide services to their constituents once again in return for political support (Haddad, Haase, and Ajamian 2019).

## 4   Part III. Method

To comprehensively answer this paper's primary research question, this study utilized a two-part methodology. First, content analysis was carried out through a review of Western and non-Western literature on civil society generally, public policy lobbying, civil society in fragmented societies, and civil society in the Arab world. The choice to survey such extensive literature was made mainly in order to deepen the analysis and to investigate whether new definitions of civil society could be applied to Lebanese and Middle Eastern contexts.

Secondly, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were thematically analyzed in order to reveal patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). Empirical research was qualitative, based on Interviews with scholars and professors on the subject of civil society activists as well as managers and staff in RWOs. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of 12 questions, all of which revolved around the role of religious welfare organizations in Lebanon and encouraged interviewees to provide in-depth information on this topic. Overall, 15 interviews were conducted (5 with RWOs managers in Beirut and South of Lebanon; 6 with scholars

and 4 with civil society activists). We stopped at number 15 because we felt that most of the information was being repeated and we were getting the same answers.

## 4.1 Data Analysis

The first step in the analysis was to examine how participants defined RWOs, their mission and responsibilities; their strengths and weaknesses; and their role in the society. After the data was analyzed, the findings were compared to primary and secondary data for additional insights.

## 4.2 Ethical Considerations

The interview questions did not cause any physical, emotional, or psychological harm. The participants were informed about how they were contributing to the study, that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that they had the right to discontinue participation at any stage. All subjects gave their verbal consent to be interviewed.

## 4.3 Limitation of Empirical Research

We encountered many obstacles while conducting empirical research. In order to contact potential interviewees, we sent individual request emails to the organizations in Lebanon that cooperate with the government. However, many of the emails bounced or email addresses were no longer in use; in addition, most organizations we did manage to contact refused to cooperate. Thus, our first limitation was the refusal of many organizations to cooperate and grant appointments. In response, we began to visit organizations without giving prior notice, requesting to visit the premises and talk to staff and beneficiaries.

# 5 Part IV. Findings

Interviews conducted provided insight concerning the role of religious welfare associations in Lebanon. Based on the coding system, four different themes were identified: (A) development of these associations; (B) evolution of the activities provided by these associations; (C) relationship with the government; and (D) advantages and disadvantages of such organizations in the Lebanese society.

## 5.1 Development of RWOs in Lebanon

National data regarding the size and composition of Lebanese civil society are unavailable; however, based on the interviews conducted, interviewees agreed that most of these organizations are directed toward the health and education sectors.

It was also evident from the interviews that the role of RWOs expanded due to three main reasons: (a) Pre-state Creation and the Ottoman Empire; (b)the Laissez-Faire Economy and Liberal Law of Associations and (c)the Political system in addition to the Civil war.

### 5.1.1 Pre-state Creation and the Ottoman Empire

Lebanon's central geographical location has provided a haven for various religious groups and minorities from neighboring regions of the Middle East. As is evident from the interviews, religious belonging has shaped most civil society organizations: families formed religious welfare organizations initially to serve their own communities.

> *We can say that the religious institutions have pre-dated the existence of the Lebanese state, and thus they are older and closer to the people than the state itself. (Interviewee 2, RWO Manager South of Lebanon)*

### 5.1.2 Laissez-Faire Economy and the Liberal Law of Associations

RWOs have also developed due to the lack of regulation of organizations' activities. Interviewees linked the growth of these organizations to the Lebanese Association's Law: these Associations are still governed by the 1909 Law of Associations introduced by the Ottoman Empire. This law is liberal because associations do not have to apply for a license upon formation; they must simply notify the government of their existence. Moreover, the law does not include any restrictions when it comes to association governance: associations are not required to demonstrate transparency or take accountability measures.

> *When established, the state recognized the autonomy of religious institutions and the freedom to create religious associations that cover every aspect of life, notably education. Their presence and activity are guaranteed by law. (Interviewee 4, RWO manager South of Lebanon)*

This, in turn, creates a flexible environment wherein religious welfare organizations function autonomously from the government.

### 5.1.3 Lebanese Political System and Confessionalism

As stated by one of the interviewees, in Lebanon, one cannot draw a distinction between political, religious, and civic life (Interviewee 7, 2015 Scholar). The consociational democracy that emerged in 1943 was based on the sharing of power in governmental and public institutions among various religious communities in the state. The state of affairs in Lebanon led citizens to interact with the state solely through their own confessional and family organizations. Confessional groups in Lebanon continuously seek opportunities to strengthen their share of power in the government in order to help their interests at the expense of others.

> *The growth of this sector then is not based on encouragement from the government but on the state's inability to exercise any authority over confessional groups' activities. (Interviewee 6, 2015 Scholar).*

## 5.2 The Second Theme that Was Identified during the Interviews Was the Evolution and Development of the Services Provided by RWOs

Based on the interviews, it was evident that services provided by these associations have evolved from a voluntary, charity-based activity into professional networks of influential organizations; this development was mainly linked to two issues: civil war in Lebanon and weaknesses of the state.

