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Islamic Voluntary Welfare Activism in Jordan

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On 25 July 2003, one of the Islamic welfare associations in Jordan, Al Afaf, held its tenth collective wedding party in Amman since its establishment ten years ago. Fifty-two couples celebrated their marriage in a mass party attended by thousands of visitors. The party took place in and around the Islamic *Dar ul-Arqam* school in an affluent Amman neighbourhood. The street leading to the school building was packed with cars, buses and invited families. Banners welcomed the visitors. Upon entering the school area, men and women visitors were separated from one another, as men and women celebrate in separate parts of the complex. There was excitement in the air. Men in green uniforms from the Jerusalem Scouting Association walked around to maintain order. An Al Afaf Association spokesman welcomed the visitors, thanked Allah for enabling all those present to attend the party, declared it a joyful occasion and presented the programme. Qur'anic verses regarding marriage and family life were recited. Next, the spokesman rose to the platform again, and spoke of the values of marriage, sharing, solidarity and love. He expressed the wish that 'the fatherland... be a land of love and welfare for everyone.' Several Islamist male singing groups performed throughout the feast. They sang of Allah the Almighty and the merits of marriage, and of the bride and bridegroom. Mostly no musical instruments were used, except for occasional drums. Nonetheless, the performances were rhythmic in character. Many men in the audience started to clap, and some danced. Finally, the fifty-two bridegrooms were led to the schoolyard by a group of men in white *kefiya*'s and traditional robes. Once in the schoolyard, white foam was poured over the bridegrooms and a circle was created in within which they danced. Towards the end of the party, *dabkeh*-dancers bared their fists and sang of liberating Palestine from the 'Zionist enemy'.

Marriage and family

Al Afaf is one of the many associations in Jordan founded and run by people belonging (either formally or informally) to the Jordanian Islamist movement. Al Afaf's president, Dr. Abdul Latif Arabiyat, for example, is a prominent leader of the Islamic Action Front Party, the political wing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. The association's founders were alarmed by the lack of access to marriage for many young Jordanians due to the high financial and material demands of the wedding parties, along with the costs and demands involved in starting a family. In their view, these high demands and the inability of young people to meet them, could easily lead to the spread of sexual immorality. The main activities of Afaf consist, therefore, in the organization of mass weddings, the provision of bridal gifts and contributions, and also of interest-free loans to the newlyweds. Moreover, the association organizes lectures and workshops related to marriage and family issues and publishes books on these topics. Within these domains Al Afaf emphasizes the traditional role of the husband as the family provider, and that of his spouse as housewife and mother. At the same time, the values of harmony, patience, mutual respect and understanding within marriage are

During the last two decades the voluntary welfare associations' role in providing social services to the underprivileged in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has been significantly enhanced. Important contributing factors to this development have been the process of political liberalization since 1989, increased economic hardship and rising levels of poverty (which were partly due to continuous state withdrawal from the domain of social welfare). Religious revival has also been a key factor and has greatly strengthened the role of voluntary associations with an Islamic background.

stressed. Abuse of the wife, a widespread phenomenon in Jordanian society, is firmly rejected in the name of Islam.

Al Afaf's discourse regarding marriage and family has a strong anti-materialist and anti-consumerist component as well. Mufid Sarhan, general manager of the association, believes Jordanians set their priorities incorrectly if they wait until they have obtained a well-paying job, a spacious home and a beautiful car before they decide to marry. 'According to Islam,' Sarhan argues,

'marital life and love is fundamental for the well being of the human being. One shouldn't cherish too high material expectations in this regard (...) material expectations should be lowered, and a higher priority should be put to the importance, the warmth and the love of marriage.'

Solidarity or *takaful* between the rich and the poor is another vital component of Al Afaf's discourse. Arabiyat explains: 'we see two extremes in our society now. On the one hand, there are many people in Jordan who are so poor that they do not have the means to have a simple wedding party, and on the other hand, there are rich people who spend tens of thousands [of] dinars on wedding parties, and celebrate them with a lot of glamour and with the aim to show off.' According to Arabiyat, it would be better if the rich spent part of their money on helping the poor to marry. Al Afaf's collective weddings, to which wealthy donors and companies contribute financially and in kind, are an expression of this conviction. The wedding-parties are meant to create an atmosphere of shared joy and togetherness, regardless of the social ranking of the participants. The parties are meant to symbolize a 'better Islamic society', characterized by a spirit of modesty, cooperation, and compassion; a society in which rich people spend part of their wealth on the welfare and the social and educational opportunities of the less privileged, rather than on their own social prestige. After all, giving for the sake of the poor and the common good is giving *fi sabeel Allah*, 'for the sake of God'.

