Between Empowerment & Paternalism

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EGBERT HARMSEN

Do Islamic charities empower their beneficiaries or rather induce new forms of paternalism? The author argues that these options are not mutually exclusive. Dissecting the ideals and practices of Islamic charities in Jordan, he shows that empowerment and paternalism should be understood in their socially and ideologically informed contexts. While blind pursuance of self-interest is discouraged, the goals of improving society may have empowering implications.

The role of Islamic voluntary welfare associations providing services to subaltern groups such as the poor, orphans, widows, and disabled is—in academic as well as media discourse and debates—often emphasized in the frame of political trends of Islamic revival occurring in the Arab world. Political scientist Sami Zubaida regards such associations as instruments of an effort of religious and moral colonization of underprivileged segments of Muslim societies employed by Islamist movements.[1] His colleague Janine Clark, on the other hand, attributes much greater significance to the function of these associations in fostering cooperative ties among actual as well as potential Islamists from the middle classes.[2] What Zubaida and Clark have in common, however, is an emphasis on the instrumental function of Islamic associations in the service of Islamist movements. The degree to which voluntary associations affiliated to political Islam may contribute to the empowerment of subaltern groups is hardly mentioned by them. Analyzing the role of Muslim NGOs in terms of the empowerment of the underprivileged, this article takes a closer look at this matter.

Voluntary welfare activism

The Muslim Brotherhood is by far the most prominent formally organized Islamist movement in Jordan. Unlike in Egypt or Syria, the Muslim Brothers are officially recognized by the Jordanian state and may, to a certain extent, undertake religious, social, and political activities openly and legally. Establishing voluntary associations that deal with the daily problems of the underprivileged segments of the society is an important strategy to spread Islamist ideology and influence in society. Jordanian legislation knows, however, many restrictions preventing such service-providing NGOs from playing too overt an oppositional role in the public sphere. Transgressions of these regulations may result in the arrest and imprisonment of NGO members as well as in the dissolution of the NGO in question.[3] This makes it impossible for these associations to mobilize subaltern groups into political struggle in order to improve their lot. Below, the example of an Islamist welfare institution serving orphans and their families will be given to discuss the question whether its activities are still contributing to the empowerment of subaltern groups, and if so, how.

Entrance of a hospital belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood in Amman, Jordan

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The Islamist welfare institution in question is a centre for the poor and orphaned in Al-Hussein, the Palestinian refugee camp in Amman that I regularly visited in 2003. It belongs to the Islamic Centre Charity Society, the biggest Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated NGO in Jordan. This Society runs many such centres, in addition to medical centres, hospitals, schools, and even some institutions of higher education, all over the country. The centre gives financial and in-kind assistance to so-called orphan families, i.e. fatherless and mostly single-parent families that lack a regular income-provider. The centre offers educational, social, and cultural activities to the same target groups.

The dependency relationship between workers of the centre and the target group was underlined during my observations of the distributions of financial and in-kind aid. The mothers of the orphan families had to wait patiently and quietly in rows in a hall until they were called upon to receive their modest benefits. This was obviously not an example of self-organization by the underprivileged fighting for their own rights. Rather, this was a welfare initiative established and implemented by Muslims from the middle class delivering services to the needy. The centre receives the sources of financial and in-kind assistance mostly from local individual donors and sometimes from donors in the Arab Gulf States.

Many of the ethical messages in folders, brochures, and pamphlets are addressed to potential donors and supporters. The latter are called upon to give selflessly to the poor and orphans *fi sabilillah*, for the sake of God. Fulfilling this duty is supposed to counter one's greed and egoism, to have a morally purifying effect, and to enhance chances for divine reward in the afterlife. The poor recipients, in turn, are told to find inner peace in God by being thankful for that which He provides them, and by cultivating a patient attitude in life. In specific terms, this entails countering their greed and jealousy vis-à-vis the better off. The perfectly just Islamic society is supposed to be realized through a pious mentality or attitude of all the believers, regardless of rank, status, or wealth. Such an attitude has to be translated into honest, selfless, and helpful behaviour.

