

Civil Society Review

Issue 3 - September, 2018

— Social Science for Change —

**UNRAVELING “CIVIL SOCIETY:” POLICY,
DEPENDENCY NETWORKS, AND TAMED DISCONTENT.
REFLECTIONS FROM LEBANON AND PALESTINE.**

Gulf States’ Humanitarian Assistance for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon / Understanding State Incorporation of The Workers’ Movement in Early Post-War Lebanon and Its Backlash on Civil Society / Les Projets Collectifs de Développement en Palestine : Diffusion de La Vulgate Néolibérale et Normalisation de La Domination / Advocating for Change in the Arab World: Successes and Failures of Lebanon’s Civil Society / *Book review* of Civil Society and Political Reform in Lebanon and Libya: Transition and constraint



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About the Civil Society Review

Published by Lebanon Support, the *Civil Society Review* emphasises cutting-edge and critical transdisciplinary analysis in a wide range of topics relevant to social sciences. It offers a novel space where academics and practitioners converge to discuss theories and reflect on practices.

It demonstrates a variety of perspectives through dynamic, historicised, and processual approaches to reflections on civil society action, and strategies in the region. While we acknowledge the polysemy and controversy behind the concept of “civil society”, and the often elusive opposition it displays, we are committed to producing original literature that both offers a reflection on civil society, particularly its contentious role and autonomy, as well as creates knowledge for what we hope can constitute tools for action and social change in the region. In this vein, the Civil Society Review, grounded in empirical research, aims at contributing to a theoretical production adopting a comparative approach among countries in the region and elsewhere. It hence focuses on the creation of a knowledge space for epistemological debates, theoretical usages, as well as empirical methodologies.

The Civil Society Review produces evidence-based research and analysis, and disseminates findings and recommendations to promote civic engagement, shape policies, and stimulate debate within civil society spheres.

In addition to its editorial board, the Civil Society Review draws expertise from practitioners, experts, researchers, and policy makers. First published in print, the Civil Society Review is made available online at a later stage.

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Table of Contents

- P. 07 **Introduction**
ELISABETH LONGUENESSE,
ELIZABETH PICARD
- P. 10 **Meet the Authors**
- P. 12 **Analyses**
Gulf States' Humanitarian Assistance for Syrian
Refugees in Lebanon
- P. 14 SUSANNE SCHMELTER

Understanding State Incorporation of the Workers'
Movement in Early Post-War Lebanon and its Backlash
on Civil Society
- P. 46 LEA BOU KHATER

Les Projets Collectifs de Développement en Palestine :
Diffusion de La Vulgate Néolibérale et Normalisation
de La Domination
- P. 70 SBEIH SBEIH
- P. 102 **Perspective**
Advocating for Change in the Arab World: Successes
and Failures of Lebanon's Civil Society
- P. 104 ELIE AL-HINDY, TANIA HADDAD,
MARIA NOUJAIM
- P. 138 **Book Review**
Carmen Geha, *Civil Society and Political Reform in Lebanon
and Libya: Transition and Constraint*, London and New
York, Routledge, 2016.
- P. 140 LAURA EL CHEMALI

Introduction

ELISABETH LONGUENESSE,
ELIZABETH PICARD

The articles gathered in this dossier offer insights, based on case studies, into the transformation of the “associative sector” in Lebanon, a sector generally seen to be at the core of an increasingly active civil society. Four of these studies relate to Lebanon, while the fifth brings a welcome comparison with the Palestinian case. The dossier also includes a review of a book that investigates the Lebanese and Libyan contexts.

The reader is likely to be immediately struck by the authors’ differing conceptions of the civil society to which they refer, but also by the absence of precise definitions of the latter.