### 5.2.1 Urgent Social and Humanitarian Need during the War

All interviewees agreed that most RWOs had initiated their activity to respond to urgent social and humanitarian situations, especially during the war period; then, at a later stage, they started to form social and education units and engaged in longer-term developmental activities.

> *we initiated our services in response to the needs of the society. (Interviewee 1, RWO manager Beirut)*

> *Prior to and during the war, the Lebanese government failed to provide any services to the most deprived rural areas in the country and did not initiate public projects in the suburbs of the capital. Due to the failure of the state and unequal regional development policies, many suburban areas, which became refuges for rural migrants, were neglected. (Interviewee 5, RWO manager Beirut)*

> *During the war, we had to start somewhere; we started providing services on an individual basis, which then institutionalized. (Interviewee 2, RWO manager South of Lebanon)*

> *our work mainly started in response to the absence of the state during the civil war. (Interviewee 4, RWO manager South of Lebanon)*

### 5.2.2 Filling the Gap Left by the State and the Economic Situation

In the absence of public welfare, these religious organizations stepped in to provide essential services to citizens. Parallel to many organizations that were formed to directly fill the gap left by the state during the civil war,

RWOs were formed to respond to dire economic conditions. As per one of the interviewees who is a civil society activist, many individual philanthropists took advantage of economic and social circumstances to develop their own organizations, which offered the best services to their constituents. (interviewee 11, 2015 Civil Society Activist)

*The environment of Lebanon definitely affects the role of religious associations. Notably the fact that the inability of the Lebanese state to deliver services for many reasons and over many years made these associations play the role that should theoretically be played by government institutions, including education healthcare development social support network and other roles.* (interviewee 11, 2015 Civil Society Activist)

*due to the weak governmental programs and un-professionalism of the state, these associations are able to outreach the basic needs in most areas.* (Interviewee 7, 2015 Scholar).

### 5.3    Power and Influence of These Organizations

When asked about the source of the power of these associations, interviewees identified two reasons:

**a.** RWOs' close relationship with funding agencies, such as international NGOs and other donors. These Organizations are enhancing their services through financial assistance from international organizations and state agencies.

*At the same time, these associations received many foreign funds since the external donors trust them more than they trust the state or simply because the funders can identify with the mission of the associations. (Interviewee 12, 2015 Civil Society Activist)*

**b.** Another source of power is RWOs' closeness to political decision-making authorities. As identified in the interviews, governmental authorities' personal values and close relations with RWOs specifically are contributing to these organizations' increased influence.

*Besides that, politicians also work on registering and give some priority rights for specific religious associations at the expense of others (religious associations from the same religion). Even in terms of submitting papers and signing contracts', it is much easier for religious associations than non-religious.* (Interviewee 8, 2015 Scholar).

*Each religious group has its own social and health associations regardless of the governmental institutions; however, most of these also are indirectly financed by governmental programs due to political and politicians' interference and favoritism. In confusion due to political nepotism the politicians pushed toward governmental funding of religious associations in place of creating a governmental social program.* (Interviewee 9, 2015 Scholar).

### 5.4    Relationship with the Government and Ministries

It was evident from the interviews that RWOs often facilitate the work of various ministries by providing financial support. Without the assistance of local contributors, especially from religious welfare associations, the ministries' centers would not be able to operate due to ministries' meager allotted funds. The Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), for example, relies on local contributions because it lacks the necessary budget to support its various centers throughout the country which cater to the needs of different communities. Furthermore, MoSA utilizes its partnerships with RWOs to gain access to different areas in Lebanon (Interviewee 10, 2015 Scholar). In short, roles are reversed in these cases: the government relies on these organizations for assistance rather than the other way around. Additionally, it is essential to note that most of the interviewees stressed that in many cases, RWOs' budgets equal or exceed the total budgets of various state ministries.

In other cases, it is the other way around: many RWOs are relying heavily on the funding that different ministries provide.

*Most of the religious welfare associations are highly dependent on and financially linked to the Lebanese state. Most of these associations have already cooperation contracts with MOSA. The ministry, through these contracts, is refunding the organizations in return for their delivered services.* (Interviewee 7, 2015 Scholar).

## 5.5    Impact of These Organizations

As revealed in the interviews, RWOs are having both positive and negative impacts on their communities:

**a.** RWOs' are having a positive economic influence on the communities they are serving and on the Lebanese society in general. Prior to and during the war, the Lebanese government failed to provide any services to the most impoverished rural areas in the country and did not initiate public projects in the suburbs of the capital. Due to the freezing of the state and unequal regional development policies, many suburban areas, which had become refuges for rural migrants, were neglected; here, RWOs stepped in to develop rural areas and play a decisive role in the economy of these areas.

> *they created job opportunities in most urban and rural areas and played a major role in the microeconomic development of rural areas. (Interviewee 13, 2015 Civil Society Activist)*

> *the economic projects that sustained the agricultural and industrial sectors also played a positive role in standardization, growth, and know-how accumulation. (Interviewee 14, 2015 Civil Society Activist)*

**b.** A common disadvantage of these organizations was the negative impact they are having on society overall. By replacing the role of the state, different communities are relying on these associations to provide them with the necessary services; this, in return, is creating loyalty to one's sect or religion at the expense of the state.

