

Shia Sectarian and Religious Organizations in Lebanon: Charitable Activities and Analytical Distinctions

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In some developing regions (and even in some industrialized countries), ethnic and religious organizations play a large role in providing social protection. A substantial and growing literature documents both the historical and contemporary importance of “faith-based” organizations in welfare regimes. Furthermore, studies of the relationship between ethnic fractionalization and public goods provision point to the role of ethnic and religious groups in providing social benefits to in-group members and even to out-group members, under some conditions. The categories of ethnic and religious organizations encompass diverse types of institutions. As a result, the political ramifications of social provision by such organizations vary widely, depending on their respective relationships with the state and forms of engagement with citizenry. Based on extensive original field research, this chapter explores these questions through a study of two Shia Muslim organizations in Lebanon, Hezbollah and Mabarrat. Western observers often group these two organizations in the same broad category, in part because they share some intellectual roots and had overlapping leaderships in an earlier time period. Although both organizations self-identify as Shia, primarily serve in-group members and play important roles in the Lebanese social safety net, they engage with the state and citizenry in radically different ways. The chapter therefore uses the examples of Hezbollah and Mabarrat to disaggregate the category of Islamic faith-based organizations to trace the very different kinds of sociopolitical roles that organizations grouped in this category play in their respective societies.