Although Susanne Schmelter does engage with the associative sector, notably emerging aid economies by focusing on Gulf-funded humanitarian engagement, she does not directly link this back to a definition of civil society. Elie Al-Hindy and his co-authors reflect directly on “civil society”, its successes and failures, and its ability to influence public policy. Still, they do not discuss any more its definition, which is almost synonymous in their view with the term “associative sector”, as put forward in the dossier’s title. For them, “civil society” has an implicitly broad dimension (“a vibrant civil society nurtures associational life”) and is above all a cornerstone of

liberal democracy. It represents one of the three sectors of society: the State, the private sector and civil society, according to the neo-liberal norms promoted by the Washington Consensus. They also consider “civil society” to be synonymous with “non-profit sector” – more or less the equivalent to the French concept of “*économie sociale et solidaire* (social, solidarity economy)”, itself distinct from the associative sector, strictly speaking. From one trajectory and from one national context to another, legal categories differ, influencing the structuring of the categories of analysis.

For Carmen Geha, whose book is presented by Laura El Chemali, as well as for Elie Al-Hindy and his co-authors, civil society seems synonymous with the associative sector, here understood as local civil society organisations. These include NGOs (“non-governmental organisations”) and community-based organisations that, in Lebanon’s reconstruction phase in the aftermath of the civil war, provided services typically offered by state institutions. It should be noted that their definition includes clan-, family- and confession-based organisations.

In contrast to the previous papers, Lea Bou Khater, without discussing the notion of civil society, looks at trade unions and at labour associations in two sectors where trade unions are prohibited: education

and the civil service. With Bou Khater, we return to an older conception (at least prior to the 1990s and the Washington Consensus) of civil society, at whose core were professional and labour organisations, expanded in the 1980s to include women’s, youth, and minority defence organisations.

Sbeih Sbeih’s contribution to this dossier deals with Palestine and offers a caustic critique of the instrumentalisation of the notion of civil society by development aid agencies, and more specifically by international donors, in order to impose a model and norms that are foreign to the realities of local society.

Nevertheless, whether the authors adhere to the idea of a positive relationship between civil society, democracy, and development or criticize its mystifying character, they all associate it, in fact, to a contemporary evolution inscribed in globalisation. In their view, NGOs and associations, local and international, play an increasingly important role in economic and social life (“operational” associations, associated to a service or developmental project), and social and political fields (“advocacy” associations aiming at change, at improvement of institutions and the political system). These two types of action are sometimes, if not often, connected within the same organisation (for example

structures aiming to help domestic workers or to defend homosexuals, or environmental associations, not mentioned in this dossier).

How and to what extent do these new civil actors take over from new (and old) social mobilisations? Asking the question in these terms might limit our thinking about advocacy associations. In fact, a revival of mobilisations could be noticed in the Lebanese case during the last years. It took a large variety of forms: in the campaigns concerning violence against women and the transfer of nationality, during the garbage crisis, in the trade unions mobilisations in the 2010s, in the unprecedented workers’ struggles by EDL day labourers and Spinneys’ employees in 14-2013, not forgetting the mobilisations in solidarity with domestic workers. The emergence of “citizen” lists in the 2016 municipal elections and in the 2018 spring legislative elections indicates an attempt to turn these movements into political ones, even if they struggle to fully take shape in a political system that remains dominated by family and clan allegiances.

The present contributions make little mention of concrete social struggles, and tend to privilege an analysis of association or union elites, their links with political power, their relationship with the State, and their dependence on funders. A future issue

should perhaps go further, and question the anchoring of these organisations in society and their ties with the social groups whose interests they claim to defend.

The driving thesis in this dossier is that the Lebanese “civil society” (formal and informal groups, associations and groupings, whether denominational or not, constituted around one service or advocacy project or another) develops in proportion to deficiencies of the State, but nonetheless remains hampered by the grip of sectarian structures and clientelist practices. Like other studies on the associative movement and collective mobilisations in Lebanon after the civil war and especially since 2005, the articles agree on the lack of effectiveness of what they refer to as “civil society” in its alternative initiatives, advocacy activities, and in its holding the State to account. However, they diverge in an intriguing way when they analyse the causes and modalities of this failure. Firstly, these articles refer to ideal models rather than direct and concrete observations of the Lebanese context. Secondly, in alternatively describing the Lebanese state as “weak” (most often) or “strong” (as in the article by Lea Bou Khater), they search for the key to this failure, but pay little attention to the reality of interactions between State and society.