> *In many cases, they help provide a better life for many citizens, but this comes with a price of additional sectarianism and loyalty to the sect rather than the country.* (Interviewee 7, 2015 Scholar).

Another disadvantage is that these organizations, through their services, are indirectly hindering the development of the state.

> *through compensating the role of the state, these organizations have fallen in the trap of taking off the burden from the state. Instead of the state developing itself and growing into the primary provider and guarantor of rights and services, the government was replaced with these associations. In some places, the government even assigned these associations to do the task that the ministry is supposed to do.* (Interviewee 8, 2015 Scholar).

Moreover, these associations, while replacing the role of the state and providing services, are, in return affecting the society at large. Associations are becoming an intermediary between the citizens and the state, creating members of communities at the expense of citizens of a unitary state, and dividing the society.

> *So instead of complementing the role of the state, religious associations replaced this latter role; in return, they became an Intermediate player between the citizen and the state. This, however, is threatening this very instrumental relation in a negative way. In short and if we push this argument to the extreme, we can blame religious institutions for the failure of achieving proper citizenry in Lebanon. (Interviewee 6, 2015 Scholar).*

> *As a result, people will be more attached and affiliated to these organizations more than the national and governmental. More segregated and sectarian affiliation linkage to these associations will be leading to a more divided society. (Interviewee 9, 2015 Scholar).*

Nevertheless, the counter-argument is that without the presence of these associations, the situation in Lebanon and the status of the Lebanese people would have been in a much worse situation. *(Interviewee 6, 2015 Scholar).*

# 6    Part V. Analysis

The confessional political system which emerged after the creation of the state of Lebanon, in addition to sectarianism in society, has directly affected the role of RWOs. These associations are operating with minimal state intervention and are becoming a valuable player in society. As in other parts of civil society, philanthropy in Lebanon is marred by sectarianism. Most sectarian or religious groups in Lebanon are forming highly efficient RWOs to provide services to members of their own communities, despite their claims that they extend their philanthropy to various communities. RWOs are considered by many citizens to be the only sources of assistance in times of economic and social unrest or crisis. Many factors have led to the development of these highly efficient organizations: the religious and cultural composition of the society, the nature of Lebanon's consociational democracy, the laissez-faire economic composition of the state, and the government's encouragement and cooperation.

Moreover, the structure of Lebanon's political system and patron-client networks, and the historical absence of state-provided social services during the civil war have assisted the development of a welfare system operating with minimal state intervention that relies significantly on these non-state actors. The welfare system is thus fragmented, allowing for religious organizations to become the primary service providers. Furthermore, the confessional system of the state has prevented the creation of an autonomous civil society capable of raising its own political demands.

In addition to establishing private health care organizations and educational units, these sectarian organizations also act as intermediaries between the state and citizens to facilitate mediated access to citizen rights. For example, the government is expected to cover the cost of hospitalization for any citizen with a serious condition; however, in reality, most citizens do not have access to this right primarily due to the Ministry of Public Health's accruing deficit. In response, organizations are stepping in to provide eligible citizens support for hospitalization costs along with other services.

Welfare organizations, through the services they provide, are reproducing the confessional system whereby differences between communities are emphasized: group particularism is favored by these organizations over Lebanese communalism. As RWOs become stronger, they are shaping the minds of their members and the identities of their communities.

Despite this, it is still essential to recognize that religious welfare organizations are assisting a considerable portion of the population and, importantly, filling the gap left by the state. To view their role in society as entirely negative would be incorrect; if RWOs stopped offering their services, many people would fall below the poverty line. In order for Lebanon to build a civic state, its people must move beyond the belief that the country's political elites are the only agents for change. The civil society that began to evolve after the civil war has been dominated by *Madani* organizations, which are horizontally structured; this structure can help create a civil society that is not reliant on patron-client networks. This emerging Lebanese civil society is demanding greater political accountability and economic governance and is lobbying for equal access to economic and political opportunities. If these demands are met, the Lebanese state will be able to create immunity against destabilizing external elements resulting from its geopolitical position. Although the movement is slowly growing, this new civil society has nonetheless proven to be an essential new player in the political arena. As it challenges traditional structures and advocates a new vision of the Lebanese state, it is expected to play a significant role in addressing divisive political confessionalism in the country and facilitating national dialogue.

# 7 Part VI. Conclusion

Religious welfare organizations are becoming a significant player at the national level in Lebanon. This paper has traced the political, religious, and social factors that have led to their development. Lebanon's history, the impact of the confessional state system, and the laissez-faire economy have all contributed to RWO development and allowed for them to fill the gap left by the state. Moreover, these organizations are becoming significant players in civil society through aiding communities and forming political, economic alliances with many sources of power. The alarming issue is, however, that RWOs' transformation of civil society is reinforcing social fragmentation and diminishing the idea of citizenship given these associations' religious, sectarian identities.

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