Ph.D. Program in Political Theory
Cycle XXIV

The Role of Civil Society in a Fragmented and a Weak Arab State:

Developing or Fragmenting the State?

Analyzing the *Mujtama Ahli*, *Mujtama Taefi* and *Mujtama Madani* in

Lebanon

Ph.D. Dissertation Abstract by
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Research and studies evaluate civil society in the Middle East and its characteristics based on Western ideals and understanding of the term. This dissertation will argue that to be able to understand civil society in the Arab Middle East, the historical and political development of each state should be taken into consideration; exporting and applying the understanding of Western liberal civil society distorts the reality. The argument is that that the historical development of the Middle East created an atmosphere for the development of a civil society that is different from the traditional civil society that developed in Western liberal thought. When analyzing civil society in the region and determining whether it exists or not, our approach should be historically and culturally sensitive. Furthermore, this dissertation will analyze the role of civil society in a weak state through taking a case study the state of Lebanon. In this respect, the second part of the dissertation will be based on empirical research conducted in Lebanon.

The case of Lebanon:

Civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were present in Lebanon since the Ottoman Empire and are protected by the Law of Associations of 1909. In the Arabic language, two terms are used to describe civil society, namely *al-mujtama al-ahli* and *al-mujtama al-madani*. (*Mujtama* means society.) The first term *ahli*, implies "kinship." It is a broad term that implies tribal rather than social movements, which are more defined by the term *al-mujtama al-madani*. *Al-mujtama al-madani* carries a willingness to move away from traditional structures and perceptions. This project will address the growing role of these different civil societies in Lebanon. It will argue that the weakness of the Lebanese state led to the development of these different types of society: The first is a strong society labeled the *mujtama ahli*. This civil society covers the role of the state and reduces the citizens to members of sectarian communities. The second, *mujtama madani,* is civic in nature and emerged as an active civil society in Lebanon as a result of the lack of progress on the political and economic level in the state. However, the role of this society is weakened by the sectarian division of the state. And a third type of society developed during the civil war in Lebanon which is labeled *mujtama Taefi* (Sectarian Society); this society is the strongest and the most powerful player in the state of Lebanon.

The main empirical research in this project aimed to prove that the Lebanese communities are seeking services and security from this civil society of *taefi* (i.e religious) and *ahli* (communal)

nature. These organizations became the most effective and efficient service providers in the state and at the same time contribute to building a confessional system that has affected private and public society. *Mujtama ahli* and *taefi* remain the most important employers, economic players and market regulators.

In this respect, this dissertation is divided into 5 main chapters:

The first chapter will review the literature on the Western civil society and will compare and contrast it with the literature that developed about civil society in the Middle East. It will further review the different theories of civil society that developed in the Arab world and will argue that civil society does exist in the Arab world; however the historical development of the Middle East created an atmosphere for the development of a civil society that is different from the traditional civil society that developed in Western liberal thought. It will further argue that most of the social organizations in the Arab world can be considered charitable religious organizations. Other institutions are linked to the state and are considered as semi-official ones. This supports the argument that there is a wide difference in the understanding and application of the term civil society between the West and the Arab world. The Arab scholars promote the idea of a civil society characterized by self-governing communities based on religion, with a minimalist state.

Chapter 2 will focus on the political system that developed in the state of Lebanon. It will argue that analyzing the Lebanese system based on the theories that link civil society to democracy leads us to conclude that Lebanon does not meet the criteria of a liberal democracy and does not enjoy a viable and active civil society. Social norms as opposed to rational pluralism have shaped the Lebanese confessional system and prevented the establishment of a proper civil society. The culture of dialogue and compromise that constitute the basic elements of a civil society were missing in post-Taef Lebanon.[1] What has been created in post-war Lebanon was a state that militantly guards group particularity under the guise of democratic legitimacy. Understanding the political background of the state of Lebanon will help us to analyze its civil society and the context in which it is operating. The Lebanese system, which had been shifting from civil peace

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[1] The Taef Agreement, or the "National Reconciliation Accord" or "Document of National Accord," is an agreement reached to provide the basis for ending the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon.

to civil war, created the perfect setting for the expansion of intermediate institutions and organizations since it was not equipped with the specific tools to repress them. Furthermore, most of the centers of powers in the state are directly or indirectly linked to one of these institutions, since the political leadership in Lebanon is created by a group of political elites that are dominant within their own respective communal society.

Chapter 3 will analyze the reasons for ranking the state of Lebanon as weak or failed state and will analyze the three different phases of state weakness.

Part 2 of the dissertation will argue that in order to understand civil society in Lebanon we should differentiate between three types of societies: *mujtama ahli*, *taefi* and *madani*.

Chapter 4 will argue that the difficulty in differing between the political, civil and religious societies in Lebanon is mainly due to the nature of the political system in Lebanon; that is, the confessional politics that reduced the area between the private and the public through the direct representation of confessions in the political system. This system led to the dependence of the political on the religious and sectarian realms. One quarter of the organizations in Lebanon have a "self-declared sectarian affiliation"; they are directly linked to existing political parties and are serving as their social and economic pillar. For many people, these organizations have served to provide much needed social, educational, health, and other services in areas where they are lacking. One of the main elements that distinguish Lebanon from other states is the confessional nature of the society and institutions: In each sectarian group members draw their identity from their confessional belonging as opposed to developing a sense of belonging to the state. The development of civil society is thus directly linked to the political system of the state. The geographical composition of the state and the presence of different distinct sectarian groups allowed the appearance of autonomous entities loyal to their parochial and sectarian identity. These groups have their own interpretation of the past and different expectations of the future; this prevents the development of a national sense of belonging and substantive liberal institutions. After the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon emerged as a weak state unable to provide the minimum public services for its citizens. This weakness allowed for the reemergence of humanitarian sectarian institutions that started providing different services to communities in Lebanon. This situation created a reliance on the growing role of these civil society organizations

at the expense of enhancing the effectiveness and accountability of public institutions: These sectarian groups in Lebanon started to create new social enterprises and developed new projects, replacing the role of the state and playing an important role in the construction and affirmation of local identities, of sense of belonging for the different communities, and of social values; they gained the loyalty of the different communities and encouraged youth to volunteer in the different sectarian organizations. The source of power of these organizations derives mainly from the economic influence on the community and the society. (Unofficial figures state that resources managed by civil society organizations (CSOs) in Lebanon could reach $1 billion a year, and the budgets of social welfare CSOs can reach $296 million (which is five times the budget of Ministry of Social Affairs). The second source of power is the closeness of the political decision-making authority to these organizations, which could favor these organizations' interests. The third sphere of power of CSOs in Lebanon is rooted in the confessional political and social system of the state. The fourth sphere of power is the high number of volunteers that these organizations are attracting, who are vowing full loyalty to the organization.

Finally, chapter 5 will analyze the role of a different type of civil society: a pure civic society. It will focus on the importance of this society that developed in the aftermath of the civil war and will argue that after the 1990 Taef Agreement, new trends have appeared. Environmental, human rights, women and certain secular organizations were formed that are more of a *madani* nature. Furthermore, this emergence of an active civil society is a consequence of the lack of progress on the political and economic level, and highlights a disconnect between the elites that demand loyalty and a society moving in a different direction. This part will analyze these organizations and to what extent they are capable of affecting public policy in the state, as well as the limitations they are facing.