This orientation on duty is also reflected in the way the centre uses its financial and in-kind assistance as a means of pressuring the orphans and their mothers to participate in its educative and cultural programme. Religious ideology, in my experience, plays a central part in these educational efforts.

During a language class for orphan boys that I attended, for instance, only religious material was used. Among this material was a poem about the life of the prophet Muhammad. The teacher drew a parallel between levels of aggression against the Prophet and his first followers in Mecca and the present situation, during which Muslims were once again humiliated and threatened by others, especially the United States and "the Jews." The message was that Muslims had to regain power by restoring their mutual solidarity as a community of believers with its common faith in God and in His revelation. Similar political messages were expressed in a satirical play that the orphan girls at the centre were staging. In this play, they mock Arab rulers who betray their own people by collaborating with the Americans and the Israelis. At that occasion, the orphan girls and the centre's women workers also sang a song about Eid al-Fitr, the feast which concludes Ramadan. A message of social solidarity as well as protest is clearly

discernable in the song. It deals with the fate of an orphan family that is economically unable to celebrate while wealthier people celebrate the feast in luxury.

Interviews with workers as well as orphans reveal that reading and reciting the Quran and the Hadith, and following the behavioural injunctions contained within both sources, play a central role in the activities and group discussions at the centre. Duties and responsibilities in the field of rituals, civilized and pious eating habits, ways of communication and modest dress, especially in the case of women, and the duty of older children to take care of smaller ones and of children in general to respect and obey the elderly or their older siblings are stressed.

In the view of the workers of this centre, religious duty is clearly connected to change and empowerment. Conversations with the orphan girls reveal that they understood the Islamic injunctions in terms of notions of dignity, taking one's responsibility, and developing and utilizing one's capabilities for the sake of beneficial purposes. There is a strong emphasis, for instance, on the importance of knowledge and education and high school achievements. The centre also tries to tutor orphan children in their homework for school. It emphasizes the value of work as a means of self-sustenance, and tries to obtain jobs for the older orphan boys by using its social networks. Furthermore, it offers the older orphan girls and their mothers training and some income in a sewing workshop and a bakery.

This example shows a blending of a paternalistic approach toward clients with certain ideas related to empowerment. Such empowerment, however, is here derived from a vision emphasizing duty toward God and toward the development of a strong and harmonious Islamic society.

Islamic piety and development

Other Muslim welfare NGOs that I visited and even some other centres of the Islamic Centre Charity Society are more obviously willing or able to cooperate with global and Western development actors, including non-Muslim ones. Such NGOs usually base their philosophy and practice of empowerment on global human, women's, and children's rights discourses that are enshrined in international treaties. Such an orientation is not necessarily at odds with a devotedly religious attitude, however. An Islamic women's association in a poor suburb in the industrial city of Zarqa', for instance, is working for the empowerment of school-dropout girls and their mothers from broken and socially weak families. Methods used by this association are literacy courses, a creative handicraft project, confidential discussions of personal and social affairs, and recreational outings. It is led by a woman who is also working as a religious teacher and social worker in a mosque. She wears orthodox Islamic dress, including the niqab or full veil. She was, at the same time, trained by Questscope, a British development organization supporting projects for "children at risk." In the name of the Islamic concept of *karama* or dignity, this association endeavours to enhance the self-esteem of the girls and their mothers, and to counter traditional habits that discriminate against females regarding their social and educational opportunities. Here we have a clear example of a process of hybridization between the discourse of Islamic piety and a modern and global development approach as promoted by Questscope.