Helping the poor, orphans, widows and the needy in general, *fi sabeel Allah*, could be considered the most basic tenet in the discourse surrounding the social work of Islamic voluntary welfare associations in Jordan. All kinds of services to the underprivileged groups just mentioned, whether they consist of monthly payments of financial benefits, distributions of food, clothes and blankets, *iftar*-meals during *Ramadan*, helping poor families to cope with social problems, providing vocational training in areas ranging from sewing to basic computer-skills and income-generating projects, ought to be given without expecting anything in return. Members and donors of the associations attribute selfless human compassion towards others to *taqwa* or fear of God, and any activity emanating from that principle is considered to be done for Him. Such activity is thus considered part of the '*ibadat*', as much as as an observance of the *salat* or the *haji*, for instance. In this connection, concern with the after-life is often expressed as a central element of the motivation for a Muslim to do social work.



Brides pose for a picture with their grooms at mass wedding organized by Jordan's Islamic society, al-Afaf, Amman, 25 July 2003.

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Apart from the question of motivation, Islamic faith and discourse also play a role in the *tarbiya* or educational programmes that these associations provide for the poor and orphaned, and for the wider public. The centres for orphans and the poor belonging to the Islamic Charity Centre Society, a nationwide welfare society widely considered as the 'social wing' of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, claim to have a 'comprehensive' approach towards the problems of the poor and orphaned. They provide lessons in Qur'anic recitation, *tafsir*, and rituals; they help poor and orphaned children with problems related to learning at school; and they teach them *adab* or good manners and morals in dealing with others in society and about various other health and social issues. Apart from that, they teach the mothers to bring-up their children in a patient and friendly way and urge the client-families to stick together. Older brothers or sisters are admonished to take responsibility for their younger siblings, and the latter are told to obey the former. Working at achieving harmonious relations within family and community is regarded as an essential Islamic duty. Preaching Islamic values, like patience and thankfulness for what is provided by Allah, is also regarded as part of the *da'wa* carried out by these centres and associations. The objective of this mission is instilling a combined sense of piety and dignity into orphans and the poor, and to prevent at all cost the dreadful prospects of family-disintegration, addiction, crime and immorality.

Politics of welfare

Are Islamic voluntary welfare associations vehicles for the political aims of the Jordanian Islamist movement? Representatives of these associations vehemently deny any such political involvement. They stress that they work under the authority of the Ministry for Social Development and the Jordanian Law on Societies and Social Bodies, which stipulate that voluntary associations are prohibited from working for any personal or political gain. There are actually religiously inspired Muslim welfare associations in Jordan without any links to the movement. Dr. Musa Shteivi, a sociologist at Jordan University, insists, however, that at least those associations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood clearly play a political role in, and mobilize support for, this mainstream Islamist movement through their social work. This view appears to be supported, for example, by the active involvement of workers of centres belonging to the Islamic Charity Centre Society in the election-campaigns of the Islamic Action Front Party (IAF). The director of one of the centres for aiding orphans and the poor in Amman, for instance, figured as an IAF-candidate during the campaign for the municipal elections held on 17 July 2003. That the public sympathy and respect Islamists enjoy in several local communities through their social work is closely related to their political mobilization efforts, is highly probable. It is the—often multiple—roles of the people within and around these associations, with all their social networks at their disposal, which shed light on topics like the relationship between voluntary welfare associations and the

Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Action Front Party, the government-sponsored *zakat*-committees, other political and social institutions, and the general public.

There might be other reasons why representatives and members of Islamic voluntary welfare associations do not like to be identified with a particular movement or organization such as the Muslim Brotherhood. They want to stress that their services and/or messages are available and addressed to all members of the community, regardless of their political or organizational affiliation. This seems to conform to the populist message of Islamists who stress that Islam as a total way of life, and as a social and political order, represents the true desires, aspirations and needs of 'the people' as a whole, regardless of class, gender and social standing. Their ideology claims to represent a 'religious core' among all Muslims (and among Christians) rather than just one version of (political) Islamic discourse. As Mufid Sarhan, general manager of Al Afaf stated: '... there isn't such a thing in Jordan as an "Islamic association." Of course, we give expression to Islamic norms, morals and values in our work and our publications, but how could you expect otherwise? After all, the overwhelming majority of the people here are Muslims!'

Religion plays a dominant symbolic role in Jordanian civil society and the public sphere, and this role has only strengthened since the events of 11 September 2001. Dr. Abdallah Khateeb, the president of the General Union of Voluntary Societies in Jordan, certainly not an Islamist himself, is sceptical about the concept of Islamic voluntary welfare associations, and stresses that all voluntary societies work on the basis of religious principles related to compassion and solidarity with the poor. Evidently, radical secularist voices in Jordan, which are explicitly questioning the role of religion in political and social life, are marginal. And while Islamist opinions on concrete issues might be countered in the public sphere, this also often happens in the name of Islam. For instance, in August 2003, when Islamist deputies contested the new divorce (*khulu*) law giving women the right to divorce their husbands without the latter's consent, arguing that the law would pave the way for the disintegration of families, demonstrations were held in defence of the new legislation. The demonstrators asserted that a harmonious family-life could only be based upon the voluntary commitment of wife and husband, and that the new interpretation of *khulu* was therefore in agreement with the principles of the *shari'a*. Government figures usually support the more liberal interpretations within Islamic discourse and since the regime has managed, so far, to determine the rules governing public debates, Islamists are compelled to spread their *da'wa*, to a large extent, through their social networks.

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