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Hidden Agents: Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in the Palestinian Territories

Author: Zaghrou, Ziyad

Abstract: Recently, there has been a great deal of scholarly and popular interest in the activities of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the Middle East. In particular, socio-economic services provided by FBOs have generated a heated debate in which advocates and opponents of these organizations have locked heads together in an attempt to advance their own arguments and advocate for policies harboring their views. While there has not been any absolute winner in the debate both camps, to an extent, agree that the service activities of FBOs have an implicit political component as the later seek to influence and modify the societal relations extending among the public, private and the not-for-profit spheres. Understanding the role of FBOs in Islamic societies is further complicated by a relative absence of empirical research or even accessible descriptive data either within a single country or across countries. In an effort to limit this complexity, the research design underlying this dissertation focuses upon one case: the Palestinian Territories (PT). I examine the advocacy behavior of FBOs in the Palestinian territories and how they influence local level social policies. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, I specifically study correlations between several organizational and environmental characteristics and the tendency for FBOs to: (a) form collaborative links with other civil society agents, as well as, governmental agencies and private businesses; and (b) get involved in advocacy-related activities. This research describes, as well, the scope of the FBO sector in the PT and differentiates between direct and indirect advocacy. It further presents two successful case studies to demonstrate how FBOs manage to influence social policies.

I argue that FBOs are far from being an apolitical agent with a limited ideological and social agenda. On the contrary, they are active participants in the local policy process and they achieve their objectives through multiple strategies in which collaborative networks with other actors in society and religious framing are considered the most prominent.

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