Another example is the Al-Aqsa Association led by Nawal al-Fauri. She is an Islamist activist for women's and children's rights who left the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s out of frustration with the conservative and patriarchal attitudes among the organization's leadership. The Islamic message means for her that one should adopt a positive, friendly, and constructive attitude toward outsiders, including non-Muslims, and look for beneficial cooperation with them. With the support of several Western embassies, her association has implemented micro-credit projects enabling needy women to set up agricultural and stockbreeding farms. In the name of the Islamic message, the association carries out awareness raising activities for underprivileged women on social, cultural, and political issues, including gender. Again in the name of Islam, Al-Fauri stresses that women have a right to participate in economic, social, and economic life that is equal to that of men, and that a husband has to assist his wife in household tasks and the upbringing of children. Women, she states, should follow the will of God as it is revealed in the Islamic sources, and not the arbitrary and self-interested traditional habits and beliefs invented by men. In my experience, especially females belonging to Muslim, including Islamist, voluntary welfare associations are often critical of traditional gender habits discriminating against women.

Al-Faruq Welfare Society for Orphans, that is mainly active in the Palestinian refugee camp of the northern city of Irbid, is not Islamist in orientation. It provides nonetheless the same type of services to orphan- or fatherless families as the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated centres for the poor and orphans are doing. Its educational and cultural programmes, however, are much less one-sidedly based on a religious doctrine. They pay as much attention to globally formulated human, children's, and women's rights. Their methodology toward orphan children and their upbringing is to an important extent adopted from UNICEF. This approach is focused on letting children discover their own individual qualities and taking their individual feelings and thoughts seriously, rather than on conformity with strictly conceived religious injunctions. However, the Society organizes Quran courses as well, and uses Islamic concepts in its discourse. A female social worker of the Society, for instance, saw in the Quranic principle of *himaya*, or protection of the woman, a basis for the struggle against women's abuse and domestic violence. The social workers use religious concepts like *rahma* (compassion), *tasamuh* (forgiveness and tolerance), and *sabr* (patience) to redirect communication within client families in the direction of mutual empathy, understanding, and respect and to counter practices of verbal and physical violence.

Between empowerment and paternalism

In the more conservative Islamist view, rights and empowerment are not primarily based on the assertive autonomy of individuals, groups, or classes. They can be realized only when Muslim society as a whole achieves an environment of social harmony and solidarity, thus implying that one's rights are necessarily embedded in social relationships of dependency. In this view, a Muslim's duty necessarily fulfils another Muslim's rights. A truly pious lifestyle, Islamists reason, will lead to true social harmony, prosperity, and justice. Concomitantly, they insist that blind pursuance of self-interest and "one's own rights" by any separate individual, group, or class will lead to the undermining, disruption, and disintegration of Muslim society. Such a worldview implies a confirmation and legitimation of existing social hierarchies and dependency relationships along the lines of class, age, and gender, even though the "stronger" are called upon to exercise their power with good care and consideration for the "weaker." Such a combination of power and care creates a relationship of paternalism and patronage. On the other hand, the stress of the Islamist discourse on shaping and improving one's actual behaviour and fully utilizing one's capabilities in a wide range of social fields, including ritual discipline, interpersonal relationships, education, training, and work, may have empowering implications on an individual level for men and women alike.

The Islamic message may also be used to criticize traditional practices often perceived as oppressive, for instance toward women or children, and as negative in terms of social cohesion and well-being in modern society. Muslim NGOs and Islamist social centres with more liberal orientations focus on the reinterpretation of the Islamic message in line with globally formulated rights principles, and on an active cooperation with transnational—including Western—development actors. On the other hand, fear of losing one's independence and cultural authenticity in the face of western-dominated globalization processes is widespread. Islamist ideology is the most outspoken and dogmatic expression of this fear, but the same sentiment is shared by other Muslim associations as well. Generally speaking in Jordanian society, Islam stands for what is good—hence, working for a better social environment is often perceived first and foremost in Islamic terms. This may have implications for the choices international development partners have to make in the selection of local development partners. Secularist biases in the Western-dominated international development community may have to be critically rethought.

Notes

1. Sami Zubaida, "Civil Society, Democracy and Community in the Middle East," unpublished document, 26–28.
2. Janine A. Clark, *Islam, Charity and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 161.
3. Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Embedded Authoritarianism, Bureaucratic Obstacles and Limits to Non-Governmental Organizations in Jordan," in *Jordan in Transition*, ed. George Joffé (London: Hurst and Company, 2002), 115–122.

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