In Lebanon, the functioning of public life and of the State clearly conflicts with the ideal model of democracy, of responsibility and of citizenship proposed by the theoreticians of civil society. Yet, “international” society, on which the

Lebanese associative world closely depends, refers to this ideal model throughout its documents. Moreover, this international society is more extravagant in terms of norms and procedures than in terms of financial aid, as illustrated through numerous examples in Sbeih Sbeih’s article. How can the labour movement of the past and the associative world of today make themselves the messengers of society when their donors dictate their objectives and strategies?

The studies published here show a submission, if not an adherence, to “international” management criteria that make communication with donors of primary importance. Moreover, there is in Lebanon a tendency towards the professionalisation of associative actors in such a way that they become experts and entrepreneurs, and make their sector one of the most active “industries” in the Lebanese economy. In this way, humanitarian ethos gives way to logic of profitability. Ordinary actors in social life and basic public problems are scarcely mentioned. Interactions between the society and the associative world (humanitarian, developmental or advocacy), especially in terms of a relationship of domination, are little mentioned. An exception is the salutary reference by Susanne Schmelter with regard to humanitarian and sectarian associations taking into account the beliefs and values of the populations they help. However, this raises other questions: When reflecting on civil society, can we include organisations of a religious nature, that could hypothetically speaking contribute to

the fragmentation of society? In addition, are trade unions and associations able to escape the dominant logic of Lebanese society, while the trade union movement itself, traditionally supra denominational, finds itself finally trapped? Here, there is a double demand that the associative activists will have to respond to in order to be able to influence public action: to start again from the field, on one hand, and to think of the civil society as a plural one, on the other hand.

The relationship between civil society organisations and the State is the second point of contention of these studies. To understand it in a dichotomous mode (strong State - dominated society or weak State - strong society) leads the analysis into a deadlock. Either the civil society is paralyzed, manipulated, and in the best case co-opted by the political class via networks of clientelism and corruption considered legitimate because they are naturalised, and this explains its failures despite the scale of social movements in the 2010s. Or the reform of the State is considered impossible and the mission of substituting itself to a failing political class is assigned to the civil society by the “international society”, and this implies its inextricable dependence. Then arises the question of whether Lebanese society and its institutions are able to go beyond its vertical divisions in favour of the construction of transversal mediation structures and the negotiation of stakes that cut across these divisions.

The shift in analytical perspective put forward by Timothy Mitchell in 1991 and

made explicit ten years later by Joel Migdal via the term “State-in-society” should provide for a reorientation of objectives and modes of action of the associative sector in Lebanon. It would mean abandoning a vertical perspective in which the state is nothing but the reflection of an autonomous society, immobilised by primordial cleavages (sectarian, but also clannish and local). In this perspective, the society is held hostage to the combined interests of political rulers, confined to assigned identities, controlled by networks of power and inexorably undermined by the wheeling and dealing of its leaders. Indeed, many civil society organisations in Lebanon, even those described as secular in these studies, have sectarian origins and even agendas tinged with religious values. However, this does not prevent them from being involved – and even leading – transversal mobilisations and actions to advance various interests and demands of the society, as Laura El Chemali shows in her report. By pivoting the axis of analysis and activism from vertical to horizontal, the associative sector in Lebanon can demonstrate and develop its strength, including in the political sphere.

In any case, the reflections on civil society proposed in this issue of the *Civil Society Review*, in Lebanon as well as in Palestine open up toward further investigations and interrogations. For they not only question the State, its nature and its functions, but politics in a broader sense.

Meet the Authors

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